

# The Real Prize

By

Misty Malone

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# Chapter One

Sarah Stellings had just taken eggs and milk out of her refrigerator, ready to make some breakfast, when she heard a knock on her kitchen door. That door led to her garage, so she paused a moment to wonder who would be in her garage. Then it occurred to her; today was Tuesday, garbage day, and she had forgotten to take her cans out to the curb yet again. Apparently Heath Jenkins, her neighbor across the street, and the man she'd grown very fond of, had used her security code to open her garage door and took care of her garbage for her, again.

"Come on in, Heath. It's open," she yelled.

Heath walked in, shaking his head. He went to her and gave her a kiss while wrapping his arms around her. "What am I going to do with you?"

"That kiss was a good start," she said with a giggle. She reached up, hoping for another, but he stopped her, shaking his head again. "What's wrong?"

He kept his arms around her, but had a frown on his face. "For starters, why was that door open?"

She had a sheepish expression on her face as she looked up at him. "I know, I know. I should lock that even though the garage door is down. Honestly, though, I really don't even think about it. I figure if the garage door is down nobody's going to get to this door."

"But sometimes—"

"I know; sometimes a plane or jet going by will set something off and it will open. Or sometimes a neighbor's garage door opener will open yours. But neither of those have ever happened."

He sighed. "So that means it never will?"

"No, of course not," she admitted. "I'm sorry, I'll try harder to remember." She reached up again to sneak a quick kiss on his cheek. "And I'll try harder to remember to take my garbage down next week, too. Thank you for doing that again, too."

"Yeah, again. I don't mind taking your garbage out at all, but I do worry about your forgetfulness. I guess I'm going to have to do something to help you start remembering things.

I'm afraid some day you're going to forget something really important and put yourself in a dangerous situation."

She laughed and brushed the idea aside. "Oh, don't be so dramatic. I just forget things now and then."

He grinned as he pulled her in against his chest. "All I can say is it's a good thing your head's attached to your body, or you'd probably forget that, too."

She giggled and cuddled in against him. "How about some breakfast? I was just getting ready to make an omelet. The least I can do is feed you after you took my garbage down for me again."

They visited while she cooked and they enjoyed breakfast. He helped her wash the dishes, and went back across the street, where he lived.

Sarah went to her office, but was having trouble concentrating on work. Her mind was on Heath. Thinking back, she remembered the day she moved into her new house. It had been terrifying for her. She'd been teaching, and knew she needed a change. She took a trip to the ocean over spring break to give some serious thought to her situation.

Although she hadn't come up with any solutions during her trip, she had purchased a \$100 raffle ticket. Some kids were selling the tickets for their YMCA. They were actually giving away a house by the ocean, and the money would be used to enlarge the YMCA and build a swimming pool for the swim team to use. When she was younger she was on the swim team at her local YMCA, so she readily bought the raffle ticket and put it in her purse.

She returned home with no answers, until an attorney called her to congratulate her on having the winning raffle ticket. She had won the house by the ocean!

Realizing that may just be the answer she'd been looking for, she gave notice at her school. There were only six weeks left in that school year, so she told them she wouldn't be back next year. That gave the district sufficient time to replace her, and she could move out of the area and get the fresh start she felt her life needed.

The closer she got to the move, the more she realized what a big step this was, and she became a little nervous. By the time the movers unloaded everything at her new house and left, she was terrified.

She wandered through her house, telling herself she'd done the right thing and trying to calm her nerves, when Heath appeared at her door. When she shook his hand she couldn't deny a

tingling going through her, and for some reason, she immediately felt herself calming. She was simply trying to get on with her life at that time, certainly wasn't looking for a man in her life, so she didn't understand the feelings she had. She was so confused she didn't even notice how good looking he was. She didn't really see his thick black hair or his broad shoulders, or muscular chest, but she did catch the wonderful spicy, masculine scent when he leaned in and shook her hand.

He turned out to be a godsend, eagerly showing her around, helping her find anything she needed, and calming her fears about moving to a new place. He somehow made her feel like she was right where she belonged.

Over the next several weeks, they'd gotten to know each other better. They both enjoyed spending time together, and felt comfortable and relaxed around each other. They were now comfortably in a relationship. She felt like she was finally beginning to get on with her life, and Heath was a big part of the reason. But she knew it bothered him when she forgot things. She'd always been forgetful, so it was no big deal to her, but she hated disappointing Heath. She'd have to start trying harder.

