

GETTING COMPLICATED

Prequel to Getting Personal

By **Diane Amos**

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Smashwords Edition

Getting Complicated

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Series

Book 1: Getting Complicated (short story/prequel)

Book 2: Getting Personal

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Other Books

Winner Takes All

Dedication

Pam Champagne

For your ability to point out what I've missed!

Nina Pierce

For your invaluable tech help!

Whenever I had a meltdown, I shared my innermost woes with my best friend, Jeannine Lessard. Today was one of those days. My mother, who in my mind is practically a born again virgin, dropped over earlier to ask a favor: Would I please check her writing for typos and inconsistencies? Thinking she'd filled out a job application, I gladly agreed and was surprised when she handed me a manila envelope filled with loose pages.

Jeannine, who's short, smart and brutally honest, lived in a 200 square foot efficiency apartment. One cramped room served as kitchen, living room and bedroom. Standing in the center of the room, if I stretched my arms, I could almost touch the opposite walls.

I frowned at the pages in my hands. "I'm shocked with my mother's new venture."

"You have to admire a woman her age pursuing her dream of becoming a published author." Jeannine handed me a beer and plunked a second bottle on the tiny end table by the couch.

As I skimmed through a few pages, drops of sweat beaded my forehead. Either Jeannine had turned up the thermostat, or my mother's writing was getting to me. Deep inside, I ignored the erratic, but pleasant muscular twinges, sending electrical impulses careening toward the apex of my legs. Holy smokes! My mother knew how to turn up the heat. "She needs a new dictionary," I said, and tried to overlook the lust flickering to life within me.

Jeannine plunked herself down at the other end of the lumpy couch. Aging springs protested with a calliope of squeaks and squeals. "Spelling isn't my strong suit either."

I took a moment to compose myself. "There's nothing wrong with my mother's spelling. It's her choice of words that alarms me. She sent me to Catholic school for eight years, then she hands me a bunch of pages filled with..." *Smut* sounded rather harsh. I settled on *orgasmic literature*. "I'm speechless. Of all the genres, why did she pick erotica?" I ran my hand over my forehead where a headache clanged like a distant ocean channel marker."

"I hear erotica is selling really well right now. Women of all ages enjoy reading it. Not that I'd know, mind you," Jeannine said with a wink.

"My life is falling apart, and you're cheery and spouting smart-alecky remarks."

"You're making a moose out of mouse. You need to calm down. This isn't as bad as you think."

Easy for you to say. "The two of us reading erotica is a totally different scenario. She's my mother." I read several more paragraphs. My face reddened on impact. "Cock pops out at me on every page!"

"Cocks have a way of popping out," Jeannine said with a crafty grin.

I groaned, all the while devouring my mother's prose. This was addictive. If I wasn't already sitting, the next paragraph would have knocked me onto my butt. Wowza! "This isn't a laughing matter. I'm being serious here. How would you feel if your mother were writing this type of book?"

"I don't have to worry about that. My mother would never say cock, not even in reference to a fowl. You're mother's gutsy to make such a move. I say hip hip hooray!"

Unable to stop reading, I skimmed several more pages. "Easy for you to cheer her on. She's not related to you."

"You tend to go off the deep end way too easily. Take a wait and see attitude. No one but you will read her writing unless it gets published."

The muscles in the back of my neck started to relax. "You have a valid point. The odds of selling a book in today's market are slim. I might have nothing to worry about."

Jeannine sent me a pensive glance. "But then, there are e-books. Anyone can publish one of those."

"Thanks a lot. I was starting to feel better." To cool down, I took several sips from the bottle of beer. "Meanwhile, I'll try to encourage her to use more tepid words."

"Such as *IT*." Jeannine's wise ass grin grated. Big time.

"If my mother goes through with this, and on an off chance, actually sells the book, I won't be able to show my face anywhere."

"If her book sells, you should be proud of her accomplishment. Besides, I bet she uses a pseudonym."

"She already has one. Busty Galore."

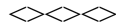
Jeannine took a swig of her beer. "Then what's your problem? No one will know Busty Galore's identity."

"Mom will want her bio and a photo on the back cover. She'll tell all our family and friends about her new career. If the book is released, she'll buy an ad on the front page of the local newspaper. I bet she advertises on television and gets a couple talk shows to do interviews. Everyone will know."

