



**Short and Sweet**  
**Six Short Romances**

**Lynne Marshall**

# **Short and Sweet**

Six Short Stories

By

Lynne Marshall

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An original *Woman's World* short story  
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*I sold my first and only Woman's World story in December 2005, and it appeared in the March 14, 2006 edition. I originally wrote 1,100 words and titled it A Knight in Dusty Overalls, but the title and length were changed to suit the magazine. If you enjoy short romance stories, this one is for you.*

## **A GOOD HUSBAND**

by Lynne Marshall ©2005

Gladys and Russell came to the clinic every Friday morning for a blood pressure check. Alice reached for the stethoscope around her neck and smiled at the pair.

"We're married sixty-two years," Russell said, as he did every week. "Can you believe it?"

Alice answered in her typical smart-alecky way with a wink while applying the cuff to Gladys' arm. "And you're still talking to each other?"

That got a laugh from both of them. Alice couldn't help noticing the care the older couple took with each other. She thought about her own marriage and felt a wave of guilt.

Alice had been head over heels for her husband, Brian, when they first married. After the kids came along, it became easy to get annoyed, and too often, she'd said exactly what was on her mind, even though she knew her words often hurt him.

She hadn't even bothered to kiss Brian goodbye that morning, and they'd only been married ten years. Instead, Alice had complained about how hard it was to get two kids ready for school while she prepared for work. But now, she recalled, it was Brian who had fixed them breakfast and handed off the lunch sacks on their way out the door.

"Everything looks good," she said to the couple, smiling.

The appointment over, Russell stood and offered a hand to help Gladys up. He placed a sweater over her bird-like shoulders and handed her purse to her. Gladys smiled. "You're a good husband, dear."

"And you're a good wife."

Alice's heart lurched a little. When, lately, had she bothered to say anything sweet like that to Brian? Big, burly, tenderhearted Brian got up every day and went to work as an electrician. Though he might be more of a knight in dusty overalls than shining armor, he supported his family with pride. He wasn't perfect—far from it. In fact, lately, he'd been choosing to play cards with the guys on Friday nights, rather than watch a video with her and the kids. That irked her, and she'd let him know it that morning.

Alice watched the old couple head down the hall, holding on to each other for support, and said a prayer for her own marriage.

On her break, Alice sat talking with Noreen, a co-worker who was considering a separation.

“Listen to what our marriage counselor suggested,” Noreen said. “She wrote it out like a prescription: Be polite to each other.” She laughed wryly. “Don’t allow yourself to say anything spiteful.”

“Maybe she has a point,” Alice said thoughtfully.

“She said another couple in our same predicament tried it. After months of not talking to each other, they started with polite sentences.” Noreen laced her fingers in her lap. “After another few weeks, they’d become friendly again, and within another month, they’d changed their minds about divorce. Just by being nice to each other.”

“Sounds like it’s worth a shot,” Alice said. She reached across and grasped her friend’s arm. “Don’t give up, okay?”

That night, knowing Brian would come home to change before the card game, Alice gave the kids an early dinner, then fixed Brian’s favorite meal of meatloaf and mashed potatoes. When he walked in the door, she kissed him.

“Hey, thanks,” he said, a surprised sparkle in his eyes.

He wanted to hug her, she could tell, but held back, probably because of the dirty work clothes. Instead, he leaned forward and gave her a kiss. They looked into each other’s eyes and smiled. The old spark was still there.

“You’re the best, you know that?” he said.

With Brian’s touch and sweet words, Alice felt a rush of relief—it wasn’t too late, she was sure of it. They were in this marriage for the long haul like Gladys and Russell.

“Hmm, what’s cooking?” Brian peeked into the oven. He smiled and looked questioningly at Alice.

“Because you’re such a good husband, I made your favorite,” she said.

After ten years of marriage, Alice could read Brian’s expressions. By the looks of it, she’d made him very happy with a simple thing like a home-cooked meal.

“So, what movie are we watching with the kids tonight?” Brian asked.

He may have been standing before her in dusty overalls, but she could see him for who he really was, her knight, the man who’d swept her off her feet eleven years ago. And right that moment, in her mind’s eye, he mounted a white horse, reached down for her hand, and pulled her up to ride off into the sunset.

## **A is for Average**

by Lynne Marshall

© 2006

My mother always assured me of two things; I'd grow into *my* nose and *her* bra size. As it turned out, neither ever happened. My name is Rita A. Marano, I'm almost thirty years old, and I know who I am. My eyes aren't pretty, my hair is basic brown, and simply put, I'm ordinary. I've always thought the "A" in my name was for "Average" instead of Antonia.

