

Chef Jill Morgan Storm has set out to find the man of her dreams, but he's not exactly on the menu ...

HOT FLASH

Kathy
Carmichael



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Kathy
Carmichael



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DEDICATION:

This book is dedicated in loving memory to my mother, Charlotte Daniels Lynch Nohr. May she happily continue nagging me from the Great Beyond.

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Dear Happily Married Woman:

I saw your recent announcement in the newspaper celebrating many years of marriage.

Since my first marriage failed and I've been unsuccessful in my attempts to find a partner in life, I want to learn from the experts, women like you who've been married for years, about what makes a relationship work.

Would you mind, please, filling out the enclosed survey? I've included an SASE.

Many thanks,

Jill Morgan Storm

An Unhappily Single Woman

PROLOGUE

Birthdays are like a box of Tampax.

When the box is new, you thoughtlessly reach in and grab another but as the box empties you start worrying about running out before you're ready.

Not only was my Tampax supply getting low, but it was my fortieth flipping birthday, and did I mention I was bloated, too?

I stood in my bathroom, styling my hair and trying to get ready for a night out with the girls, when my phone rang. My stomach sank as I read the caller ID and saw it was from the hotel restaurant where I work as sous chef.

"Hello?"

"Jill, you've got to get down here, Right now." Big E, the pastry chef, blurted out.

I put down my blow-dryer. "What's wrong now?"

"Chef Radkin is what's wrong. He's always what's wrong."

"It's my birthday," I whined, but I knew my

protestations were useless. The five-star chef, while incredibly talented, was equally gifted at creating problems—especially when I wasn't at La Papillon to discourage him from drinking. For some reason, I was the designated problem fixer. "Can't you handle the disaster du jour?"

"You're the only one he'll listen to."

"I don't want to be late to my own birthday party. Can you put Radkin on the phone?"

"That's not possible. I'm sorry, Jill, but if you don't come, Juan will freeze to death. You don't want that on your conscience, do you?"

I hate it when he appeals to my inner guilt and makes me feel like I'm responsible for what happens there.

Within a short time, I entered the kitchen at La Papillon, only to observe Chef Radkin standing in front of the huge restaurant freezer, swinging a saucepan at one of the dishwashers who looked as if he was trying to open the freezer behind the mad chef.

As I stepped close, sure enough, I could just make out a very blue and probably frostbitten Juan through the tiny freezer window. Surely that wasn't an icicle dangling from his nose?

"So, Radkin," I said boldly, counting on his creepy crush on me to keep him from smashing my face in with the shiny pan and hoping that I was far enough out of reach for him to grope me. Did I mention that was one of his favorite pastimes?

“Jill!” He stopped midswing when he saw it was me. “Happy birthday!”

“I left my birthday petit fours in the freezer,” I said as casually as I could, again hoping to preserve my facial features. “Mind letting me through?”

He looked a little mulish over the idea, and I made a mental note to not actually go into said freezer for fear I’d soon join Juan in his frozen hell. “Please?”

“Anything for you, Jilly,” he said, turning and opening the freezer with a gallant flourish, fully intent on feeling me up if I took a step nearer.

However, he’d temporarily forgotten his captive. Juan spilled out and Big E quickly enfolded him in a few crisp white tablecloths while a cook rushed forward with a cup of coffee for the close-to-stiff man.

I turned to Radkin. “Thanks.”

Unfortunately, I’d let my guard down and the chef took full advantage by grabbing my left breast. However, despite his smarmy smile, he must have gone heavy on the sauce celebrating my birthday because he slowly sank to the floor in an unconscious heap.

I’d need to bathe for a week to get the imprint of his hand off my mental body. “Clean up on aisle five.”

After making sure he was safely stowed in his office and that Juan was okay and didn’t plan to sue, I headed out, only a little late for meeting my friends for dinner and contemplating whether there was time for a quick shower first.

The Irish poet, Thomas Moore, said, “What though youth gave love and roses, Age still leaves us friends and wine.” Updated for our current millennium, that means—hit forty and it’s all over except for friends and good saki.

I hope he’s wrong, but with fabulous friends and enough saki, who cares if he’s right?

Celebrating my fortieth flipping birthday finally became tolerable thanks to the aforementioned combination. My dearest friends (we’d all met and bonded at “Baby Swimming” sixteen years earlier) met me at a fabulous Chinese restaurant on the strip and the remains of Moo Shu Pork, Sesame Chicken, and egg rolls congealed on the tabletop in front of us. From our booth, we had a view of some of Las Vegas’s most famous casino hotels; and the fountain in front of the Bellagio twinkled with hundreds of lights and thousands of streams of water.

We were totally snockered—well, except for Susan, who was the designated driver. She couldn’t drink anyway since she was mucho pregnant. We weren’t liquored up enough to spend the evening in front of the porcelain god, but we were unsteady and relaxed. Very relaxed.

I’d reached that stage of relaxation where I was keeling over and Susan’s shoulder was the only thing separating my chin from the tabletop.

Connie held up a saucer containing plastic-wrapped cookies. “Fortune time.”

Thank God they didn't expect me to blow out candles. Good friends know that a cake set ablaze with a depressing number of candles is not a good thing. I grabbed a cookie. "I hope mine says *Congratulations. Your kid just won a college scholarship.*"

"Are you sure Stephen won't get a scholarship?"

I shook my head. The room spun like a dervish. I adore my son and know how wonderful he is, but not everyone appreciates him for the creative kid he is. He courageously walks to the beat of his own artistic drummer. "He went to his da—other mother's without sharing his report card with me. I hope he didn't flunk."

"That would give you another year to get college money together," suggested MaryEllen helpfully.

Like kids who flunk their junior year have admissions departments beating down their doors? "What colleges want kids who struggle with their academic classes?"

Getting college money for Stephen was my first priority. Somehow, I'd find a way to send him to whatever college would take him. Good mothers do that and, dammit, I am a good mother.

Stephen would never have to struggle to find a way to pay rent or buy food—or take care of *his* kid—like I once had to when his father left us. Stephen wouldn't have school loans so huge they rivaled the National Debt. That's an exaggeration, but as a percentage of

income, it's not too far off the mark.

I'd been too proud to ask my folks for help. In retrospect, maybe I'd been wrong. The price of being indebted to my parents makes me cringe even now. My mom intrudes enough in my life without that.

As I tore the wrapping from my fortune cookie, I glanced at Susan. "Did your son, David, hear back on the music scholarship?"

"One of them. NU offered him a full, but he's holding out for Juilliard. I hate the idea of him being that far from home."

MaryEllen asked, "What about a school loan?"

Susan mentioned a Web site and told me to visit it. I grimaced. "Do you guys know how hard I had to work to pay off my school loans? It took forever on my salary as a cook. I don't want Stephen to have to do that."

"You're usually such an optimist, Jill. What's wrong?" Connie looked at me intently.

"The age thing is making me nuts."

"Deal with it." Susan patted her stomach. "You could be forty *and* pregnant."

"Good point. I keep reminding myself that getting older is way better than the alternative, but it's not working."

"Think of it as a chance to reexamine your life," Connie advised. "You need to consider your options for the future."

“What she needs is more sake.” MaryEllen feathered her fingers in the air. “It’ll bring back Jill’s normal rosy glow.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said Connie. “What’s your fortune cookie say, Jill?”

Connie was the only one of us who didn’t worry about tuition for her kid next year. Her daughter, Rachel, left home two years earlier to head for New York and fame as a fashion model. Now Rachel’s lovely face is featured on the cover of magazines like *Cosmo* and *Seventeen*. Connie insisted Rachel get her GED, but she was dragging her feet about enrolling in college. Connie tried to act like it was no big deal, but I knew it bothered her.

“What does yours say?” MaryEllen asked Connie.

“*It is better to give than receive, but sometimes receiving is more enjoyable.*” Connie wiggled her eyebrows and everyone laughed.

“That’s so you,” said MaryEllen.

Susan read hers aloud. “*Take time to smell the roses but watch out for those thorns.*” She frowned. “Do you think thorns are a metaphor for labor pains?”

“If so, it was written by a man.” Connie doesn’t much like men these days, either. Ever since her divorce when Rachel was three, Connie’s been looking for a man to solve all her problems. The problem is that the men in her life are the problem. She’s drawn to bad boys, has a fierce need to redeem them, and in the end she’s

always left holding the bag in the form of credit card bills and late rent penalties when the men disappear.

Lately, however, she's sworn off men and I have a side bet with Susan over how long that'll last, because Connie really loves sex.

Connie, seated beside MaryEllen, leaned over to read her fortune. "Oh, that's a good one."

