

# **COFFEE TO GO**

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to my husband, Don, for his continued love and support in all of my endeavors, and his awesome editing abilities.  
And to Little Bud, our independent cat, for interrupting me when I should take a break.

## CHAPTER ONE

“Hi, Mel. How are you?”

“Fine. Now tell me what you want.” Melanie knew from the tone of Susan’s voice that she was about to ask for something.

“I need a really big favor, Mel. Brian invited four associates over for dinner tonight and one couldn’t make it. I need you to come over and fill a chair at the table.”

“Susan, are you trying to set me up again?” Ever since she had broken her engagement two months ago, her well-intentioned but misguided sister had kept trying to get her to date again.

“Not this time, Mel. This dinner is really important to Brian. His architect will be here and I could really use your support. I haven’t met any of these people before, so they could be sixty and balding for all I know. Please, Mel?”

“Don’t whine. If you promise me this isn’t a setup, I’ll come over.”

“I promise. Be here about six-thirty. Love ya! Bye.” And she hung up the phone.

Having planned a long hot soak in the tub, Melanie now had to settle for a quick shower. She dressed carefully and applied a light touch of make-up. Her teal blue dress was flattering in its simplicity and she knew it brought out the highlights in her auburn hair. She added a gold choker and drop earrings. Grabbing a small evening bag, she took one last look in the mirror and left her apartment.

As an insurance broker, she was in contact with people on a daily basis, but since her break-up, she had been keeping to herself in her free time. Now she felt a little tremor of excitement at the prospect of meeting others in a social setting.

Tapping lightly on her sister’s door, she let herself in. She saw him immediately – and flashed back to that disastrous episode at the local Tim Horton’s only days ago. In unison, they both said “You!”

Sensing the sudden tension in the room, Brian came over. “I see you’ve already met my architect, Russ.” Before she could respond, Russ said “We’ve bumped into each other before, yes.”

Being introduced to the other couple gave Melanie a few moments to become composed, but she was dismayed to find herself seated beside Russ at dinner. *At least I don’t have to look at him*, she mused. When he tried to make conversation, she answered in monosyllables or ignored him completely, until finally he leaned over and spoke very quietly into her ear. “Stop sulking and smile. Your attitude is going to spoil this dinner for your sister and Brian, and it is really important to them, so I suggest you shape up.”

Without really thinking about it, Melanie turned and smiled at him while swinging her foot under the table and kicking him on the shin. Still smiling, she asked him “How’s that for attitude?”

To give him credit, he just smiled back and raised an eyebrow. In spite of her antagonism towards him, she had to acknowledge the truth in what he said and she made a real effort to be pleasant for the rest of the meal. As soon as it was over and she had helped clean the table and load the dishwasher, she made her excuses and prepared to leave. She found

him at her elbow as she reached for the door knob.

“I’ll walk you out.”

“There’s no need. I can see myself out.”

“That wasn’t a question, Melanie.” He opened the door and waited for her to exit, then followed quickly as she almost sprinted to her car. Holding her car door closed with his hand on the frame, he said “Look, Melanie, I know you don’t like me any better than I like you, but I’m going to be working closely with Brian, so we have to sort this out because we’ll be running into each other. Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night so that we can come to some kind of an understanding? You choose the restaurant.”

Reluctantly she agreed. “Okay. Meet me at Kelly’s at seven-thirty. Now can I get into my car, please?”

Holding up his hands, he stepped back and said “Be my guest. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Driving home, Melanie re-visited that horrible day at Tim Horton's. She had just paid for her coffee and turned to leave when he also turned in the other direction with a full cup. The collision was made with enough force to pop the tops on both cups and spray the contents over them. Her temper flared immediately, as did his. Neither spoke, just glared and left.

For Melanie, it was a disaster. She had been assigned one of their largest farm accounts and she knew that, although they had faith in her abilities, it was still a test. Being new to the office, and relatively new as a broker, she was determined to prove herself, and show them that she was a capable and valuable employee.

The farmer, Noah Draper, had requested a review of his farm policy, so she had visited him at his home, reviewed his current coverages, and made extensive notes of the changes he required. Before leaving, she took photos of the dwelling, barns and outbuildings. She knew companies had complaints of photos being submitted that could only be described as 'drive-by shootings' where the broker parked at the side of the road, stuck his camera out of the car window, and took a couple of pictures which he sent to the company. Fortunately these were in the minority, and Melanie was determined to stay out of that category.

Digital cameras had made the process much easier, and the knowledge she had gained about the proper way to photograph buildings from a school camera club, helped her immensely. Each building was shot from opposite corners, thus giving a good view of all sides and roof areas. She still remembered being told of a risk with beautiful photos of the front of an out-building, taken straight on. When the inspector made a visit, he discovered most of the back wall of the building was missing.

Mr. Draper was coming to the office at nine that morning to discuss his policy, and Melanie was going to give him comparative quotes from the farm companies her brokerage represented. She was going to have to do it with coffee stains all over her once-pristine white blouse. As she fumed, a part of her mind made a mental note to herself - *store a change of clothing in the office at the first opportunity.*

She had borrowed a sweater from the receptionist. The color clashed horribly with her

skirt, but it covered most of the damage and, by the time Mr. Draper arrived for their meeting, she had calmed down sufficiently to carry on with her presentation. After discussing the various options, Mr. Draper gave her his decision on the coverages, and left quite satisfied with her assistance, so the day wasn't a total write-off. She was happy to wrap up his policy on the spot, because she knew if he didn't commit with her right away, he would possibly go elsewhere for another quote, and she could lose him as a client.

Her stomach in knots after work the next day, Melanie went home, showered and dressed in her most conservative suit. It helped her to feel a little more in control. But her confidence waned as she entered the restaurant. Kicking him had definitely not been wise. She spotted him immediately at a corner table, and for just a brief moment, saw him as a tall, young, attractive man rather than her enemy. His dark brown hair was cut really short, he had a firm jaw and his eyes held secrets and laughter.

Looking pointedly at her feet, he asked "How much danger am I in tonight?"

"Since we're supposed to be resolving our differences, I'll restrain myself. Just for the record, have you any idea what a horrible day that was for me? I was on my way to meet with one of our most important clients and I had to walk into the room wearing the contents of your coffee cup on my blouse, thanks to you. It was totally mortifying."

"Also for the record, the responsibility for that collision was at least fifty-fifty, so that makes us even. I was on my way to pitch my bid to Brian and his associates. No time to go home and change, no clean shirt at the office. Fortunately, they didn't hold my appearance against me."

Just then the waiter approached. "My name is Tom. I will be your server tonight. Would you like a coffee to start?"

Russ caught her eye, and suddenly they both burst into laughter, startling the waiter.

"Truce?" He smiled at her.

"Truce," she said, and smiled back.

She immediately felt the tension she'd been holding in her shoulders drain away. She had behaved like a brat at her sister's house, and she had to admit, the coffee spill was as much her fault as his. Now that they were no longer antagonists, she was able to really look at him as a man, and she was quite intrigued by what she saw. His hair was medium brown, with an-almost military cut. Blue eyes, strong chin with a slight cleft, and when he smiled, a dimple popped out on the left side of his face, giving her an immediate image of the adorable little boy he must have been.

She had almost finished her inventory of his features while he was adding cream to his coffee, when he suddenly looked up and caught her studying him.

"Like what you see?" He was grinning at her.

"Nah. Hair is too short, there's only one dimple, and that chin has aggression and determination written all over it."

"That's it? That's the best you can do?"

"On short notice, yeah. But I can probably come up with some more, given time."

"Time I can give you. Susan said you work as an insurance broker. I could use some help. I've designed a house for myself and construction is beginning in two weeks. I need a builder's risk policy in place before then. Can you help me out?"

"I can, but the question is, will I?"

"I thought we called a truce."

"Just kidding. I can get some quotes for you if you give me the details. Call and make an appointment for any day next week. Are you building the house yourself?"

"No. I haven't the time, or the expertise. I've hired a contractor to do the work."

The waiter came by and topped up their coffees, asking if they were ready to order. They suddenly realized they had been talking non-stop since they declared the truce, so picked up the menus and studied them. With their orders placed, both having chosen the special - salmon steak with lemon/dill sauce, small oven-roasted potatoes, and mixed vegetables, they immediately picked up where they had left off.

"So where's your lot?"

"Out of town a few miles, in the woods, with a small trout lake, fed by a stream."

"Sounds awesome!"

"It is. I was really lucky to find it. Living in town, even a small one, doesn't do it for me. I like the forest and the solitude - also the fresh fish for dinner now and then. I will be really happy when I can move out of town."

Looking up at her, he asked, "Do you fish?"

"Never have. I've been a townie most of my life. My only exposure to the great outdoors was a summer at youth camp when I was a kid."

"Want me to teach you?"

"Does this involve touching worms?"

"Only way to catch a trout."

"And how do you explain to the worm that you are going to impale him on a barbed hook and that he will probably wind up in a fish's belly?"

"Are you trying to put me off fishing?"

Just then their plates arrived, and silence ensued as they ate their meals.

She just couldn't help it. She had to ask, "Do you think this salmon regretted grabbing a worm?"

"Cut it out, Melanie. You really need some attitude adjustments." He wasn't quite smiling, so she decided it was time to shut up and leave him alone.

Dinner was finished in relative peace, both declined dessert, he paid the tab, and they left the restaurant. As she stood by her car, he said, "See you next week."

Fishing a business card from her purse, she handed it to him. "Here's my office number

and extension. You know, there's something about you that makes me want to aggravate you. I'll have to study the matter. See you next week."

"Study hard. I'd like to know the answer too. On that note, I'm off. Bye, Melanie." With that parting comment, he slid into his truck and was gone, wondering why she was angry and why she was taking it out on him, or any other man, for that matter.

Driving away, she also wondered why she was needling him. He seemed like a really nice guy. Suddenly she realized it probably had more to do with her recent break-up. She'd been feeling like all men were scum for some time now, and it wasn't fair to take it out on him.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lying full length on his recliner, hands behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles, and a deep frown on his brow, Russ contemplated the enigma that was Melanie. In repose, she looked like a sweet girl next door, but that girl sure had a tongue on her. Why the needling comments? He had thought they were past the coffee incident. With her big brown eyes and long wavy auburn hair, a disarming smile when she chose to show it, and a smattering of freckles across her nose, she could easily be described as 'cute'. She really intrigued him.

That crack about his hair being too short made him want to let it grow long enough for a ponytail, just to see what she'd have to say about that. He had chosen to wear it short when he was at university to save money on haircuts, and had just never bothered to change the style. Maybe it was time to rethink the matter.

*What am I doing? It's none of her business how I wear my hair!* He couldn't believe he had been on the verge of changing something about himself - just for her.

He had dated a bit in high school and university, but nothing too serious because his entire focus was on getting his degree doing what he loved best - designing buildings. He'd been playing with building blocks long after the other little boys were on to bigger and better things, but he just liked to see the different shapes and designs he could construct, using his imagination. With studying now behind him, he was often amazed at how the image for a proposed building would form in his mind long before he put pencil to paper.

He realized that he was really looking forward to the meeting he had arranged with Melanie for Tuesday and describing his proposed home to her. If she would just watch her tongue. Maybe she'd like to visit his lot some day and maybe she'd even like to try and catch a trout. And maybe she'd let him cook it for her supper...

*Whoa! Slow down, boy. You just met her. Maybe she has a boyfriend or maybe she's engaged to somebody.* As he pulled himself upright and went back to his drawing board for a couple of hours work, he became aware that images of her had started to crawl into his thoughts a little too much.

\* \* \*

Tuesday had finally arrived and Melanie was also reviewing their last meeting and was still upset with herself for the way she had spoken to him. Knowing why she had done it didn't excuse her behavior. At some point, she was going to have to apologize and explain herself to him, like it or not.

Walking into the office right on time, Russ asked for Melanie at the counter. The receptionist directed him to her office and after a brief greeting, she began questioning him in a business-like manner, a change in character which somewhat surprised him and changed his previous opinion of her personality. She began taking notes as he answered her questions.

"How far is the fire hall from your lot?"

"Less than five kilometers."

"That's good news for you as it keeps the rate down. Next question: what's the construction going to be?"

"I'm building into the side of a hill with a walk-out basement. Because it faces south, I'm adding a lot of windows across the front to take advantage of the sun for passive solar heat. The house will actually be sitting backwards to the road, with living room and kitchen facing the lake, and bedrooms and bathrooms facing the road. I'll have my office, recreation room, laundry and spare bedrooms in the basement."

"As to construction, I am going to use field-stone on the one-story level with gray brick veneer on the other three sides. There will be a covered cedar deck on the east side with an open cedar deck across the south side at ground level."

"I'm going to have a fireplace in the living room and an airtight stove in the basement and I'll also have a back-up generator wired in to start automatically if there's a power outage while I'm away visiting a site. I'm also installing a full security system as well as motion detection lights and camera. Because I'll be working at home a great deal of the time, with client files on premises, I have to protect their interests."

"My plans call for as many 'green' features as possible. Everything from drywall, to carpets, to paints, to built-in cupboards, will be as non-toxic as I am able to locate the products. I'd like to be off grid, but there are too many tall trees on the lot for a windmill and I would need that to generate sufficient power."

"I'm adding an attached two-car garage on the north side of the house to help insulate it and to allow for easy inside transfer of groceries to the kitchen." Taking a breath, he said, "Sorry! I'm getting carried away. My uncle left me his estate in his will with the direction that I should enjoy it, so this is my treat to myself and I'm getting really excited to see it finished."

"What's your anticipated completed value?"

"I'd say in the neighborhood of \$450,000."

"How long will construction take?"

"I'm hoping to have it finished in three months so I can be settled before winter sets in."

"One more question; what will your heat source be?"

"I'm putting in a high-efficiency air source heat pump along with on demand propane-fired hot water heat. There will be an air exchanger as well because the house will be R2000."

"What about the roof construction?"

"Steel shingles because they are maintenance-free, timeless and more attractive than an ordinary steel roof."

"Okay. Just one more thing - I need the dimensions and then I'll have everything to put together your quotes."

Once Russ had given her the rest of the information, he made an appointment for Friday to come back for the quotes. He was really impressed with her professionalism and trusted that he would get the best possible coverage from her. Realizing that he was looking forward to seeing her again, he once more wondered if she was involved with anyone.

Melanie knew which company best met his needs, but she also wanted to give him some alternatives. It didn't take her long to put together the information and prepare the quotes for him and she too, was looking forward to Friday. He had arranged the meeting for late Friday afternoon and she wondered if he might ask her out for dinner after their meeting.

Russ had thought about taking her to dinner, but had come up with a much better idea. Friday arrived and their meeting didn't take long. The first quote she gave him was the industry standard - a builders' risk that would end when construction was finished. Then a homeowners policy would be put in place. The second quote was coverage from one of the Mutual companies. They had recently introduced a plan where the house would be placed on a homeowner's policy with an attached builder's risk coverage. The term for construction was a generous six months, and once construction was completed, the coverage would continue in force as a homeowner policy.

Handing him the paperwork, Melanie said, "I'll leave these quotes with you and you can let me know, after you've reviewed them, which suits you best."

Russ folded the papers and tucked them into his pocket. "Would you like to come and see my lot and the blueprints tomorrow?" He was grinning at her. "I could teach you how to put a worm on a hook."

