



My
Mother
the
Man-
Eater

TRACY KRAUSS

*My Mother
The Man Eater*

Tracy Krauss



Strategic Book Group

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Proverbs 31: 30

Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades. The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-God.

(The Message)

Isaiah 1:18

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.
(NIV)

Chapter One

Tactical position in place. Zeroing in on target. . . slow. . . steady...
Engage! “Ah! The feel of brushed silk!”

The woman looked up abruptly at the attractive, blonde saleswoman. Her eyes flickered self consciously before she lowered her gaze. She dropped her hand, as if the soft rose colored garment was hot to the touch. “Umm. Yes, it’s nice. . . ”

The saleswoman retrieved a peach silk garment that was strewn carelessly over the rack. “This one is lovely as well. Were you interested in anything particular?”

The woman fingered the velvety material longingly. “Oh no. Not really. I was just looking.”

“Of course. Spend as much time as you like. As you can see, we’ve got lots to choose from. Did you notice this style? It’s just in. Very chic.” She pulled a royal blue lace and gossamer gown from a nearby display.

“Oh. . . ” the woman breathed, obvious longing in her eyes. “That is pretty. . . ” She reached out to touch the fabric, before quickly withdrawing again. “I couldn’t,” she said, trying not to make eye contact. “I mean it’s so. . . so skimpy!”

“You think? I’ve got some similar designs in all the same fabrics that are a little more modest.” She skillfully led the now curious customer to another rack. “You can try on as many as you like; just for fun, of course.”

Half an hour later the shopper left the lingerie department, loaded with two bags of purchases.

Joleen Allen, the successful sales rep, allowed a satisfied smile to flicker across her face as she stowed the receipts in their proper tray under the cash register. Another satisfied customer. Another sale to add to her roster. Not

bad for a slow Wednesday afternoon. Let the boss take that and chew on it for awhile.

“You’ve got the gift, Joleen,” commented another salesclerk from the perfume counter next to lingerie. She sauntered to where her counterpart was now straightening the already precisely folded undergarments.

“Times are tough,” Joleen replied with a shrug. Using one of her sculpted nails, she tucked a piece of blonde hair behind an ear. Her dangling gold earrings danced. “I’ve got to make the best of each and every opportunity.”

“Spoken like a true, loyal, Redman’s employee.”

“Come now, Brenda. You’re sounding a bit out of sorts this morning. Was that a note of sarcasm I detected?” Joleen asked.

“Maybe,” Brenda admitted. “I just about choked on my coffee at our morning staff meeting. You’d think after this many years, experienced employees wouldn’t have to participate in all this ‘Rah, rah, go team go’ company propaganda, you know?” Her short, dark hair bounced as she shook her head.

“Now that hardly sounds like ‘Salesperson of the Month,’” Joleen observed. “I saw your picture posted on the ‘Wall of Fame’ this morning in the coffee room.”

“I went through an awful lot of perfume testers for that honor, let me tell you!” Brenda said sarcastically. “I find it demoralizing, not the other way around.”

“I’m sure management means well,” Joleen offered.

Brenda sighed dramatically. “Making people smell good is easy. But you – I’ll bet you could sell a bikini to my 90 year old grandmother!”

“Bring her shopping and I’ll see what I can do,” Joleen countered with a grin. “After all, even 90 year old grandmothers deserve to pamper themselves. You’re only as beautiful as you feel, I always say.”

“Easy for you to say,” Brenda grumbled. “Every breathing male that passes by your department has to roll his tongue back into his mouth. Not fair! Five children and you still have your school girl figure!”

“You’re exaggerating again! Besides, it isn’t easy. It takes a lot of hard work to stay in shape.”

“And it’s your job to convince every customer they can do the same. I just don’t understand how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Convince some of these women to even try some of this stuff on.” Brenda scowled as she removed a hanger that held little more than strings with a bit of lace attached. She looked at it skeptically. “How does it work, anyway?”

“I see myself as a therapist,” Joleen replied, cocking her head to one side. “It’s my job to unlock the inner beauty in every one of my customers.”

“Whoa! You’ve obviously been practicing that line,” Brenda laughed.

