

# Rent-a-Husband

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**Karen Hagersten**

In the fast-paced 1990s of Silicon Valley, Andrea Burman starts a company to supply young men to families with overworked husbands.

## 1 First Day of School

Like any woman whose husband worked for a Silicon Valley computer company, Andrea needed an extra pair of hands. And an extra pair of legs with very bendy knees. An extra set of teeth to hold these bolts. An able and involved stuntwoman to be where she could not be. A hotline, for urgent issues, staffed with knowledgeable personnel preferably chained to the desk in her home office. But at this very moment, here in her own backyard, an extra pair of hands just might get the jungle gym built before her first patient arrived.

Technology was amazing, like the cordless phone in the damp grass at her feet, as long as she stayed within range. She could be constantly available, even now, in the morning, when a patient might cancel, and still get the house picked up, a wash in, and the next patient's journal reviewed. She was extremely fortunate that Dan, unlike the other husbands, drove Laura and Sam to school, giving her a few precious minutes.

Laura, born first, had mastered so much, like the Tiny Love Gymini 3-D Activity Gym that stimulated sight and pattern recognition in toddlers. But technology for child development was leaping ahead. The geodesic jungle gym in the backyard was too late for Laura, but it would help develop the left and right sides of Sam's brain.

To build the gym, though, she would have liked a real flesh-and-blood husband. Or one that didn't work eight to eight seven days a week. Or wasn't in a perpetual foul mood.

At her feet, the phone shrilled. Its antenna protruded from the grass like a giant grasshopper. On the third ring, her message would kick in. Andrea kept jiggling bolts through the flattened ends of metal rods painted red, blue, and yellow. Once the bolts were in place she could answer the phone without the structure collapsing. Not yet though. Use time wisely.

Mental checklist of reasons not to pick up: If she could finish this dome before her first patient arrived in forty minutes, Laura and Sam would finally have a play structure like all the other kids—but better. The geodesic dome reflected a whole-earth recognition of the

complete child, socially, physically, and intellectually. Children needed to be placed in stimulating and productive environments if they were going to reach their full potential. The geodesic design was an expensive, but not the most expensive, option.

It would make up for the playhouse Dan had promised to build years ago but never—stop! Don't go there! Bitter tears stung her eyes. If she could just build this jungle gym, everything would be fine. And if she couldn't . . . well, she didn't really know what would happen, but it would be terrible.

A call she had successfully refrained from answering earlier had been a mother asking Andrea to recommend SAT educational testing for her eight-year-old daughter. The child had been taking Ritalin for months, and her test grades in school had improved in an ordered, accountable way.

“One,” Andrea counted now after the first ring, taking the motor-oil-soaked nut from her lips. With the metallic aftertaste on her teeth, she concentrated on wheedling the uncooperative threads of the nut onto the end of the bolt. When all forty-five nuts were loosely applied, they had to be tightened. The instructions said to not tighten them until they were all in place. The wrench was at the ready, tucked in the belt of her business khakis with their useless little pockets. Then there were the plastic safety caps to cover the bolt tips. With sudden dread she wondered if they really were safe. What if a child got hurt? But there was no one she could ask. She was alone, as a mother, as a therapist, as a human being, as a geodesic dome assembler.

“Two.” The caller could be her first patient, a young woman who had a tendency to cancel her sessions at the last minute. Andrea wasn't supposed to care about that—the patient paid anyway—but she did.

The message kicked in after the third ring.

“Andrea Burman? Is this Andrea Burman’s telephone? My name is Steve Bl—” Steve muffled his name quickly and cleared his throat. “Let’s keep it at Steve. Anyway, I’m looking for someone for my wife. She’s depressed, and Eli Bernstein in San Diego recommended you.”

Being recommended by Eli Bernstein was an incredible compliment. Andrea let the top layer of rods flop down, wiping her sweaty palms on her khaki thighs, to snatch the phone from the ground. She straightened, punching buttons, but the wrench in her belt loosened. It dropped, heavy cold metal, into her white cotton underpants.

“This!” Andrea gulped down her octave-high voice. She sucked in her abdomen to extricate the wrench. “This is Andrea Burman.”

“Andrea? This is Steve, just Steve. Great, I’m glad you picked up, because it’s urgent. My wife, she, she’s losing it, saying vicious things you wouldn’t believe. It’s not like her. I don’t have time. There was this coup on the board of my company last week. The jerks kicked me out. Out of the company, that is.”

“Steve, you sound very upset. Why don’t you come see me today so we can talk this over.” Still recovering from the cold wrench, she vaguely remembered an opening in her schedule later in the day.

“That’s life. C’est la vie, as they say. But my wife, I mean, you’re a shrink, right? She thinks I’m a sex addict. I mean, she knows I can’t sleep otherwise. Just because I’m kicked out of the company, she wants a divorce. I know it’s because I’m not making any money.”

