

Single & Seasoned

A Book for Women Who Chose Themselves

by Merlene Sulph

SINGLE & SEASONED

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Also by Merlene Sulph:

Sexy Mind

Keep It Hot at Home

Give Yourself Grace

DEDICATION

*For every woman who stopped waiting for someone else to make
her life beautiful and picked up the paintbrush herself.*

For the women who chose themselves when nobody else did.

*This one's for you. You were never too much. You were always
enough.*

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Seasoned Life

Let me tell you something right now, before you turn another page: this is not a pity party.

This is not a book about how to "cope" with being single. This is not a survival guide for lonely women clutching their pillows at night wondering where their soulmate is hiding. If that's what you came for, baby, you picked up the wrong book.

This book? This is a celebration.

This is for the woman who has been through it. The one who has loved hard, lost harder, picked herself up off the floor, wiped her mascara, reapplied her lipstick, and kept it moving. This is for the woman who has been called "too picky," "too independent," "too strong," and "too much" -- and finally realized that "too much" just means she was in rooms that were too small.

You're not just single. You're seasoned.

Seasoned means you've got flavor. Experience. Depth. You've tasted love in all its forms -- the sweet, the bitter, the kind that burned your tongue and the kind that melted on it like honey. You've survived heartbreak that would have flattened lesser women. You've sat in the fire and came out not burned but refined.

I wrote Sexy Mind because I believe the most powerful thing a woman can possess is her own thoughts, unfiltered and free. I wrote Keep It Hot at

Home because passion isn't something you outsource -- it starts with you. And I wrote Give Yourself Grace because mercy toward ourselves is the hardest and most necessary kind.

But this book? This one might be the most important thing I've ever written. Because this is the book I needed when I was sitting alone on a Saturday night, scrolling through my phone, watching everyone else's highlight reel and wondering what was wrong with me.

Nothing. Nothing was wrong with me. And nothing is wrong with you.

Being single at any age -- whether you're 25 or 55 -- is not a diagnosis. It's not a deficiency. It's not a phase you need to rush through on your way to "real life." Your life is real right now. This moment. This breath. This version of you, unattached and unapologetic.

In the pages ahead, we're going to talk about everything. The ex who almost broke you. The family member who won't stop asking when you're getting married. The nights that feel too quiet. The dates that feel too loud. The joy of eating alone at a beautiful restaurant. The power of building your own empire without splitting the profits -- or the headaches.

We're going to laugh. We're going to get real. And by the time you close this book, you're going to look at your single life not as something to endure but as something to savor.

So pour yourself a glass of whatever makes you feel good. Get comfortable. And let's have a conversation -- just you and me -- about what it really means to be single and seasoned.

Welcome, sis. You're home.

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

Single Is Not a Status -- It's a Superpower

Somewhere along the way, somebody decided that being single was a problem that needed solving. Like it was a disease. A condition. A temporary inconvenience on the road to the "real" destination -- which, according to society, is a ring, a wedding, a joint bank account, and someone else's last name.

And I need you to hear me when I say this: that is a lie.

Being single is not a waiting room. You are not sitting on some cosmic bench, ticket in hand, hoping your number gets called. You are not "between relationships." You are not "still looking." You are not a half waiting to become whole.

You are whole. Right now. As you are. Full stop.

I know that's hard to believe sometimes. I know it because I've been there. I've been the woman who walked into a party and immediately felt like the odd one out because everyone seemed to come in pairs, like animals boarding Noah's Ark. I've been the woman who checked "single" on a form and felt a little sting, like I was confessing something shameful. I've been the woman who wondered, late at night, if maybe everyone else knew something I didn't.

But here's what I figured out, and it changed everything: being single isn't the absence of something. It's the presence of something. It's the presence

of freedom. Choice. Self-knowledge. Space.

Think about it. When was the last time you made a decision -- a real, life-altering decision -- without having to consider someone else's feelings, schedule, ego, or baggage? When was the last time you could pick up and travel somewhere just because you wanted to? When was the last time your entire evening belonged to you -- no compromises, no negotiations, no silent resentment?

That's not loneliness. That's liberty.

Now, I'm not anti-relationship. Let me be crystal clear about that. Love is beautiful. Partnership can be one of the most rewarding experiences in life. But you know what else is beautiful? Not settling for a mediocre version of it just because you're scared to eat dinner alone.

The superpower of being single isn't that you don't need anyone. It's that you get to figure out who you are without anyone else's fingerprints on your identity. When you're in a relationship -- especially a long one -- it's so easy to lose yourself. Your tastes start blending with theirs. Your dreams start shrinking to fit theirs. Your voice gets a little quieter because keeping the peace feels easier than keeping it real.

Being single is the chance to turn your own volume all the way up.

I want you to reframe the way you see your relationship status. Every time someone asks you, "So, are you seeing anyone?" I want you to smile -- not apologetically, not defensively -- and say, "Yes. I'm seeing me. And she's incredible."

Because she is.

Think about everything you've survived to get to this page. Every heartbreak. Every disappointment. Every time someone told you that you weren't enough, and you believed it for a while, but then you didn't. Every

time you rebuilt yourself from scratch -- new apartment, new mindset, new boundaries, new energy.

That woman? She's not broken. She's a masterpiece in progress. And she doesn't need another person to complete the picture. She is the picture.

Here's what your superpower gives you:

- Clarity. You know what you want because you've had the silence and space to hear your own voice.
- Standards. You're not desperate. Desperate women accept crumbs. You're holding out for the whole bakery.
- Growth. Every day you spend single is a day you spend investing in yourself -- your mind, your body, your career, your peace.
- Freedom. You answer to no one. Your schedule, your money, your body, your rules.
- Resilience. You've proven that you don't need someone else to survive. You don't just survive -- you thrive.

So the next time someone looks at you with pity because you showed up to the cookout without a plus-one, remember: you didn't come alone. You came with your peace of mind. Your self-respect. Your freedom. And those three things are worth more than any relationship built on convenience, loneliness, or fear.