"You have to be kidding! You know what I think of handling worms. But yes, I'd love to see where your house is going to sit. I have an image in my head of the building, but no idea what the surroundings will look like."

"Give me your home address and I'll pick you up after lunch."

Writing her home phone number and address on the back of a business card, she handed it to him. "See you tomorrow." And she couldn't wait!

Because the weather was co-operating with sunshine and a gentle breeze on Saturday, she decided on jeans and top, but added sneakers to her outfit in case the lot was rugged. The morning was spent putting a French braid in her hair so she wouldn't have to worry about it blowing around her face. She was more excited than nervous when she answered the door at one-thirty.



"Better add a sweater to your ensemble. It can be cooler in the woods and by the water." She caught him appraising her, but he just grinned when she said, "See anything you like?"

Ignoring her question, he asked, "Ready to go?"

"Soon as I grab my purse." She picked it up, along with a sweater, and followed him out to his truck. Their first stop was a quick one to pick up a fishing license for her. Once they were on the road again, she turned to him. "Russ I want to apologize for my behavior at my sister's and at dinner the other night. You were on the receiving end of something that should have been aimed at someone else. I'm sorry I was rude." It wasn't easy getting the words out, but she wanted to get it out of the way quickly.

"So who did the dirty on you?"

"My ex-fiancé. The same old story. Want the gory details?"

"Only if you want to tell me. It might make you feel better to unload."

"Okay, here goes. His name is Rick Mason. We were only engaged for three months and had just begun making wedding plans. We were at a dance one night. I was in a cubicle in the ladies room. Two friends came in but they didn't know I was there. One of them said 'Did you hear about Rick Mason?' The other replied 'Rick who?'

'Melanie's Rick. He's been with a blonde more than once. They were necking in a bar one night. Poor Melanie. She doesn't even know.'

Taking a deep breath, she continued with her story. "I was totally devastated. I had to stay put until they left, then I took the chicken's way out because I couldn't face him and I didn't want a scene in public. I ducked out and called a cab, and went home. After a couple of stiff drinks, I sent him a text message that said, "You are history. Just be thankful you're not dead. Your ex - Melanie."

"What did he do?"

"He called about a million times, but I refused to pick up or call back. Finally he came to the door, so I threw his ring at him and told him to go play with the blonde. And that I never wanted to see him again. For once, he did what he was told."

She paused for a moment. "Think I was too harsh?"

"How long ago did this happen?" He glanced at her, no smile.

"About two months ago."

"So you haven't totally recovered yet."

"I guess not. But you know what? You are the first person I've told about this. Susan doesn't even know. I just told her things weren't working out and we were going our separate ways. *Then* she tells me she never really liked Rick."

"Feel better?"

"Surprisingly, yes. You make a good listener."

"Not all men are rats, Melanie. There are some good ones out there. Look at me, for instance." This time he had a big smile and his dimple was showing. Cute!

As he spoke, he turned off the highway onto a side road, traveled a short distance and then turned into a laneway with a locked gate.

"Passenger opens the gate, Mel. Out you go." and he handed her a padlock key.

"Aye, aye, Sir!" She quickly unlocked the gate, held it open while he drove through, then locked it behind her and got back into the truck.

"Why the locked gate?"

"My trout. Poachers like to help themselves."

"Are you going to keep it locked once you take up residence?"

"No. Too much of a nuisance. I'm designing the driveway so the house is hidden from the road, and hopefully no one will know whether I'm in or out. I'm fortunate because I'm able to work from home a great deal of the time. I'll just visit our head office and building sites now and then."

"Lucky guy. I'd love to have a job like that. Will you be able to get high speed internet out here?"

"Not a problem. There's a tower nearby. I'll just need to add a receiver and router and I'll have my wireless hookup. The county made it a priority that everyone who wanted high speed would have access to it, fortunately for me."

By now they had followed a short, but winding laneway through the pines to a small open meadow that sloped down to the lake below, water sparkling in the sunlight.

"Russ, this is so beautiful!"

The meadow was ringed by pines, cedars, maples, and many other varieties of trees. It was late June now, so the white daisies and yellow buttercups were blooming in profusion. It would be equally beautiful in the fall when the leaves were in full color.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

Scanning the perimeter of the meadow, Melanie spotted a travel trailer and picnic table tucked between some pines.

"You stay here sometimes?"

"I spend most weekends here, weather permitting. It gets me out of town and I can work on blueprints if the mood strikes. I have a drafting board in the trailer."

"Are you a workaholic?"

"I guess I have tendencies in that direction, but to me it isn't really work. I enjoy the challenge of putting together a design that works."

Russ watched as Melanie continued looking around the lot. "Have you seen enough yet?"

Wistfully, Melanie replied, "I could just sit down in the grass and look at the lake and trees all day. It is so peaceful here and I can see why you fell in love with it. The fall

colors around the lake will be beautiful!"

"Well we'd better get on it if I'm going to teach you how to catch a trout."

"Seriously, do I have to handle worms?" Melanie's expression was clearly squeamish.

"That's your first assignment. Follow me."

He led the way down the incline to the lake shore. "See that white box buried in the ground over by the tree?"

Nodding, Melanie walked towards spot he indicated. *Don't make me touch those things!* He couldn't be that mean!

"Lift the lid on the box and bring me a dozen worms."

Gritting her teeth, Melanie lifted the lid. "You beast! How could you be so nasty?" Inside were two small Styrofoam boxes. Picking one up, she closed the box lid and went back to where he was standing. "You did that on purpose!"

"Just wanted to see how brave you were. You passed the test. Time is wasting. Let's go."

She could tell he was anxious to get on the lake, so she followed quickly as he headed to a cedar garden shed. When he opened the door, she could see all manner of fishing gear, life jackets, net, and a container for the fish. He explained that he believed dragging the fish around the lake on a stringer was unnecessarily cruel, so he put them in water until he was ready to filet them.

"So you do have a heart."

Handing her assorted items, he gathered up the rest of the things they would need and headed to the dock where his fourteen-foot aluminum boat was tied up. The motor was electric and had a small solar panel attached to the battery terminals to keep it charged up and ready for use.

"Did you bring a hat?"

"No. Just my sunglasses."

Going back to the shed, he came back with a white Tilley hat for her. "This is probably too big, but it will keep the sun off of your head and shield your face. It can get pretty hot out on the water."

"Unless you are a good practicing Kahuna. Then you can just create a few clouds to cover the sun for as long as you need them." Melanie grinned at him as she spoke.

"Am I supposed to understand what you just said?" Russ really looked puzzled.

"No. But maybe while we're waiting for the fish to bite, I'll let you in on the secret."

"Can't wait. If you can arrange some clouds for us, I'll be eternally grateful."

Holding the boat steady, he waited for her to step into it and get settled, and then loaded all of the gear they would need. Once he was seated, life jackets in place, he baited the hooks. "Just so you know, I'm letting you off the hook, so to speak, this time. But some day you will bait a hook."

*In your dreams, buster! You don't know how stubborn and determined I can be. Keeping*

her thoughts to herself, she listened attentively to his instructions.

"There are some things you need to know before we head out. Rainbow trout are really feisty and they can flip themselves off of the hook if it isn't set really well. Once a fish bites, you need to keep tension on the line as you reel him in. When either of us catches a fish, I'll kill the motor. The other one will pick up the net, and hold it in the water off the side of the boat so the fish can be brought up to it. Then we scoop it up, taking care not to knock him with the rim of the net. Once he's in the net, we can bring him into the boat, then I'll take the hook out and we can put him in the container of water. We only need two fish for our supper so that's all we'll catch."

"You are cooking supper?", she asked.

"I sure am. Are you ready to catch a fish?"

"No, but let's do it."

Under his direction, she released the snap on the end of a rope that was holding the boat to an eye bolt in the side of the dock. He did likewise at the front of the boat and they were on their way. Once they were out on the lake, he showed her how to feed the line out slowly, set it, and troll for fish.

"The lake has a couple of deep holes where the fish hang out sometimes. Other times they are near surface, jumping for flies. It depends on the weather, the season, and the time of day."

"And a good Kahuna could just call them and they'd come."

"There you go again with the Kahuna stuff. What are you talking about?" Russ was truly baffled.

As they trolled slowly around the lake she gave him a very brief glimpse into the history and mystique of the ancient Polynesian Kahunas, or Keepers of the Secret. She had studied and written a paper on them for an English class in school, but the subject was so vast and covered so many sub-topics it couldn't easily be explained in one, or even many, conversations.

"They believed that everything in the Universe was connected by what they called 'Aka threads'. This was very much like what our current scientists have named the 'new' string theory of the Universe, even though it was being used by the Polynesians over two thousand years ago."

"They also believed that all thoughts have energy - something our scientists have already measured and proven - and that thoughts can influence and affect matter. Using these two beliefs, they were able to perform healing on others, even though they were at great distances from them. The thoughts and energy would travel on the Aka threads, bringing healing to the other person."

"They lived very closely with nature, believed in nature spirits who would do their bidding when asked, and could communicate with animals by telepathy. They were known to be able to call sea turtles. This being true, you should be able to call a trout and have him come to you here. Right?"

"If you say so. What else did they do?" Russ was more than a little skeptical, but curious.

"They would talk to the nature spirits and have them control the weather. So we should be able to bring a little white cloud over the sun while we are fishing. The thing I read that I liked the best about them was their belief system - no hurt, no sin. In other words, if you didn't intentionally hurt someone, then you were not committing a sin. Of course, the other side of that was that intentional hurt *was* a sin. If they did feel they had committed a sin against another, they would perform some sort of penance - usually quite rigorous."

Suddenly her eyes got big, she let out a yelp and said, "Help! Something just grabbed my bait. What do I do?"

"Calm down. Start reeling slowly and steadily, keeping the line taut."

Doing as he instructed, she brought the line to the boat, only to discover half of the worm was gone and no fish.

"Bad news. You didn't get a fish. Good news, they are starting to bite. Should have supper soon."

Once he had secured what was left of the worm, she put her line out again and they fished in silence for a while. She found it very relaxing, and decided he was really good company.

Again, she felt a tug on her line. At his direction, she gave the rod a jerk to set the hook, and this time she could feel the fish fighting as she reeled it in. Russ stopped the motor, picked up the net and quickly scooped up the fish as it neared the boat. The hook had just caught on the edge of the mouth, so it was easy for him to release the fish and place it in the container of water.

"One more and we're done. By the way, that's a nice one you caught. Well done. You take direction well."

"Why thank you, kind Sir. Now it's your turn."

He again baited her hook, she let her line out, and before ten minutes had passed, she had landed her second fish.

"Now you know why men rarely take women on fishing trips. They don't like being shown up."

"Does that mean I can't do this again?" Melanie faked a pout.

"I'll make an exception for you. I'll teach you how to fish and you can teach me more about the Kahunas. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Okay, time to learn how to filet the fish. Come along." Russ led the way.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Following him to a table near the shed, she watched as he brought over a board with an attached clamp, and two fish knives. Picking up a fish, he quickly hit it on the back of the head with the butt end of the knife, killing it instantly. Placing the head in the clamp on

the board, the fish on its side, he said, "Watch carefully. This is the tricky part. Starting just below the head, make an incision across the neck, lay the knife flat on the edge of the incision, and then slice the flesh from the side of the fish, being careful to stay just on top of the spine. Slice it to the tail and lift it off. I normally put it in the water while I prepare the rest of the filets, but you are going to do the next part."

"Are you serious?"

"Yep. It's not that difficult." Picking up a short piece of pine two-by-six, he set it on the table in front of her. Handing her the filet knife, he placed the filet, skin side down, on the board. Taking her hand, he had her run her fingers up the length of the filet until she found the ridge of tiny bones.

"Now all you have to do is make a V cut on each side of that strip of bones, not all the way through to the skin, but just enough to get under the bones, and lift them off. I'll remove the skin later. Think you can handle that?"

"Doesn't sound too difficult, but you'd better watch this first one to make sure I'm doing it right. It feels a bit like performing surgery." Melanie was nervous, but determined.

"That's a good way to describe it. Be careful with the knife - the blade is really sharp."

"Yes, Boss." Working carefully as he had instructed, she successfully cut out a small strip and removed it. Running her fingers back up the filet, she was happy to discover there were no more bones to be found.

Working quietly together, they soon had all four filets prepared and marinating in lemon juice. Russ had wrapped two potatoes in foil to bake on the barbecue. Once it was lit, warmed up, and the potatoes placed inside, he opened a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and poured two glasses. "The potatoes will take quite a while, so we can relax and enjoy our wine." He had placed two lawn chairs side by side, facing the lake.

*How can he bear to leave this place and go back into town?* Melanie was totally captivated by the peace and quiet, the bird songs in the background, and the sunlight sparkling on the water. The busy world of work, traffic, telephones and emails had melted away and she felt really happy.

"You know, Russ, I think I finally understand what people mean when they talk about being at one with nature." As she spoke, two deer walked out of the tree-line to the lake shore and began drinking at the water's edge. "Look! Aren't they beautiful?"

"They come here often later in the day. If you like taking photographs, this is the place to do it."

"Does that mean I'm invited back here again?"

"Any time. You are a very restful companion - even if you do beat me at fishing."

Sitting quietly, they watched the deer. Neither was uncomfortable with the silence, contented to soak up the beauty around them. They sipped their wine and gazed out at the lake, where a trout jumped for a fly now and then, leaving behind a circle of ripples that slowly disappeared. Dragonflies soared around them, catching mosquitoes and other small insects, sometimes landing on an arm or thigh, to sit for a moment and then move on. Melanie had never been that close to a live dragonfly before and she was intrigued

with the beautiful patterns and colors on their wings and bodies.

Sometime later, Russ stirred and went to check on the potatoes. Deciding that they were done, he prepared the pan for the fish with a small amount of oil, placed them in the pan and turned the heat down to medium. He went into the trailer and came back out with dishes, cutlery, napkins and a plastic tablecloth for the picnic table. Handing them to her, he went back inside and returned with a large bowl of salad and two bottles of dressing. She had set the table and refilled their wine glasses.

"So the man can cook!"

"What you see here today is the extent of my expertise, with the exception of burgers and dogs. I try to limit my intake of red meat, but there's nothing like a juicy sirloin burger now and then."

Watching as he turned the filets and seasoned them lightly with some Cajun spice, she suddenly realized that she was quite hungry. She also realized that she hadn't felt this happy in months - not since her breakup. Russ was easy to be with, easy to talk to, and, she had to admit, really easy on the eyes. It was the first time in a long time that she had been able to look at a man without feeling angry.

"Supper is served, My Lady." Loading the plates with the filets and potatoes, he handed her the bowl of salad. "Help yourself."

"This is my kind of meal - not too heavy, but really tasty. By the way, there's something a bit fishy about the meals we've been having." Raising an eyebrow, she grinned at him.

"Really funny, Melanie." Amused, he grinned back at her.

Relaxing after the meal with coffee and a plate of cheese and fruit, Melanie felt comfortable and happy with Russ. If she felt like sitting quietly, he was content to do likewise. If she was chattering about inconsequentials, he willingly participated. It felt really good to be with a man who asked for nothing but friendship.

"I could sit here forever, Russ, but the dew is starting to fall, so I'd better make a move. I'll help you clean up first, though."

"No need. I'll run you home and then I'm coming back here until Monday morning. The dishes can wait. I'll just put the cheese and fruit in the fridge first."

He returned shortly and they made the trip back to town in companionable silence.