"You're jumping to conclusions again." Jeannine's mouth twitched. "Hey, how about *purple headed cobra of love*?"

"Huh?"

"You know, as a cock substitute."



I'd never eaten at La Crepe, located in the Old Port area of Portland, Maine. To afford the meals here, I'd either have to apply for a personal loan or sell my slightly tarnished soul to the Devil. As I sat opposite Josh Matthews, my instincts told me I'd never forget tonight. Something cataclysmic was about to rock my life into another dimension. Unfortunately, my woman's intuition had failed me in the past. I ignored my niggling, internal warning system. Josh was different from the other sleaze-ball jerks I'd dated.

The waiter seated us by the window overlooking the lights of the harbor. "I can't believe you've lived in Portland your entire life, and you've never eaten here." Josh's pale blue eyes twinkled in the candlelight. His heated gaze sent my heart rate into overdrive.

As Josh admired the yachts, sailboats, recreational cruisers and commercial fishing vessels on slips and moorings, I studied the man sitting next to me: blonde hair, strong chin and a pale complexion because he spent more time in the office than the great outdoors. His ambition was an admirable trait. Clean manicured fingernails put my chewed ones to shame, that I hid on my lap beneath the table. Josh was medium height, a quarter to a half inch shorter than I was, maybe a little more, but I wasn't willing to go there. According to my mother, I wasn't getting any younger. Plus any single women in her right mind would consider Josh a *REAL CATCH*. For once, I had to agree with her.

If I could somehow wave a magic wand and change one thing, I'd either shrink a couple inches or increase his height and the size of his hands. Granted that's two things, but since I don't have a magic wand, cheating a little makes no difference. I'd found a sensible solution. I slouch and don't wear heels when we're together.

Otherwise, Josh was absolutely perfect.

He was charming, handsome, thoughtful and smart. Rarely a day went by without him finding a way to show how much he cared. Sometimes it was a phone call, an electronic card,

candy, a stuffed animal or a small gift. This morning the florist delivered twenty-eight long stem roses in a crystal vase.

"Thanks for the roses," I said and basked in his widening smile.

"One rose for every day we've been together."

That was so sweet. "They're beautiful. Gorgeous. I've taken a picture so I'll remember them always."

"You deserve the best," he said and brushed his lips against the side of my face. "Surely, a pretty girl like you gets flowers all the time."

"I've had lots of flowers." Though unfortunate, the itty bitty lie was needed to save face. There were the dandelions in third grade from Billy, my next door neighbor, the carnation in junior high from a boy whose name I'd forgotten, and the orchid for my senior prom that might not count, since I went with a friend and paid for it myself. I certainly wasn't going to admit the last time anyone sent me roses I was a newborn at the hospital.

"Were you surprised?" he asked, looking pleased.

"You could say that." When I opened the door and saw the kid standing there with my flowers, my jaw hit my chest with enough velocity to crack a rib. I bent over and inhaled the fragrance of the blooms, thinking what a lucky woman I was. A high-pitched voice brought me back to the present. "Lady, I have other orders to deliver. Do you want these or not?" As I grabbed the vase, my fingers lost their grip and slipped over the condensation on the glass. I made a brilliant save, but water sloshed all over me and the delivery boy. Nothing could mar my euphoria, not even the curse that rent the air as he scowled at me with an extended hand. I threw him a five and kicked the door shut.

"Do you know what you're going to order?" Josh asked. "Their prime rib is the best. Of course the seafood doesn't get any fresher."

I glanced at the appetizers on the menu and did a double take. Thanks to my mother, I knew the value of a buck. I checked out the desserts. At these prices, I could afford a glass of water and a thirty dollar bowl of ice cream, which should have veins of fourteen carat gold running through it. "Are you sure you don't want to leave and go somewhere else?"

He cupped his right hand over my fingers fidgeting with the thick linen napkin on my lap. "Doesn't anything on the menu appeal to you?" While there, I thought he might cop a feel. I jiggled my leg back and forth, hoping he'd take the hint.

But he was the perfect gentleman. *SIGH!*

"Everything's so expensive," I said.

"I'm not concerned. You shouldn't be either." He glanced at me over his menu, his eyes alight with emotions. I saw caring, definitely lust and possibly love. Did I dare hope I'd found the man of my dreams, my soulmate? Because of my past blunders with men, I wondered whether I'd misread his expression.

