

# Male Wanted

CLASSIFIED ADS:

Personals

674

MALE WANTED

5500-100 SWISS to make

in private single from world

experience to experience

experience not required, but

must be able to

write 550-3153



**Betty Jo  
Schuler**

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

**Hard Shell Word Factory**

[www.hardshell.com](http://www.hardshell.com)

Copyright ©2002 by Betty Jo Schuler

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This book cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Bob, Karen, Robin, and Brett,  
I hope this book makes you laugh.  
Betty Jo Schuler

## Chapter 1

HOPING TO find an M&M, Taylor Gayle dug in her skirt pocket and finding it as empty as her social calendar, hoped it wasn't a bad omen. At age twenty-four, she shouldn't need a date for a Homecoming Dance, but as a high school librarian who'd been assigned to chaperone duty, attending alone would be worse.

Taylor pushed open the door to The Town Crier with a sweaty, ringless hand, and straightened her shoulders. She'd gotten herself into this mess with a tiny white lie that snowballed and she would get herself out. Walking rapidly, sandals slapping against the bare wood floor, she crossed the newspaper office and stepped up to the counter.

A sharply dressed male at a desk on the other side pecked away at a typewriter without looking up. A huge furry mutt nuzzled its head against his thigh. She cleared her throat. "I'd like to place a personal ad, please."

"Take a form." The man, whose hair was very dark and wavy, nodded toward a row of wooden trays on the counter, each with a different label and in a different color. "And have a seat."

The Personal ad forms were a tawdry hot pink that unnerved Taylor, and the schoolroom desk set in a corner made her feel like a naughty child sent to consider her behavior. Years earlier, when she loved to laugh, she'd been sent to sit in the corner frequently.

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

"I have one filled out." She'd pondered a week before filling it out and was anxious to get rid of it before she turned chicken. She'd chosen the Crier, one of two local papers, because the Courier's offices were smack in the middle of town where everyone could see her going in and out. The Crier was tucked away on a side street. Taylor waved the paper over the counter.

The dog looked up. Gray with hair that hung over its mournful eyes, he looked empathetic. His master ripped a sheet out of the typewriter without a glance in her direction. "Didn't your typing teacher tell you not to do that?" she huffed.

"Never took typing."

Taylor felt the color rise in her cheeks. If she hadn't been so concerned with meeting a man who would escort her to the homecoming dance, she would have realized that he was typing with only two fingers. She'd always prided herself on being perceptive.

He reached for her form and tossed it alongside his typewriter, consulted a handwritten sheet and told her the cost. She paid and leaned on the counter while he dug in a drawer for a receipt book. The early September day was unseasonably warm and the newspaper office typical of Boomtown, Ohio, decades behind. She'd been here three months and hadn't grown used to finding a moderate-sized town, frozen in time. A brass spittoon sat in the corner next to a scarred wooden bench in front of a plate glass window. The only other attempt at decor was a philodendron with

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

yellowing leaves set next to the row of forms, and trays labeled Business, Personal, Classified, and Yard Sales.

Except for a harried look, the guy digging frantically for a receipt book looked more like a CEO of a big company than editor of a small town newspaper. His navy pants and white shirt were neatly tailored, and he wore a red power tie and tasseled power loafers, she noted as he stalked to a file cabinet to continue his search. "R," he muttered, leaning over to open a lower drawer.

Hmm. Nice buns, and the cloth of his shirt strained over his broad shoulders and biceps. He rose and raised both hands helplessly. "I'll just write it on a piece of paper."

Okay, maybe he couldn't run a company. But he wasn't wearing a wedding band, and inept in the office didn't say anything about his ability to dance. The Snoopy bandage on his thumb didn't necessarily mean he was immature. He might just like to have fun. "Are you the editor?"

Half nodding, half shrugging, he held out a hand. "Max Stuart."

She liked the warmth and strength of his grip and was awed by the way his broad hand engulfed hers, but she refrained from offering her name. A lock of dark hair fell onto his forehead and she clenched her fingers as they itched to push it back. He picked up paper and pen, and she turned away deliberately. This was a business visit and she had no business considering Max Stuart's qualifications as an escort.

A black tin that she assumed was set on the counter with customers in mind caught her attention. Short and squat, it was decorated with colorful pictures of jellybeans and

lollipops. Closing the three-foot space between her and the can, her mouth watering, Taylor edged closer, hoping it also contained M&Ms. Chocolate enclosed in those crispy colored shells was the food of goddesses. She paused to read the label on the can.

"Suckers. Help Yourself." Oh, well. At four o'clock in the afternoon on the day she swallowed her pride to advertise for a man, any kind of candy would do. She lifted the lid.

A snake popped out and struck her in the chin.

Taylor screamed and swatted. The snake sank into a heap on the counter.

Paper.

Max ripped her "receipt" from his notepad and chuckled.

"A fine way to treat your customers," she snapped. Her hands were visibly shaking and she clasped them to her waist.

"You're the first one I've seen strike back. Most people think it's funny." His blue eyes hinted at an apology, one she couldn't accept after his laugh at her expense. He was handsome, and presumably single, but she had one jokester in her life already.

Grabbing the paper from his hand, she streaked through the entrance hall, past the mailboxes where customers picked up replies to their ads, glad she'd never have to enter his office again. Sliding behind the wheel of her modest black sedan, she turned the ignition key. Prior to that stupid snake trick, Max hadn't paid any attention to her. Then, he laughed.

Max waved goodbye from the plate glass window but the woman who'd gotten bent out of shape over the snake turned

her head. Sitting down at his sister's desk again, he sighed. "Some people have no sense of humor, Muttso."

The dog cocked an ear. Penny's pet was a pest but a good listener. Max had talked to him frequently during his first frustrating day in the newspaper office. Soon, he'd go home to Penny's apartment while his new animal friend stayed here. Meanwhile, Penny spent her days in court and her nights in the Grand Hotel.

Max loved his sister but he shouldn't be here in her office. He should be in his own, doing his job. His meeting with the consultant on Niftee's new toy line was coming up soon, and their plans needed finalizing before he approached his dad. Max smoothed the rumpled form he'd laid beside his computer. The ink was smeared as if the woman who'd just left perspired filling it out. Scooping his reading glasses out of their hiding place beneath the stack of papers on his desk, he slipped them on. He needed these half-things to read fine, or smeary, print, and hers was both. He read her ad and laughed. No wonder she'd been so uptight.

"The lady wants a man," he told Muttso. "Her name's Gayle." Small, young-looking, and somber, she had probably sweat blood placing an ad for a date. Add falling for the suckers joke, and it wasn't surprising she got angry. The snake in a can was Penny's favorite Niftee Novelty. Max thought it stunk.

So did Gayle. Nice name. Pretty woman if she wouldn't dress so plainly.

"Down, Muttso." Max shoved the dog's nose out of his lap. "Lie down." He tapped the half standard poodle, half-who-



*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

knew-what, on his generous rump. Muttso licked Max's hand causing him to hit the wrong key and he groaned. "I have enough trouble typing. Please. Don't try to help."

If he'd quit talking to the dog, maybe it would sulk in a corner and keep its head out of the way.

Where was the correction tape? He riffled through the top drawer. He'd offered to buy Penny a computer to make her work easier, but she was too proud to accept financial help. Even as a kid, she'd wanted to do everything herself. She'd gone out on a limb, buying this small advertising newspaper, and she'd gone out on an even weaker limb, asking him to sit in while she served on jury duty. Max was the creative type, not a business man.

The phone rang and he took another yard sale ad, from another person who wanted to list everything. Items listed on a notepad, fingers cramping, he returned to the Personal he was typing. Wiping a pale pink smear from the form to expose Gayle's first name, he caught a whiff of strawberry. Lipstick? Bubble gum? Blood? He grinned and typed in her last name, Taylor.

Max yanked Gayle's ad out of the typewriter. His typing teacher had tried to teach him better, but a redhead with a glorious body, her breasts bounced when she took a deep breath and lit into him. At sixteen, he'd found that fun, but after three weeks, she kicked him out of class. He'd typed with two fingers and stayed clear of women with red hair ever since.

He glanced at his watch. He'd also limited himself to good clean fun. Yet, here he was, half knowing what he was doing,

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

going home to a furnished apartment he'd never seen in a town he didn't know or care to know.

He had forty minutes to deliver the ads to Carbon City to be typeset and printed for Wednesday's Crier, and it was a thirty-minute drive. Tapping his forefingers like a frenzied Vaudeville dancer, he zipped off the yard sale ad and added it to the others. "Done," he told Muttso, slapping a hand down on the pile.

A paper fluttered to the floor and picking it up, Max saw it belonged to the woman who wanted a man. Taking his suit coat from the back of the chair, Max drew a golden wand, his favorite novelty, from the inside pocket and waved it over Gayle's ad. Sparks flew, Max chuckled, and Muttso, whining, crawled under the desk. "Sorry, old buddy, but I owe the lady a favor to make up for the snake trick. Life is meant to be magical, and Gayle obviously needs some magic in her life."

\* \* \* \*

EAGER TO see how many replies her ad brought, Taylor headed straight for her mailbox at the Town Crier when she left school. She subscribed to the daily but couldn't bear to read last night's paper. Just thinking about her plea for a man made her blush, the curse of being an almost-redhead. Hair coloring dulled her strawberry-blond hair to light brown, but the telling red that sprang to her cheeks at the slightest provocation was impossible to disguise. Besides, she knew what her ad said. What she didn't know was what the replies would say. Would one be sensitive and romantic, producing her dream man?

Would she catch a glimpse of Max Stuart when she picked up her letters in the entrance hall?

What if her mailbox was empty? What if no one wanted to meet her?

Since tenth grade when her sister burst into full bloom while she remained a ripe bud, guys tripped over Taylor's feet getting to Sheila. Taylor had grown used to the lack of attention and preferred it to lustful male slobbering. But when Max Stuart looked at her with black-fringed, sea blue eyes, she'd wished she was beautiful. Stopped at a traffic light, she snapped down the car visor and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Same plain Jane, made plainer with the hair dye and oversized glasses.

Taylor snapped the visor back impatiently. She was acting like a lovesick ninny. The light changed, and she turned onto Grand Avenue. Her brother Jake used to call her and Sheila twinny-ninnies and Taylor hated it. Their mother called them You Twins, which was just as bad. "Would You Twins please come here?" Mom didn't mean anything by it, but they weren't joined at the hip.

Sheila still liked to play jokes, but she was never caught. Taylor got caught in every prank she played. And when her sister was the culprit, Taylor was the one who paid, because she laughed aloud in class.

And the one time she'd lied? Bingo. Caught again.

The traffic was crazy this afternoon. Stalled in the middle of the block, she tapped a staccato on the steering wheel. When Dani, her library assistant, started to brag about her medical school boyfriend and ask questions about Taylor's

love life, she'd invented a fiancé. Never dreaming she'd have to chaperone a dance. Never dreaming she'd sink to this level. Advertising for a man was humiliating, but better than kissing frogs, hoping to find a prince on short notice. The fiancé story was a romantic fantasy, not a lie, in her mind, but few people would believe she was the type to spin fantasies.

Max Stuart was handsomer than any man she'd fantasized. "Max Stuart." Taylor said his name aloud, tasting the words on her lips. Max's sapphire eyes spoke of passion. His high cheekbones made him look aristocratic. His mouth was sensitive, his jaw strong, and he had a sexy little cleft in his chin. Taylor hummed a few bars of "Someday My Prince Will Come." The driver behind her tapped his horn, and she eased the car forward with the traffic. Everyone, even Sheila, thought she was serious and unromantic, because that's what she led them to believe, but Taylor Gayle was a flesh and blood woman with dreams and desires. She looked up at a sky the exact color of Max Stuart's eyes.

And almost missed her turn. She had to stop this daydreaming and come down to earth. She'd need to show wisdom in her selection of a man. Muttering, she screeched onto the side street that led to The Town Crier, parked at the corner and looked around furtively before dashing the half block to the newspaper office. Inside the corridor, she strained her eyes, looking through the glass door half hoping, half afraid she'd see Max. No one was visible, so she turned to the bank of mailboxes.

Hers was stuffed. Heart pounding, she held the envelopes to her chest. "Yes!"

Half an hour later, sitting in the living room of her second floor, rented flat at Glorious Apartments, Taylor read the first letter. "Oh, no!" She tore open another. No. No. No.

\* \* \* \*

MAX STARED at the pile of ads on his sister's desk at The Town Crier and wished he was in his own office at Niftee Novelty and Toy Company. He wished he could go home tonight to his condo and waterbed in nearby Carbon City. He wished he had a loving woman to rub his back. Penny's mattress was too soft and her bed too short, and he couldn't reach the place where his back ached to rub it. But he had a soft spot in his heart for the twerp, and he had no woman in his life. Lying in the corner, Muttso looked as downhearted as Max felt. "They're all trouble," Max told him. "You think they're soft and sweet, and first thing you know, you find they're made of steel, on the way to the top, using you for a ladder."

The door slammed. The woman who wanted a man slapped The Town Crier on the counter and pounded her fist on it.

"I told you," Max whispered to his canine friend.

"Don't you know anything?" the woman huffed.

Max knew he'd been caught with his half-glasses on. Penny insisted they made him look distinguished, but they made him feel like an old man. Keeping his head down, he slipped them off and under the papers where he'd found them.

"You could at least have the courtesy to look up." The woman pounded again. A steely babe from the start, he found her approach interesting.

"May I help you?" he asked, sitting straight and blinking at the sight of her red-splotched face. Talk about irate. He shouldn't have worried about his glasses. Hers were huge. Funny, he hadn't noticed them the first time. Maybe he'd been too busy looking at the long-lashed, tawny eyes behind them. Man-eating tiger-eyes? "Gayle, isn't it?"

"Taylor."

"Gayle Taylor." He nodded sagely.

"Taylor Gayle," she shouted.

She must have filled out the ad last name first. Anger made her nose wiggle like Muttso's when he smelled a treat. Max smothered a smile. "What's the problem, Taylor?"

"Don't patronize me, you moron. Your saying my name wrong proves I was right."

"About what?"

"That you have no business working at a newspaper." Max couldn't argue with that, so he remained silent. "Read what you wrote," she said, pointing to an ad circled in red.

SWF is looking for SWSMM to mate. So he'd hit a couple of extra keys. He shrugged.

"You don't get it, do you? SMM to mate? Every sadomasochist in the county is going to proposition me. I wrote SWM to date. That's single white male. To date. Not mate. That's two mistakes you made." She waggled two pale pink fingernails in his face. "And look how they make the rest sound."

Max read the rest of the ad. Interests range from word games to marathons. 'Romance not required, but must dance. Short men, don't be afraid to reply.' A grin spread across his face. "I'll bet my wording gets attention."

"From sickos, sure, but that's not what I'm looking for." Taking off her horn-rimmed glasses, she wiped perspiration from the bridge of her pert nose. "I want a retraction," she said, snapping back her shoulders and clamping on her glasses. "An apology. A correction." Her shoulders sagged once again.

"Come on. It can't be that bad. This burg is so far behind time, they haven't gotten the definition of SM yet." He was surprised she had. Little and innocent-looking, she could have been a schoolgirl playing dress-up. In drab clothes. Max turned his attention from her to the ad again. The qualifications she sought in a man were unusual. "What kind of marathons did you have in mind?"

"Running." She accompanied her shout with a few furious running steps. "Wipe that smirk off your face."

"Games?"

"Scrabble, crosswords, that sort of thing." Her cheeks bore two brilliant spots of red. "Word games, like I said."

"The short men line is the clincher, I suppose." He managed an almost apologetic tone.

"I didn't come here to dissect the ad to death." Gayle ... or was it Taylor ... pounded a fist on the counter. "I want to know what you're going to do."

"Fill out another form and I'll reprint it."

"Free." Her eyes met and held his. "And to be safe, I'll type it myself," she said.

Max waved her toward the typewriter. Another Penny. Independent as a hog on ice. "Be my guest."

He'd raised the office chair to accommodate his long legs, and her feet didn't touch the floor. With a few wiggles, she slid forward on the rough upholstery, a movement that hiked her ankle-length brown dress up to show shapely calves. Following them down to simple beige sandals, he admired the golden tan of her skin. A gold chain with two interlinked hearts encircled one slender ankle. A gift from a boyfriend? Not likely, if she was advertising for a man. As she typed, a task she performed deftly, she chewed her lip. Removing the paper carefully, she handed it to him. She'd inserted, "The editor wishes to apologize for the errors in the previous ad and to claim full blame."

As she rounded the corner of the counter again, she paused before him and a mixture of light fragrances tickled his senses. Lilac? Something sweet. He held the typewritten page close to his face. Lilacs, for sure. His grandmother used to wear lilac water, and Max loved it but didn't think you could buy it any more. Gayle squeezed past him, her hair brushing his chin with a faint lemony scent. She was fiery, but feminine and old-fashioned, and her simple style of dress intrigued him, just as packages wrapped in plain brown paper did.

She turned to eye him, and her lower lip trembled. "I put my name and address at the bottom so you can send me a personal apology."



She wasn't as tough as she tried to act. "Your new ad will appear Friday," he said gently.

"Meanwhile, my ad appears again incorrectly."

She knew ads didn't appear for two days, and it was too late to pull her old one from tomorrow's issue. He tapped his Seiko watch. "Afraid so. Maybe you could just ignore the letters you get until the error is corrected."

"Maybe you could just—" She clamped her lips shut so tightly they formed a straight line. Turning on her heel, she strode out of the office, slamming the door behind her.

Angry, again. What did it take to make Gayle—or Taylor—smile?

Max leaned against the window frame and watched her all the way to the corner. She flounced up to a black sedan, hips swinging. She was as testy as a submarine sailor after a month at sea, but five feet of well-packed anger turned him on. Just shy of six feet, was he too tall to suit her? He hadn't danced lately but used to be good, and he loved word games. With her, he'd even enjoy a marathon, although he could think of better kinds than running. Closing his eyes, he executed a dance step, imagining her small body against his, her head on his shoulder, his chin against her hair. The aroma of lilac and lemon, the softness of her curves, the stiffness of her spine.

He'd had a lot of crazy ideas, but this one was too crazy to consider. He wasn't her type of man and she definitely wasn't his kind of woman.

## Chapter 2

TAYLOR FUMED as she drove through the downtown area of Boomtown. The men who wrote her those dirty letters might as well have sent pornographic letters to a nun. She wasn't a total innocent but she was the furthest thing from a sadist or a masochist. She trembled when the doctor came at her knees with a tiny rubber hammer to test her reflexes. She hyperventilated when a chiropractor tried to crack her back. She screamed in the privacy of her bathroom when she ripped off a Band Aid. She hated pain. And she hated inflicting it. When she stepped on a bug, she stepped gently.

Sheila couldn't step on bugs at all. Taylor was assertive when she needed to be. Like today with Max Stuart.

Whisking past Elegant Department Store, Chic Couture, and Grand Hotel before turning off Park Avenue onto Fifth Avenue, squalling her tires, Taylor continued to fume. Whoever named the streets and downtown businesses had illusions of grandeur, and whoever hired Max Stuart to run the Crier had rocks for brains. Her brother Jake had talked her into coming to Boomtown, saying it was charming, a breath from the past. "Ha. Bad breath."

She'd been looking for a temporary job, had library experience, and Progress High needed a sub for Jake's wife, Amy, while she took maternity leave. Taylor loved working at the Windsor Grove Public Library when she was in high school. Books to read, touch, and smell. Computerized card files.

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Progress High used the Dewey Decimal system with cards in wooden drawers and the library smelled like rotting apples and sweaty tennis shoes.

Wheeling into the parking lot beside Glorious Apartments, which were far from Glorious, Taylor tried to center herself before stepping out onto steaming asphalt. Red and gold tinged the maple trees lining the avenue with beauty, but the sticky heat of late afternoon had plastered her dress to her tush and thighs.

She walked away from the car, reciting her mantra, "A worker who fits the public's stereotyped image is treated with more trust and respect." The social research class she was taking this quarter required a theorem, and so far, hers checked out. Sure, the high school boys gawked at her assistant Dani's low necklines and tight clothes, but when they seriously needed help, they came to Taylor, the sedate librarian. Respect was important, and hard earned, when you were small in stature. No one in her family thought she could or should become a professor. Too little. Too cute. Too this, too that.

Her premise was an important discovery she'd made her senior year of high school. Dress and behave the way people expect and you're in like Flynn. When she and Sheila both ran for class president, Taylor won because she dressed like a businesswoman and presented a set of goals. Serious stuff, being president. When they vied for prom queen, Sheila won because she dressed like a teen princess and acted like Miss Popularity. Sheila was no airhead but took herself lightly.

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Taylor had researched her premise throughout college, wearing appropriate clothing for jobs she chose on the basis of how much they'd test her theory. So it was only natural that she choose it for her class topic. The skimpy black outfit she'd worn to work at a lakeside bar earlier this summer presented the greatest personal challenge, since she was naturally modest. But with her hair dyed bright red and without her glasses, she'd been able to pretend she was someone else, and even flirt, making more tips than any other server.

Her optometrist said she didn't need glasses, but he didn't see the world through her eyes. So she bought suitable ones at a variety store. At the bar, she'd been satisfied with blurry images, but as a researcher, she preferred to see life in clear, crisp outlines. If she hadn't been wearing glasses when she saw Max Stuart, she might have missed some detail of his perfect outline.

The thought of Max uncentered Taylor and started her fuming again. How could he be dumb enough to make a mistake that would cost her a week of the four until the dance? Thanks to him, she'd have to get to know her chosen applicant really fast.

Taylor pushed through the door into the musty-smelling first floor hall and stopped before the bank of mailboxes on the wall. Four floors, four apartments on each, fifteen other tenants, counting the landlady. In the short time she'd lived there, she'd met only a few people. Inserting her key in her box, she pulled out a letter from her mother and one from Joe, a guy she'd met at the bar. If he hadn't been attracted to

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

a woman with fiery hair and twenty-twenty vision, she might have asked him to the Homecoming Dance. He was a nice guy who made her feel pretty but wouldn't know the Taylor she'd become. The modest persona she'd assumed for her librarian job was closest to her real self. If the men who wrote her those horrible propositions only knew what a mistake they'd made.

A postcard standing on edge against the side of the box caught her attention as she was about to close it. A matador flagging a bull with his red cape was on one side, a message written in Spanish on the other. She'd studied French and Latin but couldn't read a word of Spanish. Sheila was baiting her, just as the matador baited the bull. Taylor was dying to hear about her sister's photo shoot in Spain and ongoing husband hunt. And what did she get? A practical joke. If one of them didn't take things seriously, they'd have been known as twins in trouble.

Sheila was a lot like Max Stuart. Jamming the mail in her purse, Taylor banged the box shut. Each had a misguided sense of humor they used to torture her. They were sadists. "Oh, no. Not sado—" She held her head as memory of the misprinted ad flooded back.

"Headache, dear?" The landlady, Mrs. Stout, stepped out of her apartment opposite the mailboxes into the hall. "Home late, aren't you?" She looked at her watch, then leaned forward confidentially. "I've been waiting for you. I wanted to make sure you knew we have a new tenant on third floor. He moved in Monday. He came in a while ago from work. Good-

looking gent, and you missed him. Again. He's single, like you."

Taylor edged toward the stairwell. "I don't mind being single."

"So you say, but it isn't safe for young women today. You need a husband to look out for you."

Taylor backed up the first two steps. Her landlady was a throwback to the fifties, just like the apartment house she ran.

Catherine Stout pursed her lips and folded her arms. "How come you never ride the elevator?"

"Walking is good exercise." And Taylor was scared to death of the ancient, rickety, cubicle. "I have to go now." Waving, she scurried up the steps to second floor and her apartment. The door downstairs banged shut.

Taylor turned her key in her lock and Vaughn Jobe, the slick-haired guy who thought he was the universe's gift to females, popped his head out of the apartment next door. "Hel-lo, Taylor."

She drew herself up to her full five-feet-two inches, gave him a cool hello, and dashed inside her apartment. Considering he was the only man in Glorious Apartments she'd met besides old Mr. Hockerberry, she should make an effort to meet the new guy upstairs.

Taylor poured herself a glass of iced tea from the brightly striped pitcher in her refrigerator. Posing as a librarian in Boomtown sucked, but it was the last of her self-assigned experiments. Soon, she could return to her real life, which come to think of it was pretty sucky, too. Settling a lemon

slice on the edge of her glass, she plucked a sprig of mint from a plant on the windowsill next to the kitchen table. This paper she was writing was the most involved she'd done, but would prepare her for writing a dissertation when she entered the doctoral program. With her master's in social psychology and the research she'd done on public perception, she hoped to have her paper published in a journal, and her doctorate would lend weight and credibility. As Dr. Taylor Gayle, she'd receive respect.

Kicking off her sandals, she curled up in a barrel chair near the living room window and set her tea on a crocheted doily on the oval table next to her. The master's hadn't given her the satisfaction she'd expected, but her Ph.D. would make her feel complete. Taylor looked at the ceiling. Did Mrs. Stout know a good-looking man when she saw one? What would said single guy be doing right now?

Getting ready to take a single-good-looking female out to dinner, no doubt.

Turning her mail over in her lap, she sighed and studied her sister's postcard. Sheila was too restless to apply herself to books, but as a top-paid model, she could see the world and learn life's lessons firsthand. Instead, she was searching for a soul mate, planning to give up her career when she found him and have kids.

Taking off her oversized glasses, Taylor laid them on the table and massaged the bridge of her nose with pinched fingers. Twenty-four was too young to wed and too old to believe in soul mates. Marriage was a contract to approach on a logical level. Not a fantasy to interpret like a dream. She

fingered the novel she'd tucked under the cushion of the chair ruefully. As long as she found her fantasies in reading, she was success-bound. Sheila, unfortunately, lived her fantasies.

Had she found someone?

Taylor laid Sheila's postcard aside. She could ask the high school Spanish teacher to translate, but who knew what Sheila might have said? She'd written Taylor a note in seventh grade, saying she could tell by her breasts she'd gotten her period, and passed the note by way of the nosiest boy in class, knowing he'd read it. If their teacher hadn't caught him laughing and made him read it aloud, it would have been bad enough. Taylor got even by pouring syrup in Sheila's hair gel bottle and was grounded for a month.

Taylor listened to the ticking wall clock and fingered the letters in her lap. She used to get so mad. She hadn't gotten angry for a long while, but Max Stuart's mistake had ticked her off in the worst way. Past experience told her getting even didn't work, but she'd have appreciated some sign of genuine regret.

Light streamed in the window beneath the venetian blind she kept hoisted halfway to benefit Jimmy Dean and Geraldine, her red geranium plants. An air-conditioner blocked the second living room window and a fan blocked the single bedroom window. The kitchen, set between the two rooms, was the only other room with sunlight for the mint plant Taylor called Sweet Thing. When they were little, she and Sheila named everything. They'd been a couple of cutups. Luckily, one of them outgrew it. She wished the other had.



Taylor ripped open Joe's letter. He'd been busy and would get in touch soon. She'd heard that line before. She opened the letter from her mother, smoothing the crisp sheets. Gossip from home was fun to read. Sometimes. But not today.

Taylor's best friend in high school gave birth to the most beautiful baby Edith ever saw. Zach, Taylor's longtime crush, married that perky little cheerleader from their class.

Taylor skimmed over a couple other bits of cheery news, her eyes skidding to a stop when her mother switched from black ink to blue, and her writing started to jump all over the page. "Sheila just called, saying she's met the man of her dreams. His name is Peter Lapierre. I know how often she's said this before, but I believe she really wants to marry this man. Her mother's scrawled signature followed the abrupt disclosure. That was it. Where had Sheila and Peter met? Where was his home? What were their plans? Surely, her mother knew more. Taylor jumped up, scattering mail, grabbed the telephone and punched in her mother's number. What if this guy lived in Spain and wanted Sheila to move thousands of miles from their home in Windsor Grove, Ohio?

Taylor hit a wrong button and had to punch in the numbers again. Why hadn't Sheila phoned her? They were twins, after all. *One ring.* Who'd spent half her life listening to Sheila's never-ending soap opera? *Second ring.* Johnny asked me to go steady. Bill wants me to go to the movie. Johnny is cuter. *Third ring.* Bill gets a bigger allowance. But then there's Scotty. *Fourth ring.* Taylor had heard about them all, except Peter.

After six rings, she hung up. Her mother didn't even have the answering machine on. Where was that woman? Sheila was due home from Spain soon, if she wasn't back already. The letter from her mother was postmarked two days ago. The postcard from Sheila was dated ten days ago. Taylor glared at the foreign words on the card. Sheila wouldn't send a postcard to relate news of such magnitude as an impending marriage. Would she?

*B-rump. Br-ump.* A noise caught Taylor up short. It sounded like a small soldier marching across the floor of the apartment above her. Miss Hawkins was ninety-years-old and barely crept along. If the new tenant moved into her apartment ... Taylor dashed out her door to bang on Vaughn's. Didn't anyone bother to tell her anything anymore? Weddings. Funerals.

He opened the door and leaned against the jamb.

"Did Miss Hawkins..." Taylor swallowed hard. Miss Hawkins once told her she loved mint tea. She'd meant to take her a few sprigs.

"Sure did. They hauled her away a few days ago."

Taylor blinked rapidly at her neighbor's crude way of wording the news. "Why didn't someone tell me? I'd have sent flowers."

"Her son rented a U-Haul. It was full without posies. Anyway, they'd have died before they reached Arizona."

Vaughn was too stupid to have baited her. Taylor closed her eyes. "Mrs. Stout said a man moved in. She didn't say what apartment."

"Hope he didn't move into 3A. A looker named Penny moved in right after Miss Hawkins left. Tall. Much taller than you." Vaughn chuckled. "Friendlier, too."

Taylor went back inside her apartment. Her tea glass was sweating and the multicolor, crocheted doily was wet. Her wilted mint leaves lay on the gold area rug alongside her scattered mail. Wadding up her mother's letter, she shot it at the chartreuse plastic waste can. Two points. Dropping Sheila's postcard and Joe's letter in a basket that held wax fruit, Taylor flopped down on one of the orange-flowered sectional sofas. She eased her feet onto the square corner table, folded her hands beneath her head, and thought stern thoughts.

Forget the bundle of dirty letters you received. Forget Joe who will soon forget you. Forget the hissy-fit you threw in Max Stuart's office. Forget that Sheila's in love. Forget that this sectional is too darned short even for a short person. Forget that the apartment is short on light and long on color. Forget. Relax.

She sat up. She needed a date. She should never have said she was engaged. But how was she to know that Dani would blab the story all over school? Dani, who was twenty-two-years-old with big breasts, long legs, and auburn hair, was thrilled they had to chaperone the Homecoming Dance. "Held in the Grand Hotel Ballroom, it's bigger and better than the prom. The band is straight from Vegas and supposed to be really, really hot."

Whooptidoo. Taylor whirled a finger in the air.

*Bang.* A noise upstairs shook the room, shooting Sheila's postcard out of the basket onto the floor. Taylor picked it up, and fanning her hot face with it, phoned the landlady. "Which apartment did that new man move into?"

"The one just above you, 3A; have you seen him, yet?"

Taylor hadn't seen him, but she had heard him, and single and good-looking or not, he better be quiet. She'd had an incredibly difficult day and more loomed ahead. She had to finish her research paper and find a man to pose as her fiancé for one night, if Max ever got her ad right.

Taylor laid her notebooks on the table and set to work. A college degree was something you could take responsibility for, something that would never let you down. She would make her own money and take care of herself. No husband needed. If she got past the one little fib she'd told, she could forget about men. She looked at the ceiling. It was so quiet upstairs, the bang she'd heard must have been an explosion that shot her new neighbor into space. Or maybe he'd popped a champagne cork to impress some woman. The guy in 3A was probably an overgrown kid like Max Stuart with his paper snake trick. And Sheila with her postcard in Spanish. Pen poised to write, Taylor's anger bubbled to the surface. Why didn't everyone grow up?

\* \* \* \*

MAX WAS just wrapping up his day's work when a small bombshell burst through The Town Crier's front door and dumped a stack of mail on the counter. "You thought the men in this burg wouldn't know the definition of SM?"

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Max rose quickly, and Taylor ... Gayle ... whoever ... stood on tiptoe to reach across the counter and jab a finger in his chest. "I received twice as many letters as yesterday and the ones I read are just as bad." She'd ripped open a few and some were wadded up, unopened.

"I suggested you not read any more."

"Well, for once you were right. Mark that on your calendar."

As she rushed off, a narrow, calf-length skirt forced her to mince her steps while causing her hips to rotate in a fascinating way. Max sucked in his breath. "Gayle?" She tossed her head without turning around. "I'm sorry."

"You certainly are."

When the slammed door stopped reverberating, Max sat down to read a few of the proposals she'd received. They were down and dirty and he was shocked and sincerely sorry for his mistake. Picking up the telephone, he called a local florist and ordered a dozen roses sent to Gayle Taylor.

"Address?" the voice on the other end of the phone asked.

Max searched his cluttered desk before remembering she'd paid in cash and he hadn't gotten her address. Forced to cancel his order, he checked his watch and saw it was time to go. "I'll make it up to her," he told Muttso. Max reached for his suit coat. The dog whined. "I'll do it without the wand. I promise."

But he didn't know how.