“Well, after you and I talk this over, you can recommend me to your wife,” Andrea pictured her business day chart on the desk inside her home office. “I do have time after lunch, at one-thirty. We can meet and determine how to proceed. If I can’t help you, I can recommend the therapist I think would suit you best. Can you make it then?”

“I mean, I still have my stock options. She’ll get her inheritance back. I’m willing to foot the bill for her sessions—in cash. I don’t want any record of this, or word will get out.”

“Then I’ll see you at one-thirty?”

“Me?” The phone’s reception skipped a beat. “Andrea, I think I have an important phone call coming in. I’ll drop my wife off at one-thirty, or give you a call.”

“Wait!” But Steve’s end of the line filled with dial tone. Andrea stared at the number pad. Maybe, at one-thirty, the wife could hold the dome upright, like work therapy. No, not okay. Don’t think like that. Or? Just to hold up the dome while Andrea threaded the nuts onto the bolts? Of course not. No.

Andrea lowered the phone to the grass. She heaved the first connected bars of the jungle gym up to where she could rest a rung on her shoulder.

A sudden flash of light inside the children’s room—the *children’s* room, where each door and window was secured—caught her eye. The sliding glass doors were less than a car length away, tucked under the eaves. Holding her breath and all her movements, watching the sliding glass door for signs of a bird caught inside, a flapping curtain, anything but a thief or rapist, a scream coiled in her throat. A far window backlit a muscular, male body through the bronzed earthquake film on the glass. The scream rose, filling her mouth—just as her neighbor Eric Wright materialized.

Impossible. Eric Wright had a successful startup. He was never home. Yet there, legs spread in athletic preparedness, a newspaper tucked obscenely into the leather belt of his khakis, was Eric. He tried with both hands to lift the door open. The massive glass jerked in its tracks.

“The wooden rod! In the track!” Andrea mouthed emphatically, pointing down. “To stop break-ins!”

Before she could move, Eric had opened the door, flashing a winning grin. Eric's blond hair was thick and wavy in a Dudley Do-Right way. It silvered perfectly at the temples.

"Hey, Andrea, your front door was wide open. Probably not so smart if you're out back like this." Eric's brow creased with concern. "There're all kinds of kidnappers and pedophiles wandering around looking for an open door or window."

Perspiration chilled on Andrea's skin. She hadn't even locked the drawer with the family day planner. Anyone could have come in and known their whereabouts for at least half a year. Worse, her patient journals lay open on her desk.

Eric stopped at the bars in the wet grass, but his scent of heated aftershave, morning coffee, and strawberry-scented laundry detergent continued on its path toward Andrea. It was the good fortune of living in Silicon Valley to associate with winners. Just that morning, as she was tucking organic fresh fruit into the children's lunchboxes, Dan had said something about Eric's computer company, WrightStuff, going public.

"How's it going?" Eric drew the rolled-up paper from his belt. "You get the *San Jose Mercury News*, right? Did you see the great article about our new WrightWare winner, the JustWright series? If I could get your *Merc*, I'll send it to my parents in Wisconsin."

"Wow, congratulations. Yes, Dan told me this morning. The paper's on the kitchen table. I think."

"Great, thanks, Andrea," Eric looked down at the pile of primary colors in the grass. "I'll just—oh, yeah, and Christine called. She had to stay longer, so could you please do whatever you were going to do for her?"

Oh, no. That was the time at one-thirty! Christine, a full-time at-home mom, had flown to Madison to care for her mother who had breast cancer. Just in case her return flight was delayed, she'd asked Andrea to pick up Emily and Alex Wright early from school. They had

appointments with the very best dentist in town, where Andrea's children were waitlisted. Andrea's thoughts bounced off her rising panic. Eric watched her expectantly.

"Is this the article?" Andrea reached for the paper he extended with eager instinct, his body following his hand to the middle of the structure. Andrea quickly creased the paper, bent it over a horizontal bar, and raised the whole structure until the article bobbed before Eric's eyes.

"Eric, could you?" Andrea propped his warm fleshy hands under the cold bars and dropped to her knees to gather the bolts jutting up from the grass.

Eric tilted his head to focus on another article on the page, but he kept holding up the bars. "Wow, I missed this! Apple is letting over a thousand people go. I heard rumors yesterday that the Newton line was in trouble again, but I thought it affected only contracted part-timers. I tried to tell them about the WrightStuff interface, but no. Let them sink, I say."

"Really?" Andrea jumped to her feet and flipped up bars to build triangles. "I had heard it was Sun Microsystems—"

"Where'd you hear that? Hey, by the way, is HAL downsizing? Dan should be in the know."

