



Daddy's Little Matchmakers

By Kathleen Y'Barbo

Excerpt proved courtesy of www.kathleenbarbo.com

The call came in a full fifteen minutes before Amy Spencer's lunch break ended. As a temp, she had no obligation to go beyond the requirements of the job she would have only until Friday. And yet, how could she ignore the phone when it was the first time the thing had rung all morning?

Reluctantly she set aside the remains of her sandwich and the novel she'd likely finish before the end of the day. "Vine Beach Gazette, Classifieds Department," she said as she reached for her water bottle and took a sip.

"I would like to place an ad to sell my sailboat."

Much as the distinctly male voice stated his desire firmly, there seemed to be the slightest bit of hesitancy there. This gave Amy pause to check the caller ID.

Eric Wilson. The new veterinarian who'd bought the clinic across the street from the Gazette. Handsome, single and the father of three little girls who sat beside him in church every Sunday.

"So," he continued, "how would I go about placing an ad?"

Scrolling to the correct place on her computer screen, Amy read him the particulars. "You can either go online and do it yourself or I can take down the details and place it for you. Or you could come in and place the ad and pay for it then." She waited a moment. Nothing but silence and the occasional bark of a dog on the other end of the phone. "Dr. Wilson?" she finally asked.

"Yes, I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I was just trying to decide."

"Whether to sell, or whether to place the ad yourself?"

"Actually, I—" An eruption of high-pitched squeals interrupted his statement. "Girls, please. I'm on the phone," he said before returning to her. "Thank you for the information. You've been a great help but I'm afraid I'm going to have to—"

And then the line went dead.

Amy hung up the phone thinking of what sort of chaos three daughters might bring into the life of one single man. Having grown up the only child of older parents, she had nothing to compare.

Rising to step away from her desk, Amy tossed her sandwich into the trash and grabbed her

book. With the sun shining, the sea breeze blowing and the heat of summer not yet unbearable, she decided to spend the remaining ten minutes of her lunch break reading in the shade on her favorite park bench.

Beneath the canopy of green leaves, she scooted to the far end of the bench and settled into a comfortable position. From her vantage point, she could see the blue-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the whitecaps rolling up on Vine Beach a quarter of a mile to the south. She could also witness comings and goings in both directions on Vine Beach's primary north-south thoroughfare, aptly named Main Street.

With little to recommend Vine Beach beyond the smattering of beachfront rentals and the tiny harbor, the main traffic on the street consisted of locals. No one seemed to mind, though members of the local Chamber of Commerce met on occasion to debate ways to bring in more traffic. As yet, nothing had come of these meetings so the city remained a sleepy coastal town.

Across the way, Amy spied the elderly beautician unlocking the garishly pink doors of Ima's Beauty Shop and waved. Ima returned the gesture before slipping inside. Next door a painter was putting the final touches on the new sign on the Wilson Animal Clinic's front window. She thought of Eric Wilson's call and wondered which of the several dozen boats at the harbor was his.

Another check of her watch and Amy set aside her novel to lean back against the bench to look up through the canopy of oak leaves at the brilliant blue sky above. Returning to Vine Beach as an adult had been much different than she'd expected. Every summer for as long as she could remember, Amy had spent as much time as she could with her grandparents in their cottage by the beach.

Roses flourished on the arbor and the garden always provided enough to make porch salad, but her favorite memories were of sitting with her grandmother on the swing beneath the arbor. Her sandy toes barely brushing the ground, she could while away the hours watching the waves and the occasional sailboat heading for shore. At night she slept with the window open to the ocean breeze and dreamed salt-tinged dreams about happily-ever-afters beneath the upstairs rafters.

Never had she expected to live there, albeit temporarily, as an adult. But when her grandmother's hip surgery required she have a caregiver, Amy stepped up to the challenge. After all, Mom and Dad had only kept her employed at their shop in Houston out of love. All three of them knew there wasn't near enough work for three florists.

And thus when the call came regarding the surgery, Amy gladly spent the spring caring for her grandmother, tending the garden, the roses and her precious nana in equal parts until all were blooming. Nana's choice to move into Sandy Shores, the new assisted-living community out on Harbor Drive, had surprised Amy. Until, that is, she visited and saw her grandmother had landed solidly in her element. Always the social butterfly, Nana loved being in the middle of everything, something she couldn't manage at home.

Amy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Nana no longer needed her and, as of tomorrow,

neither did the Gazette. Was it time to move on? And if so, where would she go?

Across Main Street, the painter completed his work on the clinic door then stepped back to admire the finished product. "Eric Wilson, DVM," she whispered as she read the words beneath the sign.

