

~ Mulligan ~

by KG MacGregor

Disclaimers: Hmmm...original characters who might remind you of familiar people.

This story was written for the Academy's Valentine's Day Special, and it depicts a ROMANCE between two women.

Many thanks to my beta reader Tami, and to my Sweetcakes, whom I plan to love throughout our fast-approaching Golden Years.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Mulligan
By KG MacGregor
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"So if Betty is three times as old as her daughter Jane, and four years ago, she was four times older, how old is Jane now?" The teacher scanned the room to assess the expected confusion on the faces of those in her algebra class. Quadratic equations were always tough at first, even for the brightest students. "Who wants to try to write that formula on the board?"

Sophomore Michelle Sanders worked feverishly to sort out the problem. Math hadn't interested her much - until the day she entered Miss Stevens' class. Truth be told, it wasn't quadratic equations that piqued her interest at all; it was Miss Stevens. The algebra teacher was beautiful - tall and graceful, and with the bluest eyes Michelle had ever seen. Who cared if she was 60 years old!

"Mr. Stempel?"

All eyes turned toward Mike Stempel in the last row. The young man's arms were folded across his desk, his face buried in the crook of his elbow. Mike was sound asleep.

"Alright, someone else," she encouraged, her voice lower as she walked quietly toward the slumbering student. Any other teacher in the school might have shouted at Mike, or perhaps dropped a book loudly next to his desk to startle him awake. But Miss Stevens wasn't like other teachers; without a sound, she lifted his jacket and draped it around his shoulders.

Michelle had almost worked it out. Tentatively, she raised her hand to volunteer.

A knock at the door interrupted the lesson, as Westfield High School's principal Theodore Myers poked his head in and gestured for the teacher to come into the hallway.

"Have a look at the problems on page 68. Miss Sanders, why don't you go to the board and see if you can write that equation?"

The student beamed with pride that she had been recognized by the teacher she adored.

Louise Stevens stepped into the hallway with her boss, glancing one last time over her shoulder to verify that her students had understood her instructions.

"What is it, Ted?" The man's face was uncommonly grave. Without doubt, he was bringing bad news.

"I need you to come with me, Louise," he answered, placing his hand gently on her elbow.

"Rhonda," she whispered, starting immediately toward the stairwell.

Myers hurried behind her, but the stout man couldn't keep up with her long legs and urgent gait. By the time he reached the stairwell, Louise had turned the corner at the landing, dangerously skipping steps as she barreled toward the band room.

On a dead run, the tall teacher passed a dozen students gathered in the hallway outside the band director's office. They were somber; a few in tears.

Inside the band room, Rhonda Markosky lay on her back, her beautiful face swollen and purple. Rick D'Angelo, the physical education teacher, straddled her waist, frantically pumping her chest in a mechanical rhythm. After every fifth compression, he would pause to allow another teacher to blow a deep breath into the dying woman's lungs.

Louise hurried to kneel alongside the still form, clutching the twisted hand tightly. "Rhonda," she implored the motionless woman to respond, rubbing the hand vigorously. "Rhonda." *Sweetheart. My darling. My love.*

February 2002

"I hadn't planned on doing this by myself, Petie."

The Boston terrier, intent on proving that his tall mistress wasn't in this alone, whimpered until she pushed back from the table to allow him access to her robe-clad lap. Petie sensed that she needed an extra dose of affection this morning, and his only purpose for living was to dole those out. Oh, and to eat. And sleep.

Louise Stevens sat on her lanai with her morning coffee; her piercing blue eyes watching a small boat navigate the narrow canal behind her home. This was her first winter in Florida, where she and Rhonda had always planned to live when they retired from teaching high school in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Were it not for Petie, the loneliness of her new home would be almost unbearable.

"You're such a good boy, you know that?" she asked, delivering a loving scratch behind his ears.

Yeah, he knew. Theirs was a bond of mutual adoration.

The 3-year-old pooch had been a gift from her sophomore homeroom class the spring after Rhonda had died. Louise was very touched by the gesture, knowing that her students had read the quiet desolation on her face every day since the loss of her companion. When she opened the box on her desk and found the 8-week-old puppy, she fell in love on the spot. Accessing the Internet from her classroom, the teacher quickly located a picture of the infamous Petie of *Our Gang* fame to show her students the similar markings around the eyes. She and her class settled right away on the AKC designation Rhonda's Spartan Petie, the middle name to commemorate their high school moniker. The puppy was a godsend, and the only dog allowed in their home stadium during high school football games.

Though the nature of Louise's relationship with fellow teacher Rhonda Markosky was never formally discussed by either the faculty or students, it was common knowledge that the two had shared a home for 30 years. On those rare occasions when a poor test score or a scolding after a missed homework assignment had prompted a slur from a disgruntled student, fellow students were quick to squelch the disparagement of two of their favorite teachers.

Louise had briefly contemplated staying on until she turned 65, but when that special group of sophomores graduated two years later, she thought it a good time to leave as well. The memories of her departed lover dogged her both at home and in the hallways of Westfield High School, and Louise finally decided that she needed a change. Now here she was, 63 years old, living alone in Southwest Florida.

"Got to get that, Petie," she said, nudging the dog from her lap to grab the phone in the kitchen. "Hello."

"Hey, Lou! Listen, we've got a tee time at 11:30 if you want to join us. Think you're up for a round?"

It was longtime friend Shirley Petrelli, who, along with her partner Linda, had retired two years ago and moved here to Cape Coral, a fast-growing suburb of Fort Myers...as if a place as small as Fort Myers actually warranted a suburb. With its inexpensive tract housing, Cape Coral had been dubbed a perfect community for the "newly wed and nearly dead."

