

The Widow's Granddaughter

A short story by
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She was not someone you would expect to make a difference in anyone's life. She was neither rich nor powerful. She was not vivacious, not young, not beautiful. She was neither a mover nor a shaker. When she walked, she hobbled along, a quad cane in one hand, dragging her withered frame behind her, arthritis-infested joints creaking with each lumbering step. She reeked of old perfume; a small, black toque sat atop her thinning, black hair, probably dyed; and when she opened her mouth, from her shriveled face screeched a voice like that of the Wicked Witch of the West.

"I need you to wait out in the car while I go in and talk to him," Marietta heard the old woman say from the passenger seat.

Marietta hated the idea and searched for some pretense by which to challenge it.

She swerved to avoid a pothole. The silver-grey Chevy belonged to her grandmother, having been pre-owned twice since its birth some 20 or 30 years ago, about as long as Marietta herself had been alive. Like her grandmother, it was aged and tiny, and it hesitated in second gear. But it gave Marietta a sense of purpose, the first time in a long time that she remembered having one.

"I should help you in," she finally said, as she pulled into a parking space. "I'd hate for you to trip or something and get hurt."

"I'm not an invalid," Gran said.

"I know. But I'm supposed to be taking care of you."

"You don't have to hover over me. I'm not going to break."

So she left Marietta stewing outside in the car, angry and alone, flipping through radio stations, searching for something that would soothe her, watching her grandmother limping toward the glass-plated showroom just off of which was the office, thinking that Gran was just another job to the man waiting within, just another opportunity to take advantage of, just another account someone defaulted on, just another debt someone couldn't afford to pay.

"I'm Mrs. Mildred Kramer," the old woman said to the man sitting behind the desk.

Jeffrey Tanner heard and recognized the name. He had handled the account personally, and he knew why she was here. For a fleeting moment, he thought of offering her a seat. But then he thought the better of it: he didn't want to start by being too friendly.

Instead, he said, "What can I do for you, Mrs. Kramer?"

"I'm here to talk about my car."

"Well, what sort of car were you interested in?" Play dumb. Make her do all the work.

Instead of answering, she staggered to his guest chair and collapsed into it.

"My son and I bought a car here," she said, "and you handled the loan."

"Well, I don't know," Jeffrey answered. "Let me look it up." He punched some keys on his computer keyboard. "Awful nice weather we're having, isn't it?" he asked, trying to defuse the situation with small talk.

She eyed him carefully. "I believe we had weather like this in 1982." Her voice filled with an air of authority mixed with sarcasm, a haughty tone that clashed with its reedy quality.

"Could be," Jeffrey said. "That's before my time." He had found the right account on the

computer, even though he didn't even need to look it up. Now he was tapping sporadically on the shift key and staring at the screen as though it were showing something useful. In the grand scale of things, his little, used-car shop didn't make very many loans, not as many as a bank would. And few of his accounts defaulted. This one stood out like a sore thumb, because he knew the old woman used the car to do charity work and to avoid becoming a shut-in.

"I do remember weather not too different from this in '96," he said, continuing the useless conversation that covered up his anxiety. "That was also the year of the blizzard."

"Fascinating," she said. "I want to ask you—"

"Here's the thing, Mrs. Kramer," interrupting her. *The best way to handle a situation like this is to barrel through it head-on.* "That account is in default. Unless you remit payment immediately, we'll need to call the repo man."

She was unfazed. "That's what I'm here to talk to you about, Sir."

"I don't see what there is to talk about, Mrs. Kramer." *Hard ass, remember. Hard ass.* "If you can't come up with the money, we need the car back. There's nothing more I can do. My hands are tied."

Mrs. Kramer looked confused. "I'm sorry. I thought you were the owner here."

"I am, but that doesn't mean there's anything I can do."

He rose to see her out of the office, but she remained seated. From across his cluttered, oaken desk, she stared up at him with puppy-dog-brown eyes, grasping her cane for support.

She said, "Maybe I was wrong about you."

Jeffrey walked around the desk, toward the door, but she still didn't move to stand. She just kept staring at him, as though he were a circus attraction. *See the Skunk-Man, the face of a man, the heart of a skunk. Or would that be an insult to the skunk?*

Her calm steadfastness was beginning to rattle him. Jeffrey pulled over another chair, near to where Mrs. Kramer was sitting, and rested his foot on it. Then he leaned forward, supporting his body weight on his knee, towering over the old woman.

She continued in that same worn, creaky voice, and with the same air of confidence and authority. "In my years, I've known many people, Mr. Tanner, of all shapes and sizes, and all types. Some were as hard-nosed as a drill sergeant and stubborn as a mule, because that's what they believed in. But others didn't believe that, not deep down where it counts. They believed in people."

Now she leaned forward, as much as her ailing body would allow, and got as close as she could to his face. Her eyes narrowed.

"But I never met anyone who got the way you are, unless something or someone drove him to it."

For just an instant, April's face flashed through Jeffrey's memory. She had made him who he was, and he knew it. God, she was beautiful: skin fair and soft as a cloud on a bright spring day; hair like strands of yellow silk; rich, brown eyes he had felt staring into his soul. He remembered her fondly, painfully, and with bitterness. He hated her for what she did to him, for she had forever changed his view of the world.

Jeffrey said to the old lady, "I love your hat. Is it vintage?"

She leaned back in the chair. "My dear, late husband gave it to me on our third wedding anniversary." She chuckled, which sounded as if there were something caught in her throat.

Happy for the opportunity to make small talk, "He gave you a hat for your anniversary?"

She nodded. "He said it would bring me luck." She paused a moment. "Alex reminds me of him."

"Your grandson?"

"My son," she said.

"Ah," Jeffrey acknowledged, remembering that Alex had cosigned the loan.

She continued. "Alex worked in a music store, selling musical instruments and such. He made good money, too."

"Sounds like a good man," he said.

"His store came under new management," the old widow continued. "Then a few weeks ago, a man came to him from a church that had had its equipment stolen. Alex put together a wonderful deal for them to replace it, at a deep discount. Alex's manager didn't appreciate that."

He gazed at her, thinking how silly some people are. Jeffrey had a few corporate clients, and he understood the value of a loyal corporate customer. Sure, maybe you wouldn't make any money on a deal like that— You might even lose money. But afterward, that's the kind of customer who comes back again and again and again, with big purchase orders.

She went on. "That week, it seems the thief experienced an inexplicable stroke of conscience, because he anonymously called the police to tell them where he had hidden the original, stolen equipment. So Alex let them return the purchase, for a full refund. But apparently, the store manager was even more upset that Alex accepted the return than he had been about the discount. So Alex lost his job at the music store."

Jeffrey shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear that. Sometimes life sucks." He made a mental note, however, to contact her the next time he was short-staffed.