"Next meal is on me, Russ. Home cooked, whenever it suits you. I'll keep the menu a surprise, but no fish."

"That's an offer I won't refuse. I'm going to be out of town next week visiting a couple of sites, but I'll call you when I get back and we can set something up." He walked her to the door, said, "I really enjoyed today. Goodnight, Melanie." and with that, he was gone.

*That answers that question. No kiss goodnight.* She had been wondering about it on the drive home and wasn't sure how she felt. Deciding it was a pleasant change, she smiled to herself.

During the next few days Melanie managed to keep her focus on work, at work. During breaks and at home was another matter. She realized that she had been thinking less

frequently about Rick and his betrayal. She was no longer having flashbacks to that horrible moment when she'd found out he was cheating on her, and how hurt, angry and disillusioned she had been. If she was honest with herself, the anger had far exceeded the hurt and that fact gave her pause and made her question the depth of feeling she had had for him. How much of what she felt was loss of a great love and how much was embarrassment at being taken in by a player? Come to think of it, she had had some instances of a small orange caution light flashing in her gut, but by then they were engaged, so she just pushed them away and ignored them.

Now she found her thoughts straying much more often to Russ and their conversations and interactions. He was so easy to be with and she felt she could tell him just about anything. She had really surprised herself when she recounted the episode in the ladies room. She knew she wasn't ready for another relationship yet, and probably wouldn't be for quite some time, but Russ was beginning to seem like a really good friend and she was looking forward to making a meal for him.

He called on Thursday night. "I'm back early. Wanna cook me dinner on Saturday night?"

"I'd love to!" She was so happy to hear from him. "Come over any time after five."

"I'll be there. I haven't had a home-cooked meal, except my own, in ages. See you then." And he hung up.

Melanie was excited for the rest of the evening, all day Friday, and Saturday, as she cleaned the apartment and decided on a menu. She had started some Mung bean sprouts growing on Tuesday - just in case - and knew they would be ready by Saturday, so Chicken Chow Mein with Basmati rice seemed like a good idea. It was easy to make and one of her favorite dishes. She picked up the ingredients on her way home from work Friday, along with a couple of bottles of wine, and a carton of chocolate mint ice cream.

Once the apartment was spotless and dust-free, she had a quick sandwich for lunch and then she put together her ice cream pie. Once the table was set, she had a leisurely bubble bath, washed and dried her hair, letting it fall in natural waves and curls to her shoulders. She wasn't sure what Russ would consider proper dress code for dinner with a friend, so she chose a long, light olive green sleeveless sundress with scooped neckline and slit on one side to her knee. Sandals and a chocolate brown pendant with matching earrings completed her outfit, which she felt would be suitable as either casual or slightly dressy.

With nothing left to do and an hour to kill, Melanie curled up on the end of the sofa with a book she had started reading earlier in the week. But she couldn't stay with the story. Brown eyes, buzz cut hair, dimple in the chin and one in one cheek, thick lower lip, hints of humor in his eyes, and his grin, kept intruding. She was becoming more and more attracted to him, but flash-backs to Rick's betrayal kept her wary of becoming too involved. As a friend, he was the best. Anything more would just have to wait until she was ready to trust again.

\* \* \*

Russ had also spent the week focusing on work while he was working, but in his off-time, he thought about Melanie. He knew what he wanted, but he also knew he had a long road ahead gaining her trust. Being a good friend to her was the only way to win her heart, but when he wanted something badly enough, he could be extremely disciplined and patient.



And he wanted Melanie with everything he had in him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

As five o'clock neared, Melanie suddenly remembered the wine. She took the Sauvignon Blanc out of the fridge to warm slightly and placed the Shiraz in the fridge to cool slightly, then began pacing the floor, anxious for Russ to arrive. When the doorbell rang, she made herself slow down and answer it calmly, even though her heart was racing.

"Hi Russ. Come on in."

Handing her a bottle of Chardonnay, Russ moved into the hall. The apartment was tiny - just two small bedrooms, one of which she used as an office, a small bathroom, small kitchen and decent-sized living room. She had taken it because her unit had a balcony facing a wooded area. It was just big enough for two chairs and a little side table. She had placed several window boxes on the railing with multi-colored impatiens in full bloom, and a pot of geraniums in the corner. It was her favorite spot in the summer when the weather co-operated.

Russ was looking around the living room, taking in the pale blue walls, cream carpet and medium-blue sofa and chair. The landlord had asked her preferences in colors before updating the apartment and she was really pleased with the result. The soft colors lent a peaceful air to the rooms and she had kept knick-knacks and pictures to a minimum so it seemed larger than it actually was.

There was a bookshelf on the end wall of the living room where she had a couple of her favorite family photos, an African violet and a crystal bowl she had found at a yard sale. Her books were a mixture of fiction, all genres, and non-fiction.

As Russ approached the bookshelf, he spied a book on Huna. Pulling it from the shelf, he opened it a random page and started reading.

"Hey, Russ, I thought you came here to visit me!" Melanie grinned, as he looked over at her. "By the way, you can borrow that one, if you like - or any of the others I have on the subject. I think you'll find them quite interesting."

"Thanks. I'll do that. You've really piqued my curiosity."

"Time for the grand tour. Come on - I'll show you the other few feet of space that I have." She led him through the eat-in kitchen, down the hall to her office, bedroom and bathroom. "That's it. What do you think?"

"Very tiny, very cute, very feminine. But I really like your color schemes. Wanna give me a hand with mine when the time comes?"

"Sure, if you trust my judgment."

"I like everything I see - especially the teddy bear sitting on your bed." Raising an eyebrow, he grinned at her.

"Well, I can't have a pet in here, so he's the closest I could come to a companion. We've had many long one-sided conversations. I will say he's an excellent listener. Come on.

Let's take a glass of wine out to my balcony. Would you like Shiraz, Sauvignon Blanc or your Chardonnay?" Melanie led the way to the kitchen, and took down two wine glasses.

"I'll try the Shiraz. That's a new one to me."

Taking the bottle and glasses out to the balcony, she set them on the side table, then went back in for a dish of spicy cheese straws.

"I can see why you like it here, even if it is small. This view almost makes me feel like I'm out in the countryside."

"Oh, look. There's a kitten!" Melanie pointed to the edge of the woods where a little cat was stepping daintily through the long grass.

"Have you ever had a pet, Mel?"

"No, but a friend in school had a little white kitten named Snowball. I just loved it and played with it every time I visited her. Another friend had a dog, a Border Collie, which was always busy. It required a lot of exercise so she kept in good shape just taking it for walks and runs. Those two pets gave me a good insight into what I would or wouldn't want for a pet. Dogs adore their owners, but cats demand that we adore them. They also insist that we allow them their independence. Someday when I can live in a place where I can have a pet, I'm going to have a cat. They are so cool!"

*Note to self - get her a kitten.* Russ was watching her as she spoke and he could sense how much she really wanted to have a cat.

"What about you? Have you had pets?"

"I was always too busy to care for one. If it wasn't made of Lego blocks or Erector sets, it wouldn't hold my attention."

Sipping wine and chatting about anything and everything, Melanie suddenly looked at her watch and declared, "It's after six. I should start dinner. You can come and watch or you can sit out here and read your book - your choice."

"I'm coming in. Nothing like watching the little woman at work."

*"What did you just say?"*

"Just kidding! Just kidding! I'd rather keep chatting. Maybe I could help?"

"Big mistake, Russ. Wash your hands. You are going to work, after that little woman crack."

Although the kitchen was small, they managed to work together well. Before long they were seated at the table, wine glasses refilled and dinner under way.

When it was time for dessert, Melanie brought her ice cream pie from the fridge. His eyes lit up and a wide smile brought his dimple out when he looked at the pie.

"Wow! Where did you buy that? I've never seen anything like it!"

"Want the recipe? I can give it to you."

"You made this? You missed your calling, girl!"

"Wait until you taste it. Chocolate mint is my favorite, but you can make it with any

flavor of ice cream or frozen yogurt." Handing him a knife, pie lifter, plate and fork, she said, "Help yourself."

Russ had seconds and declared it the best dessert he'd ever had.

"So the way to a man's heart truly is through his stomach." Melanie grinned at him.

When the table was cleared, they took coffee back out on the balcony, knowing their stay would be short because of the mosquitoes, but determined to enjoy the last rays of the setting sun, and each others' company. After another enjoyable chat, they slapped mosquitoes simultaneously, and laughed as they rose to go inside.

"Melanie, I have enjoyed this evening more than I can say. You are a great cook, an interesting conversationalist, and you have a terrific sense of humor."

"Careful, Russ. I might get a swelled head. By the way, don't forget to take your book with you."

"Sounds like that's my cue to leave."

"Not at all. I just didn't want you to forget the book. We don't have to work tomorrow, so there's no rush." Melanie was loath to have the evening end.

"Nevertheless, I think I'll take myself off. I have some work I need to catch up on after being away." What he didn't say was how difficult it was to keep his distance if they were inside in her cozy living room. It was too soon and he didn't want to take a chance and spoil everything. Picking up the book on Huna, he walked over, opened the door, and said, "Thanks again, Melanie. Goodnight." And he was gone.

Again Melanie was left wondering about him. Why wasn't he making a move on her? Not that she desperately wanted him to. She knew she wasn't ready for a change in their relationship yet, but his behavior was most unusual.

On Wednesday morning, he called. "Hi Melanie. Can you meet me at Kelly's at twelve? I'm really snowed under here, so I thought I could buy you lunch and tell you what insurance coverage I've decided to put in place." What he left unsaid was the fact that he just wanted to see her again.

"I never turn down a free lunch! See you there."

Melanie was excited for the rest of the morning, watching the clock, and wondering if she looked okay. At eleven-thirty she went into the washroom, checked her hair and makeup, and decided she was presentable. She didn't stop to wonder why she was so nervous, when she was just meeting a friend to discuss business.

Arriving at Kelly's, she found Russ already seated in a back booth with a coffee in front of him.

"Am I late?" Melanie sat down across from him.

"I'm early. Wanted to get us a good spot for conducting a business meeting." He grinned at her.

"So - business first, or lunch?"

"Let's get the business out of the way first, then we can have a relaxed meal."

Pausing as the waiter poured her a coffee, Melanie had a good idea which quote he would accept.

"This was a really easy choice to make. You've sold me. I'll take the second option with the homeowners policy and attached builders risk. We're breaking ground on Monday."

"Okay. I'll arrange to have the coverage bound as of Monday morning and you'll have your policy within thirty days. By the way, you know that we could have accomplished this by one simple phone call, right?"

"Yeah, but then I would have missed lunch with my favorite pal." His grin was wide, and almost triumphant.

The waiter had been keeping an eye on their table and when she had closed her briefcase, he approached and asked if they were ready to order.

Melanie chose a turkey sandwich on toasted brown, while Russ had the smoked meat on rye with fries, and a dill pickle, which he informed her, was his vegetable. "I don't eat a lot of fries, but Kelly's makes the best. What can I say?"

Taking a couple from his plate, Melanie ate them and said, "You are right. They are the best!"

"Like you didn't already know that! Don't try and tell me you've never eaten them before."

"Guilty as charged, but I also try and stay away from them. They really aren't a healthy food choice. By the way, how's the Huna book coming along? Keeping your attention?"

"It's fascinating! I'm having a hard time putting it aside so I can get my work done. I'm almost finished it, but I think I'll have to re-read it - maybe more than once. It's a whole new way of thinking and looking at things."

Pausing a moment to finish his coffee, he looked over at her with his adorable little-boy face, the dimple showing and a definite twinkle in his eye. "I have an idea. Let's get together Saturday night and you can explain some of the stuff I'm having trouble with. I'll pick up some Chinese food when I pick you up. Then I'll pick your brain. How does that sound?" He again raised an eyebrow and waited for her response.

"Like a whole lot of picking to me. Like I said on the phone, I never turn down a free meal. You've got yourself a deal."

Glancing at her watch, Melanie exclaimed, "I've gotta run. I have a client coming in to see me shortly. Thanks for lunch. I'll put coverage in place for you. See you Saturday." And this time she was the one who was gone first.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

"So tell me, Russ, what part of Huna don't you understand? Because it was raining, they were sitting in Russ's apartment living room with glasses of wine, while the Chinese food was keeping warm in the oven. Russ was at one end of the loveseat with Melanie in the big chair across from him.

"It's not so much that I don't understand it. I studied psychology in University and I'm familiar with the id, ego and superego, or subconscious, conscious and superconscious, but I've never heard of them referred to as the low self, middle self and high self. And I certainly never considered the subconscious to be like a little child dwelling within my body, anxious to please and ready and willing to carry out my wishes. I realize it performs all sorts of tasks, like keeping my heart beating, keeping me breathing, and remembering all of the stuff I've crammed into my brain, but I sure didn't realize it was watching and listening all the time to my thoughts and words."

"Which is why we should never put ourselves down or make negative statements about ourselves or our abilities. Most of us have no idea how powerful our thoughts are and how, not only is our own low self listening, but also the low selves of others, which is why they can often tell us what we are thinking - both positive and negative. There really is no such thing as a secret, because someone somewhere has picked up a thought. They may not recognize it at a conscious level, but their low self is aware of the truth."

"That's a scary thought, but I guess I agree with it. My gut often tells me, when I'm with a client, what they are feeling and it helps me respond correctly to them. I also get strong impressions about strangers when I'm in a restaurant, just observing them."

"Tell you what, Russ. I have another book on Huna that has several exercises which will help you get in touch with your low self, and will teach you some techniques for mastering a few basic 'miracles' - like finding parking spots where you want them every time you want one, making clouds appear and disappear, resolving sticky problems without confrontations or physical conversation, and the big one - how to do distant healing on others. This isn't something you can learn overnight. It can take months or years, depending on your ability to meditate, visualize and believe."

"Sounds like I'm going to be busy on my days off for some time to come, because I find this all very fascinating, especially when the processes are referred to as 'miracles'."

"So let's eat. I'm starving!" Melanie rose from her chair and headed to the kitchen. "Where are the plates and utensils?"

"Left hand cupboard by the sink and the top drawer beneath it." Russ began taking the containers of food from the oven and placing them on the table. He filled two glasses with iced tea, and produced a pair of chopsticks. Noticing the chopsticks, Melanie exclaimed, "Am I supposed to eat with those?"

"It's the only way to eat Chinese food. Lessons are free." He proceeded to teach her how to hold them and manipulate them, and once again he was amazed to see how quickly she was able to master the task.

"You must have been an A student in school."

"Could have been, but wasn't. There are some subjects I'm just not interested in - like history. I know it's important, but it required a great deal of memory work and I just wasn't into that. Give me a good puzzle to solve, like math, and I'm happy. It wasn't until I began studying for my broker's license that I started really applying myself."

Taking her coffee to the living room, once dinner was over, Melanie glanced at the walls. There were lots of photos, but no family pictures. Every wall was covered with

photographs of buildings, from ancient to modern.

"So who's the photographer?" She looked over at Russ and caught him studying her. Blushing, she looked quickly away, so she missed the grin that appeared on his face.

"I took them all. When I finished my degree, I decided to round out my study of architecture with some up-close-and-personal experience. I spent a month touring Italy, France, Spain, Germany and the British Isles, taking photos of old buildings. When I came back, I went to New York and spent a week looking at, and photographing, new ones. It was quite an experience, and one I wouldn't have missed for anything. There are some truly amazing buildings on this planet, and these photos have become my muse. I like to combine features of old and new, and hopefully come up with something appealing."