Single is not your status. It's your superpower. Start wearing it like a cape.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

The Ex Files -- Lessons, Not Losses

Let's talk about the men. Or the women. Or whoever it was that made you feel like love was the most beautiful thing in the world -- and then set it on fire right in front of you.

We've all got an ex file. Some of us have entire filing cabinets. Organized by year, by heartbreak severity, by how long it took us to stop checking their social media. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about.

Here's the thing about exes: they are the greatest teachers you never asked for. Every single one of them walked into your life for a reason, even if that reason was simply to show you what you will never put up with again.

The one who lied? He taught you what honesty looks like by showing you its opposite. The one who was emotionally unavailable? She taught you that you deserve someone who shows up, not just someone who texts back. The one who was great on paper but terrible in person? That one taught you the difference between compatibility and chemistry -- and that you need both.

I used to carry my ex files like a suitcase full of bricks. Heavy. Bitter. Every failed relationship felt like proof that I was doing something wrong. Like love was this test I kept failing no matter how hard I studied.

But then I had a moment -- one of those 3 a.m. clarity moments when you're lying in bed staring at the ceiling and suddenly the whole universe makes sense for about thirty seconds. My moment was this: what if none of

it was wasted?

What if every heartbreak was actually a course in a curriculum I didn't know I was enrolled in? What if every "wrong" person was actually the right person for that season -- not because they were meant to stay, but because they were meant to teach?

That shift changed everything for me. And I want it to change everything for you.

Let's do an exercise right now. I want you to think about your last three relationships -- or situationships, because let's be honest, half of them never even had a title. For each one, I want you to ask yourself:

- What did I learn about what I need in a partner?
- What did I learn about what I will not tolerate?
- What did I learn about myself?

That last one is the most important. Because your exes didn't just show you who they were. They showed you who you were. The one who cheated on you? Yes, that was about his character. But it was also about the fact that you stayed three months longer than you should have because you were afraid of starting over. The one who dimmed your light? Yes, she was insecure. But it was also about the fact that you were willing to shrink yourself to make someone else comfortable.

These aren't failures. These are data points.

You are building the most important database of your life: the database of you. Every relationship you've been in has added a line to that database. And now, sitting here, single and seasoned, you have more information about yourself than you've ever had before.

You know your triggers. You know your non-negotiables. You know the difference between butterflies and anxiety. You know the difference

between passion and chaos. You know what love is supposed to feel like because you've felt what it's not supposed to feel like.

That's not baggage. That's wisdom.

Now, here's the part that's harder to talk about: forgiveness. Not for them -- for you. You need to forgive yourself for staying too long. For ignoring red flags that were so bright they could have stopped traffic. For going back when you swore you wouldn't. For losing yourself in someone who didn't deserve to find you in the first place.

You were doing the best you could with what you knew at the time. Period. No asterisks. No "yeah, but I should have known better." You didn't know better. Now you do. And that's the whole point.

So close those ex files. Don't burn them -- you might need to reference them later when someone new shows up and starts waving the same red flag with a slightly different pattern. But close them. Stop rereading the chapters that already ended. Stop rewriting the endings in your head. Stop wondering what would have happened if you had said this or done that.

It happened. It hurt. It taught you. And now it's done.

The woman you are today was built on the rubble of every relationship that didn't work out. And that woman? She's magnificent.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Stop Settling, Start Selecting

I need you to be honest with me for a second. And more importantly, I need you to be honest with yourself.

How many times have you dated someone -- knowing, knowing in your gut from the very first date -- that this person was not it? But you went back. You answered the text. You gave it "one more chance." You told your girlfriends, "He's got potential."

Baby. Potential is for science projects, not partners.

Settling is the quiet killer of happiness. It doesn't announce itself with sirens and flashing lights. It whispers. It says things like, "Well, at least he's consistent." "Nobody's perfect." "I'm not getting any younger." "Maybe my standards are too high."

Let me address that last one right now: your standards are not too high. The people you've been choosing have been too low.

There is a massive difference between being picky and being intentional. Picky is turning someone down because they wore the wrong shoes. Intentional is turning someone down because they showed you in the first thirty minutes that they don't respect your time, your boundaries, or your intelligence. One is shallow. The other is self-preservation.

Here's what I want you to do. I want you to write a list. Not a wish list for Santa Claus -- I'm not talking about "six feet tall, six figures, six-pack." I'm talking about the things that actually matter. The things that determine

whether a relationship survives past the honeymoon phase.

Things like:

- Does this person make me feel safe -- emotionally, physically, spiritually?
- Does this person respect my boundaries without making me feel guilty for having them?
- Does this person take accountability when they mess up, or do they deflect, deny, and gaslight?
- Does this person have their own life -- goals, friendships, purpose -- or are they trying to absorb mine?
- Does this person make me feel like I can be fully myself, or do I perform a version of me to keep them comfortable?
- Does this person show up consistently, or only when it's convenient?

These aren't unreasonable expectations. These are the bare minimum. And if you've been in relationships where even the bare minimum felt like too much to ask, that tells you everything you need to know about who you were choosing -- and why.

Most of us settle because we're afraid. Let's just name it. We're afraid that if we say no to this mediocre thing, nothing better will come along. We're afraid of the empty side of the bed. We're afraid of what people will think. We're afraid that our expiration date is approaching -- as if we're cartons of milk and not human beings with decades of living left to do.

But I want you to think about it from the other direction. What is the cost of settling? What does it cost you to be in a relationship where you feel unseen? Unheard? Unappreciated? What does it cost you to shrink yourself to fit into someone else's limited version of love?

It costs you everything. Your confidence. Your joy. Your time -- which is the

one resource you can never get back. Your peace of mind. Your sense of self. The years you spend in the wrong relationship are years you could have spent building the life you actually want.

Selecting is different from settling. Selecting means you approach dating from a position of power, not desperation. You're not scanning the room looking for someone to save you from your own company. You're looking around and deciding if anyone in the room is worthy of joining the incredible life you've already built.

