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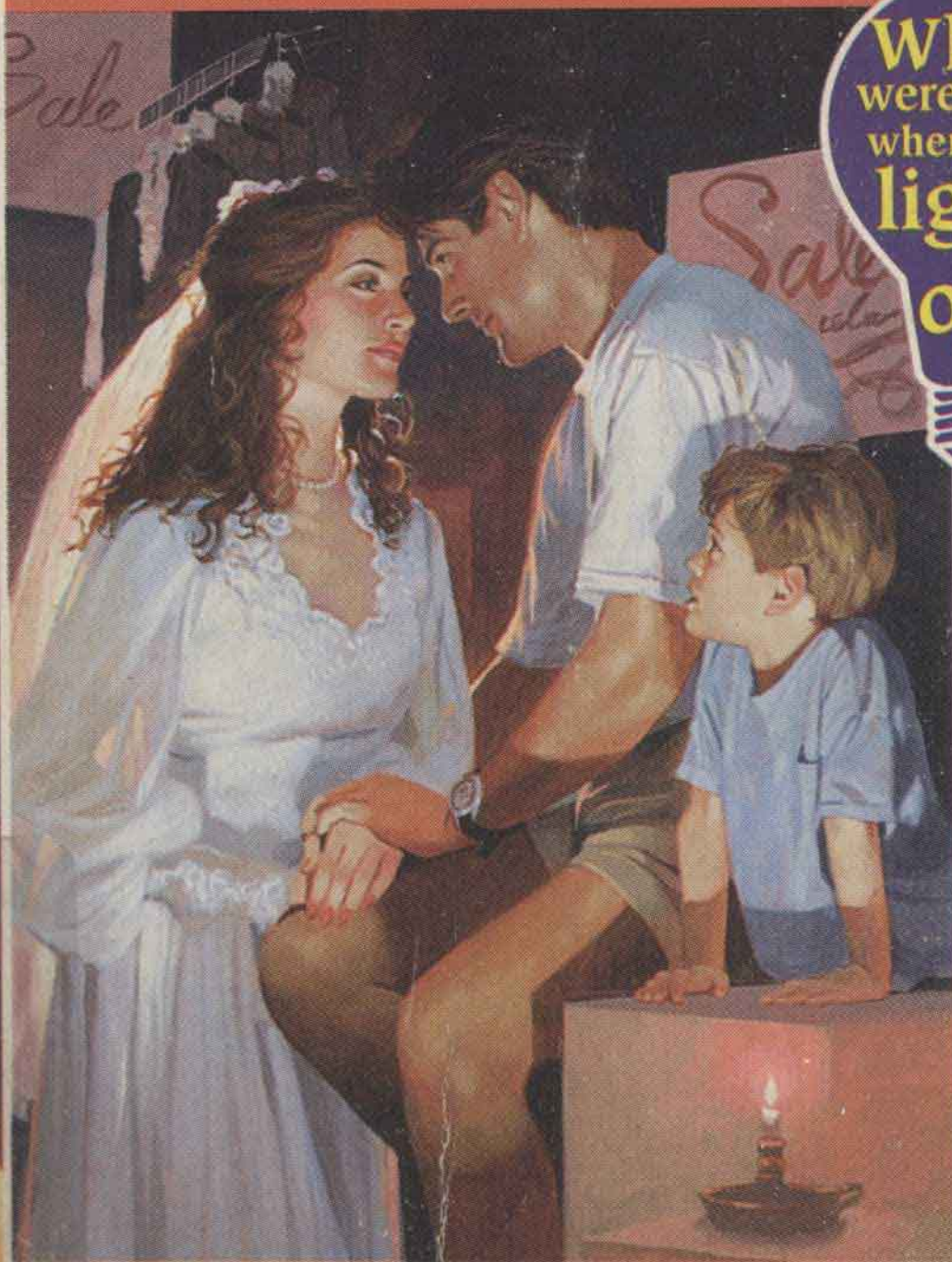
A M E R I C A N



R O M A N C E®

Linda Randall Wisdom

DO YOU TAKE THIS MAN...



