

Valentine's Day Massacre

ACT ONE, Scene One – Lock and Load

Marnie drove down the interstate with her heart in high gear. She headed to a Valentine's Day party at a friend's house with one thing on her mind—a senior in her class at high school, named Brendan—a transfer student who came to her school in mid-January. This bode well for Marnie. Brendan had come at a time after all the “couples” had sorted out. The annual pairing ritual meant that Marnie would be among the “couple-less.” She wasn't a dog, or anything. Reasonably attractive, if a bit skinny, she considered her worst feature to be her legs—two sticks in her mind. Then, Marnie's almost pathological shyness came into play. She could talk coherently with her girlfriends but, when it came to boys, she became an inarticulate, pathetic dummy. Even when she did manage to say something, it came out like a mouse's squeak.

But Brendan gave her hope. Tall, as skinny as she was and all legs too, he had a shock of unruly hair that stuck out in all directions. That tangle sat atop a kind face, with a strong mouth and chin, and a somewhat too-large nose. And oh, those eyes—as blue as a lake on one of those digitally enhanced calendar photos!

Because of her shyness—and concomitant lack of male attention—Marnie had become a hopeless romantic and devoured romance novels. All those heaving bodices and rippling pectorals would leave her in a state of near-perpetual romantic dreaminess, if not outright erotic heat. Scenes of romantic love circled in her mind, as she hugged a pillow tightly between her thighs, moving toward the sexual release of a teenage orgasm. Marnie often wondered why real life couldn't be as simple and easy to resolve as in the romance books.

She had little idea how complicated real life could get.

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Having just received her driver's license, Marnie drove her “new” car to the Valentine's Day party, for the first time driving on her own. She had saved every penny she could to purchase this four-year-old Toyota Celica—her pride and joy. The evening was clear and unusually warm for February. Had there been any hint of foul weather, her parents would have nixed her making the trip on her own. It had been hard enough convincing her parents to let her go. But they knew how reliable she could be and, against their better judgment, relented and let her go. Marnie watched them in the rearview mirror, as they stood on the sidewalk waving goodbye. The scene looked sad to her.

Being a careful driver, Marnie stayed in the right lane, on Interstate 280, traveling at five miles below the speed limit. Though she paid attention to her driving, not even using the radio, thoughts of the party, and how she was going to arrange a meeting with Brendan, kept her mind preoccupied. In fact, the only reason she decided to go was because one of her girlfriends had told her Brendan would be there. That she hadn't actually been invited didn't faze her. All parties had crashers, and girls were usually welcome anyway.

Suddenly, a high-rise pickup truck—one that appeared to be the size of an M1A1 Abrams tank and you could see the lane in front through its undercarriage—swerved into her lane. Mandy saw it coming a bit too late and hit the brakes to allow the behemoth to pull in front of her. Unfortunately, one of its huge tires clipped the front of her Celica (the elevated rear bumper didn't even come close), and sent it into a spin. In seconds, she faced the wrong way in her lane. Relieved she hadn't caromed off the cement wall to her right—now her left—her insides unclenched a little.

The last thing she saw before the lights went out was the massive grill of a Hummer 2 coming straight toward her.

Act One, Scene Two – Casualties

Marnie’s eyes fluttered open and she wondered why her parents came to the party.

“Mom? Dad? What are you doing at the Valentine’s Day party?”

“Hi Sweetie,” her mother said. “We’re not at a party, honey. You…” Her mother’s composure crumbled and she fell against Marnie’s father, crying.

“You’re in the hospital, honey,” her father continued. “You were in a car wreck.”

With a question mark written on her features, Marnie remembered being on the I-280 when a huge pickup hit her car.

“I… I’m in a… the *hospital*?”

Her father nodded.

What Marnie did next would stick in her mind for the rest of her life. She looked down along her body on the bed. Somehow, it looked too short. Then, a sickening realization caused her heart to drop into her stomach. “Daddy? Did I… are my… am I…?”

Her father nodded. His face screwed up with emotion and tears leaked from his eyes. “They’re gone, honey,” he said, before his voice cracked.

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When the H-2 hit Marnie’s car head-on, its greater weight crumpled the diminutive car’s front end, crushing it backward. The firewall and dashboard had been driven against Marnie’s legs, also crushing them. When the rescue squad got to her, they had to use the “Jaws of Life” to cut her out of the car. When they extricated Marnie from the wreckage, her legs appeared to them to be boneless. They applied tourniquets to both her thighs, used splints—not to set any bones, but to support the boneless masses that had once been Marnie’s legs—and got her into the ambulance, where EMT’s worked on her to keep her from succumbing to the trauma.

