

## Considering Margaret

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Margaret glanced up from her raspberry torte and saw her face scowling back at her from the mirror on the wall. The restaurant's overhead lighting accented the wrinkles on her cheeks and chin, and in spite of lipstick and rouge, she felt ancient. She would certainly give Jim the owner her opinion about the tackiness of using mirrors in his decorating scheme.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

Her son Mark was watching her. He rubbed the bald spot on his head and waited for her answer.

She pulled her eyes and her thoughts toward him. "Nothing."

"So, what do you think?" He took a bite of his chocolate cake.

"About *what*?" Her voice was sharp, but he was pressuring her, and she didn't like it one bit.

He leaned back on his chair. "Why are you getting upset?"

"I'm not upset. I just don't like the idea of being put into one of those places." For the last two months Mark had hardly given her the time of day. And now it appeared he wanted to put her away in a retirement community so she wouldn't be a burden, while he and the grandchildren went on with their lives.

"No one is putting you in one of those places. I only wanted you to consider *Wandering Acres* as a possibility. That's why we toured their facilities this morning. You have to admit, moving to a resort that has a swimming pool, a bowling alley, weekly concerts, and a slew of other activities, can't be all that bad."

He was wearing a grossly misinformed smile. All the activities in the world would never replace being near her family. Her grandchildren were busy enough with their marriages and their babies; if she moved forty-five minutes away from home, they would rarely come to visit. Apparently, all this time she'd been imagining her sense of importance to her son and his children. The thought sent a dull ache through her stomach full of food.

"Mom." Mark gently took her hand. "I want what's best for you. You know that, don't you?"

Margaret didn't know anything anymore. Until this morning's blasted tour, she'd been relatively content. Living two minutes away from him in an efficiency apartment was the perfect situation. She was independent, but her family was always nearby if she needed help. And she'd felt included in their lives and loved, until now.

Pulling her hand away, she looked down to fiddle with her napkin.

"I'm concerned about you. When you fell again recently..."

She interrupted. "I tripped over an area rug that is no longer there. The problem has been resolved."

"But that was the third time you fell this year. What if you break an arm or a leg the next time?"

"I know how to use a telephone."

"You may not be able to get to a phone." He pushed his dessert plate to the side and leaned into the discussion. "It's not good for you to be on your own anymore."

"May we go now?" She didn't want to stay in this conversation or in this restaurant. Grabbing her purse, she searched for her wallet.

"I'll pay for the meal." He smiled and picked up the bill. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings by taking you on a tour of Wandering Acres."

*Well, you did hurt my feelings,* she thought. Looking off to her left, Margaret fought back tears. She couldn't let him see her cry.

"Okay, we won't talk about it anymore today."

"Good." Her throat tightened with sadness as she stood.

"But, promise me one thing. Promise me you'll consider a change for the better."

She glanced at the mirror on the wall behind him. There was that scowl again. Her wrinkles were like tiny fissures on her well-worn countenance. She pushed her chair under the table.

He stood and put his napkin down. "Consider that your current living situation is no longer the best option."

She said nothing and walked toward the exit. He followed, and while he paid the bill she spoke to Jim about his decorating faux pas regarding those mirrors.

As they walked to the car Mark asked, "Do you mind if we take a few minutes on the way home to stop and see Ally? She's helping a friend move, and I told her I'd drop by to see how it's going."

He held her car door open. She loved her granddaughter, but after this morning's fiasco Margaret wasn't in the mood to visit anyone—not even family. "I'd rather go home," she said curtly, and sat in the car.

"I promise it won't take long." He shut her door and went around to the driver's side. Getting in, he started the engine and pulled into traffic.

She glanced at him. He was wearing that infernal smile.

"Where does Ally's friend live?"

"Just around the corner. In the old Anderson place, with the attached beauty parlor."

"Where I used to get my hair done?"

"That's the one."