"Nothing but the best for my girl. Besides, this is a special night. One for us to remember."

What did he mean by a special night? Maybe he wanted us to move in together. It was a bit soon, but since we saw each other practically every day, why not? It might be fun to have a roommate who also happened to be my lover. Definitely a humongous bonus. Then too, each month I was barely able to scrape up the rent for my one bedroom apartment. The last few years I'd banked every spare cent in an account earmarked as my back to school or down payment on a house fund. My nest egg had swelled to a whopping \$19,000, plus change.

Josh's cell phone jingled. He glanced down at the screen then listened to the caller. Deep ridges marred his normally smooth brow. Something was seriously wrong.

“Can’t we discuss this later,” he asked, sending me a smile that never reached his eyes. By his frustrated tone, I concluded he was talking to his ex-wife. “How serious is it? You’re sure? When?”

Josh and I met at a club last month, and things progressed well. *Well*-too tame a word. We’d gone from jumping into bed on the first date, to volcanic, explosive SEX. Twenty-eight days wasn’t much time, but for me, it was long enough to know I liked everything—except for the slight height discrepancy—about Josh, a divorced father of a three year old son suffering from scoliosis, who lived in Rhode Island. Josh worked countless hours as an attorney and was on the brink of making partner at the prodigious Skillings, Barnes, and Hubert law firm. Josh was the total package: attractive, attentive, and *gainfully employed*.

I could be in love!

Did he feel the same way?

“That much! I’ll see what I can do and get back to you.” He snapped the phone shut, slipping it into his suit coat.

“Is something wrong?”

“As far as that woman’s concerned, something’s always wrong.” He uttered a long sigh, and made a visible effort to regroup. “Sorry, I shouldn’t complain, she’s a great mother to our son. I couldn’t ask for better. She doesn’t bother me unless it’s important. It’s not fair that I make her sound like a bitch, because she isn’t. It’s just that I’m worried about Timmy.”

“Is Timmy sick?” I asked.

“Timmy will be fine. This is nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow. Tonight is about us.”

“If you’re upset, I don’t mind discussing it with you.”

“That’s one of the things I love about you. You’re always thinking of others instead of yourself. Would you like a drink?” he asked with an easy going grin, but I saw the angst and fear in the depths of his blue eyes that had darkened several shades since the fateful call from his ex. Despite the worry carving slight lines around his mouth, he looked scrumptious in his dark charcoal suit, white shirt and red tie.

“Are you having a drink?” I asked.

“I’m having a martini? You want one?”

“I’ll have a glass of Merlot. The house wine is fine.”

Laughter rumbled from his chest, the troubling phone call seemingly forgotten. “I like that you’re thrifty. No one can ever accuse you of being a gold digger. But we’re here to celebrate our twenty-eight days together. As far as I’m concerned, the sky’s the limit.”

“Most couples don’t celebrate their twenty-eighth day anniversary,” I said, and lifted the linen off the bread basket where the aroma of freshly baked rolls permeated the air. When I was a little girl, my mother boasted that with my healthy appetite, I could devour more food than most lumberjacks. While on a date, I’d learn to curb my hunger and eat like a bird, though it wasn’t easy with the aroma of bread wafting toward my nostrils.

“I hope we get to celebrate many more anniversaries,” he said, dipping his head and taking a moment to claim my mouth in a soft but pleasing kiss.

“That would be... nice.” Nice was such an innocuous word, but my mind drew a blank and it was better than leaving the sentence hanging.

He ordered a bottle of their best Merlot. We ate shrimp cocktail, thick beef Wellingtons that I could cut with a fork. “I’ve never had this kind of beef before.”

“I expect us to have many firsts together.” He slid his chair closer to mine. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve taken the liberty of ordering dessert.”

"I can't eat another bite." Not totally true, but I didn't want to scare him off by demonstrating my eating prowess.

The waiter collected our plates and silverware and returned moments later with a platter of assorted mini pastries along with cups of dark coffee.

"Anything appeal to you?" Josh asked, taking my hand and kissing my fingertips.

"Yeah, but it's not on that plate," I said with a wink that widened his pupils and his grin.

"You're everything I've been looking for in a woman." His husky voice peppered my flesh with goosebumps.

