

Andie's Halloween Fright

by

Sandra Sookoo



Praise for Not Just Make Believe by Sandra Sookoo

"NOT JUST MAKE BELIEVE is fun, witty, and filled with heart. The story is told from the heroine's point of view that often uses sarcastic humor which tickled my funny bone." – Pamela, Romance Junkies

"...I must confess that Andrea Petercheff is an honest and true scream, and you will read this to know about her, and what actually happens is entirely secondary to that...As this is a romance review I will let you in on the fact that this sexy and dynamic man Max wears happy-faced pajamas to bed, but the rest of the relationship shall just be a surprise. This is fresh, lively, original and just plain fun. Sookoo has created a star: Andrea." – Snapdragon, Long and Short Reviews

"Andrea is so NOT your typical romance heroine. Andrea is curvy, not thin; short, not tall; clumsy, the first time she meets Max she knocks him over. She is so delightfully imperfect! A woman well aware of her faults and her assets, who never keeps her mouth shut, and takes guff from no one. I loved her!... Not Just Make Believe is a unique romance. Definitely not your average fairy tale." – Sizzling Hot Books

Other books by Sandra Sookoo at Desert Breeze Publishing

Winner Takes All

The Trouble With Love

Not Just Make Believe

Not A-mused (as part of the BeMused anthology)

Embracing the Lemonade Life

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Illustration - Four people family celebrating Halloween holiday party with pirate and mermaid costumes © kakigori | 123rf.com

Illustration - Happy Halloween cozy haunted house behind a stone wall © azuzl | 123rf.com

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Well, it's been nine months since events transpired which landed me a Junior Professor boyfriend and a nice gig working at a catering outfit. And if you don't know about my story (Not Just Make Believe) let me introduce myself. My name is Andie Peterchef, a thirty-something gal living in downtown Indianapolis. I used to work in a hotel for a man who looked a lot like the Penguin of Batman fame, but now I don't, mostly because of a whole big thing last Christmas where I kinda-sorta misplaced the little girl I was in charge of and plus I argued with a big-time patron—whom I'm now dating.

Well, like I said, it's a whole big thing. You might want to read the book for more references. Meanwhile, let me tell you another story.

The ringing of my smartphone—the generic tone since I couldn't figure out how to upload a decent song on the device—had me scrambling first to find my purse then digging around in said bag for the phone. I snagged it just before it flipped to voice mail, and breathlessly said, “Hello?”

“Ooh, I like it when you're breathless. It's sexy. Ready for a fun Halloween night?”

My heart slammed into overdrive at the sound of Max's baritone voice. Every single time it reminded of melted chocolate. Warm fuzzies twisted down my spine and I smiled. “I don't know how ready I am for all the disguised ankle-biters but I can't wait to see you in your pirate costume.” He, Piper and I had gone to one of the costume supply stores last weekend and picked out personas with a theme: a family of pirates. Of course, Piper's outfit had more of a mermaid slant with a sea-green, sequined skirt and flesh colored tank top with a sewn-on sequined bikini top, but everyone would get the gist.

And Max did look good in costume. My mind skipped to the day eight months ago when he'd dressed up as a Disney prince. With his dark hair and his lean body and tight rear end, anything that man put on would be suitable for the pages of a GQ photo spread. I fanned myself with my free hand. “What's up?”

“I'm going to have to give you a rain check on tonight.”

“What?” I glanced down at my costume. Black-and-white striped tights plus a pirate wench dress with a silly, ruffled petticoat and an overly-large swashbuckling hat. I wiggled a boot. The brand-new leather creaked. “I got dressed up for nothing?” Seriously, the only reason I'd consented to wear the dress with the too-short skirt and too-low bodice was for his benefit. It wasn't the sort of thing I'd trot out every day, especially not around twenty-two ten-year-old kids. And that was only Piper's class. The rest of the school would be there too as each classroom planned to have trick-or-treating throughout the evening.

“I wouldn't say for nothing.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “I should be home by the time you return from trick-or-treating. You can give me permission to come aboard later. We'll have a nice time snuggling under the covers since it's raining.”

“Oh brother.” I rolled my eyes. No matter how great a guy was, when it came to sexy times, they always made lame jokes about it. “And bah humbug about the rain.” In Indiana, it seemed to either rain or snow on Halloween. Rarely do we have nice weather for the event. Rain meant my curly black hair would poof.