Louise had been looking forward to playing golf this winter, but those plans were thwarted when she had clumsily broken her left wrist over the Thanksgiving holiday. "That sounds really tempting, Shirl, but I'm not sure my arm's up for that just yet." She'd only gotten her cast off a

couple of weeks ago.

"Maybe you ought to go hit a bucket of balls, Lou. You know, get your swing back."

"Now that's not a bad idea. I might just do that this afternoon." It would be a great excuse to get out of the house.

"Oh, and don't forget. Linda's making lasagna on Friday."

"Sounds good. What can I bring?"

"Just Petie. Angel needs a playmate." Angel was a greyhound they had rescued last year when he was deemed unfit for racing. The sight of the two dogs - so disparate in size - playing together always made them laugh.

Louise jotted a note on her calendar to remind her about the Friday night dinner. *Old habits die hard*, she thought. She had always kept a calendar to note the various high school sporting events, plays, and band concerts, trying as hard as she could to get to all of them. It was important to support the kids in their endeavors, and in return, they gave her their best in her math class.

With a sigh, Louise noted that the Friday night dinner was the only event on her February schedule. Shirley and Linda had invited her to a dance on Valentine's Day, but it was unlikely she would go. Those things just weren't much fun as a third wheel.

After cleaning up her breakfast dishes, the tall woman retreated into her master suite and pulled on a teal nylon jogging suit with her Rockport Pro-Walkers. Petie twirled and yipped, bouncing back and forth to the closet where his leash was kept.

"Wanna go for a walk, Petie?" *Silly question*. He was ready as soon as he saw the shoes.

The terrier yipped and twirled some more, finally settling himself while she clipped the leash into place. *There would be bushes, and tall grass, and mailboxes, and even a fire hydrant in the next block!*

Two long blocks from her home, Louise and Petie turned right. This was Louise's favorite part of their route. On the left, far across a wide canal, was the fence that surrounded West Cape High School. From this vantage point, she could see the kids gather at tables and benches on a broad shaded patio. It made her miss her teaching days, but it was satisfying to see the young people laugh and joke with one another. This veiled connection to her past life was a comfort.

She'd been thinking of late that she might go in someday to introduce herself; perhaps even offer her services as a volunteer or a substitute teacher. In her 39 years at the front of a classroom, teenagers may have changed, but not much, she thought. Louise enjoyed being around them, and they could tell.

"You ready to go home, Petie?"

The short-legged terrier worked himself ragged to keep up with his tall mistress, taking six steps for every one of hers. This one-mile loop always left him tuckered out; he would sleep for two hours when they got home.

Louise unclipped the dog's leash as they walked in the door, and Petie went straight for his water bowl. His mistress detoured into a small study off the living room, where she booted up her computer.

It was a quarter to 10, and all that comprised Louise Stevens' daily routine was almost complete: breakfast, two newspapers, an extra cup of coffee, Petie's walk, and now a check of her email and the weather report for Greensburg. After her shower, she would settle in to read. And probably fall asleep again.

"I need to get out of this house, Petie!"

The startled dog cocked his head, trying to understand the source of his mistress' consternation. They had napped, had lunch, and taken another short walk, just as they always did. But for some reason she was cross.

When Louise spent too much quiet time in her new home, she grew melancholy or "self-pitying" as she would say. Closing up the lanai - okay, so it was a screened-in back porch, but lanai sounded so much more tropical - the tall woman slipped into the master bedroom to change. She had decided to take Shirley's suggestion and go hit a bucket of balls so that she could ready herself to start playing again.

Perhaps if she got back into playing golf, she could meet some new friends. Shirley and Linda were great, always trying to include her in the things they did; but it wasn't fair to tag along with them all the time. No, Louise knew that she needed to develop her own circle of friends.

The warm-up suit she'd had on earlier would suffice for just going to the range, she reasoned. Though it was uncharacteristic for the striking woman to leave her home underdressed, she was trying to adapt to this casual retirement thing. Still, a light coat of base makeup improved her complexion a bit and protected her from the sun.

Passing the full length mirror beside the bedroom door, the tall woman had second thoughts about it all, turning back to her dresser to extract the *proper* attire for going out: a white shirt with a beige collar and trim that matched her knee-length golf shorts. A light blue v-neck vest completed the outfit. Just because she could be more casual didn't mean she had to be.

The closet held two sets of clubs, her own and those of her late partner. Rhonda had so loved golf that Louise couldn't bring herself to get rid of either the clubs or the dozens of accessories, accumulated over the years at Christmas, birthdays, even Valentine's Day.

Exiting through the garage, she loaded her clubs into the trunk of her silver Mercury Sable and activated the automatic door.

"This will kill a couple of hours. Only about...", she did the math in her head, "...a quarter of a million to go."

Smack!

Louise grimaced as she watched her drive take a sharp right turn only a hundred yards out in front of the tee. She'd never had a problem with a slice before; what's more, she usually got at least 140 yards out of her driver. Sure, she hadn't swung a club since mid-October, but this was quite an unwelcome result.

Smack!

She and Rhonda had taken up golf nearly 20 years ago, joining a modest country club near their home. Summers off from teaching afforded lots of time to practice, and over the years, both women had become quite adept at guiding the "stupid little white ball" into the cup. Louise's long game had peaked about 10 years ago; these days, her drives were shorter, but her chipping and putting had improved.

Smack!

Again, her shot sliced viciously, this time clearing the fence and falling onto the adjacent fairway on Number Nine.

"There's a 50-cent surcharge for every ball that leaves the driving range."

Embarrassed that someone was witness to this horrible display, Louise chose to ignore both the remark and the remarker, fishing in her bag for a nine-iron. Leveling her hips, she positioned her hands slightly in front of the ball that sat on the bristled tee.

Smack!

Louise frowned as she watched it fall well short of the 75-yard marker.

Smack!

Smack!

Darn it! Sixty yards with a nine-iron!