Where
were you
when the
lights
went
out
?

You're
late for your wedding...
It's 100° in the shade...
Your limo driver is

psychoanalyzing you...
It's your birthday and you've
hit the big 3-0
And you've got a run in your stocking!
On the way to the church you
stop to buy a new pair...
~~when the lights go out~~

and the doors lock
shut—with you
inside!

Do you think
somebody's
trying to tell you
something?

**WHERE WERE YOU WHEN
THE LIGHTS WENT OUT?**

Dear Reader,

I can vaguely remember the great blackout of 1965, when most of New York went dark for the night. My family was at home when it hit, but some people were trapped in interesting places!

That's how it is for the three couples in this exciting trilogy that asks the question "Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?" started last month by Mary Anne Wilson's *Nine Months Later...* It's the Fourth of July, in the midst of a torrid heat wave, when a blackout darkens much of the West Coast. You're not going to believe the places and situations these couples get trapped in! Be sure you don't miss any of the action in the final book by Jacqueline Diamond.

My sister and I spent our blackout night listening to the Beatles on the radio. Trust me, though, these couples make much better use of their time!

Regards,

Debra Matteucci
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DO YOU TAKE THIS MAN...



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For Paula Detmer Riggs and Sharon Dennison who know what an important research tool shopping can be and are only too willing to suffer through such torture with me.
Now, those are true friends.



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DO YOU TAKE THIS MAN...

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Prologue

This wasn't at all what she expected as a marriage proposal.

"Think about it, Dru. All you've got to do is say you'll marry me. With all the business contacts we both have made over the years, we'd make an unbeatable team when it comes time for me to enter local politics."

Dru's smile froze. When Kevin had said he had something important to talk to her about, she had no idea he meant marriage. Funny, when she thought of a man proposing to her, she visualized candlelight, soft music, wine and a man telling her he loved her with all his heart and he couldn't live without her. She looked down at the sparkling diamond solitaire Kevin held out. She was afraid the ring would weigh down her finger so much she wouldn't be able to hold up her hand. She still stared at it, positive the stone was winking at her. It didn't seem all that pleasant a wink, either. Why was she hesitating? The man was a single woman's dream!

My daughter is almost thirty and doesn't have one prospect. I just know I'll die without seeing grand-

children. Of course, with that stubborn streak of yours, it might not be all that easy to find a man who can live with you. Her mother's voice echoed in her mind.

Dru's thirtieth birthday was only a few months away. It wasn't as if she had nothing to show for her life. True, she had her own temporary-personnel business, the bank owned more of her house than she did and, with luck, she would receive the pink slip to her car in another year. Kevin was the only man she had dated more than once in the past seventeen months. He was certainly a single woman's mother's dream come true. With his boyish blond-surfer good looks and tanned skin, he didn't look like someone who owned a successful automobile dealership with plans to expand into another county here in Southern Oregon in the next year or so. He owned a lovely home and was considered one of the most eligible men in the county. So what was the problem? Why wasn't she squealing with delight and launching herself into his arms with an unqualified yes? It's not as if marriage proposals came to a woman every day, as her mother would say. She took a deep breath.

"I would be honored to be your wife, Kevin," she said quietly.

Kevin was the one to whoop with joy. He threw his arms around her in a bear hug that threatened to crack her ribs.

"Let's get married on your birthday," he suggested with that boyish grin that had made more than one woman sigh. "Maybe you won't feel so upset you'll be thirty if we have something else to celebrate that day."

Dru bobbed her head. She wasn't sure even marrying would help soften the blow that she was turning *that* age. Still, she had a good idea this piece of news should make her mother very happy.

"HONESTLY, SAM, you need to get away from those computers more often," Carolyn teased. "Sometimes I wonder if you're not made up of circuit boards and microchips instead of flesh and blood. Of course, there are the times you prove that you aren't." Her smile warmed considerably.

