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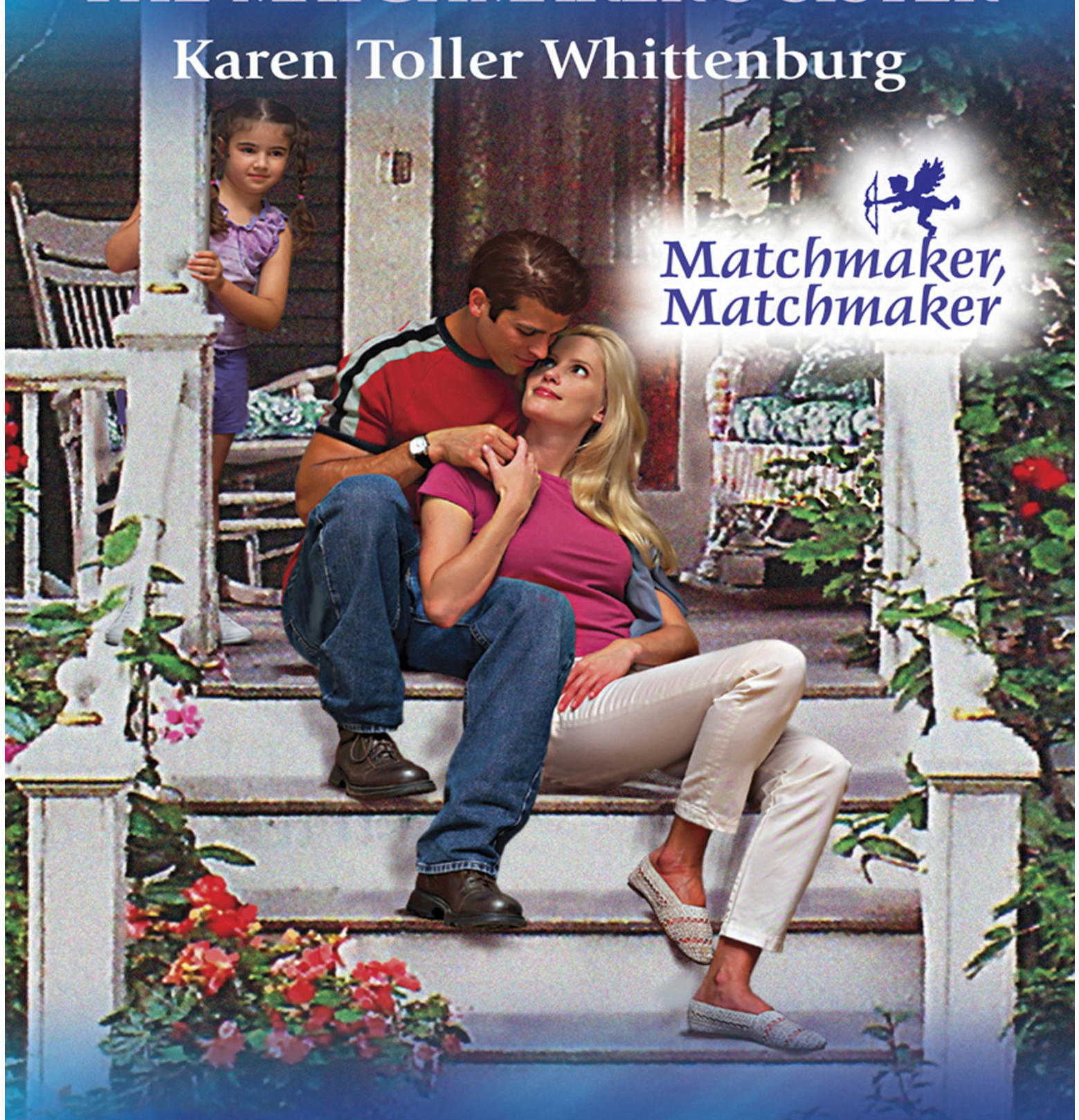
ROMANCE

THE MATCHMAKER'S SISTER

Karen Toller Whittenburg



*Matchmaker,
Matchmaker*



Mills & Boon American Romance

Karen Toller Whittenburg
The Matchmaker's Sister

«HarperCollins»

Whittenburg K.

The Matchmaker's Sister / K. Whittenburg — «HarperCollins»,
— (Mills & Boon American Romance)

Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Get me a date with a wonderful mate! Love's On The Loose In Providence... Nothing less than divine intervention can quell the commotion when the Danville girls of Providence, Rhode Island, get involved! Cool, confident Miranda is the take-charge beauty of the family. Not content with a simple silver spoon, she was born with a Day-Timer, too—and no one ever escapes her endless list of to-do's! But now the efficient Miranda is up against her sister, Ainsley, the family's intrepid Cupid, who's determined not to rest until she finds the man who'll make her sister part of a perfect pair. When four motherless children—and their handsome dad, Nate—arrive at the matchmaker's door, will Providence see another match made in heaven?

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Nate Shepard was everything Miranda had ever thought she wanted in a man. He made plans sporadically and changed them on a whim. He lived on the edge and loved it. He answered to no one but himself, took pleasure where he found it and made no apology for it. Life was big and he was living it.

