

## A Detour

— Belle A. DeCosta

“C’mon, Mel, I’d do it for you, please?” Melanie sat on her dorm room bed, trying not to give in to her roommate’s pleas.

“Becky, a Nor’easter is predicted, I have no money for gas, and you barely know this guy!”

George Mason University had played the University of Rhode Island in men’s basketball over the weekend, and Becky had partied hard (in every way) with one of the fans that had made the bus trip. In typical Becky fashion, she now considered him *The One*, and Melanie was trying to talk some sense into her.

Becky wasn’t having it. “How can you say that? We spent every second together. I know every inch of his body, and he knows mine.”

Melanie rolled her eyes. “Becky, we’ve been over this a thousand times. Sex with a stranger does not equal intimacy. It might be a rock-in’ good time, but it’s not a lasting bond.”

Becky sat at the edge of Melanie’s bed and gave her roommate her best sincere-innocent look. “This one’s different, Mel, I can feel it.”

Melanie sighed. They were always different. She hated that her friend was so gullible and, honestly, too eager to give it up. She didn’t think of Becky as a whore, more like a party girl in search of Prince Charming. As focused as Becky was on the quest, Melanie found it odd that she never dwelled on it when her dream man didn’t pan out. She’d cry briefly, shrug it off, and move on to the next. *But this time is a little crazy*, Melanie thought. *Way over the top.*

She tried again. “Becky, you want to drive from Rhode Island to Arlington, Virginia, in a storm to surprise a guy you know nothing about. You don’t find that extreme?”

“No, I find it romantic.” *More like impulsive and dangerous*, Melanie silently added. “We have a soul connection, Mel.”

Melanie was losing patience. “Seriously, a soul connection?” She drove home her point. “Where is he from? Does he have brothers and sisters? Does he like cats or dogs or none of the above? Is he vegan or a burger lover? Does he ski, fish, like boating? Hiking trails or walking the beach?”

“You don’t understand, Mel,” Becky countered. She had her there.

Where Becky was drop-dead gorgeous, a perfect 5’6”, with long, thick, golden hair, hazel eyes, and a naturally, perfectly proportioned figure, Melanie was not. She wasn’t unattractive, just nondescript as she liked to think. Barely five feet, baby-fine brown hair cut short, and a few extra pounds, Melanie blended in with the crowd. She didn’t date much (by choice) and certainly wasn’t in the market for a husband, not yet anyway. While Becky majored in liberal arts and good times, Melanie’s major was oceanography. Becky dreamed of a doting husband, a house in the ’burbs, and babies. Melanie couldn’t wait to explore the world’s seas and study marine life.

Becky was right; she didn’t get it. But Melanie knew reckless behavior when she saw it, and this certainly qualified. “It’s a bad idea,” she said, shaking her head no.

“Okay, then I’ll take the bus.”

No way Melanie was letting that happen. “All right, all right. You pay for the gas and tolls, though,” she said. Becky grinned and hugged her tightly. “I knew I could count on you!”



The two friends made their way across the quad to student parking. Melanie’s old Honda Civic sat ready to roll—or not. Betsy, as she fondly called the car, was ten years old with 160,000 miles. Melanie’s parents had bought it as a high school graduation gift to get her around town and occasionally home to Providence. The car certainly

wasn't meant to travel almost four hundred miles at night in a snowstorm. *Mom and Dad would have a cow if they knew. I'm having a cow knowing.* Melanie turned the key, half hoping Betsy wouldn't start. Much to Melanie's chagrin and Becky's delight, she did.

"Yay! We're off on an adventure." Becky clapped her hands like a kid on the way to Disney World. Melanie shot her a snarky look. "Oh, lighten up, Mel, it'll be fun."

"Sure it will. If Betsy doesn't break down, the storm stays off the coast, and what's-his-name doesn't turn out to be a serial killer."