By the time Marnie arrived at the hospital, they had stabilized her, a feat in itself and a tribute to the skill of the EMTs. They brought her to an operating room for immediate emergency surgery, where the trauma surgeon could do little else to her horribly mangled legs other than to amputate them at mid-thigh.

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At four a. m., Marnie lay in her hospital bed, looking absently down the length of her truncated body. The sleep-inducing drugs they had given her for the surgery had finally worn off and she returned to lucidity. Yet, she had enough painkillers dripping into the tube in her arm to anesthetize her entire junior high-school class.

Marnie couldn’t believe her legs had actually been removed, but she didn’t have the courage to reach down and corroborate the evidence with her hands. She remembered how much she disliked her long, stick-like legs. Now, they had been taken from her—forever—just like that.

Incongruously, she thought of Brendan. She smiled when she thought she might have had a chance with him. How would he react to a girlfriend who now stood three feet tall?

All at once, she counted her stick-like legs among the most precious things she had once owned.

ACT TWO, Scene One – Rehab

To the utter surprise of her parents, Marnie began rehab while still in the hospital. They fitted her with a pair of state-of-the-art prostheses right away, and she began working with them. Though in a great deal of pain, she worked hard and could walk with crutches by the time they moved her to a longer-term rehab facility.

Once there, she continued her physical therapy with a vengeance and became the darling of the staff. Marnie worked hard and could walk unaided inside of two months. But, by the end of each day, she almost seemed happy to unstrap the artificial limbs and crawl into bed. In spite of her hard work, the staff saw a different side of Marnie. She had become withdrawn and uncommunicative. When her day of therapy ended, she retreated to her bed as if it were a fortress, happy to be rid of her prostheses, usually dropping them in a heap next to the bed.

One night, the nurse on her rounds poked her head in to check on Marnie, as she did for every patient on her floor. Marnie didn't hear her push open the door. She saw Marnie, sitting up in the bed without a stitch on. The girl had removed her hospital gown to uncover herself and her truncated legs. She rocked back and forth and caressed the stumps of her thighs, as she hummed a little tune. Instant tears popped into the nurse's eyes as she took in the scene. Seeing Marnie's small, naked figure there, looking impossibly short and pathetic with no legs, it seemed to her as if she watched a mother singing to her children. Suddenly, Marnie turned to look at the nurse, her gaze steady. She made no move to cover up, but kept caressing her stumps. Then she turned back, as if dismissing the nurse.

"Sorry for the interruption. I usually look in on all my patients to see if they're going to be all right for the night."

"No problem," Marnie said. "Good night."

"Why are you doing that, honey? Do your...does it hurt?"

"No, there's no pain."

"Then why are you rubbing your stumps? Are you applying lotion?"

"No, I'm singing to them."

"Singing? Why?" the nurse asked, making a mental note to alert the facility's psychologist.

Marnie looked at the nurse, then back at her stumps, and continued her haunting, wordless lullaby. The nurse entered the room and came closer to the bed. She looked down at the stumps of Marnie's legs.

The trauma surgeon had done a great job of "neatening up" his gruesome work. He had closed off the amputation with neat flaps that barely showed a scar, visible only as a thin, red line across the end of each shortened appendage, as if Marnie had been born like this. Because of the therapy, the muscles of Marnie's thighs hadn't atrophied. These days, it was common surgical practice to reattach the remaining muscle and tendon to the end of the bone. This reduced muscle contraction, padded the bone end to minimize discomfort, and aided the muscles in adapting to the prostheses.

"That's a beautiful tune you're singing, and you have a beautiful voice," the nurse pointed out.

"I'm singing to my stumps," Marnie stated as matter-of-factly as reciting the weather. "They are all I have now and I feel I should love them."

"It's good that you're accepting your condition," the nurse said.

"Condition?" Marnie asked and looked at the nurse. "You think I've gone over the edge, don't you?"

"Well, no. I—"

"Did you know I once hated my skinny legs? I thought they were ugly sticks and I longed for beautiful, well-formed legs like some of the other girls had. I hated those girls for not appreciating

the gift they had been given. Now, God has taken mine away. I guess I should have loved my legs more.”

“Do you want me to help you put on your gown?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Well, try to get to sleep soon; you’ll be working hard again tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

The nurse left Marnie’s room with sadness in her heart. Such a beautiful girl, to have lost her legs like that. And she had such a pretty face and a nice, slim figure too. The nurse made a mental note to notify the psychologist.

Act Two, Scene Two – Life Stalled

Marnie’s strange behavior became the break-room talk of the rehab facility’s entire staff. Although she worked like a demon during her sessions, she never talked unless spoken to, never wore her gown when in her room, and constantly sang to her stumps. The facility’s psychologist wanted to start a regimen of sessions with Marnie, and mentioned it to her parents. They promised to talk with her about it.

