

THE BIG BOOK OF BRATS

VOLUME TWO



JODI BELLA

BLUSHING BOOKS

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BLIND DATE



PART ONE

"*J*an, it's been nearly two years since you and Pete broke up! At least give Rob a chance. I promise you won't be sorry."

Jan McKenzie folded her arms over her chest and shook her head. "I don't date anymore, Connie. And I especially don't do blind dates."

Connie Miller rolled her eyes at her best friend. "Not every man on Earth is a rat fink bastard like Pete, you know," she ground out through clenched teeth.

Jan shrugged. "Well, I don't have the time or the energy to sort them all out. So, *I repeat*, I don't date anymore. It makes my life much more simple."

Connie narrowed her gaze. "You're being so stupid, and you don't even know it! There are dozens of women out there who would jump at the chance for *one* date with Rob Shepard. The man is drop dead gorgeous! And he's funny and kind; he holds doors and chairs at the table, for crying

out loud! He even walks on the side of the sidewalk closest to the street. A real, old-fashioned gentleman! What could you possibly find to complain about with that?"

"I'm perfectly capable of holding my own doors and chairs," Jan said in quick return, a smile twitching at her lips as she watched Connie sigh in frustration. "And, for as infrequently as it happens that a runaway bus comes careening onto the sidewalk, I suppose I can take my chances walking down the street without a man beside me to take the brunt of the crash."

Her friend pointed at her accusingly. "You are *impossible*."

She laughed and grabbed Connie's finger, pulling it to her lips for a quick kiss. "I'm sorry, Con. I don't mean to drive you crazy. I just don't have any desire to date anyone."

Connie's gaze fell away, and for a few minutes, she looked defeated. Then a light brightened her face and she turned back to Jan with a crafty smile. "What if there was something in it for you?"

Jan folded her arms over her chest again and skewered her friend with a warning glare.

"No, no, don't look at me like that," Connie cajoled, holding her palms out in a plaintive gesture. "I just mean, what if it was suddenly worth your while? Would you go out with him? Just once?"

"Why is this so important to you?"

"Because you're my best friend and I want to see you happy!"

"I *am* happy!"

Connie snorted inelegantly.

"I am!"

"Sitting at home every night of your life, except for the few times I can drag you out of your apartment, does not constitute a happy life, my dear. Collecting rescue cat upon rescue cat—slowly working your way up to being the crazy

cat lady of the neighborhood does not give you happiness. Working sixty hours a week does not a happy person make. Love, Jan, you need some love in your life. Some romance. Flowers, mushy love notes, candy, and teddy bears. *Sex!* For God's sake, girl, you can't honestly sit there and mean it when you say that you're happy without all that!"

"Well, at least I'm safe," Jan mumbled.

It hurt to have Connie's gaze soften on her the way it did then. "Safe isn't the same thing as happy, Jan."

She sighed heavily. After a few moments, she admitted, "Yeah, I know."

Connie took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "So, come on, then. Please? Let me set you up with him. You'll thank me later, I promise."

"You said there'd be something in it for me," Jan reminded her shrewdly.

"Humph. I thought maybe you'd forgotten about that. Well, it's for a good cause, anyway, on both accounts. I was going to bribe you into going by giving a contribution to that animal shelter you volunteer at."

"Okay. But only if you agree to volunteer with me, for one month, on Saturday afternoons, too!"

Connie glared at her. "Okay," she agreed slowly. "You drive a hard bargain." She put out her hand and waited for Jan to shake on the deal. "But you have to make an effort for this! Don't just go through the motions to get me off your back."

Jan made herself look overly offended by this accusation. "I can't believe you would say such a thing! I always try to make a good impression, on everyone!" She was smirking, though, and Connie's glare turned even darker.

"I mean it, Jan! Promise me!"

"Oh, all right." She held up one hand as if swearing an

oath in court. "I promise to make a concerted effort for my date with what's his name."

Connie was too busy being annoyed by Jan's reference to Rob as 'what's his name' to notice that her other hand was hidden behind her back with the fingers crossed.

"His name is *Rob. Rob Shepard*. Do you think you could try to remember that?"