“Beauty is all up here.” Joleen tapped her head.

“Whatever works,” Brenda shrugged. “Stick to your philosophy if it helps make sales. But me? Trying this on would be way too humiliating.”

“What are you talking about? You look great,” Joleen protested. In truth, Brenda could best be described as cute and round. “And *that* has been a very hot seller,” she added, taking the garment from her friend and hanging it up. “Bob might like it.”

“Stop it, okay? I’m not one of your customers.” Brenda shook her head. “You need to get yourself a man, Joleen. You’ve been single way too long.”

“I’m working on it,” Joleen shrugged.

“What is it? Three weeks, now?” Brenda asked sarcastically.

“Six,” Joleen sighed melodramatically.

“All I can say is, you’re definitely the right woman for ‘this’ job. Anyway, I guess I better get back to my ‘stall’. Even Salesperson of the month can’t afford to let up.”

“Too true. Maybe next month it’ll be my turn.”

“Sporting goods, beware! I’ll have to go down and warn Emmett you’re on the warpath,” Brenda said.

“Right. It wouldn’t be fair to let the same department get all the honors too frequently. He’s so competitive!”

“I didn’t mean the Salesperson of the month thing, I meant the looking for a man thing.”

“Who? Emmett?” Joleen scowled. “He’s definitely not my type. Besides, I’ve got a couple of other prospects.”

“Joleen Allen! Prospects? Do tell.” Brenda surveyed her friend with anticipation.

“Weren’t you going back to work?” Joleen asked, hand on hip.

Brenda checked her watch. “Actually, it’s almost time for coffee break. You coming?”

“I know you, Brenda. You just want information.”

“So? You coming or not?” Brenda’s look was guileless.

Joleen just shook her head with a smirk. “I guess. I’ll just lock up my till and let Jeanie know.”

Brenda continued chatting on their way to the elevator. Joleen just smiled and let her friend talk. It was her way. She and Brenda had worked together on the same floor of Redman’s Department Store for six years. They’d seen a lot of changes, both at the store and in their personal lives. Unlike Joleen, Brenda had married later in her life and was just starting a family. Even though Joleen was only a few years older, her children were all grown up. Actually, they really didn’t have that much in common. Brenda preferred staying at home in the evenings; Joleen needed a social life.

Brenda was short and round, with dark hair and glasses; Joleen was tall and blonde. Brenda had found her soul mate. Joleen was still searching. Despite their differences, however, Joleen felt like Brenda was one of the few constants in her universe. When it came right down to it, Brenda was a faithful friend.

“Actually, you could probably use old Emett to your advantage, even if you’re not interested in him personally. You could have, like, a spy down in his department, and after he sells a piece of fitness equipment you could grab the customer and play on their new found false hope that they’re going to get all sexy and skinny and sell them all kinds of sexy, skinny underwear,” Brenda said with animation. “You’re sure to get Salesperson of the Month.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No, I’m a genius. Besides, we’re a team, remember? The ‘Redman’s’ team,” Brenda said with mock enthusiasm. “Management wants us to think like a team, so I’m thinking team. Go, team, go!”

“Watch the sarcasm. Management might have spies,” Joleen cautioned, motioning to the security camera in the elevator.

“Just having fun,” Brenda said sweetly as she waved at the camera. “It’s a good job, after all. I just get a little tired of all this ‘teamwork’ crap. It’s like ‘Spirit Week’ at High School. It’s embarrassing!”

“Well, like you said, it’s a living.”

The elevator doors swished open and the women stepped into the basement which housed stationary, children’s toys, and sporting goods, as well as the staff room.

“Hi, Emett! How are sales?” Brenda called as she and Joleen walked past sporting goods toward the staff room. She gave him a wave.

A balding middle aged man with a paunch, wearing a rumpled white shirt and tie, raised an arm in acknowledgement. He was busy with a customer.

“I can’t believe you thought I’d be interested in Emmett,” Joleen said through her teeth. Her lips maintained a composed smile.

“What’s wrong with Emmett?” Brenda asked innocently. “You’re the one with the ‘beauty is only skin deep’ philosophy, remember? Deep down, he’s probably a really nice man.”