“Honey,” her mother began during a visit, “the staff says you’re becoming withdrawn.”

“Am I?”

“They say you never speak unless asked something.”

“Am I not working hard enough during my sessions?”

“No, that’s not it, but you seem to be acting strangely too. They say you’re constantly singing to your stumps. Plus, you were naked when we came into your room.”

“I put my gown on and I sing to my stumps because I’m learning to love them. I hated my skinny legs before and God took them away from me. I should have loved them more.”

“Don’t say that, honey!” Marnie’s mother chided.

“Why not? If God didn’t take them, then what *really* happened?”

“It was an accident,” her father said.

“And God can’t control accidents? He can do anything, right?”

“Why are you bare all the time?” Marnie’s father asked, changing the subject in an attempt to rescue his wife.

“My window gets sun all day. It’s hot, and I find I like the warmth on my bare skin. It’s my room after all and I don’t have a roommate. Why can’t I do what I want?”

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Marnie started sessions with the psychologist the day after her parents’ visit and after her therapy session. The psychologist wanted her tired. In that way she would be more vulnerable, and thus more open when she talked with Marnie.

“You think I’m crazy, right?” Marnie asked as she sat on the couch and removed her prostheses and stump socks. She then pulled her gown over her head to sit naked.

“No, not at all,” the psychologist answered. “By the way, I’m Serena. May I call you Marnie?”

“Sure, *Serena*—it’s my name, after all.”

“Why did you take off your prosthetic legs when you sat down?”

“I don’t need them now, and I want my stumps to breathe. Why didn’t you ask about my getting naked?”

“I understand that you wish to shock me. It’s okay if you feel more comfortable naked; this is a private session. People have done worse.”

“Really? What?”

“We’re not here to discuss the actions of my other patients; confidentiality and all that. But most amputees prefer to wear their prosthetic limbs. It gives them more confidence.”

“Amputee. Isn’t that just the most innocuous way to talk around the fact someone’s limbs are missing? I don’t feel less confident like this. It’s who I am now.”

“And that’s okay with you?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone prefer to be legless? I see what you’re doing. You’re trying to see if I’m accepting my ‘condition,’ as the people around here refer to it; check on the progress of the ‘amputee.’”

“Isn’t that a bit of a hostile reaction?”

“Oh, really? How would you react to someone asking you stupid and patronizing questions?” Marnie waggled her stumps, uncaring if she exposed her vulva to the psychologist.

“Fair enough. Let’s move on. Why are you always naked in your room?”

“Is there something wrong with that? I’d like to be naked during therapy too; can you arrange that?”

“No, not really.”

“Are people shocked by my nakedness?”

“Some are. They’re also shocked when you remove your prosthetic legs like you do.”

“Why; because they think I’m crazy?”

“Perhaps. I think you’re doing it precisely for the shock value. Your parents told me that you told them God took your legs because you hated them. I think you were very much concerned with how you looked to others and didn’t feel you measured up. Now, you’re using your stumps and your nakedness to gain attention. You didn’t get enough before, especially from boys, and now you do when you rebel like this.”

Marnie sat silently as Serena spoke, stunned by how accurately she had hit the mark, once she got beyond the banalities. Marnie didn’t try to argue, or frame a retort; she just sat quietly, mulling over what the psychologist told her.

“Don’t you have a retort for me? What do you think of my assessment? Do you agree, or do you think I’m talking off the top of my head?”

“I agree.”

“You do? Why?”

“Before I lost my legs, I wanted boys to notice me. I thought my being so plain was the reason they didn’t. When the crash occurred, I was on my way to a party in the hopes of meeting a boy. It probably wouldn’t have worked anyway but who’s going to give me a second look now? If I stand on my stump ends, I’m no taller than a midget; but at least midgets have normal legs.”

“When you wear your prosthetic legs, you’re as tall as you were.”

“Oh, that’s a *real* turn-on. Just think of how sexy I’d look in a pair of short-shorts.”

“But the kind of person you are is so much more than how you look.”

Marnie had grown tired of Serena’s psychological pep talk. “Oh yeah? As soon as some guy saw my stumps, he’d head for the nearest exit. In order for people to see how ‘so much more’ I am, he’d have to get past the parts of me that are *so much less*.”

“Marnie, you’re....”

“Look, Serena. I’m not feeling sorry for myself and I’m not crazy. I’m coming to terms with who I am now. Perhaps I do play on the shock value, but *I’m* shocked when I see myself in a mirror. I can accept the fact guys wouldn’t find me attractive; they didn’t exactly break down my door before this. Believe me when I tell you; I can deal with it.”

“Can you? I disagree.”