That's not arrogance. That's alignment.

When you know your worth -- when you have genuinely done the work of understanding who you are, what you bring to the table, and what kind of love you deserve -- you stop accepting applications from people who aren't qualified. You don't ghost them. You don't drag it out. You simply recognize, with clarity and grace, that this person is not your match. And you keep it moving.

Being single and seasoned means you've earned the right to be selective. You paid for that right with every bad relationship, every ignored red flag, every tear you shed over someone who wasn't worth your mascara.

So stop settling. Start selecting. And if nobody meets your criteria right now? Good. That means your standards are working.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

Your Body, Your Rules

Can we have a grown-woman conversation right now? Good. Because this chapter is for the woman who thinks she needs a partner to feel desirable. The woman who put her sensuality on a shelf the moment her last relationship ended, like it was a seasonal decoration she'd pull out again "when the time is right."

Sis. The time is right. The time is now.

Your sensuality is not a gift you give to someone else. It's not something that activates only when another person touches you. Your sensuality is yours. It lives in your body. It hums underneath your skin. It's in the way you move, the way you breathe, the way you look at yourself in the mirror -- or the way you avoid looking at yourself in the mirror.

Let's start there. When was the last time you really looked at yourself? Not a quick glance while brushing your teeth. Not a critical scan searching for flaws. I mean looked at yourself the way you'd look at someone you loved. With softness. With appreciation. With desire.

Your body has carried you through every season of your life. Every heartbreak, every triumph, every late night, every early morning. It has danced, cried, healed, and kept going even when your mind was ready to quit. That body deserves to be celebrated -- by you, first and always.

Self-care is not a bubble bath and a face mask -- although those are lovely. Real self-care is the way you talk to yourself when you're naked. It's the

way you feed yourself. Move yourself. Dress yourself. Touch yourself. It's the decision to treat your body like a temple even when nobody else is worshipping there.

Let's talk about pleasure, because we're all adults here. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a woman who knows what she likes and isn't ashamed of it. Self-pleasure is not a consolation prize for being single. It's a practice. It's self-knowledge. It's a woman saying, "I know my body. I know what it needs. And I don't need anyone's permission to give it that."

If that makes you uncomfortable, good. Sit with that discomfort for a minute. Ask yourself where it came from. Was it something your mother told you? Something the church taught you? Something society whispered to you so many times that it started to feel like your own thought?

Your body is not a sin. Your desire is not a deficiency. And your pleasure is not dependent on another person's participation.

Now let's talk about how you show up in the world. When you got single, did you stop dressing up? Did you trade in the outfits that made you feel powerful for sweatpants and resignation? Did you tell yourself, "Who am I dressing up for?"

You. You are dressing up for you.

Wear the dress. Put on the perfume. Do your hair the way that makes you feel like the baddest woman in the room. Not because someone might see you. Not because you're trying to attract a partner. Because you deserve to feel beautiful every single day of your life -- partnered or not.

Buy yourself flowers. Light the good candles. Use the fancy sheets. Cook yourself a beautiful meal and plate it like you're on a cooking show. Stop saving the good stuff for some hypothetical future person. You are the person. You are the occasion.

Your body, your rules means this: you get to decide what feels good. You get to decide who touches you and how. You get to decide whether you want to be celibate, casual, or somewhere in between. There is no right answer except the one that aligns with your peace and your values.

And here's something nobody tells single women: you are allowed to be sexy without being sexual. You are allowed to carry yourself with a quiet, magnetic confidence that has nothing to do with whether you're sleeping with anyone. Sexiness is not about what you do in the bedroom. It's about how you carry yourself in every room.

Own your body. Celebrate it. Nourish it. Move it. Adorn it. Love it out loud, with no apology and no audience required.

Because a woman who is in love with herself? That's the most powerful woman in the world.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

The Art of Eating Alone (And Loving It)

The first time I ate at a restaurant alone, I almost had a panic attack.

I'm serious. I walked in, told the hostess, "Table for one," and my voice cracked like I was confessing a crime. She seated me at a little two-top near the window -- with that empty chair across from me just staring -- and I immediately pulled out my phone so I could look busy. God forbid anyone in that restaurant think I was alone because I didn't have options.

I ordered fast. I ate fast. I tipped too much out of some weird guilt, and I left feeling like I had survived something traumatic.

That was then.

Now? Now I request the good table. The one by the window with the view. I order appetizers and dessert. I bring a book or I bring nothing at all. I sit there, and I savor every bite, every sip, every moment of peace. And when the server asks, "Just one tonight?" I say, "Yes, just me," and I say it like I'm announcing royalty.

Because I am.

There is an art to being alone in public, and it is one of the most liberating skills a woman can develop. We have been conditioned to believe that doing things solo is sad -- that restaurants, movies, vacations, and concerts are designed for groups and couples, and that a woman alone is a woman who couldn't find anyone to join her.

Wrong. A woman alone is a woman who doesn't need anyone to join her. There's a difference, and it's everything.

I want you to start dating yourself. And I don't mean that in the cheesy, self-help-poster kind of way. I mean it literally. I want you to take yourself out. Plan it like you would plan a date with someone you're trying to impress.

Pick a restaurant you've been wanting to try. Get dressed. Not sweatpants-and-a-ponytail dressed -- actually dressed. Put on something that makes you feel good. Drive there with your favorite music playing. Walk in with your chin up. Sit down. Order what you want, not what's cheapest. Be present.

And here's the challenge: put your phone away. Not face-down on the table -- in your bag. Because the whole point of a solo date is to practice being comfortable with yourself without a screen as a security blanket.

Notice the food. Notice the ambiance. Notice how it feels to not have to make conversation, to not have to consider someone else's preferences, to not have to split the check or argue about the tip. Notice the freedom of it.

Now expand it. Go to a movie alone. Go to a museum. Go to a concert. Take a weekend trip to a city you've never visited. Book a hotel room with a big bathtub and room service and spend an entire Saturday doing absolutely nothing.