\* \* \* \*

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

IT WAS FRIDAY, and Taylor arose early to run. Today, her corrected ad would appear and today, her workweek would end. Tomorrow, she could do whatever she liked. Lie in bed, read, shop for a dress for the Homecoming Dance. She didn't have any marathons scheduled but wanted to stay in shape. Not that anyone in Boomtown could see her shape in the baggy shorts and tee shirt she wore to uphold her librarian image.

She passed a milkman running his route, setting milk on doorsteps. A delivery boy tossed the Cincinnati Enquirer onto porches. The aroma of bacon wafted onto the street from more than one house. Home in Windsor Grove, a woman grabbed a newspaper, bagel, and coffee at the station before hopping a commuter train to Cincy. Here, there were women who cooked breakfast and sent their kids off to school with a kiss. Like her mother, before Dad left, forcing Edith Gayle into the workplace.

Those early years were blissful, and sometimes, Taylor wished she could relive them. Slowing to a brisk walk for a cool down, she passed a young woman having a yard sale. Sitting in a lawn chair, she cuddled a little girl who looked to be about two. Still in her pajamas, the child clutched a blanket and sucked her thumb. Sheila used to love her blankie and thumb. Even though Sheila was taller and ten minutes older, Taylor sometimes felt like her mother. Aunt Ellen, Mom's sister, said Taylor was born an old woman. Mom said that wasn't true; she'd grown serious when her father left, but before that, when Aunt Ellen was out sowing her wild

oats and wasn't paying attention, both The Twins were a handful.

Taylor wasn't sure who was right. She just knew that at some point she'd lost interest in playing pranks, and she'd completely skipped the pajama party and paint-your-face stage, jumping right into intellectual self-improvement and planning her life ahead.

A church bell rang, and Taylor, checking her watch, quickened her step. Running had become a pleasure, almost an addiction, when she entered college. Sheila went to modeling school in the East and Taylor felt lost without her. Even though they'd pursued separate activities with different friends in high school, they'd had one another to come home to.

At the wood rail fence outside her apartment building, Taylor did a few stretching exercises. The morning breeze ruffled her hair gently, and the early sun warmed her skin. The citrusy aroma of lantana drifted across an open yard and she wondered what kind of flowers grew in Spain. Sheila loved exotic flowers. Taylor loved old-fashioned sweet-smelling ones, like lilacs, violets, and roses.

Back at Glorious 2A, Taylor showered, applied strawberry lip-gloss and mascara, and grabbed a bagel for the drive to school. Window down, she enveloped herself in the haunting melody of a country singer who'd found her one true love. A man exited a bakery and waved a donut at her. "Nice day," he called. Taylor waved and smiled. There was something to be said for the retro life in this Midwestern town.

Mrs. Stout said a country singer, Rosie Lafew, lived across from Taylor on second floor but was out on tour. Taylor hadn't caught the name of the singer who'd found her true love and wondered if it was her.

Entering the school library minutes later, Taylor sniffed the air. Someone had brought treats, and the smell of sugar-cinnamon donuts heightened her contentment.

Her mellow mood started to dissipate midmorning when a dozen kids needed the same book for a class assignment and all thought they should have it first. Taylor thought their teacher should have checked availability first, but managed to keep a serene front until Dani started prattling about her handsome intern and the homecoming bash. "Is your fiancé coming?" she asked Taylor.

"I don't know if he'd enjoy a high school dance," she hedged.

"He will, unless he's a stick-in-the-mud." Raking her with an appraising glance, Dani shrugged, as if it stood to reason a man engaged to Taylor was one. "Too bad he can't make it."

"Oh, he's coming. I was just saying I hope he won't be bored."

Dani bounced on her high-heeled, sling-back shoes. "I can't wait to meet him. You haven't said what he looks like. Is his hair light or dark?"

"Black, and wavy, and his eyes are blue." Taylor dropped a library card when she realized what she'd said. And done. By the time she'd picked up the card, Dani had dashed off to spread the news.

\* \* \* \*



THE PHONE rang early Friday morning, waking Max from a dead sleep. After that new super-sized water balloon he'd been testing burst the other night, he'd had to test it again, making him late to bed. "Mother," he said, sitting up in bed and scrubbing his fingers through his hair. He smiled into the phone. "How are you?"

"I called to see how you're doing. The newspaper business isn't exactly your mug of ale."

"It's going okay, I think." Max looked at the clock and saw it was quarter to eight. He could still make it to the Crier by nine. "We'll see what my baby sister thinks when she gets back." Stepping out of bed, Max tossed the covers up and the quilted coverlet over them. Penny's apartment was basically ugly and with all the frilly things she'd added to make it homey, gave him the creeps. She was so bullheaded, she'd chosen a place she could afford without help from their parents, just as she'd taken out a loan to buy the newspaper rather than work for one of Dad's companies. The furniture must have been ultra-modern fifty years ago, and there were so few windows admitting light, he felt like he was living in a tomb. Unlike Penny, Max had been eager for success and willing to be thrown a family crumb or two. Now, he oversaw three family businesses, and on his thirtieth birthday next June, he'd receive controlling interest in Niftee and take over production management. Even so, he wanted and needed Dad's approval on the new toy line.

Phone in hand, Max strolled to the kitchen and took the cover off the coffee maker. Filling the carafe, he measured

coffee into the filtered basket while listening to his mother's chitchat. "When are you coming back to Carbon City?" she asked suddenly. "Marcia has been asking about you. The Tiara Ball is coming up soon and I think she's hoping you'll take her again."

Max groaned inwardly. Marcia Millian was a career woman he'd almost married before realizing their worlds didn't mix. She loved hobnobbing with the big guns and he preferred a laid-back night at home. He'd leveled with her but she wasn't a woman who took 'no' for an answer. "I'll move back to my condo whenever they spring the twerp."

His mother chuckled, just as he knew she would. Penny was as tall as Max and hated what-she-called demeaning names. "I'm still keeping an eye on the other businesses. Tell Dad not to worry."

"He isn't worried, Maxwell. You're always dependable. How's the new line coming?"

His mother was his confidante and knew how much it meant to him. "I think Dad will like it." Looking out his third floor apartment window, Max's eye snagged on a head of dishwater blonde hair above a white blouse and long gray skirt. The woman who advertised for a man. Coming out of this apartment house. Leaning a shoulder against the window frame, he followed her with his gaze across the parking lot. A spunky little thing, her walk reflected that spunk. Her hair caught a beam of early morning sunlight and shone pinkish-gold as she slid behind the wheel of a black sedan. If she'd let it hang loose around her shoulders, it would shine more

brightly. Maybe that's why she pulled it back. Maybe she was afraid to shine. Afraid to be noticed.

"Max, is it all right if I give Marcia your current address? She's carrying a torch for you, I'm afraid."

"Then, it would be better if she found someone else." Jacqueline Stuart sighed and Max felt a twinge of compassion. Marcia saw him as one more acquisition for her corporate life. His mother saw him as the son who would one day give her grandchildren. Marcia was ingratiating when it suited her purposes, and his mother was softhearted. She'd hate being the bearer of unpleasant news. "I'll call Marcia soon," he promised, before hanging up and allowing his thoughts to return to his neighbor.

\* \* \* \*

STILL STANDING outside her car, she put on her glasses and patted her hair where it was anchored behind her ears. Most women tried to make themselves attractive. Gayle tried to hide her assets as if she were ashamed of them. When her ad came out today, would she find a man who suited her?

Max smacked his hands together. He could send her his floral apology now that he knew she lived in his building. He hung up, loped down the steps, and checked the mailboxes. Apartment 2A. Gayle. She lived right below him.

Upstairs, he dialed the florist. Would roses appeal to her? His favorite flowers were violets but watching her generic-looking car glide from the lot, he thought she might like something more common and practical. Something lasting.

When the florist answered the phone, Max asked for an indoor plant. "What kind?" the voice on the other end asked.

Max's first thought was "cactus" considering the recipient's prickly nature, but deeming that unsuitable for an apology, he hesitated.

"Perhaps I could help. If you'd care to tell me the nature of the occasion. A romantic gesture? Token of affection? Business formality? A plant to cheer someone."

"That's it," Max said, picturing big eyes in a small, forlorn face. Taylor ... Gayle ... whoever ... was depressed when he last saw her. And angry. "To cheer someone."

"Then, you want our Make-A-Friend-Smile Chrysanthemum." The salesperson sounded like she was smiling already. "Does the recipient like yellow?"

Max didn't know a whatever-chrysanthemum when he saw it, but he didn't suppose it came in gray or beige. "Yellow's good. Send the biggest plant you have." He gave her the address. "That's apartment 2A. Gayle. Sign it, 'My apologies. Max.'"

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR NEEDED a man who looked like Max Stuart. Her big mouth had narrowed her search to the improbable, if not impossible. When was she going to learn to keep her fantasies to herself?

At four o'clock, she left the library, heart pounding with excitement, and fear. Eager to see if Max had gotten her ad in today's issue correct, she double-parked to buy a copy at the

newsstand closest to school. "Sold out? You sold out of The Town Crier?"

The elderly man sitting on a wooden crate gave her a toothless grin. "The Crier must have had some hot ads today."

Taylor prayed there were no hot Personal ads. Max surely couldn't make another mistake but she needed to see the ad before she could relax. If it appeared today, correctly, she could receive letters as early as tomorrow.

She needed milk for tomorrow's breakfast so she stopped at the market. Leaving the engine running, she dashed inside and bought a quart of skim milk and a quart of chocolate. She needed chocolate to soothe her. "Do you sell Town Criers here?" she asked at the checkout counter.

"We do, but we're out." The woman shrugged as she bagged the groceries. "Second time it ever happened, and the first time was earlier this week."

Taylor's heart beat against her ribs like a fish in a net. She held her chest, afraid her heart would break out. Could word have gotten out that the mousy high school librarian was advertising for someone to date? Was all of Boomtown laughing at her expense? She grabbed a box of cream-filled chocolate cupcakes with her free hand and gave it to the cashier. "I'll take these, too."

Taylor ate two cupcakes on the way home.

Hopping out of her car at Glorious Apartments, she set her shoulders and her mind straight. No one reading the ad would know it was hers.

She dashed by Mrs. Stout's door. Halfway up the steps, she ran into Vaughn coming down. "Hel-lo, Baby." He slid his gaze insultingly up and down her frame. "Did I ever have you pegged wrong. Beneath that plain wrapper lies a woman I'd like to know."

Taylor smacked his face.

He pulled her up close to him, nearly knocking the grocery sack out of her hands and him and her down the steps. "So you weren't kidding?" He grinned.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked furiously.

"Like you don't know."

"Nice day if it doesn't rain," Mrs. Stout called from the bottom of the stairs, and he let go.

Thankful for once that the landlady was keeping a watchful eye on her tenants, Taylor dashed up the steps and into her apartment. Leaning against the door, she felt the blood drain from her body. Vaughn seemed harmless, before. What did he mean about her not kidding?

She set the milk in the fridge and the cupcakes on the table before summoning the nerve to open her door again to pick up the Crier. She reached for it and heard footsteps on the bare wood stairs. Her hand froze on the newspaper. Afraid Vaughn was returning, she kept her position, rear end in the air and backed toward the door. A pair of tasseled loafers passed, and her eyes locked on them. It couldn't be. Pulse pounding, she slid her gaze a fraction higher. Navy pants. A little higher. A Snoopy bandage. When he started up the next set of steps toward third floor, she scooted backward and slammed the door, more shaken than before.

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Max Stuart was the good-looking, single man who lived upstairs.

### Chapter 3

TAYLOR SLID the rubber band off the newspaper and someone knocked. Vaughn? Max? She shivered.

"Florist delivery," a voice said.

Taylor opened the door and a boy shoved a plant into her hands. A huge yellow chrysanthemum plant, it wore smiling faces on each bloom and a bow tie around the black-foiled pot. The tiny eyes were plastic and the eyeballs jiggled when she walked. The pipe cleaner mouths maintained their smiles. She set the plant on a table and reached for the tiny white envelope. Sheila's humor had sunk to a ridiculous level if she sent this six-headed blooming idiot.

Someone knocked at the door. Casting an uneasy eye over her shoulder at the multiple smiles, Taylor looked through the door's peephole into beady blue eyes beneath bushy red eyebrows. Her visitor's lips were fleshy and the glass in the peephole magnified them when he spoke. "I'm here to answer your ad."

Trembling, Taylor slid the deadbolt into place and sank to the floor. The man pounded on the door. "I'm everything you asked for."

His nasty laugh sent waves of fear through her.

"Out of the way, buddy. I'm the answer to the maiden's prayers," another voice said.

Taylor crawled toward the telephone, then stopped. Whom could she call for help? What would she say? That she'd advertised for a man and something went wrong? Something



was going on, but what? Trying to ignore the argument outside her door, she grabbed *The Town Crier* and crawled to the kitchen. Chocolate. She needed chocolate. She poured a glass of chocolate milk and took a gulp. A loud and annoying whir started upstairs. It sounded like a giant bee out of control. Grabbing a broom from the closet, she tapped the ceiling hard. The whirring didn't stop. Taking another swallow of milk, Taylor jerked open a cabinet and grabbed a bottle of rum off the shelf.

\* \* \* \*

MAX, WHO'D been testing a new toy, was as surprised by the tapping on his floor as he had been when he saw what's-her-name leaning over her newspaper in the hall below. Gayle, or Taylor ... dammit, why would anyone give their daughter a last name for a first, or vice versa ... lived in the apartment below him, and she was looking for a man. He grinned. Were those love taps she was sending him? Maybe she wanted to thank him for the plant.

Chuckling, he set the mechanical spaceship in motion again. It whirred as it circled, doors opening, two little space people popping in and out. He flipped the lever on the side and it made a whining noise, then a tiny voice spoke up.

"Look, Herb. The moon."

"It's not the moon, Gladys," a voice replied. "It's earth."

"Fly me to the moon, Herb," Gladys whined.

"Of course, sweetheart," the other voice replied.

One of the space figures hurtled from the spaceship. The whine became a laugh and then a siren as the spaceship whirled madly before stopping.

Niftee Novelties had a winner on their hands. It was a great gag gift for adults. Wedding. Anniversary. Birthday. Chuckling, he set it on the table and popped open a beer. Now that the toy was quiet, he could hear a ruckus downstairs. Someone was knocking. "Go away," a feminine voice shouted.

"I have a whip," a gruff voice cajoled. "You can be a tigress and I'll tame you, baby."

"Wait until you see what I've got." A bone-chilling laugh followed that remark.

"I'm going to call the police," the woman shouted.

Gayle. Or Taylor. It had to be her. But why were those men knocking at her door? Surely not. Not again. He grabbed the Crier he'd stuck in his jacket pocket. Too bad he'd left the magic wand at the office. Too bad the wand wasn't really magic.

"I'm going to sue you for prejudice," a deep voice called downstairs. "Black is beautiful, sweetheart."

"I'm not prejudiced. The whole thing is a mistake," the woman yelled.

"I know lots of words and I'm good at games."

"Go away!"

Max laid the newspaper out on the kitchen counter and skimmed the ads. Coming to hers, he read carefully.

SWF desires SWSMM to date. Interests range from word games to marathons. Romance not required, but must dance.

Short men, don't be afraid to reply. Glorious Apartments.  
#2A. The editor wishes to apologize for the errors in the  
previous ad and to claim full blame.

Criminy. How did her address get in there? Max raked his  
fingers through his hair. No wonder men were knocking.  
Single white sadomasochistic males. And one irate African-  
American. What in hell was he going to do now? He folded the  
newspaper and the spaceship fell off on the floor, whirling and  
squealing.

A furious pounding sounded on the ceiling below him. He  
shut the novelty off fast. "Damn you," a voice shouted. "I  
know you're up there. Isn't it bad enough you're ruining my  
life, Max Stuart? Or must you drive me crazy, too?"

\* \* \* \*

RUM-SPIKED chocolate milk sucked. Satisfied the knocking  
had subsided at least temporarily, Taylor rose slowly from  
where she'd sat huddled on the floor, poured out her brown  
cow cocktail, and picked up the newspaper she'd dropped.

That moron editor had made another mistake. Whips,  
chains, handcuffs. She shivered at the thought. It had to be  
his fault. She looked at the leering faces on her  
chrysanthemum plant. It was hard telling what the message  
on the card suggested. Smart woman that she was, she  
wouldn't open it.

The phone rang. She picked it up hesitantly. The caller  
started speaking before she could say anything. "This is Mrs.  
Stout. I don't know what's been going on up there, but I  
asked Mr. Hockerberry to turn his bulldog loose. I think those

friends of yours have gone, but I'd better not hear them up there again. I thought you were a nice quiet librarian."

"I am." Taylor choked on the words. "I mean, I try to be. It was a horrendous mistake."

The landlady seemed somewhat mollified by Taylor's apology, but she wanted an explanation Taylor wasn't prepared to make. "You'd better shape up or ship out," Mrs. Stout warned. "This is a reputable apartment complex."

A vicious growl sounded outside Taylor's door. She waited until it sounded again to make sure it wasn't a man, then drew a deep breath. She wouldn't be bothered as long as Petunia stood guard. She wouldn't be able to go out either, but that was fine. She had no place to go once school let out. Boomtown had nothing to offer except her job.

After setting the mum plant in the bathroom where she wouldn't have to look at its smiling faces, she changed into shorts and an oversized white tee shirt and took off her glasses. She was in trouble until this ad-thing blew over, but not as much trouble as Max Stuart when she laid hands on him. The man was trouble with a capital T.

She wouldn't be surprised if he moved in upstairs to harass her.

Footsteps sounded outside the door and Petunia growled. Taylor poured herself a straight shot of rum and half a glass of white milk for a chaser. A voice murmured and the dog barked menacingly. Taylor downed the shot. The footsteps retreated and stopped. Taylor smiled. Good work, Petunia.

The footsteps came toward her door again. Taylor poured another shot and chased it with milk. Why would anyone

name a vicious dog after a flower? She shook her head to clear it. She'd never drunk straight rum before. It made her stomach burn and her eyes just a teensy bit fuzzy. A knock sounded at the door and she poured another shot. "Gayle, are you all right?"

It was him. That newspaper editor. He was so-o dumb. He just couldn't remember her name was Gayle ... no ... Taylor. Oh, damn it. Why did her mother's maiden name have to be Taylor? She splashed some more rum into the never-before-used Las Vegas shot glass. A gift from her traveling sister. Modeling jobs took her everywhere. Why couldn't Sheila have been named Taylor? Or why couldn't their mother's maiden name have been Susan or Mary? No, that wouldn't work. Then she, Taylor, would have two first names instead of two last. Or did she have two firsts already?

"Gayle?" a voice called. She dipped her tongue in the rum. Her tongue felt numb. Or was it her nose that felt numb? She pressed it against the shot glass. "Let me in. It's me, Max."

"Max? This is me, Taylor." She laughed. With her eyes so close to the glass, the showgirl looked funny. "T.G. Taylor comes first."

"Please let me in. There's been a mistake."

"Like I don't know that?" She opened the door slowly and leaned against the jamb. "What did you do to the dog?" Petunia lay on the doormat on her side, tongue hanging out. Her eyes were closed. Taylor dropped to her knees and laid her hand on Petunia's side. "Did you kill her?"

Max, noting Taylor sounded more confused than alarmed over the docile pet's death, thought her confusion might have

something to do with the shot glass in her hand. He grinned. "Nope, I charmed her."

She laid her head on the dog's side. "Speak to me, Petunia."

"Arf," Max said.

"You are not funny." She rose to poke a finger in his chest. She looked decidedly tipsy but cute without her glasses. He wondered if she could see him. One of the combs had fallen out of her hair, allowing the soft strands to nestle on her shoulder.

He pulled the other comb out. "That's better." He finger-combed that side of her hair so it fell onto her shoulder like the other side did. "You look more balanced."

"I don't feel balanced," she said, holding her head as she moved through the door cautiously. "That dog is supposed to be vicious."

"Fortunately, she's a pussycat."

"Nope, she's a Petunia, and now I know why."

"Are you okay?" T.G. would be a good mnemonic device if he could just remember it was in backward alphabetical order. "T.G.?"

"My brother calls me T.G.I.F. and I hate it. I wish I'd been Sheila. She could have been Mother's maiden name. Why me? She got the looks, too." Putting a hand to her face, Taylor frowned and scanned the room.

She'd missed her glasses, he surmised, handing them to her. Leading her to the kitchen table, he pulled out a chair. Spying the empty milk glass, he filled it and handed her a cupcake. Food in her stomach might counteract the rum from

the near empty bottle. She licked the chocolate icing on her cake. She didn't look like much of a drinker. TGIF. That worked for him. "Taylor?" She looked up. "I'll make coffee if you like."

She shook her head, broke the cupcake open, and took a bite from the middle. "What did you do this time?" she asked, propping her chin in her hand.

"We'll talk about it later. You have cream filling on your nose."

She stuck her tongue out and almost touched the cream. Her eyes crossed. Biting back a smile, he swiped the cream off with his fingertip and stuck it in his mouth. "If you're hungry, you can eat a cake, too," she said, "and you can drink some milk. But it makes your head fizz."

Max burst out laughing.

"You're obnoxious." She squinted her eyes. "But kind of cute."

\* \* \* \*

WHEN TAYLOR awoke, she was lying on a sectional, knees bent. Max was sitting in the lime green barrel chair staring at Jimmy Dean and Geraldine. The ugly chair looked a lot better with him in it. She straightened her legs, so her feet rested on the table. He looked at her. She closed her eyes and opened them again. He was still there. "How did I get here?"

"I ... um ... carried you. I was afraid you'd get a catch in your neck, with your head lying on the table." He rose and went to the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with a cup of hot tea. "I take it you don't drink coffee?"

"Nope." He'd stuck a sprig of mint and a piece of lemon on the saucer. Max Stuart had some redeeming qualities, but she hadn't forgotten his weaknesses. He was a poor newspaper editor and he laughed at her. Taylor sat up slowly. "I want to see The Town Crier."

"No. You don't."

"Then you tell me. What happened, Max?"

He quirked an eyebrow when she called him by his first name. It surprised her, too, but she waited for his answer.

He explained she must have written her address on the paper so he could send her an apology and he didn't notice. "The copy editor at Carbon City evidently caught the name and town and deleted them but missed the apartment address. As for SWSMM, it was somebody's typo."

"Not mine," she said, shaking her head. "Ouch." She held her temple and rose slowly.

"That's where the name 'rum punch' comes from," he said, chuckling.

"Not smart, nor funny. As I was saying, I'm an excellent typist."

"It's a moot point. The question is, what do we do now?"

"We?" The word exploded from her mouth, hurting her head. "You got me into this trouble. You get me out."

Max squirmed. "I'll print a retraction, but the paper doesn't come out again until Monday."

"And in the meantime?" She walked slowly to the window where she picked a dead leaf off Jimmy and touched Geraldine. She caught Max watching and shrugged. "I give them equal attention so they'll both thrive."



"My sister talks to her plants but they die anyway."

Taylor sat down again, thankful for a man who knew about plant care. Not that this man was hers, but he was there to witness what her brother Jake called 'crazy daisy pampering,' and he hadn't laughed. Taylor had never nurtured a daisy. She wasn't even into plants much, unless they had a purpose. The geraniums added life to a deadly decor. The mint made the kitchen smell like something besides mildew, and flavored her tea. The plants she had, she pampered, but no one knew she named them, except Sheila. Taylor cocked her head at Max. He had two redeeming qualities, if she could just remember what his other one was. She didn't think you could count his dazzling blue eyes or that sexy mouth of his, or his black, wavy hair. "Your sister must be doing something wrong. Watering them too much or too little. Giving them too much or too little light." Taylor grinned. "Saying the wrong things."

"You have a sense of humor," Max said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"You didn't see the humor in the miswritten ad."

"I still don't. Monday is a long time away. I can't put up with this all weekend." She waved a hand toward the door.

"There's no way I can get the word out faster. I am not printing an Extra edition of The Town Crier."

"Spoilsport." Even in casual clothes, he appeared neat and well dressed. His khaki shorts were crisp, his yellow polo shirt bright, and his Topsiders scuff-free. His legs and arms were

tanned. "You can't get much sun in a newspaper office. Do you go to one of those suntan places?"

His deep tan became a deep red. "I get my tan outdoors."

"Then why are you blushing?"

"It was an off the wall question." He stood up and looked toward her door. "You could put a sign out. 'Apartment for rent.' Lead people to think you moved away."

"Or I could put a sign out that says, Suckers, Come In, and have a bucket of water rigged to fall on their heads."

"That trick wasn't mine. I'm working for my sister."

Taylor stared at him for a second. His sister owned the paper? He couldn't be her typist and he certainly dressed well for a gofer. "You didn't have to laugh."

"Laughter's good for you, and it was funny the way you smacked that snake."

"I could put a sign on my door directing callers to Apartment 3A and see how funny you find that." She tossed her head, but hearing footfalls on the stairs took a long, slow breath. "Too late."

"I'll answer your door and tell whoever it is that I got here first and staked a claim."

"Now, that's a master plan." Rolling her eyes, Taylor excused herself. "You stand guard until you come up with an idea that works, and I'll take a long, relaxing bubble bath to recuperate."

\* \* \* \*

WITH THE WATER running, she could still hear him talking to men in the hall, and their bawdy voices talking back.

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

"Dammit, I'm her husband," Max shouted. Now, that was an innovative thought. She scooted down in the bubbles. The men in the hall did some talking, then Max again. They were all very loud. People on fourth floor could probably hear. "She put the ad in the paper because we had a spat," Max shouted. "She's my wife and we've made up and I want you to get out."

The noise that followed chilled Taylor's blood. It sounded like bone against bone. "Max?" she called, scrambling from the suds-filled tub. "Are you okay?" Swiping the bubbles from her skin with a wet cloth, she donned a terry robe and rubbed it against her like a towel. "Max?" She leaned her ear against the door.

Silence.

The aroma of Mrs. Stout's favorite dinner, corned beef and cabbage hung heavily in the air. Heart pounding, Taylor eased open the bathroom door and crept into the living room, knowing she'd find the hall door open. Sure enough, Max lay on the living room floor, Petunia licking his face. "Damn." Taylor dropped to her knees. What if he was dead? Killed trying to protect her. "Can't you do anything right?" she whispered, feeling his head. "Max? Please. Speak to me."

## Chapter 4

"GOTCHA," MAX said, opening one eye to grin. "I'm down but not out."

Taylor reared back, planting her fists on her cute little hips. "If you don't stop telling people you're my husband, and playing tricks like you just pulled, I'll knock you out myself. Your humor stinks and you can't do anything right. Why would I marry anyone like you?"

Max felt his jaw, which stung from a blow, while he continued to lie on the floor and let Taylor fume. He'd caught her showing concern and she was embarrassed. How often did she use anger to hide her emotions? "I'm handsome, charming, and you need me to protect you." He chuckled her under the chin. It was worth getting hit to find out she cared about him, at least a little. "Now, please state your qualifications."

"You don't want to hear them. I don't cook. I hate to clean. I have poor eyes." She felt for her glasses. "And I have poor judgment or I wouldn't have placed an ad in *The Town Crier*."

"Rub my head again." Max smiled. "Better yet, I'll turn over and you can rub my back. It's been hurting ever since I started sleeping in Penny's bed."

"I wasn't rubbing your head. I was feeling it. And I don't care to hear who you're sleeping with."

"Penny is my sister, and I'm not sleeping with her. She isn't in the bed. She's sleeping at the Grand Hotel."

"Tell someone who cares."

Taylor stalked off and Max rose to brush himself off. She returned with her glasses on, combs in place, acting sedate. But with damp hair clinging to her neck, the scent of strawberry bubbles, and the bulky robe that engulfed her, she resembled a cuddly child. "You look cute."

She swatted him on the arm. "Don't say 'cute' to me. I hate that."

He raised a brow. "Touchy, aren't we?"

"Cute is a condescending, male chauvinist term."

"Let's go back to where you first came into the room." He lay on the floor. Petunia stared at him. "Gotcha," Max said, looking at Taylor with one eye.

"I hope the dog mistakes you for a fire-hydrant." She flounced off toward the kitchen.

Max followed her and the dog followed him. "I'm hungry. You don't cook at all?"

She opened the freezer door to show him a neatly arranged stack of frozen dinners. Taking one out of a box, she stuck it in the microwave. "I nuke. But I'm not feeding you."

He watched her heat and eat a meat loaf dinner. It smelled tangy and tomato-y. A drop of sauce beaded on her lip and he longed to lick it off. "Get rid of those puppy dog eyes," Taylor said, waving a fork at him.

Max looked at Petunia. "Her or me?"

"I give up." Taylor threw both hands in the air. "The dog goes home." She marched to the door and waved Petunia out. The dog went meekly. "Now, you." Taylor wagged a finger in Max's face. "You take your choice of dinners and then you go, too. It's eight o'clock. No one's been here for half an hour."

She opened the freezer again and someone pounded on the door. Male voices began a loud discussion. "I was here first."

"Get out of my way. I was." Scuffling ensued.

Taking a deep breath and pulling himself up to his full height, Max marched to the living room and opened the door. Petunia sat on her haunches, tongue hanging out, watching two big guys shove one another around the hall. The mutt wasn't doing her job. "Excuse me, sirs" Max said. "The ad was an error. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? I took off from my job as bouncer at Dirty Dogs' to come here tonight."

The skinny one elbowed the burly guy who'd just spoken and nodded toward Max. "This guy's lying. He got here first and wants to get rid of us. He wants her for himself."

The bouncer glared at Max. "We want to talk to the babe."

"She is not a babe," Max declared, wondering why the word applied to the woman shrinking into the corner of the sofa bothered him so much. She should have stayed in the kitchen. She should have gotten dressed instead of sitting there in her robe. He motioned her to get out of the room. "She has to go fix my dinner."

Taylor glared at him.

"Is that her?" The bum followed Max's gaze to leer at Taylor. The other bum stuck a foot as long as Max's arm in the door. "You want this guy, or me, babe?"

He puffed out his chest and showed biceps the size of cantaloupes. Max swallowed hard. Taylor lowered her gaze to her clenched hands. "Go," he told her.

"I've got good teeth for love bites." The oaf bared his teeth.

Petunia growled.

Their guest stepped back. Petunia followed. Max slammed the door, locked it, and shot the deadbolt.

"Coward." Taylor had the nerve to snicker.

The two men outside echoed her thought in less attractive terms.

Petunia set up quite a commotion, probably because she wanted back in, but the men pounded down the stairs.

"You weren't cooperating. You wouldn't get out of the room and you wouldn't tell him to go away."

"I don't like being bossed."

"It's insulting not to be chosen over that steroid-inflated lamebrain. You could have told him you preferred me."

"Why would I? She has to go cook my dinner," she mimicked. "The little lady is at my beck and call."

"That does it. You're on your own. If you don't want me to act as your husband and defend you, I'm through." Max left, slamming the door behind him.

Taylor stared at the closed door. Was he dense or what? "Husbands aren't supposed to act that way," she called, hoping he was still within earshot.

When Max didn't answer, her cracker box apartment suddenly seemed very large and lonely. He had tried to take care of her and she'd driven him away. No wonder she needed to advertise for a date. She knew nothing about men.

The elevator groaned to a halt and heavy steps sounded in the hall outside. She reached for the lock, her pulse playing hopscotch.

"Hey, buddy." Max's voice. He was still out there. A rush of blood warmed her. She listened. "If you're here about the ad, the newspaper made a big mistake. I live here. Instead of Glorious Apartments, it should have said Gloria's apartment. Thing is, I don't know who Gloria is or what building she lives in."

Clever, Max. Taylor chuckled softly.

A male voice muttered a string of curses. "That rinky-dink, poor excuse for a newspaper can't get a diddley-damn thing right," he raged, stomping off.

"Every paper is entitled to an occasional mistake," Max called.

He opened the door, nearly hitting Taylor in the face. She gasped and he touched her head gently. "You all right?"

She nodded and he locked the door.

"What are you doing? I thought you were leaving." He stared at her and she bit her tongue, wishing she could keep her mouth shut. She didn't want him to go.

"I can't leave you here to face this alone." He rubbed a broad thumb across her lower lip, sending a shiver through her, and she ducked her head. "I made the mistake and I have to assume responsibility," he said.

He rested a hand on her shoulder and it felt warm and strong. With his other hand, he brushed her lip again and she darted out her tongue to taste his skin. He deepened his gaze. His eyes were the bluest she'd ever seen. She felt like



the heroine in a romance novel with him looking at her that way. Strengthened by feeling like someone else, she smiled flirtatiously, the way she'd done at the bar.

Max smiled—tenderly. She closed her eyes, sure she'd imagined it, but when she opened them, the look was still there. She met his eyes with hers.

A loud knock sounded on the wall between apartments. "Tay-lor? You there, baby?"

Max's face darkened to an angry shade of red. "Friend of yours?" he asked in a low whisper. Her worst enemy after ruining a perfect moment, Taylor wished Vaughn had moved to Arizona in that U-Haul. She shook her head.

"I'm here," Max called, with a thump on the wall. "Want to make something of it?"

"I can wait my turn," Vaughn said in his slimiest voice.

Taylor shuddered. Max slammed his fist against the wall. The phone rang and she answered. "Is Petunia in there with you?" Mr. Hockerberry asked.

When Taylor said the bulldog left, he became very agitated. "We've got to find her."