There is one thing special about me though; it's my voice. I've been told it's very soothing. And since I make my living talking on the phone, that's a good thing.

As a telephone advice nurse, I recently got involved with a stroke victim and his family. I answered their questions and helped with hospital discharge problems. One of the sons, Eric, seemed to be taking on the brunt of his father's home care. Through numerous phone conversations, Eric and I sort of hit it off. He'd call for moral support, to ask more questions, or sometimes, just to check in and say hello. Eric told me my voice was comforting and my confidence in him helped him realize he could manage all the changes going on in his father's life. He was so grateful for my expert help that he invited me to come to the restaurant where he worked. Eric promised that everything would be on the house.

I knew how expensive the place was. I'd never been there because I couldn't afford it, and I was hesitant about a blind meet. I figured he'd probably react to me like everyone else—ho hum—but I wanted a sneak peek of him, too. So I made up an excuse about why I couldn't go and secretly devised a plan.

My best friend Michelle agreed to spend half a day's salary and go with me to Chez Charles. We dressed up. I wore a smart black skirt and strappy sandals, even had a pedicure. I've been told bright blue is a good color for me, so my top matched the ocean on a sunny day. It even made my eyes stand out a little. What mattered was, I *felt* special.

We strolled into the grand European tiled entrance dotted with potted palms, heard a pianist playing Brahms, and walked toward the maître d'. Michelle asked the stuffy gentleman in a white waistcoat if we could sit in Eric's section. I nodded in approval. *Good thinking!*

The crowded and noisy room smelled of fresh baked bread and crushed garlic, but I was anxious, not hungry. We were seated in a small booth with a white tablecloth. With palm tingling anticipation, I watched a regular looking thirty-something guy come our way. He had collar-length brown hair and, up close, deep set green eyes. He filled his white waiter shirt out with broad shoulders and strong looking arms, and his smile was adorable in a one-dimple sort of way. His badge read: Eric.

Michelle and I glanced at each other and tried not to giggle, just like a couple of teenagers. She bumped my knee under the table when he asked what we'd like to order, so I went first.

By this time, he'd made me so nervous my mouth had gone dry. I tried to sound natural and laid the menu on the table to hide my shaking hands

"I was thinking about the chicken," I said. *It was the cheapest thing on the menu!* I followed up with a pithy, "Can I substitute the potato with rice?"

He looked thoughtfully earnest, and said, "May I make a recommendation?"

I saw the slightest sparkle in his eyes when he recited the entire list of specials from memory. I noticed sturdy hands that obviously knew about hard work—beyond waiting tables. I thought about the heavy responsibility he'd taken on with his father since the stroke. My heart broke a little for him, but first it beat really fast when his finger accidentally touched mine while pointing to an item on the menu. Before I knew it, I'd changed my mind and went for the almond crusted salmon with mango chutney.

We smiled at each other and—I'd swear on a stack of anything you'd want me to—something jumped between us. I got tingly all over and felt a tickle all the way down my spine.

After he took Michelle's order, he grinned at me again. Okay, I realize male waiters flirt with lady guests to get bigger tips, but this felt different. Maybe I was more sheltered than I'd imagined, but dang, he seemed absorbed with me, and it felt great.

Along with the basket of baguettes came a bottle of Chardonnay. We mentioned that we hadn't ordered any wine, and he said it was part of the daily special. Next came crab stuffed mushrooms. Raising our eyebrows, Michelle and I looked at each other. *Some special.*

Eric kept making extra visits, smiling each time, asking if we needed anything else. *Yeah, I'd like a plate of you!* That's when I noticed the wine had gone to my head and cut back a bit.

After our meal, Eric insisted that dessert was part of the special, too, and brought us both coffee. I was stuffed, but Michelle and I looked at each other and said in unison, "We'll share."

Normally, I would have thought I'd died and gone to heaven with the chocolate eight ways sampler, but the real treat was Eric. A perfect gentleman, he charmed the slinky sandals right off my feet. And I'm quite sure he knew it, too, because he kept making eye contact with me, and my face felt hot, like I'd been sunbathing. Michelle slipped off to the restroom, and all of a sudden, it was just Eric and I.

"Was everything to your liking?" he asked.

At that moment, I realized if he'd suggested that I drop everything and run away with him, I would have. But then I wouldn't have gotten very far before I probably would have hurled, too, because of all the eating I'd done, so it was a good thing he didn't ask.

"Oh, yes. I've never had a finer meal." I tried to sound sophisticated, but it came out regular old Average Rita.

“I hope you’ll come back...often,” he said with a subtle smile as he handed me the black leather check holder. And with a playful glance, he said, “But I guess all good things must come to an end.”

I nodded in wistful agreement as he walked off, and I took a cheap glance as his cute and tight rear end.

