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Delayed Gratification

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She sat alone. Her table was on the patio where she could see the cars as they pulled into the restaurant parking lot. She waited for him and wondered what to expect.

She didn't have to wait long. His black Jeep pulled into the parking lot and found the first available space. His eyes were searching the patio even as he approached, and he found her easily. She smiled and returned his wave, then watched him duck around the corner toward the entrance.

He looked good, she decided. A far cry from the man he'd been when she'd first ushered him into her office. That man had shuffled along, shoulders slumped, head down, as if waiting for the next blow to land. His voice had been flat and subdued, his handshake weak; his whole being, from the fifty pounds of excess weight around his waist to the chronic sigh that punctuated his speech, proclaimed him a man defeated. Now, even in the crowded restaurant, she could see the spring in his step, the energy in his smile, the shine in his eyes. And those eyes and that smile were fixed firmly on her as he half-ran the last few steps to the table. She rose to meet him in a friendly hug, part of their tradition since that first meeting.

"It's so good to see you again, Amanda," he said, giving her an extra squeeze. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"You're ten minutes early, as always," she replied, allowing him to hold the chair as she sat back down. His smile was infectious; she found herself almost grinning at him.

He shrugged and looked at the waiter, who was trying to hand him a menu. "I'm ready to order now, if you like. Amanda?"

"Why not?" She turned to the waiter and handed him her menu. "I'll have the chicken and shrimp stir fry and a bowl of won-ton soup."

"Triple Delight for me," he added. "And lots of iced tea."

The waiter retreated with a friendly nod. Amanda looked over her companion again. She noted the well-tailored suit he wore over his trim, lean body; the confident spread of his shoulders; the quick movement of his eye as he took in the entire scene around them. And she felt a small rush of pride at having helped this man to become this way.

"So tell me, Ben ... why are we having dinner tonight?"

"I want to show you something." He flashed that infectious grin again, reached inside his suit jacket, and pulled out a thick envelope. She took it from him, removed the contents, and unfolded them. The first page bore a simple title in bold, ornate type:

FINAL DECREE OF DIVORCE

She stopped reading and looked back into his eyes. "Are we celebrating?"

"We are celebrating," he confirmed.

Amanda skimmed the papers, her conscious mind gleaning the basic structure of the deal, which had been signed 30 days before. Meanwhile, in the back of her mind, the picture of a heavy oak chest bound with chains and locks took shape. "You got everything you wanted," she noted. "Full custody of Jenny, the house, no alimony. This is wonderful."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. "Pretty much," he agreed. "As of today, I'm a free man."

Without thinking, she reached across the table and took his hand. "I'm so happy for you," she gushed. "Have you started dating yet?"

An odd look came over his face for a moment, and a tiny jolt of energy passed between them. "Not yet," he said. "There's someone I'd like to start seeing, but I've been waiting for the right time."

Amanda nodded. She wondered if he could sense the racing of her pulse, her rapid and shallow breathing. Silently, she willed herself to relax, relax. "Wise," she commended

him, letting herself slip a little bit into therapist mode. "Too many people rush right into another relationship."

He winked at her. "But I had you," he countered. "And you taught me the value of delayed gratification."

Delayed gratification, she thought to herself, nodding. *The story of my life, it seems.*

She remembered again that first meeting. He'd come to her out of desperation, just picking her name from the phone book, hoping she could somehow hypnotize him out of the depression that was draining his life. She spent most of that first session listening while he told her about how his wife wanted him to move out but refused to say why; how the stress from his job was being compounded by feeling unwanted in his own home; how, to get brief escapes from it all, he had been eating and drinking too much and exercising too little.

Amanda's first instinct had been to send him to a psychiatrist, to get him evaluated for treatment with antidepressants. But that wasn't why she'd become a hypnotherapist; before going down that path, she had to try every alternative. She listened carefully, looking for the patterns at the root of it all, looking for a way she could help. In the end, she took him into hypnosis and gave him some broad, general suggestions he could use to cope with stress in more constructive ways; taught him how to use self-hypnosis to maintain his equilibrium, and to speed up his thinking when he needed to.

The results surpassed her every expectation. Ben had come out of that first trance with a broad, relaxed smile on his face; his eyes took on a sparkle that hadn't been there an hour before, and he seemed two inches taller when he stood up to leave than he'd been when he arrived. Amanda saw the first hints of the man Ben could be, and she resolved to use all of her skills to help that man emerge.