Max overheard and sighed heavily. "Lock the door behind me and I'll help him look. And please," he ran his eyes down her terry-clad body. "Get some clothes on while I'm gone."

It shouldn't take long to find that huge lump of a bulldog lying on the steps or in the hall. He was telling her what to do again, but he wouldn't want her to get dressed unless her near-nakedness bothered him. Dressing carefully, she sprayed cologne behind her ears, and as an afterthought, took the combs out of her hair and tousled it with her fingers.

Her naturally strawberry blonde hair curled slightly with a little encouragement. When she'd finished her stint as a librarian, she'd quit using that dulling brown rinse.

Just when Taylor thought Max was never going to return, he came back to say they hadn't found Petunia. "Mr. Hockerberry is really upset."

"I can imagine. She's like a daughter to him."

"She doesn't have his nose. His is much pointier."

Taylor ignored Max's attempt at humor. "We shouldn't have put her out. What if one of those awful men stole her?"

"No one's going to walk off with a seventy-pound dog."

"What if Petunia walked off with them? Followed, I mean."

Max sank into a chair and held his head, hands over his eyes. "I'm so hungry, I can't think."

"A dog is missing, and you think about food." Not to mention she'd 'fixed up' for him and he hadn't noticed. Taylor jerked open the freezer door. "What'll it be? Chicken, turkey, beef, pasta?"

He looked up, a gleam in his eyes. "Do you have anything Mexican?"

"Geez, talk about picky." She yanked open the cabinet and produced a bag of nacho chips, then fished a plastic-wrapped, cooked hamburger patty and a jar of salsa-cheese dip out of the fridge. She heated the hamburger in the microwave, crumbled the hot meat with a fork, and sprinkled it over chips on a plate. Dipping generous spoonfuls of salsa-cheese out of the jar, she slathered it over the top of the pile and nuked it just long enough to say Presto.

Max watched with such interest, she was surprised his tongue wasn't hanging out. "Want hot sauce?"

He grabbed the plate, tasted a bite, and shook his head. "Perfect. You said you don't cook."

She helped herself to a slathered chip. "I improvise, sometimes. Do you cook for yourself?"

A bark brought them both to attention. "Petunia," Taylor whispered. "She's back."

"I think that bark came from ... next door."

"Vaughn's barking?"

"No, it is Petunia but—"

"That worm has Mr. Hockerberry's dog? How could he? Why would he?" She pounded on the wall. "Do you have Petunia over there?"

"Why don't you come see?"

"So that's what he's up to." Max threw a fist against the wall, making a dent in the plaster.

"Now you've done it," Taylor hissed. "I'll lose my damage deposit."

"I'll come over there if you want company," Max shouted at Vaughn.

"I have one dog already."

"Damn, I'm tired of people messing with me when I'm trying to eat." Max roared out of her apartment, banged on Vaughn's door, and when he opened up, exploded. "You poor excuse for a man. You—" He drew back his fist.

Petunia shot out of Vaughn's door and ran between Max's legs. Max lost his balance, threw his hands in the air, and went down on one knee.

Mr. Hockerberry dashed out of his apartment and punched Vaughn in the nose. "I'll teach you to hold my bulldog captive."

Taylor was glad she'd followed Max. She wouldn't have missed that punch to Vaughn's jaw for anything. Max sighed, pulled her back inside her apartment, and closed the door.

"See what a good protector I make?"

They were standing face to face. "You didn't hit him."

"I was going to."

"I know," she said softly.

"Hey, look at you." He sifted her hair through his fingers, and her heart did a pirouette. "You smell good, too." He nuzzled her neck, and she rested her hands on his shoulders. He'd noticed.

"Thanks," she whispered.

He brushed the top of her head with a kiss. "Now, may I please eat?"

\* \* \* \*

Taylor agreed to let Max pretend to be her husband. She even agreed to let him spend the night. "But you have to sleep on the couch," she said, like a woman who was mad at her husband. She'd glared at him while he savored his long overdue supper, so maybe she was angry, but he couldn't see why after he'd rushed to her rescue.

Stomach full at last, he smiled blissfully. "Aw, shucks. The couch again?"

She stalked off to return with a bright patchwork quilt and a pillow that she tossed on the sectional. She kept her sense

of humor well hidden. Without a pleasantry, she returned to her bedroom via the kitchen where she switched off the light. Moonlight shining through the kitchen window lighted his way as he followed and spoke through her closed door. "Could you tell me where the bathroom is, please?"

She opened up and pointed to a door off her bedroom. Penny's apartment was arranged the same way. He should have known. "Make it good because this is your last time tonight." Taylor folded her arms.

"You'd make a fine prison matron," he said sweetly.

She growled low in her throat and plopped down on the bed to wait. He'd never suffered bathroom shyness before. It figured. "Could you take a walk?" he called.

Where in hell had she gotten that ugly plant? Six faces smiling at him didn't help anything. Turning them toward the wall, he finished his business. Where was the flower he sent?

Taylor was running water in the kitchen when he came out. She didn't look up, so he kept his mouth shut.

He might as well sleep in his clothes in case someone knocked. Lying down on the longer sectional, he eased his feet onto the corner table the way Taylor did. His stuck out too far; if he turned over, he'd knock off the lamp. Edging out of the tight spot, he spread the quilt on the floor and punched the pillow, making a place for his head.

She came into the room. He kept his eyes closed. He'd been as quiet as he could. She left. He could hear her making noises in her room. She must be getting undressed. He tried not to think about her in panties and bra. Or without them. Maybe she hadn't come into the room to chew him out.

Maybe ... He shut off that errant thought. Taylor wasn't the type to come looking for love with a man she barely knew.

Her springs squeaked. If she made love in that bed, everyone in the building would hear. Would she make love with him? If she did, could he make her forget that all the tenants could hear them? Stop it, he told his brain. It's hard enough to sleep with her just two rooms away.

The doorbell rang. Max groaned, yanked his shirt off, and mussed his hair before answering. A neatly dressed man with a pleasant face apologized. "Sorry. I must have the wrong apartment."

Max lay down again. Taylor's bedsprings squeaked. She must be tossing and turning. If she didn't quit, people would think he and she ... He heard her door open. Heard tiptoed footsteps. He opened one eye to see her standing in the doorway. The light from her bedroom lamp shone through the kitchen, lighting her tousled hair. She wore a flowered robe. Less bulky than the terry one she'd worn before, it was tightly cinched at the waist, outlining subtle curves and a slender shape. The robe was silky-looking like lingerie, and his fantasy about her without panties and bra arose again.

"Are you awake?" she asked in a stage whisper.

"No," he said aloud.

"Okay." She turned around.

"Of course, I'm awake. Come back here. How else would I answer?"

"Do you always give smart answers?"

"Better than dumb ones."

"I wonder," she said, but chuckled. "I can't sleep." She sat on the long sectional, her legs stretched out toward him. The moonlight from the window that held her geraniums fell across her. Her robe parted near the knees, exposing trim ankles and a hint of thigh. Glad none of the moonlight reached him, he closed his eyes and tried to say the alphabet backwards. "I thought maybe we could talk," Taylor said softly.

Max sat up, and she gaped at his bare chest. He smiled but kept the quilt over his bent knees. "Talk would be good. What shall we talk about?"

"I asked earlier if you cooked."

Good topic. Boring enough he wouldn't need the quilt. "I usually eat out," he said honestly. "But I do cook occasionally." Like Christmas Day when restaurants were closed and his parents were out of the country. But he'd thought about cooking more. Penny had all kinds of pots and pans and small appliances, several of them gifts from him, and there weren't any decent delis nearby.

"Do you have any specialty dishes?"

Hamburger Helper creations probably didn't count. He shook his head.

"Max, I've been thinking about sadomasochists." And he thought she was thinking about him. He definitely didn't need the quilt any longer. "Do you think they're sick or perverted?"

Her question surprised the hell out of him. "People are different. I don't think you can put a quality judgment on sexual preferences."

She sat up straight and smiled. "I'm so glad to hear you say that because I was thinking the same thing."

"Really?" He rubbed the stubble on his chin. Her eyes shone as if he'd really impressed her. Encouraged, he expounded. "Sadists and masochists. Hence, sadomasochism. I suppose as long as they hook up with the same kind of people, they're okay."

Taylor nodded. "Excellent insight."

"Where are we going with this?" he asked, confused.

"I don't approve of value judgments and I've been making one that's unfair." If he thought he was confused before. "I'm going to try not to condemn those ... people ... any more."

Max was going to try not to jump out the window.

"It's not their fault your newspaper misled them, leading them to my door."

He wasn't going there. "You asked two questions. My turn. Tell me about your ankle bracelet. A gift?"

Taylor stretched her shapely leg and looked at the gold bracelet. The movement opened her robe further. He fumbled with the quilt.

"From my parents. I have a twin. Sheila wears one, too. They have our initials on them." She stretched out her leg again and he scooted closer, dragging the quilt along. He touched the bracelet and his finger grazed Taylor's leg. She drew it back quickly.

"You spoke of Sheila earlier. When your head was fizzy."

Taylor laid her palms against her cheeks as if they were hot. "We're actually very close, no matter what I said."



"You didn't say anything insulting about your sister, only that she got the looks and you got your mother's name."

Even in the pale light, Max could see her frown. "Taylor is Mother's maiden name. It's dignified and I like it, but some people get my names turned around. Like you."

"Taylor Gayle. T.G.I.F. You straightened me out." He scooted near the couch so he could see her better. She eased her robe together. "If you have a middle name, don't tell me, or it will confuse me again."

She laughed lightly. "You asked a question. Now, it's my turn. How did you get your tan?"

That was the second time she'd mentioned his tan. He oversaw his father's tanning business, but he didn't like tanning beds. He'd rather spend his time outdoors.

"Is there something wrong with my question?"

"Sorry. Must be the hour. My response time is slowing down." Damn, now she'd think he did tan under bulbs.

"Swimming. Tennis." He'd done both on a recent trip to Mexico. Marcia used to beg to go along when he took a business trip, then complain when he spent time on the courts or on the beach. If he ever got serious over another woman, she'd have to understand combining business and pleasure. "My turn? Why did you say your sister got the looks if you're twins?"

"We're fraternal. She's taller and looks like a Barbie doll. She's a model and currently in Spain." Taylor shrugged.

Someone knocked on the door. They both sighed. Max answered, and after a long discussion with a pushy,

inebriated, little squirt of a male, he came back to find Taylor curled up on the couch, asleep.

He sat on the edge of the quilt closest to the sectional and watched her sleep. The sweep of heavy lashes on a delicately sculptured face captivated him. Her gently curved chest rising and falling as she slept fluttered the fabric of her robe, exposing a hint of creamy skin. She'd curled her small fingers into fists clasped under her chin. Sheila might know how to dress better or something, but she couldn't be lovelier than Taylor. In repose, she looked so delicate, so feminine, so appealing—it was hard to believe she'd needed to advertise for a man.

\* \* \* \*

NEXT MORNING, when Taylor awoke on the sofa and realized she'd fallen asleep while Max argued with one of her visitors, she clasped her robe tightly shut with both hands. The only sound was the ticking of the brass sunburst clock on the wall. Another remnant of an earlier era, she found its sound reassuring when she was alone. But this morning, she wasn't alone. Max was there. Touching her hand to her hair, hoping it didn't look frightful, she sat up.

The quilt she'd given Max to sleep on lay neatly folded on the barrel chair, the pillow on top of it. He wasn't one of those men who were slobes around the house. Another point in his favor. So why was she keeping score? Darned if she knew.

The point was, he was gone.

She'd like to have seen him waking up, his beautiful blue eyes heavy with sleep, his ebony hair falling into waves on his

forehead. Fighting disappointment and the urge to lie back down, she stood and stretched. Looking at the bright side, it was Saturday and she didn't have to go to work.

But neither did Max, so where had he gone in such a rush?

After toast and a cup of tea with a sprig of mint from Sweet Thing, she rinsed her dishes in the sink. If she ever came up with a good reason to keep a six-headed, leering chrysanthemum, she'd name the new plant. Touching her geraniums, she was grateful for their bright faces. "Good morning, Geraldine. Good morning, Jimmy Dean." Spotting a piece of paper stuck between the two pots, she unfolded it curiously.

"Thanks for the hospitality, T.G. I'll check on you tonight. M.S., not S.M."

Smiling like one of those dumb mums, she stuck Max's note on the fridge with a Have a Nice Day magnet and hummed while she poured her morning bowl of cereal. The words, "I'll check on you tonight," held a sweet ring. He was thoughtful. She resisted the urge to chalk up another point in the air. But when she checked the mailbox downstairs for the first time since Sheila's postcard and found a short handwritten letter of apology, she wet her finger and chalked two up for Max.

His letter ended, "If I can do anything more to make it up to you for my errors, please let me know."

Flowers would be nice. But a note was fine.

\* \* \* \*

MAX ENTERED Glorious Apartments Saturday evening after checking on his father's Tan-a-Rama, Quick Copy, and Niftee Novelty, with both less and more anticipation than the day before. He dreaded the task of keeping sadomasochists away from T.G's door, but the tiny bundle of energy behind that door was unpredictable, and ... interesting. And he had come upon a perfect plan for showing her that he was capable of doing some things ... many things ... well, before she threw him for a loop.

He shifted his heavy grocery bag from one arm to the other. Mrs. Stout's dinner aroma was somewhat pleasanter than yesterday's. She opened the door and caught him sniffing. "Liver and onions," she said, folding her arms.

It must have been the onions that smelled good.

"Liver's good for your blood," she added, and the mention of the two words, liver and blood, in the same sentence flip-flopped his stomach, but he smiled forgivingly. The landlady's home-cooked dinners had given him the priceless plan he was about to put into effect.

"That Miss Gayle doesn't usually create such a disturbance," Mrs. Stout called after him as he started up the steps.

He waved a hand at her. "No problem."

"How come you never take the elevator?"

It rattled the shaft and creaked the cables. His mama didn't raise any fools. An idea striking him, he turned around. "How come you've never installed a system to buzz guests in? Taylor had unwelcome visitors. If you'd install a speaker

system, tenants could inquire who's at the front door before they get past this entryway."

Mrs. Stout planted her hands on her hips. "No one's had trouble before her."

"And no one's crashed in that elevator yet. But I think there are codes about protecting your tenants."

"You think I'm made of money?"

"Safety first," he said pleasantly. "Expense is your second concern."

Leaving her sputtering, Max went on to second floor. If she installed the buzzer system, he might win even more points with Taylor. Not that he had any long-range plans for overwhelming her. He just wanted her to acknowledge his good sense and stop acting like he was a first class idiot. He'd always prided himself on doing things well.

Taylor's doorstep was quiet, and muttering a prayer of thanks, he dashed on to 3A and changed clothes. Taylor had asked if he cooked for himself. She didn't. So she must have asked because she was craving a home-cooked meal. He wasn't a cook, but he could read, and he'd read the directions for making a stir-fry meal. Grocery bag in one arm and a basket of Penny's cookware in the other, he headed down to 2A, ready to impress Taylor Gayle.

He'd thought about his favorite meals and they all required watching several pots at once. But with this type of cooking, you threw everything except dessert in the same pan. He hoped Taylor wasn't one of those people who thought they needed rice because even with quick-cooking rice, he didn't think he could manage it. The loaf of fresh bread and quart of

fresh strawberries he'd bought would complete the meal. He'd decided against dinner wine after her rum fiasco. He didn't want her falling on her face in his Asian creation.

He'd never been nervous about dinner with a woman before.

He set his basket down and knocked on Taylor's door. He'd given the landlady food for thought and now he was going to give the tenant of 2A food for her body. When Mrs. Stout smelled his cooking, she'd come sniffing around, and he'd open Taylor's door and proudly say, "Chicken Stir-Fry." He knocked again, nearly dropping the bread tucked under his arm in the process. "It's me. Max."

Taylor swung open the door and he gaped at her. She was wearing a yellow sundress that stopped mid-knee instead of mid-calf. He clutched the grocery bag tighter as she played with one tiny strap. "Are you coming in or not?" she asked.

"And hello to you, sweetheart." The elevator rumbled. He stepped inside quickly, hoping it wasn't a visitor for her.

She toyed with her strap some more. "Thank you for the letter and note."

She'd still never mentioned the plant. "Apology accepted?"

"Maybe." She smiled through half-lowered eyelashes. He almost dropped bag and basket. Taylor Gayle was flirting with him.

"What are you carrying?"

He led the way to her kitchen. "I've decided to cook dinner for you tonight."

"Lucky me." She didn't quite carry off the sarcasm, and when he made an elaborate production of arranging his

cookware and tools on the counter, she wiggled in anticipation. "Is that a wok?"

"My sister's. I gave it to her last Christmas." He began to unload his grocery bag. "Celery, onion, chicken breasts, soy sauce, potatoes."

"Are you sure potatoes belong in a stir-fry dish?"

"You can put in whatever you like and I'm a meat and potatoes man. Bell peppers, bok choy, strawberries."

"Yuck. I know strawberries don't belong."

He set out the package of shortcakes. "I'll be quiet and clean the berries while you cook," Taylor said meekly.

He set the wok on the stove burner like the directions said and poured in some oil before starting to chop chicken and vegetables. A loud knock on the front door brought him up short and he nicked his thumb. "Ow." He stuck it in his mouth and frowned.

"Your knife is dull," Taylor said, inspecting it.

"If it was dull, I wouldn't have cut myself."

"Yes, you would. You pushed harder. Dull knives cut more people than—"

The grease in the wok popped and splattered. "Ouch."

"You shouldn't have turned it on yet."

He should have bought Penny an electric wok with temperature control. The knock became a pounding. He couldn't impress Taylor with his culinary talents with her nagging and men beating the door down. "I'll be back in a minute," he growled.

Taylor, eager to get Max out of her kitchen, waved him toward the door. "Take your time."

While Max argued with a loudmouthed man, she removed the wok from the heat so it could cool down and finished cutting up vegetables and chicken.

"I didn't know anyone could chop so fast."

She put the wok back on the burner. "I left out the potatoes."

He wrinkled his nose at her and dropped in a handful of chicken strips.

"You should wait until the oil is hot again."

"I'll bet you're a back seat driver as well." He turned the heat up and elbowed her from the stove. "I promised to cook for you."

"I am not a back seat driver, unless the person driving needs help." She turned to the strawberries and began stemming and washing, anything to keep from looking at the mess in the wok. "Have you ever cooked before?"

Grease popped, Max cursed, someone knocked, and he cursed some more. Just as she thought. When he said he cooked "occasionally," he meant "never before." So why did he offer?

There was a louder knock at the door. "Maybe they'll go away," Max said, stirring and frying rapidly.

"Just keep stirring. I'll get this one." Taylor would rather face one of the apes ... Whoops. She'd rather face one of the men that had been knocking at her door than that lethal pot on the stove.

"I can," Max said, but when he looked back at the grease-soaked, sizzling mess and hesitated, she dashed off. "Call me if you need help," he yelled after her.



Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

"Call 911 if you need help," she muttered before easing the door open.

## Chapter 5

"I'M SORRY. I thought Taylor Gayle lived here." Joe, from the bar. He looked uncertain. If she didn't say anything, maybe he'd go away.

"You're looking at her," Vaughn called from his open door. The worm was spying. Taylor hoped he fell down the elevator shaft and Petunia peed on him.

"Taylor?" Joe stared at her.

"Joe." She forced a smile. "This isn't a good time."

Scorched onion and heaven-knew-what-other odors, blended with a smoky haze, wafted from the kitchen through the living room. The smoke alarm went off. Max shouted obscenities. "I'm sorry. I should have told you I'm married." She slammed the door in Joe's face and ran.

Max was carrying the smoking, spitting wok to the sink. "Don't run water in it," she cried. "Just set it down."

His hand was already on the faucet. A splash hit the mess and steam shot into the air. He jumped back, his hand scalded. At least, he'd gotten the water turned off before he scalded his face with steam. Max turned pale and sank to his knees. Taylor turned the smoke alarm and the stove off, then knelt before him. "Are you okay?"

"Hell, no."

Before she could say, "I hear sirens," she heard feet pounding up the steps. The firehouse was only a block away. Firemen pushed through the door. A young, eager one turned the hose in the sink and black smoke filled the kitchen. An

EMT arrived and tended to Max's hand. Taylor sat on the living room couch and held her head. "Why did the first handsome man I met have to be a total goof-up?"

"Help," a voice called from somewhere. "The elevator's stuck."

Joe. The firemen dashed out of the apartment to rescue him. Taylor hid her head under the pillow Max had slept on the previous night. It smelled masculine and woodsy and very nice. He was so sexy, it was a shame he didn't have good sense.

"What's going on here?" Mrs. Stout stomped into Taylor's apartment. "Are you trying to burn this place down?"

"There's no fire, only smoke, but your fire insurance policy should cover the damage," a returning fireman said. "But if you're the owner of this house, before you call them, you'd better call someone to fix that elevator. There's a man trapped between floors. I've got a couple of men trying to rescue him now. I'm sure that rickety thing doesn't meet building codes. You need to take care of it pronto. Okay?"

Mrs. Stout nodded and left, white-faced, tightlipped, her fists clenched.

The fire chief wrote up a report while an EMT talked to Taylor. "You might want to call your doctor and have him prescribe an antibiotic ointment and pain pills for your husband. If his hand isn't better on Monday, he ought to have the doc take a look."

If the world thought she was married to Max Stuart, they underestimated her, but too weak to protest, Taylor nodded.

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Everyone else cleared out and Max stood before her, hair tousled, face pale, white tee shirt blackened and damp. A total, adorable mess. "I'm sorry," he said.

Taylor laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks.

"If you're hitting the rum again," Max said, "please count me in."

\* \* \* \*

MAX'S EFFORTS to show Taylor he was a man of many talents had backfired big time. He didn't appreciate being laughed at any more than she did, and he was hungry in spite of his pain. Her kitchen was a disaster and their dinner had gone up in smoke. If he wanted to impress her, he'd have to think of another way. "I'll take you somewhere to eat. Name the place."

Taylor wrinkled her nose. "The odor and all that hubbub killed my appetite. Let's take a walk and breathe fresh air, then think about food."

Max changed clothes and contacted his family doctor in Carbon City about prescriptions, thinking about food the whole time. He could eat a cow. A T-bone sounded good. Petunia barked when he walked by Mr. Hockerberry's door, and Max's stomach growled. Bulldog. Hot dog. Taylor was waiting outside her door and they walked down the stairs. "Maybe we can sneak by Mrs. Stout's without her hearing," Taylor said.

They might as well have tried to sneak by the President's bodyguards. She threw open her door. "Did you know that

young man who had a problem running the elevator?" she demanded of Taylor.

Had a problem running it? Like it was the poor guy's fault. Max chuckled. Taylor glared at him. Mrs. Stout didn't wait for an answer. "He said he was looking for a red-haired woman named Taylor Gayle."

"It must have been another one," Taylor said. "I never saw the man before in my life."

"You're not living here under a false identity, are you?" The landlady looked as suspicious as Max felt. Redhead? Another Taylor Gayle?

Taylor whipped out her driver's license, and from where he stood, Max could see she had blonde hair in the picture, not red. Mrs. Stout read everything on it before turning on him. "You threatened to cause me trouble over the elevator and buzzing system. Did you call the fire department on me?"

"He accidentally set off the fire alarm while cooking," Taylor said, smiling pleasantly.

Muttering, the landlady stalked inside her apartment and slammed her door.

"How many Taylor Gayles are there in this world?" he asked, when they were safely outside.

"I have no idea. What's a buzzing system?"

He explained what he'd told Mrs. Stout. "I didn't threaten her."

"It sounds like a good idea."

He didn't know if Taylor meant the buzzing system or a threat, but his hand had begun to hurt worse. At the drug store a few blocks down, they picked up his prescriptions,

then headed for a water fountain where he took his pain medicine.

"We'll have to go back soon so you can apply the ointment," Taylor said.

"Not before I eat."

"Stop grumbling and think about something besides food."

"Like how I'm going to type with one hand?"

"One finger," she corrected, chuckling.

His stomach growled loudly.

"You win. Let's find something to eat."

They were passing a park he'd never seen before.

"Paradise Park," he read on the arch that spanned the entrance.

"If it's Paradise, they must have food," Taylor said, pulling him through the wide iron gates. "Right, Max?"

He pulled her up short by the hand and kissed her lips.

"Right, Taylor."

She sighed and caressed the back of his neck. He kissed her as lightly as before. "The park is pretty," she said, when they started walking again.

Dusk was falling. Gas lights outlined the paths and fireflies dotted the grassy expanse. The night air smelled fresh and sweet and the croak of a bullfrog in a pond punctuated the chirp of crickets. Couples holding hands passed, talking softly. A child's laughter echoed from the playground. "You're right," Max said softly. "It is."

A vendor selling hot dogs and lemonade lounged against a maple tree. "I could eat a dozen dogs," Max confessed, "but when I asked you to dinner, I had someplace nice in mind."

"This is nice."

After ordering two lemonades and three hot dogs, two loaded and one for her with mustard only, Max led her to a park bench. The pain pill had begun to kick in and he felt strangely contented. They talked about inconsequential things, like school days. He told her about his typing teacher. "So that's why I never learned."

"You were a young leech," she said, handing over the last half of her hot dog to him.

"I learned my lesson. I steer clear of redheads. They're too temperamental."

Taylor stared into her lemonade. "Would you say that's a stereotype?"

He shrugged. "I'd say it's good sense."

She frowned. "Did you go to college? I'd think it would be difficult to type an entire thesis with two fingers."

He could type forty words a minute that way. He chuckled.

She stretched her legs out in front of her and stirred her drink with her straw. "Higher education is no laughing matter."

"That's what the pros say."

She sat up straight, sloshing lemonade over the side of her cup. "Who are you talking about?"

"You needn't act so defensive. I'm talking about my relatives, not yours. My Grandfather Stuart was a professor and two of his sons, my father's brothers, are hoity-toity PhD's we call Pooh-Pooh and Pro." Max chuckled again.

Taylor deepened her frown. "Scholars who have completed years of education and attained their doctorates deserve respect."

"Yeah. Well." Max shrugged. "Maybe you should meet them."

"I'd like that," she said, rising to toss her empty cup into a wire basket. "I admire highly educated people." She stuck out her chin. "I made up my mind when I was a little girl that I'd get a college degree."

Max studied her curiously. She wore drab green walking shorts that reached her knees and a white shirt with a button-down collar. Her earrings were unimaginative gold dots, and she wore serious walking shoes. Her attire made her look bookish, but behind that facade lay an attractive woman. One who looked temptingly feminine in a flowered robe or playing with the tiny strap of a sundress. One who didn't know how unkind and haughty professors could be.

He tossed his cup in the trash can. His uncles acted as if they could walk on water. And his father's answer? "Soap floats." When Max was older, he learned his father didn't mean 'soap.'

Taylor strode off and he hurried to catch up. "Why?"

"Why what?" She walked faster, as if trying to keep up with the thoughts running through her head. Or run away from them.

"Not many kids think about degrees," Max said.

"Sheila didn't. She wanted to be a model or a movie star or a princess, which is what Daddy called her. Princess. She had a tiara and plastic high heels." Taylor slowed down a little



Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

"Mother used to say she'd be a beauty queen, and she was. Prom Queen. County Fair Queen. Then she took up modeling. Daddy called me Whiz Kid."

Taylor slowed her steps even more. Max's hand had begun to hurt again, but he slipped his good arm around her shoulders, sensing a sadness in Taylor's silence.

"I read the print on cereal boxes before I started school. I counted the change in his pocket. I loved books. My father said I'd fulfill his dream and graduate from college one day."

Max didn't say anything but her dream wish was obvious.

"It's not what you think." Taylor stopped beneath a spreading elm. "My dad took off when I was ten. Just left without telling anyone goodbye. I was really mad at him. We never heard from him again. Mom had to work to support us." Taylor began to walk, away from the park. "So it's obvious I don't want to achieve to please him. If he had anything at all to do with my efforts, it would be to show him I could do what I wanted without his help, but he died before I finished high school. We learned of his death through the insurance company."

Max tightened the arm around her, wishing he knew what to say. His family was closely knit and financially comfortable. He wished she could have had that, too. As they neared their apartment building, silence swirled around them.

"His insurance was made out to Mom. That's how I could afford to get my bachelor's degree." She opened her mouth as if to add something else, but closed it again.

"Why did you advertise for a man?"

"I didn't advertise for a man. I advertised for a man to date. There's a difference. I don't want one to keep."

"I meant, why did you need to advertise? I'd think you could get one on your own."

"Thanks." Her voice dripped sarcasm. Her chin quivered.

"Hey. I'm sorry." He took her hand and it felt very small inside his. "I meant well."

"Look at me. I'm plain. I'm cantankerous. And independent. Men don't like that."

"You are cantankerous," he agreed with a grin. "And independent. As for plain, you aren't but you make yourself out to be." He pulled her to a stop beneath a maple tree in front of their apartment house. Sheltered beneath the green canopy, he took her by both arms and drew her close. Dusk was falling but light from the parking lot fell across her face. "Your eyes are long-lashed and beautiful." He slipped her glasses off. "Have you ever thought about smaller lenses? Or contacts?"

She grabbed the glasses out of his hand and shoved them back on her face. "I didn't ask for a makeover."

"Your hair looks better loose," he said nonplused, playing with a strand.

She moaned so loudly that a couple passing by stared at her, then him.

"And you'd look damned good in short shorts. Add a tight tee shirt, and you'd have men flocking to your door."

"I *have* men flocking to my door, all with sick minds, thank you very much."

"I thought you were making an attitude adjustment, seeing sadomasochists as people walking to the beat of their own drums."

She dashed up the walk and through the front door to Glorious Apartments, letting it slam. Fortunately, he caught it with his shoulder, not his face or bad hand. "You are cantankerous," he repeated, glad to see her that way again.

"Darned straight I am."

"You're hiding your good looks. That's all I was trying to say."

She stopped and he took her arm. She turned big eyes toward him. Were they moist? He rubbed a fingertip across her cheek.

Mrs. Stout stuck her head out her door.

Max pulled Taylor's eyelid up with his good hand. "She has something in her eye." Damn. He wanted to tell her he liked her the way she was. Her eyes were moist.

The landlady harumphed. "I called the insurance adjuster. Don't touch anything in your apartment, Ms. Gayle. They'll be here Monday."

Max caught up to Taylor halfway up the steps. "Don't touch anything? Now there's a trick," she huffed. "How do I manage that, pray tell?"

Two really seedy looking men were knocking on the door to 2A. The smell of smoke and burned food filled the hall. Max pulled her around the corner onto the next flight of steps.

"Come on up to my place. I'll let you touch anything you like."

Taylor chuckled. There was that sense of humor he liked. It had been a tough day for them both. She hesitated at the doorway. "I won't bite. I promise."

"No love bites?" she teased.

"Not unless you ask," he said, closing the door behind them with his foot. "But if you wouldn't mind, I would like a kiss."

He slanted his lips over hers. Just as he thought, they were warm and sweet and hungry. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his. For one long moment, he forgot everything but the taste and smell of her. The feel of her tongue against his. Her breasts pressed against his ribs. Aroused, he skimmed a hand up her side, over her tiny waist, and slid it between them where he could feel the curve of her breast. She sighed into his mouth and he moved boldly, teasing the tip of one through her clothing so the nipple hardened. He spread his hand, splaying his fingers over the small but oh-so-desirable globe. She twisted her fingers in his hair. He squeezed her breast.

"Ouch!"

Taylor's eyes flew open when Max screeched. Breathless from his hot seeking lips and shaking from his yell of pain, she fought back laughter.

"Damn." He held his burned hand to his chest. "I really am a goof-up. You're right. Any sane man would have used his good hand."

"Passion does funny things," she said, allowing herself a smile.

"Yes," he said, giving her an odd look, "it does."

She looked around his place while struggling to regain her composure. A cream-colored afghan was thrown across the short sectional and matching throw pillows with ruffles dotted the longer one. Pictures in silver frames, a collection of ceramic angels, and a wicker stand with drooping fern completed the picture. "Nice place you have here," she said, tongue in cheek. His sectionals were just as ugly as hers but striped in teal, aqua, and blue, and his barrel chair was lemon yellow. The added touches made a difference. "I like what you've done with it."

Max, dropping down onto the longer sectional and shoving a pillow aside, darted her a pained look.

A framed picture of him and a tall, attractive woman sat on a table. Taylor touched it but refused to give him the satisfaction of asking if she was a girlfriend. A picture of a man and woman sat on another table. Dignified people with pleasant faces. "My parents," Max said when she picked the photograph up.

"They look nice. My father died in Oklahoma," Taylor said, "and the insurance company notified us. The money wasn't a lot, but it eased the burden on Mom who worked hard to raise three of us." Taylor set the picture back on the table. "Besides Sheila and I, there's Jake. He and his wife Amy live in Boomtown. They have two cute girls and a baby due any day."

"Penny's my only sibling." Max nodded toward the picture of him and the young woman. "I wish she'd get married and have kids. I'd like to be an uncle."

"I want to meet your uncles. The pros."

"I don't see them often." Max motioned Taylor to follow him into the kitchen and winced. "Darned burns. Want something to drink?"

She looked past him into the refrigerator. "I'll take a root beer."

He handed her one and helped himself to a regular beer. "The doctor said I could take more pain medication in an hour."

