



The
LAST
BEST
THING

A Novella by Kate Sebeny

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Prologue: Squatter's Rights

Sarah homesteaded my heart. The lawyer in me sees it that way. I picture Sarah as a pioneer lured or forced westward into tall-grass prairie, moving into the unsettled wilderness of my youth and staking her claim. Over the years, she made title-validating improvements: She drilled a well, tapping into a vast unsuspected aquifer; she cleared away brambles, stumps and stones, making way for a wealth of soul-sustaining crops; she transformed the rude sod house of passion, slowly building a complex Victorian farmhouse of love. Sarah turned my untenanted tract into an oasis where we have thrived together for most of 50 years.

But she built it all on condemned property.

Even on my best days, I can't go up the stairs without coughing like a bandit. For all practical purposes, I'm an invalid. I feel like a guest in my own home, and Sarah is the groundskeeper, cook, maid, nurse, chauffeur and gofer, all in one. The worst part is that I can't help my darling anymore. Not with the chores, not with the worries or responsibilities, not with any of my husbandly duties and privileges. Big as I am physically, I'm a lousy helpmate. Sarah is always at my side, but I'm never at hers.

I know this isn't what she signed up for. Yet, to her credit and detriment, Sarah took that in-sickness-and-in-health, till-death-do-us-part business seriously. It's not important to me; I'm past that. And, to all appearances, Sarah's content with the intolerable situation. I think a lot of that's for my benefit. Still, I believe her when she says she's happy to have me around on any terms. That's because the woman can't lie. By that, I don't mean she wouldn't lie; she'd lie like a bandit if she could pull it off. She simply can't lie; she's constitutionally incapable. Sarah's got a funny way of making vices out of virtues.

A dusting of gray has settled in her hair over the years and the corrosive wash of weather, laughter, worry and time has brought out the character in her fine face. But, other than that, she's still the same woman I married, the woman I marvel at to this day. "A hundred pounds

dripping wet, she's my clever little pet," I sang to her sappily in our long-ago courting days, though I think she never weighed that much, even during her one, miscarried pregnancy. Nearly a foot and a half shorter than me, a third my weight, her waist no bigger around than my thigh, still I never worry about hurting her. She's so strong, in body, in mind, in spirit and in loyalty. She's a saint. Providing a candidate for sainthood can't be disqualified for smoking like a chimney, drinking like a fish, cursing like a sailor and screwing like a floozy, that is.

But I haven't seen Sarah's lusty grin for a long time now, or her eyes darken with desire. I can't even begin to satisfy my darling anymore. I have to sleep downstairs in my reclining chair a lot, upright so the fluid in my lungs doesn't drown me. Even when I feel good enough to make it upstairs to bed, I have to prop myself up with pillows. It's only rarely that I'm able to lie down beside my wife and spoon her the way I like best. That's what I miss most, the spooning.

Because I suffer from congestive heart failure, I turned out to be a worthless investment for Sarah. For her own good, I wish I could evict myself from her heart somehow, though I know even death can't do that. Not by a long shot is she stupid and she's no martyr; just stubborn, always has been. She clings fiercely to her deed as the property slides into ruin. I know she loves me. But it's a crime to watch a woman with such assets squander them on a man that brings such a poor return. My lawyerly side says she should diversify, reinvest in sounder stock, but she refuses to stop pouring good emotional capital after bad. So what good will her hard-won mortgage do her when mortality forecloses on me?

She refuses to leave me or our home, despite the fact that both require far more maintenance and repair than she can keep up with or that makes sense doing. Though there's absolutely no legal compulsion for her to stay, Sarah's one of those people who believe you can't leave a place once you've buried loved ones on the property. This tenacity reminds me of the modern legal term for "squatter's rights": "adverse possession."

And I'll never leave Sarah, not even when I die. Since she insists on staying here, I will, too. Of course, it would be illegal to bury me on the property, so I'll have myself cremated and she can do with me whatever makes her feel best. Alive or dead, I want to stay as close to her as I can.

Then she can visit me, like she does Joe.

At least she won't be lonely. Sarah will always have me, as she always has Joe. And she has all the other people we've collected over the years, people who have come to live in what's turned out to be our own private little retirement community: Betty from up the road and her daughter, Libby, and Henry—whose questionable life's goal was to retire to Iowa from Amsterdam. What started out 50 years ago as an annual party evolved into a yearly reunion and then a way of life. It's sort of like a geriatric Big Chill.

Understand that I wasn't always a useless old man stewing in his own juices. In my productive years, I was a business lawyer—small business—helping commercially ambitious folks provide goods and services in economically depressed central Iowa. At one point, some enterprise was operating out of every main-street storefront in the tiny town nearest my home—the buildings that hadn't already burned or been torn down, that is. And I had a hand in setting up every one. I can't stand the stuffiness, the unfeeling greed of big corporations. And I never wanted to be a trial lawyer because I can't stomach the idea of defending some of the human garbage doing these violent and crazy things to people. Even prosecuting such scum would taint me somehow, I thought.

So that kind of puts me in a strange box, when I think of how our dear friend Joe ended up as plant fertilizer. And here's the weirdest corner of the box: Sarah killed Joe. She shot him in the head and buried him in the backyard with all the dogs and cats we've had over the years and the miscarried clump of cells that never became a baby. A homemade headstone and a marijuana bush mark his grave.

We hope you enjoyed the prologue to *The Last Best Thing* by Kate Sebeny.

The Last Best Thing is available April 11, 2015, from [Kellan Publishing](#).