MaryEllen beamed. "It says, *Invest in manufacturing and manufacture goodness.*"

The three women looked at me. I hadn't opened mine yet, so I cracked my cookie and pulled out the thin white strip of paper. "*You will renew acquaintance with a dark-haired stranger.*"

What the hell was that supposed to mean? How do you renew acquaintance with someone you don't know? "I wanted a scholarship, dammit."

"Too bad it didn't work out with the Asshole Professor," consoled MaryEllen.

"Free tuition, down the drain." I sighed. It had been a perfect solution. If I'd married the Asshole Professor, Stephen would have gotten free tuition at NU as the son of an employee.

It took me a week after our breakup to realize I'd been "settling" when I considered marrying the Asshole Professor. But let me tell you, there's nothing wrong with settling when college tuition is part of the deal.

Connie pointed at my boobs with her chopstick. "At least you got something out of the bargain. I wish

one of my ex-boyfriends had bought me bodacious chachas.”

When the Asshole Professor offered me boobs, I figured, why not? I’d always been embarrassed by my lack of a figure, and having boobs would make me feel more . . . feminine. And they are awesome, even if I do say so myself. “I wonder if they’re what gave him the idea of running off with his student? Once he saw the breasts of a twenty-year-old, maybe he had to discover what the rest of her looked like?”

Even worse, the Asshole Professor’s new squeeze was closer in age to Stephen than to me. I sucked in my stomach. In the right light and with my stomach tucked in and if I didn’t breathe, someone might conceivably think I was twenty or at least under thirty.

“Forget the professor. I have an idea that’ll help me find Mr. Right—and hopefully he’ll be in a position to pay Stephen’s tuition.” I pulled a list of questions from my pocket. “My parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary is coming up and Mom left me with a huge stack of newspaper “Style” sections about couples celebrating their anniversaries. Looking at all those photos of smiling married couples who seemed so happy made me want to know why their marriages lasted. I want to know if there’s a recipe for marital success.”

“So?”

“I’m going to ask them.” I gulped, then unfolded the paper, smoothed it, and placed it faceup in the middle of

the table, careful to avoid the soy sauce spill. "I'm tired of Mr. Wrongs. I need Stephen's tuition, and gaining a real relationship would be a bonus. I'm thinking these couples can point me in the right direction."

Susan grabbed it before the others got a look at it. "This is awesome!"

"What is it?" asked Connie.

"A survey for happily married couples. Why didn't any of us think of this before?" She passed the list to MaryEllen, who quickly scanned it, then handed it on to Connie.

"You're sending it to the couples in the newspaper?"

"That's the idea. I checked some of the names from the newspapers and most of them are listed in the phone book."

"It's a very good idea." Susan looked at me approvingly. MaryEllen looked at me encouragingly. Connie didn't look at me at all. She was mesmerized by my survey questions.

"You know," said MaryEllen, who by this point had lost her esses, "I think we can improve on the survey. There's nothing on there about vibratorz."

"Vibrators! There's nothing on here about *sex!*" Connie looked at me as though I'd lost my mind.

"Give me the PDA I gave you," said Susan.

I remembered her giving me the PDA, but I a) wasn't sure how to use it and b) was fairly certain it was

sitting with the pile of other birthday gifts I'd received from them at my apartment. I must have looked blank, because Susan added, "I stuck it in your purse."

It took me a second to find it and give it to her.

She opened the keyboard. "I'm going to retype your survey with our suggestions added to it. I really think you should do this. I'm dying to know what other married women think."

"Are you ready to type?" Connie asked Susan. "I've got suggestions out the ying-yang."

"Ready."

"In the section where they rate items of importance in a successful marriage, there has to be something about sex. Whether the husband or wife are great lovers, whether they both are, or whether they're both lousy. That kind of thing. Also frequency. Do they hump like bunnies?"

"Isn't that kind of personal?" I asked. "I mean, would they tell me that kind of thing?"

"I'm fairly certain I know how to handle it," said Susan, her fingers typing so fast I thought she might create some kind of minor cyclone.

MaryEllen spoke up. "You're mizzing one item that iz eztrremely important."

"And it iz—I mean, is?"

"Doez the huzband azk for directionz when he'z lozt?"

"Does any man?"

“My huzband doez,” said MaryEllen. “It’z one of hiz mozt a-mor-al traitz.”

I think she meant admirable, but I’m not 100 percent certain. “Maybe we should add something about assembling bikes on Christmas Eve when the instructions are written in a foreign language?”

“Screw that,” said Connie. “Just make sure that survey has plenty of questions about sex.”

“Zex makez a lot of zenze.” MaryEllen bobbed her head in agreement but couldn’t seem to stop bobbing.

“Time to cut off the saki,” said Susan, who cringed at each of MaryEllen’s head bobs. “I don’t want any of you getting sick in my car.”

By the time we’d paid, Susan had a final draft of the survey, ready for me to send out.

MARRIAGE SATISFACTION SURVEY

1. How long have you been married? _____
A) 25–35 years B) 36–45 years C) 46-plus years
D) Can't remember
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being sucky and 10 being awesome, how happy would you rank your marriage?

3. Please rank the following on how important you believe they are in the success of your marriage (scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not important and 10 being absolutely necessary):
 - Being best friends _____
 - Companionship _____
 - Shared interests/hobbies _____
 - Ability to make a budget and live within it _____
 - Interests/hobbies outside the marriage _____
 - Ability to follow or ask for instructions _____
 - Commitment _____
 - Sexual compatibility _____
 - Sense of humor _____
 - Honesty _____
 - Fidelity _____
 - Good at household or auto repairs _____
4. How often do you and your husband have relations on average: _____
A) Hourly B) Daily C) Several times a week
D) Weekly E) Can't remember

5. Are you happy with the frequency you have relations with your husband? Do you feel it makes a difference in your marriage?_____

6. Is there any one thing you believe makes your marriage last?_____

7. What other thing, or things, do you believe makes your marriage happy? _____

8. Are there any character traits you think are important in selecting a spouse _____

9. Does your husband:

Fall asleep in front of the TV?_____

Take you out to dinner or to the movies?_____

If so, how often? _____

Know how to assemble things?_____

Give appropriate and well-thought-out gifts?_____

Hold your hand when you walk?_____

Help around the house? _____

Help with the children? _____

10. What traits do you bring to your marriage that help make it work? _____

Survey Comments: _____

CHAPTER ONE

Dear Jill,

I don't usually respond to surveys, but your questions brought to mind how much I love my husband and how much I appreciate him. Thank you for the reminder.

We've been mostly happily married over thirty-six years. Of course there have been ups and downs, but we worked our way through them. As a salesman, he travels quite often and that's put him in the way of lots of temptation. Yet he hasn't once wavered in his love and devotion to me.

The best piece of advice I can give you is to be tolerant. No one is perfect, but if you let your fellow know you'll always be there for him, then he'll always be there for you.

All the best,

Mary Swift

A very wise woman once told me (okay, it was Susan, but she's really wise!) that all mothers make their daughters crazy. She said she began getting along with her mother after accepting that as a given and asking herself why her mom made her so nuts. I'm not sure she realized this beforehand, because her mother died five years ago.

Either way, for me the answer is simple. My mother makes me crazy because she *is* nuts.

I don't know about you, but whenever trouble looms, storm clouds gather, or Mom is within shouting distance, I head for the nearest bathroom, primarily because it has a lock and bringing guests in with you is frowned on.

It's a nice quiet little place—as long as no one knows where to find you. I flinched at the sound of determined knocking on the bathroom door, then stared at my self-portrait (drawn in lipstick) on the mirror.

I added a mustache.

The hotel where I work as a sous chef is usually safe territory. But when I heard whispers about my mother attending one of the functions we were catering, I'd grabbed a pen and a stack of Post-its for writing out my suicide note cum last will and testament. I couldn't bear the idea of dealing with my mother while I was dealing with reaching my fiftieth flipping decade.

I'm not saying forty is old, but it's a lifetime from twenty. I use the age of twenty, not because it's the

exact age of the Asshole Professor's new squeeze—well, not totally. It's also the age I was when I met Stephen's father.

I'd begun receiving responses from my surveys, and they suggested things like tolerance and accepting your mate's flaws. When I was twenty, that might have seemed easier than now. At flipping forty, I was too cynical and jaded. I could accept a man leaving the toilet seat up, but it's hard to accept men with commitment phobias. They don't stick around long enough to practice tolerating them.

Normally, I have a sunny disposition and I'm often described as perky. While it annoys me, it's fairly accurate. But this aging thing was doing a real number on me. Why should this birthday matter more than the others? Was this really only about turning forty, or was my mood caused by a general dissatisfaction with my life?

Connie had suggested self-examination. Figuring it couldn't hurt and seemed like a better use of Post-it notes, I wrote out a summation of my life to date, then stuck it beside my self-portrait on the bathroom mirror.

