

The SHORT,
Spectacular
Indie-Publishing
CAREER of
Matilda Walter

Sandra Hutchison

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*For indie authors
everywhere*

*“I’ve read your book on streptothricosis,” said
Pritchard-Mitford, shaking hands. “A brilliant
performance, sir.” “Thank you,” said Walter Mitty.*

—JAMES THURBER

WALLY STARED DREAMILY at the textured wall of her cubicle. Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to quit her thankless day job and focus exclusively on the continuing adventures of her beloved characters Christina Christie and Jack Amber?

Her heroine Christina Christie was a former heiress on the run, forced by necessity to work as a waitress in the scummiest bar on the most beautiful beach on Honeymoon Island, an incredibly picturesque yet strangely affordable and uncrowded island off the Gulf Coast of Florida.

Her hero Jack Amber was the mysterious new man in town, a guy who’d made going around shirtless so hot that almost all the other single men under 80 had either joined a gym, scheduled ab implants, or hunkered down on their sofas for the duration.

If only Christina didn't need to worry that Jack might actually be a hit man sent to make sure she never ratted on her powerful ex-boyfriend!

Christina hadn't realized Rocky "the Fist" Carbona was actually a terrifying drug kingpin until their fifth date, when he'd casually ordered an execution over lobster at a fancy restaurant. At least, that's what she was pretty sure he'd done. In the middle of a tense conversation on his cell phone, he'd said, "That bastard! Sounds like time for a little T&E." (That was the other bad thing about Rocky: He was always on his phone.)

"T&E?" Christina had asked. "Travel and expenses?"

"No, torture and execution," Rocky had said casually, then started coughing. "That was a joke. Ha ha. You know that, right?"

Christina might have stared at him a little too long before she'd said, "Yeah, of course."

Fortunately, she hadn't been in her car when it blew up. That poor valet.

She knew she might just be paranoid. Maybe Rocky really had been joking, and her car had just blown up spontaneously. After all, Christina had ignored an awful lot of recall notices. It could be she'd dropped everything and run away to the most remote English-speaking paradise she could get to with her frequent flyer miles for nothing.

And it could be that Jack Amber was simply the strangely secretive, wealthy former male model that he claimed to be. She couldn't help noticing, though, that he always had a gun on him. AND a silencer.

“Second amendment, baby,” he’d told her, as if that explained everything. And maybe it did, in Florida.

On the plus side, fear of her imminent death made the attraction between them really sizzle!

“Walter!” her boss demanded. “Where are the list orders for the November walk-in bathtub promotion?”

Susanne Whitcomb was a former UConn women’s basketball forward. Tiny Wally was always forced to look up to meet her eyes, and it was even worse when Wally was seated. She canted her head back as far as it would go and smiled apologetically. “Sorry. I’m still waiting for a count.” That was true, but only because she’d sent the query in so late.

Wally had been distracted all week. First, she’d had to come up with a better *nom de plume* than Walter Mitty. Who would buy a romance novel written by someone with a name like that? She’d settled on Matilda Walter, which was fairly close to her real name, but made her sound like a wise, confident older woman with just a touch of romantic Australian *je-ne-sais-quoi*, or at least *I-don’t-know-what-mate*.

Hmm. Should she relocate her story to Australia? But that would require so much more research. Impatient with the pace she’d kept so far, Wally had already decided that instead of plodding through her outline, writing all those tedious establishing scenes, she’d skip ahead to the part where Christina and Jack do it for the very first time.

And then she’d just kept revising that chapter.

“You know we need to mail that one during Medicare enrollment,” Susanne said. “If the old ladies think it’s covered we can get them on the hook. No more excuses, Wally. I need those orders ready to go by the end of the day!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Wally said, and Susanne’s mouth tightened. *Oops.* Wally had been raised in a polite Southern town where any woman older than her was supposed to be called “ma’am.” In New Jersey, however, it was apparently something of an insult.

After Susanne stalked away, Wally’s coworker Jonathan sidled in from his side of the cubicle wall. He was a recent hire whose head full of gorgeous brown curls rivaled even Jack Amber’s, though he was sadly lacking in Jack’s musculature.

“That *ma’am* was just brilliant,” he said. “It pretty much implies she’s an old hag, but they can’t fire you for being polite.”

“I sure hope they can’t,” she said, suddenly worried. She needed to make some kind of living until she finished her novel and became rich and famous.