“I *don't care*,” Marnie said, as she put on her stump socks and began fitting her legs. Then she stood, still naked, and walked to the door with her gown over her shoulder. “Let’s see what they make of me walking to my room like this.”

“Would that make you feel better about yourself?”

Marnie looked at Serena. The woman had the annoying habit of hitting the mark. She pulled on her gown.

“Please don’t take this as being patronizing but what you just did is a positive thing. It’s how change happens.”

“Thing will change for me when some guys comes and sweeps me off my feet—in spite of my lack of them.”

Act Two, Scene Three – Life Restarted

When Marnie left rehab, she won an award as the hardest working patient at the facility. She endured the silly ceremony the staff made over it, as though she were five, instead of nearly eighteen. During the remainder of her time there, however, not much about her had changed—save for one thing—Marnie made peace with Serena; and took up writing.

At first, she pounded away on her laptop to put down how she felt and what she experienced. She guarded her writing like the gold in Ft. Knox. But that began to change shortly after she left rehab and moved home with her parents.

When she moved back into the house, it became her castle and she left it only to take long walks—dressed in long sweat pants to hide her prostheses. She had worked hard to get in shape and she wanted to maintain her muscle tone. She informed her parents that no concessions were to be made *at all* for her lack of legs. If she wished to go anywhere in, or out of, the house, she would do it under her own power, or not at all. She wouldn’t even use a wheelchair to make things easier for her when at home.

In the warm weather, Marnie would get out of bed, fit her legs, and make her way to the patio to have breakfast and begin her writing for the day. Her parents adapted to the fact she never bothered to dress around the house, or on the patio—unless it grew too cold. She even kept a calendar of how many days she could go without dressing. Even when guests were to arrive she didn’t bother to dress. If that guest was a family friend, and understood, she would remain bare during the visit; otherwise she’d retreat to her room. One night, her father got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and saw Marnie enter the house, carrying her sweats. Their eyes met.

“Honey, did you just take a walk naked?”

“Yes. No one’s out this late.”

“Your mother and I have tried to accommodate your eccentricities and support you in them, but the last thing we need now is for you to be arrested, or worse. Please dress when you go out and don’t do it so late. We live in a nice neighborhood, but it’s not safe for you to be alone, especially naked.”

Marnie raised her hand, which contained a spray can of military grade CS. I carry protection.”

Her father went to her and hugged her. “Sweetheart, when we went to the hospital and saw you in that bed...well.... We’re proud of how well you’ve dealt with losing your legs (her father dared not use any euphemisms with Marnie). Just do me a favor. If you want to do any more naked, nocturnal ramblings, just get me up; I’ll go with you.”

“You will?”

“I just want you to be safe.”

Marnie hugged her father. “Thanks. I love you Daddy.”

“And we love you with all our hearts.”

“I’m sorry to be so much trouble.”

“You’re no trouble.”

“Even when I insist on being naked?”

Her father smiled. “There are worse things than having a nudist for a daughter. We’d appreciate it though if you’d dress when guests visit.”

Marnie’s nude ways became but one of the eccentricities her parents accepted in her. Marnie’s father even got to calling her his “naked angel.”

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Once she had gotten past writing out her inner struggles, Marnie turned to fiction. She wrote a novel—a romantic novel—but with quirky heroines and heroes—not at all the regular fare. Her parents read her story and loved it, encouraging Marnie to send it to publishers. To everyone’s utter surprise, she hit pay dirt on her third try.

The novel, entitled *Love’s Losses*, made the New York Times best-seller list. Part of its success rested on the fact that Marnie’s publisher played up the handicap angle in her cover bio on the dust jacket. Not too happy about it, Marnie nevertheless allowed the shameless ploy. The publisher wanted a full-length photo, showing Marnie’s prosthetic legs, but she rebelled and would only allow an above-the-waist portrait.

When novel two, *A Passion for Losers*, hit the best-seller list, it became evident that Marnie didn’t need the help of her handicap in marketing her novels, so she insisted they drop it. It became evident to her publisher that Marnie had a magic formula in writing her quirky, off-the-beaten-path novels. The string of successes continued. *I Never Want to Lose My Heart*, *Call Me Crazy*, *The Unlikely Lover*, and *Do Me Right* all soared to the top of the best-seller list.

Things went swimmingly until her publisher wanted her to make personal appearances. Marnie resisted with all her might. She offered to do them on the condition she be allowed to be naked. To her surprise, her publisher actually considered it; they even worked out a deal with some nudist parks! Realizing her bluff had been called, Marnie resisted again.

