

Four Words
by Karen Kittrell

The walls of the Judge's chamber loomed behind a single wood table. Fine scratches etched the table's surface, buffed smooth from use, attractive with age. Like the table before him, the Judge's face, gray hair and all-knowing eyes were marred by time yet veiled with certain civility as he waited for my reply.

"He's in an unmarked grave," I confessed.

At first, the location was easy to find, disturbed dirt and unhealed ground bore a visible wound that grasses hesitated to swallow. Drought and then autumn winds followed. Winter rains fell repairing the ground and mending broken hearts. "It's comforting to go there, except...I'm reminded of what I haven't done."

He shook his head. "Too many years have passed."

A trickle of sweat rolled down my back. The sweltering leather of my chair forced me to my feet. The chamber lacked windows. Instead, each wall displayed a dizzying number of varnished shelves filled from floor to ceiling with dusty, untitled books. My entrance to the room, the door behind me, blended into the rows of bound leather and dark woods. A hidden clock faintly ticked and chimed a minor chord. I heard the swift beating of a heart, lifted my hand to my own chest, and felt nothing.

My voice quivered. "I only need four words. Then it will all be done."

He leaned back, silent.

"You see, it was all set. He paid for everything – did everything. But he missed the words. They're mine now."

"Then, do it. Finish it."

"It's not that easy."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "No one will care. They never do."

"I care. My brother said to use controversial words. Whatever that means. He suggested nothing and said he would never go there."

"Hmm" The Judge rested his chin on his hand. "I prefer REST IN PEACE. Short and comforting."

"Too short. Besides, that's three words I have four words to say everything. I considered TOGETHER ALWAYS. But he clearly went first, and that's only two. I

can't sacrifice the other two words. There's BELOVED HUSBAND AND FATHER. It sounds too formal, old-fashioned. I could choose LOVING HUSBAND FATHER GRANDFATHER. No commas. No punctuation allowed.

"There's occupations. I could follow the template with his service, rank and war. It would honor his country but surrender those four precious words, earned over the last decades. An acquaintance told me she had learned from him. He challenged her to find her strength. She said he inspired many to achieve.

"My mother agreed. I had wanted his marker completed for her. She was disturbed by the bareness, the nothingness, as if it had been a futile exercise, an indignity of omission. But I feared the sight of her name next to his. Would it hasten her eagerness to join him? I needed to engrave hers at the same time for the letters and edging to match, but I could not. Not yet."

"Eight." The Judge stirred interrupting my confession. "You need eight words."

I nodded. "With a simple white cross, he could have been buried in the cemetery of the brave and the free. However, they wanted to be together. They paid, more than they could afford, to be side by side. That was important to them. She could not help me. I had to do it alone."

"But you didn't." He reminded me.

"I began the process. People misled me. I learned to trust no one selling the products of passage. There's a pressure to sell more and charge more. It's a business."

"Enough." His tone was low and final.

But I could not stop now. "There were many decisions. First, the granite, so many colors. My mother wanted an orange. I wondered how much she really saw with her cataracts changing the hue to brown. She had a dark purple blanket. It accompanied her on each hospital visit and to various nursing homes; she said it was brown. A full life of serving others mattered less than the comfort of that brown blanket She gave to the youth, especially the underdogs of society. She was much more than BELVOED WIFE MOTHER GRANDMOTHER and more than, punctuation or not, LOVING WIFE MOTHER GRANDMOTHER. She championed the future youth."

"Why not engrave those words?"

"I could, but there was another space."

Eyebrows furrowed, he pursed his lips before speaking. "Four words each." He counted them on his fingers. "CHAMPIONED THE FUTURE YOUTH. INSPIRED MANY TO ACHIEVE."

"Yes, I mean no. You see there was a third plot. Until my brother married, they planned it for him now I want to be there, a special homecoming, a permanent return to where I began My husband and I, not side by side, but...our marker would show us together when...after we both..."

The Judge sighed.

"When you tried to take him with the first hear attack, he made me promise not to put him next to my parents. He didn't want to be there alone without me. The third heart attack – that did it. He's waiting for me. His ashes are in a box under my bed."

"Twelve words?"

"I have to plan the marker for both of us. The representative said it would be unconventional to have a marker without an internment. If I had been the first, of course we thought I would be, all the markers could have been created then, and our children could take care of my husband later. Perhaps it is for the best. Otherwise, on a highway somewhere in Detroit, a cloud of dust would billow from a passenger window. Oh, he'd be taken care of all right. I will have to put him to rest. I have to do it now. There is no one else. I don't mean to drag this out. You gave me an extension last time, and I failed to finish. This time I will do it. No excuses."

The clock chimed the hour. Sixteen. I must have miscounted. "That is an odd clock. Sixteen chimes?"

"Not chimes." A gavel sounded. "Words."