Amy's thoughts again shifted to Dr. Wilson. Everything she knew about the man came from her grandmother, Nana Spencer, whose knowledge of all things related to Vine Beach was arguably more extensive than any data uncovered by the reporters at the Gazette. And according to Nana, the veterinarian, a widower of undetermined length, had moved to Vine Beach to take over Doc Simmons's practice upon the older man's retirement and to see that his girls were near his late wife's family.

A car door slammed, drawing her attention to the parking lot beside the animal clinic. There she saw the object of her thoughts walking toward what was likely the back door of the clinic. He looked busy—possibly distracted by whatever boisterous behavior had caused him to end their call so quickly—as he ran his hand through thick dark hair. He lifted his head, and their gazes met awkwardly across the distance. At least she thought he saw her. For a second Amy wondered if she should acknowledge him. The vet waved, solving the problem of how to respond, so she did the same.

Checking her watch, Amy gathered up her novel and rose. Four more hours of work, and her temporary job at the paper would end. Then she'd be forced to decide whether to allow the temp agency to place her elsewhere or perhaps to pack her things and move on.

Surely there was work for a trained florist somewhere.

Trained florist. More like a girl who'd picked so many flowers as a child that her mother finally taught her how to make something pretty of her mess. Amy giggled at the thought. "You have a nice laugh."

She jumped, dropping the novel as she whirled around to see Eric Wilson crossing Main Street. Scrambling for the book, she tugged at the edge of her blouse and tried not to allow her embarrassment to show.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

His worried expression made her smile in spite of her flustered state. "No, it's fine. Really." She lifted her hand to smooth back her hair and promptly dropped the book again.

The vet leaned to reach for the novel and so did Amy. Before either could accomplish the task, their heads bumped. Wincing, Amy felt the heat rise in her neck. As she took a step backward, Eric retrieved the book.

"I'm sorry," he said again as he thrust the book toward her. "Seems I've now got two reasons to apologize."

"No, really." Amy took the book and held it tight against her chest. "I'm fine." She glanced down at the smudge of brown decorating her blouse and saw the source: a nasty smear of dirt in a matching color on the novel's back cover. She quickly flipped the book around and adjusted its location to cover the spot then slowly lifted her eyes to meet his stare.

An awkward moment passed and then he reached to offer her his hand. "Eric Wilson," he said. "I'm new to Vine Beach." He gestured to the clinic behind him. "Bought the practice from Doc Simmons a few months ago." A pause. "And you're Amy. The classifieds girl."

Amy shook his hand as she pondered the statement. The vet must have noticed her expression of confusion for he hastened to add, "I called back and someone told me Amy the classifieds girl was at lunch. Sitting in the park. Reading a book. And so, since I was on the cell and could plainly see that there was a woman sitting in the park next to the newspaper office reading a book, I..." He released her hand and took a step backward then looked away. "Anyway," he finally said, "I wanted to apologize for hanging up the call so abruptly. Things just got a little noisy and then the dog got loose and, well, I really hadn't intended for them to overhear, anyway."

"Happens all the time," Amy hastened to say as she tried not to study his handsome features or notice the slight hint of what might be tiredness in his eyes. His lovely eyes, she amended.

"Especially lately," he said softly. "What I mean is, the girls are getting settled into their new home and new school, which means things have been a little..."

"Noisy?" she supplied.

"Yes," Dr. Wilson said on a long exhale of breath. "They're good girls, and I'm very glad I've got my mother here to help. But managing three girls while trying to get a vet practice off the ground has been an adventure."

"Your daughters are adorable." At his look of surprise, she shrugged. "I've seen you...that is, them, at church and, well, they're adorable."

"Oh, yes, right." He ran his hand through his hair. "Thankfully they all look like their mother. They miss her, I'm afraid."

Dr. Wilson's eyes widened, and Amy knew he'd given her more insight than he'd intended. She hurried to cover the awkward moment with the first thing she could think of. "It's hard to move with children, I would imagine."

"Yes," he said, seeming grateful for the gentle veer away from what was probably a sore subject. "Though the unpacking was much easier than the packing. It's amazing the amount of things girls collect. Ribbons, bows, dolls and don't get me started on the amount of clothes they have. And the shoes? Why does anyone need more than a dozen pairs of shoes?"

His chuckle was low and swift, and Amy quickly joined in.

"Hey, now. We women need our accessories, and a girl can't have her shoes be mismatched with her outfit. It just isn't done."

"Oh, believe me, I know. I suppose they inherited the shoe gene from their mother. She was forever explaining why she needed yet another pair."