"You mean it?"

"Definitely. Have you examined the desserts?"

"No, I'd rather look at you."

"I have a surprise for you."

I sent him a wicked grin. "I have a surprise for you, too, but you'll have to wait until we get back home."

"You're a naughty girl. That's another of your loveable traits." He kissed me again, a light feathery touch that sent my pulse racing. "My surprise for you is on the dessert plate."

I glanced down and among the pastries, saw a plush deep blue, velvet box with a silver bow. With shaking fingers, I tugged at the ribbon and opened the hinged top. Inside was a HUGE marquise cut, solitaire diamond ring. Tears flooded my eyes.

One moment, Josh was sitting beside me, the next he was on one knee. "Monique, I know this is fast, but love is like that sometimes. Make me the happiest man in the world. Say you'll be my wife."

"Is this for real?" I looked around expecting to see cameras recording a sick prank for reality television. Nearby diners were staring, waiting for my reply. What was the holdup? I'd waited my entire life to find my prince charming. My knight in shining armor.

Too choked up to speak, I nodded. As he slipped the ring on the ring finger of my left hand, cheers rang out around us.

On the drive home, Josh was quieter than usual. According to Jeannine my daily exercise regime was comprised of two routines, me putting my foot repeatedly in my mouth, and me jumping to conclusions at breakneck speed. Tonight was no exception. My feet were firmly planted on the floor so there was little danger of me stepping on my tongue, but my mind buzzed like a chainsaw on steroids with possible reasons Josh had said a total of three words since we'd left the restaurant.

He was tired. That made sense.

Or maybe, he was angry, but I'd said nothing to upset him. He might be mad at his ex-wife.

All reasonable explanations for the perpetual frown on his face.

Unless he regretted giving me the ring!

Yikes!!! My stomach knotted. Oh, NO!!! What I had I done? Maybe he was quiet because I'd also been quiet.

Or...

I'd had the engagement ring on my finger less than an hour, and already Josh wanted it back. I needed answers.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"I love the ring."

“Good.”

“Are you upset?”

“I guess it shows, huh?”

My worst fears had materialized. Tears rimmed my eyes. “It sure does.”

“I can’t help how I feel.”

I nodded, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

“This is my fault. Right now, my focus should be on my son.”

“I understand that your son has to come first. I’m okay with that.”

A sad smile crossed his lips. “You’re so understanding.”

I’d had about all I could take. I needed to know the score. So I got right to the point. “I suppose you want your ring back.”

He jerked his head toward me. “Of course not. Where did you get that crazy idea?”

The car thudded over the rumble strip. We turned in time to see a truck parked in the breakdown lane. I slammed my right foot down hard as my hands gripped the seat. Josh steered the car around the vehicle and back onto the highway. He threw me a concerned glance. “I love you. I want us to be married, the sooner the better. I don’t believe in long engagements, but unfortunately, before I can marry you, first, I need to attend to a personal matter.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I don’t want to burden you with my problems.”

“I’m going to be your wife. I want to share the bad as well as the good with you.”

He pulled into a parking lot and turned off the ignition. For several seconds, he said nothing, stared out the window as though the answers to his problems were hidden on the mall exterior. “I’ve done a terrible thing.”

The desperation in his voice sent shivers down my spine. “Wh... at?” Did I really want to know? Probably not, but whatever he’d done stood between the present and our future together. “Did you rob a bank or hijack an armored car?” I uttered a nervous laugh. The meal I’d eaten threatened to make an encore performance.

He dashed a hand through his thick blonde hair. “Timmy was supposed to have surgery in another month when my insurance with the firm takes effect. I had money set aside in case... in case he needed it sooner.” He ran a hand over his face.

Was Josh crying? I couldn’t stand seeing him this upset. I placed my hand over his and squeezed, encouraging him to continue.

“You know how three year olds are? Always curious, never afraid to explore and climb to new heights. Timmy fell today, a brutal blow to his back that increased the curvature of his spine. The doctor wants to do the surgery immediately. If my son doesn’t have the surgery right away, the pressure on his spine could permanently damage his spinal cord, paralyzing him. He’d never be able to walk again.”

“That’s terrible. Surely, you don’t hold yourself responsible for Timmy’s accident?”

