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A MATCH
in the
MAKING

THE MATCHMAKERS | BOOK 1

A
MATCH
in the
MAKING

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THE MATCHMAKERS

A Match in the Making

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For Natasha Kern

My extraordinary literary agent,
who never hesitates to lend me her invaluable wisdom,
whether it be professional or personal.
It's been a privilege working with you all these years.

With much love,
Jen

One



NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

JULY 1, 1888

One of the most curious discoveries Miss Gwendolyn Brinley had made during her brief sojourn as an unexpected and oh-so-reluctant assistant matchmaker was this—securing advantageous marriages amongst the socially elite was not for the faint of heart and, frankly, could be considered a blood sport.

She'd been in Newport a mere six days, and yet the events she'd attended leading up to this evening's official opening of the Season at Mrs. Astor's impressive Beechwood "cottage" had allowed her to observe underhanded tactics one didn't expect from young ladies of such illustrious social significance.

She'd witnessed an "accidental" punch spill at a pre-Season picnic, seen ladies edging other ladies out of their way with sharp elbows to the ribs, and then watched from the balcony of the esteemed Newport Casino as a lady took out an opponent she apparently saw as competition on the marriage mart by whacking a tennis ball directly at that opponent's head, which resulted in the young lady sporting a spectacular black eye a few hours later.

In retrospect, Gwendolyn's decision to accept a paid position for the summer to afford herself a respite from the drama that always surrounded her cousin, Catriona Zimmerman, whom she'd been a companion to for years, seemed ridiculous, given that she'd now landed in a most dramatic situation.

"Miss Brinley, would you be a dear and maneuver me and this dreadful chair to the other side of the ballroom?" Mrs. Parker, her employer, said, pulling Gwendolyn from her thoughts. "I'm having difficulties keeping track of our targets from this vantage point. If we want to succeed this summer, we must learn what the most eligible gentlemen desire in potential brides. I won't be able to point out the location of those gentlemen if I can't find them in the crush we're currently in."

Mrs. Parker's blue eyes began to gleam. "I'm determined to secure the best matches for the ladies I'm sponsoring this summer, Miss Elizabeth Ellsworth and Miss Hannah Howe. To accomplish that, we're going to have to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into reconnaissance work, which was delayed due to the unfortunate breaking of my leg."

"A leg that wouldn't have been broken if you hadn't entered a three-legged race," Gwendolyn said, taking hold of the handles on the back of Mrs. Parker's wheeled chair and pushing it slowly through the guests milling about the edges of Mrs. Astor's ballroom.

"In hindsight, the three-legged race was sheer foolishness on my part," Mrs. Parker admitted. "But how could I have refused to participate when my partner was Mr. Russell Damrosch? He's worth millions and is known to be searching for a wife. I'm quite convinced he'd be a perfect match for Miss Howe."

Gwendolyn stopped pushing the chair and leaned close to Mrs. Parker's ear. "Mr. Damrosch is the last gentleman you should consider for either of your young ladies. He's obviously a thoughtless man, what with how in his pursuit of winning

the three-legged race he dragged you over the finish line after you stumbled and fell to the ground.”

“I’m sure he didn’t realize I’d fallen.”

“It would have been difficult for him to miss, because one minute the two of you were galloping along and the next you were lying on the ground. It speaks volumes about his character, or lack thereof, that he was so determined to win two bottles of The Marsh and Benson from 1809, he didn’t bother to notice the grievous injury he was causing you.”

“You can’t blame the man for being so earnest in his attempt to win the grand prize—1809 was an excellent year for Madeira.”

“Considering Mr. Damrosch is a multimillionaire, he’s capable of purchasing an endless supply of 1809 Madeira. He should have abandoned his desire to win the race the moment you fell.”

Mrs. Parker bit her lip. “I suppose you have a point. It may be prudent to have you monitor his behavior to see if that inconsiderate nature you believe he possesses rears its ugly head again.”

“It would be more prudent if you’d simply take him off your list of eligible bachelors. The last thing Miss Howe needs is to be shackled for life to an inconsiderate man.”

“Miss Howe will be only too happy to overlook inconsideration if it means she’ll have access to millions.”

“That’s a mercenary approach to marriage if there ever was one, and I haven’t gotten the impression Miss Howe’s a mercenary sort. I believe she may be interested in securing a love match over a profitable one.”

Mrs. Parker waved that aside. “If she wanted a love match, she’d have convinced her mother to approach Miss Camilla Pierpont to sponsor her, not me.”