“Hey Andie, guess what?” I darted a glance to Piper who'd just thumped down the stairs in all her bespangled glory. Her red hair streamed over her shoulders and glitter winked in the tresses.

Tons of silver glitter.

“What?” I had a bad feeling about this.

"I took the glitter out of a craft kit and sprinkled it in my hair. Now it looks like I'm magic." Piper twirled around. Metallic particles floated in the air around her, catching the light.

"I can see that." Into the phone I said, "Great. She's dumped a whole tube of glitter in her hair." Which meant there'd be a huge mess in the bathroom and a trail of the sparkling stuff down the stairs. "That's gonna be a pain to clean." Glitter was like Easter grass. You never do really vacuum it all.

"Focus on one issue at a time, Andrea." Max's classy pronunciation of my name never failed to send shivers through me. "I'll take care of it later."

You bet you will, buster. I don't live here, which means I'm under no obligation to clean up after you. "Okay." I gave Piper a wave then pointed toward her jacket. "You mean I have to take her trick-or-treating too? In the rain?" Yeah, I loved the red-headed menace like my own kid but assuming I'd go around the neighborhood dressed like I was infringed too much on the boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Ten to one I'd look worse than a drowned rat in my outfit when the moisture took hold.

"I'm afraid so. I need to finish marking up the last handful of finals then post all the grades online. It'll probably take me a couple of hours at least."

I blew out a breath more designed to flip the trailing end of the feather on my hat out of my face than for irritation. "I thought it was Professor Larson's job." He was the head honcho in the finance department and Max's boss.

"It is, but he pulled rank on me this morning. Something about asking my forgiveness was easier than living with his wife who'd be in a foul temper for days if he bailed on their Halloween cocktail party." His chuckle tickled my ear. "Since I'm not tenured, I get the grunt jobs."

Though he'd kept to his promise about not working long hours now that he'd gotten out of the stock market game, there were times when the job came first, and it just so happened that Halloween coincided with first quarter grading deadlines.

"Fantastic." I huffed into the phone. "I won't have time to change, you know."

"All the better to order me to do your bidding when you come back to the house."

"Seriously, Max, it's a school night. Plus, you might be officially on fall break, but I'm not and neither is Piper." The college fall break was two weeks as opposed to all the other schools in the area which only gave out three days. "I'm not sleeping over, if you get my drift." I'd only done that a couple of times. I didn't want it to become a habit and definitely didn't want Max to become used to that sort of thing. If he wanted all the perks of having me around his house then he'd better do what Beyoncé says in her song and put a ring on it.

Yeah, I've grown a backbone since you last heard from me. Be proud.

"I understand. I'll just have to limit myself to a kiss or three." He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "All right. I'd better get going and tackle the last of these papers. Have fun tonight."

"I'll try, but I fear my patience will vanish within the first five minutes." Acclimating to being around kids all the time had been a huge learning curve.

"You'll be great, just like you always are. If I finish early, I'll try and catch you and Piper either at the school or out in the neighborhood."

"That'd be nice."

"No guarantee but I'll do my best." His voice rose slightly which mean he must be smiling. "Who knows, you may even be scared silly."

I snorted. "That I doubt. There are only a few things in life that scare me. None of which I'll find out at the elementary school." Unless you count a bunch of kids dressed up as princesses

and super heroes, and I didn't. After working for Howard Bloesberg plus pandering to the patrons at the hotel and their needs, nothing scared me.

Seriously, I couldn't mess this up.

"Okay. Love you."

Warmth spread through my chest. I'd never be tired of hearing that, especially since we'd only recently started saying it. "Love you too. Bye."

Piper skipped over to me while attempting to shove her arms into her jacket. "He's not coming, is he?"

She's a smart kid, I'll give her that. "Nope, he's stuck at school, but if he gets done early, he'll come and find us."

"He won't. Uncle Max will be busy, and then he'll be on the Internet and will forget." Piper gave me the kid version of "the look". An eyebrow quirked upward. "You know how he is."

I snickered. Unfortunately, I did know. "Sorry, kiddo. It's not much fun being a grown-up sometimes. He tries his best though."

Piper tossed her hair. A shower of glitter fell from the strands. "Good thing you're here then, huh?"

Good thing indeed. My chest tightened—a much different feeling than what I experienced from Max. Piper might drive me crazy but the kid was gold. No way did I need to show her my vulnerability. I'd be done for. "Let's go grab a quick bit to eat then we'll go to your school."