My eyes practically popped out of my head when I read the bill!

It said: *Dear Rita, Dinner is on me. Thanks for everything, Eric.*

I caught up with him at the kitchen doors and said, “How’d you know it was me?”

A gentle, endearing look crossed his face. “I’d know your voice anywhere.”

If there weren’t three other employees standing around, I’d have grabbed his broad shoulders and kissed him right there in the restaurant. Not! Sometimes I get my fantasy life mixed up with reality. Instead, in true Rita fashion, I shook my head and grinned until I thought my lips might get stuck on my teeth.

“May I call you sometime?” he asked. “I mean, not at the advice line, but at your house?”

At that most-perfect moment, right in front of the bustling Chez Charles restaurant kitchen, I felt spectacular! Gorgeous! Ecstatic!

Anything...but average old Rita. “Of course! You had me at ‘May I take your order’.” I grinned again, this time until my cheeks hurt.

With that, he leaned forward and gave me a kiss so soft yet knee-buckling sweet, that up until that moment in my life I’d only dreamed about happening to me.

Smack in the middle of our special kiss, I decided to drop the A. from my name. Forever.

## **A PERFECT MATCH**

by Lynne Marshall

©2008

Five minutes before closing the Men's Store, a man with beautiful silver-white hair rushed through the doors. Audra Lindsay bit her tongue. Business had been slower than her social life all afternoon, and now, when she looked forward to closing up and joining her friends for Canasta, this guy came barreling in.

"You've got to help me," he said with a desperate look in his Paul Newman blue eyes.

Audra's vision blurred when she stared too long at his golfing clothes. Bright, clashing plaids battled fiercer than Braveheart versus the Brits. A gold and green shirt and red and brown slacks almost hurt her eyes. She tried to concentrate on his face.

"I've got a date with a lady tonight. She, Darlene that is, told me I looked like Father Christmas run amok last week, and I don't want to embarrass myself again."

"That's not a very nice thing to say." She bristled at the cruelty of some women.

He smiled, and Audra's vision snapped back into focus.

"You see, I'm color blind, and my youngest daughter—who usually helps me pick out my clothes—is on a six week European vacation. I'm sunk without her."

The dear man looked so forlorn, Audra had to bite back a smile. Now if she were in the market for a mature man to date, this guy would fit the bill. But she wasn't sure if she was ready for that yet, even though it had been three years since Martin had passed on. In a time when her friends were starting to retire and wonder what to do with themselves, she was thankful for her part-time job and lots of hobbies that kept her too busy to think about it much.

"I'll be glad to help you. What is it you're looking for?"

She used her salesperson voice and walked toward a circular rack stuffed tight with shirts of all colors and sizes.

He tried on three different sets and looked darned good in each one. Obviously, he kept himself in shape. Within half an hour he'd purchased a pair of slacks and a snappy sweater with matching socks and prepared to leave.

"Now that was painless." He grinned at Audra, and her cheeks flushed warm.

"In my humble opinion, you're going to look smashing tonight," she said, when she handed him his change.

"My name's Shepherd, and I'm deeply obliged to you," he looked at her nametag, "Audra." He winked, and her tummy did a little flippity-flop. Maybe she was ready to date.

“It’s been my pleasure to help you, Shepherd,” she said wistfully, knowing she’d never see him again. But she had enjoyed every minute of helping him choose which slacks and shirt to buy.

On Monday afternoon, when she reported to work, she was greeted with a loud bouquet in a vase. She’d never thought flowers could clash...until now. The owner said they’d come that morning and handed her a note. She opened it and read: *Thanks for your help. I hand-picked each of these flowers, just for you. Shep.*

How sweet. A smile stretched across her face, the likes of which she hadn’t felt since her Martin used to tell her how beautiful she was. When she noticed the owner watching her with curiosity, she said, “Another satisfied customer. Maybe you should give me a raise.”

He laughed and changed the subject.

The next weekend, around three o’clock, Shep came strolling in looking dapper, though mismatched. Audra laid down the romance book she’d brought to read during the lulls.

Lifting her eyebrow, she said. “Another hot date?”

He smiled and a wonderful feeling crept up her spine.

“I’m going dancing,” he said

“Gotta look good.”

Oh, how she used to love to dance. Audra had often longed to take ballroom dancing lessons but since she didn’t have a partner, never got up the nerve.

“Well, we’ll just have to pick out something special for you, then. By the way, the flowers were beautiful.”

“I hoped you’d like them.” He looked earnest, and it touched her.

She showed Shep her favorite shirt—a blue one that matched his eyes—and caught him watching her rather than the clothes when she held up the ensemble for his approval.