"I mentioned that Alex bought me something lucky. He bought me a lucky car. I'm on a fixed income, and I can't afford it on my own. But I do need it to get around, and my granddaughter can drive me. Unfortunately, Alex's current situation has left him short of cash. However, he will get another job, and we'll make good on the loan, if you will afford us some grace."

"Mrs. Kramer, I already told you we can't—"

"Mr. Tanner, you can do anything you want. What you choose to do is another matter altogether."

"Look, Lady..." Jeffrey felt rage welling in his gut. "You think running a business is all peaches and cream, like I have all the money and all the power and I can get away with anything I want. But that's not how the world works. It's dog-eat-dog out there." He stabbed his finger toward the window. "And if I don't hold my bottom line, I'm going to be in the poor house. Being nice don't buy you a load of beans in this world. So either come up with the cash, or I'm taking the car."

He felt like he had just vomited up his stomach lining.

"Anyhow," he added, "why isn't your son here? He cosigned the loan, right?" Jeffrey would much rather have been arguing with another man than with a frail, old lady.

Mrs. Kramer sat for several seconds. Then she quietly struggled to her feet and without a word hobbled out of the office and into the parking lot.

From his office, Jeffrey watched her through the window. At least the worst was over, for now. And he could get someone else to handle the rest.

In the parking lot, a young woman began helping Mrs. Kramer into a car, a young woman who epitomized youth and beauty. The sunlight glinted off her blonde hair, ruffled occasionally by a gentle breeze, flowing down around soft cheeks to just past her delicate shoulders. She wore a smart, brown, corduroy jacket and blue jeans, with sleek, brown shoes on her feet. It was an outfit that accentuated her curves just enough, but not too much, and made her look tall and sexy. As she turned her head, the sun lit up her bright blue eyes, sparkling like sapphires set below fine, fair eyebrows, setting off a small, straight nose and pale lips.

Jeffrey's heart skipped a beat. Wealth was not just about money, he knew. And this might be a way for him to make things right, both for him and for Mrs. Kramer.

Marietta regarded the man, as he double-timed it across the parking lot.

"You didn't introduce me to your driver," he said, slightly out of breath, placing his hands on his hips.

"This is my granddaughter, Mr. Tanner," said the old widow.

He turned to Marietta, reached out his hand, and smiled. "Glad to meet you."

"I guess that makes one of us," she scoffed.

"Marietta, please," said Mrs. Kramer. "Decorum."

Marietta didn't believe in decorum, but for her grandmother, she would try anything.

"I'm sorry, Gran," she said.

Marietta reluctantly took the man's hand for a fleeting moment, leaving her grandmother perched on the edge of the car seat, the old woman's legs hanging out through the open passenger-side door. His palm was smooth, and his touch, gentle. He wore a white shirt and conservative tie, and he stood a half-foot taller than she, with well-groomed, sandy hair, hazel eyes, and a smile that could charm the pants off an ice-queen. That smile, once she took a moment to notice it, her heart began beating faster.

"Marietta," Jeffrey cooed, still staring at her, "please don't judge me too harshly. I think we might be able to work something out after all."

Marietta felt her grandmother eyeing him suspiciously, because she saw the attraction in his eyes. But she also knew the power she had over men, and she wasn't afraid to use it.

"Well, that's different, then. What changed your mind?" she asked with a flirtatious smile.

Jeffrey's heart jumped a little. "You did," he answered matter-of-factly.

"Isn't that something?" Marietta mocked playfully. "I must be the most persuasive person on the planet." His cheeks dimpled, and for a moment, Marietta wondered how it would feel to

brush her finger over one.

“Indeed you are,” Jeffrey said. “Let me buy you dinner tonight, and we’ll discuss it.”

Mrs. Kramer huffed.

“And who knows,” he continued, ogling her up and down. “If the evening goes well, we can swing around to my place for a nightcap.” He allowed himself a lascivious sigh, carefully observing her reaction.

Marietta knew her grandmother must have been gaping in horror, but she put it out of her mind. She strutted up to Jeffrey, stared him in the face. She whiffed his cologne, a gentle but manly scent. She thought of nuzzling up against his neck and inhaling. She even knew that he would enjoy the gesture, and that was her weapon.

“You couldn’t keep up with me, that’s for sure,” she intoned. Her eyes pierced the air between them like darts.

Jeffrey reveled in the sexual tension, in the game. If she was bluffing, he was ready to call.

“I’m sure I could keep up,” he said, “and I’d like to prove it to you.”

“Marietta!” the widow scolded, interrupting. Then, “Mr. Tanner, my granddaughter will not be selling herself at any price, least of all for something so insignificant as an automobile.”

Jeffrey feigned hurt. “No, of course not. I didn’t mean to imply anything improper. I only meant that”—and he returned his gaze, smiling, to the breathtaking Marietta, softening his voice—“it would be easier to talk as friends than as adversaries.”

“It works out the same either way,” the old woman said scornfully. Then to Marietta, “You don’t have to do anything for this man. We’ll find an alternative arrangement.”

Jeffrey breathed slowly, trying to keep his cool. Marietta had already taken him. She did more than just excite him; she enthralled him. The very sound of her voice, the way it touched on his ear, the way its tone rose and fell, made his heart pound. And now she was so close, he could smell the perfume of her hair, count the freckles on her nose. He imagined he could almost feel her eyelashes flicking as she blinked. If he dared, he could reach out and stroke her cheek, run a finger down her warm, smooth neck, maybe cause her to let out a little moan.

“I promise you’ll have a good time,” he purred seductively.

But she didn’t care about his promises. She simply wanted to hurt him, and she knew that she could. “You’re a pig,” Marietta said, still grinning, through clenched teeth. “You know that?”

Maybe it didn’t matter whether he was a pig— Of course he was a pig! Only pigs got ahead in this world. And that wouldn’t prevent him from clinching the deal.

“Look,” he said, “I know you don’t particularly like me.” Not true, he thought, but worth the fiction. “But if you just give me a chance, I can be a nice guy, and I think you’ll have a good time.” He paused a beat and then added, “What do you have to lose? It’s not like you can’t change your mind later. All I want is for you to give me a chance. A little good food and good company. Won’t cost you a thing.”

“Okay,” Marietta heard herself saying. And then it was too late to take it back, even if she had wanted to.

Marietta drove her grandmother most of the way home without talking, until the elder Kramer broke the silence.

"He's not just some guy you picked up in at a bar, you know."

"I know," Marietta said. Guys in bars were usually not quite so good looking, she thought, and she didn't have to think of them as jerks until later, when she broke things off with them.

"This is more complicated," her grandmother continued.

"I know," Marietta repeated.

"What do you hope to accomplish?"

"It can't hurt to keep on his good side." There it was, unabashed, blatant. She wasn't doing it for herself. She was doing it because Gran needed his good graces. To Marietta, it seemed as good a reason as any to take advantage of a man.

"You know as well as I do," said the more experienced, older woman, bluntly, "the only way to get on his good side is to sleep with him. At least that's what he expects."

