

The Daughter-in-Law Society©

A novel

By Patricia Weber

Preface

I step up to the easel, grab the marker, and slash my wish list onto the white paper:

1. I want my mother-in-law to smile when she sees me instead of looking like she just had a root canal.
2. I want her to make it through just one meal without making some wiseass remark about my cooking.
3. I want her to say, "Hello" when she calls our house instead of just snapping, "Can I speak with my son?"
4. I want her to respect that I shall make babies if and when it is appropriate according to *my* personal timetable. She does *not* own my uterus ...

"Kat, stop right there," Gabriella commanded, just as I was poised to pen wish number five. "Any human being with an ounce of class and civility would show you these common courtesies. Now, I understand that we are not discussing a normal, caring, decent human being here. Your mother-in-law is a real bitch, plain and simple. We get that—all of us here have been to hell and back with our mothers-in-law. And let me emphasize the word back. ' We are back from hell and are living in mother-in-law bliss.'" She paused a moment to let her words sink into my wine-soaked brain.

I took a huge gulp of wine and said, ther-in-law bliss? Really? You ladies are hilarious! You must be drinking a little too much of this red stuff, if you know what I mean. I have no desire to become a drunk just so I can tolerate the heathen bitch that gave birth to my husband. No way. She is not winning this war."

Gabriella leaned forward and said, "I am not suggesting you medicate your way to personal happiness. Perhaps you don't understand the power we hold to really change this monster-in-law of yours.

"Yeah?" I asked her. "What can you do to my mother-in-law? Slap a lawsuit on her for breach of humanity? Gabriella Eastbrooks is the most gorgeous, most sought-after entertainment attorney in Los Angeles. All the pill-popping, coke-snorting celebrities hire Gabriella when they need their 'Get Out of Jail Free' cards punched. She rarely loses. It's shocking how much money these celebutards give her just so they don't have to pay the price of being bad like the rest of society. I can't say I respect her job, but then who am I to judge?

"Honestly, Gabriella, what can you do to make my mother-in-law like me? Kidnap her; take her to some exclusive private island and have one of your thug clients torture her until she promises to play nicey-nice with her daughter-in-law?"

Unfazed by my doubt in her abilities, she pushes a glossy strand of auburn hair behind her ear and says, "Don't get me wrong; your wish list is good. But what if you had a chance to make her into the greatest mother-in-law a woman could ask for? One who would praise your dusty furniture and gobble down your burnt pot roast and literally worship the ground you walk on? Now, take this piece of paper and write down what your ideal mother-in-law would be like. Remember, it's a wish list so don't leave anything out. Then I will tell you how we can make it come true."

I look around at my new group of friends and then again at Gabriella. She is staring at me over her lipstick-smearred wine glass, her mocha-colored eyes wide with . . . what? Sympathy? Anticipation? Or did I see Amber flecks of victory? She was damn proud of something; I just

didn't know what it was. The uneasiness in my gut told me that I was going to find out very soon. Or was that just the wine buzz again?

"Perhaps you are more of a visual person, Kat," Gabriella continues. She looks at Claudia; their heads swiveling in slow motion. "Let's go, ladies."

I stood up, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

Chapter One

“Hey, Debbie,” I can’t talk right now. I just pulled up to the house where they are holding the ...

"Katherine Margaret! Deb’s voice stops me in my tracks. "You must be kidding, right? What the hell has happened to you? Why doesn’t your momma’s boy husband just put his animal back in her cage where she belongs? He is such a freakin’ wuss, and you are starting to act like one too!

I can feel the heat of embarrassment rush through my veins. My best friend has never been one to sugarcoat things. I had spoken to her earlier in the day to tell her about the meeting I was attending, but purposely rushed her off the phone to avoid any further explanation.

"Seriously, Kat," Deb demanded, "We’ve known each other since we were five-year-olds and I have never known you to back down. Remember your secret club, Nerds Across the Nation? NAN? What other high school student would risk their own reputation to protect students who weren’t blessed with the popularity gene? No one except you! You practically made the football team cry for picking on Andy, the frizzy-hair zit-faced boy. That was the last day that poor kid had to pick disgusting spitballs out of his hair. You did that, Kat. Single-handed. NAN Power all the way!"

The frustration seeping from her voice mirrors my own. I’ve been mad as hell for weeks, but could not see any other solution. I was either going to beat the living hell out of my mother-in-law or I was getting a divorce. Or was there one more option that would help me figure all of this out? The entrance to this faux English country manor McMansion and what might happen inside was my last hope.

Deb, I have nowhere else to go with this. I hate my mother-in-law; you know that. She is making my life a living hell and my husband wears blinders when his mother is involved. When I do stand up for myself with her, he says I am being over-sensitive. She smirks at me behind his back, and I want to rip her eyes out and feed them to her. But I can't win. I mean, how shitty must it be if I have to do a Google search for "I hate my mother-in-law" or "mother-in-law hell", not knowing what I really wanted to find but just hoping that someone in this world understands my pain?"