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Heath went to his office to start his work day, but had some trouble getting the newest tenant on their street out of his mind. Sarah was about the prettiest, sexiest, most charming person on earth, but she wasn't aware of it. She was completely down to earth and humble, and had the biggest heart of any woman he'd ever met, all of which made her absolutely irresistible in Heath's opinion. She was also extremely forgetful, and paid absolutely no attention to her surroundings and any danger therein, or her health, which frustrated him immensely.

The two of them had hit it off right from the first moment they met. Heath wasn't dating anyone at the time, preferring to concentrate on his career, but being a gentleman, he went across the street to introduce himself and welcome her to the neighborhood the day she moved in. He was surprised when he felt a shock course through his body when they shook hands. He'd never experienced that before, and her long look at him had him wondering if she'd felt it, too. Discovering she was new not just to that house, but to the whole area, he offered to show her around. She accepted graciously, and they'd been more than just neighbors ever since.

Lately, however, he'd become concerned. The more he'd gotten to know her, the more he realized how little attention she actually did give to her surroundings and safety. He made some coffee, and went back to his office.

He sat down and began to sip his coffee, but he was also deep in thought. He was becoming very fond of Sarah, but there were a couple things that concerned him. One was her carelessness. Saying she just forgets things now and then was an understatement. She forgets a lot of things, and he was becoming concerned. He was of the opinion it wasn't simply a case of forgetfulness. She was careless, doing things without thinking.

He'd been thinking about that quite a bit lately, thinking he had to do something to get her to be more careful, but he wasn't sure what exactly he could or should do. He was also a little concerned about her past. He'd shared his life's story with her, but she seemed guarded about hers. He often wondered whether these two things were related. Perhaps she'd had some kind of traumatic event in her life that she'd never actually gotten over. If she was preoccupied, that would explain her carelessness.

Staring at his computer while he sipped his coffee, he reached a decision. He would try to find out about her past. If there was a problem there, he'd help her get past it. Maybe that would solve her carelessness. If that wasn't her problem, he'd address it head on, and talk to her about it.

With that decision made, he picked up his phone and called Sarah. After a bit of quick small talk, he got down to the reason for his call. "Honey, why don't I fix us dinner tonight? After we eat there's something I'd like to talk to you about."

She paused a moment. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing like that. I just want to talk a little bit."

"Okay," she agreed, still sounding a little concerned. "What would you like me to bring?"

"That depends. I thought I'd cook some steaks outside, and I'll put some potatoes in the oven to bake. What else would you like with that?"

"That's plenty to fill me up, but how about if I bring a tossed salad? I know you liked the raspberry dressing I made. I'll make more of that."

"That sounds wonderful. Thank you."

"Thank you for cooking the rest of the meal. What time would you like me over there?"

"I've got a conference call this afternoon. Is 7:00 okay?"

"Fine."

"Good. See you then." He hung up and forced himself to get busy. He had to make sure he was prepared for that conference call.

She went into her office to start writing, but her mind kept wandering back to Heath, and what he might want to talk about. She forced her mind back to her writing, and after reading what she'd written so far, she deleted it. She thought of a better angle to approach her new story, and rewrote the beginning. She sat back and read it, and deleted it again. She couldn't get her mind off of Heath and what he wanted to talk about.

Frustrated, she went to the kitchen and fixed a sandwich for lunch. Then it was back to her office and the computer. She tried to start her story yet again, and hated it yet again, so she deleted it once more. That happened three more times, until she gave up. She checked her email and Facebook, then went to the kitchen to make the salad dressing. Once that was done she made the salad, and went to Heath's house a little early.

He was outside at the grill, turning the steaks when he saw her crossing the street. He went out to meet her and took the salad. "This looks delicious," he said as he led her into his kitchen.

"I'm early. Is that a problem? If you're busy yet, still working, I can come back later."

"Nope, you're fine. I just finished work and came out to put the steaks on. How's the writing going?"

"Not the best today," she answered honestly.

"Problem?"

"I guess I just wasn't concentrating very well."

That was pretty much what he'd planned on talking to her about tonight, so he turned to her. "Why? Is something on your mind? Maybe talking will help."

"That's what I'm hoping," she said.

He was concerned and went to pick up her hands in his. "If something's bothering you I'd like to talk about it, honey. What do you want to talk about?"