“Hey, do you mind if I ask how you got a name like Walter?”

If she minded *that* she’d have had a very unhappy life. “My mom’s best friend named her daughters Sidney, Drew, and Robb, so Mom figured Walter would be the next big thing. Also, I think she had a crush on Walter Cronkite. I found a whole manila envelope full of stuff about him in her underwear drawer.”

His eyebrows rose. “Do I want to know why you were in your mother’s underwear drawer?”

Wally had been cleaning it out after her mother died. “No.”

His smile disappeared. “Oh. Okay.”

He left.

She returned to her task, frowning. Had she just missed an opportunity to flirt with a cute guy over her mother’s granny panties and Walter Cronkite fetish? But she really didn’t see how introducing a dead mother into the conversation could have stirred any romance.

Wally was just no good at sparkling banter. She never had been. She was always missing social cues when they mattered. She would often lie in bed at night and suddenly realize the opportunities she’d missed that day.

That inability to come up with appropriate quips when needed perhaps explained why she liked to write in the first place, or at least to think about writing. It was a solace, her secret life as a novelist, even if she hadn’t actually finished any novels yet. She was quite certain that her heroine Christina Christie would never fail to have a brilliant rejoinder ready at the very moment it was needed.

Christina was blessed in so many ways. She had much bigger breasts and a much tinier waist than Wally did. Her hair, rather than being a mousy brown, was a thick lustrous brunette. Everything fit her, not that it mattered, because unless she was at the bar, she was usually wearing some cute guy’s big shirt after she’d just had hot sex with him. Christina could have an orgasm at the drop of a pin, even with a guy she’d just met who was drunk and sweaty and hadn’t brought

a condom and hadn't gotten around to telling her his last name yet.

And none of those guys had taken Christina to the places Jack Amber had, all week long. All he had to do was hold her glance for a half a second and she would start to whimper. And last night, he'd done so much more than just hold her glance...

Shaking herself slightly, Wally picked up the phone and called the list house. Yes, they could hurry up her counts. A-Plus Medical Devices LLC was a big client, after all. They would be emailed over momentarily.

That crisis handled, Wally sat back to wait for the email and let her mind return to her novel.

Jack Amber was a bit like the boy Wally had loved from afar in high school, only taller, broader, more muscled, wealthier, with better teeth, more facial hair, less body odor, and much more interest in having sex with a female. Mind-blowingly great sex. Wally herself had only had minimally satisfactory sex at this point in her life, but she remained optimistic. She just needed to find her very own Jack Amber.

Maybe her very own Jack Amber would read her book, and fall in love with her that way. Although she kind of doubted Jack Amber would ever read a romance novel, and if he did, would she really want that kind of guy? That might just be Todd all over again.

Maybe she should try to make it an action thriller with a romantic subplot instead of a romance novel. Unfortunately, she hadn't read a thriller in years. She just wasn't sure what the deal was with them.

“Walter, explain this to me!”

“I’m sorry?” Wally said, blinking.

Susan was holding out a sheaf of list orders. “These counts! This is a roll-out, not a test. You do understand that, don’t you? A ROLL OUT. An important one!”

Wally had never pretended to understand direct marketing, but she did have a clue that she’d missed something important. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I assumed it was like all the other orders I’ve done on that product.”

“Look at the campaign specs! My God, don’t you read them? CAN you read?”

Wally was tempted to tell her she was not only an excellent reader who could get through five or six romances a week, she also a gifted writer who was going to be a famous novelist any day now. But some instinct held her back. “I’m sorry. I’ve been a little distracted by a personal issue.”

That admission appeared to deflate Susanne slightly. Not for long, though, because after sighing heavily, she said, “Then you’d better get whatever help you need with it pronto, because those personal issues are interfering with your job performance. And we can’t have that. Do you understand? I’m going to have to write this up.”

Wally stared back at her. Write it up? Was Susanne a writer, too? Surely that would be the most boring plot development in history? Then she realized Susanne probably meant something a little more formal, something potentially involving Human Resources.

“I won’t let it happen again, Susanne. I promise.”

“Okay, here’s the deal,” her boss said. “Wow me by fixing this to what it’s supposed to be by the time I come in tomorrow morning. If you can’t get it done, I’m going to have to give this whole product line to someone else. And you really don’t want me to do that.”

That bitch Suzie Whitless was back, in her lowest-cut dress. She gave Jack a predatory grin before she deliberately dropped her tiny little purse on the floor next to him.

