

In the Game©

by Peter G. Pollak

Prologue: Thursday, February 20: 11:00 AM

“Can’t you move any faster?” Joanne asked.

Bernard turned back on his skis. Joanne had to brace herself to avoid running into him. “It’s not good to get over-heated, Jo,” he said patiently.

Joanne gave him a dirty look. She hated being called ‘Jo’. “Fine,” she said.

Bernard winced. He knew that Joanne was a superior athlete when he suggested cross-country skiing in Thatcher Park, but he hoped that his taking the initiative would change her attitude. 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 Feldman in the first place.

“There are some picnic tables up ahead,” Bernard said. “Ready for lunch?”

Joanne nodded and gave him one of her fake smiles. That had been the first clue. He remembered when he first noticed her pretending. They seemed to hit it off and made plans to go to a play and dinner on their third date. He took her to his favorite restaurant and was describing his version of one of the recipes on the menu. He prided himself on his cooking and planned on inviting her over to cook for her. She apparently couldn’t have cared less about his cooking talent because she seemed miles away. Her smile feigned attention while her eyes were roaming the room. Was she looking to see if she knew anyone else in the restaurant? Maybe she was rehearsing what she’d say about having been seen out with a dentist? But Bernard only tried harder 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 said. “I pretty much stick to frozen fish, chicken and salads. 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 had smiled at her jibe, but inside he was seething.

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

“There’s room enough for both of us on this side,” he pointed out.

“I’m fine over here,” Joanne replied, continuing to clear a space. She had been avoiding close physical contact from the moment he showed an interest. Yet, she kept saying yes when he asked her out and against his better judgment he kept asking.

Bernard had packed lunch the night before. Knowing she was not a sandwich eater, he had purchased containers of humus and guacamole and had cut up celery, carrots and both green and red peppers. He also picked up some pita bread and cut up chunks of Gorgonzola and Gouda.

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

“Everything looks yummy,” Joanne admitted.

He showed her how to open the wine bag and lifted his to his mouth. “Salut!”

“Salut,” 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,” he stated.

“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 right away and almost suggested that they ski back, but that would just confirm her view of him. He’d play the devil-may-care role to the end.

“Ready,” Bernard said a few minutes later, packing up the remainders of their lunch. “There’s a spectacular view of the valley farther up.”

Bernard swung the pack on his back and pulled on his ski gloves. “I’ll follow you,” he said.

For the next 40 minutes they skied steadily along the side of the mountain. 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 having thought she would fall for him. Things had come too easy. They’d been introduced at the singles club and she accepted his phone call cheerfully. He also hated her for continuing to date him if she didn’t feel they were compatible. But that was silly he realized. 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, did she! She had judged him without giving him a chance. That wasn’t fair.

Finally Joanne slowed down. A cliff ran along the side of the trail to their right, but for most of the way a line of trees blocked the view. She stopped where some people had created a side trail to the edge of the cliff. “Let’s take a look,” she said.

“What a view,” Joanne said when she got to the edge.

Bernard was afraid of heights. He couldn’t even go over to the railing on the deck at the Empire State Building. He remained several ski lengths back from the where Joanne was leaning on her skis. She turned back to see why he hadn’t joined her.

“Come on, scaredy cat. It’s a spectacular view.”

Bernard shook his head. He saw a look of disdain as she turned away from him. A feeling of anger welled up in him. He braced his poles and pushed himself forwards. He saw that the tops of her skis were inches from the edge of the cliff. Bernard let go of his ski pole, put his hand on her back and pushed hard.

“What?” 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.