

SOLO

—

A Love Letter From Dad

(89,656 words)

A Novel

by

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PROLOGUE

Destiny. It's a weird thing. Sort of like apples. If you bite into a rotten one, hey, you can always plant the seeds and start over.

Now take my friend, Paul. Here's a man who knows about destiny. Good human being, respected in his community, solid job, great kids, sweetheart of a wife. Let me tell ya, it was as though he had a padlock on life. This guy was the icon of spiritual strength for everyone else. You know, like Job in the Bible. Then three years ago Destiny whips out her master key, unlocks the padlock, and BOOM! Paul's whole life begins to unravel like an old knit sweater.

First, the man loses his wife. She'd been his closest earthly friend for over 25 years. Dazed, spinning down like a bird with a broken wing, he smacks the pavement. He was like a little boy lost. He daydreamed about his sweetheart until he ran his job into a ditch over it. He rarely talked to friends anymore. And then the kicker; his grown children decided they no longer respected their father. Now *that's* rotten apples, pal. I mean, what's a man to do?

In Paul's case, he planted the seeds of destiny and started another orchard. And the fruit was ... ohhhhh, sooooo sweet.

ONE

Sunrise Marina, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Sometime during the past few years.

The young woman searched Paul's eyes as she sipped her coffee in silence. After long seconds she asked softly, simply, "Would you like to spend the night with *me*?"

Whoa! Hit the pause button. I'm afraid I'm running ahead of myself. Let me rewind about twenty minutes of this film and give you a little background first. Okay, let's try it again.

The afternoon thunderstorm blew into the Fort like the ghosts of Black Beard's fleet—grey sails billowing, cannons thundering, swords flashing. Paul turned his face away from the peppering rain as he hurried back to *Solo*, the aged-but-elegant wooden sailboat that had been his bachelor's pad for the past five weeks. But the two-fisted squall bullying its way ashore today was calm compared to the five-foot-six blond hurricane he would find waiting in the cabin.

He stepped over onto the bobbing rain-slick deck, balancing himself with the two plastic bags of groceries he was carrying, then eased down into the cockpit. Ducking under the canvas dodger he noticed the companionway hatch swinging back and forth slowly in rhythm with the rocking boat. First open, then bumping gently closed, then open again, it paused with deliberation at the end of each swing. Not as he had left it. He blocked it open with his toe.

"Hello . . ." he called below.

No answer. Nevertheless, he had that feeling.

He descended the ladder into the heart of the sloop and was met by a pleasant though not-altogether-foreign surprise. A seductive fragrance swirled close around him like a veiled dancer, teasing his manly curiosity to follow. He didn't argue. It led him below and he was not disappointed.

One glimpse of her lovely legs and those huggy white shorts made him wonder if he might have to jump-start his pacemaker. He closed his eyes and tasted a lingering whiff of that provocative scent once more.

Mmmmmmm ... seems like an old friend.

When Paul's vision adjusted to the dimly-lit cabin he recognized the young woman as one of the members of the all-female amateur crew of the 46 foot racing sloop, *Bonny Belle*, moored on the north side of the marina.

The delicate Rembrandt light spilling in from the port behind wrapped softly around the girl's hair and shoulders, blushing as it stroked her cheek. It set her apart from the dull shadows beyond, rendering her an exquisite Venus, a living sculpture of feminine loveliness.

"Well hello," Paul said, setting the groceries on the narrow counter. "This is a pleasant surprise. Didn't you kids have enough fun with me last Saturday? Back for more?"

He turned on the cabin light above the settee where she lounged, tanned legs crossed, leafing indifferently through the first several pages of his manuscript that was lying on the navigation desk.

She looked up, unsmiling. "I'm not a kid." She stretched, dropping the pages back onto the others like so much junk mail. "There's something I'd like to talk with you about. You weren't here so I invited myself aboard."

She locked her fingers around one of those exquisite knees and granted him a grudging empty smile.

"That's fine. Mi casa, su casa. How about some coffee?"

"Might as well."

