



*Limited
Light*



Carla Rossi

*White
Rosebud*

Marti leaned back against the mirror over the sink...

She turned to gaze at the streaks of dirt on her face, the dried blood on her hands, and her hair wildly sticking out in all directions. "Ooohhhh," she groaned. "I look terrible."

"No, you're beautiful."

He wet another towel and started to carefully wash the rest of her foot.

She tried to brush him away. "Stop, Jim. You don't have to do that."

"I want to," he said, and squeezed warm, soapy water across the top of her foot and between her toes.

With expert tenderness, he dried her wound and propped her foot on his leg. He studied the array of tape and bandages he'd lined up along the counter. "Let's see..."

"Aren't you going to say 'I told you so'?"

He ripped off a piece of tape. "Of course not. I l—"

He snapped his mouth closed and never looked up.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, you were right, and I was wrong and stupid, and I'll never do it again."

He held one end of the tape down with his thumb and tried to close the gash. "You're not stupid, just stubborn sometimes. And I don't need to be right. I need you to be okay."

Marti's heart ignited like a sparkler--a slow motion sparkler that caught fire gradually then burned brighter and pulsed faster with each discovery her mind realized. She was overcome with the depth of feelings she had for him and the sudden

awareness of how he felt about her. She leaned her head against the mirror and accepted the truth. This man, the one who just washed her dust-covered foot, was quite possibly the best man God ever made.

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by

Carla Rossi

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To my original author support group: Cheri, Denise,
Kathy, Lesa, Lisa, Susan, and Tiffany.

Chapter One

The wet grass sparkled in the morning sun and dampened Marti's bare legs as she dropped to her knees at her grandfather's grave. With a shaky finger, she followed the letters of his name where they lay etched forever in the cold granite. "Oh, Grandpa William, you wouldn't believe what a mess I've made of things. I sure wish you were here to help me."

Warm tears slid down her cheeks and dotted her gauzy peach skirt as it billowed around her in the mild breeze.

The intrusive snap of a twig startled her. She jumped to her feet and whipped around to find a tall man dressed in a suit. She blinked away a few blurry tears and tried to focus. The intruder was perched precariously on tiptoe with slightly bent knees and arms out wide as if to balance. Clearly, he'd accidentally wandered into her private space and was trying to wander back out of it just as quickly.

"I'm sorry," he said as he stood straight and shrugged with obvious embarrassment. "I was trying not to disturb you, but I stepped on this stick and..."

Marti waved away his words. "It doesn't matter. I need to go anyway." With an anxious hand, she patted the side of her skirt, digging within the folds to find her pocket and then a tissue. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. He wasn't moving. *Why doesn't he leave?* No tissue. *I'm a mess, please leave.* Her silent plea was useless. When she looked up, he was staring past her shoulder to her grandfather's tombstone. Curls of light brown hair danced along his collar. His whole face lit up as something must have dawned on him.

He caught her gaze in his again. "You're Martha Randolph." He smiled broadly. "You're Rose Randolph's granddaughter."

Marti managed a tentative smile, accompanied by a step backward. Just a little uneasy, she wondered if it were a good thing or a bad thing that this stranger recognized her in a graveyard.

"Yes, she is my grandmother."

"I'm Jim Bowman." He took two eager steps forward and held out his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Martha."

Her cheeks grew hot as she placed her icy hand in his warm comforting one. "It's Marti." She swallowed hard. "Everyone calls me Marti."

Now that he'd stepped in closer, Marti tilted her head to look up into his eyes. Bright green and alight with interest, they reminded her of how bloodshot and puffy hers must be.

"How do you know my grandmother?" She dipped her head to hide her fire-engine red nose.

"We attend the same church." He paused and ran a finger under the collar of his dress shirt. "How long have you been in town? Your grandmother hasn't said a word."

Marti sucked in a huge, unladylike sniff and attacked the other side of her skirt, still in search of a fresh tissue. "I drove up from Houston this morning."

"That's great. She'll be glad to see you. How long are you staying?"

Her eyes welled with new tears; she shuddered as she fought to hold them in. How long, indeed? How long does one stay when she's running home to grandma and has absolutely nowhere else to go?

Deep inside her pocket, her fingers closed around the elusive dry tissue. *Finally*. With a deep breath she brought it to her nose and blew. At full volume.

"I'm sorry," she choked, overcome with embarrassment.

Jim cleared his throat. "No, I'm sorry, Martha. I never meant to disturb you."

"*Marti*," she corrected.

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I don't think I can call you Marti. I've listened to your grandmother talk about you so much, I'm afraid you'll always be Martha to me."

She took another step backward. "I need to go."

But she couldn't move.

His gaze traveled down the length of her body and rested on her feet. "Shoes?" he asked simply.