Her publisher—even her parents—pleaded with her to do some simple book signings, which Marnie wanted none of. She argued until her reservations began to sound stale and silly—even to her. Finally, she agreed to do *one*. Having only one shot at it, the publisher set a date at one of the area’s biggest bookstores. At Marnie’s insistence, they were to set up table at the back of the store, near the restroom. They had to place a skirt around the table, and Marnie would wear long pants, just in case. She would not get up at all, so food and drink would have to be kept to a minimum. If the need for a bathroom break became necessary, they’d have to clear the store of all but employees. The store agreed to all of these stipulations, since just the appearance of a writer of Marnie’s popularity would result in massive sales.

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The day came and Marnie sat at her table awaiting the crowds. To say she had butterflies in her stomach would be like saying that hurricane Katrina was a “bit of wind.” The door opened and Marnie cast a quick prayer heavenward. A line of people approached the table, clutching their books (only two allowed) and the bookstore’s employees coached them not to gab or make any moves toward Marnie. Photos were out of the question. The bookstore wanted Marnie to have as good a time as possible.

The experience proved to be a whirl of conflicting sensations for Marnie. If she heard once how brave, how beautiful, and how talented she was, she heard it a hundred times. Nevertheless, she began to enjoy the praise of some of the more sincere customers. For the first time in her young life, she became the center of attention—something she longed for in high school. In spite of the huge crowd, before she knew it the store closed and she could see the end of the line. Amazed that she had gotten through with no bathroom break, she nevertheless felt happy to call it a day and even contemplated the possibility of doing another book signing sometime.

Then, without warning, HE stepped up to the table.

ACT THREE, Scene One – Life Renewed

The most beautiful man Marnie had *ever* seen, walked up to the table and stuck out his hand. He was the last one in line. To say he was handsome would be an insult. He had one of those faces, framed by longish, sandy hair that a person, man or woman, couldn't help but notice. If he stood in the middle of a room, the wind would blow back his hair even though there *was* no wind! If he smiled in a darkened room, sun would sparkle off his impossibly white teeth in dazzling glints.

"Hi, my name's Garth. It's a real pleasure to meet you."

Marnie shook Garth's hand and stared into the deep pools of his clear, green eyes. It made her want to take a swan dive into his soul and never come up for air. She realized she had been staring and clutching his hand like a drowning person would a life preserver. She released his hand, dropped her gaze, and her eyes rested on an immaculately preserved copy of her first novel, complete with non-tattered dust jacket. She recognized it as a first edition.

"I confess I only bought your first book, so I brought that for you to sign."

"I, um...er, I mean...it's rare for a man to read romance novels," Marnie replied, as she signed it. "Did you like it?"

"It was interesting, but it's not my cup of tea. The jacket bio and your photo prompted me to buy it."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I your beautiful, strong face—and the story your bio had to tell—intrigued me. It made me want to read what such a remarkable person had written. When your second book came out, I read the jacket bio, hoping to learn something new but they had changed it; it wasn't what I wanted to read. Then, when I heard about this first-ever signing, I wanted to meet you at last."

"And how am I remarkable, Garth—besides having a beautiful, strong face?" Marnie asked, brazenly fishing for a compliment.

"You're remarkable because you rose above horrible circumstances to become a successful writer."

Had anyone but this gorgeous man what he did, Marnie would have bristled, but he sounded so sincere. Besides, Marnie didn't want the encounter to end. For the first time in years, her romantic soul began to assert itself. Then she did something so totally out of character for her, even she couldn't believe it as it happened. "Are you seeing someone, Garth?" She dove into his mesmerizing, green eyes again.

"No, not at the moment. I'm not very successful at relationships, I'm afraid."

Marnie, emboldened by Garth's honest answer, asked her next question. "Would you like to get together over a cup of coffee and talk?"

Garth actually blushed. "Gee, this is unexpected. Sure."

“Okay, just let me attend to some details. Can you wait awhile?”

“Not a problem. I was just going to go home to supper with my cat anyway.”

Hearing his answer, Marnie changed tack. “If your cat doesn’t mind being stood up, would you like to have that supper with me? I’m starved, all of a sudden. There’s an Applebees here in this mall. I like their Bourbon Street Steak.”

“Wow, a woman who likes meat over a salad. Sure—I’d love to have supper with you, but it has to be my treat.”

“Deal. Wait right here.”

Marnie got her legs into position and levered herself to a standing position. They had state-of-the-art knees that required no fiddling to lock them when she stood. Self-conscious over Garth watching, she hoped she moved with more grace than someone doing “The Robot” on the dance floor.

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“But you don’t even know this guy!” the publisher’s agent, Cheri, who had driven her to the bookstore, said as Marnie exited the restroom.

“So? I’m an adult and you’re *not* my mother.”

