

**A Slot Machine Ate My
Midlife Crisis**

by

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Chapter 1

A Forty-Five-Year-Old

Born-Again Virgin

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Was the honeymoon over already? I couldn't help wondering as I sat in Houston's Hobby Airport, sipping chai tea latte while waiting to board a TransWest flight to Las Vegas. Roger had dropped me at the airport that morning, but he didn't seem terribly upset that I was leaving for five days. Come to think of it, I wasn't exactly broken up about it myself.

Yes, of course, he was totally consumed with the big project he was designing outside of town, and I was excited about my upcoming weekend in Sin City with Paula. But we'd only been married three-and-a-half months! Shouldn't we still have been basking in the warm afterglow of newlywed bliss?

Well, we weren't. In fact, things had been tense since we'd gotten back from our honeymoon. Lots of arguments – about household things, career stuff, social matters. You name it, we fought about it. So I guess it wasn't surprising that we were looking forward to getting away from each other for a few days.

But still, it was discouraging, upsetting. This wasn't the way we wanted our marriage to start, especially after the seven happy years we'd spent together in

L.A. Our love affair had carried on, full throttle, even after Roger moved to Texas the previous fall to start work on Magnolia Crescent. I'd wanted to be with him, of course, though I dreaded leaving behind my life in L.A. But that's exactly what I did in January 2005, when I sold my condo, got a job transfer, and joined him in Houston.

Before I'd even unpacked or settled into the rambling red-brick colonial Roger bought on his second day here, he swept me off my feet with a romantic marriage proposal one morning over coffee and cornflakes. It was all so sudden, so impulsive. But what was I supposed to do, say no? I was crazy about the guy!

One week later, on January 28, 2005, forty-five-year-old Wendy Cantrell tied the knot with fifty-year-old Roger Sinclair in a tacky, pint-size chapel outside Houston. It was an overcast Saturday afternoon. Pretty dreary, really. A grimy, grayish-white chapel surrounded by oil refineries. Two dingy doves cooing in a cage. Cars racing by on the nearby freeway. A bald minister and his dumpy wife. A photographer in a baggy, gravy-stained suit. I don't even remember their names. And their faith? Who knows?

We did manage a few decent photos. Roger looked tall, dark, and dapper in a charcoal-gray pinstriped suit with a sprig of ivory-colored roses pinned to its lapel. Beside him, yours truly beamed in a size-8 Carolina Herrera white silk dress. On my left shoulder was a corsage of cream-colored roses and carnations that matched my bouquet. My shoulder-length, honey-blonde hair hung loosely

beneath a white pillbox hat with a chin-length veil. A light dusting of makeup enhanced my fair skin and green eyes.

After the ceremony, we headed to a posh hotel on Post Oak to dine by candlelight and dance the night away. The next day, it was off to the airport, and London, our go-to city for good times. Most people get turned on by the Louvre, Notre Dame and Versailles. Not us. Our aphrodisiacs were Big Ben, the Tower and Westminster Abbey. Tea and crumpets, here we come!

Four blissful weeks later, it was back to Houston. During the flight, we pulled out floor plans and hashed over renovation ideas for our house. Still in a state of giddy afterglow, we were both looking forward to starting our new lives as Mr. and Mrs. Roger Sinclair. But little did we know that a series of annoying household problems – and, later, career and social ones as well – would make our return to the Lone Star State the Homecoming from Hell.

Let's see, where do I begin? Leaks in the roof, hornets' nests, predator termites. And what about those chameleons? The little green darlings were cute enough by themselves, but slithering around the walls of our bedroom? No, thank you! After growing up in mile-high Denver and twenty-five years in L.A., six-inch-long green lizards weren't something I could cope with. For one long week, I put up with the mini-reptiles; then I fled to a guestroom. Roger tried to sleep with me there, but the bed was too small, and his back couldn't take the mattress, so back to the master bedroom he trudged.

Newlyweds sleeping apart? Can you imagine? Our sex life had already taken a hit since we'd been back. Would this be the final nail in the coffin? I was beginning to feel like a forty-five-year-old born-again virgin.

But sleeping arrangements were the least of my problems.

There were Roger's two new bosses, real estate big shots Dan Latham and Earl Parnell. Nice enough guys, but their overbearing, high-society wives, Clare and Doris, were something else. From day one, these two sixty-something, overdressed, pampered barracudas tried to bury me in all sorts of inane social functions. Tea parties, library luncheons, bake sales and cotillions at the Cattlemen's Club, Garden Society soirees... you name it. It was all for the good of my husband's image, they'd insist. It would help Roger, their husbands, and the project as well...blah, blah, blah.

After a long career in retail management, I was used to the fast-paced corporate world, and the last thing I wanted, or needed, was their interference. Why couldn't they just back off and let me get used to my new life before getting in my face about doing charity work and taking in foster children? I resented their lame attempts to turn me into a boring, conformist Stepford Wife. But what I resented even more was Roger's going along with it--to make his own life easier. We got into some bitter fights when he criticized me for standing up to them.