1. A failed marriage
2. My recent breakup
3. \$1,000 in savings and \$1,963 in checking
4. A wonderful son
5. My job as executive sous chef
6. Fabulous friends

Okay, on the surface my life might not look so bad.

But once you know the details, you'll agree I was knee-deep in suckiness.

Item #1. Sure, my broken marriage wasn't my fault. What led me to choose a mate who wouldn't stick? Did I have awful taste in men, or was there something wrong with me?

Item #2. Three weeks ago, the asshole I thought might be husband number two dumped me. Even worse, he kept my favorite iron skillet. I'd already left seven voice messages that he hadn't returned. Mental note: *Get it back!*

Item #3. Financially, I wasn't in horrible shape, but the only designer clothing I could afford was sold at Wal-Mart or Target. How long would \$2,963 last, considering rent was due (over \$900 a month!), not to mention utilities and credit card bills? Raising a kid is expensive, and my child support payments didn't come close to what I spend.

Item #4. My son, Stephen, is not simply wonderful, he's the cherry on top of the whipped cream of my life. However, he needs college tuition and he rarely speaks to me. When he does, it's in French. *Tres sucki, non?*

Item #5. While I love my job and I adore cooking, I don't love it quite so much when it requires creating three thousand identical Southwestern chicken breasts.

Item #6. My friends are my lifeline. They give meaning to my existence. When I'm with them, I can forget I'm a woman with responsibilities and simply

enjoy being myself. And when I'm hurt or discouraged, they're always there to pick me up.

Lately, the hurts way outnumbered the ups. Sucky. Sucky. Sucky.

Needing something to cheer me up, I went into the restroom stall, yanked on the roll of paper, and then dragged it back to the sink where I began making toilet paper origami. I was actually pretty good at it.

Origami is like cooking. If you follow the recipe, you know exactly what you'll get. Too bad life doesn't come with instructions. With origami and cooking, I feel a sense of control. If my life could be like that, then all I'd have to do is follow the rules and everything would turn out okay. Lately I'd been following the directions for creating an origami fish. I grinned when it almost came out like I wanted. Just one more fold and —

The pounding on the bathroom door resumed and I jumped.

"You've got to come out of there sometime, Jill," said Big E, the pastry chef, as he banged on the door again.

"Has Mom left yet?"

"You know, she's a very nice woman."

Snort. Like he knew anything about my mother?

If you stick your finger in an electric socket, it will give you an idea of my reaction to dealing with my mom. Basically, my hair stands on end and painful vibes ping-pong through my nerve endings.

So there I was, hiding in the bathroom, hoping she'd give up and go away and knowing that was about as likely as the Federal Reserve announcing the new interest rates are ninety days same as cash.

One of the best things about working for a large hotel is that Mom hasn't yet found the employee bathrooms.

However, I learned persistence from my mother. It's both her greatest trait and her worst. I knew why she was there—she'd found me another man. She wouldn't give up until I reported in.

I considered washing my hands again before leaving the restroom, but I'd already done that six times and my hands had puckered. I grabbed my Post-its off the mirror and stuck them in my pocket. Time to face the dating squad.

Big E smirked as I left the bathroom. I asked, "Where is she?"

"The kitchen."

I girded my loins. My sucky life was about to sink to a new low. Mom would try the patience of a saint. She has good intentions, and I certainly could have done worse in the parent stakes. The problem is, she lives in her own little world and it bears no resemblance to reality. Until a few years ago that wasn't an issue because my dad was wealthy enough that reality never crept near her.

Things, however, had changed, and once reality bit her on the butt in the form of a criminal indictment

against Dad, rather than rise to the occasion, she retreated even further into her fantasy world. My father did what he could to protect her from his prison cell and I tried my best to hold up my end. But it wasn't easy.

Figuring that since I was going to hear about whatever guy she'd found anyway, I might as well get it over with, so I took a deep breath, then peeked into the kitchen. Mom was standing in the channel, blocking the way.

I straightened my uniform and then stepped forward. "Why are you standing in the middle of the room, Mom, keeping everyone from doing their jobs? You know you're not supposed to be back here."

"I wanted to talk with you."

Talk? I knew what she wanted to talk about and I dreaded hearing about the man of her dreams for me. "Talking is forbidden during working hours, Mom."

There were snickers all around at that comment and I sent Jaime, the grill man, a dirty look.

"Well, what am I supposed to do when you don't answer my phone calls?"

"You could leave a message so I'll know to call you back." Try the patience of a saint? She'd try the patience of the devil. She was always after me, trying to introduce me to some guy who she thought would be perfect for me, and they were always perfectly *wrong* for me.

The cook elbowed me, trying to get to his station.

I stepped aside, nearly landing in Fang, the nickname given the sixty-quart standing mixer.

I'd just turned forty flipping years old and I didn't have that much time left anymore—certainly not for dealing with my mother. “How did you get in here?”

“I was at the Rosemoors' fiftieth wedding anniversary party.”

“You know the Rosemoors?”

“I do now.” She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “I crashed.”

I grabbed her arm and dragged her out of the kitchen and into a small storage room before I lost my job. “Are you trying to get me fired?”

She looked at me cluelessly and I felt a little guilty. Okay, a lot guilty. My nerve endings began doing the Macarena.

Just then, a deliveryman arrived at the door, pulling a dolly laden with crates. I sucked in my stomach and crammed my back end into a shelf so he could get past us. “Please don't come here again, Mom. My boss frowns on visitors.”

“I wouldn't want to do anything that would jeopardize your job, Jill.”

As the deliveryman left, I had to climb on one of his crates in order to breathe again. “I know you wouldn't, just don't come here again. Okay?”

She nodded.

The pastry chef started into the room, after

supplies, but changed his mind when he saw us and retraced his steps. Smart guy.

My mother seemed oblivious to the interruptions. My friends said she reminded them of a strange combination of Debbie Reynolds and Marlo Thomas. I fought a brief annoyance that she maintained the appearance of the perfect upper-class society woman, neatly dressed, and not at all stressed-out like me.

And my stress level was climbing.

“Where’s Jill?” called someone from the kitchen.

I had to get back to work. If Mom would hurry up and tell me about this latest guy, then I could get rid of her. “What do you need?”

“Your help with the warden. I think he has it in for your father.”

Surely she didn’t want me to date the prison warden? My father had been CEO of a huge corporation before the Enron scandal. Thanks to similar bookkeeping methods, Dad calls the state pen home for the next five to seven years. I didn’t have Stephen’s college tuition because Dad hid most of their assets in overseas banks.

I had still been in the recovery room after Stephen’s birth when Dad first promised to handle his college expenses. So you can just imagine my reaction (spontaneous combustion) when Dad suggested after he was sentenced, “Maybe Stephen can wait for college until after I get out of prison?”

The last thing I needed to hear at the moment was

that Dad was having trouble while in prison or that his release would be delayed. My stomach knotted. “What happened with the warden?”

“Our fiftieth wedding anniversary is next month. All I want is to have a picture of us in the paper. Is that too much to ask?”

“What does that have to do with the warden?” Or dating the warden? It was mind-boggling how my parents had stayed together for fifty years. Talking with either of them for fifty minutes was enough to make me wish I had a prescription for Xanax. And, since my divorce, I couldn’t sustain a relationship for fifty weeks. Was there some secret relationship recipe I hadn’t been let in on? I sure hoped my surveys would give me the answer.

“Oh, Jill.” Mom shook her head. “I’m just beside myself. That warden refused—he refused!—to allow my photographer’s crew in to check for lighting and the best location for the shot. Can you imagine?”

I couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. “Your photographer’s crew?”

“For our photo for the paper. The warden was quite rude when I was making arrangements to have your father fitted for a tuxedo. I have half a mind to call the governor’s office. He and your father were always very good friends.”

I caught on that Mom wanted anniversary pictures but she’d lost me at the tux. “Dad needs a tuxedo . . .”

“For the photos.” Mom nodded. “I’m not nearly

half as good at communicating as you are, Jill. I was hoping you'd talk with the warden and see if you can straighten this out for me?"

Yup, she evidently wanted to set me up with the warden at the prison where my father was serving time. Good God. "I could call him, but I doubt he'd agree to it, Mom."

"If you were to pay him a visit? In person? And maybe you could wear your cute pink skirt."

I got it now. She thought if I wore the pink skirt I hadn't worn in public for at least ten years, enough of my legs would show that it would either get me a date . . . or distract the warden. "Shall I bring a metal file and a lock-picking kit, too?"

"Don't be facetious. This is very important to me, Jill." Her lips thinned in that *you've hurt me now* expression I was too-intimately familiar with.