"You know, this game's got a lot of funny rules, but there isn't one that says you can't use a seven-iron to get you 75 yards."

Louise roiled at the comment, frustrated at her own loss of distance, and further exasperated by this stranger who suddenly found her game so interesting. Turning, she eyed her tormentor, a short stocky woman of about 60, with bright green eyes and a shock of sun-bleached hair poking every which way from the top of her visor. The darkly tanned face, arms and legs suggested that this woman had spent many, many years on Florida's fairways.

"Do you mind?"

"Not at all," the petite blonde answered matter-of-factly. "Usually, I get paid to say things like that, but I have the discretion to waive my fee in certain circumstances."

"Perhaps you should save your sage advice for someone who wants to hear it so badly that she's willing to pay for it." *She'd be sort of cute if she weren't so arrogant!*

"It's your lead arm, by the way. It's not pulling through, so you're getting the slice from pushing the ball with your trailing arm. If I had to guess, I'd say you've had an injury of some sort."

"You can tell that by my swing, huh? The difference in the tan didn't give away the fact that I've been wearing a cast on this arm for the last six weeks?"

"Well now that you mention it..."

"Right. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to continue my *rehabilitation*," she said, emphasizing the last word with no small measure of sarcasm.

"Of course," the woman said, not yet ready to walk away from this intriguing newcomer. "By the way, you have a beautiful..." *face, figure, behind*, "...swing."

Louise turned around and dropped her chin to her chest so that the shower massager could send its hot pulses to her aching shoulders and neck. In retrospect, hitting only a small bucket of balls

would have been a better idea, but she'd felt ambitious when she arrived at the range. Hopefully, the soreness would be gone by tomorrow, and she'd try it again.

Petie was quite confused at the order of business today. His mistress usually showered after their walk, not before...and she'd hardly spoken to him at breakfast, her mind seemingly somewhere else.

"Hmm...I wonder if..." Turning off the water, Louise wrapped her hair in a towel and quickly dried off. Donning her robe again, she walked into the study and booted up the computer, twisting back and forth impatiently in her office chair as she waited for her icons to appear. Four minutes later, she had her answer.

"Martha Beck." The web site for the Pine Island Country Club boasted two pros, Jim Conrad and one Martha Beck, the pompous woman who had practically accosted her at the driving range yesterday. "Marty" had joined the staff at Pine Island 14 years ago. "Probably when this picture was made," Louise sneered, taking in the photo of a much younger, much thinner woman. Not that Louise minded a few extra pounds on a woman - Rhonda had been a size 16. Deciding that she in fact preferred the stockier version of the little blonde pro, she caught herself wondering why on earth it mattered to her one whit whether Martha Beck was skinny or stout.

Her muscle soreness gone by the next day, Louise resumed her daily routine. She'd been thinking for two days about that rude woman, the cute one with all those laugh lines, the one who had complimented her swing. It would probably be a good idea to go hit another bucket of balls....

Briefly, she contemplated going somewhere besides the Pine Island Golf Club so she would avoid another encounter. *Now that would be silly*, Louise concluded; *I'm a member there*. So instead, she showered and put on one of her most flattering outfits, pulling her collar-length salt and pepper hair back; it was barely long enough to clamp with a barrette. She didn't need the stylish straw hat, as the range tees were situated underneath a canopy, but she looked good in it, so she wore it anyway.

Louise walked into the pro shop at exactly the same hour as she had on Monday, proceeding to the same set of covered tees, even waiting for an older gentleman to finish so she could use the same mat.

Smack!

That slice wasn't quite as pronounced as it had been the other day, but there still wasn't much distance.

Smack!

Slow down, she admonished herself. *What's the big hurry?*

The familiar voice of the golf pro sounded, this time from behind and directed at a woman of about 50 who obviously colored her dark red hair and wore entirely too much makeup.

"That's it, follow through," the blonde instructor encouraged.

"I don't know, it still doesn't feel right," the woman whined. "Maybe you could...show me again, you know, holding the club with me?"

Louise picked that moment to switch from her driver to her five-iron, unable to resist a peek at the personalized lesson the pro was giving this Tammy Faye Baker look-alike.

Settled behind the woman, the short muscular arms reached around and closed over the woman's hands as they gripped the club. In tandem, they drew the club overhead.

"That's right, parallel to the ground," she coached.

Together they swung through, sweeping the club head in a perfect arc past the trailing shoulder.

"Just like that."

"That felt great," the woman gushed. "Let's do it again!"

"That felt great. Let's do it again," Louise muttered in a low squeaky voice.

Smack!

Now she was hooking her five-iron.

Smack!

Smack!

Good distance, though. Louise was hitting the ball harder than usual, but she knew that she was pushing it, not letting the club do the work. Too much of that, and she'd be sore again tomorrow.

Smack!

Smack!

"You know, we're open till dark. You can take your time if you want."

"You again!" *Why does this woman always show up when I'm screwing up?*

"Now don't get excited. I was giving a lesson and saw you over here. Thought I'd just say hello and properly introduce myself. I'm Martha Beck, Marty to my friends."

"Hello, *Martha*." Louise emphasized her choice of names. She and *Marty* were not friends.

"Hi." Marty looked over her shoulder at her struggling student, then back at this beautiful woman who didn't like her yet. "Uh, nice hat."

Smack!

Darn it!

It was Marty Beck's nature to be friendly and outgoing, but those who were more serious sometimes had trouble accepting her offhanded sense of humor. She also had a penchant for handing out compliments right and left, looking for something she liked in everyone she met. That habit had gotten her into trouble more times than she could count, and had eventually caused the ruin of her relationship with Angela, who simply didn't trust that her flirtations were innocent.

Of course, there was that one time that they weren't, and that made all the others pretty hard to accept.

