



The
Casserole
Brigade

Joan Conning Afman

The Casserole Brigade

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By

Joan Conning Afman



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Dedication

*To Mandi; the model for my heroine
And to all the lovely ladies out there who are
searching for Mr. Perfect—
(including myself!)*

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Chapter One

My mother looked up from her everlasting knitting and peered over the porch railing toward the house next door, where that newly-singled hunk, Aaron Grant, lived. He and his wife, Marina, had moved in not even a year ago, and now he was a widower.

A drunk driver, a rainy night, a slippery road—she'd been driving home from a Tupperware party, of all things. I'm so out of it, domestic-wise, that I didn't even know they still had those things. Anyway, it was very sudden, she didn't suffer, and when the cops got there, a cool five minutes later, she was already dead. I heard that she hung out of the driver-side door like someone doing a swan-dive, and that her long, red hair which fell nearly to her waist and she wore loose, looked like a carpet on the pavement.

Not a pretty picture, I know, and I don't mean to start off in such a depressing manner. I didn't know them well; they seemed to be a couple who treasured their privacy, and I had no husband, so no reason to try to socialize with them. I spoke to them when I saw them around, but it had never gone further than that. I never even took them the obligatory welcome covered dish, and had always felt guilty about it.

My grandmother, Nana, clicked her tongue and made a not-so-subtle gesture toward the house next door.

“There goes Nanette Lewis with a casserole,” Mom observed, and clicked her tongue. “It hasn’t even been a month since Marina died, and she’s the third one this week. You’d think they’d have a little more respect.”

I didn’t bother looking up. “Oh yeah? Who else has been over?”

“Lexi Allen was there Tuesday, while you were at church, drooling over the married minister.”

“I didn’t ask for a comment on my feelings,” I said, a little sharply. “Lexi, huh? Who else?”

“Um...can’t think of her name. You went to high school with her...”

“Bedford is a small town, Mom. I went to high school with *everybody*.”

“She was a year ahead of you, dark-haired and pretty. She married that red-headed boy...”

I snapped my fingers. “Deedee Pratt! Her husband died a couple years ago, but I never thought she was interested in getting involved with anyone else. They had a very special relationship.”

“Just like the Reverend Kenyon Carver and Lindsey,” Nana said. “Nobody could come between them.”

‘The Reverend Kenyon Carver’. She always refers to him with his complete title, as if he were the Pope. “Nobody wants to,” I said with an edge to my voice. *I want to, but I’m not going to. Just because I sit there during his sermons and fantasize having sex with him doesn’t mean*—I banished my unworthy thoughts. I put down my Kindle, on which I had downloaded Bill O’Reilly’s latest killer expose’. I was having a hard time divorcing myself from it for even a minute, and shook my head. “I’m not surprised Aaron’s getting all this attention. He’s in his forties, I’d guess, he’s gorgeous, he has his own company, which seems to be doing

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quite well, and now he's available. The statistics are that men who lose their wives are generally remarried within a year. First one who gets him is the blue-ribbon winner."

A small smile twitched at the corner of Nans mouth. "In your generation's vocabulary, he's awesome and he's *hot*."

"Yes, all of that," I agreed, amused. *So why aren't you going after him? Because you're scared, that's why. Scared you'll get hurt again. Loving Kenyon is much safer.*

Mom reached out and patted my knee. "*What* is it about Kenyon Carver that you think you love?" Her face showed her concern. "There's a real guy available right next door. Why do you keep your heart locked up with a fantasy that will never happen? And at your age, Mandi, why is your heart fixated on a guy you can't have?"

I bristled. "At my age? Forty-four is hardly ancient, Mom."

I know, but the hot guy next door is probably about your age, too, while Kenyon's got to be going on fifty, I would think."

"Forty-eight next June eighteenth." I sighed, thinking of Kenyon. I pictured his chiseled features in my mind, his piercing deep amber eyes, his compassionate smile. And underneath that sober, clerical robe, I fantasized a taut, lean body that would feel just so right against mine....

"Well?"

I jerked my thoughts guiltily back to her question.

I met her eyes, hoping she hadn't been able to read my thoughts. "He's intelligent, compassionate, well-spoken—"

"That goes with the job," Nana said.

I ignored that, and continued. "I find him very attractive physically, and..." I put my hand over my heart—"I *feel* love for him. Who can explain just *why* they love someone?"

Nana took a sip of tea and shook her cup at me. "I don't doubt that you love him, Mandi. But I am saying you love him

because he's *safe*. You don't want to risk getting hurt again by someone like Dylan Fielding."

I winced. "Don't mention that name to me, please."

Mom gestured to the house next door. We watched as the door opened. Rather than invite Nanette in, Aaron stepped out onto the porch. We heard their voices, hers high, his low, but not the actual words. I could see her well enough, though. She sported a yellow sweater that made her ample boobs look like grapefruits, and a mini-skirt tight enough to be a girdle. (Remember girdles?) Her hair, which was way too yellow to be natural, hung down her back below her shoulders, but it was no competition for the coppery mane Marina had cultivated.