Max looked pale, she noticed, as he popped a pill. "You think you should drink beer with that?"

He opened it and took a big swallow. "Definitely," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Or was he hiding a grin?

His kitchen was much like hers but once again, there were many added features. Covers on small appliances. African violets with rubbery leaves and no blooms in the window. An attractive bouquet of silk flowers on the kitchen table. He should stick with silk. "Did you bring along all these things?" she asked, with a sweep of her hand.

Max was removing the gauze from his hand in preparation for the burn ointment. Teeth gritted, he was turning paler by the minute. She pushed him toward a stool. "Sit down before you fall down, and let me help."

He locked his feet behind the wooden legs of the stool and closed his eyes. Seeing the angry red welts on his hands, she couldn't blame him. Making soothing sounds, she uncapped the tube of antibiotic salve and lifted his hand for a better look. He stiffened. The air conditioner hummed steadily but sweat beaded his forehead. "I need a bullet to bite."

She handed him his beer. "Take a swig of this," she said, picking up a tea towel to wipe the perspiration away. "This is only going to hurt a little."

Max took a second swig and sighed, and Taylor hoped he was beginning to relax a little. She applied the ointment gently. "I don't think you should cook any more. Ever."

"I'm a good cook."

"And I play center for the Indianapolis Pacers."

She wrapped his hand again and he freed himself from the stool. She washed her hands and he helped himself to another beer. "Surgery's over," Taylor said, taking it out of his hand and taking a swallow.

"I'll give you one," he said, but she shook her head and handed it back.

A crossword puzzle lay half-worked on his kitchen table. "Oh, good," she said, picking it up. "Where's your pencil?"

"I hate for people to work my puzzles."

"Be a sport. I played nurse."

He half-handed her a pencil. "We could do it together."

"Stingy." She grabbed the pencil. "You didn't tell me you liked word games." Leading him to the living room, she sat on the floor and patted the hardwood beside her. "Okay. Sit."

"I'm not a dog," he grumbled.

"If you were, you'd flunk obedience school with an attitude like that." She checked the pencil point. "Whose dog was that at the newspaper office?"

"Muttso belongs to my sister."

"The one who kills her plants. You seem to have inherited the same green thumb."

"These are her plants. This is her apartment. I hope you didn't think all this ruffled stuff was mine." He nodded toward the sofa pillows, and Taylor grinned. "My Lord, you did. I hope you didn't see the frilly coverlet on the bed."

"You haven't invited me to the bedroom yet."

"I'd be glad to." He grinned lecherously and rose to return with another beer. After one swallow, he handed it to her.

"I'm using Penny's apartment while I run the paper for her. She's sequestered."

"I hope it doesn't run in the family."

He laughed and she loved the way his eyes crinkled at the corners and a hint of a dimple flickered in one cheek.

"Murder trial. She's on the jury."

"Better than the defendant." Taylor asked questions about the trial and his sister.

"Penny did play center, in college basketball. Everyone in our family is tall."

"I'm the only short one in mine." Taylor wrapped her arms around her bent legs and rested her chin on her knees. "I've suffered for it. My brother and sister teased me, and still do. My teachers put me in the front of the classroom so I could see the blackboard, and I could never get away with anything. Sheila was tall so she got away with murder in the back of the room. When we had class pictures taken, the other kids would giggle when I was placed in the front row where I'd show. It was humiliating." She rolled her eyes and gave a theatrical sigh.

"You are cute, even if you don't want to be."



"Attractive. Beautiful. Witty. Smart. You can say any of those—even if they're not true. Well, I am smart. But 'cute' is not a compliment. "Witty." She snapped her fingers. "Witty goes in number five, down." She leaned over the crossword to write the letters in the boxes.

He got the word that went across, and heads together, they worked the puzzle, quibbling and laughing. When they finished, she yawned. "I wonder what's going on downstairs. I need to go home."

"I like having you here. You're fun." Fun? No one had called her 'fun' in a long time. He leaned forward and she thought he was going to kiss her. Just how frilly was the bedroom? She half-closed her eyes. He touched her lips. "I'll go along and make sure you don't touch anything," he said.

Maybe he'd kiss her to keep her from touching anything. Or maybe he'd kiss her to make sure she would. The color rose in her cheeks but he'd stood and was offering her his hand. She took hold and let him pull her to her feet. On the way to the door, a comb fell out of her hair and she leaned over to pick it up. There was a toy under the chair.

"What's this?" she asked.

Max fished it out with his good hand and showed her a tiny man in a red, white, and blue striped suit. He flipped a switch and the man marched, beating a drum.

"It's him, the noisy little guy I heard up here the other night." The man started tap dancing. He did a back flip, then started marching and drumming again. Taylor laughed. "He's a one-man show." She knelt on the floor. "A gift?"

Glad she liked Uncle Samuel, Max bowed and was surprised to find his head felt weightless. "A demo from Niftee Novelty and Toy Company. A new version of an old windup toy, he'll be our Independence Day Special for next year."

"You sell toys?"

Max was surprised by the lift of her brow. "Anything wrong with that?"

"No. It's just ... I thought you worked at The Town Crier."

"I'm a temp, filling in as editor for my sister, Penny."

"That might explain the mistakes." Taylor cocked her head and checked him out. "But for either job, you dress so dapper."

"Dapper?" His head felt like a balloon attached to his neck. "Clothes make the man, you know? Appearance is important."

"My theory exactly." She smacked her hand down on the back of an overstuffed chair.

He took hold of the chair. "Go on."

"It doesn't matter." Flushing, she opened his apartment door. "Mrs. S-s-stout."

Their landlady raised her gray eyebrows so high they almost touched her hairline. "Mr. Stuart. Ms. Gayle. We don't ... ahem ... cohabitate here."

Max stepped forward, eager to save Taylor and his sister, the actual tenant of 3A, embarrassment. "I was just showing Ms. Gayle my toy."

Mrs. Whattzit gasped.

He raised his hand and it felt as heavy as his head did light. "Uh ... I mean, toys." He shook his head to clear his vision and sank to the floor.

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

\* \* \* \*

HE HAD TO get up. He just couldn't remember why. He stretched out full length. The floor beneath him was reassuringly stable. He felt warm breath on his face. He blinked and touched a soft cheek. It wasn't his. He opened his eyes wide.

"You are a disaster waiting to happen," a mouth with brown eyes huffed.

"Dap-per disaster." His face felt funny when he smiled. "And you are cute, Tigif." He just got the words out when she disappeared from view.

## Chapter 6

"I DRAGGED you up off the floor, down the steps, and into my apartment past two towering sadomasochists. Now, you better damn well shape up."

Max blinked. He was lying on a hardwood floor in a room with a rotating ceiling. A hand smacked his cheek gently.

"I warned you not to drink beer with pain medication." He grinned. The hand smacked him again. He opened his mouth and captured the fingertips in it, biting just enough to hold onto them.

"You dingaling."

The mouth that was becoming a face with an uptilted nose smiled. The face was pretty. He sucked the fingertips. The mouth sighed. TGIF "Do you have a middle name?" he asked around the fingers.

"Ann. But you won't remember. You're out of it."

"I knew an Ann once. No, it was Anna. Anna Banana. Bo-banna."

Tigif dumped something cold and wet over his head. "Why in hell's name did you do that?"

"You were starting to tick me off."

He saw a half-empty glass in her hand. "You'd better stop that. Anna was my Granna."

She emptied it on his face.

She was starting to tick him off, but the water must have done a trick on his head because he could see his assailant clearly. "Taylor Ann Gayle. TAG."

"Sheila calls me that and I don't like it. You're like her. She can't cook either, although she never burned the house down. And she never passed out in front of the landlady after making embarrassing statements. And—someone's knocking again." Taylor sank into a quivering mass on the floor. "I want my life back. I don't even have a date for the Homecoming Dance and Sheila's in love and you're a disaster and everything sucks."

"Homecoming Dance?" Maybe his head wasn't clear, after all. He rose slowly and sat on her ugly, flowered sofa. He preferred his ugly stripes. "Are you still in school?"

"I told you before, I'm a high school librarian," Taylor declared huffily, moving to sit beside him. "I have to chaperone."

"And you think you should have a date."

"I'm expected to show up with my fiancé."

"Which you don't have."

"You don't have to rub it in," she said, folding her arms across her chest.

He eased one arm around her and hugged her close. She sighed and leaned into him. He nestled his chin against her head. Her hair smelled like fresh lemonade. "How did you drag me down the stairs and into your apartment? You don't weigh one-hundred pounds soaked with sweat."

"I weigh one-hundred and two, and you stumbled along. I told Mrs. Stout you'd had pain medication for your hand, and she helped me get you on your feet. You half-slid down the stairs and the men at my door..." Taylor's scowl disappeared

in a flood of laughter. "The men..." She was off again, holding her sides. "Took one look at you and fled."

Max tipped her chin and looked into her eyes. Her eyes were the color of dark espresso, flecked with gold. He took off her oversized glasses and laid them on the table. "They must have thought you were some woman."

"I am," she said softly, raising her chin.

"Yes." He lowered his mouth slowly. She lifted hers ever so slightly. He leaned his head closer and brushed her lips with his. She tasted of root beer and strawberry lip balm and mint. "Delicious," he whispered. He flicked his tongue across her lips and she caught her breath. He kissed her softly and she raised her arms to encircle his neck. He deepened the kiss and she responded, and his thoughts fell into place, straighter than they'd ever been. He wanted Taylor. Wanted to make love to her. He parted her lips with his tongue and she stiffened in his arms. He kissed her gently, long and slow, but gently. He'd scared her half out of her wits screaming the last time he'd taken her in his arms. He didn't want to make that mistake again. He wanted....

Taylor sighed into his mouth. "Max?"

"Hmm?" He brushed noses with her, hungry for more of her sweet mouth.

"Can you dance?" He nodded and nuzzled his chin against her neck. It felt so soft, he wanted to touch her all over. She leaned away from him. "Would you take me to the Homecoming Dance next Saturday?"

"Dance?" Who said anything about dancing? He'd better pay closer attention to what was said. "You're kidding. I'm

twenty-nine-years-old and you want me to go to a high school dance? I didn't like school dances when I was in my teens."

"I'm twenty-four and I have to go. Why didn't you like them?"

"The girls giggled and the guys sneaked outside to smoke and—"

"I'm a chaperone and I won't let them go outside to smoke."

"Oh, great. That's another thing I didn't like. Chaperones that wouldn't let you sneak a kiss behind the bleachers."

"This chaperone might if you're her date and don't let anyone see." She played with a lock of hair that had fallen down on his forehead, twirling it around her finger and letting it spring back. "This dance is being held at the Grand Hotel Ballroom; they have a band from Vegas coming, and I promise not to giggle if you go."

She did the hair thing again and it felt good. "Did you like high school dances?"

"Sheila always had the dream date of the class while I went with the class clown or most likely to succeed, but I liked them anyway. Her dates were good-looking duds. Mine were smart or funny. And I loved transforming the gym into a fairyland with crepe paper and choosing a new gown." She sighed dreamily.

"Our crepe paper always fell down and the punch was sickeningly sweet," Max muttered. Taylor lay her head against his chest and snuggled against him. He wrapped an arm around her. "You're not going to let me say no, are you?"

"I fixed up your hand, forgave you for scorching my kitchen, and dragged you downstairs to my apartment."

She felt fragile and special in his arms. He tightened his hold. "Just for the record, my maternal grandmother, Anna, was a sweetheart I called Granna Anna. The banana part came from a song."

"They play songs at dances."

She had a one-track mind. He liked to dance and it was his fault she hadn't found a date yet. "I'll feel like an old man with all those kids."

"I forgave you for screaming in my ear."

Life's most embarrassing, and frustrating, moment. That was a biggie. "Do you forgive me for the mistake in the ad and the men knocking at your door?" he asked.

As if on cue, someone pounded. "I'm not sure." She laid a finger to her chin.

"Okay, I'll go to the dance." He dropped a kiss on her forehead. "My pleasure, but can we sneak away early?"

"Chaperones have to stay until it's over."

"You drive a hard bargain." He kissed the tip of her nose.

"Then you'll go?"

He brushed his lips across hers. "I'll go and go you one better." He teased her nipple with his good hand. "Now that you have a date, I'll drive to Carbon City and personally yank your ad from The Town Crier. Then you won't be bothered any more."

"No." She splayed a hand against his chest. "I have to see, if just once, you can get it right."



She might as well have thrown more cold water on him. Reaching for the quilt she kept folded on the couch for him, Max curled up on the floor. Someday, he'd show Taylor Ann Gayle, he could do something right, but after a day like the one he'd had, he wasn't taking a chance on tonight.

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR AWOKES Sunday morning to the smell of coffee. Max had slept on her floor again, having fallen asleep ten minutes into a TV movie they'd been watching. She'd lifted his head and put it on a pillow without him waking, then curled up on the sofa where she looked at him more than the show. He breathed quietly, his broad chest rising and falling gently. His stomach was firm and flat beneath his tee shirt and imagining what lay beneath his trim khaki shorts, she tingled all over.

She tried to concentrate on Michael Douglas on the screen, but his sexiness only reminded her of Maxwell Stuart, lying on her living room floor. Without opening his eyes, he fumbled with the top button of his shorts. Taylor caught her breath as the button popped out of the buttonhole. Max fluttered his fingers. Was he going to unzip them, too? She clutched the couch pillow. She'd heard of walking in your sleep, but undressing...? He lifted the zipper pull. She fisted her hand to her mouth to smother a gasp. Maybe she should wake him. "Max?"

He turned over on his side, eyes closed, a half-smile on his face and a bulge in the front of his shorts that hadn't been there before. He murmured something.

Did he say Tag?

Max moaned softly, sending shock waves through her body. Waves of desire like nothing she'd ever felt before. The feeling was delicious, and painful. Looking at his erection, his sculpted body, his handsome face, his erection ... heat pooled between her legs with a sweet ache. He turned onto his back again and she longed to throw herself on top of him. He blinked and she froze. She wanted him so badly, he'd see it in her face if he opened his eyes.

When it was clear Max was still asleep, she fled to the shower where it took a long time to wash away the heat of her desire. She'd finally slept, only to dream he was kissing her senseless and about to enter her, joining their bodies in the union she longed for, when she blurted a shameful truth. She was a virgin. At her confession, he'd dropped her like a burning wok and turned cold water on her. When she'd awakened, she'd rushed into the bathroom and splashed her face with tepid water, trying to get a grip on herself.

She wasn't a virgin technically, but her scanty sexual experience had been disappointing. Would her inexperience disappoint Max, if they went to bed?

She was brushing her teeth when she noticed a tiny white envelope on the floor. Remembering she'd found it in the chrysanthemums, she picked it up and turned it over in her hand. If it was from one of her S&M. admirers, she'd be better off putting it back, unread. She reached out a hand. The plant was turned toward the wall. Strange.

"Are you going to sleep all day?" Max pounded on her bedroom door.

She turned the pot around and stuck the envelope in the plant.

"I've got breakfast on the table."

If he cooked, she could have burned to death in her bed. "I'll be right there." Shuddering, Taylor slipped into lacy underwear. The first thing she laid hands on was a blue jumper that stopped inches above her knees. She'd bought it to wear on cool days with matching tights and a tee shirt, but it was too warm for either. Running a brush through her hair, she slipped into sandals, and dabbed some lilac water behind her ears. Sheila liked rich, musky scents and poked fun at Taylor's old-fashioned cologne. She yanked open the door.

Max leaned against the kitchen cabinets, glaring at the wall clock. "It's about time. Breakfast will be co—Whoa. I like that."

Remembering what all she'd wanted to do for him ... to him ... with him ... last night, she felt her cheeks grow warm. She lowered her eyes. A china cup of tea with lemon and mint sat steaming on the table. "I thought I smelled coffee."

"Mine." He pointed to the other cup.

She skimmed her eyes over two pink place mats with china plates, a basket of scones, and a breakfast casserole of some sort. "What's all this?"

"Delicious Deli's Dayrise Dish is a sausage, cheese, and hash brown quiche."

"Say that three times," she teased.

He did. "The table setting came from Penny's feminine kitchen."

Taylor smiled and touched the stubble on his chin, "Are you always so thoughtful?" A wave of his hair had fallen down on his forehead and she touched it, without pushing it back.

"Sorry, I haven't cleaned up yet."

"You look good to me."

"You smell good." He reached for her. "And so does breakfast," he said, sniffing the air and looking from her to the food and back again.

"So, eat. You're starving and the food is hot. I don't want your efforts to go to waste." She unfurled a napkin and waved him toward the table. "I'll still be here when the food is gone."

He looked at her as if he was about to say something but shook his head, sat down, and reached for the quiche.

If he ever chose her over something to eat, she'd know it was love. Love. She thought that three times.

"I look grody," Max complained to Taylor as they passed Vaughn in the hall, wearing white pants and a plaid shirt, his hair slicked back as usual. "I can't see why you wanted me to go out this way."

"You look sexy with your hair falling down in your face and stubble on your chin."

"That description really makes me feel better."

Mr. Hockerberry was going out the front entrance in a light blue summer suit. Max stepped into the shadows of the hall. Taylor tugged on his hand. "It's Sunday, and I look like a tramp," he grumbled.

Taylor found his appearance excitingly masculine. "We're not going to church. We're taking a morning walk, for

heaven's sake. Would you please walk out the door? I never saw a man so vain."

"The image you present to others is who you are. This morning, my appearance spells s-l-o-b."

She caught his hand and walking briskly, dragged him through the parking lot to the sidewalk. She usually ran but he'd insisted he didn't like to greet the day at such a fast pace. "Did you get that image idea from a sales training course?"

"I got it from my father." Max zigzagged through a pile of fallen leaves. "And he got it from his. 'The way you look affects your performance.' Grandfather told his sons he learned that in boarding school and it still went."

Interesting. Taylor believed appearance affected reaction, but did it affect a person's action as well? "Most kids dress casually today."

"If a college kid in The Uncles' classes looks sloppy, it goes against his or her grade."

"That's not really fair."

"The Uncles are hard taskmasters. But then, they're pros. They have their doctorates."

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm?"

"Our family relationship with my dad's brothers is rocky."

"You don't like them?"

"They don't approve of us." Max sighed. "We decided to spend a pleasant day together, so let's not discuss The Uncles."

"But I want—"

"Not today," Max said, draping an arm across her shoulders.

She couldn't imagine what they found to disapprove. His family looked like nice people in the pictures she saw. "Maybe I should meet your family."

"Sounds serious."

Taylor smiled. She wasn't going there. It was a beautiful day and a handsome man walked beside her. Their steps matched, the sun felt warm, and her bare shoulders burned under his touch. A breeze lifted her hair off her neck and she sighed happily. The leaves on the trees had begun to resemble a paint palette. She looked up at Max and he dropped a smiling kiss on her lips without missing a step.

"I heard there are carriage rentals down by the railroad depot. Want to see Boomtown in one?" he asked.

Taylor looked at her watch. She usually walked for a longer period of time, but what the heck. "I've never ridden in a horse-drawn carriage. I'd love it."

\* \* \* \*

SITTING IN the jump seat at the back of the wagon, Taylor craned her neck to see parts of the town she'd never seen before. Side streets were dotted with secondhand stores, pawnshops, and the quintessential yard sale on every block. Unlike downtown, names were simple and to the point. Used Cars. Quick Pawn. Eddie's Market.

Lawns were neatly mowed. Windows shone. Sidewalks were swept clean. An American flag and a cement urn stood

on every corner. A quiet dignity hovered over it all. Jake was right about the town's charm. "I like it."

"I like you," Max said, and squeezed her hand.

She liked him, too. More than any man she'd ever known. She loved the feel of his strong hand holding hers. She loved the way he'd said those three words so tenderly. She loved the way he looked directly into her eyes when he said them. Max Stuart made her feel as if she were the only person in the world.

The gentle bounce of the wagon and the clip-clop of the horse's hooves were soothing and the liveried driver's patter intriguing. "On your right, we have the Boomtown Antique Mart and Flea Market. The home of Defense Central, a plant that made munitions during World War II; more than a thousand people were employed here."

Max straightened at her side.

"After the war," the driver continued, "it became White Central Kitchens, where metal kitchen cabinets were made. Gradually, they lost favor with wooden cabinets coming into vogue. For twenty years, the factory stood empty."

"I love history," Max said quietly.

Taylor looked up at him, surprised.

"In the eighties, a local entrepreneur opened an antique store in one corner of the building." The horse circled the block while the driver continued his spiel, explaining that the idea took hold with half the factory becoming an antique mall. On the weekends, the rest of the plant served as a flea market with regional venders selling their wares.

"In the 1940's residents believed Boomtown would become a metropolis, but the country's political and sociological profile changed and the town's future changed with it. So Boomtown never achieved the size or status predicted, but it maintained its ambiance."

The driver ended his talk as he drew up at a carriage stop on the corner of the antique mall and flea market. "I'll make the return trip in ten minutes. If you want to tour the mall, a carriage comes by every hour."

Stepping down from the carriage, Taylor felt sobered by the end of an era. "My brother called the town a breath from the past. I understand now what he meant. So much hope and love went into the buildings and the street's names, I feel a new respect for Boomtown and its people."

Max turned her toward him, looked deep into her eyes, and she understood him a little better, too. He joked about everything else but she'd seen and felt his passion when he said, "I love history."

"So do I," he whispered hoarsely, and then he kissed her in front of everybody. Kissed her with a gentle warmth that touched her heart. I love him, Taylor thought. I love Max Stuart.

Taylor hugged her love to her heart and pushed it out of her mind as she and Max entered the former defense plant. Maybe it was the magic of the day. Maybe it was a trick fate had played. Whatever this feeling was, she'd enjoy it today, then hope it went away.

\* \* \* \*



INSIDE THE antique mart, the spirit of Boomtown was alive and well. Music played, kids jostled one another and laughed, adults haggled good-naturedly over prices. Goods from the past, present, and future filled the stalls. Max and Taylor strolled up and down the aisles. He asked questions about old pottery and trinkets and rubbed stones and fossils that were supposedly found on the grounds when the defense plant was built. When they came to a table of antique toys, he studied each one and bought a teeny jack-in-the-box with a monkey inside. "You like things popping out of boxes, don't you?" Taylor smiled.

"My sister does. I told you the snake in the can is hers. I like old things. You know that Uncle Samuel you found? He was modeled after a toy my mother's brother had as a child."

Taylor took the brown bag with the jack-in-the-box and stuck it in her shoulder bag so Max could have both hands free to look at books. He bought one about the Native Americans that once inhabited Ohio and another about the promise of population growth in World War II and later decline of industry in Boomtown.

He didn't seem like the Max Stuart she knew.

When she stopped to look at jewelry, he leaned against a post and leafed through his books. The gentle way he handled them brought tears to her eyes. If she could remember the tally on his good points, she'd up the total by another.

"The decline of Boomtown is similar to the story of a book about Middletown, USA, required reading at Ball State University."

Taylor did a doubletake. "You never told me you went to college."

"Two years."

He turned to a table of old knives and pretended interest. She tapped him on the shoulder. "And then?"

"I dropped out."

"Why?"

"Education isn't the answer to everything."

The crowd thickened as the carriage dropped off another load of sightseers. It was hard not to be separated with people jostling them and impossible to question him further. Besides, how did you argue with a statement like that? She tucked her hand in his arm.

As they pushed on, she spotted something. "Oh, look." She pointed to a bench that was child-sized but sturdy and made of maple. Two interlocked hearts were carved in the back. "I must buy that for Sheila."

"The hearts are interlocked like those on your ankle bracelets." Max smiled, as if he understood, but only a twin would truly understand how interlocked she and Sheila were. Two hearts, two souls, two lives intertwined. Knowing one another's thoughts and feelings. "Nice workmanship," he said, running his hands over the wood. "It's not antique but it's worth the asking price."

If it hadn't been, Taylor would have bought it anyway. She'd give it to her sister and Peter for a wedding gift. Hearts had been their "thing" since they were born. Matching identification bands made of pink beads on their ankles in the hospital. Locketts with hearts and their names engraved on

them in grade school. And finally, the ankle bracelets for high school graduation. "If people can't tell us apart by now," Taylor protested when Mom gave them those, "they should be allowed to wallow in their confusion."

Their mother looked hurt and Sheila stepped in. "Tag's just kidding, Mom. We love them, the same as we love one another."

Feeling ashamed, Taylor agreed and she hadn't objected to a heart gift or twin reference since. Sheila, who liked the interlocked concept, would love the bench.

The woodworker took Taylor's money and offered to hold the bench while they finished shopping. She and Max moved on to look at a beautiful display of handmade quilts. "There are so many lovely things," Taylor said, sighing, "that before I move, I'd like to do my Christmas shopping here."

"You're going to move?" Max clasped his hand over hers on a quilt.

"Pardon me, lady, but I overheard what you were saying about Christmas." A man shoved a microphone into her face. "I'm from WBJ5-TV out of Cincinnati, and we're doing a Hometown Highlights segment live. This is a great place to shop and I think viewers would like to know what you've spotted today that makes you want to come back."

"Uh ... furniture. Quilts."

"Before we go on, may I ask your name?"

"T-Taylor."

"Glad to meet you, Taylor. Is this your husband?"

Slack-jawed, she looked at Max. The interviewer shoved the microphone his way. His face red, Max pushed his hair back. "Nuh ... yes. I'm Ma ... tt."

"And your last name, Matt?"

Max looked at her. "Gayle."

My heaven. What would people think? Her mother. The people at school. She grabbed the mic. "Hale. Mah hubby meant to say Hale." Taylor wrapped her arm around Max's waist. "This is our first trip north of the Mason-Dixon Lahn and Matt is simply blown away bah it all."

"Blown away by Boomtown's Defense Plant? You're quite the comedian, Mrs. Hale."

Laughter from the crowd rang in her scarlet-tinged ears as she and Max finally broke away. Detouring just long enough to get her bench, he hauled her and it toward a waiting carriage. Taylor clutched the books he'd bought to her chest and tried to look penitent, but the music in her heart played a smile around her lips. She hadn't had so much fun in a long time.

"I looked grody on television. And foolish," Max complained as he tried hoisting himself and the bench into the carriage. He was using one hand, his burned one, and frowning, so she put her shoulder to his rear and shoved.

Max fell onto the carriage seat on top of the bench in his arms and almost fell over the other side. The two prior occupants and the driver whirled around. Rising slowly, bench clutched tightly, Max frowned down at her.

Even when he was angry, he looked so sexy she didn't mind being seen by the TV viewing audience as his wife. Was

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

she losing her mind as well as her heart?

## Chapter 7

THE FRONT door of the Town Crier banged and Max looked up from his sister's desk as Marcia Millian's high heels clicked loudly across the wood floor. He was wearing his half-glasses but didn't bother to remove them. Marcia looked around the room, nose wrinkled as if she smelled something bad. She ran a finger over the counter and inspected it.

Max stood and watched with amusement. "You forgot your white gloves. I believe they're standard for the dust test."

She gave a sharp jerk on her suit jacket. "I saw you on television." She came around the counter to perch on his desk. She crossed her legs, causing her skirt to ride up. Seeing a short skirt creep up on Marcia to reveal more thigh didn't excite him as much as watching Taylor's long skirt expose one lovely ankle. "Please tell me you aren't married to that little shrimp. I could see she caught you off guard, so I'm guessing you went along with the joke."

"We're not married but Taylor is a nice girl." Lord, that sounded inept. "With a sense of humor."

"I'll bet she likes toys and novelties because they smell like money."

"Taylor doesn't know..."

"What doesn't she know?"

He didn't like the glint in Marcia's eye. "I've been meaning to call you. Mother seemed to think you and I ... that is ... she said you thought..."

"That we still have something too good between us to let go? We do, Max." She slid off the desk, came over to him, and took hold of his shirt collar with both hands. "If you would stop playing silly pranks, everything would be perfect between us. I don't see anything wrong with your business, but you could act the part of an executive instead of a naughty boy." She pushed her lips into an exaggerated pout and raised them toward his mouth.

"Marcia." He loosened her fingers from his collar, and she slid them down to his tie. "I like having fun. I enjoy mixing business with pleasure. I like coming up with new toys and the challenge of finding ones that kids and adults will love and buy. That's who I am and what I do. I don't like formal dinners and business meetings, and I'm not crazy about wearing a suit all the time. I do the best I can with the business world, but you thrive on work. Business is your world and I don't belong in it."

She yanked his tie, hard. "You could be someone, Maxwell Stuart. Someone big. Important. Successful. But you don't have the savvy. You're just like your uncles said, a loser, the same as your dad."

"It's time you left."

"I'm going just as fast as I can. Loser!" She slammed the door.

Max heaved a sigh of relief and broke into a grin. If she'd have insulted him alone, he might have held his temper but no one talked about his father. "Good riddance." Max dusted his hands.

\* \* \* \*

"WHAT'S THE occasion?" Dani asked Taylor, sweeping a mascara-fringed glance over her white dress. Taylor had chosen red combs for her hair and looped a red printed bandanna around her waist. It wasn't too big a stretch for a librarian's stereotype, she'd told herself that morning when she dressed, but she might have been mistaken. "Is your fiancé coming mid-week?"

"M—" Taylor stopped herself. Dani wasn't thinking of Max, and Taylor shouldn't be. The man was impossible. She hadn't tried to be funny on TV. And it was no worse than him giving a false name. Was he afraid to be seen with her? Embarrassed to be caught unkempt? Or why had he alternately pouted over the laughing stock they'd made of themselves and joked about 'his southern-bred honey'? She had been about to say Max might stop by the school library on his way home, but last night he'd gone straight to his apartment after work and she'd heard nothing from him.

"Go on," Dani prompted. "What is this mysterious fiancé's name? Mmm ... what?"

Taylor couldn't say Max. He'd given the TV interviewer a false name for a reason. She wished she knew what it was. "M..." Malcomb? Morton? No, she needed a name that sounded suave. "Mm-is-ter Peter Lapierre."

"I love that name!" Dani clapped her hands. "This town is so boring, it's a good thing you met someone before you came here."

Taylor concentrated on the computer screen and the listing of new books they'd received.



"Of course, there is a little excitement now and then." Dani perched on the edge of Taylor's desk. "Did you hear about the ad that appeared in The Town Crier last week?"

Taylor hit the wrong key on the computer and her screen went blank.

Dani leaned forward confidentially. "Some woman ... advertised for an S.M. partner."

Careful not to look at her, Taylor reloaded the file. "What's S.M.?"

"Sadomasochism. Didn't you learn about that in health class or somewhere?"

Taylor gave her assistant a blank look.

"Honestly." Dani threw up her hands. "You are too naive to be real."

Amused in spite of herself, Taylor couldn't resist tormenting Dani. "Does it have anything to do with..." She lowered her voice. "S-e-x?"

"Of course!" Dani stared at her. "You're teasing." She burst out laughing. "You have a sense of humor."

Why did that come as such a surprise to everyone?

"The Town Crier sold out of papers. It was so different from the usual stuff, everyone wanted to guess who placed it. And you know what I think?"

Taylor's heart pounded. She shook her head.

"I think the editor made the whole thing up to sell more newspapers. Later in the week the ad listed the address as Glorious Apartments, which is just too farfetched. Glorious is an ancient place where no one under seventy would be

caught dead." Dani fluffed her hair. "I live in Condo Complex. Where do you live?"

"I rent rooms from a little old lady."

"You know?" Dani stretched, and a young man who wanted to check out a book nearly lost his eyeballs on the counter.

"You really should get a life, Taylor."

\* \* \* \*

TIMES HAD changed since his high school days, Max thought, as he donned a black tuxedo with red cummerbund the following Saturday night. The Homecoming Dance at Carbon City was held in the high school gym, following a football game, and jeans and a nice sweater were perfectly acceptable. He hadn't worn a tux since the Tiara Ball last year.

Damn. Marcia made him mad. If his parents saw him on television, unshaven with Taylor Hale just up from the Mason-Dixon Line, they'd know it was some kind of joke. If The Uncles saw him, they'd tell one another that couldn't be Maxwell Stuart, descended from their bloodline. But for Marcia to come into the office, saying what they said about him and Dad ... Max hated the way his dad's brothers thought they were better, and knew more than anyone else. Niftee novelties and toys were designed, manufactured, and marketed by his father's company. Start to finish, Niftee was Dad's baby, and when he was hospitalized and his bills mounted, The Uncles could have stepped in and saved him from impending bankruptcy. But no, they had to pooh-pooh his idea and say he should have become a professional man.

Toys were for kids. So Max dropped out of school and ran the company while quietly feeding his college fund back into the business.

Sometimes he'd remember he wanted to be a history professor and then he'd remind himself of how haughty The Uncles were. He'd never understood why Dad didn't want him to be a teacher until he'd seen Pooh-Pooh and Pro in action. They were enough to sour a person on education and educators.

Max's biggest worry was that his TV appearance might drive away clients and Niftee sales would suffer, driving Dad into a depression like the one after the surgery. But when he'd talked to him yesterday, he seemed fine. Perhaps he finally believed Max liked what he was doing. The only thing he regretted was not graduating. He'd taken a couple of classes and gotten his associate's degree but he wanted a full degree. If he could go back, he'd take some classes in design so he could invent his own toys, like Dad.

Taylor sure laid it on thick with that TV guy, but the broadcast was live so there was no going back. He'd stayed away from her on Monday, afraid the paparazzi would want a follow-up story. "Would you tell us what you bought? Are you planning to come North again to Christmas shop, Mr. and Mrs. Hale?"

