



A Transatlantic WLW Romance

**NOT ONLY
FINE
BED**

Sienna Waters

*Bestselling author of *The Wrong Date* and *A Quiet Life**



Not Only One Bed
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To N.-

We're gonna need a bigger bed...

xxx

Content Warning!

Be aware that Trix, a character you're about to meet, is jaded, critical, and frankly, down-right rude when it comes to her opinions about romance novels and the kind of people that read them. Never fear. She will get her comeuppance. You and I both know the power of romance. Trix, sadly, is going to have to learn...

Chapter One

Trix put down her knife and fork though she'd barely eaten anything. Her stomach rumbled with what she was pretty sure was excitement rather than hunger, but she picked up her wine glass and drained it anyway to quell the sound.

“Not so hungry, eh?” said Anne-Marie.

“I, uh, had a big breakfast?” ventured Trix.

Anne-Marie fluttered a hand at her as though she didn't believe a word of it and spooned the last of her risotto into her mouth. She chewed approximately three hundred times, which should have been impossible. Who could chew risotto for that long?

Be patient, Trix schooled herself. You know it's coming, just be patient. She took a look around her. Half of London was in the room. Or half of the kind of London that was important, anyway. This was exactly the kind of place she'd known that Anne-Marie would choose for lunch. Hip, fashionable, but classy at the same time.

Trix calmed herself with a deep breath and turned her attention back to her boss.

Anne-Marie swallowed and took a sip of her own wine and swallowed again until Trix was about ready to scream again. Another sip of wine and she was seriously considering reaching over the table and grabbing her boss by the throat and shaking her. She sat on her hands.

“So,” Anne-Marie said finally.

“So.”

“I think I'm supposed to start off with ‘I suppose you're wondering why I've asked you here.’” A grin. Anne-Marie tucked a lock of deep chestnut hair behind her ear and Trix wondered if she dyed it. She must dye it. The woman was well over fifty with little crinkles of wrinkles around her dark eyes. Not unattractive.

“Mmm,” Trix said, anxious to get on with matters.

“But you’ve been with Levoisier and Partners long enough to know what these little lunches are all about,” continued Anne-Marie.

Trix crossed her legs and wondered if she had time to go and pee. No. She really didn’t. If she did, there was every chance that Anne-Marie would order dessert and then she’d have to wait another half an hour.

“You’re aware that there have been a couple of retirements, some re-shuffling amongst us.”

Trix nodded with what she hoped was just the right amount of enthusiasm.

“And that, of course, you have shown such taste, such... discernment in your choices up to now.”

Trix swallowed. Being a literary agent meant that having taste, having discernment, wasn’t just a question of showing class or of having the right furniture or knowing the right people. Having taste was part of her job, the one talent that she needed to choose the right books, the right authors, the right everything.

“And so, we, well, I,” Anne-Marie gave a coy little smile. “I have decided that the time is ripe and that you, my dear, should be propelled into the upper echelons of our little company.”

Little company. A company that currently represented four out of the ten authors on *The Times* bestseller list. Trix swallowed again. She was so close. Everything she’d ever wanted was just about to be handed to her. Her stomach clenched and rumbled again.

“It is my absolute pleasure, *chérie*, to offer you the position of head of romance acquisitions.”

Trix’s mouth was already open, the words of gratitude were already starting to spill out, she couldn’t help herself. “Thank you, of...” Her mouth slammed shut as her ears caught her brain up with what had just happened. There was a long second of silence. “Romance?” she finally managed to croak.

Anne-Marie beamed and nodded. “Just so.”

“But...” She tried and couldn’t form the words.

Anne-Marie settled back into her chair. “But you were expecting something else. Literary fiction, perhaps?”

Trix bit her tongue and nodded.

Anne-Marie shrugged. “You are a fool then.”

“A fool?” A niggle of indignation was enough to unfreeze her thoughts. “A fool? I’ve been molded for that position, promised it by not just you but your deputy and my boss. It’s been the reason I’ve stayed with the company and the reason I’ve worked so hard and—”

“And do not think I do not know this,” interrupted Anne-Marie. “But what I am offering you is a far juicier cherry.” She frowned and leaned forward again. “Literary fiction is all very well, but who reads those books now? Romance is, by far, the largest chunk of the literary market. It’s booming more than ever, its readers are voracious, its authors are the wealthiest, and you, my dear, are just the person to take over the department.”

Suddenly, Trix was desperate for a drink. She picked up her glass only to find it empty. Anne-Marie picked up the wine bottle and emptied the last inch into Trix’s glass.

“Ah,” she said. “Just look. The last of the bottle. In France, we say that this means that you will be the next one married.”

Trix eyed the deep red in her glass and found she’d suddenly lost her taste for it. She pushed the glass away. “Anne-Marie,” she said, attempting to sound reasonable.

“No, no,” said the dark-haired woman. “You need to think this through carefully, Trix. I don’t offer you this job lightly. It’s a big deal, bigger than I think you perhaps realize.” Her eyes narrowed. “And I do hope that you’re not going to be one of those snobby women who look down on romance novels?”

Trix took a breath and shook her head. “No, no, of course not.”

“Good.” Anne-Marie smiled again. “Romance novels sell dreams, *chérie*, don’t you ever forget that.” She checked her watch and gave a sharp nod. “And I shall be leaving you, I have a meeting this afternoon.”

Trix just about stopped herself from snorting at this. A meeting. Anne-Marie had drunk ninety percent of the wine herself and she had a feeling that any meetings involved the rendez-vous of pillow and head.

“Ah, yes,” said Anne-Marie. “I have not forgotten about your little sabbatical, do not worry. You will not be expected to start until your return. In fact, by the time you come back, we will have moved you into one of the corner offices. Just do not forget to have your assistant send you some manuscripts so you can get ahead of what we’re looking for this season.”

She paused and eyed Trix carefully.

“This is a big opportunity. Do not let me down. Do not let yourself down. It would behoove you to learn more about romance before you leap to judgment.” She smiled, more sympathetically this time. “You have worked long and hard, Trix. Perhaps you have let the more personal things slide by. Perhaps it would do you good to indulge in a little... romance during your sabbatical. Remind yourself of why love is important.”

It was the alcohol talking. It had to be. If it wasn’t then Trix was pretty sure that her boss had just told her to get a date.

Anne-Marie stood up from the table and stalked away across the restaurant on heels so high that Trix wondered if her brain ever got oxygen-starved. Maybe she’d been uncharitable about the alcohol. Maybe it was a cultural thing. Anne-Marie didn’t seem to be out of control. Not that that should be a surprise. The woman had a reputation for being the sharpest knife in the drawer, someone that knew her stuff, that could handle anything.

Too bad that this time she’d made a mistake.

CHASTITY SNORTED WITH laughter and then hiccuped as she tried to silence herself. “Sorry, sorry,” she managed to

say.

“You’d better be,” said Trix, settling down behind her desk.

“It’s just that...” Chastity dissolved into giggles again and collapsed into the visitor’s chair, blue-tipped hair swinging and jewelry clattering as she wiped at her eyes. “It’s just that... you...”

“Me what?” Trix said.

Generally, she liked Chastity. Blue hair and eyebrow rings aside, the woman had sense and was a bulldog on the phone, keeping Trix’s time free to do her actual job rather than pamper sensitive authors. Currently though she was considering sending Chastity back to whatever Youth Training Scheme had sent her.

Chastity took a couple of deep breaths and gained a modicum of control. “You...” And lost it again. “Romance,” she choked out.

Trix tapped her fingers on her desk. “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

With a great effort of will Chastity restrained herself. “It’s just that, well, you’re not exactly a romantic, are you? You dumped the last woman you were seeing because she sent flowers to the office.”

“It was unprofessional.”

“Right,” said Chastity. “And she was the only date I’ve known you to go on, and I’ve been here for five years now. You’re not a romantic, face it, Trix.”

Trix blew out a breath. There was no point denying it. “It’s all nonsense and I don’t have time for it.”

“See?” said Chastity. Then she took pity on her boss. “But AM’s right about one thing, romance is by far the biggest slice of the pie. This is quite the coup from a career point of view.”

“I wanted literary fiction,” Trix said. The news hadn’t quite sunk in yet.

“You wanted to be surrounded by old white men smoking pipes? You’ve got the chance to do so much more with romance.”

Trix wasn’t going to say it, she refused to say it. But deep inside she knew she felt it. Romance was sad. It was small. It was for bored housewives and horny teenagers. Anyone who was anyone read literature, not thick paperbacks with suspiciously muscled half-naked men on the covers and sticky pages.

But she knew well enough not to criticize anyone else’s reading tastes out loud. Particularly when she was about to head up the department. The last thing she needed was word getting out that she thought the entire section should be locked up in a mental hospital for hysterical women.

“Look, I’ll send you some ‘scripts,” Chastity was saying. “I’ll pick through them and send you some good ones and maybe you’ll change your mind. Maybe romance isn’t what you think it is.”

“Right,” said Trix without much hope.

“And, um, it’s not my place to say anything, but it wouldn’t do you any harm to get a little... personal experience as well.”

Trix raised an eyebrow.

“You know, date a little more? Get some on the ground experience, learn what your writers are writing about.”

Trix pursed her lips but said nothing. Chastity sighed.

“Fine. I’ll send you some manuscripts while you’re away. And if that’s all you’ve got for me, I’m out of here. Enjoy your holiday.”

“It’s not a holiday.”

“Your sabbatical.”

“Visiting a father I haven’t seen for longer than I can remember?”

Chastity shrugged. “You decided to go, no one forced you.”

Which wasn't exactly true. Trix had drunkenly agreed to a Zoom call and then half-nodded off and woken up to find herself somewhat agreeing to visit the States. She'd assumed her mother would get her off the hook, but had been surprised to find that her mother had actually supported the idea. She'd had no idea that her parents even spoke to each other anymore.

"And then there's your sister's wedding," Chastity added.

"Half-sister," corrected Trix.

"Still, something to look forward to. And a chance to learn a bit more about romance." She chuckled again as she got up. "You and romance," she said, shaking her head.

"I don't know what you're laughing at," said Trix. "Has the humor of someone called Chastity working in romance acquisitions been lost on you?"

Chastity's eyes and mouth turned into perfectly round circles as the news dawned on her and even Trix had to laugh.

"You don't laugh at me, I won't laugh at you," she said, finally.

"Deal," said Chastity. She looked up at the clock on the wall. "But if you don't get out of here now you're going to miss that flight of yours."

Trix sighed. As if that would be a bad thing.

Chapter Two

Kel gave her trademarked half-grin. The one that melted hearts, the one that made her dimples stand out and her green eyes sparkle.

“I guess I could think about it,” the blonde on the other side of the counter said, a little too doubtfully for Kel’s taste.

“Just a drink, no pressure,” Kel said. “You’re here for summer school, right?”

The blonde nodded and Kel handed over her change then picked up a frequent drinker card. She carefully stamped one little coffee cup and then scrawled her number at the top.

“Here, you buy nine coffees and you get the barista for free,” she said, with a wink.

The blonde laughed. “You’re cute, but to be honest, I just got out of a relationship and—”

“Woah, hold on there. You’re cool, I’m cool, I’m just suggesting a drink, not that we get married or anything.” Kel paused, looking up thoughtfully. “Though, I suppose if the evening ended that way...”

And the blonde laughed again. “Okay, okay, you’re right. A drink never hurt anyone.” She leaned on the counter and arched an eyebrow. “Or maybe a little more than a drink?”

“Sex is good for the soul,” said Kel, earnestly.

The blonde was still laughing as she picked up her coffee and walked toward the door.

“Call me,” Kel said after her.

“Oh, she will,” said Joey, coming in from the back room.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Don’t they all?” Joey said.

Kel liked her new boss. Joey was butch, had a shaved head and plenty of tattoos, and was also straight. A fact that Kel had found out the hard way by trying to tempt her into bed. A

night that made her cringe a little and made Joey laugh like hell.

“Most of them do,” Kel muttered darkly.

Joey rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so touchy. One girl turns you down and suddenly your playboy reputation is ruined?”

“No.”

“Then cheer up. I don’t want you sulking, it drives customers away. You and me both need this job, so let’s at least make an attempt to keep the clientele happy.”

“Business is always slow in the summer,” Kel said, leaning back against the counter with her arms folded. “It picks up again in September when real classes start. So don’t worry about takings being down for a couple of months.”

Joey raised an eyebrow. “Should that not have been on the list of things to tell me before I bought this place?”

“All’s fair in love and war, or in love and business, I guess,” laughed Kel. “But seriously, don’t worry. This place is a good little earner. I’ve worked here for three years now, trust me.”

“I do. That’s why you’re still here, despite the fact that you talk your way into the beds of half our female customers.”

“Can’t help the fact that women love me,” Kel grinned.

Joey propped herself up next to one of the refrigerated cake displays. “Three years is a long time, don’t you get tired of it?”

“Tired of what? Hitting on women and having fun?”

“Sitting around in a small college town,” Joey said. “Isn’t there more that you want?”

“Jesus, Joe. Don’t pull any punches, will you? Besides, didn’t you literally just move from the city to this small college town? That would rather imply that there’s something desirable about living here.”

“There is,” said Joey. “Because I’ve hit forty, because I burnt out of working in finance and had money to spare.

Because my best friend found the love of her life and left the country.”

“Leaving you behind to count your heartbreaks?” Kel said. “I’ve already offered to keep you company but you firmly play for the other team.”

“I needed the change,” Joey said. “But that’s me. You’ve been in Mount Cline your whole life, right? Don’t you think about escaping?”

Kel rubbed at her eyes, her grin deserting her. This conversation wasn’t headed where she wanted it to head.

“Okay, okay,” Joey said. “I’ll come clean.” She flushed and bit her lip. “Um, you left the laptop in the back room open.”

“I definitely don’t look at porn at work,” Kel smirked, trying to get control of the conversation again.

“Yeah, but you do look at expensive art colleges in London,” said Joey.

Kel slumped and then shrugged. “What of it? It’s not like I’m going to end up there or anything.”

“Why not?”

Jesus. For a morning that had started off cheerful and sunny, things were getting serious fast. Not the way Kel preferred to live life. She shrugged again. “Do I look like I can afford an expensive art college to you?”

“You’re talented.”

“What would you know about it?” But her heart swelled a little because she was, she knew, talented. Unfortunately, talent didn’t pay the bills. At least not in Kel’s world.

“Well, there’s probably a scholarship or something, isn’t there?”

“There is.”

“So…”

Joey trailed off and Kel really, really didn’t want to be having this conversation.

“So it’s not enough.”

“How do you know? Why don’t you at least look? Apply? Get the information?” Joey pressed.

Kel squeezed her eyes tight shut in the hopes that Joey would disappear, or that the earth would crumble beneath her feet, or, at the very least, a customer would walk in. But nothing happened for a long minute. She sighed.

“Already have.”

“You applied?”

Kel nodded.

“Then why are you such a Debbie Downer about it?” Joey asked. She took a step forward, leaning down so that she was looking into Kel’s eyes. “Ah. Right. Don’t want to hope, right?”

“Maybe,” Kel said, looking away.

Joey laughed. “That’s crazy. What’s life without hope?”

“I am hoping,” said Kel. “I’m just hoping privately, that’s all.”

Joey shook her head. “You’re weird, you know that? You’re quite happy to share your bed with any attractive woman that comes along.” She held up a hand to stop Kel interrupting. “I’m not judging, I’ve got no problem with that. But you share your body so easily and yet your hopes, your dreams, they’re just for you.”

“Doesn’t do any good talking about things that haven’t happened yet.”

“Bullshit.”

Kel sighed. “Look, I applied, I haven’t even got in yet. And even if I do get in, I can’t afford to go. It’s just a pipe dream. Something I tried to see if I could.”

“But you want it?”

“I’ve wanted it since as long as I can remember,” admitted Kel, not entirely sure why she was admitting it.

“So why now?” pressed Joey. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, but you’re twenty eight, Kel, not exactly freshman age.”

“You kidding? You think that kids from families like mine go to college?”

“Families like yours?” asked Joey, confused.

Sometimes Kel forgot that Joey hadn’t grown up in town, that she didn’t know everything and everyone. Maybe because she’d felt so comfortable around her since the moment she’d walked through the doors.

“A deadbeat dad and a drunk for a mom don’t exactly equal a ginormous college fund,” said Kel. “Besides, I wasn’t ready. I needed to find myself, find what I wanted. If you’d have handed me a bunch of cash when I was eighteen I’d have blown it on, I don’t know, trips to Burning Man and paintbrushes, probably. Artists grow into themselves.”

“And now you know that this is what you want.”

Kel sighed. “Look, can we stop this conversation?”

“If you tell me that this is what you want.”

“Fine. Yes. This is what I want. I’m dying to get in and I have no idea what I’ll do if I do get in but I’ll try and work things out and in the meantime I’d really rather not jinx things by talking about them. Fair?”

“Fair,” Joey said. Then she grinned. “But you’re gonna get in.”

“How do you know?”

“Sixth sense,” said Joey, mysteriously.

Kel treated her to a spectacular eye roll.

“Dismiss it all you like, but I’ve got a sense for these things.”

“Then I’d better find a sugar mommy, ‘cos that’s the only way I’m going to be able to pay for a place like this.”

Joey grinned at her. “Just as long as you’re not counting on me, I spent everything I have buying this place. A place that

you've currently informed me won't start turning a profit until September."

"Maybe we'll both be needing a sugar mommy."

Joey sighed. "Yeah, even I might switch teams for someone rich enough."

Kel pulled the handle of the coffee machine, eliciting a hiss of steam. "Might as well have a little caffeine whilst we wait for Bill or Billless Gates to walk through the door."

Joey's eyes lit up and she turned to pull a plate out of the refrigerated cabinet. "And I've perfected carrot cake," she said proudly, offering the plate up to Kel.

Kel forced herself to keep a straight face and forced herself to take a piece, the smallest she could find which was tough given that Joey had cut the cake into doorstep sized slices. "Mmm," she said. "Look delicious." Which, to be fair, it did. Unfortunately, she was pretty sure that she could smell... cayenne pepper?

She took a bite and her eyes started to water unprompted. She tried desperately to swallow but ended up coughing and grabbing for a napkin to spit the cake into.

"Ah," said Joey. "Not my finest creation?"

Secretly, Kel was beginning to wonder just what had made Joey buy a cake and coffee shop when, as she'd admitted on her first day, she'd never baked a cake in her life. "Um, it could use a little work."

Joey's face fell and Kel sighed.

"Come on, there's no one coming in this afternoon. Put the closed sign up and I'll walk you through the carrot cake recipe," Kel said, aware of the fact that she was talking herself out of an afternoon's worth of tips on the off chance that someone did come in.

Joey brightened up. "I'll let you take half the cake home."

"Which cake?" asked Kel suspiciously. "Because I'm sending the one that you've just given me to Poison Control as evidence."

“The good cake,” Joey promised. “Come on. I’ll need to bake a good cake to impress my potential sugar mommy or daddy.”

If only that was all it took, Kel thought, as she followed Joey into the kitchen.

Chapter Three

The plane thundered through the sky and Trix stretched out, ignoring the manuscript in front of her and wondering if she should have another glass of champagne.

“Can I get you something?” asked a steward smoothly appearing at her side.

She eyed her empty glass then the manuscript next to it and sighed. “No,” she said. “Thank you, but I’m fine.”

Yes, she was disappointed. She’d wanted literary fiction bad enough that she could taste it. But this was a setback, nothing more. If she behaved herself, did well, then she’d have the chance at literary fiction again. With this agency or with another.

What she couldn’t afford to do was blow this opportunity out of spite or disappointment or anything else.

She picked up the manuscript again.

She’d taken a handful of ‘scripts from the romance acquisition department on her way out of the door, figuring she’d at least have something to read on the plane. Something to take her mind off her errant father and her mother’s mysterious new connection to him and the fact that she was about to spend more than a month in the States away from her precious job.

She flicked over a page and tried to read all the words again.

The present story featured a man and woman on an airplane, which she’d taken as a good sign. The very title, *Mile High Love*, had been enough to assure her that she was going to hate the book, but it also seemed appropriate given her current situation.

The couple in question had been assigned seats next to each other on a transatlantic flight and, Trix assumed, would be falling in love before the full nine hours were up.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see the man in the seat next to her. He was snoring, eyes covered by a face mask, vast belly shaking with each snore, three empty glasses in front of him.

With a snort of disbelief she closed the manuscript for good.

This wasn't going to work out.

Who fell in love in nine hours? What could it possibly be about a germ-ridden, stinking tube in the sky that was so romantic? Besides, the female character was on her way to visit her dying mother and the male was simply switching flights to go on to a job interview on the other side of the country. Surely that would put a damper on any potential relationship.

It was unrealistic.

Unrealistic and, frankly, stupid.

Trix closed her eyes and wished that she'd ordered that second glass of champagne.

BY THE TIME she blundered off the plane she'd slightly reconsidered her idea of nine hours not being long enough to fall in love. In her current state, nine hours felt like a lifetime, and her eyes were bleary, her mouth tasted foul, and she'd give her left arm for an actual, solid bed.

The airport buzzed around her and she managed to find her suitcase, but once she'd been spat out into the arrivals hall she found herself at a loss.

She'd sort of assumed that someone would pick her up, and realized in a panic that she had no idea of her father's actual address. The town, sure, but not the street address.

She was starting to feel a little sick when the crowds began to clear and then she saw him.

In a drawer in her mother's bedroom there was a small, dog-eared photograph that Trix had come across when she was all of eight years old. She'd known immediately that the man in the picture was her father, and so she'd stolen it, kept it under

her mattress, all the way through boarding school and even university.

It had shown a man with flowing dark hair, dangerously blue eyes, a man in a leather jacket and jeans that frayed at the cuffs. A man with snake hips and a criminal air. A man that she could almost understand a woman might fall in love with. Almost.

To be clear, that man bore absolutely nothing in common with the one currently standing in front of her.

No, this man had thinning hair combed back from his temples, he was wearing comfortable shoes and slacks. His tweed jacket had leather patches on the elbows, but that was the only connection that Trix could make to the man from the photograph.

“Trix, darling,” he said, coming at her with open arms and enveloping her in a hug. “I’m so glad that you came. Any trouble getting here?”

Trix managed to extricate herself fairly gracefully from the unwanted hug. “Uh, no, no trouble,” she said.

“Immigration can be a nightmare, especially in these troubled times,” said her father, taking the handle of her suitcase.

“Immigration?” Trix said confused. “I have an American passport.”

He turned to her uncertainly. “You do?”

“I have an American parent,” she said, finding it somewhat strange that she had to remind him.

“Ah, yes, of course,” he said. “Well, the car’s waiting over here, just follow me.”

And it only now occurred to her just how little her father knew about her.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, of course. She literally couldn’t remember the last time she’d physically seen him.

Oh, there'd been birthday cards and Christmas presents and the odd Skype call and then Zoom when that became a thing. But they had been mostly out of a sense of duty, at least on her behalf. As far as Trix was concerned, her stepfather was the one she called dad, he was the one that showed up on parent's day, the one that taught her to drive, and that was just how it was.

And now this. An invitation to spend the summer here, to go to the wedding of a half-sibling she'd never even met. An invitation accepted in bewilderment that had become far more real than she'd intended it to.

"Let me guess," her father said, as they walked out of the chill of the airport into the sticky warmth of the evening. "You're wondering what on earth you're doing here and how it all came to this?"

Trix was taken aback. "No, not at all," she said politely.

Her father laughed. "Bullshit. The English have a complete inability to say 'no' to anything outright. They're far too polite. When confronted with a pushy American they nearly always end up agreeing to whatever it is we want out of fear of offending us." He clicked a car key and the boot of a large SUV opened. He hefted her suitcase into it and then turned to her with a wink. "How else do you think I persuaded someone like your mother to marry me?"

Trix opened her mouth and then closed it again, not at all sure of what she wanted to say.

Her father laughed and she saw an echo of the old photograph.

"Come on, Trix, humor your old man. It's about time we spent some time together you and I. And this seemed like a good opportunity. Emily's getting married, I'm losing one daughter, and maybe I thought I should find another daughter to, I don't know, replace her or something."

Trix arched an eyebrow. "You are a professor of psychology, there is no way in any universe that you believe something as trite as that."

Her father slouched a little. “Maybe not,” he admitted. “Maybe I’m just trying to make up for lost time. Lost opportunities. Maybe there’s been enough loss already and I’d like to have a gain for once.”

He turned away to open the door, but not before Trix saw a glimmer of a tear creeping from his eye. She swallowed and reminded herself that the man had lost his wife not a year ago. Okay, it was a wife that wasn’t her mother, but that didn’t mean that he wasn’t grieving. Maybe he did want to make up for something that he’d lost.

He was smiling again as he turned to let her into the passenger seat. “Your chariot awaits, my lady.”

She managed to smile back. “Thanks... dad.” The word tasted strange. But he straightened up and grinned wider and she knew she’d said the right thing.

TO HER HORROR, Trix fell asleep in the car and woke up to her father gently shaking her shoulder.

“Come on, let’s get you in the house,” he said. “There’s a bed already made up for you, you must be exhausted.”

“I’m fine,” she said, convincing absolutely no one that she was. Her eyelids felt like they were made of lead. She did manage to climb out of the enormous car all by herself, but she then let herself be escorted up wide stairs to a large front door and then into a house that smelled of cedar and cotton.

“Right over here,” her father said, propelling her to a large door. “This is the guest suite, you’ll be comfortable in here. And don’t worry about being polite. You sleep, get over this jet lag, and we’ll see you in the morning. Help yourself to anything you like in the meantime.”

She had a hand on the door handle already, was already half asleep.

“Dad?” said a voice.

“Ah,” said her father. “Emily, come and meet Trix. Trix, let me just get your things from the car.”

He disappeared and was replaced by a slim, dark-haired woman that looked far more like the picture Trix had kept under her mattress than her father did. Trix swallowed. Her half-sister, she assumed. A decade younger than her, or close enough to it. And a perfect stranger.

She managed to paste a smile on her face and held out her hand to shake, hoping to avoid the American predilection for hugging at every opportunity.

But she needn't have bothered.

Emily made no move, either to hug her or to take her hand.

"Just so that we're totally on the same page," Emily said. "Your invitation came from dad, not from me."

"Oh," said Trix. "Oh, I, uh..."

"This is my day and you are not here to ruin it," hissed Emily, just as the front door banged open again.

"Making friends already, I hope," said their father, dragging Trix's suitcase into the foyer.

"Absolutely," Emily said with a bright, flashing smile. "But poor Trix looks about done in, I think those bags under her eyes might have put her over the baggage allowance."

"Which is exactly why we're not bothering her any more tonight," said their father. "Trix, my dear, here's your case, and now we're leaving you alone and don't want to see you before breakfast time. Off you go."

And the pair of them walked off toward the back of the house leaving Trix staring after them.

What the hell had all that been about?

She looked down at her suitcase, then at her hand that was still on the door handle.

Jet lag. That was what it was. She was too tired to form a sentence, let alone a comprehensive thought. There must have been some kind of cultural misunderstanding. Something that would have to wait until the morning to be sorted out.

Chapter Four

The way the morning sunlight hit the blonde hair on the pillow next to hers made Kel want to paint.

Oils weren't her thing, but for a brief instant she could see exactly the tubes she'd need to mix to get the color that she wanted. She could see the movements she'd need to make with the brush, she could feel the picture forming under her hands.

Then the blonde stirred and Kel half-grinned as the woman next to her stretched.

"When I asked you over for breakfast I figured we'd be watching Buffy until dawn," she drawled.

The blonde smiled back. "I've never had much patience for TV, to be honest."

"So all that stuff about loving the subversion of vampiric tropes was bullshit?" said Kel, pretending to be offended.

"I'm sorry." The blonde arched an eyebrow. "Anything that I can do to make it up to you?"

"I might be able to think of something," Kel muttered, her head already bowing, her lips already starting to caress soft skin at the base of the woman's neck.

She was rudely interrupted somewhere south of the neck but north of where she really wanted to be by a loud beeping.

"Shit, shit." The blonde struggled upright, pressing at her watch. "Shit."

"Not good news, I take it?" said Kel, lying back on the bed.

"I'm supposed to be in class." She was already getting up, already searching for the clothes that were scattered across the apartment floor. At least it wouldn't take her long to find them, the place was the size of a matchbox.

"I guess this is goodbye then," Kel said, watching as she struggled to get back into a tank top.

“I’ll call you later,” the blonde promised, as she wriggled into her pants and picked up her bag.

But Kel knew that things wouldn’t be the same.

It was no fault of the blonde’s.

Kel had a distinct rule about sharing her bed with the same person for more than one night. Some might say that made her a slut. Well, her mother might say that. But in Kel’s view, it made life easier, cleaner. There could be no misunderstandings.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like the blonde, whose name had definitely escaped her. She was a nice woman, they’d had a good time.

It was more that she liked all women. And committing to one just seemed... Well, it seemed like only reading one book for the rest of her life. Or only eating scrambled eggs forever. And why do that when there was a huge public library down the street and tacos and pizza and burgers existed?

She stretched and hopped out of bed. It was time that she thought about getting to work anyway. Painting and girl trouble would have to wait for later.

SHE LIFTED THE apartment door with one hand whilst pulling it closed with the other, the only way that the door would actually lock. She was so used to it, she barely noticed it by now. Then she jogged down the stairs, freshly washed hair bouncing, the hole in her right sneaker no problem because it wasn’t raining.

She nearly didn’t stop for the mail. It was still early, and Sam, the mail carrier, almost certainly hadn’t come yet. But then she did, as if some force was pulling her toward the mailbox.

And when she saw what was inside her heart stopped for a long moment and her hands wouldn’t move.

“Shit,” she mumbled.

The envelope just sat there minding its own business.

“Shit,” she said again. Like that might help matters.

Finally, slowly, shakily, she reached in and pulled out the brown envelope. It was weighty in her hand, the stamps foreign and unfamiliar. She stared at it as her stomach turned somersaults and she felt eggs re-scrambling in her stomach.

Then, lightning fast, she shoved the envelope into her backpack.

Once out of sight, her heart rate returned to normal and her breakfast settled. She was being stupid.

But she couldn't help it.

A long, long time ago she'd sat on a chair that was too big for her in a classroom that overwhelmed her in a place she truly didn't understand.

She'd longed to go to school. She'd watched the big kids take the school bus and pressed her nose against the living room window wanting to join them. And when the day finally came, her mother, sober for once, had dressed her up and Kel had run off as though her feet were on fire.

It hadn't been what she'd expected.

Not that she was stupid. But she didn't understand what was happening. Didn't understand that the other kids had had parents who had taught them to write their names, taught them numbers. Didn't understand that inequality started from the very bottom.

By lunchtime she was ready to curl up in a little ball and cry the rest of the day away. She knew kids were already looking at her, talking about her, judging her.

Then the teacher had handed out large sheets of paper and tiny pots of paint and Kel's interest had been perked. She watched carefully, picking up the brush as all the other kids did, dipping it in the paint, touching it to the paper.

From the very first instant the brush had felt like an extension of her fingers, like a part of her.

"Shit," she said again, louder this time.