"Oh!" She looked down at her bare feet and back to Jim. "They're in the car. The ground is wet." Then she noticed *his* feet. Two very nice shoes were now soggy from the dew. The bottom of his soaked pant legs hung limply around his ankles. "It looks like you should have done the same."

And while he was looking down, she raced to her car.

The cardboard boxes which were stacked high in the back seat of Marti's red BMW swayed and shifted as she jostled up Grandma Rose's gravel drive.

"Sorry, Ruby," she said to the car, after one particularly deep pothole. "I'll try to get us out of here in a few days." She patted the dash. "I promise."

By the time she reached the sprawling farmhouse, there was no sign of Grandma Rose's car. She'd already left for church.

Marti stepped onto the front porch and tilted the terra cotta pot full of pansies to reveal the spare key. A mass of unruly curls fell across her eyes. She gathered it and twisted it into a knot at the nape of her neck, then secured it with a pencil from her bag. Not the most chic hair fashion statement, but certainly the most resourceful for the moment.

The March breeze fluttered across the Johnny jump-ups and snapdragons in the beds along the porch as she picked up her travel bag. Everything else would have to wait; she wanted a bath.

Once inside, she ran hot water into Grandma Rose's deep tub and sank into the soothing water. The scent of hyacinth and lavender was strong and relaxing as she stretched out among the billowing clouds of soap. She squeezed her eyes shut against the certainty of tears as she prayed again.

Well, Lord, here I am. I'm counting on You to help me straighten all this out...please, Lord...please forgive me...and help me start over...

After weeks of physical and emotional exhaustion, Marti's body craved sleep. She collapsed into the canopied antique bed she'd slept in as a teenager. No more tears, she vowed to herself as she bunched the feather pillow beneath her head and burrowed under the pink chenille bedspread.

Morning stretched into afternoon. The bright sun trickled through the blinds and warmed her skin as she drifted in and out of twilight slumber. Sounds from below floated up the stairs. The clank of a spoon, the closing of a cabinet door, and then muted words and phrases from her grandmother and a guest. A male guest. Between her grogginess and the distance, Marti couldn't make out exactly what they were saying, but was sure she heard...*something must have happened, and can't imagine what's going on.*

Grandma Rose's voice got louder. "Poor child. All I know is, she called me a few weeks ago and something was terribly wrong."

Marti opted to bury her head rather than give in to familiar tears. She ignored the voices and reached for a pillow. She was floating again. Floating then sinking into much needed sleep. The low rumble of the conversation lulled her. She recognized the voice.

Jim Bowman... that's Jim Bowman downstairs in the kitchen with Grandma Rose...

The outside corners of Marti's eyes were tight with dried tears. She attempted to open them. Too much trouble. She left them closed. Tuesday? No...Wednesday? Yes. Wednesday.

She smelled yellow cake baking downstairs and heard Grandma Rose load the metal mixing bowl into the dishwasher. Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since yesterday. Or was it the day before? Maybe after a little more sleep, she could think clearly.

She was just turning over to doze again when Grandma Rose entered the room, flipped open the blinds, and pulled back the blankets.

"Time to get up, Martha. You can't hide in this bed anymore."

Marti tucked herself into the fetal position and hugged her pillow. “I’m not hiding. I’m resting.”

The mattress dipped as Grandma Rose sat down. “We need to talk. It’s time you told me what’s going on.”

Marti rolled onto her back and let out a long, slow sigh. Grandma Rose was the very picture of spring, all decked out in her sunny yellow checked blouse and khakis. Marti’s heart swelled with affection. Her grandmother’s sparkling blue gaze met hers with the persistent question.

Marti frowned. “Everything’s a mess, I’m an idiot, and I don’t want to talk about it. The end.” She curled back to her side and used her toes to try to grab the blanket that had been pulled to the foot of the bed.

Grandma Rose trapped it firmly with her hand and stopped the progress. “The truth, Martha. What’s happened?”

Marti used the edge of the pillowcase to dab fresh tears. “Um...everything’s a mess, I’m a fool, and I *still* don’t want to talk about it?” She sniffed. “The end?”

Grandma Rose narrowed her gaze.

Marti gave up. “Oh, all right.” She pulled herself up to sit cross-legged. “I’ll tell you, but then I don’t want to talk about it ever again.”

Grandma Rose grabbed a box of tissues from the nightstand and scooted in next to Marti. “Is this about Philip? Did you two break up?”

Marti remembered the day she’d called her grandmother about Philip. *He’s great, he’s fantastic, we’re falling in love. I think he’s the one, the man God sent me to marry.* In the end, she couldn’t have been more wrong, and the magnitude of her mistake was going to kill Grandma Rose. It had nearly killed her.

