

In the Game©

by Peter G. Pollak

Prologue

Albany County, New York State, Thursday, February 20, 1992: 11:15 AM

“Can’t you move any faster?”

Bernard turned to look back, slowing down even more. Joanne had to brace herself to avoid running into him. “It’s not good to get over-heated, Jo,” he replied.

She gave him a dirty look. He forgot she hated being called ‘Jo’. “Fine,” she said. “Let’s keep moving.”

Bernard winced. He knew that Joanne was a superior athlete when he suggested cross-country skiing, but he hoped his taking the initiative would change her attitude towards him. He should have realized that it was hopeless. After their third date, she had started measuring him, telling him in not-so-subtle ways where he came up short. She was hypercritical; it was probably why she chose law as a profession—which begged the question why he was attracted to women like Joanne in the first place!

After a while, Bernard slowed down again. “Ready for lunch? There are some picnic tables up ahead.”

Joanne nodded and gave him one of her thin smiles. That had been the first clue. He remembered when he first noticed her pretending. They seemed to hit it off on their first date. A few weeks after that, he took her to his favorite restaurant. He prided himself on his cooking skill and was planning to cook a meal for her, which he hoped would lead to intimacy, but she seemed miles away when he started describing his version of one of the

dishes on the menu. Her smile feigned attention while her eyes roamed the room. Was she looking to see if she recognized anyone? Maybe she was rehearsing what she'd say about having been seen out with a divorced dentist. At that moment, instead of throwing in the towel, he tried to win her favor. He stopped talking about his cooking prowess and asked her what she liked to cook.

"What? Oh, I don't do very much cooking these days," she replied. "I pretty much stick to salads with chicken or frozen fish. That is, if I even bother."

Bernard raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you're being modest."

"No, it's true. Thank goodness for the Super Shopper. It's so easy to pick up something after work."

"I like to plan my meals a week at a time," he admitted.

Joanne had winked. "My, won't you make some woman a good catch!"

He remembered having smiled at her jibe, but he had been seething. Today's outing was probably his last chance.

Bernard took off his skis and started sweeping the loose snow off the picnic table. Joanne cleaned the bench on the opposite side.

"There's room enough for both of us on this side," he pointed out.

Joanne continued to clear a space. "I'm fine over here."

She had been avoiding close physical contact from their first date. Yet, she kept saying yes when he asked her out, and against his better judgment, he kept asking.

Bernard had packed lunch for them the night before. Knowing she was not a sandwich eater, he purchased containers of humus and guacamole, and cut up celery,

carrots, and both green and red peppers. He also brought some Gorgonzola and Gouda cheese and picked up some fresh pita bread to go with it.

“I decanted a nice California merlot,” he said, putting two wine bags on the table.

“Everything looks yummy,” Joanne admitted.

He showed her how to open the wine bag, then lifted his to his mouth. “*Salute!*”

“*Salute,*” she replied.

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

“Bernard, this is so lovely. It’s a perfect day. I want to thank you for suggesting it.”

“I knew you’d like it.”

“You’re a sweet guy, Bernard . . . But I’ve been meaning to tell you. You’re just not my type. I think this should be our last date.”

Bernard nodded and looked down at his food. What was someone supposed to say at a moment like this?

“Don’t feel bad,” Joanne said. “I know you’re coming off a divorce, and you’re probably looking for a long-term relationship. I’m sure you’ll find the right woman soon. That’s why it’s better for you to keep looking than to waste your time with me.”

Bernard managed a sort of a smile. “Thanks for...” He was about to say ‘nothing,’ but realized that didn’t sound right. “Thanks for being so honest,” he mumbled.

Joanne smiled back. She lifted her wine pouch. “To finding a mate for Bernard.”

Bernard drank, but felt foolish. He wanted to end the day then and there, but that would just confirm her view of him. He’d play devil-may-care role to the end.

“Ready?” Bernard said a few minutes later, packing up the remainder of their lunch.

“There’s a spectacular view of the valley up ahead.”

