

# ~ Mulligan III: : Teacher's Pet ~

by KG MacGregor

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**Disclaimers:** : Marty & Lou are back, and they're still in love. This is the third story in the Mulligan series. You really ought to read the others first: [Mulligan](#) and [Mulligan II: In the Rough](#), but if it doesn't matter to you, it doesn't matter to me either.

Thanks as always to my beta reader Tami, and to my Sweetcakes, who makes it possible for me to write about love.

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**Mulligan III: : Teacher's Pet**

**By KG MacGregor**

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"You want chips or peanuts, sweetie?" Rhonda folded the plastic wrap tightly over the sandwich halves and dropped them into two separate brown paper bags.

"What kind of sandwiches did you make?"

"Pastrami and Swiss with that deli mustard you like."

"Is there soup?"

"Yeah, I fixed cream of mushroom."

"That's enough for me, I think." Louise tied her coat around her waist and grabbed the keys from the hook next to the back door. "I'm going to warm up the car. Be right back."

Both women absently fell into their morning routine, eager to get to work to see what the school day would bring. Tonight, their Westfield High School basketball teams - boys and girls - played at home against archrival Greensburg. That meant a quick supper and a return to the gymnasium, where both would lend a hand checking purses and backpacks as the excited crowd streamed in.

"There must be an inch of frost on the windows," Louise lamented as she hurried back in through the back door.

"Did you turn on the defroster?"

"Don't I always turn on the defroster?"

Rhonda chuckled. They had this conversation nearly every winter morning. That was her cue for

the next line. "What if we just sat in the car and made out? That would warm it up."

On that note, Louise strode across the kitchen and folded her partner into her arms. "What if we just warmed ourselves up before we went out there?" Lowering her head, she found Rhonda's lips and covered them with her own. For almost a full minute, they shared their love and passion in a deep, soulful kiss.

"Gosh, Lou, I never get tired of that."

"Me neither." After 29 years together, their love for one another was strong and still growing. In five more years when Rhonda turned 65, they'd both retire and move to South Florida, where they could indulge freely in their two favorite pastimes: golf and each other.

"Okay, let's go get this day over with so we can come back home and do that some more."

Louise helped the heavier woman into her coat and grabbed their two lunches, holding the screen open while Rhonda locked the back door. Their life as lovers was suspended each day on this concrete porch; to those who knew them only outside of their home, these two were the quintessential old maid schoolteachers.

## **December 2002**

Looking out from the kitchen window in their Florida home, Louise Stevens laughed aloud at her lover's backyard antics with the stubborn Boston terrier. Petie wanted badly to go to his favorite spot near the seawall, but a story in the paper last week warned pet owners of the dangers of alligators in the neighborhood canals. One particularly aggressive creature nearly made a meal of a pooping Pekingese, and that was enough for Louise to restrict Petie's range in the backyard. But for her amusement, Marty was dramatically tugging on the leash, pretending that the tiny pooch was dragging her across the grass.

Louise was thrilled at the way her canine companion and new lover had accepted each other, falling easily into a playful camaraderie that might have left someone else feeling a little jealous. But the way she connected with Marty made her want to share everything in her life, including that little black and white mama's boy who was valiantly trying to get to his preferred spot in the yard.

Watching the two go back and forth in the backyard, Louise's heart swelled with love for the blonde golf pro. After less than a year, Marty Beck was firmly entrenched in her life, and she was already richer for it. She marveled at how seamlessly they had meshed their lives, and how happy she was every day to have someone so wonderful to care about.

Marty was a jewel, albeit a diamond in the rough. Most people only knew her as the gregarious

golf pro, the jokester who had a quip for nearly every occasion. But those people had no idea of Marty's sweet side, the one who played make-believe with her five-year-old grandson; the one who brought flowers to her on the 14th of every month to commemorate the first night they kissed; or the one who went all shy each time they lay together as lovers.

"There you go, Petie." Marty unclipped his leash as they entered the lanai. "Go see if your mom has breakfast ready."

The terrier bolted for the kitchen, where breakfast was the second thing on his mind.

"Were you a good boy, Petie?" Louise smiled down as the excited pooch turned in circles with glee. Setting his bowl on the floor, she stooped low to scratch behind his flattened ears. "You're the best little dog in the world. Such a handsome boy! Look at you dance!"

This was his favorite moment of the whole day.

"Mmmm, somebody made pancakes." Marty eyed the syrup bottle and covered plates. "Let me wash my hands."

Louise carried their plates to the table on the lanai and sat down. In the days after Rhonda died, she'd read the paper during breakfast to pass the time, but now she saved that task for when Marty left for work. It was fun to start the day with the bubbly golf pro; Marty's companionship had changed her whole outlook on life.

"You're teeing off at noon?" Marty took a seat and set the plate cover aside.

"I think it's 12:30. I'll have to call Linda and double-check."

"I'll look in the book when I get there and call you if you want."

"Okay." Louise had a standing foursome on Tuesdays with her friends Shirley and Linda, and their new friend, Pauline Rourke.

"Did Pauline like her new driver?" Now that the novice golfer was swinging better, Marty had recommended the largest club head available to get more distance down the middle of the fairway.

"Are you kidding? We all liked it! I bet I got another 20 yards with it last week."

"If you want one, just say the word and I'll order it."

"Believe me, I'm considering it." Louise finished her breakfast and pushed her plate aside, pouring more coffee for both of them. "Are you going to tell me what you'd like for Christmas, or is it okay for me to pick out a plaid sweater on my own?"

Marty made a face at the vision of opening such a gift and trying to smile in appreciation. "I'll

think of something and let you know, I promise. Are you going to come to the Christmas party at the club with me?" It was only the week before Thanksgiving, but Marty had a lot to do to get ready for the club's member gala.

