

The Marriage Exchange

A Short Story

By Robert H. Reck

An innovative, problem-solving matchmaking service that breaks the rules

Marybeth stomped down the street trying to vent her anger. Brad had pissed her off every day this week, setting a new record for his insensitivity and selfishness. Moreover her wrist hurt where he'd twisted it trying to gain control over her and make her have sex with him the night before. She'd spit in his face and he'd thrown her across the room onto the sofa. Now that she thought of it, her hip hurt too.

"Oh, God," she thought, "I'm headed towards a divorce. He was so nice when we lived together – and then we had to go and get married." The wedding had been two years ago and the marriage had gone downhill from there. A fleeting thought of the lavish wedding and reception flashed through her head.

"I'll call Jess later and see if she has any suggestions." Jess, her long-time best friend, had divorced her husband of five years the year before and now seemed to be living an idyllic life living and working in the Embarcadero in San Francisco. She had several attentive boyfriends that seemed to adore her and satisfy her every need. Marybeth pushed back the twinge of jealousy that crept into her mind when she thought of Jess.

"Coffee; must have a coffee." The aroma of fresh brewed coffee wafted onto the sidewalk as she passed the Starbucks near her office. As usual she turned and waited in line for the expensive brew.

Afterwards, as a reward that fine spring morning and also to cool her temper and anger at Brad before she went to her office, she sat at a small metal table outside the coffee shop and sipped the hot coffee.

It was then that she noticed renovations going on in the empty store next door to Starbucks. The store had sat vacant for almost two years, the art gallery that had been in the place had folded. She recalled the art had never appealed to her and that she'd never seen anyone other than the gallery owner in the store. No wonder it had folded. There was no indication of what the new store would become.

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Two days later, Marybeth stomped down the street – as usual. She thought, “Brad’s setting a new record. He’s been an asshole everyday this month.” This morning he’d yelled at her for leaving her dirty clothes from the day before in a pile in the corner of the bedroom. Of course, his were strewn from one end of their condominium to the other, some of them smelly remnants of his basketball game with the guys the evening before at the court in the schoolyard near where they lived. He’d thrown a few things at her but fortunately they’d been clothing.

Also as usual, she turned into Starbucks glancing at the pile of construction debris piled curbside for trash pickup by the empty store next door. “That’s quite a renovation they’re doing there,” she thought. I wonder what the store will be.

When her turn came to order her coffee she also asked the girl behind the counter if she knew what the store would be. The result was a shrug and a shake of the head.

On her way to work she peered through the windows of the construction site next door. The place would be some kind of nicely appointed office space. She could see that the contractors were preparing a number of separate rooms. Based on wires hanging from the wall, the place would be well connected with computers and such. She speculated on what kinds of business that might include: insurance? Investments? Telemarketing? Oh well, time will tell.

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Two weeks later things had only gotten worse with Brad. Marybeth came out from Starbucks and sat down to enjoy her morning coffee. She thought, “I have to get my head off my hellish life with Brad and into my job. My marriage is affecting everything I do.” Suddenly, she noticed the intriguing name for the store that had been under construction. The signage must have gone up the day before while she’d been at work:

Marriage Exchange

“Hummm. Marriage Exchange,” she thought, “I’d love to exchange my marriage for someone else’s. I wonder if they’ll do that for me? Nah. Probably just a catchy name for a marketing company of some kind – or perhaps counseling.” After all, no one could exchange your marriage, could they?

She reflected on Brad’s latest ‘stunt’ as she referred to them. He’d gone out drinking with the guys and not come home until one in the morning. Then he’d demanded sex with her. She’d told him on no uncertain terms to ‘fuck off’ and get sober. She locked him out of the bedroom, worried that he’d destroy the door. He’d slept on the couch, again, and was just rolling his slovenly body into gear as she’d left the condo. “What a mess I’ve made of my life – my marriage,” she thought.

The thought of sex flit through her mind and made her smile. She hadn't had sex with Brad for months. She decided to save her 'treasures' for some future, more deserving lover. Brad was turned off – permanently. Nonetheless, she felt needy some days. She thought of Jess and her lovers. She'd call Jess later, if nothing more than to get her perspective on what she should do. Jess was earthy, but gave good advice and was always a good listener.

After she finished her coffee, Marybeth looked in the windows of the new shop again, however, there appeared there was no furniture or equipment yet in the offices. The following day, she asked about the shop at Starbucks but again only got a shrug indicating both indifference and lack of knowledge.

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A week later, seething with her latest frustration with Brad, something to do with his anger over her meals and his drinking problem, Marybeth trod into Starbucks, her mind full of thoughts about how soon she could extricate herself from her husband. Such a shame I can't snap my fingers and make him vanish like the witch on that old black and white TV show.

A few minutes later armed with her coffee, she decided she'd better let her anger at Brad cool down before barreling into work with her current attitude. She sat at one of the metal tables and took a deep breath. "Maybe I should try mediation," she thought, "Or levitation; I'll levitate Brad right into the path of a speeding locomotive."

She looked across the sidewalk and for the first time realized that the previously vacant store now had come to life: *Marriage Exchange*. There were lights on in the establishment and she could see one woman moving around the outer reception area, neatening up the area.

Marybeth screwed up her courage, stood and walked towards the new store. As she entered a subtle sweet aroma of jasmine caught her attention and made her pause. She could feel some of her anger drain away.

"Hello," a woman's voice said pleasantly. "May I help you?"

Marybeth turned and looked at the woman: about her age, pretty – no even beautiful, trim, wonderful skin tone, hair done in an attractive twist, silk blouse, black stovepipe slacks, low heels. "Yes, I guess." She paused and for a moment mused over how her own dress standards had declined as her anger at Brad grew. "Your store name caught my attention. I wondered what you did, or perhaps if you have a brochure."

The woman smiled and said, "I'm Tara. And yes, we do have a brochure." She rummaged in her desk and produced a single pocket-sized pamphlet with picture of smiling couples on

it. She rose again and handed it to Marybeth. “Do you need a replacement or a better model?” she asked with a touch of humor in her voice.

Marybeth asked, “Replacement? Better model?” The woman sounded like she’d been talking about refrigerators.

Tara laughed. “Yes. Women come to us when they either need to replace a husband or boyfriend that’s left them high and dry, or they want to get rid of one they have and get a better one. Usually they’re in a marriage, but not always; sometimes it’s a long-term relationship, that’s why we call it *Marriage Exchange*.”

Marybeth nodded in understanding and stated bluntly, “Oh, I need a new model!” She glanced at the brochure. “How do you make THAT happen?”

“Well, we have a variety of techniques. Apparently the one you have doesn’t show any signs of departing? Have you tried counseling?”

Marybeth said, “He won’t go to counseling; I’ve asked several times. And, no, he won’t leave on his own. All he does is criticize and yell at me for my mistakes; he can occasionally be a little physical.” She rubbed her wrist still sore from over a week earlier. “I’ve kept score over the past couple of months and there’s only been one day when he was nice all day.”

“Well, on one level, we have two basic techniques. We can help you push him out, or we can use some outside ‘magnet’ to make him want to leave you for what he thinks will be better. In the process we also find ‘something better’ for you. How’s that sound?”

She thought for a moment and said, “Well, for one, it sounds expensive. Don’t I need a lawyer and divorce papers and things like that?”

“We provide all that as part of our package, satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. The ‘Do It Yourself’ kit is \$2,000; the ‘Chauffeured Package’ is \$3,000, plus out-of-pocket expenses. There can be a few extras. We can finance the payments or even arrange for the money to be ‘extracted’ from your spouse’s share of the divorce settlement as he departs. When you sign up for one of the programs we explain all the details to you.” She looked at me expectantly.

After a moment Marybeth said, “Let me get back to you. That’s more money than I’ve got now, and I also want to read your brochure. Do you have references for this kind of thing?”

“Oh yes, just let me know when you want them. We’re very patient and there’s no hard sell. I should also mention that something like this can take a few months; a separation or divorce

is not something that we can make happen overnight, although we have had a number of miraculous departures or exchanges.” Tara smiled warmly.

Marybeth took the brochure and her coffee and left the store, completing her walk to work. She felt as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders even though she hadn’t signed up for any *Marriage Exchange* programs.

At work she read the little brochure about a dozen times, but it provided no further information about *Marriage Exchange* other than what Tara had told her. There was a phone number, a local exchange that she assumed was the storefront she’d visited. She called and heard Tara answer: “*Marriage Exchange*, how may I help you?”

“Tara, this is Marybeth Wagner, I was in there about an hour ago. I wondered if I could talk to one or two people that used you guys. Is that awkward?”

“No, no,” Tara told her. “Here are two names: Kate Webster and Diane Lawford. I think they both work in town near here.” She also provided the phone numbers. “If you want I can give you a couple of men as well; you know problems such as you’re facing can be felt equally on either side of a relationship.”