“I know that...but this is so unlike you. We had to move heaven and earth to get you here after years of trying, and now you want to go off with the first handsome guy you meet?”

“*Handsome?* Have you no eyes? He’s prettier than I am. Look, you can come with us if you insist.”

“Oh yeah, I’d love to be a third wheel. But I can’t, in good conscience, just let you go off with him. Tell you what; I’ll take a table nearby and keep an eye on you from there. If you don’t want to go along with that, then I’ll just have to tell him that I’m *obligated* to take you home.”

“Okay, okay, warden. I’ll agree to that.”

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“Garth, please tell me how a good-looking guy like you isn’t very successful in relationships,” Marnie said, as they sat down at their table, conscious of Cheri’s presence at a nearby table. She surprised herself with her boldness. “I would think every hottie in town would be beating a path to your door.”

“That’s just it. Relationships based on looks alone are the most superficial of all. All of the women I’ve dated, super-model, or Plain Jane, just want to move to the bedroom in five minutes.”

“Gee, that must be a chore.”

“It is for me. I’m interested in something more long-term. I have a strong, Christian faith, so I’m not into one night stands.”

“What, there aren’t women at church who would want something more long-term?”

“I’ve been engaged twice, and both times it fell apart. We were both going in different directions, I guess. Looks only take you so far.”

Marnie was beginning to get bad vibes about this guy. Was he HIV positive or something?

“So what *is it* you want in a woman?”

“Well, she has to be reasonably good-looking—”

“And you think I’m reasonably good-looking?”

“Of course! Look, I didn’t mean anything by—”

“Continue with your list, please,” Marnie interrupted.

“She has to be smart and independent, and someone capable of making her own way in the world, like you.”

“So I fit your list’s qualifications then?”

“Oh yes; to a tee. I was hoping when I met you that you wouldn’t prove to be a disappointment.”

“And the store-bought legs aren’t?” Marnie realized how hard she sounded.

“No, not at all! Believe me, I don’t usually accept supper invitations from women. I’m old-fashioned enough to want to be the one to do the asking.”

“Garth, I’ve gone so far beyond my own boundaries today, I’m going to be honest with you. Would that be okay?”

“I appreciate honesty.”

“Well, quite frankly, I’m a little suspicious of a guy who looks like you do wanting to go out with someone like me?”

“Someone like *you*? What’s that supposed to mean? Is it because you’re a double amputee?”

Marnie’s estimation of Garth jumped when he didn’t dance around her handicap—he came right out and stated the facts.

“Well...yes, as a matter of fact. I mean, I’m a double amputee *and* black. You’re white. You have to admit that it doesn’t exactly make for country cottages, white picket fences, and Golden Retrievers in the front yard.”

“I think I’m insulted. What do either of those things have to do with it? Neither bothers me in the least. It doesn’t change my thinking, if that’s what you mean.”

“I’m sorry if I insulted you but, I have to admit, you’re not what I expected. So...you think we might have a chance at a relationship?”

“Only if you can respect a good-looking guy, with a strong faith.”

“I don’t see any deal-breakers in there, aside from the fact you’re either very modest, or a liar.”

“Liar? How am I lying?”

“Since we’re being so honest here, you’re *not* good-looking. Good-looking is a generic term one uses to avoid insulting someone who *isn’t* that good-looking. You go so far beyond good-looking, you’re not even in the same zip code. You define *beautiful*, even people usually use the term to describe women. I’ll bet you look even more beautiful naked.”

Garth blushed again, confirming his modesty. “I don’t know what to say about that.”

“The beautiful part, or the naked part?”

“Both, I guess.”

At that moment, looking at Garth’s serious expression, Marnie realized she had possibly gone too far. “I supposed I crossed some sort of line, huh?”

Garth looked at her and flashed one of his ice-melting smiles. “I can see you’re going to be a handful, but I’m sort of glad you *did* cross that line. I’ve never met another woman like you.”

And—just like that—Marnie fell in love.

Act Three, Scene Two – Love Reloaded

After that fateful meeting, Marnie and Garth started dating. Her parents became deliriously happy for her—their only child was finally seeing someone. The fact that Garth was white made not a whit of difference to them; they had raised Marnie to be color-blind. Any reservations they might have had vanished when they met Garth. They loved him after five minutes.

After six dates, Garth proved to be every bit the straight arrow he had indicated. Though he held hands and put his arm around her, he hadn’t even tried to kiss Marnie. This, ironically, proved to be a problem for her. Because of all her reading and writing of romantic novels, the art of

osculation was a large component of how love happened. So, on their seventh date, Marnie reached for the gold ring.

They had gone to an early supper, then to see a movie. The evening turned out to be perfect, the talk over their meal convivial, the movie a classic “chick-flick,” the drive home comfy, with the two of them chatting easily, comfortable in each other’s company. Finally, Garth pulled up in front of her parent’s house.