I took myself to Paris once. Solo. And people looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "You went to Paris? Alone?" they said, as if the city would somehow be less beautiful without a man standing next to me in front of the Eiffel Tower.

It wasn't less beautiful. It was more beautiful. Because I saw it through my own eyes, at my own pace, without compromise. I ate croissants at midnight because no one was there to tell me it was too late. I wandered

through side streets with no itinerary. I sat in a café for three hours and watched the world go by, and not once did I feel lonely.

I felt alive.

Solo experiences teach you something that coupled experiences never can: that your own company is enough. That you are interesting. That you are fun. That you don't need an audience to enjoy your life.

The discomfort of doing things alone is temporary. The confidence you build from doing it is permanent. Every solo dinner, every solo trip, every solo movie is a deposit into your self-worth account. And eventually, that account gets so full that the idea of settling for bad company just to avoid being alone becomes laughable.

You won't miss the empty chair across from you. You'll be too busy enjoying the view from your own seat.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

Friends With Benefits... And Boundaries

Okay, let's get into it. Because I know some of you are reading this book thinking, "That's cute, Merlene, but I still have needs."

Yes, you do. And that's perfectly fine.

Being single doesn't mean being celibate -- unless you want it to, and if so, more power to you. But for those of you who are out there navigating the complicated, confusing, sometimes exhilarating world of casual relationships, situationships, and friends-with-benefits arrangements, we need to have a real talk.

Because here's the truth about FWBs: they can work. But only if you are ruthlessly honest -- with yourself first, and with the other person second.

The first question you need to ask yourself before entering any casual arrangement is this: Am I genuinely okay with this being casual, or am I secretly hoping it turns into something more?

Be honest. Because if the answer is the second one, you are not in a casual arrangement. You are in a trap you built for yourself. And it will hurt. Not because casual relationships are inherently painful, but because you're lying to yourself about what you want, and lies always catch up to you.

I've seen too many brilliant, beautiful women pretend they were cool with situationships when they were anything but. They played it casual on the

outside -- "Oh, we're just having fun, it's not serious" -- while on the inside they were analyzing every text, every look, every silence, trying to decode whether this man was falling for them.

Sis. If you have to decode it, it's not there.

Now, if you are genuinely in a place where casual works for you -- where you can enjoy physical connection without emotional attachment, where you can walk away without looking back, where it adds to your life rather than draining it -- then let's talk about how to do it right.

Rule number one: Boundaries are non-negotiable. Before anything physical happens, you need to have a conversation. An actual, grown-up, look-each-other-in-the-eye conversation about what this is and what it isn't. You are not "exclusive." You are not "building toward something." You are two adults who enjoy each other's company in a specific context. Say it out loud. Make sure you both mean it.

Rule number two: Check in with yourself regularly. Feelings change. What was casual three months ago might not feel casual anymore. If you notice that you're checking your phone more, that you're jealous when they mention other people, that you're starting to imagine a future -- stop. Reassess. Be willing to walk away if the arrangement is no longer serving your peace.

Rule number three: Protect your health. Always. Without exception. Without apology. This is non-negotiable regardless of how attractive they are or how "caught up in the moment" you feel. Your health is not collateral.

Rule number four: Don't let anyone make you feel ashamed. There are people who will judge you. People who think a woman who enjoys casual connections is somehow less than. Those people are projecting their own issues onto your life. Your body, your choices,

your business.

Rule number five: Know when to close the chapter. FWB arrangements have a shelf life. They're not designed to go on forever. When it starts to feel stale, complicated, or emotionally messy, end it. Cleanly. With kindness and clarity. No ghosting. No drama. Just a simple, "This was great, but I'm moving on."

The key to all of this is self-awareness. A seasoned woman knows the difference between a decision and a default. She doesn't fall into situationships accidentally. She enters them with her eyes open, her boundaries firm, and her self-worth intact.

You can enjoy connection without commitment. You can have fun without losing yourself. You can be single, sexually liberated, and emotionally healthy all at the same time.

Just make sure you're the one holding the reins.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Your Mama Asks "When You Getting Married?"

You know the scene. It's Thanksgiving. You're minding your business, reaching for the mac and cheese, feeling good about life. And then it comes. Like clockwork. Like a missile wrapped in love and passive aggression.

"So... you seeing anybody?"

It might be your mama. Your auntie. Your grandmother. Your well-meaning coworker. Your hairdresser. The lady at church who has been praying for your husband since 2014. Somebody, somewhere, is always ready to remind you that your ring finger is empty, as if you hadn't noticed.

And let me tell you something: it never stops. It doesn't matter if you just got promoted, bought a house, traveled to three countries, or solved world hunger. The first question is always about your relationship status. Always.

I used to get defensive about it. I'd snap back. I'd over-explain. I'd launch into a whole speech about how I'm perfectly happy, thank you very much, and I don't need a man to validate my existence, and could we please change the subject before I flip this table?

But then I realized something: their question says more about them than it does about me.

When your mama asks when you're getting married, she's not trying to

insult you. She's speaking from a generation that measured a woman's success by her marital status. She's worried about you because in her world, an unmarried woman was an unprotected woman. She loves you. She just loves you in a language that doesn't always translate to your reality.

When your auntie side-eyes you at the family reunion, she's projecting. Maybe she settled. Maybe she wishes she hadn't. Maybe she's jealous of your freedom but would never admit it. Maybe she genuinely cannot fathom that a woman could be happy alone because she's never experienced it.

When your coworker says, "Don't worry, you'll find someone," she's operating from the assumption that you're worried. That you're searching. That your singleness is a problem in need of a solution. She means well. She's just wrong.

So how do you handle it? Here are a few approaches I've tested over the years:

The Graceful Redirect: "I'm in a great place right now. Tell me about what's going on with you!" This works beautifully because most people asking about your love life would much rather talk about their own.

The Honest Answer: "I'm not in a rush. I'd rather be happily single than unhappily married." This one tends to shut the conversation down fast, especially around people who are unhappily married. Watch their faces. It's illuminating.