“It’s over with Philip.” She paused to pull a fresh tissue from the box. “As you know, it happened real fast. I fell for him hook, line, and sinker. I thought he was going to marry me. I prayed about it and thought it was okay, but I was being completely deceived and didn’t have sense enough to see it.” She poked her dirty hair behind her ears. “Of course, I was too enamored to see the truth, even when God was hitting me over the head with warning signs. I ignored them.” She buried her head in her hands.

“Go on, Martha. Just spit it out.”

She raised her head to meet her grandmother’s gaze. “He couldn’t have married me, Grandma. He’s already married.”

Grandma Rose’s face went pale with the very look of shock and disappointment Marti had hoped to avoid.

“Oh, sweetie,” she started with a hint of caution in her voice. “How bad is it?”

“It’s bad. I thought we were getting married. I...we...oh Grandma, I’ve really messed up.”

Just as when she was a child and had done something wrong and had to confess, she dissolved into giant jerking sobs. But this wasn’t a childish mistake like breaking something or telling a lie. There was nothing to glue back together and no one to apologize to. It was herself she’d given away—to the totally wrong man.

“I’m so ashamed...”

“Shh...shh...” Grandma Rose pulled her close. “Tell me the rest.”

“Apparently, his wife is still in Canada. When he moved to Houston to take over our office, she stayed behind to sell the house and all that. He came and swept us all off our feet. Handsome, charming, successful...”

“Lying, cheating, snake-in-the-grass...”

“I know that now. And I knew better than to get involved with someone I worked with. Especially my boss. But we just fell right into it. I thought my prince had come.”

“How did you find out?” Grandma Rose shifted and patted her lap as a signal for Marti to put her head down. “And what about your job?”

“They had a wedding anniversary. She sent him six dozen red roses.”

“One for every year, I guess.”

“Yep. He didn’t want it to tip me off, so he had them moved to my office and said he sent them to celebrate our six month anniversary. One for every month we’d been together.”

“He really *is* a snake.”

“That’s an insult to snakes. Anyway, he made one tactical error. He missed one of the cards. I started putting all the clues together. The rest is history. And even though I was the one conned by one of the best, I’m the one who had to leave my job. Apparently company romance is only acceptable when it’s going well. There’s no provision in the policy for heartbroken subordinates, so I resigned. I’d lost everyone’s respect, anyway. It’s one thing to play the worldly game and have an office fling, but when I fell in love and took his promises seriously, I turned into a hopeless romantic weakling. I lost all credibility. My ‘killer instinct,’ they said, was gone.”

“That’s ridiculous, Martha. There must be three hundred employees at Brawner & Fitch. It’s an international company and you’re one of the best financial advisors they have. Couldn’t you just transfer departments or something?”

“Let’s just say it was difficult to be there after the whole thing blew up.”

“What are all those boxes in the back of your car?”

“I sold the condo.”

“Oh, Martha.”

“Yep again,” she nodded in confirmation. “I’m using the profit and my savings to move on.”

They fell into silence. Marti trembled with the remnants of her wracking sobs and wondered what Grandma Rose thought of her.

“Wanna hear the best of it?” Marti sighed and flipped onto her back to look up into Grandma Rose’s fair, round face. “Wanna know what was the cream gravy on my chicken fried steak?”

Grandma Rose tried to pull her crooked, aging fingers through Marti’s stubborn curls. “Shoot.”

“You know that creepy guy I went to school with here in Texas? George Watson?”

“Oh, yeah, the Watson boy. Chased you all through high school.”

“Stalked is more like it.”

“Okay. *Stalked.*”

“He works for an accounting firm in the same building. He’s still creepy, by the way. Anyway, he heard about the scandal and wasted no time calling his mother here in Madison to let her know what a mess I’ve made of my life.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Yes, and he even told me about it. Found me in the parking lot on the day I resigned. Told me he’d talked to his mom. Made it sound like he was concerned when I know he was just trying to get the rumor mill going.”

Grandma Rose sprang from the bed and snapped her fingers. “That’s it!”

Marti’s head dropped sharply to the mattress. “Whoa. I think you gave me a neck injury here.”

If Grandma Rose heard her complaint, she made no indication. "I knew it."

Marti slid off the bed and rubbed her neck. "Knew what?"

"Rumor mill is right. Those old biddies at the church have been dying to say something to me, but not one of them has had the nerve to talk. That's what all their whispering is about. They've heard the story from 'ol George-the-Stalker's mom, and they're just passin' it around and makin' it juicier with every turn."

Marti bit back a chuckle--her first in weeks. "Calm down there, Granny, you're gonna hurt yourself."

She put a finger in Marti's face. "Oh, don't you 'granny' me. I can't believe those old bags."

