

THE MARRIAGE LIST

by Jean C. Joachim

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SUNNY DAYS, MOONLIT NIGHTS

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*For my aunt, Nan Edelston Cohen who would have loved this
book had she lived to read it.*

With appreciation for your love and support to: Diana Finegold,
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Chapter One

Envy burned in Grey's chest as he walked through the door at Blondie's, the sports bar on West 79th Street. His three best buddies had it all, great jobs and great wives, while at 30 years old, Grey was still working night and day, saving every penny and sleeping alone...most nights. Tonight he faced the challenge of listening to them brag without letting the smile slip off his face.

The bar was beginning to get noisy with baseball games on three TVs and rowdy laughter. Grey wondered when it'd be his turn for happiness. He got a table and downed a drink before his friends arrived, brushing a careless hand through his sandy hair.

His hazel eyes swept the room for eligible women. There were a couple at the bar, talking to each other, looking pretty hot. Later, he'd try to drum up some action. One looked over at him, her gaze moving over his body slowly and her broadening smile indicated she approved of what she saw. Her blonde hair and ample chest made it hard for him to turn his gaze back to the door, where Will was entering, followed by Spence.

Grey raised his hand in greeting to his buddies as they made their way to his table. This was their quarterly get-together for a couple of beers and dinner. Though they were eight years out of college, when they were together it was like old times hanging at the fraternity. Practically inseparable in college, they called themselves the "Four Horsemen". When Bobby arrived, they motioned to the waitress for another pitcher of beer. 5

After placing their food orders, the Horsemen settled back in their chairs. Grey opened the conversation.

“So how’s married life treating you guys?”

“Thinking about tying the knot, Grey?” Bobby asked.

“That would be news,” Will put in, before taking a swig of beer.

“Yeah, yeah, ‘Grey Andrews, tired of screwing different women every night sets the date’” Spence said, making quotation marks in the air with his hands.

“I’ll drink to that,” Will said, raising his mug in a mock toast.

“You’ll drink to anything!” Bobby piped up.

“So who is she?” Spence asked, narrowing his eyes and gazing at Grey.

“No one. There’s no one,” Grey said, his shirt collar feeling suddenly tight. He reached up and unbuttoned his shirt then took a deep breath.

“Sure, sure. You don’t have to tell us, but we’ll find out eventually,” Will said.

“Come on, guys, I’m serious,” Grey continued.

“So you’ve stopped working sixty hour weeks and sleeping with whatever you could pick up at a bar?” Bobby asked.

“Maybe.”

“Gonna kick out your roommate and squeeze a wife into that cramped place you live?” Will asked.

“I’m looking.”

“So the nest egg is fat enough now, got enough cash and you’re ready for the next step? Grey, you plan like a girl,” Spence chuckled and the other two laughed with him.

“So marriage isn’t so great for you guys, huh? Is that what I’m hearing?” Grey said, smirking.

Grey, the only unmarried one, wanted to hear how married life was treating his friends. Although he wasn’t in love or even dating one woman exclusively, he was thinking about taking the plunge himself...time to start looking for Ms. Right. Spence was right, Grey was a planner.

Will took a gulp of his beer before he turned to Grey.

“Your crazy job giving you time off to get married?”

Grey had spent the past eight years working sixty hour weeks to achieve success; his job at an investment firm kept him busy watching his clients’ money and his own. He lived on practically nothing, took girls on inexpensive dates, shared an apartment, all to save up for freedom and marriage, the way he wanted it.

“Still the master of the cheap date, Grey?” Spence asked him, putting down his empty beer glass.

So what if he was inventive enough to master the art of low-cost dating: picnics in Central Park, free concerts, trips to the Bronx Zoo on free entry days, long walks. The women he escorted didn’t mind that dates with him were unusual instead of costly. Grey wooed his women on as few dollars as possible, saving every cent and it was paying off as he watched his money grow, multiplying at a rapid rate.

“I’m still careful with my money, Spence. How’s your marriage, by the way?” Grey asked, lounging back in his chair.

Grey was on a mission, gathering data, information, formulating his plan for wedded bliss. After two pitchers, tongues started to loosen up. 6

“My wife is a pain in the ass with her decorator and her cook. The living room is white, can’t wear shoes there. Can’t put my feet up on the coffee table. And food! Tiny portions, salads. Give me a good meatloaf any day, I eat like a rabbit,” Will complained, refilling his glass.

The table was silent for a moment.

“Bobby, how’s that sexy lady you married?” Spence asked, his eyes glittering with either desire or envy, Grey couldn’t tell which.

“Watch it, Spence. Just because she has big boobs...”