"No family photos?" Melanie realized she knew very little about his personal life.

"There's an album somewhere with some photos, lots of them taken when I was little. Because I'm an only child, my parents took many pictures of me. They had me later in life, so I guess I was quite a novelty. I didn't lack for anything but I don't believe I was spoiled either. I wasn't given an allowance, but I was paid nominal amounts from a very young age for doing age-appropriate chores, like cleaning my room, cutting grass, shoveling snow, washing windows, until I was old enough to begin working at summer and after-school jobs to earn my own spending money. That's when my Dad took me to the bank, set me up with an account, and a system where a percentage of every paycheck went automatically into a guaranteed investment certificate. That started me on the path to routinely saving money, something for which I am truly grateful. I didn't miss the money and I was really impressed when I realized it was growing for me."

"Are your parents living near by?"

"They have a condo here and another one in Florida, where they spend most of the winter. Because they are retired, they travel a great deal and are basically enjoying life. I visit with them whenever they come home to roost for a while. What about you? Any siblings besides Susan?"

"Nope. Just the two of us. Usually we get along well, unless she starts trying to manage my life. She thinks being the eldest entitles her. I can't wait for them to have kids so she can mother them instead of me."

"And your parents? Are they nearby as well?"

"Not at present. Dad works for an international insurance company and was recently transferred to the east coast to manage a branch office there. My mom worked in an upscale clothing store, but at the moment she's just getting them settled in their new digs. She'll start looking around for something to do when she gets adequately bored. We keep in touch by email and Skype, and I'm planning to go visit later this summer."

"So I guess I can figure out where your interest in the insurance industry came from?"

"Oh, yes! I heard many conversations about it, mostly from the company perspective, which probably helps me be a better broker. It's quite a balancing act, keeping the companies, the clients, and the brokerage all happy and treated fairly."

"I can relate to that. Sometimes my vision doesn't mesh with that of my client, so I have to change what to me is a marvelous masterpiece to something they can not only live with, but really like."

"So we have something in common." Melanie smiled at him, then said, "By the way, Russ, is it my imagination or is your hair growing longer?" Before he could answer, she exclaimed, "Oh my gosh, you are blushing! What's up with that?"

*Yes – what is up with that? Must be because of the crack she made about my hair being too short. And I haven't blushed since Becky Sue kissed me on the cheek when I was nine.*

"I'm not blushing. It's sunburn, and I just haven't had time to go to the barber. So, since you said it was too short, should I let it grow out?"

"I've never seen it any other way, so unless or until I see it long, I can't give you an informed opinion. And you *were* blushing!"

"Was not."

"Were too."

"What are you – six?"

"You started it." Russ had a big smile on his face, because she was just so much fun.

Melanie smiled back at him. "On a more serious note, why aren't you married?"

"Too busy, first studying and then getting started on my career. I dated off and on but my studies and working got in the way of any kind of a serious relationship."

"Don't you want to get married and have a family?"

"Sure I do, someday."

"So how will you balance your workaholic tendencies with a family? What makes you think anything would be different from your previous go-nowhere relationships?"

"Simple answer – the right person. Once I have her in my life, I'll move work to second place, and family will be my first priority."

"You sound almost like you have someone in mind to fill the bill." Melanie noticed a flicker of some emotion in his eyes as she spoke, but when he answered, it was very non-committal.

"I know what I want in a wife and when the time is right, I'll have her."

"Positive thinking? Law of Attraction? Fate? Kismet? Karma? Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"Could happen if two people are really right for each other – the 'till death doth us part' kind of right. In which case, I guess you could call it Karma. Anyway, that's what I want. Something that will last for a lifetime."

"How many kids do you want?" Melanie was curious to see what he'd say since he was an only child.

"Two to four. Being an only child was okay, but some of my friends were from larger families and they really had fun together, and I'd like that for my kids."

“So, we have that all settled. Now we just have to find a wife for you.”

“Shouldn’t you be finding yourself a husband instead of trying to arrange my life?” Russ raised an eyebrow at her, something he seemed to do frequently when they were having their discussions.

“Nah. I’ve sworn off men. Once burned, twice shy. The single life suits me just fine. Nobody to answer to, no need to wonder what he’s doing, or who he’s doing. No thanks!” As she spoke, Melanie realized she was becoming agitated and didn’t want Russ to pick up on it. Glancing at her watch, she said, “Wow! Look at the time. I’d better go.” She rose and took their coffee cups to the kitchen.

Russ hadn’t missed the agitation and the underlying anger still simmering below the surface. “Well, Pal, let’s get you home. I’ve got some stuff to do before the ground-breaking out at my place on Monday. I’m really looking forward to having my house up and finished so I can move out there. Ready?”

Russ opened the door for her, walked her to his truck, and they drove over to her apartment in a companionable silence. At her door, Russ waited as she unlocked it, then said, “By the way, wanna go fishing next weekend, weather permitting? I don’t want you to forget everything I taught you.”

“Sure do, unless you’re afraid I’ll show you up again. ‘Night, Russ.” Tossing him a smile and a wave, she was through the door and had it closed.

Grinning to himself, Russ whistled most of the way home.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Until the door was firmly closed behind her, Melanie managed to keep a smile on her face, but once inside and away from Russ’s all-knowing, all-seeing eyes, she slumped down against the door, pulled up her knees and rested her forehead on them. *Whatever possessed me to say what I did, about not wanting a husband? Am I still that screwed up by Rick? I really thought I was over the scumbag.* Wearily she got to her feet and went off to bed, telling herself that things would look better in the morning.

\* \* \*

Seated in the boat early Saturday afternoon, fishing rod in hand, Melanie gazed at the lakeshore, ringed on three sides with pine, cedar, balsam, spruce, tamarack, and a few deciduous trees peppered amongst them. A slight breeze ruffled the needles gently and she once more felt the incredible sense of peace this place of Russ’s held for her. Glancing over at him, she again caught him studying her, but this time, he was the first to look away.

“Time for your first miracle, Russ. See that tiny wisp of a cloud almost directly overhead?”

“Hard to miss, since it’s the only one in the sky.”

“Here’s what we do. Look away from it and imagine a stream of warm air flowing from



the top of your head to the wisp of cloud. Hold that thought for a minute or so.”

“Eyes open or closed?”

“Whatever works for you. Less distractions if they are closed.”

A few seconds went by and she noticed he had closed his eyes. She took a quick peek at the cloud, only to discover it was no longer there.

“Okay, time to look.”

Russ opened his eyes, looked up at the cloud, and exclaimed, “Are you kidding me? Where is it? I do not believe this!” And, just as she anticipated, the little cloud started to re-form.

“Look again, Russ.”

“It’s coming back.!”

“Because you said you didn’t believe it. What else did you expect?” She grinned at him. “You’re a good student and you’ll be a great miracle-worker once you get rid of the doubt. Wow! I’ve got a fish.” Reeling in carefully as she’d been taught, Melanie was pleased to see a good-sized Rainbow on her hook. “Guess you’re going to get whapped again, Cowboy.”

“The day is young, my dear. Don’t get too cocky.” Russ unhooked the trout and placed it in the container, re-baited her hook, and dropped it over the side of the boat so she could feed it out. “Tell you what. You beat me today and you bait the hooks next time.”

“Not happening. Not now, not ever. Anything but that.”

“Anything? That gives me a whole lot of ideas.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“I take that back. I’ll do the dishes tonight.” Melanie was quick to change her tune. It was the first time he had made any kind of a suggestive comment, and it made her uncomfortable.

“No worries. I just caught my dinner. You’re off the hook.” He quickly landed his fish and dealt with it. “By the way, we’re having a new fishing lesson today. We’re making smoked fish this time, so we’ll do two for dinner and catch two more, one each, for our larders.”

“So we just need two more. Funny. I was under the impression that fishing required hours and hours of just sitting in a boat, waiting for the fish to bite.”

“Not here. Because this is a private lake, it doesn’t get fished out.”

As they continued fishing, they discovered that the little cloud had again disappeared and the sky was once more clear blue. “Okay, Russ. Next lesson.” Melanie knew this one was harder to believe but figured they should try it anyway. “We’re going to make a little cloud appear this time. If you look beyond the blue in the sky, you’ll see a slight hint of white. Just imagine that it’s cotton wool and pull a little bit of it towards you. We’ll put one near where the other one was. Just pretend it’s up there hiding and we’re going to coax it out.”

Again they closed their eyes, imagined the little cloud coming back, and when they

looked again, it had just begun to form.

“Melanie, you have no idea how impressed I am! If you had tried this before I read the book on Huna practices, I would have thought you were a total nut case. But if that’s true, I guess I’m one as well. I can’t wait to see what else you have up your sleeve.”

“The tricky part about this is belief. If you try and demonstrate it to a total skeptic, it just won’t work because their doubt will prevent it – unless you have a group of really powerful believers who can over-ride the doubts.” She again began reeling in her line.

“Got another one! Grab the net.”

“No can do. I’ve got one too.” Russ had killed the motor and was reeling his line in as well. “Okay. We’ll do this another way. When you get the fish close to the boat, lift him up out of the water and swing him in.” As he spoke, Russ was carrying out the maneuver with his fish. Melanie did likewise, and managed to keep the lines from tangling.

Back on shore, Russ again gathered up the knives. “Today you are going to learn how to scale and gut a fish. Think you can manage that?”

“As long as worms aren’t involved.” Knowing she was going to be fishing, Melanie had worn a pair of faded denims and an older T-shirt. As the lesson began, she was thankful she hadn’t worn white.

“Since we’re smoking the fish today, we’ll leave them whole. We’ll do the Speckles first. No scales and therefore a bit easier. Grab the fish tightly below the head with its back into your palm. Take the knife and starting at the tail end of the fish, make an incision up the belly to just below the head. Then you slice around below the fins to the back of the head, first on one side, then on the other, and then around the back, cutting through the spine. Put the knife down, grab the head of the fish and pull down on it towards the belly. The entrails will all come away with the head, and you just toss that part into the lake for the turtles and minnows. Run your thumb down the inside of the fish to remove any lingering bits, and you are finished. Easy, huh?” Russ was showing her step by step as he explained the process, helping where needed.

Once she was used to the feel of the slippery fish in her hand, and told herself this was just another surgical procedure, Melanie was able to follow along with his demonstration and instructions, although she found the skin to be much tougher than expected.

“Okay. Next lesson. Time to learn how to scale a fish.” Handing her a Rainbow trout which he had quickly dispatched with a sharp whack to the back of the head, he gave her a different knife. “We’re going to scrape against the scales and pop them off. They tend to be sticky, so you’ll have to scrape your knife blade on the edge of the board occasionally. The most difficult part is keeping a grip on the fish, so I’ll let you use the clamp on yours.”

As Melanie worked on the scales, she had to agree with him. The scales were sticky and the fish was wiggly, but she soon got the hang of it, and was finished with hers shortly after Russ put his own down. They worked together quickly, cleaning up the knives, boards and table.

“Okay. Let’s get the smoker going.” Russ led her over to what looked a bit like a barbeque, but had a charcoal chamber on one side and a chimney with a vent cover on the

other. Gathering some small twigs, Russ arranged them in the chamber and added some charcoal chunks, then struck a match and lit the twigs. Picking up the container with the fish, Russ headed to the trailer, Melanie beside him. Once the fish were marinating, Russ took a couple of cold beers from the fridge and offered one to Melanie. Since it wasn't her favorite tippie, she asked for a Sprite so she could mix it. Drinks in hand, they took folding chairs over to the smoker and settled in for a four-hour wait.

"I should tell you," Russ said, "before I forget, that everything I've taught you is my way of doing things. Doesn't mean it's the right way, because there are many different ways of dealing with fish. There are also many different flavors you can use in the smoker, like apple, cherry, and hickory. You can also marinate the fish in a solution of sea salt and brown sugar. I haven't tried it yet, but it's supposed to be really tasty. Every fisherman has his procedure and mine is what I was taught, so it's what I use."

The conversation eventually returned to Huna and what other miracles could be performed with it.

"Here's your next assignment. When you are going someplace new, like a client's office building, or a building out of town, decide when you leave home that there will be a parking space for you right in front of, or near, the building. Believe it will be there and then forget about it until you are nearing your destination. Then watch carefully for it, take it when you see it, and then thank your subconscious profusely for getting it for you. When you repeat this successfully several times, it will become another learned task, as part of driving the car, for your subconscious to carry out every time for you. This works with an agreement at a subconscious level, by all parties involved."

"Sounds like a tall order to me." Russ was having a difficult time wrapping his head around this stuff.

"Just remember that your subconscious wants to help and please you at all times. Show your appreciation when he's successful and he will work even harder for you. One time I went to stop in front of a store and there was a FedEx truck right where I wanted to be, so I just drove around the block and as I came back around the corner, the driver was just pulling away from the curb, so I drove in. Works every time for me."

Melanie had been practicing some of these exercises for years, so she knew what she was talking about. Her interest had gone far beyond what had been required for her English assignment, thus she had a working knowledge of the principles behind the practice.

"I'll be looking for a report on your success next time I see you." Melanie smiled at him, happy to find that he was a kindred spirit.

The next four hours passed all too quickly for both of them. They tended the smoker, turned the fish periodically, and added charcoal and maple chips as needed. In between these tasks, they talked of anything that came to mind.

"I noticed the excavation has begun for the basement of your house. What comes next?"

"The forms will be put in place and then the cement truck will come and pour the foundation. Because it's a walk-out basement, the walls have to be stepped down from the full wall height at the back, to ground floor level at the front. Before the floor is poured, the plumbing and in-floor heating pipes will be put in place."

“It must be really exciting for you!”

“It is. It’s the first time I’ve designed something for myself with nobody to answer to or to suggest changes to me. I’m still really surprised by the traditional design I came up with, when I could have had anything I wanted. Sometime in the future, it may be on the market for sale, and traditional often sells more easily. Unless, of course, it gets passed down from my children to their children, and so on, to a never-ending stream of relatives. What a thought!”

“It’s a marvelous place for kids to grow up, learning how to fish and swim, watching wildlife in its natural habitat.” Melanie had a sudden thought. “What about bears?”

“Just something to be aware of and to respect. There are precautions that must be taken, just as you would when camping. Keeping meat and bones out of the composter, and being extra careful during cub season. I haven’t seen any since I’ve been coming here, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t some around.”

Russ checked the fish one more time and declared them finished. “Let’s eat.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

During the following couple of weeks, Melanie had plenty of time for reflection. Russ had told her he would be tied up with a new client, a current client who was presenting him with a challenge, and a site he had to visit. As she was also busy at work, the time went by quickly. Her evenings were spent reading out on her balcony until the bugs drove her inside. She began re-reading her Huna books so she would know what she was talking about with Russ. As she read, she realized she hadn’t been making much use of all of the information at her fingertips. Finding parking spaces had become a normal way of life for her, but she hadn’t bothered trying to alter the weather very often because farmers and people with gardens needed the rain. Besides, she wouldn’t melt if she got wet.

Her thoughts strayed often in the evenings to Russ, wondering what he was doing, when he would call, and what he thought about her. She knew she was becoming quite attached to him, with feelings that were much stronger than just friendship, and she knew she was treading on dangerous ground. He had in no way indicated that he was interested in anything other than friendship, and he had made it quite clear that his focus was on business now.

