

Inspired by Much Ado about Nothing
by William Shakespeare

Much Ado about
MATRIMONY

a novella by
Linda Fulkerson

ONE



“You got it?”

Tricia Waters patted a lump in her cross-body bag and grinned at Halle Holt, her younger cousin and best friend. “Yep. Let’s do this!” She clicked the lock button on her SUV’s key fob.

Linking arms, the two skipped toward the entrance of Ed’s Bridal Emporium. When they reached the double-glass doors, Tricia grasped the handle and paused. She grinned at the bride-to-be and said in a sing-song voice, “If you’re gonna get wed ...”

“You’re gonna need Ed!” Halle finished the store’s hokey jingle.

The pair burst into a fit of giggles as they crossed the threshold and entered the wonderful world of satin and sequins. Tricia stopped and took it all in. Had it been six years since she’d last been here? It seemed like a lifetime ago. And yet, it seemed like yesterday.

A larger-than-life cardboard cutout of Ed Stephens, the franchise’s founder, stood near the reception area. Consultants scurried about the sales floor, assisting other soon-to-be brides and their entourages. Racks of gowns, organized by color palettes, lined the left half of the building. To the right, an

assortment of all-things-wedding, from flowers and photographers to cakes and catering—even a travel agency—were arranged in neat stations, each attended by a set of specialists, ready to serve—a veritable one-stop bridal shop.

Nothing in the store had changed. But everything in Tricia's life had. Not wanting to spoil the mood for her cousin's special day, Tricia forced the memories from her mind. She grinned at Halle, who gave her a tentative smile. "You ready?"

Her cousin nodded. "Yeah. You gonna be okay with this?"

"Sure. Come on!" Tricia nudged her bestie forward and moved alongside her to the counter.

Within a few moments, a young woman with stylishly coiffed platinum-blond hair wearing a shimmering turquoise bodycon dress and matching stilettos strode toward them. A trio of aides, each with an armful of gowns, tottered behind their leader.

"Hi. I'm Fallon. Welcome to Ed's Bridal Emporium. I'll be helping you select the gown of your dreams." She reached her hand to Tricia, who nodded toward Halle.

"She's the bride."

Fallon's mouth transformed into a perfectly shaped *O*. "Of course." She immediately shifted her full attention to Halle.

The helpers busied about, hanging various-styled gowns on a nearby rack. Halle beelined toward a gown that shimmered with sequins and pearls.

"It's like something out of a fairy tale!" Halle traced the translucent bow at the back with her finger. She flipped the tag around and gasped.

"It's gorgeous! Is it your size?" Tricia reached for the tag.

"Yes." The bride-to-be spun toward Fallon and glared. "But it's *way* out of my price range." She pointed to the paper in the consultant's hand. "Did you read my responses to the questionnaire?"

Fallon's face contorted, and she resembled one of those shamed-dog memes. "Why, yes. I read what you *put*, but I also noted you're a nurse practitioner, which means you're

practically a doctor—” The words spilled quickly from her mouth.

“Which means I’m smart enough not to spend a fortune on a dress I’ll only wear once.” Halle cut her off. “This gown costs over four thousand dollars. My budget is three *hundred*.”

Tricia struggled not to laugh. Halle might be petite, but the family feistiness filled her small frame.

Fallon stiffened. “You were serious?” Noting the unwavering expression on Halle’s face, she turned toward the trio. “You heard her,” she snapped. “Check the budget and clearance racks!”

After an uncomfortable space of several minutes, the harried helpers returned with a fresh set of gowns for Halle to consider. Tricia found a chair and pulled her phone from her bag. A slip of paper fell to the floor. She picked up the tattered piece, slowly unfolded it, and read the scribbled word for probably the thousandth time. “Arkansas.”

Halle twirled in front of a nearby mirror. “What about this one?”