Then she grabbed her bike and pedaled as fast as she could to the store.

“Are you being chased by wolves?” Joey’s face creased into a grin as Kel banged through the door.

“Yes,” said Kel. “Wait, no. Hold on.” She reached into her backpack and rummaged around.

“Mad dogs then?” asked Joey. “Oh, I know, pirates?”

“We’re land-locked,” Kel said, finally dragging the envelope out of her bag.

“Okay, but—” Joey stopped talking as Kel thrust the envelope into her hand. Her eyes widened and then she looked up at Kel. “So?”

“So what?” Kel said. “I haven’t opened it yet, have I?”

Joey turned it over. “Huh. Scaredy cat, are you?” She grinned to take the sting out of the words, and tossed the envelope back to Kel. “Better open it then, hadn’t you, or else you’ll never know.”

“Uh, I kind of thought that you’d...” began Kel. But Joey was already disappearing into the back.

Kel looked at the envelope in her hands, felt the swirling in her stomach again and then swore heartily. Her fingers scrabbled at the paper until they got a hold and then she tore the envelope open.

She was still staring at the words on the letter when Joey came back.

“So,” Joey said. “I’ve already created you an account at Crossing the Pond, you just need to choose a password.” She dumped the store laptop on the counter then cleared her throat.

“What?”

“A password,” Joey said.

“For what?”

“For Crossing the Pond.”

“I got in.” The words didn’t seem real. Hell, the letter didn’t seem real.

“Right, so choose a password.”

Kel's legs started to shake and Joey caught her elbow, pushing her down into a chair at a small square table and picking up the laptop before sitting down to join her.

"I got in."

"Of course you did," said Joey. "I never expected less. Which means we've got to start working on a way to get you over there."

"What's Crossing the Pond?" Kel asked, the words finally sinking in.

"Do you actually listen to anything I say?"

The blood was coming back to Kel's face, streaming back into her brain. She managed to grin. "If it doesn't involve naked women, money, or art there's only a fifty-fifty chance."

Joey rolled her eyes. "I told you, my best friend Piper moved to the UK and started this website. It's called Crossing the Pond and it helps people from Anglo countries move around. Tells you about visas, restrictions, working, all kinds of things. It's useful. So choose a password and we'll get started."

Obediently, Kel typed in a password, confirmed it, then slid the laptop back to Joey.

The shine was starting to wear off.

"I don't..." She wanted this more than anything. More than perhaps she'd realized. She'd applied out of fear, prompted by the fear that she'd get rejected, done it just to see if she could. And now it was like the world was being handed to her on a plate. Except the plate was enclosed in one of those glass bell jars and she was damned if she could get at it.

"Give me a second," Joey said.

"I can't do this," Kel mumbled.

"Do what?"

"Someone like me in a place like that," said Kel, the doubts rushing up to slap her in the face.

“Horsecrap,” Joey said, eyes glued to the screen. “You applied because you know you belong there and they’ll be lucky to have you.”

“But there’s no way I can afford it.” Which was true. Applying had been dumb. She shouldn’t have let herself believe that this could happen.

“Look, getting a visa shouldn’t be a problem, you’ll even be allowed to work for a few hours a week. Throw in a scholarship and then there are a couple of educational grants that you can apply for...”

“And I’ll still need a sugar mommy to pay for the rest,” groaned Kel.

“Yeah, but not a Bill Gates level sugar mommy,” Joey said. “Just a regular level sugar mommy. Say, a senator or something.”

Kel snorted a laugh but her heart was squeezing its feelings out, leaving her heavy and black inside.

Joey’s hand crept over the table. “Kel, I want you to look at me.”

Even her eyes were heavy, but she did as she was told.

“You want this, you deserve this,” Joey said quietly. “I know you think you don’t, but you do. And I know the answers aren’t easy, but nothing that’s worth having is easy. At some point you need to decide if you’re going to fight for something or let it go. So what are you going to do? Let this fade away, regret it for the next sixty years. Or put up a fight?”

Kel swallowed. Outside, the sun was shining, the birds were singing and Mount Cline looked just like it did on every summer day. She knew because she’d seen every summer day in Mount Cline. Every single summer day since the day she was born.

“You a fighter or a quitter, Kel?”

She took a deep breath. Could she really do this? Not get in, she’d done that. Not pay for it, that was still very definitely up

in the air. But let herself hope? Could she, just for once, believe that good things could happen to good people?

“Kel?”

Kelly Bradshaw, graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts. It sounded ridiculous. But it had a ring to it.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Joey said. “That’s the best you’ve got?”

“Yeah,” Kel said again, a grin spreading across her face. “Yeah, let’s do this. I’ll figure it out, we’ll figure it out. Like you said, if it’s not worth fighting for, it’s not worth having.”

“Awesome,” Joey said, pushing the laptop toward Kel. “You get on top of this grant business, then we’ll put our heads together and try and come up with a way for you to make some extra cash. Oh, and there’s a cheesecake about ready to come out of the oven, so we can taste test that at the same time.”

Kel frowned. “The oven?” she asked, knowing damn well that the only cheesecake recipe in the store’s recipe book was the no-bake, chill only kind.

“Yeah,” Joey said, standing up. “It smelled a bit funny at first, but I think it just needed to cook.”

She bustled off, leaving Kel shaking her head in disbelief.

Chapter Five

The morning didn't start well.

Trix slept like the dead, woke up in an unfamiliar bed, eyed a pile of manuscripts she really didn't want to read, pulled on some clothes, and then sloped into the kitchen to find that there was no coffee in the house.

"Dad, seriously," Emily was saying. "I put the board up on the wall so you could write down what was running out. But do you see coffee written up there?"

Trix narrowed her eyes, but their father simply laughed. "So I'm a forgetful old man, what can I say? Besides I've gotta hit the office so I'll grab coffee there. As for you two..." He fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a green bill and a set of car keys. "Coffee's on me. Em, drive Trix into town to get coffee and breakfast, then maybe show her around a little."

"Oh," Trix broke in. "I'm fine, really, I—" After whatever it was that happened last night, she was uncomfortable being alone with Emily.

"It's absolutely no problem at all, is it Em?" said their father.

"Dad, I need to check on the flowers, I've got cake tasting, and I need to finalize the table settings."

"All of which can be done after coffee and breakfast," said their father with a glint of something in his eye. "Trix is new in town, you're sisters, take the poor woman to get some caffeine."

"Half sisters," both Emily and Trix said at the same time.

Trix almost smiled. At least they agreed on one thing then.

"Enough, take the car, go get sustenance," said their father.

They were both ushered outside and Trix, seeing no choice, clambered into the passenger seat of the massive SUV.

Emily said nothing as she started the engine and backed out of the driveway.

“So, um, when do I get to meet the lucky groom?” Trix asked, figuring that wedding questions were probably the safest area of conversation.

“He’s away on business right now,” Emily snapped.

Right. Okay. Not a safe area of conversation then.

“I hope that doesn’t mean that you’re doing all the work,” Trix said, determined to remain polite. “If there’s anything that I can do to help, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Emily took a full second to glare at her, which given that they were hurtling along a country lane was rather terrifying.

“If you really wanted to help, you could have stayed safely on the other side of the Atlantic,” she said, finally.

Right. So it was going to be like that. To be honest, Trix supposed she couldn’t blame the girl. Not only was she handling wedding prep alone, probably desperately missing her mother, but she’d had a half-sister foisted on her as well.

“I really don’t want to get in the way here,” Trix said equably. “I’m here at...” It seemed odd to call the man dad in front of someone who actually had the right to call him dad. “I’m here because your father asked me to come. It seemed important to him.”

“And this was the occasion that you chose to come?” Emily said, screeching the car into a parking lot. “You couldn’t have come for any one of those thirty something Christmases you missed? Or last summer? Or next summer?”

“I wasn’t asked then,” said Trix, quietly.

“This is my summer, my wedding, my special day. And now I’m expected to share my one remaining parent with some woman I’ve never met who just floats in from across the ocean?”

Emily’s long dark hair swung over her shoulder as she craned her neck and backed the car into a parking space.

“This is all set up to be a fucking nightmare,” she spat, throwing the car into park, pulling the key from the ignition, yanking the door open and getting out.

Trix laid her head against the back of the seat, treasuring the moment of silence. This was... unexpected. She'd had no intention of creating family strife. But then, maybe she should have expected it. Americans were so emotional about everything.

With a sigh, she opened up the door and climbed out. She needed coffee. How could anyone expect her to function without caffeine?

The place wasn't quite the American diner she'd thought they'd be going to. It seemed more like a small cafe. A sign above the door advertised Joey's Coffee and Cakes, though the Joey part looked like it was newly painted.

Trix blinked in the strange heat of the morning and walked inside, feeling air conditioning nip at her nose as she opened the door.

Emily was already there, standing up front talking to a woman with half a haircut. Trix approached the counter. No, not half a haircut. It was obviously designed that way. Dark hair chin length on one side, shaved on the other. The woman had pale skin, a smattering of freckles across her nose.

“And who's this then?”

Trix jumped, not expecting to be addressed. But the woman was looking at her, smiling a half-smile that lit up eyes that were bright green and set off a shimmering of dimples.

“Half-sister,” Emily grumbled. “So make it two coffees and two of whatever it is that Joey hasn't baked in the last twenty four hours.” She stalked off to find a table.

The woman beamed again at Trix, who gave her a short nod before reluctantly joining Emily at the table.

“I'm not here to make trouble,” she said as she sat down. “And I'm sorry if I'm making your life more difficult, I honestly had no intention of doing so.”

“You’re spoiling things,” Emily said.

Trix took a deep breath, then another, and then a third, but in all honesty she had no idea what to say. She vowed that she wasn’t going to say another word until she’d drunk at least half a cup of coffee.

Kel watched them with half an eye.

She knew Emily Martin, of course. Not as well as she knew most people her age in town, since Emily had been shunted off to private school somewhere out of town by her rich professor daddy and her socialite mom. But she knew enough to know that Emily was spoiled, straight, and no fun.

The half-sister though, that was different.

She was tall, her body curved in all the right places, not skinny, but not fat either. Her hair was long and dark, wavy, the kind of hair that looked good spread over a pillow. Big blue eyes, peaches and cream skin, the sister was just the kind of woman that Renaissance painters had loved to paint.

Just the kind of woman that Kel liked to bed.

No, not sister. Half sister.

She wondered on which side. Judging by the coloring she had to be the professor’s daughter. Emily’s mother had been slight, blonde, Scandinavian looking.

She poured the coffee carefully. They were obviously arguing about something. Emily looked mad. The sister looked... tired, Kel decided.

She carried the coffee over, carefully putting it down and rearranging things on the table to make room for the plates she was going to bring. And not at all because she wanted to eavesdrop. Not that either woman seemed to care.

“But you are making things more difficult, why can’t you see that?” Emily was saying.

“It wasn’t at all my intention.”

“Then why don’t you go home then?” Emily said.

Kel just about stopped herself rolling her eyes at that. Emily really was a spoiled little brat. She went back and got some danishes, serving the women who were now just glaring at each other, then beat a hasty retreat.

She left them to it, going into the back and putting a couple of cakes into the oven. Joey was doing a supply run, so the customers would be safe from cake poisoning for this morning at least.

Emily’s high pitched voice echoed through the store. Just for a second Kel wondered what it would be like to be someone like that.

She’d certainly have no worries about paying for art school if she was Emily Martin. Growing up in a big house, having riding lessons, and who knew what else. Mind you, she’d also have to end up being a little brat that deserved a slap for not knowing how lucky she was, so there was that.

She sighed and closed the oven up before heading back out to the floor.

“Get you anything else?” she asked.

“No,” Emily said, turning back to her sister. “And you are. Whether you intend to or not. You’re ruining things.”

Kel could see the sister’s face paling and she kind of wanted to put a hand on her shoulder, to let her know that she wasn’t alone, that Emily was a little monster.

“How could I be?” the woman asked, her accent sharp, the words etching a pulsing feeling through Kel’s core. She perked up, recognizing lust when she felt it. A woman with an accent, huh?

“For fuck’s sake,” said Emily. “You don’t even have a date for the wedding.”

Which should have meant nothing. Kel should have let the words float off into the air. She should have walked away and

let her life play out differently and let Emily be the bitch that she was.

But the sister flinched. It was a simple, unconscious movement that she couldn't have controlled. Kel only caught it out of the corner of her eye. The movement of someone who'd been hurt, the impact of words that stung more than they should.

Then her tongue started wagging without much forethought at all.

"Of course she does," Kel found herself saying. "She's got me." She grinned down at the sister. "If you'll have me, that is? Would you like to be my date to Emily's wedding?"

The sister looked up at her, eyes shining blue and a smile spreading across her lips. Kel tipped her a wink and her grin widened. "Well, I think I should like that very much. Do you have a name?"

"Kel," said Kel, holding out a hand.

"Trix, pleased to meet you."

Her hand was cool, soft, the skin smooth as though she'd never burned her hand on the edge of an oven or cut her fingers opening boxes or damaged herself in any way at all. And Kel was almost laughing, caught up in this shared moment, feeling Emily's horror at what was happening.

"Jesus Christ," Emily said, pushing back her chair and standing up. "The two of you deserve each other. You're a pain in my ass, Kelly Bradshaw."

She stomped to the door, turning back only when she was halfway out. "I'm your ride, so if you don't want to get stuck out here you'd better get a move on."

Trix bit back a smile and nodded, getting up from the table.

"Thanks," she whispered to Kel.

"Pleased to be of service," said Kel. She raised her voice a little, loud enough that Emily could hear. "Shall I pick you up for the rehearsal dinner?"

“For fuck’s sake,” Emily said, letting the door slam behind her.

Kel laughed as Trix rushed after her half-sister.

Chapter Six

The porch was nice. She could get used to this.

A ceiling fan chugged away, stirring the heavy air, a cool glass of American lemonade was by her side, and a pile of reading material was on the table in front of her.

It should be perfection.

Or it would have been if the current manuscript wasn't entitled *The Devilish Duke*.

Trix sighed. She was no fool. She knew that historical romance sold, she knew that with the advent of a certain TV show, HR was bigger than ever. On the other hand, she couldn't quite get over the fact that the Devilish Duke was a bit of an arsehole, and the fair young maiden in question deserved a slap.

It wasn't that the writing was bad, that she could admit. But the plot lines. Honestly. Apart from anything else, what were the chances of a duke marrying a commoner? It would be like... like the Prime Minister marrying a prostitute. Though given the current PM that might not be too far off the mark.

She groaned as she turned a page.

She was, she decided, going to write a list of forbidden words. Words that her authors would under no circumstances be allowed to use. And right at the top of that list was 'throbbing.' She read another sentence. And 'moist' would be right below it. She slammed the pages closed and leaned back in her chair.

The morning hadn't turned out that badly, she supposed. Once Emily had driven her back to the house and then driven off to go and do other things, that was.

She was trying to be patient. Trying to be understanding. A wedding was a big deal, she supposed. Stressful. The girl had lost her mother and was doing things alone. Her husband-to-be was nowhere to be found.

Still though, it was hard to be charitable when Emily was turning out to be a spoiled little so-and-so.

It had definitely been worth playing along with that little waitress's joke, just to see the look on Emily's face. Trix chuckled to herself.

She'd have to make her way back to the cafe, make sure she thanked the woman. Kel, that was her name. Obviously, she hadn't been serious. But it had been a nice gesture, one that had made her feel welcome, made her feel a part of something for the first time since she'd landed.

She'd go back and leave a tip. Americans liked that. Tipping.

She was just wondering how much would be appropriate for offering a fake date when her father walked in from the garden.

"Ah, enjoying the nice weather are we?" he said, dropping into a seat beside her. "Always hated the English rain. Just as well I left the place really, I think the constant dripping would have driven me mad eventually."

"It's not that bad," Trix said.

"I kid," said her father. "Something that helps me diffuse tension or handle difficult situations, I'm only human, like most people."

"So leaving England was difficult for you, was it?" Trix couldn't help but say. After all, as far as she knew, no one had forced him to. He and her mother had been married. He could have stayed as long as he wanted.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, it was, actually. One of the hardest decisions I've made."

"You didn't have to leave. You could have come back."

"Could I?" he said. There was a note of sadness in his voice.

"Obviously." She wasn't going to let him off that easily.

"Ah, to have the wisdom of youth."

Trix snorted. “I’m well over thirty, thank you very much. It’s not like I’m a naive teenager.”

“Then you should know,” said her father simply.

“Know what?”

“That sometimes there’s no right answer. Sometimes you do the best that you can with the situation that you’re presented with and live with the consequences forever after.”

Trix sighed. “I suppose,” she said. She didn’t want to have this conversation. She didn’t even want to be here. But here she was and she had to make the best of it.

In her head she’d already decided. She’d stay for the wedding, it would be rude not to, but then she’d plead work responsibilities and get the first flight home that she could.

“So what about Emily’s other half then?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Drake? He’s a fine young man. You’ll like him.”

“But he’s away on business right before the wedding?”

Her father shrugged. “He’s trying a case in The Hague. Something to do with refugee children being given visas. He’s a human rights lawyer, you know.”

Ah. That put a different spin on things. Trix felt slightly guilty for thinking uncharitably of the man. “I see.”

“Spends his time between here and Europe, so Emily will be doing the same. Flitting about on his private jet and spending summers in Muscat, or do I mean Mustique? Anyway, that sort of thing.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Sounds like a fairy tale,” said her father.

“Fairy tales aren’t true though.”

“And yet they continue to sell,” he said. “You’re a literary agent, you should know that. Fairy tales speak to our very essence as a culture, as humans. They present us with clear moral questions that actually have answers. They show us that

good triumphs over evil, that love wins out in the end, and that the villain will have his just desserts.”

“All of which are unrealistic portraits of how the world actually works.”

“And yet what would we be if we didn’t believe in those things?” her father asked with a smile. “How sad and small and plain would our lives be without love and justice and right?”

Trix opened her mouth to answer but closed it when Emily strode out onto the porch.

“Dad, there you are. The caterers are on the phone, something about transfer of funds. Can you talk to them for me?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” said her father standing up.

Trix picked up another manuscript from the pile. She flipped open the cover and was about to start reading when she felt eyes on her.

“It was a joke, you know that, right?”

She looked up at Emily. “A joke?”

“Kel. Her asking you to the wedding. Her being your date. It was a joke, that’s all.”

Trix widened her eyes, trying to look as innocent as possible. “I’m sure it wasn’t,” she said. “After all, why on earth would someone joke about something like that?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Kel’s the town slut, everyone knows that. She’s a playboy, she sleeps with anything that moves. She’s just trying to get into your pants.”

“Huh,” said Trix. “Has she got into yours?” Not the most polite question, but she couldn’t help herself.

Emily’s face turned redder. “Obviously not,” she said. “And obviously she’s not your date for the wedding.”

“And yet you wanted me to have a date for the wedding,” Trix said. “It seemed so important to you.”

Toying with Emily was turning out to be more satisfying than she'd imagined. This was not the kind of woman she was, Trix reminded herself. But Emily had been such a little toe-rag that it was hard not to want to tease her.

“Not a date like that though.”

“But you said it wasn't real anyway.”

“Of course it's not. She's just messing with you to mess with me, that's all.”

“Why would she want to mess with you?” Trix asked, still playing innocent.

“I don't know. Probably because she couldn't get into my pants even if she wanted to.”

“But you don't mind if she gets into mine though, do you?” Trix asked. “I mean, you're not homophobic or anything like that, are you?”

Emily's skin was almost crimson. “Of course not!” she choked. “But she's playing with you. I'm only trying to be nice, trying to stop you from embarrassing yourself. She's not into you or anything.”

“Oh, I don't know,” Trix said, trying to look doubtful. “I sort of had the impression that she liked me.” Her eyes brightened. “You know, I think I'll go back to that cafe tomorrow and check. I can ask her openly whether she's interested in coming. Besides, since I'm the invited guest, it's really my job to invite a date, not the other way around.”

Emily growled, teeth clenched and looked like she was about to explode. Trix was going to put her out of her misery, really she was. She was not a cruel woman. She'd been to boarding school, she knew what bullying was, and she had a strong sense of fairness, truly. She was about to tell Emily that she was joking.

Or, said a little voice at the back of her head, you could play this through to the end.

The waitress had seemed willing. Had seemed fun even. Maybe she could persuade her to play along. Or maybe she

could pay her, employ her, get her to extend the joke.

No. That wasn't fair. And yet... the thought of Emily's face when she showed up at the wedding with Kel on her arm was very, very tempting.

She was still torn, unsure of whether to come clean, when their father appeared at the door.

"You know," he said. "I've had an idea."

Both girls turned their eyes to him.

"A really good idea," he emphasized.

Emily scowled and Trix smothered a smile. It looked like her half sister had had plenty of experience with her father's good ideas and was less than approving.

"No, Em, really, hear me out."

"What is it?" Emily asked.

Her father grinned. "Trix should be a bridesmaid at the wedding."

Chapter Seven

Kel leaned on the counter, chewing on a toothpick and thinking.

Trix.

What kind of name was that? Like for a cat or something, fine. But for an actual human woman? Maybe it was a foreign thing? Speaking of which, where was this Trixie even from? She seemed to speak English pretty well. Not that Kel had anything at all against non-Americans. Zero experience, but nothing against them.

Huh.

She'd been trying to be nice. She'd been kidding. Right up until the second that she wasn't. Right up until it had suddenly dawned on her that in the midst of her joking around, in the midst of her trying to defend the poor woman, letting her know that someone was on her side, she might just have stumbled on the very thing that she'd been looking for.

She felt kind of shaky and a little sick.

The store bell dinged.

“Caffeine, I need caffeine.”

Kel grinned as Sam dodged through the door before it closed. Her mailbag was slung over one shoulder, her socks were pulled all the way up to the knee, and her hair was in a sensible ponytail. Just who she needed to see.

“How many have you had already today?” Kel asked.

“Ugh, this is my fifth, okay?”

“And what did the doctor say about too much caffeine?” prompted Kel.

“Not to have it,” said Sam, dropping her bag. “But come on, Kel, I get up at three in the morning. And one of the kittens is teething so I was up with her all night too. Gimme a break.”

Kel pretended to consider this. “Half regular, half decaf. Final offer.”

“I’ll take it,” gasped Sam, scrambling onto one of the high stools by the counter.

“In return, I want to pick your brain,” said Kel, preparing a cup and the coffee machine.

“Sure thing, what d’ya need.”

Kel grinned. Sam knew everything and everyone in Mount Cline. If she didn’t know it, it wasn’t worth knowing. “The professor’s got a guest in,” she said. “Name of Trix.”

Sam frowned, then her face brightened. “That’s the daughter,” she said. “A half sister to Emily. The prof was married once before, to somebody in England, I think. He was working over there on his doctorate and moved back here after the divorce. Met madame and started over. Not that the girl’s been seen around here.” She squinted at Kel. “But she’s here now, you’re saying?”

“Seen her with my very own eyes,” said Kel. “That all you got?” She slid the coffee across the counter.

“That’s all there is,” Sam said, taking the cup. “I can’t be expected to know the affairs of people that don’t even live in town.”

“And why’s that?” Kel grinned. “I’m constantly surprised that the CIA don’t come calling for you wanting to put your skills to good use.”

Sam was still laughing when Joey pushed the front door open. “A little help at the back?” she called in.

“Gimme a sec, Sam. I’d better help Joey unload out back.”

“No, no, an even trade is the deal for gossip, you know that, Kel.”

“What you gave me isn’t even gossip. It’s barely information.”

“I want to know if young Joe there is on the market. She available?”

“You interested?”

Sam scowled at her. “Just answer the question.”

With a sigh, Kel nodded. “But I don’t think she’s interested in having anyone. I mean, at least that I’ve seen. She doesn’t flirt, she’s not into women for sure, and, I don’t know, she doesn’t seem like she’s actively looking.”

“We’ll see about that,” Sam said, draining the rest of her hot coffee. “I’d better be getting on with it then.”

Kel wiped her hands on a towel and headed into the back, still thinking. Not that she had that much more to think about.

“So, what’s been happening while I was gone?” Joey asked, putting a pallet of milk cartons onto the counter. “You suddenly have a rush of customers?”

“Um, no.” Kell ripped the plastic on the pallet and started pulling cartons out.

“Shame,” said Joey. She grunted as she lifted a box of flour. “Bill Gates happen to walk in to solve all our money problems?”

Kel felt herself blush, felt the blood rush up from the soles of her feet to warm her cheeks.

“Oh my God,” said Joey, turning to face her. “Did he? Seriously?”

“No,” said Kel. “Not exactly.”

Joey put the flour down. “I think you’re going to have to explain yourself a little.”

Fine. She needed to run all this by someone anyway.

“Alright, you know that psych professor that comes in here sometimes?”

Joey pushed her lips out in thought, then nodded. “Kind of balding, got an ass of a daughter, uh... lost his wife kind of recently, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“He’s pretty good looking,” said Joey. “I mean, he’s got kind eyes.”

“Not him. His daughter.”

Joey’s eyes widened. “Kel...”

“Not that one,” said Kel patiently. “There’s another one. One from his first marriage. She’s just shown up in town, I’m guessing because of the upcoming wedding.”

“The one they didn’t ask me to make the cakes for,” put in Joey.

Which was probably the best decision Emily had ever made in her life, Kel thought privately. “Right. Well, actually both daughters came in here this morning and, um, I kind of ended up asking one of them to be my date to the wedding. Not Emily, obviously.”

“Uh...”

“I was kidding,” Kel said. “At the time I was kidding.”

Joey sighed. “But the professor lives in that big old house up at the edge of town and is obviously dripping with money and you’re starting to wonder if your joke might be a little more serious than you first thought.”

“It sounds so... mercenary.”

“That it does.”

“But...”

“Come on,” Joey said, leaning against the kitchen counter. “You weren’t really serious about that sugar mommy thing, were you?”

“No,” said Kel. Except she wasn’t exactly sure that she hadn’t been.

“Kel, I don’t know what you think of yourself, and granted, I don’t know you that well, but I don’t think that you’re hard-hearted enough to just use someone for their money.”

“It’s not that I didn’t like her,” Kel put in. “She’s attractive, she seemed... sympathetic. Nice. Funny.”

“How long did you meet her for?”

“She looked like she needed rescuing.”

“So you rescue her and she ends up bank-rolling your art school?” Joey asked, crossing her arms.

Kel shrugged. “Maybe she’s looking for a charity case?”

“There’s a fatal flaw in this whole plan of yours. Which, by the way, isn’t really a plan at all,” Joey said. “Have you forgotten that you don’t spend more than twenty four hours with a woman? That’s going to make persuading someone to be your sugar mommy kind of hard.”

Kel sighed. “Maybe she’s the exception. Maybe... I don’t know, maybe I’ll end up liking her.”

“You’ve got to persuade her to like you first.”

“Like that’s ever been a problem,” Kel snorted.

“Fine,” said Joey. “But you’re not a bad person, Kel. You’re not. And I know you don’t think you deserve a lot, but you do. I don’t think that you’re cold-hearted and mercenary enough to use a woman for her money, even if you can persuade yourself to spend more than a day with her. It was fine when this was all a joke, but you can’t possibly be serious about this.”

Kel sighed again, deeper this time. “No,” she said. “I guess you’re right. I couldn’t take advantage of anyone. I mean, if she liked me, if she wanted to give me money, well, then I’d be an idiot to turn her down.”

“An idiot,” Joey agreed.

“But I couldn’t use her.”

“A mutual agreement is different,” Joey said. “But you’re not the type to deliberately hurt a woman. Even though I suspect you accidentally hurt them all the time.”

“Listen, I promise nobody anything. I like to have fun.”

“And no woman has ever interested you enough to settle down?” pried Joey.

“Nope. And no woman’s going to. I’m irresistible and yet untamable.”

It was Joey’s turn to snort. “All right then, little Ms. Untamable, help me get all that sugar out of the back of the car, otherwise I might get my whip and chair.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t tame women the same way as you tame lions,” Kel said.

“What would you know?” asked Joey, following her outside to unload the rest of the shopping from the car. “You’re untamable, remember?”

Kel picked up a heavy tote bag and slung it over her shoulder. It looked like Joey was going for another afternoon of cake making. So at least she should have plenty to distract her from the idea of sugar mommies. Avoiding food poisoning was becoming a full-time part of her job.

Chapter Eight

“It’s not that I dislike them,” Trix said.

“Wait, are we talking about your family or the manuscripts at this point?” Chastity asked, one be-ringed eyebrow lifting.

“The manuscripts,” said Trix, rolling her eyes at the web cam.

“Yeah, you don’t dislike them, you hate them.”

Trix sighed. “I’m trying, I really am. I’ve thumbed through four of them.”

“And discovered that you’re the least romantic person in the world?”

“Because I didn’t already know that?”

Chastity took pity on her boss. “Alright, there’s a couple of reasons that you don’t like these manuscripts,” she said. “And the first is a pretty important one. You took a handful of ‘scripts off the discard pile. They’re books we’ve already decided not to represent.”

Trix felt a small swelling of relief. “Thank God, I was beginning to think that I’d have to resign.”

“Yeah, maybe you should be a little more careful,” said Chastity. “Anyway, I’ve sent a bunch more to your email, good ones this time, so you can read them on your tablet.”

“You’re a star, Chas, thank you.”

“Hold up there, cowboy,” said Chastity, raising that eyebrow again. “There’s a little more going on here.”

Trix sighed. “Fine. Shoot. I know exactly what you’re going to say.”

“Why should I bother then?” pouted Chastity.

“Why do you ever?” Trix asked. She relented. “Because I need to hear it.”

Chastity shuffled in her chair, her face appearing frighteningly close to the camera for an instant before settling. “Look, Trix, boss, I don’t know what your deal is. And I’m not interfering or judging or anything. Maybe you’re asexual or aromantic, and that’s absolutely fine. You be who you are.”

“I’m neither of those things, not that it’s any of your business,” Trix broke in, flushing.

“Really? ‘Cos you might want to look them up.” Chastity looked concerned. “You’re not interested in romance, you don’t believe in love or fairy tales, I get it, I really do. I even get it if you don’t want to be labeled, that’s cool.”

“Maybe you should be the one over here,” Trix said. “This sounds like a very American conversation.”

Chastity glared at her and Trix sighed.

“I’m not ace, or aromantic, I just... I don’t know. None of this rings true to me. It’s all fake, false, built on ideals and dreams that can’t exist. Okay, I’ve never had time for this bullshit myself. But I know other people that are happy, I know romance must exist in some form or another.”

Chastity grinned. “So you’re telling me that the way to your heart is devoid of romance. You’re not looking for candles or flowers or chocolates. You’re basically looking for a woman to come up to you and say ‘hey, you look nice, let’s jump into bed and then start planning a life together.’”

“Would that be so bad?” Trix asked.

“So it’s not that you don’t believe in love, you just don’t believe in romance.”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

Chastity let out a big breath. “Well, that’s going to be somewhat of a problem in the head of romance acquisitions, don’t you think?”

“Does it have to be?”

“Yes. Because the second reason you’re not liking any of these manuscripts is because you’re not buying into the dream. You just don’t understand. It’s like... Like if you’d never taken

a physics class but then became head of non-fiction and science acquisitions. It just wouldn't work."