Jan smiled sweetly. "Sure." She pretended to try very hard to commit the name to memory, even though she already knew it and had just been teasing Connie. "*Rob Shepard*. I got it."

Connie shook her head again and stood to clear the table of their lunch dishes. "You are simply impossible."

When she had disappeared into the kitchen, Jan unlocked her crossed fingers and set her chin in her hands. What the hell had she just agreed to?

And how, exactly, was she going to get through this blind date without putting her heart at risk? She would have to give that matter some serious thought.



CONNIE GRABBED Rob's hand and sat forward in her chair. "Come on, Rob. For your old pal, Connie? Just take her out once. I know you won't be disappointed."

Rob pointedly removed his hand out from under hers and fixed her with his most stern stare. "If she's so great that I won't be disappointed for taking her out, then why are *you* matchmaking for her?"

"Because...she's been bitten bad in the past. She hasn't been out on a date in about two years." Connie cringed at how bad the picture was that she was painting. "But, I *know*, if she just gives it a chance, like she promised me she would,

and if you take her out, just once, I know you guys will hit it off!"

Rob sighed. "You're not going to let me off the hook on this, are you?"

"Nope."

His eyes rolled to the ceiling. "All right. I concede. God knows I'll never win in a contest of wills with you." He sent her a lopsided smile. "So. Tell me about her. And not just the good stuff. What about that bad bite in her past?"

Connie shrugged. "Her last boyfriend was a real jerk. Slept around on her and was verbally abusive. He really took a toll on her self-confidence. She put up with it, though. Until one day, she went to the bank to get money out of MAC and found that her account was empty. He'd taken off with everything. She immediately canceled their joint credit cards, but it was too late—he'd already run those up pretty high, too. And, of course, he was nowhere to be found. It really did a number on her credit rating. She had no choice but to start paying the cards off; if she tried to wait 'till he was found, who knew how high the interest would inflate the bills by then?" Connie shook her head.

Rob's gaze was dark. "Oh, boy. This sounds like it's going to be one fun date."

"No, don't worry. I made her promise me she'd give you an honest chance. That she'd be on her best behavior. Plus, I'm sure that, deep down, she wants another chance to be with someone. And, let's not forget, of course, that the minute she sees you, she'll want to do everything possible to ensure seeing you again. She'd be crazy not to."

He shook his head. "Over the top flattery isn't necessary, Constance Miller. I already agreed to your little hair-brained scheme. Remember?"

She grinned and reached over with both hands to pull his face forward. She smacked a loud kiss on his forehead. "And

you won't regret it! I gotta run. Pick her up at seven on Saturday. And call me Sunday with all the details!"

Rob watched Connie flit away. The slip of paper she'd given him with Jan's address on it burned like a live ember in his front jeans pocket.

He sort of regretted it already...



JAN STOOD TAPPING HER FOOT, arms crossed over her chest, her gaze darting from her silent front door to the wall clock in the hallway.

Mr. Wonderful was two minutes late.

Not a good way to start off a blind date, in her opinion.

She glanced down at herself and smirked. Of course, neither was the way she'd dressed for tonight's meeting.

She'd spent a small eternity sifting through her closet and drawers, trying to decide what to wear. She'd tried on flowery skirts, tight jeans, off the shoulder blouses, and even her one sexy black dress. Nothing felt right for the mood she was trying to create. Then she'd found it—the ugliest article of clothing she owned.

The dress had actually been a bridesmaid's gown at one time. In the tradition of so many bridesmaid dresses, it was hideous. The only reason she'd hung onto it, besides the ridiculous amount of money she'd spent on it, was that she'd thought that perhaps one day she could turn it into some sort of costume for Halloween.

It was a hideous shade of green—somewhere between army green and jade, in a metallic fabric. It had a puffy skirt and a strapless, heart-shaped neckline. It sort of resembled something that a girl from the eighties would have worn to her junior prom, although she certainly wouldn't have chosen that color.

To complement the dress, Jan had teased her bangs and sloppily arranged her long blond hair. She'd done her make up to match the color of the dress, and had been heavy handed with her application. She'd only glanced in the mirror briefly once her transformation was complete, but she knew she was quite a fright to look upon.