"We don't know that, Gran." A lie. But something inside Marietta expected the same, and wanted it.

"I think we do know," Gran objected. "It was pretty clear to me. And I don't think you should prostitute yourself. You're better than that."

Marietta said nothing. She wasn't better than that. She knew it. Gran knew it. And despite the independence Gran had always showed and had always taught to Marietta, the fact was that Gran needed her help.

"I'll borrow the money from my annuity," Gran continued. "I'll cut back on my standard of living, and Alex can help me pay it back when he gets another job. Or maybe I'll just go without the car." She paused before she finished: "I don't want you involved."

Marietta knew that none of those options were acceptable. In particular, Uncle Alex had a wife and family to support, and ever since he had lost his job and the recession hit, he had been sinking further and further. That was, she knew, why he hadn't come with them that day. And if his story turned out anything like the other stories Marietta had heard, he wouldn't be able to help out Gran, even if he was able to find work.

"Look, I'll just have dinner with him" Marietta said. "That's all. And then we'll see where we stand. It can't do any harm."

If nothing else, this was Marietta's destiny, her one good deed, her one chance of redemption, because she owed it to her grandmother.

Preparing for the evening's date filled Marietta with an array of mixed feelings, like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. On the one hand, she thought Jeffrey Tanner was cute, and under normal circumstances, *she* might have gone after *him*. She imagined running her fingers through his hair, her fingertips just touching his scalp. She wondered if his shoulders were as broad and muscular as they had seemed that morning, and whether he would twinge as she brushed up against his nipples.

On the other hand, he had invented the word *slime*, tightening the thumbscrews on an old

lady in order to obtain a few friendly benefits for himself. Talk about mixing business and pleasure! The thought made Marietta sick with hatred and bitterness.

But on the other hand, the thought also made Marietta want to use him, to hurt him, all the more.

And she could do this for Gran, because she owed Gran her life.

The surprise result of an anonymous one-night stand, Marietta never knew who her father was, and he never knew about Marietta. And when Marietta was still just a girl, her mother died in a drunk-driving accident, leaving her with her grandparents.

In college, she hooked up with a guy and, much to Gran's dismay, married him. After the divorce, Marietta spent years flitting from job to job, man to man, and couch to couch, at times living out of a suitcase and bumming showers off her friends.

When her grandfather passed on, Gran asked her to move back home, to serve as nurse to her ailing grandmother.

Marietta wasn't sure why she accepted, but she was glad she did, because it was just what she needed. Gran had welcomed Marietta into her house, and seemed to peer into Marietta's soul, showing the same inner strength that Marietta had remembered growing up. Living at home again brought her back to a simpler, more stable lifestyle. She lived at Gran's house in the spare bedroom, rent-free, and for spending money, she picked up a part-time job at a boutique in the mall.

As Gran's nursemaid, Marietta spent less time at parties, bars, and clubs, and more time with the one person who, she now saw, had loved her more than any other person in her life. She filled her days making Gran's meals, tidying up the house, chauffeuring the old woman around, to the nursing home, to church events, even to the local food pantry, where Gran and her granddaughter helped maintain and dole out supplies to people even poorer than they were. She hadn't even dated since moving back home. She flirted from time to time with the orderlies at the nursing home where Gran's few surviving friends lived, but she told herself she did not have enough time for men. In the back of her mind, though, she knew that a more fundamental change was taking place. Her life was getting back on track.

Gran's body may have been failing, but her mind was as sharp as ever, and her life as rich as ever, as long as she could get around—and that's why she needed a car, nothing fancy, just transportation. There were no other alternatives. Gran would become a shut-in. Her life would be effectively over.

Gran had saved Marietta not just once, but twice: first when her mother died, raising her as a daughter; and now for a second time, welcoming her back as the prodigal. Marietta owed her, doubly. And she could do this one thing. She *had* to do this one thing.

But on the other hand, Gran had already disapproved, strongly. And for all her independence—which she had inherited from her grandmother—Marietta still desired Gran's approval, and loved and honored her grandmother more than anyone else in the world.

At almost half an hour past the appointed time, Jeffrey sauntered into the Italian restaurant

where they had agreed to meet. At first, he didn't see Marietta, and he considered that maybe she had given up waiting for him. Nonetheless, he scanned the room. Romantic music vibrated through the atmosphere, and succulent aromas assaulted Jeffrey's olfactory senses, making his mouth water. Through the dim lights, he made out Marietta, breathtakingly beautiful in a blue cocktail dress, seated at the bar, nursing a martini. He stopped for a moment to admire her. He sighed deeply. Then he took the stool next to her.

"Hey, look!" she called, a little too enthusiastically. "It's John!"

"Jeffrey," he corrected her. She smelled like gin.

Marietta still doubted what she was doing there, thinking she could still get out of it if she wanted to, convinced that she needed to go through with it, feeling that she wanted to anyhow, knowing that she would hate herself in the morning even more than she did already. And then there was Jeffrey, looking even better than she had remembered. Or maybe she was seeing him through martini-colored glasses.

"Bartender, can you get John here a drink?" she called to the man behind the counter.

"My name's Jeffrey," he repeated.

She giggled. "John Chicken-Balls." Funny joke, she thought, although she didn't know why. Jeffrey asked the bartender for a glass of Pinot Grigio, then he turned his attention back to the girl in the blue dress.

"How many of those have you had?" he asked, motioning to her martini glass.

"I don't remember," she said. She had been drinking to calm her mind, and it seemed to be working. "But you are late."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Hey..." The bartender brought Jeffrey's wine and Jeffrey thanked him. "Why don't we get a table and get something to eat? Do you like spaghetti?"

She had been gulping her martini when he said this, and just now she started giggling again.

"Did I say something funny?"

Unable to speak, unable to swallow, she nodded and held her hand to her chest. When she finally caught her breath, she said, "I always thought that was a funny word."

"Spaghetti?"

She giggled some more.

This vulgar conversation was now bordering on the profane. He needed to somehow stem the tide of her inebriation.

"Yeah," he said, "and eating it is just as fun, and I think it might do you some good."

"Oh no," she said, shaking her head and grinning slyly through slurred lips. "If I eat anything, then I won't get drunk enough to forget about tonight, and it's very important for me to not know what I'm doing while I'm doing it. You know what I mean?"

"Do I really disgust you that much?" Jeffrey asked.

"Oh yes," she said. "But you're as much as I deserve. You know,"—she pointed a finger at his face—"I could really go for you. If you weren't so mean."

"Give me a chance." He smiled. "I can be nice."

“Oh, yes, you can, you sly fox. But if I tell you to get lost, the deal’s off, isn’t it? So how nice is that? But you know, I brought it on myself. That’s what I get, because that’s what I wanted, dammit.”

She took another swig of martini.

“It’s in my genes, you know. I’m from that side of the family. If it weren’t for Gran, I’d be out on the street. And that’s why I deserve someone like you.”

