



Sister-to-Sister

# *Third Time's a Charm*

a novel

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One sign was certain to drive even the most pressing appointment right out of a girl's head: Today Only—All Shoes 15% Off. The bright red letters snagged Tori Sanderson's gaze as she speed-walked through the mall toward the exit, an elegantly wrapped box clutched in her arms. She skidded to a halt before the exclusive store. The last time she shopped here, she'd tried on a darling pair of Bournes that had haunted her dreams since she walked out without them. If her sister Allie hadn't been with her at the time, she would have bought them in addition to the two pairs that went home with her. But Allie wasn't here now. Tori glanced down at the pumps on her feet. They looked okay with this new dress, but those Bournes would be perfect.

She glanced at her watch. Two o'clock. The bridal shower started in one hour, and the drive from Lexington to Danville would take about forty minutes. If she'd known about the sale, she would have left the office at noon. Or maybe she would have skipped work completely. Some people didn't come in at all on Saturday.

But, of course, those people didn't work for Kate Bowman.

Tori thrust thoughts of the office out of her mind. She spent far too much time at work, and even more time worrying about her job when she wasn't there. Anybody who worked as hard as she did deserved a reward. And was there a better reward anywhere than a new pair of shoes?

She tucked her sister's shower gift under her arm and tilted her chin in the air as she pressed her way into the crowded shoe store.



Ninety minutes later Tori marched up the sidewalk and mounted the stairs to Allie's front door, then paused to examine the dim reflection in the storm door glass. With nervous fingers, she plucked at her hem and guided a stray ringlet back into the Shirley Temple mass on her head.

What was the matter with her? Why didn't she just dash into the mall, pick up Joan's gift, and run straight back to the car? She aimed a smile at the shoes on her feet. They *were* absolutely adorable, and the matching belt had been on sale too. But she should have ignored the sale sign. Then she could have gotten here in time to pretend to be enthusiastic about Joan's wedding and help set up for this party.

No, it wasn't the shoe store. It was her job. If she had a normal job, she wouldn't be working every Saturday. She would have been here this morning, blowing up balloons or something, and she wouldn't feel like such a loser of a sister now. Kate's constant demands were taking over her personal life lately, and she didn't like it one bit. But what

else could she do? Advertising was a fiercely competitive business. If she slacked off even a little bit at work, she'd find herself removed from the prestigious customer accounts and assigned to something dull and unimportant, like Lawton Lawn Service.

Besides, Allie probably didn't need her help planning a bridal shower. No doubt her super-organized oldest sister had everything under control, as always. She probably recruited Gram to bake cookies or other goodies, much better than the bag of Oreos Tori would have grabbed at the store if she'd been put in charge of snacks. Allie could handle anything: the food, the decorations, those silly games you had to play at showers. Besides, both Joan and Allie knew she'd been working on a big project the past few months. They didn't expect her help.

And hopefully they didn't suspect her lack of help with the shower was because of her lack of support for the wedding. They wouldn't think that, would they? No, they wouldn't.

Tori clutched at the shoulder strap of her handbag. So why did she feel like such a slouchy sister?

A burst of muffled laughter sounded from inside the house. The party was under way, and she was missing it. Tori squared her shoulders and opened the door.

Inside, a jumble of clutter and chatter greeted her. Folding chairs lined the perimeter of Allie's tiny living room, each one occupied. Wall-to-wall women, all of them talking and laughing and sipping something orangey out of plastic punch cups. Tori stopped just inside the doorway and scanned the room for a familiar face.

"Tori!"

Joan jumped off the sofa and crossed the room in two steps. Tori found herself pulled into an embrace.

"I'm sorry I'm late." She held on to her middle sister for an extra couple of seconds.

Joan returned her hug. "You're just in time. Allie has been hinting at some embarrassing game she's planning to play, and I need an ally." She pushed Tori back, hands clutching her arms as her gaze swept downward. "Look at that dress. On most women it would look like a baggy T-shirt, but on you it's fantastic."

A rush of warmth for her sister thawed the edges of Tori's discomfort. Nobody could spend more than a minute in Joan's company and feel uncomfortable. She exuded happiness, especially since she met her fiancé, a doctor who moved to town last year. Of course, the guy's good looks were spoiled by an over-the-top attitude about religion, in Tori's opinion. An attitude that seemed to be spreading through the Sanderson family at an alarming rate.