“Miss Pierpont?”

Craning her neck, Mrs. Parker waved toward a beautiful lady with golden hair, dressed in the first state of fashion and

surrounded by an entire brigade of gentlemen. “That’s Camilla over there. She’s a grand heiress, the only heiress, in fact, to the Hubert Pierpont fortune.”

“And she’s a matchmaker?”

“I know, she hardly fits the standard image of matchmakers, since we tend to be older matrons of society. Camilla’s twenty-five, unmarried, and has allowed it to be known she intends to embrace her spinster state forever.”

“It seems peculiar for a confirmed spinster to dabble in match-making.”

“Indeed, but she’s unusually successful with her matches, which makes her direct competition for me. I haven’t heard a peep about a specific lady she may be sponsoring this Season, but even if she’s decided to sit the summer out, she’s surely sizing up the gentlemen surrounding her. It won’t benefit us if she sets her sights on one of them for a match in the future. That means you need to get me settled and then get to the task I’ve given you this evening.”

Mrs. Parker gestured to a spot next to the orchestra. “There’s Mrs. Ryerson. You may deposit me beside her. I’ve been meaning to speak with her about her son, August. He’s a quiet young man but may be a prime catch in the next few years because he’s due to inherit a substantial fortune. He’ll only be a catch, though, *if* he can learn to mingle more comfortably in society. I believe tonight is the night I’ll present that concerning matter to his mother.”

Gwendolyn opened her mouth, then swallowed the opinion she’d been about to broach. Mrs. Parker didn’t appear to welcome unsolicited advice from a mere employee, but it was doubtful Mrs. Ryerson was going to enjoy listening to Mrs. Parker wax on about the deficiencies she saw in the lady’s son. Pushing the chair into motion again, she kept to the edge of the ballroom floor as Mr. Nash, Mrs. Astor’s cotillion leader, called out instructions to dancers weaving their way through a “German” known as the Hungarian.

She was forced to stop when she reached a gathering of young ladies dressed in lovely creations of soft-colored silk, the colors adding a festive atmosphere to an already splendid ballroom. Unfortunately, even though the ladies clearly saw they were blocking Gwendolyn's way, not one of them bothered to step aside to create a path for her. Instead, they continued chatting amongst themselves, acting quite as if Gwendolyn and Mrs. Parker were invisible.

Their lack of acknowledgment wasn't much of a surprise, because when she'd first arrived in Newport and accompanied Mrs. Parker to Mrs. Elbridge Gerry's pre-Season picnic, young ladies and their mothers had been only too keen to make Gwendolyn's acquaintance—until they learned she was in Mrs. Parker's employ. That information spread like wildfire, and after everyone realized she was not in Newport as competition, not one lady bothered to speak with her again.

At first, she'd been taken aback to find herself slighted, because she'd never experienced being labeled an outcast before. Truth be told, after spending the past several years traveling the world with Catriona, she'd grown accustomed to being well received by aristocrats, foreign leaders, and a variety of diplomats in whatever country they were visiting.

Granted, her reception in those far-off lands was directly connected to Catriona, who'd been a world-renowned opera singer before she'd fallen madly in love with Mr. Barnabas Zimmerman and left opera behind without a backward glance. Barnabas had been an industrial titan, and until his unexpected death after a short illness had showered Catriona with affection and love, leaving her despondent after he died, as well as a very wealthy widow.

When it became clear Catriona was becoming a shadow of her former self, Gwendolyn had taken matters into her own hands. She'd always considered herself an unconventional woman and, unlike most of her friends, had never longed to

marry right out of the schoolroom and settle into wedded bliss. Because of that, she'd not hesitated to insist Catriona embark with her on a world tour, taking on the role of her cousin's companion—a position Catriona wholeheartedly approved of, because when she wasn't despondent, she knew full well she was capable of attracting trouble on a concerningly frequent basis.

Traveling the world had seen Catriona begin to heal from the devastation of losing her Barnabas, while Gwendolyn had been given the privilege of meeting fascinating people who genuinely seemed to enjoy spending time in her company.

But not once in her travels had she run across the blatant snobbery she was encountering in Newport. She'd been warned that Newport was one of the most pretentious summer retreats in the country, but not putting much stock in the warnings, she'd accepted Mrs. Parker's offer.

She'd believed summering in Newport as a paid companion would provide her with a much-needed rest from her travels, as well as a well-deserved reprieve from her cousin. Unfortunately, rest and relaxation seemed in short supply these days.

