

# "Dog Park"

by Donita K. Paul

Melissa looked deep into Chip's soulful brown eyes and said, "There are a thousand and one places I'd rather be than here with you." The Newfoundland dropped his jaw, letting his pink tongue loll over a row of pointed white teeth. He gave her a panting grin before taking off for another lope around the dog park. Melissa shivered against the early morning chill and zipped her denim jacket up to her chin. Shoving her hands into the ample pockets, she stepped at a brisk pace along the tarmac path.

Ordinarily on a Saturday morning, her dad would be walking Chipper, and she would still be tucked in bed in her own apartment across town. But last night her dad had called announcing he'd injured his ankle playing shuffleboard. Shuffleboard! Her dad still played tennis three times a week with another retired insurance man at Silver Lodge Senior Village. Her suspicions had been confirmed when she saw her dad trot down the hall to the bathroom in the middle of the night. She never slept well on the sofa-bed in his living room with its steep hills, creaking valleys, and bagel-sized lumps impossible to ignore. But her dad's deception wasn't worth getting up for a confrontation. This morning he'd limped out to the kitchen and asked her to take Chipper for his run. The old schemer was up to something. Why did he trick me into spending the weekend with him?

Intrigued, she bet herself a double amaretto latté she'd know before the day was over. Picking up her pace, she summoned Chipper with a whistle. He gladly jogged at her side.

As they rounded the lap a second time, she saw a man enter the dog park through the west entrance. This tall, athletic figure caught her attention for two reasons: He was about forty years younger than the other residents of Silver Lodge, and his dog was a little foo-foo critter, one with more hair than body.

A monstrous bark roared out of Chipper's throat. Before Melissa could snatch his collar, he took off, catapulting toward the new-

comers. The little dog yipped and danced at the end of its lead. The man tried desperately to swoop the jumping bean into his arms. Melissa gave him credit for not abandoning the dog. I hope he takes that shrimp and retreats behind the gate.

Her frantic yells did nothing to slow her dad's dog. She increased her speed, knowing she'd never catch Chip before he swallowed the hairy mouthful. I wonder if Dad has liability insurance for a dog fight.

Just before Chipper reached his victim, the man dropped on all fours over the tidbit, enclosing it within his rolled up body.

Chip came to a halt, sat down as if befuddled, and tilted his head. He whined, shifted his front feet, then gave a sharp bark.

Melissa reached the giant dog, secured the leash to his collar, and wrapped the nylon braid around her palm, making it as short as possible.

Bending over, with her hands on her knees, she had no breath to speak. She panted. Her chest would stop pounding like a kettle drum. Soon, she hoped.

The man didn't move. His body muffled the little dog's protest, now a shrill yap mixed with a miniature, but valiant, growl. "It's . . ." Melissa gasped. "It's okay." She tried to stand up, but couldn't quite pull the stitch in her side straight. "I've got . . . Chipper . . . on a lead." The man's head jerked up. "Chipper? Did you say Chipper?" A morning stubble covered his red, glowering face. He uncurled his body but remained on his knees, his hands on the feisty scrap whose fierce barks had turned to eager whines.

"This is Leo. Your father didn't happen to mention a Leo, did he?" Melissa fought to hold Chip back. Her hands ached more than her side now. Both dogs seemed intent on leaping at each other. "Leo?" She ground the name out between her teeth. "Yes, he said something about Leo." She managed to look past her dad's massive dog to the man's face. His anger had evaporated. A hint of a grin sparkled in his brown eyes, and a dimple appeared in his bristly cheek. He chuckled. "I think we can let

these old friends say hello." Melissa let go of the leash and sat down with a thud on the grass. The dogs' tails wagged as they nosed each other. The man extended his hand past the mutual admiration ritual. Melissa shook it. He didn't let go, but stood and helped her regain her feet. "I'm Pete Martoni. This is my mom's dog."

Melissa withdrew her hand from his warm, capable grasp. "You don't usually walk her dog, do you?" "No." He leaned over and unsnapped the leash. Melissa did the same, and the dogs took off to enjoy a run.

"Mom called last night. She'd hurt her wrist." "Playing shuffleboard?" "How'd you –?" He stopped and grinned. "How's your dad feeling this morning?" "He's in bed, but I think the 'major injury' he suffered in yesterday's wild shuffleboard match is healed." "What shall we do to them?" His deep voice sounded as if he relished the idea of a conspiracy. Melissa smiled. Cooking up a bit of revenge would be fun.

"Let's discuss it over coffee. My treat," she said. "I just won a bet."