



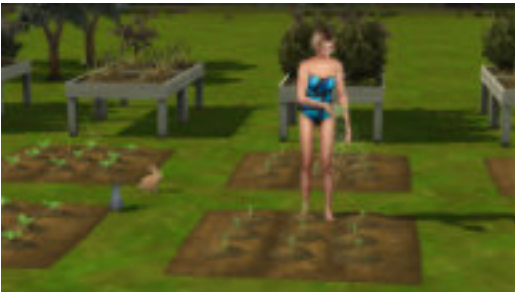
PROLOGUE

Janet glided through the cool water of the basement pool, each breaststroke a steady metronome in the hush of evening. One... two... three... she counted silently, though her thoughts drifted ahead, rehearsing the vows she knew were coming. Beneath the surface, her mind wandered to loves past—those sparks she once chased before Silver Creek. She tried to summon the exact rush of a first glance, the warmth of a secret smile, but the details floated just out of reach. She pictured the red-haired boy from high school, afternoons spent tuning motorcycles in his father’s garage, his laughter blazing like his hair... yet even his name slipped through her fingers like a loose gear. When Janet broke the surface, she inhaled a soft sigh. Ripples of pool light danced across the tile as Kent climbed the stairs, swim trunks slung low at his hips. His face was somber—uneasy. Settling beside her at the water’s edge, he swallowed before speaking. “Janet, I need you to listen for a few minutes.”

Janet hauled herself up onto the pool’s edge and sitting, concern tightening her chest. She studied Kent’s clouded expression—those familiar eyes shadowed with fear. He glanced away; jaw clenched. *He’s keeping something from me*, she realized, heart picking up its own staccato rhythm. Kent drew in a shaky breath. “I’ve been tested—diagnosed with dyslexia.” His voice trembled. “I’m worried I’m letting you down.” Janet pressed her hand to his, noting how his fingers trembled against hers. In that moment, she felt the echo of her youthful uncertainty—of hoping and failing at love—fade beneath something steadier, deeper. “It’s okay not to be perfect,” she said softly, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead. Her pulse slowed in time with his. “I still want to marry you.” Kent’s tension eased, and relief flickered in his eyes. He closed the distance between them, anchoring Janet with a grateful smile that needed no vows to be true.



While Kent was away at his first series of courses, Janet received a request from her supervisors from her regular assignment as a Land Surveyor: Palmetto Bay needed volunteers to clear debris from the storm-battered shore. Despite the cold rain lashing her face, Janet felt a warm tug of nostalgia when she returned to work several hours in her childhood town. While working with cleaning up trash, Janet thought of her past with challenging parents before slipping back to the presence and wanting to get away from the cold rain.



Back home in Cedar Hollow that evening, Janet tended her rabbit hutch and checked on the burgeoning garden. Each sprout and nibbling nose reminded her of the gentle rhythms of this life—so different from the lecture halls where Kent had chosen to spend his evening, hunkered over homework beneath the harsh glare of fluorescent lights.





The following afternoon, Janet returned from work to find Daquan Villanueva waiting on her front porch. He was one of the neighbors she and Kent had met at the local bar shortly after moving in—a friendly face, at least until today. In his hands he held a wrapped present—butcher block and gleaming set of knives: a wedding gift, he said, stepping too close. His eyes lingered on her lips, and Janet’s heart hammered in alarm.

Inside, Kent sat at the dining room table, with scattered notes around him. He heard the low tension in Daquan’s voice, the hushed promises and Janet’s polite but firm refusals.

When he glimpsed Daquan leaning in, attempting to seduce her, something inside Kent snapped. He rose so swiftly his chair clattered backward, and Janet bolted through the open door—her pulse pounding.

Kent didn’t touch Daquan; he didn’t need to. His words, sharp and accusing, cut through the tension. Janet heard him from the family room as Daquan stammered his apologies and fled down the driveway. Kent’s voice thundered until at last, he slammed the door shut behind their uninvited guest.



Inside, Janet gently eased into the dining room chair, her breath coming in ragged bursts. Kent’s chest heaved with anger as he turned back to her. “Why didn’t you stop him sooner?” he demanded.

Janet lifted her chin, steadying herself. Anger coiled beneath her calm. “Because I’m not coy enough to let him take advantage,” she said. In the hush that followed, they found clarity. They spoke softly about trust and boundaries—she insisted he could spend time with other women so long as he kept it platonic; he insisted she could do likewise, though he drew a sterner line against any physical contact. The agreement left them both feeling strangely tender, strengthened by honesty.



The next morning, Kent’s mind still buzzed with the previous day’s turmoil. He visited his psychologist for their weekly check-in, unloading the weight from his chest. Frustration gave way to relief as the session ended—he felt lighter, better equipped for what came next.

In his only morning class, he absorbed the knowledge and taken notes to use later for his final then trudged home beneath another cold, relentless rain. Two of their four rain barrels had sprung leaks, and Kent spent the afternoon patching them. Each sealed crack felt like a small victory in the fight to keep their homestead both functional and ecologically sound.

Meanwhile, Janet’s work at the wildlife reserve bore fruit: her supervisors awarded her a promotion to Wildlife Technician, complete with a raise and bonus. That evening, she balanced their household ledger, then transferred a substantial sum toward their homestead loan—erasing a third of its balance. Her heart swelled with pride and apprehension: the loan remained under her name alone, even after marriage, while Kent shouldered his own student debt. Yet Janet still dreamed of expanding their produce garden—selling herbs, flowers, vegetables, and perhaps livestock offerings at the Cedar Hollow market to secure their future.





Later, over grilled cheese sandwiches, Janet felt the familiar stirrings of pregnancy fatigue. Still, she joined Kent in the adjoining home office—now converted into a gym—to spar gently with the floor-mounted boxing cylinder. She focused on precision and impact strength, determined to stay fit for herself and their child.

Kent, tapped away at his keyboard, writing and revising his term paper until its arguments shone. He leaned back at last, satisfied: the paper was outstanding.



By week’s end, the tension of Daquan’s intrusion and the stress of academic deadlines had faded. They dressed up for dinner in Wallingbron to visit SimCity Family Stars restaurant, then slipped into the blues club downtown. As the saxophone wailed and the bass thumped, Janet and Kent danced close, lost in the music—and in each other’s arms—grateful for the peace they had reclaimed together.

EPILOGUE

Six months had barely passed since she and Kent first met, yet this week—more than any before—had crystallized her choice. *Who will walk beside me when this story ends?* she wondered, her pulse fluttering at the thought of unwavering companionship. Every shared laugh, every hushed confession in the dark, seemed to bind her more firmly to him.

Meanwhile, Kent—*Dyslexia be damned*, he promised himself, forcing his eyes to focus on the fiercest determination was reserved for Janet’s safety—and her happiness. The memory of Daquan’s mocking grin reinforced his resolve: no one would cross the line he’d drawn around her.

A tremor of anticipation coiled in his chest as he imagined Janet’s smile, the warmth that had become his haven. Soon, he told himself, soon he’d prove he could be both her protector and the father she needed. Beneath the weight of assignments, he felt an unexpected swell of purpose. In Janet’s presence, he saw the final chapter of his life taking shape—and he was determined to write it together with her.



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