Trix turned this idea over in her mind for a second. "I suppose," she said, eventually. "Not that that gives me a solution here."

"Your solution is easy," said Chastity, peering too close to the camera again.

"Yeah? Then give me your wisdom, oh wise one."

Chastity shrugged. "You need to learn about love."

Trix crossed her arms and leaned back in the unsteady desk chair. The guest suite of her father's house was exactly that: a suite. There was a small living room, a full bathroom, a bedroom, and even an office corner. Whatever else her father was or wasn't, he certainly wasn't lacking in funds.

"Got any suggestions for how that's supposed to work?" she asked Chastity.

"Like anything else, I suppose," said Chastity. "You research it. Ask questions, observe. Just because you don't believe in something doesn't mean that something isn't true. If you can figure out what it is that others experience, how they believe in this fairy tale, then perhaps you can willingly suspend your disbelief when reading."

Trix opened her mouth to respond, then reconsidered. That actually wasn't a bad idea. Every now and again she forgot just how smart Chastity could be.

"Okay," she said. "Research. Just the same as if I'd been hired for the science section but didn't know physics."

"Exactly," said Chastity. "And if that doesn't work, well, I'll go ahead and hire you an escort and have her teach you about love."

"And you'll end up sacked," Trix said immediately. "So if you like your job, I suggest you keep that idea to yourself."

"Fine, fine," Chastity said. "And by the way, expect a call from AM at some point. She's anxious to know how you're

getting along with your reading. I tried to put her off, but she wasn't having it."

Trix groaned. "Fine, I'll handle her."

Chastity laughed at the very idea and ended the call.

Trix stretched and stood up. She'd slept well and the last signs of jet lag were gone, her mind was sharp again and this, this seemed like a project she could get behind. Research was what she did, she was good at it. Maybe Chastity had just given her a way into this job, a way to connect.

She went out into the main house. It felt too big, too empty. The ceilings were high and the air was cool and she wandered through quiet rooms toward the kitchen.

"Oh, it's you," Emily said. She was sitting at a breakfast bar, eating a bowl of cereal.

"I am indeed still here," said Trix, bristling. "Haven't disappeared into the night or anything."

"Shame," said Emily.

Trix bit her tongue, pulling herself back. The girl was family. She was stressed. She was a pain in the arse, but there was no point in picking a fight.

Time to try again.

She pulled a bottle of orange juice from the fridge and a glass from the cupboard next to it and settled on the opposite side of the breakfast bar. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Free country," Emily said, scooping up a spoonful of cereal.

"How did you fall in love with Drake?"

Emily rolled her eyes. "Checking me out, are you? Making sure I'm not just marrying him for his money?"

"No," Trix said. "I'm honestly curious, that's all."

Emily pushed her bowl away. "It's none of your business," she said. "And let's be clear here. You're here, dad invited

you, at his insistence you're going to be a fucking bridesmaid at my wedding—”

“Hey, hey, it's not like I want to be a bridesmaid,” Trix interrupted.

Emily pulled a face. “Fine. But the one thing that we're not is friends, you got that? We share a little DNA, that's all.”

“Okay, I understand. I mean, I don't agree, I see no reason why we can't be civil to each other. And in all honesty, I don't really understand why you're so hostile to me.”

For a second, Emily's eyes flashed to the refrigerator. Trix followed her gaze. A photograph was pinned to the door by a magnet that looked like a watermelon. A photograph of a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes, skin pale, nose refined. Trix's heart melted a little and she turned back to Emily who was blinking rapidly.

“I'm here and she's not,” Trix said quietly.

“Amateur psychoanalysis is the last thing I need. My dad's a shrink, remember?” Emily said gruffly. “And the message still stands. We're not friends, stay out of my business.”

“Fine,” said Trix. “But we need to call a truce and be civil to each other. I won't interfere in your business, but you can't go around treating me like I'm the unwanted step-child.”

Emily was about to say that that's exactly what Trix was, but Trix got in first.

“Sooner or later, dad's going to hear you and you know how disappointed it will make him to hear the way you talk to me.”

Emily sighed then nodded. “Alright. Civil. That's all.”

“That's all I ask,” Trix said as Emily slid down from her stool and left the kitchen.

Trix poured her juice. So much for research. Not that she'd really expected picking Emily's brains to be that easy. But she'd hoped for a little something to get her started.

The problem now was that she didn't exactly know anyone else that she could ask. She was miles from home and it wasn't

like she had that many friends anyway. At least not the kind she could call and ask about their love lives.

The juice was tart and made her mouth wrinkle. She needed an in, a guru, a best friend she could pump for info.

All she had was a little brat of a half sister and a come on from a waitress at a coffee shop. She picked up her glass. Fine. The internet it would have to be. Someone out in cyberspace must have answers about this whole romance thing.

Chapter Nine

The call from Anne-Marie came a little after lunchtime. It was short but nonetheless life-changing in the grand scheme of things.

Trix had already steeled herself for the call. She waited, picked up on the third ring, and answered calmly and coolly.

She had this, she reminded herself. Okay, internet research wasn't exactly turning out great. There seemed like there was a ton of info out there, but that was kind of the problem. She still didn't know what was real and what wasn't.

But she'd find a way to understand romance.

There was nothing to worry about.

"Trix, *chérie*, how was your flight?"

"Absolutely fine, thank you for asking." She perched on the edge of the bed. Somehow, Anne-Marie's voice always made her smile a little. The woman had a reputation as a bit of a dragon, but Trix had always seen more or less eye-to-eye with her boss. Up until now.

"Excellent. I'm calling for two reasons really. The first is that I'm dying to know how your reading is going."

Trix was well-prepared. "I've got to be honest, Anne-Marie, I've been jet lagged and passed out quite a lot of the time. I haven't had much of a chance to read. What with wedding preparations and everything." A little white lie. "But what I've read so far has been... well written." Just not believable.

"Ah, that is a shame, but then, perhaps I am too eagerly chomping at the bit, as you English like to say. I should give you a little more time, I think," Anne-Marie's voice crackled over the phone. "But that leads me to the second reason for my call."

Trix let out a breath. It looked like she was getting off easy on this one.

“It occurs to be that in all the excitement of lunch the other day I neglected to tell you what your new salary would be,” Anne-Marie continued. “Which is remiss of me. Normally, of course, I would never mention money over the telephone, but this does seem to be a slight exception.”

Trix was now holding her breath.

And she continued to hold it as Anne-Marie mentioned a figure that was far higher than anything she’d had in mind. Far higher than anything she’d ever dreamed of, to be honest. And suddenly she was beginning to understand what Anne-Marie had been saying about romance being a juicier cherry, a better option.

“Uh-huh,” she managed to respond.

“So, you see, I really do hope that you come to understand romance for not only the treasure that it is, the entertainment behemoth that it is, but also the opportunity that it is,” Anne-Marie said.

“Right, right,” Trix said, still somewhat lost in the idea of just how much money she’d be making.

“And that you’ll understand that it’s essential that you get a handle on what is expected and desirable in a solid romance novel by the time you return. Now that your jet lag is over, I can, of course, count on you to read more than a few manuscripts, can I not?”

“Absolutely,” said Trix.

“And perhaps even to experience a little holiday romance yourself, no?” asked Anne-Marie with a small laugh. “After all, a deep personal connection to our subject matter is what makes us so able to choose books that will appeal to readers.”

Trix’s stomach was in her mouth. “Uh-huh.”

“Then I will leave you to your reading,” Anne-Marie said. “Have a lovely holiday and I do so look forward to seeing you thrive in your new position.”

The phone buzzed and then went silent and Trix dropped her mobile to the bed.

So much more was at stake here than she'd thought.

And Anne-Marie was right, if she was going to succeed it was vital that she understood romance and love, whatever else she might think about stupid romance novels. It wasn't like she had to actually fall in love, right?

The idea was slowly coalescing in her brain. A combination of her conversations with Chastity, Emily, Anne-Marie and the waitress with half a haircut.

It was crazy. Crazy but maybe it could work.

What was the worst that could happen? She could say no. And then what? Trix would just be in the same position that she was in right now. And if she said yes, well, then Trix would have her very own guide. Not to mention the satisfaction of seeing the look on Emily's face and proving her wrong.

She stood up, shoved her phone deep in her pocket and went out into the hallway.

The car keys were sitting in a bowl by the front door. Her father had said to feel free to use them. So Trix picked them up, jangled them in her hand, then walked out into the heat of the day.

Completely forgetting the fact that not only had she never driven in the States before, but that she hadn't actually driven since she'd taken her driving test more than a decade ago.

Kel was pulling a chocolate cake out of the oven when she heard voices in the store. She got the cake onto a cooling rack. This one was a good one, she knew since she'd overseen the entire process. The yellow cake still in the oven, on the other hand, was a Joey-only creation.

It smelled slightly of a candle Kel had once sniffed in a department store. She had no idea whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“...like absolute maniacs!”

The words were hard, the consonants clipped and the voice familiar.

“Oh my God,” Kel heard Joey say. “Your accent is adorable.”

“And your drivers are insane,” said the other voice.

“Are you English?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

But Kel was already walking out to the front, her famous half-grin already on her face. “Well, well, if my wedding date hasn’t shown up a little early,” she said.

“And... that would be my cue to go check on the cakes in the back,” Joey said, sliding away from the counter. “Behave yourself,” she hissed at Kel as she left.

Kel kept her smile. “You doing okay?”

“Barely,” Trix said. Her face was pale. “You don’t sell alcohol, do you?”

“We don’t,” Kel said. “I could make you a strong espresso though if that would help?”

Trix groaned, which Kel took as a yes. So she started preparing coffee. “What exactly is it that’s wrong?”

Trix groaned again. “I drove.”

“Ah, I see,” said Kel, not seeing at all.

“I drove for the first time in America, and, to be completely honest, for the first time in about a million years.”

“Ah,” Kel said. She put the small espresso cup on the machine, pulled the handle, and let the hissing begin. “Um, what was so important that you needed to drive for the first time in a million years?”

“You,” said Trix. Then she blushed deep red and Kel watched the color paint her cheeks and wanted to paint her all over again. “I mean, that came out wrong, but, um, well, I wanted to see you and everything in this damn country is so

damn far away from everything else, so driving was the only option, and...”

“And now you’re here,” Kel said, putting the coffee in front of her. “And I’m here. So what’s going on?” She cleared her throat and decided that she had to do the decent thing. The right thing. “You do understand that I was kidding yesterday, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Trix said firmly.

Kel’s heart sank a little. “I just didn’t want there to be some cultural misunderstanding or anything,” she said quietly. There went her chance at a sugar mommy. Joey was right, she wasn’t cut out for the mercenary life.

“I understand that you were joking,” Trix said. “But I want to take you up on your offer. That’s why I’m here.”

Kel’s mouth opened and then just stayed that way. Something didn’t compute and her tongue refused to form words until her brain caught up with the conversation.

“Okay,” Trix said. “I understand if you don’t want to be my date—”

“No, no,” interrupted Kel. “It’s not that.”

“Can we start again?” asked Trix. “The thing is, I kind of need some help, and I think you might be the person to help me.”

“And why’s that?” asked Kel, slightly suspicious now. They barely knew each other, after all.

“Emily said, well, I won’t repeat the words, but she said that you were, um, very experienced when it came to women.”

“She said I was a slut,” filled in Kel.

Trix blushed again, but continued speaking. “I would like it if you were my date to the wedding. I’d like to prove Emily wrong, I’d like to, well, to be honest, I’d like to get up her nose a bit and irritate her.”

“Then I’m definitely in,” Kel laughed.

“There’s more to it than that,” said Trix. “I want to learn from you. About love. And things. And...”

“Uh, are you asking me to... to prostitute myself?” Kel asked, not entirely sure where this was going.

“No, it’s just. It’s complicated. I want to learn about romance. For my new job. As an agent for romance novels.” Trix let out a breath. “Jesus, this is going terribly.”

“No, no it’s not,” Kel said slowly. “I guess I kind of understand.”

“There’s money in it for you,” Trix said quickly. “I can pay for your time, that’s not an issue. But it is important that Emily actually thinks that you’re my real date. Because if she doesn’t, there’s no way she’s letting you come to that wedding.”

“And you need me at the wedding because...?”

“Because Emily doesn’t think I can get a date. Which is stupid,” said Trix. “But somehow it’s important that I wipe the smirk off her face for a while. Also because in the process of learning about romance and love, I think I might need you at the wedding to consult with.”

Kel leaned on the counter. “Okay. So let me get this straight. For some reason you know nothing about romance. You want me to teach you by paying me to pretend to be your date, in order that you can better do your job.”

“Um, yes,” said Trix.

“I think I’ve read that book.”

Trix’s dark eyebrows rose. “It’s a book?”

“It’s a trope,” said Kel. “Fake dating. The couple pretends to date and in the process falls in love.”

“See, that’s why I need you, for information like that,” said Trix. Then her face got serious. “Not that that’s going to happen to us.”

“So, all of that with the addendum that we absolutely can’t fall in love?”

“Right,” said Trix.

Kel pressed her lips together, thinking. There was money here. Money that she needed. More than that though, there was a challenge. She was irresistible and untamable, right? And here was little miss rich girl telling her that they weren't going to develop feelings? Weren't going to jump in bed together?

As if.

She thought quickly, trying to come up with a downside. But she couldn't see one. Here she was, wanting a sugar mommy but way too moral to actually trick someone into providing for her. And then in walks Trix, practically begging to be her sugar mommy.

Could the fates align any better?

She sniffed, shrugged, tried to make it seem as though it was no big deal. “Yeah, okay,” she said.

“Shake on it,” said Trix, holding out her hand.

Kel did as she was told, feeling the warm softness of Trix's hand once again. It felt nice, like her hand fit perfectly into Kel's hand. A good fit.

“Good,” Trix said, pulling her hand away. “And for your first responsibility, I'm going to need you to drive me back to my dad's place.”

“Seriously? I do have a job here,” Kel said.

“I can wait.”

Kel sighed and checked her watch. It was almost break time anyway, and she could throw her bike into the back of the big SUV that the professor drove and get her exercise on the way back.

“Joe?” she shouted through to the back. “I'm taking my break now if that's cool?”

“Go ahead,” came back Joey's voice.

Kel ducked out from behind the counter. “Come on then,” she said, holding the door open for Trix.

“I’m capable of both opening and walking through doors alone,” said Trix as she walked out.

Kel shook her head. “You’ve got a lot to learn,” she said.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Kel said. “Nothing.”

Chapter Ten

Kel revved the engine of the powerful SUV and felt vibrations run up through her legs. She bit her lip and side-eyed Trix, who was settling into the seat next to her.

She had to bite her lip because, for one, it was one of her sexiest looks, and for two, it stopped her grinning like an idiot, and grinning like an idiot was not a sexy look.

In one stroke she'd not only solved at least some of her financial problems, but she'd also taken steps to reclaim her playboy reputation. In truth, she'd been more hurt than she'd admit that Joey had turned her down. Then along came Trix, the most attractive woman she'd seen in ages and...

Well, okay, no falling in love, but that wasn't an issue. All Kel had to do was keep her interested enough to keep paying the bills. All the advantages of being a gigolo without any of the dubious moral bits about tricking anyone.

As for the sex part, well, the very first thing the woman had done was ask to be driven home. The message couldn't get much clearer than that.

"So, Trix," Kel said, pulling out of the parking lot with confidence.

"Mmm?"

"I meant the name," said Kel. "Interesting. What's it short for?"

"Beatrice," Trix said.

"How do you get Trix from Beatrice?"

"How do you get Bill from William?" Trix responded. "Besides, it was a boarding school thing. I was Bea until I left for school."

The accent was sharp and almost strict and Kel could nearly hear Trix yelling out her name. The idea of it sent a shiver down her spine. She wondered if she had enough time to seal the deal right now. It was technically only break time.

“Staying long?” she asked.

“No,” Trix said shortly. “So, tell me, what other romance novel tropes are there?”

Kel swerved and then corrected her steering. “Um, aren’t you the one who’s a romance novel... something?”

“Head of acquisitions,” Trix said. “And yes, I should probably know this.”

Or be able to Google it, thought Kel. But she played along. “I guess there’s enemies to lovers.”

“Where you... fall in love with someone you hate?” Trix ventured. “And why would you do that?”

“Because they’re both strong emotions that are easily confused,” said Kel. She wondered if maybe she was a little out of her depth. “And sometimes passion comes from another place. Or maybe you never hated the person in the first place and just got confused. I don’t know.”

“Okay, what else?”

“I guess... forbidden love?”

“Like under the Taliban or something?”

Kel snorted. “Not exactly. More like you’re a Democrat and he’s a Republican, or your family owns an independent bookstore and she’s the heir to a huge book chain fortune. Something like that.”

“Fraternalizing with the enemy,” Trix said disapprovingly.

Kel frowned. “You know, I’m getting the impression that you don’t actually like romance novels very much.”

“I think the turning is here,” Trix said, without addressing the subject at all. “And if you’re going to be any help to me, then it would be better if you reserved judgment.”

“Like you’ve done about romance?” Kel couldn’t help but say as she turned the massive SUV into the long driveway.

“Look, as far as I can see, all this romance stuff is nonsense. I don’t have time for it. I do, however, have a job that I love

and that I need, and if this is a step that I have to take then I'll take it. Romance is big business."

"It is," Kel said, drawing up in front of the house.

The very size of it almost took her breath away. It was huge. Her apartment could fit inside it a hundred times over. The trailer she'd grown up in would fit through the front door. Just the thought of the wealth inside made her steel her backbone and paste on a smile.

"And what you believe is none of my business," she finished. "You're absolutely right, I'll reserve judgment."

"Good," said Trix.

Kel unbuckled her seat belt, turning so that she could see Trix. She half-smiled, raised one eyebrow and lowered her voice just a tad. "Maybe you should reserve judgment too though," she said.

"And why's that?"

Kel let her smile widen a little. "Because you're an attractive woman, Trix, you must know that. You can't possibly go around thinking that other people don't notice."

In Kel's experience, women tended to like being told that other women saw how pretty they were. And in Trix's case it was far from being a lie.

"Obviously, I don't," was Trix's response.

Kel leaned in a little. "And if I've noticed, would that be such a bad thing?" she purred.

"No, it would be perfectly normal. I assume you've got eyes and that they function in the way they should," Trix said sharply. "Now, as for our arrangement, I suggest you pick me up tomorrow evening and show me your most romantic date. We won't be *on* a date, understand? But I'd like to see how you think. Be prepared to explain to me why certain things are romantic and what the appropriate responses are."

Kel opened her mouth then looked up at the house, thought of the money, and shrugged. "Okay then, one romantic date."

“But it’s not an actual date,” added Trix.

“Of course not,” said Kel. The wind had gone out of her sails. One second she’d been leaning in closer, smelling Trix’s rose scent and the next she was being treated like a freshman with a sociology project to complete.

“Wonderful, then pick me up at seven.”

Kel nodded, then remembered her manners and jumped out of the car. She rounded the hood and reached the passenger side just in time to almost be flattened by Trix opening her door.

“I did tell you I’m capable of opening doors,” Trix said, seeing Kel’s surprised face.

“You did,” allowed Kel. “However, and I don’t mean to be... judgmental,” she said the word carefully. “But this is kind of part of the deal. It’s chivalrous to open doors, to be considerate of your partner’s needs.”

“It’s romantic?” Trix said in disbelief.

“In a way.” Kel cleared her throat. “It, um, it’s practical too. Like, when women used to have long dresses, it was difficult to get through doors, so it was easier to have a man hold the door for them.”

Trix stared at her, then nodded. “Makes sense,” she said. “Fine. You can open the doors.”

A second later a jangling ball of shininess flew at Kel’s face. She just caught the keys in time. She glared at Trix, who nodded toward the front door. With a sigh, Kel walked over to the porch and unlocked the front door so that Trix could go inside.

“Seven,” Trix said as she disappeared. “Don’t forget.”

Leaving Kel standing out on the porch like the paper boy wondering just how she’d gone from confidently leaning in to get closer in the car to being dismissed on the porch.

She shook her head. There was something about Trix. Something that somehow left her feeling just a little bit lost.

She looked down at her sneakers, wiggling her toe into the hole in the right sole. But then there was the possibility of having a sugar mommy. A real sugar mommy. Someone who could pay her, someone who could help her out, and Trix had just fallen into her lap.

All she had to do was play along.

And face it, at some point, Trix was going to want to sleep with her. Women did, for the most part. Mostly because she asked them to.

Kel went back to the SUV and pulled her bike out of the back.

She needed to wow Trix, that was the thing. She needed to wow her and teach her to believe in romance and that way, that way the woman was sure to fall into her arms. Something that Kel was starting to realize she actually wanted.

Not in the long term of course.

And that pesky little rule about not falling in love? Who cared? She had no intention of falling in love. In lust, perhaps. But not love.

If she had to fake things a little, then she would. Art college was waiting for her, after all. But she wouldn't lie, she promised herself. That would be taking things too far.

She threw her leg over her bike just as her phone started to ring.

Pulling her cell from her pocket, her heart sank as she saw who it was. She considered not answering, but then she'd just be bugged all day and all evening until she did answer it. Better to get it over with.

"Yes?" she answered.

"Kel, baby, it's me."

"Yeah, ma, I know it's you. What d'ya need?"

"Why would you think I needed anything? Can't I just call my one and only daughter?"

“Because you needing something is the only reason you call your one and only daughter,” Kel said. “What do you want, ma? I’m kind of in a hurry here. I gotta get back to work.”

“That’s a fine thing to say to your mother.”

Kel sighed with impatience. “Ma, how much do you need?”

“How much?” She heard a breath down the phone. “Well, if you’re offering, a little extra wouldn’t go amiss, but—”

“I’ll transfer it when I get back to the store,” Kel said and hung up.

She took a long look back at the house.

It always came back to money, didn’t it?

But this could be her opportunity for something bigger, something better, all she had to do was play her cards right. And impress Beatrice... whatever her last name was.

Kel tightened her hands around the handlebars and kicked off, sprinting her bike down the drive. She could do this.

If romance was what Trix wanted, then romance she would have.

And come hell or highwater Kel was going to make Trix fall for her. That was the only way she’d get the financial support she needed in the end. And it shouldn’t be that hard, not really. All she had to do was pull out all the stops, right?

Chapter Eleven

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Emily stood, hands on hips, at the bottom of the grand staircase.

“In what way, exactly?” Trix asked.

“Like I didn’t see you out there with that... that... that woman,” Emily said.

Trix was thankful at least that Emily was choosing her words carefully. “And what of it?” she asked, finding that she was more and more amused with Emily’s irritation.

“It’s fake, all of it’s fake. There’s no way that you knew each other before, you just met in the cake shop when I was there. She asked you to the wedding as a joke and now... Now I don’t know what you’re doing, other than trying to ruin things for me.”

Trix lifted an eyebrow. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re not the center of the world?”

“Has anyone ever told you the same thing?” spat Emily.

“As it happens, yes. My mother when my baby brother was born,” Trix said. “I was five. I’m not sure what your excuse is.”

“What are you doing with her?” Emily asked.

Trix shrugged, not at all willing to tell the full truth on this one and still rather enjoying Emily’s frustration. She had no time for people who thought others were below them or lesser than them in any way. “I happen to like her.”

Emily snorted. “As if. She’s playing with you if anything. She’s annoying, she’s a playboy, and she’s just trying to get your money.”

“I do hope that you’re going to be nicer to her at the wedding,” Trix said calmly.

“You’re not bringing her to the wedding.”

Trix smiled. “Fine. Not a problem.”

Emily’s face fell into a scowl, Trix just beamed at her and turned to go to the kitchen, letting her wait, letting her think, and finally speaking over her shoulder just as she turned the corner.

“Oh, but are you sure it won’t look a little odd if one of your bridesmaids doesn’t have a date?”

There was a flurry of movement and by the time Trix was pouring herself a glass of water, Emily was leaning on the kitchen counter and glaring at her. “You could ask someone else.”

“I don’t know anyone else,” Trix said reasonably. “So you’re going to have to choose between having your wedding look as perfect as you want, or taking out your bizarre hatred of Kel and your spite toward me by forbidding me to bring her. Your call.”

Emily closed her eyes. “You know this is all very stressful, don’t you?”

“I’ve offered to help,” said Trix.

Emily’s eyes opened again. “Actually, there is something you can do.”

For just a second, Trix considered laughing in her face. But she wasn’t that mean. “Just say the word.”

“I’m expecting some deliveries this afternoon. Napkins and table settings and who knows what else. But I need to go and finalize the cake decorations.”

“I’ll be here reading manuscripts,” Trix said. “And I’m happy to answer the door and sign for whatever needs signing for.”

Emily’s face uncreased slightly. “Thanks.” She said it as though it hurt.

“Like I said, happy to help.”

Emily nodded and pushed herself off the counter. “I’ll be getting on with things then.”

“So Kel’s coming to the wedding?” Trix called after her.

Emily hesitated in the doorway. “As long as you two are actually a thing, yes,” she said. “I’m not having interlopers though.”

Trix shrugged. “Fine by me,” she said, squashing down the anxious feeling in her stomach. After all, what did it matter to her whether she and Kel were pretend dating for the wedding or not? The woman was supposed to be teaching her about romance, after all.

“I guess she’s coming then.”

READING ON THE tablet made her eyes sting but was preferable to carrying large stacks of manuscripts out into the garden.

This was turning into a real mini vacation. With the house mostly empty and the weather scorching hot, Trix had to say that she was starting to relax into this. In fact, she’d relaxed enough to read a full chapter of a book before putting it down.

“Ridiculous,” she said to herself.

“What’s ridiculous?”

Her father strolled out and perched on the edge of a sun lounger.

“This book,” said Trix.

“And why is it ridiculous?”

“Because it’s a romance novel.”

Her father shook his head. “Love stories have been part of our culture for as long as there have been stories,” he said.

“Then we’re all stupider than I thought.”

“No, we all need hope,” he said. “There are three types of story, did you know that?”

Trix sighed, but he continued anyway.

“There are the scary stories, the ones that teach us not to do something dangerous. Then there are the stories of the gods,

the ones that teach us how to behave. And there are love stories, arguably the most important of the three.”

“And why’s that?” asked Trix suspiciously.

“Like I said, because those are the ones that teach us how to hope. In a tough, scary, dangerous world where the gods can rain down fire or plague at any moment, love stories are the ones that say, hey, it’s okay, there is something beautiful out there. Maybe you won’t have a quiet life, but you’ll have this one moment of happiness at least, and maybe your kid will have that quiet life, or his kid, or his kid.”

Trix put her tablet down. “Is that what you’d wish for me and Emily?” she said. “A quiet life?”

Her father snorted. “Can’t say that I would at that,” he said. “My life’s been far from quiet, and I’ve enjoyed every ball-tightening second of it. Motorbiking through Pakistan, jumping off Roman aqueducts, seizing the day at every opportunity.”

“You did those things?”

Her father nodded. “We don’t know each other very well, do we?”

Trix shook her head.

“I think I’d like to change that. If you’re interested.”

Trix blew out a breath. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Maybe. Over time.”

Her father nodded. “I’m open to questions,” he said. “I know that you must have some. I know that these things aren’t always easy to talk about. But if you need answers, I’m here. No holds barred.”

Crickets chirped in the background, there was the hissing of a sprinkler. “Maybe,” Trix said carefully.

Her father stood up. “I’ll let you get on with your work then,” he said. Then he hesitated.

“Mmm?”

“Love,” he said.

“What?”

“I might not wish the two of you a quiet life, unless that’s what you want. But I would wish you love.”

“Love?” Trix said. “Surely you could be less trite than that. Surely there’s something more important. Wealth perhaps, or respect, success in our chosen fields? Something that’s not dependent on somebody else, on some old-fashioned template of what a woman’s life is supposed to look like.”

“I wish you all those things,” her father said simply. “But more than that, I wish that you know the completeness that I had with Vanessa.”

It was the first time she’d heard him mention his late wife’s name.

“Maybe you’re right, maybe I’m old-fashioned. I can’t help myself though. There is nothing that I’ve experienced that will ever match the pure completeness of holding my wife in my arms.” He looked toward the house. “And it’s nothing that I will ever experience again.”

Jesus. She couldn’t do maudlin, not now. Not about a woman she’d never met with a man she barely knew. She didn’t know what to say, was about to murmur some platitudes when the doorbell rang through a speaker on the back porch.

“Got to get that,” she said, standing up so fast her tablet slid to the grass. “I promised Emily I’d sign for her deliveries.”

She made her escape as fast as she could. And when she opened the door she found a small man holding a large bouquet of flowers.

“Beatrice?” he said in a thick, syrupy accent.

Trix found the flowers being pushed into her arms and then she was watching the man bounce away to his van and smelling floral scents and getting pricked by thorns.

For her?

She deposited the flowers on the hallway table and plucked out the card.

Romance awaits. Until tomorrow...

For fuck's sake.

Maybe this wasn't such a great idea. Maybe she was going stir crazy from not working, or stir crazy from trying to work and not being able to finish a book. Or maybe this was all a prank. Or a dream. Yes, that was it. Maybe she was going to wake up and be in her own bed in her own flat with a brand new job in literary fiction to look forward to.

She pinched herself hard.

But didn't wake up.

Kel.

The swirling signature at the bottom of the card couldn't possibly belong to the woman. More likely to the florist.

Had she made a mistake? After all, how did you teach someone about romance? Kel obviously hadn't gotten the message. She didn't need to be romanced, she needed to be more comfortable with romance, needed to learn the tropes, the expectations.

"Nice flowers," her father said, coming into the hallway. "Got an admirer already?"

Trix was about to snort a laugh at this when she remembered that as far as Emily, and therefore also her father, was concerned she and Kel were absolutely dating.

"Something like that," she said, weakly.

"Your third day in the country and already you're breaking hearts," said her father. He grinned at her. "Chip off the old block, aren't you?"

Trix grinned grimly as her father went off to his office.

Obviously she was going to need to give Kel a talking to about what was and was not expected of her. She was paying the woman. This was a business relationship. And as traditional as flowers might be, they also made a mess of falling petals and died disturbingly quickly.

Not a romantic message, at least as far as Trix was concerned.

Chapter Twelve

“Flowers die,” Trix said, climbing out of the car.

Flowers also cost a fortune, Kel thought as she pulled the picnic basket out of the trunk.

“I think maybe that’s part of the point,” she said. “Come on, this way.”

“What point?” Trix asked, as she followed Kel down a small path into the park.

“Well, flowers are beautiful, but they’re also fragile and their beauty is fleeting. They’re a reminder that life passes quickly and you should treasure moments whilst you can. I think that’s what’s romantic about them.”

“Oh.”

“I get that a bunch of romance stuff is just about tradition and what-not, but mostly there’s a reason, or there used to be a reason, for something to be the way it is,” Kel said.

And perhaps, just perhaps, Trix was trying just a little too hard to hate on romance, thought Kel.

“I didn’t think of that.” Kel could hear Trix tramping along behind her. The evening was sticky and hot. “Um, thank you for the flowers.”