Her question disrupted Tricia’s musing. “Oh. *Um*, that’s lovely.” She hadn’t lied. The simple dress featured a slim-cut bodice that flowed into a loose A-line skirt. “How much?”

“Two eight-nine. But I’ll need a slip, which’ll be a bit more.”

Tricia stuffed the paper back into her bag.

“What’s that?” Halle didn’t miss much. Her gaze met Tricia’s, and she knew she was busted. “I ... *uh* ...”

“You *kept* it?”

Tricia lowered her eyes toward her feet. A corner of polish had chipped off her left big toe. Time for a pedicure. “Yeah. I kept it. For all the good it did me.”

Halle slipped into the seat next to Tricia, ignoring the scowl Fallon sent her way. If the woman worked on commission, she was likely counting the minutes until the end of this half-hour so she could move on to a more lucrative session.

“Hey.” Halle tipped Tricia’s chin upward with a finger. “It

brought you home. To me. And to your dream house.” She smiled.

Tricia brushed away a tear. “Yeah. It did.” She cleared the raspiness from her throat. “I threw away everything else—even all the pictures.”

Halle looked thoughtful for a moment. “You’d already broken up before I moved here. I never even met him.”

“Some days, I wish I hadn’t.” Tricia faced Halle and forced a smile. “So, what about this dress? Is it a winner?”

Halle stood and spun one more time. “It’s comfy. Like a nightgown.”

“Comfy is good. You ready to say ‘yes’ to your dress?”

She nodded. “I’ll take this one.”

Fallon pointed a finger at one of her followers and then toward the dressing room. “Candace, please help our bride-to-be out of the gown and zip it into a bag.” She glanced at her smartwatch. The high-tech gadget did nothing to accessorize her chic ensemble.

“Thank you for your time,” Tricia offered. Her curt tone was harsher than she intended, but she didn’t apologize. “Of course,” Fallon responded. She peeked at the bulky timepiece again and added, “Gotta run. Best wishes to your friend.” And she was gone.

Halle emerged from the dressing room, a soft glow radiating from her face.

Tricia smiled. “You look happy.”

“I am! I can’t wait until CJ sees me walking down the aisle.” She paused, and her expression softened. Taking Tricia’s face in her hands, she said, “God’s got the right guy out there for you. You’ll find him.”

“I thought Ned *was* the right guy. Until he wasn’t.” Tricia sighed. “But today isn’t about me. Come on, let’s check out, then we can splurge on some sundaes. You have plenty of room in that dress for a few more pounds.” She winked.

A slight panicked look flashed across Halle’s face.

“What’s wrong?”

“My purse! I don’t have it.”

“I don’t remember you bringing it in with you. Did you leave it in my vehicle?”

Halle shrugged. “I don’t know. I wonder if I left it at CJ’s.” She reached into her jeans pocket for her phone. After punching in a text, she glanced up. “But you’ve got the goods, right?”

Tricia laughed, patting her lumpy bag.

When they reached the checkout counter, the clerk wore a well-practiced smile as she rang up the order. “Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials. Your total today will be three hundred forty-two dollars and seventy cents. Will this be cash or card?”

“Cash.” Halle winked at Tricia, who pulled out a Pringles can and handed it to her cousin.

They both giggled as Halle peeled the lid back and shook out a wad of five-dollar bills. She counted them toward the clerk. “Five, ten, fifteen, twenty.”

The young woman stared at the mound of bills and sputtered, “Are you seriously going to pay with *that*?”

“It’s legal tender, right?”

“Yes, but ... I’m afraid I’ll need to call a manager.”

Halle put a finger to her lips. “*Sbb*. I’m counting.”

Tricia laughed out loud. May as well enjoy this experience as the maid of honor because she knew she’d never be the bride.



BEN MCINTYRE TOOK the steps two at a time until he reached the stoop of his best friend’s apartment. Anxious to see CJ again, Ben banged on the door.