It had been pretty funny, and one day was as long as Max had been able to stay away from Taylor. He slipped his feet into black shoes. Tuesday night, he'd asked her if she'd like to take a walk and they'd strolled through Paradise Park, neither of them minding when a light rain started to fall. Wednesday

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

night, she'd invited him to a chili supper at the Senior Center; she had two tickets she'd bought from someone at school, and they'd both felt comfortable chatting with older people. She wasn't like other women he'd known. The water fight she'd started under the sprinklers at the cemetery Thursday was a riot. Friday, they'd gone to a history movie at the museum, her idea, but she seemed as interested as he did.

The Uncles would disown him from the Stuart clan if they'd seen them in the graveyard. He and Taylor had taken flowers to Granna, whom he missed so much he hadn't visited her burial plot, and when he rubbed his eyes, Taylor held his hand tightly while looking the other way. On the way out of the cemetery, he'd stumbled over a sprinkler and shot it her way. So, maybe he'd started it by soaking her, but she had a knack of making him goof up.

If Mrs. Stout saw him and Taylor on TV, she'd think they were both living in her apartments under false names. Chuckling, Max pinned a red carnation to his lapel and picked up the white orchid he'd bought Taylor. He'd had it made into a wrist corsage, in case she surprised him and wore a strapless dress. She'd surprised him a lot lately.

He frowned as he descended the worn stairway to the second floor. Since she insisted he prove that he could get her ad right, they would have only this one night together as a couple. When the letters started coming in from Boomtown's straight men, she'd choose someone else to do crosswords, play games, and kiss. Someone other than him.

That should be okay. He hadn't been looking for a relationship. He'd bungled his way into this one. At 2A, he squared his shoulders and lifted his knuckles to knock.

Max jumped back as Taylor threw open the door. "I hope I don't look overeager. I know you hadn't knocked yet, but I sensed you were here."

He liked her eagerness. He handed her the corsage box. "You look beautiful." And sexier than he could have imagined. Her black gown was high in front with a halter neck and formfitting, with a swoosh of ruffles from the knees down, allowing her to move freely. "Turn around." She pivoted, exposing delicate tanned shoulders with a beauty spot on her left shoulder blade. He touched it.

"It's a birthmark."

"It looks like a heart. I like it." Her back wasn't bare to the waist like he'd hoped but her shoulders were bare. He laid his hands on them and gloried at the soft heat beneath his fingers. The delicate, velvety skin. He turned her around. "You take my breath away."

She smiled and touched his cheek, and he couldn't believe he'd ever thought she was plain. "Compliments are above the call of duty."

"Duty has nothing to do with tonight," he said, drawing her close for a long, lingering kiss. "Tonight is sheer pleasure."

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR FELT as if she'd entered a dream world. Max's red Corvette was posh, he looked handsome in his tux, and his kiss had confirmed the fact she was in love. She ran her hand

across the dashboard. He must sell a lot of toys. He glanced at her inquisitively. "It's beautiful," she said, and he laid his hand over hers.

She took her glasses out of her evening bag and put them on before crossing the threshold of the Grand Hotel. She'd fashioned her hair into an upsweep and bought a gown that was daring for her librarian persona, but ditching the glasses would mean going one step too far. "You must see pretty well without them," Max commented as a uniformed doorman bowed them through the brass-framed wide glass door.

"Better sometimes than others. I ... uh ... have astigmatism."

The Grand Hotel was actually grand, unlike the many *non-de-plumes* in Boomtown. "Plush red carpet, gilded sofas with velvet seats, lush ferns and a fountain. I'll bet the rooms are lovely," Taylor said wistfully. She'd never stayed in a really nice hotel.

"We could find out," Max said, wagging his brows.

After that kiss at her apartment, she was hot enough, but no matter what he said, tonight was a favor to make up for his multiple errors. His kiss seemed tender and passionate, and sincere, but she couldn't let herself read too much into it. "You'd do anything to get out of going to this dance, wouldn't you?"

"Life's not fair," he said as the glass elevator with piped-in music whisked them to the top floor. "Penny's sequestered in a luxury hotel while I keep the home fires burning in an archaic apartment house with a wire cage that groans."

"You're very good at keeping home fires burning."

"And you make Glorious Apartments glorious." He dropped a kiss on her nose.

Max took her arm as they entered the ballroom, steering her through a crowd of high school kids. Crystal chandeliers seemed out of keeping with the rock music the Vegas band was just beginning to play. "Yo, you must be new here. Wanta dance?" a boy with spiked hair asked Taylor.

"No, thank you," she said. "I ... we ... just got here."

"Catch ya later," the teen said, dancing his way across the room.

"He thinks you're a student."

"The curse of being tiny."

"Miss Gayle?" A handsome young man she recognized as a football player stopped before them. "Would you like to dance?"

"Thank you, but I don't believe so."

"You sure look different tonight," he said. "Hot, you know."

"Thank you, Todd," Taylor said, remembering his name.

"I'll bet he doesn't ask any of the other chaperones," Max grumbled as they made their way to the punch table.

He was looking at a cluster of chaperones that included a woman with her foot in a cast, an obese guidance counselor crammed into a purple-sequined gown, and a man in a plaid suit and striped tie. "You haven't seen Dani yet." Taylor nodded toward her assistant who was talking to a pale, thin man in a white dinner jacket near the punch table.

"She does look better than the others," Max said, waggling his brows again.

"Marcus isn't bad-looking." Taylor pointed out a blonde, bearded male teacher. "I made up the story about a fiancé to keep him at arm's length."

Max's smile faded, she noticed with satisfaction. Hers faded when Dani spotted them and waved, a gesture that set her boobs bouncing inside her form-fitting white dress. Tugging her future doctor along, she wiggled her way through the crowd toward them.

"Taylor," Dani said as warmly as if they were lifelong friends. "I want you to meet Joseph Otter. And this must be your Peter."

Max choked on his punch and Taylor felt her cheeks flame. She'd forgotten to tell him he was supposed to assume a different identity. She'd even forgotten she'd given Dani a name for her fiancé. "Yes. This is Peter." Darn, what was the last name of Sheila's intended? "Peter La..."

"Pierre?" Dani supplied, giggling. "Are you so excited you forgot your husband-to-be's name?"

"Yes," Taylor said, hooking her hand through Max's arm and squeezing it tightly. She could tell by the twitching of his face muscles he was about to burst out laughing. "I've missed him so much, I'm just tongue-tied. Now, if you don't mind, we were on our way to the dance floor. They're playing our song."

Max made a definite choking sound. His face was turning purple. "Goodbye, Joseph," she said, tugging Max toward the dance floor. "It's been a pleasure."

"Nice meeting you, Peter," the pre-med student said, holding out his hand to Max.



"Pierre," Max corrected.

Taylor yanked on his arm and pulled him toward the dance floor. "Your name is Peter Lapierre," she said between clenched teeth.

"I thought you changed it from Peter to Pierre." His laughter seemed to be getting the best of him.

"Stop that and dance."

"Since when is Proud Mary our song, sweetie pie?"

"Since right now." And suddenly, Taylor started to laugh. "If Dani marries him, her name will be Dani Otter."

"Dani Otter what?" Max played straight man, much to her delight. "Otter go away?"

"Everyone's staring at us," Taylor whispered. "We otter stop laughing." She pulled a straight face. "I mean, we have to stop."

The band switched to a popular slow song and Max drew her close. "I'll try to think about something else."

With his breath tickling her ear, Taylor thought about something else, and when Max pressed his body against hers, she knew he was thinking the same thing.

\* \* \* \*

HOURS LATER, the band played "Goodnight, Sweetheart."

"My high school dances were never like tonight's," Max said softly.

Nor were hers. Her escorts were never so handsome as Max, never danced so well, never made her heart do the light fantastic when they held her close. He caught her to him and

rubbed his chin against her hair. "I'm not ready for the night to end," he said softly.

She had to remember he wasn't really her fiancé, or even her boyfriend, and they weren't destined to become closer. Max thought a college education was overrated, which was like thumbing his nose at her life's goals. And if he knew she wanted to be a professor, he'd never want to see her again.

"Taylor? Have you gone to sleep on me?" She shook her head, nuzzling his chest with the motion. Max smelled like fresh air and crisp men's cologne and carnation. Going to sleep on him, her body pressed tightly against his, was a very appealing idea. Chances are it was lust she felt for Max. Not love. She'd had little experience with either.

On the way home, he laid his hand on her knee, and she laid her head on his shoulder. It felt so right, but it was all so wrong. "I'm glad you invited me to the dance," he whispered, his breath hot in her ear. "I like playing Peter." He trailed a finger up and down her back as they walked the stairs to her apartment.

She belonged with a man who was interested in the psychological and sociological issues in education and society. Not one who played with, and sold, silly toys and made her laugh. Not one who turned her on with his every touch. "Would you like to come in for a while?" The words popped out.

Inside her apartment, she leaned her head against his chest once more, drawn by an invisible magnetic force. He stroked her hair. They could be friends, make love even,

without the same long-term goals. She didn't want the night to end—ever. She wanted to stay in Max's arms.

He tipped her chin. "Would you like to go somewhere?"

"What?"

"A walk in the park. A late movie. Coffee shop. You name it. I just don't want to leave you."

She couldn't suggest he come into her bed. She backed toward the bedroom. Maybe he was afraid to ask. "I'll just change into something more comfortable."

"Me, too," he said, and was gone.

Taylor slammed her bedroom door and kicked off her evening shoes. You didn't need a college education to understand, "I'll just change into something more comfortable." That line was in every romantic movie and TV show she'd ever seen.

Her bed was perfectly made with crisp sheets, her room carefully picked up. She hadn't consciously thought about him taking her to bed, but the disappointment she felt told her inner psyche she'd had high hopes.

By the time Taylor had hung up her dress, she heard Max reenter her apartment. "You should have locked the door," he called from the kitchen. "I knocked and you didn't hear me. Anyone could have come in."

"If I'd locked it, you couldn't have," she called back. It was a warm and muggy night, and a walk wasn't tops on her entertainment list, but this might be her one and only date with Max. So she'd better make it good. Donning a loose white sundress that felt good against her skin, she shook her hair free, and coming out of the bedroom, managed to drop

her glasses and step on them. They were hard as all get-out to break. She ground her heel, glad he had his back turned.

"Look what I did now," she gasped.

Max shoved something in his pocket. Turning, he rushed to pick up her glasses. "Criminy. They look like an elephant stepped on them. You must weigh more than one-hundred-and two."

She turned up her nose at him and taking the broken glasses, tossed them in the plastic waste can. "Good thing my eyes are working well tonight."

Max stared at her.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked impatiently.

He shook his head, apparently ridding it of some errant thought, and looked down at a postcard in his hand. Sheila's. "Where did you find that?" Taylor asked, snatching it away.

"In the crack between the cushions on the couch. I sat down and there it was."

She'd picked it up off the floor the day his noise blew it out of the fruit bowl. When she sat down to think, she must have let it slip out of her hands. "It's from my sister."

"Who's in love."

"You read my message?"

"I didn't have anything else to do."

Max read Spanish. She didn't care if he was a snoop. She handed the card back to him. "I've forgotten what it says. Read the rest."

"I thought we were going to take a walk."

"We've got all night. I want you to read it."

He squinted, shrugged, pulled half glasses from his pocket and slipped them on. "I can't wait—"

"I didn't know you wore glasses to read."

Max took them off again before looking up.

"You're embarrassed to be seen in them," Taylor said triumphantly. "You are a vain man."

"I am not." He stuck them on and glared at her.

"You look distinguished."

"Really?" His vanity, his first flaw other than his propensity for goofing up, was endearing. She nodded and he smiled and started to read again. "I can't wait for you to meet my dream man."

"I've been through a thousand of Sheila's dream boys and men." Taylor sighed.

"I'm getting married and I want you to be maid-of-honor."

"What?"

"You forgot that part?"

"Uh ... I must have missed it. Or misread it. My Spanish is rusty." Taylor sank down on the couch and fanned herself with a sofa pillow. "Read the rest to see if I missed anything else."

"I'm sure Mom told you I was in love, and you stewed because I told her first. But if you laid your pride aside and had someone read you this card, promptly..." Max hesitated and looked over his glasses at her.

"Wipe that smirk off your face," Taylor ordered.

"She goes on," he said without complying, "then, you'll be the first to know I'm getting married in six weeks."

"Married? She just met the guy. Has she completely lost her mind?"

Max shrugged and read, "Please ask your fiancé to be a groomsman."

"You deceitful crumb," Taylor yelled, grabbing her postcard back. "You're making up everything." She turned her back. "Once you learned I never studied Spanish, you could have given me a break. But no, you had to go on and give me the scare of my life." She turned around again, hands on hips, to face his knowing smirk. "You really are as bad as Sheila. You're rotten cooks, great dancers, and you both love to trick me."

"Is great dancing bad?"

"You put me to shame."

"You dance as well as I do, and I'll bet you're as good a dancer as Sheila." He cupped her chin in his hand. "Is all the lava you keep spitting because you don't think you measure up to your twin?"

"I'm the smart one and she's the pretty one if you must know, but we don't compete, and in the future, I'll thank you not to play Dr. Freud."

Max held her tightly and rubbed his chin across the top of her head. "Taylor, sweetheart, you're pretty and you're smart. But not smart enough to catch me lying because I didn't. I took four years of Spanish in high school, and I read every word exactly as it was written."

He read the message aloud in fluent Spanish and she couldn't doubt him any longer. She threw up her hands. "Why does she think I'm engaged?" Taylor paced the floor, stopping

to tweak a brown leaf off Jimmy Dean and one that was turning yellow off Geraldine. "Dani couldn't have spread the word all the way to Spain, could she? Unless she knows one of Sheila's friends or her friends' friends. Darn. I tell one lie and I get caught. Now, I have to find a date for Sheila's wedding."

"If you're bridesmaid, why do you need an escort?"

Leave it to a man to not understand. "She marries a handsome, wealthy man and I don't even have a boyfriend?" Taylor rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Max, I'd look like a charity case. The ugly stepsister. The—"

"Okay, okay. You need a date. Maybe the groomsman—"

Taylor interrupted him this time. "What groomsman? What fiancé? I'm out on a limb here, and you can't seem to see it. She thinks I have a fiancé, so I at least have to have a date for her wedding. Preferably, a date who'll pretend to be a fiancé."

She turned to Max expectantly. Hopefully. "You've had experience."

He stepped back. "Oh, no. Pretending to be your husband when strangers knocked at your door was one thing, and acting as your fiancé at a high school dance was another, but I'm not going to be drawn into a web of deceit."

"It's just for one night and it's no big deal."

He took another step backward. "I'd have to lie to your whole family and someone would trip me up with a question I can't answer and embarrass you. Then you'd get mad and say I always goof up."

"You won't blow this. I'll coach you."

"No. As soon as they meet me, your mother and sister will start talking silver and china patterns and want to know how many children we want."

"Sounds like you've been this route before." Her interest piqued, Taylor tipped her head to look into his eyes.

He averted his gaze. "I was almost engaged once, but when every female on both sides of the family began talking number of attendants, groomsmen, babies ... I realized I didn't love the girl enough to go through all that."

If he loved someone enough, would he? Or would he insist on a small wedding or elopement? "The focus will be on Sheila and Peter, not you and me."

"Don't kid yourself. When one of my buddies got married, he talked another friend into buying his girl a ring. Then, both guys started in on me. Everyone who takes the plunge wants to see their friends go down with them."

"Ah, come on." Taylor slipped her arms around his neck. "I'll protect you."

"Absolutely not." Max shook his head. She played with the hair on the back of his neck. He took hold of her hands and pulled them away. "I can't go, Taylor. I'm allergic to weddings. I break out in a sweat."

"Very funny," she said, parting her lips.

Max kissed her, but when he deepened his kiss and she found herself leaning into him, she forced herself to ease away. She was timber to his fire. He pulled her close again, and she ignited with passion. Pressing against him, she met the thrusts of his tongue with hers. He splayed his hands across her back where it was bare above her sundress. She



Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

shivered and he slid them down her waist, half-spanning it, then on down to cup her bottom.

If he took her to bed, then consented to the wedding, she'd think he said 'yes' because he felt he owed her. And if they went to bed and he didn't go to the wedding, she'd know she failed as a lover. She wanted him with every fiber of her body, but she wanted their next date—if they had one—to be "no strings attached." Sighing, she planted her hands against his chest. "If you got my ad right, I'll find a date for the wedding. So please, just forget I asked."

## Chapter 8

MAX GLARED at the typewriter keys. Taylor was still determined to go through with her ridiculous idea of advertising for a man. She had thrown a bucket of cold water on the fire building inside him when she brought up the ad, and he should be grateful. Otherwise, he'd have tried to tempt her into something she might regret. She wasn't the type to take lovemaking lightly. An admirable but frustrating quality.

He shoved his chair back and rested his elbows on its arms. He hated to see her go to her sister's wedding with someone she picked out of a newspaper. Someone lustful. Someone who might be a rapist or a murderer. If it wasn't too late, he'd be tempted to drop the ad, or doctor it up a little. Maybe have the men come to him first for screening. Or send him their credentials. He tented his fingers. What kind of man would answer an ad like hers? What would he say in a letter if he was that kind of man?

Max shoved his chair forward again and began to type. "To whom it may concern." No. That was too formal. "Dear Ms. SF." Kind of hokey but he was just playing around here. "I am a single male (never married), understanding, and moderately nice-looking. I treat a woman well." That should strike home with Taylor, after all those S&M letters. He scratched his head. What else? "I love to dance and play word games." No sense saying he didn't like to run unless there was a reason, such as stealing third base or whacking a

tennis ball. "I enjoy adventure movies and..." He paused to white the sentence out and omit 'adventure.' "And quiet evenings at home." He wrote a couple more sentences. If she really read this, she'd think he was crazy. "I dress well but enjoy casual clothes when I'm not working. I like learning new information but love reading about olden times." He whited those lines out. He didn't want her to guess he wrote the letter. "I don't have a lot of formal education but I'm well-informed."

Muttso stuck his head in Max's lap. "Hey, buddy. You haven't done that much lately." He petted the dog and he lay down again. "You washing your hands of me? Okay, so I don't blame you. This is sheer lunacy but it's kind of fun." He tented his fingers and studied what he'd written. "I'm looking for a casual relationship and would love to meet you. How would you like to go..." He thought for a moment. She liked romantic movies. Max grabbed a copy of *The Town Crier* off the counter and scanned the ads. "...to the Bijoux in Boomtown Saturday night?" He signed it "Harrison," his middle name, and put the phone number at his condo.

Muttso panted and Max, chuckling, rose to get him a drink of water. The sound or movement sent the dog scuttering into a corner. "You and Petunia are both afraid of your own shadows," Max scolded.

He set the fresh water on the floor and Penny's dog ambled forth slowly.

What if he sent the letter? Would Taylor pick him for a date? It would be an interesting experiment. He chuckled

again and Muttso cocked an ear at him. "You think I'm crazy?"

The overgrown pooch ducked his head, took two laps of his water, and walked back to the corner to lie down. He drank more than that when Max first came, and showed more interest in eating. There were shelves full of canned dog food in the storeroom, so he must like the stuff, but he never emptied his dish. Maybe he wasn't getting enough exercise, or maybe he missed his mistress. Penny kept him at the Crier, too, but she pretty much spoiled him. Max walked him around the block morning and night. Crouching, he petted the dog. Muttso looked up with soulful eyes.

A night at Glorious Apartment 3A might cheer him, and Mrs. Stout allowed pets. "You want to go home with me, big guy?" The dog ran to the coat closet where Max kept his leash. "Smart boy," Max said, clipping it on his collar.

They were on their way to the door when Max had a thought. Carefully releasing his letter from the typewriter, he folded it and took out a plain white envelope that he addressed, stamped, and stuck in his pocket. "We'll have to take a ride over to my place and change the answering machine message if I decide to mail it."

Muttso stood on his hind legs against the front door and gnawed on the handle. He was ready to go and Max was ready for the crazy bin. "Muttso and Nuttso. If vaudeville wasn't dead, we could start an act."

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR COULD have been Cinderella spotted with the prince. She spent the Monday after the Homecoming Dance fielding questions and comments from students, teachers, and Dani. "Where did you ever meet Peter? Where did he learn to dance like that? What does he do for a living?

"He's so hot, you'd better keep him under lock and key." That from Dani who, judging by the scrutinizing look she gave Taylor, thought it was a miracle she'd gotten Max in the first place.

"I keep him handcuffed to my bed," Taylor said sweetly. Dani looked startled.

Taylor winked. "That keeps him hot."

"Your glasses are gone. I knew there was something different about you. You look better without them."

Thank you, Dani, for that observation. Taylor had forgotten all about the blasted glasses. She'd been preoccupied ever since the dance with thoughts of "what if..." What if she hadn't pulled away? What if she had gone to bed with Max? She was certain that was what he'd had in mind. He'd looked as crestfallen as she'd felt when he suggested a walk earlier.

"Can you see?"

"Not well, but I ... uh ... lost a lens." The rest of the day, Taylor tried to remember to grope and blink.

"I guess you do need help seeing, but maybe you could get contacts," Dani said when she was leaving.

Or a seeing eye dog? Taylor might have overdone her act but she'd gotten a lot of work out of her assistant. "There's a thought."

"And if you don't mind a suggestion, you should wear your hair another way and buy clothes with more style. You looked cool the other night at the dance."

A cool woman with a hot man. Taylor and Max ... Peter, to everyone at school. Dani's left-handed compliment put a smile on Taylor's lips. "Dani? I was kidding about the handcuffs," she said before she left.

Taylor passed Max, walking Muttso, and honked her horn. Max gave her a wave and a warm smile, heightening her good mood. She'd been depressed yesterday when he didn't come around, but maybe he had things to do. Visit his mother? Polish his toys? See a girlfriend?

She hoped he didn't have a girlfriend, but a guy that handsome could have his pick.

They'd both lost interest in a walk after she pulled away from him. Was he angry? Disappointed? He said he was suddenly tired and asked for a rain check, but what if he didn't come back? What if he'd been working up to taking her to bed and decided he was wasting his time?

Taylor had changed into shorts and was pouring herself a glass of iced tea when she remembered the glasses she'd meant to buy. Shrugging, she sliced a lemon. Might as well let her assistant prove useful again.

Taylor heard a godawful noise—a scuttling, followed by a low moan. Cursing, from Max. What was he up to now? He must have some toy up there. The moan became a howl, rising in intensity. More cursing. Petunia barked. The ancient elevator creaked slowly upward. The only person who rode it nowadays was Mrs. Stout. Taylor's phone rang.

"Max here. See if you can detain the landlady while I take this dog outside."

"Since when do you have a dog?"

"It's Muttso. I brought him home and he won't settle down, and Mrs. Stout is going to blame me for the noise." Max hung up.

Taylor raced out her door and saw the cage-like elevator groaning its way to second floor. "Mrs. Stout," she called.

"Could you stop for a minute? I need your help."

The landlady's cheeks bore two bright spots of red, and she'd stuck a knitting needle through the gray knot on top her head. Her flowered apron was spotted with spaghetti sauce.

"I have to take care of something first."

She chugged right past second floor.

"It's an emergency," Taylor wailed.

The elevator screeched to a halt halfway to third floor.

"Did you push the emergency button or are you stuck?" Taylor hollered.

"I pulled the brake," Mrs. Stout said. "I'm coming down."

A grinding of gears was followed by a shaking and shuddering. "Blast it, now I am stuck."

Taylor looked around to see Max creeping down the steps, dragging a reluctant Muttso. As he rounded the corner, starting for first floor, he gave Taylor thumbs up.

"What should I do?" she hissed, running after him.

"Nothing, until I'm gone."

Taylor repeated her question for the landlady who sent her after the fix-it man she relied on for everything. "Lives three blocks down, has a sign out front. Hurry."

Taylor ran to her apartment to get her car keys. Her Crier lay in front of her door and she picked it up and tossed it inside. If she didn't come up with a good reason why she wanted to talk to the landlady, hence causing her to get stuck in the elevator, she'd be in the same doghouse as Max. On wheels.

\* \* \* \*

MAX TOOK Muttso for a long walk before sneaking back into the apartment house. In retrospect, he shouldn't have given Muttso an automated poodle that barked for a toy. Penny's dog was a big baby, petrified of the frolicking, yipping canine.

On the way back to the apartments, Muttso stood on his hind legs to peer in the window of a butcher shop. Max peered in, too. The butcher held up one finger for them to wait, then came forth with a soup bone. "I've been wondering what happened to you, boy. You usually come see me every day." Muttso wagged his whole body before grabbing the bone.

Max understood now why Penny had such a large supply of dog food on the storeroom shelf.

Mrs. Stout didn't look out when they passed her door, and Max cast a nervous look toward the elevator shaft. The rickety cage was sitting on ground level.

Muttso padded behind Max up the stairway to the second floor where Max pecked on Mr. Hockerberry's door. If the dog made friends with Petunia, maybe he'd be happier here, and quieter. And maybe since Max had learned what the dog liked



to eat, he'd quit longing for Penny. Mr. Hockerberry opened up and the dogs fell in love at first sight. Maybe the affinity was because of their cowardice. Max hoped it wasn't that Petunia was in heat.

Mr. Hockerberry asked if Muttso could stay awhile, and Max readily agreed. He had to talk to Taylor. He had to thank her for getting him out of a jam. He had to tell her ... what? He just wanted to see her. Hell, he wanted to beg her not to go out with any of those perverts she'd pick up in a newspaper ad. But what right did he have?

Her door was standing half open so he walked in. "Taylor?" He strode to the kitchen. "Where are you?" No answer. The bedroom door stood open and a suitcase lay closed on the bed. Max's heart pounded. She'd said something about moving. "Taylor?"

The bathroom door opened. A tall, slender blonde splayed one hand across her chest, her eyes wide. "Who are you? Why didn't you knock?"

The annoyance in her voice did it. She sounded like Taylor. "You must be Sheila." He held out his hand. "Max Stuart."

Her fingers were long and slender, her nails rectangular and red-tipped. Taylor's fingers were short, her nails small pink ovals. Sheila could almost look him in the eye. Taylor would need a footstool to level gazes. Sheila's waist was tiny, her breasts generous. Taylor was petite. Perfectly petite.

Both girls wore ankle bracelets with interlocked hearts.

"If you're through comparing me to my twin," Sheila said, "you can shake my hand."

"I guess you must go through that quite a bit."

She tossed her long hair. "And I guess you must be Tag's boyfriend." Her laughter was husky, her tone of voice playful. "Looks like my sister has good taste." She was an easygoing flirt. Taylor's sincerity made her seem serious. Sheila would be a hard woman to compete with.

"You take longer to recover than most people. Do you find us alike, or not?"

"I haven't decided. Where is Taylor?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. I came to surprise her and found the door unlocked and her gone. She must not have gone far." Sheila swung into the kitchen on long tanned legs that went all the way up to short white shorts. She opened the refrigerator door and bent at the waist to look inside. Was she testing his allegiance to Taylor? Or was Sheila so used to flaunting her charms that the moves were uncalculated? "I'm hungry." Sheila busied herself taking things from the fridge. Eggs. Butter. "How about you? Like fried egg sandwiches?"

"Sure, but Taylor said you can't cook."

"She did, did she?" Sheila's eyes took on added sparkle. "Maybe my little sis underestimates me."

Max glanced at the clock. Where was Taylor? He wanted to see her.

Sheila held her tongue between her teeth while she worked. After throwing in a hunk of butter, she carefully cracked an egg, then another. "Whoops. That yolk broke." She broke another. "Oh well, scrambled eggs make good sandwiches."

It might have been when Sheila decided to make an omelet instead of egg sandwiches that she got into trouble, or maybe she decided on an omelet because she was already in trouble. She put in cheese first thing, and it melted, making a stringy mess, so she was trying to chop green pepper and onion fast, when she cut herself. "Yikes." She jumped around, her thumb in her mouth.

"Let me see."

She held out her thumb and Max saw a drop of blood. "It's only a scratch."

"You wouldn't say that if it was your cut." Tears sprang to her eyes. He took her hand for a closer look.

"You two must have already met."

Max swung around. Taylor's eyes blazed. Her lower lip quivered. "Your sister cut herself."

"Tag!" Sheila broke away from him, throwing her arms around her twin.

"She-she." Taylor's voice grew soft, and so did her gaze. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I didn't know."

"You never plan."

"You always do."

"Ladies." Max cleared his throat. "The omelet is burning."

Taylor reeled from the jealousy she'd felt when she found Max holding Sheila's hand, looking concerned. She never could stay mad at her twin, but Max was a different story. While she cleaned up the mess in the kitchen and started over, he fetched a Band Aid from the bathroom for her sister's finger. Knowing he was putting it on, she kept her

back turned. When she heard him take a seat, she cast a look over her shoulder. "You and Max are the two worst cooks I know."

Sheila, sitting on a stool beside Max, leaning on her elbows and looking beautiful, laughed. Taylor had never really envied her sister of her looks, or her men, but today was different. Max was different. Taylor cracked the egg on the edge of the pan and part of the shell fell in. She cared about Max Stuart, the inept toy salesman who was allergic to marriage, the tenant who'd ticked Mrs. Stout off again. Big mistake, she'd have to get over her infatuation.

"I'm glad I got to meet your fiancé before the wedding," Sheila said.

"My fiancé?" Taylor dropped a whole egg, shell and all, into the skillet.

Sheila's low laughter further flustered Taylor, and she burned her finger dipping the unbroken egg out with her hand. Dropping the egg into the sink with a splat, she ran cold water on her fingers. "I think I'll make scrambled eggs with cheese melted over them. If there's any cheese left," she babbled.

"I think we've taken that road before," Max objected.

"I think I can handle this," Taylor said coldly.

"Max is your fiancé, isn't he?" Sheila asked.

Was that suspicion or laughter in her voice? Taylor studied the eggs.

Max, who'd been putting away the condiments Sheila dragged out, crossed the kitchen to loop his arms around Taylor's waist and kiss her on the cheek. If he knew what the

touch of his lips did to her ... She leaned into his shoulder. "In the flesh," he said.

Taylor smiled stiffly. "Enough about us, Sheila. Max and I want to hear about Peter."

"Peter?" Max choked on the word. "Peter Lapierre?"

"Of course, sweetheart." Taylor elbowed him sharply.

"I smell something," Sheila said.

A rat? Sheila gestured toward the stove and Taylor whirled. "Damn, the eggs are burning."

"I think we should order pizza," Max said.

"I can get this right," Taylor fumed, shoving them out onto a plate and dumping cheese on top of them.

Where had Sheila gotten the idea she and Max were engaged and why had he let her think it? And why had she, Taylor, played along with him? And why in hell was her twin chuckling?

The eggs were crisp around the edges and brown on the bottom, but Max and Sheila were smart enough not to comment.

Sheila described Peter as wonderful and charming, and explained she'd come home to make wedding arrangements. Not pausing to allow questions, she left her food barely touched and breezed out the door of 2A without giving them one bit of "real" information about Peter. At the door, she turned to kiss Taylor on the cheek. "See you soon, Tag."

Mr. Hockerberry opened his door and Muttso and Petunia bounded into the hall. As allergic to dogs as Max was to marriage, Taylor's twin fled down the steps, her case banging against her legs as she ran.

Petunia's master dragged her back into his apartment. Max grabbed Muttso and tried to pull him through the door of Taylor's. Muttso struggled and whined. Mr. Hockerberry slammed his door and Petunia barked shrilly.

Vaughn stepped out into the hall.

Taylor ran to the kitchen and grabbed Max's plate of eggs and set them on the living room floor. Muttso bounded inside. Max followed and slammed the door.

"Footsteps on the stairs," Taylor whispered.

"What are you doing, Vaughn Jobe?" Mrs. Stout demanded outside Taylor's door. "If you think you're funny, imitating a pack of dogs, you'd better think again or I'll throw you out of here."

Max and Taylor held each other, smothering their laughter. Muttso stood up at the kitchen table to eat Sheila's eggs. And Taylor's. Afterward, he fell asleep on the kitchen floor and Max and Taylor ordered pizza. The dog was still sleeping when Max got ready to leave. "I hope he's not dead."

"Funny," Taylor said. "Those eggs weren't that bad."

Max put his arms around her. "You don't have to do everything perfectly. It's all right to make a mistake."

"Okay, so they were bad. Sheila shook me up thinking we're engaged."

"She shook me up when I learned she was engaged to Peter Lapierre."

Taylor smiled sheepishly. "I'm glad you're not Peter."

He tipped her chin and rubbed noses with her. "Where were you when Sheila got here?"

"I took Mrs. Stout some mint leaves for her iced tea and sweet-talked her a bit. She was pretty shook up after her bout in the elevator."

"Thanks for saving me and Muttso from her wrath."

"If you don't leave soon, she'll think we're cohabitating again. You can leave the dog here if you want and I'll take him running in the morning."

Max told her of the butcher shop discovery. "I could spend the night too and show you where it is."

"You'll have to tell me where to find it. We can't take a chance on getting evicted for cohabitating," Taylor said, raising her lips for a kiss.

"I didn't say anything about..." He grinned.

She took a deep breath. If he had, she might have consented.

"Oh well, everyone would probably hear us. Your bed squeaks. I used to lie here on the floor and listen to it."