Connie would be disappointed, if she saw her now. But, at least, her friend couldn't say that she hadn't put effort into her appearance; she had—just not the *right kind* of effort.

Perhaps, she wouldn't even have to endure this date, after all. Maybe Mr. Wonderful would make up some excuse to leave, once he got a good look at her. After all, what man in his right mind would actually *want* to be seen with a woman on his arm that looked the way Jan did?

Of course, he had to *show up* first and see her, she thought with another stabbing glance at her clock.

A second later, the sound of the doorbell made her jump high. Pressing a hand to her chest, Jan took a long breath in and out to calm herself then made her way over to the door.

She pressed her eye briefly to the peephole and was treated to an up-close image of her date.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Connie had said the man was handsome, but she had failed to mention just how damn hot he really was!

Oh, God... Her gaze fell to her hideous dress, and her stomach plummeted to her feet.

Don't be ridiculous, a voice scolded her from the back of her mind. He's a *man*, isn't he? So what if he's gorgeous! Pete was pretty damn cute, too. They're all alike, no matter what they look like!

She made herself listen to the voice in her head. Even though she didn't really *want* to.

When Jan wrenched the door open, she was momentarily blindsided not only by the full effect of his beauty (no

longer obscured by the lens of the peephole) but by his dazzling grin, and the dozen pink roses he was holding out to her.

"Good evening, Jan," he said in a wonderful rumble. To his credit, his gaze never once left her face to steal a furtive glance at her ridiculous outfit. Though, of course, her face and hair were enough of an eyeful on their own.

Jan forced herself to blink and look away from his soft blue gaze. She took the flowers from him with a bit of a jerk and snapped, "You're late!"

She was aware of him staring after her, as she turned abruptly on her heel and flounced back down the hall to the kitchen. After a few moments, she heard the soft click of the door as it closed and then his tread on the hardwood floor behind her.

When he caught up to her in the kitchen where she was hastily filling a vase with water, he grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry for being a *little* late," he said in what was clearly a patient tone, as though he was being condescending to a young child who was about to throw a temper tantrum. "The traffic was heavier than I expected, and there was some construction that I wasn't aware of."

"It's fine," she said dismissively, as she plopped the roses into the vase. "Even if it does damage my first impression of you."

Now his gaze did wander slowly from her face down the length of her body in that hideous dress. He said not one word, but let that look do his talking for him. And the message was loud and clear—he thought her first impression was equally lacking.

"Well, I'd understand, of course, if you wanted to cancel the date, considering my lateness," he drawled finally. His dangerous tone sent an unexpected shiver dancing down Jan's spine.

"N-no," she answered shakily. "I promised Connie that I'd let you take me out. And I don't break my promises."

Rob's full, sensuous mouth curved into a grin, and Jan felt her knees weaken. "That's good, sour puss. 'Cause neither do I. And I promised Connie that I'd take *you* out... So, let's go then, shall we?"

"Did you just call me 'sour puss?'" Jan demanded, hands immediately flying to her slender hips.

His grin broadened. Slowly, he shrugged. "Change your puss, and I'll change the nickname to something more complimentary," he offered.

Her gaze narrowed, and, if anything, her 'puss' only became more sour. Rob chuckled lightly and reached out to chuck her under her chin.

"Ahh, come on. Lighten up. Here, let's go have some dinner, okay?" He held out his hand to her, but Jan ignored his offer and stalked off ahead of him towards the door.

After a brief moment, during which she again felt his thoughtful gaze on her back, he followed.



THIS NIGHT WAS TURNING into the biggest mistake of Rob's life.

First, there'd been the gracious way that Jan had greeted him at her house. Then she'd all but flipped when she'd come outside and seen the Jeep.

"You're taking me out in *that*?"

"I know, it's not exactly what you'd expect," he'd conceded, trying to see the monster rock crawler through her eyes. "But the Jag is in the shop, and I didn't have any other choice but this. Sorry."

Her eyes had grown round with disbelief. Then she'd made a rude sound of doubt. "Yeah, right, your *Jag*..."

"No, I'm serious." When she'd only continued to stare at him, he'd shrugged and gone to the passenger door to hold it for her. He'd known she would need a boost up into the seat. "Obviously, I don't usually take my dates out in this. But the Jag's been acting up lately, and I had to take it in to get it checked out."

