

CHAPTER VIII

"Oh, so you were going to slip off without me, were you? Now that's what I call an unneighborly trick— mighty unneighborly!" she accused them.

Susan flung herself impetuously upon Celia, a thin scrawny little body in much-washed brown shorts and thin shirt, her face eager and alight. "Oh, Celia, I'm so glad!"

They were just finishing the meal when there was a step on the back porch and a gentle knock at the door before it swung open to admit Win, handsome and well groomed in beautifully cut slacks and a thin cashmere sweater.

Celia flushing to the tips of her ears, had a swift vision of the scene as it must appear to him: herself at one end of the table, Rusty at the other, Susan between them.

Win looked at her swiftly, smiling, and then as he took in the scene, his smile stiffened a little and some of the revealing warmth went out of his eyes.

"Oh," he said, and somehow his tone sounded flat, almost accusing. "I seem always to be intruding! I heard voices—"

Celia and swiftly, her voice not quite steady, "Intruding? Don't be silly! Come in and have a cup of coffee—if you can bear to be given coffee at a kitchen table."

Win's eyes flickered just a little so silightly that she couldn't be quite sure that she had really seen the expression. "And what makes you think I wouldn't enjoy a cup of coffee you had made, at a kitchen table?" he asked.

Rusty smiled and said cheerfully, an odd look in his eyes. "Sorry, Mallory, but I made the coffee. Do you mind?"

"Why should I — so long as it's good coffee?"

"Oh, it's very good coffee," answered Rusty, as Susan brought a chair and placed it beside her own, and Celia filled a cup and placed it before Win. "You see, Celia's a pretty good cook, but she can't make decent coffee!"

The words were innocent, but there was, Celia told herself crazily, a faint edge to them. And the edge was even sharper on Win's answer, as he said coolly, "I can't quite believe that anything Celia did was less than perfection!"

Rusty looked sharply at him and then at Celia, and pursed his lips in a slight, noiseless whistle.

Win, looking straight at him, asked flatly, "Hasn't Celia told you?"

"Oh course not, Win! There hasn't been time—" Celia began breathlessly.

"Told me what?" asked Rusty politely, as though his interest were merely a matter of curiosity.

"That she's going to marry me—rightaway," said Win quietly.

Rusty's eyes widened a little as they went from Win to Celia, and then back to the coffee he was stirring around in his cup.

"Congratulations, Mallory, you're a lucky guy!"

Win put an arm about Celia and drew her close. "You think I don't know that?" he asked.

Rusty met his eyes and asked coolly, "Do you?" But before Win could answer, Rusty turned to Celia and said gently, "All the best, Celia—you've got it coming!"

"Thank," said Celia, and somehow she couldn't say anything else.

Susan stood quietly at one side of the kitchen. She did not understand much of this. She knew that Celia had thrown a bombshell when she announced she was marrying Win Mallory.

Rusty turned toward the door and she cried out in alarm, "Oh, but Rusty—our picnic! We're going fishing—and it's too late!"

Rusty stood still for a moment then smiled down at her, his eyes affectionate and warm.

"Sure we are, pal, but I don't imagine Celia will want to go—" he began.

Susan turned to Celia in quick alarm. "But you said you'd go!"

"Of course I'm going. I've never broken a promise to you, have I?"

Susan's small face was once more radiant, and she turned eagerly and politely t oWin. "We're going on a picnic, Mr. Mallory, and we'd be very pleased if you cared to go with us."

Win smiled down at her and said with every evidence of delight, "Well, now that's splendid! Thank you, I'd like it very much!"

Rusty hesitated at the doorway and said awkwardly above Susan's head, "I don't know whether you will care about it, Mallory—"

"Celia's going isn't she? Then I'd care a lot about it'" said Win in a tone that added as definitely as words could have done "And that's that."

It seemed to Celia that the big, old-fashioned room was filled with a conflict of personalities and ideas; though in reality there was no sound at all until she herself said hurriedly, "Susan, you run along and feed the pets while I pack a lunch."