Suddenly I sob, a twin waterfall of tears soaking my cheeks, undoubtedly streaking my carefully applied makeup. Shit... I wanted to look good for this meeting with my new Internet friends.

"Okay, okay," Deb says, her voice cracking too. "I understand, Kat. You know I do. I knew things were tense with her but I didn't know it had gotten this bad. Please stop crying. Let's lighten the mood a bit, okay? Do you know what my mommy-in-law-dearest did to me yesterday?"

Now I have to tell you, Deb has a very special gift for making me laugh, even when I am in the foulest of moods. Sometimes she makes silly faces, tells me a story from the Day in the Life of Deb, and if all else fails, she belches and scratches herself like some overall-wearing inbred redneck named Bubba. Total immature, lamebrain, elementary school stuff, but it works every time.

"Fine," I say, wiping my face with the hem of my shirt. "What did she do to you, and it *better* be funny."

"Well, I was chit-chatting with my sister-in-law about turning thirty-one and how I was starting to notice the lines around my eyes more and more and then I joked around that I found

some chin hairs. I quickly told her I was kidding, 'cause she has a gift for gab and my hormonal issues would make for great brunch conversation with her mom. Of course, it's true. I really did find a few manly chin hairs, but my sister-in-law didn't need to know that. Well, as hell would have it, in a matter of minutes my dear smother-in-law, Fiona, calls and says she is the neighborhood and wants to drop off a few things."

-So, ding-dong, there she is at my door with her usual 'I am about to take a whack at your ego but I will do it in such a sweet way, you won't know what hit you' look. 'Here, I brought you a little something I thought you could use', she said. If she *really* knew me she would have brought either a gun to kill her with or a bottle of gin I could guzzle so I could tolerate her visit. Neither was in the box. It immediately dawned on me that my sister-in-law had opened her trap and my mother-in-law pounced on the opportunity. Ready to know the surprise in the box? One bottle of hair removal cream, one pair of tweezers, some waxing strips in case the hair is too thick for the cream and or tweezers to work—her words, not mine—and about four different eye creams that were partially used and, last but not least, two bottles of 75-proof sun block that smelled like coconut."

I was laughing so hard I had to clamp my hand over my mouth to keep my voice from echoing down the quiet residential street. "That's awesome, Deb."

"Oh, wait, it gets better. None of the shit was *new*. She told me that when Sly Sara, my sweet sister-in-law, told her about my problems, she went through her medicine cabinet and found some stuff she had picked up back when she was going through 'the change.' That was like ten *freaking* years ago! The creams were hard as rocks and gross. And *lucky* for me, Fiona went through Menopause just fine—a hot flash here and there, but that was about it. As Fiona would say, "It's in the genes! Some of us are luckier than others". Wink Wink. With my luck,

she'll live to be a hundred and never age. Ugh. Can you imagine the nerve of her? Of course, I had to be a smart ass and tell her that I was thinking about letting the facial hair grow out because her son is a bit kinky and might enjoy the fantasy of being with a dude. Let's just say that shut her up real fast. She left so fast the wind blew my hair back."

"You're the best, Deb. I wish I were there to see that. Why didn't you call me that day? By the way, do you think Darren would really like being with a guy? He does act a bit girly sometimes and not in a metro-sexual kind of way. I mean that pink tie ..."

We're both giggling now and that's the way I like it. Deb and I are BFFs for life and she knows how to snatch me back from the brink.

"Get out of there and get your butt home," she said. You don't need some New Age religious cult to help you group-think your way forward in your marriage. Kyle is great. He loves you and that's all that matters. So his mother has issues. That's her problem, not yours. Tell her to take a flying you-know-what like you would do to anyone else who tried to treat you badly. But I just laughed again and told her I would call her after my meeting. This is an opportunity and I'm not about to let it get away. The tears are gone and I'm not shaking any more, but still, I have doubts, self-doubts.

My mother-in-law is my Achilles Heel. I can handle any boss, any co-worker, any client, any anything it seems. But I love my husband and I want our marriage to work. I want it to be like my own parent's marriage, which was wonderful, and that's what's making this all so hard.

Boys love their mothers; at least most of the boys I have known. You can have every kind of fight with a man, but leave his momma out of it. That must be why they invented that game, *Yo Momma*. Two guys insult each other's mothers. The object of the game is not only to be the funniest, but to incite your opponent to violent anger. I can say just about anything to my

husband, Kyle, so long as I don't diss his mom. When I do, his entire disposition changes. It's the one time I *really* don't like him when he's angry. After an argument about his mother, there is definitely no make-up sex.

Twenty minutes have passed since I hung up with Debbie. Flurries of anxiety bubble around in my belly as I anticipate walking into a room full of people I don't know and discussing my mother-in-law problems. Even more frightening is the possibility that I just might know someone in there. Los Angeles is big, but gossip spreads faster than wildfires around here. What if one of my mother-in-law's friends is at the meeting? It is possible they might hate their own mother-in-law, but it probably won't make them any more understanding of my own hatred toward their dear friend. She can appear to be human in front of others; I've seen her do it. Her fangs shrink but I've never been sure what she does with her tail. She probably has her slacks tailor-made to hide the damn thing. Then again, maybe they dislike her too but don't know how to tell her to jump off a bridge in a nice way and I'd be helping them ...