She'd snorted inelegantly at that and waved one hand dismissively. "Okay. Whatever."

It had been funny trying to boost her and all that material she was wearing up into the Jeep. She'd obviously not wanted him touching her and had even tried getting inside without his help, quickly discovering that she couldn't manage it. It had been a full five minutes before his grin had disappeared after the experience of wrangling her inside.

Things had gone from bad to worse, though, when they had arrived at Dominick's Italian Restaurant and discovered that the staff had lost Rob's reservation. Though the manager was apologetic, the restaurant was presently fully booked. Unless they wanted to wait for another table to finish eating, taking God-only-knew-how-long, they were out of luck in having dinner there.

So, back into the Jeep they'd gone. And from there, they'd driven from restaurant to restaurant, trying to find one with a decent wait time. Which, of course, was nearly impossible on a Saturday night at seven o'clock.

And then it had happened. Suddenly, as they'd driven in stony silence down the road—BOOM!

Rob had blown a tire.

He'd managed to get them safely off the road, pulling quickly into a parking lot at a grocery store. Then, without a word to his simmering companion, he'd jumped down from the Jeep to inspect the damage.

Which was, naturally, very bad. The tire was trashed. And

so, that was how Rob wound up changing a tire in his best suit and tie.

Ugh. What a night. *Why* had he agreed to this date again?

Now, as he climbed back up into the Jeep, he let out a sigh. Jan glared out the windshield, her arms folded in front of her, as if he was personally responsible for everything that had gone wrong tonight. She didn't glance his way or say one word.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

He sensed that she wanted to say yes. But something held her back.

When she didn't answer, he sighed again. What was he supposed to do with this crabby woman?

"There's a Mickey D's up there," he said, pointing up the road. "I know it's not exactly five-star dining, but it's food. You game, sour puss?"

He watched, as her nose rose in the air a notch, waiting for her acidic response to his suggestion. She surprised him by saying, "Sure."

"Um, okay, then."

The fast food restaurant was nearly empty, which only made them stand out all the more in their dressier clothes. Rob felt like a teenager on his prom date, stopping in at McDonald's for a late night snack.

"What's your poison?" he asked, turning to look at her, as they waited to place their order at the counter.

"I'll just have a salad."

"At McDonald's?" he questioned critically.

She met his gaze then. "Fine." She stepped purposefully up to the counter and crossed her arms over her chest like a petulant child. "I'll have a number four meal, please, with a chocolate shake. And you can biggie size it. And add an apple pie, too, please."

Then she turned back to Rob and speared him with her green gaze. "Happy now?"

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am." He glanced at the kid behind the counter. "Make that two. That's what I always eat when I come here."

Jan rolled her eyes, and Rob's grin spread. She probably wasn't happy to know that she'd ordered his favorite.

They sat by a window and dug into the food without wasting any time. It was late, and they were both famished.

Once he had a few bites of hamburger and a dozen or so fries in his belly, Rob speared Jan with merciless eyes. "You're a closet Micky D's fan," he accused teasingly.

Her eyes flashed with ire, and he waited again for an acerbic comeback. But it didn't come. Instead, she suddenly giggled and crammed two fries in her mouth. Ducking her head almost shyly, she mumbled around her food, "Guilty."

He was so surprised by this, as well as the uncharacteristic way she was acting, that he burst out laughing. The sound of his laughter pulled her head up, and she blushed at being the center of his amusement.

But when their eyes met, she smiled and giggled again.

"You know," he said in a low voice, just loud enough for her ears alone. "When you wipe off the sour puss, you're a very pretty lady."

To his delight, she blushed. She seemed suddenly very engrossed in the food in front of her.

"And when you blush like *that*," Rob continued, hoping he wasn't pushing his luck, as he reached across the table and brushed just his fingertips down her pink cheek. "You're as beautiful as an angel."

"Stop," she pleaded softly, though he noticed that ever-so-slightly, she was leaning into his touch.

"Why?" he wondered.

"Because...I'm *not* beautiful."

"Says who?"

"Says me." She toyed distractedly with a French fry.