She talked to Susan on the phone a couple of times, but said nothing about seeing Russ, and, since Susan didn’t mention it, she was certain he hadn’t said anything to Brian. For this, she was grateful, but she wondered if it was because she wasn’t really that important to him.

When the phone finally rang and she said, “Hello?” he just said, “I did it! Not once, but twice!”

“Russ? What did you do?” Melanie was mystified.

“I found a parking space right where I wanted it - two times! This stuff really works!” He sounded just like a little kid with a new toy.

"Well if you like that, there are many more interesting things you can learn." Melanie had already decided on what she would tell him about next, when they got together again.

"Can't wait, but I'll have to. I still have some sticky problems to iron out, as well as plans to draft. How about we plan another fishing trip for a week from Sunday? That will give me incentive to get this stuff resolved."

"Sounds great. How about I bring the dinner this time - something that goes with fish?"

"You've got it. I'll call towards the end of next week to confirm. Okay?"

"I'll be waiting. Bye, Russ."

Although he would like to keep her on the phone a bit longer, Russ just said, "Bye." and hung up the phone.

Once again, Melanie found herself eagerly waiting for the next ten days to pass so she could see him again. Since the weather had turned hot and humid, she decided to make a potato salad, cabbage salad, raw veggies and dip, as well as a cheese ball and French stick loaf for munchies while the fish were cooking. Since she couldn't transport an ice cream pie, she decided to make a batch of chocolate brownies instead.

Russ called Friday night to make sure they were still on for Sunday. She was happy to see that the weather forecast was co-operating with a few clouds and slightly cooler temperatures. Just right for an afternoon on the lake.

"I'll pick you up at one, if that's okay."

"That's fine. See you then with food in hand."

"What are we having?"

"Now Russ, you don't really expect me to tell you that, do you?"

"Why not? It's a simple question."

"Because life would be really dull without an occasional surprise, so this is it for you. Just wait and see."

"But what if it's something I don't like? What then?"

"Then you eat a lot of fish, I guess. Now be a good boy and quit whining."

"I'm not whining!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

Melanie was laughing so hard she could barely say, "Bye, Russ. See you Sunday." Hanging up the phone, she was still chuckling to herself.

By noon on Sunday, she had the food prepared and packed on ice in the cooler. She was wearing clam diggers with a matching top in teal blue. Her hair was confined in a French braid, and this time she had her own hat. She had made a phone call and had a Tilley hat delivered by express post. It had a dark green underside on the brim; something she was advised would keep the glare of the sun on the water from her eyes.

Russ's eyes lit up when she opened the door. "Wow! You look like a model for a vacation brochure! Love the hat, by the way."

Blushing, Melanie pointed to the cooler on the floor by the door. "You can carry that, but no peeking!"

"And if I do?"

"No dessert for you."

"If it's ice cream pie, I sure won't peek." Russ lifted the cooler and stepped back while she closed and locked the door.

As they drove onto Russ's lot, Melanie was surprised to see that the well had been drilled and the basement poured. She had Russ place the cooler in the trailer and then made him go outside while she put the food in the fridge.

"You really aren't going to let me see what you brought, are you, you heartless wench." Russ grinned at her as she came out of the trailer.

"No chance. I'll bet you were a real little brat at Christmas, trying to find out what you were getting in the way of presents."

"Who me? I'll have you know I was a model child."

"I'll just bet you were. Now let's go catch some fish."

"Just two fish, unless you don't want one."

"Two fish it is." Melanie helped carry the necessary equipment to the boat. She was beginning to feel like an old hand at this fishing business. But she still wasn't going to touch a worm.

Out on the lake, they drifted quietly for a while, enjoying the day and the peaceful surroundings. Suddenly Russ asked, "By the way, what is my next lesson on 'magic'? I've been wondering about it for days."

"Did you read anything about 'grumbling' in the book you borrowed? I can't remember if it made mention of it."

"Nope. That's a new one to me. What is it?" Russ had no idea what she was talking about, but he was sure it would be something interesting.

"Have you ever meditated, Russ?"

"Nope."

"Well, in order to 'grumble' you will need to do a little meditating first. It's necessary to calm and clear your mind, and to be able to hold focus for a few minutes. There are good audiotapes that can really help with the process. Once you can do that, the rest is easy. 'Grumbling' is a process whereby you resolve a difference with someone without confronting them physically. You just calm your mind, call them up, and talk directly to their subconscious. That way, their conscious mind doesn't get in the way. You will get an impression right away of how receptive they are. There are actually three parts to the process - explain the situation as you see it, admit your part in it, and then offer a solution that will work for both parties."

"Got an example you can share with me?"

"Let's see. Okay, when I first tried using this, I had a client come into the office, ranting and raving, and angry. He had purchased a large generator but forgot to notify us, so it wasn't added to his policy. About fourteen months later, it was stolen and the company denied the claim. He was really angry with himself for not adding it to the policy, but was taking it out on the nearest person, who happened to be me."

"What happened?"

"I went home from work, calmed myself down, and then called him up in my mind. He was still very angry, but now he couldn't talk back, just listen. I apologized for our part in the problem, because we hadn't asked him for an updated list of equipment on his renewal, so we had to share the blame. Then I suggested he report it to the police and give them a copy of his bill of sale with a serial number on it. I also told him to tell the police the names of all those who knew that he had bought a generator. Because he was a bit of a recluse, there weren't many."

"The next morning I phoned him back and he was much calmer, so I was able to follow up with the suggestion that he call the police, something he hadn't thought to do yet. Two weeks later, he called back and apologized for yelling at me at our original meeting, said the police had found the generator for him. Then he asked if I would please add it to the policy. Problem solved."

"Wow! That sounds promising. I have a situation where I could really use some help. My client is insisting on a floor plan that just won't work and is refusing to listen to me when I try to explain why it won't work. I am sure going to give it a try. So now do I get to know what's for dinner tonight?"

"Not a chance, Russ. And if we don't catch some fish soon, we'll be lacking the protein portion of our meal. Time to call for volunteers."

Two minutes later, Melanie caught a fish.

"You are kidding me!" Russ landed the fish and re-baited the hook for her.

"Well, maybe that one was a coincidence. Then again, maybe not." Melanie grinned at him. "The Kahunas believed that we go through life in agreement with everyone and everything around us, both positive and negative, in experiences."

They continued to fish for another fifteen minutes, when Russ landed a second one, and they were finished.

"We're going to cook these ones whole for a change. Since they are Rainbows, which means scaling them. You up for that?"

"I'll do one, but only one. I much prefer filleting them."

Once the fish were prepared, Russ placed lemon slices and butter in the cavity, then rolled them in a double layer of tinfoil. When the equipment was cleaned up and put away, they put the fish on the barbecue, opened a bottle of wine, and pulled their chairs nearby. Melanie brought the cheese ball and thinly sliced bread out and set it on a small table in front of them.

"Now can I find out?"

"If you are talking about the menu, NO, for the last time. You really are a pest and I bet your mother let you get away with this kind of behaviour all the time."

"Nope. Not a chance. She's just as tough as you are. But you can't blame a guy for trying." Heaving an exaggerated sigh, Russ muttered, "Guess I'll just have to wait."

"Guess so. So tell me what's happening with your house construction."

"Everything is coming together nicely. The house should be ready for furniture early in September. Can't wait." Russ went over and turned the trout, checked the temperature on the barbecue, and said, "Looks like they'll be ready in about ten minutes."

Melanie rose and began setting the picnic table with dishes, cutlery and napkins. She set out cans of lemon iced tea and glasses, and then sat back down.

"Where's the food?"

"You'll get that when the fish is done, not before."

"You're a real tease, you know that?"

Ten minutes later, Russ turned off the barbecue and brought the fish packets to the table. Melanie went inside and began bringing out the potato salad, cabbage salad and veggies and dip. She left the brownies out of sight.

"Okay, Russ. Have at it."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, and then Russ said, "Worth the wait." and kept on eating.

"Ah, but you haven't seen dessert yet." Melanie grinned at him.

"And you aren't going to tell me what it is."

"Chocolate brownies."

Russ burst out laughing. "You never cease to amaze me!"

Much later, as they were walking over to the truck, Melanie stubbed her toe on an exposed root and started to fall. Russ dropped the cooler and grabbed her by the arm to steady her. She looked up at him to say 'thanks', and suddenly everything changed. He was staring at her mouth and she was sure he was going to kiss her.

Pulling back quickly from his grip, Melanie muttered, "Thanks. Clumsy of me."

Russ let her go, knowing he had almost made a mistake. "Not your fault. I've been dealing with those roots whenever I find them, so you actually did me a favour, finding this one for me."

As he drove home, he tried to keep the conversation light, but she was quiet and reserved with him, and he cursed himself for coming close to ruining everything.

Melanie made an effort as she was leaving him at the door. "Thanks for another great fishing day, Russ." And she hurried inside.



## CHAPTER NINE

*What's the matter with me? I really like him - a lot. So what if he kissed me?* But she knew the minute they kissed, their relationship would change from good friends to something very different, and something she knew she still wasn't ready to deal with. Her feelings for him were becoming stronger every time she was with him. Just as she was dozing off at eleven, the phone rang. Picking it up, she said, "Hello?"

"Just wanted to thank you again for the great dinner and for finding the root for me. Oh, by the way, don't sweat the small stuff. Goodnight." And he hung up before she could say anything.

*Yeah, I know, it's all small stuff in the broader scheme of things.* But she felt better for having heard his voice, and was able to drift off to sleep with a smile on her face.

A week later, the smile was gone and Melanie was devastated. She had been across the street from Kelly's restaurant when she happened to look over and saw Russ with a tall blonde in his arms, kissing her on the cheek. She thought she was going to throw up, her reaction to the image was so strong. All of the feelings of betrayal, hurt, and anger came flooding back and she felt tears forming in her eyes.

Hurrying in a daze to her car, she unlocked it, slid behind the wheel and drove back to her apartment as quickly as possible, her errands forgotten and her mind in a fog.

Sitting on her balcony with a glass of wine, she tried to persuade herself that she was being completely unreasonable. *We are just friends and I have no claim on him. Who he dates is none of my business, and why am I getting so upset anyway?*

During the following week, she did her best to keep her mind on her work and provide good service, but her evenings were spent staring at the wall, feeling nauseated, and wondering what was wrong with her. She didn't want to talk to Russ, so she let the answering machine pick up her calls. He started leaving messages on the weekend, but she ignored them, hoping he would give up.

Monday after work, she was on her way to her car in the parking lot, when he came up behind her, took her by the arm, and walked her, resisting, to his truck.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" Melanie tried to pull away from him.

"We're going to go have a chat. Hop in." He held the truck door open. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way, but do it we will. Your choice."

Melanie was aware enough to know by the tension in his jaw that he meant what he said. Reluctantly and angrily, she climbed up and slid onto the seat, then slammed the door. Once Russ was behind the wheel and they were moving, she said, "I didn't take you for a bully."

"And I didn't take you for a chicken."

He drove rapidly out to his lot, parked the truck, went around and opened her door.

"Out."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No." As she stepped from the truck, he took her by the arm and walked her down to the lakeshore.

"Sit." He pulled one of the chairs over beside the other. Once she was seated, he sat down beside her.

"Okay, Melanie. When someone refuses to answer the phone or return my calls, I need to know why. We're going to sit here, if it takes all night, until I find out what's going on. If I have done something to upset you, I need to know so I can fix it. I really thought we were friends. And friends don't behave this way."

Staring at the ground, Melanie had no idea how she was going to answer him. She knew her reaction was unreasonable and irrational, and she knew he deserved an explanation, but now she just felt foolish and embarrassed. He had a right to be with whomever he wished.

"Come on, Mel. I won't bite. I just want to know." His tone was kind and patient, and she knew he was looking at her.

"I saw something that upset me because it triggered a lot of old feelings I thought I had dealt with. I know my reaction was irrational and unfounded, but I couldn't help it. I'm really sorry, Russ. This isn't your fault."

"So what did you see that would upset you so much you couldn't talk to me?"

"I saw you outside of Kelly's with the blonde. I know you have a right to see whomever you please. It's none of my business, but it just triggered a reaction I couldn't deal with."

"What blonde?"

"I don't know. She was in your arms and you were kissing her on the cheek. I'm sorry I over-reacted."

"Oh, Mel. That's my cousin, Kate. Her husband had a heart attack last week. She was just telling me that he's going to be okay. There was minimal damage to his heart."

"Now I feel like a real idiot. I'm so embarrassed! It was a totally dumb reaction to what I saw."

"But understandable, given your history with Rick. So are we friends again?" Russ smiled at her.

"Friends."

Standing up, Russ took her hands and pulled her to her feet. "I think you could use a hug." He put his arms around her and she hid her face against his chest, biting her lip so she wouldn't burst into tears. He could have stayed like that forever, savouring her closeness, the fresh scent of her hair, the warmth of her body next to his, but he didn't want to push her, so he stepped back, looked down at her, and asked, "Feel better now?"

"Much better. Thanks for making me talk to you, Russ."

"Promise me it won't happen again. There's nothing we can't talk about."

"I promise."

"Okay. Let's get you home. We both have work tomorrow."

For the first time since she had seen him with his cousin, she slept soundly.

\* \* \*

Driving back to his apartment, Russ was still reliving the moments when he held Melanie in his arms. He knew a great deal of her reaction had to be because of Rick, but he was hopeful that some of it was jealousy, even if she wasn't ready to admit it yet.

Suddenly he had a brainwave - something that would probably help her a great deal, and, in the end, would be of benefit to him as well. He was beginning to feel much more optimistic about the future of their relationship.

\* \* \*

Two days later, Melanie got a call at work from Russ. It was short and to the point. "Meet me for lunch at Kelly's at noon. I've got an idea that I think you'll like."

"So now I'm curious - can't refuse. See you there."

This time she was the first to arrive, so she ordered a cup of coffee while she waited. She was still embarrassed by her behaviour, but much less so than before their talk.

Once Russ had arrived and their orders were placed, Melanie was eager to find out what his idea was about.

"I did some 'grumbling' to my stubborn client, with baby-step results so far. His tone has become less demanding, so I'll give him another shot tonight and see what happens. Anyway, that's just a lead-in to my idea. I have an assignment for you."

"You do?"

"Yep. You aren't going to like it but I guarantee the results will more than compensate for the initial discomfort."

"Now I'm really curious, and a bit nervous."

"I want you to 'grumble' to Rick and tell him all of the things you didn't say to him when you broke up. After you've said everything you want to say, I want you to thank him on my behalf, because if he had married you, you wouldn't be my new best friend. Brilliant, huh?" Russ was grinning at her.

"I think I'd better quit teaching you how to use Huna. You're getting way too good at grasping the concepts and running with them." She paused for a moment. "Do I really have to do this?"

"I think you do. You need to free yourself from the hurt and anger, and short of confronting him face to face in the physical, this is the next best thing."

"You know what is really annoying me right now? You are right and I should have thought of it myself. I probably would have, given enough time."

Their meals arrived and they were silent as they ate. Melanie was busy thinking about the upcoming 'grumbling' session. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but Russ was right - it would be very beneficial.

"Earth to Melanie." Russ was smiling at her, having a good idea of where her mind was focused. "Are you up for the challenge?"

"I guess I have to practice what I preach, don't I?"