On Friday morning - same mat, same hat - Louise didn't encounter the annoying golf pro on the driving range, though she did catch a glimpse of her twice riding by in a golf cart. The second time, the little blonde was headed toward the pro shop.

Louise hurriedly hit most of her remaining balls, scuttling five or six into the grass in front of the tee. She entered the clubhouse just in time to see the blonde blur heading out the door on the other side into the parking lot. Since she didn't really need anything from the pro shop today, the tall woman proceeded straight through, exiting just in time to see Martha get into a waiting car and plant a kiss on the cheek of a younger woman - a much younger woman!

People should act their age! Louise groused, clacking across the pavement in her spiked shoes.

"You really ought to come with us. We've gone two years now, and both times were so much fun." Linda and Shirley implored Louise to consider coming with them to the Valentine's Dance the next Friday night. "There'll be lots of women there, many of them single."

"I'm not looking to meet any *single women*. I'm not ready for that sort of thing." The way she'd been missing Rhonda lately, Louise sometimes doubted that she ever would be ready.

"You should at least come and make some friends. Wouldn't it be nice to get to know people who can just pick up and go to the beach in the afternoon, or who can run up to Sarasota with you for the symphony?"

Louise conceded that having friends for just such occasions would be nice, but she was adamant that she didn't want to meet someone who had other things in mind.

"But those other things...sometimes, they just come along when you aren't looking," Shirley suggested.

"Not for me, they don't." Since Rhonda died, there hadn't been anyone who was even remotely interesting from a romantic perspective. Well, except in an odd sort of way.... *Now that's just ridiculous, Louise!*

"By the way, Lou, we got a tee time for Tuesday at 10. If you're up for a round, I'll call out to the club and see if they can find us a fourth."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that. But I have to warn you that I've been hitting the ball all over the place since I got my cast off."

"You know, you ought to call Marty Beck. She's the golf pro over at Pine Island, and she's really good. Family, too. I bet she could give you a few pointers."

Louise stiffened, remembering the sight of the golf pro getting into the car with that...that child! "I think I can manage just fine," she answered, barely able to check the hostility she felt. "I just have to get my strength back."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Linda said, looking at her partner curiously. *What was that about?* "But if you change your mind..."

"I won't."

Tuesday finally came and Louise got a special thrill out of reading that Greensburg was getting eight to 10 inches of snow today. Here in Cape Coral, they would hit 83 this afternoon,

For her first day back on the links, Louise selected yet another flattering outfit, this one a white sleeveless shirt with red plaid trim on the collar and shoulders to match her long shorts. Again, she pulled her hair back in a barrette so it wouldn't blow in her face, this time adding a pair of gold hoops and just a touch of lipstick. The hat finished the look.

After a brief stop at the club drop, Louise found a rare parking place in the shade, next to a familiar car. It was...yes, it was the one Martha Beck had gotten into last week. Obviously, her little girlfriend was a golfer too. *Probably in the children's league!*

Not seeing Shirley's station wagon, Louise opted to wait inside the clubhouse, that is, until she spotted the cradle-robbing golf pro behind the counter. Hoping to avoid the unwelcome advice-dispenser, she immediately drifted into the racks of golf shirts by the door. If the short woman got distracted, she could slip back out and wait for Linda and Shirley, maybe even sending them in with her green fee.

"You know, we have some women's clothing over on this side, if you're into that sort of thing, that is."

Louise cringed at the annoying voice.

"I was thinking about a gift," she shot back. "But never mind." She really needed some golf socks, but she'd be darned if she was going to buy anything in here.

"Hi, Lou!" Linda breezed into the shop. "Shirley's parking the car. Hi, Marty," she grinned at the golf pro, who had obviously just made a very delightful connection.

"Why Linda, I didn't know you and Lou were such good friends." Marty grinned back at the tall woman, who was now slinking deeper into the men's wear.

"Oh, yeah, we go way back. We taught in the same school district up north. Say, did you get us a fourth?"

"Sure did! She's waiting for you already at the driving range. Name's Pauline Rourke. Red hair, extra makeup," she whispered the last bit conspiratorially.

Louise blanched. *Not that woman!*

Indeed, Tammy Faye was her partner today, and if that in itself wasn't bad enough, the woman practically chanted every mantra of golf mechanics on each and every stroke. *Line it up. Head down. Eye on the ball. Left arm straight. Follow through. See it in.* Her best hole all day was a double bogey.

Louise was still slicing her driver and hooking her long irons, but her short game saved her. She'd have played much better with new socks.

At Pauline's insistence, the foursome stopped in the clubhouse for a quick drink after their mediocre round. Louise admitted to herself that she liked Pauline just fine, despite her annoying golf habits and the sometimes distracting abundance of makeup. People did what they did to feel good about themselves, and that was more important than anything else in the world.

"Isn't that Marty Beck just the cutest thing!" Pauline exclaimed.

"Marty's great," Linda agreed. "Don't you think, Lou?" She had been surprised to learn that the two knew one another. Clearly, Marty had taken a shine to their tall, beautiful friend, but for some reason, Louise was gruff and disapproving when it came to the little golf pro.

"She seems very...knowledgeable," Louise conceded.

"What can I get you ladies to drink?" The server perched over their table, familiar green eyes smiling a welcome.

That's her, Louise realized, the one who picked up Marty - I mean Martha - in the car last week. She can't be more than 25 years old!

"The first round's on the house, Katie." The golf pro pulled up a chair between Pauline and a dismayed Louise. "And could I get a club soda?"

How rude could this woman possibly be? Now she has her...girlfriend fetching her drinks while she sits down to flirt with one of her protégées.

"So when are you going to get back on the fairways, Marty?"

Shirley's question surprised Louise. *Back on the fairways?*

"Three more weeks," she answered. "Wouldn't want to pop those stitches."