Sam Winslow, known for some of the most radical computer games on the market nowadays, stretched his long legs out in front of him. He knew his jeans should have been tossed out long ago, but he was more concerned with comfort than looks. His dusty brown hair was also in need of a trim, and he silently made a note to get a haircut within the next few days. He had an idea he looked more like a bum than a successful computer-game designer. He felt guilty he hadn't dressed up more for Carolyn.

A criminal attorney for a well-known law firm, Carolyn Jeffreys—as usual—was impeccably dressed in a burgundy lightweight wool designer suit, her black hair pulled back in a glossy coil resting against her nape. Her makeup was subtle and meant to enhance the cool beauty that was at odds with her Italian ancestry.

They were supposed to go out to dinner tonight, but Carolyn had stayed late at her office to finish some paperwork, so Sam suggested she stop by afterward and he'd order in Chinese. She had just arrived and

settled herself on the couch with a glass of wine in her hand.

Sam and Carolyn had been seeing each other almost a year. She was a driving force in her profession and sometimes canceled a date more often than he did because of business. Still, he had been thinking about her in more-permanent terms lately. He had even gone so far as to think about her as his kids' stepmother. He wondered if his kids would like her. They hadn't met her last summer, since he had only started seeing her. He already knew they didn't like the guy his ex married. According to Davis, the guy was a real jerk, and Lisa's kindest comment about the man was that he should have been strangled at birth. Poor little Brandon only muttered that the man didn't understand computer games. They had been giving their mother, Marie, so much trouble that she was threatening to ship all three of them out to him on a full-time basis. Little did she know the idea didn't bother him a bit. As wild as they were at times, he loved his kids with all his heart and he missed them every day he wasn't with them.

"Carolyn, how do you feel about marriage?" he asked suddenly as he spooned sweet-and-sour duck onto plates.

"Marriage?" While her tone expressed surprise, the look in her eyes told him something else. Obviously, her mind had flirted with the same subject for some time now.

Sam kept his smile fixed on his face. Now he'd gone and done it.

Chapter One

“That can’t be the time!” Dru gasped when she spied the clock as she stepped out of the bathroom. The effects of the long bubble bath she had taken to relax instantly vanished. She shivered slightly as the cold air from the vent wafted over her. She was just glad her air conditioner was working on such a hot day. The last thing she needed was frizzy hair from the heat. The towel she had wrapped around her body after she stepped out of the tub dropped to the floor in a damp heap as she spun in a circle, trying to figure out what to do next. “No! The clock has to be wrong.”

She froze for a moment. “Makeup!” Still naked, she raced back to the bathroom and swiftly applied makeup, brushing a soft green eyeshadow on her lids, emphasizing further with an olive green eyeliner. She muttered soft curses under her breath as she searched for her blush and dusted the soft rose color across her cheeks. She grimaced as she felt the warm air intrude as soon as the air conditioner shut down for a few moments.

Why did today have to be one of the hottest days of the year? She only hoped she wouldn’t wilt before she

reached the chapel. A sweaty bride was not exactly an attractive picture.

"Lipstick," she muttered, checking the color name on each case. "No, put the dress on first, then the lipstick." She quickly used perfumed dusting powder, smoothed on body lotion in the same fragrance, then ran back into her bedroom. A quick look at the clock told her the minutes were ticking away as she put on frilly, creamy white lingerie and a lace-trimmed garter belt. After she carefully pulled on creamy white stockings, she reached for her gown.

A gown worthy of a bride, she thought, choking back a laugh as she settled the creamy white silk, calf-length gown over her head and smoothed the fitted bodice down. The off-the-shoulder gown showed off her golden tanned shoulders, while the bodice was tightly fitted on her slim waist. The skirt flared out with a lace overskirt that turned it into a dress worthy of a fairy tale.

She quickly fastened her pearl choker around her throat and added the matching pearl drop earrings. It took several tries since her hands were shaking so badly.

Not from bridal nerves, she assured herself. There was no reason to feel nervous about marrying Kevin. He was perfect for her. Just what she needed.