Andrea glanced up at Eric over the newspaper that hung between them. Dan had muttered something about restructuring that morning, but was it secret? There had been some kind of hiring frenzy. Dan was responsible for integrating new hires—while they were churning through executives at the corporate office.

Eric's eyes flitted across the news page. Spotting another article, he crowed. "Yes! Another reference to WrightStuff! Stock prices are going up, up, up!"

Andrea worked the bolts into the holes, even getting Eric to raise the entire structure five inches to more easily screw the nuts onto the ends of the bolts. She would tighten them later.

Eric's excitement throbbed in heat waves from his body. His face glowed pink. His eyes sparkled. When his hair fell forward, his fingers twitched, but, good boy, he kept his hands in place. Instead, he tossed his head so his hair glinted silver and gold in the morning light. "The talk is traveling the valley wire now. Just in time for my meeting with investors on Wednesday." His shoulder muscles drooped.

Andrea nudged his arms back up into position above his head. "Amazing. That's so great."

For the first time, Eric looked at his own biceps holding up the red, blue, and yellow hemisphere surrounding him. "What is this thing?"

"A jungle gym shaped like a geodesic dome. You know, Buckminster Fuller? It's actually—"

"Andrea, I gotta go. Really."

"Wait, Eric, just a minute more, please?" Andrea's trembling fingers dropped a nut. "Oh, wait, please! Only fifteen—"

*"Fifteen!"*

"Fifteen nuts, less, actually, because I'm missing a bolt." From the nearby hedge, Andrea snapped off a twig she jammed through the rod ends. "These nuts go on really—"

"I'd send Christine over if she were home. Why don't you ask Wendy Chang? She's not there at Apple to defend her eWorld project, so she's probably the one let go."

Wendy Chang lived on their cul-de-sac of single-story Eichler homes shaded by tall trees. The similarity of the homes made it a close-knit neighborhood by valley standards. Before giving birth to triplets at the beginning of the summer, Wendy had held a seventy-hour-a-week job as an engineer at Apple. Still, she had more cleaners and gardeners than anyone else—Andrea's breezed through every two weeks—and had totally monopolized the



neighborhood handyman. She was firmly established as someone you never asked for help—just like Eric.

“Or ask Christine when she gets home. She loves to waste family time on this kind of stuff. Listen, I stayed home to catch a call from Europe. I just came over for a copy of that article.”

Andrea brushed off her hands. “Done! Thank you. You can let go now.”

Inside the dome of primary-colored triangles, Eric lowered his arms in doubt. “Amazing.” He eyed a triangle before squeezing through. A bar caught momentarily on his belt. “Don’t you need to tighten the screws?”

“Yes, I will. I’ll do that now. I’d never have gotten this far without you.”

Eric stood taller as he stepped away to freedom. “It looks great. But please don’t tell Christine I helped you. She’ll expect me to help her all the time.”

Betray Christine, her most dependable emergency mom? Fear laced through Andrea like an underground plume of poison. “Oh, Eric! She won’t expect you to help.”

Eric tucked the rolled-up newspaper back in his belt outside the sliding glass door. “Could you get that article now, Andrea? Wait!” Eric lifted the door back into place and dropped the wooden bar back in the track. “You should be thinking about the safety of your children, Andrea. Hey, and another thing. Do you still volunteer therapy services to newcomers? Is that through some women’s group?”

“I provide counseling as part of the placement team at Community Connections, if that’s what you mean. It isn’t volunteer.” Andrea was volunteering right now, picking up Eric’s children from school. Any more and she’d have to sleep with Eric. Of course, if he was as uninterested in sex as Dan, it could work. If she could find another mom to pick up Emily and Alex while she saw that Steve person, review her next patient’s journal, tighten all the

nuts so no child would get hurt climbing on the structure before it was sturdy, and put away the breakfast dishes and lunchbox stuff.

“By the way, Eric, do you know who are listed as safe pickup parents for Alex and Emily?”

“Yeah? We sometimes use Community Connections to relocate families here. They are really expensive.” Eric seemed to have forgotten about his call from Europe.

Of course he didn't. The business section was under breakfast dishes in the family room. Extricating it, Andrea replanned. If she took Laura and Sam grocery shopping straight from school, she could debrief them about their day while buying food. Or while driving. It was less focused but efficient. Her friends who had teenagers were always telling her to use the car as a communication opportunity. Now that Sam had started school, she had to get those routines in place.

“You know, I might be interested in that volunteer therapy thing of yours.” Eric scanned the article, as if to make sure it was as positive in her paper as it had been in his. “Why don't you come over this Friday for a cookout? You and Dan, of course. I'm having a good old American cookout in the backyard for some business associates from Sweden.”

Closing the gate, Andrea watched Eric stride away across the cul-de-sac to his car. Had that man just asked for free therapy? Had he said he was having a cookout without Christine? Or had she volunteered?