Crap, I'm getting way ahead of myself. I am known to over-think things. In any event, this is my only shot at staying married and not going to jail for kicking the living shit out of her; a two-fer if ever there was one. Screw it; I'm going in.

Chapter 2

"Welcome!" the smiling ultra-thin blonde greets me, holding her arms open like some Hollywood starlet on the red carpet. She all but blows me air kisses. "Come in, come in!"

Wow, did *Who's Who of Hollywood* just arrive? I look behind me and see no one else, no cameras, no reporters, so she must be talking to me. She's very enthusiastic. The hostess politely welcomes me in. So lavish was the home that when I hear piano music in the background, I wonder briefly if Elton John is sitting at a grand piano somewhere off stage. Two tiny designer dogs, Chi-Poos I think, run in from another room and bounce around my feet like little battery-operated toys. One wore a *Miss Bitch* shirt and the other one sported a little less antagonistic tee that kindly proclaimed *I only bite ugly people*. Nice. These mutant dogs are a staple now in LA and have replaced the passé purebreds. Give me a pound hound like my mutt Skeemo any day.

The home and the hostess, who introduced herself as Claudia, are both quite magnificent in appearance. Then again, what is not magnificent in Beverly Hills? Claudia must be a model or something that requires you to be beautiful. She takes me and the bouncing yappers down a long dimly lit corridor. Claudia casually takes a look behind her and smiles at me every fifteen or so steps, her blonde mane swinging over her shoulders. It's as though she's checking to make sure I'm still there and haven't second-guessed myself and run out the door. But no, I'm in it now, unless I see a pentagram painted on the floor in blood.

We have now crossed over what looks like the main living areas of the home. We make a right, then a left, passing other lavish rooms that look like decorator showrooms. Someone really needs to get this house on MTV Cribs. Mmm Hmm.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and immediately feel the burn of humiliation heat my face. Who was that loser in the mirror walking meekly behind the skinny blonde starlet? And my embarrassment wasn't from admitting my guilty pleasure in watching teenage shows. The truth was suddenly right there in the ten thousand dollar beveled wood carved mirror and I knew my best friend Deb was right. I've lost my backbone, at least when it comes to my relationship with my mother-in-law, and probably even my husband. I mean, he married me because he said I was funny, pretty, good ... wait ... actually fantastic in bed, and smart. Where did the smart go?

Professional speaking, I am an unstoppable powerhouse. At a young twenty-seven years old, I worked my way up the corporate ladder to my stressful yet cushy job as Senior Vice President of Sales for a Fortune 500 Internet Technology firm. And there were no horizontal interviews either. There were many attempts from the suited pigs, but it just wasn't my style. I worked hard to perfect my skills as a master negotiator and learned that the way to win a deal is with honesty, sincerity, and product knowledge. I live both my personal and professional life this way, or at least I used to.

Yet here I am in a stranger's home, maybe risking my life, humiliating myself, because I cannot get my mother-in-law to be civil toward me. She doesn't just pick on me, she is downright mean. Cruel. The woman is vile.

After what seems like an eternity, and about the time I was wishing I had worn my old track shoes instead of heels, we reach the end of the hallway and approach a closed door. I

notice a Louis XIV table flanking the door that is piled high with stacks of folders and stapled papers. Before I could ask if we had finally arrived at our destination, Claudia abruptly stops and turns, folding her arms across her substantial and probably enhanced cleavage.

Her tone is sweet yet stern when she says, "Honey, now before we go in, I will need you to sign a non-disclosure agreement that states you must not speak about what we do or discuss at our meetings. Everything that goes on is to be held in the strictest of confidence.¶

Claudia rifles through the stack of papers trying to find the right forms to secure my involvement and silence in whatever the hell was going on here. The long walk had served to calm my nerves, but now this talk of silence and secrecy has my skin crawling and my heart thumping again. Looking at Claudia's dramatic black leather leggings and six-inch designer pumps, I begin to wonder if I'd read the website wrong. Perhaps it was just a front for a kinky lesbian sex club. Ugh, what have I gotten myself into? Of course, I couldn't just turn back now and run like a scared little girl. I knew the curiosity bug had bitten me. I *must* know what is going behind those paneled mahogany doors.

As Claudia arranges the papers, I try to hide my confusion and slight terror. I scout out the other exits just in case I need to make a mad dash out of here. If I walk in and see anything other than a group of women pouring their hearts out about their mothers-in-law, I am a goner. Eventually Claudia hands me a three-page agreement, which I scan and sign. It appears to be nothing more than a standard non-disclosure. Nothing scary. The only thing unique about it is the glossary: Mother-in-law- "MIL". Daughter-in-law- "DIL". I could add a few more of my own. "BIL"-Bitch-in-law. What is it with every topic, every hobby, and every job in the world? They all have their crazy acronyms and jargon. Pimps must defend calling their women

“hos” because it really stands for Hourly Operators. hand the papers back to Claudia and smile.