By the time Piper and I arrive at her elementary school, the ordinary rain had morphed into a heavier downpour. I checked the weather radar as I followed Piper into the building. Juggling the phone, the umbrella and the two bags of baked goods took real talent, so did not having a freak out when I saw the colorful red and yellow splotches coming our way on the map. No problem. I could do this. Remain calm so the kids in my charge won't freak out too.

I am woman; hear me promise myself a stop at Starbucks once this night is finally over. The good thing? According to the radar, once the storm passed, the rain would end.

And then it happened. That inevitable moment when you know you're way out of your comfort zone and it rolls over you like the tide.

Heat built in the hall, compounded with so many bodies—bodies that were in various stages of dampness. I could almost see the steam rising under the florescent light. The noise level in the walkway bordered on deafening. It felt as if I was trapped in a huge birdcage full of chattering, screeching exotic birds and their high-pitched voices echoed off the cinder block walls. My chest clenched. What's the deal? These kids had just seen their friends three hours ago when school let out and now they acted as if they'd been apart for a decade.

Parents, guardians and older family members waded through the throng of costumed kids, more or less herding their charges toward their respective classrooms. By the time I reached Piper's room, she'd already forged ahead, her glitter-encrusted red hair shining under the florescent lights. Between that and her sequins, she looked like a human disco ball. It was a wonder she didn't blind anyone. In the classroom, the noise level dropped a fraction as the adults who belonged to the kids took up positions at the back and sides of the room. Strains of "The Monster Mash" drifted into the classroom from across the hall.

"Okay, could I please have your attention?" Piper's teacher, Mrs. Markham, strode to the front of the room. Her only concession to Halloween was a pair of cat ears on a headband. She

wore a pair of jeans and an Indianapolis Colts sweatshirt for the rest of her ensemble. On her tall, thin frame, she could have been a runway model. “The kids will be trick-or-treating in other classrooms for the next hour. I’ll need a few parents to hand out candy here. A few more will need to set up the refreshment tables for the kids. Other than that, have fun.”

I sidled over to Piper. She stood with one of her friends who was dressed like some sort of pop star. Really, it’s shameful how not clued-in I am regarding popular singers. “Do you want me to go with you?” I only asked because she had a tendency to panic in crowds of people, even more so when there were a lot of adults she didn’t know. For all her confident shenanigans in the hotel, living in the suburbs and out of her controlled environment had made her more wary. I suppose that was a good thing. Maybe it would tone her down a bit.

“No.” She rolled her eyes while gesturing toward the other parents. “You stay here, Andie, okay? I’ll be back soon.”

When she moved off, her friend said, “I’m glad you didn’t want your mom going with us.”

Piper answered, “Me too because she’d steal some of my candy and she would constantly pester me about my friends.”

The other girl shook her head. “Moms are annoying sometimes.”

I didn’t catch Piper’s response since the girls had moved out of the room, but I couldn’t help my grin. She hadn’t corrected her friend about the mom thing. Silly girl. My heart did a funny flippy thing. Maybe one day being a parent wouldn’t be so bad.

And I would so not want her candy! Just because I’d filched a couple of pieces from her stash a week ago didn’t mean I’d do it again. Okay, it probably did but that’s beside the point. I hated that she knew me so well.

While Mrs. Markham circulated through the parents and also while shrieks and giggles echoes through the hall, I joined the other women putting out baked goods. My chocolate chip cookies joined homemade granola bars, fresh fruit, juice boxes and a whole host of other healthy snacks.

“Wow, times have changed.” I tidied up my cookie display. “When I was in school, we had candy and cupcakes at our parties.”

One of the women near me snorted and then a crash of thunder drowned out her tittering chuckle. She glanced at me over the tops of her designer eyeglasses. Her lashes had so much mascara on them they resembled a bee’s legs full of pollen. “Cupcakes have been off the list for a few years. The janitors don’t like trying to clean icing out of the carpets.”

“I guess I can understand that but it sort of takes the fun out of a party.” Cupcakes were something I used to look forward to at school. Of course, me being a curvy girl, I looked forward to anything with sugar in it.

“Speaking of fun, you’re Andie, right?”

“Yeah.” How did my name connote fun?

“My daughter is Ashley, one of Piper’s friends. You saw her a bit ago.”