When the door opened, CJ pulled Ben into a man hug. “Wow. The mighty doctor, returned from war. Or wherever you’ve been hiding since we left Ole Miss.”

"It's been a minute, right?" Ben chuckled and held up an envelope. "I brought pics and a brochure."

"Of the venue?"

"Yep." He took three long strides and reached the dining table. "You ready to move out of this matchbox into a real house?"

CJ ran his hand through his straw-colored hair. "Definitely. It'll be a stretch with both of us just starting our careers. We're saddled with student loans."

"True. But an endodontist and a nurse practitioner should make it just fine." Ben sighed and looked down. "Trust me, I'd rather have the debt and have my parents back."

CJ put a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, man. I can't imagine. How you making it?"

Ben sucked in a deep breath. "It's tough, I'm not gonna lie. Hopefully, things will work out for me to move here. Still waiting to find out about the clinic, but it's all good."

"I'll be glad to have you here." CJ moved toward the table and leaned over the spread of photos. He faced Ben and furrowed his brow. "Where are you staying? You get a place yet?"

"I have an accepted offer. I should hear something back any day. Oh, and I'm meeting with a lawyer in Little Rock later this week. Apparently, Mom's family had property here. Not sure of the details yet, but I'll know more about it soon. I found a room to rent in the meantime." He pointed to the table. "Well, what do you think?"

"Wow." He looked up at his best man. "You sure about this?"

"Am I sure of giving my best friend the wedding his bride has always dreamed of?" Ben laughed. "Yeah. I'm positive."

"Halle's wanted a beach wedding ever since she went to one when she was a little girl." He looked Ben in the eye. "No way could I afford this. And no way can I pay you back. Not for a long time, anyway."

"*Pfft.*" He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "It's a gift. Your wedding gift. I'm glad to do it. But I need to know now if

you're sure you want a 'destination' wedding. Too bad there aren't any beaches in Arkansas."

"Well, at least the Mississippi Gulf isn't too far away. Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks." He laughed. "It still feels weird calling you Ben. Why'd you change your name?"

He shrugged. "Some of my classmates said Ned was too stuffy. Asked if I had a nickname. So, I switched to using Ben."

"Well, it suits you. It's ... friendly."

Friendly. Maybe too friendly. That's what got him in trouble in the past. He shook off the memory. "Speaking of names, what's the story behind yours? I never heard it."

"*Ab*, that. My dad was a huge Jean-Claude Van Damme fan. I was born while he was deployed, and Mom got the names mixed up. My birth certificate says 'Claudio Jean.' When my dad returned stateside, he started calling me CJ."

"Which is way better, *Claudio*." Ben punched him in the arm. "Okay. Back to the brochure. There are some villas along the beach here for the wedding party. And here's a pavilion for the reception." He pointed to one of the photos.

CJ shook his head. "Halle's going to be thrilled. I can't wait to tell her." He brushed a tear from his eye. "Sorry. Got a little emotional."

"Nothing wrong with that." Ben gave him a light slap on the back. "The venue is Halle's present. Now, for yours."

"Mine?"

"Your official engagement announcement."

"Yeah? It's tonight. You made reservations for the wedding party at Joe's Place, right?"

"Yep. And I stopped by there on my way over here. It's all taken care of."

"*What?* I was supposed to handle that."

"No sense in you running up a credit card. My parents may be gone, but they ensured I'd be well taken care of should anything happen." He'd known his mother's family had money, but he was shocked at the amount he received following their

fatal car accident. "And if I can't use their blessing to bless my friends, what kind of schmuck would that make me, *hmm?*"

"It's just ..."

Ben shook his head. "Forget about it. You've found the girl of your dreams." He sucked in a deep breath. "Besides, it's not like I'm ever going to get married."

"You don't know that."

A sigh passed through his lips. "Yeah, I do. There was only one girl for me, and that ship has sailed."

Both of their phones dinged with texts.

CJ laughed and pointed at Ben. "You first."

