

“An irresistible hook, an unlikely (but perfect for each other) duo, and the winsome voice of author Angela Ruth Strong come together in *Husband Auditions* to form a sweet and funny love story readers will adore. Simultaneously an homage to and a lampoon of old-fashioned pursuits of matrimony, inspirational romance fans will gobble up this thoroughly modern tale. I was completely charmed from aloha to aloha.”

BETHANY TURNER, award-winning author of *Plot Twist* and
The Secret Life of Sarah Hollenbeck

“*Husband Auditions* is as hilarious as it is charming! Angela Ruth Strong once again brings her unique voice and quirky sense of humor to create memorable, laugh-out-loud characters that subtly teach important lessons in love—and not so subtly linger in our minds long after the final page is devoured.”

BETSY ST. AMANT, author of *The Key to Love*

“Original and fun! *Husband Auditions* is a wonderful staycation of a book. Grab your latte and prepare to giggle.”

KRISTIN BILLERBECK, author of *Room at the Top*

“A sweet, warmhearted love story that encourages the soul and draws plenty of smiles. Readers of Christian romance will enjoy this fun, modern tale of a list that, when used as intended, just might snag you a husband.”

MELISSA FERGUSON, author of *The Dating Charade*

“To say I enjoyed *Husband Auditions* is an understatement—I loved it! My favorite contemporary book of the year. With realistic, heart-drawn characters, issues that are all too relatable, and laugh-out-loud moments galore, I thoroughly recommend Strong’s latest novel to readers who appreciate romance, comedy, and truth. Run and get it now!”

CAROLYN MILLER, author of the Regency Wallflowers
and Regency Brides series

“In Strong’s signature way of weaving a story that’s equally full of laughs and depth, *Husband Auditions* covers all the bases for a home-run rom-com and then delivers a grand-slam finish.”

JAYCEE WEAVER, author of the Everyday Love series

“The moment I read the premise, I couldn’t wait to get my hands on this book. *Husband Auditions* is a delightful abundance of comedy and chemistry interwoven with the rich themes and characters I’ve come to expect from Strong’s writing.”

HEATHER WOODHAVEN, author of *The Secret Life of Book Club*

“In *Husband Auditions*, Angela Ruth Strong delivers humor, romance, and a heartfelt message. Romance fans will laugh their way to a unique happily-ever-after.”

TONI SHILOH, author of *An Unlikely Proposal*

“*Husband Auditions* is a fun and quirky romance. The perfect read to unwind from a challenging day.”

KIMBERLY ROSE JOHNSON, award-winning author of
Christian romance and romantic suspense

“*Husband Auditions* is a delightfully humorous bookish escape. Filled with outdated advice on how to snag a husband—and a quirky heroine willing to follow such suggestions as carrying around a hatbox—readers will snicker their way to an ending that may be even more satisfying than a simple happily-ever-after.”

SARAH MONZON, author of the Sewing in SoCal series

“Perfect for fans of Becky Wade and Bethany Turner, this hilariously irreverent look at the lengths women have gone to for love is seventy years in the making. Readers will adore the oh-so-relatable Meri. And Kai? His lovable, sloth-with-a-heart-of-gold personality is a refreshing and delectable addition to the dreamy hero hall of fame.”

JANINE ROSCHE, author of the Madison River Romance series

HUSBAND AUDITIONS

A Novel

ANGELA RUTH STRONG



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Husband Auditions

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CHAPTER ONE



Meri

#16. *Work as a waitress or nurse. Men love being taken care of.*

I hated *My Best Friend's Wedding*. No, I'm not talking about the ceremony I just took part in, which was absolutely beautiful despite that the bridesmaid's dress I'm still wearing makes me look like an origami swan. I'm referring to the movie with Julia Roberts and Cameron Diaz.

Okay, honestly, it was a good movie until the end. Spoiler alert: The rich, beautiful blonde gets the guy, while the heroine is left alone.

Granted, Julia's character had been conniving and selfish at times, but since she learned a valuable lesson through the story, I can't help thinking that both she—and I—deserve a happy ending. As for Cameron being jilted at the altar—who cares? Again, rich, beautiful, blonde.

But I'm none of those, so what hope do I have? Not only am I still wearing this ugly grass-green dress, that's uncomfortably strapless and slipping dangerously low, but . . . I caught the bouquet! To make the situation even more embarrassing, my competition was a gang of eight-year-olds.

That's right. I'm the last of my nursing-school friends, or any of my friends for that matter, to be single.

