

SEA TO SKY, A Hunter Rayne Highway Mystery  
by R.E. Donald

Excerpt

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The watching woman had noticed him watching her. She looked again at her wristwatch, then at the pub's entrance, as if to say, See, I'm waiting for someone. He followed her gaze to the doorway and there was Alora Magee, lawyer from Los Angeles, an acquaintance from last summer who seemed to be attracted to him and wanted to get to know him better. He'd liked her, but would probably never have seen her again if she hadn't made the first move. It started with *Do you ski?* Then *I'm coming to Whistler in February. How would you like to show me around?*

She looked good. Her hair was short and glossy, a brown so dark it seemed black beside the cinnamon colored suede of her jacket. She wore dark jeans that showed off her slender hips, and a soft ivory sweater, against which hung an asymmetrical rock of amber on a leather thong. Hunter stood up and cleared his throat, then remembered his mother's lessons on manners and made his way past a few crowded tables to greet her. "Hi, you made it," he said, offered her his arm and escorted her back to his table. "How do you like Whistler so far?"

She stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips across his cheek. Her lips were soft as a baby's breath and a rich vanilla scent lingered beside his nose. "Hey, handsome," she said. "Good thing you're here to support me. After two days on the slopes I can hardly walk." She leaned against him, warm and soft and not heavy at all.

He remembered how refreshing her cheerful, confident manner had been when he met her in Los Angeles. She acted as if they were friends already, and he went along with it. "Glad to be of service," he said with a smile, waiting as she slid into the booth before sitting down across from her. So this is how it's done, he said to himself. Just pretend you know each other better than you really do.

They talked about skiing at first. He hadn't skied for several years, he told her. Not since he broke up with his wife. He used to take his girls skiing on the North Shore mountains, the ones you could see across the inlet from Vancouver. He thought, but didn't say, that they used to have family skiing days more often when the girls were younger. What happened in those later years? Could he have spent so much time away from home, even as a detective with the RCMP, that he had no time for skiing with his family? He knew the answer. He spent a lot of what used to be family time with Ken, trying to keep his best friend sane, trying to keep him from drinking, trying to keep him from doing what he eventually did do. By the time Ken was gone, it seemed too late to recapture the family life they'd had.

She ordered a martini. "Dirty," she told the waiter.

"What's that?" Hunter asked her. "Beer for me. Labatt's Blue in the bottle, if you have it," he said to the waiter.

“A little olive juice in it,” she told him. “I don’t know why I order it that way. Maybe just for a conversation piece.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“I guess ...” Her voice died abruptly. Her face had flash frozen into a fixed mask, mouth slightly open, eyes wide, with a glint of panic in the pupils. Hunter followed her gaze to a large round table across the room where a man was pulling out a chair facing the entrance for himself, and motioning his female companion to one on the opposite side of the large empty table. He was a fit, well built man but the way his turtleneck sweater bulged softly above his belt showed he was past his athletic prime. He wore a light leather jacket and slacks. His companion was an attractive young woman, tall and slender but lacking the healthy glow of the skiers around her, as if she were recovering from an illness. She wore no coat. Hunter assumed they were guests at this hotel, same as Alora. The woman settled into her seat and smiled, but the smile seemed forced, almost pained, and she half turned to watch the entrance, as if expecting someone else to arrive. The man pulled a menu across the table and opened it, ignoring his companion.

Alora drew her breath in sharply and seemed to recoil. She raised her hand to the side of her face and leaned in towards Hunter’s shoulder. “I’ve got to go,” she said in a hurried whisper. “Come with me.” Her other hand fumbled along Hunter’s arm, and squeezed his wrist. “Please.”

Hunter nodded. He knew she’d had a good reason for changing her phone number last summer, and assumed it was a stalker, although he hadn’t asked her, hadn’t wanted to pry, and right now was not the time to ask. He glanced over at the watching woman and sensed that her attention, too, was focused on the man in the leather jacket. Hunter slapped a twenty on the table and got to his feet, standing between Alora and the man who seemed to scare her. He kept that position as they walked towards the entrance. She shrank into herself and kept her head down and turned away, her upper body frozen as if she were carrying a too full cup of scalding tea. She almost walked right into a little girl, less than three years old, who stopped short and was bumped from behind by a boy a couple of years older.

“Alora? Is that you?”

Alora jerked upright and gasped. Behind the two children stood a woman of about sixty, with a confused frown on her face. She was a pleasant looking woman, well groomed and wearing a ski sweater, black pants and moccasin boots. There was an older man at her right elbow, with a strong, narrow face and a military hair cut, a look of surprise on his face. “We startled her,” he said, putting his hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Hello, Alora.” Neither his voice nor his face held a smile. The two of them, husband and wife, were clearly not pleased to see her. The children looked up at the cluster of adults in confusion.

“Well, well. Look who’s here.”

Hunter heard the voice and felt the presence of the man behind him but didn’t turn around. He kept his hand on Alora’s elbow and could feel it start to tremble as she turned to face the voice. “Mike,” she nodded, her voice firmer than Hunter would have expected, then

acknowledged the two older people in turn. “Beth. John.” She took a deep breath before saying, “Nice to see you”, which was obviously a lie.

“It’s been a long time,” the woman called Beth said. She smiled sadly and sighed. “I hope you’ve found what you were looking for,” she said, unable or unwilling to hide the bitterness in her voice, and bent to the children. “Let’s go find your mom,” she said, and led them into the restaurant. John, the older man, nodded to Alora and turned to follow his wife.

Hunter stepped back so he could see the man Alora had addressed as Mike. The man tried to stare Alora down with an acerbic smile, but she wouldn’t look away. He didn’t even acknowledge Hunter’s presence. “Nice to meet you, Mike,” Hunter said, offering his hand, and Mike seemed to notice him for the first time. He sized Hunter up, eyes moving from his sheepskin jacket to his jeans and boots, but didn’t reach for his offered hand. Hunter noticed that the older man had stopped just behind Mike’s back and half turned around to watch.

“You fucking her?” said Mike, his eyes back on Alora.

Hunter felt heat rise up his neck and into his face. He usually had a long fuse, but men like Mike had a way of shortening it. “Say that again,” he said, low and even, “and I will knock your teeth down your throat.” That forced Mike to turn away from Alora and face Hunter.

The older man behind lifted his hand. “Mike,” he said. There was a note of warning in his voice.

“Not your business, Dad.” Then to Hunter, “You’re lucky my family’s here. Watch your back, cowboy.” The words smelled of alcohol. He nodded to Alora. “I’ll be seeing you,” he said. “We’ve got some catching up to do.”

Alora turned and began to walk away. “You hear me, bitch?” Mike raised his voice after her.

Hunter took a step towards him, but Mike’s father had grabbed Mike’s arm and yanked him around. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

Mike shrugged off his father’s hand. “I said it’s not your business,” he said, took one last look at Alora’s retreating back, and sulked his way back to his table. Hunter and the older man watched as he yanked out his chair and sat down, waving off his wife’s questions, then grabbing the black apron of a passing waiter. His wife and his mother both looked uncomfortable, and both turned their attention to the two children, trying to act as if nothing was wrong.

The older man looked at Hunter and smiled apologetically. “Stress,” he said. “He has a stressful job.” He looked towards Alora, who stood waiting in the lobby for Hunter, and regarded her for a moment with a puzzled frown. “She left him, years ago. I guess he’s a little bitter about it.”

“I won’t make trouble unless he does,” said Hunter. He took one last look at the man in the leather jacket, nodded to the older man, and walked away.