"Ladies, good heavens," Mrs. Parker barked, snapping Gwendolyn back to the situation at hand. "Have you failed to notice that Miss Brinley is trying to push me to the other side of the ballroom? She certainly can't be expected to plow through all of you, unless she doesn't mind taking out a few of your limbs, which I'm going to assume she *would* mind. You need to make a path for us—and quickly, if you please."

A chorus of apologies rang out before the young ladies glided out of the way, leaving Gwendolyn free to wheel Mrs. Parker across the floor. She maneuvered the wheeled chair into the spot directly beside Mrs. Ryerson, who didn't look overjoyed to be joined by the illustrious matchmaker. The lady's lips thinned before she began taking a marked interest in the orchestra—not that Mrs. Parker noticed, because she was squinting at something across the room.

“Ah, there he is,” Mrs. Parker proclaimed. “And thank goodness, Miss Pierpont hasn’t joined him yet. I’m not certain you’re ready to go up against a matchmaker of her repute.”

“I’m not up for going against *any* matchmaker, whether they’re possessed of a wonderful repute or not. To remind you, yet again, I accepted a paid-companion position with you, not matchmaker.”

“Assistant matchmaker, dear. You don’t have the experience needed to be a true matchmaker.”

“I’m not qualified to be an assistant matchmaker either. Frankly, I’ve been thinking I should do both of us a favor and bow out of your employ before I prove how unqualified I am. From what you’ve told me, you never fail with making splendid matches. I would hate to be responsible for your suffering a failure this Season.”

“I have every confidence you’ll rise magnificently to your assistant-matchmaking position,” Mrs. Parker countered. “You, out of any of the candidates the agency sent me when my last companion left without notice, impressed me with your no-nonsense attitude and your air of competency. Add in the notion you were a paid companion of Catriona Zimmerman, a lady known for her temperamental nature when she was Catriona Sullivan, the opera singer, and I believe you’ll find your summer as my assistant matchmaker downright successful.”

“I beg to differ. I have no qualifications as a matchmaker and am doomed for failure. That will reflect poorly on you and is exactly why you should contact the employment agency again and have them send you actual matchmaker candidates.”

Mrs. Parker waved Gwendolyn’s declaration aside. “Matchmakers aren’t a dime a dozen, Miss Brinley. I highly doubt the agency has any candidates qualified for the position I need fulfilled.” She gestured across the ballroom. “With that out of the way, your first task awaits you underneath that chandelier—Mr. Walter Townsend.”

A knot immediately developed in Gwendolyn's stomach before she settled a frown on Mrs. Parker. "Didn't you tell me Walter Townsend is considered *the* catch of the Season?"

"Indeed. And as such, it would be a true feather in my cap if we landed him for one of our young ladies." Mrs. Parker rubbed her hands together. "I adore my feathers, so off you go. And remember, I'm counting on you to not let me down."

Two



The knot in Gwendolyn’s stomach increased when she turned her attention Walter Townsend’s way and discovered him surrounded by a throng of young ladies doing their best to attract his attention.

Fans were being plied with languid grace, lashes were fluttering like a chorus of butterflies, and well-practiced smiles weren’t wavering, each of those smiles settled firmly on *the* catch of the Season.

Gwendolyn swallowed and returned her attention to Mrs. Parker. “I don’t believe now is an opportune moment to approach Mr. Townsend. He seems rather occupied.”

“Of course he’s occupied. He’s the most in-demand gentleman of the Season, and for good reason. Not only has he been described as boyishly handsome—what with that floppy dark hair of his that is always falling over his forehead—he’s in possession of one of the largest fortunes in the country. He’s merely thirty-three years of age. Most gentlemen don’t secure that type of wealth until they’re much older.”

Gwendolyn forced her attention back to Walter, who was bending his head close to Miss Elizabeth Ellsworth and smiling—

a good sign, considering Miss Ellsworth was one of Mrs. Parker's young ladies.

"I definitely shouldn't interrupt now. He seems to be engaged in conversation with Miss Ellsworth, and . . ." Gwendolyn winced. "Oh dear, another young lady has shouldered Elizabeth out of the way and taken her spot beside Mr. Townsend."