Louise hesitated out of habit. For 31 years, she and Rhonda had kept their private life private. Only their closest friends knew of their intimate relationship, and they had told no one at school, even though most of their coworkers probably surmised as much. But Marty was nothing like that. All of the staff at Pine Island Country Club knew they were lovers, and seemed to accept them. The assertive golf pro gave them no room for anything else; she was what she was, and she'd never really seen fit to pretend otherwise.

"If you want me to be there, then I shall be. But if you don't tell me what you want, you're going to be wearing a plaid sweater." In truth, she'd already purchased Marty's gift, airline tickets and their share of a condo rental in Palm Springs for March, the week of the LPGA Championship. They would go with their friends from North Carolina, Carol and Joyce, who made the trip every year, and with Florida friends Linda and Shirley.

"Okay, I'll look in the catalog at the pro shop."

"You know, honey, not every gift has to be something to do with golf."

"It doesn't?" Marty feigned surprise as she pushed her empty plate aside.

"No, believe it or not, some people give other things."

"Really? I think I'm having a crisis!"

"Well, calm yourself. If you find something in that catalog, you bring it on home. But you better hurry, or you won't have anything in your stocking but a lump of coal."

Marty grinned at Louise's teasing. She'd already gotten her sweetie a present, and it had nothing to do with golf. No sir, it was a ring, a pretty gold band with small diamonds that she hoped Louise Stevens would never take off.

"I better go. I'll see you about noon, okay?"

As she did every morning, Louise followed the shorter woman to the garage door and hugged her close. "I can't wait. I love you."

"I love you too."

The long kiss that followed sealed their declarations, and Marty left as usual wearing a broad smile.

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Louise laid out her golf clothes, dark blue shorts and a white shirt with a tan vest. Before her shower, though, she'd check her email. With Petie on her heels, she entered the small study and booted up her desktop computer. She had only one message today, this one from *Spartan01*. Louise smiled as she recognized the moniker for her former student, Michelle Sanders.

Michelle was in Louise's homeroom for all four years of high school, and in her math class for three. It was clear as early as her sophomore year that the girl had a fierce crush on her math teacher, but Louise was careful to neither encourage it, nor to push the impressionable student away. By her senior year, the crush had run its course, but as the teacher made plans to retire and move to Florida, Michelle asked if it would be okay to correspond by email.

The two traded friendly notes about once a month. At first, they chatted about Michelle's experiences as a freshman at Slippery Rock State University, where to her former teacher's delight, she'd decided to pursue a teaching degree in mathematics. Over time, Michelle began to share things of a more personal nature, and it was clear to Louise that the girl was probing for permission to be candid. When the teacher responded with genuine warmth and openness, Michelle told her that she was beginning to come to terms with her own sexual identity. She'd been pretty sure in high school that she was gay, but wasn't ready to follow that path. But having the chance to meet other lesbians at college had given her the courage to come out to herself, to her close friends, and to her favorite teacher.

Today's note was a nice surprise!

*Hi Miss Stevens,*

*Our semester is almost over! I'm already cramming for finals, but I think I'll make the dean's list again. I wanted to let you know that I'll be visiting my grandmother in Sarasota with my family over Thanksgiving. We fly in on Wednesday night and stay until Sunday morning. I see on the map that Sarasota is pretty close to Cape Coral, so I was wondering if there was any chance we could get together for lunch or something. It would be really nice to see you again, and I'd love to get some career advice. Let me know if you think it would work out, but if not, that's okay and I hope you have a very nice Thanksgiving.*

*Love, Michelle*

It would be fun to see Michelle again, Louise thought as she hit the reply key. She really enjoyed staying connected to the likable young lady, and wished in a way that Marty could meet her so she could get just a little idea of what life had been like for her at the front of the classroom. But an invitation like that was sort of risky, she thought. Michelle certainly wasn't stupid, and it

wouldn't take her long to figure out who exactly Marty was. That part of her life was private, not at all something Louise wanted to share with people from her school.

*Dear Michelle,*

*That's wonderful news about the dean's list, though I'm not the least bit surprised. And it's great news too that you're coming down with your family for Thanksgiving. Of course I'd love to see you again. Friday or Saturday would work for me, so if you'll set one of those days aside, I'll plan something. You want career advice? Retire! Have a safe trip down. I'm really looking forward to seeing you again.*

*Love, Louise Stevens*

The teacher had never made any bones at all about the fact that she loved each and every one of her students. To herself, she acknowledged that she loved some more than others, and Michelle was definitely one of those. It had touched Louise's heart to watch the young woman struggle so awkwardly with the teenage social scene. Truth be told, it had reminded her of her own uncomfortable adolescence.

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"I wish you could meet her, Marty. She's such a sweet girl." Louise deposited her partner's dinner tray on the coffee table and returned to the kitchen to retrieve her own. The hockey wars were on tap tonight, with Louise's Pittsburgh Penguins taking on Marty's Tampa Bay Lightning on TV.

"Why don't you invite her over for dinner?"

Louise shook her head. "I don't know, sweetheart. I just..." she trailed off.

"Are you ashamed of me, Lou?" Marty asked, mostly joking.

"No, of course not! But Rhonda and I always kept our relationship quiet at school. I mean a lot of people might have thought they knew something, but no one really knew for sure because we never told a soul."

"Didn't people ever come to your house?"

"Yeah, but we had separate bedrooms."

Marty looked at her in amazement.

"Not separate like that, I mean separate just for appearance sake," Louise clarified. "I think some people just thought we were old maids. Every now and then, I'd hear something whispered by the

kids, but it just wasn't talked about out loud, you know?"

"Yeah, I was more discreet when Katie was growing up because I didn't want her friends to give her a hard time. But she's the one who told me to be myself, that she'd handle it."

"That's because you and your daughter had a good relationship."

"That's true," Marty agreed. She and Katie had always been close. "And because there were times that she was more mature than her mother."