Oh my! Louise hoped whatever it was wasn't serious.

"Marty had that same gall bladder surgery Linda had six years ago," Shirley explained.

"Aw, you poor baby!" Pauline gushed.

Aw, you poor baby! Louise mimicked the women in her mind, but not without unconsciously

crinkling her lips and bobbing her head back and forth mockingly. It seemed that the golf pro was fine now, and for that, she was glad.

Katie returned, passing out the drinks, saving Marty's club soda for last. "Here you go, Mom."

Mom?

"Thanks, hon. Have you guys met my daughter Katie?" Marty made the brief introductions, and Katie returned to her work behind the counter.

Her daughter?

"She and my grandson moved down to help out after my surgery, but I think I've convinced them to stick around," Marty explained, obviously glad to have her family close by. "So how was the round?"

"Not bad," Shirley answered. "Lou usually kicks our butts, but she's been gimpy with her arm lately, so I managed to beat her today by a couple of strokes."

She has a daughter and a grandson!

"Yeah, I've watched her on the range. I can see that she's a natural," she went on, as though the tall woman *with the most beautiful blue eyes she'd ever seen* wasn't sitting right beside her. "By the way, welcome to the Pine Island Golf Club, Miss Stevens. As a new member, you get one free lesson with the pro - that would be me - any time you want."

"You mean I haven't gotten that over with already?" Louise asked almost jokingly...almost.

The golf pro chuckled. "Well, the complimentary lesson isn't mandatory. You do seem to be a very good golfer, but if you ever decide you want any help, just let me know." With that gracious remark, Martha Beck picked up her drink and walked back out to the pro shop.

The three ladies scowled at Louise as if she'd just been caught cheating on her score card.

"What?" she asked defensively.

No one answered, but their expressions remained unchanged.

"Fine!" Louise answered, storming off after the little blonde.

Marty thought this was as good a time as any to rearrange the sweater display. Inventory was down until Thursday's shipment, so there wasn't any sense in having things up on the top shelf. Stretching on her tiptoes, she reached in vain for the folded stack.

"Let me," a low voice behind her said. Long arms stretched over her head and lowered the sweaters into her waiting hands. "Can't have you popping those stitches."

"Thank you," the red-faced pro muttered as she turned toward her benefactor. Sometimes she hated being so short. "Is there something I can do for you, Miss Stevens?"

"My...friends call me Lou."

"What should I call you?"

"Touché." Louise was ashamed of how she'd treated this woman since the moment they met. "How about you call me Lou?"

"Okay. Is there something you need, Lou?"

Louise sighed, knowing that it was her turn to make a friendly overture. "I've been having a little trouble with a slice, and I thought maybe you could...."

"You call a hard right turn little?" she joked. *Oops!* The blue-eyed glare was back. "I mean, you wanna...maybe meet me at the range tomorrow and see if we can...work it out?"

"Ten o'clock?"

"Ten is good."

Early the next morning, Louise made a special trip to the country club at Burnt Store, hoping to find a really nice outfit that wasn't hanging in the pro shop at Pine Island. Satisfied with the solid blue shorts and blue and white striped sleeveless shirt, she finished the look with a barrette, this time leaving a few wisps on each side to frame her face.

Louise had always been comfortable with the way she looked. She was regularly complimented, and got her share of second looks. Most important, though, Rhonda had raved about her beauty every day.

"But the game's a different one at 63, isn't it Petie?"

The dog's tail twittered happily, as it did every time his mistress said "*Mmmmpppffff, Petie.*"

These days, Louise paid a good bit of attention to covering the wrinkles that gathered around her eyes and the corners of her mouth, and to moisturizing her neck and chest. Though her hands sported a few of those unsightly age spots, they were for the most part still soft and elegant looking. A weekly manicure was her one indulgence.

So what was it about Marty Beck that had her preening in front of the mirror like this? Something about that cute little blonde had clicked for Louise; she barely recognized the feelings of attraction that were stirring within. In her 31 years with Rhonda, she'd never had another woman turn her head, not even for an instant. And in the years since Rhonda died, no one had interested her that way at all. But undeniably, attraction was what it was. *If Marty just weren't so....*

Louise arrived early to warm up before her free lesson with the very cute golf pro.

Smack!

Wicked slice.

Smack!

That one was a little better, with more distance.

Smack!

Smack!

Smack!

The slice was gone.

Smack!

A hundred and forty yards, straight down the middle of the range.

Smack!

Again.

"So was there anything else I could help you with?" The blonde golfer had slipped up quietly to observe her student unobtrusively. "You appear to be quite the accelerated learner."

"I, uh...I seem to have come out of my slump."

"Well, I'm very glad I could be of assistance, Lou." She was disappointed that there didn't seem to be any reason for the lesson.

"But...but I have this hook on my long irons!" Louise exclaimed with unusual braggadocio. Quickly, she drew her three-iron from the bag, smacking her first shot 115 yards out, sans hook.

"Hmm...."

Smack!

Still no hook.

Uh-oh! On her next shot, Louise played the ball off her front foot, executing a neat dog-leg left.

"You should play the ball a little more in the center of your body, hands slightly in front," Marty corrected gently.

"Like this?" she asked, overstepping so that the ball was in fact closer now to her back foot. This time, she shanked it, sending it over the fence into the ninth fairway. "Oops! I know, that'll cost me 50 cents."

The golf pro chuckled, almost certain she was being played, though why the proud woman would want to do that was a mystery. "Tell you what. You line yourself up the way you think you ought to be, and I'll come over and fine tune your position."

Louise obliged, settling slightly off-center with her hands behind the ball.

Marty stepped up behind her and reached around. Lou was sort of thin - *a tall drink of water, but not too thin*, she thought. "Okay, here's the problem. Let go of the club."

Louise did as she was asked, focused completely on the muscular leathered arms that encircled her waist.