“Oopsie!” she squealed, and bent down to retrieve it, strategically exposing what cleavage she had.

Jack, Christina noticed, turned red and shifted uncomfortably on his bar stool. “Hello, Suzie,” he said, with a nervous smile.

He wasn’t really going to talk to that woman, was he? Suzie was not only too tall for him, she had really tiny breasts, clearly augmented with one of those high-tech bras.

Apparently, though, that was all it took. Jack’s attention was still squarely on Suzie.

Christina slopped her bar rag down into the bucket of soapy water and then smacked it onto the little purse Susie had just placed on the bar, splashing soapy water on Suzie and Jack and a couple of innocent regulars in the process. On herself, too.

“Oh dear!” she said into the shocked silence that followed as she lifted her rag to reveal Suzie’s soaked evening bag. “I could have sworn that was a palmetto bug!”

Suzie stared down at her sodden little purse. “You thought a sparkling red Kate Spade clutch was a palmetto bug?”

Christina said, “I sure hope there wasn’t anything in there that mattered.”

“I’m sure I’ll survive,” Suzie said, with a studied flip of her hair. She smiled warmly at Jack.

Jack coughed uncomfortably. He glanced quickly at Christina and then looked away, towards the front door.

Susie growled a little under her breath and said to Christina, “On the other hand, I’m sure Boone will insist that you replace it.” She lifted her voice. “Right, Boone?”

Boone, the grizzled biker who owned Boone’s Bar and Grill, sauntered over. Every visible square inch of flesh on him – other than his face – was covered in tattoos. This had intimidated Christina until she’d noticed that many of them were characters from My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.

He stared at the sodden bag for a moment, then turned his baleful glance on Suzie. “Sure thing, hon. Leave it with us, and I’ll replace it myself. I saw one just like it at Walmart the last time I was there.”

Another shocked silence fell. Why was Boone the grizzled old biker shopping for purses in Walmart?

“Let me help you get that straightened out,” Jonathan said.

Wally gazed at him, dumbfounded. It was true, the whole possibly-gay-boss-shopping-at-Walmart angle wasn’t really working at *all*, but how could he possibly know that?

He said, “You need all of them done over, right?”

“Oh. Yeah, I do,” she said. List orders. He was talking about list orders.

“I’m caught up with mine. Give me some of yours and I’ll help you get done.”

“That’s so sweet of you,” Wally said. The list house had already gotten her what she needed, but actually getting it processed on her end would require tedious hours of data entry and paperwork.

No doubt that was why she had once again slipped away to Honeymoon Island, where no one even knew what direct mail was, and barely any presort standard mail of any dimension or weight made it past the giant trash can next to the post office boxes.

“Do you always work this late?” she asked Jonathan.

“Not always,” he said. “But it’s no problem for me. Tell you what – we get it done, and then we can grab some dinner, okay? I happen to know that it’s on the company when we have to work past six. A pretty good incentive to work late, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” Wally said. She’d really rather have those hours of her life back. Then it occurred to her that he had just asked her out to dinner, sort of.

Okay, so maybe those hours wouldn’t have been so wasted after all.

“You seem distracted lately,” Jonathan said over dinner at the local inexpensive-but-still-darn-tasty Italian restaurant. A-Plus Medical Devices LLC was willing to cover dinner for exempt employees working overtime, but only within reason. “Is there something wrong?”

Wally eyed him warily. Could he be trusted? Could he possibly understand?

Her heroine Christina Christie wouldn't have hesitated for even a moment. She was brave, possibly even stupid. That might be part of the reason she had so much more sex than Wally did. Wally decided to assume that Jonathan was a nice guy and adopt her heroine's attitude for at least one night. She would just put it all out there.

"Truthfully? I'm working on a novel," she said. "It has me really distracted."

"A novel," he said. "Wow, that's impressive. What's it about?"

"It's an island romance. With a hit man and an heiress. He's supposed to kill her, but he falls in love with her instead. And vice versa. Except that she's not supposed to kill him. She'd just, you know, like to not be killed."

"I see," he said, frowning just a bit. "I don't read a lot of romance novels. That kind of plot can sell?"

"Oh yeah, it's practically a whole category," she said. "And romance is the single largest book category on Kindle. Women who read romances tend to read one a day or something like that. I should know, I'm one of them."

"Oh, so you're a big reader." His tone had gone a bit flat.