"I don't have time to go to the prison, but I'll call the warden and see what I can do." Was it possible that for once she hadn't wanted to lecture me about needing a man? Maybe she thought I was over the hill? Always on the lookout for the silver lining, I decided there were some decided perks to turning forty.

"Jill, I need you!" called someone from the kitchen. From the sounds of it, a man who truly needed *me*.

Wanting to hurry things along, I turned to leave. "I absolutely have to get back to work now. I'll walk with you to the banquet room."

Mom touched my arm as we reached the hall leading to the room where the Rosemoors' party was being held. "You've always been such a good daughter. Your problems would all be solved if only you'd find a new husband—" She interrupted herself. "Oh, that reminds me. I've found you a man!"

Of course she had. How silly of me to have thought she'd given up on her manhunt, even for a moment. "Who now?"

"This one's your type. I'm sure of it. I met him at the party just now." She signaled for me to join her at the swinging door opening from the hallway into the banquet room. "Come over here and I'll point him out."

I did as she asked, wondering if he was a corporate executive, the president of something, or what charity he donated large sums to. "Where is he?"

She opened the swinging door a crack, then pointed to a very tall and very attractive man standing near an older man and woman.

"Is he talking with Mr. and Mrs. Rosemoor?"

"Yes, he's their only son and best of all, he's single!"

I knew there had to be a catch because he actually *looked* interesting. "What's he do for a living?"

"He's a zookeeper." Mom beamed at me. "He promised to wait so I could introduce you."

"I can't go out there, Mom. I have a job to do."

"He seems very sweet."

I watched him interacting with his parents for a moment and wondered if Mom was right for once. He wasn't bad looking. Until . . .

His mother licked the corner of her napkin, reached over, and wiped off his mouth. My jaw dropped, but it wasn't over! Next, she pulled out a comb and smoothed his hair.

And he held still for it.

"Mrs. Rosemoor said he'd be on his feet again soon. Losing his job at the zoo is only a tiny setback."

This begged the question, other than finally getting my mother off my back, how would becoming involved with an unemployed, zoo-keeping mama's boy solve all my problems?



One of the things I've come to value as I ripen (a.k.a. mature), is quiet time to spend alone. After work, I came home to a peaceful apartment because Stephen was with his fa—other mother and he wouldn't be home until morning. Since my ex's sex change was completed last year, our relationship had devolved into *competitive mothering*. If Stormy could afford Stephen's tuition, I'd even consider letting her win. Unfortunately, she's still paying for her surgery and likely will be for the next ten years.

I took a seat at my writing desk and thumbed

through the stack of survey responses from the couples celebrating significant anniversaries.

I grinned at one respondent's answer to what makes her marriage last. She answered, "Hot sex." Farther down the survey, her answer under her spouse's character traits said, "Sensitive lover."

Another response came from a woman who hadn't had sex since 1990, but stated that her husband had never been any good anyway. Sounded like my non-relationship with Stephen's father.

As I scanned the stack, I saw there were two golf widows, three military wives, and several others whose husbands traveled as part of their jobs.

I was left with a series of questions:

How would I find anything useful from such diverse women?

How had any of these marriages lasted?

How had Mom and Dad's marriage lasted for so long?

What makes successful marriages tick?

As much as Mom's attempts at matchmaking annoyed me, I wanted to find someone. Although I had many people around me and I wasn't lonely, I wanted to be in a good relationship.

I missed the close friendship of a man. I missed the emotional intimacy. And I really missed having an escort. I'd realized that after the Asshole Professor had dumped me. The sex hadn't been that great and there

wasn't much in the intimacy department, but I always had a date to take with me to social functions. Plus, there was the side benefit of not worrying about Stephen's tuition.

What I missed most, however, was my skillet. It was perfect. It was iron. It was well seasoned. I felt naked without it. And the jerk hadn't returned it or my phone calls.

I was tired of doing everything by the rules, by doing things the right way, when all it got me was nowhere.

Being forty flipping years old wouldn't be so bad if it meant I could do things differently, if I no longer believed it was so damned important to be a good girl.

I was no longer a girl.

I was ripe, dammit.

Maybe it was time to take chances, time to leap out of my usual comfort zone, time to act out in general! I wanted to act out, act up, and kick up my heels a little.

No matter how many times I looked at the survey responses, nothing seemed to jump out at me until . . . Wait a sec. All of the responses that ranked their marital happiness as awesome had one thing, and only one thing, in common.

They all had absentee husbands!

Could the answer to marital happiness be to marry a traveling salesman?

Could solving my problems be this easy?

I wanted to cheer, but at that moment, the phone rang. I checked the caller ID and it was Connie. I couldn't wait to tell her about the scheme that was percolating in my head.

I didn't bother with preliminary pleasantries. "I have a great idea!"

"So do I," purred Connie. "I've thought of the perfect thing to cheer you up. Have you gotten your skillet back yet?"

"No . . ."

"You still have the key to his condo?"

"Yeah? Are we going to break in?"

"You got it. I've been watching his place and the coast is clear. Wait for me outside. I'll be there in ten minutes. Don't forget the key!"

"What? Have you become some kind of ex-boyfriend stalker?"

"No. A skillet-getter-backer."

"We can't break into his condo."

"You've got a key. That's not breaking and entering. Besides, he's got your skillet. There's probably some statute about unlawful possession. We're not stealing anything. Unlocking is legal."

"What if he changed the lock?"

"Then we'll leave. I promise not to smash windows. Well, unless there's a good reason. You can tell me about your great idea when I pick you up. Be there in a minute!"

“Wait,” I said again, but she’d hung up. I was hoping she’d called to invite me to a party or something glamorous, not to commence a life of crime. On the other hand, within the hour I could have my skillet back. Wasn’t I just contemplating kicking up my heels and moving outside my comfort zone? Unlocking and entering definitely qualified as acting out.

What would Connie think of my idea and the glimmer of a Salesman a.k.a. Tuition Plan that my subconscious had just about fully hatched? I couldn’t think of anything better for improving my mood and returning my optimism.

Twenty minutes later, I unlocked the Asshole Professor’s front door.

“Hurry up,” said Connie as I stood still, listening for any sound indicating he might be home. All I could hear was my heart throbbing in my ears. “Shh.”

She pushed past me. “Quit shushing me. I told you he’s gone.”

I followed her inside and closed the door.

She made a beeline to the bar. “Get your skillet and I’ll make us a drinkie winkie.” After fumbling around in the cupboard, she pulled out a bottle. “Sour apple martini sound good to you?”

“A sour apple martini sounds delicious.” It was the perfect accompaniment to breaking and entering. I definitely needed a drink. His condo had a kitchen open to a living area with a wet bar on the opposite

wall. I walked over to the kitchen counter and laid down my purse.

While Connie began mixing our drinks, I pulled open the drawer where the pots and pans were kept just below the cooktop. My forehead wrinkled when I didn't see my skillet. I moved pans around. No luck.

Quickly closing that drawer, I opened the one below it. My skillet wasn't there, either. "I can't find it."

"Keep looking. He probably moved it somewhere to keep it safe for you."

I threw open cupboards, doors, drawers, anything and everything. I tossed towels, hot pads, and utensils on the floor. Hiking my skirt to hip level, I placed my knee on the counter and vaulted up. Feeling like a gymnast, I searched the cabinets where he stored rarely used items. "It's not here."

Connie walked into the kitchen area, raised an eyebrow as she looked at the mess I made, then calmly handed my martini up to me. "Drink up and tell me about your great idea."

I took a sip, allowing the tartness to linger a moment before I slithered back to the floor, my dismount anything but graceful. "It's about my survey responses."

"Have you gotten many?" Connie began rifling through the cupboard behind her.

"Twenty-seven."

"I bet they all had hot sex." She pulled out a frying pan. "Is this yours?"

“No.” I shook my head and she replaced it in the cupboard. “So far the surveys haven’t said too much about sex, except for the lack of it.” I addressed her posterior because she’d burrowed almost all the way into the cabinet. “The only responses with anything in common have a husband who is never home. Traveling salesmen, golf widows, even a restaurant site selector—the guys are always gone.”

“Ohhhh. Traveling salesmen?” She pulled her head out of the cupboard. “You could do a lot with a traveling salesman.”

“That’s what I was thinking!” I stuffed some utensils back in a drawer, then began stacking the pots I’d pulled out.

“With your job, you have lots of opportunities for meeting salesmen.” She emerged from the cabinet and began going through the pantry.

“There always seems to be a sales convention of some sort going on.” I nodded, getting into the idea. “I’ve been worrying about tuition for Stephen. So, here’s my thinking. A traveling salesman is the perfect answer to all my concerns. One woman wrote that she had one week on and three weeks off each month, so I’m thinking one week of sizzling sex and then he’s gone again, leaving me to do my own thing. He sends home his paycheck and Stephen’s tuition is covered.”