After hanging up, Marybeth dialed Kate’s number. Almost immediately a female voice answered: “Optimal Insurance, how may I direct your call?” She requested Kate Webster and in another moment another voice answered, “Hi. This is Kate.”

Marybeth started, “Kate, you don’t know me but *Marriage Exchange* gave me your name as a reference. I know it may be presumptive to ask but I was curious why you used them and how you think about someone like me using them? I’m thinking very seriously of signing onto their program.”

“Where are you? Now I mean?” Kate asked.

Marybeth answered, “Errr, I work downtown, near Main and Pineapple.”

Kate said, “Oh, Good. I’m about two blocks from you. How about we do lunch? Do you know the sandwich shop on Cortez near Main?” The pair set up a meeting and two hours later the two women sat on a park bench in front of City Hall eating their sandwiches.

Kate started by telling her story, “I was married to a guy named Charlie. Everybody loved Charlie, including his secretary. He bonked her a few times and I suspected but didn’t have any solid evidence. I could have probably forgiven that, but then his whole disposition around me soured; I couldn’t do anything right. It was a downward spiral. I figured he’d leave but he didn’t, he just hung around, fucked her, and made my life miserable. He

wouldn't go to counseling either. I hated to go home from work. I didn't know where to turn."

"A friend told me about *Marriage Exchange*. I thought it was a joke, you know 'trade your husband in for a better model' and all that. It wasn't. I'm married to Todd now and he's such a sweetheart, as different as night and day from Charlie. He's attentive, loving, kind, can't wait to do things with me, dotes on me, and calls me a few times every day just to tell me he loves me. Moreover," she whispered, "He's a divine lover. He's a dream come true."

"Anyway, M.E. as I call them; apparently had some other gal enter the picture and come on to Charlie. She was irresistible – even more than his secretary - and he went for the bait. They did their magic on him and next thing I knew he'd packed up and moved out, then pleaded with me to divorce him on my terms. He gave me an outrageously great settlement. A month or so later, just when I was thinking of getting back into life, Todd showed up to offer help and solace, although I didn't think I needed much of that." She laughed, "Anyway, I'd resolved to swear off men and never get married again. Todd swept me off my feet, from day one, and a couple of months after my divorce became final, we ran away to Vegas and got hitched. I've never been happier in my life and my life only gets better with him."

Marybeth pushed and prodded with questions; amazed and incredulous that Kate could go through such a rapid change and come out of it amazingly upbeat and elated without the bitterness she detected in so many divorced women. Yet the evidence sat beside her on the bench as they had lunch.

Marybeth called Diane Lawford in the afternoon. As soon as Diane realized she'd been given as a reference, she giggled and suggested a glass of wine after work. She told Marybeth, "This isn't the kind of thing I can talk to you over the telephone about." They agreed on a spot downtown and Marybeth spent the rest of the afternoon wondering about Kate and Diane's objectivity. Had they been so desperate to get rid of their husbands that any replacement would do? Had they paid full price? How long had it taken? Were they still bitter?

Diane Lawford was a beautiful woman and warmed instantly to Marybeth. The two settled into a leather-bound booth at the stately old Hotel Drake, now made over and part of a national chain. Each had ordered a glass of Merlot.

Diane told her, "I can't tell you how happy I was with *Marriage Exchange*. Two years ago I even contemplated suicide. Darren, my ex, beat me up once in a while; it was his way of controlling me. I asked him to leave several times, but the most I got out of that discussion was a broken jaw one time. I had to drink my meals through a straw for six weeks; they wired it shut. I also missed two months of work."

She went on, “A friend had found the Exchange in another city and sent me a brochure. One day while I was at home nursing a black eye, I called them and talked to someone named Rachel. After she understood how desperate I was, she came here at her own expense a few days later and talked me through the program. I signed up and spent three days giving them an unimaginable amount of information about Darren and me, a lot of ... well, kind of personal ... intimate information. Well, after things started, at least his disposition improved slightly and I didn’t feel I’d get roughed up, and then six weeks after I’d started he told me he was divorcing me; he moved out that day and I haven’t seen him since.”

“What did it cost you?” Marybeth asked.

“Well, it didn’t cost me anything. Darren doesn’t know it but he paid for the Exchange as part of his settlement.”

“Exchange?”

“Oh yes, a couple of months after Darren moved out, Kinsey Cartland showed up on my doorstep, literally. The Exchange had him come by to help me sort out my affairs. They knew I’d eventually have to move to smaller quarters and trim back in a number of ways. Anyway, Kinsey arrived at ten o’clock in the morning and proposed marriage over a bottle of outrageously expensive wine that same day at five o’clock. Of course, I didn’t accept right away, but I did four months later. He swept me off my feet.”

“And you’re happy?” Marybeth asked tentatively.

“Happy?” Diane stated incredulously. “I haven’t had an unhappy second for the three years since Kinsey came into my life. He’s the most fascinating man I know, plus he’s a divine lover.” Diane got a kind of dreamy look on her face.

“Is it ... is your marriage all based on sex?” Marybeth asked.

“Oh no,” Diane exclaimed. “He’s a bit of an intellectual. He’s written a couple of dozen books – mostly textbooks and he’s often a guest lecturer at the City’s college. He’s well off, plus he brings me gifts, he writes me poetry, he’s surprised me with trips to Europe – where he’s from, and to the Caribbean, he helps with housework, he’s handy around the home, he likes all my friends – even the crazy ones, and he encourages my wild streak.”

Marybeth just sat in an astonished state and said, “Wow!” Finally she asked, “What did they do – the *Marriage Exchange*?”

Diane said, “All I can figure is they lured Darren out by some strong female scent – some other female was involved, but I don’t think much ever happened between them. He was burning up with passion for something or someone when he left – he just wanted out and I

mean immediately. Rachel, the M.E. woman I worked with, said they used something new called E.H.T., whatever that is – don't ask me, I didn't pay attention. I heard through the grapevine that Darren had changed jobs and was doing all right, but that's all I know for sure. I don't want to stir up a hornet's nest so I haven't called him but he's around town.

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“How do I sign up?” Marybeth asked. She sat in front of Tara's desk at *Marriage Exchange*, her feet planted firmly on the floor and her purse clutched in front of her. On the desk sat her morning cup of coffee.

Tara said looking at her desk calendar, “We'll book a couple of days for you to come in to share a lot of information with us about yourself and about Brad. We could start on Friday and then pick up the second day and any additional time we might need the following week.” She looked to Marybeth for approval.

Marybeth nodded, “The sooner the better. Should I plan being here the whole day? This is so important; I can take time off from work.”

Tara said it would take at least two full days and then any other time could be done after work, unless there was something exceptional. Marybeth booked Friday and the following Monday.

Then Marybeth asked an interesting question: “As you do whatever it is you do to Brad, is there any chance I could watch it take place? I'd really like to see how you do what you do, but really I want to see the prick cooked in his own juices.” She thought a minute and asked, “Diane said you used something called E.H.T. as part of your approach; what's that?”

Tara laughed and said, “We'll see if there's a situation where you can watch. You'll have to ask Stacy; she'll be your advocate here. You'll meet her Friday. Some parts of what we do I just don't know how you'd even be able to see them, but certainly any pickups or come-ons we can figure something out. It depends in part on Brad's habits. As for E.H.T., that stands for Extended Hypnosis Therapy. Several of the founders are expert in the approach and use it in some of our work. Stacy can tell you more about it on Friday.”

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Friday, Marybeth arrived at *Marriage Exchange* at exactly 8:30 a.m. as she'd been told to do. Tara was there and introduce her to Stacy who would be the first person she'd work with in terms of collecting information about her and Brad.

Stacy was another stunning person: long black hair, with natural curls in it, high cheek bones that provided angular relief to her crystal clear complexion and full lips. Stacy was also

about Marybeth's height and full bosomed. Stacy's legs were sheathed in a long, maxi-length dark gray skirt with a slit up one side. As she walked in her low heels, Marybeth could occasionally see significant flashes of skin well up Stacy's thigh. The whole package was alluring and Marybeth actually felt herself flush at her unusual Sapphic reaction.

Having met Tara a few days earlier, Marybeth had started dressing better again. She wore heels, snug designer jeans that showed off her best assets, and an expensive looking summery blouse and a colorful scarf that called attention to her slim neckline and breasts. She had a light sweater in her oversize purse. She'd actually admired her flat tummy in the mirror that morning as she'd stood assessing her nude body after her morning shower. She recalled thinking, "It's a shame Brad will never get to touch all this lovely real estate again." She also wondered if anyone would ever find her interesting enough to explore the secrets her body held.

"Shall we begin?" Stacy said, after she'd led Marybeth into a nicely decorated and comfortable meeting room. The two sat; both chairs were padded in comfortable leather. The table between them had a posh inlay of leather also. The surroundings were rich and suggested a successful organization.