"My floor squeaks, too. I laid in bed and listened to you rolling around."

"Each of us thinking about the other. I like that." Max brushed her hair with his lips, and then he kissed her hard on the mouth, before he left.

"See you in the morning," he said, and Taylor liked the reassuring sound of those words. Did his bed squeak? She'd never heard it from down here if it did.

## Chapter 9

DAZED BY the morning freshness of Max—breath sweet from toothpaste, ebony hair curling damply on his neck, and hands hot on her arms when he drew her close for a kiss—Taylor stumbled over the Crier after he left. She was rushing to the window to gaze out over her geraniums at him and Muttso crossing the asphalt to climb into Max's candy apple red Corvette when her toe struck the rolled-up newspaper. Seeing it on the floor near the door where she'd tossed it, she was hardly surprised she'd forgotten. Monday had been one fiasco after another, but it ended well. Picking it up, she waited until Max had driven out of sight before turning to the Personal Ads. SWF seeks SWM to date. She scanned the rest of the advertisement.

Every word was right this time.

With no ad to spat over or sadomasochists to protect her from, he'd no longer be part of her life. There was a saying, "To error is human." So Max was a little more human than most? He was also sexier and more fun than any man she'd ever met.

But he didn't drop by that evening to say, "See? I told you I could get it right."

Next afternoon, Taylor went to the Crier to check her box and found ten letters, each written by a man who sounded normal, but none held the spark she was looking for. Next day, she found twenty letters. She read each one carefully, discarding some, saving others. She had to keep sight of her



goal which was to find a date, not, as Max had mistakenly printed before, a mate. The guy didn't have to be Tom Cruise, Richard Gere, and Patrick Swayze rolled into one.

A simple Max Stuart would do.

Why hadn't he been by since Tuesday morning when he picked up Muttso?

Each day she picked up letters, she stole a glance inside the newspaper office. The counter was too high to see him behind it, unless he stood, but he never did. Not knowing what she'd done wrong, she grew more depressed, and kept forgetting to buy new glasses. And after a few days, she grew used to seeing the world without them and fond of the freedom "naked eyes" gave her. No red marks on her nose, no pressure from the weight of the oversized spectacles. To make the "new contacts" story she told Dani and others at school seem real, she blinked or dabbed her eyes with a tissue whenever she thought about it.

Dani invited Taylor to go to her beauty salon Friday after school, and since Dani had presumptuously scheduled the appointment, Taylor's drab locks fell into the hands of Vivienne at Razzle Dazzle Style's Inn.

"I can't believe your hair is naturally reddish-blond and not that dull ash color. You look marvelous," Dani said afterward.

Marvelous wasn't part of Taylor's plan, and neither were Ripe Raspberry fingernails by Jean Claude and lipstick to match, but Taylor was bummed. She'd spent every evening staring at her course work, eating M&M's and listening for a sound from upstairs to prove Max was still there. But there

were no marching sounds, no booms, no sound of cursing. No friendly clatter of footsteps as he loped down the stairs. No one to fend off the bad guys if one came knocking. No sexy blue-eyed smile.

The letters dwindled each day. Friday, there were only two. And when she looked inside the Crier office, she finally saw someone behind the counter, but even from the back, she could tell it was a female. Not masculine Max.

Time was running out. She had to make a date. Half a dozen guys sounded promising. After reading these two new letters, she'd start accepting.

Vaughn came out of his apartment just as she was unlocking her door Friday. "Hello, Taylor. You're looking especially nice."

She dropped her mail. He sounded civilized. "Thank you, Vaughn."

He picked up the letters and handed them to her. "Haven't seen your boyfriend around lately." At her raised brow, he added, "Mad Max."

"He isn't my boyfriend." If he was, he wouldn't go all week without seeing me.

"Then perhaps you'd consider going out with me?"

She opened her door. Even the change in Vaughn's demeanor didn't change the way she felt. A tiger didn't change its stripes. Vaughn was still a worm in her book, and Max was a chicken. "Sorry."

"Just as I thought," Vaughn called. "You're mad over Max."

It didn't matter whether she was or not. Locking the door, she sat down to read her new letters. Her ad had run once

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

and brought a pile of mail, just as the first ads had brought dozens of letters and callers. But after a few days, interest petered out. One letter came from a truck driver who picked up his copy of the newspaper when he was leaving town; he'd be back in a month. Too long to wait, she threw his letter in the living room's circular, chartreuse file. The second was from a young widower with four little boys, ages three to ten. Wadding up his letter, Taylor shot it after the first. She might want kids someday but all she wanted now was a date.

Someone had to act as Peter's groomsman and her fiancé and pretend to love her. Swiping away a tear, she settled down to rereading the letters she'd marked "possible choices." Six letters. Six chances to find someone. She picked up the phone.

Six phone calls later, she had six dates, beginning with Saturday and ending the following Friday night.

\* \* \* \*

MAX NEVER expected to feel sad about leaving 3A but he felt desolate as he prepared to pack his personal belongings. He'd had some great times with Taylor. Even the time spent guarding her from the sadomasochists had been fun. He'd been gone four days, called to New York on business the day the ad came out. The public relations firm had assigned the Niftee Account to one of their Senior Associates who wanted to meet Max. The new rep reported Uncle Samuel was a hit with buyers and she expected sales to soar when it hit shelves in the spring. When she'd wanted to discuss other new products, he'd pitched his own idea for a new "old" toy

and desire to develop an entire historical toy line, and she'd been enthusiastic. Combining his love for history and toys was his ultimate goal and he'd been drunk on happiness until he'd come back to reality.

Taylor could have found someone else by now.

It was sheer dumb luck that Penny's jury duty ended just as he'd gotten the summons to New York, and she'd left the Grand Hotel life to return to the Crier and a lovesick Muttso. One night at Glorious Apartments and the dog returned worse off than before. Lovesick was worse than homesick.

The good news was, Max didn't have to run the paper any more. The bad news was, Penny wanted her apartment back. He'd persuaded her to stay with their parents until he got back and packed up, and now that the time had come, he couldn't leave without saying goodbye to Taylor. Not that he was lovesick like Muttso, but he did care. They weren't suited, he knew that, but he wished they were.

He ran down the stairs and knocked. He hadn't gotten back until late afternoon. It was nearly dinnertime now. He hoped she hadn't gone out. He knocked again.

"I'll be right there." Taylor's voice sounded musical. She opened the door with a smile that faded when she saw him. "Max. I thought you were somebody else."

"You look like someone else." Her hair looked like strawberry silk, curling softly to her shoulders with a deep fringe of bangs drawing attention to her long-lashed eyes. She still hadn't replaced her glasses. Her silk blouse was a vibrant gold, her skirt a tawny color almost the shade of her eyes. He couldn't stop staring. She was a beauty. A butterfly

emerged from a cocoon. He hoped she hadn't fallen in love with someone. "You've changed."

She laughed up at him, and even her manner was different. "How do you like the new Taylor?"

"I liked the old one just fine." He reached out and drew her close. Had another man made her happy? Was she in love? "I've missed you, Taylor."

"You have?" Her voice sounded surprised against his chest.

He nodded and her hair tickled his chin with its satiny fragrance. He missed the lemon scent. "What did you do to yourself?"

"I was razzle-dazzled," she said, pulling away to flip her hair with deep rose-colored nails. "Highlighted, styled, and manicured."

"Look at me," he said, and when she raised her head, he kissed her.

"My hair is naturally blondish-red. I know you don't like redheads."

"I'd like you if your hair was purple."

Her lips matched her fingernails and no longer tasted like strawberry lip balm, but he tasted them again, and she responded as warmly and eagerly as he felt. He'd missed her more than he realized. Feet sounded on the steps. She didn't seem to notice anything but the thrusts of his tongue. He drew her closer, hoping to shut out everything else. Everyone else.

Heavy footsteps approached. Undoubtedly male. Max tipped Taylor's chin. "You're beautiful, but why did you do all this?"

She flicked her lips with her tongue, and he longed to capture that tongue. "I'm not sure."

A male cleared his voice at their elbows. "I'm John Stone, looking for Taylor Gayle."

Taylor planted her palms against Max's chest. "I'm Taylor, and this is my neighbor. Max," she said, turning to him, "I'd like you to meet my date."

Max had wanted to throw John Stone down the stairs. He wanted to tell him to stay away from Taylor. He wanted to rip the guy's chest hair out. Didn't he know nice guys wore their shirts buttoned to the neck and a necktie on a Friday night date? It didn't matter that Taylor got home before eleven o'clock, Max hadn't gotten a plug nickel's worth of sleep all night. If Taylor had invited the punk in, he would have set off his spaceship or burst a water balloon, but John said a quick goodnight at the door. Max watched out the window to make sure.

She'd reduced him to a spy.

He should have been the one taking her out. She could trust him.

The letter. He'd forgotten about the letter he wrote. Damn. Why hadn't he mailed it? If he had, he might have been Taylor's date last night. If he could just sneak the letter into her Crier box, maybe his plan could still work.

He drove down to the newspaper office. "Max." Penny was just unlocking the door. "What are you doing here?"

"I ... uh ... wanted to see if everything was okay." He'd forgotten she sometimes went in on Saturday morning. He patted Muttso.

"You did fine with the business, bro', but what did you do to my dog? He won't stay here alone at night. He's Velcro since I returned. Mom and Dad are tired of having him underfoot, sulking. I need my apartment back."

"Muttso missed you." And now, he misses Petunia. "I took him home one night and..." Max shrugged. "Penny, I ... uh ... have unfinished business at Glorious Apartments. Could you give me a few more days? Please?"

"You want to stay there in ruffled retro when you have a masculine, luxury condo." His sister eyed him with amusement. "There has to be a woman involved. Please tell me it's not Rosie Lafew, the big-haired country singer in 2C.

Max had never met Rosie, but the description couldn't be more wrong for Taylor. "The woman in question is new in 2A and petite with regular hair. Her name is Taylor."

"What's her first name?"

"That is her first name. Taylor. Taylor Gayle. How would you like to live in my condo for a week or two?"

Penny's eyes lit up. "What's the catch, besides the commute?"

"None. I promise you."

"Max, have you met the guy who lives next to her?"

"If you're talking about Vaughn, I've had the displeasure."

"I think he's misunderstood. One of those guys who comes on too strong, I believe he feels inferior and overcompensates."

"He is inferior."

Penny shook her head. "I know The Uncles turned you off on academics, but you really should take a psychology course, Max. People tend to mask their feelings by—"

"Twerp? Can I stay in your cramped, light-starved apartment a week or so more, while you live in my spacious condo with cable TV and a hot tub?"

"I guess I can suffer through it, but being the honorable woman I am, I must remind you, Muttso is going to live in your place with me, and he's shedding."

Max couldn't let Taylor go unprotected from whatever-kind-of-guys were out there. Couldn't let her go to Sheila's wedding with a stranger. Picturing the Oriental rug that had belonged to Granna Anna matted with gray hair, he shuddered, but nodded firmly. He kissed his sister's cheek. "I'm sorry I ever teased you by calling you 'little sister' and 'twerp.'"

Penny shook her head. "It must be love or you wouldn't go sentimental and sappy on me. But, Max? Good luck."

\* \* \* \*

MAX WASN'T in love. He just wanted to protect Taylor. Penny had seen him out the door so he still had the letter. He had to find a way to get it to her. She had a small stack of replies she was scanning when he dropped by early that evening. She motioned him to sit down with her at the kitchen table. "I've narrowed my search down to these. Listen to this one."

Max didn't want to listen but he did. There was no need for Taylor to know he was no longer at the Crier and able to



return to his condo. She'd get all huffy if she knew he was trying to take care of her. He felt nauseous after the third list of overblown qualifications. She seemed impressed. If he could just plant the letter without her knowing, maybe she'd go for Harrison. "Got anything to drink?"

"Milk. Coke. Help yourself and hand me that bag of M&M's, will you?"

Taylor had her back to him. He slipped the letter he'd written out of his back pocket and bending over to look in the fridge, dropped it on the floor. With his toe, he scooted it halfway under the refrigerator. Grabbing a can of Coke, he took the bag of candy off the counter and sat down.

"How was John Stone?"

She looked up at him quizzically. "I'm not sure how you meant that, but he was a gentleman."

"Boring?"

"Yes, but I am glad he was a gentleman."

"Why don't you give it up, Taylor?"

"Not on your life." She popped a piece of candy in her mouth. "There has to be someone out there for me."

"Have you read all your letters?"

She tilted her head and gave him a searching look. He shrugged. "I just thought you might have missed a good candidate. These guys sound oafish." He took a swig of his cola. "No date tonight?"

"Oafish?" She stared at the last letter she read. "Tonight's date had to cancel to stay with his mother."

"Too bad. He sounds like a winner."

"His mother had a toenail removed and she's in pain. I think it's sweet he's concerned."

Max stood and shoved his chair in. Taylor needed a college course on selecting men. "Maybe you could reschedule your date so he could show you his home video of the operation."

"You're heartless, Max Stuart." She jumped up, tawny eyes flashing, rosy lips pursed. "You haven't a caring bone in your body."

Max would have argued the point except that the body part that felt so caring when Taylor got up in his face that way wasn't a bone, technically. His grin must have told her what he was thinking. Or maybe she was close enough to feel.

"You're impossible. I don't want to talk about this any more."

She turned her back and he admired the way she shifted her cute derriere out and to the side when she was angry. She took a step away. It would be better if she spotted the letter when he wasn't there. He was a second rate actor. "Fine. Let's go out for pizza and a movie."

"Vegetarian and a love story?"

"Everything but anchovies and an adventure film."

"Adventure and vegetarian?"

"Vegetarian with extra cheese. Movie first or pizza?"

"Movie, so we'll be hungry for buttered popcorn." She turned to face him.

"And thirsty for a fountain Coke." Max drew her close. "You know, Tag?" She swatted him and he chuckled. He lowered his lips slowly. "You're my kind of girl."

## Chapter 10

MAX HAD forgotten how much he enjoyed a simple movie date. Sharing popcorn and candy during a high-adventure movie that Taylor seemed to like as much as he did made him feel like a kid again. Strolling through Paradise Park after loading up on pizza gave him a lighthearted feeling he hadn't experienced in years. He'd been so busy since going to work for Dad, the only dates he'd had were with Marcia, and most of them were business-social affairs. Never spontaneous fun like he'd had tonight.

His sister said, "It must be love." Never having been in love, he couldn't be sure, but he was keeping an open mind. If loving to be with someone was "love," it was a possibility. He waited for Taylor to unlock her door. Holding her, kissing her, and maybe more, should help him decide.

"Max, it's too late for you to come in. I have to work tomorrow and so do you."

He took her into his arms and rubbed his chin against her hair. It shimmered like strawberry ginger ale in the hall light. "It's not that late."

"Thanks for a lovely evening, Max." She gave him a peck on the cheek.

Now, he really felt like a teenager again, and this wasn't the part he'd liked. "I don't want to leave you yet."

"I'm sorry. I'm really tired."

"Then how about a date tomorrow night? Do you bowl? Or is that too plebeian for you?" Marcia wouldn't be caught dead in flat-heeled red shoes with a number on the back.

Taylor's laughter trilled in the dark, empty hall. "I love bowling, but I have a date tomorrow night. I have dates the rest of the week, Max. I'm going out with the finalists."

"What about me? What am I supposed to do?"

"Whatever you've been doing the past few nights."

"I had business to attend to. I was out of town. I was not dating strangers."

"Someone you know then?"

"No. I wasn't seeing anyone. Please call the dates off. You're taking a risk."

"I need a date for Sheila's wedding and I have to continue to look until I find one."

He hoped she found it under her refrigerator.

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR LOCKED her door and shot the deadbolt. Stalking to the kitchen, she put water on to boil for tea. She needed soothing before she could sleep. Tonight's date was half octopus, half jerk. The next time she went out, she was wearing glasses again. And an ankle-length skirt. She put a tea bag in a cup and took a spoon out of the drawer. Maybe she should call off her search. Maybe she should have listened to Max.

A loud squeaking noise overhead brought her up short and she dropped her spoon. What was he doing now? Max. Taylor felt calmer just knowing he was near. The big jerk, why

wouldn't he give in and go to the wedding? She bent to pick up the spoon. A tiny corner of white stuck out from beneath the refrigerator. It looked like an envelope. She pulled it out. Falling back on her heels, she studied the typewritten address. It had come to her post office box, so she must have dropped it when sorting her mail. She turned it over. It was still sealed.

She laid it on the table and finished preparing her cup of tea. Looking out the window at the lighted parking lot below, she took a deep breath. She couldn't go out with a guy like tonight's again. It had been a foolish plan. Maybe she shouldn't even open the letter. Maybe she should be a sport and go to Sheila's wedding unescorted.

Taylor ripped open the envelope and pulled out a typewritten letter.

"Dear Ms. SF. I am a single male (never married), understanding, and moderately nice-looking. I treat a woman well. I love to dance and play word games. I enjoy movies, quiet evenings at home, and intimate dinners at nice restaurants. I don't care for big parties and social folderol. I have a sense of humor but I'm an old-fashioned guy at heart. I like candlelight, holidays, and family traditions. I don't have a lot of formal education but I'm well informed. I'm looking for a casual relationship and would love to meet you. How would you like to go to the Bijoux in Boomtown Saturday night?" It was signed, "Harrison" and followed by a telephone number.

He sounded like a great candidate. She read the letter again.

What did he mean he didn't have a lot of formal education? She hoped he wasn't a high school dropout. His grammar was good, and he knew how to type. Of course, he might have used two fingers, like Max. She read the letter again. Candlelight, holidays, and family traditions. She loved that part. Did Max like romantic things like this guy? She was old-fashioned at heart like the man who wrote the letter. Was Max?

Taylor shoved her hair behind her ears. What was the matter with her? Every letter she read, every man she dated, all she could think of was Max. The typist had used whiteout several times on the letter. He was sweet to take such pains. Max wasn't sweet. He wouldn't take her to the wedding.

She picked up the telephone and punched in his number. Maybe this one would be okay. She crossed her fingers. Her heart raced. "Hello. You've reached..." The voice on the other end sounded slow and sexy with a slight southern drawl. He repeated the phone number but didn't give his name. "Please leave a message and I'll get back to you."

She heard a beep and took a deep breath. "Harrison ... this is Taylor, the Ms. Single Female you wrote to. A movie sounds good but I'd like to meet you someplace first, so we can get to know one another. Please call me." She gave her number. Her hands were shaking when she hung up.

And then she heard the squeak again. Bedsprings. It sounded like bedsprings squeaking in Max's apartment. Taylor reached for the rum, then changed her mind and grabbed the M&M's.

MAX LEFT his office in Carbon City early the next day and burned up the road to Boomtown. If Taylor hadn't found the letter yet, he'd kick it under the refrigerator so far she'd never find it. Last night while she was out with another one of those crumb bums, he'd started thinking how foolish it sounded. "Candlelight, holidays." He sounded gay. "Old-fashioned guy at heart." She'd barf when she read that part. Worse yet, he hadn't thought out his plan. If Taylor wanted to go out with Harrison, what would he do? Wear a fake nose and mustache when he picked her up? Or just show up as Max and have her tell him to get lost?

Just as he wheeled into the parking lot, Sheila entered the front door of Glorious Apartments. She might provide the distraction he needed. He gave her time to get settled in Taylor's apartment before climbing the stairs to 2A. This needed to seem like a casual visit. He knocked.

Taylor greeted him coolly. "We're planning a bachelorette party."

"I saw Sheila's car and came by to say hello." He crossed the room to where Sheila sat and she greeted him warmly.

Taylor picked up a pen and sat down next to her sister on the longer sectional. They were sharing a bottle of chardonnay and poring over some lists. He sat in the barrel chair.

"Doesn't Taylor look great?" he asked.

"She always looks great," Sheila said, smiling at her twin. "But yes, her new look suits her."

"We have work to do here," Taylor said, rattling a paper.

Max was reminded of the day they met and the way she shook that pink personal ad form. "I don't want to interrupt. Just go ahead, and I'll listen."

Taylor glared at him. "I don't think you'll find wedding talk interesting. You must have something better to do."

"You look very distinguished," Sheila said, eyeing his suit.

"I came straight from work. Clothes make the man." He shrugged.

"Are you a Taylor convert? Sounds like one of her theo—"

"I have nothing to do with how he dresses. He was like that before we met," Taylor snapped.

She made it sound like he was mentally deficient or had an incurable skin condition. He looked at Sheila and shrugged again. "If you don't mind," he told Taylor, "I could sure use a glass of that wine."

Taylor splashed some into a glass and handed it to him before shoving a paper in Sheila's hand. "We're working on a guest list."

Sheila looked at the paper. "I think we should include..." She named a couple of women's names.

"Would it be okay if I used the bathroom?" Max asked.

"Wonderful." Taylor waved him away. "Don't hurry."

He looked on the floor in front of the refrigerator. Nothing. He got down and tried to look under it. No sign of the letter. The women were still talking but he went to the bathroom, shut the door, and flushed the john. The smiling faced plant was turned forward again and looked droopy. He took a Dixie cup from the bathroom dispenser and watered it. Where was



his letter? Had Taylor read it yet? Why was she in such a testy mood?

He looked on the counter as he passed through the kitchen. Nothing there. The table was bare. "Are you about finished?" Max asked, when he was seated again. Both women frowned. "I'll be quiet," he said.

For the next half hour, they seemed to forget he was there. Max eyed every inch of the apartment he could see, searching for the letter. His eyes grew tired and he closed them. He was about to doze off when he heard Sheila mention the tuxedos for the wedding. He pretended to be asleep. "When is Max going to be fitted?"

"Max isn't..." Taylor stopped and he opened his eyes to see her bite her lip.

"He is going to be groomsman, isn't he?" Sheila shot him a look of alarm.

Max rose quickly and hauled Taylor to her feet for a kiss. She turned her head and his lips grazed her cheek. "Of course, I am. I can be fitted anytime." He took hold of Taylor's chin and kissed her lips. She stuck her tongue out. He drew it into his mouth. She pulled away. He smiled sweetly, hoping she didn't belt him. "Just say the word."

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR JABBED a finger in Max's chest after Sheila left. "What kind of word do you expect from me?"

"Give me your word you won't date any more of those losers you found through the newspaper ad, and I'll take you to the wedding."

"Whooptido. Why don't you do me a favor, Max? Anyway, they're not all losers. Carl is an attorney and Adam is working on a master's degree in music."

"Is that all that's important to you? Education and profession?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Toys and novelties aren't good enough? A sales position wouldn't be prestigious enough?"

"I'm not a snob if that's what you think, and your question is irrelevant. You didn't want to take me to the wedding." She tossed her head. "So ... I met a guy who likes ... weddings and even though he doesn't have a college degree ... I asked him."

Damn. It would have been better if she'd found his letter. He might have stood a chance. He ran his fingers through his hair. "Taylor, please. Tell this guy you can't go. I'll take you."

"I'm not a charity case."

"It's not charity. I don't want you to go with him."

She flushed red from her neckline to her hair. "That isn't reason enough."

"What is reason enough?"

"Wanting to go with me."

"I do."

"Careful. Those words may bring on an allergic reaction."

"Taylor. I'm sorry. Please go to Sheila's wedding with me. I want to take you."

She pounded on his chest with her fists. "Now is a wonderful time to decide that."

He caught her hands and kissed them. "Calm down."

"I am calm." She burst into tears.

"Taylor." He held her close and stroked her hair. "Don't cry."

She looked up, chin thrust forward. He wiped her tears away with his fingertips. She shoved his hand away. "You put me through all this, and after I decide to go with Harrison, you want to take me? You're impossible, and don't get excited thinking I'm crying because you hurt me. I'm crying because I'm mad."

"Harrison?" Max burst out laughing. "You're going out with a guy named Harrison?"

Taylor picked up a sofa pillow and belted him. "Get out of here, Max Stuart. I don't want to see you again. Ever."

He backed toward the door. "I'll call later to see if you change your mind."

She threw the pillow at him. "Call the woman you took into your bed." She reached for the bowl of waxed fruit and he ran.

Why did she think he'd taken a woman to bed? And what was he going to do about her date with Harrison? If Max picked Taylor up and admitted he was Harrison, she'd be so humiliated, she'd never speak to him again.

If the Crier was a regular newspaper instead of an advertising newspaper, he'd have Penny print a false obituary for Harrison. Maybe he could fake an estate sale ad. The recently late Harrison Harrison's worldly goods are being sold. Max became so wrapped up in possibilities, he was smiling when he stopped at Precious Posies and asked them to deliver a bouquet of roses and baby's breath to Taylor. On the card,

he wrote, "I apologize—again. Pick you up at nine. Romantic movie and vegetarian pizza."

At his condo, he listened to her message on his answering machine. If she cared enough about him to cry, why did she sound so eager to go out with Harrison? Max's blood came to a low boil. He'd really begun to think she cared about him. Why else would she cry? Maybe if he hadn't laughed ... he should learn to keep his sense of humor under wraps.

Should Harrison call and make a date? Or should he brush her off so Max could get a date? Criminy. Competing against himself was tough. If Harrison didn't answer her message, she'd write him off. But it would be interesting to see if he could upstage another man. Harrison Harrison. Max didn't like the guy one bit.

\* \* \* \*

STANDING STILL on a stool while the seamstress tucked and pinned the ice blue satin maid-of-honor gown was difficult for Taylor. She'd felt restless and bewildered since last night. She shouldn't have cried in front of Max. She almost never cried. So why was she weepy lately? Love was supposed to be a happy feeling. "Yikes."

"I'm sorry if I stuck you, but if you'd stand still, dear, we'd finish more quickly."

Taylor didn't bother to explain she hadn't been stuck. She'd been struck with the realization she loved a man who hated weddings. She loved weddings. One day, she hoped to wear a bridal gown with a long train and a seed pearl crown

with a veil. She'd carry a nosegay of violets and roses and baby's breath.

"Would you turn around, please?" the seamstress asked.

Taylor pivoted. She was a fool planning a dream wedding that might never happen. Max was like Sheila, playing tricks and burning food, but he was like Sheila in other, positive, ways. He was honest and sincere, humorous and affectionate, kind to animals and people. And sexy. Every time he kissed her, she felt like a chocolate bar left in the sun. If he ever made love to her, she'd melt totally away.

She should have demanded to know whom Max took to bed.

"Finished," the seamstress said.

Finished. Taylor let out her breath and even to her, it sounded like a sob.

Back in her jeans and shirt, Taylor ran for the car. An autumn breeze swirled dead leaves around her feet and gray clouds hung overhead. If Harrison hadn't returned her call, she'd take Max up on his offer to take her and after the wedding was over, she'd tell everyone they'd broken their engagement.

"Surprise." Mrs. Stout threw open her door and shoved a bouquet into Taylor's hands. "You weren't home so the florist asked to leave these here."

"Roses," Taylor said softly, burying her nose in their fragrance as she took the milk glass vase into her hands. "In an old-fashioned bouquet." Just the way she'd dreamed of getting flowers from a man.

"Do you know who they're from?"

"I have no idea," Taylor said honestly. Max wouldn't. Harrison couldn't. He didn't know her address. Joe, maybe.

She rushed up the stairs. Her landlady's disappointment behind her was a palpable silence. Taylor didn't care. This was a moment to savor alone.

Seated on the sofa, she read the card.

Max. He didn't sign his name but the message made it clear. Wrapped in happiness, she held the vase in her hands, feeling like someone who's loved. Sheila had Peter. Taylor felt happy for her. Max didn't love her but he must care a little; he wanted to take her to a movie and out for pizza. Maybe she'd imagined the bedsprings squeaking. She should give him the benefit of the doubt.

The phone rang sharply, and she jumped, nearly toppling the flowers in her lap. Clutching them tightly, she rose and slowly approached the telephone as it rang again. If it was Harrison, what would she say to him? Attending the wedding with Max would be perfect. He was a groomsman and she was maid-of-honor. She set the flowers down on the table next to her, heart pounding so loudly she couldn't hear the ticking of the sunburst clock on the wall. "Hello?"

"Taylor? This is Harrison ... uh ... Harrison."

"Hello, Harrison." He had a nice voice. "What's your last name?"

"Harrison. Harrison Harrison."

She choked back a giggle. That was worse than Taylor Gayle. She couldn't talk without laughing.

"You said you'd like to meet before we dated." Harrison's southern drawl became more decided when he spoke again after a long pause. "Are you still interested?"

Was she? Why did he think she wouldn't be? "I ... uh ... what did you have in mind?"

"How about lunch at Omelet Heaven?"

She hadn't been able to look at an egg since Sheila tried to make an omelet.

"Would you prefer Delicious Deli?"

Max had brought her breakfast from there.

"You're not saying anything. Perhaps you had some place nicer in mind? Like the Grand Hotel?"

"It's not that, Harrison." How did he keep hitting all the places that reminded her of Max? "I just..." Have someone else in mind. She bent her head to bury her nose in the bouquet she'd set on the table. "I'm sorry. I've changed my mind."

"Is it my name? Or my lack of education?"

She hoped she hadn't hurt him. With a name like Harrison Harrison, he'd probably been poked fun at all his life. "Oh no, it's not you. It's me. I'm sorry for taking up your time."

\* \* \* \*

MAX SHOWED up at six o'clock, looking dapper in a beige windbreaker and slacks. His pullover shirt was a shade lighter than his eyes, his smile brighter than the sun that had broken out from behind the clouds soon after she'd called Harrison. Struck with an insane urge to fall into his arms, Taylor locked her hands behind her back. "Thank you for the flowers."

"Since you're thanking me and not pelting me with fruit and pillows, may I safely assume we're on for this evening?" She nodded. He laid his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eye. "And the wedding? May I have a date with you for that, too?"

She'd turned down Harrison and he had the best credentials, and she wanted to go with Max. There was no reason to refuse. "If you're sure you can control your sneezing, we're on."

"What about your date with Harrison?"

"Gloating is ugly, Max."

"I like beating out guys with funny names." They walked downstairs and out the door and he took her hand. "Taylor? Something's been bothering me. Why did you think I took someone else to bed?"

Taylor was getting what she wanted, a date for the wedding, and soon after, they'd go their separate ways. She'd told herself there was no reason to ruin the movie date by voicing her suspicions when she held no claims on him. So she'd pretended it was just an angry remark that came off the top of her head.

After that night, they saw one another every day.

Autumn-crisp air and gold-tipped leaves invited them outdoors in the early evening and on the weekend. They took a wagon ride through the apple orchard where they bought cider, a pumpkin to carve, and bouquets of bittersweet. They attended the local Autumn Arts festival and posed for a charcoal sketch, which Taylor silently vowed she'd have framed. They roasted hot dogs on the apartment patio and



*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

ate homemade honey and bread he bought at the festival. Life was good and Max so wonderful, with each passing day, her suspicion he'd taken someone else to bed grew fainter.

He had work to do and she had her class paper to finish, but every hour they spent together drew them closer. Taylor tried to pretend life would continue forever just as it was, but Jake and Amy's baby was due two weeks after the wedding, and two weeks after the baby was born, Amy wanted to return to her job at the library.

On Friday, Taylor and Max took a walk before dinner. The rehearsal and wedding were scheduled a week apart. Tomorrow evening was the rehearsal. Stars sparkled in the sky, grass damp with evening dew shone beneath their feet, and Paradise Park lay quiet. The evening breeze rustled the trees, scattering leaves whose colors were hard to distinguish in the twilight. Taylor loved evenings like this.

"I enjoy quiet times and doing simple things. I'm even beginning to like Boomtown," Max said.

"Do you miss city life and night spots?"

"Night spots top my list of least favorite places to go"

"Along with weddings?" The words popped out and she bit her tongue.

"And business lunches and dinner parties,"

The words held a familiar ring. Taylor frowned, trying to remember.

"Life should hold both business and pleasure, but one shouldn't be for the sake of the other."

Taylor nodded. "I agree."

"I don't dislike weddings," Max went on, "just the folderol. The bride and groom send out hundreds of invitations to people they barely know, go to department stores where they create a list, complete with prices, of everything they'd like to receive as gifts. They hire a photographer to take hundreds of photos and have a cake baked with everything from staircases to lights. It's all very crass and commercial. Old-fashioned weddings with candlelight and gifts chosen by close family and friends who come to share the day with the couple are all right. I just hate horns and whistles."

"Too much folderol."

"Right." Max nodded emphatically.

"You like a traditional wedding with candlelight. You also like holidays."

"Huh?"

"Omelets, Delicious Deli, and the Grand Hotel." Taylor rolled her eyes. "Don't you have any imagination? Did you have to steal from yourself for Harrison?"

The sheep-eating grin he'd worn all evening turned sheepish. "I thought writing a letter was imaginative."

"Sneaky, Max. And not too bright. What if I'd said yes to Harrison Harrison? A name, which, by the way, wasn't very imaginative. What were you going to do then?"

"Show up and ask you to forgive me." He dropped to his knees. "Like this. Please. I just wanted to beat out the competition."

The park was deserted and dark enough that the lamplights were starting to come on. She crouched to look him in the eye. "Why?"

"I care about you, Taylor. I didn't want you going out with all those other guys."

"You care about me?" He must not mean it the way it sounded.

"I do. I mean, I care." He raked his fingers through his hair.