She looked confused. "Not me—you," she said. "You said you want to talk about something tonight, and I've been trying to figure out what it could be. I'm hoping after we talk I'll be able to concentrate better."

"Oh, that," he said dismissively. "It's not anything you should have been worrying about. We'll talk after dinner." Without giving her a chance to object to the delay, he got her busy with



something else. "Actually, I'm glad you came over early, though. I think the potatoes are done. If you want to help me set the table, I'll take the potatoes out and the steaks should be ready by then and we can eat."

He successfully got her talking about other things, and before she knew it they were done with their dinner and the dishes were washed.

"Okay," he said a bit hesitantly, "let's go into the living room and sit down."

Once they were seated on the couch, she turned to him. "Okay, what did you want to talk about?"

Heath wasn't real sure how he wanted to approach this subject. He'd felt from early on that she was running from something. He knew she'd won the house, but he felt as though there was something she wanted to put behind her, and this new house allowed her to move to a new location. But, he could sense her struggling to put whatever it was that made her move, behind her.

He put his arm around her, pulling her over against him, and she cuddled up beside him. "Sarah, what I want to talk a little bit about is you."

"Me?"

"Yes. I'm glad you won this house and moved here. I've really enjoyed getting to know you."

She seemed nervous, but answered, "I'm glad, too. I've enjoyed it here very much, especially meeting and getting to know you."

"You know, I've told you all about myself; where I grew up and what I do. I told you that I ended up here because my grandparents had a small vacation home in this area and I always liked it here. I don't know much about you, though. I know you bought a winning raffle ticket and here you are, but that's about all I know about your past."

He felt her stiffen a bit before responding. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," he said with a chuckle. "Where did you grow up? How did you come to buy that raffle ticket? What made you decide to move out here? Do you have any family?"

She stiffened again when he mentioned her family, and he felt bad. "I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't ask these questions. I'm sure if you want me to know any of that information, you'll tell me."

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "No, it's all right. Actually, we've been getting closer, which I'm very happy about, and you do have a right to know about my past. It's kind of hard to talk about some of it, but the past several days I've felt like I'm keeping something from you, and I don't want to do that."

He tightened his arm around her and leaned over to give her a kiss on her cheek. "If you don't want to talk about it, I won't ask you to, but sometimes talking about it helps."

"My mother used to say that. When she knew something was bothering me, she used to say I'd feel better if I talked about it. She was usually right, too."

"She sounds like a smart lady."

"She was."

"Was?"

"Yes. She died shortly after I graduated from college."

"I'm sorry, Sarah. It sounds like you were close."

"We were close. She got sick my last year of college, so after I graduated I moved back home to Illinois to help Dad take care of her. She died four months later."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. I'm glad I moved back home, though, so I had those last four months with her. My dad and I got closer during that time, too. We helped each other through a really rough time."

"I'm glad he was there for you."

"Yeah, me, too. You know, it's kind of funny. I always thought nothing exciting ever happened in that small town I grew up in, and planned on moving away after college. But then after Mom died, I took a job teaching English at my old high school that next year, just so I could stay close to my dad. We had become closer than we had been while I was growing up, and that was special to me."

"That sounds good. I'm glad you found that closeness."

"I am, too. I always wanted to write, but it's hard to make a living doing that, which is why I was teaching. Dad encouraged me to start writing some, too, so I did. I had a few short stories published, which was very encouraging, but I didn't have the money to live on while I tried writing full time, so I continued teaching, and writing when I could."

"What changed? You're just writing now. Did you write a best seller that I don't know about?"

Sarah chuckled. "I wish. No, I'm really just getting started on my writing." She swallowed hard, squared her shoulders, and continued her story. "One day I came home to find Charlie Sanders, a neighbor of ours, at our front door, knocking. He's also the chief of police, and I knew right away something was wrong. I got out of my car and he came over to me. He put his arm around me and asked if we could go inside. When we got inside, he sat me down on the couch and held my hands while he told me there had been a terrible accident. A man driving a truck was obviously drunk, and headed for a school bus that was stopped, unloading kids. All the witnesses said Dad obviously saw the out of control pickup careening straight toward the bus, and purposely drove his car in front of the bus, in essence saving the lives of all the children. It killed him, but the kids and bus driver were all fine."

"So he was a hero," Heath said quietly.