“I love it.” Connie tossed back the last of her martini.

I loved it myself. Maybe the surveys really had

given me the answer I was looking for. Surely I'd have lots of salesmen to choose from. It was only a matter of applying myself to meeting as many as possible.

"Have you considered holding auditions?"

"What kind?"

"Sexual auditions. With all the bad luck you've had in the bedroom, let me tell you, the last thing you want is a man who's not sexually compatible."

"Great idea." Connie had bragged about Mind-Blowing Sex ever since I'd known her. I never got any and wondered if I ever would. This could be my shot at it.

A muffled thud and the sound of the front door lock turning made Connie shriek. She grabbed her purse and mine, then dragged me by the arm to the sliding door exiting onto a patio.

I glanced back through the hedges we'd ducked behind and took in the disorder we'd created, just as the Asshole Professor stepped into the kitchen. He didn't appear to see us as we sneaked behind shrubbery and made our way back to the car. I wondered if he'd know it was me or think some mystery lush had raided his wet bar.

"Do you think he'll call the police?"

"We didn't steal anything." Connie shrugged as she started the car. "What's he going to say? 'Hello, Officer. I want to report a mess?'"

She had a point. Although I was disappointed

about not finding my wayward skillet, I was pretty revved about the decision I'd made. The answer to all my problems was to hunt down the perfect traveling salesman. I could become a salesman groupie.

CHAPTER TWO

Dear Unhappily Single Woman,

Are you nuts? Instead of sending out surveys, you should be counting your blessings!

My husband retired a couple of years ago and has been under my feet 24/7 until I insisted he find a hobby because he drove me nuts. He started working out at the spa. Now, after thirty-two of the best years of my life, the louse left me for a slut half his age. His personal trainer!

I hope she has better luck training him than I did.

You want the truth? Men are just children in larger bodies. Honey, you don't want the heartache. Stay single and invest in a Rocket Propulsion Vibramatic Model XXX19.

Yours sincerely,

Buffy Gordon-Hough

Over the next week, more survey responses trickled in. I sat at my desk in the corner of my dining room, riffing through the survey responses like Midas counting gold coins and daydreaming about auditions and M.B.S. (Mind Blowing Sex).

After reading a survey questioning my sanity for wanting a man at all, doubts about my traveling salesman plan crept in.

It did seem sort of harebrained. Would setting my sights on a salesman classify me as a gold digger? What made me think a relationship with a salesman would be any better than the ones I'd already been involved in? And, bottom line, was I really that desperate yet?

I guess I was. While the idea seemed nutty on the surface, it appealed to my sense of adventure—and Stephen's college tuition might be the payoff.

I'm not sure if other people have a secret dream, but I did. A dream that sort of embarrassed me, which is why it was a secret. I once asked Connie if she had a secret dream and Connie reassured me that of course she does. She dreams of winning the lottery and having sex with lots of younger men.

That isn't the kind of secret dream I mean. Her fantasy is the kind that could come true, or is at least more likely to come true. After all, someone has to win the lottery.

I pulled my wallet from my handbag, stuck my hand in the little pocket behind the change purse, a

pocket you wouldn't realize was there unless you'd explored the wallet carefully, then slid out the magazine photo of my dream.

It was a house in Lexington, Kentucky, surrounded by a white picket fence. Between the house and the fence was lots and lots of Kentucky bluegrass.

Other people might fantasize about winning the lottery, but I dream of white picket fences. Nevada doesn't especially run to houses with picket fences, at least not the sort surrounded by bluegrass.

I'd pulled out the photo so many times that the edges had frayed and a crease at the corner fell off in my hands. Perhaps I should take it to be laminated? Technically, the house wasn't my dream it was what the house symbolized. I didn't actually need a picket fence, or bluegrass, or this particular house. What I craved was the safety and security and the feeling of home and peacefulness that stole over me whenever I looked at it.

Now that I was forty flipping years old, my dream seemed farther away than ever.

I was angry. I was alone. And I was scared.

It was time to take myself and my dreams seriously. I'd scheme, plan, devise, forecast, concoct, hatch, frame, and design.

I'd make accountant types seem like screw-offs and anal compulsives seem relaxed, and mostly, I'd be more organized than Susan, who's the most together person I've ever met. If I didn't love her, she'd scare me half

to death.

And, dammit, I'd find the perfect traveling salesman to pay for Stephen's schooling and provide me with M.B.S.

I pushed the growing stack of surveys away and gave the newspaper a fast scan. For once no family member was featured in it. A few months back, I flinched every time I saw the paper because I knew my dad would be front-page news.

I heard the front door open and Stephen called out, "I'm home, *Maman*."

"Welcome home," I answered as he neared and pressed a quick smooch to my cheek. "Did you have a good time?"

He rolled his eyes. I hadn't truly expected an answer.

Although I wanted him to spend time with his father—other mother, knowing he was back gave me a sense of security. Even though he's a head taller than me, I like having my chickling safe at home.

I always worry when he's gone, even when there's nothing specific to worry about. However, now that my ex has her own entertainment business (too bad it isn't successful enough to run to college tuition), occasionally she fills in for sick or missing employees. I insist that she return Stephen home on those occasions and not take him with her while she does her cross-dressing diva act. Stephen has enough confusion over the whole sex change issue. I know I do.

The good news was I'd almost stopped cringing whenever I saw Stephen's blue hair. The bad news was that the French beret perched jauntily atop said blue hair still made me cringe.

"S'up?"

At least he hadn't added *Maman*. The mix of high school slang with street French made conversation with him confusing—that is, whenever he decided to converse. He'd actually found a way to give his grunts a French accent.

"I'm getting ready to run some errands. Want to come along?"

"Can you get me some new pastels?"

I looked at him closely. At the sweet nose I'd kissed a zillion times that had now bloomed into youthful manhood. At the cat-green eyes that seemed to capture more life and energy from his surroundings than any other eyes I'd ever known. At his strong chin that so reminded me of the man who'd been his father. "Do you have an inner woman aching to break out?"

He rolled his eyes. "Just because Stormy—"

"You've told me this before. *Just because Stormy had an inner woman doesn't mean her son does, too.* But pastels?"

"I'm working on a new version of *Las Vegas après Holocaust*, Mom. I ran out of orange and black."

Did I mention his artwork generally gives me nightmares?

“I’m going to Target. Will they have pastels?”

French grunt.

“Come with?”

More eye rolling.

“I can’t be expected to pick the right kind of art supplies. You said so yourself. Besides, I might need a big strong man like you to help little ol’ me load my purchases in the Animal.”

The Animal is the name of my Saturn ever since Stephen got a learner’s permit and on his first outing drove into the McDonald’s drive-thru window. Literally into.

Insurance paid to fix McDonald’s but not the Saturn. Fortunately, it still runs. Unfortunately, with the combination of dents, rust, and green paint, it now looks like a tarantula on PCP.

“I’ll come. Just don’t talk to me.”

“That’s hard, Stephen. What if there’s some danger? I’ll need to warn you. Even if it’s only to say, ‘Watch out for the Bounty avalanche.’”

French grunt.

I shrugged, grabbed my keys, and we headed out the door.

Our trip to Target began as expected.

I like going out with my son. I really do. Honest. Even when he walks ten paces in front of me so he can pretend we aren’t together.

Before long I realized I’d left my list at home and

now I wandered aimlessly wondering what the hell it was I needed besides Stephen's pastels.

After Stephen chose his pastels, I grabbed a packet of laminating sticky paper to see if I could do some repair work on my dream house photo. As we walked amicably down the aisles in pursuit of whatever it was I'd forgotten, I decided it was a good time to find out about his report card. Since he spent the night before with his father—other mother, he'd managed to avoid me so far.

"Did you get your grades on Friday?"

French grunt.

"So, how'd you do?"

"Got an A in French."

"Oh, that's good." Maybe he'd turned a new leaf and his grades had skyrocketed?

"Mais oui."

"Any other As?" I couldn't keep the hopeful note out of my voice.

"Art."

He stopped to gaze at a computer game display, indicating our discussion was over. I, however, am never one to take a broad hint, especially not when in pursuit of my son's grades. "How do the rest look?"

"Two Cs and two Ds."

My stomach churned. Definitely no hope for a scholarship reprieve. Unless . . . "Water polo?"

Stephen rolled his eyes, then walked back up the aisle.

I rushed to catch up with him. "Darts?"

No response.

Just then a cute pajama set caught my eye. Immediately behind it was a colorful bra display. I needed another bra. Hey, there's a chance it *could* have been on my list.

As a decoy, I quickly grabbed the cute pj's, which I had no intention of buying. Stephen was more likely to cooperate while I shopped for pj's than if he thought I was looking at bras. "Stay right here. I need to check this out and I'll be right back."