"Well that's still true, isn't it?" she teased. "You know, I bet more people know about you and me than knew about Rhonda and me, and we were together 31 years. Of course, I helped that along by that little scene in the pro shop at Elk Ridge," the proud woman muttered sheepishly.

Marty chuckled at the memory, but it certainly hadn't been funny at the time. Louise had been so worried that she'd declared her love in front of all the people who had gathered around to watch the paramedics deal with her bout of the flu. "You know, honey, it meant a lot to me that you said those things in front of everybody."

Without warning, tears sprang to Louise's crystal blue eyes as she relived that moment and the one that changed her life forever. Marty immediately pushed her dinner tray away and scooted closer to her lover, wrapping her in a comforting hug.

"I didn't say those things to Rhonda when she died, Marty. Not because they weren't true, but because other people were listening," she said as she began to sob. To this day, she was ashamed that she'd chosen propriety over telling Rhonda one last time that she loved her.

"It's okay, Lou. Rhonda knew how you felt about her." Marty rocked her partner slightly as she stroked the gray hair. It was hard sometimes not to feel a little jealous when Lou talked with such emotion of her former lover, but those feelings always prompted pangs of guilt that Rhonda was gone and Marty was here reaping the benefits.

Louise wasn't about to let herself off the hook that easily. Of course Rhonda had known, but the lack of candor had left her with things she had wanted to say one more time. She vowed never to miss an opportunity to remind Marty that she was loved.

"Do you know how I feel about you, little one?"

"Little one? Hello! Have you seen my ass lately, Lou? I can hardly get my pants zipped! And every time I turn around, you're filling my plate, and can I just say 'No thank you'? No! I have to eat every bite because it's all delicious and decadent and you fixed it with your loving hands. You better hope I outlive you, sweetheart, because if I don't, you're going to have to bury me in piano case!"

Louise burst out laughing at Marty's self-deprecating diatribe, not missing the chance to reach around and squeeze the derriere in question. She loved how easily her lover moved her from

sadness to joy.

"Now don't go rubbing it like that! You're going to stimulate it and make it grow even bigger!"

Louise quickly brought her hands back in front and cupped the blonde woman's already large breasts.

"And if those get any bigger, I won't be able to see to putt," she laughed, enjoying her partner's sudden playfulness, especially in the wake of such a sad moment.

"Marty Beck, you are so good for me!"

The green eyes sparkled with happiness. "You're good for me, too, Lou...even if you are making me fat! But if you keep this up, we're going to have to sleep on the floor."

"Okay by me." Louise didn't mind one bit that her already stocky lover had put on about 10 pounds during their first year together, though both of them needed to watch that as they got older. They were getting lots of exercise, and both got regular checkups.

"Hey, I have an idea!" Marty's attention went back to what had started the conversation. "Does Michelle play golf?"

"As a matter of fact, she does. Or at least she took it as her physical education elective last year. That's a good idea! I could bring her out for a round and introduce the two of you."

"Okay, but if I see her flirting with you, I'm going to take her out."

"She isn't going to flirt with me! I told you, she got over all that."

"I find it pretty hard to believe somebody could get over you, Lou."

Marty said the sweetest things.

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"Do I look okay?" Michelle Sanders had fretted for a week about what to wear, finally talking her mom into buying her some brand new shorts and a golf shirt. Both of her parents were pleased at the chance to see their daughter's former favorite teacher again.

"You look great!" Louise enthused. Her own outfit was one that Marty had given her for her birthday back in September, long black pants and a colorful shirt with a blue vest. "And your mom and dad are so proud of you!"



"Yeah, but unlike you, I think they're surprised about how well I've done in school," the sophomore joked.

"I don't really think so," the former teacher said seriously as they got into the car. "They know how smart you are."

"Well you're about to find out what a terrible golfer I am."

"It's just for fun, you know. I was just kidding with your dad about that dollar-a-hole thing."

"Oh, sure you were. But I brought cash just in case."

"No, you're my guest today, Michelle. So tell me some more about your friends. Who all do you keep up with from Westfield?"

On the hour-long drive back to the Cape, Michelle filled her teacher in on all the gossip about her classmates. For Louise, it was almost as good as being there. She really missed her teaching days, and still intended to volunteer at the high school one of these days. Meeting Marty Beck had put those plans on hold.

"Here we are. Welcome to Pine Island Country Club."

"Wow! This is nice. Are you sure I look alright?"

"You look fine. Stop worrying. Besides, we're probably going to play in the water, in the sand, and in the woods today, so you wouldn't want to be wearing your Sunday best."

The pair got out and opened the trunk. Inside were two sets of clubs, one belonging to Louise, the other to Rhonda. Michelle realized it right away when she spotted the monogrammed bag.

"These were Miss Markosky's clubs!"

"That's right. And you have the honor of being the first person to use them in over four years." It was a very sentimental moment when she'd taken her former lover's clubs from the closet, but Louise had no misgivings at all about letting Michelle use them. Rhonda wouldn't have minded one bit.

"Boy, that really is an honor."

Together, they entered the clubhouse, where Louise immediately went to browse the racks when she saw that Marty was busy behind the counter. If she killed a little time, she could make the introduction right here as they were signing in.

"Can I help you ladies with something?" The blonde golf pro finally sauntered over to where they were looking at jackets, eyeing the lanky youth with her partner.

"I don't need anything, but I think my friend here could use a visor."

"I think we can fix her right up."

"That's a good idea," Michelle agreed readily, reaching into her back pocket for her wallet. It would be kind of nice to have something with the club name on it, since it would always be a reminder of her favorite teacher.

"Michelle, this is my very dear friend, Marty Beck. She's one of the first people I met when I moved down here. Marty, I'd like you to meet one of my favorite students from 39 years at Westfield High School, Michelle Sanders."