"Says *you*? Or says someone else, someone from the past who made you believe you weren't beautiful?" He could tell he'd hit the mark when she flinched, just slightly. He traced the line of her bottom lip with his thumb. "Whoever that was, Jan, he was not only very, very wrong, but he was a fool. He was a damn fool to let you get away from him."

Her gaze rose from her tray of food and fastened onto him, watching him, weighing his words for truth.

"Do you believe me?"

Slowly, she nodded her head.

"Good girl. I don't let my women walk around disagreeing with me on things that are so very important, you understand." He smiled then, an easy, flirty smile. He didn't want her to get jumpy over his words. For now, it was okay if she thought he was joking, though he was completely serious.

She returned the smile, looking shy again.

He gestured to her food. "Eat up, angel," he encouraged. "You need your strength and energy. The night's still young."

"Where are we going now?" Jan asked, as they pulled out of the McDonald's parking lot.

"Well, the plan tonight was for a movie, but with our dinner debacle, it would appear that we've missed it." Rob looked at her and smiled apologetically. "So, I was thinking maybe we could go back to your place and talk for a bit."

"Talk?" Jan couldn't help the quiet suspicion that crept into her voice.

"I promise, that's all. Just talking. Maybe some television, if you want. Do you trust me?"

She was surprised to realize that she did. Somewhere along the line tonight, the icy armor she'd mentally put on had melted. She no longer felt the need to be nasty to this

man. Nor was she really wary of his motives, despite her past experiences with men. If he said he just wanted to talk to her, she believed him.

"I do. I'm sorry. Old habits die hard." She shrugged.

"That's okay." He reached across the gap between them and captured her hand in his for a light squeeze. He kept hold of her fingers then, interlacing them with his own, and rested their joined hands on his knee as he drove.

That small contact was ridiculously pleasant. It had been so long since Jan had held hands with a man and, quite honestly, she'd never held hands with one who was so strikingly handsome.

When they returned to her home, they settled on the sofa and shared a pot of coffee between them. Rob absently stroked Jan's lap cat, Pearl, who had lain down beside him and butted her head against his wrist until he'd paid her some attention. Jan turned on some quiet music in the background and slipped off her painful heels.

"Do you mind if I go and get changed?" she asked, knowing how cliché that had to sound.

To his credit, Rob didn't make any smart remarks. "Go ahead. I'll be right here when you get back."

She made quick work of changing into jeans and a favorite sweater. The other cats, Moonshadow and Iris, regarded her critically from where they lay cuddled together on her bed.

It took a little more time to scrub all the goop off her face. She grimaced in the mirror as she worked. Lord, what a supremely childish thing to do! What had she been thinking? That he was so superficial that the moment he saw her in her ugly dress and heavily applied make-up, he would turn tail and run away? What an idiot she'd been!

When all the make-up was finally gone, and she'd

salvaged what she could of her poorly dressed hair, she made her way back out to her date.

He smiled warmly when he saw her now and held out a hand. "Well, now, look at you! Wow. Even more lovely than before." When she blushed and put her hand inside of his, he tugged her towards him and then down onto one of his knees. Surprisingly, she found that she didn't exactly mind his forwardness. "What a treat. Thank you for showing me the *real* you."

She blushed deeper at his words of praise. "Yeah, um, about that...I'm sorry...I guess I've sort of been trying to sabotage this date from the onset."

He grinned at her confession and ran one hand lightly over the back of her head. "Oh, yes, Jan. I know what you've been doing. And after all Connie went through to get the two of us together tonight. That was a very naughty thing to do, don't you think?"

Nervously, she nodded her head, staring at her feet where they dangled over his hard thighs.

"See, that's exactly what I want to talk to you about, Jan. About your naughtiness, and just what exactly we're going to do about that..."

PART TWO

"What...what do you mean, 'what we're going to do' about it?" Jan asked Rob nervously, her brow furrowed.

"Well," he said, drawling the word out. "More like, what *I'm* going to do about it."

Now, she folded her arms over her chest. "What are you talking about?"

He ran one large hand over the crown of her head. "Let me ask you a question, okay? After you let yourself relax with me tonight, after you stopped trying to deliberately ruin