“Whatever you recommend, Audra. You’re taste is impeccable.”

When he came in the third week, she felt both happy to see him and angry. Shep shouldn’t have to buy a new outfit every weekend just to please that picky girlfriend. She decided to be bold, like the heroine in the romance novel she’d just finished reading.

“You know, if it’s only a matter of matching colors, I can organize your wardrobe. I could put stickers on your clothes that said the color. You’d never have to clash again.”

“That’s a great idea, Audra.” His blue eyes sparkled. “How about tomorrow, say two o’clock?”

How could she refuse? The next day, she walked up the steps to Shep’s condo, worrying. What was she thinking, going to a strange man’s house unchaperoned?

Meeting her at the door with a smile, he had a toddler on his hip. “Come in,” he said, brightly. “I’m babysitting for my son and daughter-in-law. This is Kate.”

“Well hey there, Kate,” Audra said, feeling her concern disappear.

Shep's provincial home looked comfy and inviting, just like him. And he had a natural rapport with his granddaughter that warmed Audra's heart.

After escorting her inside, he offered her some coffee, and while she organized and labeled his wardrobe, they chatted like old friends. Audra caught a glimpse of the two of them in his full-length mirror and thought they made a handsome couple.

But, she reminded herself, he was seeing another woman.

"How was your dancing date last week?" She tried to sound casual but felt nervous prying.

"It was okay."

Audra studied him and cocked her head to the side. "Only okay?" she asked, her hopes at the possibility of something more with Shep suddenly buoying.

The phone rang in the other room. He rushed to answer.

"Hello? Darlene, I was hoping you'd call."

Audra's cheerful mood evaporated. She tuned out. Darlene, the woman who makes fun of how he dresses, gets to date him. While I, the woman who appreciates a great guy when I see one, get stuck sorting his socks.

A moment later he came back to the bedroom with a pensive look on his face. "Can you pick out a special shirt for me?"

If he meant something to her, she needed to be blunt. While labeling a forest green polo shirt, she dared to look into his eyes. "You know, if a woman can't tell what a wonderful man you are after a few dates, I don't think even wearing Armani will make a difference."

Shep switched Kate to his other hip, took Audra's hand and looked sincerely at her. "It's funny you say that because I just told Darlene we clashed."

"You did?" Audra's pulse kept time with the sudden surge of excitement and the feel of Shep's firm grip.

"I sure did. I've found a better match." Shep winked.

Audra thought she might need to sit down.

"You feel like going dancing tonight?"

Halfway to sitting on the edge of his bed, she grinned and shot back up. "Yes!"

"Well, what should I wear?"

She thought for a moment, while steadying her flutters, and handed him her favorite shirt—the one that matched his beautiful blue eyes—then realized her heart was already dancing.

## FINDING NORTH

by Lynne Marshall

© 2009

Erica Yeager dreaded yet another company conference, but as assistant supervisor for the accounting department, she had to attend. Hot, overwhelmingly hot, Palm Springs was a departure from the usual locations, and her supervisor had promised something out of the ordinary at the end of the week. At least Paul North, her secret crush from Information Tech support, was there. But after a week of workshops and endless meetings, she'd hardly seen him, and as the week drew to a close, her disappointment grew.

On Friday night, a huge charter bus appeared at the hotel entrance. The employees were being rewarded for a week of hard work. Wearing the recommended clothing, she boarded the bus along with fifty others for a surprise destination. Three rows ahead, she spied Paul casually chatting with another IT guy. His broad shoulders rose above the back of the seat, showcasing a western-styled shirt and Stetson hat. Would she have the nerve to talk to him tonight?

To Erica's surprise, the group was transported deep into the desert and back in time to an old western town. A bank, jail, trading post, hotel, and the most popular storefront – a cantina– lined a dusty desert street. The strong and enticing scent of cowboy barbeque started her mouth watering, and an inviting country band played the kind of music that made a girl want to Texas two-step, even though she'd never done it before. But what really set her heart longing for a good old-fashioned romantic evening was the awesome starry night. Myriad stars blinked above, and combined with the warm breezy evening, her overly romantic tendencies kicked into gear. Erica felt as if she'd stepped back in time. Back when a man called a lady ma'am and tipped his hat. Back when a gentleman asked ...“May I join you?”

Huh? Was it her imagination or had Paul North just spoken to her?

“Is this seat taken?” he said, motioning to the empty chair beside her.

“Oh. Uh, no. I mean, yes.” Unable to verbalize a coherent sentence, she gestured toward the chair and nodded.

He sat holding a plate stacked with ribs, chicken, baked beans and cornbread.

Making a quick recovery, she nibbled at her chicken leg. “Isn't this great?”

“Fantastic,” he said.