Hmm . . . Maybe I'm glad Julia Roberts is still single at the end of the movie because now we have something in common. Me and Jules.

Husband Auditions

I wish I could claim to also be a tall redhead with a toothpaste-commercial smile. I'm actually an ordinary thirty-one-year-old woman who still looks twelve due to an exorbitant amount of freckles. And my boring brown hair is neither as curly as Julia's hair when it's curly nor as straight as Julia's hair when it's straight. My hair is wavy. Which sounds nice, but really means it can't be considered sleek nor bouncy. No, Julia's character and I are only bonded by the bare ring finger.

Said finger cramps as I grip my luggage tighter, juggle it with my other belongings, and struggle up the one step in front of my younger brother's townhome located in the West Hills of Portland, Oregon. The dum-dum can afford such a place because he's a workaholic, which has left him single as well as successful.

Scratch successful. Having your fiancée leave you because you prioritize your career over loved ones does not make a person successful. Let's call him prosperous. And maybe a little stingy too. Which is why he's rented out the spare bedrooms to a couple of his classmates from film school.

Of the three of them, he's the only one I *wouldn't* consider a starving artist. Though they must all be starved for affection, judging by their singleness. Unfortunately, I'm about to join their Bermuda Triangle of relationships.

I'd usually go right in, but my hands are full. Stupid bouquet and such. I kick the door a few times in attempt to sound as if I'm knocking.

I don't want to live here for the summer, but I currently have nowhere else to go, and three months will give me some time to figure out what I do want to do. The only thing I know for sure is that I can't keep all my stuff in my old garage indefinitely, since Anne lives there with a husband now.

I stare at Charlie's trendy, cranberry-colored door. So misleadingly cheerful. And still closed.

Music drifts from inside.

I kick again and add a "Hello?" for good measure.

Nothing. My brother's Subaru Legacy is in the parking spot behind me, so I know he's here.

Angela Ruth Strong

I do an upright row with a tote bag to press my elbow to the doorbell.

No footsteps tap to the beat. Fine. I'll perform a juggling act and open the door myself.

I slip the tote up to my elbow until I'm tilted sideways like the patient with back problems who came into my doctor's office last week, but at least I'm able to grip the doorknob. I twist and release. The door swings open to reveal the far windows with a view of the city skyline underneath the snowy white peak of Mt. Hood—like a Facebook frame on an Instagram filter.

This image is not picture perfect, however, because sitting on the kind of black leather couch you'd expect to find in a bachelor pad like my brother's is Kai Kamaka. Feet up on one of the two cube-like coffee tables, MacBook on his lap.

I'm surprised the guy is awake during the day. Five years after graduating, he still works at the same place where his school counselor got him an internship and, like a nocturnal college student, he prefers the night shift. He's a prime example of the shortage of mature men in the world and why I haven't been able to find one yet.

He grins at me and my charade of a pack animal. He has one of those grins that would have gotten him out of trouble for pulling the fire alarm as a kindergartner but can only be considered childish after the age of five.

"Hey, Meri," he says in a voice much too deep for elementary school. "Why are you wearing a dinner napkin?"

Now that I think about it, the folds in my bodice do resemble the aforementioned part of the table setting during today's reception dinner, but that's not the issue here. "It helps soak up all my sweat when I'm left standing in the burning heat by a lazy roommate who refuses to open the door." Okay, the heat actually feels warm and inviting. I always appreciate sunny days in Oregon. But again, not the issue.

Kai lifts his phone. "I'm not lazy. I checked my phone to see if anybody texted to say they were coming over. No texts."

The hipster definition of hard work. Though I'd consider Kai more of a skater than a hipster. Even though I've never seen him on a

Husband Auditions

longboard, I'm sure he has one. He's lanky, wears baggy clothes, and his shiny, dark hair hangs almost in his eyes. If we lived in the state of his heritage, Hawaii, I'd call him a surfer. We do have some surfers here in Oregon, but due to water temperature, they must wear wet suits and be real diehards. Kai is not a diehard. So, we'll stick with skater.

"Dude," I speak his language. "You're not the only person who lives here."

"Oh, that's right. Welcome home." He turns his attention to his computer screen. "Why'd you even knock if you live here now?"

My dramatic motion toward my luggage is lost on him. Or maybe he's pretending he doesn't notice so he won't feel guilty for not helping me carry anything.