Stacy went on, "You and I will spend this morning together. After lunch, you'll meet with Mike Connors and he'll continue with you in the afternoon. He's new to this office, but one of the co-founders of *Marriage Exchange*, so you'll be getting the best all the way along today." She smiled in an engaging way. Marybeth felt herself relax.

Stacy continued, "The three of us will meet again for the last half-hour of the day to wrap up and cover any unasked questions. I'm going to collect a lot of standard information and then start to ask you some very personal questions that I hope you'll answer candidly. Sometimes, it's just some little fact that helps us trip the scale in the right direction so bear with us. Of course, all of the information is confidential. We do record our sessions so we can go back and review the information, but the tapes are destroyed after a month or you can have them back."

Marybeth nodded; she'd been ready to start all week.

Stacy started with the usual questions about Marybeth's demographics: address, birth date, parents, health, financial status, job position and nature of work. Then the questions became a little more personal: how she felt growing up, her relationship with parents and siblings, her friends and how they interacted, her education, her work and her co-workers.

The questions then got into her emotional life: how she felt about things in general; what made her happy and sad; what brought joy to her life? Did she have a narrow or wide range of emotions? Was she quick to anger ... or laugh? Was she forgiving and tolerant?

Marybeth felt well grilled about her 'public' life by the time the pair took a fifteen-minute break about ten-thirty. She walked around outside to clear the cobwebs from her head and get a little exercise and fresh air.

Stacy started the late morning part of her interview with an interesting question: "Marybeth, when you first saw me, what did you feel?"

Marybeth stammered a little at the directness of the question. Finally, she garnered the courage to answer it accurately; "To tell the truth I had several thoughts. Well, first you come across as very professional and competent. Perhaps it's the way you dress or carry yourself, however, I felt I was in good hands and made the right decision to come here." She paused and went on, "You are also a beautiful woman. Everything about you has, errr ... sex appeal, and I wish I had the ability to always look as nice as you do – to be sexy too."

Stacy didn't bat an eye, but made a minor notation on her note pad. Finally she looked up and said, "You're normal and I appreciate your compliments. To tell you the truth, I'm drawn to you as well. Your jeans are tight enough to show you have nice legs. You are sexy in your own way." She grinned.

Marybeth almost gasped.

Stacy added with a laugh, "Don't worry, I'm not hitting on you. If I ever did, I'm pretty direct and you'll know it. Besides I like guys."

After that, the questions got very personal, including Marybeth's sexual preferences, experience and predilections. When did you start having sex? Did you like it? Have you had many partners? Who was the best? Why? What do you like most about it? What have you done? What would you like to do again ... not do again? What do you fantasize about?

Marybeth decided this was the most complete interview she'd ever had. Somehow the morning flew by until suddenly Stacy's phone buzzed to indicate noon.

As they stood to go to lunch, Marybeth volunteered, "All this talk about sex made me hot and bothered. The first male I meet better watch out."

Stacy laughed and confided, "Frankly, I am too. Mike probably won't notice, and even if he does he'll act professionally. By the way, he's going to join us for lunch. I thought we'd go to a little sandwich place around the corner." She grinned at the clear indication that Mike would be the first male I'd see.

Mike was waiting in the lobby of the small office and after a cordial introduction; the three walked the hundred yards or so to the Greek restaurant on the corner.

Marybeth studied Mike as they walked. As Tara and Stacy were beautiful, Mike was handsome. He stood just over six feet tall, with short wavy dusty brown hair. He was smooth shaven and thus his square jaw and clean-cut look were amplified. He had square shoulders and no doubt worked out to carry the physique evident on his body. He had trim hips, a cute little behind, and what looked like long strong legs. Marybeth now felt even more bothered.

Mike was very polite and held the chairs for both Marybeth and Stacy. Marybeth wondered if the two of them were an event. She started to hang on his every word, his voice so well modulated and masculine. She checked his left hand and for some reason was glad to see he wore no wedding ring.

“So are you all answered out?” Mike asked with a touch of humor in his voice.

“Well, let’s just say I’ve never spent such a concentrated period of time talking about myself – and in some sensitive areas too.”

He turned to Stacy and asked with a chuckle, “How’d she do on all the sex questions? Did you finish?”

Stacy said, “You can listen to the tapes later but she seems above normal on the scale. That’s good; we’re more likely to find her someone quickly that way. I’ll explain the side to side variations to you later.”

Marybeth asked, “Huh?”

“Oh, we use some research instruments that allow us to portray your answers on a multi-dimensional grid. What the resulting polyhedron looks like – up, down, left, right, and all the other dimensions – helps us understand both you and Brad better, plus it helps us match you to some other people with a much higher degree of success than any dating service ever dreamed about. Isn’t that right, Mike?” Stacy turned to him clearly with a desire to impress, and Marybeth suddenly realized two things: Stacy and Mike had not worked closely before today, and Stacy appeared attracted to Mike. She wondered if Mike had been Stacy’s date the night before and then decided the two did not have that kind of chemistry yet. She could see the unrealized potential between the pair and felt glad that they worked together.

Mike picked up the lead and answered in a professional tone, “I worked at two dating services before this – e-Harmony and Match.com. They’re the leaders in what they do. While I worked, I also went to grad school and came across these new techniques and instruments that we use now, and then co-founded *Marriage Exchange*. I couldn’t wait to apply some of what I learned. The company is now five years old and our success rate is phenomenal.”

Stacy said in a flirty jest, “You don’t need to sell it, Mike. She’s already bought.”

He retorted with a chuckle, “No, but I am bragging. This is really good stuff.” He turned back to Marybeth, “You should know that about a year ago, based on the instrument’s use on a couple of thousand individuals, the whole shebang got updated and refined. The improvements are wonderful. Further my partner and I have integrated what we call E.H.T. into our approach and it’s made it almost foolproof.”

“Oh, I wanted to know more about E.H.T.,” Marybeth said jumping into the conversation.

Mike began, “Well it stands for Extended Hypnosis Therapy. The term ‘extended’ means it lasts for a long time; it also takes a long time, relatively, to make happen. The technique was created to deal with addictions – nicotine and drugs; and then began being used in other areas such as treating post-traumatic stress, anxiety and such. The problem with it is that any therapeutic benefits tend to wear off unless they were reinforced in some subtle ways. We learned how to make the benefits last longer – a few months anyway - and also how to avoid any feeling of violation or doing something against your will. Then a couple of us got interested in using the approach to help improve relationships, and,” he gestured, “Here we are.”

“Who’s your co-partner?”

Mike replied, “Rachel Star. We were grad students together and then co-founded *Marriage Exchange*. We got the Atlanta office started and then I decided we needed to expand and so she started a Washington office. I stayed in Atlanta until I groomed someone that could run it. I moved here about a month ago after we’d made arrangements for this office, clerical help and such.”

Marybeth was enthralled with Mike’s enthusiasm about the profiling instrument and E.H.T., as well as the new office. She asked some polite questions and relished his answers. She’d certainly lucked out in finding this place, and prayed that it would work on Brad. All that, plus she hoped she’d get to spend more time with Mike than just the coming afternoon. The trio finished their sandwiches and drinks and walked back to the office.

As they walked in the office door, Stacy excused herself and said she’d rejoin them about 4:30 p.m. Mike led Marybeth back into the same interview room they’d used that morning and the two sat comfortably at the table.

Mike finally looked up and said, “OK, for the next few hours, we’re going to talk about Brad. So close your eyes and take a deep breath.”

Marybeth did exactly that to get her head in gear.

Mike said, “We’ll start with the easy stuff first. Give me his demographics – his bio if you will; all the kind of information you probably gave Stacy at the start of this morning.”

Marybeth laid out what she knew about her husband: birthday, where he grew up, parents, family, financial status, job, friends, and so forth. She talked fast and ignored the small microphone sitting before her. Mike also wrote rapidly as she talked. Finally, she ran out of the ‘public’ things to say about him. She was surprised she knew so much of his background, and doubted if he’d ever paid that much attention to her life.

Mike then pushed into a new but related area; questions like: How did you meet? When did you have sex? How was it? What did he say? How did he react? Did he follow up or did you? What were your later dates like? Was sex a regular occurrence? When did you start living together? Why? What did each of you get from cohabitating? How did your relationship change over time? Why did you two decide to get married? Was the engagement different from just living together? How did things change during that time period? What was the wedding like? How did Brad behave? How did the frequency with which you had sex change over time? Why?

Then Mike took yet another tack: Who are Brad’s friends? Does he bring them home? Have you met them all? What percentage of time is he with them? Do you detect anything emotional in his relationship with them? What do you know about the home life of his friends? What do they do together?

Mike’s questions then shifted and got into Brad’s anger, distrust and dissatisfaction with life. He probed to find Brad’s open sores that he said they might find a way to exploit. Mike also bore in on Brad’s sexuality even further: What turned him on? How did he react to things you did together? Did you and he have any joint fantasies you explored? Was he all male? Do you describe him as an alpha? How would he have reacted if you had an affair?