"His name is Mark. And honestly, do you always have to assume the worst?" Becky patted the dashboard. "Betsy will do just fine. A little snow never hurt anybody, and if Mark was going to kill me, he would've done it already." She gave her friend a playful look. "Why don't you save the worry for if and when we need it, Mom?"

*She has a point. I agreed to this potential fiasco. I might as well enjoy it until it all hits the fan.* "K," was all she said.

The friends chatted about classes, gossiped, and sang along with Melanie's playlist. When they stopped for gas in New York, the first snowflakes started to fall. *We should turn back,* Melanie thought, replacing the gas nozzle on the pump holder. But she changed her mind when she returned to the driver's seat and saw Becky carefree, her head bobbing to the music. *She's right. I do need to lighten up. It's just a few flakes. We can always wait it out at a McDonald's in a service center. And Betsy is performing beautifully.*

"You aren't turning us around, are you?" Becky asked.

"Nope. Onward we go." Melanie gave her a grin. "A little snow never hurt anybody." *I hope,* she thought. Becky gave her a fist bump, and they continued on their way.

By the time they made it halfway down the New Jersey Turnpike, it was snowing sideways, and even Becky was concerned. "I hope you can see better than I can."

"I'm looking out the same window you are," Melanie snapped. She was angrier at herself than Becky. *I knew better! What was I thinking?*

*Oh yeah, lighten up. Right. A lot of good that'll do me in the morgue.* Becky spotted an abandoned rest area, and Melanie pulled in, praying she didn't hit a barrier. She didn't, but she did run over something that popped Betsy's front tires.

"Great!" Melanie grumbled.

"Now what do we do?" Becky whined.

"Well, we don't curl up in a ball and whimper."

"That was mean, Mel. I'm scared. We could freeze to death out here."

*Be nice. She's not made like you.* Melanie let out a long breath. "We aren't going to freeze. It's coming down hard, but it just started to get crazy. I have AAA, and Betsy has plenty of gas. We'll ration the heat, keep the exhaust pipe clear, and wait for a tow."

After endless busy signals, Melanie finally got through to AAA. She explained their situation and where they were. The dispatcher told her to sit tight; she'd send a tow truck, but it would be a while. "Calls are coming in fast and furious; some people are stranded with children and no heat. Make sure to clear your exhaust pipe and charge your phone each time you run the car." *Ah, duh*, Melanie thought. *That's a no-brainer.* Then she noticed Becky was scrolling through TikTok and understood why the dispatcher felt the reminder was necessary.

Melanie turned off the car and was surprised by how quickly it got cold. She popped the trunk, pulled out the provisions she always carried, threw them in the backseat, and shivered back into the driver's seat. She looked over to an astonished Becky.

"Blankets, a flashlight, protein bars, and bottled water?"

Melanie handed her a blanket. "I have sand and a shovel back there, too. You never know when you'll need a survival kit on the road."

Becky was in awe. "I would have never thought of that." She smiled at her roomie. "But I'm awfully glad you did." They shared a bottle of water in compatible silence until Becky's phone rang. "It's Mark!" she cried and answered midway through the second ring. "Hiya, handsome, you'll never guess..." Melanie watched her friend's face transition from elation to disbelief. Becky put the phone on speaker.

“Who *are* you?” an irate female demanded. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter. Stop sexting my fiancé, slut, or I’ll put it out on the internet for all to see. Got it?” Speechless, Becky only nodded, so Melanie answered for her.

“Got it. But think twice before going there; I have some goodies that your precious Mark sent to me.” Melanie hung up. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just shocked is all.” Becky wiped the tears from her eyes. “I guess I’ll never learn.”

“You’re just too trusting. Maybe don’t offer your whole heart wide open, right away,” Melanie suggested.

Becky gave a sad smile. “It’s just my way.” After a few minutes, she was back to center and giggled. “Hey, anything in that survival kit to pee in?”

*How does she recover so quickly?* Melanie wondered as she reached into the backseat. She handed Becky an empty coffee can. “You’re joking, right?” Melanie assured her she was not. “I’ll take my chances in the elements,” Becky said, opening her door.