“You don’t even know me, and already you’ve judged me. Is that fair?”

No, it wasn’t fair. But it was life. “It’s as fair as people like you and me deserve,” she said sadly.

“I’m a nice guy,” he repeated, “once you get to know me. And I’m sure you’re very nice, too.”

“Yeah,” she added, “but you’re stingy.”

“I’m paying for dinner, not to mention all those drinks you’re downing. How stingy is that?”

“Yeah, but it’s only because you want something.”

“I want the company of a beautiful woman. What’s wrong with that?”

“Company,’ right,” she said sarcastically. She thought she had heard every euphemism for sex ever invented, but he had managed to come up with a new one.

She continued: “Always take advantage of the the situation, no matter how many people you hurt.”

Her attitude was beginning to annoy Jeffrey, and he briefly considered leaving her there so she could finish her debauchery all by herself. But he knew he couldn’t do that. And deep down in his gut, he didn’t want to, either. For some reason he couldn’t explain, this woman was innately special to him, regardless of how annoying she was at the moment.

“If I had simply asked you out, would you have accepted?” he asked.

Marietta considered her own mixed feelings. “I don’t know,” she said.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” he said. “But I wanted you to go out with me. And at the time, this seemed the only way to get your attention. I’m sorry that it upset you.”

“And you always take advantage of the situation, right?”

There was that phrase again. Why should he have to justify himself to her? “Well, wouldn’t you rather be with someone who could take advantage of the situation, rather than someone who let everyone else walk all over you?”

Before Marietta could answer, the maitre d’ arrived and seated them at a table. Jeffrey asked for “water, lots of water” to drink.

“You know why I’m doing this, though, you know,” Marietta said, apropos of nothing. “It’s not for you, no. I mean, don’t get me wrong.” She touched the back of his hand and smiled coyly. His skin felt smooth, except for fine bristles of hair, almost imperceptible. She lightly riffled it, enjoying the texture under her fingers. “You’re cute. But actually, you piss me off!”

“Is that why you dressed up?” he said. “That cute, blue dress you’re wearing is no house frock, you know.” Jeffrey could tell that she had clearly put some thought into what she would wear. Her natural features required little makeup, but even in this area, he now noticed, she had tastefully applied eyeshadow, blush, and lipstick. He stared into her eyes of crystal

Caribbean sea, and he felt a little sorry for her.

"I just wanted to get on your good side," she said. "But I'm not doing this for you, and I'm not doing it for me. I'm doing it for her."

"Your grandmother?" Jeffrey said.

"Right," she said between sips. "Something you wouldn't understand."

"Try me," he said.

"That woman does more for people like you every day, than you probably have in your entire life. How could you understand? I didn't even get it until..." Until her grandfather had passed on and Gran had put trust in her.

"Until what?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. She didn't want to share her feelings about her grandfather's death with this man. She was still sober enough at least to realize that. She swallowed another sip of her drink.

"Anyhow," she continued. "I'm glad you know how to take advantage of the situation, because otherwise you wouldn't take advantage of a drunk girl, and you may need to do that tonight, eh?" She grinned salaciously.

"I guess that depends on how drunk you are," he answered. "But I have to admit, this isn't the kind of fun I had in mind."

"Ooh..." She grinned. "I know the kind of fun you had in mind." She giggled again.

Jeffrey tried to get her to drink water, warning her, "You're going to have one awful hangover tomorrow," but she actively resisted the idea. He did manage to get her to eat some Fettuccine Alfredo, which he reasoned would also help, as well as some shrimp and chicken, and a little dessert. And he successfully shifted the subject of conversation to more pleasant discussion, like music, movies, fashion, astrology... religion and politics... anything that would keep her from talking about how much she hated him. Ironically, he found himself genuinely enjoying her company, and wanting her to like him.

He obviously couldn't let her drive home. She did not resist as he put her in his car, but she did refuse to tell him where she lived, insisting through slurred syllables that he drive her to his place. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

So he took her to his apartment, gave her a T-shirt to wear, held her hair as she lost her mostly-liquid dinner to the porcelain receptacle, and tucked her into his bed. He crashed on the living-room sofa.

Marietta dreamed that her father had returned for her.

My father has come for me.

I hear Gran talking to him, though I can't see her, asking him to stay and take care of me, explaining how much he's missed, saying that she won't be around for too much longer, won't be able to take care of me anymore, and that I need his help now. I feel helpless.

He looks me up and down and tells me I've grown up into a beautiful woman. I know he wants to have an incestuous affair with me, and that if I resist, he'll abandon me again. I fear

abandonment, but I loathe the alternative. I'm seriously considering going through with it.

I hear Gran now arguing with me not to do it. But I've resigned myself. I undress, lay on my bed, terrified, and sob and wait for the inevitable.

Suddenly, Prince Charming appears, speaking kindly, stroking my hair, trying to soothe me. I appreciate the effort, but I'm so distraught, I don't believe anybody can help me.

My mother appears, as beautiful as I remember her from when I was little. She scolds my father, telling him he's not allowed to go through with it, because he doesn't care for me as a true father would. I ask her how she can say that, because she left me, too. No, she says, she never left; she has always been with me, still alive. But she has to remain in hiding, because the men who chased my father away are still after her, and would come after me, too, if they knew of our relationship.

I turn my head to see Prince Charming, who kisses me, calming me. In that instant, I feel enraptured, in love, comforted, and I kiss him back, passionately, running my hand across his cheek. He climbs into bed with me, and we make love. I feel him entering me, and in erotic ecstasy, we grow closer, as though we're becoming part of each other.

I feel Gran looking on, disapproving, but I also feel convinced that I could persuade her to change her mind. However, I know that it doesn't matter, because Prince Charming will up and leave me, never to be seen again, as soon as we're done.

Marietta awoke with a knot in her stomach, shivering, and with a headache as big as the sun. She quickly determined where she was, but her memories of the previous evening were mixed with dream images. She lay in bed for a long time, wrestling with those images. The worst of the dream she already knew: the nightmare had been recurring from time to time for years. But some elements were new, and she wasn't sure what was memory and what was dream. She lay in bed, trying to sift fiction from reality, to remember what happened the previous night. But her mind was a blank, and she assumed that the dream was actually her mind's distorted memory of what had happened last night. That meant that not only did he get what he wanted, but she had also made an ass of herself and lost control of the situation.

Feeling half a slut, half a whore, and 100% complete failure, she rushed to get dressed, grabbed her purse, and stumbled through the apartment toward the front door.

Jeffrey yelled to her from the kitchen as she passed. "I'm making us extra-large omelets. Here, I'll pour you a glass of orange juice."

Each word grated on her head like a wood rasp.

"No, no," she eked out. "I'm—" ...*uh, trying to think up an excuse.* "Uh. I'm late for work."