“You’re welcome,” Kel laughed. “You wanted romance, you’re getting romance. Just you wait for a second.”

They walked on for another few meters and then broke out of the trees onto a small cliff that looked out over the town.

“Wow,” Trix said. “It’s beautiful up here.”

“That’s the point,” Kel said, putting down the picnic basket and starting to lay down a blanket. “Also, I have a list for you.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket.

“A list of what?” Trix asked, taking the paper.

“Movies you should watch. If you want to learn about romance tropes then rom-coms are a pretty good place to

start.”

“Earning your keep already?” asked Trix.

“You’re paying me to do a job, right?” And it was half a joke but half serious because the subject of money hadn’t been discussed yet.

She glanced over and Trix was looking at the paper and the sun was catching in her hair. Seduce the rich Englishwoman whilst getting paid to teach her about romance. It shouldn’t be that hard. Hell, she’d probably do it just for the challenge, even if she wasn’t going to get paid.

No, she told herself, setting out glasses, no, she wouldn’t. She needed cash. She was going to go to art college. Even in her head, those words sounded fake, like she was talking about someone else.

“Get me your info and I’ll send money at the end of every week,” Trix said, sitting down on one corner of the blanket.

“Right,” said Kel, mouth suddenly dry. “Uh, wine?”

“Yes, please.” Trix looked around. “It’s pretty here. It’s also hot and sticky.”

“Just wait until later,” grinned Kel. “Once the stars come out, this is about the most beautiful place in the world.”

Trix raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I don’t think that staying out here that late seems like a good idea.”

Kel shrugged. “It’s up to you. But stars are romantic.”

“I’ve seen them before. They’re exploding balls of gas, not especially reminiscent of all things love.” Trix took a glass.

“Just why are you so down on love then?” asked Kel, taking her own glass and having a big gulp of alcohol. She felt like she might need it.

“No need to get all Freudian or anything,” Trix answered.

Kel snorted. “You’re the one with a shrink for a dad. I’m just curious, that’s all. I mean, you’re kind of like the Grinch and Christmas, except in your case I suppose it’s Valentine’s day.”

“I just find the whole thing ridiculous.” She drank slowly and Kel watched her throat as she swallowed.

“Love or romance?” asked Kel. She looked up and the sky was darkening.

“Both.” Trix sighed. “To be honest, I don’t have time for it, any of it.”

“So you don’t want to be in love, you don’t want to find a partner?”

“Do you?” asked Trix.

The question took Kel off guard. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that if half of what Emily says about you is true then you don’t exactly seem like the kind of person that’s looking for a relationship either.”

Kel felt herself blushing. She also felt the conversation sliding out of her control. Not a feeling she was used to around attractive women.

“Maybe I don’t,” she admitted. “At least not right now. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want romance, I don’t want fun.”

“Which is where we differ,” Trix said, taking another drink. “Romance is fairy tales for adults, and frankly, I never much liked fairy tales, even as a child.”

“But romance is...” Kel struggled. “It’s... fun. It’s exciting and dangerous and risky, and the pay off is amazing.” She hesitated for a second, then tilted her head. “Um, you have, uh, okay, this is none of my business, but have you, um...”

“I thought Americans were supposed to be direct?” said Trix, deep blues eyes glinting like sapphire. “If you’re inquiring as to my experience with sexual activity then yes, I have, and no, I’m not. And you’re right, that’s not any of your business.”

The sky was darkening even further and Kel had a feeling that the weather might just be playing into her hands. It bugged her that Trix hadn’t even looked at her properly, hadn’t noticed her famous half-grin, hadn’t at least laughed at anything she’d said.

“Well, I suppose it’s my job to try and change your mind,” she said. “About romance, that is.”

“Not so fast,” said Trix. “We have a rule about this. You’re a teacher only.”

“Mmm,” Kel said.

But what was romance without a touch? Without a kiss?

Okay, so Trix was a hard nut to crack. But that didn’t mean she was uncrackable. It wasn’t like Joey, who was obviously straight. This was a gay woman. An attractive gay woman. And at some point, Kel was certain, Trix would see her charms.

If she played her cards right, that point might even be in the next half hour or so. Maybe sooner, looking up at the dark clouds banked up to the west.

“What about a fairy tale wedding?” Kel pushed. “You never even dreamed of that as a child?!”

Trix snorted and pushed a lock of dark hair behind her ear in a way that made Kel’s stomach tighten with wanting.

“My parents had the traditional fairy tale wedding. All carriages and long white dresses. My grandfather said it cost a fortune and the only pay-off was me.”

“You’re quite the pay-off though,” Kel said, half-grinning, flashing her dimples. Trix glared at her, so she turned the smile off again. “So what happened with them then? You parents, I mean.”

“The same as happens to everyone, I expect. Things weren’t what they expected once the fairy tale got old. Eighteen months after the wedding, dad was back over here, and I haven’t seen him more than a couple of times since.”

“And yet you’re here for the wedding of the dreaded Emily,” Kel said without thinking too hard. Then she blushed. “Sorry, I know she’s your sister.”

“Half sister,” said Trix. “As well as a complete and utter asshole. But yes, here I am. It’s a long story.”

Just as Kel was about to prompt her into telling the story, a large dollop of rain plopped audibly onto the blanket they were sitting on.

“Heavens,” Trix said, looking up.

“Do people actually say that?” asked Kel, already gathering up the glasses. She’d known that the weather was going to play along. She could already feel the warmth of lust stirring in her stomach.

“I just did, didn’t I?” Trix said. And with that, the sky broke and rain began to pour down.

“It’s just a summer storm,” Kel shouted over the noise of drops hitting the leaves all around them. “Come on, there’s a shelter just over here.”

A shelter that was just about big enough for the two of them. With a bench that was just about big enough for the two of them. As long as they sat very, very close.

Kel’s heart skipped a beat at the thought of it. Close to Trix. Close enough to touch, to smell, and then, well, then surely it was only a matter of time.

Her shirt was already sticking to her, and as she turned back to check on Trix she could see that the light cotton dress the woman was wearing was clinging to every curve.

“Just over here,” Kel shouted.

She dodged under the wooden shelter and turned to see Trix rolling her eyes.

“This is ridiculous.”

“What?” asked Kel innocently.

“I’m not made of paper,” said Trix. “Nor am I the wicked witch of the west.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not going to melt.” Rain was pouring off her skin, slicking it so that it seemed wet with sweat, clinging in beads to her eyelashes.

“Uh...” was about all that Kel could get out as her eyes strayed down to find that Trix’s bra might not quite have the coverage she’d hoped for. Her mouth went dry in stark contrast to the vast amounts of rain still falling.

“Come on,” Trix said. “The faster we get back to the car, the faster we’ll be dry. Chip-chop, let’s get a move on.”

She marched off and Kel stepped out into the downpour.

She still held wine glasses in her hand, the blanket was tossed over her shoulder, the rain dripped from her nose. She took one look back at the tiny bench where just a moment ago she’d been imagining cuddling up to Trix, and then sighed.

This wasn’t going to be as easy as she’d anticipated.

“Get a move on,” Trix shouted. “You’ll catch your death out here.”

Not what Kel had imagined catching when she’d planned a romantic star-lit picnic.

But she was starting to think that being around Trix wasn’t going to be like anything else she’d ever imagined.

One more sigh and she stomped off across the puddle-laden path toward the car. She was wet, and not in a good way.

Chapter Thirteen

Trix took a deep breath and pulled away from the red light, the SUV rumbling beneath her. One more turn and she had it.

Getting to the mall hadn't exactly been difficult, it was signposted from miles away. And to be fair, driving in America was actually better than driving at home. The wide lanes and automatic transmission meant it was a little like 'driving light'. She'd be damn glad to get out of the car though.

By the time she'd pulled into a huge parking space and found her way into the mall, she was feeling decently confident about her ability to get around. One thing she hadn't considered about spending more than a few days here was that the country was huge. Even getting the mail from the box at the end of the drive was a trek.

She spied Kel a few meters away, holding cardboard coffee cups and looking thoroughly at home. Americans and their shopping, Trix thought. The place smelled like cinnamon and vanilla and it was bustling, even at eleven on a weekday morning.

"I bought you this," Kel said, holding out a coffee cup.

"In an attempt to woo me?" Trix said sharply.

"Uh, no, I just thought you might like some caffeine."

From the look on Kel's face it was obvious that what she was saying was true and Trix felt a bite of regret at what she'd just said. "Um, thank you." She took the cup and gathered herself. "So, why are we here?"

Kel shrugged. "Because there's not much else to do around town. I thought you might want to see the sights. This is pretty much it. Didn't seem like Emily was about to show you around, and, well, maybe you don't want to hang with your dad?"

Her dad. Like her father had actually been there. A plea to come and visit, to spend more time together and get to know each other, and he'd been working most of the time. Or

avoiding her. Either way, it seemed like she'd made a bad decision in coming here.

"You guys get along?" Kel said, slurping at her coffee and starting to walk.

"What?"

"You and your old man, do you get along?"

"Why—" began Trix.

"Look, I get that you don't want to date and you definitely don't want to fall in love," Kel said, stopping and turning to face her. "But that doesn't mean you have to be a closed book all the time. You're allowed to open up from time to time."

"Open up and talk about my emotions and be all American?" said Trix.

Kel rolled her eyes. "You say that like it's such a terrible thing. Has being all British and reserved worked out so well for you so far?"

Fair point. Trix wrinkled her nose and started walking again. "We get along okay," she said. "I suppose. I mean, given that I've never really been around him much and that now that I am here he's always off counseling people or locking them in looney bins or whatever it is he does."

"Probably just feels awkward and doesn't know how to act around you," said Kel.

"But why?" Trix asked, dodging a woman with a pushchair. "I'm his daughter, he's my father, you'd think this sort of stuff would come naturally."

"You'd think that love and romance would all come naturally," Kel said.

"Touché." Trix breathed out a sigh. "I guess I sort of expected this little reunion to go better than it has, that's all."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you're a little intimidating," said Kel. "Maybe that's part of the problem. Frankly, you come across as slightly terrifying."

"So you think my dad's afraid of me? Fantastic."

“No, well, maybe, I don’t know. But he’s obviously having a hard time connecting with you and maybe you could try to meet him half-way, that’s all.”

“Get along so well with your own parents that you can throw around advice like that?” Trix asked suspiciously.

Kel blushed.

“Ah, so the truth comes out.”

“My dad’s not in the picture, never has been, and my mom, well, she’s around but not always in the sense of being a parent.”

Trix sipped at her coffee. She got the point. She was lucky. She might not have had a father and mother that played happy families, but she’d still had more than a lot of other people got. More than Kel had had anyway.

“Did you do your homework?”

“If by that you mean did I spend most of the last day and a half stuck in front of a TV screen, then yes, I did,” Trix said primly.

“Okay, that gives us something to talk about then,” Kel said. “Let’s start off with what similarities you noticed. What’s something that all the movies you watched had in common?”

“They were full of weak women who fell back on having to get married in order to fulfill some sort of patriarchal prophecy that being in a couple is the only path to happiness.”

Kel groaned. “For real, Trix? That’s your take home message?”

“Was that not what was going on?”

Kel rubbed at her face. “Okay, here’s the thing. You equate love with weakness. You think that romance means being weak and giving up. But that’s not what’s happening at all.”

“Right.”

“No, you don’t get it. Falling in love means having to show your full self to someone. It means baring your vulnerabilities and faults, admitting to your crimes and lies, uncovering those

annoying habits and taking off all the make up. And that, my dear, is about the most incredibly brave thing that someone could ever do. There's no weakness in that."

Trix stopped again and lifted an eyebrow. "I suppose you do that at least once a week, do you?"

Kel blushed again and swallowed. "You make fun of it because it's something that scares you. The very fact that it scares you should tell you that it takes an immense amount of bravery to show someone the real you."

They stopped in front of an elevator and Kel pushed the button. The door slid immediately open.

"Oh no," Trix said.

"You're afraid of elevators?" said Kel. "Well there's a start, see, opening up doesn't have to be so difficult."

"Not at all," said Trix. "But I watched enough of those sappy movies to know damn well that getting into that elevator with you almost guarantees that the thing will break down and we'll be stuck in there together." She turned and walked toward the escalator.

"Only if the plot demands that we fall in love," Kel said, chasing after her. "And that's not what's happening here, remember?"

Trix turned. Kel was one step above her going down on the escalator. Her dark hair was falling over one cheek, her eyes were sparkling and her grin was infectious. Dimples flashed in her cheeks.

No, that wasn't what was happening here. There'd be no falling in love. But, and here was a thought, if she were to fall in love, she supposed that someone like Kel would be better than most other options.

"At least I can be honest with you," she said out loud.

"What?" Kel asked.

"Nothing," said Trix, shaking her head at the thought.

It was nothing. Except maybe she had a little glimmer of understanding now. There were, she had to admit, some people that it was just easier to be honest with. Easier to open up to, she supposed. Chastity was easy to talk to. So was Kel.

Maybe that was what made the difference in the end.

“I also discovered the ‘kissing in the rain’ trope,” she said sharply as they stepped off the escalator.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It starts to pour down, hero and/or heroine get soaked through and at some point end up kissing, rather than realizing they’re about to catch pneumonia.”

“Surely you’re not implying that I can control the weather?” Kel said.

Trix glared at her. “I’m implying that despite our agreement you might be harboring some ideas that are less than appropriate.”

“Are you over eighteen?” Kel asked.

“Obviously.”

“So we’re both consenting adults. There’s nothing inappropriate going on. Do you want a Cinnabon?”

“I... have no idea. What’s a Cinnabon?”

“You’ll love it,” Kel said, dancing away toward a brightly colored stand that smelled like a funfair.

Trix followed, fully aware of the fact that Kel hadn’t exactly come clean about what she’d been doing the other night.

The woman was a pain. She was also, Trix had to say, far sharper and more intelligent than she’d given her credit for at first. She was slowly starting to get into the idea of romance, even if she did think the whole thing was stupid. At least now she was starting to understand tropes and expectations.

Which meant that Kel was a better teacher than might have been expected.

There was also the not inconsequential fact that Emily now thought they were dating and that taking Kel to the wedding might just make an unbearable day almost bearable. At least she'd have someone to talk to.

"Here, try this," Kel said, thrusting a cake the size of the steering wheel in the SUV at her.

"Wait a moment."

Trix shook her empty coffee cup and then pushed it into the nearest trash can, banging her hand against the rough edge of the opening as she did so.

"Fuck."

"Hold on, let me look at that." Kel put the cake down on the counter and pulled Trix's hand toward her before Trix could stop her.

For a quick second they were standing there in the middle of the mall, smelling of cinnamon and vanilla and surrounded by shoppers, in a quiet bubble where Kel was holding on to her hand and they were warm and Trix felt her heart speed up and then... and then she snatched her hand away.

"I've seen the films. You're not rescuing me," she said.

"Rescuing you from rabid trash cans?" Kel asked with an eye roll.

"Rescuing me from anything," Trix said firmly. "I do not need rescuing."

"Maybe, but you should probably at least disinfect that," Kel said, looking down at the graze on top of Trix's hand.

"Which I shall take care of right this moment," Trix said. She pulled a bottle of hand sanitizer out of her purse and squirted some onto the wound. "There. All done. No knight in shining armor necessary. Now give me that damn cake."

Obediently, Kel handed over the cinnamon roll and Trix took a huge bite.

"So? What do you think?" Kel asked.

“I think that there’s enough sugar in here to make all my teeth fall out and my pancreas go on strike,” said Trix.

“Fine,” huffed Kel. “Give it back then.”

“Not on your life,” said Trix, starting to walk again and taking another big bite of the cake.

From behind she heard the sound of Kel laughing, and then footsteps hurried to catch her up. “You’re very unexpected at times,” Kel said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“It’s easy to be surprising when you never open up to anyone,” said Trix. “That’s only logical.”

“I can see that there might be a few advantages to not wearing your heart on your sleeve.” Kel shot her a glance. “Mind you, there are a fair few disadvantages as well.”

“You don’t just wear your heart on your sleeve, you’ve got it tattooed straight into your skin.”

Kel snorted. “We’ll just see about that. Now are you going to share that cinnamon roll or not?”

Trix hesitated and then sighed. “Fine, you can have half. But only because I don’t want to go into a diabetic coma.”

She handed over half the cake and couldn’t help but smile as Kel took a huge bite and groaned in pleasure.

Chapter Fourteen

“So, how’s the gigolo business?”

Kel hung up her bag and grunted.

“That good, huh?” Joey said, stirring whatever was in her mixing bowl. “Let me guess, your foreign lover is refusing to fall for your charms.”

“No, that’s not it at all,” Kel said, settling against the kitchen counter and folding her arms.

Which wasn’t exactly true. Okay, so she had kind of thought that this would be easier. Most women just fell at her feet. But it wasn’t as though she needed Trix to fall in love with her or jump into bed with her or anything else.

They had a business relationship. Maybe if she played her cards right then Trix would just keep paying her, despite the lack of sex. Though Kel was fairly certain that sugar mommies involved sex at some point.

It was more that it stung her pride. Which it shouldn’t. Not every woman was going to fall for her, in her head she knew that. So why did she care so much about this particular one? It was almost as if Trix hadn’t even noticed her at all.

“Maybe you should stop trying,” Joey said, intent on her mixing bowl.

“And that accomplishes what, exactly?”

Joey shrugged. “Sometimes things come good when you stop trying so damn hard. And anyway, is it so important that she falls for you? She’s paying you anyway.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

Joey grinned. “But you were also thinking that it pisses you off that she’s not into you.”

“Which makes me sound predatory.”

“It does,” Joey said. “So maybe just stop it.” She paused and looked up. “Unless you’re actually into her, that is. Are

you?”

“No, obviously not.”

“Sure? I mean, that would be the way things go, right? All these women fall for your charms and you don’t want them, and then the one that isn’t interested at all is the one that you fall for. I believe that’s traditional.”

“Nope and nope. Not interested,” Kel said. “What would I do with an English girlfriend, anyway?”

“Oh, I don’t know, move to London and go to art college maybe?”

“I’ll have enough to do keeping up with my studies. And that’s if I even end up going.”

“No time for love.”

“Never time for love.”

Joey snorted. “You’re an idiot, you know that?”

“Who are you to criticize? It’s not like I see you getting flowers, or sending them, for that matter.”

“I’m firmly on the shelf,” Joey said, bending down to get something out of a cupboard.

“On the shelf? If you’re not careful, you’ll get all dusty down there,” laughed Kel. “And there’s no way you should be on the shelf. You deserve so much more than that. You’re hot and fun and you’ve got your own business, why would you just settle for being on the shelf?”

“And you’re trying to persuade me to start a relationship because?” Joey asked, taking a spoonful of white powder from a box. “You’re not the best role model here, Kel. Besides, you’re only telling me the same thing that I’ve been telling you. You deserve more than a series of one night stands.”

“So neither of us are taking your advice,” Kel said, leaning in to read the recipe on the counter. “Which is probably for the best because who has time for a relationship? It’s the romance that’s the fun part, anyway. And at least I get some of that.”

“I’ve had enough romance to last me a life time,” grumbled Joey, sprinkling her spoon of powder into her cake mix.

“Joe?”

“Mmm?”

“You know there’s a difference between baking powder and baking soda, right?”

Joey looked at the box in front of her then looked over at the recipe, then looked into the bowl of cake mix in dismay. “You’re kidding, right?”

Kel shook her head.

“Why do they give things such similar names?” wailed Joey.

The shop bell rang and Kel straightened up. “You might want to throw that away and start over.”

Joey pulled a face then shrugged. “Why? It’s done now. We might as well see how it turns out. I might have invented the next big thing.”

“You might be giving customers indigestion.”

“I’ll test it on you first,” said Joey.

“Mail’s in,” cried a voice from the front.

Kel sighed at Joey’s continued incompetence and went out to the front to find Sam grinning at her. The grin faded somewhat.

“Not that I don’t love you, but I was hoping for the lady of the house,” Sam said.

“Joey’s finishing up in back,” Kel said, taking the stack of bills and circulars from Sam’s hands.

“I’ll just wait then,” Sam said firmly. “In the meantime, a little bird told me that you had a date with the professor’s daughter. Care to share?”

“It wasn’t a date.”

“Mmm-hmm. We all know how you operate, Kel. If it wasn’t a date this time, it will be next time. And it’s just as

well, at least that way one of his daughters will be satisfied. From what I hear, Emily's about to explode over all the wedding arrangements."

"She's always been a perfectionist."

"And her with no one there to help her out," Sam said. "It's almost enough to make you feel sorry for her."

"She's got her dad to sign the checks, that's all she cares about," said Kel. "And if she'd be a little nicer to people, maybe she'd have someone that wanted to help her."

"Who's helping who?" Joey asked, coming out of the back and wiping her hands on a towel.

"Nothing for you to worry about," Sam grinned, hefting her mailbag up onto her shoulder. "And you're just who I was hoping to see. I hear that you're single and looking."

Joey turned beet red and Kel bit back a smile but couldn't help a snort of amusement. Joey glared at her.

"Hey, don't look at me. I've embarrassed myself enough when it comes to you and romance," Kel said.

Joey took a deep breath. "Sam, you're really nice, and I really do like you, it's just that—"

"Hold on there," Sam said. "I'm not asking for myself. I've got enough going on in my life with a half dozen kittens to look after without getting myself a girlfriend or boyfriend to go along with them."

"Okay," Joey said slowly. "So if you're not asking for yourself then..."

"Then she's playing matchmaker," Kel filled in. "Which is a role Sam has often fancied herself in."

"I'm the one that introduced Mary and Dave at the pet store," Sam put in. "Not to mention Dave and Hal when that didn't work out."

Kel smirked and Joey hushed her. "That's kind, Sam, but—"

"But nothing. You're a good looking lady and there's folks around here interested in that. Besides, don't you need a little

romance in your life?”

“Mmm, don’t you?” Kel put in. “Don’t you deserve a little love?”

Joey put her hands on her hips and stared both of them down, then slowly, slowly, she started to nod. “Yes.”

“What?” Kel asked.

“You’re both exactly right, that’s exactly what I need. I need a little relationship action, someone to complain to after a long day here, someone to buy me chocolate.”

“Oh no,” Kel said. “You just said yourself that you’re on the shelf.”

“And you said I shouldn’t be,” pointed out Joey. “And maybe you’re right. Maybe we should both be taking my advice. Maybe a little dating, as in dating not just sex, is what we both need.”

Kel groaned. “You’re doing this to prove a point, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. Maybe you need to see that my advice is good advice. Maybe you need to have a healthy relationship modeled in front of you.”

“Hold on here,” Sam said. “I’m only talking about dinner or something, I’m not sure the gentleman in question is looking for a wife.”

“Which is absolutely fine,” Joey said. “Relationships aren’t black and white, it’s not be a playboy or settle down for life and have kids, there are plenty of in-between phases.”

Kel shook her head. “Proceed at your own risk,” she said. “I’m going to go and check on that cake.”

Seeing her opportunity to get rid of the mess that Joey had just made she left the two women to discuss the finer details of the date. It was Joey’s business, not hers. If the woman wanted to start dating again, well, good for her.

Maybe she’d realize eventually that not everyone had the same needs.

Kel's needs were firmly centered around her bedroom and she saw no need to complicate things further.

IT WAS CLOSING time by the time Kel had a minute to herself to check her phone. What with preventing Joey from baking alone and teaching her the difference between various important ingredients, she hadn't had time to pee, let alone do anything else.

She put in her PIN and checked her messages, seeing a pink icon from her bank. A deposit had been made. A deposit that made her eyes grow larger as she took in the full amount.

It had to be some kind of mistake.

And yet... the further she looked, the more it seemed like the money really was for her. It could only be from Trix. An astonishing sum for sitting around talking and assigning her movies to watch. A sum that, if repeated regularly enough, would be more than enough to ensure that she could go and study to her heart's content.

Her stomach flipped over a little.

Quickly, she texted Trix a thank you. She didn't want to seem ungrateful. She clearly couldn't afford to blow this opportunity.

Which was when she saw the text from her mother. Her stomach sank back down into its normal position again. Her mom, of course.

She swallowed hard and for a millisecond considered deleting the text. But she couldn't, just couldn't.

It took all of a minute to transfer a hundred bucks to her mom and she felt guilty and resentful for every second of that minute.

And she hated herself for not being able to say no, for not turning her back on someone who'd never been there for her.

She was just putting her phone away when it dinged.

The message was short and sweet, a smiley emoji and nothing more.

It took a second to realize that it came not from her mother, but from Trix.

And Kel's stomach flipped all over again.

Chapter Fifteen

Trix read Kel's message one more time. Which was odd because she'd already read it at least ten times by now, but her fingers just kept opening it up again. All it said was a polite thank you, which was gratefully received. There was nothing there to read really, no more information.

Yet she just kept opening the damn thing.

At least she was reading something though. The pile of manuscripts on her tablet wasn't getting any smaller. She was trying, and she was doing a little better. Somehow, identifying all the tropes that she was starting to learn was making things slightly better.

But she just couldn't get over the idea that all these books were ridiculous. They involved contrived situations and stupid conversations and there was nothing realistic about them at all.

"Don't forget to pack some hiking gear," her father said, coming into the kitchen.

"Huh? What?"

"Hiking gear, don't forget to pack some," he repeated. "You did bring some, I assume. The hiking up around the hotel is wonderful, it's truly beautiful and it's definitely something that you should see."

Trix frowned. Hotel? "Uh, hotel?"

Her father poured himself some iced tea, a drink that Trix really couldn't get behind. Tea should be hot, not cold. "The hotel," he said. "You know, for the wedding."

"Woah, hold on here, there's a hotel?" She was thoroughly confused.

"Haven't you and Emily talked about all of this?" her father asked. "We'll be leaving in a couple of days, driving up there. It's not far, but far enough that we've rented rooms for those who need it."

“The wedding’s at a hotel.” She’d just assumed it would be in a church. Or at worst right here in the house.

“It was just easier that way,” her father said. “The venue has done a lot of the planning, and of course they’ll do the cleaning up after. Drake’s family suggested the place and I’ve got to say, it’s stunning. You’ll love it.”

But Trix was busy thinking through everything that had just happened. The one gleaming thought in her mind was Kel.

She’d gone from taking a date to a wedding just to piss off her half sister to suddenly having to spend a weekend with someone she practically knew nothing about.

“You didn’t tell her we were going up to the mountains?” her father said as Emily waltzed in. “Trix had no idea we were going to a hotel for the wedding.”

“Must have forgotten,” said Emily, shrugging. She turned her fake-smile to Trix. “But not to worry, sis, I’ve already changed the reservations so that you and Kel get a double room.”

Trix opened her mouth to say something, anything, when her father broke in. “Kel? Kelly Bradshaw?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm,” said Emily. “She and your daughter are dating, didn’t you know that? They’re coming to the wedding together and everything.”

Trix winced as her father looked at her, but he just grinned and laughed. “You’re a fast worker alright,” he said to her. “A chip off the old block. See what you like and then go for it. Good for you. Kel’s a nice girl, attractive too, and half that reputation she’d got is gossip and nothing else. She might not have got the best start in life, but she’s a smart kid and she’s going places.”

Which might just be the first nice thing Trix had heard about Kel now that she came to think of it. She managed a sickly grin. Emily and her father started talking about family coming up for the wedding and Trix slipped away without them noticing.

She had an appointment with Kel. An appointment, not a date, she reminded herself. And it was about time she was totally honest about what Kel had signed up for, especially now that there were hotel rooms and night-times and beds involved in the equation.

She needed to offer the woman an out. Tell her that she needn't come. It didn't matter what Emily would say or think, this was turning into way more of a commitment than it should be and it wasn't fair to expect Kel to be on board with all of this.

THE BAR WAS exactly what Trix would have expected. There were neon signs on the wall, draft taps, and a bartender that had a smile so white it almost glowed in the dark. It was, she thought, the perfect American bar. They should shoot movies here.

"What can I do for you?" drawled the bartender in a southern accent that made her wonder if he had a cowboy hat and a horse out back.

"Um, just a lager please."

He frowned, then shrugged. "That's a beer, right?"

She nodded. "Light beer."

"Oh, we got those." He pulled a bottle out of a refrigerated drawer and popped the top. "Your accent's real cute, where y'all from."

"England," she said, taking the ice-cold bottle.

"Never been there myself, but wouldn't mind a look-see," he grinned at her.

She took a sip of the beer as an excuse for something to do, then grimaced as she swallowed. "Um, when I said light beer, I meant light in color," she said. "Not alcohol-free."

"That's not alcohol-free," the bartender scowled.

"But it's also not an import," finished Kel, strolling up to the bar. "Europeans like their beer a bit stronger than a Bud Light," she said to the bartender. "Give her a Heineken or something and put it on my tab."

“Thanks,” Trix said when she had a new beer in hand.

“Happy to translate,” said Kel, picking up a beer of her own. “Now let’s grab a table. You don’t want Luke over here listening to every word you’ve got to say about love and romance.”

“What I don’t know about love and romance ain’t worth knowing,” the bartender shot back.

Kel laughed as she led them both to a table in the corner. “Alrighty then,” she said, sitting down. “Let’s talk about dating. You done any?”

Trix blew out her cheeks. She needed to do this, needed to say the right thing.

“It’s fine if you haven’t,” Kel said, misunderstanding Trix’s hesitancy.

“It’s not that,” said Trix. She cleared her throat and then cleared it again. “It’s, um, well, it’s time for me to come clean about something.” She scratched her nose. “You’re probably going to want to end this arrangement, and that’s absolutely fine. There’s no hard feelings or anything.”

“Wait a sec,” Kel interrupted. “Why would I want to end this? I thought we were just getting started. We’ve still got a wedding to go to, apart from anything else.”

“That’s the thing,” Trix said.

“The wedding?” asked Kel, confused.

“I, um, might not have been completely honest about this wedding thing. Not that it was all my fault,” she added hurriedly. “Some things have been sprung on me as well.”

“Like what?” Kel said.

“Like, um, well, like I’m supposed to be a bridesmaid.”

There was a moment of silence until Kel burst out laughing.

“It’s not funny,” Trix put in. “My father arranged it all, Emily definitely doesn’t want me in the wedding party. And apart from anything else, it’ll require dancing and everything.”

“So?” Kel said, still chortling. Then her face changed. “Wait, you don’t think I can dance?”

Before Trix knew what was happening, Kel was pulling her up off the bench seat and dancing to the janky country music in the background. She moved her hips and Trix tried to pull away, but Kel was pulling her in, humming to the music, pulling her closer and closer.

Until they were touching. Until Kel’s body fit perfectly into the curves of Trix’s torso. Until she could smell Kel like a cake shop all sugar and spice. Until she could feel the thrum of a heartbeat through her chest. Until she could see Kel’s smile drop, her humming stop, her green eyes get that glint in them.

Until she yanked herself away and threw herself back into her seat.

“Not the point,” she said.

“I can dance,” Kel said slowly sitting down.

“Yeah, well, that’s not the only problem,” Trix said, aware that she was breathless, as though dancing for that brief second had been anything like real exercise. “There’s more than that. The wedding is at a hotel. It’s not here in town.”