"Especially when it's good for you. You'll let me know how it works out for you?"

"Since it involves you, I guess I should. But don't hold your breath. It may take me a few days to get up enough courage to do this. I'll have to figure out what I want to say, besides calling him a scumbag."

"Probably not the best way to start off your mental conversation."

"That was just another gut reaction. I'll try to control myself. On that note, I'd better get back to work."

"I'll be waiting to hear from you." Russ held the door for her as they exited the restaurant.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sitting on her balcony, Melanie gazed out towards the woods, but she wasn't really seeing anything. Her mind was busy figuring out what she wanted to say to Rick. She knew Russ was right - she had a lot of unresolved feelings to deal with and this was the best way to get them out in the open. She wasn't ready to talk to Rick face to face.

Taking a few deep breaths, she calmed her mind, and then called up an image of Rick. Her immediate impression was one of resistance from him, so she quickly began sending her thoughts to him.

*Rick, I want to apologize for not allowing you to talk to me the last time you came to the apartment. I was hurt, angry and humiliated, and really rude. I wish you had just told me that our relationship wasn't working for you so that we could have parted without bad feelings between us. I hope you are able to find happiness someday. I'm much better now.*

As she spoke, Melanie had the impression that Rick was relaxing and really listening to her.

*By the way, I want to thank you on behalf of Russ, my new friend. He said he's happy you didn't marry me, because if you had, he and I wouldn't be friends. So thank you from both of us. Be happy!*

Coming out of her meditation, Melanie couldn't believe the great sense of relief that she felt. She only wished she had thought of this herself, and carried it out much sooner. She owed Russ a really big 'thank you'.

Her opportunity to say so came sooner than she expected. There was a knock on her door and there stood Russ with Chinese take-out in hand. "I figured you'd be home from work by now, so I took a chance and brought dinner. Couldn't wait to get a report on your 'talk' with Rick."

"Very timely, Russ. We must be on the same wavelength. I just finished 'grumbling' and I really thank you for suggesting it. I feel much lighter - I guess that's the right word - like I can let go of all of that negative stuff."

"Happy to be of assistance. I've got a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc to celebrate your success."

Let's take a glass out on your balcony."

Once they were settled, Russ said, "I want to pick your brain for a minute. You know roughly what my house is going to look like, floor-plan-wise. What type of decor do you think would suit it?"

"That's easy - if it was my house. I'd make it Country Comfortable, if you know what I mean. Lots of solid wood, no chrome or glass, minimal drapes or curtains on the windows; maybe some see-through blinds. Flooring is a tough call. I like both hardwood and carpeting, but ceramic tile is probably a better choice for high volume traffic areas. That's something you will have to decide for yourself. I would have hand-crafted quilts on the beds, high-backed comfortable sofa and recliners - and that's all I can come up with at the moment."

"We really are on the same wavelength. I've ordered all of the cupboards, cabinets, dining table and chairs, coffee and end tables, bedroom suites, and office furniture to be custom made of solid oak. I want furniture that will last through future generations."

"Wow! That doesn't come cheap!"

"No, but I think the investment is well worth it. I haven't decided on flooring yet."

"What about color schemes?"

"That's where I draw a blank. I think I'll hire an interior decorator, tell her our ideas, and see what she comes up with." Russ realized as soon as he spoke, that he had said 'our' instead of 'my', but Melanie didn't pick up on it, so maybe she didn't notice. He was really happy to hear that her tastes were quite similar to his, because he had every intention that it would be their home, hopefully not too far into the future. The fact that she had done her 'grumbling' to Rick, with a positive outcome, gave him hope that she would soon be ready for more than just his friendship.

"Now that we have that settled, let's eat." Russ rose and held the patio door open for her. After dinner was over, Russ insisted on helping with the dishes. She washed and he dried.

"By the way, Russ, I can now give you an informed decision. I really like the new look. More hair gives you more personality."

"That's a really weird thing to say! What does it mean anyway?"

"Well, Pal, think of it like this: set a no-name brand package beside a top-of-the-line product and compare them." Melanie grinned at him.

"So now I'm a product?"

"And a very fine one, if I do say so."

"All because of some extra hair on my head?"

"You really have no idea the change it makes, do you?"

"Guess I'll have to take your word for it. I'm not really big on staring at myself in the mirror and analyzing my appearance." He grinned back at her. "Now about your other two criticisms - I can't do anything about my lack of symmetrical dimples nor the so-called aggressive and determined chin, so I guess you're stuck with what you see."

"Works for me." Melanie glanced at her watch and he caught her in the act.

"Guess it's time to wrap things up, much as I'm enjoying myself. Before I go, I have a question for you, but I'm a bit hesitant to ask it."

"Ask away. All I can say is yes or no." Melanie tensed up as she wondered what was coming.

Clearing his throat, Russ fidgeted and Melanie realized she had never seen him nervous or unsure of himself before. "I have an invitation to attend an awards dinner dance for Brian's company. I can bring a guest. I'd like you to go with me, but I know it may get Susan on your case about keeping our friendship a secret from her, to say nothing of stirring up her matchmaking inclinations." He paused a moment. "What do you think?"

Melanie didn't hesitate. "I would love to go with you, and Susan be damned. She can give it her best shot, but I'm not going to let her interfere in my life again. Where and when?"

Russ burst out laughing. "You really know how to throw me off balance, Kiddo. I fully expected you to say no. But I'm really happy you didn't." He just couldn't help himself. He walked over and pulled her close for a quick hug. "This is one party I'm really going to enjoy. 'Night, Mel." And he was gone.

Melanie stood transfixed. This was the second time she'd been in his arms, without any come-on on his part, and she had to admit she quite liked it. She felt safe with him and she realized she was really looking forward to the evening. This was immediately followed by the question - *what do I wear?* She had suitable dresses, but they all reminded her of dates with Rick, so she decided it was time for a shopping trip. Since Russ hadn't mentioned getting together on the weekend, she considered asking Susan to go with her, and telling her about her friendship with Russ. But the thought of the look on her sister's face, when she caught sight of them at the dinner, was just too delicious to pass up.

The weather on Saturday was sunny and comfortably warm without being oppressive. A perfect day for shopping. Melanie took her time, trying on and discarding a number of dresses, until she finally found one she fell in love with before she even put it on. Antique gold in color, it was made of a gauzy material, maxi in length, with scooped neck and tiered flared skirt. The neckline and tiers were trimmed with rust colored beading. When she tried it on, the fit was perfect and, best of all, it was really comfortable.

She had a pair of brown heels that she liked, but she loved to dance and, since she didn't want to suffer with aching feet the next day, she decided on a pair of brown ballerina flats. Finding just the right pair in the right color took much longer than finding the dress, but she felt pleased with her choices as she headed home.

Since the dinner wasn't for two weeks, Melanie put her purchases away, tried to forget about the upcoming date with Russ, and placed her attention back on the job.

\* \* \*

Russ was smiling to himself as he drove away from Melanie's apartment. The hug had been a risk, but he just had to have her in his arms again, if only for a moment. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to hide how he felt. He was looking forward to the awards night with great anticipation and some trepidation. Dancing with her was

going to be ecstasy and agony - in equal measure. But the prize was also going to be well worth the pain.

He, too, focused on his job, the construction of his house, and the irresistible urge to call Melanie - many times. He couldn't wait for the day when he could finally tell her he loved her and ask her to marry him, but he knew he needed a sign from her indicating that she was ready to hear what he wanted to say. Time was passing quickly. Work had begun on the interior of his house, and he would soon be ready to add the furniture and move, because he had a plan he wanted to put in place that just might bring Melanie closer to him.

\* \* \*

Melanie had decided to take the Friday afternoon off on the day of her first real 'date' with Russ, so she had made an appointment to have her hair done after lunch. She was becoming more excited and nervous as the clock ticked off the hours and then minutes until she could leave the office. Gathering up her purse and briefcase, she left the building and rushed home for a quick lunch, and a change to jeans and T-shirt. She had the hairdresser shampoo, blow-dry and then set her hair, this time pulled back from her face and held in place with a pair of jeweled combs she had purchased when she first let her hair grow long. The mass of curls cascaded down her back and she was really pleased with the result.

Back at her apartment, she had a long soak in a bubble bath, then gave herself a manicure and pedicure, finishing with a pale pearl polish. Russ had said he would pick her up at five-thirty, so she kept an eye on the time as she applied her makeup, and donned her new dress and shoes.

With a half-hour to fill, she tried to read, but wound up pacing the floor and watching the clock. In all the times she had been with Russ, she had never felt this nervous or excited, and wasn't really sure why.

When the doorbell rang, she tried not to run and throw it open. Her breath caught in a gasp as she looked at Russ. She had seen him in blazer and dress pants before, but never all suited up and groomed like a model. Trying to hide her nervousness, she blurted out the first thing that came into her head. "Wow! You clean up really well!"

"And you are more incredibly beautiful than ever." Russ took her hand and kissed it. "Your chariot awaits, My Lady." As he led her outside, she was surprised to see a mid-sized gray sedan at the curb.

"Where's the truck?"

"Not a suitable chariot for a princess. This is my non-work vehicle. Are you ready to meet the world?"

"No. But let's go."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Walking into the hotel ballroom on Russ's arm, Melanie truly felt like a princess. Noticing the admiring glances the women were casting in Russ's direction, she suddenly became aware that she was with a very handsome, sexy man, not just her good fishing buddy. It made her feel a little nervous and shy. What she failed to notice was the interest the men in the room were showing in her, as they crossed over to the bar.

There was no sign of Susan and Brian yet, as Russ got them each a glass of wine. He introduced her to everyone who spoke to him, but the names and faces just became a blur. She was beginning to tire of keeping a smile on her face and uttering 'pleased to meet you', when Susan appeared at her side. She was smiling broadly and looked really excited as she said, "Hi, Russ. Can I steal my little sister for a minute?"

"Sure. Help yourself. I have to talk to Brian anyway."

Susan quickly led her over to an unoccupied space by the wall, and Melanie thought, *Here we go! Time for the inquisition.* But a huge surprise awaited her. Susan didn't mention Russ or ask why Melanie was with him. Instead, she said, "I'm so glad you are here. I have to talk to somebody."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I hope. For once I think everything is really and truly right. Oh, Mel, I think I'm finally pregnant! I've got an appointment Monday morning to find out for sure. I don't want to say anything to Brian until I'm positive, because I don't want him to be disappointed."

"No wonder you look so beautiful and glowing. Oh, Sue, I'm so happy for you! I know how much you guys have wanted this to happen." Melanie grabbed her sister in a big hug. She didn't notice Russ watching and smiling at the scene.

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for you. This is great news. I'm going to be an auntie. Wow! I can't wait."

"Not a word about this to anyone, Mel. Promise?"

"I promise. Now we'd better get back into circulation or there are going to be questions to answer."

As they walked over to join Russ and Brian, Susan suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "What are you doing here with Russ, anyway? I got the feeling at my dinner that you couldn't stand each other."

Melanie just shook her head. "It's a really long story, Sue. Too long to get into just now. How about lunch on Tuesday? You can tell me your news and I'll fill you in on what's been happening with me."

"It's a date." With that decided, they joined the men and began circulating until dinner was announced. Melanie was pleased to find that Susan and Brian were seated at the table with them. The dinner was excellent, but she found the speeches to be a bit boring, because she couldn't wait to dance with Russ. She told herself it was because she really loved dancing, then called herself a liar because she knew it had more to do with being in his arms and close to him.

Finally the awards had been given out, the speeches all concluded, and the tables cleared.



The combo tuned up their instruments and launched into their version of 'Moon River'. Melanie had a CD of slow dance tunes at home, and this was her favorite sound track.

As the music started, Russ stood and turned to Melanie. "My dance, I believe." Taking her hand, he led her onto the dance floor. He was an excellent dancer and easy to follow. But she realized by the third slow dance that he was holding her like she was his mother or sister, and not as a girlfriend. *Weird!*

When Melanie indulged in wine, it was usually just a third or a half glass, unless she was in her own home or was being driven home. Then she might have two half glasses. But the wine being poured tonight was generous, to say the least, and she had had a second glass with dinner. She was now feeling the effects. She wanted Russ to pull her in close to his body, and she resisted the urge to put her arms around his neck, with difficulty.

As the third song was ending, Russ said, "Melanie, I..." but just then Brian tapped him on the shoulder and asked, "Mind if I cut in? I haven't danced with my favorite sister-in-law in a very long time."

"She's all yours, but only for one dance." Russ smiled at them both and walked off the floor, silently thanking Brian for interrupting what probably would have been a mistake on his part. He had almost told Melanie that he wanted more than just friendship from her.

As Melanie danced with Brian, he said, "What's up with you and Russ?"

"We're just friends, Brian, so don't go getting any ideas. He's teaching me how to fish."

"If you say so, Kiddo. By the way, what were you and Susan talking about before dinner? Looked pretty intense to me."

"She was asking me about Russ. You know Susan. She wants everybody to be hooked up and as happy as you two are." Melanie was quite comfortable with telling him a half-truth. She wasn't lying, just censoring her words a bit. When the dance ended, Brian walked her back to their table where Russ was in a deep conversation with Susan.

"Can we sit out a couple, Russ? I need a break."

"Would you like a glass of wine?"

"No thanks. Definitely not. Just a Sprite, if they have it."

When Brian and Susan got up to dance, Melanie took the opportunity to ask Russ what he had been about to tell her when Brian cut in on the dance floor.

"What? Oh, that. I, um, was just going to thank you for coming with me tonight. It would have been boring to come here alone".

"By the way the ladies have been eyeing you, you wouldn't have been alone for long."

"You jealous?" Russ grinned at her, but he was really interested in her answer.

Melanie found herself blushing as she stammered out a denial. "Of course I'm not jealous. You're a free agent, Russ."

"Then why are you blushing?" His grin widened.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Here we go again! Back to grade one. Don't you think it's time we both grew up?"  
Melanie grinned back at him.

"On that note, I think they are playing our song. Let's dance."

"I don't recognize it. What is it?"

"'Funny Face' - right up your alley."

She punched him lightly on the shoulder as they made their way onto the floor. It was the first time she had touched him of her own volition and it gave him hope that her guard was slipping.

This time Russ held her closer on the dance floor, bringing their clasped hands in against his chest. "If I told you that you are the most beautiful woman in the room tonight, am I in danger of a reprisal?"

"Don't, Russ. You'll make me blush again. Besides, you're probably just fishing for a compliment, and there's no way I'm going to tell you that you are easily the best-looking, sexiest male specimen here tonight."

"I think you just did, Mel. Gee, thanks! By the way, are you familiar with this song?"

"Nope. It's a new one to me."

"It's one of my favorites, sort of a song about you and me. You should check it out sometime. Oh, Mel, I so enjoy your company. Now let's dance."

As the song ended, they walked off the floor, both ready to call it a night. They found Susan and Brian and said their goodnights, then left. At her door, Russ took her face in his hands and kissed her on the forehead. "Goodnight, Princess."

"Goodnight, Russ. Thanks for a really great evening." Melanie put her key in the lock and opened the door. Russ had stepped back from her, so she knew that was the only kiss she was going to get tonight. This time she wasn't bemused, she was annoyed. *What's the matter with me? Or him?*

Walking into the restaurant at noon on Tuesday, Melanie spied Susan right away. She was beaming from ear to ear, and her news was written all over her face.