"Not a *crazy* reader," she said, conscious of the stigma involved. "Most of my friends are back in Virginia. My grandma got me this job and I couldn't really say no because it sure pays better than Walmart. Reading passes the time when I don't really have anything else to do."

“So you live with your grandmother.” That little piece of information hadn’t done anything for his tone, either.

“I live in the downstairs apartment,” she said. “She leaves me alone. She can’t handle the stairs. I usually only see her when I take her groceries and books and stuff. And I eat dinner with her on Sunday.”

“Oh,” he said. He sat up a little. “I’m sure she appreciates that.”

“She does. She’s a sweetheart. She likes to read romances, too.”

“Does she know about the one you’re writing?” he asked. She blushed. “No. It’s not a sweet romance.”

He grinned. “It’s bitter?”

“No, it’s, you know … it has sex scenes in it.” She could feel her face getting hot. “It’s not something I’d show my grandmother. Though she does read hot romances. You wouldn’t believe some of the books she passed down to me when I was just a kid!”

Come to think of it, it was Grandma who had started her down this path, wasn’t it?

He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a pleasant huskiness. “So do you do any, um, personal research for these books?”

Well, *duh*. “Yeah, I google stuff sometimes.”

He gave her tight a little smile, then sat back and folded his arms. “So you have an agent and a publisher and all that?”

“No, no. For romance, you don’t even need one anymore. You can just write a book and publish it. You know, on Kindle.”

“How do you know it’s ready to publish?”

She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Who makes sure that it’s ready to put out there? Spelled right and stuff like that?”

“I’m a good speller.”

“Okay,” he said, and went silent for a little while, focusing instead on his food.

“Do you like to read?” she asked.

“Um... mostly graphic novels, lately,” he said. “You know, like Batman.”

She didn’t want a man who read romances, but that sounded a little juvenile. At least he read *something*, though. Most guys she’d dated found playing a video game infinitely preferable to reading a book. “So I guess you wouldn’t be caught dead reading a romance.”

“It wouldn’t be my first choice. But I’ll read yours if you want me to.”

For the first time, she began to wonder if maybe this was all just a way to get in her pants. She just couldn’t imagine any guy ever asking to do such a thing because he actually wanted to. “That’s so nice of you. But I have to finish it first.”

“Oh, okay. How far along is it?”

Wally nearly choked on a piece of lettuce and started coughing, and couldn’t stop.

“Are you all right?” he asked, standing up in alarm.

Something had definitely gone down the wrong way. “I’ll be right back,” she gasped, between nasty deep-throated coughs, and headed to the bathroom to get a handle on it. She

really was coughing, but she wouldn't mind if he forgot that pesky question about how far she'd gotten.

Once she'd stopped hacking her lungs out, she dabbed her ruined make-up – coughing in a desperate bid for breath was never good for one's mascara – and reflected that "I've written one chapter" wouldn't sound very professional. Even if she *had* written twenty drafts of it.

It really was time to buckle down and write her book.

After whatever was going to happen with Jonathan tonight.

She suddenly remembered his earlier question about research. Oh, jeez! Had that been another social cue she'd missed?

As she washed her hands, she practiced saying into the mirror, "Would you like to help me do a little research?" She put as much of a sultry spin on it as she could.

A wary voice came from one of the stalls. "What kind of research?"

"Sorry! I didn't mean...!" Wally ran for it before whoever it was could come out.

Back at their booth, she said, "Wanna help me research?" It came out breathless and panicked instead of sultry.

He grinned. "I'd be happy to."

"But I want to make love," she whined, six months later. She didn't even try to claim it was research any more.

"Just read it," he said, holding out his laptop. "I incorporated your suggestion about Jack's tortured past. See if it works."

“You’re a slave driver, you know that?” She took the laptop from him with a grimace and dropped down onto the sofa to read.

Jonathan had been even more excited by all those videos of fantastically successful Kindle Direct Publishing authors than she was. He had even begun researching the market by reading, or at least skimming, other books in the category. Unlike her, he had ambitions in marketing that had led him to his job at A-Plus Medical Devices LLC. He was soon urging her to get her book finished.

That wasn’t the only thing he urged her to do, of course. And the thing was, she liked being urged to have sex a whole lot better.

One day when he’d gotten too frustrated with her pace of production, she’d said, “You write it!” and to her astonishment he had taken her up on that.