Jeffrey didn't know whether he believed that. He knew she had a part-time job at the mall, but he had assumed she spent most of her time taking care of her grandmother.

"Well, at least grab a banana or two and a bottle of water." He picked up a banana from the fruit bowl and held it out to her.

Half stooped over, fumbling in her purse for her keys, she stopped for a moment. It seemed a non-threatening enough gesture for him to make.

"Thanks," she said, as she accepted the banana. The shame beating down upon her conscience was almost unbearable. "Uh. So are we all set?"

"What do you mean?"

She didn't understand why she couldn't just do what she'd usually do, just out and ask whether she was a good lay. For some bizarre reason, she just didn't feel up to it.

She tried again. "The car, are we all set with the car?"

"Your grandmother's car," Jeffrey said. "Don't worry. We'll work out something."

This confirmed her worst fears. She turned to leave, because she was about to start crying in front of him.

"By the way, how do you expect to get anywhere without a car?" he asked.

"But," she said on verge of tears, "I thought you said it was all set."

"Yes," he intoned slowly, "but it's also still parked back at the restaurant, and I don't think you're going to walk all that way."

"Oh shit!" Marietta said, holding her head between her hands, along with the banana. "Why did this have to happen to me?!" Then, "Ow." Her head was pounding, and her brain wasn't working.

He walked over and wiped a tear just beginning to trickle from her left eye. "Hurts, doesn't it?"

He couldn't possibly know how much she was hurting inside. "You have no idea," she said.

She noticed an omelet steaming on the stove. "Gee, those eggs smell good."

"They'll make you feel better. Sure you don't have time?"

"Uw..." She shook her head. "This was a bad idea. I should never have done this. Thanks for everything, but I really need to get away from here. I'll call a cab." She started rifling through her purse again. "Where's that damn cell phone?! Ow..."

"You really need to stop that." In his most charming voice and with his most charming smile, "I'll drive you, but I want you to eat some hangover food first. You can use my phone to call in sick, if you need to."

She couldn't stand his display of generosity. "You don't need to buy the prostitute dinner and breakfast and drive her around, too. I'll find a way home, and you don't have to worry about it."

"What are you talking about?" Jeffrey was genuinely confused.

"Sex for a car," she blurted out, carefully avoiding eye-contact. "That's what it was, and I know it was my idea, and I'm not blaming you, but let's just be honest about it. And now that it's done and over with, I just really want to get out of here."

He shook his head. "There was no sex."

"But," Marietta puzzled, "last night, this morning..." She pointed toward the bedroom.

"Honey, the only thing you did in my bed was pass out."

"Oh no," Marietta groaned. "All that and for nothing?! Ow..." She really did need to learn to control the volume of her own voice.

He restrained a guffaw, instead grabbed her shoulders and gently ushered her into one of his dining room chairs. Then he knelt beside her, holding her hand.

“It wasn’t for nothing,” he said. “We had a good time, at least I did, except that you drink like a fish, and you’re a mean drunk. Didn’t see that coming. You kept railing about how much you hate me. Then you wouldn’t let me drive you home, so I brought you here.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I remember that.”

“Well, then, that’s it. You slept in the bedroom, and I crashed on the couch out here.”

Marietta was beginning to regret what she had thought of him. She agreed to stay for breakfast.

After a three-egg omelet and a large glass of orange juice, Marietta’s head felt a little better, and she was actually beginning to laugh at Jeffrey’s jokes and enjoy his company. And she felt a little guilty about that.

He drove her to her car.

“Would you like to try for dinner again?” he asked.

Marietta hesitated. He probably deserved a second chance, since she had so screwed up the first one. But agreeing to date him was what had gotten her into trouble in the first place, and she felt there was some reason she shouldn’t go down that path again—though her brain wouldn’t let her remember what it was at that instant. In any case, she wasn’t ready to start dating again. And God knows what her grandmother would say!

“I’ll cook for you,” he said.

“I don’t know,” she replied, shaking her head.

“I studied as a professional chef.”

“Before you got into used cars?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said, completely serious. “You won’t be disappointed.”

She eyed him suspiciously, but he had his dimples on, and she couldn’t tell what was going on behind that smile. Was this just a story? Another scheme to get her into bed? Another chance to redeem herself? Or did he genuinely like her? She didn’t see how he could, or why she should like him.

“I promise, I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

“That’ll be some trick,” she said sarcastically and then instantly regretted it. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

Jeffrey smiled his most charming smile and gently touched her shoulder. “So what do you say? Dinner tonight? For real this time?”

His touch passed through her body like a bolt of electricity. “Okay,” she said. But she was thinking, Isn’t that how I got into trouble in the first place?

All the way home, Marietta worried about what she was going to tell her grandmother, about everything. As she entered the front door, she listened for signs that Gran was up and about. She walked toward the kitchen, where she heard movement.

“Gran? Is that you?”

“Yes,” came the reply. “You’re late, by about 10 hours.” She was shuffling across the floor, a tomato in one hand, her walker in the other, making her way toward a cutting board she had

laid out on the kitchen table.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry I didn't call."

"Uh huh," said the old woman. "Is everything taken care of, then?"

"With the car? Yes," said Marietta. "He said we can work out a repayment plan."

"Fine. We'll speak no more about it, then."

Marietta stepped up and grabbed the tomato from her grandmother's hand. "Here. Let me do that for you." She retrieved the chef's knife from the large silverware drawer and began by cutting out the stem and slicing the tomato in halves. Still worried about what to say, worried about what Gran must think of her, the emotions from that morning churning, Marietta began to cry.

"Do you want to talk about it?" said the old woman.

Marietta shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've made a mess of everything."

"What do you mean? What happened?"

She began to cut one of the tomato halves into wedges, but gave up and set the knife on the cutting board.

"You've been so good to me, Gran," she said. "And all I've done is ruin everything."

The old woman grinned a little. "My Little One, you're still young. You have your whole life ahead of you."

Marietta shook her head again. "I'm almost 30. And what have I got to show for it? I flunked out of college; I'm divorced; I've been fired from every job I've ever had; I've spent almost all of your money. The only thing I'm good at is being a slut. And I don't even know how to do that right anymore!" She took a moment to sniffle. "And you're not going to be around forever. Once you're gone, I won't even have you to kick around. Serves me right."

The old woman had been listening attentively. Now she spoke. "Marietta, you know you haven't been fired from every job you've had. And you didn't flunk out of college; you quit, because it wasn't right for you, and that was the right thing to do. And it takes two people to make a marriage fail, just as it takes two to make a marriage work. And I have plenty of money to meet my needs, as long as I budget it. And you've always survived, because you're tenacious, and that's an admirable quality, one that most people never obtain. And I've never let you kick me around. And I've always been proud of you for doing what you thought was the right thing, even if I disagreed. That's all that's happened here."

Marietta shook her head some more, slowly, because it was beginning to pulse with pain. "That's not what happened. I made a mess of everything."