She glanced above. “Look! I can see the Big Dipper.”

A wry smile lifted the corner of his mouth. “Ah, but can you find the North Star?”

She squinted and scrunched her nose. “Uh ...”

“Here's a hint. It isn't the brightest star in the sky.”

She scanned and rescanned the sky without so much as a guess as to which the North Star was.

“Do you want to know how to find it?”

“Sure.”

“See the Little Dipper?”

She nodded.

“Polaris, which is the name of the North Star, is the tail end of that constellation.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. And another way to find it is by locating the two stars that make the bottom of the bell of the Big Dipper. Now, follow that line south. See it?”

“I think I do!”

“Well, there you go then. You’ll never be lost again, ‘cause now you know how to find North.”

After they finished eating, Erica grew brave and was just about to ask Paul to dance, but Stacy from the secretarial pool beat her to it. Why couldn’t she learn to seize the moment when she had the opportunity? Once the rowdy hoedown song ended, Paul returned to the table without Stacy. Erica smiled inside.

The next dance started, a slow, romantic, fiddle-driven song, and she extended her hand toward Paul. “My turn?”

“You’ve got it,” he said, a huge grin spreading across his cheeks.

She beamed back as he took her hand. He led her to the dance floor like a hero from a historical novel. His arms felt solid, and he guided her around the floor with practiced ease. She glanced into his eyes and was startled by the flirtatious glint there.

“I’ve been meaning to thank you for adjusting my paycheck when the company made that mistake,” he said.

“Oh, it was nothing. It’s my job.”

They danced a few more steps. The smell of sage and desert heightened her senses. His enticing aftershave reminded her of the time her computer had crashed, and how pleasant it was to sit beside him in her office while he re-booted the accounting program.

She felt light as air as the desert evening breeze glided with them around the wooden planked floor. “And thank you for fixing my computer last month,” she said. She’d made a point to make the same error the very next week, just to get Paul back to fix it again. “Both times,” she added sheepishly, feeling a blush warm her cheeks.

“It was my pleasure, ma’am,” he said in character with the night.

He gazed into her eyes, and she realized she’d been short changing herself over the years. Instead of waiting around for life to find her, from now on she was going to plot her course and make the first move. It hadn’t been hard to ask Paul North to dance. After all the years of feeling adrift, she felt a new direction in her life. If she wanted something, she’d go after it. Why not?

Her eyes connected with Paul’s gaze. Had he picked up on her thoughts?

“Would you consider having dinner with me next weekend?” she asked.

“I was just about to ask you the same thing,” he said with a wide grin. His hand grasped a bit firmer at her waist, and she moved closer as they continued

to dance. A new feeling of contentment warmed her insides when she rested her head on his shoulder.

Erica glanced toward the heavens brimming with glittering stars and smiled, wondering what else she could expect now that she'd found her very own North.

## Spring Fever

by Lynne Marshall

© 2008

Itchy eyes and sneezes had led Doreen Sanderson to her latest crush. An unusually wet winter had produced a gloriously green spring, and pollen was plentiful.

She'd suffered the worst symptoms in all of her thirty-three years and finally consented to allergy testing. Her outcome wasn't good. The doctor recommended weekly shots for grasses, weeds, and trees, and out of desperation, Doreen signed on. The day she met her crush, she headed for the exit through the waiting room—the room where she'd be spending a required half-hour, post-shot wait each Wednesday for the next six months—when her gaze landed on intense dark eyes. Eyes she'd only dreamed about before, and a face etched with character and a great head of wavy dark hair. Wow. An old saying came to mind, "All things happen for a reason," and suddenly, she looked forward to returning to the clinic weekly and hoped Mr. Bright Eyes would be there too.

Yep, she blamed her allergies for the crush.

The following week, she checked in at the reception counter and placed her chart in the holder by the door. He was there! He wore a shirt with a business logo above the pocket and perused the sports page of the local paper.

"Aiden O'Keefe?" the nurse called the name of her next victim—er—patient.

Doreen's crush stood up and up and up. She felt petite for the first time in her big-boned, you-should-go-to-softball-camp-instead-of-ballet-class life. Yes, she'd reluctantly been steered away from those things considered feminine, based solely on her size. Today, Wednesday, in an allergy clinic, was the first day in her life she'd felt glad about being a jock. Finally, softball had paid off; she had an opener to strike up a conversation.

"How about those Angels," she said, when Aiden sat down beside the seat she'd strategically placed herself in.

He nodded. "They're having a great season."

"Doreen Sanderson?"

Doreen jumped when the shot nurse called her name. Aiden raised his brows and nodded in the direction of the colorful scrubs-clad nurse. "It's your turn."