I stopped myself at the last minute from rolling my eyes. Yup, I knew Ashley, the girl so fond of giving out terrible advice to my kid. “Ah.” Where was this conversation going?

The woman charged onward. “I’ll bet you’ve been having fun with Piper’s guardian, huh?” The woman’s hint was as obvious as an elephant in a kiddie pool. “That Max is handsome. I had my eye on him, but you came along and snapped him up.”

That’s right, lady. Back off. I forced a smile to my lips. “He’s a nice guy. All three of us are having a good time getting used to each other.” Honestly, none of it was this woman’s

business. “We’re a family.” A sense of protectiveness washed over me, not only for Max but for Piper. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go...” No sense finishing the sentence with a lie, and I couldn’t think that fast on the fly, so I just didn’t say anything else.

I slipped out of the classroom and inserted myself into the teeming life in the hallway. Kids ran past in their costumes. Plastic bags printed with the school logo of a hawk on a white background dangled from their hands. Some of the children’s makeup had started to streak due to the heat and rain. The scent of chocolate and bubble gum lingered on the air. I fanned my face with a hand. *Too many people.* Up ahead I spied Piper’s bright, glittery hair. Figuring I might as well tail her since I didn’t want to return to the classroom and Ashley’s mom, I waded through the crowds.

Overhead, thunder boomed. The lights flickered. A couple of the kids seemed visibly upset but not enough to abandon classroom trick-or-treating. Piper looked over her shoulder a few times, and once her gaze fell on me. I gave her a wink, not wanting to wave and embarrass her. A tiny smile tugged at her lips and she continued down the hall. The crowd shifted, blocking her from my view. Thunder rolled again and this time it cracked directly overhead. Flickers of vivid lightning cut through the florescent glow. The lights dimmed, came back on and then cut off, plunging the hallways into darkness.

Screams of terror and squeals of panic shattered the air. As one entity, the crowd surged forward. I couldn’t stand my ground against the force of the terrified adults and children.

My stomach dropped. Mild alarm climbed my throat, threatening to choke me. When I told Max nothing much would scare me, I’d lied. The thought of losing Piper again was petrifying. And now, I couldn’t see her. My palms prickled with heat and sweat. I wiped them on my skirt. Auxiliary lights at the far end of the hallway kicked on but the weak illumination didn’t reach my location. I guess what they say is true about losing one sense; the rest grow strong because I became extremely conscious of the smells in the hallway. A mix of cleaning supplies, wooden pencils and lingering cafeteria food invaded my nose.

I took a deep breath and blew it out again. *Please don’t throw up.*

“Piper?” I braced my hands against the smooth-painted wall, determined not to let the tide catch me. “Piper, where are you?”

“Andie?” Her response sounded faint and seemed to come from somewhere ahead and to my left.

“Stay put, kiddo. I’ll be right there.” Of course, that was easier said than done as the hallway was clogged with people trying to go both ways at once. We were all hamsters in a tunnel of doom.

Another peal of thunder rumbled above.

“Andie!” Fear wobbled in Piper’s voice. “They’re pushing me.”

“Hang on. I’m coming!” I’ve often heard about women doing amazing things when their kids are threatened. I’ve heard people talk about having “mama bear” syndrome. Before, I hadn’t really understood what that meant. Now I did. Okay, maybe I didn’t *know* exactly, but I sure did feel like a mama opossum, or maybe a mama ocelot...or something. Heat flowed over me from head to foot. The urge to push down every single person between me and Piper slammed my chest. And heaven help anyone who got in my way and kept me from her. Okay to be fair, I might have exaggerated the situation. It wasn’t as if the school was scary-crowded like Disney World gets during the holidays or the malls the day after Thanksgiving, but it wasn’t pleasant.

And I wanted my girl.

I'll admit I threw a couple of elbows in my quest through the crowded hallway. If I had to play the part of a salmon going upstream, I wanted every advantage. Somewhere at the edge of my consciousness, the principal talked on a megaphone. He informed us they were working on getting the lights back on, or at least a generator. I didn't care. My only goal in that moment was to find Piper and make sure she was safe.

I'd just shuffled past a darkened doorway when someone grabbed me around the middle and pulled me aside. I swung around and pushed at the person. I held my purse by the strap, ready to do bodily injury to my attacker with the five-pound weapon. One of the auxiliary lights blinked on. I screamed. I'd come face to face with a clown. A sick feeling filled my stomach while cold ribbons of fear twisted around my spine. "Get your hands off me!"