Bernard swung the pack on his back and pulled on his ski gloves. "I'll follow you."

They skied steadily along the side of the mountain for the next hour. The day had been cool and overcast to start, but was now sunny and getting warmer. Bernard's emotions were running riot. He hated himself for thinking she would fall for him. Things had come too easy. They'd been introduced at the Albany Singles' Club and she accepted his phone call cheerfully. Now, he hated her for continuing to date him if she didn't feel they were compatible. That was silly, wasn't it? The whole idea of the club was to meet people and to get to know them. You had to go out with someone a few times in order to get to know someone, didn't you! But she really didn't know him! She had judged him without giving him a chance. That wasn't fair.

A cliff ran along the side of the trail to their left, but for most of the way a line of trees blocked the view. Joanne stopped where someone had packed down the snow, creating a side trail to the edge of the cliff. "Let's take a look," she suggested.

She skied over to the edge. "What a view."

Bernard was afraid of heights. He couldn't go over to the railing on the glassed-in deck at the Empire State Building. He remained several ski lengths back from where Joanne was leaning on her skis.

She turned back and waved her arm. "Come on, scaredy cat. It's a spectacular view."

Bernard shook his head. He saw her look of disdain as she turned away from him. A feeling of anger welled up in him. He braced his poles and pushed himself forward. The tops of Joanne's skis were inches from the edge of the cliff.

He let go of his ski pole, put his hand on her back and pushed hard.

Joanne gulped as she turned to try to see what was happening. She tried to stop herself from falling, but it was too late. She screamed as she tottered on the edge, a look of incomprehension in her eyes. The scream became a shriek as her body plunged down the embankment.

Chapter One: Tuesday, April 13, 1999: 8:30 AM

“Dad, do you have any plans for today?”

Jake Barnes looked up from his newspaper. “Not yet.”

“I made a list of some groceries we need. Where should I put it?”

“Right there on the counter.”

“Don’t forget to use the coupons from the Sunday paper.”

Jake nodded. His daughter finished packing her lunch. She ate in her office at the back of the dress shop she managed in uptown Albany. “You’ll be home when Michael gets out of school, right?”

Jake, who had gone back to his paper, looked up again. Mary was standing by the back door with her bags in hand. “Yes, Mary,” he said, smiling.

“See that he takes Benji for a walk and finishes all of his homework before he watches any TV.”

“Mary, dear, I know the routine.”

“Then why did I find the two of you watching the Simpson’s yesterday when he hadn’t finished his math problems?”

“That was my fault. I told him to come down to help me get dinner ready.”

Mary gave him a quizzical look. “So, what are you going to do today?”

“I thought I’d start by reading the newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee.”

“You know what I mean.”

“How about if I take up quilting? I hear they’re starting a class at the community college.”

“Dad, I’m serious.”

“Mary. Please don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

Mary came over and gave her father a hug as best as she could balancing her pocketbook, lunch bag and briefcase.

Jake got up and opened the back door for her. He watched until she’d backed her car out the driveway, then filled up his coffee mug and snuck a doughnut from the box he’d hidden in the pantry. He knew he shouldn’t be eating doughnuts and that third cup of coffee was probably bad for him as well. His doctor told him he needed to lose at least twenty-five pounds, but he didn’t have the willpower these days. Staying in shape had seemed selfish when his wife became ill three years ago and now six months after her death he still couldn’t motivate himself to go to the gym.

Having finished reading the sports and news pages, Jake turned to the Life section. He had started reading that part of the newspaper after his wife had taken ill and he’d taken over cooking duties. The paper offered quick and easy recipes that even he could manage. Then, after Mary’s divorce, she moved back home with his ten-year-old grandson and Jake had volunteered to be in charge of evening meals during the week.

The obits were in the back of the Life section. Skimming to see if he recognized any names, a headline caught his eye. “Local Woman Dies in Mexico; Group Cuts Trip Short.” He read the full story through quickly, then more slowly a second time.