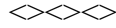
Josh leaned his forehead against mine, his teary eyes dark as the midnight sky. The bond between us intensified. “I spent the money in his emergency fund. Today, before lunch I got the news I would be making partner in another week. That’ll include a huge bonus. Unfortunately, I need the money right now, not next week.”

“What did you use the money for?”

“You don’t want to know.”

It took a moment for my brain to register what he’d said and to jump to the only possible conclusion.

He'd bought my ring.



Feeling like a fool and the biggest dope in the universe, I stood at Jeannine's door, holding a backpack and a suitcase, mustering the strength to lift my hand and knock. For the last few days, I'd avoided all contact with the outside world. I dreaded the questions I'd have to answer. Even worse I dreaded having to admit what an idiot I'd been. Even Jeannine who'd lived through all my trials and tribulations would be shocked to hear about my latest blunder.

Figuring it was now or never, I threw back my shoulders and tapped lightly on the oak door. I had to be brave. I would not fall apart. I would not give that bastard the satisfaction of ruining my life.

Although I had nowhere else to go, I hoped she wasn't home. Silly because I could hear the drone of the television and the slide of the chain lock, then the deadbolt.

The door swung open. Jeannine's eyes widened in disbelief. "What's happened?"

Unexpected tears ran down my face. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." She reached for my suitcase.

I stumbled inside, dropped the backpack by the door and fell face down on the couch. Loud wrenching sobs bellowed from my lungs. Jeannine sat beside me, stroking my back.

"Monique, no man is worth this kind of pain."

Instinctively, Jeannine knew I was there to discuss my dismal love life. Hard to imagine, but my shattered heart that ached more than I'd thought possible, was the least of my problems.

I sat up, took the tissues Jeannine handed me and between gulps of air, managed to say in broken voice, "My li...li...life is over."

Jeannine filled a glass with Merlot. "Here, drink up. This will help."

I downed the contents in a few swallows. "Josh..." "I started crying again."

"I'd like to strangle that bastard for what he's done to you." She refilled my glass that I polished off in three seconds, dulling the pain deep inside.

"Thanks, for being here every time I do something stupid."

Jeannine shook her head. "Josh seemed like the real deal. Don't blame yourself for falling in love. If you don't take a chance, you'll never find true love."

"True love," I laughed bitterly. "That's a bunch of crap. There's no such thing."

"Do you want to talk about it and tell me what he did?"

"He proposed, got down on one knee in the middle of the restaurant for the world to see, then he gave me a big fat diamond ring that had to be worth a fortune. That's what the bastard did. If I live to be a hundred, no, make that a thousand years old, I'll never forgive the son of a bitch."

Looking more confused than ever, Jeannine tapped my hand. "You're not making sense. Surely, there's more to this story."

I sneered at her. "Oh, there's lots more. That's where my moronic tendencies come into play. Big time. If you look up moron in the dictionary, you'll see a photo of me, prancing like a court jester. I was such a fool. I'm embarrassed to confess what I did."

"It can't be that bad."

"If you multiply all the stupid things I've done in my life by a million, that would pale compared to this," I said, fresh tears rimming my eyes. "No matter how I look at it, I'm the most stupid person in the entire world."

"You're being awfully hard on yourself."

Getting Personal

By Diane Amos

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Winner Takes All

GETTING PERSONAL

Chapter 1

From a distance I spotted a sliver of light beneath the shade on my tenant's side of the duplex. If I wasn't careful, she'd see me and invite me in. My neighbor was nice enough. She paid her rent on time, and on occasion, lent me money and then canceled the debt. But some favors came with obligations.

Unfortunately, when I'd needed a comforting word and a shoulder to cry on, I'd spilled my guts to this woman. And on this particular evening I wanted to spend a quiet night at home, alone with my animals and my latest acquisition, Milton the Gecko, who slept in a J.C. Penney's box on my front seat.

I eased my '92 Ford Explorer into the driveway. I wrenched open the door, grabbed the box, yanked the key from the ignition, and ran. Had the engine simply died, I might have escaped unseen. Instead, the vehicle shimmied and rumbled loud enough to wake the deaf, the dead, and the one person I dreaded most, my tenant—my mother.

“Monique, I see you've been shopping. It's about time you spiffed up your wardrobe.”

I suppressed a moan. "Hi, Mom. What's up?"

