

Solo

Synopsis

Paul Wagner, 50, returns to the old rented sailboat, Solo — his bachelor's pad for the past five weeks — and finds a beautiful 24 year old woman, Joy, waiting for him. Joy is a member of the all-female amateur crew of the racing sloop, Bonny Belle, anchored nearby at the marina. Joy has come to apologize for a stunt the crew pulled on Paul the previous Saturday. They talk, and later she “seemingly” offers to spend the night with him to make up for the stunt the crew pulled. He is floored, but turns the encounter around, treating her with fatherly kindness and understanding.

In another part of Fort Lauderdale, psychologist, Dr. Jan Campbell, is in a heated discussion with her estranged husband, airline pilot, Doug Campbell, over getting their marriage back together. Doug leaves in a huff. Jan later breaks down under the pressure of losing the husband she loves, and of having to face life with her two sons without their father, revealing to the reader that she is not the “Super Woman” psychologist she might have appeared at first. This sets up a conflict with Jan wrestling to get her husband back from a much younger woman, Cindy, a flight attendant from Doug’s airline.

Back on the boat Paul and Joy talk more and he finds that she lost her father to cancer when she was only a young teenager. From this point on a father/daughter friendship begins to blossom between them, continuing throughout the book.

They go to dinner that evening to celebrate Joy’s 24th birthday, then spend the night on the boat, laughing together and getting to know one another from a father/daughter perspective. But they let the crew, who is watching from afar, think that a wild time is being had on Paul’s boat. Joy does this to get even with her friends for setting her up earlier and sending her to visit Paul on false pretenses.

The friendship between Paul and Joy eventually extends to the entire crew, who adopt him as a “backup” dad. He becomes particularly close friends with Joy, of course, and also Bonny, the owner and

captain of the racing sloop, Bonny Belle. A special bond also develops with Debbie, a 22 year old unwed mother of a five year old daughter. Paul takes on these new friendships with gusto, acting out the part of the surrogate father and sharing conservative advice about life with these much younger women. He is, at the same time, working on a book about a 24 year-old, younger woman, the identity of whom is kept from the reader until the end.

After a month or so Joy invites Paul to sit in on a psyche class she and several others from the crew are taking at Florida State. The professor is Dr. Jan Campbell. When Paul gets to the class that evening, he finds that most of the questions Joy had asked him that first evening on Solo were based on a class assignment. Feeling as though he had been betrayed he blows up and storms out. Joy is left with the others, devastated.

The following Saturday Jan drops by Paul's boat to apologize. A new friendship begins and from here, throughout the book, Jan regards Paul as an older-brother figure. Later she discusses her failed marriage with him, as well as confiding that she had been raped repeatedly by her father when she was just a young teen, causing her to act coldly to her husband's sexual advances most of the 12 years of their marriage. Paul responds in brotherly fashion with kindness and with a dose of his usual "down-home" philosophy on solving her marital problems.

Doug continues to treat Jan poorly, laying most of the blame on her for their separation. He breaks his promise to spend the Fourth of July with his family, choosing instead to spend that time in Vail, Colorado, with Cindy, his live-in girlfriend.

Paul returns to Colorado to be with his family over the fourth. While there, several pivotal things happen to slam the story into high gear. First, while Paul is gone, the crew back in Florida comes upon a copy of his "secret" ms. After reading the first chapter (which is woven into the text of chapter 16 of the main novel, Solo), they decide that the 24-year-old woman in Paul's book is, in fact, Joy. It becomes

apparent to them that he has taken the liberty of describing some very personal encounters between he and Joy. Things which Joy claims never happened. Rick, Joy's part-time boyfriend, throws fuel on the fire by lying about Paul, claiming he overheard Paul saying disgusting things about joy.

At the same time, in Colorado, Doug and Cindy go on a trail ride where Doug's horse explodes at the sight of a bear, rears, and rolls over backward on top of Doug. Jan is notified, calls Paul, then heads to Colorado with the boys to be with Doug at the Vail hospital. Paul finds Doug and talks to him like a father about how much his family needs him. Doug's girlfriend, Cindy, is also there, but keeps to herself.

Just before Doug's family arrives, Doug and Cindy agree to part and go their separate ways. Later, Paul finds her, broken and weeping, and befriends her. At the point of her greatest hurt, frustration, and guilt, Paul takes her for coffee. He treats her with fatherly kindness, and finds that she is the daughter of a pastor in Lincoln, Nebraska. She admits that she has become the "soiled dove" who flew away from home to find the lifestyle she has been living. Paul comforts her and encourages her to go home to Lincoln to visit her folks, who have been waiting for her return. An old boyfriend is also there, still waiting for her to come home.

Doug and Jan begin to mend their broken marriage, even as his body begins to mend from his injuries. Paul heads back to Florida. When he arrives, Joy comes to his boat and flies in his face about using her as a model for the young woman in his book. She will not permit him to explain and ends the friendship. She pulls a stunt to shame him, simply to get even.

From this point on, Paul is looked upon as nothing but a "dirty old man" by the young women on the crew, who shun him. He slips into a melancholy mood, both over the loss of their friendship and over the loss of his wife three years earlier, which now haunts him even more than before. After preparing Solo Paul says goodbye to Jan and her family and to Frank and Aileen, the marina owners. Then he heads up the eastern seaboard, headed for Maine, a dream he and his wife had shared before her death.

Back in Fort Lauderdale, in a fit of drunkenness, Joy's part-time boyfriend, Rick, tries to force her into sex and in the process, admits that he lied about Paul and his book. Someone stops Rick. After this, the girls go to Jan's home, where she sits them down and reads parts of the last chapter of Paul's novel to them, explaining that the young, 24 year-old "mystery woman" in the book is actually Paul writing about the memory of his wife from when they were first married. The girls are crushed and at Doug's prodding, decide to "hit the open sea" and set sail for Maine to find Paul and make things right.

Bonny had been planning on a cruise to Boston for two years, so they simply pick up Joy's mother in Boston, on the way, then detour to Rockport, Maine, to find Paul. Paul's 25 year old son, Mark, had driven across the country, along with Paul's three-year-old son, Timothy (who the reader has been led to believe throughout the book, was Paul's grandchild), to spend some time with Paul on the boat. Timothy was born to Paul and his wife three years earlier, but at the time of his birth Donna's heart couldn't take the delivery and she died in childbirth. This fact is also hidden until the last two chapters.

When the girls arrive, relationships begin to blossom. Joy and Mark, who have been anxious to meet one another since hearing reports from Paul, strike a match. In the meantime, Paul and Betty, Joy's mother, also realize that they have both been eager to meet each other. It seems Joy had been secretly playing matchmaker, feeding her mother information about Paul, and vice versa.

By the last chapter, Mark has decided to drive his truck to Florida, get a job, find an apartment, and get to know Joy better. Paul, in a stroke of genius (or perhaps fate) offers to have Betty sail the boat back to Lauderdale with him and his younger son so the adults can also get to know one another better. But Betty misunderstands and thinks Paul is proposing marriage. A strained situation develops, during which Paul realizes this is what was meant to be. He makes his proposal serious on the last page, Betty accepts, and Joy later smiles and calls him "Dad."