"To start with, you want the grip to rest against your stomach like this."

"Uh, my stomach's a little higher than that, Marty."

"Oh, okay." Glad her red face was hidden, the coach continued. "On taller people, it sometimes...rests...lower. Now on your irons, there's always going to be just a teensy lilt in the shaft. You know, if you let go of it, it would balance only a second, then fall to the left. And the ball sits right in front of your nose with your feet spread even. Got it?" She could feel the lanky woman shifting her hips and arms. Marty wondered what it would be like to dance with Lou Stevens.

Now acutely aware of the woman who was pushed up behind her, Louise suddenly took stock of what was happening. Here she was, acting juvenile over Marty Beck, just like Pauline Rourke had. Furthermore, she was making fools of both of them with her put-on girlish ineptitude. "I think I've got it now," she interjected, stepping forward to escape the seeming embrace. "Why don't I give it a try?"

True to form, Louise proceeded to loft four shots in a row more or less down the middle, all falling about a hundred yards away.

Marty felt the retreat and floundered for her most professional demeanor, genuinely embarrassed by what she'd been thinking only moments earlier. "Well, as I said earlier, you're one gifted learner."

"Uh, thanks," the tall woman stammered. "I guess I should be going." Not making eye contact with the pro, Louise stuffed her club back into the bag, heaving it onto her shoulder and turning quickly toward the parking lot. *Air, I need air!*

"Wow! You look great, Lou! I'm so glad you decided to come with us after all." Shirley had on black slacks with a red and white polka-dotted shirt; her partner wore a deep red party dress, with short puffy sleeves and a skirt that twirled.

But all eyes tonight - all eyes over 50, anyway - would be on Louise Stevens, dressed for the occasion in a long-sleeved black dress that tapered to just above the knee. The plunging v-neck called attention to the tantalizing hollow between her smallish breasts; a similar v-cut reached to the middle of her back. The gray-streaked hair - actually she had finally admitted to herself that it was now mostly gray with only a few remaining black streaks - was swept back on the sides with wispy bangs, and pearls adorned her ears.

"You are so beautiful, Lou. I bet you have to beat them off with a stick tonight," Linda added.

"Well, if that's the case, maybe I should take my own car. I might welcome a dance or two, but if somebody hangs around too long, I'm outta there!" She had only agreed to come when Shirley offhandedly mentioned that there might be a few people there who played golf at Pine Island. That got Louise to wondering....

"Don't worry, we'll rescue you. But you try to have a good time. These dances are great, and there are lots of nice women there. And men too, if you want to make friends with some of the guys."

"Is there a liquor limit?" she deadpanned.

"No, but we'll cut you off if you start to undress," Shirley joked.

Ten minutes later, the threesome arrived at the VFW Hall, which was decorated tonight in Valentine themes. There were hundreds of red, pink, and white balloons, and each of the red-papered tables held a vase of roses, with glitter hearts and ribbons scattered about.

Linda led them to a table near the dance floor, but Louise gestured toward one a little further away, less well-lit and completely out of the traffic area.

"Now nobody's going to see you over here, Lou."

"That's fine with me. Maybe I'll do the watching tonight."

"But will you ask someone to dance?"

"Only if I can't stop myself," she promised sarcastically. These sorts of soirees had been so much fun with Rhonda, who always danced with everybody in the room. They didn't go to many, since it was important in their jobs to keep a low profile in Greensburg; but from time to time, they would go to the larger events in nearby Pittsburgh. Louise would usually sit at the table and entertain their friends, dancing every fifth or sixth tune with her vivacious partner. This was only her third such party since Rhonda died, and while it was difficult, Louise had to admit that it did her good to get out. She liked dressing up, and knew it was important to meet people, especially since she was new to the Southwest Florida gay and lesbian community.

They had arrived somewhat late, but new arrivals kept pouring in. After accepting an early offer to dance with a stylish woman in her mid-50s - and politely declining a second dance - Louise settled in to watch the crowd, content to sip her wine unnoticed. At the urging of her friends, she took a couple of turns on the dance floor with each of them, who were now wrapped around each other, swaying to a slow romantic tune.

The tall woman checked her watch. They would leave soon, as Shirley never, ever missed the maritime and fishing reports on the 11 o'clock news; besides, her friends were headed out early tomorrow to go grouper fishing off Marco Island.

"Are you having a good time?"

The question startled Louise, but not as much as the sight of Marty Beck standing at her table. The golf pro was dressed in pleated black gabardine slacks with flat black shoes; her red silk shirt opened at the top to reveal an ample cleavage. Louise had never actually seen the woman without her visor, and was pleasantly surprised to find a rather flattering hairstyle, layer upon layer of the sun-bleached strands.

"I...my friends...we....," she stammered. "Won't you please sit down?"

Marty smiled and pulled out a chair. "You look very nice tonight."

"Thank you."

"Actually, that isn't true."

Louise rolled her eyes. *Here it comes, a smart remark. Why does she have to do this? She'd be so....*

"What I meant to say is that you look stunning tonight. I saw you dancing earlier with Linda, and

I doubt anyone else in this room could do justice to that dress you're wearing."

Louise couldn't believe her ears. Marty Beck had just paid her one of the nicest compliments she'd ever heard.

"Why, thank you Marty. You look very nice too." She really did. Red was a good color with that bright blonde hair...and her green eyes were prominent even in the dim light.

"Listen, Lou...I think you and I may have gotten off on the wrong foot or something last week. Do you think we could just start over?"

"You mean...like a Mulligan?"

"Yeah," Marty nodded, smiling. Many weekend golfers took what was called a Mulligan - a "do-over" - when they muffed the drive off the first tee. "I haven't met anyone as interesting as you in a long time, Lou. I'd like for us to be friends."