Confession time. Besides losing a child, I did harbor one other paralyzing fear—clowns. I hated them with the white-hot heat of a thousand suns. It all stems from a childhood visit to the circus gone wrong—long story.

"Geez lady, calm down." The clown released me and stepped backward. "I was just playing a joke."

"Well go play it on someone else. I'm on a mission." Adrenaline surged through my body and made me feel like superwoman. I scooted out of the doorway and back into the crowded hall. "Piper?"

Parents up and down the passage called for their kids. A few kids shouted for their teachers or siblings, and all the while, thunder pealed though it sounded as if the storm was moving away. Thank goodness.

"Piper, where are you?" Someone plowed into me with a stroller. The backs of my calves throbbed. I half-turned. The shadowy shape of the contraption loomed behind me. "Seriously?"

"I'm in Mr. Jensen's doorway!" Piper's answer pushed the stroller-wielder's rudeness from my mind.

I rolled my eyes. Yeah, that was helpful since the only classroom I knew was Piper's. As I continued along the hall, bright white auxiliary lights popped on at regular intervals near the ceiling. They flickered to life and provided enough illumination to safely navigate the hall without doing bodily injury to someone. Each doorway I peeked into didn't reveal the red-haired mermaid. While my heart still hammered behind my ribcage, I followed the stream of people. Just call me a sheep in the herd. One more doorway loomed ahead near one of the outside exits. A red EXIT sign glowed in the dimness above the door.

"Piper?"

She didn't answer, and my fear edged up a notch.

Two steps brought me to the doorway and a surge in pedestrian traffic sent me stumbling into the alcove. I stood with my back to the closed door and attempted to quiet my mind in order to consider my options. Seconds later, someone yanked open the door and I fell backward. Strong arms—male arms—caught my tumble. The scent of clean, crisp cologne reached my nose right before I was turned around and propped against the window to one side of the door. The man pressed his body against mine, trapping me between him and the cool glass.

I opened my mouth to scream, but then checked myself. Wait. I recognized that scent and the feel of that body! "Max?"

His baritone chuckle slid over my skin like silk. "Trick or treat, Andie."

Piper giggled behind him. "Did you like that trick?"

A wave of relief washed over me to know Piper was safe and sound. "Oh, loads." I slipped my arms around Max's shoulders. Now that my fear had subsided, every pore in my

stressed out body clambered for his attention. “What are you doing here?” Not to mention he was soaked. The poor feather in his pirate hat drooped and dripped onto my shoulder.

“I finished early then followed the storm down here. Just as I pulled into the parking lot, the power went out.” He cupped my cheek. His fingers fanned into my hair. “I came in the side door and saw Piper immediately after.”

“So you decided it’d be fun to play a joke on me?” I gave him a mock-frown while my heart beat slowed to what counted as normal in Max’s presence. How could I stay angry at him while my knees wobbled from his closeness and he had that particular mysterious grin on his face?

“Yeah.” He brushed my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. His gorgeous brown eyes twinkled in the lights from the hallway. “In my defense, I was concerned for you and Piper. My goal was to rescue my girls and then whisk you both away for hot chocolate at Starbucks.”

Shivers fell down my spine. Hot chocolate, Max and knowing Piper was safe. Could life be any better? “I was ready to smack you with my purse. Some clown accosted me a few minutes before. I’ve got mad ninja skills with my bag.”

“I’m sure you do. That thing weighs a ton.” Max put his lips to my ear and said, “Do you want a trick or a treat?”

Flutters tickled my insides. I grinned. “How about something sweet instead?”

“I have just the thing.” He pressed his lips to mine.

Oh yeah. That’s what I’m talking about. I melted into his embrace regardless of the fact that Piper watched us from the side, and gave myself up to the moment for a few seconds. I knew what Max’s kisses did to me, and there was no way I’d embarrass Piper with a big PDA, but just the same, butterflies did cartwheels inside my belly, tickling in a way that brought both heat to my body and chills to my skin. I pulled away and then lowered my voice so only he could hear, “You’d better be careful, Max. A casual observer might think you’re fixing to claim some booty.” My cheeks heated. Did that lame one-liner just could out of my mouth?