Melanie had started the car again when Becky yelled for her to hurry and bring the flashlight. Becky knelt beside a large trash bag that was twitching. Even with the howling wind, they could hear cries coming from within. While Melanie held the flashlight steady, Becky tore open the bag and found a beagle wrapped in a quilt, barely alive and terrified. Melanie was sickened by what she saw. *Who could do such a thing?* “We’ve got to get her in the car fast!” Becky hollered over the wind. “Help me lift her. We’ll use the quilt as a makeshift stretcher.” They went to move the dog, and she wailed in agony. Becky unwrapped the quilt and found the reason. “Oh my God, you poor baby!” she cried. Melanie had no idea what Becky had discovered but fully understood the urgency in her voice. They rushed the beagle into the car, and Becky climbed in the backseat with her.

“Start the car and blast the heat,” she instructed. The dog was shaking uncontrollably from fear, pain, and cold. Becky wrapped her in every available covering, including her coat and sweater. “Come

on, little mama, hang in there,” she pleaded. Melanie had no clue what to do and watched as Becky rubbed the dog in circular motions, cooing words of comfort the entire time. When her hands began to cramp, she switched places with Melanie and coached her on how to do it. “Not too hard, but with enough pressure to warm her blood and get it moving.”

Melanie got into a rhythm and felt the dog’s quaking begin to ease. “It’s working!” she exclaimed and went to put the pup on her lap. A panicked Becky yelled not to move her. “Why not? My body heat will help warm her,” practical Melanie pointed out.

“Because she’s in labor.”

“As in having puppies?” Melanie was beside herself and quick to switch places with Becky.

“That’s the definition, yes.” Becky poured water into her cupped hand, and the dog eagerly lapped it up. “With the trauma she’s endured, it’s probably too late to save the puppies, but there’s still a chance she’ll make it.” Becky caressed the dog’s muzzle and was rewarded with a lick. “If she delivers soon.” The exhausted pup closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Thinking it was a bad sign, Melanie worried the dog was dying. Becky assured her it was common for a dog in labor to sleep before she birthed.

Becky moved up to the front seat to let the beagle rest. “How do you know so much about dogs?” Melanie asked. Becky explained that her grandfather was a breeder before he retired, and she’d spent much of her childhood with her grandparents. Melanie gave her a puzzled look.

“My father was away a lot on business, and my mother is a full-blown narcissist. When Daddy traveled, I went to Gram and Gramps’s house to escape her sharp tongue and put-downs. I guess they’re the reason I open my heart so readily.” She smiled. “I grew up swallowed in their love and watched them offer the same to their dogs, to anything or anyone, really. I witnessed firsthand the difference it made in the lives they touched and in their own.”

Melanie pointed out that surviving her mother's behavior must be where she learned how to recover quickly from hurt and rejection. Becky agreed. "And because of Daddy, I know I don't want a man that doesn't stick around. So, guys like that are easy for me to move on from."

Melanie took advantage of the opening. "Did you ever think maybe your partying and casual attitude toward sex sends the wrong signal?"

"I'm sure it does to some. But what's the harm if I don't get crushed at the loss?"

"But it does affect you, Becky. I've seen it."

"Affect, yes. Crush, no. There's a big difference." Becky paused. "I'd rather keep an open mind and heart than live in fear of a minor letdown."

Melanie plunged ahead. "Your lifestyle isn't emotionally healthy, Becky."

Becky laughed. "Maybe not for you, but I'm having a blast! There's a whole lifetime to settle down. I'm going to enjoy these four years." She checked on the dog and turned back to Melanie. "What's your story? Why are you so buttoned up?"

Melanie took a deep breath and explained. Her father had left when she was ten years old, and her mother fell apart. "She was totally helpless. She knew nothing about their finances, where to take the car for maintenance, how to shut off the water valve, mow a lawn, nothing." Melanie shook her head. "Mom married my stepfather because he could fix stuff, and she hated being alone. I promised myself I would never be in that situation."