There was only one problem: along the way, Amanda found her clinical detachment waning. This new Ben -- the real Ben, as she thought of him -- was warm, funny, and vibrant. Her office felt empty when he left it, and she found herself letting his sessions drag on as they talked about any topic under the sun. Her objectivity was gone.

She had tried placing her feelings in her Thought Closet, where she tucked her attitudes about smoking, illegal drugs, and other irresponsible behavior. Every therapist worth his or her salt has such a closet, she knew; a place to store those attitudes so they won't interfere with helping the person. But as soon as she tried it, she knew it wouldn't work -- these feelings were too strong, too unruly, too dangerous. That was when she first envisioned the chest. Her mind constructed it, aided by self-hypnosis, to be strong enough for the job. There she kept those dangerous feelings locked away, except for those rare occasions, mostly late at night, when she took them out to look at them, to learn from them, to let herself feel them for an hour or two before locking them carefully away again.

The image of the chest was strong in Amanda's mind as she and Ben ate their dinner and made small talk. When had she last seen him professionally? Six months ago? Eight months? Closer to six, she decided. Was that long enough? The chest shook, and the locks rattled in their hasps.

Hold on, Amanda, she cautioned herself. He may not be an active client, but you're still his therapist. There are still rules.

"... to get your advice. Amanda?"

Amanda shook her head clear. "I'm sorry, Ben. I zoned out for a few minutes there."

"Long day?" There was sympathy in his face, and concern.

She blushed a little bit. "Something like that. I'm back now."

"I was saying that I have a bit of an issue to work out, and I'd like your advice."

She nodded and reached in her purse for her PDA. "We can set up an appointment ..."

Ben was shaking his head. "It's not that kind of issue," he said, smiling. "It's more of a sit-down-in-the-living-room-with-a-friend type of issue. Would you consider coming back to my place after dinner for a while?"

She was intrigued. "Okay," she told him. "I'd like that."

They finished dinner. Ben paid and led her out to the parking lot. She followed him in her car, even though she knew the way; it gave her a chance to recollect herself, while the chest shook and rattled in the back seat.

She pulled into an unreserved parking spot and allowed Ben to lead her into the building. The last time she'd been here, she recalled, was when she'd helped him move in. A full day of laughing and joking as they unpacked boxes, drinking beer and eating pizza, brushing against each other in the hallways ... things had almost gotten out of hand that day, she remembered. But that would have been a disaster for both of them. Enter the chest, with its thick sides and heavy chains and sturdy padlocks.

She noticed Ben looking at her. Reading her mind? "It's a little better organized now than when you saw it last," he said, slipping his key into the lock.

He ushered her inside. The living room was clearly ready for company. It was freshly vacuumed and dusted, with nothing out of place. There was a black leather sofa and matching easy chair, a glass-topped coffee table and end tables, and an open shelf unit featuring a wide-screen television, a modest stereo, and a reasonable collection of hardbound books. "Very nice," she approved, remembering the second-hand futon and orange crates it had originally been furnished with. Then her eye spotted something

dangling from the ceiling: a teardrop-shaped crystal suspended on an almost-invisible black string. It hovered above and just behind the easy chair. "Is that what I think it is?" she asked, approaching the spot.

He chuckled self-consciously. "That chair is my sanctuary," he explained. "Try it."

She set her purse down on the coffee table and sat in the easy chair. He guided her hand to a button located just under the right armrest; she pressed it and felt the chair recline back, a footrest rising from under the front to support her legs. Her body tilted back with the chair until she found herself looking straight up at the teardrop crystal.

Ben reached up, took the crystal in his fingers, and gave it a spin. "I love to sit here, recline back, and just relax into my chair, watching the crystal as it spins. Studying the way the facets catch the light as it spins first one way, then slowing down, and spinning the other way. Swaying back and forth, glistening and glinting ... it's captivating, isn't it? And so relaxing ..." As he spoke, his voice slowed down.

Amanda found herself staring at the swaying, spinning crystal. As she heard his voice grow softer and slower, she found herself wanting to relax and look more deeply into it. The chair was lovely. Some leather furniture felt tight and tough, as if the stuffing were trying to burst out; this leather was soft and yielding, conforming easily to her body. She felt herself sinking into it, responding to Ben's voice, relaxing.