Mrs. Parker craned her neck, her eyes narrowed on the lady who'd displaced Miss Ellsworth. "Miss Tillie Wickham. Why am I not surprised? She's a brash young lady and was the one responsible for blackening Miss Cordelia Lowe's eye on the tennis court the other day. The very idea she just shoved our delightful Miss Ellsworth aside is not to be borne, which means you'll need to intervene."

"When discussing my new job requirements, you didn't mention anything about my being expected to do any intervening. Frankly, I'm beginning to feel rather weak in the knees at the mere thought of interrupting Miss Wickham, who is now giggling into her handkerchief and won't appreciate my disrupting her amusing time with Mr. Townsend."

"You're hardly the type of woman to suffer from weak knees, but I will apologize for constantly changing the requirements of your job. I've never had an assistant matchmaker before, so I'm making up job requirements as we go."

"That's hardly fair."

"No one ever claimed life is fair." Mrs. Parker nodded toward Walter again. "But the evening isn't getting any younger, and I know you're deliberately dawdling to avoid speaking with Mr. Townsend."

Gwendolyn crossed her arms over her chest. "Too right I am. Sending me after our biggest fish first isn't what I'd consider the best-laid plan. I should start with a smaller fish, perhaps Mr. E. J. Boettcher. If you'll recall, I met him at Mrs. Gerry's picnic, so he won't find it odd if I show up at his side and begin speaking with him."

“On the contrary, he’ll find that curious indeed since he couldn’t get away from you fast enough at the picnic.”

Gwendolyn tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “I suppose that’s a valid point, as well as good reason for you to remove Mr. E. J. Boettcher from your list of eligible gentlemen. It was not well done of him to seek out an introduction to me and then flee from my presence the second he learned I’m in your employ and not a new addition to the society set.”

Mrs. Parker’s forehead furrowed. “I must admit I’ve been reconsidering my decision to let people know you’re in my employ. But in my defense, I had no idea at that time I was going to break my leg, leaving me no choice but to turn you into my assistant matchmaker.”

“You did seem determined to let everyone know I was your paid companion right off the bat.”

“At the time I thought it was prudent to do so.”

“Because?”

Mrs. Parker frowned. “Have you not looked in a mirror lately? You’re far too beautiful to ignore, what with that fiery hair and striking bone structure of yours, not to mention your green eyes. Gentlemen are drawn to women who look like you. I was concerned that, if everyone didn’t know you were my companion, you’d draw attention away from Miss Ellsworth and Miss Howe.”

She bit her lip. “I didn’t realize society would give you what almost amounts to a cut direct. That’s bound to make your new position a touch tricky to implement, but I say there’s no time like the present to see if you can overcome society’s lack of acknowledgment and attempt to obtain a short audience with Walter Townsend.”

Gwendolyn blinked. “I thought I was only supposed to observe gentlemen this evening.”

“That was before Tillie Wickham shoved our Elizabeth out of her way. You might as well, after your intervention, use the

moment to your advantage and spend a few minutes probing Mr. Townsend's deepest thoughts."

"You definitely never mentioned anything about *probing*."

"Well, now I have, and with that, time's a wasting." Mrs. Parker gave a waggle of her fingers in Walter's direction. "Remember that enthusiasm is in order, and a smile wouldn't be remiss either. Gentlemen always find smiling ladies far more appealing than scowling ones."

Gwendolyn drew in a breath, slowly released it, and then summoned up a smile, one that left Mrs. Parker shaking her head.

"Good heavens, dear, I hope that's not the only smile at your disposal, because it's downright terrifying."

Gwendolyn pressed her lips together before she tried again, and Mrs. Parker responded with a wince—hardly an encouraging sign.

"Maybe you should forget the smiling," Mrs. Parker muttered.

"Agreed. Besides, since I doubt an intervention with Tillie Wickham is going to go well, it won't matter if I'm smiling or not. Given her questionable temperament, I'll be lucky to survive our encounter unscathed, although thank goodness she doesn't seem to have brought her tennis racquet with her tonight." With that Gwendolyn lifted her chin, sent a nod to Mrs. Parker, and began striding along the edges of the ballroom.

"This is the worst summer ever," she muttered, edging around a lady whose perfume wafted over Gwendolyn like a heavy cloud, the scent so cloying it was difficult to breathe. Sneezing soon commenced, and after blotting a now-runny nose with a handkerchief, Gwendolyn continued on her way, the thought returning that her summer was going to be nothing less than dreadful when the lady drenched in perfume called after her that one shouldn't attend balls when suffering from a summer cold, her comment leaving guests scrambling out of Gwendolyn's way.