“Let’s go!” Claudia returns my smile and opens the door.

The room behind the previously closed doors is not just a meeting room as I'd expected; it is a darkened full-on movie theater, not merely some jacked up home theater with a vinyl couch. There are rows of padded crushed leather recliner chairs and one wall has a commercial-sized refreshment bar complete with cappuccino machines and popcorn makers. In case you think the size and scope of this theater shock me, let me remind you that I live in an area of California where the idea of taking a vacation includes renting a private yacht and chillin' in St. Tropez. More so, the founders of the tech company I work for are worth billions of dollars, and I personally happened to make a few million bucks from the stock I was given as a sign-on bonus. Paper money, but an asset nevertheless. So I'm not hurting for money nor am I naïve. And maybe LA has jaded me a bit, but home movie theaters, even one this large and lavish, don't impress me like they used to when I was living in North Carolina.

What was now showing was what shocked my dormant Southern sensibilities. The flickering hi-def screen displayed something way beyond the Playboy channel. Two people were getting busy making mad loud dirty passionate love. I could only see the tops of the heads of the people watching the porno flick so I wasn't entirely sure if the audience was women, men, or a combination. Maybe this wasn't a lesbian thing after all. I am officially concerned that I have landed myself smack in the precursor of a live orgy scene. Just as I take a few steps backward with my hand trying to inconspicuously find the door handle, I recognize a famous face on the giant screen. I freeze, mid reach. Hmmm. I didn't know *she* was doing porn films now. A few years back People Magazine had put her on the list of the highest paid actresses. However, her

career had taken a bit of dive when she hit the big 3-0. She sure looked happy now. The reason for her euphoria became apparent when a man's head popped up from under the covers and I recognized him, too. And he was not her husband. Well, this was obviously not a porno flick and it's not a movie I have seen. But wait, it's starting to look familiar. Then it hits me. Yes! I have seen the previews for this movie, but it's not even in theaters yet. I saw the coming attractions just the other day. Okay, this isn't so bad. Claudia's into piracy, not orgies. It's illegal, but I can handle it.

Claudia must have been reading my mind because not even a minute after I finished this thought she informs me that her husband is a bigwig movie producer and gets to pre-screen movies before they hit the theaters. She likes to share them with her close friends. Wow, guess I'm a close friend now. As I am about to respond _what a cool gig that is', Claudia has floated away. She is heading back down the hallway from where we just came. I am now standing alone in the back of the theater.

Do I just stand here and wait for the meeting to start or do I go talk to the group of women? I can't really talk to them because they are in the middle of watching a movie and that would be pretty rude and presumptuous on my part. Sure, Mrs. Important, let's stop the movie just for you! Ugh. This is a bit uncomfortable and I am beginning to get flashbacks of middle school. I didn't have the gift of blending into the crowd back then and I don't have it right now either. I feel my stomach start to bubble and knot up. I hope Claudia has a supply of gas masks in this mansion because these ladies are going to need them if I don't start relaxing soon. You

would think I would have some Xanax or Valium handy for occasions like this. Doctors give them out like candy here but I just happened to find the one family doctor who doesn't believe in medicating the problem. Mental note to myself: find a new doctor who thinks pill popping is the answer.

It feels like 11:59:50 on New Year's Eve in my gut and something the size of a disco ball is about to drop, yet I can guarantee no one will be cheering. Screw it; I can't hold it in. My stomach is cramping, oh, here it comes. . .

"Hi! I'm Julia," She presents a tiny, beautifully manicured paw that looks so fragile it might break if I squeeze too hard.

Pull it back in Katherine. Breathe and squeeze those cheeks.

Julia is extraordinarily petite and fragile looking with a strong resemblance to that of that Posh Beckham woman. Absolute perfection. The one difference I immediately notice is Julia's perfect wide-toothed grin. From what I have seen in my celebrity mags, Beckham doesn't smile very often. I don't know why. If I were married to Bend It I'd grin like a freaking moron from morning til night. Perhaps she is avoiding laugh lines. That's a little secret in Hollywood. You can smile, but don't stretch the smile. Then again, maybe VB has her own mother-in-law from hell. That would be so cool. Imagine if "V" starts coming to our meetings complaining about Momma Bend It, and we have to try and help her work through it? Fun stuff.

I think I have my bowels under control for the moment but I'm terrified to relax, so my greeting probably sounds a bit stiff.

"Hi, I'm Katherine," I said, gritting my teeth in an effort not to fart. "But you can call me Kat." I reach for Tinkerbell's, I mean Julia's, hand but she isn't having it. Before I have time to protest, we are embracing like long lost sisters.

“Welcome to your new family, Kat. I promise things are going to get better for you, starting tonight.”