Charlie thunders up the stairs at the back of the living room. At least I know my brother will lift the load from my shoulders. In the twenty-seven years I've known him, I'm not sure I've ever seen him sit on a couch with his feet up. Even when he was a sick two-year-old, he was more likely to climb the fridge, looking for medicine to fix his problems. Of course, as his older sibling, I got in trouble for that stunt.

"Hey, sis." He grabs two of my suitcases without a hug. He'll remember to hug me later. Connection is always an afterthought with him. "Why are you still standing outside?"

If I had his energy, I would be moved in and painting my room by now. "My hands are full, and your roommate wouldn't get up to open the door."

Kai grins at that. No shame. "Next time you want me to open the door, yell, 'Pizza delivery!'"

Charlie rolls my suitcases toward the staircases, one of which goes up to the master bedroom, the other of which goes down to the daylight basement. "Kai. Get up and help, or I'll raise your rent."

Kai folds his laptop, pushes to his feet, and moseys my way. There's not much left for him to help with. Just my tote, purse, bouquet, and an evil card from the bride that I'm surprised I haven't put through a shredder yet. I adjust so I can carry everything without his help.

His eyes light on the bouquet. "How many single ladies did you knock over to catch that thing?"

Angela Ruth Strong

If ever there was a time for a witty retort, this was it. Tragically, the place where I keep my witty retorts—my pride—is still wounded from the memory of standing in the middle of a ballroom surrounded by giggly elementary schoolers who had to have the idea of a “bouquet toss” explained to them by the DJ. My only hope is that these freckles served as camouflage. “None. I’m the only single lady left.”

Kai clicks his tongue and reaches for my tote. “Well, now you’re doomed.”

My shoulders slump, which makes it way too easy for Kai to slide the bag from my elbow. I’d meant to refuse his help. “Doomed to be embarrassed at weddings,” I mutter.

“No.” Rather than turn and lead the way, Kai pauses, blocking my path.

Is he expecting a tip for his service as a bellhop? Is he going to hold my luggage for ransom? It’s not as if I have much left to lose. My home, my best friend, my future? All gone. I’ll open my purse and hold it out for him to take whatever he likes.

He doesn’t look at my purse but narrows his eyes. “I meant you’re doomed to have the next wedding.”

Oh? Oh . . .

I stand up straighter. One’s man doom is another man’s destiny. But who could *my* man possibly be?

I’m a nurse. The only men I ever meet are either coughing on me or sporting contagious rashes. Unlike every other decision I’ve made in life, I didn’t get into medicine for the men. I got into it because Charlie was always getting hurt as a kid and bringing him a Band-Aid made him smile. Which gave me the feeling I could change the world.

The little rascal thunders up the stairs again. “Meri, get in here. I didn’t say anything before, but you’re letting the cold air out, and now that you’re subletting my room, you’ll be paying part of those utility bills.”

He’ll remember to hug me eventually. I’m sure it’s on his mental to-do list. Somewhere below “remind Meri to pay utility bills.”

Kai saunters away. It’s a saunter this time rather than a mosey

Husband Auditions

because he's swinging my tote in a very sauntering way. "Where do you want this?" he asks, obviously lacking my brother's Thor-like affinity for stairs. He drops my bag at the end of the couch before I have a chance to answer.

I sigh and close the door, which momentarily distracts me from thoughts of both Kai and my future husband. Have you ever noticed how people in the movies hardly ever close doors? The actors simply walk into a room and leave the door wide open as if people in Hollywood never had to face the harsh reality of a utility bill. I'm sure Charlie won't let that happen in any of the films he directs. He's going to revolutionize the industry.

You know what would be cool? If he got nominated for an Oscar someday and took me as his date—since most other women in his life won't wait indefinitely for a hug the way I will—and that's where I meet the man of my dreams. I scrunch my lips, trying to remember if any of The Avengers are still single.

"You okay, Meri?" Charlie frowns. "Oh, I forgot to hug you, didn't I?" He strides over, and I find myself in his signature choke hold. Why did I want a hug from him again?

Kai kicks his bare feet back up on the cube I vow to never eat off and flips his laptop open without a glance my way to make sure I'm surviving WrestleMania. "Don't take her attitude personally, Charlie. She's just upset she caught the bouquet at the wedding."

I guess I'm being a little cranky, aren't I? It's not their fault I'm lonely and homeless.

Charlie grips my shoulders and looks down at the crushed peonies. At least they still smell fresh like summer. I'll dry them and store them in a vase for my flower girls to sprinkle down the aisle on my big day. Because maybe Kai's right. Maybe I'm doomed-slash-destined to have the next wedding.