He clicked the dim-witted galley light on, then pulled the companionway hatch closed against Black Beard's men, who were now swarming the boat.

"What's the perfume?" Paul asked, stripping off a handful of paper towels and drying his face and arms.

"Elizabeth Arden something-or-other. I don't remember."

"Reminds me of a Lizzy Arden scent I used to buy my wife years ago. Drove ... me ... nuts."

The girl responded with an ask-me-if-I-care raise of her eyebrows, then shifted her legs.

"Excuse me while I put on a dry shirt," Paul said, ducking into the small stateroom.

He felt he was out of sight around the corner but she had a perfect side view of his XL frame, bared from the waist up, reflected in the mirror mounted on the open door. She jiggled her foot, flopping her sandal nervously as she inspected the boat's tight interior.

A small oak-framed photograph of an attractive woman, perhaps in her late forties, hugging two teenagers and a wolf-looking dog, hung crooked above the old HP computer. The woman's smile was genuinely infectious. Something about her spoke of warmth and love, life and family. A snapshot of a grinning perhaps-three-year-old boy, being licked to death by that same wolfish dog, was wedged in the lower left-hand corner of the frame.

A blue-denim work shirt and dingy Starter athletic socks lay in a pile on the far end of the settee. The girl rubbed her palms together and tensed her jaw as though the mere thought of this man's dirty clothes soiled her hands.

A largish pair of dampish green-and-yellow-plaid swim trunks hung from a hook by the slim-line closet. A small waste basket—appropriately, a white plastic pig sitting up begging with his enormous mouth spread wide—overflowed with discarded printer paper. She picked up several wadded pieces from the floor and shoved them down into the pig's throat. Two days worth of dirty dishes filled the small sink and the general appearance of the place, in the visitor's mind, shouted, "Slob!"

The sloop itself brought back memories of a tiny travel trailer her father had borrowed for a vacation once when she was seven. She remembered thinking then that the trailer was a sardine can for their family of three but would have made a wonderful play house for her, alone. Ditto for this joker and his little boat.

The raw scent of fresh-slapped English Leather lured the visitor's attention back for a second glance at the man in the mirror. She noticed two handfuls of hair curling on his deep chest and she couldn't help thinking that her father, who'd passed away nine years earlier, would have been a broom handle compared to this guy. Not bad looking for an older man, though, this pseudo-sailor. Reminded her of a younger ... Harrison Ford? Naaaaa!

She surveyed the unmade bed, closed her eyes, and turned away, clutching the front edge of the cushion with both hands. She drew a deep breath through her nostrils. The locker-room scent of a man living alone in cramped quarters—quite unfamiliar to the young woman—swelled within her, causing an inexplicable sense of exhilaration mixed with slight nausea. She shuddered these feelings off and wondered how she had let herself get talked into this. *Let's get this over with and get out of here.*

Paul pulled a T-shirt from a drawer, stretched it over his head and shoulders, and tucked it down into his jeans as he stepped back into the main cabin. The shirt displayed a faded-red Corvette with the words, “Vettes on the Rockies, 1999.”

She averted her eyes when he caught her reading it.

“Let me stow these groceries,” he said. He began stuffing things askew into the small cupboards. “What brings you around on a day like this?”

She ignored the question and continued her examination of the mahogany-trimmed cabin. Shortly she spotted the top half of an old *Sport’s Illustrated* swimsuit issue sticking halfway out of a jumbled pile of research material on the couch beside her. She pulled it free and sized up the cover photo; a young Kathy Ireland, whose picture now shared the appearance of the aged and wrinkled cover. After flipping pages in chunks the young woman looked up.

“What’s this?” Her sarcasm oozed like swamp tar. “Going to buy a *swimsuit* for your *daughter*?”

“No! My daughter lives in Colorado. Besides, the swimsuits in that magazine are for the boys.”

Paul gave his guest an eyebrow-raising juvenile grin. She returned a flat no-frills stare. He slid the milk and eggs into the “ET” sized refrigerator, then began digging through a drawer for the can opener.