The Humor Approach: "When I find someone who can match my energy, pay their own bills, and doesn't think 'communication' means texting 'wyd' at midnight, I'll let you know." Laughter diffuses everything.

The Boundary: "I love you, but my relationship status isn't up for

discussion. Let's talk about something else." This one is for repeat offenders. Said with love but firmness. No apology necessary.

Here's what you don't owe anyone: an explanation. You don't owe anyone a timeline, a justification, or a roadmap for your romantic future. You don't have to prove that you're "putting yourself out there." You don't have to list the apps you're on or the dates you've been on or the reasons you're not with someone right now.

Your life is not a report card. And other people's expectations are not your assignments.

The hardest part is when the pressure comes from people you love. When your mama tears up and says she just wants grandkids. When your best friend gets engaged and you can see the pity in her eyes even though she's trying to hide it. When you start to wonder if maybe they're right. Maybe something is wrong with you.

Nothing is wrong with you. You are on your own timeline. Your life is unfolding exactly as it should. And the people who love you will eventually understand that -- or they won't. Either way, you keep living.

Pass the mac and cheese. Mind your business. And let them talk.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

Building Your Empire Solo

Let me paint a picture for you. You wake up in a home you own. Not rent -- own. You decorated every room yourself. The kitchen has the countertops you chose. The bedroom has the sheets you wanted, not some compromise between your taste and someone else's. You walk to the closet and it's all yours. Every inch. No one else's shoes. No one else's clutter. No one else's energy.

You check your bank account and every dollar in there is a dollar you earned. Nobody spent it without asking. Nobody gambled it away. Nobody promised to pay you back and didn't. It's yours.

That's not a fantasy. That's a Tuesday. And it can be your Tuesday.

One of the most underrated advantages of being single is the financial and professional freedom it gives you. When you're building alone, you're building for one. Every decision you make is aligned with your goals, your values, your vision. No committee meetings. No silent resentments about who spent what. No compromising your career for someone else's.

And I'm not talking about just getting by. I'm talking about building.

I want every single woman reading this book to think of herself as a CEO. Not someday. Right now. You are the CEO of your life. Your career is a department. Your finances are a department. Your health, your social life, your personal development -- all departments. And you are running the whole operation.

Let's start with money, because money is freedom and freedom is everything. If you are single and not investing in your financial education, we need to fix that immediately. I'm talking about:

- Emergency fund. Three to six months of expenses, sitting in a high-yield savings account, doing nothing but giving you peace of mind. Because peace of mind is priceless.

- Retirement. Max out that 401(k). Open a Roth IRA. Start yesterday. The earlier you invest, the more time works in your favor.

- Homeownership. If it makes sense for your situation, buy property. You don't need a spouse to get a mortgage. You need a credit score, a down payment, and the audacity to believe you deserve a house with your name on the deed.

- Investments. Stocks, index funds, real estate, a business -- put your money somewhere it can grow. Stop letting it sit in a checking account being disrespected by inflation.

- Insurance and estate planning. Yes, even single women need a will. You need beneficiaries, a healthcare directive, and someone you trust with power of attorney. Handle your business like the boss you are.

Now let's talk career. Being single gives you a professional advantage that coupled people sometimes envy quietly. You can take the risky job in the new city. You can go back to school. You can start the side hustle at midnight without worrying about waking anyone up. You can say yes to the opportunity that requires travel, long hours, or relocation without a single negotiation.

Use that advantage. Don't waste it waiting for your "real life" to start. This is your real life. Invest in yourself like you're the best stock on the market -- because you are.

I also want to talk about building your own table. You've heard the saying: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, build your own table." As a single woman, you don't just need a seat. You need the whole table. And the chairs. And the chandelier. Build a life so solid that if a partner comes along, they're joining something magnificent -- not building the foundation with you.

Because here's the thing: when you build with someone, you also risk losing it with someone. Divorce splits assets. Breakups derail businesses. Shared finances become battlefields. But what you build alone? That's yours forever. Nobody can take it in a settlement. Nobody can claim half. Nobody can walk away and leave you starting over.

That's not pessimism. That's protection.

Am I saying never share your life with someone? No. I'm saying build yours first. Build it so strong, so stable, so beautifully yours that anything anyone adds to it is a bonus, not a necessity.

You are not waiting for someone to build with. You are building. Right now. Brick by brick. Dollar by dollar. Dream by dream. And that empire? It's going to be glorious.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

The Loneliness Hour -- And How to Survive It

I'd be lying if I told you being single was sunshine and empowerment every minute of every day. I'd be lying if I said I never had those moments -- the ones that hit at 11 p.m. on a Sunday, when the apartment is too quiet and the bed is too big and you scroll through your phone looking for someone to text but everyone is busy living their coupled-up lives.

I call it the Loneliness Hour. And every single woman knows exactly what I'm talking about.

It's not all the time. That's what makes it sneaky. You can go weeks feeling like the most powerful, independent, self-sufficient woman on the planet. You're thriving. You're booked and busy. You're living your best life. And then one random Tuesday, for no identifiable reason, it hits you like a wave. That ache. That hollow, chest-heavy feeling of wanting someone to be there.

Not there sexually. Not there practically. Just... there. Someone to say goodnight to. Someone whose breathing you can hear in the dark. Someone who knows, without you having to explain, that today was hard.

I want to validate that feeling right now. It is real. It is valid. And it does not make you weak, desperate, or contradictory. You can love your single life and still feel lonely sometimes. Those two things are not mutually exclusive. They coexist, and pretending they don't is dishonest.

But here's what I need you to understand: loneliness is a feeling. It is not a fact. It is not evidence that something is wrong with you. It is not proof that you made a mistake by not settling for the last person who offered you something mediocre. It is a temporary emotional weather pattern, and like all weather, it passes.

The danger of the Loneliness Hour isn't the feeling itself. It's what you do with it. It's the 11 p.m. text to the ex who doesn't deserve your attention. It's the download of the dating app you deleted last month. It's the spiral of self-doubt that sounds like, "What if this is it? What if I end up alone forever? What if I'm the problem?"