It took less than twenty-four hours for his joie de vivre to drive Miranda crazy.

She didn't know how anyone could live at such a pace. She didn't understand, or much appreciate, his style of spontaneity. She didn't care if his glamorous lifestyle wasn't—as he put it—all it was cracked up to be. She only knew she couldn't live that way. She needed routine, schedules, plans. She needed stability and steadiness. She needed...Nate.

She longed for him with a frightening intensity, missed him as if he'd been out of her life for months instead of hours. And although she told herself she had what she wanted, in the early-morning dusk of a new day she acknowledged that she might have made a terrible mistake.

The Matchmaker's Sister

Karen Toller Whittenburg



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Toller Whittenburg credits her love of reading with inspiring her writing career. She enjoys fiction in every form, but romance continues to hold a special place for her. As a teenager she spent long, lovely hours falling in love with Emilie Loring's heroines, falling in love with every hero and participating in every adventure. It's no wonder she always dreamed of being a romance writer. Karen lives in Oklahoma and divides her time between writing and running a household, both full-time and fulfilling careers.

Books by Karen Toller Whittenburg

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE
822—LAST-MINUTE MARRIAGE
877—HIS SHOTGUN PROPOSAL
910—THE C.E.O.'S UNPLANNED PROPOSAL
914—THE PLAYBOY'S OFFICE ROMANCE
919—THE BLACKSHEEP'S ARRANGED MARRIAGE
1006—THE MATCHMAKER'S APPRENTICE

Monday, August 4

12:15 Lunch with Ainsley @ Torrid Tomato.

Re: WEDDING

Items To Discuss/**Decisions MUST be made TODAY.

1. Date/time**

a. October 31st too soon/not enough time to plan!

1) need at least 18 months

2) Halloween! (No, no, no, no, no!)

b. Time of Ceremony

1) Evening 8:30 (8?)

2. Place—Newport Methodist. No discussion allowed.

3. No. of Attendants** (Must be four or six. Not three or five.)

a. Candlelighters (More than two is tacky.)

b. Children?

1) Calvin Braddock—ring bearer?

a) Adam and Katie's little girl, Janey, too young for flower girl.

b) Does Ivan have a suitable family relation?

2) Children misbehave/create disruptions

4. Florist**

a. My area of expertise

1) My friend Cleo (First choice)

2) Victoria (If Cleo unavailable)

5. Photographer/Videographer**

a. Andrew's area of expertise

1) Contract/deposit?

2) Consultation meeting?

3) Portrait sitting—No discussion!

6. Reception**

a. Danfair—talk to Matt about date; put on his calendar!

1) If country club preferred, contact Jacques immediately!

2) Caterer**

a) Menu

b) Wine list

b. Entertainment**

1) Music selection

7. Miscellaneous

a. Invitations**

1) Calligrapher

b. Guest List

1) Deadline—1 week!!

8. TOO MANY DETAILS—TOO LITTLE TIME!!

a. Must persuade A & I to change date.

9. Buy Aspirin.

a. Ask Dr. Ivan how many constitute lethal dose.

b. Don't take that many.

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Chapter One

Miranda Danville knew how to plan a wedding.

She'd never actually done so, but, really, how hard could it be? Especially for someone with her organizational skills. Planning anything successfully—be it a full-scale wedding or the layout of a breathtaking garden—was simply a matter of making a list. Or several lists, depending on the size and time constraints of the project. Then items on the list—or lists—prioritized by importance, organized by category and subclassified according to when and/or where action was required. There had to be some flexibility, of course, but successful planning essentially consisted of making and following a list.

A concept that was obviously unfamiliar to the wedding planner who'd put together today's fiasco. Even taking into account the last-minute nature of the occasion—Miranda's cousin, Scott, and his bride, Molly, had nearly married once before, but at the last minute and for reasons still unclear to Miranda, the bride had developed cold feet, decided she wasn't good enough for Scott and instead of walking down the aisle, she'd hit the front door running. Miranda wasn't exactly clear, either, on how the two had reconnected, although she attributed some of the blame or the credit—depending on which family member she was talking with—to her sister, Ainsley, who was, as improbable as it still seemed to Miranda, an apprentice matchmaker.

But however the reunion had come about, once Scott and Molly found each other again, they weren't taking any chances and wanted to have the wedding they'd missed out on two months before immediately. If not sooner. Which Miranda conceded was a tall order for anyone, although in her humble opinion, that neither explained nor acquitted the person or persons who had arranged this event. The wedding that had taken place earlier in the evening had contained some major faux pas. Mistakes that almost certainly could have been prevented, even at short notice, if the wedding planner had taken the time to compile a comprehensive list.

The worst, however, turned out to be the reception, held at Oceanview, the Cliffside mansion Miranda's uncle Edward called his cabin by the sea, where the food was going faster than the buffet line. Any wedding planner worth her consulting fee might be forgiven for the unfortunate incident with the candles—the fire, after all, had been minor—and perhaps there had been no way to avoid the mix-up with the flowers or to prevent the fracas between the organist, the flautist, the soloist and the cellist.