Oddly enough, I am not creeped out at all by her forwardness or by her little arms that make it only a quarter of the way around my body, which I have to say, makes me feel huge. In fact, her sincerity almost makes me tear up. I don't leave the hug one-sided and squeeze her back, risking snapping her in half like a potato chip.

“That was the best hug I've had in a long time,” I say, and I really mean it. Really.

We both laugh. “I give great hug,” Julia says, winking slyly, then giggling at her own joke. I laugh, too, in spite of myself, and nothing erupts from my huge-by-comparison body. “You're sweet, Julia, and you have a dirty little sense of humor. We can totally be friends.” I give her back my trademark vampy wink. *North Carolina wouldn't know what to do with me anymore.*

Julia and I are making small talk when Claudia walks back into the theater with two more women. I can tell instantly that they are first timers like me by the “holy crap” astonished looks on their faces. I am pretty sure I had the same expression when I walked through the doors but lucky for me, no one was there to witness it except Claudia. I am old school now. I am part of the in-crowd. Well, not the in-crowd yet ... just Julia's crowd.

"Kat, I would like to introduce you to Christina and Ashley," says Claudia. Both women nervously smile at me and I reciprocate. I wonder if I should go in for the hug like Julia did with me; it felt really great. Nah. That's a bit too bold even for me. You're either a hugger or you're not. If you have to think too much about it, it's simply not your thing.

I look over toward the recliners and notice that the credits are rolling across the screen. The movie has finished and the women are slowly beginning to make their way over to us. Several of them are holding wine glasses. *Movies and wine ... two of my favorite pastimes*, I find myself thinking.

Now that the group is together, Claudia herds us over to another comfortable sitting area with white satin sofas grouped in a U-shaped arrangement. In the center, a gorgeous mahogany table holds several crystal wine decanters and a silver tray of goblets fit for royalty. That's us all right. Royalty. Queens out to do in their mothers-in-law. At least I hope to hell that's what this coven is about.

We all select our seats; the newbies naturally sticking together like sorority pledges.

"I want to welcome you all again to our group and into my home," Claudia began. In the dim light she looks even prettier than she had at the front door. "This is where we meet every Thursday evening at seven. I am very happy that you have found us, and I am one-hundred percent certain you will feel that same gratitude soon. And please don't get me wrong; we wish you didn't have the need to search for this type of help at all. However, you are obviously having mother-in-law issues and that is what brought you here to our support group. We hope you find comfort in knowing you are not alone. I would like to give you a brief overview of how this group came to be, our global reach, as well as our mission statement and goals."

Claudia turns toward Christina, Ashley, and me for the rest of her speech. "The mission of the Daughter-in-law Society- you'll find that we shorten it to DILS- is to protect and empower the women who have sought refuge in our organization and eliminate injustices brought upon our sisters by overbearing and oftentimes cruel mothers-in-law. Our commitment is to provide you with a safe haven where you are free to express your frustrations without being

judged, blamed, or ridiculed. Over time, you will find your own inner strength. Until then, we are now your backbone and we will support you.”

Christina loses it. She puts her head on her knees and starts sobbing, crying so hard it sounds like she is drowning. Apparently, Claudia’s speech struck a real chord with her. Since I am sitting closest to her, I scooch over a bit and put my arm around her shoulders. For some reason unbeknown to me, I feel totally comfortable in the role of comforting her. I am usually pretty shielded when it comes to strangers, putting out a force field barrier that would deter a Jedi, but I feel a connection with her and want to make her feel like everything is going to be okay. Perhaps it is, because I really feel like everything is going to get better now that we are part of this society. My arm is still around her shoulders and as I am rubbing her arm, I can feel her trembling subside. I lean down and ask her if she is okay. She lifts her head and her tear-stained face now bears a small, tentative smile. I give her a reassuring “you’re not alone” squeeze and move back over to my seat. We are all going to be all right; I can just feel it. Safety in numbers, right? I glance over at Ashley, who is sitting on the other side of Christina, and can’t help but notice that she doesn’t seem the least bit concerned and almost seems bored.

Some sister she's going to make, I think. Mental note to self—Keep an eye on Ashley to see if she is capable of expressing emotions. I could be mistaking shyness for rudeness but I am pretty dead-on when it comes to first impressions. If I find myself limiting the amount of time I speak to you, chances are we aren’t going to be friends when I get to know the real you.

Claudia walks over to Christina and takes both her hands into her own. “I swear to you on my own children that if you commit yourself to this society—our sisterhood—your mother-in-law issues will eventually disappear.”

While her attention is focused on Christina, I silently repeat part of Claudia's Mission Statement in my head; the part about eliminating "injustices brought upon our sisters by overbearing and many times cruel mothers-in-law" and how she swore on her children's lives that our mother-in-law problems would soon be gone. I don't quite know what to make of her words. The only way my mother-in-law problems will go away is if she is dead. Even then, I know that witch would find a way to come back and haunt me from her grave. Maybe they have those spikes they put in vampire's hearts and that's their secret weapon. If so, I'm in. Claudia doesn't look like a killer, but she might know "those type" of people. As grim as it might seem, the demise of my mother-in-law doesn't sadden me in the least bit, which should tell you something about the depth of my despair. Of course, I would feel very sorry for my husband, but right now, I am only thinking about the pain the woman causes me.