Marty smiled. "Hi Michelle, and welcome to Pine Island. Any friend of Lou Stevens is a friend of mine."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Beck."

"Miss Beck!" Marty wailed. "Here, you can have this visor with my compliments if you promise never to call me that again!"

All three women laughed.

"The greens were cut this morning, so they're pretty quick. The pin placement is Number 3."

"Back center?"

"That's right. Have fun, and stop by later and let me know how you did." Marty looked up to catch her lover's wink and smiled broadly.

"She's really nice," Michelle remarked as they walked out to the cart.

"She sure is, but we didn't really hit it off the first couple of times I met her."

"Really? I can't imagine you not hitting it off with anybody."

"Well, she's...a kidder. I guess it took me a while to get used to it."

"Yeah, I worry sometimes that no one gets my weird sense of humor and they just think I'm a dork."

"You're not a dork. And you look fine," she repeated, tugging on the bill of the brand new visor. "Let's play some golf!"

As expected, the novice golfer was all over the course, in the water, in the woods, and in the sand. By mutual agreement, they stopped counting strokes after eight, and Michelle beat that

only three times on the front nine.

"So what's this about career advice?" Louise asked as they stopped to clean their balls on Number 10.

Michelle drew a deep breath, not quite knowing how to broach the topic, but really needing some guidance. She had imagined this conversation with Miss Stevens a number of times, even thinking that her former teacher might reveal something very personal.

"I'm...having second thoughts about going into teaching on account of what they're doing to Mr. Ulster." Darren Ulster was the band director who had taken Rhonda Markosky's place at Westfield High School.

"What do you mean? What's going on with Mr. Ulster?"

"There was this article in the paper last month about a guy who's being kicked out of the reserves because he's gay. The article mentioned that his partner was the band director at Westfield."

Louise had had an inkling that Darren was gay, but these were things they all left at home.

"So the next thing we know, the new superintendent announces at a school board meeting that Mr. Ulster's contract won't be renewed for next year. And since Mr. Ulster doesn't have tenure, he can't fight it. Mom sent me all the clippings because I was in the band. Of course, she and Dad have no idea just how close to home this all hits for me."

The retired teacher was appalled at this news. Gay teachers weren't exactly visible in their county, but there had never before been a case in which one was fired.

"Surely Mr. Meyer and the school board won't let that happen." Ted Meyer was principal at Westfield, and Louise's longtime friend. "Mr. Ulster's done a wonderful job and the students seem to like him a lot."

"I don't know, Miss Stevens. The school board keeps talking about what a good job this new superintendent is doing, so it's starting to sound like he can do whatever he wants."

For Louise, the serious turn of conversation had taken her focus from the game. Stepping aside, she waved a foursome through.

"So you're concerned that being gay will be a problem for you if you go into teaching?"

"Well, yeah. It's not fair that somebody can do a good job and be successful and still get fired for something that has nothing to do with teaching. I mean, it's not like he's even said anything at school. Even if he had of, he didn't do anything wrong." The frustration was evident in the young girl's voice.

"You're right, it isn't fair. I...", Louise shook her head in disbelief, "I just don't think Ted Meyer's

going to let that happen."

"There's a school board meeting right after my semester ends, and a couple of the band parents have asked to speak on Mr. Ulster's behalf. I was thinking I might try to get on the agenda."

"Really? What would you say?"

"Basically, I'd tell them that I think that gay students need positive role models at school. I was scared to death of what I was feeling back in high school, and there wasn't anybody at all that I could talk to about it."

Though it hadn't been said as a rebuke, Louise couldn't help but feel guilty at her secret. What was worse in her mind was that she knew that the girl probably suspected the truth, but was too respectful to ask.

"That would be a very courageous thing to do, Michelle."

"Yeah, but first, I have to tell my parents. I was thinking about saying something when we got back to Pittsburgh on Sunday. We'll only have a couple of hours to talk before I have to get back to school, but I think I should tell them in person."

The older woman waved another group through. Louise felt honored to be among the few people this young girl trusted with her most closely held secret. She remembered well what it was like to worry about how her family would react. After college, she'd told one of her brothers, and he told the other one, but she'd never talked to her parents. They knew, she guessed; she brought Rhonda to Wheeling almost every time she visited and they always shared a room. But it was never discussed.

"Those are big steps, Michelle. You won't be able to take any of it back, you know."

The girl nodded grimly. "I think my parents will be okay. I mean, it's not like this is going to come out of the blue or anything. But it pretty much guarantees that I'll never be able to go back to Westmoreland County to teach."

"Unless you and the others convince the board that this is stupid to even consider. They'll all be the laughing stock of the civilized world. This kind of thing just doesn't happen anymore." At least, Louise hoped it wouldn't happen; not to Darren, and certainly not at the place where she'd taught for 39 years.

Louise looked up to see the familiar blonde driving their way.

"You guys tired, or have you lost all your balls?" the pro quipped, coming to a stop in front of their cart.

"Neither," the tall woman answered. "We're just talking about something serious is all."

Marty picked up right away on her partner's tone and knew it wasn't something to joke about. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, but thank you." Louise cast her a look that said she'd explain later, and both women watched the golf pro disappear to the next hole.

"That was really nice of her to stop," the youth remarked.

"Yeah, that's the way Marty is. I'm lucky to have her...for a friend," she quickly added.

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"Hey, Petie!" The golf pro squatted down to greet the excited terrier. "I'm home, Lou!" She heard her lover talking in the study.

"He can't do this, can he?" Louise had finally reached Ted Meyer at his home to get to the bottom of the Darren Ulster mess. "I just think this is awful, Ted. What kind of message does that send to the kids who are starting to deal with this kind of thing? And what does it tell them about how they should treat people!"

Marty tiptoed into the room and sat down on the couch. She could hear the exasperation in Louise's voice, and couldn't imagine what had her so upset.