She gulped, rolled up her sleeves, and prepared for her fate.

Did he watch her every move from above the sports page? Not likely, but a lady could dream, couldn't she?

She sucked it up and took her shots like a big girl, then returned to her seat in the waiting room.

"You're bleeding, Doreen" he said.

"Pardon?" He'd caught her name. Good sign.

She followed his eyes to a drop of blood on her skin. He found a conveniently placed tissue box and handed her one. The tips of their fingers

touched. Feeling a spark, she took the tissue with a grateful smile and pressed it on her arm.

To distract herself, she focused on the big company softball game the next night. As the pitcher, she'd have to face the team that supposedly posed the biggest threat from all of the others in the local league. She mentally ran through her strategy, though completely distracted with Aiden's healthy deltoids.

When the nurse called his name to recheck his arms and send him home, Doreen watched with interest. He had broad shoulders and long legs, and hands like a pianist. Where had he been all of her life?

And then just as quickly, he took his newspaper and left the clinic. Disappointed he hadn't even waved, she wondered if she'd see him next week.

Thursday night, Doreen was pumped. She'd perfected both her underarm speedball and curve ball with no less than a million warm up pitches and was ready to start the game. Her opponents, the Wolverines, took the field. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Aiden O'Keefe seemed to be playing shortstop for the opposing team. She shook her head and readjusted her vision, then looked in his direction again.

Dang. The guy really looked like Aiden from the allergy clinic, but her team got struck out so fast, she never had the opportunity to check him out up close.

Fired up, she whirled her arm around like a windmill. No way was she going to let the Wolverines steamroll over the Cougars. Walking with determination to the pitcher's mound, she wished her pants didn't fit quite so tight.

She struck the first player out, and the second player, too. Then Aiden stepped up to bat. Her eyes widened, and butterflies filled her chest at the sight of him. He took a practice swing or two, tapped the tip of his sport shoe with the bat, adjusted his ball cap and stared at her with a squint of concentration.

*Be still my heart.* Now was not the time to go gaga over a hunky guy. Now was the time to play competitive softball. She deciphered the catcher's signs and prepared to pitch. Her arm circled like a sideways helicopter until she let go of the ball. Strike!

Aiden adjusted his shirt and stuck out his chin. Doreen let go of her fastball.

Strike two! He cocked a brow and studied his opponent head to toe. Was that a minute smile she detected? *Too bad. No time for flirting now.* With renewed determination, she finished him off with her curve ball. Strike three!

When he walked out to his position as shortstop, he tossed her a look as if saying he didn't know what had happened, it didn't happen often, and he damn well didn't intend to get used to it. Then, of course, she may have been reading in to it. In passing he muttered, "That's one helluva pitching arm you've got, Doreen."

So he recognized her. Doreen smiled and walked a little straighter toward the dugout. She even tried to sashay, which felt more like a runway model in combat boots.

The next Wednesday, same time and place, she arrived in the allergy clinic for her shots. Aiden wasn't there. The depth of her disappointment took her by surprise. Was he avoiding her for beating the pants off of him and his sorry softball team? It was a bittersweet victorious feeling, and it made her grin.

She took care of business and got her shots, then noticed Aiden enter the clinic. She held her breath when he took the seat next to her.

He shook out the sports page and over the top, said, "I couldn't get to first base with you the other night."

She shook her head and laughed. "That wasn't my fault."

He gazed appreciatively at her, smiled, and looked at his watch. "I was thinking about getting something to eat after my shots. You hungry?"

Stifling her glee, she said, "I could eat."

"The least I can do is buy the winning pitcher dinner."

They made small talk the rest of their waiting time, and when Aiden and Doreen were ready to leave, he grinned charmingly at her and said, "Maybe this time you'll let me get to first base."

She laughed, thinking, *Darlin' you've already hit a home run!*

## Written in the Stars

by Lynne Marshall

© 2007

Julie Schultz fanned her face and headed for the nearest exit, wondering why she'd agreed to attend a speed-date extravaganza. Her best friend Stella had talked her into it. Being a hairstylist kept her in constant contact with women, and it had been four months since her last date.

"How's it going?" Stella asked, on the first fifteen-minute break of the "Thirty-Something Date Night."

"Not bad," she lied. No point in disappointing her friend.

They'd closed the restaurant for the pre-paid Thursday night event and capped the number for attendees at 100. At least the odds of men to women were even, unlike the real world.

"Where're you going? The bathroom's this way," Stella said, veering to the right.

"To get some fresh air." Julie had already suffered through eight mini dates by circulating around the numbered booths at the Southern Comfort Café. She hadn't found one decent prospect for a future date, and the thought of going through a dozen more seemed daunting. Fresh air was in order.