Kel frowned. “You know, I think I knew that, but I’m not sure how?”

“And you don’t think that’s a problem?”

“Why?” Kel asked. Then she straightened up. “Unless you think it’s a problem. I mean, this is all about you pissing off your sister, right?”

“Half sister,” said Trix.

“Right. So if you don’t want me there, I suppose...”

“No, that’s not it. I just thought it might be awkward is all.”

“Not as awkward as this conversation is rapidly getting,” said Kel. “Why should it be awkward? We’re both getting a weekend away out of the deal. It doesn’t really change anything, does it?”

Trix scratched her nose again. “We’ve got a room,” she said. “Emily arranged it.”

Kel spluttered with laughter. “You’re worried about the ‘only one bed’ trope, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?” Trix practically screeched.

Kel shrugged. “I’m a big girl. You’ve made yourself clear. You’re not interested. We’re both grown ups. If you don’t want me at the wedding then fine, I’ll stay home. But I don’t see why this all needs to be a problem unless you want to make it one.”

Trix ran her tongue over her teeth. She should stop this, it was slightly ridiculous. She didn’t need Kel there at all. She was nothing more than a consultant.

On the other hand, the thought of facing mountains of people she didn’t know without at least one friendly face by her side didn’t do much for it. She had to admit that it would be nice to have someone that wasn’t a complete stranger by her side.

“I don’t have to come, Trix,” Kel said.

A flash of a memory came to her. The country song changed to something more pop, but for an instant Trix could feel the way Kel had pulled her in, could feel the way their bodies had fit together.

Then Kel sucked at her beer bottle and the moment was broken and Trix was breathing out.

“Fine, come,” she said. “No funny business though.”

“No funny business,” Kel said, face serious.

And Trix almost, almost believed that she meant it.

Chapter Sixteen

If Kel closed her eyes and concentrated hard enough, she could still feel Trix's body pressed up against hers in the bar. She could feel the way they fit together, the way they slid into place like it was natural.

If she opened her eyes, she could see the impatient undergrad that was standing in front of the cash register.

"Sorry," Kel said. "Long night last night." She smiled and the undergrad smiled back.

"Do anything exciting?"

Kel shrugged. "Nah, not really."

The blonde leaned on the counter. "I find that hard to believe."

"Can I get you anything else?"

A cocked eyebrow greeted her and Kel forced her smile to be a little wider. "I'll take some of that carrot cake if you're offering."

"Sure," Kel said, grateful for the chance to break eye contact. She served up the cake, finished the latte the girl had ordered, and collected the appropriate amount of cash.

"Thanks," said the girl. She picked up her plate and cup. "I'll, uh, I'll be right over there if you need anything."

Kel gave one more polite smile. Why would she need anything? Wasn't that supposed to be her line? And the girl walked away to a table by the window.

"Are you dead?"

"What?"

Joey came to stand next to her at the counter. "Are you dead?" she repeated. "Or under some kind of magic spell? Or, I don't know, did all those antibiotics that are supposed to be floating around in the water supply finally rid you of all your hormones?"

“What on earth are you talking about?” Kel said, crossing her arms. “And I do hope you know that antibiotics don’t work that way.”

“That poor girl just spent an entire interaction flirting with you and you ignored her. To be fair, you were extremely professional and as your boss I should be thrilled. As your friend, I’m slightly worried though.”

“She did not,” Kel said, though she had a sneaky feeling that she had just missed the girl’s intentions entirely.

“Did too,” said Joey.

Kel sighed. “How was your date?” Changing the subject seemed the sensible thing to do.

It was Joey’s turn to grin. “It was alright.”

“Alright? That smile says more than alright. Did you... did you get laid?”

“Bad taste, Kel,” Joey said, but she was still smiling. “For your information, no, I did not get laid, nor am I likely to in the near future.”

“Oh dear, was he like super old?”

“No, I just have old-fashioned ideas about sex,” Joey said. “I like to reserve it for those that I know a little better.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. Each to their own. As long as you don’t judge me for jumping into bed with people I won’t judge you for sliding into bed like you’re getting into a cold swimming pool.”

“Thank you so much,” said Joey sourly. “And whilst we’re on the subject...”

“Oh no, we’re not on the subject. We’re on your subject now,” said Kel. “So you didn’t get laid, but you’re still looking like the cat that got the cream.”

“It was nice,” admitted Joey. She stretched, showing off the tattoos that curled around her arms. “It was nice to be wined and dined, nice to have some adult conversation. Which is

what dating is all about. You jump straight into bed and you miss all the good stuff first. All the anticipation, the romance.”

Kel ignored this. “You like him then? Are you seeing him again?”

“Yes and yes,” said Joey. She turned bright blue eyes on Kel. “Not that I’m saying he’s the one or anything. But I had a good time and I wouldn’t mind doing it again. It was nice to have the company, to be honest.”

“And are you going to tell me who the mystery man is?”

“Nope,” said Joey. “I’m keeping that to myself for a little while longer, if you don’t mind. This is a small town and I could do without the gossip.”

“Chance would be a fine thing given that Sam’s the one that set you up.”

“I’ve handled it,” Joey said. “I bribed her with all the information I can pry out of you about you and Trix.”

“There’s no information to pry,” Kel said, the words feeling chalky in her mouth.

She could be wrong, she told herself. She could be. She wasn’t infallible, no matter what she told Joey about being irresistible and untameable. She’d been known to screw things up, just look at Joey herself, she’d been so sure there was a connection there.

But she was equally sure that she felt something with Trix. Her skin tingled when she was around, that had to mean something, surely? She was no idiot, she knew what lust felt like, she was more than familiar with the buzzing in her stomach, the warmth between her legs. Yet Trix showed no sign at all that she felt either of those things.

“No information to pry, eh?” Joey said.

“Excuse me?”

They both turned to see the undergrad standing at the counter, plate in hand, looking slightly pale.

“Yes, dear?” Joey said.

“I don’t mean to complain, or to be a pain,” began the girl.

“No,” interrupted Kel. “Don’t apologize for standing up for something. That’s a terrible thing to do. You have the right to complain, you have the right to be a pain, don’t apologize for taking up space in a room.”

The blonde blushed. “Um, right.”

“I think what my colleague was saying was that we’re absolutely open to feedback,” Joey added, frowning at Kel.

“Okay, good. It’s just that, well, this cake does taste a little... not good.”

“Not good?” Kel said, already taking a fork and pulling another slice out of the cooler. She took a small bite and immediately spat it back out again. “Joe, you mixed up the sugar and the salt again.” She turned to the girl. “I’m so sorry, let me get you your money back. Joey, get that cake out of the cooler.”

THE DAY SEEMED long, too long, like she was waiting for a dentist appointment or something, which made no sense at all.

She’d fixed Joey’s carrot cake problem by baking a new one, and Joey had gone on a supply run when the door opened.

Outside the window, a large SUV lurked and Kel’s heart skipped a beat until she turned and saw that it was Emily coming in, not Trix.

“Hi, Emily,” she said politely.

“I’ll take a large frappe,” Emily said. “And whatever Joey didn’t make to take home for dessert tonight.”

“Sure thing,” Kel said, pulling out half a cheesecake that was still in the cooler. “All ready for the wedding, you must be excited.”

“Yes and yes,” said Emily, scowling. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

Kel couldn’t help but grin. “It’s not? I’m coming, remember? I’m your bridesmaid’s date?”

Emily growled in response to this. “I’ve got your number, Kelly Bradshaw. I don’t know what you’re up to yet, but I know you’re up to something. I’ll figure it out. And don’t think that I won’t have you marched out of the venue in front of everyone, because I absolutely will.”

“Drake home yet?” Kel asked sweetly.

Emily gritted her teeth. “He’ll be here for the wedding.”

“I should hope so,” said Kel. “That’ll be twenty bucks even.”

Emily practically threw the money at her and stalked out, peeling the SUV out of the parking lot so that it screeched onto the street. Kel sighed.

It felt like an endless day. Endless and gray.

There was no one around so she went into the back and grabbed her phone. One notification glowed on the screen.

Do you have a tux?

Kel grinned and typed back. *I look fantastic in a tux, just you wait and see. You’ll drool over me.*

Three dots flashed and flashed again until Trix’s message came in. *I didn’t ask to see you in one. Emily is insisting that this is black tie only.*

Right, Kel typed back. *Because you definitely don’t want to see me in my sexy tux.*

Three dots. *I’ll try and restrain myself when the sight is finally unveiled.*

Kel laughed. *Well, if me in the tux doesn’t blow your mind, it looks great on the floor next to your bed too...* She’d hit send before she remembered who she was writing to and for an agonizing second she felt sick. She’d pushed things too far. Then three little dots appeared.

eye roll Trix wrote.

And Kel was still laughing as Joey stumbled in with a crate of sugar. “You’re looking happier than this morning.”

“I’m fine.”

“Right, you’re not fine. Don’t think I’m so old that I’ve forgotten that I was half way through interrogating you this morning,” Joey said, dropping the crate onto the counter. “I’m no idiot. I see you mooning around.”

“I’m not mooning.”

“You are too. And we both know exactly why. This Trix girl is starting to get to you. All the signs are there. You’re staring out of the window, you’re grim one minute and grinning like an idiot the next, you’ve got no appetite.”

“I’ve got no appetite because one of us keeps mixing up ingredients in our cakes,” grumbled Kel.

“I’d be careful throwing accusations around if I were you.”

“Why’s that?”

Joey laughed. “Because I’m assuming that you’d like the weekend off to go to a certain wedding?”

Kel grimaced. “Crap. I totally forgot to ask, didn’t I?”

“You did,” said Joey. “But given that half the town are going to be up there I’m closing on Saturday anyway, so you can have the whole weekend, no problem.”

Kel cleared her throat. “Um, there’s something else.”

Joey put her hands on her hips. “You want my car too, don’t you?”

“Or the van?” Kel said. “I’ve got to get myself up there after all, and it’s a bit far for my bike.”

“Take the car,” said Joey. “And ride in style with your lady love. Now come and help me unload the van or I’ll change my mind.”

Kel trooped out of the back door to do her share of the lifting.

She felt lighter than she had all day. And she had a chance, she told herself, as she opened up the van doors. After all, she and Trix had an entire weekend to spend together. If

something was going to happen, then it would happen this weekend. And if it didn't, well, she'd have to admit that she was losing her touch.

Chapter Seventeen

Emily looked on as her father hefted the dress bag into the back of the car.

“Be careful with it,” she yelled.

“I’ve got it,” mumbled her father.

“Jesus, let me, let me.” She hurried to the car and Trix hung back.

“Why do you let her talk to you like that?” Trix couldn’t help but ask as her father came back to the porch.

“We’re not English, we don’t have the same kind of formality as you may be used to,” he said. He was wearing slacks and a shirt, looking tired.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” said Trix. “You let her talk to you like you’re rubbish, she’s being rude, not informal.”

Her father sighed. “She’s had a rough few months. I suppose perhaps I have been slightly indulgent.”

“Slightly?” Trix said, raising an eyebrow.

“Beatrice, come, I don’t want to argue and I definitely don’t want to talk about child-rearing. I’ve a feeling I wouldn’t come out of that conversation looking particularly good.”

“I’d say.”

He took her hand and squeezed it before quickly letting go. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. There are no words that will fix anything, I’m fully aware of that. But I’m also getting old, Trix. And getting old gives you more time to think than you’d really like to have.”

Trix sighed. “You’re not old, dad.”

“Yes, I am. And my youngest daughter is getting married and starting her own life and maybe this is all giving me time to take stock of things. Em will be gone, Vanessa has been gone a year now. There’s only me left.”

He was starting to sound sentimental and like his nose was stuffed up. Trix cleared her throat.

“Yes, and you,” he said, turning to her. “But I don’t seem to be making a great job of connecting with you, do I?”

“It might help if you were around occasionally,” Trix said. “Not that I don’t have my own things to do, but you seem to work a lot.”

“I do,” he admitted. “But I think if I’m being honest I’m just avoiding being at home. There’s too much baggage here, too much that needs dealing with.”

“Which includes me.” It should sting. Maybe it did. But it wasn’t like they’d ever been close. The longer Trix was here, the more she was realizing that coming had been a mistake. She and her father weren’t going to have the kind of movie-perfect relationship he might have wanted.

“I should make more of an effort.” His brow wrinkled in thought. “You’re intimidating, Trix. Always have been, even when you were small. You have this way of thinking, solid and inflexible, like you know everything, everything you think is right. Mostly you are right, I suppose. But still, it does make you hard to approach.”

Trix sighed. “Well, thanks for that, dad. Nice talk.”

“I didn’t mean...” He sighed. “I don’t know what I mean. I need to try harder. Let’s get this wedding out of the way and then—”

He was interrupted by the blaring of a car horn as a cloud of dust sprayed down the driveway.

“What on earth is that?” he said as the low-slung black sports car slid to a halt in front of the house.

Trix laughed with glee as Kel pushed her sunglasses up on top of her head and gave her a wink. “Your chariot, madame.”

“That would be my ride,” Trix said to her father.

“I thought we’d all drive up together, have some family time,” he began.

“Ah, maybe on the way home?” Trix said, already stepping off the porch and having no intention of ever, ever getting stuck in a car with her father and her half sister.

“Emily will be leaving for her honeymoon,” her father said.

But Trix was already climbing into the car as Kel jumped out to throw her suitcase into the impossibly small trunk.

“I’ll see you at the hotel,” Trix said, pretending she hadn’t heard her father.

Kel bounced back into the car and raised her eyebrows. “Ready to blow this joint?”

“Please,” hissed Trix. “Now.”

Obediently, Kel peeled out of the drive and the car leapt under them.

“Nice ride,” Trix said.

“It’s Joey’s. I’m borrowing it for the weekend.” Kel looked at her. “Just in case you thought I was a secret millionaire or something.”

Trix settled into the leather seat, stretching out her legs. “Not in the slightest,” she said, contented. “What are you though?”

“Huh?” Kel’s attention was on the road.

“Well, you’re not a secret millionaire and you’re working in a cake shop but you don’t seem like a baker. You seem like someone who’s biding their time. So what are you?”

Kel shifted up a gear. “I’m an artist,” she said.

“Seriously, Kel, I’m really asking here.”

Silently, Kel pulled a tablet from the center console and flicked it on, passing it over to Trix without looking. Trix stared at the first picture, then began flicking through the rest.

“These are yours?” she said, finally.

“Well, they’re not Picasso’s.”

“They’re good. Very good,” Trix said, impressed. She went to enough gallery openings and exhibitions in London to know

what she was looking at was good.

“They’re okay, could be better.” Kel shifted again. “Now, have you actually finished a romance novel yet?”

Trix groaned and pulled out her sunglasses. “No.”

“Are you even trying?”

“Obviously, I am. I know this is important. I just... I just can’t quite bring myself to care.”

“Because you think falling in love is stupid and cheesy and everyone in these books makes dumb decisions.”

“And they all have ridiculous miscommunications.”

“Right,” Kel said. She turned the car toward the highway. “You know, I think going to a wedding will be good for you. Maybe you need to catch a little romance.”

“Is it contagious?”

Kel shrugged. “We can only hope.”

“TURN AROUND,” KEL sang.

“Bright eyes,” added Trix in a surprisingly clear alto.

“This is a love song,” said Kel. The car was speeding along the interstate.

“Did I say I hated love songs?” asked Trix. “Besides, whatever it is, it’s a great tune and very singable.”

“Aha, so you do have a heart,” Kel laughed. “Good to know. How do you feel about Celine Dion?”

“Slightly sick. But I can handle a little Boyz to Men.”

Kel laughed harder. “Retro, cool.” The song came to an end and Kel turned the radio down. “How come you didn’t want to ride with your dad?”

“Would you want to be in a car with Emily?”

“I guess not,” said Kel. The car was starting to make a choking noise and she was frowning at the dashboard.

“Thanks for rescuing me back there, I mean, I think if you’d been a minute later he’d have guilt-tripped me into riding with

them.”

“Who says you don’t need a knight in shining armor?” Kel said, turning to grin at her just as the car choked again and then slowed. “Crap.” She turned the steering wheel and pushed the car toward the median, getting out of traffic just as the engine stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Trix said.

Kel’s face was turning red.

“What is it?”

“Um, you’re not going to believe this, but, uh, we ran out of gas?”

“You ran out of... petrol? You’re out of petrol? For God’s sake, Kel, how does that even happen? There’s a gauge right there that tells you how much petrol’s in the tank.”

“It’s fine. There’ll be a station at the next exit. I’ll go get a can and come back.”

“Oh no way,” said Trix, undoing her seat belt. “I’m not waiting around here to become episode three on some true crime podcast. I’m coming with you.”

“It might, um, it might take a while.”

“Why?” asked Trix suspiciously. “How far is it to the next exit?”

“Uh, about eight miles, more or less.”

Trix groaned and opened the door. “Let’s get going then. I can’t believe you’d do something like this.”

“It’s not like I chose to run out of gas.”

“It’s not like you checked to make sure there was enough,” Trix yelled as they started their walk down the noisy highway.

IT WAS DARK when they drew up in front of the hotel complex. The place had a driveway longer than the street that Trix lived on, and was lit in a warm yellow glow that made the wooden buildings look Scandinavian and expensive. Which they probably were.

“Ma’am, ma’am, you can’t leave your car there.”

A man hurried out of the hotel foyer and Kel threw him the car keys. “Then move it.”

Trix tried to look haughty as she strode after Kel into the hotel, but it was hard when there were blisters on her blisters and she smelled of diesel fumes and her make-up was melted down her face in itchy rivulets.

“We’re here for the wedding,” Kel said tiredly to the receptionist.

“Ah, you must be Ms. Bradshaw and Ms. Winchester, your room is ready for you and the rest of the guests are already participating in the rehearsal dinner.”

Trix growled at Kel. “Told you we were late.”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Kel said.

Silently, the two of them followed a porter to the elevator and then down a corridor and into a luxurious room.

Trix found that she’d been holding her breath, but as the room door opened she saw two twin beds and remembered to breathe again. Safe. None of that one bed trope nonsense. But as soon as the porter left to get their luggage, Kel began lugging a nightstand out of the way.

“What are you doing?” Trix asked, more annoyed than ever at the woman.

Kel grunted as she pushed one bed toward the other. “What does it look like?”

“You’re... making one bed?” hazarded Trix.

“Exactly.”

“Um, why?”

Kel straightened up and surveyed her work, then turned back to Trix. “You think that this isn’t a test? That Emily didn’t deliberately book us a room with two beds just to try and prove that we’re not actually dating? She threatened to have me escorted off the premises, you know?”

“Oh,” was all Trix could find to say. She was busy staring at what had just become a one bed trope.

“Come on, we don’t have time for primping, we’d better get downstairs. You’re a bridesmaid, remember? I’m pretty sure that your attendance at the rehearsal dinner is mandatory,” said Kel, heading to the door.

“Right,” Trix said.

But she had a long, hard look at the bed she, no, *they* were supposed to spend the next two nights in before she left the room.

Chapter Eighteen

A tall, blonde woman was waiting by the doors to the dining room and Kel found herself being ushered inside, closely followed by Trix.

“Who’s she? An aunt or something?” she hissed.

Trix shrugged. “I barely know who my father is and you expect me to identify random women? I’ve not got a clue.”

“Finally, finally, we’re all here,” the woman announced.

An entire table full of people turned to look at them and Kel was suddenly aware of the fact that she smelled and looked like she’d been dragged through a stable. Walking down the side of the highway in ninety something degree heat didn’t do much for anybody’s looks, and she had the feeling her deodorant had hung up its hat and quit hours ago.

“Well then, sit down, eat,” the woman said to the two of them.

Feeling and looking like naughty children, Trix and Kel slunk toward the table. Kel could feel Emily’s eyes glaring at her. Next to her, a tall, dark man was grinning merrily. He must be Drake, Emily’s fiancé. Kel felt heartily sorry for him, he looked like a nice guy.

“I’m starving,” Kel whispered to Trix as they were seated at the bottom of the table. Around twenty pairs of eyes were watching them.

“I could eat,” said Trix, easily. She began helping herself to a bowl of pasta salad, so Kel guessed it was okay to tuck in. She figured that Trix was English and had to know good manners.

“Now, we can begin,” the blonde woman said, standing at the head of the table.

It became clear, as Kel devoured a peppery pasta salad, that the woman was the wedding planner.

She began by taking them through the order of service, telling them who should stand where and say what and who knew what else. Kel blocked out the details, she wasn't involved in the wedding itself, she had nothing to worry about.

Instead, she thought about her rash decision to push the two beds together upstairs.

It had been instinct more than anything, the same she'd do in any hotel room. It was surprising how often hotels and motels assumed that you were sisters or best friends when renting a room, giving two beds as default.

She'd been right though. This was probably Emily testing them.

Which didn't mean she wasn't feeling guilty about having ulterior motives.

The one bed trope was successful for a reason. There weren't many who could turn down temptation when it was right beside them. Literally.

Not that she had any intention of doing anything without some kind of sign from Trix. Not at all.

They'd made a connection though, right? They'd sung in the car like they'd known each other for years. They'd broken down barriers, started to get closer, friendly even. Right up until the damn vehicle ran out of gas.

Kel could kick herself for such an elementary mistake.

And now here they were surrounded by mostly strangers. Tired and exhausted. Romance lurking in every corner. And one bed. Well, practically one bed.

Having a sugar mommy, Kel reflected as she spooned more salad onto her plate, was turning out to be a lot trickier and a lot less sexy than she'd thought. Still though, there was that pay check at the end of the week, she couldn't deny that that helped.

It helped enough that she'd already applied for the grant to go to college, she was on the verge of sending in her acceptance letter. She just needed to be a little more sure that

the money would be there. A little more sure that Trix could be counted on for a while longer to need her.

“That’s us,” Trix said.

A sharp elbow dug into Kel’s side and then Trix was pulling her up out of her seat.

The wedding planner was standing them in a line. Emily and Drake first, then a woman and man that Kel didn’t know but assumed were the maid of honor and her date, then Trix and Kel, then another pair and another and on until everyone was standing.

“So, dancing,” the planner began.

Kel tuned back out again. In front, Drake was stretching his neck, one hand creeping up Emily’s back. He was obviously as bored as she was. Kel grinned and reached around the woman in front to tap Drake’s shoulder.

“You’re Drake,” she said.

He grinned and his eyes danced. “Not exactly a prize winning guess since it’s my wedding and all,” he whispered back. “But yes. Who are you?”

“Kel,” said Kel, then rolled her eyes. “I’d be the date of your fiancée’s half sister.”

“Oh, right,” said Drake, craning over to see Trix and then holding out his hand. “Drake, pleased to meet you, Beatrice. We’ll have to have a drink later, maybe breakfast in the morning? I’m sorry I didn’t meet you before, work, you know?”

Trix was nodding and smiling and then Emily was glaring at everyone.

“Will you all listen?” she hissed.

Kel sighed, then brightened up. “We solved the bed problem,” she said, innocently. “So don’t worry about it.”

“What bed problem?” asked Drake.

“Oh, it was nothing, just a mistake,” Kel said airily. “There were twin beds in our room rather than a double, but we’ve

handled it, so no worries.”

Trix elbowed her again and Kel rubbed at her side. There was going to be a bruise. Emily’s face looked like thunder and Kel was trying not to giggle when the speakers crackled.

“And now, we dance,” the wedding planner was saying, as music began to pour from the speakers. “First the happy couple.”

Emily pasted on a smile and practically dragged Drake out onto the floor and Kel looked down at her dirty t-shirt and banged up sneakers. “Hey, I don’t think this is a great idea,” she whispered to Trix.

But Trix was already smiling so hard that it looked painted on, her teeth gritted. She pulled Kel out toward the floor. “We both stink,” she said.

Kel took one last look down at herself.

“Dance!” shouted the planner.

And Kel gave up.

She took Trix’s hand and pulled her in, clasping around her waist, starting to turn to the music even before Trix’s body was pressed up against hers and then...

And then everything faded.

If she’d have been asked later, Kel couldn’t say how long they’d danced or what they’d danced to. All she could remember was the startling blue of Trix’s eyes, the smoothness of her skin, the warmth of her pressed against her, the way her muscles moved under her skin.

All she could remember was the growing realization that whatever it was she was feeling, it was far different from anything that had come before.

It wasn’t just lust. Sure, lust was there. But there was something else too, something terrifying and large, something that made her heart forget how to beat properly and her lungs forget how to take in oxygen.

She held Trix and she danced and she tried desperately to think of an excuse to get out of this, to break away, because whatever this was, whatever she was feeling, it was the most frightening thing she'd felt in years.

She wanted to pull away. She wanted to escape. But Kel's hands were holding her tight and as much as she tried to pull back, she simply couldn't. In the end, she let her eyes half-close and she surrendered to what had to happen.

The two of them, dirty and sweaty and stinking, clinging to each other and waltzing on an expensive dance floor as music floated around them.

The two of them moving as one, as Trix's breath came faster, as her pulse started to pick up, as her eyes closed properly.

The two of them pressed against each other, their bodies fitting together in just the way that Trix remembered from the bar. Like they'd been cut from the same cloth, like they were meant to forever stand close.

Her head moved in. For one, long second, she was pushing her face into Kel's dirty t-shirt, she was inhaling the scent of her, letting herself feel safe and protected in arms that she knew with a certainty would never let her go.

Then the music stopped.

For far too long the two of them stood still.

Then Trix took a deep breath and pulled away. "You need a shower."

"You need a bath," Kel responded.

But the words hadn't come out as hard as she'd expected. They were softer, deeper, gentler.

"Excellent," the planner said.

Trix took a step back.

“Then we’re ready for tomorrow. I’ll expect the wedding party upstairs at three.” She glanced down at Trix and Kel. “And I do hope we’ll all be appropriately dressed.”

Kel snorted and Trix swallowed. The dancers drifted away, some going back to the table, some moving on to the bar.

“You okay?” Kel asked.

Trix nodded. “Just tired, that’s all.”

“Same. Maybe we should say our good nights and be off.”

Off to that big bed upstairs. Trix said nothing, but it was inevitable that they ended up there.

Kel pulled up the comforter as Trix got into bed. She was wearing pajamas, real, silk ones by the look of them. Kel could almost feel the slipperiness of the material under her fingers. They were expensive and the polar opposite of Kel’s own ratty t-shirt.

“I’ll read for a while, if that’s alright?” Trix said, not looking Kel in the eye.

“Sure,” Kel said.

And she waited for the disappointment to hit, waited for the heaviness of anticipation in her stomach to leave, but neither did.

When she closed her eyes, she could smell Trix, could feel her body again as they danced. And somehow, that was enough.

She snuggled down and hugged herself. Not once did she reach out to touch Trix. Before long, sleep was creeping up on her.

Kel didn’t try anything.

Okay, so she'd promised not to. But still, Trix had somewhat expected it. Especially after Kel had pushed the beds together. Instead though, Kel was curled up next to her, breathing softly, her face relaxing into sleep.

What, Trix wondered, would she have done if Kel had made a move?

She bit her lip and decided not to answer the question. Not now.

She clicked on a new manuscript on her tablet and opened the file. *The Wedding Proposal* the title page read, apt if nothing else. And then she settled down to read, steeling herself for yet another terrible romance novel.

Kel sighed next to her, shifting occasionally in her sleep, the air was fresh and cool from the open window, the night was quiet and dark.

And it was long after midnight before Trix turned the final page and read *The End*.

Chapter Nineteen

Kel poured herself some juice from the juice bar, picked up her plate and hustled to an empty table. She was starving.

She'd slept like the dead, contrary to what she'd expected. She'd been anticipating a night of, well, anticipation. A night of longing to touch Trix. Or a night of actually touching Trix.

Neither had happened. Instead, she'd slipped straight into sleep and had slept like she hadn't done since she was a child. It was weird, but she wasn't going to question it. She felt amazing, if only she could sleep that well every night.

When she'd left the room, Trix had still been snoring. She'd had half a mind to wake her up, to ask if she'd slipped sleeping pills into their drinks or something. But she'd looked so peaceful, dark hair splayed out over the pillow, that Kel really hadn't had the heart to do it.

The hotel dining room was full of guests and Kel tucked into her breakfast like she hadn't eaten for days. Maybe it was the fresh air up here, she figured. Maybe that was why she felt like she had a new lease on life, maybe that was why she felt like she was about seven again with all the energy in the world.

Or at least she did until her phone started to ring.

"lo," she mumbled, mouth still half full of toast.

"Kel, baby."

Kel groaned. Her mother, really not who she wanted to talk to, not now, not ever really.

The clearest memory of her childhood was her mother calling her name. Not in a gentle, maternal way, but a shrill voice calling from the couch in front of the TV. A voice telling her to get dinner started or to run to the store or to bring cookies.

For a while there, she'd wondered whether her mother could actually move. She'd been sat in front of the TV in the

morning when Kel got herself up for school, and still there when Kel finished her homework and gritty-eyed went to bed.

But her mom could move well enough when there was no one else there to do the work for her. A fact that it had taken Kel an embarrassingly long time to realize. Now she hadn't set foot in the musty old trailer for years, which didn't stop her mother calling.

"What is it, ma? I'm out of town."

"Just calling to check in on my only daughter, that's allowed, isn't it?"

Kel rolled her eyes. "What do you want?" she asked, pushing some scrambled eggs into her mouth.

"Nothing! Why should I want anything? You always treat me like I'm some hanger-on, some sulky teenager that needs looking after, a parasite. I birthed you, Kelly Bradshaw."

Kel snorted. "It might as well have been the other way around."

"Are you implying that I'm not a good mother?"

"There's no implication about it. You were awful. And now you seem to think that whatever I have is yours, which doesn't exactly make you mother of the year."

"What we have is ours," her mother said. "I gave you everything I had when you were a kid, and now you return the favor."

"Yeah, that's really not how that works," Kel said.

"So you'd just leave your mother to starve, would you? Let me be evicted? Just let me live on the streets?"

Kel sighed. "Jesus, ma, what happened to the money I sent you last week?"

There was a crackle on the line and she knew her mother wouldn't answer. "I'm a month behind on the rent."

There weren't many options here. She could refuse to send her mom money, but that just meant her mother would turn up on her doorstep. Helping out was the best thing for both of

them. “I’ll send you some cash,” she said, sitting back in her chair and closing her eyes.

She was willing to bet that nobody else in this minimalist, wood-paneled dining room had a mother like this.

“It’s the last time I’ll ask, I swear, Kel.”

“It’ll be the last time I give,” Kel said. She’d been debating not saying anything, just leaving, but now she couldn’t help herself. “I’m getting out of here. Leaving the country.”

“You? Where are you going?”

“I’m going to art college in London,” Kel said, still feeling like a fake as she said it, feeling like she was describing someone else’s life.

Her mother laughed. “Where is someone like you going to get the money to do something like that?”

Kel bristled. “I’ve got savings. I’ve applied for a student loan.”

“Uh-huh, and that’s going to cover all your costs, is it?”

“Not exactly,” Kel admitted. She hated the thought that her mother might be right. “But there’s someone who’s going to help me. A woman. A rich woman. She’s already been paying me and she’ll help cover my costs.” She prayed that was true but was uncomfortable with how it sounded when she explained.