After reassuring Christina, Claudia quickly picks up the discussion where she left off. "As you have just witnessed, we, the DILS, will be your backbone when you don't have the strength to stand on your own." She pauses again and I wonder if we should applaud. Before I make an ass of myself, Claudia clears her throat and asks us if we would like a glass of wine before she continues.

Tinkerbell flies off into the kitchen and is back in seconds with an uncorked bottle of vintage Bordeaux. As Julia is passing around glasses, Ashley puts her hand up and says, "I don't drink red. Unless you have a nice dry white, don't bother." The comment was incredibly rude. I mean, you're a guest in someone's home. Just take it and don't drink it, right? Julia looks a bit taken aback but just smiles sweetly and moves on to Christina. I, on the other hand, did not take it so lightly. If this were any other time or place, I would correct this woman immediately. She reminded me of my mother-in-law right at that moment and I had such an urge to knock her teeth out.

out. However, I have to remind myself this isn't my home; I'm a newcomer to the group and I need to just bite my tongue. For now. Claudia pretends not to notice the rude bitch and resumes the discussion.

“Three weeks from today, ladies, the DILS will proudly celebrate our third anniversary.

For three years, we have been helping women all over the world rectify their mother-in-law problems, while at the same time forming life-long friendships. I founded this organization out of my own desperation. Years of being told I wasn't a good wife or a good mother took its toll on me. My mother-in-law had virtually crushed my self-esteem. I hated her and I resented my husband for not protecting me from a monster that was destroying me. I went online and searched for information on how to deal with an abusive mother-in-law. I found nothing remotely helpful. Yes, there were bits of information here and there, mostly articles written by pseudo-psychologists, but nothing that helped *me*. But I went to an online women's community and posted my mother-in-law story. I kept it brief and just gave one example of what a terror she was. Within three hours, over twenty women had responded to my post. Some shared their own horror stories while others poured out anonymous hatred and anguish. By the next morning, more than hundred women had replied. And they all said the same thing: They were relieved to know that they were not the only ones out there dealing with this issue. You see ladies, once you discover how many women can relate to you, you can stop blaming yourself. The group of women, including myself, who sought support and advice initially communicated through email and chat. Although we were spread out across the world, we all had something in common: a mother-in-law from hell. Through our communications, we were able to provide one another with a different perspective on the problems at hand. My problems with my mother-in-law didn't magically disappear. However, I was able to handle her in a different way. Even though

my new friends weren't standing next to me, I felt stronger against her. It was as though I was now part of an army!"

Like me, Christina had become deeply engrossed in Claudia's tale. Ashley was applying lip-gloss, lost in her own world. I was beginning to take her mother-in-law's side.

Claudia clasped her hands together, looked around the room, took a deep breath, and sighed.

"Well, I think I have spoken enough for one day. Ladies, let's enjoy some wine."

Chapter Three

I love my Kyle, but we've been together long enough that we've both developed little tricks to get over on one another. Kyle, for example, knows I've been struggling with his mother. So when he knows I am going to have to deal with her, he delivers the news electronically and in a manner to which I cannot respond. Example: Today, a few days after my first DILS meeting, I return home from work to find a message on our home answering machine. "Honey, Mom is joining us for dinner tonight around eight. See you then!"

Damn him! He communicates with me all day long at work (and vice versa). I have a cell phone, a Blackberry, a PC, a web cam, and a secretary, but when it comes to his mother, he either leaves me post-it notes on the refrigerator or leaves messages like these at home, knowing I've been at work all day long and can't respond until it's far too late. Sometimes I think I should treat him similarly. Call him at work and ask his secretary to interrupt whatever meeting he's in – the larger the better – to announce, "Mr. Embers, your wife just called. She wants you to know she's banging her personal trainer and would you mind not coming home for another few hours, unless of course you want to watch."

My stomach knots up. I deal with captains of industry all day long – CEOs, billionaires, Actors/Actresses, and your everyday Playboy who wants to start her own website, but the idea of having to provide a meal for my MIL (I've now begun to use my new DILS acronym jibber-jargon), is more nerve-wracking to me than having to lose my virginity all over again.

What had I learned at my first meeting? Oh, yes ... call my sponsor. Damn, this is just like AA. Why *can't* it be AA and not DILS? I enjoy drinking far more than I do having a mother-in-law. Couldn't I trade in one problem for another?

But I'm still so new; I don't yet have a sponsor. I go to my Blackberry. Julia. Julia, the little waif. I felt a connection with her; I can't quite explain it. Part of me wants to call Claudia, the Head Mistress, but that's bad office politics. Too needy and too presumptuous to be the new person who throws off the vibe that she can only deal with the top dog. Naw, I'll start farther down the food chain. Potato chip. Get it?