But there was no excuse for the shortage of food.

Well, no one would have the opportunity to mess up Ainsley's wedding. It was going to be perfect. Absolutely perfect. The wedding of the year. And if that meant Miranda had to do every single thing herself, had to check and double-check every detail a dozen times, then that's what she'd do. Ainsley, the youngest of Miranda's four siblings, would be the first to marry and it was important that her wedding be an especially memorable event for the entire family.

For as far back as she could remember, Miranda had looked forward to birthdays, holidays or any other occasion that brought her parents home...even though they never stayed for long. Charles and Linney Danville were always leaving for one faraway place or another. Miranda had lost count of the many goodbyes she'd waved to her parents as they left their ancestral home, Danfair, and their children, Matthew, Miranda, Andrew and Ainsley, in order to help someone less fortunate in some other corner of the earth. And, as the Danvilles had an abundance of riches—much of it channeled into the philanthropic Danville Foundation—almost everyone was less fortunate. Which meant there was always someplace—other than the cliffs of Newport, Rhode Island—where Charles and Linney were needed.

Miranda knew she was fortunate to have parents who believed that great wealth demanded great responsibility and who, from the start of their marriage, were committed to making the philanthropic

work of the Foundation their mission in life. They traveled the world, bringing food, medicine and teams of workers to benefit the victims of war or famine, earthquakes or floods. Their humanitarian aid had helped so many, brought hope where none had existed, made such a difference in so many lives that Miranda couldn't begrudge her parents their choices, even if, on many occasions, she had wished for a more normal family life. One in which the parents were the primary caregivers instead of a series of nannies and an assortment of housekeeping staff.

The arrangement had made for an odd childhood for Miranda and her siblings—they weren't orphans, exactly, but they lacked the presence of a parent just the same. Their extended family consisted of one uncle—Edward, Charles's younger brother, Edward's wife, Aunt Ellora, and three cousins, Scott, Emily and Claire. No one seemed to think any crisis could arise that Uncle Edward couldn't handle, at least until Charles and Linney could make it home. And, as far as Miranda knew, it had never occurred to either Charles or Linney that their children weren't perfectly fine—even, perhaps, better off—inside the safe walls of Danfair than they would be under the roof of their uncle and aunt.

So, for much of the time, the four Danville children had been left to their own devices... watched over by strangers who kept them safe and provided for their basic needs, but comforted and cared for mainly by one another. Since there had been no one else to do it, Miranda had taken on Linney's role as mother to Matt, Andrew and Ainsley. She'd handled the little and large details of their lives. She'd learned to make lists. She'd learned to be organized. She'd learned to plan ahead. In the back of her mind, she'd always expected that one day there'd be an end to it, a point at which her parents would come home and take over the daily responsibilities of the children they'd brought into the world and she'd be free to live her own life without bearing—however cheerfully—the responsibility of caring for someone else's children. But that hadn't happened.

Until now.

Now that she, Matt, Andrew and Ainsley were all officially adults.

Now that Ainsley was going to be married.

For Miranda, the wedding represented a demarcation, a distinct separation between past and present. It was the signal for change, the moment she would feel free of the responsibility of caring for someone else's children. She didn't know why Ainsley's marriage seemed like such a milestone to her or why she felt such an obligation to make the wedding as grand and wonderful as possible.

Maybe it had to do with the fact that she was twenty-nine, closing in on thirty, and beginning to think that life was passing her by while she took care of running Danfair and smoothing the bumps for her siblings and her parents. Maybe it had to do with the fact that Charles and Linney were coming home, which was always cause for celebration. Their time at Danfair had always been limited and so their presence had become an event in itself, enough reason to celebrate. For them to return for their youngest child's wedding... well, in Miranda's opinion, that rated an extra-special effort.

And celebrations, as Miranda well knew, took careful planning.

A concept that wouldn't occur to Ainsley. She had never been particularly interested in thinking too far ahead. She went through life like a sunbeam, unconcerned about the details. And now that she was in love... Well, Miranda knew the task of putting together the wedding would fall largely to her. Somehow the details of her family's lives always fell to her. Always had. In one way or another, they probably always would.

"October?" Erica Hibbard, Miranda's best friend and most reliable commiserator, looked up from perusing the buffet table, a frown creasing her forehead, a cherry tomato speared on her fork. "But that's only three months away. It's impossible to put together a decent dinner party in that length of time, much less a wedding."

"Try telling that to Ainsley." Miranda searched the appetizers for something more appealing than a celery stick, but the trays were pretty well picked over already. There would, she decided, be no shortage of vegetables at Ainsley's wedding. "She and Ivan don't want to wait. They've chosen

Halloween as their wedding date and, so far, I haven't been able to persuade them to postpone their nuptials by so much as a week, much less until next year. No matter what argument I make, neither of them will budge."

"But didn't your parents just leave for Sierra Leone? Will they even be back before October?"

"They'll be home in time for the wedding," she said, not allowing the sentence to end with a sigh, although she knew Erica would have been very understanding. "Mother told me she knew Baby would be a beautiful bride no matter what the date or the weather. And she trusts me—can you believe she said that?—to help Ainsley put together a lovely wedding."