My mother, Anne Marie St. Cyr, age fifty-eight, eternal flower child of the sixties, wore white bobby socks and a floral muumuu with strands of glass beads around her neck. Her long brown ponytail swung as she gestured wildly, genetic proof of her French heritage.

"Come in, dear, and show me what you've bought."

I laughed nervously, quickly unlocked my door, and slipped Milton inside my half of the duplex.

When I entered my mother's kitchen, she waved me into her office. Her size five Birkenstocks thumped against the tile floor. "I've something very interesting to discuss with you."

I'd seen that devious look too many times. "Why do I get the feeling I'm about to be skinned alive?"

She motioned me to sit in the spare chair by the computer. "Don't you trust your own mother?"

"Absolutely not."

She chuckled under her breath. "I need your assistance with my new book."

"After the last time, you promised never to ask for my help again."

"This is different," she said, her tone defensive. "I can't do the research by myself. Are you going to deny your poor old mother?"

"Don't use that damsel in distress stuff on me. You're the most capable person I know."

She shrugged and signed onto the Internet.

The modem hummed. Her fingers flew over the keyboard. My mother wrote erotic fiction under the pen name, Busty Galore, a misnomer because, unlike me, her shoulder blades protruded farther than her breasts. I loved her dearly, but she had a way of butting into my life. Plus, her 20/20 eyesight and keen ears were capable of seeing and hearing only what she wanted.

As she clicked onto the personals, apprehension sliced through me.

"Look at it this way, by helping me, you'll help yourself too." She checked the box in front of "*Men Looking for Women*," then continued down the column, "*ages 28-40, build: athletic, average, or slightly overweight.*"

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "The last time I got involved in one of your schemes I ended up knee-deep in mudflats with bullets whizzing over my head."

"That clam digger sure got edgy when he thought you were staking claim to his territory." My mother laughed. "Anyway, everything turned out fine once I explained I was gathering information for a book. Besides, that was so long ago, I'm surprised you still remember."

"How can I forget! My boots were suctioned in muck. I ran barefoot, pursued by a wild-eyed man toting a sharp clam fork and shouting obscenities. I'm lucky I wasn't killed."

"You exaggerate," she said sweetly. "Besides, I thought he was kind of cute. And thanks to you, I got enough material to write my book, which I've already sold for a considerable sum, I might add. If you hadn't been so crabby, I bet he'd have asked you for a date."

"The man was a lunatic!"

"Once he calmed down, he seemed nice enough."

"I refuse to discuss this again," I said, and smacked my lips shut.

My mother turned back to the computer.

I was twelve years old when my father died. My mother worked two jobs, often doing without so my brother, Thomas, and I could wear the right clothes and fit in with the other children at Saint Joseph's Parochial School. We owed her big time. Unlike me, my brother made

himself scarce, which didn't matter because it is a Catholic daughter's duty to assist her "poor decrepit mother"—her words, not mine.

Ten years ago she sold her first book and, much to the family's surprise, became an overnight success. Unfortunately, each time she coaxed me into helping her, something backfired.

I rolled my eyes. "I absolutely refuse to root around in dirt, scale buildings, or anything else that might do bodily harm."

"There'll be no bullets this time. No mud either. This is very safe, and you'll enjoy yourself." She eyed me warily. "You really need to get out more."

"Humph." I'd already lost this battle.

A sweet smile stretched across her red lips. "If all goes well, our research will help me write a good book, and at the same time, solve your problem."

"I don't have a problem."

"For Heaven's sake, you're almost thirty-six years-old and still single."

"I like my life just the way it is. Plus, I prefer to play the field."

"The only action on that dried-up plot of land is an occasional male running in the wrong direction."

"I'll have you know, I had a luncheon date today with a wonderful man."

She eyed me warily. "Will you see him again?"

"I'm sure I will." Mr. Murdock, the sixty-five year old janitor at work let it slip he'd be spending his birthday alone. The old man had done me many favors. Wanting to repay his kindness, I invited him out for a bite to eat at Eddie's Diner. After the meal the waitress served a large piece of cake with lit candles. When I dropped off Mr. Murdock, he pressed his lips to my cheek.

I saw the doubt in my mother's eyes. "As a matter of fact, he kissed me," I added, hating myself.

"What's his name?"

"Look, Mom, I know you mean well, but I'm happy. Really."