The questions went on and on, and Marybeth realized that Mike was methodically searching for the weaknesses in Brad’s behavior, disposition, performance, preferences, and fantasies. Somehow, *Marriage Exchange* would find the chinks in Brad’s armor and use them to advantage. They’d slip in the Trojan horse and then the job would basically be done.

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Marybeth arrived home exhausted from the intense questioning she’d undergone all day. Stacy had made her promise to relax over the weekend.

Brad was particularly surly when she walked in the door. She hadn’t expected him to be home until after sunset since he usually played ‘hoops’ until he had to come home and eat, consume a prodigious amount of beer, belch a dozen times, and then lamely try to have sex with her.

“Why are you late?” He demanded. “Where’s my dinner?”

She brushed off his comment with a remark about workload at her job and then set about fixing dinner. Brad got into the beer right away, not a good sign unless she could get him to consume so much that he eventually passed out in front of the television.

He grumbled and sniped at her as she worked in the kitchen, actually tossing a nearly empty can at her as she rushed some hamburgers to the table for him. She then had to scurry to clean up the spilled brew before it stained the carpet.

If she hadn’t found the glimmer of hope at *Marriage Exchange*, this would have been the night she probably would have walked into the bedroom, packed a suitcase, and then walked out the door into the night, risking that he might get physically abusive with her in some way.

Brad wolfed down his dinner, making crude remarks about how he wanted to fuck her and make her his woman tonight. When out of sight, Marybeth just rolled her eyes, and went to get him another beer. Then she had what she thought was a stroke of genius: she’d make him a boilermaker. She poured a little of the beer from the can and poured in about an ounce of Jack Daniels – Brad’s favorite hard liquor. She carried it to him as he watched TV.

“Honey, I know how much you like your beer,” Marybeth crooned as she delivered the special can to him. “This one’s special; see if you like it. I made it just for you.”

Brad gave her a suspicious look and sniffed the can then took a sip. Marybeth adopted the posture of the doting wife and stood near him with a calculated look of trying to please him. “Hey, this is good. You put some Jack in this? Good girl.” He turned back to the TV.

She smiled and clapped her hands, apparently pleased that she could please her man. She kept delivering those to him for the next two hours, the dose of Jack larger in each succeeding can.

Brad passed out about ten o’clock. Marybeth put a pillow under his head, covered him over, and turned the television volume down slightly on the twenty-four hour sports channel. He’d be out until around six in the morning when he’d have to get up to piss; he wouldn’t bother her then. He’d just go back to sleep on the couch again, probably after taking a pile of pills to mitigate the terrible hangover he’d have by then. She grinned at her sweet revenge.

As Marybeth closed the door to the bedroom, she thought how diabolical she’d been. I’ll have to tell Stacy on Monday she thought – or Mike. She found herself attracted to the two of them.

*

Monday morning, she enthusiastically strode into *Marriage Exchange* ready for another full day of questioning. She wasn't disappointed. In the morning, Mike and Stacy each interviewed her further, the emphasis shifting more towards her husband and his terrible behavior. She told them about how she had fended him off all weekend, keeping him in an alcoholic stupor. She urged them to move quickly.

After lunch she was introduced to other people new to the office, Philip and Natalie, both also beautiful people and skilled interviewers who led her deeper into a psychological assessment of Brad, and, of course, herself. The quartet of interviewers met as a group with her from four to six o'clock, probing a few untouched areas as well as searching further for any hidden areas any one of them might have missed that could provide a leverage point for dealing with her husband – or, for that matter, matching her to some highly desirable mate.

Marybeth picked up some Chinese takeout on the way home, however, Brad wasn't there when she arrived at the condo. She ate and eventually put the leftovers in the refrigerator for him, if he ever came home. One could hope.

About midnight she heard the door slam, announcing Brad's presence one again. He came into the bedroom and she could smell the stale smoke and beer on him before he even got near the bed.

"Oh, yuck!" she said with an acidic voice. "You need a shower. You smell terrible."

"Fuck you, bitch," he said as a retort and left the room, slamming the bedroom door. Marybeth felt sorry for their neighbors. Brad's anger at her had gotten louder and meaner with each passing week, resulting in more yelling and now his slamming doors. That said, she thanked the stars he hadn't tried to make love to her.

*

At work two days later, Marybeth answered her cell phone. "Marybeth, this is Stacy."

"Hi, what's up? Do you need me for more questions?"

"No," she said in a cheery voice. "I just wanted to let you know that we're starting today – this evening in fact. Come by the office about five. You said you wanted to see part of this operation. We're assuming that Brad will go by his usual club after work."

"Oh yes," Marybeth said with a touch of glee in her voice. "I'll be there."

*

Stacy finished placing the scraggly dark wig on Marybeth's head and adjusted the look. "Now, with this change of clothes and some crazy glasses, we know Brad will write you off as someone he's not interested in. You'll just be a body in this place, if he should even see you."

Marybeth looked at herself in the mirror in the backroom of the *Marriage Exchange*. She barely recognized herself. She wore the clothes of someone ten years younger and much more punk; large tinted glasses gave her a funky look that would not appeal to Brad. Stacy had also down dressed and wore a wig, giving her a less than attractive appearance. The two were a pair.

"OK, let's go," Stacy said, "I need to warn you that Brad may not be approachable tonight. We think we have the right mix of ingredients, but we'll have to see." Stacy led them out the door and they caught a taxi to a club not too far from where Brad worked and where Marybeth knew he often went after work, sometimes for hours and hours.

The place was filling up rapidly as the after work crowd poured in for some drinks or even a burger before heading home. A DJ kept a wide variety of songs playing at too high a volume over the speakers on the stage. He had a smoke machine that gave an interesting air to the place.

Stacy said, "See the redhead near the bar?"

Marybeth nodded.

"She's the bait. She's done this before for us."

"She's going to pick him up?"

"Oh, a little more than that, but I'll explain as things unfold."

Marybeth turned rapidly away from her look at the redhead that also took in the main door to the club. "He's here. He's actually here."

"Oh good," Stacy said. She picked a small device out of her purse and held it near her lips. Marybeth leaned forward so she could see and hear what Stacy said into the small microphone, "Chili, your target just came in. Sandy hair, blue shirt near the door looking around. Now he's heading to the slot at the bar to your left about six people down from you."

Marybeth hitched around until she could see the redhead, whose name was apparently Chili. She raised both arms and stretched; apparently a signal that she'd heard the message and homed in on the target. The pair watched as she hefted her pert figure off the bar stool and

sauntered towards Brad, stopping to make a remark to each person as she went. Marybeth could tell she could be very friendly.

“Chili’s an expert at flirting. You’ll meet her later. She said she wanted to meet you too. It’s unusual that we do this, but you wanted to see her in action plus she also wanted to meet you after reading your file and listening to some of your tapes over the weekend. She’s from the Atlanta office, by the way.”

Marybeth blushed thinking of some of the material on the tapes.

Chili reached Brad and tossed out some comment to him. He replied and soon the two were in conversation. The postures of the flirting couple were unmistakable. This was a mating dance: Chili out for the kill and Brad the soon to be carcass. Soon they watched Chili buy Brad a second beer and then a third.

Stacy explained, “Based on what you told us, Brad appears to be a sucker for females that gift him little things – like a drink. It’s a dom-sub thing. Moreover, he likes redheads, freckles, and touching – see how she’s got her hand on his arm now and her body pushed into his muscles. He likes an aggressive female, even if she’s teasing.”

Marybeth said, “But I never told you any of those things explicitly.”

“No, but we imputed them from the data you gave us after we did a computer analysis. By Saturday we thought we had it figured out and what you told us Monday only confirmed our initial analysis. Fortunately, Chili was free and could start the game tonight.”

“She came here from Georgia?” Marybeth asked in an astonished voice.

“Yep, just for you. She’s got friends here too, so it’s not entirely a dedicated trip.”

They watched as Brad pulled Chili in closer to him, trying to plant a kiss on her cheek. Chili deftly turned at the last minute, laughed and then sashayed away from him towards the ladies room.

“Quick, that’s our sign, come with me,” Stacy said. She pulled Marybeth up and the two women followed the trail Chili had left towards the ladies room. The room was a torrent of women coming and going, the area in front of the large mirror swamped with women primping before they went back into the meat locker.

Stacy saw Chili and led Marybeth over. “Hi, doll. This is Marybeth.”

Chili smiled warmly and sympathetically at Marybeth; “You’ve got yourself quite a handful to get rid of out there. He’s a case, all ego and self centeredness.”

“I heard you came up especially to help do this for me. I’m so grateful. I hope he doesn’t give you a hard time. That’s what I usually get.”