"Did those two little words scare you, Max? I do." She wiggled her fingers in his face and said them again in an eerie voice. "I do." He blinked as if she'd waved a snake in his face. "I do—oo." She faked a sneeze. "Ah-choo."

"What are you trying to prove?" He stood up and smacked the dust off his knees.

She got up in his face. "I don't have to prove anything. You just proved you don't like weddings because you're afraid of marriage."

"I am not."

She looked straight in those melt-your-heart, then-break-it-blue eyes. He averted his gaze and she took his chin and turned his face around, toward her. "Max?"

"I like enjoying life, like you and I've been doing. Marriage changes things."

Max liked being with her. Taylor clasped that thought to her heart. Marriage did sometimes change people. Or they changed it. Her father left. But it might also change things for the better.

He pulled her close. "Maxwell Harrison Stuart ... Granna's last name was Harrison and it's my middle name ... likes simple pleasures and he's loved the past few nights with Taylor Ann Gayle."

She smiled up at him and he kissed her. His breath was hot, mixing with hers. His hold was strong. His body was lean and hard. "This is not a simple pleasure," he whispered between kisses. "This is exquisite."

Taylor gasped as he she felt his desire spring to life and he pressed it against her. The aroma of hot dogs wrapped itself around them as a vendor rattled past. Max didn't notice and Taylor smiled into his kiss. Exquisite, and more.

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR TURNED in her independent class study and presented her pilot study to the committee, was accepted into the doctoral studies program, and felt content. She'd liked to have celebrated the news with Max and champagne, but she hadn't told him about her quest yet.

When her mother called to invite Taylor and Max to dinner to meet Sheila's groom Friday night, Taylor was thrilled she'd finally get to meet the mysterious Mr. Peter Lapierre. Sheila had been very closemouthed about her future husband.

"I'll be happy to meet your neighbor, Max, too," her mother said.

Neighbor? Not fiancé? "Mom, did you tell Sheila that Max and I were engaged?"

"I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me? Oh darling, that's wonderful. Sheila said he's very good-looking."

"Mom, I—"

"Now I can meet both of my twins' fiancés in one evening. Jake and Amy will be here, too, and Jenny and Joanne. Maybe I'll ask Aunt Joyce, too."

"Mother, that isn't nec—"

"I'm so glad you've found someone, Taylor. I wanted to get you both settled before..." Edith Gayle fell silent and Taylor's heart beat faster. Was her mother dying? "Never mind. I'll tell you Friday night."

Her mother giggled into the phone and hung up. She wouldn't giggle if she had a terminal illness, would she?

\* \* \* \*

"IT'S ALL starting," Max said, as he nervously escorted Taylor to the door of the modest looking home in an older neighborhood in Windsor Grove. "Meet the relatives and first thing you know, someone will start making us a quilt."

Taylor wrinkled her nose at him. "No one in my family quilts."

The cement steps that led to the porch were crumbling, and the paint on the shutters was peeling, but inside the house, everything shone. The wooden floor, the hall chandelier, the railing to the upstairs sparkled. He straightened his suit coat. Taylor said this wouldn't be a formal dinner, but he wanted to show her mother respect, so he'd worn a suit.

Taylor led him into the dining room where he met her brother, Jake, and his wife, a very pregnant but lovely Amy, and their two kids, Joanne and Jenny. Jake whistled. "Looking spiffy, sis."

Taylor, who was wearing a soft blue sweater dress that showed off her figure, ruffled his dark hair.

"You two might as well sit down. Mom's still cooking, and the bride and groom haven't arrived," Jake said.

The dining room furniture was scarred, the wallpaper faded, the rug threadbare, but the table was set with beautiful old china, crystal, and linen napkins. "Hoping for a boy this time?" Max asked the expectant couple, taking a chair next to Taylor and across from her brother.

"Another girl would be fine," Jake said. "I've spent my life with women." He smiled at Amy and their daughters. The little one, who sucked her thumb and played with the tablecloth, was a charmer. The older one looked a lot like "Aunt Taylor." Max wished Penny would make him an uncle.

A tall, thin woman with tightly permed salt and pepper hair, sharp features, and nervous movements entered the room. Her black printed dress and tailored white apron were perfectly pressed. "Aren't Sheila and Peter here yet? Everything's ready."

"Mother," Taylor said. "I want you to meet Max Stuart."

"We're here. We're here." Sheila burst into the room, on Peter's arm. "Mama." She wrapped her arm around their mother's shoulders. Sheila's face was flushed, her eyes sparkling, her fiancé at her side. "I want you to meet your almost son-in-law."

Peter shook Edith's hand soberly. She fluttered like a nervous bird. "So glad to meet you at last."

"Likewise." He pulled her chair out for her.

She sat down and unfolded her napkin before declaring she hadn't yet set the food on the table. "I'll help," Taylor said.

Amy and Sheila helped, too. Baked chicken, three vegetables, and mashed potatoes and gravy. "And we have two desserts for later," Edith said, sitting down at last. Max smiled blissfully at Taylor and she grinned. Jake, who looked very little like his sisters, offered the blessing. Max ate hungrily, while tuning into bits of conversation. The little girls were going to take part in the wedding and wanted to know all the details. Peter, whom he'd met at the bachelor party, was quiet and reserved, letting bubbly Sheila do all the talking. "My goodness, Mother, it's warm in here," she said when she paused.

"It wouldn't be so hot if you wouldn't talk so much," Taylor said.

Sheila took off the short jacket she wore and wrinkled her nose the way Taylor did.

"Twins," their mother warned, and they smiled at one another.

"Just wait until you have children and they fuss, then gang up on you," Edith said, looking from one couple to another.

Sheila half-turned to hang her jacket on the back of her chair, and there on her shoulder was a birthmark—a heart, like Taylor's. Higher and smaller, but a heart.

Edith turned to Max. "What kind of business are you in?"

He glanced at Taylor. "Toys and novelties." He needed to tell her the truth about his position soon.

Taylor wished the subject of Max's work hadn't come up. Peter was probably a professional man. Doctor, lawyer, CEO. She hoped no one asked about her studies. She wanted to tell Max about her dreams of a doctorate, and eventually, a full

professorship, but every time she thought about—The Uncles—she chickened out. Max got his back in the air every time he heard the word professor. "He's a salesman, Mother."

Why was he frowning at her? If he hadn't given such a brief answer, she wouldn't have felt obligated to step in. He never talked about his work, but he must like toys since he brought them home with him.

Her mother ate in small bursts, patting her hair now and then, looking from the clock to the door. Had she invited Aunt Joyce after all? Taylor prayed her surprise was a newfangled dessert, not her mother's sister who talked through her nose due to allergies. Now, there was a woman who might be allergic to weddings. If she thought it was possible, she would be. She was allergic to everything else.

Taylor looked at Max, who seemed to be enjoying himself. For a man who loved to eat, her mother's house was heaven. She turned her attention to Peter Lapierre, who had freckles and sandy hair that was thinning. The same height as Sheila, he was slender, and his gray slacks and darker gray jacket hung loose. Max, who looked devastating in a perfectly-tailored navy pinstriped suit, looked more like a man she'd expect Sheila to pick. Max was charming. Peter seemed a bit stiff.

Her mother looked from Max to Peter as if she was comparing them too. "What is your occupation, Peter?"

"I thought you knew. I'm a funeral director, Mother Gayle. I earned my degree in mortuary science."

Taylor's eyes met Sheila's and her twin mouthed the word, "Don't."



Don't laugh. Taylor knew what Sheila meant, and she struggled to comply. Taylor cast a worried look at their mother who was holding her throat.

"How and where did you two meet?" Max asked casually.

Taylor excused herself and ran for the bathroom.

Jake had already lost it, so it wasn't necessary. When she came back, everyone was chuckling. She'd just taken her seat again when the doorbell rang. "My surprise," her mother said, fanning herself with her napkin. "Jake, let him in."

"Mr. Mueller," Taylor heard Jake say. "I believe Mother's expecting you."

The butcher from Tops Market?

Her mother rose and held out a hand. "Ross, I believe you remember the twins, Taylor and Sheila, and this is Jake's wife Amy and their girls, Jenny and Joanne. This is Peter Lapierre, Sheila's intended, and Max Stuart, Taylor's. Family, and almost-family, I want you to meet—my future husband."

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR CORNERED her mother in the kitchen after dinner. "Did you like the chocolate fudge cake?" Edith asked.

"You know I did and you know that's not what I want to talk about."

"I hope you aren't upset about Ross and me. We were both at the Senior Bingo one Saturday night, and he sat next to me and said I looked nice." Edith smiled down at her apron. "I was wearing a navy blue print dress as old as the Seven Hills of Cincinnati, so I was embarrassed, but he said his wife, Mame, always said I had good taste. So I thought Mame

might not mind me talking to him. And we started chatting, and he noticed I missed a number and marked it for me. My, the way that man can talk and play Bingo at the same time, just undid me. Your father could never think about two things at once. He couldn't eat Jell-O and watch a television program, that's how single-minded he was. He never even thought of you and Sheila as twins the way everyone else did."

Taylor had never heard her mother talk about anything personal, and she hadn't once mentioned her father since he walked off. "Dad thought of Sheila as The Princess and me as the Whiz Kid."

"Oh, Taylor." Her mother touched her bangs and registered surprise "I like your hair. I should have noticed earlier but I was nervous about Ross coming." Edith looked down at Taylor's knees. "And you have such nice legs, I'm glad you quit hiding them. Your Aunt Joyce used to drive Mama crazy with her short skirts. If I'd had Joyce's legs, I might have worn short dresses, too, but with these long legs, I looked like a twin Popsicle. Sheila has my legs."

"And I have Aunt Joyce's?"

Edith nodded. "Sheila got Joyce's allergies, too. Well, not all of them, but Sheila's allergic to dogs and dandelions and I don't know what else. Anyway, Ross asked me to a movie the next night and we started seeing one another almost every day."

Taylor had never noticed how pretty her mother was before. Maybe she'd never had the bloom in her cheeks. "That's nice, Mama."

"He's thoughtful and we like the same things." She pleated her apron with her fingers. "I'm sorry to go on this way."

"It's okay. I just wanted to know about him and you."

"You always loved your father so, but all he could see when he looked at you was your IQ. And Sheila was a pretty girl to him. I kept pointing out you two were twins."

Taylor dashed away a tear. "You're the best." Her mother did what she thought was right, and that was the best anyone could do. Taylor hugged her. "I hope you and Ross have a good life."

"You and Max, too." Her mother touched her cheek. "He's a lucky man, sweetheart."

\* \* \* \*

"I CAN'T believe it." Taylor laid her head against the back of Max's Corvette seat. She was giddy with happiness over her mother's unaccustomed display of affection. And her own Aunt Joyce legs. And, her mother's candid remarks about her father. What did he see when he looked at Jake, she wondered. "My mother is marrying Mr. Mueller. She used to buy soup bones from him. He and his wife ran a Mom-and-Pop store, the last one left in Windsor Grove. When she died, he sold out and went to work somewhere else."

"Tops Market. Nice guy. He's the man who gives Muttso his bones."

Taylor shook her head in wonder. It had been an extraordinary day.

"A butcher and an undertaker should add color to your family," Max said, covering her hand with his.

"Blood and guts?" Taylor asked, chuckling. "Mom looked like she was going to faint when he called her Mother Gayle and told her what he does for a living." Taylor cracked up.

"Undertaking is a distinguished profession. And a serious one. So why are you laughing?" Max tch-tched. "The man has a degree and a goal. I thought you'd be impressed."

"I'm sorry, but Sheila and a mortician..." Taylor laughed so hard, she had to hold her stomach. "It's just too bizarre. She dated the fast, fun-loving, state-of-the-art guys. I could pick an undertaker and Mom wouldn't blink an eye. But Sheila used to throw up if she stepped on a bug. She said dead things gave her the squiggers." Taylor lost it again.

Max wasn't laughing. She tried to stop.

"Peter has a sense of humor. He laughed when he said they met when she posed for a Plan-For-Eternity ad. But he did look somber in gray."

Taylor wiped her eyes with a tissue and took a deep breath. "You have to wear subtle colors in his profession." She pulled a serious face.

"So, you think undertakers should always wear gray?"

Taylor started at his sharp tone. "I have a theory that appearance affects acceptance in the workplace. If Peter wore bright colors and plaids, potential customers wouldn't trust him to handle their funerals properly."

"Maybe the potential corpse likes bright plaids. Maybe he wants a jolly funeral."

She rolled her eyes. "Then he would hire Peter. Most people wouldn't. Come off it, Max."

"You dress sedately for your job as a librarian because you think it fits an image. Is that correct?"

Taylor nodded. "Students and teachers show me more respect."

"Do my clothes indicate I'm a toy salesman? Or do you know how toy salesmen are supposed to look? Do you think I should wear a clown suit with big pockets for my toys and sport a rubber nose that squeaks so I'd make more sales?" Max's blue eyes blazed and he gripped the wheel hard, his knuckles showing white in the moonlight.

"You've got it all wrong, Max. I think your power dressing helps you address store managers. If you dressed like you said, you'd sell to carnival barkers. You dress like a businessman." An upscale businessman but she didn't want to fuel the fire. "I thought we thought the same on this. You say, 'clothes make the man or woman.'"

Max was silent as he pulled into Glorious Apartments' parking lot and switched off the ignition.

"Stereotyped images breed confidence," Taylor explained. "Dani, for instance, dresses like a flake. Long, dangly earrings. Short skirts. Well, you've seen Dani. She flaunts her sexuality, and who's going to trust a librarian like her to recommend the best book on the Crimean War?"

"Is it because of the way she dresses you wouldn't trust her? Or the way she acts?"

Taylor sighed. "Max, this is a ridiculous discussion. It's getting late." She had hoped tonight might be the night he'd take her to bed. And here they were discussing theory.

"You've brightened your hair, shed your glasses, started wearing colors instead of neutrals. How has this affected your acceptance at school?" Before she could answer, he popped another question. "How has your new appearance affected your behavior?"

Behavior? Taylor folded her hands tightly. He'd mentioned something like this before. "I ... don't know."

"Come on, Taylor. Action. Reaction. You have a master's degree. Cause and effect."

Heat crept up Taylor's neck and anger curled her toes. Who was Max Stuart to belittle her degree? And her class study? To put her on the spot this way over a silly thing like Peter's clothes being necessarily somber. "Why do you hate education so?"

"I don't. Let me start you off. You smile more since you changed your appearance."

"I'm not smiling now."

"You're more outgoing, aren't you?"

"I've been friendlier with Dani, going shopping, and stuff, if that's what you mean." And she had started eating in the teacher's lounge since the Homecoming Dance, after one of the teachers urged her to join them. "You know? You may have something. Students and teachers come to me just as much as they did, and for other things. A girl asked me for a book on sexual relations the other day."

Max burst out laughing. "She trusted you to advise her on that?"

"How do you know I don't know more about that than the Crimean War?"

"I don't, but I'd like to find out." He took her into his arms and smiled into her eyes. "You haven't poked me in the chest or swatted me today. You may be mellowing."

"Don't count on it." She tapped a fist against his jaw, gently.

"Appearance affects action as well as reaction. The Uncles live by it. Remember? They grade students lower for improper dress."

Anger had crept into Max's voice again. Taylor knitted her brow. "Max, I want to meet The Uncles."

"What do they have to do with us?"

Us? If there was an us, they had a lot to do with the future. They'd clearly affected Max's outlook on education, and perhaps, life. "Humor me."

"I'll try, but could we please get back to where we were?"

Taylor valued education because it was the one place she excelled. Sheila had the looks. The personality. But recently, Taylor felt almost as pretty, almost as personable. And her doctorate had begun to lose its personal importance. "First, let me say something. I like you just the way you are. You're smart, have a great sense of humor, and you're handsome. So you're not a great news editor and burn things when you cook? No big deal."

He hopped out of the car, slammed the door, and came around to let her out. Had she made things worse? She stepped out her own door. The minute her feet hit the paved parking lot, he drew her against him and spoke fiercely. "I love you, Taylor. No matter what you wear or if your hair is red. Is that a big deal?"

So big she couldn't speak. So large her eyes filled with tears. So huge she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down for a long, passionate kiss.

"Humongous," she whispered when they came up for air.

"Stupendous."

"And why is that?" he said hoarsely.

"Because I love you, too."

"That's what I hoped you'd say."

\* \* \* \*

MAX AWOKES with his arms around a beautiful woman with tousled hair. "Mmm," he said, kissing Taylor's cheek.

"Mmm," she said sleepily. Opening one eye, she looked surprised, but pleased as a cat finding cream in its dish.

"You're everything I thought you would be. And more." He cupped her chin.

"You know something? Clothes don't make the man. You're just as handsome without them. Just as sweet. And sexy." He cupped her breast and the nipple hardened. She smiled.

"You're doing it again."

Chuckling, he slid his body down hers until her nipple was in his mouth. Then he slid lower, running his tongue down her stomach. She gasped. He licked lower. She tangled her fingers in his hair and arched her back. He flicked his tongue slowly at first, then faster, delving inside her now and then. And again. Taylor cried out and he held her hips tightly, his mouth firm and seeking.

Something inside her exploded, sending quicksilver through her veins. Max had given her something she'd never



*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

experienced before. And when he fitted himself inside, where his tongue had been, she came again. She thought last night had been perfect but now she knew perfection, and orgasm. A very big deal. "You are a genius," she whispered huskily, and he chuckled and ground his body against hers.

"And you are so good at sex, you should stick with it and forget the Crimean War."

"Max, do you think everyone in the apartment house heard my bed squeaking?"

"If they say anything, just tell them it was my mouse they heard."

"Your what?"

"My newest reproduction of a very old toy, I thought you'd probably heard it by now. Oh, no! That's why you thought..."

Max was laughing anyway, so Taylor thought she might as well tickle him.

## Chapter 11

SATURDAY, AND Max and Taylor had the whole day ahead of them, until time to go to the church for the wedding rehearsal. He drank his second cup of coffee while she made an omelet. No shell in the egg. No problem. "Perfect," he said.

Smiling, she leaned across the table for a kiss.

After breakfast, they did the crossword in the Cincinnati Enquirer. Then he cleaned up the table while she watered her plants. "Morning, Sweet Thing," she said as she watered the mint in the window.

"Mornin' yourself," Max said.

He hurried into the living room where he heard her talking softly. Was she speaking to him? He edged quietly to the doorway. "Now, Jimmy Dean, I want you to perk up. Geraldine is outbloomng you."

He folded his arms and leaned against the doorjamb. "You name your plants?"

Taylor turned quickly, slopping water from her sprinkling can onto the floor. Her cheeks flushed but she shrugged casually. "Lots of people talk to plants, but I like to call mine by name. When Sheila and I were kids and I was getting hooked on literature, I called my stuffed bear Longfellow and she called hers Short Fellow. When I explained, she thought it was a great joke, and after that, we teamed up on names. Not long afterward, we got guinea pigs and she named hers Jimmy Dean after the sausage." Taylor rolled her eyes and

grinned. "So I called mine Bob Evans, which Sheila said was dumber because the names didn't sound alike. So when I bought these two geraniums, I named one Jimmy Dean and picked a name I thought she'd approve. Geraldine."

Max crossed the room for another kiss. "You are cute."

"Okay. Coming from you, that sounds like a compliment." She caressed the back of his neck. "Time for my morning run. Care to join me?"

"I know a better way to exercise, but the fresh air will do me good. I'll dash upstairs and change clothes."

"You don't care to run in pinstripes?" She turned toward the bedroom.

"If I don't get out of here, with you heading that direction, I won't care to run at all." He backed toward the door. "I won't be gone long."

She followed him for another kiss. "You'd better not be."

He caressed her tush and flicked his tongue against her lips. "I could start tickling you again," she offered.

"You know what you started with that last night."

"How well I know." She was breathing hard when he turned the door handle, and so was he.

"Well!" Mrs. Stout stood in the hall, hand poised to knock.

"Good morning," Max said. "I was just going to ... the dry cleaners."

"Most people take their pants along with the jackets to be cleaned."

"I ... uh ... spilled something on my coat."

"And the moon is made of blue cheese. I want you out of Glorious Apartments by nightfall, Mr. Stuart. If you can't quit cohabitating, you can't stay here."

"As for you," she said, whirling on Taylor, "I'll give you until the end of the month when your rent's up to find another place."

"That's not fair," Max protested.

"You're not a tenant. Your sister, Penny, is the one who signed the contract, and I happen to know the murder trial is over. So why isn't she back yet? I don't allow co-leasing any more than cohabitation."

Mrs. Stout stalked off. Max and Taylor looked at one another and burst out laughing. Looking over her shoulder, Mrs. Stout glared and pushed the button for the elevator. She stepped inside, and her screams echoed all the way to the bottom.

The EMT's said a Mr. Hockerberry called 911 saying his landlady fell down the elevator shaft. Mrs. Stout said he should mind his own damned business. She didn't fall and the elevator didn't fail. It was those two cussed dogs making love inside that caused her to scream.

Penny had come home for more clothes and brought Muttso with her, she told Max and Taylor. The dog sneaked off while she was putting her stuff in the car, and she thought he'd be all right inside the building, but Muttso, and Petunia, were traumatized by the scare the landlady had given them. "Hasn't she ever seen two dogs mate before?"

"Mate?" Mr. Hockerberry gasped. "Mate?" he shrieked. "If your mutt got my Petunia pregnant..."

"My Muttso isn't a mutt," Penny shouted. "And your Petunia is no shrinking violet. I'll bet she made the advances."

Max and Taylor ran for the parking lot where they could laugh without censure. An ambulance and police car were still parked outside the building, so they joined hands for a walk. "Where are you going to live when you leave the apartments?" she asked as they strolled down the street.

"I have a place," he admitted, "in Carbon City."

"Why haven't you gone home if the murder trial is over?"

"I didn't want to leave you." He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to hold her close. "I talked Penny into a temporary trade."

"Really?" Taylor stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "Where is your place?"

"Close enough for you to live with me and still work at Boomtown High School."

"Live with you?" Her voice sounded choked, even to her own ears.

"Afraid cohabitating would ruin your image and cost you your librarian job?"

"I ... uh ... won't be a librarian forever."

"What will you be?" His eyes mirrored the laughter in his voice. "A wife and mother?"

Suddenly, Taylor's eyes brimmed with tears. "That would be nice, but Max, I'm going to be a sociology professor with a Ph.D."

\* \* \* \*

MAX WAS angrier than he'd ever been in his life. Taylor Gayle was a damned brain. An intellectual. A career woman who would become a professor and wash her hands of him, just as The Uncles had washed theirs of Dad. The long skirts and glasses had been an act. So had the shy persona. She'd posed as a restaurant critic and worked in a bar before pretending to be a librarian. Boy, had she fooled him. He'd thought she was sweet and innocent, and natural. She'd almost had him smelling orange blossoms when he kissed her, and then—wham. She'd dropped a bomb on him.

She'd insisted she would be the same person when she had her doctorate and her professorship. But his mama didn't raise any fools. Give a scholar a Ph.D. and his or her nose shot up in the air and stayed there. Teaching was an honored profession, and Max would have taught if it wasn't for The Uncles.

His relationship with Taylor had seemed perfect. And now, it was in the toilet. If she'd lied to him about everything else, who was to say she hadn't lied about her feelings for him? She might have even been faking that overwhelming response to lovemaking.

Thinking of that sidetracked him into a ready response of his own.

Max buttoned his tan sports coat with a vengeance. He'd wear a flannel shirt, if he had one, just to show her he knew what a man who had nothing more than an associate's degree should wear. He stalked to the window and looked out at the moonlight on the manmade lake. It was good to be home in his condo at Marina Manor, with its masculine furnishings.

Leather furniture in shades of brown. Sturdy mahogany tables. Beige carpeting and cream walls. The wide windows that opened one whole wall to the balcony, letting in lots of light. Granna's Oriental rug centered the room and a curio cabinet in one corner held his keepsakes. He opened the cabinet door and rubbed an arrowhead. Next to it stood Niftee's original Uncle Samuel. Max's pulse quickened, thinking that a toy he created might stand beside Samuel one day.

Max went back to the bedroom to finish dressing. The books he bought at the Antique Mart the day he and Taylor shopped lay on his bedside table. Did she read in bed as he often did? A vision of her sitting against the pillows of his king-sized bed with a textbook and monocle made him turn away.

His kitchen looked sterile with its white appliances and black walls, but it was safe from his cooking endeavors. His freezer and cabinets held every convenience food known to man. He touched a magnet his mother bought him. The message on it said, "Success is doing what you love." She knew his toy dream. Taylor didn't.

He hadn't been completely honest with her, not admitting his position in the company but he hadn't lied. She'd pulled a scam on him and her coworkers for a lousy research class. He'd been had by her plain girl search for a date for the Homecoming Dance. He'd been beguiled into saying he'd be a groomsman in her sister's wedding and her escort so she wouldn't go with a pervert. He'd taken her to bed and told her

he loved her. One week from today, after the wedding ceremony, they'd be free of one another.

He picked up the carnation he'd worn in his lapel to the dance. The flower was brown at the edges, and he crushed it in his hand and threw it in the wastebasket.

In the spare bedroom, he sat on the bed and stared at the worktable that was scattered with plans and drawings and some of the newer toys. He did love Taylor. He loved the Taylor who was feisty and cute and made ordinary happenings spectacular. He loved the fresh smell of her, the feel of her satiny skin, and the way her mouth tasted of strawberries and chocolate. But he didn't know the Taylor who'd lied about her profession, and he couldn't love a professor who looked down her nose at him.

He picked up the toy that made her bang on her ceiling, and subsequently, made him run to her rescue. Ever since that first night when he found her slaphappy from rum and milk, he'd wanted to take care of Taylor.

But toys were his life and they weren't good enough for her.

Max left his tenth floor Marina condo, rode a swift elevator to the lobby, and strode to the desk for valet parking and ordered up his Corvette. Maybe he should have set her straight earlier, but Taylor loved him for himself or she didn't love him at all. Tonight, he'd find out which.

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR LEFT apartment 2A, planning to drive herself to church. Max was madder than a hatter when she leveled with



him about her research and her degree. Ever since she'd learned about his uncles, she'd been afraid this would happen, and he'd blown the whole thing out of proportion just as she'd thought he would.

She leaned against the wall outside her door, clutching her evening bag to her chest. Sheila had said "casual dress" was fine but Taylor wanted to make a good ... perhaps last ... impression on Max.

She couldn't imagine what The Uncles did to affect Max so strongly. Most profs were nice, normal people. He was so hardheaded. If he seriously cared about her, he'd want her to do what she dreamed of doing. He seemed to think her plan to become a professor was invented to make him miserable. When she said she didn't think cohabitation would be appropriate for a woman who hoped to influence young lives, he'd acted totally ridiculous, saying he supposed she thought it was okay for a toy salesman. She didn't care if he sold condoms with headlights, and she'd told him so. When he failed to laugh, she knew he was mad.

Marriage would be perfectly acceptable, but she couldn't say so without looking as if she was proposing. If it occurred to him to propose, he must have been unwilling to make that commitment, because he strode away lickety-split, leaving her in the parking lot. She'd wanted to follow him and bang some sense into head, but he was right, she had mellowed. It didn't feel right to demand attention any more.

Now, she had to face him at the wedding rehearsal and dinner, knowing she'd probably never see him after next Saturday's wedding and reception. Sheila's dream was

coming true, although Peter wasn't the type of man Taylor saw as a soul mate for her twin.

Taylor had promised herself she'd get her doctor of philosophy and teach, and she would someday, but loving Max had put other thoughts into her head. She wanted to ... cook bacon and eggs and hold yard sales with a baby in her arms.

She must have lost her mind. Along with her heart.

"That's a pitiful sigh." Taylor hadn't seen Vaughn coming out of his place. He wrinkled his nose. "Smells like she's cooking something good for a change."

Taylor hadn't noticed. Vaughn rang for the elevator. She raised her eyebrows in question. "Our landlady sprang for a new one," he said.

An elevator stopped, the door opened, and a bell dinged. Taylor stepped inside the new conveyance. Carpeted with mirrors, a lighted sign inside flashed red, No Animals Allowed. "That means you," she told Vaughn.

"You're safe, even if you are looking mighty good these days. I'm seeing someone. Your boyfriend's sister."

"Penny? You're kidding me."

"Nope." Vaughn straightened his shirt collar. "Since I met her, I don't even look when Rosie Lafew walks by."

Rosie was buxom and bold. Taylor couldn't imagine Vaughn could resist. "Nice elevator," she said noncommittally. "It must have cost the landlady a bundle."

"She didn't want to get in trouble over the age and disabilities act. She's also putting in a speaker system so

guests can't enter without your buzzing them in. Your boyfriend put that idea in her head."

"He isn't my ... Max?"

"That's right, and she's blaming you and him for costing her so much money. She said he threatened her and it was all because you're sleeping together."

Taylor's mouth dropped to her knees. "I'm not ... we're not..." Taylor was still sputtering when the door opened and there stood Penny Stuart. Penny smiled, Vaughn kissed her hand, and Taylor forced her mouth closed. She must have been swept off to Kansas and Vaughn was the phony Wizard.

"Guess what," Penny told Taylor. "I'm going to be a grandmother."

Her jaw dropped again. "You're not even married."

Penny laughed. "Petunia is expecting and my Muttso has been named as the father. Mr. Hockerberry is having a conniption fit, worrying who will adopt the children. If I don't find takers, he says he'll file a paternity suit. Can I interest you?"

A cross between a bulldog and a shaggy elephant? She wasn't that insane, yet. "Sorry, I'm moving soon and can't have pets."

A woman with big hair and boobs and hips walked by. Vaughn kept his eyes on Penny, but she ran after Rosie. "Wait. I have a question to ask you."

Shaking her head in amazement, Taylor rushed out the door to find Max sitting outside the entrance in his Vette. Another miracle, so soon?

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

Max motioned for her to get in. "I thought it would arouse suspicion if we arrived separately."

He was right, so she climbed in. He didn't say anything more and she hugged the door on the way to the church. Denied his devastating smile and hand on her knee, she felt cold and depressed. When he parked, she hopped out quickly and while waiting for the rehearsal to begin, let Jenny and Joanne cozy in between them. They seemed to have fallen for Max, pawing at his clothes and playing with his wavy hair. He drew pictures for them on the back of an old church program to keep them quiet while the minister gave instructions. When Taylor and Max walked down the aisle as directed, he pretended as if he cared for her. She did care for him but pretended she didn't. Afterward, they traveled the short distance to the restaurant in silence.

The Grand Hotel dining room wasn't as fancy as the ballroom, but it was comfortable. Armchairs with padded seats circled tables that seated twelve. A small combo played dinner music. Taylor and Max, Sheila and Peter, Jake and Amy and their two girls, Edith and Mr. Mueller, and the minister and his wife sat together. "When are you two going to tie the knot?" Peter asked Max and Taylor over the soup course.

First, social folderol, and now the spread of disease. Taylor looked at Max, afraid he would bolt. His ears turned red and he ladled soup into his mouth. Taylor answered sweetly. "We haven't set a date."

"After this weekend, you'll catch the fever," Amy said, leaning forward as far as her belly would allow. "That's what happened to us."

Max strangled on his soup. Taylor choked back a giggle.

"What religious denomination are you?" the minister asked.

Max and she stared at one another. "Presbyterian, same as Sheila," Taylor said, although she hadn't attended services since she left home.

"Episcopalian," Max replied.

"Close enough for reconciliation," the reverend said.

Taylor didn't think he meant what she was thinking, but she wished she and Max could reconcile. She missed him. Even with him sitting next to her, just knowing he was angry made her feel lonely. Soup was replaced with salad, and then the main course brought on. Max hung his jacket on the back of his chair so he could cut up little Jenny's roast beef. Amy thanked him and looked at Sheila. "How many children do you want?"

"Twin girls," she said, smiling at Taylor fondly.

"And a boy," Peter said, darting his fiancée an affectionate glance. "Right?"

"Right," Sheila said, laying down her fork to squeeze his hand. "Taylor doesn't want any kids, do you, Tag?"

It was Taylor's time to choke. A pea lodged firmly in her throat. Max smacked her on the back, harder than she felt necessary. "Don't call me Tag."

"Haven't you gotten over that dog's name in our first grade reader yet? Get a life," Sheila complained good-naturedly.

"Do you want rug rats?"

"I might," Taylor said coolly. "I was twelve the last time we had this conversation and afraid if I had a boy, he'd act like Jake. I thought boys were all brats, not rug rats." She cast apologetic glances at Max and the minister.

"I never did anything to you," Jake protested, "except call you TGIF."

"And call me twinny and the two of us twinny-ninnies," Taylor said, wrinkling her nose at him. "We were always The Twins and you had to make it worse."

"Children," Edith said, casting an apologetic look at Mr. Mueller. "Stop quibbling."

"Taylor didn't change her mind about boys until she met Zach," Sheila said. "Has she ever mentioned him, Max?"

"The boy next door," Edith said, smiling. "Her first boyfriend, his family moved in when the twins were freshmen and Taylor didn't know anyone else existed all through high school."

"He was a year older and thought I was a pal. Or a pest. He never thought of me as a girl. So how can you say he was my first boyfriend?"

"I thought you'd marry him," Edith said. "Instead, he married that cheerleader who chased him. You were always too shy."

"Mo-ther," Taylor hissed. "Cut it out."

Edith sighed. "What about you, Max? Have you ever been married? Do you want children?"