"This is for you." Tori thrust her gift into Joan's hands. "I hope you like it."

"What a gorgeous package." Joan ran a finger over the elaborate silver bow. "Go grab some punch while I put this in the other room. Allie and Gram are in the kitchen."

Tori picked her way across the room, nodding a smile at the chatting women. She recognized a few faces. Most of these women went to the church where Tori and her sisters had been raised, and where they still attended.

"Hey, long time no see." Eve Tankersley scooted her folding chair sideways a few inches to allow Tori to squeeze through. "We've missed you at church. Where've you been lately?"

Tori shrugged as she angled through the opening. "Working, mostly."

She escaped to the kitchen without having to offer any further excuses. When she stepped through the doorway, Allie pounced on her.

"There you are! It's about time. Here. " She thrust a plastic container into Tori's hands. "Get a tray out of the cabinet above the dishwasher and arrange these brownies on it."

Tori stuck her lower lip out and sniffed loudly. "It's nice to see you too."

Allie paused in the act of reaching for the sink. She returned to squeeze Tori's shoulders in a quick hug. "Sorry, I'm doing the headless chicken dance right now. It is good to see you." She whirled away.

"Hello, Tori." Gram started to rise from her seat at the small table, but Tori hurried to her side to save her the effort. Gram had recovered enough from breaking her hip last year that she no longer used a walker, but she still winced often and moved more slowly than before.

Tori pressed a kiss into a soft cheek. "Hi, Gram."

Wrinkled eyelids drooped over the blue eyes turned up toward her. "We missed you again last week. Sunday dinner isn't the same without the whole family there."

"I missed you too." Tori sidestepped Allie to retrieve the tray. "My job is crazy busy right now. Sundays are the only day I seem to be able to get any work done, when the phone isn't ringing constantly and someone isn't poking their head into my cubicle every few minutes."

Gram's mouth drew into a puckered line. "You shouldn't work on Sundays. It's supposed to be a day of rest."

Tori had a flash of irritation over the lecture, but it evaporated as quickly as it came. Gram meant well. "I know, but apparently my boss doesn't believe in rest." Work wasn't a subject she wanted to discuss right now, certainly not with Gram, so she changed the subject. "Where's Mom?"

"In the nursery, rocking the baby."

Tori brightened. Ten-month-old Joanie could sweeten even the sourest mood. "Oh, goodie! I want to go play with my niece."

She tossed the tray and brownie container onto the table. Before she'd taken half a step toward the doorway, Allie gripped her arm and pulled her to a stop.

"Oh, no you don't. Mom's trying to get her down for a nap. If you go in there, you'll just get her all riled up again and we'll never get anything done." She gave Tori a gentle shove toward the table. "Now get cracking on those brownies. We have to hurry up in here so we can go wrap Joan in toilet paper."



"Wow, Joan, you pulled in quite a haul." Tori stooped as she shuffled across the living room in her bare feet, her finger held firmly in a chubby little hand. Seemed like Joanie had grown two inches since she last saw her. Bright blonde wisps of hair were starting to curl over her collar and above her ears, and she was a lot steadier on her feet. Not quite ten months old, and she was close to walking already. She turned a happy grin upward and giggled. Tori could feel her stress melting away at the sound.

Mom had left with the last of the shower guests, apologizing for not staying to clean up, but she had just enough

time to get to the hospital before her nursing shift began. Tori tried not to think of the piles on her desk back at the office. She'd stuffed a report in her briefcase to work on at home. It was due Monday, and since this afternoon was shot, she'd have to do it tomorrow. That would mean missing the traditional Sanderson family dinner three Sundays in a row, but it couldn't be helped.

Allie wadded up a piece of wrapping paper and shoved it into a bulging plastic garbage bag. "I don't know where you're going to put all this stuff in that tiny little house of Ken's. And this is just the shower. In another month the wedding gifts will start pouring in."

Joan balanced a box on top of an already unsteady pile near the door, ready to be loaded into the car. "Gifts won't be *pouring in*." She slid the band off her long brown ponytail and combed a couple of stray locks back into place with her fingers before replacing it. "We're only having a small wedding."