You are not the problem. And "alone forever" is a story your fear tells you at its loudest hour. Don't make decisions at your lowest frequency.

So what do you do when the Loneliness Hour hits? You survive it. And then you thrive past it. Here's how:

Feel it. Don't numb it. Don't scroll past it. Don't pour wine on it. Sit with the feeling. Let it move through you. Cry if you need to. Journal if that helps. But don't run from it, because what you run from chases you.

Name it. "I'm feeling lonely right now. This is temporary. This does not define my life." Words have power. Naming a feeling strips it of some of its intensity.

Call someone. Not the ex. A friend. A sister. Your mama. Someone who loves you without conditions. You don't have to explain why you're calling. Just hearing another voice can dissolve the isolation.

Move your body. Walk. Stretch. Dance in your living room at midnight. Physical movement shifts emotional energy faster than almost anything else.

Create something. Write. Cook. Draw. Rearrange your furniture. When you channel lonely energy into creative energy, you transform pain into purpose.

Remember your why. You are single for a reason. Maybe you chose it. Maybe life chose it for you. Either way, you are here because you refused to accept a love that was less than you deserve. That is not a failure. That is courage.

The Loneliness Hour will come again. It always does. But each time it comes, it stays a little shorter. Because each time you survive it without compromising your standards, without texting the wrong person, without spiraling into self-pity, you get stronger. You prove to yourself that you can handle your own darkness.

And a woman who can handle her own darkness? She is unstoppable.

The quiet nights don't define you. The way you move through them does.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

Dating After 30, 40, 50 -- The Real Tea

If one more person tells me that dating gets harder as you get older, I'm going to scream. Into a pillow. With style.

Because here's the actual truth: dating doesn't get harder. Your tolerance for nonsense gets lower. And that is not the same thing.

At 22, you had time to waste on a man who "wasn't sure what he wanted."
At 35? Baby, you know what you want, and you know what he wants, and if those two things don't align by dessert, you're asking for the check.

That's not difficult. That's efficient.

But let's be real about what dating looks like at different stages, because every decade has its own flavor -- some sweet, some spicy, some absolutely ridiculous.

Dating in your 30s is when you start to feel the pressure. Not from yourself, necessarily, but from the world. Everyone around you is getting engaged, married, pregnant, posting family photos with matching outfits. And you're over here trying to figure out if the guy you met on the app is actually six feet tall or if that's just his Hinge personality.

Your 30s are when the biological clock conversation starts -- whether you want it to or not. People ask about your "timeline" as if your uterus has a project manager. Here's what I need you to know: your 30s are not a deadline. They are a prime. You are more confident, more established,

more self-aware than you've ever been. You are dating from a position of strength, not desperation. Use that.

Dating in your 40s is when it gets interesting. By now, most of the games are over. You've seen every play in the playbook. You can spot a liar in the first five minutes. You can tell the difference between a man who's genuinely interested and a man who's just bored and scrolling.

Your 40s are also when you might be dating people with more complex lives -- ex-spouses, children, custody arrangements, baggage that requires its own moving truck. That's not a dealbreaker. But it does require discernment. You're not just choosing a partner; you're choosing a situation. Make sure it's one you actually want to be in.

The beauty of dating in your 40s is that you no longer perform. You show up as yourself -- the real, unfiltered, take-it-or-leave-it version of yourself. And if they leave it? Good. You just saved yourself six months of pretending to be someone you're not.

Dating in your 50s and beyond is the plot twist nobody warned you about: it can actually be fun. By this point, you have lived. You have survived things that would make a movie. You have nothing left to prove and everything left to enjoy.

The stakes feel different because they are different. You're not looking for someone to build a life with -- you've already built one. You're looking for someone to enjoy it with. And if nobody shows up who's worth your Saturday night? Fine. You'll enjoy it yourself. You're very good at that by now.

Now, let's talk about the apps. Because if you're dating in any decade right now, you're probably on one. Or seven. And the apps are a whole experience.

Here's my advice: treat dating apps like a buffet, not a marriage mart. Browse. Sample. Don't commit to anything based on a profile picture and a bio that says "I love to laugh" -- as if laughing were a unique personality trait and not a basic human function.

Set boundaries with the apps. Give yourself a time limit. Don't let swiping become your evening hobby. And for the love of everything holy, do not let a stranger's failure to text you back ruin your day. That person doesn't know you. Their silence is not a verdict on your worth.

Also: real life still exists. People meet at coffee shops, grocery stores, book clubs, gyms, airports, and weddings. They meet through friends. They meet at work. They meet in the most random, unscripted, un-algorithm-able ways possible. So look up from your phone once in a while. The love of your life might be standing right next to you in the produce aisle, squeezing avocados.

Or not. And that's fine too.

Because at every age, the goal is not to find someone. The goal is to live so fully that if someone shows up, they're joining a life that's already magnificent. And if they don't show up? The life is still magnificent.

That's the real tea. Sip it slow.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Healing the Daddy Wounds

This is the chapter that's going to hurt a little. Maybe a lot. But I need you to stay with me, because this might be the most important conversation in this entire book.

Let's talk about your father.

Whether he was absent, abusive, emotionally unavailable, inconsistent, or just... not what you needed him to be, the relationship you had -- or didn't have -- with your father shaped the way you love. It shaped the way you receive love. It shaped the way you choose partners. And until you look at it honestly, it will keep shaping you in ways you don't even realize.

I'm not here to bash fathers. Some of you had wonderful dads, and I celebrate that. But some of you -- many of you -- grew up with a hole where a father's love was supposed to be. And you've been trying to fill it ever since.

Maybe you've been drawn to unavailable men because unavailability feels familiar. It feels like home -- not because it's healthy, but because it's what you know. The man who only calls when he wants something? He feels normal to you because your father only showed up when it was convenient. The man who promises and never delivers? He feels safe because you learned early that love comes with disappointment attached.