“Oh Kel, places like that aren’t for people like us,” her mother said.

Which was about as much as Kel could take. She snarled that she’d send some money and hung the phone up.

She opened her eyes again and Emily was so close she could almost reach out and touch her.

“I knew it,” Emily said, her pale cheeks flushed, her blonde hair tied so tight in a bun that it was stretching her skin. “I knew this was all fake, I knew—”

“There you are, darling.”

Drake appeared out of nowhere, a cheeky grin on his face, dimples flashing. He threw an arm around his bride's shoulders.

"You're not supposed to see me today," screeched Emily.

"I see you so little of the time," said Drake with a pout. "Keeping an old tradition like that is ridiculous. Besides, it's not like you're in your wedding dress or anything."

"That's not the point," said Emily.

Kel spotted her opening and took it, slinking away from the table as Emily and Drake argued.

Just what she needed. She should have kept her stupid mouth shut. She just prayed now that Emily would be so distracted by the wedding that she wouldn't say anything to Trix. Still, she supposed that she could always tell Trix that Emily was lying.

Emily was sure to exaggerate the situation anyway.

She'd just say that Emily was making trouble, that was all. Trix would believe her, or so she hoped.

"HOW CAN YOU not even have your hair done?" Trix grumbled.

"Um, because..." Kel gestured at her head. "It's not like I've got a whole lot of hair to be done. Besides, you're the bridesmaid, not me. You're the one that needs to be primped and preened."

Trix sighed. "I know, I know. It's just that spending so much time with a hysterical Emily and her friends isn't doing much for my mental health."

"Which I'm guessing explains why you're sitting in a hotel bar in your robe."

"It might."

"It'll be over soon," Kel promised her. "Want me to buy you a drink?"

"I want you to buy me many drinks. Unfortunately, I've got a feeling that if I show up drunk then Emily will simply order

a liver transplant for me and then force me up the aisle anyway.”

Kel laughed. “I’ll get you a drink after you’re done,” she promised.

“Fine. I supposed I’d better get back to it,” Trix said.

She stood up, her robe falling off one shoulder as she did so. With a quick movement she adjusted the sleeve, but Kel had already seen her skin, had already imagined the softness of it, the way it would feel under her lips.

She crossed her legs tight.

There was no denying the fact that she had it bad. She wanted Trix. Maybe tonight would be their night. Maybe a couple of glasses of champagne and she could finally get this out of her system.

Or maybe she’d fall asleep like a baby again. She still hadn’t quite understood that one.

“I’ll see you later,” Trix said, turning to go.

In an instant, Kel had captured her wrist, had just wrapped her fingers around it, pulling Trix back toward her. It was instinct only, there was no thought behind it. But as Trix’s blue eyes settled on her face, Kel’s stomach flipped and her core burned.

“What?” Trix asked, making no move to pull away.

Kel took a deep breath then grinned. “Nothing,” she said. “You’ve just got a little something here.” She wiped away an imaginary speck of dirt from Trix’s cheek, her hand shaking so much she quickly released the woman.

“Ah,” Trix said. “Thanks.”

“Welcome,” said Kel, hoarsely.

And then Trix was walking away and Kel’s breath was coming back in gulps.

Jesus, she should order a drink now, something to settle her nerves. She wondered if it was possible to go mad from lust. Maybe this was a thing, maybe other people felt like this all

the time. She was trying to catch the bartender's attention when a hand fell on her shoulder.

"Hello, stranger."

She turned to see Joey standing right behind her. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"That's a fine welcome," Joey said. She signaled to the bartender. "Just a coffee please, and one for my friend."

"I was going to order a real drink."

"It's barely lunchtime," said Joey. "You'll get enough alcohol later."

"Thanks, mom," grumbled Kel. "And what *are* you doing here?"

"I was invited, actually."

"Joey, my dear, so glad you could make it," said a rumbling voice.

Kel frowned as the professor practically leaped across the room to drop a kiss on Joey's cheek.

"It's my pleasure," said Joey.

"Well, I'm delighted nevertheless," said the professor. "Please make yourself at home, avail yourself of the facilities, et cetera. I'm afraid I won't be much of an escort today, but I'm happy you came anyway." He let his hand linger on her shoulder for a moment too long, then left.

By which point, Kel had just about put the pieces together.

"He's your mystery date, isn't he?" she said. "The professor, Emily and Trix's dad, he's the blind date that Sam set you up on."

Joey pulled a face. "Hold your horses. Technically, yes. But it's not quite what you think."

"You're at his daughter's wedding," said Kel.

"As a friend, with my own hotel room and everything, and only because one of the RSVP'd guests canceled at the last

minute,” Joey said. “It was a spur of the moment thing and anyway, I thought you’d appreciate the support.”

“Mmmhmm. You wanted to check up on me.”

“Well, I’ll admit to being curious about how this sugar mummy thing is working out,” Joey grinned, accepting her coffee from the bartender.

“It’s going fine,” said Kel, not at all sure of how anything was going anymore. She was starting to have the sneaky feeling that she might be in over her head, that she might have been better off never having met Trix, that she should never even have applied to art college.

“It sure is,” Joey said.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I was over there watching the two of you,” said Joey, stirring her coffee, then pulling the spoon out to lick it. “And I’d say that things are going very well indeed.”

“Meaning?” prompted Kel.

“Meaning that you’re in love with her, aren’t you?” Joey said, with a satisfied smile.

Chapter Twenty

Trix sighed and tugged at her dress. To give Emily her due, she hadn't let spite interfere with the stylishness of her wedding.

Still though, Trix could do without the fancy dress. Not that she had anything against dressing up. But this, this was just a little too... She looked in the mirror at the pale apricot sheath. A little too on the nose, she supposed. This dress could be nothing other than a bridesmaid's dress. Throw in the shoes, the carefully curled hair, and she looked, well, she looked like a bridesmaid.

Which wasn't at all what she wanted to look like.

A ridiculous idea, all of it, the whole damn nightmare. She should have said no, she should have stood up for herself, she should never have come here in the first place.

Her phone rang on the night table.

The night table next to the ginormous bed that she'd shared with Kel all night. Not that anything had happened, but still...

"I'm just checking in," trilled Chastity's voice as soon as Trix picked up. Trix turned back to the mirror.

"Checking in on what?" she asked as she fussed with her hair.

"On you, of course," said Chastity. "And, um, your reading, I suppose."

"Aha, so Anne-Marie has you checking up on me?"

"Not exactly. Well, a little. But I do want to know how it's going." There was a slight pause. "Um, you have actually read something, haven't you?"

Trix sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'll have you know that just last night I finished *The Wedding Proposal*."

Finished it and, not that she'd ever admit it, sniffed slightly at the ending.

“Wait, you finished a whole romance novel?”

“I did, and there’s no need to sound so surprised,” said Trix. “This is my job now, after all.”

Except she was surprised. Of course she was, because Trix herself was surprised.

Surprised that for some reason last night things just clicked into place. That for once the tropes didn’t seem so foolish, the characters didn’t seem so stupid, that she could, in some small way, connect to what was happening.

Surprised that she’d finished the entire book. That every time she’d thought about ending the chapter and turning in, she’d turned to see Kel slumbering beside her and smiled, actually smiled, and turned the page and started reading again.

Like Kel had put her in a little bubble of warm blankets and soft lamp light and safety and that reading the book had been... Eugh. Pleasant. Pleasant and enjoyable and even, just slightly, touching.

“That’s amazing,” Chastity said. “I flicked through it and thought it was a decent contender, shall I invite the author in for a first-meet? Then there are a couple of others that I’ve starred for attention as well. I’ll email you with the details and...”

She went on and on and Trix was still sitting on the edge of the bed, still looking at her reflection in the mirror, still thinking about last night.

Nothing had happened. Not a thing. Not a touch, not a breath, not a kiss, nothing. Yet everything had happened. Everything seemed changed somehow.

Everything was different and still the same all at the same time. Which made absolutely zero sense.

“Ms. Winchester?” There was a soft knock at the door.

“Yes?” she asked, covering the phone mouthpiece with her hand.

“The wedding party is gathering at the top of the stairs.”

“I’ll be right there,” she said and uncovered the phone. “Fine, send whatever you like,” she told Chastity. “I’ll be back soon enough.”

“I thought you were staying on for another three weeks?”

“Plans change,” Trix said grimly.

They particularly changed when strange, unwanted things were happening. They changed because her half-sister was a bitch, because her father was too afraid to speak to her, because... Because Kel was working some kind of foolish magic on her.

Plans changed and the sooner she was out of here the better.

She’d asked Kel to consult, to explain a few things to her. She’d obviously done her job well. If Trix could read a romance novel cover to cover then Kel’s work was done, right? And there was no need to stick around for more.

“Ms. Winchester?”

Yet another knock at the door.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Trix.

“SEE, WASN’T THAT beautiful?” Kel said as they walked into the hotel dining room.

The whole place was now decked out in tiny lights, a band was playing and the large French windows were open to the gardens and the soft, blue night.

“Beautiful? It was long, my feet ache, and neither one of them can possibly be telling the truth about everything that they said. You really think Emily is going to love, honor, and obey?” Trix said. “And Drake is hardly ever around, I doubt he’ll be there in sickness and in health.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Kel. “You really do need that drink. Here.” She grabbed two champagne glasses from a passing waiter. “Drink that.”

Trix drained the glass in one. “A complete waste of time.”

“You don’t really believe that,” said Kel. The room was filling up as guests filtered in from the ceremony.

“Why not?” asked Trix. It would be time to dance soon, the last of her obligations. She wondered if she could sneak upstairs and change out of the bridesmaid dress after the dance was over.

“Because if you do, you’re the most cold-hearted woman on the planet, and I know that you’re not,” Kel said. She stepped in closer. “Okay, maybe they won’t be perfect, but they’ll try. And isn’t that all that we can do, try? Maybe Emily won’t honor him, but she’ll smile and laugh with his mother even though she hates her, because she loves him. Maybe Drake won’t always be there, but he’ll call at four in the morning from Indonesia even though he’s jet lagged and his eyes won’t stay open just to hear her voice.”

Trix opened her mouth.

“No, you listen,” said Kel. “Maybe this will all break down to nothing. But even if it does, they still have moments of completion. All this ceremony, dressing up, dancing, maybe you’re right, maybe that’s all a waste of time. But the sentiment behind it is not. The fact that we can love and be loved in return is the most beautiful part of being human, maybe the only beautiful part.”

Trix opened her mouth again, but Kel wasn’t done.

“And for you to stand here and deny all of that, deride it, just because you’re afraid that you’ll never have what your sister has, is petty, small, and beneath you, Beatrice. You pretend to be ignorant, you pretend that all of this is ridiculous, that you don’t understand it. But that’s all it is, a pretense. Deep in your heart I know that you get it, I know that you understand.”

“How,” Trix said, mouth dry. “How do you know?”

Kel smiled. “Because you have a heart, Trix. Because you’re human. Because as much as you might pretend not to see the most touching, beautiful, serene thing you’ve ever seen, you know that love exists. Just like you know that elephants exist, even if you’ve never seen one. You just know.”

“I have seen one,” said Trix.

Kel sighed. “Not the point,” she said as she took Trix’s hand.

“But—”

But it was too late. The band was already playing, Emily and Drake were already spinning around the dance floor, and Kel was already pulling her out, putting a firm hand on her waist, counting her in and then swirling her around.

And for once, Trix let someone else take control.

She let Kel steer her around the floor, let Kel pull her in close enough so that she could feel her heart beat. She let Kel hold her and she wondered, just for a moment, just how well Kel knew her, how well anyone could know anyone else.

She didn’t know if she wanted Kel to be wrong or right. But she did know that she’d read that whole damn book last night and for once, yes, she’d understood, she’d connected. Whether she wanted to or not.

Then Kel was holding her tighter, was swirling her faster, and Trix’s pulse was beating in time to the music. She could smell vanilla and fresh air, she could almost taste the salt from Kel’s skin. She could see the dancing green of her eyes, could see the small scar in her right eyebrow.

Then she was drawing closer, her eyes were closing, she didn’t know whose heartbeat she was feeling, didn’t know if it even mattered as Kel’s soft lips drew closer and closer to her own.

The room was a shining mix of colors, twirling around them, the music all that mattered. Trix leaned in, took a breath, half-closed her eyes and gave in to what her body was demanding that she do.

Until the music stopped.

And in an instant they were standing still, lips scant millimeters apart, breathing in each other’s breath, hands aching to caress, to stroke, hearts stopped in an exquisite moment of wanting.

Kel was the first to move, an infinitesimal drawing closer.

But it was Trix that pulled away. Pulled away so fast that she almost tripped over the train of her dress.

“I need to go and change,” she said.

Kel lifted an eyebrow and stared at her for a long second, then shrugged. “Okay.”

Trix nodded and stepped back, feeling the pull get weaker the further away she got.

“Trix?”

“Yes?” She didn’t even look at her, couldn’t look at her.

“I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

A sentence that had multiple meanings, none of which Trix wanted to consider.

She practically ran out of the room, crashing out into a well-lit corridor before she could catch her breath and think about what she was doing, what she’d almost done.

Why had she walked away?

It had felt right, even she could say that.

It had felt right, she had wanted it, she had almost fallen for one of the oldest tropes in the book. A forced dance that suddenly crashed two characters into the same place. A dance that could only end in a kiss.

And she’d subverted it, turned the trope on its head and walked away.

Because, she realized now, as well as Kel might know her, as astute as her observations might be, Trix understood Kel all too well in return.

She would not and could not be another notch on Kel’s bed post. She was not something to be achieved, she was not a challenge to be conquered or an obstacle to be overcome.

And in Kel’s mind, that was all Trix thought she could be.

Women fell at Kel’s feet, she’d heard that from enough people and seen enough of Kel to know that was true.

Women fell at Kel's feet, but not this one. Not now, not ever.

Chapter Twenty One

“And what was all of that?”

Kel raised an eyebrow. “All of what?”

Joey pulled up a bar stool next to her. “All of that staring into each other’s eyes and sighing.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Kel.

Joey raised a hand to the bartender. “Two whiskeys please.”

“I don’t drink whiskey.”

“Who said one of them was for you?” asked Joey. “Having a good time?”

“I suppose. I don’t mind a dance, but I could do without Emily glaring at me across the room ten times an hour,” said Kel.

“Tell me about it,” said Joey.

Two glasses were put down on the bar, and despite what she’d said, Joey pushed one toward Kel. “Why is she glaring at you?” Kel asked.

“I suspect someone has told her that her father invited me,” said Joey regretfully. “Not at all what was meant to happen. Actually, not at all how it was all meant. Dan really did invite me as a friend, nothing more.”

“So it’s Dan now, is it?” Kel teased.

“Yeah,” said Joey. “But I’m not sure it will be for too much longer.”

“Your date go that badly?”

Joey sighed and picked up her glass. “Look, it was a nice thought. I get where Sam was coming from. But there’s no way that Dan is ready for anything serious yet. Maybe not ever. He adored his wife and he’s lost without her. He’s certainly ready for a little company, maybe ready even to put himself out there again. But nothing long-term.”

“Which is all you’re interested in?” asked Kel.

Joey nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I think so. I mean, I’m not sure I really got that until this week, but yes, I think if I’m going to risk my heart I want it to be for something important, not just for a fling.”

“Uh-huh. So you’re all about falling in love.”

“Would that be so bad? And I’m not thinking of it like that. You know what I want?” Joey asked. “I want to wake up next to someone. I want someone who I can turn to and complain about the news when it’s on TV. I want to know that after a terrible day I can have someone smile at me and tell me that it’s all going to be okay, and, more importantly—”

“You’ll believe them,” Kel finished.

Joey sipped again and looked at her thoughtfully. “Not sure I expected you to really understand that.”

“Not sure I expected to either,” admitted Kel.

“Anyway, the point is that I’m definitely here as Dan’s friend and nothing more. And if I weren’t, well, I wouldn’t be here. I’m not unfeeling enough to turn up at a poor girl’s wedding after she’s lost her mother as her father’s date. I’m not sure Emily’s got that message though.” Joey looked into her glass. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“So why did you?”

“Wanted my dose of romance, I suppose,” said Joey. “I wanted to see that sometimes things get a happy ending.”

Kel snorted. “You could watch the Hallmark channel for that.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do that next time,” Joey said, then she grinned. “On the other hand, if I’d stayed home, I’d have missed whatever it was that just went down on that dance floor.”

“You do know that nothing happened, right?”

“Bullshit,” said Joey. “And if you believe that you’re either an idiot or completely blind. You do realize that you’re falling

in love with her, don't you?"

Kel drank some more of the whiskey so fast that it burned down her throat and made her cough. "As if," she said when she could speak again.

"Yes, as if," said Joey. "You're not as smart as I thought you were. Are you seriously going to deny that you came within a millisecond of kissing that woman just a few minutes ago? The whole room was crackling with the energy between you, for God's sake the poor bride and groom barely got a look in."

"Great, yet another reason for Emily to hate me."

"Don't deflect."

"Fine," said Kel. "Yes, we almost kissed. But so what? She's my sugar mommy, remember? And so I want to sleep with her, so what? There's nothing wrong with appreciating the female form, and there's certainly nothing wrong with sex."

"So that's all this is? Sex? Lust?"

Kel sniffed and shrugged.

"So last night, at the first opportunity you had, you jumped her, seduced her, shared her bed?" prodded Joey.

"No," Kel said. "But—"

"But nothing," said Joey. "I get that you're the great playboy, that you're untameable and all the rest, that no woman can tie you down because all you want is sex."

"Which is not a bad thing," Kel put in again.

"It's not," agreed Joey. "But it's also not all you deserve and I wish you could see that, Kel. I wish you could see what's right in front of your damn eyes."

"Which you can see but everyone else is blind to," Kel said, getting irritated.

"Okay, here's the deal. I'm going to ask you some questions. If you can answer them correctly then I swear to God I won't ever talk to you about relationships again and I'll never even mention Trix's name again, deal?"

Kel relaxed a little and rolled her eyes. “Fine. Deal.”

“What’s Trix’s real name?”

“Psh, easy. Beatrice,” said Kel. “She was Bea until she went to boarding school, then she became Trix.”

“How does she take her coffee?”

“With milk and one sugar as long as it’s brown sugar, otherwise without.”

“What’s her job?”

“Uh, she’s a literary agent and she’s just been moved to some kind of romance novel department.” Kel swigged some more of her drink. Whiskey was growing on her. “These are all easy. If you’re looking to catch me out then you won’t.”

“Fine, there’s just one more question,” said Joey. “Last one.”

“Shoot.”

Joey took a drink before she spoke. “A couple of weeks ago you met a young blonde undergrad who was taking summer school. The two of you spent a night together.”

“Not a question.”

“Here’s the question,” Joey said. “What was her name?”

Kel opened her mouth, then closed it, thinking furiously. A, it began with an A she was almost sure of it. Amy? Anna? No. Dammit. She breathed out through her nose. “Anya,” she said finally, with a certainty that she didn’t feel.

“Rebecca,” said Joey. “Her name was Rebecca, and I know because she’s called the shop three times now asking for you.”

“Crap.”

“No,” said Joey. “Not crap. Because what you’re not getting is that you like Trix. Really like her. You like her enough to not only remember her name, but also all the little things about her. You like her enough that even when you had the chance you didn’t turn your smooth moves on her, you respected her wishes. You like her enough that holding her on that dance

floor tonight felt like holding all the possibilities in the world in your arms.”

Kel breathed in, her chest tight.

“Tell me I’m wrong, Kel and I won’t say another word about it.”

“I... I,” stuttered Kel.

It was like the day dawning on her, like the sun rising up over the horizon and lighting all the shadows and shapes that had been so unfamiliar at night, everything suddenly became clear and understandable and right.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” Joey said again.

“I... I can’t,” Kel said, looking at her boss in disbelief. “Oh, Joe, what am I supposed to do?”

Joey laughed. “Well, for a start you can stop looking like someone just ran over your puppy. This isn’t a bad thing, Kel. It’s a lovely, beautiful, wondrous thing. It’s not a disaster.”

“She said no feelings, Joe. She was very clear on that. She said definitely no falling in love, definitely no emotions.”

It was Joey’s turn to shrug. “She didn’t look to me like someone who didn’t have feelings out there tonight. Did she seem like she wasn’t interested?”

Kel took a second to think, took a second for the panic that had been rising in her to subside, for her to breathe fully again. She started to smile, started to feel light and... and happy. “No,” she said. “No, she didn’t.”

“Okay, then this isn’t rocket science, Kel. You know what you have to do.”

“I do?” Kel asked.

This seemed so new and dangerous. She felt amazing and yet terrified at the same time. She wanted to hold the realization in her heart, treasure it and keep it safe, but at the same time she wanted to yell to the whole room about how she felt.

This had never happened to her before, she was sure of it. So what was so different now? What had changed about her so much that she wanted this?

“Yes,” Joey said. “Yes, you do. There’s only one thing you can do.”

“Which is?” Kel asked.

It didn’t matter, did it, she thought. Whatever had changed, whatever the risk was, it didn’t matter. What mattered was she wanted more, she wanted Trix, she wanted to snuggle up beside her in bed every night, even if they didn’t have sex. Well, maybe after sex, but still, she wanted to sleep beside her, be safe and warm, and...

“You have to tell her, you idiot,” Joey said. “A relationship is at least a two person affair, you can’t do it all alone.”

“Oh,” Kel said. And the idea grew on her. “Oh,” she said again, sliding down off her bar stool. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

“Go on then,” Joey said. “Just—”

But the rest of her sentence was lost as Kel pushed her way through the wedding guests desperately searching for a glimpse of Trix’s dark head.

Chapter Twenty Two

Her legs were shaking. Her mouth was dry. By any sensible standard of measurement, Kel was terrified. Petrified even. Except her legs just kept on walking. Trix was around here somewhere and when she found her...

What?

When she found her, what exactly did she plan to do? To spill out half-formed thoughts and garbage until she finally made herself understood? To persuade Trix to understand something that she didn't really understand herself?

Maybe.

All she knew was she needed to find Trix. Needed to find her and inform her of this grand change in the state of affairs. Because now she knew, she couldn't keep the news to herself.

She was really falling for someone.

Huh.

She wanted to feel stifled, but she couldn't. She wanted to be angry at herself for falling into the trap, for becoming normal. But she couldn't. Every time she tried to think in the old ways, every time she remembered that she wasn't the relationship type, she remembered how well she'd slept next to Trix.

That was the key to it all. Being with someone that instinctively you trusted so hard that you could lower every defense you had to close your eyes and sleep like a child.

Okay, okay, there were problems here. Like Trix might not like her back, except she really thought she did. Like Trix might not want a relationship, probably didn't, but Kel was sure about her powers of persuasion.

All it would take was the truth, she was sure of it.

She spun around, growling in frustration, unable to see Trix anywhere.

And there were advantages. Like Trix being English and Kel being accepted into art college in London. That couldn't be a coincidence, could it? That was fate underlining the fact that they should really be together. Kel felt like an idiot for not seeing it before.

An idiot for not realizing that every time she saw Trix's blue eyes her heart about stopped. For not realizing that every time she accidentally brushed against Trix's arm electricity arced through the air. That every time she smelled Trix's perfume her pulse sky-rocketed.

“You.”

She was about to head to the elevator bank when Emily appeared, still dressed in full white. Kel groaned.

“Congratulations?” she hazarded.

“I knew something was going on,” Emily spat.

“Do you not have more important things to worry about?” asked Kel. “I mean, you did just get married. Surely there are things you need to do, like... Um... Consuming that bond. Or wait, do I mean consummating?”

“You really think that Trix is going to be your sugar mommy?” Emily said. “Someone like you?”

Kel bit her lip. This was going to take a lot of explaining. An explanation she really couldn't give until she'd cleared things with Trix, until she knew what they really were, until she'd persuaded Trix to see her the same way Kel saw Trix.

Eugh.

“It's none of your business,” Kel said, drawing herself up. “And I'd be grateful if you'd keep anything you overheard by rudely eavesdropping to yourself.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “You're stupider than I thought you were, Kel. Ever heard of Google?”

Now Kel frowned, a seed of doubt planted in her stomach. “What?”

“Google, it’s a place where you search for things. A place where, if you’ve got any smarts at all, you look up people you might be thinking about dating, or in your case, screwing over and scamming?”

“I know what Google is,” said Kel patiently. “I’m failing to see the connection though.”

Emily’s grin stretched wider across her face. “You mean you really don’t know?”

“Don’t know what?” asked Kel, getting irritated.

“You’re messing with the wrong family,” said Emily.

“Why do you care? You hate Trix anyway. So why don’t you just butt out and let everyone else live their own lives? You’ve got a wedding happening, a honeymoon to go on. Come on, Emily.” Kel was aware that she was starting to sound like she was begging. Maybe she was.

“I might not like her. I might not like the fact that she turns up now, on the one day that’s supposed to really matter to me. That she worms her way into being a bridesmaid, that she’s taking up the seat that should have been my mother’s,” Emily said.

“I’m not sure she wanted to be a bridesmaid.”

But Emily wasn’t done. “Nevertheless, I won’t let a nobody like you scam a relative. And that’s what you are, Kel, a nobody. Especially when compared to someone like Trix. You’ve been an idiot and you’ve bitten off far more than you can chew.”

“I’m not scamming her, for God’s sake,” Kel barked.

“That’s not what I heard when you were on the phone this morning.”

“You shouldn’t have been eavesdropping.” Kel took a breath. “And it was a misunderstanding, is all.”

“Whatever. You’re right about one thing, I do have far more important things to worry about right now. I’m also not going to make a scene having you thrown out.” Emily leaned in until Kel could smell champagne on her breath. “But you’d better

start being smarter, Kel Bradshaw. Because you're going to be in way more trouble than you think."

"I've about had it with your mysteries," said Kel, finally starting to lose her temper. "You're a spoiled little brat who's selfish and cares only about her own needs."

"Maybe," shrugged Emily. "But if you don't look after yourself, who else is going to do it? Mind you, I've got a husband now, someone to depend on. Which is more than can be said for you."

"Enough," Kel said. "I'm not listening to any more."

"That's your choice," said Emily. "But I really do suggest that you get onto Google and find out what you've got yourself into." She smiled a plastic smile and waltzed away back to the party.

Kel's fingers itched to take her phone out of her pocket, but she didn't want to give Emily the satisfaction. She waited until the bride was fully out of sight before she gave in to the temptation.

Quickly, she typed Beatrice Martin into the search bar. Nothing. She tried Trix Martin. Still nothing. She huffed out a sigh of irritation.

Maybe Emily didn't know what she was talking about.

But something spurred her on. Emily had seemed so sure, so gloating. Okay, searching for Trix herself didn't find anything. She'd definitely heard Trix's last name at reception. Just once. She bit her tongue, trying and failing to remember. Right, what about her mother? Except Kel had no way of knowing what her name was.

She sucked at her teeth.

Okay, but she did know the professor's name. He was doctor Martin and Joey had referred to him as Dan just this morning. She typed in 'Dan Martin English wife' out of desperation.

The very first result made her legs start to shake again so badly that she slid down the wall and sat on the floor. She read

a second article, just to make sure. And then, because she was a glutton for punishment, she hit the link that took her to the Wikipedia page.

Lady Beatrice Cecilia Helena Winchester.

Which was a mouthful and Kel wondered how long it had taken Trix to learn how to write her name at school.

And the pieces suddenly started to come together.

Doctor Dan Martin was Daniel Martin and Trix's mother was Lady Victoria Winchester. She'd never put two and two together because... because what were the chances? She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall.

It had been the wedding of the century.

A fairy tale ceremony with horse-drawn carriages and royalty in attendance, with a blushing young beautiful bride and the handsome American commoner she'd given her heart to. A woman willing to give up her titles, her family, her wealth all to marry the one man she knew she couldn't be without. Until a last minute change of heart by a doting father had ensured that Lady Victoria would have all she was born to and the hand of the man she loved. Kel hadn't even been born, but she knew the story, everyone knew the story.

The perfect love story, the happy ending to end all happy endings. Right up until a few months later when the scandal of their divorce hit the headlines.

And Trix was their daughter.

It explained a lot, Kel guessed. How could anyone who came out of that still believe in fairy tales? After all, Trix had played a part in one, albeit a small part. It was no wonder that all the romance had been drained out of her, she had to have learned far too early that love wasn't always enough.

Her heart hurt for Trix.

But at the same time, she couldn't help but remember Emily's words. How could someone like Trix fall for someone like her?

She gave a bitter laugh. She'd done a far better job choosing a sugar mommy than she could ever have hoped for. Yet now, now that there was more than just money on the table, now she could see that whatever Joey might think about what she deserved or didn't deserve, Trix was way out of her league.

There was no way in hell that an English lady, an aristocrat no less, would want anything to do with a broke barista, a failed artist, a scruffy girl that cut her own hair and grew up in a trailer park.

Her heart was breaking for Trix. But now it was breaking all over again for herself.

This simply wasn't going to work.

Chapter Twenty Three

The kiss had been close enough to feel it. But it didn't matter in the end, did it? Trix stomped back down to the party, feeling far more comfortable in the shorter dress she'd bought for the occasion.

It didn't matter because Kel was a playboy. Girl. Whatever. And Trix was no notch on the bedpost. And it didn't matter because she didn't play these games anyway. Okay, sure, so her heart beat hard and her pulse raced and her mouth went dry. But she would deny to her dying day that she had feelings for Kel.

Trix didn't do feelings. End of story.

Feelings, love, romance, whatever, it all ended in misery. She just had to keep reminding herself of that so she could remember to guard her heart ever more closely.

"There she is, my beautiful daughter."

Trix groaned inwardly. She didn't know her father well, but even she could tell that he was already half-drunk. "Hi, dad."

"Come on, come on, sit and have a drink with your old man." He beckoned her over to a table and signaled for more champagne. Trix sat down since she didn't have much choice.

"Are you sure you should be having another glass?" she asked carefully.

"I paid for the damn stuff," grumbled her father. Then he sighed. "Hey, could you bring a glass of water with that too?" he shouted after the waiter. "Maybe you're right," he said, turning back to Trix. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Is anyone?" said Trix.

The party was in full swing, tiny lights twinkling over the dance floor, people talking and moving and the air filled with sound. Trix really didn't know what she was doing there. She'd book a ticket tonight, she decided. When the party was

over she'd get online and find a flight leaving in the next couple of days.

"I've really fucked this up, haven't I?"

"Huh?" Her attention snapped back to her father.

"I've fucked this up. I see that now," he said, face red with drink. "I'm sorry, Trix."

"You've nothing to be sorry for," she said automatically without meaning it at all.

"You and Emily hate each other."

She blew out a breath. "I wouldn't say that."

"You're different, two sides of the same coin probably, it was somewhat inevitable. And I made things infinitely worse by not only inviting you here to what was supposed to be her big day, but making you a bridesmaid just to top things off."

Trix bit back a smile. He seemed truly desolate. Yes, he'd cocked things up. But at least he'd tried.

"I just wanted you to feel like you were part of the family, that's all. I figured if you were here for this, you'd feel like you were a part of us, that you were welcome, that we'd let you into a special time in our lives."