"I'll go along and help her. With the menagerie she's got, it's quite a chore," said Rusty, and with Susan's hand in his he went ut of the kitchen.

For a moment after the door had closed behind them, Win stood looking down at Celia, and she had the craziest feeling of shyness, as though she wanted to run away from him; but when he move took her in his arms and held her closely and kissed her, the shyness was swallowed up in a tingling ecstasy that was halfway between delight and pain.

I'm afraid," said Win after a heady, excited moment, slipping a finger beneath her chin and lifting her face upward so that he could search her eyes, "that you've been a ba dgirl, my sweet!"

"I don't know what you mean," she murmured inanely.

Win's head nodded toward the door that had closed behind Rusty, and he said softly, "You've been flirting with that young man haven't you? Aren't you ashamed of making a fool of him?"

Celia's color burned hotly and her eyes flashed with anger as she drew herself from his arms.

"I haven't flirted with Rusty, and I can't quite see any girl making a fool of him," she protested. "He is—immune to women—"

Win tipped back his handsome head and laughed gaily.

"Oh my poor sweet!" he chided her intelligence gently seeming to deny her the possession of any. "You surely weren't taken in by anything so—so corny as that? Why, it's plain as a pikestaff that the man is mad about you."

Celia said icily, "You are being very silly! Rusty and I are friends, but not even old ones. I like him fairly well and he tolerates me—that's all."

"Getting breakfast for him every morning, and seeing him day in and day out, your feeling for him gradually changed," Win finished for her smoothly.

"All right, sweet, I won't tease you. But you're mine now, and I won't stand for any monkey business—you hear?"

Celia laughed at him. "That's good old caveman approach, is it? That sounds a bit funny, from you."

When she had packed the battered old wicker hamper that had seen many years of faithful service, because the Bartletts were a picnic-loving family, Win stood up, lifted the basket and made a grimace.

"We won't be gone for more than a week, will we?" he suggested.

"Don't worry about my having packed too much food. We'll all be starved by the time we get to Niskey's Lake!" she assured him.

He winced. "You're not going to Niskey's Lake, darling?" he protested, as though he found the thought almost painful.

"It's the nearest lake that has any fish in it," she pointed out reasonably.

"Oh. But look here, why don't we drive across to Azalea, and on down to the dock where my boat's tied up? There's sure to be enough gas for the day, and we can go down river, where Randolph and Susan can catch something really exciting."

When he broached the matter to Susan and Rusty, Celia saw the instant stiffening of Rusty's face as the protest rose in his mind; but Susan, saucer-eyes with excitement fairly danced at the prospect of going out in a boat to fish!

Win's car was parked in the drive He hoisted the hamper into the trunk, and Susan into the rumble and Celia in the front seat, by which time Rusty had joined an enchanted Susan in the rumble.

Two miles from the highway the road ended at a small but well-constructed boathouse, with a pier thrusting a long narrow finger out into the swiftly moving black river.

As Win unlocked the door and thrust it open, Celia looked into the dark interior andglimpsed the shadowy forms of a rowboat, two canoes, small mahogany toy of a speedboat and the larger cruiser.

Win walked along the narrow guard-plank to the big double doofs that opend out over the water. When he had flung these back, the morning sun poured into the place, and Celia saw that the cruiser was a handsome one, far larger than she would have believed this river would accommodate.

It was, in Susan's ecstatic opinion an altogether perfect day, a day to remember as long as she lived. She caught two fish that seemed to her enormous, which Rusty did not try to help her land.

Rusty had a bit of luck with one bass; but it was obvious, even to the excited and all but delirious Susan that Rusty's thoughts were a long way off.

They came back to the boathouse for lunch, because there was no safe place where they could tie up the cruiser.

The big upper room of the boathouse, with its gaily striped awnings, its green shutters held flat against the white- painted walls was a very pleasant place.

They spread lunch on a table beside a window overlooking the woods. There were cocktails for Rusty, Win and Celia, and ginger ale for Susan, and while it was not at all a picnic, in the sense the Bartletts used the word — which meant spreading a clean cotton cloth on a convenient rock, bringing sticks to build a fire beneath a portable grill, to make coffee or broil hamburgers or franffurters—it was a very pleasant meal.