“We’ll co-author,” he said. “You know what women want to read. I know how to get things done.”

“You go right ahead,” she’d told him, figuring he’d see just how hard it was to sit down at the computer and just bang something out. She had been stunned when he not only set up a writing schedule, but actually kept to it, and had soon finished a first draft from her outline. And it wasn’t even terrible.

“Hey!” she said, looking up from an extra sex scene he had inserted. “Are you making Christina do that because you want me to do it?”

“Of course not,” he said. “Not that I would complain if you wanted to give it a try.”

She wrinkled up her nose. “I don’t.”

“Fine,” he said. “But based on my research, just about EVERYONE everywhere is doing it, except us.”

“Would you also jump off a building if everyone else was doing it?”

He squinted at her in obvious puzzlement.

She said, “It’s what my mom used to say that whenever we told her what all the other kids did.”

“I think that’s a little weird to even bring up in this context. Perhaps especially the mom part.”

“Okay, you’re probably right. I still don’t want to do it.”

“Okay, fine. It can stay in the book, though, can’t it?”

“Yeah, sure. It does get me hot to read about it.” She waggled her eyebrows at him. “So do you want to have sex now?”

“No, Wally! When you’re done reading this draft. AND you give me some feedback on it.”

She sighed, and read on. After a moment she looked up. “I also wouldn’t date you if I thought you might be out to kill me.”

He chuckled. “I’m relieved to hear it.”

“We need to start establishing our author platform,” he said, a few weeks later. He had completed their third draft of *Love's Stunning Assassin* and it was out with a couple of her romance-reading friends for feedback. “Nobody’s ever heard of Matilda Walter, though I agree that sounds better on a romance book than Walter Mitty.”

“What about your name?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t need my name on this,” he said. “And I don’t think that would be a good career move for me or the book, honestly.”

“It doesn’t seem fair. You’ve done more than half of the work.”

“Just earning my keep. Though it’s been more fun than I expected.”

She pointed at the screen, where’d she’d enlarged a stock photo of a young man with impressive abdominals. “Look at these abs. Aren’t they perfect for Jack?”

He scowled. Abs were a bit of a sore point for him, perhaps because he didn’t have any to speak of, even though he’d taken up doing sit-ups every night. “Ever since you started looking for those, our online ads have been coming up with gay porn. Maybe that’s not going to send the right signal for this market.”

“We just need a woman’s touch, too. Maybe we could paste Christina’s long, elegant hand in right about... there,” she said, pointing significantly lower on the screen.

He coughed. “Not that low. We don’t want Amazon to stick this in the erotica category.”

“I’ll play around with it.” She had downloaded a shareware design program, and was determined to figure this out on her own. To her surprise, she was finding cover design more fun than writing. Maybe *that* was what she was meant to do with her life.

“Don’t you think it might be a good idea to invest in a professional cover designer for this?” he said.

“Let me try it first.”

Jonathan and Wally had decided they could commit what used to be his rent payment to the book, if necessary, since he had moved in. Her grandma hadn't been officially notified, but she wasn't complaining about it, either.

But that didn't mean they should spend money they didn't have to. They might need it someday, for something Jonathan hadn't brought up yet. This had made it a little awkward for Wally as they read together through the various declarations of undying love he'd put in the characters' mouths at the end of the novel.

Where was *Jonathan's* declaration of undying love?

Wally had no sooner clicked "publish" on Love's Stunning Assassin: Stunned by Love Hot Romance Series Book One by Matilda Walter and put the Amazon link on her Facebook page than twenty orders popped up on her KDP Report.

"Wow, that was fast," she posted happily on Matilda Walter's Facebook author page, which had gained over a thousand followers since the last time she'd looked. "Maybe we really are going to be able to make a living doing this!"

"Of course you are!" at least twenty friends responded immediately, each with some variation of "Because you're both absolutely brilliant!" Every single one of them promptly shared her link, urging everyone they knew to go buy it.

She smiled and diligently "liked" everyone who responded, even the friends of friends who posted "Am I supposed to know this Matilda Walter?"

“It’s Wally, silly,” various people wrote. “Our Wally is a FAMOUS AUTHOR! Isn’t that FANTASTIC? Go buy her book RIGHT NOW.”

While she was busy liking posts, a hundred more sales popped up. This must be what they called word of mouth!

A crumpled ball of paper landed on the desk in front of her, startling her out of her reverie.