“Don’t worry, Marybeth,” Chili told her. “You’ll find a way to pay it back and I’ll try to leave him at least neutered tonight so he won’t be a problem when he gets home.” She winked at Stacy. She pulled the earpiece out from behind her hair and with some finger work dislodged the small transmitter from her lacy under garments and pulled it up and out of her blouse by the wire. “You’d better take this. If he starts rummaging around in my hair or elsewhere, I don’t want him finding it.” Stacy took the receiver and put it in her pocket.

Chili exchanged a couple of words with Stacy and then said, “I better get back. I’m going to deliver the first dose in a few minutes if I can. I’ll check in with you later or tomorrow.” She slipped out the door of the bathroom as a gaggle of early twenty-somethings came giggling in the door.

“We’ll give her a few minutes then slip out,” Stacy said as she headed towards an open stall. “Be right out.”

Back at their table, Stacy and Marybeth watched Chili and Brad in their flirtatious dance.

“Will she lure him with sex?” Marybeth asked, suddenly starting to put pieces of the puzzle together.

“Yes ... and no,” Stacy said. “Brad is complex. He’d take the sex, but the fact is he wants more. He wants to play out that dom-sub thing I mentioned, plus he’d like to entertain all manner of fantasies with the right woman, most sexual, but some more substantive. That’s why we picked Chili.”

“I just don’t want her to do something she wouldn’t normally do,” Marybeth said.

“Oh, she won’t. You should know that Chili is happily married. She went through the *Marriage Exchange* program about two years ago – at the time she lived in Raleigh. She liked it so much she started working with us.”

“Did she have a terrible marriage, like mine?”

“No, in fact it was just one of those things that turned cold after a few years. Amazing, since I met both of them and thought they were warm people – just not with each other. Anyway, that was true exchange.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well in that case we matched Chili and Hank, her first husband, up with Shane and Alison. They were going through the program too, only from a few miles away in Chapel Hill. The couples hit it off and so did the cross pairs, if you know what I mean. They ended swapping spouses.”

“You mean sexually?” Marybeth asked, surprised by the volume of her voice.

Stacy laughed, “Well, I don’t know about that, but after they’d established their compatibility, they swapped marriage partners for good – two success stories. Shane moved to Raleigh to be with Chili, and Hank to Chapel Hill to be with Alison. They even kept the houses they had.”

“Did you think of doing that with Brad and me?” Marybeth asked then realized the dubious nature of her question. She clarified, “I mean, swapping us with another couple.” She gave Stacy a lopsided grin.

“Yes, briefly, at least until we learned about Brad’s abusive nature. I haven’t met a woman yet that wants an abusive, often drunk, self-centered, egotistical bastard as a mate.” She laughed at her string of words. She added, “Sounds just like my first husband.”

“You mean ... you ... were you a client too?”

“One of the first,” Stacy said. “At that time there was a lot of theory about all the match making and luring games. I lived in Boston at the time and met Mike’s co-founder –Rachel. She was doing her Ph.D. on E.H.T. They needed a test subject and I was one of them, or rather my ex was.”

Marybeth asked, “If E.H.T. is so good, why not just hypnotize the person so they change their disposition and be nice. Why does the couple have to break up?”

Stacy nodded and said, “What their research found is you can only change the fundamental nature of someone for a short time – a few months at best. If you keep coming back and reinforcing it, you can boost it back up, but sooner or later, what I call their true nature resurfaces.” She thought for a moment and added, “To your other question, if Brad changed now and stayed that way would you take him back?”

Marybeth thought for a moment and said, “No, not now. The relationship is too damaged to survive.”

Stacy said, “Mine was too. Anyway, this part of what we do is sort of temporary. The person knows what they’re doing, they can even object if they want, but it’s done nicely. They can be a little easier to convince too. But sooner or later, we have to let nature take its course and they’ll revert to the way they were – in Brad’s case, a rotten disposition.”

Marybeth turned back to look across the room at Chili and Brad. Chili had her arm around his shoulders and was whispering in his ear. "I hope she's having fun," she thought aloud.

"No," Stacy said in a serious tone, "I think she's actually working. He's getting his first dose of hypnosis therapy based on the spacey look on his face." We watched for a few minutes; Brad sat almost motionless on the bar stool as Stacy whispered non-stop into his ear.

Finally, Stacy said, "We should get out of here. Not much more is going to happen tonight. She'll make a date to see him back here in a couple of days probably. I'll talk to her tomorrow morning and let you know of anything important."

The pair settled the tab and left the club. Brad never paid any attention to them.

*

Marybeth was in bed when she heard the door to the condominium open and shut as Brad came home. She actually thought he was trying to be quiet for a change. She waited for his usual attempt to make love to her; however, it never came.

In the morning as she got up to go to work, Brad was asleep on the sofa. He cranked one eye open and looked at her as she passed by to go to the kitchen; "Hi Babe. I didn't want to wake you so I slept out here. Got home past your bedtime I guess. Have a good day at work." His eyes closed and he nodded off again.

Marybeth was amazed at his pleasant demeanor. He'd rarely been that nice to her. Then she thought, 'Too little; Too late.'

In late morning Stacy called Marybeth. "I just wanted to update you. I talked to Chili and she's cool with everything that happened. She said he was an easy subject to hypnotize and open to every suggestion she made. She reminded me to tell you that some of it may wear off so don't be surprised if he regresses in some situations until he gets the full treatment. One session does not a success make." She laughed and said, "You can always revert to the boiler makers again." The two chatted a little more and ended the call.

*

Friday evening, Brad was groping a pretty and young longhaired blonde when Chili came through the door of the bar. She nodded subtly in the direction of Stacy and Marybeth's distant table then slowly worked her way down the bar to Brad and the blonde. Once there she planted a very wet and sensual kiss on him that made others at the bar start to comment about the steamy relationship and how Brad was going to get very lucky tonight.

Much to the surprise of his bar mates, as well as to Brad's surprise and apparent pleasure, Chili turned to the blonde and planted a similar sensuous kiss on her, running her tongue up to one of the blonde's ears and back down to her mouth. Soon the two were creating a small scene right in front of Brad. A couple of catcalls rang out from down the bar. The bartender paused to leer at the pair.

Marybeth asked Stacy in a conspiratorial whisper, "Is the blonde part of the act?"

Stacy laughed and said, "No, never saw her before. Chili has wide and varied tastes as you can see. Who knows, she just might take the blonde home tonight." She grinned at Marybeth at the obvious sexual innuendo.

"Hot," Marybeth whispered as she sat back.

The trio at the bar fell into conversation, with lots of physical touch involved. As Marybeth and Stacy watched, they could see Brad enter his trance-like state as Chili whispered in his ear and then remarkably, she repeated the process on the cute blonde.

"Do they know what's happening?" Marybeth asked.

"Oh, yes," Stacy said. "They're fully aware. They're just allowing themselves to be led more directly to make decisions and take actions they otherwise might dismiss."

The trio soon hit the dance floor and started gyrating around to the rock music echoing off the walls. Marybeth felt a touch of nostalgia and even a twinge of jealousy as she watched him flirting with Chili and the blonde. Such a shame, she thought. If only they could have made the marriage work. Now, she tested once more in her mind, it was dead – very dead – and she was ready to move on with her life.

*

The following week all was quiet and she only saw Brad a few times. On Wednesday night when she got home from work, she actually found a note from Brad telling her, politely, that he intended to play basketball with the guys and when he would be home.

In the morning, she found Brad again asleep on the living room sofa. As he got up and rubbed his eyes he told her, "I know I've been a little edgy the past year or so. Anyway, I thought I'd sleep out here until you felt comfortable asking me back to our bed. I won't try to force my way on you any longer." He gave her a warm smile and then headed off to use the bathroom.

Marybeth was speechless. She accepted the comment with a nod and then prepared breakfast for the two of them. The two made polite conversation about his basketball game the evening before.

*

Mike escorted Marybeth to Brad's favorite bar the following Friday evening. She again wore the wig and some clothes that were just 'not her'. They took a table far from the bar, but one that afforded each a view of most bar stools. Brad appeared again right after work only this time obviously waited for someone. The 'someone' turned out to be Chili.

Mike volunteered, "According to Chili the blonde might show up too. Apparently they did have a little liaison last week."

Marybeth's eyebrows rose. "Did everyone participate? Brad?"

Mike laughed and said, "From what I hear, Chili got lucky. Brad didn't."

Before too much time had passed, Marybeth noted that Brad's vacant stare had returned and that Chili was whispering in his ear. "How many sessions like this does it take?" Marybeth asked.

Mike replied, "Well, we measure the effectiveness of E.H.T. on a ten-point scale. We keep up the 'treatments' until the subject gets to a nine or ten. Based on what you told us about his behavior over the weekend and earlier this week, and about his change of attitude – his politeness and all – I'd say he's at about a six. We're getting close, given that we started at zero. Chili will give him a strong dose tonight and we'll reassess in a couple of days."

Marybeth sighed and then relaxed back into the chair, watching one more time as Chili whispered into Brad's ear; she was rubbing his arm in an intimate manner and Brad had a distant look in his eyes.