She chuckled softly and looked up at Ben, who was also staring into the crystal. "Are you trying to induce me?"

Ben blinked heavily, shook his head, and looked back down. "Oh! Sorry ... I just sort of got caught up in it. I've put myself under so many times that way, it's sort of automatic."

"I could hear it in your voice," she replied. "And you almost took me in with you." Stroking the soft, plush arms of the chair, she closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. "It was very tempting. But maybe we should get to what you wanted to ask me about."

Ben nodded and plopped onto the sofa next to her. His whole body turned to face Amanda, arms hanging over the side while he spoke. "You asked if I'd started dating again. I haven't -- I didn't want to risk giving Julia any last-minute ammunition, and the one person I might have been interested in wasn't available either."

Amanda brought the chair upright again. She was leaning forward, almost copying his body posture only a bit more relaxed, a bit more in control. "But now she is?"

His shoulders rose in a half-shrug, and he glanced up at the ceiling before meeting her gaze again. "That's the issue," he said. "I'm not sure. And I don't know how to approach her."

"I see. Has she ever shown any sign of being interested in you?"

"Maybe," he said, his eyes looking off into the distance. "There was a time or two when she seemed that way. But then she sort of backed off. At the time I figured it was just as well, since I was technically still married to Julia." His eyes found hers again. "I don't have to tell you what that shyster of hers would have been able to do with a gift like that."

"That's true," she agreed. Julia's predatory lawyer had been the source of much of Ben's stress.

"So I set the whole thing aside," Ben continued. "Delayed gratification, as you put it. And now I'm free -- but I don't know what her status is, or what her feelings might be, or how to approach her with any of this."

"I see," she said again. Meanwhile, inside her mind, she struggled to control the emotional tempest within. The chest was still securely locked, but Amanda found herself acutely aware of its contents and the massive conflict of interest before her. She chose her words carefully. "You could call her up, ask her to dinner. Let her know you're free, and see how she responds."

"I've done that."

"And?" *Relax*, she told herself. *Stop gripping the chair that way.*

He shook his head slowly. "I can't tell. She's friendly, just like always, but I can't see any sign of anything more."

"Do you think she's holding back?"

"Maybe," he replied. "But maybe I just want to think that. It's hard to sort out what I really believe from what I just hope ... you know what I mean?"

"I know," she assured him, working to keep the bitter truth of that out of her voice. Her hypnotherapy training had taught her a lot about voice control. *Damned good thing, too*, she reflected, adding a couple of stout steel bands to the image of the straining chest. That helped; she felt her ability to detach asserting itself. "You could continue as you have been," she suggested, "spending time with her much as you can. In time she will get the message that you have feelings for her and either respond to it or not."

He nodded, grimacing slightly. "Is there an 'or' coming?"

She hesitated; it hadn't been in her conscious mind, but there was an obvious alternative. "Or," she added, meeting his gaze again, "you might choose to sit her down, take her by the hand, and tell her how you feel. Go for broke. She might not give you the response you'd like, but at least you'd know."

Amanda saw the resolve in Ben's face as she finished and immediately cursed herself inwardly. *What are you doing, trying to sabotage things so you can take a shot at him*

yourself? In that moment she despised herself, the chest that taunted her from within, and the entire cruel situation.

And then she felt a weight settle on the arm of her chair, and looked up to see Ben staring down at her. His hands took and cradled hers, and moisture glinted in his eyes as he locked them onto hers.

"Amanda," he began, his voice gravelly with pent-up emotion, "I love you. I've been in love with you for months, probably since that first day in your office. In the time we've known each other you've been my confidante, my sage advisor, and my friend. I owe you more than I can ever repay, and far more than you've ever asked for. You taught me the value of patience, of waiting until the time is right to seek what I want from life. Now I think the time is right for me to ask: on top of everything else you already are, will you be my lover?"

Her lips moved, but the words wouldn't come out. The image of Ben's face hovering over her grew fuzzy as the tears flowed, but another image came to the front, clear and sharp as any solid object: a heavy oak chest, with locks and chains and steel bands falling aside, and the lid bursting open.

Her arms reached up to find him and pull him down for their first kiss.

-wg
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