Joanie toddled toward the chair where Gram sat dozing. She released Tori's finger and clutched the padded chair arm. Tori straightened and arched her back to stretch muscles stiff from bending. "Three bridesmaids is not a small wedding."

Joan's head dipped in acknowledgment. "True, but I had to have my sisters with me, and I couldn't leave Ken's sister out." She gave a short laugh. "We're going to have more people in the wedding party than guests."

"You might not be sending out a lot of invitations, but I think you'll be surprised at how many people from church show up." Allie gave the contents of the garbage bag a flat-handed shove to make room for more trash. "If you ask

me, issuing a blanket invitation to the entire congregation is a mistake. How are we going to estimate a number for the reception?"

To save money, Joan had asked her family to help prepare the food for the wedding reception. And the church sewing circle was making the bridesmaids' dresses. Tori was skeptical about the outcome of *that*, but it wasn't her wedding.

"We'll work it out." The bride-to-be seemed entirely unconcerned as she dropped to her knees and opened the top of a box. She lifted out a cream-colored cable knit throw blanket and rubbed it on her cheek. "Tori, this feels absolutely glorious. Where in the world did you get it?"

Tori crossed the room and fingered the soft cashmere. "At the mall. The store ordered it in special."

"A Ralph Lauren blanket." An almost fearful look crossed Joan's face. "I'm sure it cost a fortune. Do we dare use it, or should I lock it in a safe and save it for the next time the Queen of England comes for a visit?"

Tori laughed. "Use it. You deserve it more than any old queen. Nothing but the best for *my* sister." She sobered and gave Joan a stern look. "But keep that giant mongrel away from it."

The thought of the slobbery horse Ken passed off as a dog lounging on her expensive gift sent a shudder rippling through Tori's shoulders.

"Don't worry. I won't let Trigger near this." Joan stored the cashmere throw back in the box and replaced the lid.

Allie thrust the garbage bag into Tori's hands and pointed toward the coffee table, where an array of plastic cups and plates and forks littered the surface. As Tori perched on the

edge of the couch cushion and began clearing the trash, Joanie dropped to her hands and knees and crawled across the carpet toward Aunt Joan with surprising speed, her plastic diaper crinkling. A pile of brightly colored bows diverted her attention, and she veered toward them. She cooed a soft “Oooooohhhh” and reached for one with a chubby hand. Laughing, Joan pulled the little girl onto her lap and covered them both with bows.

“I wish you were old enough to be my flower girl.” She planted a kiss on top of the baby’s head.

Tori kept her smile guileless. “You could wait until she is. Another two years and Joanie will be the perfect age.”

Allie paused in the act of folding a chair to send a scowl toward Tori, but Joan’s laugh held no trace of hurt feelings. “Oh, I can’t do that.”

*You could if you wanted to.* Tori avoided both sisters’ gazes and picked up a plate with a half-eaten piece of cake.

“So, have you decided who’s going to give you away yet?” Allie leaned the collapsed chair against the wall and reached for another.

Joan’s smile dissolved. “No. In fact, I’m thinking about walking down the aisle by myself.”

Allie shook her head. “Not a good idea. Trust me, you’ll need someone to lean on. My legs were shaking so badly Uncle Edward had to practically carry me down the aisle. I wish he was still alive.”

Tori glanced toward Gram at the mention of her deceased brother. The elderly lady’s head had nodded forward until her chin rested on her chest. Her shoulders rose and fell in an even rhythm.

"I wish Grandpa was still alive," Joan said quietly. "He's the one who ought to give me away."

Nobody mentioned Daddy. Tori scooped up the last crumpled napkin and shoved it in the bag. He'd lost the right to give the bride away fifteen years ago, when he deserted them after his divorce from Mom. The jerk.

"Mom would do it," she said.

"I know, but . . ." Joan plucked at a blonde curl on Joanie's hair. "I don't know. It just doesn't seem right. Mom deserves to be escorted herself, and sit in the place of honor as mother of the bride."

Allie collapsed the last of the folding chairs. "Eric will be glad to walk you down the aisle, you know that."