Mike hitched his chair a little closer to Marybeth. He reached over and held her hand. The nonchalant move was anything but that to Marybeth; her body went on high alert at the gesture. As the minutes passed and they sipped their drinks and talked, Marybeth again felt the physical attraction she had for Mike. Apparently Mike liked her too.

The pair talked, occasionally glancing at Brad and Chili. Marybeth's interest in Mike far exceeded any curiosity she had about watching Brad get a treatment from Chili. She suggested they leave the noisy bar and find some place quiet where they could talk. Fifteen minutes later the two of them sat tightly against one another on a park bench outside a nearby café; each had a cup of coffee.

Mike and Marybeth each shared their life stories. She got him talking about where he saw himself in the future and what his goals were. As they talked, their bodies touched more and more. A new intimacy that hadn't been there before grew between the two. Neither could believe how comfortable they were with each other, how their life goals were so congruent, and how close they started to feel to each other.

Soon Marybeth reluctantly said, "We should go. I have to play catch-up this weekend – a few things from the office I pushed off from when we did all the interviewing. Brad looks in good hands. I wouldn't even care if he got lucky tonight." Mike shook his head to indicate that such an outcome was unlikely.

Mike settled the bill and the couple left the bar. Outside they stood and faced each other. Neither wanted the evening to end. Mike whispered to Marybeth, "You know I'm very taken with you. Some time – soon, I hope we can date, and, you know, do stuff together. I know you may not be ready now, but someday." He bent and kissed her.

The words and his kiss surprised Marybeth. "Oh ... oh ... yes ... I'd like that ... I'd like that very much."

Marybeth reached up and stroked Mike's face, and the couple kissed again – and again. The pair stood in the middle of the sidewalk, the fervor of their kisses overtaking them and their kisses becoming more intense. Her heart beat fast, and she felt the elation of this budding relationship. A group of people tumbled out of the bar, laughing and full of gaiety.

Marybeth and Mike pulled apart and looked at each other. Mike sighed and said, "Let me get you a taxi." A minute later, he'd hailed a cab, and he kissed her goodnight one last time. Both went home with stars in their eyes.

Over the weekend, Brad seemed to be away from the condo more than usual. His welcome absence meant she didn't receive the abuse he normally showered on her, and she also had time to think. Her thoughts mostly centered on Mike. Every time she thought about him, her heart beat faster, and she flushed with longing for him.

She thought about how long it had been since she'd rejected Brad's advances. She also thought about the very personal revelations she'd provided to Stacy and Mike in the interviews, and how drawn to Mike she'd become with the passing days as they worked or talked together.

Monday morning he called her and asked whether they could have lunch at a small outdoor bistro. He said he wanted to cover a couple of more questions; however, the questions he asked, she'd already answered. They both knew the real reason was so they could spend time together. The couple held hands as they walked back towards their offices. They met several more times during the week, with the only excuse being just to get together.

Friday night, Mike invited Marybeth to again frequent the bar where Brad was going to be worked on by Chili again. Marybeth again donned her wig and the funky clothes that made look like a cross between Goth and punk. They arrived early and got their usual seats – distant from the bar, yet with a good view of the bar seating.

The pair watched Chili arrive. She looked around and saw them; she nodded in their direction. Brad arrived about two minutes later, found Chili, and the pair sat on the tall bar stools.

Marybeth finally turned to Mike and told him, “The only reason I’m here tonight is to be with you. I know what Chili will do. I don’t need to watch if you have other plans.”

Mike looked pleased. He said, “The only plans I have would be to take you back to my place. It’s quieter and we can talk.” He looked her over, “Plus, you won’t have to wear the disguise.” They both laughed.

She looked into Mike’s face and kissed him. She said, “Take me home.”

Mike looked surprised, but nodded as he accepted Marybeth’s willingness to be with him. Mike settled the account and a moment later, outside the bar, he hailed a taxi to take them to his apartment a few blocks away.

At his apartment as Mike took her coat, Marybeth asked, “Am I under any kind of hypnotic spell by any chance?” She also pulled the wig from her head and brushed out her hair.

Mike laughed, “No, only the spells and curses we place on ourselves. No one of us has done anything to you. You, however, have made yourself open to other people as you closed Brad out of your life. You’re receptive ... and I’m glad.” He came and kissed her, and she kissed back, just enough to hold a promise of where the night would go. Mike walked to his open kitchen as she stood by his window admiring the view of the courtyard below.

He got out some Grand Marnier and gestured with a small liqueur glass to Marybeth. She nodded her acceptance, and he poured a half a glass of the rich tasting liquid. He brought the glass to her, but rather than handing her the glass, he took a sip and then kissed her again, this time using his tongue to open her mouth and then squirting the Grand Marnier from his mouth into hers. The moment was a turning point. She moved forward, pushing her hips into his. This was a mating dance.

"Wow," she said, licking her lips, "No one has ever French-kissed me with Grand Marnier before." After a few more regular kisses, she said, "I'd like some more Grand Marnier." Mike reached for a clean glass, but she stopped his hand. "No, that's not how I want it." He

sipped some more of the liqueur in his mouth, and again thrust his tongue and the liquid into her mouth as they French kissed again.

In an obvious move, Marybeth reached up and undid the top button on her blouse. "The rest is up to you," she said in a sexy voice.

*

"Marybeth, this is Stacy," she heard as she fumbled with her cell phone. "I just wanted you to know that Chili did another assessment last night and Brad is at a nine or ten on our scale. She planted the final seeds for him to leave you, so he might say something any day. I just wanted you to be prepared."

"That was so fast," Marybeth spoke into the phone, thinking only a month had elapsed since she'd signed up for *Marriage Exchange*. "Thank heavens. I didn't want a long drawn out process. Thank you and please thank Chili. Will I see her again?"

"Oh, I'm certain of it. She wants to see you sometime anyway, perhaps after the Brad thing has finished unraveling." Stacy paused and added, "I'm alone in the office and someone just came in, I'll keep you informed and if you have anything to report, please call me. Bye."

They bid goodbyes and hung up.

*

Thursday morning, Marybeth awoke early. Something told her this would be an important day, a sixth sense perhaps.

As usual, Brad had slept on the sofa. He stirred when she shuffled into the kitchen to get a glass of juice and start the coffee. "Mornin' Hun," he said.

"Good morning, Bradley," Marybeth said in a cheery voice, noting she used a name she'd often reserved for him in more formal occasions. "Coffee will be ready in five minutes. I'm going to do scrambled eggs, can I fix you some too?"

"That'd be nice," he said pleasantly. "I'll be right back." He headed down the short hall into the guest bathroom.

Marybeth thought how amazed she was at his change in behavior since Chili had started to work on his case.

Brad came back into the living-dining room. He'd put on slacks and a golf shirt and a pair of loafers. He said, "After breakfast, I was sort of hoping we could talk a little – about our relationship. Can you stay home a bit and not rush off to work?"

Marybeth nodded and said, "Fine, I'll be here. I can do what I have to do here today." She paused and added, "Coffee?" A smile graced her whole body.

Brad started talking, apparently unable to wait until after breakfast was finished; "I don't know what happened to me when we got married. I think I resented being tied down I guess. I don't know. Anyway, a week or so ago, I woke up to the fact that I haven't been a very good husband. I guess I also woke up to the fact that you've fallen out of love with me."

Marybeth sat opposite Brad at the dining table and nodded in agreement with his assessment of her feelings.

Brad went on, "Anyway, given that our marriage is dead and we're both young enough to move on, I feel I should move out and that we should divorce."

Marybeth nodded in agreement again.

"To make it up to you, I'll cover all the costs and such. We don't have too many assets, but you can take whatever you want. I need to start over again in so many ways. I thought I'd take a trip of some kind, by myself, and try to find myself and figure out how I can be a better person the next time around."

Marybeth asked, "Have you met someone?"

He answered, "Yes and no. I've met several interesting people, and deep down I know they'd never really be interested in me the way I am. If I can change, I don't know whether they'll be there then, but I'll be okay. Eventually I'll find someone – and I hope you will too." He paused and looked longingly at her and added, "I really loved you; I'm sorry I screwed it up so."

She nodded and rose, getting the coffee pot and pouring them both another cup. After a long silence, she caught his eye and said, "Brad, thank you."

Marybeth worked at home that day, in one sense feeling she had to be there for him. Late in the afternoon a melancholy mood struck her. She sat by her condominium window and looked out over the terrace, a glass of wine in her hand. A light mist from a gray sky filled the outside air.

"It was so easy," she thought. Brad had spent the morning packing. He'd even planned ahead and brought boxes in to pack up some of his possessions and his sports gear. There

hadn't been any arguments and she'd kept her distance as he packed, although he seemed pleasant enough.

He told her he'd taken a short-term rental on an apartment a couple of miles away. The rent was good and the place was clean. Before lunch, she'd helped him carry a few of the boxes down to his car. And then he drove away and Marybeth felt a dark blanket lift from her life.