They drove in silence while Margaret stewed about their visit to Wandering Acres. Mark was a good son, but his suggestion that she “consider a better option” had thrown her for a loop. His recent distance from her made sense, now that she understood he wanted to stick her in a retirement community.

“Here we are.” He pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. “Let’s go in, shall we?”

“I think I’ll stay in the car.”

He reached over and patted her thigh as if she were a child or a dog. “Mom. Ally will want to see you. Come in with me.”

Staring at his insistent face, Margaret huffed while he got out and opened her door. That grin of his was proof he didn’t care about her feelings. She joined him and they walked toward the house. He pushed the front door open without knocking.

“Mark, shouldn’t you...”

“Ally? We’re here,” he called out, and stepped inside.

She followed begrudgingly.

“Hi Dad! Hi Grandma!” Ally turned from unpacking boxes on the kitchen counter and walked over to give her a hug. “How was your tour of Wandering Acres?”

Margaret changed the subject. “I never saw the inside of this house when the Andersons lived here.”

“Hey, do you want to see the old beauty parlor?”

Mark’s hand was touching her shoulder. She answered him with a shrug.

“Come on.” He hooked his arm in hers and nodded sweetly toward the door at the end of the living room.

Reluctantly, she walked with him through the door that led into Mrs. Anderson’s old salon.

The freshly painted room bore no resemblance to its former existence. A cute kitchen filled the back wall where the hair-washing sinks had been located. Directly to its left was a new, paneled bathroom door. Toward the front of the room, where styling chairs and upright hair dryers had once sat, there was a sofa and matching recliner and a beautiful coffee table. She walked over to the sofa. "This is exactly like mine." Glancing around, she said, "In fact, it all looks like..." Margaret stopped and her eyebrows pinched together in a mixture of consternation and confusion. "This is my furniture!" She stared at Mark. "What are my things doing in the beauty parlor that now belongs to Ally's friend?"

He rubbed his bald spot. "Well, as father and daughter, Ally and I are also friends, so technically I didn't lie to you."

She waited for him to start making some sense.

"At the restaurant, I asked if you would consider a change for the better. I will feel much better about your safety if we live next door to each other. So I bought this place for you and me." Mark gestured to the room. "This is the same size as your efficiency apartment, with the same amenities."

She stared blankly at his face while the synapses of her brain misfired.

"Mom? Are you okay?" He leaned in closer.

After a few seconds Margaret's synapses kicked in just enough to protest. "This morning you took me to see Wandering Acres!"

Mark flashed a playful grin. "Well, Ally and her friends needed this morning to move your things in here."

As her heart joined forces with her mind, Margaret struggled to maintain control. "And for the last two months you've been avoiding me!"

He looked slightly chagrined. “That’s not true, Mom. I’ve been working here in the evenings, fixing this place up—painting the walls, doing the floors, putting in new light fixtures . . .”

His voice trailed off as Margaret slumped down onto the sofa, a tug-of-war erupting between her stoic face and her surging emotions.

Fighting hard, she assembled her thoughts, until enough order allowed her to ask, “You bought this house.”

“I did.”

“You bought it for *us*.”

He nodded, his face lit up in one big smile.

“You mean I am to live here, beside you? This is what you had in mind when you asked me to consider a change?”

“Yes.” Mark’s eyes were soft and bright.

All at once a shudder of relief coursed through Margaret’s body. She collapsed into a heap of mess as honest words spewed out of her mouth, “I thought you wanted to put me away!”

Mark sat down quietly beside her and pulled her close to himself in a side embrace.

Wrapped into his hug, she shed tears of relief, until composing herself enough to sit up straight and dab her eyes with the tissue he’d offered. She looked around in awe and stopped when she caught the kindness in her son’s expression. “This is my home. This is our home. You did this for me.”

“Unless you’d prefer to live at Wandering Acres. Feel free to consider your options.”

He was wearing an impish grin.

“I’ve had enough considering for one day.” Nodding and sighing and shaking her head in wonderment, Margaret turned and looked directly into his eyes. “If you’re waiting for me to say yes, consider it done.”