"Did you date any cheerleaders?" Sheila chimed in, breaking the tension so everyone laughed. "This isn't the inquisition, Mom." She reached over to pat her mother's hand.

"I've never been married, and yes, I'd like children," Max declared. "And no, I didn't date a cheerleader, but I went steady with the girl who was elected prom queen, if that counts. And now," he said, smiling, "I'd like to propose a toast to the engaged couple."

\* \* \* \*

"THANKS FOR not running out the door," Taylor whispered after the toast, although a proposal of marriage would have been better.

"It's worse than I thought," he answered behind his napkin. "They act like our wedding's next."

"Want to dance?"

"Oh, sure, that will really throw them off the track."

"Max, you heard Sheila call you my fiancé the day you met her. Well, Mom thinks so, too. Could we just pretend until after the wedding?"

He wrinkled his brow. "So you want to dance with me as part of an act?"

"As a sincere apology for not sharing my goals with you in the beginning." She touched his face again, even though her mother was staring. "I love to dance and I love you, Max." She kept her voice very quiet.

He put his jacket back on and led her onto the dance floor. "I apologized to you for my newspaper mistake with flowers,

and you weren't forgiving. You never mentioned getting them."

"I thanked you for the roses."

"Not the roses. Much earlier when men were knocking at your door."

"The only thing I got earlier was a plant with faces." She gasped. "You sent that?"

His eyes registered shock and he moaned. "The monstrosity in the bathroom? I hope not. Was my name on the card?"

"I never looked. I thought a sadist sent it."

"I turned it toward the bathroom wall."

"I skimmed on the watering, but it kept smiling, and blooming, and I thought with determination like that, it deserved to live. So I've been talking to it. But I haven't thought of an appropriate name, or names, yet." She slid both arms around his neck. "Thank you for the plant. I forgive you for misprinting my ad."

The music ended and he kept his arms around her. "You're forgiven too, but if dancing together is apologizing, you don't have to quit."

When the combo played the last song of the evening, he gave her a final whirl and dipped her nearly to the floor. Smiling into his eyes, she maintained her composure until a small voice squawked. "Look, Herb. The moon!"

He stood her up like a mannequin and patted his jacket pocket.

A tiny spaceship whirled madly around the floor. "It's not the moon, Gladys. It's earth."



"Fly me to the moon, Herb."

"Of course, sweetheart." A figure hurtled from the spaceship, the whine became a laugh, and a siren shrilled as the spaceship whirled madly around the dance floor.

The giant bee she'd heard in his apartment. Max Stuart was toast.

\* \* \* \*

GOOFBALL WAS not an appropriate name for the smiling chrysanthemum plant he'd sent Taylor with good intent. Max yanked too hard on his bow tie and it came half untied. The darned things were supposed to be stitched. After twenty minutes, he'd restored it to order and was ready to fasten his cummerbund. This was the last time he wore a monkey suit, he told himself as he slid his arms into his sleeves and straightened the jacket before the mirror. Not that Taylor would require it of him any more. She wasn't too pleased with the Niftee Novelty he'd thought was perfect for wedding rehearsal parties.

After a stunned silence, most people laughed. But not Taylor. Since then, she'd been calling the plant Goofball, and in private, he bet she'd been calling him worse names than that.

He'd stuck it in his pocket intending to embarrass her, or make her laugh, planning it as kind of a test. If she cared enough about him, she'd accept him as a toy salesman, and think a novelty act at a wedding rehearsal party went with the territory. But he'd changed his mind when they'd begun to hit it off again, and when she'd asked him to dance, he'd put on

his jacket, forgetting about the spaceship until they dipped and it fell from his pocket.

He'd never marry a woman who didn't have a sense of humor. Marry? Where had that thought come from? She'd turned down his suggestion they live together.

So why had he suggested living together, instead of marriage?

He'd just never thought about getting married, but he'd like having someone he loved to come home to each evening. And he wanted babies. Jake and Amy's kids had taken to him. Kids usually did. Taylor didn't want boys. He did. He also wanted a girl. Hell, he wanted a house full of kids. But Taylor was the first woman who'd made him think about marriage, and they weren't cut out for one another. She wanted to be a professor, not a mother, and her dreams would soon come true.

The day after the rehearsal, Amy gave birth, and Taylor called to tell him she'd be through with her job and out of his life. In two weeks.

"We have to find someone to fill in for bridesmaid. Maybe we could ask your old girlfriend, the prom queen. What was her name?"

"Marcia, and she and I were an item once, but no more."

"She's the one you almost married?"

"Yes, and I'm glad I didn't. Taylor, I'd like to see the new baby. Would you go to the hospital with me?"

"I'm going and I can't stop you."

Max wasn't sure why he'd wanted to go to the hospital, but when he saw Taylor cooing through the glass at that tiny

*Male Wanted*  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

shriveled red baby girl, he knew his heart's desire. He wanted her to have his children. Weird that such a thought could be sexy.

Taylor had talked to him grudgingly when they were alone but normally in front of her family. Maybe she'd get over her anger. Maybe he should tell her about his work and dreams. He was so damned confused, he didn't know what to do.

He opened a small chest where he kept the diamond cufflinks his parents gave him, and there, beside them, lay a solitaire diamond ring. Granna Anna had given it to him before she died, to give to someone he loved someday. He hadn't worn the cufflinks since her funeral, and he hadn't look at the ring since then. Picking up the simple gold band with the carat stone, he knew it was no accident he'd chosen to wear the cufflinks tonight. He'd wanted to see the ring. He wanted to see it on Taylor's finger. She tried to act feisty but she was a marshmallow at heart. That's why she wanted a big wedding. And he'd be glad to give it to her if she'd say yes.

## Chapter 12

TAYLOR WAS supposed to move out of Glorious Apartments in a week, and it was just as well. She was ready to leave the memories of Max behind. Ready to leave town. Ready ... for what? Amy had given birth two weeks early but bounced back like a bungee and would go to work soon. It had been hard to stay angry with Max when he looked at the baby, wide-eyed, a tender smile on his lips. Joy was an apt name for the little girl. Taylor couldn't wait to hold her new niece.

Mrs. Stout had dropped by earlier to ask if Taylor had found a place yet, and she'd said was going to live with her mother until she found a place in Windsor Grove. It was too bad Zach married the cheerleader. If he still lived next door, he might take her mind off Max.

Fat chance.

She would stay with Jake and Amy until Amy went back to work and then she'd go home to her mother who didn't plan to marry Mr. Mueller until spring. Taylor packed a small bag with her lingerie and accessories and laid out her maid of honor dress. She had two hours to kill and refused to sit there wishing Max would show up. She'd find something to do until time to go.

Penny was in the elevator. "I can only ride when Muttso is visiting Mr. Hockerberry and Petunia," she said, laughing. Sobering as the door shut, she touched Taylor's arm. "Max told me what happened at the rehearsal dinner. I'm sorry if

he embarrassed you. That spaceship is one of the novelties Dad designed and one of Max's favorites. My mother says Dad has a warped sense of humor, but she loves it. We all do. Have you met Mom and Dad yet?"

Taylor shook her head. She'd hoped to be introduced to them as Max's future wife, but that was a foolish dream. He was the ultimate goof-up, or goof ball depending on whether it was intentional, dropping that toy on the dance floor. She loved him, but he wasn't husband material. "You must have guessed Pop had a bent for humor; otherwise, why would he have started Niftee Novelty and Toys?"

Taylor snapped out of her reverie. "Wait a minute. Your father designed the spaceship? He started Niftee?"

"Max didn't tell you? Dad doesn't design all the products, only a few, but his early patents inspired him to make and sell things he considered fun."

"So Max works for your dad?"

"I ... uh ... have to hurry, but I think you should talk to my brother. He told me you give your plants names, so I tried it, and mine are growing better. Thanks for the tip. Kimberly and Millicent are doing better already." She ran out the door and across the parking lot.

Taylor stood in doorway and watched Penny jump in her car. One more surprise happening and she'd pass out.

Max pulled up, squealing his tires. Opening the door, he motioned her to get in. She shook her head. "Please," he said.

She considered lying on the ground and saying Gotcha like he once did. "No."

He jumped out, ran around the car, and picked her up. "This is important." He dumped her in the passenger seat of his car.

She huffed and pretended to be insulted, but her heart beat a happy tune. No man should look so sexy in jeans and a white tee shirt. Maybe that's why he wore suits, to mask his sex appeal. "You aren't dressed for the wedding. Are you still going?"

"You aren't dressed for the wedding either." He gave her a blue-eyed, heart-melting smile. Sheila used to be the only one she couldn't stay mad at. "Are you?"

Remembering she was wearing plaid boxer shorts and a godawful tee shirt with a plaid heart on the front, she groaned. "Mom bought Sheila and I these twin sets for our birthday. Where are you taking me?"

"Are you tired of being a twin?"

Taylor shrugged. "Sometimes I'd like to be myself. I don't think I should meet anyone dressed this way."

"I never saw a woman so vain." Max brushed a thumb across her cheek, a dangerous thing to do when he was swooping the Corvette into a parking place.

"Be careful," Taylor warned. "You didn't answer my question. Where are we going?"

"You think my logic is so farfetched, I want to show you the basis for it." She opened her mouth. He shook his head. "Don't ask."

Taylor shrugged. "Why did your sister name her plants Kimberly and Millicent?"

"You've been talking to Penny?"

Was Max afraid she'd learned something he hadn't told her?

"Penny had turtles with those names and they lived for years. She's hoping their luck rubs off."

Taylor smiled. Penny's logic was similar to Sheila's. Max opened his door and came around to open hers. She looked at the name of the building and gripped the edge of her seat. "Exactly what is the University Club?"

"A restaurant and pub with game rooms, et cetera. We're going in for a drink. I don't have to lift you out, do I?"

She didn't like the look in Max's eye and she hated her appearance. "We have to be at the church soon." He'd opened her door and was tapping his foot. She'd never seen him so jumpy. "I can't go inside this way."

"We'll make it on time. You look cute. I mean, nice. You look normal."

She flipped down the visor and looked at herself. Her face was clean and her hair neat, even if it was in a ponytail. She stepped out of the car and looked down to inspect her white tennis shoes. Max took her arm. "Tell me I'm not going to have to carry you inside."

She shook her head and he took her hand. His was clammy.

The building was made of limestone and brick with amber glass windows, and dark and cool inside. Max nodded toward a brass plaque that said Professors' Pub and steered her through the door.

High-backed chairs and barstools were covered in deep burgundy leather. A brick floor and a dark wood ceiling added

to the dusky decor. Two men sat at a corner table playing gin. Half a dozen men sat at the bar. Three women sat at a table near the door. The bartender leaned against the wall listening to classical music on the radio. Max guided Taylor to a table near the gin players. "Scotch on Rocks," he told the bartender when he came around.

Taylor ordered Rum and Coke. "I didn't know you liked Scotch."

"I don't." He grimaced and went over to the bar and came back with a beer and her mixed drink. "I have to learn to be myself," he said softly.

"Maxwell." One of the gin players slapped down his cards. "Gin."

The other man frowned down his nose before turning around. "What are you doing dressed like that in this club, son?"

The Uncles. Taylor fidgeted in her seat.

The first uncle wore a turtleneck and a herringbone blazer with leather elbow patches. Max introduced him as Walter. The second uncle, Gerald, wore a three-piece charcoal suit, gray dress shirt, and black cravat. Max introduced Taylor as a friend.

"Sit down," Gerald said. Taylor, intimidated by his brisk nod at the chair between him and Walter, did as he said.

"Not there," said Walter. "That chair stares right into the light. Here." He tapped the other chair.

Taylor moved. Max took the chair she'd vacated and tented his fingers. She raised her brows at him.



"Did you attend a university, my dear?" the man in the suit asked Taylor.

Was that a requirement for coming in here? "Yes, sir. I have a bachelor's and a master's."

"Marvelous," said one.

"Maybe you can talk some sense into our nephew," said the other. "Where did you get your degrees?"

Taylor told them. "Oh, that's too bad," said Walter. "You should have gone to..."

"A top twenty school," Gerald finished, shooting his cuffs.

Taylor felt like she was a ping-pong game observer. Walter must be the pooh-pooh and Gerald the professional.

"Do you like our pub? We donated it."

"Maxwell's father, Joseph, could have done the same if he hadn't gone into the toy business." Taylor thought the pooh-pooh prof was going to weep.

"Education is the answer to everything. Don't you agree, dear?"

"Maybe not everything."

"Oh, pooh," said Walter.

"A profession is so important," Gerald said, polishing his diamond cufflinks on the tablecloth. "If you have a college education, no one can take that away from you."

Taylor stared into her rum and Coke.

"Love and marriage are hooey." Walter tapped his pipe as if there were something in it.

"Toys and novelties are the real hooey," Gerald said.

"Joseph could have been somebody."

Max raised his eyebrows at Taylor and she nodded. She'd seen enough. He stood and she did, too. "Dad is somebody with a reputable business and a family who loves him, and that's no hooey."

"Pooh. You are so blind, boy. You're following right in his footsteps. It's such a loss."

"Professionalism is the key word. Education. Appearance."

Taylor followed Max outside into the sunlight. Neither of them said anything until they were in the car headed back to Glorious Apartments when he started talking fast.

"Grandfather wanted his boys to be educators. Fun wasn't important. Learning was. He went to a boarding school where work was all he knew. But Dad and The Uncles had the benefit of a mother who knew how to smile and relax. Grandmother Stuart was a strong woman who could stand up to her husband, and my father took his lead from her. Grandma had a collection of toys from her childhood and one that belonged to her brother was the model for Uncle Samuel."

Max stared straight ahead and Taylor kept quiet.

"Dad's mother died when he was a high school senior, but she left each of her sons an inheritance and he used his to start Niftee." Max shot Taylor a glance before continuing.

"Grandfather Stuart thought he should use it for college and hadn't forgiven him when he died two years later. And, as you saw, The Uncles continued the vengeance." Max hesitated, then went on to explain how his dad almost lost everything when he had health problems but managed to survive without their help.

"Clothes don't make the person, Max. We were both wrong about that. Your uncles are unreal, with all their affectations. Leather elbow patches and a pipe. A cravat and diamond cufflinks. I'm surprised one didn't have a monocle and the other a gold-tipped cane. They're..."

"Stereotypes. Would you feel better educated with them at the front of the class than a man in jeans and a tee shirt or a woman in red?"

Taylor chewed her lip. She'd omitted something in her theorem if Max thought that. He pulled into the parking lot of the church and opened the door. "We should be getting dressed right now."

"Wait. You surely don't think I'd act like them?"

"How can you be certain you wouldn't?"

\* \* \* \*

ACTION AND reaction. The way you dress affects the way you act and vice versa. The Uncles are pompous and dress in an exaggerated manner, so they exaggerate their behavior. My stereotype theory is incomplete without the behavior aspect. Taylor shifted her weight from one pale blue satin-shod foot to the other. She had more work to do.

"What are you frowning about, Tag?" Sheila asked, wrapping her arm around Taylor's shoulders.

The hairdresser who'd put the finishing touches to the bride's hair had left them alone in the dressing room without Taylor noticing her departure. She and Sheila wore matching pink robes with heart appliqués and brought back to the present, Taylor wondered if they'd ever dress alike again.

Sheila wrapped her arm around Taylor's shoulders and looked at her in the mirror. "Don't worry. Mom will still buy us matching heart outfits."

"I wouldn't mind if she'd buy us big girl clothes. We look like we're six-years-old."

"You look like you're six. I look sixteen."

Taylor wrinkled her nose.

Sheila turned her around. "You're still wearing that little half-frown that means there's something on your mind. Since it isn't the robes, what did Max do?"

Taylor's words gushed forth. "We were almost late getting here. He took me to meet his uncles. They're professors and he doesn't like them. Neither did I, but he doesn't like professors at all."

Sheila patted her hand. "I wouldn't worry. If he loves you, he'll love your work."

"The profs are stereotypes. They shot a hole in my theory. I'll have to do more research."

"Don't be a prof. And your problems are solved."

"I'm not changing my life's ambition for a man."

Sheila shrugged. "I can understand that, but I never did think you were the professor type. A girl who hides romance books under her mattress? Come on, Tag. You're talking out of the wrong side of your brain. You're a creator. Remember the stories you used to write?"

"Historical romances." Taylor played with the edge of Sheila's robe. Max liked history. "You knew and never said anything."

"Sweetie, I know everything about you. I know you love me, but to this day, you hate the way Mom always calls us The Twins. You hate Twinny. You want to be yourself. That's it!" Sheila grabbed Taylor by the shoulders. "You want to establish your own identity. I wanted marriage so you said you didn't, just to be different. Why didn't I see that before?"

Taylor didn't think she'd seen it that clearly herself. "Maybe you don't know everything about me after all."

"I know you're in love and..." Sheila lit up like a chandelier. "You slept with him, didn't you?"

"He was the first man I found who could read the postcard my sister wrote in Spanish, and I was grateful. So it's your fault."

Sheila started giggling and Taylor shook a finger at her. "Max is just like you. He plays tricks, and thinks he's so smart, and he does things by mistake that are worse than tricks. But you're both sweet and funny and kind and I love you both."

"When the master's degree wasn't enough, I knew you were searching for something, but I didn't realize it was identity. I thought it was a man to love."

"I think the two may go hand in hand, but now I've found one, he doesn't want to marry a professor, and I didn't want to marry a toy salesman. But..." She tapped her fingernail against her teeth. "I don't care what he does for a living because I love him."

"Listen to what you just said."

Taylor smiled weakly. "It's true, but he doesn't feel the same way."

"He'll come around, Tag. I assumed Peter was a businessman because of the way he dressed. Mortician never entered my mind and when I found out, it was too late because I was in love with him."

"Squiggers?"

Sheila laughed. "Big squiggers, but I can deal with them. I just can't ... won't ... live in an apartment upstairs of a funeral home."

"I could loan you a spaceship to keep your mind off the dead people."

"Could I get a shot?" the photographer asked, stepping up with his camera.

"Vodka or bourbon?" Taylor quipped and Sheila broke up.

"Keep laughing." The photographer focused. "Did anyone ever tell you girls that you look alike?"

"Some people think we're twins," Sheila said.

"But we're more than that; we're sisters with interlocked hearts," Taylor told him, her eyes on her sister's face. Sheila, who'd always loved the twin connection, would love her wedding gift.

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR WALKED down the aisle, step-slide, step-slide. Max stood at the front of the church next to Peter and Jake. Her eyes met Max's and she faltered. He gave a tiny thumbs-up gesture and she smiled and regained her composure, turning near the altar to face the crowd.

Amy entered next. Joanne, the junior bridesmaid, was followed by little Jenny, trailing rose petals. Baby Joy sat on Grandma Edith's lap, her eyes closed.

The organist struck up, "Here Comes the Bride."

Sheila walked down the aisle, head high, creamy shoulders bared in an off-the-shoulder gown that showed the tiny birthmark heart on her shoulder. She was the most beautiful bride Taylor ever laid eyes on, and her heart brimmed with love when her sister shifted her gaze from Peter to her and smiled. Jake met Sheila halfway and accompanied her down the aisle where, doing double-duty, he would give her hand in marriage to Peter.

Max caught Taylor's eye and like a diamond catching a glint of sunshine, her mouth reflected his smile. She didn't need a doctorate to feel fulfilled. She needed his love and acceptance.

"Ah-chew!" Taylor looked around for Aunt Joyce, sure she recognized her nasal sneeze.

"Ah-choo!" Sheila echoed as she passed Aunt Joyce's pew.

"Ah-chew!" A whole string of sneezes followed. Aunt Joyce. Sheila. Aunt Joyce. Sheila.

The bride stopped and Taylor handed her a tissue. Her eyes and her nose were running and she probably couldn't see where she was going. Sheila sneezed again.

"It's her fault," Aunt Joyce gasped, pointing to a woman across the aisle. "That woman has a dog."

Everyone in First Presbyterian craned their necks. Some people stood up. Sheila turned around. A woman in turquoise velvet sitting in the third pew on the groom's side clutched a

Chihuahua to her chest. Sheila ran to the altar and half-hid behind the lectern.

"He asked me to bring her." The woman pointed to Peter.

"Pootsy won't bite, Sheila. She's my good little dog," Peter said, smiling. "Yes, she is." He hurried over to the pew. "And this is my friend Margaret." Peter kissed the woman on the cheek. Then he kissed the dog. "Daddy loves his little Pootsy and couldn't get married without her. Sheila, say hello to Pootsy." He took the dog from Margaret to meet Sheila.

Pootsy kissed Sheila.

"Ah-choo!" Tears ran down her cheeks. Her nose ran. She sneezed again. Her face and neck were starting to blotch. She waved her bridal bouquet. "Take him away."

"Sheila, stop. You're frightening our dog."

"Our dog? You never told me you had a dog."

"I was keeping him for a little surprise."

"Big surprise. I'm allergic."

"I'm sure there are shots you can take."

"And if there aren't? Or I don't want to?"

Peter laid his hand over his heart. "Pootsy is like a child to me."

Sheila ran up the aisle and out the door of the church. Taylor ran past the stricken guests after her sister and Max after her. Jake and Amy were close behind. Jenny and Joanne raced one another. Peter, looking wounded, stayed where he was, with Margaret and a yapping dog.

Taylor and Max watched Sheila squeal out in a waiting black stretch limo. "Is that a rented limo or a funeral car?" Max asked.



"Squiggers," Taylor threw back her head and laughed.

"How can you? At a time like this?" Edith Gayle wrung her hands.

"Sheila will be okay, Mom."

"I know, but we have a hundred and fifty guests and a caterer."

"Wine and dine them and they won't care," Jake suggested.

His mother looked at him, surprised. "Hey, I have ideas and they're good sometimes." Behind his hand, he spoke to Max and Taylor. "Growing up it was always The Twins and Jake. I played a supporting role all my life."

Taylor digested that bit of information as Jake took over. At his direction, they climbed in Max's Corvette and headed for the reception hall. Had he felt like odd man out when she and Sheila were born the day before his second birthday?

Max cleared his throat. "I should probably wait to tell you this, but I have to get something off my chest. I'm not a salesman. I manage Niftee Novelty and Toys and oversee my parents' other two businesses."

Taylor's mouth fell open. "You oversee three companies?"

"Tan-a-Rama, and no, I don't use the tanning beds, and Quick Copy don't take much time. At Niftee, toys are designed, produced, and sold. I'm in charge of operations there, so I wear a suit."

"That explains a few things."

"I wanted to teach history, but when Dad had his heart attack, I dropped out of school to run the company. With a

couple of night classes, I was able to obtain an associate's degree in business."

She couldn't believe he'd wanted to teach.

"I like running Niftee now, and if all goes well, on my thirtieth birthday, I'll receive fifty-one percent of the company from my parents. With controlling interest, I plan to start a new line of historical reproduction toys. Combine my interests." He gave her a shaky smile.

They had many things in common. "Max, I never meant to come across as a snob. Education was my playing card, my brains the leveler that brought me as much attention from Daddy as Sheila. And with Mom, we were always the twins, so I wasn't anyone by myself. I thought if I excelled at something ... a doctorate sounded more important than M.R.S."

"You are beautiful and smart and—"

Taylor put her fingers to his lips. "Lucky. A marriage certificate is more important than another diploma, but I could live without a piece of paper of any kind, loving you."

"You'll have them both, I promise. I want to marry you," he said. "Will you—?"

"Yes." She smiled up at him. "I love you for who you are, not what you do, or how you dress, Max."

He took her hand and slipped a diamond ring on her finger.

"Oh, Max. It's beautiful." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Granna Anna's, she wanted me to give it to someone I love." He kissed her. "I'll love you even if you get a doctorate and become professor."

"I want to be your wife and our children's mother, Max. I still want to be a prof but I think I'd like to stay home with the kids until they start school."

"I've heard the early years are the most impressionable," Max said.

They joined the remainder of the wedding party in the reception hall. "You two aren't supposed to neck next to the wedding cake," Amy teased.

"We were sealing our engagement with a kiss," Taylor said softly.

Edith Gayle overheard. Looking at Taylor's diamond, she gasped, "It's beautiful."

"I have an idea," Jake said. "Why don't we turn this shindig into an engagement party?"

\* \* \* \*

TAYLOR HANDED her sister a glass of wine. She shook her head. "It reminds me of champagne."

A week had passed and Sheila had remained inconsolable over the embarrassment she'd caused her family. "It wasn't that bad," their mother insisted, turning the pearl ring that Mr. Mueller had given her. "The guests had two engagements to celebrate and food and music and we returned their gifts."

"Peter Lapierre is a dope," Taylor said, sitting on her mother's sofa to hug her twin. Peter hadn't called or come after Sheila.

"Any man who'd choose a dog over the woman he married is worse than a dope," Edith said.

"I'm the one who's played the fool. I was ready to overcome my squiggers for him." Suddenly, Sheila giggled.

Taylor handed her the glass of wine and Sheila looked into the shimmery liquid.

"An annulment won't be a problem," Edith said. "I talked to a lawyer. Remember old Mr. Donaldson, who read your father's will? He said Peter was marrying you under false pretenses."

"Not admitting he was the father of a dog?" Taylor asked, and Sheila giggled again.

"I remember Mr. Donaldson," Taylor said. "He read the will saying Daddy's heirs were entitled to his insurance, then handed you a leather folder with the will inside."

"I never looked at it. I didn't want to see your father's handwriting again. It was scrawled on notebook paper, I could see that."

"What did you do with it?" Sheila asked.

"I'd like to see it," Taylor said.

"It's in my bureau drawer." Edith turned toward the window. "Look, if you like."

Taylor beat Sheila to the bureau. "You and your marathons. It's not fair," Sheila said, giving her a playful shove.

"Twins," their mother said from the doorway.

Laughing like twinny-ninnies, Taylor pretended to fight with Sheila over the leather folder before sitting down with her on the bed to look at it together.

Inside the leather folder was the scrawled will that took about thirty seconds to read. Taylor reached for the folder to

put it back. Sheila teasingly held it out of reach, and a yellowed newspaper clipping fell out. Taylor snatched it up. "It looks like a newspaper ad." Unfolding it, she read the words silently, then aloud. "Man searching for identity. Male, approximately..." It gave her father's height, weight, and age. "Blondish-red hair, hazel eyes. No identification. Bump on head indicates blow may have caused amnesia. Anyone having information, call..." It gave a telephone number in Oklahoma.

"He didn't leave us," Taylor whispered.

"He probably died not knowing who he was," Sheila said.

Their mother shook her head. "It was a ploy, I'll bet, and he planted it with the will. He probably left with another woman."

"Mom, you said Daddy was single-minded," Taylor reminded her. "So would he be capable of such a plan?"

"I could find out!" Sheila said. "I can't face the people in Windsor Grove and I took a month off for my honeymoon. I could go to Oklahoma and find out what he did when he lived there."

"Maybe you can find a new husband while you're there," Taylor called, as her sister pounded up the steps.

\* \* \* \*

NEWSPAPER ADS had a funny way of working in their family. Taylor smiled as the sleek elevator at Niftee Toys whisked her to the top floor and the manager's office. Max's secretary, a middle-aged woman, nodded toward a door marked "Maxwell H. Stuart. Private."

"He's expecting you, Miss Taylor."

On Christmas Eve, she would become Taylor Stuart. Maybe she should have picked a man named Bob or Jim instead of one with two last names. But Max was the right man for her. She peeked in the door. He looked dapper in a cream-colored sport shirt and dark striped tie. Since she'd done the stereotype study, he'd been playing with his image and she'd played with hers.

Black leggings and boots and a hip-length plaid cardigan were a statement of individuality. She was no longer librarian but temporary nanny and part time student. Ever since she and Joy dropped Joanne and Jenny off at afternoon preschool, the baby had been asleep. Cuddling her close, Taylor kissed her rosebud cheek.

Max was talking on the phone and typing notes on a computer with two fingers. His desk was immaculate. Another phone rang and he excused himself to switch over without a hitch.

Max looked up to see Taylor watching him, baby Joy in her arms, and he quickly freed himself from his calls. "Come in, you two beauties."

"I'm impressed. You're very efficient in your own environment."

"Usually, but I'm not sure what may happen with you around. You make me forget everything I ever knew how to do."

"Not everything." Taylor smiled up at him through her lashes.

"How can you be sure?" He perched on the corner of the desk.

She stood and caressed his cheek, making the hair on the back of his neck stand up. She ran her fingers down to his chest and tugged on his belt. "You win," he said, covering his lap with his hands.

"What's my prize?"

"Give the baby to me and I'll show you."

"What are you going to do?" He held out his arms and Taylor handed over Joy. "Support her head," she called as he disappeared, leaving her alone in the office.

Max returned in a flash and locked the door behind him. "Mrs. Beal loves babies. She'll support her head."

He took Taylor's hand and laid it in his lap. "Ready to claim your prize?"

"Max." Taylor pulled back. "Tell me you're kidding."

He showed her he wasn't kidding. He pulled up her long sweater and played with one lace-clad breast. The nipple hardened and he played with the other. Taylor moaned and Max walked her backward to his desk. "No," she said.

He laid her gently back on it. It was such a long desk, even her feet fit. She smiled as he slid her sweater up and unclasped the lacy bra, freeing her breasts. "I've never done anything like this, even in my wildest imagination."

"Neither have I, so that makes it special." He unfastened his pants while fondling her breasts. He looked less dapper on his knees, poised over her on the desk, and she giggled. "You make everything fun," Max said. "I like a woman who knows how to mix business with pleasure."

Pleasure. Taylor bit her lip to keep from crying out and waking Joy or alerting Mrs. Beal. She liked a man who knew how to get down to business before a baby cried or a secretary knocked, in any location and position. Max managed it all beautifully. "I'm going to change my mum plant's name," she said, watching him zip up again. "To Perfection."

"Does that mean you don't feel it's necessary to run any more ads?"

"Not unless it's for my twin," Taylor said, running her fingers through Max's hair. "She may be playing detective, but no matter where she goes, my beautiful counterpart is on a husband search." Max reached for Taylor again and she raised her lips. "And if she runs an ad in Oklahoma, who knows what kind of trouble she'll find."

"Are you calling me trouble?" Max asked, his mouth a breath away from hers.

"I'll take the fifth on that."

"If you're mixing it with chocolate milk," Max whispered. "Count me in."

\* \* \* \*

MAX DROPPED his jaw when Taylor met him at the back of the church to walk down the aisle. She looked drop-dead gorgeous in lace and chiffon. The lace dipped to expose a delicate hint of her breasts, then clung to her body, skimming her waist and hips where it flared into a cloud that swirled about her legs when she walked.

Her hand on his arm was tiny. He laid his over it. It wasn't just her beauty he loved. She'd seen right through The



Uncles. "You look like every bride should," he said softly. "I love you."

"And I love you. Listen. They're playing our song."

"Proud Mary?"

Taylor giggled. "The Wedding March."

The organist repeated the introduction and they moved slowly forward, Max's hand over hers on his arm. He wasn't letting his twin get away.

\* \* \* \*

SHE SMILED up at him and a flash went off as the photographer caught them on film. "I now pronounce you man and wife." Max kissed the beautiful twin and the one who was smart enough not to marry Peter Lapierre caught the bouquet.

"I used to dream we'd have a double wedding, but I guess you wouldn't have liked that," Sheila said afterward.

"I'm past the twin thing now but every bride should have her day." Sheila laughed and Taylor caught her hands. "She-she, who told you I was engaged?"

"You did. You showed me your ring right after my reception."

"Don't play innocent with me. Who told you weeks earlier?"

"No one. I made it up to put pressure on you." Laughing, Sheila pushed Taylor toward the doors of the church and Max. "Time to go, Tag."

Time to go. Time to marry. Time to raise kids for family get-togethers. Time for Mom to marry Mr. Mueller. Sheila to

Male Wanted  
*by Betty Jo Schuler*

find out what happened to Daddy, and to find a husband. Petunia and Muttso to have puppies. Taylor shook her head at the wonder of all that had happened lately. Dashing out the door into a shower of bubbles blown by guests, she felt as if someone, somewhere, had waved a magic wand over her. Mrs. Maxwell Harrison Stuart was the luckiest woman on earth.

## About the Author

A job in a candy store may sound like a dream come true to some people, but when Betty Jo Schuler was in school, she envied librarians, surrounded by all those books filled with delicious tales. Instead of becoming a librarian, she became an elementary teacher and the mother of four. She kept that dream tucked away, and while surrounded by kids, it changed and grew to filling books with delicious tales she's written herself.

"I was a very imaginative kid," she says, "and I am still imaginative. I think MALE WANTED proves that."

Schuler spins tales at her Indiana home, halfway between Indianapolis and Cincinnati where she lives with her husband Paul. Her kids are grown, and she's quit teaching to write full time. Ever eager to keep up with the times, this author of three print books had her first electronic book published in 1998, and has continued to write and publish many more. "I love writing ebooks and my publishers are the greatest to work with! My readers are wonderful too, and I enjoy hearing from them. Send an e-mail to [bschuler@webworks2000.net](mailto:bschuler@webworks2000.net) and tell me what you think of this or any of my books. To check out my backlist as well as my upcoming releases, please visit my website at:

[home.webworks2000.net/bschuler/bettyjo.html](http://home.webworks2000.net/bschuler/bettyjo.html)

I hope you have as much fun reading MALE WANTED as I had writing it.

---

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this ebook by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)