"So when is the hearing?" Without a word to her lover, the taller woman lovingly ran her hand through the blonde hair. "Who's going to speak on his behalf?"

The golf pro couldn't piece together what the conversation was about, but she'd never seen Louise so obviously irritated.

"Look, Ted...I need to talk to someone here about this before I make a decision, but if there's anything at all I can do to help Darren, I will." Her voice held a barely perceptible shake. "Yes, I think it does."

"What is it, Lou? What's wrong?"

Louise related the tale from Michelle and the confirmation from her former boss. "Michelle's going to lay it all on the line to speak up about this at the school board meeting. I tell you, it makes me ashamed."

"Lou, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You and Rhonda lived in a different time."

"I know, but that 19-year-old girl's risking everything because she wants to do what's right, and

I'm still sitting on this big secret, hiding my head because I'm too afraid to speak up."

"This isn't your battle, sweetheart."

"But it is, Marty. Battles like this belong to all of us. I've just never had the nerve to do my part." Louise gulped to gather her courage. "I want to help him, and I think I should."

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Marty tried to convince her that she didn't have to do this, but in the end, Louise made the difficult decision to journey to Greensburg to speak to the board. Even their friends Shirley and Linda, who had also taught in the county's school system, had thrown in their support. In the three years since they'd left Pennsylvania, they'd reveled in their newfound freedom.

By the time she'd made up her mind, Ted Meyer had been unable to add Louise's name onto the board's agenda at the last minute; instead, he promised to relinquish to her his allotted time. So like all of the others, she would be given four minutes to state her support for Darren Ulster.

"Call me when you get there," Marty asked as they pulled to the curb at Southwest Florida Regional Airport.

"I will."

"And call me tonight when it's finished." She squeezed the long slender hand one more time.

"I will, sweetheart. I love you." Leaning across the car seat, she planted a sweet kiss on her partner's cheek. Louise knew that her lover sometimes struggled when she was confronted with the specter of Rhonda. She wanted Marty to know how much she appreciated her extraordinary effort to accept all of this. "Thank you for being so understanding."

The next 24 hours would be grueling for the 64-year-old woman. Louise was set to fly to Pittsburgh, changing planes in Charlotte. Ted would meet her plane and the two of them would hopefully grab a quick bite to eat before going to the school board meeting. When it was over, she'd stay the night at his home, and his wife Dottie would drive her back to Pittsburgh in the morning to catch an early flight home.

Under other circumstances, she'd have enjoyed a chance to visit the school and see some of her former colleagues. But she'd promised Marty that she'd go with her to the Christmas party at the club tomorrow night; and besides, after the remarks she'd make tonight, she wasn't sure she could face her fellow teachers.

Wouldn't some of them be surprised to know that the two old maids had been cavorting for 31 years, she thought, chuckling to herself.

*"Does this feel good?" Louise asked as she rubbed her friend's aching feet. Rhonda stood for most of the day, usually moving back and forth across the band room to work with individual students or instrument sections. At the end of the day, her feet were swollen and tired, and Louise would massage them for sometimes an hour or more.*

*For Rhonda, it was sure handy having a roommate who was so generous. And it was divine to feel Louise Stevens' hands on her body, even if it was only to relieve the soreness in her feet. "It's wonderful, Lou!"*

*Unbeknownst to Rhonda Markosky, Louise relished any excuse to run her hands along her friend's legs, or any other body part that seemed to need attention. She enjoyed the fact that their friendship included such physical closeness.*

*"My shoulders and back are what's aching tonight, though. I had to stow all those heavy instruments in the lockers. I'm going to have one of the kids come in over the summer and help me move all the tubas and bass drums to the bottom shelves and put the lighter stuff up top." Today had been their last day of school.*

*"You want me to rub your shoulders?"*

*"You don't have to do that."*

*"I don't mind. Why don't you get changed into your nightgown and lie down on your bed? I'll come in in a minute and see if I can work some of the soreness out," Louise offered innocently.*

*"Are you sure you don't mind?"*

*"No, not at all. I'll go put my pajamas on too. That way, when you fall asleep, I can just go on to bed without making a lot of noise to get ready."*

*"Okay, if you're sure."*

*A few minutes later, Rhonda was face down on her bed with Louise beside her, firmly kneading the stiff muscles in her back.*

*"Do you, uh, want me to use some lotion to make it feel better?" That would mean that Rhonda would have to lift her gown, Louise knew.*

*"Sure."*

*Louise marveled at the expanse of skin as Rhonda tugged the gown above her head, laying it beside her on the pillow. Acutely aware that the woman was now completely naked beneath the covers, she warmed the lotion in her hands before spreading it*

*smoothly across the broad back.*

*"That feels great," Rhonda murmured.*

*It certainly does, Louise thought, as her hands stroked the flattened planes. Pushing up from the base of the spine, she pressed the heels of her hands into the taut muscles on either side all the way to the shoulders, trailing her fingertips softly down the sides so that they barely brushed the sides of Rhonda's breasts. Each time, she began her ascent a half-centimeter lower, almost at the top of the beautiful, shapely behind, not quite visible from beneath the covers. If Rhonda allowed her to, she would repeat this motion for hours.*

*In all her life, Louise had never been so sexually aroused. Though she felt guilty over her own enjoyment of this massage, she got no signal from Rhonda to stop. Instead, she heard a deep sigh from the woman beneath her.*

*"Lou," Rhonda said softly as she started to turn over.*

*At once, the taller woman leaned back, suddenly afraid she had crossed a line. But Rhonda rolled completely onto her back, her breasts now exposed in apparent invitation. The woman's hazel eyes were pleading, and she reached to clasp Louise's wrists in her hands.*

*Louise sat frozen, afraid to move, and afraid not to. Did Rhonda want this too? Her answer came when the other woman led her hands....*

"Are you finished with this?" the flight attendant asked, gesturing toward the empty cup in Louise's hand.