*Oaxaca, Mexico: Angela Boyer, 34, died Sunday after a brief illness while on a trip with the Albany Singles Club, a club official reported*

*yesterday. Preliminary indications are that Boyer contracted spinal meningitis in a remote area in the Mexican state of Oaxaca.*

*“Angela Boyer succumbed despite receiving medical attention to combat the infection,” reported Albert Blaylock, an official with the club, in a written statement. Blaylock, a local travel agent, was not on the trip.*

*The remaining members of the group will return home after undergoing medical tests in Mexico according to the statement.*

*In addition to Boyer, the following Albany-area residents were on the trip: Ellen Bartlett, Marlene Crosetti, Mary Fitzpatrick, Beverly Harris, Dr. Bernard Johns, Elliott Jorgensen, Jessica Kennedy, Ed Martin, Marc Nicholson, William Parsons, Charlotte Richards, Susan Stachowski, Dr. Randolph Smythe, Ralph Thompson and Stacey Winthrop.*

“Damn,” Jake said out loud. “Damn.”

Benji, the Barnes’ four-year old collie who had been asleep under the table, stirred, stretched and got to his feet. Jake rubbed the dog’s head. A sour feeling spread throughout his body like a fast-acting medication; he began to perspire. “I can’t f-ing believe it.”

Jake didn’t know Angela Boyer. Nor for that matter did he know any of the other names listed at the bottom of the obituary—except for one—Dr. Bernard Johns, a local dentist whom he had questioned seven years previously when a woman with whom Johns had been skiing fell to her death in Thatcher Park. Jake had never been satisfied with Dr. Johns’ rendition that he was at least ten feet behind her when the woman lost balance and

fell. Even though his superiors at the Albany Police Department had declared the woman's death an accident, clearing Johns of any wrong-doing, Jake felt they had closed the investigation too quickly.

That case would have remained filed among the many others where the pieces don't quite fit, except for a second instance of an unexplained death with a connection to Dr. Johns. Three and a half years ago the body of a local woman was found at the bottom of a mountain trail in the Catskill region of New York State. There were no obvious signs of foul play and again the death was ruled an accident. Jake thought it suspicious that a hiking club member would have gone up a difficult trail without a companion. Following his hunch, Jake had obtained a list of the hiking club's members. One name stuck out: Dr. Bernard Johns.

Dr. Johns was divorced, had no children and was a respected member of the Albany community. When Jake questioned the leader of the hiking club, he admitted having seen Johns and the deceased leave group meetings together. Jake filed his report with Lieutenant Art Keller, head of the detectives division of the Albany Police Department, recommending that Johns be questioned in the woman's death, but Keller nixed the idea. The State Police had declared the woman's death accidental Keller reminded Jake. Hence, their department did not have an open case on the matter and he was not to interview Dr. Johns.

Now Johns' name had come up again in connection with the death of yet another area woman.

Taken separately each of the three deaths might seem to have logical explanations, but Jake hadn't been a cop for thirty years without learning to detect guilt in a person's

bearing. Something in Johns' demeanor had bothered him on that cold February afternoon seven years ago when he and his partner questioned Dr. Johns.

He still remembered Johns' exact words. "If she hadn't been so anxious to get a better view, she'd be alive today. Some women don't know when to stop."

Had the fact that he'd gotten away with murdering Joanne Feldman emboldened Johns to commit additional murders? Was Angela Boyer yet another of his victims?

The question was what could he do about it. Jake had been forced to retire from the Albany Police Department three months earlier after having failed a medical exam. He had no right to investigate Bernard Johns on his own and he doubted that Art Keller would welcome his suggestion that someone look into what happened to Angela Boyer.

The question Jake asked himself over and over was "why?" Why would a prominent dentist kill any one of those women? Without a motive, Jake knew his chances of getting anyone else to take his questions seriously were slim to none.

Jake noticed that Benji was scratching at the back door to go out. Reluctantly he reached for his jacket.

Forty-five minutes later they were back in the family kitchen. Jake read the newspaper story one more time, stuffed his daughter's grocery list in his pocket, found his car keys and headed out the back door.