The town clock struck the half hour, and Amy jerked her attention in that direction. Time to return to her desk. "It's my turn to apologize, Dr. Wilson. You see, my lunch hour's over and.. " She tilted her head toward the newspaper office. "I should get back to work."

He followed her gaze then, as an expression of recognition dawned, and nodded. "Please, call me Eric."

"Eric," she echoed. "If you'll call me Amy." Shifting her book to the other hand, Amy reached out to shake his. His grip was firm, his smile slow in appearing. "It's been nice meeting you."

The vet seemed unsure of what to say. "Nice, yes," he echoed. "And I'll call again soon, Amy." His eyes widened as he must have realized his word choice left his intentions in question. "To sell the boat," he added. "Probably Monday. I should have a decent photo to use by then."

"Monday. Right." She almost told him that on Monday someone else would be taking his call. Before she could manage it, the vet had turned to sprint back across Main Street. As she watched him go, Amy wondered what it must be like to live in a noisy house. To have to end a call because children were laughing.

Amy sighed. Somewhere out there the Lord had a place for her. And perhaps there would be a family, as well. Whatever, wherever, she knew she would find that perfect fit. Until then, nothing in her life could be anything less than temporary.

Once again, Eric Wilson turned to wave, and this time she returned the gesture without hesitation. Silently she added a prayer that he, too, would find whatever it was he needed.

Eric Wilson slipped in the back door of the clinic and reached for the lone file awaiting his attention in his in-box then went into his office and closed the door. Unlike his in-box, his mailbox was stuffed full of envelopes, all bills needing to be paid. Eric sighed and settled behind the desk he'd inherited with the building.

Since arriving in Vine Beach and acquiring Dr. Simmons's dwindling practice, he'd found it painfully obvious why the old vet had chosen to retire. There simply weren't enough clients to keep a full-time veterinarian in business.

Of course, he'd known the size of the practice and had ample time to change his mind once he saw the sorry state of the ledger sheet, but coming to Vine Beach meant giving up some things. Financial solvency and his prize sailboat would just have to be sacrificed in the short term so his

girls would be settled and happy in the long term.

It was a fair trade, though he would miss that sailboat dearly.

Perhaps he should call now and get it over with. He could always upload a photo of the craft tonight from his laptop. Surely he had a decent one saved somewhere. Besides, it would not be any easier to put the boat up for sale on Monday. Likely he would find too many good reasons to keep it instead.

Eric reached for the phone then decided the classifieds girl was probably not back at her desk. Amy, that was her name. And she was pretty. Eyes as blue as the sky and blond hair that fell in heavy curls over her shoulders. This much he'd allowed himself to notice. Anything more just felt wrong. As if he was somehow being unfaithful to his wife's memory.

And yet his friends all told him to get on with his life. Just this morning his mother had gently reminded him it had been more than three years since Christy's long battle with cancer had been lost. And then there were the seemingly nonstop questions from the girls regarding his single state and when they might expect him to fall in love again.

The trouble with all the good advice was that none of it felt as if it applied to him. As for the girls and their questions, what did they know of love? It wasn't as if he could just shut off his feelings at will. In truth, Eric wasn't completely sure how he felt about any of it.

Worse, the more days that passed the fewer memories he could recollect about life before cancer changed everything. Not everything, he corrected. The girls were still the same. Slightly more subdued when he tried to talk to them about Christy, but all in all just as lovely and lively as they had been before.

Their resiliency humbled him, as did their repeated promises to him that God would bring him another wife. Not a girlfriend, they always insisted, for he told them he would never date, but a wife. A wife to make him happy again.

A tear threatened and he blinked it away. That his girls were concerned with his happiness spoke volumes, though he couldn't yet agree with their idea of a solution. Perhaps his mother and the others were right. Maybe he just needed to get over it and move on.

But how? It sounded so easy in theory, but in reality, Eric knew he was well and truly stuck. Hadn't his old friend Riley said the same thing just yesterday on the phone? Pride hadn't allowed Eric to answer, or maybe it was the fact that once again Riley was trying to convince him to join the widowers' small group that met on Saturday mornings.

He didn't need a small group to remind him he was a widower. And he surely didn't need to hang around a basketball court with a bunch of other guys talking about death and dying.

Eric ran his hand through his hair and leaned back to close his eyes. A moment later, he opened them again, his gaze landing on the stack of bills. Yet another problem he had not solved.

What he could do, however, was see to the lone client who was waiting for him in exam room one. With a sigh, he forced his mind to focus on the details of the file on his desk then went to see to the ailing terrier. At least a broken bone was something he could fix, unlike the troubles that seemed to pile on like stones on a very tall and completely impassable wall.

*Read more sample chapters, and learn more about upcoming releases at
www.KathleenYBarbo.com!*