"I can understand that," Trix said. "But maybe it wasn't the best idea."

Her father snorted. "Damn right it wasn't. But then I've always been king of the bad ideas, haven't I?"

It was all Trix could do not to snap back at him. The intimation was obvious. Marrying her mother was a bad idea. All the hue and cry and scandal was a bad idea. And by extension, Trix herself was a bad idea.

"You're feeling sorry for yourself," she said sourly. "It's unattractive."

"I shouldn't have let myself be talked into this."

She was about to say something else and stopped before anything came out as his words set in. "What? Talked into

what?"

"Inviting you," he said. "I told your mother it was a bad idea. But she talked me into it and I could see her point, but then I was right all along. Your mother always had the ability to do that to me. She could make me swear that black was white."

"Wait, mummy talked you into this?"

He nodded.

Trix frowned in thought. "But... why?"

He shrugged. "She said that we ruined you, that we've made you think that love, marriage, the whole nine yards, is all crap. She said we should have handled the divorce differently and that now you're doomed to be forever alone or some kind of crap like that."

"Mummy sent me here because she thinks that... what? That I need—"

"—to get over whatever's bugging you and realize that mistakes happen to everyone and just because one ending isn't happy doesn't mean the next one won't be. Or something like that. I wasn't paying that much attention. Your mother's got a hypnotic voice, you know that?"

"I can't say that I'd noticed," Trix said.

She got up from the table. The waiter had brought water and she could see an elderly man making his way over, anxious to talk to her father, and she was done with this conversation. Done with parents in general this evening.

Her mother had said nothing to her, this had all been done behind her back, like she was a child, and it annoyed her. Annoyed her enough that she went straight to the bar.

"I'll take a whiskey please, no ice."

"A girl after my own heart."

Trix only now noticed the shaven-headed woman from the cake shop sitting at the bar. "Oh, hello," she said politely.

“I’m Joey,” the woman smiled back. “I’m Kel’s boss at the cake store. So, how did it go?”

“How did what go?”

Christ, she needed that drink, she was beginning to lose the thread of what was going on here.

“Wait, you talked to Kel already, right?”

“Haven’t seen her for ages,” Trix said distractedly as she reached for her drink.

Joey grimaced, which caught her eye.

“Why?” she asked suspiciously.

“No reason,” Joey said innocently. She cleared her throat. “Uh, she’s a decent woman, you know?”

“Kel?” Trix asked, taking a big gulp of liquor.

Joey nodded. “I know she comes off as a player, maybe she is, but it’s only because she thinks she doesn’t deserve anything more than that. She had a rough upbringing.”

“Didn’t we all?” said Trix, still thinking of her interfering parents.

“What? All that boarding school and pony riding depress you too much? Too many vacations to the Maldives and party dresses?”

Trix put her glass down. “Ah. I see you’ve realized who I am.”

“Anyone over the age of forty will know who you are. Though I’ll admit I didn’t get it until I learned your dad’s first name. But yes, I do know who you are. And I know that you and Kel might seem like chalk and cheese, you with your money and titles and her growing up in a trailer and all.”

“I would never hold something like that against anyone, ever,” Trix said.

“Glad to hear it,” grunted Joey. “Which brings me back to my point. Kel is the way she is because she doesn’t believe she

deserves anything more than that, which you and I can both agree is ridiculous, right?”

Just for a second, Trix thought about Kel. Thought about her in a way that didn't involve wanting or romance or anything else. Thought about the way she'd brought her coffee to the mall, the way she'd jumped with both feet into dealing with the wedding, with dancing in front of everyone. The way she'd been patient, kind, considerate. The way she'd curled up like a child and slept next to her in that big bed upstairs without ever putting a finger on her.

“Yes,” she said, slowly. “Yes, she does deserve more than that.”

“She needs the right person is all, someone who will offer her what she deserves. Someone who won't judge her, who won't hold what she came from against her. Someone that she feels safe enough with that she can let down this façade that she has and show some actual feelings.”

“Someone she feels safe enough to sleep with,” Trix said. “I mean, actually really sleep with.”

“Yeah,” Joey said. “Yeah, I guess something like that.”

Trix put down her glass.

She knew what she had to do.

It really was that simple.

“I've got a question,” she said to Joey.

“Mmm?”

“Does, um, does she like me?”

Joey spluttered with laughter. “Oh dear,” she said. “That's really not for me to say, is it? But I think you and she might need to have a little talk. Maybe it's time to find her and have this out with her? The two of you are wandering around in the dark just at the moment.”

Which was rather too romance novel like for Trix's tastes. She nodded, drained her glass, then pushed away from the bar.

“I suppose I should go and do something about that then, shouldn’t I?”

“Just like I said,” Joey grinned. “A girl after my own heart. Go chase her down.”

Trix rolled her eyes. This wasn’t going to be a declaration of love. There would be no flowers, no flash mob, no chasing her through the airport, and certainly no holding an old-fashioned boom box over her head or meeting on top of the Empire State building.

But she was going to find Kel and talk to her. That she could definitely do.

Chapter Twenty Four

Kel was still sitting on the floor. Her butt was getting numb and she was trying to decide if she should go and get a drink or if she should just call it a night and crawl back upstairs to bed.

The bed was kind of a problem. One bed. Though technically two, she supposed. And now that Emily was so sure she knew what was going on they could separate the beds again. But the thought of that was somehow worse than the thought of going upstairs to just one bed.

A bed she'd have to share with Trix.

Sorry.

Lady Beatrice.

She squeezed the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. This had all really just spiraled out of control, hadn't it?

Of all the people in the world she could have picked to be her potential sugar mommy, she had to go and pick one that actually really could be a sugar mommy. Not that that was what she was looking for.

No, she'd need to extricate herself from this situation. She'd tell Trix she was busy now with work and she couldn't consult. And art college... Well, maybe she'd better leave art college to the likes of Lady Beatrice and her friends.

She'd get herself out of all this then go and get to work in the shop. She'd work hard, save up some money, maybe take some classes at the community college. And she'd stop Joey from poisoning people, that seemed like a worthwhile occupation.

"Is this seat taken?"

Kel heaved a sigh and opened her eyes, then blinked because she was pretty sure she wasn't seeing what she thought she was seeing.

“Customarily, you answer with either a yes or a no,” Trix said, hand on hip.

She was wearing a different dress. Shorter, and a dark sapphire blue that matched her eyes, a dress that clung tightly and left nothing to the imagination.

“Uh, no, I guess not,” Kel managed to croak.

“Good,” Trix said, delicately folding herself so that she could sit next to Kel, back against the wall.

“Is everything okay?” Kel asked.

“I don’t know,” said Trix. “Not a bloody clue, actually. Which is sort of why I’m here.”

“Oh.” Kel didn’t really know what to say to that.

“You know what I always find is missing in romance novels? At least the few that I’ve started and the one that I’ve read so far?”

“You’re an expert then,” Kel said dryly. “What’s missing?”

“Communication,” Trix said. “It seems to me like an awful lot of things could be solved by people simply sitting down and saying what’s on their minds. It would make things easier in a solid ninety percent of cases.”

“It’d make stories a lot less interesting though,” Kel pointed out. “Shorter too.”

“Better for the environment,” countered Trix. “We’d use less paper to print them.”

“I’m not entirely sure that your readers would be satisfied.”

“And they’re the ones paying,” Trix agreed. “Still though, it’s always seemed ridiculous to me that grown adults couldn’t just speak their minds, or hearts, or whatever. It’s sort of like going around starving to death because you don’t tell anyone that you’re hungry.”

“And are you?” asked Kel, starting to grin. “Hungry, that is?”

Trix sniffed. “Talking in code, that’s another thing I hate.”

“You’re the one that started all this.”

“Huh. You’re right. So maybe I should be the one to nip things in the bud.”

But she didn’t say anything. Kel looked over and Trix’s eyes were wide, her face pale and she was taking enough deep breaths that she was in serious danger of hyperventilating.

“Yeah, I think you might be on the verge of discovering why people don’t just spill out their hearts at the smallest opportunity,” Kel said. “It’s terrifying, isn’t it?”

Trix nodded mutely.

“Fine, I’ll start,” said Kel. “I know who you are, Lady Beatrice. Or do I call you ma’am? Or You Majesty?”

“My lady will do just fine, since we’ve met more than once,” Trix said. She sighed. “You know, I don’t generally go around telling people my title. It’s not that I don’t appreciate where I come from, it’s more that in daily life it tends to be more of a hindrance than a help.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Would you have jokingly asked me to this wedding if I’d been introduced to you as the Right Honorable Lady Beatrice?”

“Point taken.”

“Besides, it’s not a big deal. My mother has all the money, I’m firmly doing things by myself thank you very much.”

“Right,” said Kel. “Okay, I can respect that. You haven’t been acting like a lady, I suppose. So that’s my bit out of the way. I admitted that I know who you are and now it’s your turn.”

Trix raised an eyebrow. “That’s all you have to admit, is it?”

Kel felt herself go red. She mumbled something incoherent.

“No, no, it’s fine,” said Trix. “You’ve taken a step, it’s my turn to take a step.” She took one last deep breath. “I find that against my better judgment I am attracted to you and I am

concerned that given your reputation I will be a notch on your bedpost.”

Kel took a second to drink this in, the good and the bad. “You said no feelings,” she said.

“I can, on occasion, be wrong.”

“And if you don’t believe in romance and love and all the rest of that nonsense, as you put it,” continued Kel. “Then what’s wrong with being a notch on a bedpost?”

“I’d have heartily agreed with you a week ago,” Trix said. “And I don’t have a problem with being a notch on the bedpost in general. I have a problem with being a notch on *your* bedpost.”

“I see.”

Trix glared at her. “You’re really not going to make this easy on me, are you?”

“Make what easy on you?” asked Kel, starting to enjoy herself.

Trix stood up and brushed off her dress. “Fine, if you don’t want to hear this, then I won’t tell you.”

“No, wait,” said Kel, standing up too. “I do want to hear. I’m sorry. I just...” It was her turn for a deep breath. “I just... I feel just as terrified as you do.” She looked down at the ground. “I like you too, Trix. I do. But I’m afraid that someone like you won’t want to be with someone like me.”

“What do you mean someone like me?” demanded Trix.

“You know, a lady and all. Plus there was the fact that you specifically told me that there would be no feelings involved here and that there was definitely no falling in love or any other silly nonsense.”

“Right,” said Trix, scratching her nose. “I think we’ve covered the fact that I can be wrong, haven’t we?”

Kel nodded.

“Can we agree that you also might be wrong occasionally?”

Kel nodded again.

“Okay, so everything else aside, sweeping away anything either of us might have said at any point about love or romance or wanting or not wanting relationships, can we also agree that perhaps there are some feelings here?”

Kel nodded for a third time.

Trix stepped in a little. “And are these feelings that we might like to explore?”

Kel squeaked and Trix laughed. Their lips were getting dangerously close.

“That’s right, kiss the girl,” said a drunken voice.

Kel looked up to see a drunken man swaying as he waited for the elevator. “Why don’t you mind your own business?”

But Trix was already clamping a hand around her wrist, dragging her away.

“Where are we going?” Trix asked as she was pulled down the corridor.

“I haven’t got the faintest idea,” said Trix as she tried first one door then the next, finding both locked.

Finally, the fourth door opened and Trix pulled Kel inside, slamming the door behind them and leaving them both outlined in the small amount of light that snuck in from outside.

“Now, before we were rudely interrupted,” Trix said. “We were discussing whether or not these were feelings that we wanted to explore.”

She was close, so close that Kel thought she could hear her heart beating in her chest. “I may be interested,” she said, voice low and throaty.

“May?” asked Trix, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, there is one little problem,” Kel said, looking around into the shadows.

“What would that be?” Trix’s lips were getting ever closer.

Kel smirked. “We’re locked together in a broom closet with a ton of people milling around outside.”

“I’m not sure I see a problem with that,” Trix said, breath brushing against Kel’s skin.

“I don’t know,” Kel said, her own breath starting to come faster. “Are you sure that isn’t a little too trope-y for you? I mean, I wouldn’t want to stray into romance novel territory or anything.”

Trix growled and a shiver ran down Kel’s spine. “Do you have anything of actual import to say right now?”

Kel shook her head, lips just brushing against Trix’s.

“Are you sure?”

Kel nodded, lips brushing even more against Trix’s.

“Because we can absolutely continue this conversation if that’s what you’d like to do?”

Kel’s stomach was turning somersaults and for some reason her lungs had forgotten how to fill themselves with air. She squeaked again.

“Anything else?” Trix asked. Her eyes were sparkling in the darkness. One thumb came up to brush against Kel’s cheek. “Words, strange noises, anything at all?”

Kel shook her head.

And then she couldn’t have spoken even if she’d wanted to. Because Trix’s lips were crashing into her own and everything else in the world disappeared into that kiss.

Chapter Twenty Five

Trix's body strained. Kel was backed up against a shelf and Trix had put her hands on the shelf above Kel's head, fingers gripping tightly until she was white-knuckled. Her mouth crushed into Kel's, tasting sweet champagne and the earthiness of Kel herself.

But her hands, her hands needed to stay away. She wasn't sure if she could control herself if hands came into the equation. So she gripped hard, letting her mouth do the work, her body contorting to fit as closely to Kel's as it possibly could.

"We don't have to do this here," Kel said into her mouth.

Trix grunted in response, pressing herself even harder against Kel. Kel moved and a shot of electricity sprang through Trix as her breasts rubbed against Kel's chest.

"Or maybe we do?" said Kel, biting her lip.

Trix felt hands moving to her waist, felt the warmth of Kel pulling her in. Then those hands glided up, skimming her sides until delicate fingertips touched skin. Now she was biting her lip, anxious to stay quiet.

"Maybe we do have to stay here," said Kel, voice soft and hypnotic as her hands worked down the straps of Trix's dress. "My lady."

Oxygen flooded through her as she gasped, as Kel's deft fingers reached her nipple. She felt warmth and wetness and saw stars as her eyes pressed tight closed. Her fingers clutched even more tightly at the shelf above her.

"Do you like that?" asked Kel, innocently.

Which was exactly the moment that Trix's control broke completely.

Her hands came down, tangling in Kel's hair as she kissed her fully. She backed her even further into the shelving,

insinuating her thigh between Kel's legs as the other woman moaned into her mouth.

It was almost more than Trix could take. Her breath was rasping in her lungs, her body was taut with wanting release.

"Let me," Kel murmured, pulling up the hem of Trix's dress.

She hadn't intended for it to be like this at all. After all, she wasn't an innocent sixteen year old in the back of someone's car. But she ached so much for the touch that she let Kel lift her dress, let her maneuver them both into position so that while her leg was still between Kel's, Kel's thigh was also between her legs.

Kel reached for her waist again, pulling her in and Trix gasped as her center came into contact with Kel's leg. She pushed herself down, wanting more contact, her hips moving of their own accord.

She could feel it building up inside her already, could feel the pressure building and knew that the dam could break at any second. She clung to Kel, feeling the fragility of her, the muscles moving under her skin. She buried her face in Kel's neck and heard another of Kel's strange squeaks.

She grinned. "Like that, do you?" she said. She bit gently at the soft skin under Kel's chin and was rewarded with another yelp.

Then Kel was trying to push her back, was trying to pull her dress up, was panting and Trix re-found her control. Her pulse was throbbing between her legs, but she had this. In one, quick movement, she grasped both of Kel's hands, holding them just above her head.

Kel stilled and looked at her with wide eyes.

"Good girl," Trix said.

Kel melted, a moan coming from swollen lips.

Trix placed Kel's hands so that they were gripping the shelf that she herself had been holding not so long ago.

“Now, I trust you to keep your hands there. If you don’t...” Trix hesitated for just a moment, just long enough to see the darkness in Kel’s eyes. “There’ll be consequences,” she whispered.

Then, hands steady, she slowly unbuttoned Kel’s shirt, looking in her eyes the whole time, saying nothing, not needing to say a thing.

She parted her shirt, revealing a pale, soft torso, breasts high and tight, nipples hard and ready to be sucked. With one, lazy finger, she drew a pattern on Kel’s skin, skirting around her nipples, not giving her the satisfaction of being stimulated.

“Please,” Kel said softly.

Trix’s hands went to the button on Kel’s pants. “I can’t hear you.”

“Please,” Kel said as Trix flicked the button open.

“Please what?” asked Trix, raising an eyebrow and sliding Kel’s zipper down.

“Please... ma’am?” Kel asked, breath suddenly coming faster.

In answer, Trix let her hand slide down, gliding over cotton underwear until she was holding Kel between her legs, feeling the wetness of her soaking through the material.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her own breath coming faster, not at all sure now that she could do this any longer, that she could wait any longer.

“Uh-huh,” moaned Kel, eyes starting to close as Trix’s hand lightly squeezed her.

Trix’s heart was beating out of her chest, she’d never wanted someone as much in her life. She couldn’t have teased Kel longer if she tried, because she was so close to the edge herself.

Quickly, clumsily, she clawed at the edge of Kel’s underwear. Kel shifted her hips to make things easier. Then she was there, touching velvet wetness already, Kel pressing against her already.

“Please,” said Kel. “Please, please, please.”

Trix needed no prompting. Her breath came faster and faster as her fingers dipped into Kel’s wetness then came up to find the hard, swollen center of her. Kel’s head tipped back and she groaned. Trix almost came herself.

“Faster,” gasped Kel.

Trix obeyed, their roles reversed now, and Kel thrust against her hand, breath coming in sharp, short spurts until she gave a soft moan and buried her face in Trix’s chest, shivering and shaking as Trix held her close.

After a long moment of quiet, Kel gathered herself and looked up, eyes glinting in the near-darkness. “That was unexpected.”

“I thought you might need someone to show you who was boss,” Trix said, barely stopping her voice from trembling. “I’m not some little undergraduate that you pick up in a coffee shop.”

“I did pick you up in a coffee shop,” Kel said. “And maybe you were boss for a minute there. But it’s my turn now.”

Trix’s heart threatened to stop for a second.

“Unless you’ve changed your mind about sex in the janitor’s closet?” Kel asked, coming in closer.

She almost had, was almost going to beg to go upstairs, but Kel’s hands were clamping down on her hips, thumbs rubbing against the sharp points of her hip bones, and her insides appeared to be melting.

“Did you?” Kel asked. “Change your mind, that is?”

Trix swallowed, then shook her head.

“Good,” said Kel. “Because it’s time for me to show you who’s boss.”

She sank down to her knees so fast that Trix didn’t know what was happening. Soft hands were already pushing at her skirt, already skimming up her thighs.

“No,” she said. “You don’t have to—”

“I don’t have to do anything,” Kel said, looking up at her. “I want to do this. Unless...” Her thumbs stroked the sensitive skin inside Trix’s thighs. “Unless you don’t want me to?”

Trix hesitated, wanting this more than anything but afraid for some reason, hesitant about the people outside maybe, until Kel started to remove her hands and the absence of them was worse than anything Trix had ever felt before.

“I want this,” she said hoarsely.

And Kel didn’t wait for another second. She parted Trix’s legs and Trix leaned back against the wall as her underwear was pushed to one side and Kel’s breath landed hot and fast on her bare skin.

Kel’s warmth pressed closer to her until a slow, soft tongue began lapping around her wetness and Trix held her breath.

Her pulse was pounding, Kel was moving faster, her breath forced out of her lungs with a moan and Trix pushed her hips up to meet Kel’s mouth. Then she had no choice but to push her hand into her mouth, to bite down on it to muffle the sounds of her moans as her dam finally exploded and she shook again and again, certain that her legs would fail her.

COOL GREY DAWN light was creeping in at the window when they were both exhausted. Kel’s head was on Trix’s chest, and Trix was playing absently with her hair.

“Regrets?” Kel asked.

“None,” said Trix, a hundred percent sure she was right. She shifted a little, muscles aching and body tired. “None except I have to be honest.” She felt slightly guilty about not mentioning this before. “I was considering leaving.”

Kel pushed herself up and propped her head on one hand. “Leaving? So soon? I thought you were here for the summer?”

“I was,” Trix said carefully. “But with the wedding already over and the whole family reunion thing not exactly going so well, I thought I might as well head back to Blighty, get back to work.”

“Castles to rule over and horse riding lessons to take?” Kel said with a grin.

“There are no castles, there’s a crumbling stately home, and I certainly don’t need more riding lessons,” Trix said, laughing.

“Yeah, I think I might be over-influenced by PBS,” admitted Kel.

Trix narrowed her eyes. “You’re taking this awfully well,” she said. “I mean, the news that I might be leaving. Were you hoping to bed me and then be done with me?”

“Were you hoping that this would be a relationship, little miss not-romantic?” Kel asked.

Trix took a breath, then shrugged. “Not sure?” she said. “I mean, I really don’t know. I know that I like you.”

“That you want to see me again?”

Trix nodded.

“I... um, I guess I feel the same,” said Kel. She looked down at the rumpled sheet. “I’d like more than one night with you, Trix.”

Trix hadn’t known that she’d been so afraid of anything else happening. Hearing Kel’s words settled the worries inside that she hadn’t known she’d had. “Excellent then. More than one night,” she said.

“So it’s just as well that I’m moving to England, I guess,” said Kel.

The first ray of sunshine broke through the curtains and Trix’s heart finally did stop for a moment. “You’re what?” she choked out after longer than was decently polite.

“Moving to England,” Kel said with a grin. “I got accepted into art college in London.”

Trix opened her mouth then had to close it again, not sure what she wanted to say. Kel moving to England was unexpected, not at all what she’d anticipated happening. It seemed so... so serious. But Kel was smiling at her and the

room was warm and cozy and suddenly, inexplicably, the idea seemed less bad than it had initially.

“To London, huh?” Trix said.

“Yep.” Kel was watching her now, sensing maybe that something was on the edge, something was being decided.

Trix smiled. “Then I’ll look forward to showing you around,” she said.

Chapter Twenty Six

Kel practically bounced through the shop door, grin so wide it almost reached her ears.

“Let me guess,” Joey said. “You and Trix finally got on the same page.”

“Same page, same sentence, same word,” beamed Kel.

“It’s about damn time,” Joey grumbled. “Does this mean that I won’t have a parade of heart-broken women coming in and out of the store now?”

Kel threw her mail down on the counter and shrugged out of her jacket. “I can’t say for definite, but all signs point to no, no more parades of women. For the time being.”

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Joey said, shaking her head. “Kelly Bradshaw all ready to settle down.”

“Hey, I didn’t say we’re getting married or anything, just...”

“Just you can’t imagine being with anyone else?” supplied Joey.

“Yeah,” said Kel, scratching her head. “Yeah, that about sums it up.” She smelled the air, there was the distinct scent of baking. In most cake shops that would be a good thing. In this cake shop though, it just worried her. “What’s in the oven?”

“Chocolate cake,” Joey said, idly flicking through the stack of circulars and fast food menus Kel had left on the counter. “And I followed your recipe, the one in the book, and I followed it to a tee. No substitutions, no guessing, no nothing. I swear.”

“Huh,” said Kel, then decided she’d let the proof be in the eating. “Enjoy the wedding then?”

“Yeah, it was interesting,” said Joey. “It’s always fun to watch someone’s old uncles dance, and an open bar, who can complain?”

“Sticking to friends with the old professor?”

“Not so much of the old, and yes, I think so. I put him to bed though.”

“Joey!”

“He was drunk and needed a hand,” Joey said, picking up a letter in a big white envelope. “That’s what friends do, help each other out. I figured his youngest daughter was busy enough being a bride, and his eldest, well, who knows where she’d got to...” She raised an eyebrow at Kel.

“Um, probably had an early night?” Kel said, blushing.

“Right, whatever you say. Have you even looked at this mail?”

Kel shook her head. “I was running late, I grabbed it and ran. Why?”

“This looks important.” Joey handed over the white envelope.

Kel ripped it open, pulled out the letter and read it, then groaned.

“What?”

“I didn’t get the scholarship,” she said. It had been a long shot, but she’d needed it.

“You got the grant,” said Joey. “As for the rest, well, this whole sugar mommy thing worked out a hell of a lot better than I ever expected it to.”

“Bad taste, Joey.”

Joey shrugged. “You were the one that wanted money. And now, if you want to be able to follow your lady love, you’re going to have to get more money, one way or another.”

Kel swallowed. She hadn’t been serious. She’d never been serious. Not really. She could never have a sugar mommy.

“Look, there’s no harm in asking,” said Joey. “I’d lend you cash myself, but I’m on a budget. There’s nothing wrong with asking for help, Kel, not if you need it.”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“So are a lot of other things. And if you’re going to be in a relationship you’re going to see and hear and experience plenty of embarrassment. It comes with the territory.” Joey switched the coffee machine on. “I’m not saying you go begging, and I’m definitely not saying that you get paid for sex or whatever else this plan originally revolved around. I’m just saying...”

“That I should hit up my rich girlfriend for money,” finished Kel.

“No,” said Joey. “That you two should have an honest conversation about finances and the future. Normally that happens slightly later in a relationship, but the two of you are on somewhat of a deadline, aren’t you?”

Kel blew out a breath. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Then you don’t have much of a choice. You don’t have to ask for anything. But you do need to be honest about your circumstances. Maybe Trix will want to help you. Or maybe she’ll have other ideas, like where you could get a job in London, or maybe she knows of other funding, she does technically work in the arts.”

Kel was softening to the idea. She got two cups. “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I need to tell her what’s going on. Especially since I already told her that I was coming to London.”

“You told the least romantic person in the world that you’re following her half-way across the world?” Joey laughed. “Brave.”

“She didn’t panic,” said Kel.

Joey started to pour coffee. “You know, you did just call her your girlfriend.”

“Did not.”

“Did so. Just a second ago. You said that I was telling you to hit up your rich girlfriend for money. Girlfriend. Your word, not mine.”

“Huh,” Kel said. It felt so right she hadn’t even noticed. Her grin came back. “Yeah, I did, didn’t I? Girlfriend.” It tasted nice in her mouth. Nice and... smoky.

Smoky?

“Fuck,” Joey said, putting the coffee down and running into the back. “My chocolate cake!”

It was weird waking up without Kel by her side. Weirder still because she’d technically only woken up twice with Kel by her side, but still. Trix felt... lonely. Colder somehow.

Was this what it was like to depend on someone? Was this what her mother had been so sure she needed to experience?

A day ago she’d been ready to chastise her mother for manipulating her into this trip, for going behind her back and not talking to her first. Except maybe she’d been right. Maybe she’d needed this to finally see what she’d been missing by being so closed minded.

Not that seeing her father had been any help. No, running into Kel had been fate, nothing more, nothing less. Fate. Now wasn’t that a romance novel word?

Trix shook her head and headed for the shower. If she was quick, she could get in some manuscript reading before going to meet Kel at the shop. Her heart throbbed in her chest at the thought of Kel’s half-smile and dimples.

“YOU’RE STILL HERE,” Emily said, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table and sinking into it.

“Yes, still here, still your half sister, still crashing your wedding,” Trix said through a mouthful of cereal.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Emily.

“Then what did you mean?” Trix asked suspiciously.

“That I wanted to talk to you and was hoping to catch you, that’s all.” She looped her blonde hair back behind her ears.

“Wait, why are you here?” Trix said. “Aren’t you going somewhere appropriately fancy for your honeymoon?”

“Fiji,” Emily said. “But we canceled the flights. Drake needs to head back to Brussels for work, so I’m going with him.”

“And you’re okay with that?” asked Trix. She hadn’t put Emily down as the self-sacrificing type.

“Yes,” said Emily. “And don’t look so surprised. I’m fully aware that I haven’t made the best impression on you, and that’s part of the reason that I’m here. But the work Drake does is important, really important, and I understand that sometimes it has to come first. Anything I can do to help that happen I will do. He doesn’t just dream of making the world a better place, he actually does make the world a better place, and who am I to prevent that happening?”

“Wow,” said Trix, determined not to be impressed with Emily’s sudden change of heart.

Emily sighed. “I’ve been a bitch. Okay? Happy now?”

“Happy?” Trix said. “Not particularly.”

Emily sighed again. “Okay, okay. Look, the wedding was stressful, I was planning it alone, I was missing my mom, and then it seemed, I don’t know, it seemed like dad wanted you here as kind of a replacement for mom. An older woman around to be part of the wedding. It hurt me. None of which is an excuse. I was horrible to you when you didn’t deserve it.”

“So why apologize now?” Trix asked.

“Because...” Emily rubbed at her eyes. “Because I was helping Drake pack his files and I realized... I realized that the kids he represents, they’d do anything to have a sister, a half-sister, there with them. I realized that, that not many of us are lucky enough to have families and here I am trying to drive away the one connection that I have other than my father.”

“Mmm,” said Trix, still determined to reserve judgment.

“Look, I get it, I’ve been a spoiled brat and me apologizing isn’t going to solve all problems. But I did want to say it. I’m

going to act different from now on.”

“Which is easy to say when you’re leaving.”

“I’ll be in Brussels, it’s not that far from London. I’ve heard there’s a fast train,” Emily said.

Trix laughed, unable to help herself. “Yes, yes there is. If we ever fancied a family reunion.”

“I think I might like that.” Emily smiled. “I’m sorry, Trix. I’m sorry and I’d really like to have a chance to get to know you better and to have a sister.”

“Fine, on the condition that you stop behaving like a spoiled brat.”

“I deserved that,” Emily said. “And deal.”

“Great, well, now that we’ve healed family rifts, I’ve got a lunch date I need to get ready for,” Trix said, standing up.

“Wait, there’s one more thing. I can’t not say this, Trix. And I get that it’s going to sound like I’m being spoiled and a bitch again, I can only assure you that I’m not. I can’t with good conscience not tell you though.”

“Tell me what?” Trix said, heart suddenly beating faster.

“It’s about Kel.”

“No, don’t want to hear it. Her past is her past, I’m not interested in anything other than the present.”

“It’s not that,” Emily said. “It’s something that I overheard from Kel herself. I think you need to hear it. Please, sit down, Trix.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Kel's bike ticked as she pedaled up the long driveway. She felt faintly nauseous, which wasn't at all the way she was supposed to feel before what only really amounted to a second date.

But the morning was roiling in her stomach and she really did feel like she was going to throw up.

The plan had been to meet at the park, an attempt to relive what had turned out not to be their first date. But Kel hadn't been able to concentrate and in the end Joey had sent her off early with promises not to bake any cakes while she was gone.

So here she was, propping up her bike against a tree at the end of the drive and looking at the long, low house, its porch shady and tempting in the heat of the day.

She just needed to be honest, that was all. So why did she feel so bad about it?

Trix wasn't her sugar mommy. She wasn't going to ask for a handout.

So why was she still sure she was going to throw up?

She needed the money if she was going to go to London. And yet, and yet...

She tried to take a step toward the house but simply couldn't. Which was when she realized that she couldn't do this at all. She couldn't ask Trix for money. She couldn't treat her this way. She couldn't put the responsibility of her ability to move to London onto Trix's shoulders. It wasn't fair.

She'd just have to think of something else.

She'd have to.

She was reaching for her bike when the door opened.

Trix was outlined by the light that streamed through the house and for a second, Kel's heart hurt just to look at her.