Her mother was so excited about the nuptials she was already at the chapel overseeing last-minute preparations. Gwen St. James Walker Andrews Patterson intended to make sure nothing went wrong. Dru was grateful her mother had offered to take charge of the final details at the chapel. Dru sometimes thought her mother was more excited about Dru marrying

Kevin than Dru was. Even her close friend and maid of honor, Abby, was at the chapel while Dru remained home to dress herself in blessed silence.

The loud boom of a firecracker sounded in the distance—a perfect reminder this wasn't just her wedding day and her birthday but a national holiday to boot.

It was the Fourth of July. A day meant for picnics, barbecues, fireworks. Not weddings. And then there was the heat. She imagined relaxing with her neighbors on their patios as their kids ran through the sprinklers in an attempt to remain cool.

She couldn't visualize this day for a wedding. From the day Dru accepted Kevin's proposal, he had been bound and determined they were going to be married on this day. He felt it would give her thirtieth birthday even more of a special meaning. He had said just that late last night after their rehearsal dinner when he had driven her home and left her after several lingering kisses. Sadly, they were kisses that didn't make her heart race or her breath catch.

"Happy birthday, Dru," she told her reflection in the pier looking glass as she stepped into the white high-heeled pumps she had chosen to go with her gown. Pearl clips dangled at the toes.

What was she doing?

"I'm getting married," she said in hopes that saying the words out loud would make all the jangled nerves go away. "It's my birthday and my wedding day, and I'm marrying a man who I know loves me madly. We'll be deliriously happy and have lots of children, and Kevin will open his second dealership next year because he wants to expand into the next

county and..." She couldn't go on. If she did, she might break down in tears.

It had to be bridal jitters. Dru wasn't used to feeling out of control.

The front doorbell chimed melodiously.

"Terrific. It's probably someone wanting to sell me life insurance." She blew out a breath filled with frustration as she walked to the door. She pasted on her most intimidating expression as she threw open the door. "What?"

The man standing before her stepped back a pace. He wore a dark suit, white shirt and a chauffeur's cap, which he tipped toward her. "Ms. St. James, I'm Rodney. I'm here to drive you to the chapel." He ended the sentence on a questioning note, as if unsure he was at the right house—even if the lady he faced was wearing a wedding gown.

She shook her head slightly as she looked past him to the gleaming white stretch limousine parked at the curb. More than one of her neighbors had come out to get a better look.

"Honestly, you'd think they never saw a limo before," she muttered before turning back to Rodney. "I'm sorry, but you must be mistaken. I didn't arrange for a limousine."

"Your fiancé hired me," he clarified. "He said to tell you he didn't think it would look proper for you to drive yourself to your own wedding."

She gulped. True, how many brides drove themselves to their own weddings? "How thoughtful of him." She suddenly felt constricted, as if all the air had been sucked out of her universe. She forced her-

self to remain calm. She doubted the poor man would expect a bride to hyperventilate.

The driver's smile dimmed. "Is everything all right, Ms. St. James?"

She summoned up a smile worthy of a bride. "It's just the usual jitters. Let me get my things."

As Dru returned to her bedroom, she quickly ran through the bridal tradition in her mind. Something new—the pearl necklace Kevin had given her for a wedding gift. Something old—her grandmother's pearl-and-diamond drop earrings that matched the necklace. Something borrowed—the pearl clips holding back her unruly curls, which fell past her shoulders. Her hairdresser had loaned the clips to her as she performed a miracle in creating the cascade of curls down her back. Dru was lucky enough her hairdresser was also a good friend who insisted on doing her hair earlier that morning so it would look fresh for the wedding. Something blue—was the garter adorning one shapely thigh.

She picked up the small white silk purse that would hang from her wrist on a silken cord. As she turned toward the door, her gaze fell on her cellular phone standing on its charging stand. She knew that Bev, her assistant, would more than capably handle any office problems that might come up while she was away on her honeymoon. Besides, what personnel emergencies could occur on a holiday? She left it on the table.