This time his grunt didn't sound so French. It was more guttural, but he remained in place, which was all I wanted.

I darted to the bras. They were made of cotton, didn't have any froufrou lace, and I particularly liked the bright colors. Most especially, I loved the price.

It didn't take long to become absorbed in choosing which color I liked best. I didn't look up until I heard the sound of Stephen's voice.

He was in conversation with a man. I couldn't see his face. I selected one of the bras, then headed in their direction.

As I moved around the pajama rack, bits of the man came into view. I came up behind him and noted his close-fitting black T-shirt and black jeans. I admired the muscular tightness that formed the shape of an award-winning male physique. Whoa. Even from the rear, this man exuded confidence. His posture was

relaxed and yet there was a hint he would spring at the first sign of danger.

Curious how Stephen knew a man like this, I approached, unable to take my eyes off him. Wide shoulders. Oh, yeah. Trim waist. Oh, yeah. Dark hair. Oh, yeah. Dark eyes with incredibly long lashes just like George Clooney's. Ah, shit.

It was Stephen's third-grade teacher, Mr. Davin Wesley. Stephen had adored him but he'd been a total pain in my parental butt.

Eight years ago, Mr. Wesley had been an attractive man. But eight years of maturing had done incredible things to him. Who would expect the young, eager teacher to now appear more suited to a boardroom? The few crinkles age had sprinkled in the corners of his eyes didn't make him look older. Instead, they added character. His chiseled nose was still straight and strong, but now it fit his face in a way it hadn't before. The youth had left his cheeks, leaving sexy planes in their stead. And his lips . . .

I shook my head, determined to remember how Stephen had told this guy about seeing his father wearing my peekaboo nightie. Davin Wesley knew too many intimate details about my past. Intimate and humiliating details.

He was annoying. He was controlling. Hell, if I thought about it long enough, I might find some way to blame Mr. Wesley for most of my mother/son problems.

“Hullo,” I said in as snooty a tone as I could muster. It must not have worked, though, because he smiled at me.

He was one of those men with really white teeth and I wondered whether he bleached them or if they were natural. I also wished he had asparagus or some other noxious vegetable caught between his teeth. Sadly that wasn’t the case.

Not wanting to further embarrass Stephen by discussing his grades in front of his ex-teacher, I sought some safe subject I could turn our conversation to—like the weather. However, this being Nevada, there’s usually not much to talk about in that regard.

I didn’t need to change the subject, though, because Mr. Wesley directed his attention back to Stephen. “You’re a senior now, aren’t you? Are you busy applying to colleges?”

“I’m trying to decide which to apply to,” said Stephen.

My stomach churned. College. Tuition.

“You’re still painting, aren’t you?”

“*Oui*. I want to be an artist.”

“Have you considered the Massachusetts College of Art and the School of Visual Arts? They’re both top art schools.”

“Thanks for the suggestions.”

“My class would enjoy having you demonstrate how to use pastels. Would you consider speaking to them?” Mr. Wesley smiled while I mentally calculated

the tuition at top art schools.

Stephen glowed. There was little he enjoyed more than talking art. “Sure.”

“I knew when I saw your entry that it would be a winner at the Henderson ArtFest.”

“You went to the festival?” Stephen asked. “Did you know all of my artwork sold out?”

“Awesome.” Davin nodded, said to me, “I bet you’re proud.”

“I’ve been bragging about it for weeks. Stephen is very talented.”

“He is. I suspect he gets that from you?”

I chuckled. “No way. I’m an artist with a pastry brush, not a paintbrush.”

He leaned his head to one side and looked at me intently. Like he was interested in what I was saying. “It seems to me that a gift for art of whatever kind is something you both share. I hear you’re a famous chef.”

“I’m not famous, but I enjoy my job as sous chef at La Papillon.”

“I’m impressed. I bet you’re proud of your mother, too, Stephen.”

“*Oui*. Mom’s a great cook.”

Davin glanced my way again. “Oh, yeah?” His gaze lowered and I realized I was standing there with the fuchsia bra I’d selected clutched to my stomach. I quickly yanked it behind my back, but not before he noticed, because his lips slowly turned up in a lopsided smile as if

he was fighting back a laugh. It was damned sexy.

“I like to think I’m a good cook,” I replied with as much dignity as I could muster. However, it’s hard to be dignified when you’re holding a fuchsia bra in public.

Davin’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “I like to think I’m a good taster.”

Was he hinting he wanted to taste some of my cooking? Was he flirting with me? *Say something*, I said to myself. *Say something so you won’t seem like a total dweeb standing here with your mouth drooping open and lingerie hidden behind your back.* I blurted, “And all this time, I thought you were a teacher.”

“Between tasting engagements, I try to get my third graders interested in something other than snickering over body functions. Is there any chance for a tasting engagement with you two?”

Speaking of body functions, before I could reply two young women stopped in their tracks to ogle Davin. They were probably wondering how his body functioned, based on the way one of them—the youngest one—stared at his mouth.

Did I forget to mention his lips? Besides the George Clooney eyes, it was Davin Wesley’s best trait. His lips speak directly to a woman’s inner lust. You can’t help but imagine what it would feel like to have *those* lips touching you, teasing you. Considering the way the young woman was clutching her shirt, that’s exactly what was on her mind, too.

She nudged her friend and the two of them approached. Okay, they made a beeline so fast they could have competed in a track meet. They were all dimples and grins as they said in singsong unison, “Hi, Davin.”

He’d been smiling impishly at Stephen, who seemed particularly pleased with himself for some odd reason, so Davin hadn’t noticed the women until they’d spoken. He turned and addressed them, “How are you doing, Jessica and Tanya?”

“Fine. It seems odd to see you outside the classroom,” said the younger woman. She was blond, blue and dewy-eyed, and you could tell she had an enormous crush on the teacher. I’d almost forgotten what it was like to be that young and that obvious. Her friend was dark-haired, slender, and made me think of deer and gazelles.

The blonde smiled and glanced first at Stephen, then oddly at me. What did she think, that I was competition? Hardly. Like the Asshole Professor, Davin Wesley apparently attracted much younger women. Their combined ages couldn’t add up to much more than my forty flipping years.

“Speaking of the classroom, I’d like you to meet Stephen Storm and his mother, Jill . . .” He looked at me, “You haven’t remarried, have you?”

I shook my head.

He smiled again. Warmly. Maybe he really had been flirting with me?

“Jill Storm,” he continued, now addressing the women, while I was still reacting to the warmth of his smile. No wonder women tripped over themselves to come talk to him.

“I’ve invited Stephen to talk to the class,” he said.

“That’s great,” said the blonde, extending her hand to shake Stephen’s. “I’m interning in Davin’s class right now.”

“*Bien*,” replied my son, who seemed somewhat dazzled by the two attractive young women—closer, I might add, to his age than to Davin’s.

Davin then introduced the blonde as Jessica and her cohort as another teacher at his school. Jessica kept slanting seductive glances at him, but he didn’t seem to notice. I caught Tanya taking a quick peek at his posterior and, based on the grin she shot me, she didn’t seem the least ashamed about being caught. At least I had done it from a discreet distance.

Then Davin caught my eye and I realized, based on the barest hint of a blush on his tanned face, that he was aware of Tanya’s peek, too. With a sweep of his long eyelashes, he somehow conveyed an apology for our conversation being interrupted. How the hell did he do that?

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Stephen,” said Jessica. “I’m a huge fan of your artwork.”

“You’ve seen it?” Stephen’s tone was as excited as the look on his face.

“Sure.” The blonde glanced at Davin through upturned lashes, and he seemed to signal a warning to her as she continued, “In the classroom. All those paint—”

She stopped midword at Davin’s embarrassed expression. He broke in, “You’re one of my star pupils, Stephen. I still have the still life you did of the fruit bowl on the playground slide.”

Stephen grinned, but my mind was working overtime. Davin hadn’t wanted Jessica to finish her sentence about Stephen’s paintings.

Oh, shit. It had to mean that Davin was the customer who bought four of Stephen’s six paintings on exhibit at the art festival. Davin didn’t want Stephen to know he’d been the one.

Buying them had been an extremely nice gesture. No matter how I tried, I couldn’t find an ulterior motive for Davin, other than he wanted to provide moral support to his ex-student. Maybe he simply wanted to brag?

The three of them started chatting about Stephen’s upcoming visit, and about teaching, and about school, and blah blah blah, while my mind wandered.

Normally I love spending time at Target. Discount stores make life for single and working parents possible because they can shop for a myriad of items at once for everyday low prices. The nation and the economy should be grateful. And while normally I could spend a good half hour waxing eloquent over discount stores,

and *Tar-je'* in particular, right then all I wanted was to pay for our items and leave rather than listen to Davin Wesley droning on.