"You don't like your stepfather?" Becky asked.

"He's a drunk."

Becky squeezed her friend's hand. "I'm sorry."

Melanie shrugged. "I've learned to live with it. But that's why I'm always prepared and looking for possible glitches. And why I'm very picky about who I date and don't like to party," she added.

“Understandable,” Becky said. “But you aren’t your mom or step-father, and coloring outside the lines once in a while won’t ruin your life’s picture.” The dog whimpered before Melanie could respond. “Showtime,” Becky said and moved to the backseat. “Okay, mama, I know you prefer to do this alone, but this situation isn’t ideal. You do the hard part, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Melanie watched, transfixed, as Becky calmly took each stillborn puppy as it was delivered and tried in vain to save its life. “You’re doing great, mama,” she coaxed the distressed dog. “Keep up the good work.”

After three failed attempts, Becky was able to revive the fourth and final puppy. “We did it, mama!” she cried, placing the newborn beside its mother. While the beagle cleaned her pup, Becky looked from the stillborn pups to Melanie. “What do we do with these poor creatures? The ground is frozen; we can’t bury them, and I can’t bear the thought of a wild animal eating them.” Becky’s eyes filled with tears.

Melanie thought for a minute. “They’re so tiny. We can pack them with snow inside the coffee can and leave it outside to keep them frozen. We’ll put the can in the trunk when the tow truck comes and bring them home for a proper burial.”

“I knew you’d come up with a plan, Mel; you always do,” Becky said, all smiles. Melanie glanced at the gas gauge and hoped her friend was right. They had run Betsy continuously since finding the dog hours ago, and at this rate, they only had a couple more to go. *And no more clean coats or blankets.* She consciously decided to worry about it if and when the time came and mentally gave herself a pat on the back for the change in her thought pattern.

Melanie concocted the temporary coffin and checked the exhaust pipe while Becky made a clean space for the new mother and baby. Wet, tired, and emotionally drained, the two friends leaned their heads against the headrests and exhaled.

“I’m sorry I got you into this mess, Mel.”

“You didn’t get me into anything,” Melanie answered. “I’m a big



girl and made my own decision. And besides, our little friend would have died if we hadn't shown up. It was meant to be."

The beagle sighed, and Becky leaned over the seat and gave her a pat. "We did it, Mel. We saved her and her baby."

"You mean you did it," Melanie corrected.

Becky shook her head. "No, we. I knew how to care for her, but it wouldn't have mattered without your survival kit. You saved us all, Mel." Becky gave her friend a hug. "Thank you."

Melanie blushed. "Well, I would've been a hot mess and probably scared the poor dog to death. You were confident and calm, and it soothed her. I could see her trust you almost instantly because she felt your love. It was inspiring." Melanie thought for a moment, then continued. "I think I'll give the whole open-up-to-connection-thing a try."

Each had learned a valuable lesson from the other. Becky now understood the merits of forethought and practicality, and Melanie the rewards of an open mind and heart.

Becky grinned. "I'm glad our original trip got waylaid. We traveled down a more important road and reached a special destination." Melanie smiled in agreement.

As the tow truck pulled into the rest area, its headlights weren't the only light to shine.

This was a road trip Becky and Melanie would remember for life.

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**Belle A. DeCosta's** work includes her memoir, *Echoes in the Mirror*, a novel, *Treading Water* (awarded Finalist for Best First Novel by Next Generations Indie Book Awards 2022), and *The Heart of Addisen*, the second book in the *Treading Water* series. Her latest novel, *The Lesson*, was released in mid-May 2024. Belle is also featured in the ARIA Anthologies *Hope*, *Iconic Rhode Island*, and *In a Dark Time*. She makes her home in East Providence with her beloved Redbone Coonhound, Trista, and an aquarium full of assorted fish.