He glimpsed at his phone. "I'm glad you said you were sure about the beach venue because they just slam-dunked my debit card for the non-refundable deposit."

"Already?"

"The deposit is due thirty days before the wedding, which is today. Haven't you been counting?"

"Wow. It's coming up fast."

"Yep. What's your text say?"

CJ swiped his screen, and the text appeared. "It's from Halle." He blushed a little. "She wants me to swing by her apartment and see if she left her purse there. She can't find it."

"Didn't you say she's out shopping for the big dress today?"

He nodded. "Yeah. But she told me her cousin was holding the cash for her. Probably so she wouldn't spend it." CJ grinned.

"I'm parked behind you. Let's help your damsel in distress and get her purse. Then we can go grab a burger."

"Sounds good. I'll text her back while you drive and tell her about your generosity."

Fifteen minutes later, Ben pulled his truck alongside the curb in front of Halle's house. He nodded toward another vehicle parked there. "Looks like she has company."

CJ scratched his beard. "I doubt she's home yet. I don't see her cousin's rig." He hurried up the sidewalk and dug in his pocket for the key.

Ben raised his eyebrows.

CJ laughed and shook his head. "Don't get any wild ideas. This is for emergencies."

Before he could insert the key, the door swung open. A man a couple of inches taller than Ben grinned at them. White teeth contrasted against his well-tanned complexion. "Well, looky here. The bridegroom has arrived."

"Jonathan. What are you doing here?"

Ben noticed the disdain in CJ's voice.

"I came to return your blushing bride's purse." Jonathan held up the bag, then leaned in and whispered, "She left it in my car when we were ... well ... when she was in my car." He winked.

CJ grabbed the purse from Jonathan's hands. "Give me that!"

"How'd you get in?" Ben asked, his voice terse.

Jonathan held up a keyring and dangled it. "I know it's rude to look inside a lady's purse, but when I arrived, and she was gone, I had no choice."

"Get out!" CJ demanded.

"You forgot to add, 'or else.'" Jonathan smirked as he stepped past them. "And I may have been stretching things when I used the word *lady*." He skipped toward his car and sped off. Ben had to physically restrain CJ from chasing after him.

"Nothing but trouble there, buddy. Let's go find Halle and hear her side of the story."

"Her side? You heard what he said. She was making out with him in his car and forgot her purse."

"That's *not* what he said. There are two sides to every story." Ben paused, thinking back. "And it's not fair to not hear both of them."

"You know what's not fair? My 'blushing bride' hanging out with that no-good—"

Ben released his hold on CJ. "Look. Take some time to cool off, and then tonight, you can give Halle her purse and listen to her side. That's all I'm asking."

"I'll give her her purse, all right. And I'll give her her

freedom, too, because she obviously values that more than our so-called engagement.”

“Come on, CJ. Try to be reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” he scoffed. “I mean, she’s always been a flirt. It was cute when it was with me, but she promised she was done with Jonathan.”

“They have a history? Is that why your anger went from zero to off-the-scale so fast?”

“I guess.” CJ sucked in a breath. “Looks like their so-called ‘history’ has made its way from the past to the present.”

“All the more reason to get Halle’s take.”

“Are you worried about me, or are you worried about the nonrefundable deposit you just spent for nothing?”

Ben took a step back. “That’s not fair, and you know it.”

“Well, I’m sorry you’re out that money. But you can have a party on the beach or find yourself a woman and get married there yourself, for all I care. I’m done.”

“Will you at least show up tonight for the dinner? Talk to Halle. See what she has to say?”

CJ blew out a long breath and shook his head. “You missed your calling. You should’ve been a salesman. You could always convince people to do things, even when they know it’s against their better judgment.”

“I don’t think going tonight and giving Halle her purse is against your better judgment. And it’s not about the money. I’m asking as your friend.”

After a long pause, CJ looked Ben in the eye. “Fine. I’ll go tonight and give Halle her purse.”