"What happened?" the old woman asked again.

Marietta gulped. "I— uh." Her voice shrunk. "I had a little too much to drink. And I— Nothing happened. Jeffrey was a perfect gentleman."

"Jeffrey?" she asked, taken aback that Marietta would speak of him so warmly.

"Yes. He bought me dinner, cooked me breakfast, let me crash at his apartment. He listened to me insult him to his face. He loaned me his shirt." She remembered him putting her to bed. "He held my hair..." She began to sob. "I so misjudged him. I can't do anything right, can I?"

Gran was smiling the tender, knowing smile of someone who's been around the block more than twice. "No, you didn't misjudge him," she said. "I think you were right about what he was aiming at. But I think the part of him that knows how to love, it's buried deep inside. And when the chips were down, I think his true nature shone through." She paused for a breath. "Do you like him?"

"I don't know," Marietta said, regaining control over herself.

"Are you sure? You seem to be acting very emotional, over someone you have no feelings for."

"Maybe a little," Marietta admitted. She wiped her eyes with her hands. "But I don't think it's right, and I hate that. And I don't know how I'm going to face him."

"Do you have plans to see him again?"

She nodded. "He asked me to dinner."

Gran sighed. "Maybe he has feelings for you too."

During the day, Marietta took her grandmother to a doctor's appointment, then to the grocery store, and later, to the nursing home to visit some of her few remaining friends. The old folks always enjoyed visits from Mildred and Marietta. Between all the activity, she had little time to ruminate.

What time she did have alone with her thoughts, however, Marietta found herself troubling over her dream. Like anyone else, Marietta had dreamed strange dreams before, but even Freud would have had problems with this one.

Marietta had never met her father, didn't even know who he was or what he looked like, and probably never would know. She didn't even know if he was still alive. But always in her dreams, he appeared as the person she'd imagined when she was a little girl, when she wondered why he wasn't there for her. Now, as an adult, she knew it wasn't his fault, that her mother was at least as responsible for Marietta's lack of a father, and her lack of a mother, too.

Gran and Gramps did what they could, of course, and they were wonderful guardians, so wonderful that Marietta often marveled that they could have raised someone like her mother, or like Marietta herself.

But always in the dream, her father returned and demanded his roll in the hay. And always Marietta relented, and always ended up in tears. And always Mother came out of hiding, just this once, and forced him to leave. And in the end, Marietta felt both loved and denied, adopted and abandoned, dramatically emotional. Usually, she awoke in tears and lay in bed sobbing. But not this time.

This time, Prince Charming appeared. The dream was different. Prince Charming was no fairytale character. He donned normal everyday clothes, wore normal everyday cologne. They had never been introduced. Yet in her dream, she knew he was a prince, and specifically that he was Prince Charming. When he looked at her, she felt drawn to him, and when he spoke to her with his warm, soft voice, she felt he was a part of her world, and when he touched her, she felt comforted, safe. This character had never before haunted her dreams. Still, he had a

familiar quality to him that she couldn't put her finger on, as though she should know him, or know who he was. And she desired him. She wanted to see him again, if only for a brief moment or two.

Jeffrey, on the other hand, dinner plans dominated his thoughts. He knew Marietta liked Indian food, and he planned an Indian-themed menu: rice, sauce, soup, spiced fish, and dessert. He was planning the perfect evening. She was closer than ever to succumbing to his charm.

Unfortunately, his preoccupation affected his ability to concentrate on his work. One of his top salesmen even noted how off his game he was. Jeffrey replied, "Sometimes life gives you a second chance." And Jeffrey understood what that meant, even though it confused the others.

When April had left, she made it clear the reason: because Jeffrey "wasn't man enough for her." Those are the exact words she used, words that would forever be burnt into his memory. He had fallen deeply in love with her, had given her anything she wanted. Apparently, that wasn't enough. She wanted space; she got it. She wanted freedom; he gave it. That turned out to be his downfall. They say that if you love someone, let her go, and if she returns, it was meant to be. Jeffrey used to believe that, a long time ago. Now, not so much. Because instead of returning his devotion, April eventually admitted that he bored her, that he was too placid, that she could never trust him to defend her, that real men took control and went after what they wanted.

Since then, he had never let sentiment get in the way. He went after what he wanted, and he usually got it.

It had been many years since he had met someone who excited him as April had. Now, he believed life had given him a second chance, and this time he was going to do it right. This time, he was going to keep her.

He left the shop early, in the hands of his capable staff. He stopped off at the grocery store on the way home, to buy some fresh fish, a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, and numerous other odds and ends, including a new package of condoms, because he was running out, and those he always kept in supply. Packing up the wine, he thought of how he would have to carefully regulate the amount of it that Marietta drank, and he chuckled. Once he got home, he dumped his purchases on the counter, tuned in a soft jazz station on the satellite radio, and began to prepare dinner. a dance of aromas and flavors, choreographed in detail, to the setting of the dining room table and the plating of each course. Fast running out of time, he quickly showered and dressed, pausing only to admire his reflection in the mirror.

The scent of simmering spices wafted down the hallway and even permeated the air outside Jeffrey's apartment building, where Marietta first noticed it. She rang for his unit, and he buzzed her in. Inside, the smell was even stronger. Marietta's mouth began to water, and she suddenly realized how hungry she was. She had not had much to eat all day, managing only a quick lunch between taxiing her grandmother around. She got home just in time to freshen up

and throw on a clean blouse and skirt, some one-inch heels, and a barrette for her hair. She had been trying to play down the “date” aspect of the evening, but she instead found that she was nervous that everything go well.

She found Jeffrey waiting expectantly for her at his apartment door, smiling that smile of his, and she suddenly realized who Prince Charming was.

The food turned out to be both delectable and beautiful, each plate a portrait, a work of art. It had felt almost criminal to eat it. Jeffrey could have cooked at a five-star restaurant. With a talent like this, what could have possessed him to become a used-car salesman?

As it turned out, it was because he enjoyed interacting with people.

When she talked, he seemed genuinely interested. They talked about their pasts, presents, and futures. Somehow, in his presence, she remembered only pleasant memories and saw only heartening dreams.

She began feeling again the same way she had in her dream.

“Why couldn’t you have been this charming yesterday?” Marietta asked, one candlelit dinner later.

“I’m always this charming,” Jeffrey replied. “But you were upset with me last night.”

“No,” she countered. “You were an ass.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she thought she should clarify. “Or at least I thought you were. But now, you’re actually nice. You know, no expectations.”

“I want you to like me,” he explained.

She felt betrayed, that he just wanted to manipulate her feelings, that he wasn’t doing it just because he liked her.

“Is that it?” she asked. “You’re only playing the Prince Charming act because you want me to like you?”

The question both amused and confused Jeffrey. “You’re a beautiful and interesting woman. Isn’t it right that I should want you to like me?”

