

## **Wrapped in Twine, Rooted in Love**

**By: Ava Wildenmann**

Another failure. It took an embarrassing amount of self-control to keep from pushing my vase off of the table before me. Cleaning shattered glass did not seem appealing to my already-twitching fingertips, though. To satiate my frustration via a less destructive means, I yanked the white-lace bow away from the width of my vase. It fluttered innocently, pitifully to the ground.

I turned back to the flower dictionary spread in front of me. I had tried countless combinations. Rouge amaryllis, with their petals outstretched and attentively turned towards my nimble hands. Carnations of the softest blush, folded in on themselves a million times over and all the more beautiful because of it. Gerbera daisies in all of the delightful hues of spring and summer. But it always looked wrong. Leaves wilted at the wrong angles, and when I clipped at the base of stiff, woody stems their tips would ricochet and scatter messily across the greenhouse in which I sat. It was all so disorganized!

A bouquet was meant to be the picture of eloquence. Lovers offered them as tokens of affection; fans offered them to performers as expressions of support. I could not extend to my dearest companion a wilted hibiscus or rotten lady's slipper. What did that say about me? That my love was conditional? That my devotion waned?

I leaned my head into my hands as a groan left my lips. In my mind, I could see clearly the tiny print and swirling design of the letter I'd received in the mail: "My dearest friend and florist, would you be so kind as to make a bouquet for me to hold at my wedding? You're the only one I trust." What a task! What a daunting responsibility to heap upon your best friend. Yes, it was my livelihood, working with flowers, but I was used to providing them to strangers. Now, I was to be the very life in her hands; I was to be at the very forefront of the happiest day of her life.

And what if I fell short? What if I condemned her without knowing? I could catch the bouquet and be doubly cursed. Even worse, someone else could catch the bouquet and admire its blooming larkspur, not knowing that it meant fickleness.

My eyes watered. The sweet aroma of flowers seemed so sour now.

I reached out and groped for my phone. It lay face down, do-not-disturb, upon the furthest part of my desk. Within seconds, though, Lila was on the line.

"Dearest Natalie! What's the occasion?" Lila's voice was clear as a bell. She chimed and rang; her smiles were silver and her words were brass. She sang like the opera and spoke like a duchess. She was the most glorious person I'd ever known. And yet...

"I can't do it."

"What do you mean?"

"The flowers. The bouquet, I...I can't do it." I was so dull in comparison. A wishing well with no coins, an empty cabinet, a spiderweb in a fallen tree. Why would Lila even choose me as her friend? I guess the light needed dark to shine.

"For what reason!"

"I'm busy! It's spring. It's flower season. I'm...I'm..." lying. I'm lying.

"Oh, dear."

"Flowers aren't that important anyways! You can get fakes."

"Artificial flowers are like unfulfilled promises." Ouch. She couldn't have chosen worse wording. "I can't even smell them."

"Lila..."

"Natalie, I beg of you." She sounded sincere. "A wedding is no wedding without you in it."

I whined like a petulant child. "I really can't..."

"Then bring me nothing more than daisies. Pluck them from the fields in minutes and tie them with twine. I'd love to carry them, as long as they're yours."

I could not have been more shocked. My jaw worked, teeth clacking together, tongue pushing a bulge into my cheek, but I could not devise a response. Thankfully, Lila saved me the trouble of having to think of one; a microwave alarm beep tremored within my eardrum as Lila ended the transmission.

I set my phone down.

*I'd love to carry them, as long as they're yours.* This changed everything! Lila was not expecting perfection. The flowers were about sharing our connection on her special day. This declaration provided me with a new direction. There must be thought and action behind every bloom, every knot in lace. It was not just daisies! It was daffodils! It was love lies bleeding and marigold and star of Bethlehem. It was not just daisies! It couldn't be.

I stared at my vase again. Goodness, it was garish. It was filled with roses and tulips and willows; love, love, love. Where was the rest of it? It was so alive, but so uncharacteristic of life.

So it had to change.

I stood up and yanked away the mess of flowers, knitting of tangled stems, overlapping of leaves; I could not bear to toss them, though, and so I set them gently upon the table beside me. They gazed up at me with what looked like curiosity. I gazed back at them with most certain uncertainty.

I had to start with aster. Patience. Lila was always the patient one. I was always so volatile. But we'd remained friends for years upon years; her husband must be the same. If they were to get on together, they needed patience. A collapse mid-argument did nothing for their relationship; their points of view would differ, I knew, and so this aster must be fragrant enough to remind them that disagreement did not mean disenchantment.

I needed anemone, too. Forsaken. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to fill Lila's bouquet with only happy-go-lucky, beautified, flawless flowers. Life wasn't like that. My life wasn't like that. Hers wasn't. Her fiancé's wasn't! And I refused to let them pretend that it was. We'd all been let down. Forsaken. Betrayed. She'd carry that with her into her new chapter of life. They'd unpack their greatest loves and their worst fears together.

Daisies were next. Simplicity. She had asked for them. She'd told me that I could give her the easiest flower in the book and she'd still love me. She'd walk down the aisle with white, bug-bitten daisies, and she'd smile as radiantly as the summer sun. That was who Lila was. She was simple. She was kind. She was all the world wrapped into a bundle and stamped with a kiss. How could I ever refuse her?

I stuck a few bushels of arborvitae into the mix. Everlasting friendship. This was her day. Her life. Her love. But I still wanted to be with her. I wanted to be sitting there and standing there; I wanted to be in my seat and in her hands, cheering her on all the way. If anyone deserved my loyalty, it was Lila. Now, Lila didn't have a flower dictionary. But maybe, just maybe, she'd sense my overwhelming love when her fingers grazed the stem of her new bouquet.

Lastly, I added a few beautiful white roses. Mistakes. I made so many. I'd almost declined Lila. And why? Because I was scared of letting her down? I was a florist. I worked with life; my fingers brought rise to greenhouses and my nails were painted with fertilizer. The very art of gardening is messy and rooted in imperfection. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

I smiled from ear-to-ear. Splitting, real, genuine. A Lila smile. A radiant, glorious, Lila-like smile. Except it was me, not Lila. This was a Natalie smile. This was a Natalie imperfection and a Natalie innovation.

I snatched up my phone. My fingers danced across the keypad. To what tune? The beat of my heart. I texted Lila.

*"Dearest friend, I just thought I'd let you know that my schedule just freed up for your bouquet. I'll wrap it in twine for you. I can do it."*