“Man, she must be hot,” Spence continued.

“I said watch it!” Bobby got halfway out of his chair before Grey put a hand on his arm to stop him.

“What’s the matter, Spence, not getting any?” Bobby teased.

“Susan’s a great talker. She loves to talk. Very smart. Intellectual, in and out of bed. But the action I want in bed doesn’t involve talking,” Spence said, gazing down at his beer.

“I wish Tiffany would talk a little more. She says lawyer stuff is boring. I tell her ‘yeah that lawyer stuff is what pays for your wardrobe, honey’ but she doesn’t get it,” Bobby said, signaling the waitress for another pitcher.

Grey didn’t hear anything like what he’d expected. He had steeled himself to hear enough bragging to make a strong stomach retch, but it never materialized. Instead his friends continued to complain about their wives, what their seemingly perfect wives lacked and what the Horsemen were missing. His frustrated pals killed his taste for the women at the bar and the discovery of their dissatisfaction caused Grey to wonder if married life was a good idea for him after all. 7

The next night he went out to dinner with his sister, Jenna. She was two years younger than Grey and engaged to be married. Jenna taught middle school. The objective of her trip to New York City was to buy a wedding dress as well as to break bread with her favorite brother. Grey took Jenna to a nice French restaurant. After a good day in the stock market, he wanted to treat his baby sister to a superb dinner. Grey ordered a martini while Jenna had Chardonnay. She looked around at the chocolate brown walls with cream trim, the cream tablecloths and pink and white dishes and sipped her wine.

“How are you feeling about...uh...getting married?” He asked her.

“Great! Bill is everything I’ve always wanted in a man,” Jenna cooed.

“Is he a good listener?” Grey said, opening the menu.

She nodded.

“A good provider?”

“He makes a good salary as corporate counsel for the bank.” Jenna glanced at the list of specials on a separate sheet.

“And...in the sack...?” Grey asked, turning his gaze from her face back to the menu as he was embarrassing himself.

“Grey! That’s none of your business...what we do in private. Honestly!”

“I know, but are you...ah, compatible?” Grey lifted the menu higher to hide his blush.

“What do you mean?” She put her menu down and stared at her brother.

“You know what I mean, Jenna. Stop playing with me,” Grey insisted, dropping the menu.

“If you would stop asking such a personal question...”

“Compatible...like you both want it the same all the time, uh, most of the time.”

“Grey! I can’t believe you asked me that.” Jenna looked to the left and right to see if anyone at a neighboring table overheard him and was staring at her. She was relieved to find the other patrons were absorbed in their own conversations, not paying attention to her discomfort.

“Are you?” He put the menu down, enjoying having his sister on the spot.

“I’m not going to answer. Why are you asking me these personal questions? It’s not like you,” Jenna said, color rising in her cheeks.

“We had a ‘Four Horsemen’ meeting two nights ago.”

“You still keep in touch with those guys?”

“Sure, they’re still my best friends.”

The waitress appeared and they ordered dinner. Grey picked a wine to go with the meal and gave the waitress the once over. Jenna shot him a dirty look and he smiled back sheepishly.

“And? Your dinner with the Horsemen?” She prodded, picking up her water glass and taking a drink.

“They were talking about their wives...complaining actually, each about different things and I’ve been thinking. I wouldn’t want to trade places with any of them. I used to think they had it all...great jobs, great women,” he cleared his throat, “now I’m not so sure.”

“You don’t want to fall into the same trap?”

“Each one had a separate complaint, a completely different thing bugging him about his wife. Three big things.” Grey looked down at his hands.

“One of them was s-e-x?” Jenna raised an eyebrow. 8

“Spence,” He added with a wry smile, “Not getting enough. I wouldn’t want to have to beg my wife to sleep with me.” Grey picked up his water glass, drinking while he watched his sister.

The waitress returned with the wine, popped the cork and filled their glasses. Jenna waited until the waitress was out of earshot before continuing the sensitive conversation.

“That’s why you’re asking me all these personal questions?” Her face lit up with understanding.

“I need to know if it’s standard...after you’re together for a while...begging?”

“Did Bobby and Will complain about that?”

Grey shook his head.

“So then it’s not like that with everyone.” Jenna took a sip of her wine and smiled her approval.

“Translation, you and Bill are sexually compatible. You don’t make him beg?”

“Only if he’s been a bad boy,” she laughed.

“Jenna! Get serious.” He coughed, choking on his water for a second.

“How can I? This is ridiculous. Do you even have someone you’re considering marrying?”

“Not yet, but I will. I plan to. Things are going well for me now and soon I’ll be in a position to have a new life, one with room for a regular woman.”