To top it all off, I found out in April that my boss at Panache, the upscale store I worked at in L.A., had sold all six branches to a tacky retail chain. Bottom line: the management job I was supposed to get in Houston didn't pan

out, and I was suddenly unemployed. A devastating blow since I loved my job and was close to the people I worked with, especially my bosses, who were like family.

So there I was in May 2005, adrift in a strange city, with a rocky marriage, a stalled career, and no friends. Could things have been any worse?

One day, in desperation, I rang up Paula Knowlton in L.A., my go-to girlfriend in difficult moments. Saucy, blonde-haired, brown-eyed Paula was more fun than anyone I knew; just the tonic I needed. During the years we worked together, I loved stopping by her department, Couture Collections, to get an eyeful of her fabulous outfit-du-jour, watch in awe as she sold yet another \$10,000 gown to yet another woman who hadn't been to a party in years, and get the latest dish on celebrity hook-ups, meltdowns, and shopping sprees. Paula, our resident glamorista, was always upbeat and full of energy. When I dialed her number, I knew she wouldn't really listen or sympathize--she wasn't the nurturing type--but I also knew she'd distract me, entertain me, and possibly give me some good advice.

That's because she had plenty of experience, especially in the marriage department. By her mid-thirties, she'd already survived three disastrous trips down the aisle that had hardened her and made her take nothing too seriously. Her first was to a brilliant M.D. with a nasty prescription drug habit; her second was to an alcoholic real estate developer, whose hobby was seducing her friends; and her third was to a compulsive gambler, who spent most of his time on I-15, driving to and from Las Vegas.

Compared to these losers, Roger was a catch: attractive, loyal, stable, financially secure, totally into his job and me...at least until we got married, anyway. He didn't pop pills, flirt with my friends, gamble, drink excessively, or throw temper tantrums. If anything, he was a little boring, a bit predictable. Romantic, yes, but a tad tedious in bed. Unlike Paula's exes, who were all unstable stud-horses. Go figure!

Paula's marital record may have been dismal, but her shopping skills were stellar. The girl was a serious shopaholic, one of the few people I knew who could actually out-shop me, and there weren't many of those! During the day, when she wasn't assisting customers, she'd shop at Panache for stylish clothes and accessories, all of which she got at a discount. At night, when she couldn't sleep--which was often--she'd pick up high-priced designer goodies on eBay. And in between, she kept a couple of TV shopping channels hopping on speed dial. In other words, Paula shopped 24/7.

We were both workaholics, shopaholics and chocoholics, but the similarities ended there. Paula was a bolder, flashier, more brazen type who wouldn't hesitate to steal someone's sale, customer, husband, or boyfriend. She didn't care. She did whatever the hell she wanted and thought about it later, if at all. I was more sensitive, creative, conservative. While Paula tended to just go for it, at work and with men, I analyzed everything more and thought about the consequences before I acted. But who's to say which of us was more of a success, further ahead in life, or happier and more content?

When I got her on the line, she barely acknowledged my wedding news. I think she tossed out some banal one-liner like “Oh, how nice” before launching into a rambling monologue about Panache, making it known that she’d probably keep on working there, even though she knew it wouldn’t be the same. She really resented that the designer masterpieces in her department were being replaced by more generic ready-to-wear fashions.

“I can’t believe it!” she wailed. “They’re taking out the Armani suits and bringing in cheesy Liz Claibornes. The Michael Kors bags and watches have been dumped for boring, cheapo Ann Kleins. The Valentino gowns are being phased out, and the eight racks of Versace leathers have been cut to two.”

After a brief lull, she ranted on, “My God, the entire store is beginning to look and feel as gauche as a Macy’s or Bloomingdale’s. Sometimes I look around and ask myself, where am I, some tacky outlet mall in New Jersey? Or have I died and gone to hell already?”

Paula was just about to fill me in on the latest with her love life, when I heard the hot ’n’ heavy “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye droning in the background. Her cell was ringing. Younger sis, Paige, was on the line, checking in from Vegas. She put me on hold, and they chatted for a minute. Then Paula got back on and filled me in on how Paige and her friend, a dishy divorcee named Serena Wyans, were having the time of their lives in Sin City since moving there and taking jobs as casino entertainers. I’d met them both at Panache fashion shows, and they seemed nice enough. More down-to-earth and laid back than Paula...but then again, who wasn’t? I think they both were in their late

twenties. I felt envious when Paula said she was planning a long weekend in Sin City to visit them, go to a wedding, hit the boutiques, of course, and get away from the merger madness.

“Stop, I’m drooling!” I cried. “Who’s getting married? Anyone I know?”

“I don’t think so. Sam Prescott--he owns Cafe Radicchio on Melrose--and Stacy Rinaldi--she has a catering company in Brentwood. I’ve met her a few times, but I know him really well. He was a friend with benefits after my first two divorces, and a friend without after my third, because of her. I just hope he knows what he’s getting into. They’re having a pre-wedding party Thursday at the Flamingo and a garden ceremony the next morning.”

“You sound a tad jealous,” I teased. “Are you sure you can handle watching another one get away?”