“Wally!” Jonathan hissed. “Susanne’s making rounds. You have all your orders caught up, right?”

Wally blinked. “Um, mostly.”

“Busy beaver, sweetheart,” he said. It was his little code phrase for encouraging her to focus on her work. She would have really hated it if it didn’t have a connotation that reminded her of her reward for getting safely through another workday.

The one really great thing about her life now was that Christina Christie was no longer having better sex than Wally was. And unlike Christina, Wally didn’t have to worry about being assassinated.

“So how are we doing today, Wally?” Susanne loomed many feet above her as usual. Her face had that grim aura of patient longsuffering that she had begun to carry in all their conversations lately.

“Great, Susanne,” Wally said, and smiled. “How are you?” Jonathan had been coaching her in how to appear confident and positive.

“How’s the self-cleaning commode campaign looking?”

“Great” Wally said, although Susanne’s idea to include purchasers of high-end self-cleaning litter boxes was proving

a challenge since it was completely out of their usual list universe. She handed over what she had, neatly stacked. “Here’s what I have so far. The pet market segments are taking a little longer to nail down, but I should have some counts soon.”

“I see,” Susanne murmured, looking through them. “What’s here is fine.” She smiled. “So I take it you’ve gotten on top of that personal issue that was affecting you a while back?”

“Yes, I’ve definitely gotten some help with it,” Wally said.

“Well, keep up the good work,” Susanne said, and walked over to Jonathan’s cubicle. “And how is our resident list genius today?” she asked, her tone distinctly warmer.

Wally turned back to her work. She didn’t understand how Jonathan could even care about this crap they had to do in order to sell people the company’s over-priced medical devices, but he did. He seemed to want to excel at everything.

For example, he was unbelievably picky about spelling and verb tenses. He’d made them redo the book at least five times after various errors had been caught.

Personally, Wally couldn’t wait until they were rich and famous and she would never have to order another list ever again.

Or proofread.

“We’ve got two orders,” Jonathan said. “One of those is the one we bought. The other one is my mom.”

“Hit refresh,” Wally said.

He did. It still said two.

He clicked over to the product page. *Love's Stunning Assassin: Stunned by Love Hot Romance Series Book One* was ranked #895,243 in the Kindle Store. He sighed. “You said your grandma loves romance novels,” he said. “Can’t she buy one?”

“She doesn’t even own a computer, let alone a Kindle. She just reads all the large print books out of the library. Besides, I can’t make my grandma buy my book. That’s just … tacky.”

“I made my mom buy it!”

“Moms are different. My mom would have bought it, too, if she wasn’t dead. And I bet *my* mom would have written a review.”

“Depending on a review from your own mom is really kind of pathetic,” he said. “We’re going to have to figure something out here. We’re not dead in the water yet. Your two friends who read it – what can we do to get them to review it?”

“We” obviously meant her. Although both friends had sent her emails with variations on “It’s good!” neither had responded to emails since. They hadn’t liked or shared any of her book-related Facebook posts, either.”

She said, “I don’t know. It’s almost as if they just said it was good just because I was their friend.”

“Oh,” he said, and his shoulders slumped. “Well. Let’s put it free for a few days with as much promotion we can get and see if we can at least get some reviews. But it will take some time to set that up.”

The next morning, Wally got up from bed before Jonathan did, put the kettle on to boil, and sat down in front of the computer. Maybe they'd gotten a sale or two after they'd given up and gone to bed. She clicked through to the KDP dashboard.

"OH MY GOD! We're up to 1,013 units!" she squealed.

There was a muffled groan from the bedroom.

She checked the product page. Twenty reviews, all with four or five stars.

Their book was a "Hot New Release" in contemporary romance!

She checked her email. Jonathan had explained to her that they needed to get good reviews so that they could qualify, if they were lucky, for a BookBub placement, which would allow them to get some real sales numbers. But in their Matilda Walter email inbox there was already an email from BookBub with a subject line that read "We desperately want to feature your book! For free! PLEASE? PRETTY PLEASE????"

"Wow," she breathed.

Scanning down, she saw that all the book bloggers who hadn't wanted to take on the book before were suddenly clamoring for it.

She went to read the reviews. Two were from her friends, saying how excited they were that they had been able to read an advance copy of this masterpiece. The rest were just glowing reviews from readers who had somehow discovered the book the night before and read it already. One had read it twice. One was from a woman who hadn't read it yet but

wanted to give it five stars anyway because she just knew it was going to be great.