"Keep your phony baloney for someone else. I know you're lonely, and I've found the perfect solution."

If she heard my groan, she didn't let on.

She clicked several additional categories. Checkmarks filled small boxes. A list of screen names appeared. "Here we are. Males for the picking. Like ripe fruit off a tree."

A wormy apple sprang to mind.

"The Internet is a viable way to meet the opposite sex."

It finally sunk in. "You expect me to talk to men online?"

"Yes, and once you get to know them, you'll tell me all about your conversations. Of course, you'll go on dates with a few of our favorites, then report the results."

She beamed an innocent smile. "Who knows, you might even find the man of your dreams."

I glanced at the screen names on the monitor: Studman, MusclesManiac, I'veGotIt, Babemagnet, and Willin&Able. I turned to my mother. "You can't be serious."

"I'd like to submit an ad with your profile and a recent picture. That'll allow me to learn what type of man prowls the Internet for love."

"There's no way in hell—"

"You're right. We'll skip the recent photo. Though it's a shame. Personal ads with pictures get much more action."

“No way, no how. *“No!”*”

“It breaks my heart to hear you speak in that tone. It's not as if I ask you for a lot. When I go meet my Maker, you'll think back to this day and wish you'd done this itty bitty favor for your dear old mother.”

I jumped to my feet. “I'd rather face a hundred angry clam diggers than chat online with a bunch of sex-starved men.”

The next morning I awoke to the blare of a car horn in the yard. When I glanced at the alarm, I leaped from the bed, stubbed my toe on the nightstand, dashed to the front door, and waved. “Jeannine, come in a minute, I'm almost ready.”

She eyed me suspiciously as she entered. “Yeah, right.”

Jeannine Lessard is my best friend: short, smart, and brutally honest. Every other Saturday she drops me off at the Furry Friends Veterinary Clinic where I volunteer, then continues on to the Maine Medical Center where she reads to the children in the Pediatrics Unit. Later we splurge on lunch and share secrets.

“You're early,” I accused in a tone meant to inflict guilt, which always works when used on me by my mother.

“You'd better hurry, or we'll both be late.”

“Be ready in a jiffy,” I said, charging toward the bedroom while unbuttoning the top of my nightgown. “Oh, make yourself a cup of coffee. While you're at it, get me one, too.”

“Do you want me to uncover Long John's cage?”

Long John, a parrot raised by a seaman, never uttered a peep during the night. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Kiss me, I'm horny.” the bird said in a scratchy voice.

“You're a dirty old man,” Jeannine said.

“You got great knockers.”

“Thanks,” Jeannine replied with a hoot of laughter. “You're cute.”

“I want sex!”

“Who doesn't?”

I stuck my head out the bedroom door. “Don't encourage him. He'll never clean up his act with you egging him on.”

Jeannine ignored me. “Does Long John want a cracker?”

“Long John wants to screw.”

I slammed the door shut to the riot of laughter in the other room. I'd adopted Long John after its owner died. Determined to clean up his vocabulary, I'd spend hours coaxing him to say, “Long John's a pretty boy.” So far, my efforts have failed.

“Who's the cutie under the heat lamp?”

“That's Milton,” I replied, searching through my closet for clean slacks and a shirt. “Milt's owner refused to pay the vet bill.”

“I thought you weren't taking in any more rejects.”

“This is the last one,” I said, not sure if I could turn my back on any animal that needed me.

“You're too softhearted to be a volunteer at the clinic.”

“I like to be around animals, and this is the last animal I take in. Besides, I couldn't allow Milton to...well, you know...croak.”

“What's your mother think of him?”

“She doesn't know yet.”

“Oh, oh.”

I tugged a pair of tight brown slacks up over my bottom and almost managed to zip them. “Triple damn,” I mumbled, praying they’d shrunk. “Jeannine, since I’m running late, would you mind feeding Milton?”

“No problem, what’s he eat?”

“His worms are in a small carton in the refrigerator.”

“We aren’t running that late.”

I dashed into the kitchen in my bra and slacks. I grabbed a container from the refrigerator and tapped a few wax worms and wingless fruit flies into a dessert dish.

“Yummy,” Jeannine said, spooning instant coffee into mugs. “How’s your diet going?” She stared at the expanse of gut currently bulging between the V of the zipper of the slacks.