I hear the line ringing and the most pixyish voice I've ever heard this side of Peter Pan on Ice squeaks, "Hello?"

"Julia, this is Kat. We met..."

"Oh, I remember you," she says with sincere warmth in her voice. I like this girl; I really do. "What can I do for you?"

I hadn't quite thought through my speech, but I wing it anyway. "You wanna be my sponsor? I'm in a dilemma and I need someone to talk to ... right now!"

There's a deadly silence on the other end that I don't like. Finally, Julia speaks, "Well, I'm not on the level of some of the other girls, but I'll do my best. I've been attending meetings for about six months now." She pauses. "You're the first person who ever sought me out!"

I do a quick mental inventory. Not a pro, but six months into the program. Well, that's six months my elder, so she's way ahead of me. What have I got to lose?

"Here's the deal. My husband – soon to be ex-husband if he does something like this again – left me a message telling me his mother's coming over for dinner in *two hours*. There is no single thing that batters me down worse than having this woman in my house, eating my food, which she will bitch about no matter what I serve. I would rather get dunked in rat blood. What do I do?"

"Hmmm..." Julia muses. "Well, as it so happens, this is one of the more common issues we talk about in the group."

We talk about in group. God, how I hate the way that sounds. I am not a mental patient. When she says it like that, I envision myself sitting in some dank basement with walls painted Institutional Green, in an assless hospital gown, surrounded by greasy-haired girls with cuts up and down their arms. I feel so Girl Interrupted at this moment.

“Here’s the first question. What would you do if *I* were coming over for dinner?”

Odd, but I’ll play along. “I’d pull out a recipe I’ve had success with before and make it for you. Why?”

“Okay, so you are one of those types,” Julia replies.

“One of what types?” Suddenly I’m a *type*?

“No, no, it’s a good thing. I’d say it indicates you’re a very nice person who cares a lot about her guests and wants to extend herself in order to make them feel special when they come to visit her.”

“You mean, as opposed to seeing whatever leftovers I have that haven’t turned green or blue from lethal fungus?”

“Right!” she responds in that perpetually bubbly soprano cheerleader voice of hers. It really should irritate me, but she pulls it off so organically that, for her, it works. “So, go and do just that. Treat your MIL just like you would treat me.”

I mull that over a minute. “I guess. Just so long as you don’t ever ask me to treat *you* as I would like to treat *her*. Most states still have the death penalty.”

Julia giggles. “The key is, you need to pretend that tonight is a new beginning. I’m sure you’ve had her over for dinner before ...”

“Oh, don’t let me get started...”

“Right, but we’re not going there now.” Without missing a beat, little Julia is taking over and I must say, I respect that. I called her for help and she’s starting to get comfortable behind

the wheel. That's the kind of behavior that motivates me to give my colleagues at work promotions and raises.

"You must put yourself in a state of mind, Kat. You must pretend this is a new day. You're going to first try the high road, no matter what has gone down before. You'll make a really nice dinner and pretend you're doing it for someone who will appreciate it."

I pause for a second or two before letting out the biggest chuckle of my life. Even Julia finds it infectious enough to join in.

"No, no, listen to me; this works. Trust me. This one is tried and true. If it doesn't work, it will still establish a premise from which you can move forward. Are you still with me?"

"Ay, Ay sergeant," I reply, still giggling a wee bit.

"Pretend, pretend, pretend. Fake it till you make it; that's the key."

"But I thought the group was all about backbone and standing up for what's right?" I ask.

"It is. You have to work through these things, though, Kat. The answer is not in making everything a battle royal. You have to try to out-think her, not out-scream her.

"The issue with MILs is that we're vying for the love of one man – our husband and their son. Now we, as logical women, know there's no reason we can't both share and get what we want, which makes us the sane ones here. They, on the other hand, do not believe this. So in order to win, we must sometimes utilize non-violent civil disobedience."

She has me laughing again, which I like. It's taking my mind off my nausea, which would have floored me by now, but is instead just a freckle in my mind. I guess this is what that whole —sisterhood thing was about, that stuff Claudia spoke about so much at the meeting. Talking to Julia, I feel I'm part of a team, not standing all alone in a kitchen, waiting for my MIL to come along to slice and dice me with a ginsu knife.

“You want me to be like Gandhi,” I jokingly respond, chuckling at the visual.

“Think about it,” she says. —If Gandhi took a leak on a British commander’s boot, would we still be talking about him today? By letting himself get beaten and imprisoned, we empathized with him. He won our hearts.”

“Well, I certainly feel beaten and imprisoned, so I’m halfway there already.”

“Fine, but remember . . . new day. High road. High road. You’re going to make that great dinner and you’re going to do it to the best of your ability. If you screw it up, you’ll apologize graciously, just like you would with me. But that probably won’t happen anyway . . .”

“No, I cook a pretty mean Chicken Caesar Tortellini.”