I watched her try to edge toward the door, obviously hoping she'd be invited in, but Aaron stood his ground and held her off, blocking the entrance with his body.

I tried not to stare. I'd seen that body, all those tanned muscles, when Aaron mowed the lawn in nothing but his shorts, and I'd had a quick glimpse one evening, from my bedroom window, as he and Marina splashed and frolicked naked like two kids in the luxurious kidney-shaped pool they'd had installed in the back yard. That felt too much like a peeping Tom, however, so I drew the curtains and retreated to my bed. But, the image of the two of them, their beautiful, tanned bodies teasing each other in play, stayed with me until I fell asleep.

Aaron wore a white tee shirt and khaki shorts. I could imagine Nanette practically drooling, as she juggled her casserole, reached out to touch his arm, inched closer to him. I think she would have kissed him if she dared. Finally he took the casserole and retreated into the house, leaving her standing open-mouthed on the porch.

Nanette turned and stalked down the steps, tossing her hair behind her and not looking at all happy. She glanced over and saw us watching.

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Mom waved and called out, “Hi, Nanette.”

She threw us a disgusted look and half a wave as she hopped into her shiny black BMW, and tore out of the driveway.

“Cheap,” Mom said, and went back to her knitting.

“Now, Mom”, I said, picking up my Kindle, “be tolerant. It takes all kinds of people—”

“To make up a world. I know. I taught you that. There are times I regret doing it, as you seem to have one hundred percent tolerance for everybody.”

“Yep.” My mom and I had sort of a thing going, and it had been going on since I was a kid, throwing clichés at each other. She had started it.

Down into her lap went the knitting again. “And that’s another thing, Mandi. You’re too involved in that church.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” I quipped. “You were involved in the church all the time I was growing up, teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir. And so was Nana.”

“We weren’t in love with our ministers,” she said pointedly.

“I know.” Mom was right about that. But I was hopelessly head over heels with the Reverend Kenyon Carver...oh, discretely and silently, as he had a perfectly suitable and lovely wife, and I wouldn’t do anything to interfere with their marriage, even if I could. But there were times I thought he had some feelings for me too, and I couldn’t help but wonder...

No, no, lust was bad, but coveting your neighbor’s mate was a worse thing. I would never say or do anything about my feelings.

Mom hit the nail on the head. “I sometimes think your feelings for that man keep you from developing feelings for someone you could actually have.”

“Yep.” She was right on that score too. I didn’t look up from my Kindle.

“You ought to quit that job.”

"I like being the church secretary."

"You like the Reverend Kenyon Carver."

I couldn't deny that. Even though I wasn't awfully religious myself, I had a thing for spiritual men, and I knew it. Working three days a week gave me time to work on my other occupation—writing smutty romance novels. Erotica, they call it. You've heard of Lusty Lilac Press? They're famous for what they call "open-bedroom" stories, and the untamed side of my nature excelled in that. I never told Mom and Nana, of course, but so far I'd published six novels under my pen name, Destini Stone. Easy to remember, and just a little suggestive.

I heard the side door of the house next door open, and both of us looked up. Aaron stepped out, carrying the casserole dish Nanette had forced on him. He shifted it to one hand, lifted the lid of one of his trashcans with the other, and proceeded to dump the contents of the dish into the garbage.

We watched in disbelief.

My mother laughed. "Garbage in, garbage out."

Aaron looked up and saw us staring at him. He held up the dish, grimaced and waved at us. We waved back.

My eyes trailed him as he went back into the house, swinging the dish by its rim.

I felt Mom's eyes on me. "He's really good-looking, Mandi."

"Uh huh. Boy-next-door cute. Literally." I laughed.

I couldn't believe her next words. "Maybe you should take him a casserole. Make that turkey tetrazzini thing that you do so well."

I nearly fell out of the rocker. "Are you *nuts*? No way am I going to be one of the Casserole Brigade ladies."

Mom seemed engrossed in her knitting, but she kept on talking anyway. "As you said yourself, Mandi, somebody's going to get him in the next year. You might as well get into the game."

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“Mom, how can you talk that way? Anyway, I’m forty-four—I might even be older than he is. And he’s at least six foot two. I’m way too short for him. Why would he even look at me after being married to Marina?”

“Mandi, don’t put yourself down.”

I was all wound up now, practically yelling. “And he’s a successful businessman with a beautiful home, and I’m a church secretary and I still live with *my mother*. And my *grandmother*.”

She leaned forward and put her hand on my knee. “Just because that creep Dylan walked out two weeks before your wedding doesn’t mean you should hide from all men by putting your feelings on a married man you can’t have.”

I put my hands over my ears, but I couldn’t shut her out. “Mandi, you’re smart and pretty and have a great sense of humor. You’re a terrific cook, and you’d make a wonderful wife and maybe, with luck, a mother—” She looked at me and grinned, a twinkle in her eyes. “And I could crochet you a beautiful wedding gown. Prettier than the one you gave to Goodwill.”

The tears gushed from my eyes. I swiped away at them, but I just couldn’t stand it. I jumped up, clutched my Kindle to my chest, ran into the house, and slammed the door behind me.

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