Louise smiled at the cute little golf pro. "I'd like that too, Marty."

"So...would you like to dance?"

Nervously, Louise realized that she'd very much like to dance with this green-eyed blonde, just for the chance to hold her close. "I'd love to."

The pair took the floor for a timeless Righteous Brothers tune, Marty asserting the lead as she pressed the heel of her hand against the small of the tall woman's back. Dancing with Lou Stevens was just as fluid an experience as she had imagined...except it hadn't occurred to her that she'd be eye-level with these *beeeautiful*....

"Where are you from, Marty?"

"Uh, I..."

"I'm sorry, was that a hard question?" Louise had noticed that her dance partner was appreciative of her assets. What else should she expect from wearing a dress like this?

"I'm originally from Michigan. Holland, Michigan. But I've been coming down here for almost 20 years."

"What do you mean coming down here? Don't you live here?"

"Just in the winter. From May to October I work at a club in the North Carolina mountains."

"So you're a snowbird," Louise concluded.

"Sort of," Marty chuckled, "more like a migrant worker."

That drew an amused smile from the taller woman. "Have you always been a golf pro?"

"Pretty much. I played on the tour for about three years, but I wasn't good enough to make a living. There wasn't really much prize money back then. So I got married for a couple of years and had Katie."

"Your daughter seems very nice."

"She is, and she really enjoys the club work. Lord knows, she grew up with enough of it."

"So you've always been around the clubs?"

"Yeah, it suits me. I like helping people play better, and..." she looked up into the striking blue eyes, "I meet some of the nicest people."

Louise smiled down at her dance partner, releasing her grip as the tempo picked up on the next tune. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure, whatever you're having."

"A glass of wine?"

"That's fine." Marty wasn't accustomed to women buying her drinks. It was usually the other way around. "Tell you what...you go on back to the table and I'll bring it. Red or white?"

"It's Valentine's Day. How about red?"

Marty smiled and turned toward the bar. *Wow! She's pretty nice when she isn't mad at me!*

Louise made her way back to the table to find her two friends.

"Are you having a good time now, Lou?" Shirley asked, already seeing the answer on her friend's face.

"As a matter of fact, I am. That Marty Beck can be quite charming when she sets her mind to it," she chuckled.

"She sure can. We both like Marty a lot."

"Does she, uh, see a lot of different women? I mean, she just seems like the sort of person who would be...friendly with lots of people." *What she seems like is a professional flirt.*

"You know, I don't know of anyone that Marty's gone out with since we've known her," Linda said. "I heard she had some sort of really bad breakup a few years ago. But I can't say as I've ever seen her with anybody."

"Speak of the devil," Shirley exclaimed, standing to shake the golfer's hand.

"Okay, what were you telling her?" she teased. Handing the wine glass to Louise, she cautioned, "Don't believe a word anyone says about me. It's all hearsay and jealous gossip."

"I'll keep that in mind," Louise assured. She wanted to find out for herself anyway.

"It's a nice crowd, don't you think?" Marty pushed the topic of conversation away from herself.

"It seems to get bigger every year," Linda answered.

"Do you come every year?" Louise addressed the golf pro.

"Not for a while," Marty confessed. In fact, it had been years. But when Shirley had casually mentioned after their foursome the other day that the tall newcomer might be tow tonight, Marty had made her own plans to attend.

"Say, Shirley and I were just talking about our big fishing date tomorrow," Linda explained. "We thought we should probably head on home."

Automatically, Louise reached for her wrap.

"Wait, Lou!" *You can't go yet; I've only danced with you once.* "I'd be happy to give you a ride if you'd like to stay a little longer."

"I don't know," the tall woman said hesitantly. It was one thing to be dancing with this woman. But riding home with her would be almost like...a date. "I should probably go on with Shirley and Linda."

"No, you should stay," Shirley coaxed. "We'll feel awful if you leave early on account of us."

"Well, I...."

"Please, Lou," Marty wasn't above begging. "Tell you what. Let's have...two more dances. Then I'll take you home. There's one now." A slow tune was starting up, and Marty held out her hand gallantly.

Louise looked back and forth between Marty and her friends, who seemed to be encouraging her to stay. "Okay."

Squeezing again onto the floor, the women assumed the familiar embrace. Louise liked the feel of the strong arm around her waist and the calloused hand that held her own.

"So Lou," Marty looked her straight in the eye, "I bet our mutual friends could tell us a little about each other, but that seems, I don't know, less reliable than going right to the source. So

what if instead I just asked you to tell me about yourself - just the stuff you're comfortable with sharing - and I'll do the same."

"Okay." Louise felt a little embarrassed after being caught talking with Linda and Shirley; she liked Marty's more direct approach. "I moved here in November from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, which is where I first met Linda and Shirley 18 years ago. I'm 63; I just retired from teaching high school math for 39 years; and my partner of 31 years died three years ago of a heart attack." That was the sum of Louise Stevens' life. "And I miss her very much," she added softly.

Instinctively, Marty pulled the woman a little closer. "I'm sure you do, Lou. You were lucky to have someone love you for 31 years."

"I was. But I was even luckier that I got to love her." The sadness of Rhonda's memory swept over her, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

This was one of those moments in her life where Marty would have given her right arm to be a foot taller. All she wanted in the world was to cradle this woman's head protectively against her chest. Instead, she stepped closer and leaned her own head on the soft shoulder. "I'm so sorry you lost her, Lou."

Louise raised her hand and cupped the blonde head. This felt good. In the months after Rhonda died, many had offered her a comforting embrace; but until now, none of those gestures had given her strength. Maybe she hadn't been ready to receive it then; and now, no one knew how much she still needed it. But this little woman seemed to know.

Without a break, the lovers' ballad led into another, and Marty acknowledged with disappointment that her evening with Lou would soon be over.