"Yes, of course." Louise spotted the airport below as they circled to land from the north. Her life had been full of moments of truth. Tonight would be another.

It was after four o'clock when she exited to baggage claim at the Greater Pittsburgh International Airport. Her former boss greeted her with a warm hug. They'd spoken not a word about what she would say this evening, but he'd gotten a subtle confirmation of his suspicions when she'd asked him to prepare a couple of photographs from Westfield's yearbook for presentation on a screen.

"It's really good to see you again, Louise. You look great. I'd say that retirement agrees with you." He wheeled the car into traffic for the hour-long trip to Greensburg.

"Thank you, Ted. I think life in general agrees with me now. I know that when I left here, I was filled with sadness, and now I have happiness back in my life again."

"And does this happiness have a name?" he probed gently.

"Marty." Louise knew from the look on his face that her answer hadn't helped him much. "She doesn't like to be called Martha."



The principal smiled and glanced over at his smirking passenger. "I'm really glad for you, Louise."

Over a hurried dinner, the retired teacher told her boss - her friend - all about Marty Beck and how they'd spent the summer and fall in the North Carolina mountains. It was delightful to be able to open up about the one thing that had made her so happy in the past year.

"You'll have to bring her with you on your next visit," Ted insisted.

"I might just do that. But you and Dottie also have a standing invitation at our house, either in Florida or North Carolina."

Louise insisted on picking up the tab, and soon, they were on their way to the school board offices.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Are you kidding? I just hope I don't get up there and forget how to speak."

"You'll be fine. Listen, I'm going to use about 30 seconds of our time to introduce you, if that's okay. This new superintendent doesn't know Louise Stevens, and I think he should."

Louise nodded, shaking in anticipation as they pulled into the parking lot. Getting out of the car, she spotted her former student Michelle walking with her parents.

"Ted, will you excuse me? I need to speak to the Sanders family."

"Of course."

Louise walked quickly to catch up with Michelle and her parents. "Michelle?"

The student turned at the familiar voice, her eyes wide with surprise. "Miss Stevens!"

The former teacher greeted the family like old friends. "Mr. Meyer tells me that you're on the agenda for tonight."

"That's right. I can't believe you're here!" Michelle said with excitement. Her teacher had given no clue that she would make the trip.

"It was important to me to speak out about this, too. I'm so glad you told me what was going on."

"We're very proud of Michelle," Will Sanders spoke up, placing his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

"I'm very proud of her too," Louise agreed. Her voice filled with emotion, she pulled the girl into

a strong hug and told her, "Michelle, I want you to know...that I think you're one of the most courageous people I've ever known."

Coming from her favorite teacher, those were words that Michelle Sanders would treasure forever.

Ted Meyer caught up with the group and they marched into the assembly hall with determination. The noisy room quieted when the meeting was called to order.

Louise recognized the chairman...Donald...Donald Sumter. He'd graduated in one of her first classes, back in...1964. It wasn't that he was memorable in high school; rather, he'd been on the school board for almost four terms, now in his 10th year. And the third one from the left was Annette Hartig, though her name was now Mowrey. She'd graduated back in the mid-70s, and she'd been in the band! Louise would use that.

For more than an hour, the board dispensed with other business; choosing vendors and contractors for specific projects, hearing requests for redrawing school boundaries; and proclaiming a special day to honor the Greensburg Golden Lions as State Football Champs. Finally, they reached new business, an open forum to hear from the community regarding the announced non-renewal of Darren Ulster's teaching contract.

Sumter began with the ground rules: "There are five persons on the agenda for this discussion, and each will be given the allotted four minutes to deliver their remarks. No remarks will be heard from those not on the agenda. Following these speakers, the board will adjourn to discuss the issue in private, as all issues pertaining to personnel are not subject to open review."

Taking the podium first was Darren Ulster himself, who spoke not of his sexual orientation, but of his love of teaching. He implored the board to continue to allow him to live his dream as a band director in a top school district, and he promised to always perform his duties in a professional manner.

The next two speakers were band parents, the first of whom spoke of how involvement in the band had awakened in his teenage son an interest in school. He attributed this new zeal for learning directly to the influence of Darren Ulster. The second parent spoke of Ulster's dedication to his work, evidenced by the consistent high marks in regional band competitions. Her daughter had parlayed her first chair clarinet status in such an excellent band into a college music scholarship. This too, she said, was a product of the encouragement and guidance provided by Darren Ulster.

Finally, Michelle Sanders' name was called. The girl nervously approached the podium and began.

"Hello. My name is Michelle Sanders, and I used to play in the band at Westfield High School, but I graduated two years ago. Thank you for letting me come tonight to speak on behalf of Mr. Ulster. There are three things I want to say."

It was obvious to Louise that Michelle had written down her remarks and practiced saying them over and over. Now realizing how nervous she'd grown as she waited her turn, she wished she'd done the same.

"First, I want to say that I think Mr. Ulster is a wonderful teacher. He was friendly to all of the students, and he always encouraged us to do our best.

"Second, I want to say that as a student who discovered in high school that she was gay, I would have liked very much to have had someone like Mr. Ulster to talk to. I have a number of gay friends at college now, and all of us felt like outsiders in our high schools because there wasn't anyone there to talk to about our experiences. We didn't fit in, no matter how hard we tried. One of my friends at college even said she tried to kill herself back then because she felt so all alone. I think the schools should do more for all of the students, not just the ones who are straight. They already get all the breaks."

The young woman's words weren't polished, but they were nonetheless from the heart. Her remarks held just a trace of that youthful attitude of defiance that Louise had come to appreciate over the years.