Max laughed and stepped away. He tugged one of my hands. “Only yours.” He glanced at Piper. “Ready to go trick-or-treating, squirt?”

“Is Andie coming too?” She grabbed onto his free hand.

From the look of disgust that passed over his face, no doubt her hand was sticky. “Do you want her to?”

“Yup! She’s cool, Uncle Max.” Piper pulled us both from the empty classroom.

Max squeezed my fingers. “Hear that? You’re cool. I’m just chopped liver, you know, the guy who gives her food and shelter.”

I couldn’t help my widening smile. This little family was growing on me. Every day that passed I looked forward to spending more time with both of them. “Those are the breaks, man, but I do have a certain charm.”

“I’ve always thought so.” He brought my hand to his lips and dropped a kiss on the back of it. “Let’s go score some candy for her and caffeine for us.”

“Absolutely.” Seriously, I love my life.

The End

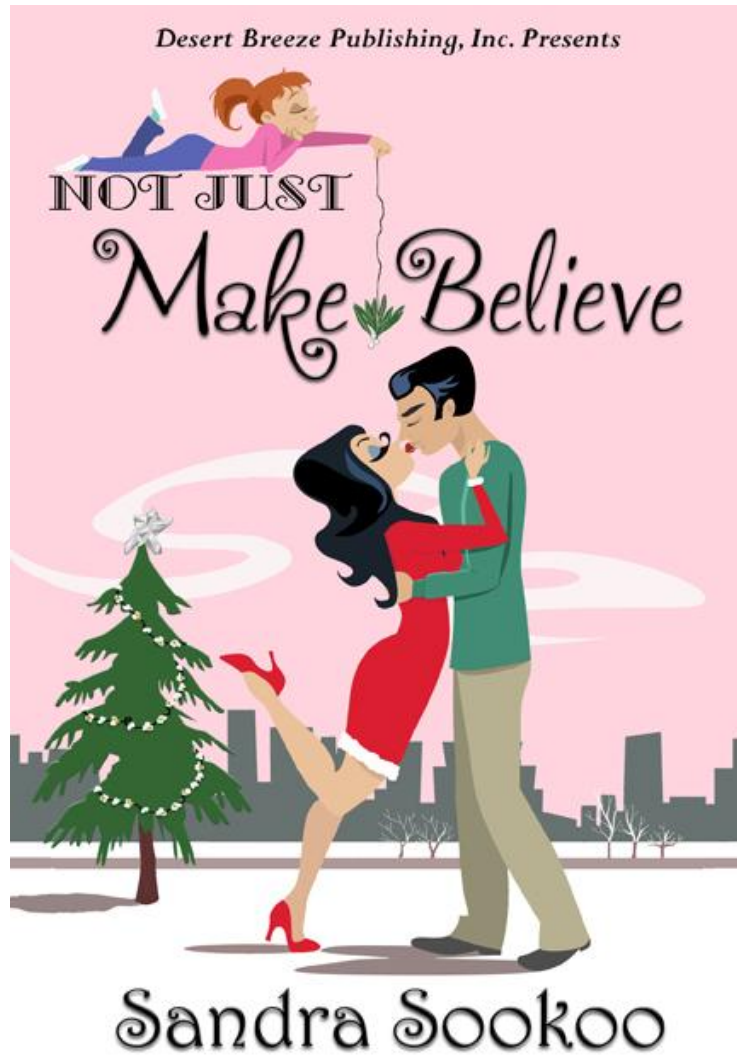
Author Bio

Sandra is a writer of romantic fiction. Her portfolio includes historical, contemporary, sci-fi, and paranormal romances in full-length books as well as shorts and novellas. No matter if the heat level is spicy or sweet, she loves to blend genres and oftentimes will add humor to the mix.

When not immersed in creating new worlds and engaging characters, Sandra likes to read, bake, taste new teas, watch *The Big Bang Theory*, and travel. Her favorite place to spend vacation hours is Walt Disney World: it's where dreams come true and the soul can play. When she's not writing, she's keeping things interesting at her *Believing is Seeing* blog or spending time with her husband, who patiently answers questions she has about men, sci-fi-related subjects, and the odd "what if".

Sandra loves to hear from her readers. You can write to her at sandrasookoo@yahoo.com, visit her website at www.sandrasookoo.com, or look her up on Facebook and Twitter. All links are provided on the front page of her website.