Taking a seat at the table, Melanie said, "I don't even have to ask! I'm so happy for you! What did the doctor say?"

"He said I'm fine and he doesn't anticipate any problems. Brian is so excited! I've never seen him this way before. We decided not to tell anyone else for a few weeks, just as a precaution."

"My lips are sealed. This is so exciting! When are you due?"

"Sometime in early April - as long as it isn't April Fools' Day. Now spill. What's going on with you and Russ? Start at the beginning. I want the whole scoop."

Melanie did just that - from the coffee disaster, the kick under the table, and the dinner to call a truce. She recounted the conversation where she told Russ about Rick, and this time she told Susan that Rick had been unfaithful.

"That scumbag! I'm so sorry, Mel. You should have told me."

"It's okay. I'm over it now, thanks to Russ. He's a really great listener, and he's been teaching me how to catch, clean and cook trout, so we've had lots of time sitting in the boat to talk. He's a really great friend to me."

"So, is he a good kisser?" Susan was grinning, but the grin soon faded as she heard Melanie's muttered answer.

"I wouldn't know." Her head was down, and she was blushing again.

"He hasn't kissed you yet? You are kidding me! That man is crazy in love with you!"

Melanie's head came up quickly and the shock was evident on her face. "Why would you say something like that? What did he say to you?"

"He didn't have to say anything. I was watching him when you were dancing with Brian. He barely took his eyes off of you, even when I was talking to him. Trust me, Mel, he's got it bad."

"Then why hasn't he made a move to show me how he feels?"

Susan was silent for a moment. "My best guess is that he's not sure you are over Rick yet, and he doesn't want to blow it."

"So what should I do, Big Sister Matchmaker?"

"You'll have to give him some clues that you really are over Rick, and that you are interested in him as more than a friend."

"But I'm not very good at putting myself out there."

"Well, let's see. A good start would be to touch him casually - on the arm or the shoulder. Give him a hug when he does something nice for you. Just start making physical contact. Call him some evening just to say goodnight. Think about what you like and transfer to him. Think you can do that?"

"You've given me a lot to think about."

"One more thing - if all else fails, just say, 'Russ, are you ever going to kiss me?'"

"Susan! I couldn't do that!"

"Well, I did, with Brian. And it worked really well." Susan was grinning from ear to ear.

"You didn't! I'm telling Mom!" And they both burst out laughing, causing other diners to smile at them.

"Back to you. Have you started planning your nursery yet? Do you want a boy, or a girl?"

"We don't care, as long as it's healthy. And, yes, I've been thinking about the nursery. Wanna help me with it, Auntie?"

"I'd love to, Sue. I'm flying down on Sunday to visit Mom and Dad, but just until Friday. As they say, houseguests are like dirty socks - after three days they start to stink."

"Oh, Mel, that's disgusting! They'll be really happy to see you. Talking by Skype just isn't the same as being there in the flesh. Does Russ know you're leaving?"

"Not yet. He's really busy with his house. Said he should be able to move in next week. I'll call him tonight and tell him."

Back at work, Melanie did her best to concentrate on work, but her conversation with Susan had really made her think, about many things. She felt ready to be kissed by Russ and to be closer to him, but she didn't know for sure if what Susan said about his feelings could be true.

Acting on impulse later that evening, she picked up the phone and called him at home.

He picked up on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hi Russ. It's me, Melanie."

"I recognized your voice. It's good to hear from you. What's up?"

"I just wanted to let you know I'm flying to the coast on Sunday to visit my parents. I'll be back Friday night."

"I'm going to miss your funny face. Can I drive you to the airport and pick you up when you come back?"

"That's not why I called - to fish for a ride. I was going to ask Brian or Susan, but since you are offering..."

"What time is your flight?"

"Nine-thirty Sunday morning."

"How about this? I'll pick you up at six-thirty and we'll have breakfast together at Kelly's. That should give us lots of time to get to the airport."

"Sounds good. See you Sunday." She hung up the phone, pleased with her first effort to approach him.

Sunday dawned clear and warm. Melanie had packed the night before, had talked to her parents by Skype to let them know the trip was still on, and what time to meet her at the airport. She was ready and waiting when Russ rang the doorbell.

"All set?"

"All set and ready to go. I really appreciate this, Russ."

"That's what friends are for - helping one another."

"So, what can I do in return?"

"I have that all figured out, but you'll have to wait until you get back. I'm going to 'kidnap' you for the entire day on Saturday."

"Now you've made me curious. Can I at least have a clue?"

"Okay - I'm going to fulfill one of your lifelong dreams for you. How's that for a teaser?"

"Just plain mean! How am I going to survive a week wondering what it is?"

"Just know that it's going to make you very happy."

They didn't linger over breakfast, not wanting to be late to the airport. Russ waited with

her until she had to check in, then pulled her into his arms for a long hug. "Have a safe trip and a great visit. I can't wait until you get back." Again, he kissed her on the forehead, and let her go to board the plane.

If anyone had been watching her on the flight, they would have seen her expressions changing from smiling to frowning to grinning, depending on which conversation she was remembering.

The week with her parents passed very quickly. Her mother still hadn't taken a job, so they were able to spend a great deal of time together. Many times, it was on the tip of Melanie's tongue to mention Russ, but since she didn't know where their relationship was going, or even if they had one, she didn't say anything.

One afternoon when her mother was out with friends, Melanie was looking through their CD collection. The title 'Funny Face' jumped out at her, and she discovered that it was written and performed by Donna Fargo, and was top of the charts in 1972. Being curious, she put it in the player, selected the right track, and sat back to listen. When the first words sounded, she turned red and put her hands over her face, as she remembered with great clarity what Russ had said about it - 'It's a song about me and you.'

'Funny Face, I love you, Funny Face, I need you,'

*Could Susan be right? Does he really love me? Am I ready for this?* Her heart was pounding and her stomach was in knots. Her one thought was that she had a couple of days left before she had to face him again.

By the time Russ met her at the airport, again with a big hug, she was relatively composed, but now very curious about what was going to take place the next day when he 'kidnapped' her.

While they drove back to her apartment, he asked her how her parents were, what she'd done all week, and generally kept her talking about herself. When he dropped her off, he just said, "Be ready at eight. I'll pick you up - oh, and be prepared for a great day."

Melanie was so excited and curious, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to sleep, so she had a glass of wine before bed, and was surprised when the alarm went off in the morning, to find that she had been out for a solid eight hours.

*What should I wear? He didn't give me even a hint about his plans.* She finally settled on a pair of white jeans and a gold v-neck T-shirt. She had time to spare, so she put her hair in a French braid, and was ready and waiting when the doorbell rang, right at eight o'clock.

"Good morning, Sunshine. Sleep well?" Russ was also wearing jeans with a golf shirt, so she relaxed about the appropriateness of her outfit.

"With the help of a glass of wine, like a baby. So, what's the big surprise?"

"Patience is a virtue, my dear, and the reward of patience is patience. But let's go before you expire from curiosity."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Melanie was really surprised when she realized Russ was taking her to his lot. As they rounded the curve in the newly-widened and graveled driveway, and the house came into view, she exclaimed, "Russ, it's beautiful! When did you do all this?" The grounds had been landscaped with late-blooming flowers in new flowerbeds and the house looked like it had been standing there for years instead of weeks.

"I've been working really hard to get it finished this week, and I've had a lot of help from good people for the stuff I couldn't do myself, like landscaping and flowerbeds. You like?"

"Oh, I definitely like! Can't wait to see what you've done inside."

"Come along and I'll give you the grand tour." The inside was just as he had described to her when she was preparing his quote, except now the furniture and fixtures were in place. His choice of oak cabinets and furniture was a good one, the bedrooms and basement were carpeted, the living room had hardwood flooring, and he had had ceramic tiles installed in the kitchen area.

"Now for your wish-fulfillment. Sit yourself down. Here's a present for you to open while I go and get the best part." He hurried off to the laundry room.

Melanie started to unwrap what appeared to be a small book. When the first layer of brightly-colored paper was removed, she discovered another layer, this time a page of cartoons from the newspaper, and was followed by more layers of the same wrapping. Suddenly she heard a sound and looked up to see a little brown kitten peering around the door frame at her. Russ was standing behind it.

"Meet Mr. Coffee. He's all yours. But there's a catch. Since he can't live with you, we'll share custody and you can have visitation rights whenever you please. Now comes the payback for airport delivery and pickup. When I have to go out of town for one or two overnights, you will need to baby-sit here until I get back. Does that work for you?" He had come into the room and was standing near her chair, the kitten still peering at her from the door frame.

Jumping out of her chair, Melanie grabbed him and gave him a big hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! Of course I'll baby-sit. But first I have to make friends with him."

Just at that moment, Russ's phone rang. "Excuse me, please. I'd better take this. Here are some treats - makes getting acquainted very easy." He handed her several small treats and went to answer the phone. When he came back, he said, "Babysitting is starting sooner than I expected. I have to go to the office and deal with a problem. I have no idea how long it will take, but I'll call you when I'm leaving to come home."

Melanie finished unwrapping her present after Russ left, and discovered it was a little how-to book for cat owners. Keeping an eye on Mr. Coffee, she began reading the book and soon noticed that his curiosity was getting the best of him. He had crept into the room, but was keeping to the wall, and keeping his big blue eyes on her.

Slowly she lowered her hand and dropped two treats to the floor beside her chair, then continued reading. By the time she had finished the book, Mr. Coffee had crept over, grabbed a treat and returned to the safety of the other side of the room.

Melanie put the book down, rose from her chair and walked over to Russ's bookshelf. As she scanned the titles, she discovered that, along with his interest in architecture, he also had a wide collection of fiction, mostly mysteries.

She hadn't heard from Russ by noon, so she raided the fridge, which she discovered was well stocked, and made herself a sandwich. Mr. Coffee had again followed her and was peering around the door frame at her, so she placed another treat on the floor beside her chair and ate her sandwich, pretending disinterest in him.

A few steps at a time, Mr. Coffee made his way over towards her chair, then finally took the last couple of steps. But this time he sat beside her chair while he ate, then proceeded to wash his face. She spoke quietly to him between bites of her sandwich and he stayed where he was, looking up at her.

Lunch over with, she carefully pushed her chair away from the table and was about to stand, when Mr. Coffee lay belly up on the floor. She knew from spending time with her friend's cat that this was a request for a belly rub, so she obliged. He began to purr and squirm with delight, so she picked him up and cuddled him, until he indicated that he wanted down.

There was still no call from Russ, so Melanie went back to his bookshelf and chose a Grisham novel she had yet to read. Once she was settled into what she now considered to be her chair, she was startled when Mr. Coffee jumped onto her lap, patted her down and then curled up in a ball and settled in for a nap. Melanie had never been happier. *I could really get used to this!*

She became immersed in the novel and read steadily until the cat stirred, jumped down and went to the door, looking back at her until she got the message. She opened the door and went outside with him. He would walk a short distance, then stop and look back at her as if he was waiting, so she began to follow him. She soon discovered that he loved to play hide-and-seek, jumping out at her from behind bushes, batting her on the leg, running past her and hiding again.

When she sensed he was becoming bored with the game, she picked him up and took him back inside. One glance at the clock and she was astonished to find that the afternoon had gone and it was now four-thirty.

Once more she inspected the cupboards and found the ingredients for a mushroom lasagna. When it was in the oven, she quickly made a salad which she had just put in the fridge, when the phone rang. It was Russ saying he was just leaving the office and would pick up something for dinner on the way home.

"No need. There's a salad in the fridge and a lasagna in the oven. The wine is chilling and Mr. Coffee is now my new best friend. See you when you get here."

"And she cooks as well." Russ hung up and Melanie wondered to herself - *as well as what?*

By the time Russ arrived, she had set the table and had the wine glasses out.

"Honey, I'm home!" He called out to her as he came through the door. "Wow! I could get used to this. I may have to plan lots of trips away."

"I'm beginning to think that the gift of a kitten was a little self-serving on your part. But then a fine upstanding gentleman like yourself would never sink so low, right?"

"That's very true. Let me go wash up and then you can tell me all about your day, over a glass of wine."

She did just that, telling him about her game of hide-and-seek with Mr. Coffee, after he had become comfortable with her.

"We have been doing that for the past few days. He's helping me keep in shape. I'm surprised he accepted you so quickly. It took me about three days and a lot of treats before I could even rub his belly. By the way, I have some good news or bad news, depending on your feelings about this babysitting business. I have to leave on Monday to visit some sites, and then attend a conference, so I won't be back until Thursday evening. Can you handle that? You wouldn't need to be here until after work on Monday."

"Sure. No problem. Nothing like jumping in at the deep end. It will give Mr. Coffee time to get used to me. How did you come up with his name?" Melanie had been meaning to ask him before now.

"I thought of you, I looked at his coat, and I remembered our first meeting. It just seemed to fit. You can change it if you like. It's probably not too ingrained into his psyche yet."

"No. Not a chance. I love it!"

Once dinner was over and the kitchen cleared, Melanie gathered up her things and went over to scratch Mr. Coffee's ears one more time. Russ grabbed his jacket and they headed for his truck. Before driving away, he turned to her and asked, "Are you really okay with this, Melanie? I don't want to impose on you, and that was never my intention."

"I'm fine with it - in fact, more than fine. Mr. Coffee will help keep me fit as well. And I'll get some time away from my - what was it? Oh, yeah - very tiny, very cute, very feminine apartment. Believe me, if I didn't want to do this, you'd know it."

"Good. Let's get you home."

Before leaving her at her door, Russ handed her a set of keys to his house, told her the security system would be in place in about three weeks time, to keep the doors and windows locked at night, and if she needed anything in the way of food, to keep the bills and he'd reimburse her.

Thinking about it later, after he had gone, she decided it sounded very much like a job, but one she was looking forward to.

When Russ came home on Thursday evening, she had planned her move carefully, but with many moments of indecision, until finally she overcame her anxiety and decided to take Susan's advice. Dinner was in the oven, the table was set and the wine was breathing. She'd had a great time with Mr. Coffee, so she was ready for Russ.

"Hi Honey, I'm home!" Russ dropped his briefcase and headed down the hall.

"Doesn't the little woman get a kiss hello?" Melanie was blushing, her heart was pounding, but she stood her ground.

Russ stopped dead in his tracks. He was completely blind-sided, but knew he had to react,



and he had to keep it light. If he ever lingered over a kiss, he wouldn't be able to stop.

"Taking you for granted already, huh?" Grabbing her, he lifted her off the ground, swung her in circle, and then planted a quick kiss on her lips. Stepping back, he asked, "So what's for dinner?"

"Wouldn't you like to know! Now go get cleaned up." Melanie just wanted him gone so she could recover her composure. Some poor excuse for a kiss that was! She'd have to tell Susan her strategy sucked - big time.

By the time Russ came back to the kitchen, she was once more composed, as was he. They had a quiet dinner, cleaned up the kitchen, and Melanie said her goodbyes and left. She had enjoyed her evening, playing house, but the lack of a real honest-to-goodness husband left the picture really flat. She knew by now that she was truly in love with him and being around him was becoming torture.

His next overnight trip didn't take place for two weeks and they didn't see each other before he left. She had called him one night to ask how Mr. Coffee was getting along, chatted about the weather and the advent of fall, and then said goodnight. She had the feeling she had interrupted him at his drawing board, so decided she wouldn't do that again.