"Now it's your turn. Tell me all about Marty Beck." Louise had pulled herself together.

"Okay, I'm 61, and I haven't ever really had a very long relationship with anybody, except Angela, and she threw me out about eight years ago because I did something very foolish. Some mistakes are so bad you just can't recover from them."

Louise suspected that she knew exactly what sort of mistake Marty had made.

"So I haven't really seen anyone since then; I've just been sort of working on myself."

"Are you happy with who you are now?" *I'm starting to think you're adorable.*

"Yeah, I really am. How about you, Lou? Are you happy?"

"I'm lonely," she answered honestly. "I didn't expect to spend this part of my life by myself."

"Who says you have to?" Louise looked startled by the question, so Marty continued, barely missing a beat. "I mean, there are lots of nice people down here our age who like to have fun."

They like to play golf, and go fishing, and just walk along the beach. There's no reason for you to ever have to do that stuff alone unless you want to."

The music stopped and the couple returned to the table. "I guess we should go," Louise suggested, picking up her wrap. Taking Marty's offered arm, she and the golf pro wordlessly exited into the parking lot, finally reaching a dark green Subaru Outback wagon.

Following Louise's directions - very important in Cape Coral, since only a handful of the streets went over the grid of canals - Marty drove the beautiful woman to her doorstep. Hopping out, she walked around and opened the door, extending her arm again to escort Louise to her front porch.

"I'm really glad we ran into each other tonight, Lou."

"So am I, and I'm really glad that we decided to take a Mulligan," the tall woman answered smiling, squeezing the arm of her new companion.

An excited yapping from the other side of the door startled the golf pro as they stepped onto the porch.

"Who's that?" Marty asked.

"That's, uh...my Doberman pinscher. He's very protective," Louise answered sternly.

"Well, he certainly sounds vicious. What is he, three weeks old?"

Both women laughed, not sure how best to get through this awkward moment. The dance, the drive home, now the doorstep. Louise hadn't had a moment like this in 35 years.

"Listen, uh, Lou?" Marty stammered nervously. "If I were to take the day off on Monday, would you be interested in riding out to Sanibel for lunch, and maybe walking on the beach over there?"

Louise's heart hammered. Since Rhonda died, she hadn't been out with another woman...at least not on a date, and that's exactly what this sounded like. But she really, really liked Marty Beck and wanted to be absolutely sure before panicking completely. "You mean like a...date?"

"Well, yeah...it could be a date." Noting the wide eyes of her companion, Marty backpedaled quickly. "But it doesn't have to be. We could just be friends." That sounded so lame. "Of course, I'd really like it if it was a date. I'd like it a lot."

Louise wouldn't look at her, but she appeared to be thinking really hard. After a torturous eternity, the tall woman finally answered. "Okay, Marty. Why don't we say it's a date!"

"Grrreat!" Marty exclaimed, realizing with embarrassment that she'd sounded just like Tony the Tiger. "I'll pick you up at...11?"

"I'll be ready." *Oh my God, I'm going out on a date in less than three days!*

"Okay." Marty's feet felt like they were glued to the front porch. Their plans made, there really wasn't any reason at all for her to still be standing there, but it just seemed like things were sort of...unfinished.

Louise was thinking the same thing. Both of them knew what finished a moment like this. It was a big step - a huge step, really - and if she'd thought about it too much, she probably would have stopped herself; but the words were out before she knew it. "So do you think you'd like to...kiss me goodnight...maybe?"

Marty sure hoped she'd heard right, or she was going to get slapped for sure. Stepping forward, she slipped one hand around Louise's shapely waist and another on the back of her neck. Ever so slowly, she pulled the beautiful red lips toward her own. They were soft...warm...and unexpectedly inviting. Boldly, she ever-so-gently teased them apart, shuddering when the warm mouth opened to allow her in. Tenderly, their tongues met and Marty got a taste of the passion that brewed underneath the surface of Louise Stevens' staid exterior.

Louise too awakened to sensations of arousal, surprised to discover a yearning for this woman who held her so close. *That was sweet, really sweet.* Louise wrapped her arms around the petite woman's middle and laid her cheek against the soft blonde hair. "Do you think you'd like to...come in and meet Petie and help me drink a pot of coffee? I bet we could find a lot to talk about."

Marty smiled. She couldn't think of anything she'd like better. She wanted to know all there was to know about Lou Stevens.

May 2002

For the fourth or fifth time, Louise strode through the darkened house, checking the windows and doors one last time. The patio furniture was stacked neatly in the corner of the garage; the kitchen was bare of all perishables; and the thermostat was set for a warm 82 degrees. A timer would turn on three lights every evening at dusk.

"You ready to go, sweetheart?" Marty called from the front porch.

Louise smiled at the endearment; she was Marty Beck's sweetheart, and Marty was hers. After the Valentine's dance, there had been no looking back for either one of them. A force neither of them could withstand pushed them past their early missteps, and into each other's heart. Within only a couple of weeks they became lovers, and now they were headed to Marty's condo in the North Carolina mountains for the summer and fall season. Louise knew her own heart well enough to recognize true love - and this adorable little golf pro was the real deal.

"Is Petie in the car already?"

"Yep! We're just waiting for you." The little blonde strode back to the car, slipping into the driver's seat to wait for her companion. To Marty, it was almost unfathomable that her life could have changed so much in just three short months. But there was no mistaking it: Lou Stevens had taken her ordinary existence and turned it into something almost dreamlike.

Louise stepped onto the porch and turned to lock the door. The brilliant sunshine cast a clear reflection on the storm door, allowing her to peek at Marty unobserved. The sight of her lover - smiling broadly as she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel - caused her heart to swell. That she had found such love not once but twice in her lifetime was just the most amazing gift.

The End.

Thanks for reading. I'd love to know what you thought of Lou & Marty.

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