“Who’s *Button*?” the girl asked, dipping her head in the direction of the manuscript. “This mystery woman in your story?”

“How far did you read?”

“Couple pages. Sounds to me like you’re a dirty old man writing trash like that about some *beautiful young woman*.” She breathed the last words with weighty Garbo lust, pointing Kathy Ireland at the manuscript with collective summary judgment.

A *Dumb and Dumber* grin smeared across Paul’s face. “You know what they say. Don’t judge a guy by his cover.”

He cranked open the coffee and savored that burly aroma as it mingled with the sweet lingering scent of perfume. Maxwell House dances with Elizabeth Arden. Paul visualized a Paul-Bunyan character waltzing a Cinderella sweetheart through *Solo*’s tight cabin.

“Beauty and the beast,” he mumbled.

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Paul stole a prolonged sideways glimpse of his attractive visitor as he scooped coffee into the basket. Her soft slender legs, which appeared to Paul to have stepped out of a Hanes commercial, originated from a pair of short white frayed Daisy Mae Levi cutoffs—which did the girl full justice, by the way. Her white halter top, tied in a bow behind her graceful neck, hugged her perfectly proportioned bosom.

Lord, this kid's an angel.

Her hair was a waterfall of spun gold, tumbling over her shoulders and flowing half the length of her back in a full loose French-braid, woven in and out with a blue-satin ribbon. She teased a few strands at her temple, whisking them to the side with her dainty fingertips.

Her hair reminded Paul of that sexy shampoo commercial he'd seen several years before. In the commercial, after the women washed their hair with this particular product, their tresses would come to life and whisper to guys everywhere, “Touch me ... hold me ... kiss me, I'm yours.” The women never said a word in the commercials but their teasing hair caused pandemonium.

This girl's hair is whispering to me.

Her eyes, Paul judged, were as soft and blue as a Colorado-evening sky, matching the ribbon in her hair, and her sensuously thick brows and long beguiling lashes were the exquisite frame to this priceless pair of cameos. Her thin nose formed an elegant bridge down to her lips and was capped by a cute suntanned-and-peeling kissable little button.

Her lips, soft full and inviting, formed a perfect Cupid's bow, turning up at the corners ever so slightly into devilish curves, barely betraying that natural smile which was hiding there, peeking around the corner of the mask. They seemed to have a life of their own, these lips, able to tease without her face knowing it, or at least without showing that it was in on the game.

I've met lips like these somewhere before.

Her skin was so soft and clear it glowed like moonbeams on a tropical bay, highlighting her bewitching feminine beauty.

This young woman is more than a cover girl. If she would just let go with a smile she could melt any normal bozo like a raspberry snowcone dropped on a July sidewalk.

Paul was struck by the realization—well, actually, it was more like being run over by a log truck—that the mysterious goddess sitting here within arm's reach was perhaps the most

beautiful he had ever met, in the flesh. *She's the kind of young woman that would make any red-blooded American guy want to step up and steal a soft little kiss. She'd slap his face, no doubt, but it'd be worth it.*

She caught Paul staring and looked away, rubbing her thighs. A few seconds later she crossed those beautiful legs again—Give me an L, give me an E, give me a G and S! Goooooo, team!—and went back to her sandal-jiggling routine.

Like dripping water the girl's unconscious sandal shaking was driving Paul bananas. He turned and snatched the thing off her dainty foot, startling her.

“What do you like in your coffee?” he asked, handing the footwear back, along with a polite, albeit forced, smile.

“Black.” She glared as she replaced the sandal, then lifted her foot to the side to straighten an ankle bracelet she was wearing.

Whew! Date with an angel! Paul man-handled his attention back to the coffee. After a minute he rubbed away the condensation and glanced out a starboard port above the counter. Black Beard's cut-throats had moved ashore and were flooding down the streets and running across lawns and parking lots, raiding and looting every corner of the city. Not one was spared. Cannon-fire thunder boomed overhead as lightning torched the clouds.