Was she being too picky? Not living with one's mother had definitely been a requirement on her application. And what about holding a steady job for more than six months? Was that too much to ask? Maybe she was shallow to hope for a halfway decent looking guy.

"Well, if you're looking for fresh air, don't go out front," Stella said. "That's where the smokers are."

"Thanks for the heads up."

Julie pushed through the double doors to the kitchen and found the exit.

Startled, she discovered someone already standing on the porch. A man in a flannel shirt with broad shoulders and long jeans-clad legs appeared as surprised as she was.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Julie stammered.

"No problem. There's room for two out here." He stepped aside to allow her to lean on the rail next to him on the compact terrace.

An awkward silence followed as Julie tried to be content standing in the dark on an awesome starry night with a complete stranger.

"I presume you're here for the speed dates, too?" she said.

"Yep."

He seemed to be studying her in the dark. Her eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting, and she noticed a warm smile and deep-set eyes.

He glanced overhead and clicked his tongue. "See that?" He pointed toward the heavens.

Julie attempted to follow his hand but truthfully didn't have a clue.

He repeated the gesture. "That cluster of stars, right there."

She squinted. "Oh, yeah. Like a W? Now I see it."

“That’s Cassiopeia.”

“Wow.” She slipped him a sideways glance. He had a strong nose from his profile, and a thick head of hair, and his arms looked well developed.

“It’s said,” he went on, “the god Poseidon punished a beautiful queen and banished her to hang in the sky for being vain. That’s her constellation.”

“Ha! If they really hung all the vain people in the sky, I’d be out of work.”

They studied the stars for several seconds, shoulder to shoulder, and Julie secretly wished she’d put astronomy as an interest on her questionnaire.

“So are you in show business or something?” he asked.

She sputtered a laugh and shook her head. “No. I’m a hair stylist.”

“Ah. Hey you might be interested in the constellation called Berenice’s Hair. A woman promised to cut off her hair to save her man. Her hair’s in the sky.”

“Wow, star gazing is really interesting. Where’s that one?”

“We’d need a telescope to find it.”

She nodded, a bit disappointed. “So are you a professor or something?”

“I’m in construction.”

“Oh my, not too many women in that line of work.”

“And to make it worse, I don’t drink, so the bar scene is out.”

Julie’s eyes widened. “Neither do I.” Then realizing how that must sound added, “Honest.”

He laughed. “I believe you. I’m Rick, by the way.” He turned and offered his hand.

“I’m Julie.” She liked his firm, warm grasp. “Any luck tonight, Rick?”

He chuckled. “Well, I’ve met eight new women. But if you want the truth, I’m not ready to ask any of them out. How about you?”

“The evening’s been great if I want to date unemployed men who still live at home.” She covered her mouth. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be so mean. We all came here for the same reason, right?”

“You’re just telling it like it is. I don’t take that as mean. But you’re right. We did come here for the same reason. Somehow, we haven’t been able to find the right person on our own.”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“So how do you feel about teenagers?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got a sixteen-year-old daughter with an attitude up the wazoo. Some women don’t like that.”

“I can handle ‘tude’. And I know a lot of men aren’t too interested in dating women with young children. I’ve got a six-year-old boy. His name is Blake.”

“Does he play ball? I missed out on the little league thing with my daughter.”

“He’s in T-ball this year.”

A warm smile spread across Rick’s face. An old sensation of tingles tickled Julie’s spine, something she hadn’t felt in a long, long time. Possibilities.

A loud clanging sound warned that the break was almost up.

Julie pulled out her date sheet. Rick reached in his shirt pocket for his. Unable to read in the dark, they stepped back into the kitchen and compared

lists. Neither was on the others'. Disappointed, she smiled resignedly at him before re-entering the café.

"It was nice to meet you, Julie."

"Same here, Rick." Poof went the possibilities.

"We'll start in two minutes," the organizer announced.

Julie made a quick stop in the bathroom. Determined to create her own possibilities, she fished for one of her business cards in her purse. She intended to find Rick before the evening was over, give him her card, and boldly say, "Call me."

Planning to make the next mini date as brief as possible, she marched toward the booth. Her confident step faltered.