Susan loved it. And Celia rejoiced in Susan's delight. Now and then she caught an odd, measuring look in Rusty's eyes as he looked at her, but when she looked back at him it was gone.

Win had been very charming to Susan. He had not treated her with the exaggerated manner most grownups use toward children, but exactly as though she had been grown-up herself, and suddenly Susan burst out, in the midst of lunch, "I'm glad you're marrying Celia!"

Win did not try to conceal his delight.

"Thank, Susan. But weren't you, at first?" asked Win.

The child blushed and said uncomfortably. "We- e- ell, no, not exactly. You see — well, I had other things planned for Celia. But you are nice! I'm going to like i twhen you marry her!"

Rusty, with a queer little taut look about his mouth, stood up and walked out on the veranda. For a moment Win's eyes followed him speculatively before they swung to Celia and his eyebrow went up a little and he made a swift little gesture of amusement and gratification.

There was an awkward silence, and then Susan said something and followed Rusty. A moment later they could be seen, the tall, broad-shouldered young man and the thin little girl, going down the steps and out into the woods that surrounded the boathouse.

Win came over and sat beside Celia. He put his arm about her and drew her close to him .and kissed her.

"That's a very understanding lit tle sister of yours, darling," he said contentedly. "Are you going to like it when I marry you?"

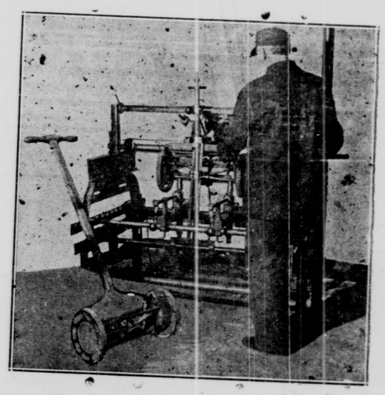
"Of course," said Celia, and trembled a little in his arms.

(To Be Continued)

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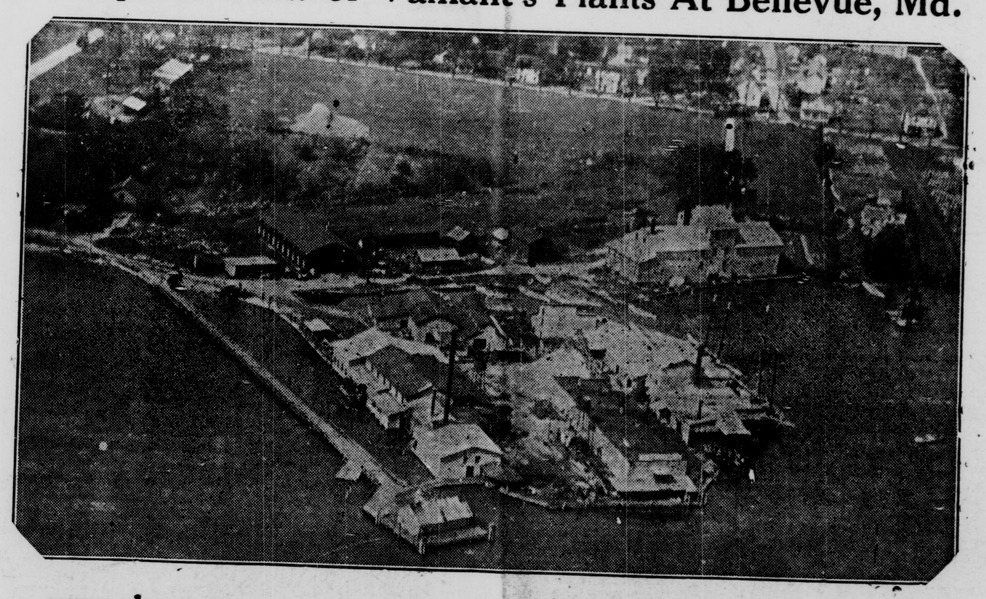


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