"But I want him to escort *you*, not me." Joan heaved a sigh and stuck a bow on the top of Joanie's head.

Tori stood and picked up the garbage bag. "Can we rent a little old man somewhere? Just for a couple of hours."

Allie's eyes twinkled. "Can't you see the ad? *Wanted: Distinguished-looking man to give away bride. Must have gray-ing hair and a tux.*"

Joan laughed. "I don't need anyone to give me away—I'm giving myself to Ken." A pretty blush colored her cheeks. "It's getting me down the aisle I need someone to cover. I'm sure I can find someone at church who'll be happy to do it. I just haven't decided who to ask yet."

It wasn't right, asking someone who was practically a stranger to escort a girl on the most important walk of her life. But what choice did Joan have? Tori clutched the top of the bag and gave it a quick twirl. Some day she'd meet Mr. Right herself, and then she'd be in the same

position as Joan, looking for a substitute father for her wedding day.

She hefted the bag and headed for the back door and the big garbage can outside. Allie followed her, and when they stepped onto the back porch, grabbed her arm.

"You have got to stop scowling every time the wedding comes up." Her hiss buzzed in Tori's ear. "This is a happy time for Joan, and she doesn't need her little sister spoiling it for her."

"I'm not spoiling anything. I'm entitled to my opinion, and I think they're moving too quickly." Tori tossed a quick glance toward the door. "She's known him less than a year. It's not right."

"They were made for each other, anybody can see that. Ken and Joan are both mature, intelligent adults who have thought this through. And they're in love. There's no reason to wait."

"There's only one reason they're rushing into marriage." Tori lowered her voice. "They just want to have sex legally. If you ask me, they ought to go ahead and do it. Get it out of their system."

Allie's jaw dropped. "I can't believe you said that."

"Oh, why not?" Tori lifted the lid on the trashcan and stuffed the bag into it. "You're not going to stand there and tell me you and Eric waited for your wedding night. It worked out for you okay."

A deep flush colored Allie's fair skin. "That's not the point. Joan and Ken are doing this the right way." She lifted her chin. "God's way. And He'll bless their marriage because of it."

*Here it comes.* Why did every conversation with her

family always turn into a sermon? Well, she didn't have the patience to listen to another one today. She had too much work to do back in Lexington.

Tori slammed the lid down. "Whatever. I'm not going to say another word."

She started to step around Allie toward the house, but stopped when her sister put a hand on her arm.

"Be happy for them, Tori. Joan is your sister, and she deserves your support. Don't spoil her big day."

Looking into Allie's earnest eyes, something twisted inside Tori's chest. Allie was right. If anyone deserved her support, it was Joan. Who came to every football game all the way through high school to watch her cheer when Mom was working second shift? Who helped her practice by reading the part of Li'l Abner to Tori's Daisy Mae about a thousand times before the school play? Who taught her to drive a stick shift, even at the risk of her own car?

A movement inside the house drew Tori's gaze through the window in the back door. Joan bent down to help Gram stand from the chair. The old woman leaned heavily on her middle granddaughter, just as Tori had leaned on Joan for years.

She drew a slow breath and looked back at Allie. "You're right. I'll be good from now on. I promise."

Allie smiled and drew her into a hug. "I know you will."

She released Tori and reached for the door. Her hand paused on the handle. "I'm dying of curiosity. How much did you pay for that Ralph Lauren cashmere throw?"

Tori hesitated. "You won't tell, will you?"

"No. But when we visit Joan and Ken, I want to know

how much luxury I'm wrapping myself in while I munch popcorn in front of a ball game."

Tori chewed the inside of her lip. Her entire family already thought she was far too extravagant and teased her about the price she paid for clothes and shoes. And really, she'd spent way too much on Joan's present, even though it was exactly everything Tori liked in a gift—luxurious, attractive, unique. But she'd never be able to deceive her big sister. Allie could spot a lie like she was looking through binoculars.

"Six hundred dollars," she admitted. "But don't tell Joan, or she'll be afraid to use it."

Allie gave a low whistle. "Don't worry. She wouldn't believe me if I told her." She shook her head. "Girl, I wish I had your job." She grinned. "Or at least your paycheck."

Tori flashed a quick smile in return. "It's my credit limit you want. American Express loves me."