If you'd like to find out how Andie and Max met and became a couple, here's the blurb and an excerpt from *Not Just Make Believe*, the book that started it all.



Blurb: Andrea Peterchef never thought her job would include a nine-year-old Piper and vomit. Then she meets Max, a workaholic stockbroker with a voice like melted chocolate and she vows to help her charge and him reconnect as a family.

Maxwell Gildenthall is haunted by the 9/11 deaths of his girlfriend and his cousin—Piper's dad. Deadlines and data define his life—not baby dolls and dress-up. When Andrea cajoles him into playing the part of dad, the benefits of spending time with the plus-size au pair are a bonus, but he can't ditch the guilt.

It'll take more than a spoonful of sugar and a dose of Christmas magic to mend the broken family. It'll take the power of love.

Excerpt:

"And anyway, in case you weren't listening to me earlier, Piper's sick. I've spent the whole night cleaning up little kid puke and trying to get her fever down. Do you know how hard it is to get tomato based vomit out of the carpet? Or find children's meds in the middle of the night at a hotel or even try to ascertain the right kind of medicine to give a kid when I'm not sure what the heck she's sick with? I'm exhausted, she's tired, and quite frankly, the thought of trying to fight my way through crowded airports during this most wonderful of holiday seasons doesn't appeal to me."

Remarkably, I heard laughter on the other end of the phone. He was laughing. "What's so funny?" I hated it when people laugh at me, especially when I really tried to pour it on thick with the sarcasm!

"I'd say Howard made a superb choice in nannies." Max Gildenthall's sound of mirth was a warm soothing baritone that reached through the phone to cover me like a fleece blanket. "At least you have spunk. And courage. And enough of a backbone to order Piper around instead of the reverse being true."

I padded into the kitchenette and was well on my way to making a nice velvety cup of hot chocolate. Chocolate. Yup, that was definitely what Max's voice sounded like. If there was anything in this world I was a snob about, it was chocolate. The richer the better. That was an interesting observation, wasn't it, likening his voice to a sugary confection?

What would Freud have to say about that?

With a mighty effort, I focused my attention on the conversation. Spunk? I didn't know whether to be upset with him for that comment or for agreeing with something Howie said. In any event, I watched the whirring turntable in the microwave as it heated my beverage. "Is there something specific you wanted, Mr. Gildenthall, or do you specialize in keeping women up in the middle of the night?"

Okay, it wasn't the middle of the night. And, I'll be the first one to admit my mental acuity is not great on two hours of sleep, but really, that comment was so downright open-ended and up for many variations of interpretation, I felt my cheeks beginning to blush.

"Hmm, how to answer such an interesting question..."

Max's voice matched his physical person. My cheeks warmed as I remembered the brief time I sat on his lap on the floor of the lobby. It wasn't often a person's voice and body matched. "Uh, I meant to say..." I stumbled to an embarrassed halt.

He chuckled as the timer on the microwave went off with a soft *ping*. "Ah, the microwave. Let me see if I can guess what you're fixing." The smile appeared in his voice as if he were standing right in front of me. "It's early, so you won't be hungry. Coffee? No, definitely not. You're way too wired a person for coffee. Tea? No again. Reminds you of your grandmother, I'll bet. Must be hot chocolate. Creamy, rich, oh so sweet but not too sweet as to make you think you're creating cavities. Comforting, but with an edge. Am I right?"

I stared at the microwave as if I had never seen it before. How did he do it? "I'll give you points for a lucky guess." I pulled out the steaming mug and held it between my hands, balancing the phone between my chin and shoulder. "Maybe you should make guessing drink preferences based on a person's personality the next big trend in the business world."

"Perhaps." Max was silent for a moment. "Listen, Andrea, I just wanted to call to check on Piper. If I can get a flight, I'll come back early, but don't tell the young troublemaker yet. I want it to be a surprise."

I rolled my eyes. Just like that, he brushed me under the rug in lieu of business. Typical male. "Well, Mr. Gildenthall, I'm sure Piper will appreciate your early arrival. If there's nothing else, I'm going back to bed." I didn't know why my words were a little bit sharper than I had intended but I didn't allow myself to dwell on the problem either.

"No, that's all. Good night or rather good morning, Miss Petercheff."

Two seconds later, I listened to the dial tone. How rude! Of course, now I was wide-awake and regaining sleep would definitely not be on the agenda any time soon.