"Have you tried talking to Ivan? Maybe he has some sense about the practicalities and can persuade Ainsley to postpone the wedding. Or at least, to choose a date other than Halloween."

Miranda had to fight the urge to roll her eyes. "Are you kidding? Since they got engaged, he's been even less sensible than she is."

"But he's a doctor...and he just started his job at the new pediatric-research center."

Lifting an expressive "you-think-I-don't-know-this?" eyebrow at her friend, Miranda turned back to the depleted appetizer trays. "Nothing will get done if I don't do it," she said. "You know that as well as I do. Their wedding could be worse than Scott's and they wouldn't even notice." Deciding against the cherry tomatoes—potentially too messy—she followed Erica along the curve of the buffet table, picking up only two carrot sticks and a tiny flat-looking quiche to place beside the solitary celery stick, with some horrible-looking cheese mixture spread over the top on her plate. "That's the problem when someone as flighty as my sister falls in love with a man who's sunny side is always up. Practicality gets smudged in the glow of their rose-colored glasses."

Erica nodded agreement and ruthlessly stabbed several pineapple chunks in succession, nabbing the fruit just ahead of a solid-looking woman who was wielding a skewer from the opposite side of the table. "You'll have to handle everything," Erica agreed with sympathy. "And on such short notice you'll never get Amy Ellen Vanderley. She's always booked well in advance. Suzanne Sinclair told me that Millicent Richards has already put her daughter's name on Amy Ellen's client list and that child isn't even out of braces yet."

"I'm not going to hire a wedding planner," Miranda said, making the decision on the spot. "I'm going to do it myself."

Erica stopped in midcapture of a cocktail sausage—Imagine! Cocktail sausages served at a Danville wedding. There would be no such hors d'oeuvre at Ainsley's wedding. Period. No discussion.—losing the sausage to the skewer by a quarter inch. "Miranda!" she said. "You can't do it without a professional planner. There's not enough time. Even you can't work miracles."

Actually, Miranda thought she could come close...if she had enough time to make the appropriate lists, hire appropriate help and attend to the details of coordinating all the little items that made up a "miracle." "I can do better than this—" she gestured broadly at the scanty amounts of food—"in my sleep. And honestly, how hard can it be to plan a wedding?"

Erica's round pixyish face crimped with worry. "Three months, Miranda. Think how stressed you'll be."

Miranda didn't think she would be that stressed. She loved a challenge, loved being busy, loved proving she could do what others said couldn't be done. "Stressed is desserts spelled backward, you know," Miranda said, apropos of nothing. "I'll be fine."

"But what about the election?" Erica pressed, moving on down the line to trays that still held a few tidbits of smoked salmon, boiled shrimp and some sort of pâté. "Don't you need to do at least some campaigning to keep your city council seat?"

Miranda laughed. "The only person in my ward to file against me is Beatrice Combs and everyone knows her only reason for doing it is so she can fuss about the tourists. No one will vote for her. A sitting councillor hasn't lost a reelection bid in years. I'm not worried." Picking up the tongs, she captured a skimpy portion of shrimp and dropped it onto her plate. "I have several private

landscape-design projects under construction and the one large project still on my desk is an update of the Foundation's Peace Garden. But my busiest schedule is always late winter, early spring, when people start thinking about new landscaping. I have plenty of time now to plan the wedding."

"That's very optimistic of you."

"No, simply realistic." She leaned over the table, reaching with the tongs to secure a tasty-looking but rather soggy chunk of the salmon. "Ainsley is getting married in October whether I'm up to my ears in work or just sitting around twiddling my thumbs. I have to plan the wedding, Erica, or it will turn out worse than this one." She gestured to encompass the buffet tables again to emphasize her point, but the tongs made a sudden metallic clank as they connected with an obstacle of similar size and Miranda looked up just in time to see the chunk of smoked salmon fly through the air and splatter across a crisp white shirtfront.

Embarrassed beyond belief, she sent her gaze up the lines of a funky blue-and-yellow-print tie, past a solid, honest-seeming chin at the base of a charmingly handsome face. A pair of friendly, if somewhat startled, brown eyes met hers and a response as sweet as a hug wrapped around her, followed almost instantly by a quicksilver stab of attraction. He was attractive and the air felt suddenly charged with awareness, making Miranda almost grateful for the swift and distracting infusion of self-consciousness that warmed her cheeks. "Oh," she said, her voice a breathy rush that couldn't all be blamed on embarrassment. "I am sooooo sorry!"

His smile curved wryly as he plucked the salmon from where it clung tenaciously, and very messily, to his chest, and dropped it onto his plate. Then he licked his fingers. "In other circumstances, I might be a little upset that my shirt's messed up," he said, his voice unoffended and rich with humor. "But considering how hungry I am, I think I'll just thank you for sharing and ask you to toss over that celery stick."

She laughed. Breathily conscious of how flirtatious, how not like herself she sounded. "Really," she said, forcing her voice to a more normal pitch. "I'm very sorry. I don't know how that happened."

"Our tongs collided," he said. "It was fate."