It's not like he's my type, or that I resented being interrupted midflirt. Although he's a decent teacher, he belongs to the class of teachers who think the children belong to them and they merely lend their budding geniuses to the care of the parents. When Stephen was in Mr. Wesley's class, he was such a control freak that I half-expected a parental report card. He sent reams of paperwork home and not only did his students have plenty of homework, the parents did, as well.

I didn't want to waste my time standing there witnessing Jessica and Tanya's attempts to snag Davin's attention.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid we need to run now," I said, politely, because he was being kind to my son.

"You didn't interrupt." Davin looked a little disappointed. "I need to head out soon, too." He smiled at the young women. "It was nice running into you."

Then he turned away from them and focused his attention back on Stephen—and shot me one of those warm smiles again.

Wanting to direct my gaze at anything other than his come-hither lips, I watched the young teachers depart. Maybe my opinion about him had been a little harsh?

He did seem to be a good influence on Stephen, who needs strong men in his life.

Davin is strong, if you consider being opinionated a strength. He's a few years younger than me and, as I've mentioned, very attractive in a sexy just-got-out-of-bed way, making him a great role model for me—and the young teachers—if not for Stephen.

I hoped Davin didn't think he was a man trapped in a woman's body. He didn't seem the type, although Daniel hadn't either and look what happened.

However, Davin Wesley was practically a poster child for the opposite of what I was looking for in a man. Not only was he bossy, he was a total homebody. This was a guy whose sense of adventure was teaching third grade for the past decade, and on a teacher's salary he couldn't afford college tuition, either. If that wasn't enough, he was way too young for me—even if he was too old for Jessica and Tanya.

Davin pulled a business card from his wallet, and handed it to Stephen. "Call me to schedule a visit."

"Okay."

"It was very nice seeing you again, Jill." Davin's smile seemed genuine.

"You, too." I knew he was hoping I'd ask him over to taste my cooking, but finding him sexy wasn't enough. Even though I was on the make, I had a definite target of my own. What point was there in flirting with Davin when I wasn't interested?

Stephen nudged his ex-teacher, as if he was encouraging him.

Davin patted Stephen on the shoulder but addressed me. “You never answered my question, you know.”

“What question?” I knew exactly what he meant and I hoped the heat rising from my neck to my face wasn’t noticeable.

“About the three of us getting together for a meal?”

“Oh. Yeah. We’ll have to do that sometime.” Vague. Deliberately vague. “Well, gotta run. See you around.”

As we turned, Davin made a parting shot. “Yes. You’ll be seeing me around.”

Why did that sound more like a threat than a pleasantry?

Stephen and I headed toward the checkout and the grin on Stephen’s face could not have been bigger. Maybe Davin Wesley wasn’t too awful since he genuinely cared about his students.

And perhaps, after all these years, I could admit that he had been right about me back then. The last time I saw him, shortly before school let out for the year, Mr. Wesley called me a deadbeat mother—well, not in those words. But his intent had been clear during our parent/teacher conference when he mentioned I wasn’t giving Stephen enough attention.

The problems between Daniel and I had first

surfaced when Stephen entered third grade. Daniel's admission that he wasn't happy in our marriage had devastated me. That he wanted to live his life as Stormy Daniels rather than Daniel Storm nearly did me in.

As a result, I couldn't spend enough time with Stephen—not with going back to school and money worries. I tried to make it up to him, but making up never seems to be as good as having been there in the first place. I could spend the rest of my life making up and it would never be good enough. Even now, Stephen spent more time chatting with his ex-teacher, had strung more words together at once, than he'd said to me all together in weeks.

I didn't know how to fix it, wasn't sure if I could, but one thing within my power was to make sure Stephen had a good education.

I'd find a way.

I'd find a nice traveling salesman, with oodles of moolah for tuition, and all would be well with my world.

And sexy control freaks like Davin Wesley could kiss my aspic.

CHAPTER THREE

Dear Jill,

What a terrific idea. Please share your survey results with those of us who've sent you information.

My personal philosophy is once you find Mr. Right, pull out all stops to snare him. Don't worry so much about learning the secrets to a successful relationship. Love is the answer!

If you love a man, you do what it takes to make the relationship work. Every woman looks for something different in a man. What works for me might not work for you.

Viva la difference and happy man hunting,

Yours truly,

Marion S. Jones

Renowned Five Star Master Chef, Albert Radkin, author of two best-selling cookbooks, internationally recognized for his take on Southwestern cuisine, was drunk. Again.

As the chef at La Papillon Casino and Hotel, he's my boss and also the biggest lush I've ever encountered. Considering I work in the food service industry, that's saying a lot.

He was slumped over his desk, which wasn't unusual, but it did give me problems. I wanted the list of upcoming banquets clipped to the clipboard under his left arm. His head rested on his right arm, so maybe it wouldn't be too difficult.

I tiptoed closer to the desk, hoping not to wake him, although I didn't think it likely. Leaning over the desk, I inched my hand toward the clipboard. I took another step closer and my fingertips came in contact with the banquet list.

I checked Albert's face. He hadn't moved at all. Using my forefinger and thumb, I pinched his uniform sleeve, then lifted his left arm. As I yanked the clipboard out, I must have joggled his arm too much, because Albert awoke.

Well, I use the word *awoke* loosely. He momentarily emerged from his stupor. His patriotic eyes opened—blue eyes, extremely bloodshot—and he slurred, “Lo, Ms. Morganstern.”

My teeth gritted. I hate being called Morganstern.

“The name’s Morgan Storm.”

“S’right.” He pulled himself upright. “You’re looking lovely today. Want to bear my children?”

I sighed. Whenever he was drunk, which was more often than not, for some reason he always wanted me to carry his children. Maybe he thought the mix of his culinary genius with my culinary near-brilliance would result in a culinary supergenius.

Thankfully, he slumped back down and began to snore, so I backed out of the room.

As I scanned the list, I realized it didn’t have the information I needed. There were several sales conferences, but how to choose the best one for finding a possible mate? Which would be most likely to have lots of men to choose from?

I would have to go see the catering manager. However, I couldn’t go without a bribe.

I had to promise Big E that I wouldn’t lock myself in the restroom again before he gave me a basket filled with his incredibly light, tasty, and delicious pastries. He was a truly tough guy, about six feet, four inches tall, and looked exactly like he belonged on a Harley, right down to a missing front tooth and pinkie finger. He swore like a biker, too, but he was an artist. No one made pastries like him. No one.

Despite the tough exterior, I’ll never forget the time his starter kicked the bucket and Big E wept for hours. Yeast can be a tough mistress.

So, now armed with suitable gastronomic persuasion, I left the kitchen and headed for sales.

Glamorous, sophisticated, and intelligent, Mandy Webster, the catering manager, was the type of woman that women loved to hate. She could swap clothes with a fashion model and look even better than they did. Men adored her and women avoided her, including me.

But she had what I needed—intimate knowledge of the sales conferences that would be most likely to a) have plenty of men, b) have plenty of men who were the right age, and c) have plenty of men who were the right age and were single. She'd know which conferences I should crash to find the salesman of my schemes, I mean, dreams.

Mandy had a small office in the administrative area of the hotel. When she saw me, she greeted me warmly and ushered me inside. For some reason, probably related to karma, she was always excited to see me, which made me feel badly about wanting to hate her.

“I brought you some pastries.” I handed her the basket, then took a seat.

Her face lit up with undisguised hunger. “Oh. I love these. Thank you!”

I felt a little guilty since I was appealing to her well-known carbohydrate addiction, but all's fair in love and payola.

She took a seat behind her desk, grabbed a pastry, and took a bite. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Well, yeah. What did she think I brought the crullers for? I wasn't sure, however, whether to act like this was pure business or to 'fess up to my plan. I eyed her as she munched, and she was even gorgeous while engorging.

"I bet you never have men trouble," I blurted. It didn't come out exactly the way I wanted, but she smiled ruefully and her eyes oozed concern.

"Sure, I do. Don't you think most women do?"

"Yeah, but with the way you look . . ." I waved my palm.

"The kind of guys who interest me most are the sort who are intimidated by my looks."

My jaw dropped. I know it did. "What kind of guys interest you most?"

"Geeks. Computer geeks." She sighed. "What can I say? I love smart men."

I felt as if I'd bitten into a bitter lemon. After all this time being jealous of her, and resenting her, it turned out . . . she was *nice*.

"I'm hoping you can help me, Mandy. I have this plan . . ." Maybe my plan was stupid? Maybe she'd think I was stupid?

She leaned forward. "A plan to do with men?"

I nodded. "Okay, you'll probably think it's insane, but I sent out surveys to women who've been married for twenty-five or more years, and the answer to a successful marriage, at least from what I've gleaned so far,

is a man who travels for a living.”