"I thought women *wanted* to catch the bouquet." I know Charlie partly says this because he cares, so I'm okay with the knowledge that he's also asking as research for some future project.

I pull away and drop the flowers in question, along with my purse and the vile envelope, onto the shiny concrete breakfast bar that sepa-

Angela Ruth Strong

rates the living area from the kitchen at the front of the townhome. I hoist up the top of my dress as discretely as possible then head to get a drink. “My problem isn’t with catching the bouquet as much as it is with *the circumstances* of catching the bouquet.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Despite all Charlie’s talent, he can’t read between the lines.

I grab a glass from the stainless-steel shelves he has in place of cabinets and cautiously press it to the lever on a refrigerator. I’m cautious because I’m still getting used to my fancy acrylic wedding nails, and because the appliance is high tech enough that I half expect it to reach for the glass with a robot arm.

Water spouts into my glass anticlimactically, freeing me to resume our conversation.

Charlie wants to know my feelings in black and white? Then I’ll give him black and white. I point to the envelope on the counter.

If I’d been less dehydrated from hauling all my belongings up the walkway, I would have taken the time to deposit the contents of the card into Charlie’s fancy trash compactor. Though I’m probably better off letting him do that for me. Just in case the trash compactor has a robot arm.

“Look what Anne gave me as a parting gift.” I lift the glass to my lips and lean my head back to guzzle the cooling liquid down my sandpaper throat. Doing so also helps me avoid looking directly at The List.

Paper rustles. Charlie separates the card from its contents. “Dear Meri, I’ll never forget our time as roommates. I loved our pedicure parties, movie nights, and borrowing your grandpa’s binoculars to spy on the firefighters—”

I set the glass down. Had it not been breakable, I would have slammed it down. “You can skip that part.”

Kai snickers, though he could have been laughing at a SpongeBob cartoon with the way his gaze remains locked on the computer. That sounds like his kind of humor.

Charlie scans to the end of the card. “I always thought we should have a double wedding, since we were the last single girls standing,

Husband Auditions

but now that it's down to you, I'm passing on The List. May it bring you the same kind of happiness I found with Damian."

Charlie blinks at me. "I'm still not getting it. You caught the bouquet. Your friend is wishing you well. What's the problem?"

"I'm last, Charlie. You know what it's like to be last, don't you?"

"No. And I never want to find out."

"Exactly!" How did the guy ever get engaged before me when he still needs people to explain the basics of emotion?

"Okay. That makes sense now." He looks from the card in one hand to the folded pages in his other. "What kind of list brings love? Is it from the Bible? The Proverbs thirty-one wife?"

Not even close. "It's from a 1950s issue of *Sophia Magazine*. Ideas on how to catch a husband."

Charlie sets the card down to unfold the thin, yellowed pages ripped from a magazine by Roxy's grandma once upon a time. Roxy was the first of our group from college to get married, though I doubt it had to do with any suggestions from The List.

Charlie smooths the creases. "Number one: *Volunteer with shelter dogs*." He looks up, hazel eyes lacking humor. "That's fine, but you can't bring any animals home. I have a strict no pet policy."

My suspicions of his being heartless are confirmed. "I'm not actually going to try these things."

"Why not? If it helps you find a mate . . ."

"First, you're not allowed to say *mate* unless you have an Australian accent." I wrinkle my nose at the word. "Second, as I said, I'm not going to do any of those things. This is supposed to be more of a good luck charm, passed around from friend to friend since we attended nursing school. I am both offended that I'm the last to get The List and by the fact that Anne thinks I need it."

Charlie lifts a shoulder. "There might be more to this than luck. Remember, G.G. grew up in the fifties, and she caught herself three husbands."

"Scandalous," Kai chimes in. Probably not talking about Sponge-Bob anymore. "Who is this GiGi woman?"

I wave him back to his computer. "G.G. is short for great-grandma,

Angela Ruth Strong

and she only remarried after the first two husbands died. Nothing scandalous about it.”

Though I can’t help wondering if she ever found her one great love. If she’d loved her first husband as much as my mom loved my dad, wouldn’t she have stayed single the way Mom did? Or maybe it was too hard to be a single mother in those days. I shouldn’t judge.

Charlie points to the pages from the magazine—proof that women in the fifties were anxious to wed. “The point is that she *did* remarry.”