Joleen gave her friend a withering look. “Real deep.”

“Ah, so it’s a bit of a double standard, I see.”

“I’m sure Emmett is a very nice man, and there is probably someone out there for him. It’s just not me,” Joleen stated.

“And you’ve got other prospects,” Brenda reminded.

“Did I say that?”

“You did. I have it on tape.” They had entered the staff room and Brenda went straight for the coffee pot. “Argh! This coffee looks rancid! I’ll have to make a fresh pot.”

“I might not have time to wait for a fresh pot,” Joleen said. “I want to stop in at shipping and receiving for a minute, too.”

“So tell me,” Brenda asked, leaning her slightly rounded frame against the counter, and crossing her arms. “What’s so special at shipping that you’d have to go bring it up yourself? Let one of the grunts do it. That’s what they get paid for.”

“Nothing wrong with checking for myself once in awhile,” Joleen hedged. “After all, I am the head of my department.”

“Mm,” Brenda nodded knowingly. “One of your prospects, I gather? Seems to me I’ve noticed a new, and might I add, very buff, delivery man on the job.”

“Brenda, I’m shocked,” Joleen exclaimed. “What would Bob say? Besides, when have you been one to go down to shipping and receiving?”

“I’ve had occasion to be down there a time or two. He’s a lot better than Emmett, I must say,” Brenda continued, undaunted. “But, what if the guy is married?”

“He’s not.”

“How do you know?”

“I asked him.”

“Really?”

“Well, in a round about way.”

“Geez, Joleen, the guy might think you’re desperate.”

“Maybe I am,” Joleen shrugged. “I’m not the type of person that likes to be alone.”

“When have you ever been alone? In all the years I’ve known you, you’ve had plenty of boyfriends. If I tried to keep up with your social calendar, I’d be a nervous wreck.”

“But that’s just it,” Joleen explained. “I’m getting tired of the ‘social calendar’, as you say. I’m ready for something deeper - more lasting.”

“Something permanent?”

“Maybe. Who knows? Anyway, I figure I don’t have time for long cat and mouse games at the beginning of a relationship.”

“Time? You talk like you’re over the hill, or something.”

“I’m not getting any younger,” Joleen admitted. “And once they find out I’ve got grown children...”

“You started young,” Brenda shrugged.

“True.”

“Or you could try someone your own age, for a change.” Brenda grinned wickedly. “Like Emmett.”

“I’m not even responding to that.”

“Could be your loss,” Brenda shrugged. “Besides, think of all the free fitness promos you’d get in on.”

“Please. Just thinking about it is making me queasy!” Joleen shook herself like a dog trying to get rid of flees. “See, that’s just it. I just don’t find older men; men like Emmett, very attractive. All men over forty are balding and fat!”

“Hmm. Bob is getting a bit of a paunch,” Brenda mused. “But I kind of find his receding hairline somewhat endearing.”

“That’s different! That’s Bob, and of course you find him attractive, because you love him and he loves you. But most men over forty are in some kind of mid life crisis. Trying to prove they’re still studs - whether they’re married or not.”

“Oh-oh. You’re sounding bitter about something.”

“You’re forgetting I was once married to an older man. Except for the fact that the union produced five beautiful daughters, it was not a happy experience,” Joleen reminded pointedly.

“True. But not all men are like Harold. Besides, this reference to ‘older men’ has me confused. You’ve moved into a different category. Men over forty are no longer older. They’re the same age.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate that,” Joleen said sarcastically.

“Hey, you’re the one who started with the whole ‘I’m not getting any younger’ thing.”

“Great. Maybe I’ll just go up to the next man I meet and say, ‘Listen, I’m actually forty-four years old, but don’t let that scare you away.’”

“Hm, see what you mean. Speaking of Harold, he still bothering you?”

Joleen sighed. “He left another nasty message on my answering machine last night. He blames me because none of the girls want to have anything to do with him.”

“That’s just stupid. He’s the one who abandoned them.”