“I enjoyed our evening,” he said, smiling. Marnie just looked at him. “What’s wrong; I have spinach in my teeth or something?”

“When are you going to kiss me?” Marnie asked, point blank.

Garth dropped his gaze and looked at his hands in his lap. “To be honest, I’ve enjoyed our times together so much, I’ve been hesitant to try.”

Marnie felt a chill run down her spine. Was she to be disappointed, yet again? “Why? Are you afraid I’ll disappoint you? please don’t tell me you’re gay.”

Garth looked at Marnie with those vivid green orbs of his. “Have you ever kissed a man, Marnie? I mean, a *real* kiss?”

Now it was Marnie’s turn to have her gaze do “lap duty.” “No...I haven’t.”

“Despite what it’s like in those romance novels you write, it can be disappointing at first.”

Marnie’s head snapped up. “How could *that* possibly be?”

“Kissing, like any action, gets better through practice.”

“I still want you to kiss me, Garth. I think I’ve fallen in love with you.” Even as she made her bold confession, Marnie couldn’t believe she had just come out with it like that.

“You have?” Garth asked.

“How could I *not*? You’re more than I ever expected. You came into my life like one of my romance characters and swept me off my feet, no pun intended. You haven’t demanded a thing from me. You’re great company and you treat me like my...my handicap doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Then, kiss me for Pete’s sake. Prove to me my foolish heart isn’t lying to me.”

Without another word, Garth reached up with his hand and brushed Marnie’s cheek with the back of it. He leaned forward and faked her out by kissing the points of her clavicles, just below her neck. A thrill ran through her. Then, he moved to her neck, her cheek, her ear. He breathed, ever so softly into it, and it made Marnie sigh. Then he moved into position, and lay his lips softly on hers, moving his tongue to gently brush the surface of her lips.

Marnie responded by pressing her mouth on his. For her whole life, she had dreamed of this moment. She had even practiced by kissing the back of her hand. Now, with the lips of the most beautiful man she had ever seen against hers, the very thought made her giddy! Her breath came in ragged gasps, as her heat rose. She could smell the clean smell of soap, mixed with Garth’s man-scent—a powerful aphrodisiac. She reached up and placed her hand behind Garth’s head, twining her fingers in his hair. How could he say it might be a disappointment? It was *amazing*! Marnie felt as though she could achieve climax at any moment.

As if divining her thoughts, Garth straightened. “I’m getting the impression it wasn’t a disappointment.” Marnie just sat back, breathing heavily. Not wanting to speak and break the spell, she shook her head. “I’m glad. You deserved for it to be as wonderful as you imagined.”

Marnie answered Garth by pulling his head down for another kiss. This time she let her imagination run its wild course, holding nothing back, her whole body electric with erotic passion.

She felt the first, galvanic thrill ripple through her loins.

Act Three, Scene Three – Love Acquired

Three days later, Marnie realized hers and Garth's next date was to be on Valentine's Day. As she sat at her dressing table, legless and bare, she thought back to the night she had been bereft of hope—and her two legs. She looked down, over the points of her small breasts and flat stomach, at the familiar sight of her two stumps. She had forgotten what it looked like to have two lower appendages with feet at the bottom, instead of feet that stood at attention next to her bed while she slept.

She had asked Garth to pick her up and take her to his place for a meal, even if it was Chinese take-out, or a delivered pizza. Garth had agreed, but insisted he be allowed to cook. He promised her it would be good. Marnie loved the idea.

The reason she had wanted their Valentine's Day evening date to be at Garth's place was that she had something in mind. It had to be this way. Their relationship would, or would not, continue after tonight.

It would all be up to Garth.

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When Garth picked her up, he handed her a card and a bouquet of flowers. She handed him her card, impressed that he hadn't given her candy. Then they drove to his apartment. In all the time they had dated, she had never seen it. When he opened the door, the exquisite smell of Italian cooking caressed her nostrils. A white, calico cat wove around her feet, unaware that Marnie couldn't feel it's presence.

"Don't mind Cassandra," Garth explained. "She's unnaturally friendly for a cat. Just don't let her trip you up."

"You read minds too?"

Garth smiled. "No, it occurred to me that your prosthetics wouldn't allow you to feel if Cassandra brushed up against your legs."

"Not a problem. I noticed her."

The apartment was as neat as a pin, and looked like it hadn't just been cleaned for this occasion, which raised Garth another notch in Marnie's mind. He took her coat and seated her at the table. He then fussed at the stove for a while. Marnie found she enjoyed watching this hunk look so domestic. Garth brought the meal to the table, then he sat opposite her.