I shake my head. I’d shown Charlie these pages so he’d understand where I’m coming from. “Keep reading. Volunteering at a shelter is normal, but it gets weirder.”

“Number two.” He clears his throat. “*Fake a flat tire or pretend engine trouble.*” He sets the papers on the counter. “Okay, that might have been safe back then, but I don’t want you doing that now. If your car breaks down, call me. Or Kai, since I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Kai? Really? “Do you even own a car, Kai?”

“Nope.” He taps at his keyboard with finality. Apparently, skaters look down on practical modes of transportation.

“Okay then. Call Triple-A when your car breaks down. I’d help, but I’ll be out of the country.”

“I know.” He’s acting like an older brother even though he’s four years younger. He thinks I need protecting. Just as Anne thinks I need help with relationships.

The front door swings open. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen walks in. Scandinavian-model beautiful. I was intimidated by her at first, as I’m sure most people are. Women anyway. Men probably look at her and instantly decide they want her to have their babies. Which is why Mom was originally against her being roommates with Charlie.

Then Mom met Gemma and her goofy playwright personality.

“Hey, roomie,” I say.

Gemma is also the reason Mom is okay with me staying in Charlie’s townhome with a male while he’s gone. I tried to tell her that Kai shouldn’t even count in the male/female roommate ratio because he’s the opposite of my type, but she pulled out her trusty “appearance of evil” verse that somehow still gives me guilt trips as a grown woman.

Husband Auditions

“Hi, Meri.” Gemma floats over. “You look pretty.”

It’s a good thing she’s a writer, not a costume designer. “Thanks.”

“Gemma.” My brother turns her way. “Would you trust a stranger to help you if your car broke down, or would you call someone you know for help?”

She runs her fingers through her long golden locks and stares off into space with her ice-blue eyes for so long that she must have forgotten to answer. She’s probably plotting the moment when her hero and heroine first meet, a meet-cute she calls it. But then she blesses us with her smile that’s as gorgeous as it is innocent. “That’s happened a few times. The men who have helped me have all been really nice.”

I’ll bet they were nice. “Gemma doesn’t count. She doesn’t need a list. Guys use lists to meet *her*.”

“What list?” she asks.

I roll my eyes and motion to the pages. “Suggestions from the fifties of how to find a husband.”

“You’re looking for a husband?” she distractedly asks as she skims the article written over half a century ago. “Oh, if you volunteer at a pet shelter, you sadly can’t bring any puppies home. I wanted one, but Charlie wouldn’t let me.”

She *is* The List. “I’m not really going to do these things.”

“Why not?” She scrolls the page with her finger. “Look at number three: *Offer to take your dad’s new car for an oil change. Have the cutest mechanic check your odometer, so he knows you’re not the type of girl who gets around.* If you meet a guy who changes your oil, he’d know enough about cars to help when you get a flat tire too.”

I’m ashamed to admit I almost consider it. Except my dad died way before I learned how to drive. And even if he were still alive and had a new car, I don’t like the idea of being judged by my mileage. I always thought I would have traveled more by the time I reached my thirties.

“Wait.” Gemma taps the page. “Number four says, *Move to a state with more men than women. We recommend Nevada.* You’re not that desperate, are you?”

How did I suddenly get classified as desperate?

Charlie crosses his arms. “I was in Vegas last month for a film fes-

Angela Ruth Strong

tival, and there seemed to be a lot of single women. I'm sure those stats have changed since this was written."

Why did he sound so serious? "I'm not moving to Vegas. And not only because it would send Mom to an early grave."

"Speaking of graves," Gemma lifts the page. "Number five suggests attending funerals to meet new widowers."

"It does not," Charlie objects without even reading it.

"Yes. It does." Maybe now both he and Gemma will realize this thing is only a joke.

Kai chuckles from his spot on the couch.

I glare. The only way Kai would ever get married is if a woman mistakenly tried #17. *Treat a bad guy like the hero you want him to be.*

"I know you won't do *that*." Gemma shrugs. "But you're already doing number sixteen."

"What?" I ask. "Move in with your brother's roommates when you have nowhere else to go?"

"You could go to Nevada." Kai.

I ignore him.

"No, sweetie." Gemma rubs my bare shoulder with her silky fingers. "Number sixteen says, *Work as a waitress or nurse. Men love being taken care of.* If you want to get married, I'm sure you'll find a man soon."

Her little pep talk is making me feel even more pathetic. Or maybe that's just because I'm standing in her angelic presence. Either way, I am hating this conversation.