“I guess so,” she admitted, but she still felt let down. “I just thought that, maybe, you were being nice because, well, maybe because you felt...” She didn’t want to finish the sentence, because she didn’t want to be disappointed. She finished off the last of her wine instead.

But he knew how he felt about her, and he completed the sentence himself. “You mean you wanted me to like you, too?” he said.

“Forget it,” she said.

How could he explain to Marietta, without asking for too much too fast, without scaring her off, without seeming too demanding or comparing her with old girlfriends? Without seeming weak? How could he explain to her how she made him feel?

He reached across the table and took her hand. “Marietta,” he said, “very rarely does a man meet a woman who literally takes his breath away, in the way she moves, the way she talks, what she says, even how she says it. I can’t explain what it is. All I know is that I would never have gone through all this for anyone else— It’s been forever since I felt this way about anyone else.”

He examined her eyes, which were staring at the carpet. "I hope that's not too heavy for you. It's just how I feel."

Marietta didn't know how she felt about that, or even what it really meant. "I need another glass of wine," is all she said.

"You also need to drive home," he objected, "and you can't do that if you're drunk."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

She carried her glass to the kitchen counter on which stood the half-empty bottle. Next to it sat a plastic grocery-store bag, which Jeffrey must have left on the counter, amongst a clutter of items that needed to be put away, and peeking out of the bag was a brand new, unopened package of condoms.

If Marietta felt betrayed before, now she felt defrauded. Something inside of her snapped. She was suddenly sick and tired of men. In a fit of lividity, she grabbed the bag of condoms and marched back out to the dining room.

"What the hell is this?!" she demanded.

In an instant, Jeffrey realized that he should have taken some time to tidy up a little before Marietta had arrived, even if it meant that dinner would have been late. He had honestly not meant anything by them. He had bought them without even thinking, and that was the problem, wasn't it. No thinking.

"That, my dear," replied Jeffrey as casually as he could, "is a box of prophylactics."

"And what did you expect to use them for?!" She quickly changed her mind. "Never mind. I don't want to know!"

She flung them across the dining room table and marched over to the living room couch, where she had stashed her purse.

Jeffrey followed her, anxious to calm her down.

She turned around and found herself face to face with him, blocking her path to the door.

"Hold on," he said quickly but smoothly. "You have the wrong idea."

"You know what gets me?" she steamed, hurt and angry. "I actually thought maybe you had feelings for me, maybe you actually liked me. And I come to find out it's all an act. All you really want is a roll in the hay!"

"Not true," he said, but she ignored him.

"It's all you men always want. It's all just a big act. There's nothing real in there, is there?" She stabbed at his heart with her finger. "Nothing genuine!"

She turned to walk around him, but he grabbed her by the shoulders. He was no longer smiling.

"You want real?" he said. "When I first met you, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. And since then, I haven't been able to think of anything else except seeing you, and hearing your voice."

"Oh, save it!" Marietta shouted, pushing him away. And she was gone.

Marietta sunk into loneliness, and the nightmares repeated themselves. She continued to tend

to her grandmother, but her mood descended into darkness, and she became more and more quiet, distant. Gran's friends noticed it, too, during their weekly visits, and all became concerned.

"Why don't you go out tonight?" Gran suggested to her one evening, as Marietta turned on the television, interrupting Gran's reading.

Marietta shook her head. "I don't much feel like it." She sat down on the living room couch. A talking head canted in melodramatic tones a tribute to some political faction or another.

"When I asked you to come live with me," Gran said, "I didn't mean for you to give up all your friends."

Marietta didn't have any real friends, not like Gran's friends were to each other. How she could have lived for so long without real friends, she didn't know. Or maybe she had gone insane because of it. Maybe if you're crazy, you're the only one who doesn't know it.

"I don't have any friends," Marietta said, flipping the channel randomly, landing on something involving dark lights, suspenseful music, and haphazardly pointed guns.

"What about that girl... Sandra? Why don't you call her and go out and dance or have a drink or whatever you girls do nowadays?"

"Troll for men," Marietta said, uneasy and a little disgusted. "We troll for men, and the first to leave with one wins."

She looked over at Gran, whose expression had changed not in the slightest.

"Why don't you and I play a hand of poker?" Marietta joked. "Bet you'd win."

"That sounds like a fine idea!" the old woman cackled. "You can get the cards, and I'll just sit here and try to figure out how to get you tell me what's really wrong."

Marietta knew her grandmother would not believe that everything was fine, because it clearly hadn't been.

"I don't know," Marietta said. "I've just been... tired."

"Does it have anything to do with the flowers and the gifts and the home-cooked gourmet meals from the man I've been lying to for you?"

Marietta shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

She slowly told Gran about the disturbing nightmares, piece by piece, about her father coming back, about his attempt to rape her in her dreams, about her mother, about Prince Charming. "I wonder what Freud would say about that one."

"Freud was a very disturbed man," Gran said. "I don't think you'd want his opinion."

"Did something like that ever happen to me? When I was little?"

Gran shook her head. "No, no. Never. I remember, though, when you were almost a teenager, you once asked me if you would ever see your father. It broke my heart, because I knew, while we tried to be good to you, we weren't really 'Mom' and 'Dad,' and that was something that would always be missing from your life."

"Gran, that's not your fault," Marietta immediately interjected.

"I know," Gran continued. "But it actually surprised me, ever since you were in college, that you lived the same way that your mother did, when it came to men."

"That's not your fault, either."

Gran nodded. "I've often wondered. But I also wondered whether you were looking for your father."

"And they say that Freud was disturbed?" Marietta joked.

"I just meant," said Gran, "that maybe your dream is trying to tell you something about the men you date. They all remind me of the men your mother used to chase. All of them, including what's-his-name."

Marietta knew Gran was referring to her ex-husband, whose name they rarely used. "The one that stuck," Marietta echoed.

"For all of five months. He was a keeper."

At that very moment, a condom commercial came on the television.

Marietta chuckled. Everything Gran was saying had been true. Marietta had just always thought it was who she was, and that Gran and Gramps, they were just different, like Marietta's Uncle Alex and Aunt Maureen.

"Did you date much before you met Gramps?" she asked.

"Yes, I had a few boyfriends. But your grandfather was really something special." Her eyes lit up at the memory. "Most of the boys, you know, they were always trying to show off around us girls. But Bill was different. He was so transparent. When he told me he was falling in love with me, I knew it was the truth."

Marietta had not realized before how special that made her feel, just hearing the story. Before she knew what she was saying, she asked:

"Do you think I'll ever find someone like that?"

Jeffrey tried everything he could think of to recapture Marietta's affections. He sent her flowers, arrangements that specifically reminded him of her. He sent her presents, gifts that he knew would impress her. He gave Hallmark quite some business, spending an inordinate amount of time picking over the selection of "I'm Sorry" cards, "Missing You" cards, "Love You" cards, and just plain "Thinking of You" cards. He wrote her long love letters, full of romantic, passionate sentiments from his heart. He didn't know that they all went unread. He only knew that they went unanswered. He even visited, several times, delivering homemade, gourmet meals for Marietta and her grandmother to enjoy, but Marietta was always "out."