“Fabulous! Just make sure that you know your guest’s likes and dislikes-- food allergies and stuff. Please, don’t battle her from the outset by putting in something she’s deadly allergic to. I can tell from the way you’re breathing, you want to slip her a roofie and carve your initials into her forehead while she’s unconscious, but resist the urge.”

She’s got me laughing out loud again, like some long-lost twin sister, the way Debbie does. Even her sense of humor is as sick as mine. “But we’ve been down this road before. No matter what I do, she will put me down and belittle me. And worse than that, she will get me off my game and get my husband to take her side.”

“Yes!” she explains. “I’m sure that’s exactly what she does. And you’re knowledgeable enough to have already figured that out. That’s half the battle. So what you have to do now is turn the tables. She knows how to be rude in such a way that it pushes your buttons. In fact, she’s probably done it enough times that half your buttons are already pushed before she steps inside your door. That’s what I mean about “new day, high road.” We get you off on the right

foot by having you pretend it's me who's coming to dinner, not her. Next, when she inevitably says something rude, play the victim.

"Play the victim?" I repeat.

"Yes. Remember your husband has somehow become blinded to how rude his mother is to you or has learned to ignore it, but suddenly gets his sight and his hearing back when you try to deal with it. That's when *she* plays the victim; am I right?"

"How did you know? Do you have hidden cameras in my place?"

"No, but I don't have to. I don't want to say this in the wrong way, but I've heard this one before. Like I said, it's a group favorite. Kind of like DILS Greatest Hits, Volume 1."

"So you've tried this and it works?" I ask.

After getting into an easy flow with my new SBF (Second Best Friend), I get a hesitant silence once more. "Sorta," she stammers. With my MIL, things are a little more sinister. For example, to my face, she would never say a negative word. Incredibly gracious to my face."

"I could live with that," I reply.

"No, no, you don't understand. It's all behind my back. It's horrible. My husband talks to me in bed and he tells me that after she's been so nice to me, she calls him on his cell and blasts me like I'm the plague or something. It's really horrendous." She pauses for a second, then quickly recovers, —But that's not what we're here about. Tonight is about you."

"Hey, I'm a two-way street kind of person. I'd be happy to be your sounding board sometime."

"Thanks," she says. —I appreciate that. But I've got a job to do now and that's to help out my big sister, Kat."

The word *big* flashes me back to *the hug* during which I felt like an Amazon.

Is my newSBF dissing me?

Julia continues. “When she puts you down or says something rude, look like you’ve just been slapped and physically turn toward your husband. Shrink and wordlessly allow him to comfort you.”

“Oh, God, that is *so* not me.”

“It’s a game; play it. And yes, it has to be physical as well as verbal.

That’s what will make it believable. Most likely, it won’t work immediately. So let her throw a few more punches. By about the third nasty comment, say something like, “That’s really hurtful. I wish you wouldn’t say things like that to me.”

Remember to lose any aggressive tone in your voice. You may have to say it a few times and when you do, vary it, but whatever you do, do not lose your cool. Each time she verbally slaps you, say something about how it makes you feel and then physically retreat into the arms of your husband. Another rule to winning this game, do not call her any names. It will be beyond tempting but resist it like you would resist Mister July calendar model standing naked in your room begging you for a dirty quickie. Bad example. Married or not, I couldn’t resist rock hard abs tempting me to rub my body all over them.”

“Earth to Julia—Are you there Julia?” I laugh.

“Okay, yes, sorry. Back to what I was saying. Don’t call her mean or a bitch or anything like that. And don’t bring up anything from the past. She’ll try that and bait you, but don’t buy into it. Ignore her and pretend she didn’t say it. Deal in the here and now and nothing else.

“So in conclusion ... new day, high road, no history, no name-calling, no name-calling, play the victim, go to your husband as if you’ve been physically assaulted, and tell her that what she just said hurt you very deeply. Keep all your speeches short and to the point. If you drone on, you’ll accidentally say something she will latch onto and play Ju-Jitsu with your words. And finally, two mental images: You are serving me, not her, and you are the female incarnation of Gandhi.”

“Got it. Serve the Julia; be the Gandhi.”

“Right!”

I’m about to hang up when a thought or two occurs to me. “But didn’t you say this doesn’t work for you?”

If I could see her over cellular space, Julia would have her shoulders hunched down right now; I can just feel it in the quiet. “Try it,” she perks back up. —I’m not telling you it will work miraculously and your troubles will be over. Think of this as a battle and not the entire war. Occasionally, you have to incur a strategic loss in order to win big later.”

“Wow, I do that at work plenty of times.”

“Precisely! Think of your MIL as a business problem you have to solve or else be out on the street, looking for a new job. If that works for you, use it. But don’t give up, at least not yet. And if this doesn’t work, or even if it does, call me and we’ll discuss what to do next.”

“There’s going to be a next? Can’t it be like a game show where if she loses, I get all the money and she goes away forever with nothing but a year’s supply of processed cheese and a copy of the home game?”

Julia laughs. “Concentrate. Get your game face on. Focus. This is war.”

Suddenly, she sounded like anything but a potato chip. She was a warrior. Game on.