“Really?”

“It looks that way.” I shrugged. “So I want to meet traveling salesmen . . . and we have so many sales conferences.”

“I love this!” Mandy, who was normally perky, now literally vibrated in her chair. “How can I help?”

I showed her the clipboard of upcoming banquets. “Which of these would be the best for me to crash?”

She took the list and scanned it quickly, then turned to her computer. Within minutes, she’d printed out a list and handed it to me.

“These six are your best bets.”

I glanced at the list and the first item caught my attention. “Easel salesmen?”

“Go figure. They’re almost all men. Cute, too.”

“Sounds great. I just hope I can pull this off.”

“What are you worried about?”

“I’ve never set out to pick up men before. I mean I know I can do it, but I’m not really sure what to say.” It wasn’t like I could walk up to a cute easel salesman and say *wanna get married and pay my son’s college tuition?* Maybe I should mention monkey sex?

“You can ask them about their jobs. That always works. Men love talking about themselves.”

“I can do that. Any other tips?”

“Well, if all else fails,” Mandy said breathlessly, “you can always use my best line.”

“You have a best line? I don’t even have a not-best line. Tell!”

“I’ll tell you, but you have to promise not to use it unless it’s an emergency.”

“Got it. Only in an emergency.” Like my situation now wasn’t an emergency? Help! I need college tuition.

“And you need to be careful who you use it on. It can’t be used lightly.”

I made an *X* over my chest. “Cross my heart.”

“Remember, only use this on a guy you are seriously interested in.”

“Promise.”

She looked around, as if worried that someone would overhear, then came from behind her desk to whisper in my ear.

After she was finished, I leaned back in my chair and marveled at her brilliance. It was one hell of a great line.



You had to hand it to the Easel Boys, they certainly knew how to do a cocktail party right. And Mandy really knew her stuff, I thought, as I glanced around the elegantly decorated ballroom. It was filled with cute guys.

A string quartet played graceful music in one corner, while the back wall was lined with hot and cold

appetizers and Julio, my favorite line cook, sliced roast beef and ham for easel salesmen as they came down the line. Several waiters hovered about the room, carrying trays filled with red and white wine for the Easel Boys' consumption.

And I could say *Easel Boys* confidently. Besides me, there were two, count 'em, two other women in the room. Who'da thunk there could be that many easel salesmen? I glanced up to heaven and said a silent thank-you.

I did some reconnaissance, checking out salesmen who looked interesting or appealing in some way. I came up with seven possibles, then recircled the room to make sure none of the seven wore physical matrimonial evidence (i.e., wedding rings). This reduced the number of possibles to three.

The first reminded me of a younger Mel Gibson. The second looked a bit like a middle-aged, Daniel Craig, the latest James Bond. The third looked like a CNN News announcer, but I wouldn't hold that against him.

I felt positively giddy with female power. The skirt I was wearing looked awesome, I had killer shoes, and an adequate amount of bodacious bosom was revealed by my blouse. Not only that, but I was armed with a sure-fire plan and, should it fail, I had Mandy's emergency line.

I approached the first guy as he left the serving line.

“Hi, I’m Jill Morgan Storm. I was wondering if you could help me?”

I stuck out my hand for him to shake and he cooperated after moving his food-laden plate into his left hand. “I’d be happy to help.”

He looked proud and pleased to be asked. This was going to be easier than I’d imagined. “I’m thinking of a career change. Are you an easel salesman?”

He nodded.

“Do you like it?”

“Love it. Are you in sales?”

“Sort of. I work for the hotel.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a sous chef.” I searched for something to say that would get him to start talking in longer sentences. “I never realized there were so many easel salesmen. Who do you sell easels to?”

“Just about everyone. My company sells a full line of presentation and display easels to distributors, office supply companies, advertising and marketing companies, hotel conference centers, and even artist supply companies.”

“Wow.” That was so much more than I wanted to know.

“We also sell other items, such as dry-erase boards, interactive marker boards, chalkboards.”

“I see.” I did see. As he continued yammering about different presentation products, my eyes began

to glaze and I saw that he was a total bore and the only thing more boring I could think of was to actually work as an easel salesman.

But if I only had to tolerate him coming home once a week, maybe I could deal with it? Maybe I could change the subject? “So, are you a Las Vegas native?”

“Nah, I’m from Omaha. Here for the convention and to get in a little slot machine action. How about you?”

“Oh, I don’t gamble.” I especially didn’t gamble on the easel salesmen all living out of state. How was I going to date them? “Don’t any of you guys live in Las Vegas?”

“Yeah. There are sales reps from all over. In fact, the number-one salesperson from this region is standing over there by the bar.”

I turned my head where he indicated, and happy days, It was my second choice easel sales rep, Mr. James Bond look-alike. Maybe he’d be more interesting than this guy. “Thanks,” I said as I headed toward my next victim . . . er . . . possible.

Feeling much more brave this time, I walked up to him and said, “Hi. I hear you’re from Vegas.”

“That’s right. How’d you know?” He smiled and I rather liked the way his eyes seemed to smile, as well.

“A guy over there said you were. I’m Jill Morgan Storm and I wonder if you can help me?”

“Nice to meet you, Jill. I’m Anthony Winston. I’d

love to help, but first, can I get you a drink?"

This was more like it. "What are you having?"

"Oh, this is just a Coke," he said. "I don't drink much."

Better and better.

We chatted for a while and it went according to plan. He hadn't launched into a spiel about his products. And he seemed genuinely interested when I mentioned I was the hotel sous chef.

"Do you have any specialties—" he was asking when another easel boy joined us. "Hey, Tony. Who you chatting with?"

I automatically checked for the matrimonial evidence and a thin gold band flashed, *not eligible*.

"This joker works at 5N with me. Jerry, meet Jill," replied Tony. "She's the chef."

"Here to look after us salesmen?"

"You could say that," I replied. "I like to make sure all our patrons are well fed." I wanted to get back to my *tête-à-tête* with Tony and turned away, but Jerry didn't seem to take a hint.

"The appetizers are great. I really liked those little pinwheel thingies. Did you make them?"

"It was my recipe."

"They're good."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Go away.

“Tony, you were going to tell me about selling easels.”

“You asked the right guy,” interrupted Jerry who punched Tony on the arm. “He’s the region’s best.”

“Really.” I looked at Tony through my lashes. “I always did like the best.”

Tony blushed and Jerry laughed.

“I can see I’m butting in,” said Jerry.

I didn’t say anything, thinking he’d finally gotten the hint, but Tony opened his mouth to object. Quickly grabbing one of the stuffed mushrooms from Jerry’s plate, I stuffed it in Tony’s mouth. “Try this.”

Jerry yanked his plate behind his back and looked at me as if I’d stolen candy from a baby. “Well, um, nice to meet you.” He backed away toward a group of men standing near the string quartet.

“Do you like the stuffed mushroom?” I asked innocently.

Tony took the napkin from around his Coke and blotted his lips. “Very good.”

Now that I had him back to myself, I wasn’t sure what to say. And I could tell from the way he was looking at me that I’d better get to the point soon. Unfortunately, every word of my plan evaporated from my brain and I was unable to think of a conversational gambit. Surely I didn’t need to use Mandy’s emergency line, yet? So I asked the only other thing I could think of. “Are you single?”

“Divorced.”

“Me, too.”

He had really nice hazel eyes and I liked the way they seemed to glitter with interest, as if he really saw me, not just the hotel sous chef.

Two other salesmen came up and clapped him on the back, congratulating him for making number one. While they chatted about selling easels, I continued watching Tony. He seemed very nice, like someone I'd really enjoy spending one week out of four with.

Unfortunately, he seemed very popular. I began to feel a little desperate, as if I'd never get his attention again. But he must have been feeling the same way, because he said, “Excuse me. I need to ask Jill a question.”

He separated himself from the others, took my arm, and walked me toward a dark corner of the ballroom. I liked him more and more.

“Thanks for going along with me,” he said. “Those two guys are my chief competitors and they really get on my nerves.”

“My pleasure.” Now I truly was at a loss for what to say. I'd asked about his job, his marital status. What else was left but Mandy's line?

It was definitely an emergency.

My forehead beaded with nervous perspiration. Could I say something like that? I appeared to be at risk of losing my best tuition candidate, so I opened my mouth to force the words from my mouth: *If you*

play your cards right, I'll let you be my love slave, but he spoke first.

“Say, I know this is fast, but would you consider having dinner with me some time?” he asked.

What a relief. I might talk a good game, but I don't have the steel *cojones* needed to carry off a line like Mandy's.

I smiled at Tony. This I could handle. I peeked up at him through my eyelashes. Maybe even a dimple or two. This I could do. “I'd love to have dinner with you.”

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