As days turned into weeks, Jeffrey wondered when he would reach his pathetic threshold and give up. Or whether he would first descend into despair. He spent increasingly more time thinking about her, trying to think of new ways to reach her. His performance at work suffered enough that his staff began mumbling, worrying about their future job prospects, but none of them dared challenge him.

Finally, he decided to make one last visit to the widow. But if this attempt failed, he would give up, whatever the cost.

"Could I speak with you for a few minutes?"

Forever gracious, she invited him in for some tea, and he accepted.

“What was it you wanted to speak to me about?” Formal and respectable.

“Has Marietta told you about our last date?”

“A little,” she said.

“I’ve been trying to let her know how I feel about her, but I don’t think the message has been getting through.”

“Yes, I know. She may still doubt your sincerity.”

“Maybe you could talk to her? Try to convince her that I’m sincere?”

The widow appeared to take a moment to think while she sipped her tea. “When she first met you, why were you so manipulative? Why did you not just ‘be yourself,’ as they say?”

“I didn’t want to lose her, before I even had a chance...” He let his words trail off.

“Yet, that appears to be exactly what you have done.”

“You don’t think there’s any way I can redeem myself?” he asked.

“I think you’re still asking the wrong question,” she answered.

Jeffrey thought about that, but his brain was beginning to hurt. She wished the old woman would stop talking in riddles and just give him the answer. He sipped from his own cup.

“This is the first time I’ve seen Marietta stand up for herself,” she said.

Jeffrey didn’t believe that. It didn’t make sense. Marietta could be such a firebrand.

The old woman continued. “She’s always been attracted to the wrong kind of men, and she’s always let them use her and leave her, under the guise that she was using them and leaving them. Ironically, you seem to have broken her out of that pattern.”

Jeffrey shook his head, confused. He had not done anything, and he had never met the Marietta who let anyone walk all over her. But there was another, more pressing thought that raced through his mind. “Are you saying I’m the wrong kind of man?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I guess it depends on how much you’re willing to trust her.”

The two sat quietly and sipped. If there was nothing he could do to redeem himself, then what was left? Maybe he should just try to be himself, whoever that was. Ever since April left him, he had learned never to leave anything to chance, always to manipulate every situation to his advantage. But if he couldn’t convince Marietta to be with him, maybe she needed to decide to accept or reject him as he was, and not as he wanted her to see him.

In any case, this was his last try. He already knew that. So he had to go for the big play, his last-ditch effort, double or nothing, a last-second full-court shot, everything on double-zero, the Hail Marietta... if providence would supply one last opportunity.

Marietta quietly descended the old, carpeted staircase, having just awoken from a nap. Her clothes were mussed, and her hair was disheveled, and she was padding in stockinged feet toward the kitchen, where she planned to make herself a snack. But she never made it to the kitchen, because she stopped and stared when she noticed who was sitting on the living room couch, drinking tea with her grandmother.

He looked up from his tea and stared longingly into Marietta’s eyes. Pure joy at the sight of her formed his face into a smile.

Marietta's heart skipped a beat in anticipation and hope, desiring to speak to him. But then she thought better, remembered that she wasn't dating right now, then remembered his dishonesty, and she turned back toward the kitchen.

He placed his cup and saucer on the coffee table and stood. "Please, please, don't go," he begged.

Instinctively, she turned back to face him. "Why not?" she challenged.

He didn't even think the words before he said them. "Because if you do, you'll break my heart."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Oh yeah," she said sarcastically. "I'm sure."

The words stung him, like little darts jabbing their way into his gut.

She continued. "You never give up, do you?"

He didn't know what to say. He didn't answer.

"It's all just a big game to you, isn't it?" She began to raise her voice. "I'm just another challenge, another notch on your bedpost. You know something? You make me sick!"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You sure are!" she retorted, but he sounded genuine. She wanted to believe him, but people said they were sorry all the time, without meaning a thing. She had used that line herself before. "What are you sorry for?" she asked.

"I thought I needed to get you to like me," he explained. "But I was wrong."

That took her aback.

"I never meant to hurt you, and you were never a game to me. It was only my own mixed up attempt to try to win you over. You've had time and reason to be angry with me, but the only thing that's been building in me is affection for you. Look, if it were anyone else, I would have reached my pathetic threshold long before this."

She didn't know what to think. Give him one more chance? The third time's the charm?

He sighed deeply, exhausted, and ran his fingers through his hair, and closed his eyes for a second. "I wish there were some way to fix the damage I've done."

She stared at him, wanting to believe him. "Why?" she asked. "Why is it so important to you?"

"I don't know why. It doesn't make any sense. But it is, and I can't help it."

Confused, she shook her head. "I don't know. I've got to think about—"

Then he went for broke. He walked up to her and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

Marietta looked up into his eyes, which no longer twinkled, but stared back at her as if pleading. His cheeks did not dimple. He was no longer charming, but pitiful and weak. Ironically, she had accomplished what she had originally set out to do to him, to hurt him, to decimate him, and her success left her feeling as empty as if she really cared about him.

She reached her hand up to his face, and then he smiled at her, and her finger touched the dimple in his cheek. Her knees began to weaken.

"I'm sorry," she said, simply.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into an embrace. He ran his fingers through

her hair.

“Ow!” she said, as his finger caught on a snarl.

“It’s a little bit tangled,” he said.

“Oh!” She stepped back and hid her hair with her hands. “I must look a mess.”

He beamed at her, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve seen for weeks.”

She felt herself blushing, and she even allowed herself to be flattered.

Then he did kiss her, tenderly and fully on the lips, caressing her ear with one hand and her back with the other.

And she kissed him as well, her knees falling out from under her, hanging on for her life, but taken up in his arms, his muscular chest pressed close her hers.

They did not live happily ever after, as they would have in a fairytale story. In fact, this was probably one of the worst ways to begin a relationship, plunged as they were into an emotional conflict.

But somehow they did make it, through many long talks. Marietta learned to trust that she did have a special place in Jeffrey’s heart. And Jeffrey learned to trust that Marietta had a special place in her heart for him.

They married after two years. In that time, they all had grown to be close, and at the wedding, Marietta’s grandmother gleamed with such pride, one might think that her entire life had been leading up to this single event.

A month after the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon, Mildred Kramer left to be with her Lord. Of sound mind to the end, she simply went to sleep one night and never woke up again. Marietta was devastated, naturally, as was her husband. But Jeffrey helped make the arrangements, and the two consoled each other.

Then, while the memory was still fresh, Marietta became pregnant. She marveled at the symmetry of life and death, and she prayed each day that she would be as good a mother to her Little One as her grandmother had been to her.

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