Fate. He believed it was fate. The thought danced through her mind like fairy dust while she stood there smiling, feeling a loopy impulse to giggle. Except she never giggled, didn't even know how. "I don't believe in fate," she said, gathering some normalcy. "But I do believe in the power of club soda, and if I were you, I'd get some on that shirt before the stain sets."

He glanced down, then brought his whiskey-brown eyes back to hers, puzzled, interested. "Club soda, huh?"

"That's what I'd use," she began. "Unless I had..."

"Nate! You old son of a gun! I thought it was you!"

Miranda's advice trailed away, overpowered by the robust greeting of a slight, middle-aged man with more smile than hair, who'd cut into the line with the clear intent of intercepting the man she'd just been talking with. Nate. His name was Nate.

"I'd heard you were back in Newport, but I thought it was probably only a rumor," the man said, one hand clasping Nate's in a handshake, the other grasping his elbow in a good-buddy squeeze. "I'm glad to see you're not holed up in that big house, waiting for some of the old gang to come and coax you out. We're not any of us the party animals we used to be, you know. Though I don't suppose you're the good-time Charlie you used to be, either."

"Mark." Nate grinned and returned the handshake with gusto. "It's great to see you. I've been home about a month now. Trying to get settled. You know how that goes."

"Sure do," Mark agreed amiably, nodding as if he did indeed know. Then his expression sobered. "Deb and I were really sorry to hear about Angie. We just couldn't believe it. There's nothing to say except I sure wish it hadn't happened."

“Me, too.” Nate’s expression was somber for a passing moment, but then his smile returned. “Maybe we can all get together. Recap some of our college adventures. Do you ever see Dalton Hughes? Is he still around here? And Jenny Oles? What about her?”

Mark laughed. “I always thought you had a thing for Jenny. Before Angie came along, anyway. Well, the last I heard, Jen’s in Boston. Married to a...”

“Miranda?” Erica, two steps down the buffet line, gestured for attention. “You’re holding up the line,” she said, loud enough to be heard, quietly enough not to be overheard. “And I think they’re bringing out the wedding cake. Maybe we can at least get a piece of that before it’s gone.”

Miranda moved forward, forcing herself not to look back at the man whose name was Nate. He should do something about that stain, she thought. He really should.

NATE WATCHED HER walk away, admiring the graceful swing of her hips, regretting the interruption, wondering if he even knew how to talk to women anymore. As a single guy, that is. At forty-four, he’d been married nearly half his life, and spending almost twenty years with the same woman—while certainly a good experience—didn’t exactly keep the old dating skills honed and razor sharp. But then he’d never expected he’d want to date again.

Angie had told him he would, had several times expressed her opinion that he shouldn’t wait too long to start, either, as it would probably take a while to find a woman willing to take on a widower with four children. She’d also instructed the kids to be nice to any woman who was crazy enough to go out with him more than once.

That was Angie. Smoothing out the future her family faced without her, striking out at the curve-ball life had tossed to her.

“She’s candy for the old eyes, that’s for sure.” Mark’s gaze followed Nate’s, lingering on the slender blonde as she left the buffet line and disappeared into another room. “If I were a few years younger and slightly less married, I’d be tempted to give that one the old Lambda Delta rush.”

Nate frowned, bringing his attention back to Mark. “Watch it there, buddy. You make it sound as if we’re already over the hill. Unless you’ve been packing in a lot more birthdays than I have, we’re both still young, with plenty of good years ahead of us.”

Mark looked at him sadly. “We’re on the shady side of forty, Nate. A couple more birthdays and we’ll be getting our membership cards from the AARP.”

The American Association for Retired Persons? The official You-Are-Old membership card? Nate wasn’t even forty-five yet. Not until December, which was nearly six months away and he certainly didn’t feel that old, even if he was, technically, retired. “Whatever happened to ‘you’re only as old as you feel?’”

“Only old people say things like that.” Mark shook his head, as if there were only rocking chairs and dentures ahead for them. “I’m afraid we’re past the age of innocence, my friend. Women like Miranda Danville see guys like us—if they even look at us at all—as father figures. Or worse, as dirty old men.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Nate started to protest those equally unflattering images, but suddenly the name registered and he blinked in surprise. “Miranda Danville?” He repeated, looking toward the spot where he’d seen her last. “That was Miranda Danville?”

“The one and only.”

“But she used to date my kid brother.”

“There ya go,” Mark said, as if that proved his point.

And maybe it did, since Nate remembered Miranda as a long-legged coltish teenager. Which he supposed had been exactly what she was at the time. How long ago had it been? Fourteen, fifteen years? And why he remembered this one girl—out of all the girls Nick had dated—was a mystery. Maybe because Miranda had been beautiful even then. Or maybe he just remembered that summer visit so well because it had been the first time he and Angie had brought the babies home to meet

their grandmother and uncle. Will and Cate were thirteen now, so it had been thirteen years. Jeez, how fast the time had gone.

"I can't get over running into you like this," Mark said, clapping him on the shoulder. "It's really great to see you looking so well, Nate. How long will you be home this time? Or is the real question how long Uncle Sam can run the country without you?"

"He's been running it without me since May." Nate eyed the buffet table again. "I'm a civilian again."