“A regular woman? I’d hate to think of you with an irregular woman,” she snickered.

“Jenna! You know what I mean.”

“Andrews family bachelor is thinking about settling down. That is news.”

“It’s not a joke,” he complained, refilling their wine glasses.

“I’m sorry, Grey. I know it isn’t. Lord knows you’re not getting any younger...seriously, I’m glad to hear it.”

The waitress arrived with their food.

“I need help here, some guidance,” Grey said before putting a forkful of sole meuniere in his mouth.

“Let’s begin with the way I solve almost every problem in my life...with a list,” she said, digging in her purse for a pen.

“I’m not into lists...it’s a girl thing.”

“Do you want my help or not?” She pulled a small pad of paper out of her purse.

He nodded, then waved his hand for her to continue.

“Okay. Three guys. Three frustrated husbands. Three wifely flaws. First one?” She asked cutting off a piece of chicken cordon bleu.

“Bobby complained that his gorgeous, sexy-as-hell wife wouldn’t listen to him. She thought his legal work was boring. I want to be able to talk to my wife about whatever business I’m in, whether she has big boobs or not,” he said, breaking into a grin.

Jenna gave him a stern look.

“Number one, she should be smart. Able to talk and listen,” Jenna said, writing, “next?”

“Will said his wife is spending all his money on decorators and cooks yet he doesn’t have a house he feels comfortable in. The guy holes up in a den, smallest room in his giant house, because Vicky’s decorated the whole house in white and it gets dirty...or something like that.”

“Translating Will’s problem into a wish...for your wish list.”

“Not a *wish* list. This is a *‘must-have’* list,” Grey said, taking a hefty portion of sole on his fork. 9

“All right, so how do you translate Will’s dilemma into a quality you want?” Jenna took the opportunity to have another bite of her dinner.

“Hmmm. Not so easy.”

“A homemaker?”

“Sort of. I’m not looking for Betty Crocker here...someone who can manage a household, I guess...and create a nice, comfortable home for me, since I’m pretty stupid at that. And who can cook herself. I don’t want to hire a decorator or a cook. Does that make sense?” He asked.

“A woman who can decorate a house, make it comfortable, right? Not a showplace, without bankrupting you and can cook a decent meal,” Jenna said, scribbling on the pad.

Grey nodded his head in agreement.

“The third thing...Spence?” Jenna asked.

“This one is important. No begging for sex,” Grey finished the last bit on his plate.

“Sexually compatible, right?”

“More than that.”

“How so?”

“She’s gotta want it as much as I do. I don’t want a woman who turns her head to the side and says, ‘okay, go ahead’, I want one who is eager for it...for me...who wants...I can’t discuss this with you, Jenna,” Grey said, picking up his wine glass to hide his blush.

“Write this last one yourself. I’m putting down sexually compatible, whatever that means to you. Please *don’t* explain it to me. Okay?” Jenna asked, tearing a sheet of paper from the pad.

He smiled a wicked grin and nodded in agreement with her.

“Here is your list. Memorize it. Every time you go out with a woman, you look for these three things,” Jenna advised, stuffing the paper in his breast pocket.

“What about honesty? Sense of humor? Looks?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Those are important traits, especially the first two. I assume everyone has to have those to get to the second date with you anyway. The list is for more than two or three dates. Use it when you consider spending a lot of time with a woman. That’s when the list kicks in. I gotta go,” she said, looking at her watch.

“No dessert?”

“Not if I want to get into the size eight wedding dress I bought today.”

“Thank you, Jenna,” he said, kissing his sister on the cheek.

“You may think it’s silly but women make lists...all women have a list they use on men, too, a list just like yours. Use it, Grey. I hope it helps you find the woman you’re looking for.”

“Me, too,” he said, dropping some bills on the table and walking out of the restaurant with his sister.

Grey and Jenna kept the list to themselves. They never spoke about it to friends or family and rarely discussed it with each other. As time went by, Grey found he valued the list more and more, as it seemed to save him from one bad relationship after another. He never got in too deep when he remembered the list and found a woman wanting in any of the characteristics on it. He felt grateful to the list for saving him from a broken heart or an unhappy marriage.

Neither Jenna nor Grey imagined such a small list could eliminate so many women. Grey intensified his search but after three years found he still didn’t have a wife, fiancée or even a woman with serious potential. He was lonely and frustrated, racking up financial gain with no one to share his good fortune. 10

He refused to abandon the list which became imprinted on his brain, the little piece of paper long discarded. He still believed it would lead him to his true love, but after searching for what he considered a long time, this patient man was finally growing impatient.