“He doesn’t seem to remember that part. His version goes that I drove him away and then refused to let him have access to his children. Access my foot! I spent years trying to find the louse so that he could help with child support! And now that they’re all grown up and don’t need his money any more, he waltzes back into their lives and expects them to welcome him with open arms.”

“Tell him to take a hike. He’s got no hold over them, or you, any longer.” Brenda noticed the contemplative look on Joleen’s face. “Joleen? He’s not threatening you, is he?”

“Harold can be very manipulative. I’m afraid he might try to turn the girls against me.”

“So he is threatening you.”

“Technically, no. Not yet. All he’s done so far is a lot of name calling and demanding. He’s asked for money, which I flatly refused. But I know what he’s capable of.”

“Have you got a lawyer?” Brenda asked.

“Why would I need a lawyer?” Joleen scoffed dismissively. “It’s just Harold trying to make my life miserable. Again.”

“It’s harassment,” Brenda insisted. “You need a lawyer.”

“Oh great! So I spend an arm and a leg on some nosy lawyer who’ll end up telling me to go home and quit being a whiner. Or worse, I’ll end up with some snake in the grass who’ll try to take advantage of me in my ‘vulnerable’ state.”

“As if that would happen!” Brenda grinned. “Although, it could be interesting . . . more prospects?”

“Brenda!”

“Seriously, you need a lawyer, girlfriend. I know this really nice man – he’s a friend of Bob’s dad – who is very reasonable, and from what I

understand, very professional. And he's also old, and since you don't like older men, there should be no problem keeping the relationship strictly platonic."

"Never trust older men," Joleen reiterated emphatically.

"Well, anyway, I still think a good lawyer might come in handy."

"Thanks. But I doubt I'll need it."

"Well, keep it in mind, just in case."

"Oh, my goodness! Times up and I still need to see Sam!" Joleen dumped the rest of her coffee into the sink and headed for the door. "Could you tell Jeanie I'll just be a few minutes? I got delayed with the new order?"

"Sam, is it?" Brenda mused. "I want details later!" she called to her friend's back.

After her conversation with Brenda, Joleen felt a little uncertain. She knew that men were attracted to her; they always had been. But perhaps her methodology was all wrong. The day might soon be coming when sex appeal wasn't enough. If she was ever to find a lasting relationship, maybe she needed a different approach. And that's what she wanted, wasn't it? Something to fill the gnawing void that had been growing inside?

She spotted Sam O'Neill almost immediately upon entering the loading area. He was tall and strongly built; a man toughened by hard work and manual labor. He looked to be in his mid thirties, with handsome chiseled features, tanned complexion and dark hair that curled out from beneath his ball cap. He seemed like a quiet type, though; a bit shy, even.

Old habits were hard to break. Joleen felt the heated excitement of conquest beginning to course through her body. Timing was everything. It was all about tactics. Outmaneuvering your opponent. She picked her way across the cement floor of the warehouse, looking decidedly out of place in her tight fitting skirt and low cut blouse amid the coveralls and ball caps.

“Oh, hello again, Sam,” she greeted with casual breathiness. Sam O’Neill touched his own ball cap and uttered an indecipherable greeting. He was on the loading dock helping to off load the contents from his delivery truck onto a wagon.

“Do you mind if I take a look at that shipping order for a minute?” Joleen asked, leaning into Sam as she peered at the clip board he was holding. “I simply must get that order of matching thongs and bras up to the floor as soon as possible. They’re selling like wildfire!” She smiled up at him as he turned a slight shade of pink. “Sometimes things get lost in the warehouse for days before I ever see them. Once it’s signed for do you think you could help me find the right box and I’ll just take it up myself?”

Sam cleared his throat. “Sure,” he mumbled. He bent over to look for the correct label and turned an even deeper shade of red. Joleen was also bending over, displaying an ample amount of cleavage. He quickly averted his eyes and picked a box up effortlessly. “It looks like there are three boxes. You’ll need a dolly.”

“Really?” Joleen inquired with innocence. “How heavy can lingerie be?” She had managed to position herself so that he had to brush past her on his way to the dolly.

“There you go,” he said, as he positioned the last box on the two wheeled cart. She was in his way again.

“Thank you so much, Sam.” She made sure she caught his eye and gave him her most winning smile.

