

A PERFECT MATCH

by Lynne Marshall ©2008

Five minutes before closing the Men's Store, a man with beautiful silver-white hair rushed through the doors. Audra Lindsay bit her tongue. Business had been slower than her social life all afternoon, and now, when she looked forward to closing up and joining her friends for Canasta, this guy came barreling in.

"You've got to help me," he said with a desperate look in his Paul Newman blue eyes.

Audra's vision blurred when she stared too long at his golfing clothes. Bright, clashing plaids battled fiercer than Braveheart versus the Brits. A gold and green shirt and red and brown slacks almost hurt her eyes. She tried to concentrate on his face.

"I've got a date with a lady tonight. She, Darlene that is, told me I looked like Father Christmas run amok last week, and I don't want to embarrass myself again."

"That's not a very nice thing to say." She bristled at the cruelty of some women.

He smiled, and Audra's vision snapped back into focus.

"You see, I'm color blind, and my youngest daughter--who usually helps me pick out my clothes--is on a six week European vacation. I'm sunk without her."

The dear man looked so forlorn, Audra had to bite back a smile. Now if she were in the market for a mature man to date, this guy would fit the bill. But she wasn't sure if she was ready for that yet, even though it had been three years since Martin had passed on. In a time when her friends were starting to retire and wonder what to do with themselves, she was thankful for her part-time job and lots of hobbies that kept her too busy to think about it much.

"I'll be glad to help you. What is it you're looking for?" She used her salesperson voice and walked toward a circular rack stuffed tight with shirts of all colors and sizes.

He tried on three different sets and looked darned good in each one. Obviously, he kept himself in shape. Within half an hour he'd purchased a pair of slacks and a snappy sweater with matching socks and prepared to leave.

"Now that was painless." He grinned at Audra, and her cheeks flushed warm.

"In my humble opinion, you're going to look smashing tonight," she said, when she handed him his change.

"My name's Shepherd, and I'm deeply obliged to you," he looked at her nametag, "Audra." He winked and her tummy did a little flippity-flop. Maybe she was ready to date.

"It's been my pleasure to help you, Shepherd," she said wistfully, knowing she'd never see him again. But she had enjoyed every minute of helping him choose which slacks and shirt to buy.

On Monday afternoon, when she reported to work, she was greeted with a loud bouquet in a vase. She'd never thought flowers could clash...until now. The owner said they'd come that morning and handed her a note. She opened it and read: Thanks for your help. I hand picked each of these flowers, just for you. Shep.

How sweet. A smile stretched across her face, the likes of which she hadn't felt since her Martin used to tell her how beautiful she was. When she noticed the owner watching her with curiosity, she said, "Another satisfied customer. Maybe you should give me a raise."

He laughed and changed the subject.

The next weekend, around three o'clock, Shep came strolling in looking dapper, though mismatched. Audra laid down the romance book she'd brought to read during the lulls.

Lifting her eyebrow, she said. "Another hot date?"

He smiled and a wonderful feeling crept up her spine.

"I'm going dancing," he said, with a spring in his step.

"Gotta look good."

Oh, how she used to love to dance. Audra had often longed to take ballroom dancing lessons, but since she didn't have a partner, never got up the nerve.

"Well, we'll just have to pick out something special for you, then. By the way, the flowers were beautiful."

"I'd hoped you'd like them." He looked earnest, and it touched her.

She showed Shep her favorite shirt--a blue one that matched his eyes--and caught him watching her rather than the clothes when she held up the ensemble for his approval.

"Whatever you recommend, Audra. You're taste is impeccable."

When he came in the third week, she felt both happy to see him and angry. Shep shouldn't have to buy a new outfit every weekend just to please that picky girlfriend. She decided to be bold, like the heroine in the romance novel she'd just finished reading.

"You know, if it's only a matter of matching colors, I can

organize your wardrobe. I could put stickers on your clothes that said the color. You'd never have to clash again."

"That's a great idea, Audra." His blue eyes sparkled. "How about tomorrow, say two o'clock?"

How could she refuse? The next day, she walked up the steps to Shep's condo, worrying. What was she thinking, going to a strange man's house un-chaperoned?

Meeting her at the door with a smile, he had a toddler on his hip. "Come in," he said, brightly. "I'm babysitting for my son and daughter-in-law. This is Kate."

"Well hey there, Kate," Audra said, feeling her concern disappear.

Shep's provincial home looked comfy and inviting, just like him. And he had a natural rapport with his granddaughter that warmed Audra's heart.

After escorting her inside, he offered her some coffee, and while she organized and labeled his wardrobe, they chatted like old friends. Audra caught a glimpse of the two of them in his full-length mirror and thought they made a handsome couple.

But, she reminded herself, he was seeing another woman.

"How was your dancing date last week?" She tried to sound casual, but felt nervous prying.

"It was okay."

Audra studied him and cocked her head to the side. "Only okay?" she asked, her hopes at the possibility of something more with Shep suddenly buoying.

The phone rang in the other room. He rushed to answer.

"Hello? Darlene, I was hoping you'd call."

Audra's cheerful mood evaporated. She tuned out. *Darlene, the woman who makes fun of how he dresses, gets to date him. While I, the woman who appreciates a great guy when I see one, get stuck sorting his socks.*

*A moment later he came back to the bedroom with a pensive look on his face. "Can you pick out a special shirt for me?"*

If he meant something to her, she needed to be blunt. While labeling a forest green polo shirt, she dared to look into his eyes. "You know, if a woman can't tell what a wonderful man you are after a few dates, I don't think even wearing Armani will make a difference."

Shep switched Kate to his other hip, took Audra's hand and looked sincerely at her. "It's funny you say that because I just told Darlene we clashed."

"You did?" Audra's pulse kept time with the sudden surge of excitement and the feel of Shep's firm grip.

"I sure did. I've found a better match." Shep winked.

Audra thought she might need to sit down.

"You feel like going dancing tonight?"

Halfway to sitting on the edge of his bed, she grinned and shot back up. "Yes!"

"Well, what should I wear?"

She thought for a moment, while steadying her flutters, and handed him her favorite shirt -- the one that matched his beautiful blue eyes -- then realized her heart was already dancing.