Now the place seemed so empty. She'd cleaned and straightened after he'd left, moving a few of her things into the closets and spaces he'd vacated. In one sense it was refreshing and in another depressing. She knew the feeling would pass and also knew her life would change only for the better.

*

“Good morning, *Marriage Exchange*.”

Marybeth recognized Tara's voice. “Hi Tara, this is Marybeth. Is Stacy in yet this fine Friday morning?” Her voice carried a new cheerfulness, a joy that hadn't been there for several years.

“Hi Marybeth, yes she is. Hold on I'll get her.”

After a silence, she heard, “Stacy here.”

“He's gone. He left yesterday.”

Stacy said, “Wow! Great! How're you feeling? No, I bet I know: a mix of relief and a little depressed, right?”

“Yeah, right,” she sighed into the telephone. “I feel I tossed away a few years of my life.”

“We've all been there,” Stacy told her. “We've got some other things to do to finish this episode in your life: paperwork, legal stuff. Are you up for it today? I've got the afternoon free.”

“I'll be there. How about three o'clock?”

*

By five o'clock, much to Marybeth's amazement, she'd completed her version of a divorce agreement and had something for Brad to sign, if he was willing. He'd said he'd agree to whatever she wanted, but the truth would be if he signed. After he signed, it would only be the mandatory state waiting period and a review by a judge before the divorce would be

completed. She'd been fair she thought, and they'd split the proceeds of the condo unless she bought his half from him. She liked walking to work. After the *Marriage Exchange* attorney departed, Marybeth and Stacy sighed and looked at each other.

Stacy said, "I think this calls for some type of celebration. How about we collect Mike and go to the wine bar down the street. My treat."

Marybeth smiled wanly; she was tired and mentally drained from thinking about the dissolution of her short marriage and longer relationship. But she liked Stacy and Mike and wanted the interaction with them. She nodded and went to gather her copies of various documents and her note pad from the table they'd been working at.

Stacy added, "Then, you and Mike can see where the evening takes you ... again." She shot Marybeth a sly grin, obviously teasing her.

"So Mike kisses and tells?" Marybeth asked in a mocking tone.

"No," Stacy said with a laugh. "I'm a superb guesser. Mike blushed ten shades of pink at the mention of your name after you were out with him watching Brad last week. I took that as a positive sign that you two had connected. I just wish I had been there with the two of you." She looked pleased with herself.

Marybeth blushed now, "Well, you're right. Sorry if I've ruined his professional reputation, but he was a perfect gentleman. Mike is a great guy and I'm glad I've had the opportunity to get to know him. It was just one of those nights where everything clicked." She gave a little cockeyed grin at her.

"I knew you two would click," Stacy said in a positive tone, as she put away some of the papers on the table. She added, "In fact, I was certain you two would click."

Marybeth looked at her with her head cocked to one side in an unasked question.

"I did your interviews, remember. I know a lot about you. Please! I listened to tapes from all the other interviews you did too, plus I did the analytic work we do to see what makes you tick – what makes Brad tick – and how the two of you interacted." She paused and added with a grin, "I also did a work up on Mike."

Marybeth said, "I thought you didn't know him until he started work here."

Stacy replied, "I really didn't. Last summer, long before you ever walked through the door, we did impartial tests on each other in the company with the new evaluation instrument. That's when I met Mike for the first time. I interviewed him for two days and then did his work-up with the evaluation software. Someone did me too. After that I didn't see him

again until he showed up here to start work the same day you walked in the door. I was working outside of Washington and he was in Atlanta. I knew after interviewing you that first day that you two would connect. I know a few other things too, but I'll tell about those later."

Marybeth looked amazed, "You mean Mike is my exchange husband?"

Stacy laughed and said, "Maybe." She turned and over her shoulder said, "Come on. Let's find him. By the way, he doesn't know I think you two are a match, so keep your mouth shut. You're not supposed to know either. It's all supposed to happen surreptitiously." She led the way out the door and down the hall to Mike's office.

"Come on Mike," she said standing in his doorway with Marybeth close behind, "We're going out to celebrate another success in *Marriage Exchange's* approach to fixing relationships, in this case getting rid of an unwanted husband. Marybeth is about to be very single again. It all went like clockwork. I'll call Chili later and tell her."

Mike stood with a smile on his face, clearly happy that things had worked out. "Marybeth, congratulations. I'm so glad all this worked for you." He came around his desk and offered a handshake to Marybeth.

Stacy said with a laugh, "A handshake? All she gets from you is a handshake? After a week ago? Oh, come on!"

Mike looked at Marybeth rather sheepishly and then moved to give her a rather bland and non-committal hug. The two moved together tentatively, until Stacy wrapped her arms around them and pushed. "I want to see a 'real' hug. Come on guys, I know you two are hot for each other!" She then orchestrated a full-body press and solid kiss between the two of them, in spite of their blushes and weak protestations.

As Marybeth and Mike parted from their kiss, Stacy was right there. Although they all were laughing at that point, Stacy leaned in, and kissed Mike, and then turned and also kissed Marybeth. Now the three laughed even more as they parted, and headed out the door to the promised drink down the street. As they walked Marybeth touched her lips, almost as if she wanted to seal in the kisses from Mike – and much to her surprise, from Stacy too. She was drawn to both of them – emotionally, physically, and intellectually. She had a fleeting thought of actually going to work for *Marriage Exchange*.

Mike was the hunk, but so kind and gentle in his approach. Moreover, he was smart and ambitious enough to be the co-founder of the company that was painlessly helping her regain singlehood again.

Stacy was gorgeous, equally sensitive, and motivated. Several times in their talks Marybeth had felt attracted to her, wondering what an encounter with another woman would be like. She'd never sampled that side of life, but now thought it interesting. She liked the saying one of her bisexual friends told her about that lifestyle: "It doubles the chance for a date on the weekend."

A glass of wine at the wine bar turned into several glasses of wine and a flow of tapas from the menu. As the evening went on the frequency of touching between the three increased. Mike initially reached out to Marybeth, clearly enamored by her. He often touched her arm or shoulder, then held her hand and then often rubbed her thigh as their knees rubbed together.

Stacy too wanted to physically touch both Marybeth and Mike. Initially it was when someone said something funny; she'd reach forward and put her hand on Marybeth or Mike's arm. The trio all hitched their chairs closer to the table when the snacks arrived and their knees touched. Stacy took advantage and often placed her palm on Marybeth's thigh or Mike's leg. She let her shapely leg rub against Mike in a more obvious flirt. Neither seemed to mind in the least.

Marybeth liked being touched. Brad had not been physical, except when he wanted sex. He had no sense of foreplay and 'caress' turned out not to be a word in his vocabulary. Mike's touch excited her just the way it had the week before when they had their first 'date' that really wasn't a date, it was checking on Chili's progress with Brad. Marybeth reciprocated to Mike, touching back to show him she liked what he was doing.

Then, increasingly, she became aware of Stacy's touches. Much to her surprise she also found those exciting, especially after she realized there was probably some sexual intent behind them. Suddenly, she remembered Stacy's comment at the office about wishing she had been with Marybeth and Mike when they had 'connected' at his apartment. The thought made her flush with excitement.

By nine o'clock, the trio had exhausted the tapas menu of the wine bar. "I'm still hungry," Marybeth announced.

"Me too," Stacy said. "Let's move this celebration,"

Mike said eagerly, "My place isn't too far. We could pick up some Chinese on the way there and hang out some more." He looked at Marybeth, hoping she'd stay with him that night. He really liked her. He didn't plan much beyond wanting Marybeth to come back to his apartment. He liked Stacy too, but wasn't sure what her role would be the rest of the evening. He was glad she wanted to be with them too.

Stacy picked up the tab as she'd promised while the other two waited and then the three walked in the direction of Mike's flat. Along the way, they stopped and picked up some takeout food as well as two more bottles of wine.

Mike played the perfect host to the two women. He gave them a brief tour of his new apartment – modern and very fashionable; made sure they were comfortable; turned on some light jazz on his stereo – some Eva Cassidy music, served the wine of their choice; and ensured they had everything they needed to enjoy the food they'd bought. His enthusiasm for perfection amused Marybeth. She kept telling him to slow down and just come and join them.

Finally, after his flurry of activity, he joined them, sitting next to Marybeth on the sofa. Stacy sat in a nearby chair. The conversation resumed, this time with talk about Marybeth's soon-to-be new single life. Stacy particularly suggesting all the different 'hang outs' where the good-looking guys went. Mike even added a few to the list.

As they finished, each of the three took their plates to the small kitchen. In the tight space, Marybeth suddenly found herself pressed against Mike. She did what came naturally, putting her arms around his neck and pulling him into a passionate kiss. The two wasted no time in escalating the brief kiss into a soul kiss with dancing tongues and hips pressed solidly against each other. She could feel Mike's arousal as the kiss extended.