“No problem,” he replied gruffly, tipping his hat. “Uh, after you.” He gestured for her to go ahead.

“Thanks again. See you around,” Joleen said, pushing the dolly as elegantly as possible. “Oops!” The top carton slid off. “I guess I’m not very good at steering these things,” she sighed. Before she had a chance to retrieve the box herself, Sam had picked it up.

“Do you want help?” he asked hesitantly.

“Would you mind?”

“Looks like the guys are doing fine unloading,” Sam said. “This’ll only take a minute.” He called to one of the other men who nodded, and then took over control of the dolly.

“I can’t tell you how embarrassed I am at being so clumsy!” exclaimed Joleen. “Or how much I appreciate your help.”

“No problem.”

They entered the intimate space of the elevator. Joleen leaned across Sam to press the button. “Ladies lingerie, coming up.”

Sam stood ram rod straight, staring directly ahead. He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, coughing into his fist before engrossing himself in the ascending numbers above the door.

“So, Sam,” Joleen cut in brightly. “We didn’t get to talk much the other day. How long have you been delivering to Redman’s?”

“About two months.”

“Really? And here we’ve only just met a couple of times. Imagine.”

“Right.” His eyes remained on the flashing numerals.

“But you must deliver all over the city,” Joleen commented.

“Yep. Pretty much.”

“You probably know this city like the back of your hand.”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ll bet you know all the best traffic routes. The quickest way to get from here to there. You’ve probably come across some nice out of the way spots, too. Places you could spend a quiet evening alone, sometime – or with someone special.”

“Uh, yeah. . .”

“Ah, here we are! Ladies non-mentionables!”

They emerged from the elevator. Joleen gave Brenda a slight wave as she and Sam walked past her perfume counter. Brenda just smiled knowingly and shook her head.

“Right over here should be fine,” Joleen directed.

Sam skillfully slipped the dolly out from under the cartons. “Well, that’s it then, uh. . . what was your name again?” The tips of his ears had turned pink again and he was rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Joleen. Joleen Allen,” Joleen supplied. She placed her hand on his arm. “And thank you again, Sam, for helping me. I’m really very grateful.”

“No problem.”

“And now that you know where I work, you can come up and visit me anytime,” Joleen said brightly.

“Um, right.” He hesitated for a moment. “Or. . . or maybe we could go out for coffee sometime,” he finally stuttered. His face was beet red now and he looked down at the floor.

Score! Sam was shy, but he wasn’t stupid. A cat like grin flashed across Joleen’s lips. “Why, Sam! That’s a wonderful idea. How about Friday?” she suggested.

“Okay.” There was pause. “You want to just meet somewhere, or should I pick you up?”

“Why don’t we just meet somewhere? How about Rio’s at, say, seven? Do you know it?”

Sam nodded. “Rio’s at seven.” He shifted awkwardly, scrutinizing a scuff on the floor.

“Wonderful.” Joleen’s eyebrows rose questioningly. “Rio’s. At seven.”

“Well, I guess I better get going.” He looked up abruptly and gave a stilted wave as he turned to excuse himself, apparently anxious to take his leave now that the ordeal was over.

Joleen waved at his retreating figure, a slight smile of satisfaction on her face. She just hoped he wasn't always this nervous. She'd have to work on bringing him out of his shell.

"That was quick work," Brenda commented, interrupting Joleen's train of thought as she sidled up to her friend.

"Even I'm surprised," Joleen laughed. "He's definitely a shy one. I wasn't expecting a date until . . . oh, next week."

"Still got all the right moves, I see," a deeper, sarcastic voice startled both women.

Joleen gasped, and then glared as her ex husband, Harold Allen, stepped out from behind a clothing rack. He looked older than she had ever remembered, but then she hadn't seen him in a long time. Years of hard living were taking their toll. He still wore his thinning dark hair in a scraggly ponytail; his cheeks and eyes had become sunken and hollow. He had the look of a vulture about to swoop down on some carrion.

He eyed Brenda suspiciously. "I'd like to talk with my wife. Alone."