"Let's ask the blessing before we eat," Garth said. Marnie bowed her head. "Lord, we thank you for this food and for the blessings of a good appetite. Thank you for bringing Marnie into my life and that I can enjoy this Valentine's Day with her. Put your hand on this night so that we may honor you with our behavior. In Jesus' name, amen."

Marnie had never heard such a heartfelt blessing. What did Garth mean by "honor you with our behavior?" They chatted about this and that while they ate, dancing around the issue of why Marnie had asked Garth to come to his apartment. Marnie liked it that Garth served wine with the meal. Obviously, his faith didn't preclude a good vintage, which this one certainly proved to be.

When they had finished, Marnie helped Garth clear the table. He rose another notch when he didn't insist she not help.

After Garth packed the leftovers, he indicated that Marnie should go sit on the sofa. "I'll get to those dishes later. I'll start coffee and be with you in a couple of minutes."

Cassandra jumped up to join Marnie and plopped in her lap. "That was one of the best Italian meals I've had in ages," Marnie called from the living room. "I'm afraid I made a pig out of myself."

“I enjoyed see you eat so well. At least you don’t pick.” Garth returned with two more glasses of wine for them to sip. Marnie noticed that he didn’t fill either too full. Good thing—she had begun to feel the effect of the two glasses she had with her meal.

“Get down, Cassandra.” The cat obligingly did so as Garth sat down. He handed Marnie a glass. “You know, I love how gracefully you move around. If I didn’t know you were using prosthetic legs, I’d never have guessed.”

“I think it must be the wine you drank. If you look closely, you’ll notice the little tells.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“Why is that so important to you? Does it allow you to imagine me as having legs?”

Garth looked at Marnie. “Is that what you think I’m doing? I’ll be honest with you. I’m curious to see what you look like without them? Does that shock you? you probably think I’m weird.”

Garth had just moved to the top of the ladder. “I asked you to bring me here for a practical reason,” Marnie said, as she worked at removing her legs and stump socks, “I *wanted* you to get a good look at the woman you’re involved with.”

Garth put his hand on hers. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Don’t I? as much as you want your curiosity satisfied, I want you to see the reality of loving a woman with no legs. After you know the truth, then tell me if it matters or not.”

Marnie had finished removing everything and she swung her stumps and put them in Garth’s lap. He didn’t even flinch. He studied her stumps for a minute, then looked up at her.

“Almost ten years ago, I was driving to a Valentines’ Day party when a monster pickup spun me around in my lane and I came face-to-face with a Hummer 2. The impact crushed the front of my Corolla and my legs. They had to amputate them.

“I thought my young life had ended, but it hadn’t. I had to wake up every day to the reality of what I had become. So, I decided to work at learning to walk with prostheses. Yet, at the same time, I became withdrawn. I got into writing as a catharsis. Who would have guessed I would become a popular novelist? I lived like a hermit, in my own little world, until that fateful day when I met you.

“All of a sudden, my life changed. For the first time, I had met a guy and he professed interest in *me*. That night, when we kissed, I dared to believe it could be different for me for a change. That kiss awoke in me passions I had only dreamed about—and wrote about. But, even as I hoped, I realized you had to know exactly who I am. Now you know the truth; what I look like beneath the self-deprecating humor and amiable chatter. When you met me in that bookstore, did this ever enter your mind?” Marnie finished her speech by waggling her stumps at Garth. Disgusted with herself for her brazenness, Marnie’s heart beat like a trip-hammer. Why had she gone and done this—probably ruining any chance she had for love?

Garth, initially surprised at Marnie’s sudden gesture, looked at the stumps of her legs. Even now, they weren’t ugly to him. Her thighs were smooth and shapely. Her café-au-lait skin had a healthy sheen to it. Even the ends of the stumps were smooth and rounded—far from ugly. He reached out, caressed the ends, and heard Marnie’s sharp intake of breath.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his expression concerned.

“No, but I find it’s kind of an erogenous zone with me.”

“Really? The surgeon who worked on you must have been a Michelangelo,” he said. “Your stumps look beautiful. I can hardly see a scar.”

Marnie’s eyes rapidly filled with tears. “You really think so?” she asked in a tiny, barely audible voice.

Garth nodded and bent forward to kiss the ends of Marnie's stumps. Because the skill of the surgeon, the sensation there remained keen and Marnie felt a thrill from Garth's kiss course through her. He then lifted her from the sofa cushion, as easily as though she weighed nothing, and sat her in his lap, wiping the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs.

"I love you, Marnie," he said, leaning in to kiss her again.

And I love you, Marnie thought, as she put her arms around Garth's broad back. All of a sudden, she couldn't wait to explore the other wonders he would show her.