Paul smoothed his mustache with a thumb and index finger as he studied his guest. “Looks like the storm came to dinner,” he said to himself.

“What?”

He jacked his thumb toward heaven. “Sounds like God is bowling again.”

The girl thought that was undoubtedly the single most-stupid thing she had ever heard any human being say, although she had to work to keep from smiling.

Paul picked up his glasses from beside the computer and slipped them on, folded his tanned arms, and leaned back against the counter. Coffee-pot music sputtered and gurgled in the background, serenading the couple.

“So ... to what do *Solo* and I owe the honor of your visit?”

She hesitated, adjusting a sandal strap. “Several of us on the crew were talking and we agreed, we owe you an apology for how we treated you last Saturday. I mean, with our hat-overboard stunt and everything. We were playing keep away with Doni's cap and it sailed over the side into the river, just as you walked by.”

“To say the least!”

“We never expected you to be the big hero.”

“Then why were you guys all yelling something about Poor Doni going overboard?”

“We were just joking with her.”

“Some joke. I jump in to save your friend, who I thought was drowning, make a total fool of myself, then find out it was only her cap? The stuff in my wallet hasn’t dried yet. And what if I’d been eaten by an alligator?”

“What can I say? One thing led to another and, hey, we’re sorry. In fact, the crew wants to get to know you better so they elected me to come over.”

“That’s nice ... so?”

“So, I’d like to ask you a few questions about yourself.”

“What kind of questions?”

“General stuff.”

Paul adjusted his watch. “GO FOR IT.”

She dug around in her purse and pulled out a pen and small notebook. “It’s okay then?”

“Sure. I interview each of the characters I make up for my books. That way I get to know them better.”

Is this guy for real? She started her questioning. “Name?”

“Paul A. Wagner.”

“What’s the A stand for?”

“I could tell you but then I’d have to kill you.”

She strangled a smile. “Age?”

“Fiftyish.”

“You look younger than that.”

“Sorry, but thank you.”

“Occupation?”

“As you probably already know I’m the maintenance man around the marina. It pays the rent on this old tub and buys the groceries. Obviously, I’m not independently wealthy yet but, when my book sells I’m going to buy a boat and cruise the world, Lord willing.”

“So, you write trashy romance novels?” She looked up at him. “Do you publish under a woman’s name?”

“Number one, NO, and number two, ABSOLUTELY NOT. I like to call my novel *A love story from a more-mature-man’s point of view*. And I write under my own name, thank you very much.” Paul smiled at his answers. “Truth is this is my first book. I sent a rewrite to my agent yesterday. Hope it satisfies him this time.” He cocked his head and glanced down at the notes his interviewer had scrawled.

Paul Wagner

50 — (LOOKS YOUNGER!)

Interviews imaginary people!!!

Writes LOVE stories??

“What did you do before you became a writer?”

Paul combed his fingers through his thick sandy hair. “Everything from lumber jacking to preaching.”

Interesting “Married?”

“Not any more.” Hard words for Paul to say. With that answer memories from three years before pierced through his soul like a band of marauding quasars, then shot back out into the blackness of their eternal orbit. They would return.

“Divorced?”

“I lost my wife three years ago to heart failure.”

“I’m sorry. Is that her in the picture?”

He nodded. “That’s my sweetheart, Donna.”

“Those your children?”

Paul straightened the frame. “Lynn, Mark, Kita the Husky, and this is Timothy down here in the corner. Lynn was a senior in high school then, Mark was nineteen. The picture of Tim was taken a couple months ago, before I left Colorado. Kita was about thirty-five, in human years.”

The girl brushed off Paul’s canine humor. She nibbled the end of her pen as she studied her notes, then asked, “Where are your children now?”

“Back home in Colorado. Lynn’s twenty-three, married, and has a couple of beautiful kids.”

“I take it Tim is your grandson, then,” the girl said, not really caring.

Paul continued. “And old Mark will be twenty-five here soon.”

“Is he married?”