"I must say you look very lovely, Ms. St. James," the driver told her as he escorted her to the passenger door and helped her into the back of the gleaming white limousine. "The groom is a lucky man."

"Thank you." She looked around the plush burgundy interior with interest. "This seat is more comfortable than my couch," she quipped with a smile.

"There's champagne in the cooler if you'd like something to soothe the bridal jitters." He winked at her as he closed the door.

She eyed the bottle with longing. How much champagne would it take to soothe her nerves? She doubted even the entire bottle would suffice.

"Terrific, just what we need. A drunken bride at her own wedding," she muttered. She fiddled with the various buttons at her fingertips. Soon soft classical music filled her ears. "That would really go over well."

Dru kept telling herself she had nothing to worry about. After all, she was marrying a wonderful man. A man any woman would be proud to have as a husband. So why did she feel as if she was having second thoughts? She was ashamed of herself for not loving Kevin the way he deserved, but she assured herself that many marriages had started off with much less and flourished. There was no reason why theirs couldn't do the same, she told herself, feeling sick inside that she felt this way. But things had gotten so far that she didn't feel she could ask Kevin for more time. Not when her mother was already planning to baby-sit her future grandchildren.

"Where did all this self-doubt come from?" she asked herself out loud.

"Is there a problem, Ms. St. James?" the driver's disembodied voice asked over a speaker.

“No, I’m just making sure I have everything,” she said brightly. “I’d hate to show up and realize I’d forgotten something important.”

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t worry about it. My wife realized she’d forgotten my ring, but the minister married us anyway.”

Dru knew her mother had the gold braided band Dru and Kevin had picked out, so that was one less thing to worry about.

“Just those nasty ol’ jitters,” she said brightly, reaching for the champagne bottle. Surely a sip wouldn’t hurt. She started to pour some into a goblet when she happened to look down at her feet. That narrow line snaking up the front of her leg couldn’t be what she thought it was, could it? That’s strange—she didn’t remember seeing it before. Maybe it was the lighting in the limo’s interior. She located the lights and brightened them as she pulled her skirt up to her knees. It wasn’t the lighting. It was what she thought it was. She pressed the intercom button.

“Rodney, we need to make a little stop.”

RODNEY HAD NO PROBLEM in finding a parking place right in front of the department store. He jumped out and opened her door.

“I’ll only be a minute,” she promised, carefully stepping out.

“Ms. St. James?” He looked uncomfortable as he shifted from one foot to another. “No offense, ma’am, but are you sure you want to get married?”

“Of course I do,” she assured him, laying her hand on his arm. “It’s just that I can’t get married with a run in my stocking.” She held out her foot to show the

mar in the silky cream-colored hosiery. "It shows too much. I'll just run in, buy a new pair, change them in there and run back out." She patted his arm. "Go sit in the back, have a soft drink from the bar and relax while you're waiting. I promise you I won't take more than five minutes. Believe me, I'm not one of those shoppers that take hours to purchase one little item."

Dru determinedly ignored interested glances from people entering and leaving the store as she walked swiftly toward it.

"Who the hell gets married on the Fourth of July?" one man muttered to his wife as he watched Dru enter the store.

"It's a good way of guaranteeing fireworks," the wife said under her breath, glaring at him.

"That was not exactly what I wanted to hear." Dru sighed as she entered the store. "This is not a good omen."

SAM HAD VISUALIZED his kids' visit this summer as one filled with lots of laughter and playtime as it had been last summer. He'd even arranged his schedule so he would have plenty of time to spend with them. So far, there'd been no sound of laughter, and his idea of playtime wasn't theirs. What was worse, they'd only been together for an hour.

It was going to be a long summer.

From the time he had picked them up at the airport earlier that morning, then dropped off their luggage at his house, he'd met with nothing but heavy sighs from twelve-year-old Lisa, disgruntled muttering from ten-year-old Davis and five-year-old Brandon looking at him with the widest, saddest eyes imaginable.