In the background, the kettle began to whistle. Then it began to shriek. Then it began to make a beep-beep-beep sound.

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no.

Next to her, Jonathan said, “I would just like to say that your phone has the most unimaginative alarm tone I have ever heard in my entire life.”

While she was grabbing her phone, he was already looking up their stats. “Our rank is even worse today,” he said.

“I don’t want to get up,” she said morosely. “I don’t want to go to work. I want to call in sick and eat ice cream and play the lottery.”

“Oh, honey,” he said. “I’m sorry, but we really have to go to work now.”

TWO MONTHS LATER

The self-cleaning commode campaign tanked. It not only failed to sell well in any of its test segments, it engendered angry mail from recipients and a federal investigation into misleading advertising copy by A-Plus Medical Devices LLC.

Things got very tense at the office as every mailing was put on hold while copy was pulled, ostensibly to be rewritten

to avoid any suggestion that Medicare would actually cover any part of the expenses.

One day Susanne Whitcomb wasn't there anymore. Word was that she'd been let go.

Later that same day, Jonathan took a phone call and then appeared, looking quite pale, in her cubicle doorway. "The CEO just called me to go down and talk to him," he said.

"What about?"

"I don't know. I just hope they're not laying me off." He left.

An hour later he was back. He didn't look terrible. He didn't look thrilled, either.

"Well?" she asked.

"I'm the new Marketing Manager," he said.

"You are? Congratulations! That's great!"

"Is it? I don't really know what the hell I'm supposed to do as Marketing Manager."

"I'm sure they'll tell you."

"I'm not sure they will," he said. "Anyway, it doesn't take effect for another couple of weeks, because this business is being shut down first."

"What?" she said, horrified.

"Oh don't worry," he said. "We'll be re-opening right away a couple of blocks down the road as B-Good Medical Devices LLC."

"Why?"

"Because they know that once we tone down the language in our letters, they won't work. But if we start over, it will take a while for the Feds to figure it out and get enough complaints

to open another case. Apparently they've already done this a few times, so it's pretty routine for them."

Wally stared at him. She did remember her grandmother cautioning her to keep her head down and avoid asking questions about the company. "It's New Jersey, honey," she'd said, as if that explained everything. "Just mind your own business and you'll be fine."

If only they had become rich and famous novelists already! But they hadn't. In fact, they'd put more money into a better-designed cover, and then they'd given away a few thousand copies, and that had only helped them sell a couple hundred copies of their book. And that was it. A copy hadn't sold in weeks. They hadn't even covered their costs.

"I guess this means I'm going to be your boss," Jonathan said. "I hope you don't mind."

"I won't mind if you promise not to be as mean as Susanne."

"I think we should find you something else to do, actually," he said. "You don't really like this, and it doesn't make sense to put all our eggs in one basket. Especially if the basket keeps picking up and moving every couple of years to avoid federal indictment."

"All our eggs?" she said.

He always talked as if they were a unit, but there had been no official declaration yet. Technically, he was just a guy getting free rent in her grandmother's basement apartment.

He grinned. "Don't you trust me, Wally?"

Should she? But that grin and those curls were even more adorable now than when they'd first met. "Yes."

“Then trust me.”

FIVE YEARS LATER

The mayor held up a glittery gold “key” to the city and said, “I am honored to give the key to our city to our small business of the year, Beefcakes Bakery!”

As the small crowd of friends and neighbors clapped, Wally smiled, shifted her firstborn, Matty, a little further over on her hip, and accepted the key, which was way too big to fit into any lock, assuming the city even had one, which she had to assume it didn’t. She handed Matty off to Jonathan, and posed for the requisite pictures with the mayor, the huge key between them. Then she waited while the mayor lowered the microphone to her level.

“I am so pleased and so proud to be honored like this,” she said. “I couldn’t have done it without the support of the business district, the city, the mayor, my dear husband, and – of course – my very discerning clientele.”

The crowd laughed.

“And now, I invite you all to have a sweet hunk of man on me.”

She stood back and let her bakery assistants start handing out the little plates, cut from the ab cakes she was most famous for. She smiled at Jonathan. He grinned back her.

They were not rich, but they were comfortable. And here on this block, at least, they were famous. Jonathan hadn’t even

had to make the switch with everyone else from B-Good Medical Devices LLC to C-Relief Medical Devices LLC, instead taking over online and wholesale marketing for the bake shop.