“He may be getting married,” Paula shot back, “but that doesn’t have to mean he’s getting away. I’ve known him a lot longer than she has. We’ve got some history together. A piece of paper doesn’t change that!”

After a cackle, she went on. “Hey, I hate to go to weddings alone, and I can bring a guest. Why don’t you fly up and tag along? I’m getting in on Thursday and staying till Monday. I booked a suite at the Venetian. I don’t think they’re sold out. Give them a call. We’ll make it a classic girls’ weekend. You know, shows, spas, clubs, the works. Can you do it? Or do you and Roger already have plans to put up curtains in the family room and drop by the Container Store?”

“Paula, go to hell!” I squealed. “Of course I can do it. I’d love a wedding and a few days in Vegas. I’ll call Roger right now and book a flight. I’m sure it’ll be okay. I can’t wait! Just like the old days. We’ve had some great times on the Strip and some really weird ones. Like when you sprained your ankle on the rock-climbing wall at Canyon Ranch.”

“Oh yeah, that was a mess. I had to keep an ice pack strapped to my leg at the blackjack table that night, but I won 700 bucks, which took away a helluva lot more pain than the pills that quack gave me at the Venetian. Speaking of pain, I felt even more when I broke my molar on fairy food at the Chocolate Swan. Remember that?”

“How could I forget?” I cracked. “We finally found an all-night dentist in that strip mall on Flamingo, but you backed out at the last minute because you wanted your own guy in Brentwood. Then you bitched and moaned all the way back to L.A. The worst four hours of my life. Remember when we stopped to eat in Victorville? I was so pissed, I almost took off without you while you were in the loo!”

“Wendy, shut up! It wasn’t that bad.”

We would have continued our giddy romp down memory lane, but I heard Marvin again, and she had to take it. We quickly agreed to meet up in a few days at the Venetian and left it at that.

Five whole days in Vegas. I was delirious! Call it trite, tacky, banal, whatever, but I loved the place. A real time-out from life. More calming than

chocolate, more soothing than shopping, less fattening than a quart of triple fudge gelato.

What was there not to love about the Strip? The amusement park atmosphere? The faux, in-your-face landmarks? The shopping-on-steroids? And what about all that fabulous food in super-size portions? Or the wall-to-wall spas, posh casinos, and hot clubs? You name it, from a replica of King Tut's tomb and shock 'n' awe shows to stomach-churning thrill rides, indoor skydiving and world-class art galleries, Vegas had it. And then some. I'd always loved Sin City. And now, more than ever, I needed a long weekend there to shake me out of the newlywed-in-Houston doldrums and put me back on the map in Fantasy-Land.

There was just one hurdle to clear before liftoff: Roger.

"You're going to Vegas? Now?" he asked incredulously when I got him on his cell. "Why? I talked to Dan about you, and he called a friend at Saks to set up an interview. I was going to tell you tonight. They want to see you early next week."

I was furious. "Why did you do that without talking to me first?" I snarled. "I told you I didn't want to look for another job right away. I need some time off, and I'm really jazzed about this weekend in Vegas. Paula and I are going to her friend's wedding at the Flamingo, no one we know, and we'll be busy the rest of the time. Girl stuff. Her sister's living there with a roommate. We're going to visit them. Can't we talk about it when I get back on Monday?"

“Wendy, sometimes I don’t understand you! You were so upset about losing your job. I’m just trying to help you find another one. Dan has connections all over the place. Believe me, if he puts in a good word for you . . .”

“Roger!” I snapped, cutting him off, “Thanks, but I’m not interested right now, okay? I’m not some little girl who lost her puppy and needs a new one to replace it. It’s going to take some time for me to get over the merger and the way Carol and Paul, my two best friends in the world, promised me a job, then sold the company without giving me a clue.”

“Okay, okay,” he backed off. “I know you’re upset, but keep in mind that it’s an ‘in’ when you need it. It’s still beyond me how someone like you can get so worked up about a crass neon backwater like Vegas.”

That’s because you’re so damn uptight, I thought to myself. Can’t you just kick back once in a while? No sense arguing with the guy when he got like this.

After we hung up, I booked a flight and suite pronto. I knew this weekend trip was the way to go. There were no worries about the house, since we’d finally found a decent maid through our neighbor, a gay pediatrician from Shreveport named Maxwell Dupree. And Roger certainly wouldn’t starve. After three-and-a-half months of marriage to moi, the man knew intimately the menu of every take-out joint within a 10-mile radius.

Still, as I packed, I had second thoughts. After all, we were newlyweds. But I’d be gone only five days, and if I stayed, I knew we’d just end up fighting more. Maybe getting away from each other was the best way to keep the peace?

A few days later, on an overcast, muggy morning, Roger drove me out to Hobby, rushing all the way so he could turn around and get back to Wiggin, the quaint hamlet where Magnolia Crescent would be built, for a 9 o'clock with Dan and Earl.

I tried to not seem too excited. He tried to not seem too preoccupied. As I boarded the silvery 757 that had finally arrived from Newark, I wondered if either one of us had actually succeeded in fooling the other?