

## *Chapter 1*

**S**o, how many times last month did you engage in sexual intercourse?”

Elaine Markowitz, a realtor, fifty-two and tummy tucked, shifted uncomfortably in her chair, disturbing the beige and teak tranquility of my office overlooking Baltimore’s Inner Harbor.

“You sure my name isn’t going to be published in this article, Dr. Berke?” she asked. “My mother’s still living. She has cataracts, but she reads.”

“No names. Just numbers, I promise. And it’s an important study.”

Elaine raised a skeptical eyebrow. “About sex?”

We’d been through this once, but now I clicked off my physician voice and turned on my woman-to-woman voice, warmer and more reassuring. “About female sexual interest once we reach menopause. And about our levels of activity and satisfaction. There are so many myths out there. Like Mother Nature flips the switch when we turn fifty and shuts us down. Which I don’t for a moment believe, but I’d like to prove it. With statistics.”

Better. Elaine settled back in her chair.

## 2 *Toby Devens*

“We need to get the facts out to the general public and to gynecologists, especially,” I pressed. “After all, the more we all know about the women we treat, the better we can meet their needs.”

“Yeah, right. Okay,” Elaine said. “Let’s get rid of the myths. Sure. Ask away.”

I’d already whipped out my survey sheet.

Policy requires that every woman coming into the OB/GYN practice of Potak, Berke, and Bernstein, MDs for her annual physical and Pap test gets five minutes of chat time after we’ve invaded her most private territory with a gloved finger and a warm speculum. I make it ten. I *like* my patients. Because I’m a gynecologic oncologist and not an obstetrician/gynecologist, most of the women I see are older. Which provided a handy population for studying the impact of age on sexual activity.

I’d been administering this survey for six months. I worked from a sampling base of a hundred. Excluding the single women in their eighties and nineties who have vaginas like prairie dog tunnels, nearly impenetrable, 30 percent of single women fifty and over in my practice reported dating at least once in the prior month. Twenty percent had been laid in that time frame. About 12 percent noted a significant other with whom they lived or an exclusive relationship with a longtime lover.

Preliminary conclusion: don’t count us out. Which was supported by my clinical observation. At least half of the women I treat are divorced or widowed, and I was handing out enough samples of Astroglide and KY Jelly to slide the entire East Coast into the Atlantic. So I knew my single patients were sexually active.

By the time I got to the second page of my checklist, Elaine Markowitz was happily sharing with me the details

MY *Favorite* MIDLIFE CRISIS (YET) 3

of her relationship with her forty-one-year-old boyfriend. "He's the stage manager at the Fells Point Dinner Theater. And, I'm not exaggerating here, he looks like a young Brando and screws like a young Bugs Bunny. Five times a week at least. But, honestly, I could go every day. He makes me feel thirty-five."

She did seem to have a dewy freshness about her as if her corpuscles were boogying through her veins and I told her so, though in more clinical terms.

"Part sex, part Dr. Fischman. Look closer." She leaned in. "This is so wonderful. You're a doctor and you can't tell. The man is a miracle worker." I proffered a noncommittal smile. *Bland. Bland was good. Lessens those cartoon parentheses around the mouth.* "I had a full face lift," Elaine chortled. "The whole shebang all at once. Eyelids, brow, chin." She stroked the adolescent tautness of her neck. "I felt like shit for two weeks, but it was worth it. Kevin never would have looked at the old me. Men look through fifty-year-old women, not *at* them, right?"

I gave her a how-would-I-know stare and changed the subject to estrogen patches.

As I droned on, Elaine actually strolled behind me to get a better look at a photo of Whit and Drew taken when the twins were five, bundled in snowsuits and mounted on kiddie skis. One of our family Christmas trips to Squaw Valley. Now Whit was in med school in Chicago with a law student girlfriend and Drew was pulling straight A's at the Art Institute of Boston. Whit looks like me, but takes himself very seriously. Drew is my ex-husband Stan all over. Nicer than Stan, though. A better person than Stan.

Elaine lifted the picture of my boys and interrupted my monologue. "Having kids really ages you. All the worry." She turned to appraise me from under scaffolded eyelids.

4 *Toby Stevens*

“You could get rid of those forehead wrinkles of yours. Botox. Or a peel. Nothing drastic.”

That stung. I thought I'd done a nice job of hiding my accordion forehead under wispy bangs. “Thanks for the tip. I'll keep it in mind.”

When she left, I headed for the powder room to peer at my reflection, which hadn't been giving me “you're the fairest in the land” lately. Still, what I saw wasn't so bad, even with the forehead pleats. Blonde hair kept glossy by weekly trips to Melik at the Istanbul Salon. Many little highlights to suggest sun streaks. Cream-and-roses skin inherited from my mother, which, alas, tended to fretworks of wrinkles. But I plumped it up with stuff that ran me eighty dollars a jar at Nordstrom's, and I calculated that at fifty-four I could pass for forty. Okay, forty-five. Maybe.

I noticed a bit of eyelid droop on the left side. And a shadow of a wattle under my chin. The sad truth is that women of a certain age must choose between face and body. Enough fat to keep your face youthfully plumped is enough to make your thighs porky. Go for the slender body, and neck up you're drawn and sunken. My personal trainer and I opted for steel biceps and a tight ass, at some cost to my face.

Hank Fischman, one of the top plastic surgeons at Johns Hopkins Hospital, was a former colleague. Maybe I'd give him a call. They used to peel your entire face back from your forehead for a face-lift. Ugh. I can roll an ovary around in my hand and slit into a belly while humming Mozart, but I couldn't do plastic if my life depended on it. Still, there had been recent advances in the full-face procedure. Before I made an appointment with Hank, I'd go online and see what was new in the Ponce de Leon business.

I couldn't believe how shallow I was becoming.