"Ex wife," Brenda corrected, undaunted. She turned to Joleen. "Listen, honey. Looks like I have a customer. But if you need anything, just holler." She glared at Harold as she swept by on her way back to her own domain.

"What are you doing here?" Joleen demanded coldly.

"Since I'm not getting any satisfaction by telephone, I thought I'd better show up in person."

"I'm very sorry, Harold, but I am busy right now and don't have time to talk," Joleen informed him icily.

Harold scanned the department store. Piped in music played softly as a few customers milled past. "Doesn't look too busy at the moment, Joleen," he observed, a thin, sarcastic smile never leaving his lips.

"Well, still, I'm at work. This isn't the time or the place," Joleen argued.

“You’d better make a time and a place, Joleen,” he said with just the right amount of threat in his voice.

“What do you want exactly?” Joleen demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. “If it’s money, you’re out of luck. I’ve worked hard all these years without any help from you and I’m not about to give you a cent. And as for the girls, they’re all grown up, now. They make their own choices about who they do and do not see. If you want to be part of their lives you’ll have to talk to them about it. But I wouldn’t hold my breath after the way you’ve treated them.”

“You disappoint me,” Harold said. “Such bitterness. Don’t you know that bitterness makes one age? And you wouldn’t want that, now, would you? Not when you’ve still got young, virile males after your – well, you know.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Leave. Now,” Joleen directed, barely controlling her anger.

“You know,” Harold continued, ignoring her. “I often wondered how many other men you’d slept with. A woman like you would find it hard to be satisfied with only one man.”

“I was never unfaithful to you, and you know it. How dare you even accuse me of such a thing?”

“And what if I was able to prove it?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Joleen scoffed.

“Hm. Considering your past history, I don’t think it would be all that difficult. I wonder what the girls would say if they found out. . . .”

“Leave them out of it. Don’t go poisoning them with your - your lies!”

“They’re not lies, are they?” Harold sneered. “We both know that.”

“My daughters and I have a solid relationship. Nothing is going to change that,” Joleen stated.

“And are you willing to test that theory?” Harold asked.

Joleen sighed, suddenly feeling every bit her forty-four years. “I’m tired of this game, Harold. What do you want?”

“Satisfaction,” he stated simply.

“Meaning?”

“It’s always grated on me that you’ve come out smelling like a rose, while I’ve been made to look like the villain. When I was going through a rough time and needed the love and support of my wife, you refused to help.”

“What? I stuck by you Harold – far longer than I should have. God knows I sacrificed to support you.”

“That’s not the way my lawyer sees it,” Harold said smugly. “He should be serving you with papers very soon.”

“You can’t possibly be serious. What could I owe you?”

“Wrongful divorce, retroactive alimony, medical support payments,” he listed with a sly grin. “Shall I go on?”

“But I had the children!” Joleen was dumbfounded. “And what are you talking about, medical payments? You were in jail.”

“I’m not talking about then. Afterwards, when I sought refuge south of the border.”

“What?” Joleen shook her head in confusion.

“Don’t worry. My lawyer will explain it all,” he smiled snidely.

“This is crazy, Harold. I don’t have any extra money. You must know that.”

He ignored her. “Don’t you just love the times we live in?” He laughed mirthlessly. “I was sick and needed treatment. I had no means of supporting myself. It’s a simple matter of negligence, my dear. And now that I’m better, well, all I’m asking for is my due.”

“This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. It’ll never stand up in court.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Harold shrugged. “But if it does go to court, a whole lot of other nasty business is bound to come to light. And you wouldn’t want that, now, would you?”

Joleen’s mouth was clamped tight, the muscles in her jaw working hard as she tried to gain control of her outrage. “I knew you were low, but not this low,” she managed to whisper. She glanced nervously toward a customer browsing through one of the racks.

“Looks like you’ve got customers,” Harold noted lightly. “We’ll keep in touch.” He sauntered casually from the lingerie department, stopping to inspect a black and red negligee on the way.

Joleen’s emotions were reeling. What moments ago had been a feeling of triumph had now turned into nauseating fear and doubt. Maybe she’d get that lawyer’s number after all.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment before pasting on a bright smile. Another shopper was in the zone.

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