I sucked in my belly. “As of today, I’m swearing off sweets, bread, and all other calorie-laden goodies. From now on, I’m eating nothing but rice cakes.”

Jeannine raised an eyebrow. “Even Milton’s diet sounds more exciting than that.”

While Jeannine spooned sugar into her cup, I rushed into the bedroom and put on the only clean unwrinkled dress I could find, a garment with puffy sleeves and a wide organza skirt. Granted it wasn’t the perfect outfit for cleaning out animal cages, but I wasn’t going to allow another person to see my gut packed into overly tight pants like a stuffed sausage about to explode.

“Hi, gorgeous.” Veterinarian Peter Sanders winked at me from the reception desk of Furry Friends Veterinary Clinic. “You all dolled up for me?”

“You aren’t my type,” I said, trying not to drown in the depths of his sapphire-blue eyes.

Peter cupped his right hand over his heart. “You really know how to wound a guy. Lucky I don’t hold a grudge. There’s a chocolate éclair from Dunkin’ Donuts in the break room. It’s got your name on it.”

Chocolate éclairs are my all time favorite. My mouth started to water; my heart began pumping. Sweat beaded my palms.

As I entered the break room, my guardian angel tapped my right shoulder. “*Avoid temptation you pathetic, weak, spineless creature.*” Like my mother, my angel does not mince words.

A stronger tap landed on my left shoulder the second I opened the box of pastries. From years in parochial school, I recognized this touch all too well. “*Start the diet tomorrow,*” it said”. *Think soft chewy donut, oozing with vanilla filling, covered with a thick layer of creamy chocolate frosting.*”

Ignoring repeated tappings on both shoulders, I pondered the succulent pastry and seriously considered postponing the diet. After all, I’m not obese. Size fourteen is nothing to sneeze at. I’d almost convinced myself that many respectable women wear larger sizes with pride when the bell over the entry door jingled. I made a quick glance out the door and saw Julie McKenzie, aka Miss I-Weigh-A-Hundred-Pounds-Soaking-Wet, sashay through the door wearing a slinky pink tank top tucked into tight black slacks zipped clear to her waistband. Peter’s eyes blinked like traffic lights.

How long had it been since I’d tucked a shirt inside my pants? There should be a law against thin woman parading around in broad daylight while men roam the earth like prehistoric cavemen. I envisioned Peter grabbing her by her hair, throwing her over his shoulder, and

carrying her into his cave-exam room where he made wild passionate love to her on top of the exam table.

Tap on my right shoulder. *"Jealousy is a sin."*

Tap on left shoulder. *"The little bitch is way too skinny."*

I eyed Julie's tiny butt, even tinier waist, and boobs so small a man would have trouble finding them in the dark.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry," I lied even as my stomach offered a loud groan of protest.

"So how did your morning go?" Jeannine asked before biting into a thick juicy hamburger topped with onions, tomatoes, and cheese. I summoned all my willpower not to run my finger through the special sauce dripping onto the paper wrapping. My empty stomach recoiled as I sipped a diet Coke and concentrated on my new figure, envisioning the look on Peter Sanders' face when I arrived for work in a sleazy tank top tucked into the waistband of skintight spandex shorts.

"It went okay," I replied in the weakened tone of a person suffering end-stage starvation. My fingers inched toward one small fry in the corner of the tray.

"Just okay?"

"It's been a long time since I've had a decent meal. Maybe I need to ease up on the diet a little."

Jeannine glanced at her watch. "You've been dieting for only four hours."

"Two hundred and forty minutes is an eternity when you're surrounded by chocolate éclairs."

"Don't expect me to believe you didn't even take a bite."

"I didn't," I insisted, looking offended.

Hard tap on my left shoulder. *"Since you licked the frosting off that éclair, then hid the remains in the bottom of the trashcan, what harm would there be in eating three tiny fries?"*

"Look," Jeannine said, swinging her burger toward me.

The saliva in my mouth crested to flood stage.

"You need to go on a sensible diet. You're starving yourself. With you, it's either all or nothing. Why don't you buy a small burger, forget the fries, and add a salad with light dressing?"

I eyed her thick juicy burger. She was right. It was all or nothing, and right now, I was craving a double burger and a large order of fries. On second thought, for a mere thirty-nine cents I could king-size that order.