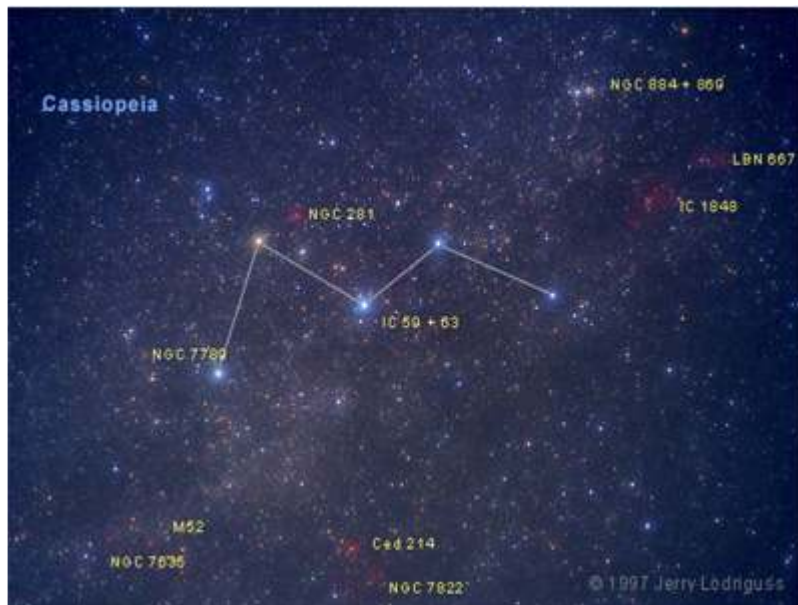
Rick stood with a wide grin on his rugged face. "It's an awesome starry night, and the Planetarium has a great show. I'm thinking about skipping out on the rest of the dates. You game?"

Not about to miss a second chance, Julie strode toward him.

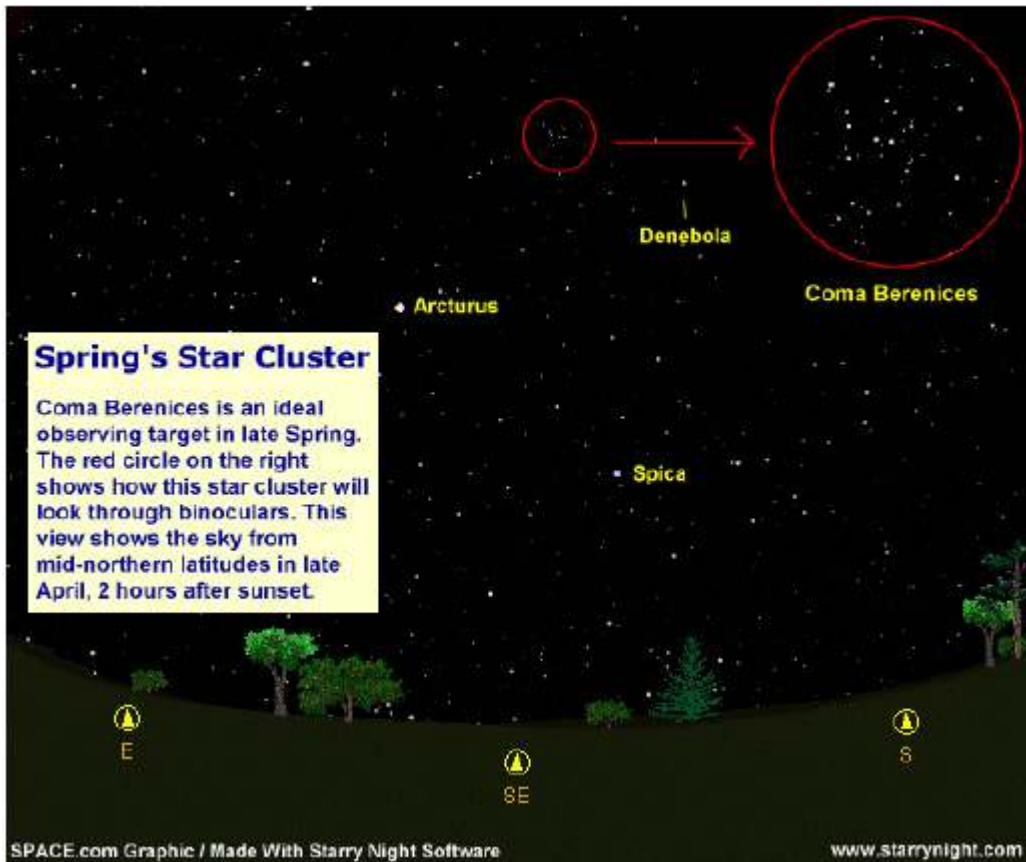
The organizer stepped between them, looking perturbed. "But you haven't even interviewed each other."

"We had our speed date during the break, and this is the lady I want to get to know better," Rick said.

Julie stepped around the event's organizer, ignoring his continued protests. She smiled and reached for Rick's outstretched hand, then flipped her hair with her hand and turned back to the protesting proprietor. Out of the corner of her mouth she said, "Sometimes, you just can't fight what's written in the stars."



Berenices Hair – also known as Coma Berenices



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