“Nope. The right sweetheart hasn’t led him to the altar yet.”

“Who would that be?” The visitor shrugged. “Just curious.”

Paul answered anyway. “A girl like his mother, I hope.”

The young woman weighed that answer for a second, then glanced back at her notes.

“May I ask you a few personal questions?”

“Why not?” Paul tapped the basket on the coffee pot to speed up the brew.

The girl took a deep self-bolstering breath. “As an older single man . . . ,” she cleared her throat, “how often do you have physical relations with women?”

He forced a stifled cough, then gasped with exaggeration as though she’d caught him square in the gut with a good right hook. “You mean, as in *Top-Gun*-carnal-knowledge-of-a-woman relations?”

Her tanned face took on a rose-petal pink undertone as she smiled with understanding.

“It’s getting a little close in here, don’t you think?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The air.” He opened the port above the counter away from the downpour. “Now, let me get this straight. Are we talking about relations with the same woman or different women? Excuse me a sec’.” He stepped into the forward berth and stretched to open the bow vent-hatch a crack. He raised his voice over his shoulder. “YOUNGER WOMEN, WOMEN MY AGE, OR ANY WOMAN I CAN FIND WHO’S WILLING?”

Who cares?

“BLONDS, BRUNETTES, RED HEADS, RAVEN BEAUTIES? LONG HAIR? SHORT HAIR?” He returned. “Tall? Short? Thin? Plump? Long legs? Well proportioned otherwise?” He outlined the hourglass curves of the female figure with his hands, like the guy did in the song in *South Pacific*. “There are a lot of possibilities here you know.”

The cub reporter dropped the notebook on her lap and raised both hands slightly.

“Whatever!”

“You understand, this subject doesn’t have a simple a-b-c answer,” Paul said. “During the latter years of our marriage my wife and I enjoyed each other . . .” he crossed his arms and shrugged his entire upper body, “as often as we wanted and needed.”

“Did you need her more than she needed you?”

“What?” Paul responded with an incredulous laugh. “Good grief. Why does the crew have to know all this?”

“They just want to know, that’s all.”

He leaned back on an elbow and sighed. “Women! Okay, I suppose it was mutual, although I will admit, I always envisioned my wife as the beautiful young woman I first married. When we enjoyed each other that way, I saw her as though she’d never aged. So, yes, I might have been the one who had the hots more often, if that’s what you guys are looking for.”

“But since your wife, how many women or, say, how many times each month?”

Paul’s eyes held the much younger woman’s gaze with the full maturity of his 50 years. The wind howled, rocking the boat. Silence pressed around them, filling the cabin like an aquarium, trapping the two in suspended animation. Finally he answered.

“None. And you can tell the crew that.”

He started pouring the coffee, then stopped and turned. “Would I be out of line here asking where we’re going with this conversation? I don’t think any of you young ladies is interested in matrimony with an old geezer like me.” He held the cup out to her and waited for an answer.

She laid her notebook and pen on the seat beside her and cuddled the hot mug with both hands, sipping and studying him. “At your age, do you still have those kinds of desires for a woman, like when you were younger?”

Paul smiled. *At my age? At what age does a man turn it off?*

She waited.

“Ooooooh, once in a while,” he said. “Sometimes I wake up at night thinking about my sweetheart and realize I’m alone now. From time to time, when I see a beautiful woman ... like you,” he nodded his compliment, “well, frankly, sometimes I’m lonely.”

The young woman searched Paul’s eyes as she sipped in silence. After long seconds she asked softly, simply, “Would you like to spend the night with *me*?”

Hello. If you were intrigued by this first chapter we would very much like to hear your comments, for better or worse. (Please email me at: carlpeters@verizon.net)

And when you write please tell us a little about yourself. IE: Your name? Where (in the world) do you live? What is your age group? Are you an author, agent, editor, publisher, teacher, or simply an occasional or avid reader of Christian books? I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Note: When a publishing date is set for *Solo*, I will inform all of our readers on this website.

Thanks much and Lord bless,

Carl Peters