"What?" Mark's eyes widened with envy and surprise. "Don't tell me you're retired!"

Nate nodded as he used a spoon to scoop some sort of rice mixture onto his plate. "Retired."

"Wow. Wish I could figure out a way to do that. Of course, I should have followed your example and taken the military route. Twenty years in the air force and here you are."

"Twenty-two years and, yes, here I am." Nate wasn't sure where, exactly, here was. But here he was, nonetheless. "Listen, it's great seeing you, too. But I probably should get on through this line before the backup causes a food fight."

"Not enough food for that. Don't know what happened. It isn't like the Danvilles to skimp on the buffet. Maybe they didn't expect such a crowd. You may not have heard that the bride left Scott at the altar last time they tried this. She ran off with some guy in a Batmobile. The family should have known everyone would turn out to see what would happen this time. Why, even you're here." Mark laughed. "But seriously, now that you're back, we're not going to let you be a stranger. Deb's around here somewhere. I know she'll want to say hello. Why don't I find her and we'll—"

There was a long drumroll, picked up from outside where the musicians were stationed and carried throughout the house by the sound system. Nate felt a moment's relief that it overpowered whatever plans Mark had been about to make. It wasn't that Nate was averse to seeing old friends and renewing old friendships. He'd been looking forward to it, in fact, knew it would be easier to make a life here, where he had roots, a history.

Angie had always planned for them to return to Rhode Island when he retired from the air force. No matter where in the world they'd been stationed, she'd worked hard to maintain the relationships they'd left behind. It was important, she'd said, that their children have a sense of home, a place where they felt they belonged. Now, especially, Nate saw the wisdom in that. The kids had never lived in Newport, had only visited from time to time, but already they were settling in as if they'd never lived anywhere else. Angie had been right about that, too...yet another example of her foresight. Nate was consistently surprised to realize just how well she'd prepared them to go on without her.

The drumroll faded and a deep voice announced, "The bride and groom will be cutting the wedding cake out on the east veranda in a few minutes. After the toasts, Scott and Molly will share their first dance as husband and wife. Guests are encouraged to make their way to the veranda now. That's the east veranda. Dancing will be outdoors near the pergola."

In the general hubbub that followed the announcement, Mark gave Nate a see-you-later clap on the shoulder and disappeared into the crowd, presumably in search of Deb. Nate left the buffet line, too, and wandered back to the table where his date was waiting. "They're going to cut the cake," he said as he slipped into the chair beside her and placed the plate of food on the table. "Do you want to go to the east veranda and watch?"

Charleigh Shepard was one of those women who improved with age, the years mellowing the taut angles of her elongated face and settling easily into the spareness of her body. At forty, she had looked older, but at seventy-three she had an agelessness that was both confident and benignly charming. Nate had never been able to decide if the softness had developed over the years as a natural evolution of her life experiences or if she'd cultivated the change within herself. He only knew she was his mother and that she was beautiful. Even when she allowed herself to frown...as she was doing now. "I watched the wedding," she said. "Isn't that enough?"

He laughed. “Now, Mother, you’re the one who wanted to come to this wedding. If you’ll recall, I suggested it would be more fun to stay home and play poker.”

She had a way of looking at him that said more than he wanted to hear about whatever topic she wasn’t going to discuss. It was a trick he tried on a regular basis with his own children. To no effect, unless he counted the times they laughed hysterically while imitating Dad-trying-to-give-us-the-look. “Okay,” he said now, giving in without her having to say a word. “I know I said I wanted to plunge right into the social scene. And I do. I just wanted another month to anticipate it.”

“You’ve had a month,” she replied tartly. “And the only thing you’ve done is putter around the house and aggravate the children. And me.”

“That’s not true. The kids always act that way. So do you, for that matter. And I’ve been fixing up the house and...and...” He warmed to his defense. “I’ve bought a building near the harbor that I’m going to renovate into a coffee bar. And I signed up to run for a seat on the city council. If that’s not plunging into life in the community, I don’t know what is.”

Charleigh sniffed, unimpressed. “At the rate your campaign is progressing, Nathaniel, even I won’t vote for you. For heaven’s sake, look around. Here you are at a wedding, surrounded by potential supporters, and if you’ve shaken one hand, I’ll eat my hat.”

“It would probably taste better than that rice,” he said. “And on the contrary, I have shaken hands. With Mark Olivant. Over by the buffet table. You remember Mark?”

“Of course I remember Mark. I also remember that he lives in Jamestown, not in Newport, not in our ward, and he will not be voting in our city elections in November.”

Nate frowned, undaunted by his mother’s chiding. “Jamestown, huh? Well, I won’t be shaking his hand again. Can’t waste perfectly good handshakes on nonvoters.”

Charleigh’s smile was affectionate, if slightly reluctant. “It’s good to have you home, son. Nicky isn’t quite the source of entertainment you’ve always been.”

“That’s because he pops in and out as if the house had a revolving door, never giving even ten minutes’ alert that he’s coming home and barely five minutes’ warning that he’s leaving again. If he’d spent the last twenty-five years only visiting you once or twice a year, you’d probably find him much more entertaining, too.”