Maybe you've been a people-pleaser, bending yourself into pretzels to earn affection because you spent your childhood trying to be good enough to

make Daddy stay. Maybe you've confused jealousy with love, control with commitment, intensity with intimacy. Maybe you've tolerated treatment from partners that you never should have tolerated because deep down, some part of you believed you didn't deserve better.

These are daddy wounds. And they are not your fault. But healing them is your responsibility.

Healing starts with acknowledgment. You have to name it. Say it out loud. Write it down. "My father's absence affected me. My father's behavior shaped my understanding of love. And some of the choices I've made in relationships were attempts to heal a wound I didn't create."

That's not weakness. That's the bravest thing a woman can do.

Next comes grief. You need to grieve the father you didn't have. Not the one who showed up for the occasional birthday. The one you deserved. The one who should have been at your school plays. The one who should have taught you what a good man looks like by being one. The one who should have set the bar so high that no one unworthy could clear it.

Grieve that man. He didn't exist for you, and that loss is real. It's okay to mourn something you never had.

Then comes the hardest part: breaking the pattern. Because once you see it -- once you really see how your father's absence has been running the show in your love life -- you can't unsee it. And you have a choice. You can keep choosing partners who recreate the wound, or you can choose differently.

Choosing differently feels wrong at first. It feels boring. The emotionally available man who calls when he says he will and shows up when he promises? He might not give you butterflies, because your nervous system has been wired to confuse anxiety with excitement. The stable, consistent, present partner might feel "too nice" or "too easy" because you've been

conditioned to associate love with struggle.

That's the wound talking. Not your heart.

Therapy helps. I'll say it plainly. If you have daddy wounds, a good therapist can help you untangle the patterns that have been running your love life from the shadows. There is no shame in sitting across from a professional and saying, "I think my relationship with my father messed me up, and I need help fixing it."

Journaling helps. Writing letters you'll never send -- to your father, to your younger self, to the men who benefited from your unhealed wounds -- can release emotions you didn't even know you were carrying.

Community helps. Talking to other women who understand. Women who get it because they lived it. There is power in shared stories. There is healing in being heard.

And eventually, after the acknowledgment, the grief, the therapy, the journaling, the hard conversations, and the even harder choices -- eventually, you get to the other side. And on the other side is this: a woman who no longer seeks her father's love in a partner's eyes. A woman who gives herself the validation she was never given. A woman who chooses partners based on alignment, not on unconscious patterns.

That woman is free. And she is you. She's always been you. She was just waiting for you to come find her.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

You Don't Need a Plus-One to Be Whole

Wedding season. Holiday parties. Work galas. Family vacations. Couples' cruises. Valentine's Day.

The world is designed for two. And when you're one, it can feel like you're walking through life with a neon sign above your head that says, "SHE CAME ALONE."

Let me tell you something: that neon sign? It's not real. Nobody is looking at you with pity. And if they are? That says everything about their insecurities and nothing about yours.

The hardest events to attend solo are weddings. I'll just say it. There is something uniquely brutal about watching two people promise to love each other forever when you're sitting at Table 9 next to someone's cousin twice removed, cutting your steak and pretending the bouquet toss isn't aimed directly at your ego.

I've been there. And here's how I got through it: I decided to be the most radiant person in the room.

Not the loudest. Not the drunkest. The most radiant. The woman who shows up in that dress. The one who dances like nobody's watching -- because she genuinely doesn't care if they are. The one who congratulates the couple with sincere joy, not hidden bitterness. The one who leaves the reception and drives home alone, with the music up and the windows down,

feeling full instead of empty.

Being radiant at events is a skill. And like any skill, it gets better with practice. Here's the secret: it's not about pretending you're fine. It's about genuinely being fine. And you get to "genuinely fine" by doing all the work we've talked about in the chapters before this one. By knowing your worth. By loving your own company. By understanding that your wholeness does not depend on someone standing beside you.

Holidays can be tricky too. Especially the ones built around romance. Valentine's Day is a \$26 billion industry designed to make single people feel defective and coupled people feel inadequate. It is a manufactured holiday that sells flowers, chocolate, and insecurity in equal measure.

My solution? I reclaimed it. Every Valentine's Day, I take myself out. Or I gather my single girlfriends and we have the most fabulous dinner anyone's ever seen. We dress up. We toast ourselves. We celebrate the love that we have -- for ourselves and for each other. And we go home feeling more loved than most couples on their best day.

Family vacations can also highlight your singleness. When your sister shows up with her husband and kids and you show up with a carry-on and a book, the contrast feels stark. But think about what you have that they don't: you can change your itinerary on a whim. You can sleep in. You can spend three hours in a museum or take a spontaneous day trip without consulting anyone. Your vacation is actually a vacation, not a negotiation.

I want to address something deeper here, though. The reason these events feel hard sometimes isn't really about being single. It's about being visible. It's about being seen as single. It's the fear that people are judging you, pitying you, wondering what's "wrong" with you.

And here's the truth that sets you free: most people are too busy worrying about their own lives to spend more than three seconds thinking about

yours. The woman who you think is judging you at the wedding? She's probably wondering if her husband remembered to book the babysitter. The coworker who you think pities you? She's probably envious that you don't have to ask permission to attend happy hour.

You are the main character of your life. Not the supporting actress in someone else's love story. You don't need a plus-one to validate your presence. You don't need someone on your arm to prove that you matter.

Walk into every room like you own it. Because when you own yourself, you own every room you enter.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Seasoned Woman's Manifesto

You've made it to the last chapter. And if you've been reading this book the way I intended -- with an open heart, a willing spirit, and maybe a glass of something nice -- then you're not the same woman who started Chapter One.

You're not different because I said something magical. You're different because you gave yourself permission to see what was already there. The strength. The wisdom. The beauty. The power. It was always in you. I just held up the mirror.

So here is your manifesto. Read it. Memorize it. Say it out loud. Write it on your bathroom mirror. Tattoo it on your soul. This is who you are.

*

I am a seasoned woman.