Russ's trip was just one overnight, returning Friday evening. Melanie was really looking forward to playing with Mr. Coffee again. She really missed him. But when Russ came in at five on Friday and called, "Hi, Honey. I'm home." there was no answer. He looked through the house but couldn't find her anywhere. Finally he went to the basement, checked it out, again with no results, so he went out the patio door. She was sitting on the deck, her head in her hands, and he could tell she was crying.

"Melanie! What's wrong?" Sitting down beside her, he put an arm around her. "Talk!"

Between hiccups, she told him that Mr. Coffee had disappeared while they were playing hide-and-seek the evening before, and hadn't come home all night. She hadn't wanted to go to work, but had two appointments scheduled with clients, so she had no choice. She had come back from work early and had called until her throat was raw, but he was nowhere to be found.

"What if a fisher or an owl caught him? What if he went out on the road and got run over by a car? What if someone found him and took him home with them? Oh, Russ, I'm so sick about this!"

"Melanie, my dear, Mr. Coffee is just being a cat. It's not the first time he's stayed out all night and all day. He's exploring and marking his new territory. Our first choice was to let him have his freedom and trust him to become street smart - or, in this case, bush smart. The second choice was to let him be a fat lazy house cat with no claws. I don't think either of us would want that for him. Okay?"

"Not okay, until he's back where he belongs." She blew her nose on a very damp tissue.

"Um, Mel, speak of the devil..."

There he was, stepping daintily through the grass, on his way over to greet them.

"Mr. Coffee, I should whup your butt for this. You just gave me about fifty gray hairs.

Come here, you brat, I need a cuddle." She picked him up and held him close for the few seconds that he would tolerate. "Hey Russ, how come you know so much when you've never had a pet?"

"I read your book. Mystery solved."

"By the way, I haven't made dinner yet. Can you wait a bit for it?"

"Melanie, I don't expect you to make my meals all the time. Let's just heat up some soup and have a sandwich with it. I expect you are really short on sleep. Why don't you stay over tonight? Go to bed early, and tomorrow morning we'll go catch some fish for the freezer."

"You sure you wouldn't mind? It sounds very tempting."

"No problem. I have some work to do tonight, so I'll stay out of your way."

Melanie did as he suggested and retired early. She slept soundly, now that Mr. Coffee was back where he belonged, stretched out at the bottom of the bed, one paw curled possessively over her ankle.

\* \* \*

Russ didn't really have work to do - just a lot of thinking. He knew he couldn't go on any longer pretending to be just friends. So it was now or never. He took a sheet of paper, spent a few minutes writing on it, and then folded it into a small square. Finding a piece of cord, he made a small hole in the corner of the square and threaded it through. That done, he set it aside ready for the morning.

\* \* \*

Melanie was up early, showered and dressed, and had the coffee and breakfast started, when Russ made his appearance. They ate in companionable silence, Mr. Coffee sitting watching them, waiting for a treat. He wasn't given table scraps but that didn't stop him from trying.

"Let's take our coffee to the living room." Russ rose and picked up the mugs and thermos, taking them into the other room. When Melanie was settled in 'her' chair, he left the room for a moment. When he returned, he was carrying Mr. Coffee. He brought him over and set him on Melanie's lap. That's when she noticed the little square of paper fastened around his neck, her name on the outside of it. She looked at Russ, a question in her eyes.

"Go ahead. Open it."

"You are weird, Russ!" But she did as asked. Untying the cord, and opening the square of paper, she began to read, blushed and then the tears started.

*'Melanie, we love you, hearts and souls. Please marry us and make us happy. We want to go to bed with you at night and waken up beside you in the morning. We want to cry with you and laugh with you, go fishing with you and play house with you for real. I want to have babies with you and fill our house with joy and laughter. Please?'*

By now, Russ was on one knee in front of her, a solitaire diamond ring in his hand.

"Please, Melanie, will you marry us?"

"Yes, I'll marry you. Oh, Russ, I love you to distraction! I thought you'd never ask!"

Slipping the ring on her finger, he pulled her into his arms and, finally, he kissed her - properly.

\* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

"Fishing, Mommy!" Three-year old Bobby pulled on her pant leg, impatience personified. They had been taking him out in the boat with them this summer and it was his favorite pastime.

"We have to wait until Daddy comes home, Sweetie."

Melanie was excited and impatient too. She had something to tell him when he arrived.

They had been married on Christmas night four years ago in Russ's living room beside the Christmas tree, with just family and a few close friends. Russ's parents had flown home from Florida for the wedding and had given Russ the keys to their condo so he could take Melanie down there for a honeymoon. His parents stayed and babysat the cat and house.

Melanie's parents had been planning on coming home for Christmas anyway, so they just shifted the date and came a week earlier to help her get ready for the big day. Brian and Susan stood up for them, Susan complaining to Melanie that being pregnant wasn't the best look for matron of honor.

Thinking over the past four years made Melanie smile. She was so in love with Russ, and so thankful every day that he had had the patience to wait until she was ready for his proposal. He had astonished her by telling her he'd bought the ring the week after she had kicked him under the table, because by then he knew he was going to marry her.

"Hi, Honey, I'm home!" Russ came in and grabbed her for his usual enthusiastic kiss.

"I'm so happy you finally got the kissing thing right, Russ. Now, how soon can we go fishing? There's a very impatient little man waiting."

Stooping down, Russ lifted Bobby high in the air and swung him around. "Wanna catch a fish, son?"

"Yes, Daddy. Hurry!"

"Do you think there'd be room in the boat for four of us?" Melanie asked him, a big smile on her face.

"Who else is coming?" But just as he asked the question, it hit him. "We're pregnant? We're pregnant! Oh, Mel, I do love you so!"

And once more he got the kissing thing just right.

THE END.

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## **THE MARVELOUS MISTAKE**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

“Hey! What do you think you are doing?” Shelley Ann Williams stood beside her Jeep, hands on her hips, staring at the hole in her lawn with a little pine tree sitting in it. Also at the tall, dark – rugged – man beside the hole with a shovel in his hands.

“I’m planting the tree you ordered.” He looked baffled.

“Wrong answer. I didn’t order any tree.” She began walking towards him.

“Isn’t this 152 Pine?”

“Yes.”

“So I’m assuming you are not Mrs. Cochran?”

“You got that one right. She lives at 125 down the street across the road. The red brick bungalow.”

“So someone inverted the numbers. I’m sorry about the hole. I’ll have it filled in and back to normal for you right away. I’m Jake, by the way.” Holding out his hand, he waited for her to take it.

Hesitating a second, Shelley finally reached out and shook his hand. “Shelley Williams.” As the unexpected electric current ran up her arm and into her body, she dropped his hand as if she’d been burned. She could feel herself begin to blush and blurted out the first thing she could think of to take his attention away from her face.

“Um – I think I’d maybe like to keep that little tree. It’s kind of growing on me – bad pun. Can I have it?”

“Sure, if you really want it. I’ll provide the labor free of charge since it was my mistake and I’ll drop a bill in the mail to you when I get back to the office.”

As he began tamping the earth down around the base of the tree, then mounding some mulch against the trunk, she had a chance to study him. He looked to be in his early thirties with short black hair, deeply tanned face and arms, brown eyes and lots of muscles. But there was an undefined air of deep sadness around him.

“That should do it.” He picked up the bag of mulch and his shovel. “I’ll get the bill into the mail tomorrow.”

“What do I have to do to keep it alive?”

“Just give it a pail of water once a week – poured slowly so it can sink into the ground. You can see where I’ve trenched around it, so that helps keep the water from running off. Just talk to it now and then. That will keep it happy and healthy.” He finally smiled and she was intrigued by the transformation it made in his appearance.

“I’ve got to run. I promised Mrs. Cochran her tree today, so I’ll have to hustle. It was nice meeting you, Shelley, even if it was by accident.”

“Thanks for the tree, Jake.” Reaching out a hand, she touched the soft green needles of the little tree. She was still standing in the same spot long after his truck had pulled away from her drive and disappeared down the street. It had been a hellish day, and her one thought on the drive home had been of a glass of wine and a soak in a bubble bath.

For over two years Shelley had withdrawn from the world and had kept her heart and her feelings walled off from everything and everybody, with one exception. To the public, she was a happy, efficient realtor who took great pride in giving excellent service to her clients, but at home out of sight, she was a completely different person, sad, resigned, and alone most of the time.

Since she had touched Jake’s hand, something had shifted – just a tiny fraction, but a shift nonetheless. Sort of like a little earth tremor, one that comes before a major quake. It frightened her, but at the same time, she felt more alive than she had in two years.

“Okay, little tree. What is your name going to be? How about Hope? I’m here to take care of you, so you have nothing to worry about. Just grow strong and tall and beautiful for me.” Giving it a final pat, she went to the house for a pail of water, and then her wine and bath.

\* \* \*

Sitting on the side of the bed, in his rented room, he stared at the large photo in his hand. Running a finger down the side of the page, he whispered, “Pretty soon, My Beauty, we will be together forever.” Stroking one side of her face, he looked at her blue eyes, full lips, high cheekbones and long wavy brown hair. She was his goddess and he was going to have her soon. It had to be soon, because he was running out of money. He’d been here for six months and once he had found her, he’d been watching her. He knew she was single, and had been for two years. He also knew she wasn’t dating anyone. He just had to have a plan. Her job was perfect for his needs. It would be so easy to have her show him a house or two, then he could put his plan into action.

\* \* \*

Jake was again digging a hole in a yard – this time the correct yard. He had another little pine tree lying on the ground beside him, ready to be planted. As he dug, he found his thoughts wandering back to Shelley and the touch of her hand. No rings on her fingers and her property had the feel of a single-person dwelling. *What am I thinking? Susan hasn’t been gone that long and I’ve got my kids to think about.* He hadn’t dated since his wife had died in an accident eighteen months ago, and had no intention of starting up with anyone now. Between his business and parenting responsibilities, his time was pretty much spoken for.

Keeping busy with work had been the only thing that kept him going after she was gone. There were many times he just wanted to dig a really big hole, crawl in and never come out again. But the thought of his children kept him rooted in reality, and he was grateful every day for the wonderful housekeeper he had found. She was an excellent mother figure for his children and she kept his house for him. He knew he would be lost without her, but she was getting on in years.

\* \* \*

Driving to work the next morning, Shelley suddenly realized she was humming a silly

tune, but humming nevertheless. She had awakened refreshed and energetic, anxious to get to the office and clean up the mess on her desk from yesterday. She tried to tell herself the bubbly feelings of excitement inside were because of Hope, her little tree, but knew she was lying to herself. The real reason was Jake and the electric current that had sizzled between them yesterday.

“So what’s up with you?” Sandy, her co-worker and best friend looked at her with a frown.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a silly grin on your face – something I’ve never seen before, in the two years you’ve been here. So give! What’s up?”

“I have a new best friend named Hope.” Shelley smiled and tried to hide the blush she could feel creeping upwards from her neck to her face.

“Oh, yeah? Where did you meet this new best friend, if I may be so bold?”

“In my front yard. She’s about four feet tall, soft to the touch, easy to get along with and wears mostly green.” She was really having trouble suppressing a giggle as she watched Sandy’s expressions change.

“Are you changing your sexual orientation, girl?”

This time the giggle escaped and Shelley finally laughed at the baffled look on Sandy’s face.

“Here. I’ll show you her picture.” Holding her cell phone for Sandy to see, she scrolled to the picture of her little tree.

“So where’s this Hope?” Still baffled, Sandy was getting impatient.

“That’s Hope, my new little pine tree.”

“You gotta be joking! You named a pine tree? And by the way, where did it come from? You never mentioned getting a tree.”

“She just appeared like magic yesterday when I got home from work.” Shelley proceeded to recount the events that had transpired, skipping over the part about the sizzle and the hunk who had caused it.

“Okay, so you have a little tree. Big deal! Why the silly grin this morning? I’m not buying it.”

She was about to press the point when Shelley’s phone rang. She left the room as Shelley took the call, but she wasn’t finished with her interrogations yet. She came back into the office and placed a note on Shelley’s desk: *Lunch at twelve noon. No excuses!*

There was no more time for thoughts of Hope or Jake as Shelley completed the call and dove into the paperwork on her desk. The hands on the clock reached twelve in no time at all and Sandy appeared right away and said, “Let’s go.”

Grabbing her purse, Shelley followed her out of the office to a little diner one block over. Orders placed and coffees in front of them, Sandy wasn’t about to wait any longer.

“I’ve had time to think this morning. That tree didn’t walk over and plant itself, so spill.”

*Now what do I say?* Shelley took her time sipping her coffee. “Okay, so it was a man who planted it.”

“Old, ugly and rude – no doubt, by the grin on your face, right?”

“Well, not quite. Early thirties, dark hair, brown eyes, about six-two, lots of muscles. Oh, and a nice smile. He was a hunk, Sandy, if you must know the truth. But there was something about him – like a really deep sadness.”

“Is he married?”

“No ring, but that doesn’t mean anything in his line of work. Rings and shovels don’t go well together, unless you want blisters.”

“Okay, so it’s time for some investigating. Who does he work for?”

“His name is Jake and the sign on his truck says Jake’s Landscaping, so I assume he owns the company. He just got the wrong house number on the order form and had the tree almost planted by the time I got home, so I asked him to leave it and bill me.”

“Wow! This has to be karma with a capital K! You two were meant to meet, no question!”

“Come on, Sandy. You know my thoughts on getting involved with anyone and my reasons to stay away from relationships. It’s just not going to happen.”

“And you know my take on the subject. Don’t deny yourself some happiness in life. You deserve it – and there are many sides to every situation, and solutions to every problem.” Shelley was shaking her head *no* as Sandy spoke.

“Sandy, you know there’s no solution to my problem. Maybe when I’m fifty or sixty, I’ll look for romance, but it’s not in the cards for me at the moment.”

Sandy realized the subject was closed – for now. It was a conversation they’d had many times, but always with the same outcome. Lunch arrived and for a few minutes, they were silent.

\* \* \*

Sitting in a booth facing Shelley, he watched as she talked to her friend. He enjoyed seeing her expressions change, and especially when her face lit up with a smile. He knew this was where she usually had lunch, if she was eating away from the office, so he had made a habit of checking to see if she was here.

Although he couldn’t hear the conversation, he was becoming a little disturbed by her animation. It was out of character, so there had to be a reason. This would require more surveillance...

\* \* \*

Pushing aside the papers on his desk, Jake pulled a card from his briefcase and sat looking at it for a long time. He had picked it up on his way home yesterday and had then spent a sleepless night thinking about it and what he planned to do with it. He knew he shouldn’t send it, but the pull to do so was just too strong. *What would Susan say, if I could talk to her?* And just as though she was sitting beside him, he could hear her voice. *Go for it, Jake! Enough with the grief. I’m happy now and I want you to be happy too.*



Heaving a sigh, he picked up a pen and addressed the envelope, found and placed a stamp on it. Opening the card, he again sat staring at it, tapping his pen on the desk. It was after five and everyone else had gone home. The housekeeper would be waiting for him to show up, so he had to fish or cut bait.

Taking a deep breath, he put pen to paper and wrote a few words on the card, shoved it in the envelope and sealed it before he could change his mind. Tossing it on the pile of outgoing mail for the morning, he grabbed his briefcase and went out to his truck. He knew he was headed down a road he wasn't ready to travel yet, but something or someone was giving him a mighty push and he couldn't resist it, no matter how hard he tried.



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