“I’m thinking of moving to Florida,” she announced evenly as if she were merely musing on what the weather would be tomorrow. “Your aunt Tilda loves it there. She’s been begging me to buy a place near hers and I’ve just about decided to go down next month and check it out.”

This was new. And unsettling. “I offered to get a place of our own, Mother. I can still do that.”

She smiled softly, a little sadly, and patted his hand. “The house has been too empty for too long. It’s right that you and your children should have it. Lord knows, Nicky would sell it if he got half a chance. Revolving door notwithstanding.”

Nate acknowledged that with a rueful grin. “Or worse...raze it and build some architectural nightmare in its place.”

“Angie and I talked about this, Nathaniel. We agreed that the children need the security of living in the home in which you grew up. What they don’t need is a grandmother trying to fill their mother’s role...and you know I’d try to do that. I can’t help myself.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Nate said, wanting to believe it. “No one will ever take Angie’s place. Or her role in the children’s lives.”

“Maybe not for Will and Cate. But the little ones? Kali and Kori are barely seven. They’re still forming...and as much as I hate to say this, Nate, it’s clear to me that you’re not entirely comfortable with being a single parent.”

“No, I’m not,” he agreed, stung not so much by the truth of that as by the awareness that she knew it. “It’s going to take a while to be entirely comfortable with anything. If it’s even possible. Angie’s only been gone a year.”

“And she was dying for three years before that. You’ve grieved for her, Nate. Your children have grieved. Now it’s time for you to start out as you mean to go on. By plunging into life. For the children’s sake if not for your own.”

He thrummed his fingertips on the table, heard voices and laughter coming from the east terrace where the cake cutting must be commencing. “You sound like Angie,” he said finally. Because, really, there wasn’t anything else to say. His mother was right. Angie had known he’d be scared out of his wits at the idea of raising their children to adulthood without her. It wasn’t that he thought he was a bad father. On occasion, he was positive he’d been a damn good one. So far, anyway. But he’d depended on Angie to smooth any rough edges, to balance his tendency to issue orders, as he had been accustomed to doing in the military. He’d counted on her to be around to share the responsibility with him. He’d never in a million years thought he’d have to bear it alone. Angie had known all that, just as she’d understood, too, that he’d be tempted to allow his mother to take on some of that responsibility if she offered.

“She hoped you’d remarry, Nate. You know that.”

“Yes, I do. She probably figured I’d totally mess up the kids if left to my own devices. But, personally, I think she was wrong about that.”

Charleigh smiled. “I think so, too. But I did promise her I’d make certain you got into the social swing and stayed there. So let’s go see if the wedding cake looks better than this.” She nodded at the untouched food on the plate. “And then I’ll have some wine and watch you dance.”

He was already on his feet, extending a hand to help her up...because she’d raised him to be a gentleman. Not because she needed any help. She was a spry seventy-three and could probably dance circles around him still. “I wasn’t planning on doing any dancing.”

“Nonsense,” she stated succinctly, rising easily and taking his arm. “You can ask some lovely young woman to dance, or if you prefer, I can do it for you.”

“Angie put you up to this, didn’t she?”

“I do have an occasional idea of my own, but Angie did mention, several times in conversation, that you’re a wonderful dancer and shouldn’t be allowed to pretend otherwise.”

“How about I pretend I was adopted?”

“Too late, I’m afraid. You’ll just have to face your fear of rejection and ask someone to dance. It won’t kill you.”

“Oh, nicely put, Mother.” He guided her toward the terrace doors and the sounds of the orchestra playing an overblown version of “The Way You Look Tonight.” “So...are you going to tell me who you want me to ask or do I have to go through a painful process of elimination?”

“I saw that lovely Miranda Danville talking to you across the buffet line. Why don’t you ask her?”

“She used to date Nicky.”

“Yes, but I think we should forgive her that lapse. She was very young then.”

“And I was married and a new father.”

“And now you’re not.” Charleigh nodded, decision made. “You’ll ask Miranda. After we’ve tested the cake and had some wine.”

The idea of dancing with Miranda was undeniably appealing. Also a trifle intimidating. She was beautiful. Not that dogs howled maniacally at his approach, but he knew his face was more character actor than soap opera star. And Miranda was also young. Not that he was old, but Mark had just told him that women like her looked at men like him as...well, older. Not that age mattered. Angie would be the first to point that out if she were here. Which, of course, she wasn’t.

Which brought him right back to the question of how to ask a young and beautiful woman to dance.

He was still pondering the how of it when his mother eventually pushed away her cake plate, dotted her mouth with a napkin and lifted her eyebrows expectantly.

“More cake?” he asked hopefully.

Her smile told him the grace period was over even as her attention moved past him and up. “Why, Miranda,” she said graciously, “how lovely to see you.”

A long, slow tingle slid the length of his spine as he pushed back from the table and stood, turning to see the woman, who’d occupied most of his thoughts since she’d hit him in the chest with her salmon, standing at his elbow, a bottle of club soda clutched in her hand.

“You remember my son Nathaniel?” Charleigh said.

“Oh...yes, of course,” Miranda answered, clearly not remembering until that very second. “Nate.”