"And third, I wanted to say that I have an interest in how all of this turns out because I am studying at Slippery Rock State to become a math teacher. I want to teach because I love working with numbers, and because a math teacher inspired me. But I also want to be able to be who and what I am, without worrying that I can be fired just because I happen to be gay.

"That's all I have to say, and thank you very much for listening."

Michelle came back to her chair as several of the observers clapped. Her mother and father both stood and hugged her briefly before sitting back down. Louise leaned over and patted her arm as Ted Meyer made his way to the podium.

"Good evening, Mr. Superintendent, Chairman, and board members. I'm Ted Meyer, the principal at Westfield High School. With your permission, I'd like to yield my minutes on the floor to Miss Louise Stevens, a former teacher of mine who retired two years ago. Since you're new to this area, Mr. Superintendent, I'd like to point out that Miss Stevens was the 1979 and 1991 Teacher of the Year in Westmoreland County. The best part of my job is leading dedicated teachers like Louise Stevens and Darren Ulster."

Louise took her place at the podium as her former boss turned on the slide projector. Behind her, a large picture of Rhonda Markosky directing the high school band graced the screen.

"Thank you, Mr. Meyer. Mr. Superintendent, Chairman Sumter - nice to see you again - and board members, hello and thank you for hearing me tonight.

"I'd like to tell you a little about the woman in the picture. She was Rhonda Markosky, and she held the position of band director at Westfield for 32 years. As many of you know, Miss Markosky died in 1998, at the front of her band room doing what she loved most. Mrs. Mowrey,

you were in Miss Markosky's band, were you not?"

The board member nodded, smiling at the high school memory.

"I could tell you about the thousands of students she inspired over the years, and the hundreds of awards she garnered for the school. But here was one of our proudest moments at Westfield."

Ted Meyer changed the screen to a front-page headline from the local newspaper: *Westfield's Markosky named Pennsylvania State Teacher of the Year.*

"That was in 1986. Rhonda Markosky is the only Westmoreland County teacher to win that state honor, so I don't have to say anymore about what kind of teacher she was." She nodded toward Meyer, who changed to the final slide, a yearbook picture of the two teachers side by side, bundled up warmly as they cheered their football team.

"What I would like to tell you is that Rhonda Markosky was gay. I know that because she was my partner for 31 years. Throughout our years as teachers here, we kept that private, afraid that it might somehow impact our jobs. Obviously, we had good reason to feel that way. Now that I've retired, I don't have to hide from prejudices or from unfounded fears. I can stand here now and speak on behalf of the hundreds of staff, teachers and administrators in the Westmoreland County school system who are gay but who are afraid to come forward. I implore you to let them do their jobs without risk of job discrimination. Let them make their contributions to the education of your children as Rhonda Markosky did; and as Darren Ulster still does.

"And when you resolve this matter of one band director, I ask you to consider making it part of your county-wide policy to make discrimination against gays a thing of the past, as much of the country has already done. Take this opportunity to teach the children of this county that no one deserves to be thrown away. You and the students will be better for it.

"Thank you."

The proud woman stepped down amidst sporadic applause that erupted into a sustained chorus of cheers. Red-faced, she walked with Meyer back to their seats, where Michelle sat with tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry I never told you, Michelle," Louise whispered, misreading the emotion as betrayal.

"It's okay, Miss Stevens. I understand. It's just...I'm so proud of you for saying all of that."

"No, I'm the proud one, Michelle. You were *my* inspiration this time."

When the board returned to chambers to discuss the issues and vote on the personnel moves, Louise was inundated with a steady stream of people offering their congratulations and support. One was Darren Ulster.

"Thank you, Lou. It means the world to me that you came all this way to speak up for me like

you did. I am so honored to have your support, and I'd give my right arm to be half the teacher Rhonda Markosky was."

"You're a great teacher in your own right, Darren. You have such a bright future, and I only hope you get to play it out. If not here, you have to find another place. You just can't waste that talent and enthusiasm."

When the throngs of people had come and gone, Louise found herself sitting alone with a still-crying Michelle Sanders.

"Are you going to do that all night?" she teased.

Michelle chuckled and blew her nose. "No, I hope not. But everything you said was so sweet. And it just breaks my heart that Miss Markosky is gone and now you're all alone."

Louise put her long arm around the young woman's shoulder. "It broke my heart to lose her, Michelle, and I was sad for a long time. But I'm not alone anymore."

"You're not?"

"No. I met someone new when I moved to Florida, and I was lucky enough to fall in love again."

Michelle warmed at the idea of her favorite teacher and friend having someone to love. "Well, I hope I get to meet her the next time I go see my grandmother," she stated hopefully.

"You already have."

The girl thought for a moment before her eyes grew wide with surprise. "Marty Beck, from the golf course?"

"That's right," Louise answered grinning.

"Awwww, Marty's so cute!"

Louise laughed aloud. "Yes, she certainly is. And the next time you come down, the three of us will spend some time together. I think you and Marty will like each other a lot."

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Louise folded the newspaper over to follow the story from the front page to its jump on page nine. It was here she was quoted.

*"Of course I'm disappointed. I'm glad to know that the vote was close, though. It gives me hope that one or two forward thinking people could change the face of this school board at the next election and this injustice can be rectified. I look to the younger generations to take the lead in that, either through their parents or for those who are old enough, by exercising their right to vote. I've always had faith that the spirit of our youth would lead us all to a better way of life, to a world where we'd celebrate our differences rather than try to insulate ourselves from them."*

The retired woman was exhausted. The late decision by the board to uphold the superintendent's recommendation had left her feeling drained and defeated; she struggled to sleep, and was now fighting the discomfort of the cramped airplane seat.

Despite her failure to sway the board's opinion, Louise Stevens felt a liberation of spirit she had never known. Rhonda would have been so proud to have seen her stand before all of those parents, administrators, and board members, declaring their love with confidence and dignity. Her only regret was that they hadn't both done it sooner, daring anyone to challenge their right to do the job they loved.