"He was. The town's people all gathered around me and helped me through it. I honestly don't know what I would have done without all their love and support. They kept telling me how proud I should be of my father, and I was. I truly was proud of him."

"It's still hard, though," he said, rubbing her arm gently for support.

"It was. And as much as I appreciated their love and support, after a couple years I was drowning in it. I had been seeing a grief counselor, and she was a great help. She made me realize that although I loved both my parents and were proud of them, they were gone, and no amount of grieving was going to bring them back. She also made me see that they wouldn't have wanted me to spend my life grieving for them."

"Good for her."

"She was great. So I was ready to move on with my life, but it was hard. To that small town, I was the poor daughter of their hero. As much as I needed their love and support to get through the accident and the next several months, that same love and support had now become pity and sorrow. It was as if the whole little town was still grieving for their hero. It was dragging me down. I knew I had to do something, but I didn't know what."

"Did you continue teaching this whole time?"

"I did. I was kind of drifting through life at that point, doing what I was used to doing, kind of like I was on auto pilot. I wasn't ready for any change in my life yet at that point. I took a couple weeks off right after the accident, but then went back to teaching, needing the routine."

"I understand."

"The driver of the pickup truck had insurance, but only \$100,000. The insurance company offered the entire amount, and I took it. Our family attorney told me Dad had underinsured coverage on his truck and I could refuse that offer and go to court, in which case Dad's insurance would cover whatever the judge or jury awarded above the total the other driver had, but I didn't want to do that. I would have had to file a lawsuit, given a deposition, maybe more, answered lots of questions, talked to attorneys, and gone to court, where I would have had to testify. More importantly, I would have had to listen to the whole incident being replayed again. All that would have done is kept me thinking about it, grieving about it even longer, and all just for more money. Money wasn't going to bring Dad back. We didn't have much money growing up, but I was happy, so I didn't see that a big stack of money was worth rehashing what happened over and over and over. I didn't want to relive the whole thing again and have to start the grieving process over from the beginning."

"Good for you," Heath said sincerely.

"I didn't really know what I would have done with the money, anyway, so it wasn't that important to me. I got the \$100,000, and I put it in a savings account. I figured I'd wait until my mind was clearer to decide what to do with it."

"Another good decision," Heath praised.

She smiled a bit. "As it turns out, yes, it was. At the time, it was more because I didn't know what else to do with it. When I realized I was ready to move on with my life, but the town wasn't, I didn't know what to do. I took the week of spring break to come out here to the ocean. I hoped the change of scenery and fresh, sea air would help me decide what to do."

"Did it?"

"No, not really. While I was out here, though, I saw some kids selling raffle tickets, and I bought one."

"And the rest, as they say, is history?"

She chuckled, but agreed. "Yep. When I got the call that I'd won, I decided this was my answer, so I gave notice at work, put the house on the market, and called the moving company,

all in the same day so I couldn't back out. During the last six weeks of the school year, I did some thinking. At that time, the only thing that seemed to cheer me up was the writing I was doing. So I made a decision. I had planned on applying for a teaching job out here, but decided not to. While I'm moving, I figured I may as well have a whole new start and try my hand at writing for a living. I have the money from the insurance company and from the sale of the house. Although it sounds like a lot of money to me, I'm not totally naive. I know I can't retire, or even live off of it for very long, but I figured without a house payment, if I continue to live fairly modestly, it should be enough for a few years, which should give me sufficient time to give writing a fair chance. If it doesn't work out, then I'll look for another teaching job."

Heath pulled her into his arms a bit tighter and kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry for what you've been through, but I'm proud of you. You've made what sound to me like some very good, very brave decisions. I hope it all works out for you. I know I'm glad you're here."

"Thank you, Heath," she said, turning toward him for a kiss, which he was quick to give.

"Thank you for sharing your story with me," he said. "I know it wasn't easy to talk about."

"It wasn't, but I'm glad I did."

"I am, too. I care a great deal about you, and I feel as though I know a little more about you now. I hope you know that you can talk to me about anything. I don't want us to have any secrets, or feel as though we can't be open with each other. I think that's important in a relationship."

"I think so, too, and thank you." The kiss he gave her was filled with passion. It left no doubt in her mind he meant what he'd said.

The next several days they both felt a closeness they hadn't felt before. She told him a couple times that she felt better since they'd talked and she'd shared that with him. He hoped that would help her focus and she wouldn't be as careless.