



## *Stuck in the Middle*

By Virginia Smith

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### CHAPTER ONE

*Brrring. Brrring.*

From the desk behind the sales counter in the rear of the showroom, Joan Sanderson scanned the empty store. Fluorescent ceiling lights cast a harsh glow that reflected off the polished wooden surfaces of the furniture artfully arranged for display. Where was . . . oh yes. Rosa would be a couple of hours late this morning, after her daughter's doctor appointment. She reached for the phone and punched the button for the first line. "Good morning, Abernathy Sales and Rental."

"I'm going to kill her."

Joan closed her eyes. *Patience. I need patience.* "Hi, Mom. What has Gram done?"

"She alphabetized my underwear drawer."

"She *what?*" A snort of unladylike laughter blasted through Joan's nose.

"It's not funny, Joan. My bras are all in the first row, color-coded alphabetically from left to right, and then a row of panties, all folded in little squares, and then slips. And socks along the back row. Everything's so neat it makes me want to throw up."

Joan picked up a pile of invoices on the edge of the desk and shuffled them into a tidy stack. "C'mon, Mom, your underwear drawer is a disaster. What's wrong with a little order?"

“That is not the point, and you know it. She went into my room! She touched my underwear. She invaded my privacy! I’ve been sitting here for the past twenty minutes afraid to look in the closet. What if she got in there too?”

A hint of panic colored the anger in Mom’s voice. Gram was harmless, but she did have an obsessive-compulsive tendency to alphabetize everything she touched. Lately everything she did grated on her only daughter’s nerves like a snowplow on icy roads. Joan feared one day Gram would do something to push Mom over the edge. The front page of tomorrow’s *Advocate-Messenger* flashed into her mind:

**CRAZED WOMAN SLAUGHTERS  
ALPHABETICALLY CORRECT MOTHER**

“I’m sure your closet is fine.” Through the glass doors Joan watched a red pickup zoom into a parking space near the store. “She was only trying to be helpful, you know.”

Mom huffed. “She can organize the cans in the pantry and the jars in the spice rack all she wants. But three women living under one roof have got to have boundaries. Bedrooms should be off-limits.”

“So tell her that. Gram understands the need for boundaries.”

A couple emerged from the truck and made their way toward the store. The door alarm bleeped a stuttering double tone as the pair stepped from the clammy Kentucky heat into the air-conditioned store. They were college freshmen if Joan was any judge, much too young to be shopping for furniture.

“Be with you folks in a minute,” she called, then spoke in a lower voice into the phone. “I’ve got customers. I need to go.”

Mom ignored her. “Do you think I haven’t told her that a dozen times? She pays no attention to me and does as she pleases. I don’t think I can take this much longer.”

Joan clutched the receiver, a cold lump settling in the pit of her stomach. “What do you mean?”

After a pause, Mom sighed. “I don’t know. I wish I did. But really, we’ve got to do something before—”

Joan’s mouth went dry. Something in her mother’s tone hinted that she was about to launch into a subject that left Joan sick with dread. She couldn’t get into this right now, not on the phone, and not when she was the only one in the store. She turned her back toward the

watching couple and spoke quietly into the receiver. "I've got to go, Mom. We'll talk about this later. Goodbye."

The phone clicked down into its cradle harder than she intended as she sucked in a slow, deep breath. Time to calm down. She could think about Mom and Gram later.

A professional smile plastered on her face, she weaved her way through the furniture displays. Her young customers stood just inside the door as though they had happened across a patch of superglue. The guy looked a little shell-shocked as his gaze slid around the store. The girl, on the other hand, watched Joan like a cat in front of a fishbowl.

*Oh, puh-lease.* Joan stifled a chuckle. *I'm twenty-five years old! Your college boy is safe with me.*

Stale cigarette smoke assaulted her nostrils as she approached them, strong enough that she struggled not to take a step backward to escape the stench. Both wore jeans and flip-flops. The girl sported a belly shirt revealing a glimpse of silver in the center of an incredibly tiny waist; the guy, a loose, rust-colored T-shirt. Still eyeing Joan warily, she had a grip on his arm like a monkey with a banana in a cageful of hungry primates.

"Hi, I'm Joan."

The telephone rang from the back of the store. For a moment, she was tempted to let it go to voice mail. But that was bad business. Joan smiled at the newlyweds and took a backward step toward the sales counter.

"Feel free to look around." She edged toward the desk. "The dinette sets are here, with formal dining room furniture over there. You'll find the payment amounts and contract periods on the yellow labels."

As she reached the telephone, her customers' feet came unstuck, and they wandered toward the dinette displays. "Good morning, Abernathy's."

"Did you just hang up on your mother?"

Joan winced at her sister's scolding tone. Word traveled at roughly the speed of light in the Sanderson family. "Hi, Allie. I guess she called you?"

"Of course she called me. She's upset. I would be too if you slammed the phone down in my ear."

“I did not hang up on Mom.” Joan picked up a pencil and rolled it between her fingers. “Not technically, anyway. I said goodbye first. But all she wanted to do was complain about Gram, and I had customers. They’re still here, by the way.”

A disgusted grunt sounded in Joan’s ear. “Okay, okay, I’ll let you go. But you call her and apologize, you hear?”

“When I get a chance.”

Joan replaced the receiver with extreme care. Having Mom upset with her was bad enough. Best not alienate her big sister too.

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