I have loved and I have lost and I have survived both. I carry my scars not as shame but as proof that I am still here, still standing, still open to what life has to offer.

I am not waiting. I am not paused. I am not on hold. I am living -- fully, loudly, unapologetically. My life did not start when someone chose me. My life started when I chose me.

I am not incomplete. I am not a half looking for my other half. I am whole. I was born whole. I have always been whole. No relationship

status can add to my wholeness, and no absence can subtract from it.

I refuse to settle. I will not accept a love that makes me smaller. I will not stay in a room that doesn't fit me. I will not shrink my voice, dim my light, or lower my standards to make someone else comfortable.

I honor my body. This body has carried me through every season, every storm, every joy. I will feed it well, move it with purpose, dress it with intention, and love it without apology. My sensuality is mine. My pleasure is mine. My body, my rules.

I enjoy my own company. I eat alone and love it. I travel alone and thrive. I sit in silence and hear my own wisdom. I am the most interesting person I know, and I will never apologize for savoring my own presence.

I set boundaries without guilt. My no is a complete sentence. My peace is not negotiable. I will protect my energy like the precious resource it is, and I will release anyone and anything that threatens it.

I build my own empire. My career, my finances, my home, my future -- I built them with my own hands. I don't need a partner to co-sign my dreams. I am my own investor, my own CEO, my own biggest bet.

I acknowledge my loneliness without being consumed by it. Sometimes the quiet nights are heavy. Sometimes the empty side of the bed aches. I feel it. I honor it. And I move through it, knowing that loneliness is a visitor, not a resident.

I have healed my wounds. The ones my father left. The ones my exes left. The ones I left on myself. Healing is not a destination. It is a practice. And I practice it every day, with courage and compassion.

I walk into every room like I belong. Because I do. I don't need a plus-one to be seen. I don't need a ring to be respected. I don't need

anyone's permission to take up space.

I am single. Not broken. Not lonely. Not incomplete. Not "still looking."

I am single by choice -- and the choice I made was me.

I am seasoned. Tested by fire. Softened by grace. Sharpened by experience. Flavored by every season I've lived through. I am not raw.

I am not bitter. I am rich. Complex. Delicious.

I am strong. Not because I never break, but because I always rebuild. Not because I never cry, but because I always rise. My strength is not the absence of vulnerability. It is the courage to be vulnerable and keep going.

I am spectacular. Not someday. Not when I find someone. Not when I lose the weight or get the promotion or check some imaginary box. Right now. In this body. In this life. In this moment. I am spectacular.

This is my manifesto. This is my declaration. This is my truth.

I am single and seasoned. And I am everything.

* * *

Closing Thoughts

If you take nothing else from this book, take this: you were never the problem.

You were never too much, too old, too picky, too independent, too loud, too ambitious, or too anything. You were always exactly what you were supposed to be -- a woman in progress, a woman in power, a woman in her own lane doing 90 in a 65 with the top down.

The world will keep trying to convince you that single is a deficiency. That you're missing something. That your life won't start until someone puts a ring on it.

Smile at the world. And keep living.

Because you know something the world doesn't: the ring is not the prize. You are the prize. You have always been the prize. And anyone who gets the privilege of loving you will be getting the deal of a lifetime -- because you didn't sit around waiting for them. You built yourself into something extraordinary while they were still figuring out who they were.

Go live your beautiful, single, seasoned life. Eat alone. Travel alone. Build alone. Heal alone. Dance alone. And when the right person shows up -- if they show up -- you won't need them. You'll choose them. And that choice, made from wholeness instead of hunger, is the most powerful love there is.

I'm proud of you. Now go be proud of yourself.

* * *

Final Thoughts

Writing this book was personal. Every chapter pulled something out of me that I didn't know I was still carrying. Every word was a conversation I wished someone had had with me years ago, during the seasons when I felt most alone, most misunderstood, most invisible.

But here's what I learned in the writing: I was never invisible. I just wasn't looking at myself.

I hope this book becomes the mirror you needed. I hope you dog-ear the pages. I hope you underline sentences and write "YES" in the margins. I hope you pass it to your best friend, your sister, your daughter, your coworker -- every woman who needs to be reminded that she is not a half waiting to be completed.

The seasoned life is not a consolation prize. It is the main event. And you, my love, are the headliner.

Until next time,

Merlene

* * *

Acknowledgments

First and always, I thank God for giving me the words when I didn't think I had any left.

To every woman who has ever picked up one of my books -- whether it was Sexy Mind, Keep It Hot at Home, or Give Yourself Grace -- thank you for trusting me with your time and your heart. You are the reason I write. Every message, every review, every "girl, that chapter changed my life" -- I carry those with me.

To my friends who listened to me read chapters out loud at 1 a.m. and told me the truth even when I didn't want to hear it: thank you. You are my village, my sounding board, my safety net.

To my family -- yes, even the ones who keep asking when I'm getting married -- I love you. Your questions come from love, even when they come with a side of audacity.

To every woman who is single tonight and reading these words: you are not alone. You are part of a sisterhood that spans every age, every background, every story. We are millions strong. And we are magnificent.

And finally, to myself. To the woman who sat alone in a quiet apartment years ago, wondering if she would ever feel whole. Look at you now, baby. You wrote the book.

* * *

About the Author

Merlene Sulph is the bestselling author of Sexy Mind, Keep It Hot at Home, and Give Yourself Grace. Known for her bold, unapologetic voice and her ability to make readers feel like they're having a conversation with their most honest, most loving, most real girlfriend, Merlene writes for women who are done with fluff and ready for truth.

Her work explores love, identity, sensuality, self-worth, and the radical act of choosing yourself in a world that constantly tells you to choose someone else. With humor, vulnerability, and a whole lot of sass, Merlene has built a devoted readership of women who see themselves in every page.

Single & Seasoned is her fourth book and, in her words, "the one I was always meant to write."

When she's not writing, Merlene can be found eating alone at beautiful restaurants, traveling solo to places that scare and inspire her, and reminding every woman she meets that she is, in fact, the prize.

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