Marty would have been proud of her too. Ah, Marty! After just one night away, Louise missed the comforting embrace of her lover and the smile that warmed her from across the room. Marty had been so supportive of her once she'd decided to do this, listening to her spout ideas about what to say, and helping to select the pictures to show. Rhonda would have liked the little golfer, and there was no doubt that Marty would have hit it off with the band director.

It was funny in a way that Louise had never thought to compare her feelings for Marty to those for Rhonda. She always felt lucky that she got to have them both. Rhonda was right for her then; and Marty was right for her now.

*"...please bring your tray tables to the upright and locked position. The flight attendants will be passing through the cabin one last time to collect any remaining service items. We'll be landing shortly."*

Louise peeked out at the swamp below, glad to be back home and eager to be in her lover's arms.

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Louise awoke somewhat disoriented at the ringing phone. The room was already dark, which meant it was after five on this December evening. Through the bedroom door, she could hear Marty answer the call in a quiet voice.

A nap this late in the day was a rarity for the retiree, but the last 24 hours had sapped her energy. Louise smiled as she turned beneath the covers. It was also rare for her to sleep in the nude, but she and Marty had made sweet love when they returned home from the airport. She had needed

badly to show her lover how she felt, just as she had needed to feel alive in Marty's love. The last thing she remembered was feeling her lover's arms and legs draped across her body as Marty gently stroked her brow and whispered words of love.

The golfer's silhouette appeared in the doorway. "Sweetheart?"

"I'm awake. Who is it?"

"It's Ted Meyer."

Louise sat up and tucked the sheet beneath her armpits, scooting over and patting the bed for Marty to sit. Petie joined them, taking his place on Louise's opposite side.

"Hi Ted...yeah, but I couldn't believe how tired I was. This getting old stuff isn't for sissies." Unconsciously, she stroked her lover's back as she listened to the news. "You're kidding! So what happens now?" She gripped Marty's shoulder with excitement. "That's great news, Ted. I'm so glad you called...No, it wasn't me at all. It was just the right thing to do...Thanks, bye."

"So what's the news?"

"You won't believe this, Marty! People saw the story in the paper today and they started calling the school board. Ted said they had almost five hundred calls before lunch, and that most people were mad. Apparently, enough of the board members got worried about their jobs and they called an emergency meeting and reversed their decision. Darren's going to get to keep his job after all."

"Lou, that's great! You did it!"

"No, I didn't do it. We all did it. It was plain as day that they were wrong, and with all the arguments in the paper, and then all the parents calling, they finally saw it themselves."

"Well, I'm still proud of you," Marty said.

"You've done this to me, Marty. Being with you just makes me want to tell everybody how happy I am all the time." Louise wrapped both arms around her partner's waist.

"You make me happy too, Lou. Are you still planning on going to the Christmas party tonight, or do you need to rest some more?"

"I'm coming with you, sweetheart. Let me go get in the shower...."

"Hold on a minute," Marty stopped her. "I know it's early, but how would you like to open a Christmas present?"

"It's nine days until Christmas!"

"I know, but this present's special. I think you might like to have it when we go out tonight. I know I'd like it."

"Okay," Louise nodded.

Marty disappeared and returned with a wrapped shoebox.

"You want me to wear new shoes?"

"Just open it."

Louise did as she was told, folding back the tissue paper to find several sleeves of golf balls. "I get it. You want me to take these new golf balls in my purse so I can slug anyone you flirt with."

"I do not flirt," the golfer said defensively. Marty nudged the box in the center aside to reveal a velvet jewelry box in the bottom. "I couldn't have you guessing what it was," she explained. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

And a surprise it was, as the sight of the diamond-studded gold band nearly stole her breath. "Oh, Marty!"

"Will you wear this for me, Lou?"

"Oh, Marty!" Louise had always been jealous of those who got to proudly display the symbol of their love. But trading rings with Rhonda would have prompted too many unwelcome questions. And now, Marty was offering to have her wear this beautiful band.

The blonde woman slipped it gently over the knuckle on Louise's left hand. "I'd appreciate it if you'd wear it all the time, Lou, and if you'd always let it remind you that I love you, and that I'm going to share the rest of your life."

"Oh, Marty!" It seemed to be all she could say. Finally, she found more words. "It's the most beautiful ring I've ever seen. But what about you? Shouldn't I get a ring for you too?"

"I can't really wear one, sweetheart. You know, I have these fat knuckles and then my hands sweat all day, and I usually have on a glove. But maybe if you went for a nose ring, I could do that!"

"You are so silly, Marty Beck. Just for that, I might take you up on it and get one so I can lead you wherever I want you to go."

"You don't need a nose ring for that, Lou. All you have to do is go somewhere and I'll follow you."

"Oh, Marty! I love you so much."



"I love you, too," the blonde woman answered as she hugged her lover close. "So did you get me a plaid sweater?"

"Did you want a plaid sweater? I still have eight shopping days until Christmas," she teased.

"No, that's okay. But I will be wearing something special tonight."

"What's that?"

"I thought I'd tuck a little mistletoe in my cap and see if I could get a certain tall, blue-eyed retired schoolteacher to kiss me all night."

"Well you'd better not put that cap on until you're ready to come home, or you're not even going to know you're at a Christmas party," Louise warned.

"I guess we should go put in an appearance then, huh?"

Louise was looking forward to the chance to take her partner's side at the party tonight. She wanted people to see their happiness together, and she wanted them to know that she was proud to call Marty Beck her partner. She would always regret that she and Rhonda hadn't publicly declared their love for one another; but with Marty, she had a chance to love out loud, and she wasn't going to let it pass her by.

**The End.**

Thanks for reading more of Marty and Lou. Drop me a line and let me know what you thought.  
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