“I’m Nicky’s older brother.” He couldn’t believe he’d said the O word first thing. Way to go, Nate. “But I hope you won’t hold that against me.”

She smiled a little uncertainly. “I, uh...no. No, I always rather liked Nick. Although I haven’t seen him in some time. A long time, actually.” Her smile hesitated, turned from him to his mother. “How is Nick?” she asked as if she thought, perhaps, she ought to ask.

“Still wildly attractive and unattractively wild. From a mother’s standpoint, anyway.”

“Oh.” Miranda’s lovely eyes—blue with an intriguing touch of gold—flickered to Nate’s, returned to Charleigh. “I see his picture on the newsstands occasionally.”

Charleigh smiled, proud of her youngest child despite his shortcomings. “He’s very popular at Soap Opera Digest.”

Mainly because his private life was as full of bizarre intrigues as his alter ego’s, Daxson Darck, on Sunset Beach. But Nate didn’t feel the need to point that out. Nor did his mother.

Miranda hesitated, then turned to Nate. “I got some club soda,” she said, offering him the bottle. “For your shirt.”

Nate took the bottle from her hand with no intent of touching her except in the most casual way. But she had a grip on the club soda, almost as if she was reluctant to let it go, and his fingers lingered for a moment on hers. The spark of recognition flared, instantaneous and erotic. And he pulled back from the exchange almost as quickly as she.

“It’s so interesting that you should walk up just now, Miranda,” Charleigh was saying with a conversational smile. “Because Nate was just talking about you.”

“He was?”

A soft touch of color bloomed on her cheeks and despite every effort to stay unaffected, Nate was charmed to the core. She had felt it, too, that moment of awareness. It might have been a long time since he’d shared that first recognition of electric attraction, but it wasn’t the sort of thing a man forgot.

“Was he explaining how I ruined his shirt? I still can’t believe that happened.”

“Our tongs collided,” Nate informed his mother, pointing to the stain, which until that minute he’d forgotten was there. “It was fate.”

Charleigh glanced at his shirtfront. “Fate?”

“I was hungry. She was tossing salmon.”

“How serendipitous.” Charleigh’s smile turned to Miranda. “No, actually he was wondering aloud if I thought you might dance with him. If he asked. I was just telling him I was sure you would when, suddenly, here you are.”

Miranda looked surprised, but she didn’t seem appalled by the thought of dancing with him. Nate considered that a positive sign. Below the drape of the tablecloth, his mother’s foot nudged his. “Miranda,” he asked obediently, “would you like to dance?”

“Um, sure,” she replied doubtfully, her gaze flickering to his chest, then back to his face. “Unless you’d rather get some club soda on that stain.”

“Probably best to let the dry cleaners treat it,” Charleigh said, apparently believing he’d take any excuse to get out of dancing.

But even mothers were wrong on occasion. And although he might be on the shady side of forty, he was a long way from passing up the opportunity to hold a beautiful woman in his arms. “The club soda will wait for me,” he said. “The music won’t.”

He took her hand, seeking, and finding, that shiver of electric response, and led her to the dance floor, where he drew her into his arms. The song was as soft as the night air around them. And Nate felt like a young man at his first formal dance. Expectant. Excited. Uncertain.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said. “It’s been quite a while since I was in this position.”

She held herself rather stiffly, not exactly melting against him, but she looked up at that and smiled. And his heart skipped a beat. Maybe he was too old for this. “What position?” she asked. “Dancing?”

“Having my mother kick me in the instep until I asked you to dance. She thinks I’m backward with women.”

Miranda’s eyebrow arched prettily. “And are you?”

“I don’t know. I never thought so before.”

“Before she kicked you?”

He grinned. “Sometime around then, yes.” Relaxing into the rhythm of the music, he tried to draw Miranda closer, but she resisted, one palm pressed rather solidly against his chest. He didn’t insist, of course, but wondered if maybe she hadn’t wanted to dance with him. Maybe Mark had been right and women like Miranda viewed men over forty with suspicion. Or distaste.

But he knew he hadn’t imagined the attraction. Or the subtle blush still lingering in her cheeks. He felt the attraction now, was reasonably sure she was feeling it, too. And she didn’t seem the type to be nervous about dancing with a man, even if he wasn’t exactly the Prince Charming she might have had in mind.

On the other hand... there was her palm maintaining a curious, if not completely unreasonable, distance between them.

And then it hit him.

The stain on his shirt bothered her. She either didn’t want to come into contact with it or she felt afraid of making it worse if she did. He had to restrain a ridiculous grin from eating up his entire face. Either reason was perfectly acceptable to him as utterly, unexpectedly charming. She was worried about the stupid stain and it was all she could do to be out here dancing, instead of inside, at one sink or another, scrubbing salmon juice out of his shirt.

He stopped in midstep. “I’m sorry,” he said, taking her hand and turning toward the house. “But I can’t concentrate on anything except getting that club soda on this shirt.”

Her relief was instant and companionable. “I was thinking the same thing. The longer it sets, the harder it will be to get out.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he replied, intrigued by the warmth in her hand and completely captivated by the smile in her eyes.

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