At the end of their kiss they parted, looking longingly at each other. Marybeth became aware of Stacy standing only a few feet from them watching intently, totally mesmerized by the display of passion the two had just completed.

Marybeth turned to her, "Did you mean what you said earlier? You wished you could be with the two of us – to make love with us?"

Stacy nodded and in a throaty whisper said, "Yes. Most definitely yes."

Marybeth reached out to Stacy and the two came together. Marybeth said, "I've never been with a woman before."

Stacy said softly, "Neither have I, but I want to be with you." She looked at Mike and said, "And with you. Somehow I know this is a path to some new happiness for me – for each of us."

Marybeth leaned in and kissed Stacy, a soft feminine kiss full of tenderness, caring and love. Mike put his arms around the two of them and kissed Stacy after Marybeth had finished.

Mike looked at Stacy tenderly and said, "I can't believe we've worked in the same company all this time and I never realized ... I mean I would have moved here sooner." Stacy held her

fingers to his lips; Mike kissed them. He turned to Marybeth, and said, “And you, ...” Their lips met again.

The trio stood in a new unity, their arms, hands and mouths touching and exploring one another, as their kisses and utterances of love filled the soft quiet between them. No one objected as each piece of clothing dropped to the floor, a victim of the love and the desire the three felt for each other. As the last of their clothing fell to the pile, Mike led the willing threesome to his bedroom.

*

Saturday morning, after kissing each other awake and the natural aftermath, the trio had what Stacy called a ‘touch and feel’ breakfast. Marybeth then led them all back to her condo so she could pick up a change of clothes and a few cosmetics Stacy and she could share. They’d already talked about spending the rest of the weekend together. The three then meandered through a street fair and market, picking out some fresh foods to use that evening for dinner.

Lunch consisted of some quesadillas at a sidewalk table for a little Mexican restaurant in Mike’s neighborhood. Anyone studying the trio would have had difficulty figuring out the pairing amongst the three of them, the difficulty created by the fact that there was no pairing – they were a threesome.

After lunch they walked along the river, enjoying the sunny afternoon. As they walked, Mike paused to look at some used books a sidewalk vendor was selling. He told them, “You walk on ahead, I’ll just be a moment.”

The girls walked on ahead at a slow pace, arm in arm. Marybeth remembered a comment Stacy had made: “Stacy, you said something yesterday that I just remembered and I’m not sure what you meant. You said that you knew Mike and I would connect, but then you said you knew a few other things and you’d tell me later. What were the other things?”

Stacy actually blushed. She stopped and turned so the two of them faced each other. Stacy said, “Well, besides discovering that Mike and you were a great match, I learned that Mike and I are a perfect match too.” She paused and added, “And I also learned that you and I are a perfect match. Our trio is a perfect match all the way around. We were made for each other.” She leaned in and slowly and passionately kissed Marybeth on the lips; Marybeth kissed back.

They parted and Marybeth said, “Oh,” in a neutral voice. The pair started walking again, looking back to keep Mike in sight as he picked out another book to look at. Stacy looked sideways at Marybeth, afraid for the first time that she’d overstepped some hidden boundary. A long silence hung between them.

Finally, Marybeth stopped and hugged Stacy to her. She said, “You know, I’ve never envisioned myself in a relationship – a love relationship – with a woman, let alone a man like Mike and a woman at the same time. It’s exciting in one sense and I feel so appreciated by the two of you.”

She paused and looked at Stacy before continuing; “I feel a burden I didn’t feel in my other relationships – when I was one part of a couple – even with Brad. I never felt I had to balance between lovers because there was only one. Last night and this morning, even today, I’m constantly testing to be sure no one feels left out of my affection – my love for them.”

“Oh, Honey,” Stacy said, “You don’t have to worry about that kind of stuff on a minute by minute basis. It’ll all even out. Plus neither Mike nor I are shy. If we want something from you, I’m sure we’ll signal that to you rather clearly. I’d just ask for some of your time or create a ‘date’ with you – if it was all right with you – and Mike, of course.” We looked back towards the bookseller and Mike had just finished his purchases and started to walk to catch up with us.

Marybeth asked, “What if Mike doesn’t want a threesome?”

“I think he will,” Stacy said with a grin. “Let’s ask him.” She led Marybeth to a nearby park bench and the two sat until Mike caught up with them.

“Mike, have a seat,” Stacy said in a coy voice. “We have the beginning of a lovely proposition for you.” She turned to Marybeth to be sure she had stated things properly. She nodded.

Mike sat between them, taking the time to kiss each woman on the lips in a tender way. Before either could say anything he reached in his bag and pulled out two books: the first, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was one of the best selling book of love poems for all time; the second, an anthology of love poems by Susan Polis Shultz. He carefully presented one book to Marybeth and the other to Stacy, following each gift with a kiss.

Mike said, “I give you each a book of love poems because in the short time we’ve known each other, I find myself falling in love with each of you – an untenable situation I know, yet one I can’t seem to help.” He turned and kissed each woman again. A passerby on the river walkway did a double take; Mike just smiled to the man.

Stacy said, “Mike, I’m falling for you pretty fast too. It was destined I found out.”

Mike looked puzzled.

Stacy went on, holding one of his hands tightly as Marybeth held tightly to his other hand; “I probably did something I wasn’t supposed to do at work. Remember when we were testing the new approach and I interviewed you last year. Well I kept my notes, the analytic work I did on you and my access to your *Marriage Exchange* computer profile. When I heard you were coming to this office and we’d be working together, I pulled your profile up and ran it against the people in our system. I was one of those women ... and I came out as your most likely match – by far.” Stacy actually blushed as she finished her confession. She was looking at the book in her lap and not directly at Mike. A tear started to roll down her cheek as she talked.

Mike started to say something, but Stacy turned and put a finger to his lips. “There’s more,” she said in a weak voice of contrition. “After we did all the interviews and the profile on Marybeth, I repeated the process. You and Marybeth matched with a very high score ... and so did Marybeth and I.” Stacy looked down at her lap with a shy smile, randomly turning through the pages of the book Mike had just given her.

Marybeth asked the two of them, “Why does the idea of the three of us being together in a long-term relationship have to be untenable?” She particularly looked at Mike who had just made that statement a moment before. “The idea of a threesome was what Stacy and I wanted to talk to you about just before you arrived with our gifts.” She patted her poetry book. “We wanted to talk about it, not as a one night stand – or a casual lusty weekend – but as something with some staying power to it.”

Mike looked surprised at her proposition and hugged both women to him. The trio moved to a nearby coffee house and sat for two hours sipping coffee. They talked about how they could work through dating and even living together, as well as Marybeth’s concern over balance and jealousy.

They played the ‘what-if’ game about situations that might come up and how the threesome would handle it. They talked about living arrangements, daily chores, lovemaking, illnesses, parents and siblings, friends, work, communicating, and a lot of the issues they’d found to be sticking points in other relationships. They revisited some of the areas in the interviews each had gone through they remembered as sticking points or questions that were hard to answer or deal with. As the afternoon wore on, each became increasingly comfortable with the idea of the threesome as well as with the wit and intellect of their new lovers.

Mike actually confessed he thought he’d died and gone to heaven to have fallen in love so quickly with two beautiful women. His big concern had been having to make a choice between the two of them, a choice that didn’t need to be made if he was allowed to love both of them.

Marybeth looked up at him and asked, “Are you concerned about our bisexual natures? Something, I might add we both just discovered about ourselves.”

Mike grinned and confessed further that he found it exceptionally arousing that the two of them loved each other and had physical feelings not only for him but also for the other in their triangle. He also admitted he'd been concerned about the 'balance' issue the same way Marybeth had, having to share his 'limited resources' as he called them – gesturing towards his groin – with two women.

Both women laughed and acknowledged that they both felt more than adequately satisfied the night before and that morning. Stacy espoused her theory that none of them should worry about balance on a minute-to-minute basis, but on a longer-term basis – say on the order of days. “If one of us feels needy, all she or he needs to do is talk about it: right?” The others agreed, falling back on the principle of excessive communication that they'd already agreed upon in their long discussion.

Late in the afternoon Mike, Stacy and Marybeth lay beside each other in Mike's large bed. Mike held his lovers to his body and the three each looked lovingly at each other with grateful smiles. There was the promise that the three of them would repeat their ardor after dinner. After a long silence, Marybeth whispered to her new lovers, “If you guys want a testimonial about *Marriage Exchange*, just let me know; I am one satisfied customer.”

The three all burst out laughing and hugged even more tightly.

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Late Monday morning, Marybeth called her friend Jess in San Francisco. When Jess answered, she said, “Jess, you know how you're always telling me to dump Brad, loosen up and go connect with someone. Well, Brad's gone. I'm in love – with a great guy ... *and* a beautiful woman, and they both love me back. And I've got to tell you about the most amazing weekend the three of us had ... and it's just the beginning of something that feels so right and long lasting ...”

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