Weren't they lucky that they'd been able to turn her fascination with beautiful abs into a profitable enterprise? As for the books – well, she still read them, though not quite as voraciously as she once had. And as it happened, authors holding launch parties were a big part of her clientele. She was an expert at matching her three-dimensional ab cakes to their book covers.

She wished them well. She understood their hopes and dreams. The book release parties they held in her bake shop were almost always well-attended, because people loved to show up for the free cake the authors would provide.

And sometimes, Wally was happy to see, her authors even managed to sell a book or two!

THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you liked this story, please take a moment to review it, or at least tell some friends about it.

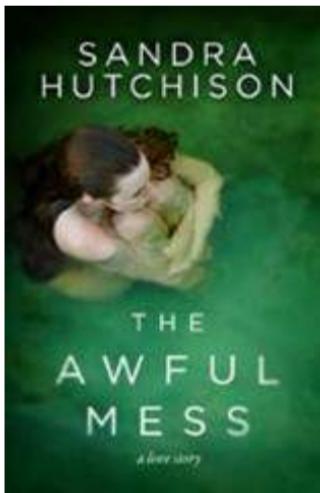
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While I'm working on building up my list over the course of 2015, I plan to randomly pick one member to receive a \$5 Amazon gift card (or the equivalent in whatever retailer you read ebooks on) every three months. I don't share your email addresses, and I won't hit you up very often. I know we all get too much email already.

To interact with me on a more regular basis, you might want to subscribe to my blog at [sheerhubris.com](#), like my [Facebook author page](#), become a friend on my [Facebook profile page](#), or follow me on [Twitter](#).

If you enjoyed this story, check out my two novels. They aren't as light as this little comedy, but I would hope that you might enjoy them anyway. Read about them on the next two pages.

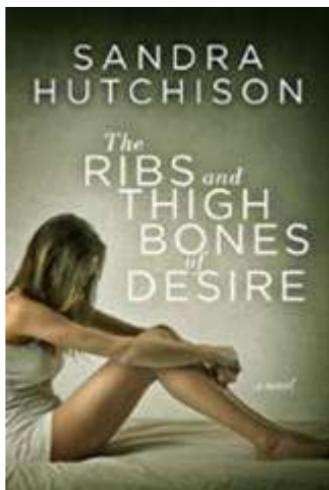
ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR



Recently-divorced editor (and “heathen”) Mary moves to small town New Hampshire seeking a quiet life, only to get into an awful mess with a local priest, a surprise pregnancy, and a handsome cop who supports gay rights but not sex before marriage. One of five general fiction semifinalists for the 2014 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award, it has over 100 five-star reviews at Amazon.com.

Learn more at sheerhubris.com or Amazon.com.

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR



In a small Western Massachusetts town in 1977 a thirty-two-year-old widowed physics professor and the sixteen-year-old girl who used to babysit his daughter forge a bond fraught with potential scandal as they try to help each other survive loss, guilt, fear, trauma, and growing up. This provocative new coming-of-age novel asks: Is there ever a time when doing the wrong thing might be exactly right?

Learn more at sheerhubris.com or Amazon.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born and raised in the Tampa Bay area, Sandra Hutchison survived a transplant to a small, snowy New England town in high school and eventually stopped sulking about it, though it's possible she's still working it out in her fiction. After working in publishing in New Jersey, she moved to the Capital Region of New York, where she teaches writing at Hudson Valley Community College. Her debut novel *The Awful Mess: A Love Story* was one of five general fiction semifinalists for the 2014 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. Her second novel, *The Ribs and Thigh Bones of Desire*, was published in December of 2014.

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I planned for this to be a free title as a Christmas present for my readers and indie author friends (and also for former colleagues in the direct mail division of Prentice Hall, who actually know what a “roll out” is). With no income likely from it, I couldn’t justify paying too much to produce it, so I am especially indebted to Jessica Brouker and Lynne Clark and indie author A.L. Jambor for helpful feedback and edits on the manuscript.

I also couldn’t afford to get a cover commissioned, so thanks to everyone who helped me choose between black and orange. (Yes, that’s all the choice they got. See what fun you could have on my Facebook page?) I’m grateful also to the developers of the lovely free design program GIMP.

If you haven’t read the original short story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber, you really should – it’s a short classic of American humor, and last I checked it was also available for free on *The New Yorker’s* website.

But first, go check out my other books!