Now she really laughed. "Old bags? C'mon, those women are your friends."

"If they were my friends, they would have come to me with concern for you. They would have wanted to know the truth."

Marti sat down on the short, padded stool in front of the dressing table. "It doesn't matter. They probably just didn't want to scare you. I don't care. I won't be here that long anyway."

Grandma Rose headed for the bathroom. "I'm starting the shower for you."

"Can't I just sleep some more?"

"No. You're going to take a shower, put some mascara on those gorgeous eyes and untangle that mop. We're going to lunch and then shopping and then to Wednesday night Bible study."

Marti groaned. "*Not church.*" Panic rose in her chest. "I can't face those people. Especially since they know."

“You can, and you will.” She reached into Marti’s bag and started pulling out her make-up. “In fact, the sooner the better. Show ‘em you’re okay. Prove to those hot air balloons you’re better than their gossip.” She shoved the deodorant and toothbrush into her hands. “Here. You really need these.”

“Very funny.”

“Besides,” Grandma Rose continued, “you know I’ve wanted you to meet Pastor James for months.”

Now she was really alarmed. She moaned as she left the stool and headed for the bed. “I can’t do it. It hurts too much and I’m too ashamed.”

Grandma Rose rushed to her side and stopped her from crawling into the bed. “Stand up, Martha.”

“What’s the use? I know how disappointed you are in me. Imagine how I feel about myself.”

Grandma Rose grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her around. Her grip was surprisingly strong for such a little old lady. Marti gasped in surprise.

“Look at me, Martha,” she commanded. “You made a mistake. You trusted a man who lied to you and broke your heart. God has forgiven you. You have to forgive yourself.”

Marti covered her face. “How can I possibly forgive myself for being so stupid?”

Grandma Rose peeled her hands away. “Look in my eyes, Martha. I’m going to say something very important.”

Marti lifted her head.

Grandma Rose’s face softened. “The One who really matters knows who you are and what you do.”

Marti sucked in a shuddering breath and leaned into her grandmother’s comforting embrace. She squeezed her eyes tight and inhaled the scent of Grandma Rose’s cotton blouse and the hint of lilac

lotion on her hands. *It's true; God knows. God knows...*

They were late for church, of course, because no matter how many pieces Marti's heart might be in, there was always shoe shopping to make it better.

They arrived after everyone else and, at Marti's insistence, took a seat way in the back instead of heading for Grandma Rose's regular pew. The lone acoustic guitarist led the congregation through the final refrain of a comforting hymn.

Marti spotted Jim Bowman sitting on the front right pew. She elbowed Grandma Rose and pointed. "By the way," she whispered, "I met your friend there in the cemetery Sunday morning. And don't think I didn't hear him in the house Sunday afternoon. You two were talking about me."

Grandma Rose shot Marti a disapproving look. "We're in church, Martha. We'll talk later."

Great. I'm ten years old again.

She returned her attention to Jim and his light, wavy hair. His profile revealed a deep dimple when he smiled at a toddler who got away from her mother and took off teetering up the aisle. She wondered how she missed the dimple the first time he smiled at her.

The song leader stepped aside to make way for Pastor James to come forward and start Bible study. Marti's eyes grew wide, and her heart skipped a beat as Jim Bowman took the podium.

Well, duh. Jim? Pastor James?

She turned to whisper to the side of Grandma Rose's silvery blond head. "Why didn't you say anything a minute ago when I mentioned Jim Bowman?" she spat out a little louder than she intended.

The corners of her grandmother's mouth lightly curled. She didn't even bat an eye.

As Pastor James welcomed the congregation and began to introduce the topic and scripture reference for the evening, he glanced around the room and spotted her. She tried to slide down in her seat, and in doing so almost slid off the slippery wooden pew.

"Sit still, Martha."

"Terrific," Marti shot back. "Now you want to say something."

She looked to the front again. Pastor James nodded slightly and smiled. She quickly looked away, sure everyone in the room caught his attempt to acknowledge her.

And just when I was trying to disappear...

She sat back, crossed her arms, and tried to remain aloof, but the longer she listened, the more enthralled she became. Who knew Pastor James was such a good teacher? As his lesson on how Christians should handle day-to-day burdens and worries deepened, he instructed everyone to turn to Matthew chapter eleven, verse twenty-eight.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

The words speared what was left of her broken heart. She withered beneath the powerful yet comforting words spoken by Jesus. Could she really give all her pain and sorrow to Him? Was she ever going to feel right and be at rest again?

She pulled a tissue out of her grandmother's large beige purse and held it to her tender nose. Maybe being ten years old again wasn't such a bad idea. She scooted into the shelter of Grandma Rose's arm, and for the remainder of the service wept quietly under the burden she didn't think would ever go away.