Trix. Her Trix. It gave her a glow of pride that she still wasn't sure she deserved.

Screw going back to the shop to wait. She was here now, she might not be asking for a hand-out, but she could still see Trix, smell her, kiss her. Her pulse began pounding as she waved and then jogged over to the porch.

"Couldn't wait to see you," she said, then grimaced. "That sounded corny as all get out. Sorry. But, um, still kind of true."

Trix's face didn't break into a smile.

"Too corny?" Kel said. "Do I need to back off a little?"

"You tell me," said Trix, voice harder than Kel had ever heard it.

"Sorry," said Kel. "I don't understand."

"Tell me," said Trix. "When exactly were you going to ask for money? Today? Or were you going to leave it for a couple of dates first? Or perhaps you were planning on coming to England and then asking me, when I'd take pity on a foreigner abroad?"

Kel's mouth opened but the words wouldn't come. What exactly was she supposed to say? She was confused, she had no idea how Trix had found out about the money, nor what she'd heard. She had no idea how to tell her that whilst there might have been kidding around, she really didn't intend to take advantage of her.

"Cat got your tongue?" Trix said. "Or are you actually embarrassed? Because that I could understand."

"I, uh, I..." stuttered Kel.

"Did you think I wouldn't find out? Did you think that Emily wouldn't tell me about your phone call? Or did you think I wouldn't believe her?"

"Well..." started Kel. In all the excitement she'd forgotten what Emily had overheard.

"Maybe I shouldn't, I don't know, you tell me, Kel. Should I believe what Emily says, or is she just trying to create

trouble? Did that phone call actually happen?"

"Yes," Kel said immediately. The thought of lying had never even crossed her mind.

Trix closed her eyes for a second and Kel could feel how much she hurt. "I'm not sure we have anything left to say to each other."

She was turning to go back inside when Kel finally came to her senses. "Stop. Stop, wait."

"Why should I?" Trix said, face furious.

"Because it doesn't end like this," Kel said. "Because we're not having some stupid romance novel misunderstanding. That's not how this works, it's not how we work. You have to at least give me the opportunity to explain myself."

Trix hesitated and Kel knew she'd got her, knew she was right.

"Give me five minutes," Kel said. "Please. Just sit right here on the porch with me and give me five minutes and then I'll walk away forever if you want me to."

Slowly, carefully, Trix turned around. She watched Kel for what felt like an hour and then began to move in the direction of the porch chairs. "Five minutes."

Kel sat down and took a second to gather her thoughts. "Okay," she said. "The phone call happened. I was talking to my mother. I shouldn't have said what I said, but you didn't hear the other side of the conversation. My mother thinks that college isn't for people like us." She felt blood rushing to her cheeks. "It's not for people that grow up in trailer parks."

"Which is obviously untrue," said Trix, voice thawing slightly.

"She wanted to know where I was getting money. I told her you were paying me, which is true, you were."

"But you were going to ask for more money, weren't you?" said Trix, no longer looking quite as angry.

Kel sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Yes. I was. That’s why I was coming here. I didn’t get the scholarship I needed, so I was coming here to talk to you about money. But not to get a hand-out.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know where else to turn,” Kel said. “I thought maybe you’d know of a job I could get, or perhaps a different scholarship or grant, maybe through your contacts you could help me. In the worst case, maybe you’d consider a loan. But I absolutely a hundred percent was not just coming here to ask you to give me money.”

“Okay,” Trix said. “Okay, I believe you. I have no reason not to.”

“I’m sorry,” said Kel, looking down at the wooden planks on the floor. “I’m sorry that you got mixed up in this, I’m sorry you had to hear what Emily said, what I said, I’m sorry that...” Her breath hitched. “I’m sorry that I’m not a better person.”

“This isn’t to do with you being a better person, Kel. You could use better judgment, certainly, but you are a good person, a deserving person.”

Which made Kel feel even less deserving than before. Because how could Trix just get over something like that? How could Trix tell her she was a good person? The only explanation had to be that Trix was an even better person. A person that Kel didn’t have a hope of deserving.

“But all of this does kind of prove my point,” Trix said.

Kel knew what was happening. She could smell it in the air, could feel it on her skin. She just didn’t want to believe it.

“It doesn’t,” she said, whispering.

“But it does, Kel, can’t you see? The romance stuff, the weddings, the sex in closets, the feel good things, they’re great, they’re wonderful. Even I can see that. I don’t want you to think I regret what we did, I certainly don’t.”

“There’s a but coming.”

“But real life intercedes. It has to. Because romance isn’t real, it’s a fairy tale. It’s beautiful to believe in but it’s unrealistic. I had an amazing time with you, Kel.”

Kel blinked away hot, furious tears and Trix leaned in, taking her hands until Kel’s heart slowed a little.

“I had an amazing time with you, Kel,” Trix said again softly. “But it can’t last. How can it? I’ll be forever on guard in case you are a gold-digger, in case you just want me for my money.”

“But—”

Trix just went right on talking. “And you’ll never ask for help that you need because you’ll be afraid that I’ll think you’re a gold-digger. We’re already starting off with something coming between us. That’s no way to start anything.”

“But we’re being honest about it,” Kel began.

Trix shook her head. “No, Kel. Honesty isn’t just a magic cure-all. In the same way that sorry doesn’t heal all wounds. I know you’re a good person, I know you’re going to do amazing things, but I also know that whatever this is that we have isn’t going to work out.”

“You’re quitting at the first obstacle,” Kel said.

“Yes,” said Trix. “Precisely because it’s the first obstacle. The first of many, many more.” She let go of Kel’s hands and sat back. “You know, maybe the problem was never that I didn’t believe in romance, maybe it was that I didn’t believe it could last. Every romance has to be marred by reality, and that’s so heart-breaking that I don’t know how people experience it day after day and still drag themselves out of bed.”

“Because it’s worth it in the end,” said Kel. “Because what’s life if you can’t share it with someone?”

“Life is life, shared or not,” Trix said. “It’s better to have loved and lost than never loved at all? What clap-trap. It’s better not to get hurt in the first place.”

Kel nodded, breathed slowly, swallowed. “So this is it, isn’t it?”

“I think so, Kel. Don’t you?”

It was, by far, the nicest, politest, way she’d ever been refused. If this was breaking up then Kel wasn’t entirely sure what all the fuss was about. Except that she felt like her heart was being ripped out of her chest.

“I, uh, I do really like you, for the record.”

Trix smiled. “I like you too,” she said. “And also just for the record, you’re a great person. A deserving person. You will get what’s yours, you should get what’s yours. I’ll be happy to look around and see if there are any scholarships or other grants to help you study.”

Kel wanted to groan. Why did she have to be so nice? Was there no shred of anger there, no jealousy, no negativity? Just one tiny thing to show her that Trix wasn’t as perfect as she was? One little flaw that would tell her that perhaps she could, one day, be deserving of someone like this?

But even she could see that Trix was way out of her league.

“Thank you.” Kel stood up. “I guess I should get out of your hair.”

Trix stayed seated. “Goodbye, Kel. It’s been a pleasure.”

It took every atom of strength that Kel had to turn around and walk away. But she did it. She walked all the way to her bike, mounted it, began pedaling.

And with every stroke of the pedal down the driveway she could feel Trix’s eyes on her. And with every stroke of the pedal down the driveway she could hear her heart crying out. But she left anyway. Because in the end, Trix deserved better.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Trix folded the shirt carefully, then tutted, unfolded it and tried again. Packing was taking a whole lot longer than it had taken in London. Maybe because she'd had less on her mind then.

It wasn't as though this was the first time she'd ended something that could have turned into something else. She took a deep breath. It wasn't as though this was the first time she'd ended something that could have been a *relationship*.

No, she had plenty of practice at that. She was right, she knew that, she had no doubt at all that everything she'd told Kel was the truth. Ugly reality always intervened and, in fact, it had already come knocking on the door, so why prolong things?

Had she really thought things would be different this time? Had she really gone against everything she believed in, every experience she'd ever had, just for things to fall apart again?

The shirt still wasn't folded properly. She gritted her teeth and tried again.

She had. That was the problem. For a second back there at the wedding, she'd allowed herself to think that maybe Kel was different, maybe she was different, maybe things would be different.

Of course, that's not how the world worked. Hoofbeats mean horses, not zebras, and Kel was just another in a long line of horses.

She was just straightening out the seam on the shirt's sleeve when her phone rang.

"Trix," she answered without looking.

"You're coming home?"

She sat down on the side of the bed and left the shirt alone. "How did you hear so soon?"

“Because you used your frequent flyer card to book the tickets and it’s my email on the account,” Chastity said.

“It is?”

“So you don’t lose out on points when you travel for work,” said Chastity. “Which isn’t really the important part of this conversation, Trix. You’re coming home already? What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” said Trix, burying away the big, black thing that had literally just happened deep down inside her. “The wedding’s over and I thought I’d get a head start on the new job, that’s all. There’s nothing for me to do here.”

“You might be surprised,” Chastity said, darkly. “How was the wedding? Romantic and touching? Did you cry?”

“The wedding was just like any other wedding,” Trix said. “And obviously I didn’t cry. Besides, I assumed weddings were generally considered to be happy occasions.”

“You can cry from happiness. Also, you can’t come home right now.”

Trix frowned. “And why’s that? Nuclear attack at Piccadilly? Heathrow surrounded by dragons?”

“Sure you don’t want a job in fantasy and science fiction rather than romance?” said Chastity. “And no to both, it’s for your own good. You need to stay over there.”

Trix pinched the bridge of her nose between her finger and thumb. “Chastity, I am, for my sins, your boss. If there’s something going on, I’d really rather that you told me. I’m not in the mood for mysteries and I’ve got a splitting headache.”

Chastity huffed and Trix could hear her eyes roll. “Fine. Anne-Marie might have heard that you’re coming back early.”

“So?”

“So, she said that you must have had plenty of time on your holidays and she’s expecting three vetted manuscripts from you the morning you get back to work.”

Trix’s mouth went dry. “Three?”

“How many have you approved?”

Trix thought back to the one and only book she’d finished. “One.”

“It’s a start,” said Chastity. “But I wouldn’t advise getting back here until you’ve got two more. Delay your flight for a few days until you can get some reading done. Hell, move on to the Caribbean or something, sit by the pool and read if you don’t want to stay there. But don’t come home until you’ve got something to show Anne-Marie. It’s your first task in your new job, you can’t screw it up.”

“Yeah,” said Trix, rubbing at her eyes again. “Yeah, right. Thanks for the heads up. I’ll move my flight and get you details of the new one as soon as I can.”

“No need, I get your emails, remember?” Chastity chirped. “I’ll let you get on with things then. Good luck and happy reading.”

Trix groaned as she hung up the phone. The thought of trawling through more manuscripts did nothing to improve her mood.

THREE SHARP TAPS sounded at the bedroom door. Trix put her tablet down with a sigh. She was only two thirds of the way through a manuscript and she desperately wanted to finish. But by the look of the light, it was later in the day than she’d really thought.

“Come in.”

Her father popped his head around the door. “Sure? I’m not interrupting anything?”

“Come in,” said Trix. He was interrupting, but it seemed impolite to say so.

“I thought maybe we could go out to dinner,” he said, coming to perch on the edge of the bed. “Just you and me, since Emily’s busy getting ready to leave and all.”

“Is she really just settling for canceling that expensive honeymoon?” asked Trix. “It seems out of character.”

Her father smiled a little. “You didn’t exactly meet Em at her best, did you?” he said. “You know, she once got a special award at school because she made a club for all the first time boarders. She went to boarding school, you know, just like you. And you know how lonely it can get at first.”

Trix remembered vividly how alone and terrified she’d been on her first night away from home.

“So Em made a club for all of them to share their fears and support each other. No one asked her to do it, she didn’t even ask the school. She just did it of her own accord.”

“That’s... sweet, I suppose.”

“That’s Em. She is sweet. Usually.” He sighed a sigh that seemed to come from his boots. “She’s been going through a bad time. With Drake gone so much, planning the wedding, her mom not being here, and then...”

“Me showing up.”

He nodded. “She’s a good girl, Trix, you just met her at a bad time.”

Trix shifted on the bed. “She did apologize to me.”

“Good, I’m glad. And in answer to your question, yes, she’s fine with canceling the honeymoon. In fact, it was her suggestion and I wouldn’t expect less of her.”

“You must be proud of her then,” said Trix, complimenting without really thinking about it.

“I’m proud of you both. Which is why I’m here asking if you want to come to dinner with me.”

She looked over at her tablet then shook her head. She needed to work and she needed to get out of here. “I can’t, I’m sorry.”

“Going out with that Kel again?” he asked, standing up. “Not that I mind, she’s a nice girl.”

“Woman, she’s a woman,” Trix said. “And no, for your information.” She felt the blackness bubbling up inside her again. “We, uh, it’s not like there was... Nothing.”

“The two of you had an argument? Did you break up?”

“There was nothing to break up,” said Trix. There wasn’t. One night did not make a relationship.

“Are you sure? The two of you looked close. I was starting to hope...”

“That I was turning into an old romantic, like you?” asked Trix sharply. “No, dad, I’m not quite as gullible as all that. Or as greedy. Or whatever it was that drove you to—” She caught herself and shut her mouth. She was in his house, after all.

“Gullible? Greedy? Is that what you think of me?” her father asked, looking hurt.

“I don’t think anything of you,” said Trix. “I barely know you. I do know that coming over here was a mistake and I’m trying to leave as soon as I can. If you could give me a little time to finish these manuscripts then I’ll get out of here and I won’t be bothering you again.”

“You’re not a bother, Trix.” He smiled a little. “Somewhat of a mystery, but not a bother.”

“Fine, whatever.”

“No, not whatever. You have feelings that are preying on you, Trix. It’s important that you voice them. If I’m hearing you properly, then you feel that I am in some way the antithesis of what you want to be, that I am romantic and by extension you wish to be non-romantic in order not to repeat things that you see as my mistakes?”

“Don’t therapize me,” she spat. “I’m not one of your American ‘spill my heart to the barista’ patients.”

The word barista made her think of Kel and it hurt rather more than she’d expected.

“Of course, of course,” her father said. He turned to leave, pausing at the door. “For what it’s worth, I think you and Kelly Bradshaw are a good match.”

“There’s no good match. I’m not interested. I’m not falling into these stupid romantic traps, I’m not interested in getting involved with anyone. And that includes you.” She stopped

abruptly, aware of what she'd just said. There was silence for a long minute, her words echoing somewhere inside her father's head.

“Very well,” he said finally. “I'll leave you to do what you need to do.”

He closed the door quietly behind him and Trix found that her eyes were prickling with tears. She sniffed, blinked furiously, but nothing would stop them. In the end, she gave in, turning into her pillow and crying for the first time in far longer than she could remember.

But when she was done, she still picked up her tablet and continued reading. And she read to the very end of the book.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Kel wiped down the counter. Joey was off for the afternoon, so the population of Mount Cline was safe for the time being. The cloth was heavy in her hand, and the silence in the empty shop was heavier.

She still wasn't sure exactly what had happened. It had been so sudden. She'd had that glimpse of hope and then... and then it was just gone. Trix was wrong about reality interceding, wrong about how she thought things should go. But regardless, she was so obviously more than Kel deserved that letting her go and not fighting was the decent thing to do.

Her phone rang in the back. Since there was no one else around, she went back and picked it up, answering it as she returned to the shop counter.

"You called."

"Mom?" Kel sighed and leaned against the cooler. "I called like three hours ago, where were you?"

"My shows were on."

"Which meant you couldn't answer the phone?"

"My shows were on," said her mother, stubbornly. "Anyway, what did you want? I thought you were done with sad old women living in trailer parks, I thought you were on your way up in the world."

Which made what she wanted to ask even more difficult. Trust her mother to be able to do that. "I, uh, I wanted to check in with you?" she tried, something her mother said when she wanted money.

Her mother recognized the signal immediately and snorted. "So you're all out of cash, is that it? What happened to the rich girl you were screwing?"

"I wasn't..." Kel swallowed. "We've broken up. And I know I shouldn't be asking, but I have to, ma. Is there any

money? A rich uncle? A secret trust fund? A mortgage on the trailer?"

Another snort was her answer. "You know as well as I do that there's nothing other than what we scrape together to keep food on the table." There was a gasp of silence. "You coming to your senses yet? Realizing that this art college thing isn't for the likes of us?"

And something inside Kel broke. "No, ma. No, I'm not. I'm struggling to find a way to keep a dream alive, if that's alright with you? And maybe college isn't for the likes of you, but that doesn't mean it's not for me."

"Why not? Because I'm an old woman in a trailer park?"

"No, ma, because you're happy being an old woman in a trailer park."

The silence was longer this time. "You think this is what I wanted?" her mother said, finally. "That I wanted to bring up a kid alone in a trailer barely big enough to fit a microwave?"

Kel took a breath. "No, ma. No, I'm sure that wasn't your plan. I'm sure you had your own hopes and dreams. But you gave up on them."

"I had you."

"You gave up, ma. You stopped fighting. And yes, I do think you're happy, or as happy as you get. You watch your shows, you gossip with the neighbors, there's food on the table now and less of a struggle than before. Are you telling me that life is so bad?"

"I'm telling you that you should be careful what you wish for."

"The problem, ma, is that you never thought you deserved any more. I don't know, maybe dad knocked it out of you, maybe your parents did, maybe you just decided to settle. But I see that you don't think you deserve more."

"But you think you do?"

Kel thought back to the thrill she'd felt when she'd been accepted to art school. She thought back to the way she felt

when a pencil or paintbrush was in her hand. She thought back to every second and third job she'd had, every time she'd eaten Ramen for dinner, every time she'd had not even that.

“Yes,” she said, slowly. “I think I deserve more. If I’m willing to fight for it, if I’m willing to do the work, yes, I think I deserve it.”

Her mother sniffed. “Well, don’t be expecting hand outs from me, you won’t be getting one. There’s no cash in the kitty and I’m damned if I know where you’re going to find the money. You’ll just have to get yourself another sugar mommy, won’t you?”

There was a cracking sound then a hum, then nothing. Her mother had hung up.

“Not bad,” said a voice.

Kel turned around and Joey was standing in the doorway. “Did you just listen in on my conversation?” Jesus, she really needed to start being more careful where she made phone calls. Between Emily and now Joey privacy was in short supply.

“Only the end part,” said Joey evenly. “I just came in to pick up my car keys, I left them out back. I just happened to overhear a little, that’s all. And well done. It took balls to say that, but it took wisdom to realize it.”

“Not that it’s going to make any difference. There’s no money, I can’t find a way to get over there, everything is falling apart.”

She felt the sadness deep in her chest. For a moment she could see clearly what Trix had been talking about. Oh, not necessarily about romance, but the underlying idea she had. It was all about hope. Hope was a dangerous thing. It was tempting and beautiful, but it was sharp and shattered when it was broken.

“Sometimes, you just have to trust in fate,” Joey said.

“Really?” asked Kel, slightly annoyed. “And what do you suggest I do then? Just buy a ticket, hop on a plane and hope that everything works out alright in the end?”

Joey shrugged. “Do you have a better idea?”

Kel took a breath to answer but no answer came to her. She scowled instead.

“Look, I know things didn’t work out with Trix. But maybe you should give things another go? Go and see her. Maybe she’s in as much pain as you are,” said Joey, stepping forward and laying a hand on Kel’s arm.

Kel snatched her arm away. “No. She was right. And even if I did go to see her, it wouldn’t solve my financial problems.”

“I didn’t say it would,” said Joey gently.

“You haven’t said anything, actually,” said Kel, anger burning up inside her now, hot and bubbly. “You suggest that I irresponsibly fly off across the world without a plan, you suggest that I just turn up at Trix’s and... and what? You’re full of the most useless advice I’ve ever heard. If you’re going to say something, Joe, could you at least try to make it useful?”

Joey’s face creased, but she stepped back and Kel could see that she was hurt. “You’re right, I’m not much help.”

“Just... just let me work through this. Let me try and figure out some answers,” said Kel.

“Right, yes, of course, this is none of my business.” Joey was backing away. “I’ll leave you to close up.”

Kel closed her eyes and didn’t say a word to stop her as Joey left. Maybe she should have tried. Joey was only trying to stay positive, only trying to help. The problem was that it was so hard to believe in anything just at the moment.

Or maybe the problem was that it had been so much easier to believe things with Trix around. Having to explain things to her, having to break down movies and tropes and books, it made things easier to understand.

Kel growled to herself.

Pissing off her boss wasn’t exactly a great plan.

The shop bell rang, Kel painted on a smile as a young, blonde woman came up to the front.

“Just a latte to go. Oh, and maybe a chocolate chip cookie,” the blonde smiled.

Kel started the coffee machine. The blonde smiled at her and Kel’s heartbeat didn’t change an iota. Great. Now her libido was screwed as well. Just what she needed.

She forced herself to dazzle with her famous half-smile. Dimples flashing, she asked: “Here for summer school?”

“Here for a friend’s wedding actually,” said the blonde. “But it was this weekend and I’ll be heading back home tomorrow.”

“And where’s home?” Kel said, pouring milk into the foaming jar.

“Down south.”

Kel cocked an eyebrow. “A woman of mystery, I like it.”

“Sometimes it’s better to remain strangers,” said the woman, but she was smiling back now and Kel could feel the little hairs on the back of her neck rising. “Don’t you think?”

“Sometimes,” said Kel, making the word throaty and deep.

“But I do still have one night in town, if you wanted to get to know each other a little better?” The blonde was leaning in, one elbow on the counter, her green eyes dark and sparkling.

And Kel felt cold.

She poured the coffee, slid the cup across the counter. “Sorry,” she said. “I’ve got plans.”

Plans that involved sitting around her postage stamp of an apartment and figuring out where she was supposed to find hundreds of dollars.

The blonde straightened up. “Sure, no problem. I hope I didn’t...”

“No worries,” Kel said, ringing up the order. “Another time, another place, it would totally have worked. Just tonight...” She checked the total. “That’ll be seven twenty.”

The blonde looked at her long and hard, then nodded and slid a ten across the counter. “Keep the change,” she said, as she took her coffee and cookie and walked away.

Kel watched her go.

She’d do anything to turn back time. Anything to stop herself making that stupid call to her mom, to stop Emily overhearing her, to stop Trix’s fading belief, to stop everything and try again.

But there was nothing she could do.

And now she couldn’t even soothe herself with a beautiful woman for the night.

With a sigh, she started to shut down the coffee machine. It was time to close up before she damaged anyone else’s feelings.

Chapter Thirty

There wasn't even a knock at the door. One minute Trix was lying alone finishing up a manuscript, the next Emily was barging into the spare room.

"Don't you knock?"

"It's my house," Emily said.

"Not anymore. I'm pretty sure it's dad's now."

"Is this sisterly banter? Because I have to say, I'm not loving it," Emily said, plonking herself down on the end of the bed. "Come on then."

"Come on then what?" asked Trix.

"Start getting ready."

"For... what?"

"For a night out. I believe you call it 'going out on the lash'. I looked it up online."

"Only if you're about nineteen and think that drinking fifteen pints makes you look like a real man," said Trix, picking up her tablet again. "And I have no plans to go anywhere."

"Look," said Emily. "Dad called me, he's worried about you."

"What is it with people worrying about me?" Trix asked. "I'm a grown adult, I'm more than capable of taking care of myself. And it's slightly ironic that dad's choosing now to start worrying about me."

"He's trying his best," Emily said. "As am I. He's worried about you because he thinks he's made your life worse by inviting you here and that he's screwed you up for good by divorcing your mom and moving away."

"Which he might have done," said Trix, sulkily.

"I thought you were a grown adult capable of taking care of yourself?" said Emily. "In which case, you don't get to blame

mommy and daddy for things any more.”

“Fine, I won’t. But I do get to make my own decisions, one of which is that I’m not intending to go out drinking tonight.”

Emily leaned back on her elbows watching Trix. “It’s my second to last night in town and I’m offering to take you out,” she said. “I’ve made time. Come on.”

“Not my problem,” Trix said, switching her tablet screen back on.

Emily shrugged. “Your call. But it’s a little over-dramatic, isn’t it? This whole dark night of the soul thing.”

“Dark night of the soul?” Trix asked. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s a romance novel thing. The hero and heroine break up around two thirds of the way through the book and then one or both of them suffers the dark night of the soul. They wander around depressed and irritable until one or both of them comes to the realization that they never should have broken up in the first place. Cue the big reconciliation and happy ever after ending.”

“Yeah, that’s not what’s happening here,” Trix said.

“You sure?” asked Emily. “Because that’s a lot what it looks like from where I’m sitting.”

THE BAR WAS neon lit and just as stereotypically American as it had been the last time Trix set foot in it. Though that time she’d been meeting Kel. And Kel had proven she could dance, she remembered with a warm twinge in her stomach, she’d pulled her in close and...

And nothing. If she didn’t think about things they’d hurt less. That was simple logic.

“What’ll it be?” Emily asked.

Trix thought fast. Definitely not beer, not after last time. “Rum and coke,” she said. “But not in a glass that’s filled to the brim with ice, please.”

“Cuba Libre, easy on the ice, got it,” Emily said.

She went off to get drinks and Trix slid into a booth. One drink. Two tops. Just to prove that she wasn't sitting at home having some kind of break-up induced depressive episode. In the end, it had seemed easier just to leave with Emily than to argue with her. Something that Trix suspected was often the case with her half sister.

"Here we go," said Emily, bringing the drinks over. "Here's to family and friends and new relationships."

Trix lowered her glass.

"Oops," Emily said. "I meant familial relationship rather than romantic ones. Better?"

Trix nodded and clinked glasses before taking a sip of a drink that was far stronger than she'd expected.

"So, I'm going to go ahead and guess that I might have been half wrong," said Emily. "Which is apropos for a half sister.

"In what way?"

"Well, I thought you were just fake dating Kel to irritate me, but apparently Kel was fake dating but you were actually feeling the real deal."

"Oh no," said Trix. "I absolutely was not."

"So it was so easy to ditch her when you found out she was using you as a sugar mommy?"

"That's not what was happening," Trix said, appalled at how bad that sounded.

"Wait, are we talking about the same person, because..."

"Because you eavesdropped and overheard half a conversation," said Trix. "But she wasn't necessarily using me for money, though she does need money."

"Which is why you broke up with her."

"No! Of course not, I'd never break up with someone because they weren't rich."

"So why did you then? I mean, if all this was a misunderstanding and you weren't just dating her to get at me,

why break up?”

Trix sighed. “Maybe I was sort of playing along with her joke because I saw how irritated it made you.” She took a sip of her drink. “Sorry.”

“I probably deserved it,” Emily said. “But that doesn’t explain why you’re walking around like the world’s about to end and you’ve just bought a year long Costco membership.”

“I am not. Not that I know what Costco is, or why I’d want to be a member.”

“Fine. But you are lying around being grumpy and wanting to leave early and upsetting dad.”

“No...” Except maybe she was. It was kind of hard to deny the truth.

“Did you actually like her?” Emily pressed.

And even harder to lie about the truth. “Yes,” Trix said quietly. “Yes, I did, but it doesn’t matter because it wouldn’t have worked. Besides I don’t believe in romance and happy endings and all that jazz.”

“I’m not sure it matters if you do or not,” Emily said. “Things can happen without you believing in them. There are plenty of idiots that don’t believe vaccines work, and yet there’s even more people that don’t have polio or measles or whatever else.”

“I thought that Kel was the last person you wanted me dating.”

“I’m not sure it’s my business, is it? I mean, if it was kind of a misunderstanding and you do really like her, then you should make each other happy. End of story.”

“Is that what happened with you and Drake?” Trix asked, trying to deflect.

“Drake and I were never meant to be, which is why we work together so well,” Emily said. “We’ve got our happy ending, but only because we both busted our asses to make it happen. You know the first time I met Drake it was for ten

minutes in a bar and then he flew off to Jakarta and I didn't see him again for six months."

"And that's your happy ending?"

"No, that's our happy beginning," said Emily. "We sacrificed and worked and strived to make this relationship work because it's something we both wanted."

"Even though you were on separate continents?"

Emily shrugged. "You can see only problems or you can see solutions. It worked for us because we wanted it to work. Because we could see what we wanted to build together."

Trix sighed. "Fine, I'm happy for you. But I really don't want to talk about this anymore. There's nothing between Kel and I, and I'm perfectly fine, there's nothing for you or dad to worry about."

"So there's nothing stopping you having another drink then?" Emily said, standing up. "No, no, sit down, I'm getting these as well."

SHE WASN'T DRUNK exactly when she got back. But she wasn't sober either. The world had rounded corners and was a little less in focus than usual.

She'd had enough to drink that she could hug Emily goodbye for the first time. But not so much that her first action when she got in wasn't to turn her tablet on. She waited for it to boot up and changed into pajamas.

She barely had ten pages left to read in the manuscript she'd started earlier, so she finished up quickly. Then she had to decide whether to earmark it for further investigation or not.

She lay her head back against the pillow.

She'd finished the book, which was a big step. Something that she supposed she had to credit Kel with for helping her to see that romance novels weren't quite as foolish as she'd thought.

It wasn't that she was being too judgmental, at least not as far as she could see. It was that... well, the story just seemed a little hard to believe, that was all.

She thought back to the first book she'd read, reading long into the night with Kel slumbering beside her. And then she wondered just why it was that it had been so much easier to believe that book.

For an instant she could almost hear Kel's light snores as she dismissed the book and opened up a new manuscript file.

Chapter Thirty One

The phone rang far earlier than Trix would have liked it to. Though she supposed that for Anne-Marie it was technically late rather than early.

“So, how is it going?” chirped Anne-Marie, seemingly unaffected by time.

“How’s what going?” asked Trix, mouth dry and eyes gritty.

“The reading, the manuscripts, of course.”

Trix struggled to sit up in bed. “Um,” she began.

“Of course, I’m sure that you will have read many of them by now.”

She looked down at her tablet and suddenly decided that maybe she had learned something from all this business with Kel. Honesty was by far the best policy. After all, once she’d realized that sleeping together was a mistake, she’d been honest and they’d had a mature, civilized discussion.

No dark nights of the soul.

No tears.

Just honesty.

“Actually,” she said, more confident now. “There’s something that I really need to talk to you about.”

“And what’s that, *chérie*?”

Deep breath. “I’ve tried, Anne-Marie. I’ve read, or partially read, dozens of manuscripts at this point. And the thing is…” Another deep breath. “The thing is that I think you may have made a mistake. I don’t think I’m the person for this job, I truly don’t.”

“You’re my best acquisitions editor,” Anne-Marie screeched. “And you think I made a mistake? You are exactly what the department needs to be more efficient and even more profitable. The year-end bonuses alone will make the job worth it. Besides, I don’t make mistakes.”

Trix swallowed. “What about if I went back to my old job?”

“The position is filled,” Anne-Marie said sharply. “If you find that this is a job that you cannot or will not do then I will ensure that your severance package is a generous one, that is the best that I can do for you.”

It hit Trix like a punch in the gut. “Oh,” was all she could manage.

Anne-Marie’s voice softened. “I do not see what is so difficult about this for you, *chérie*. I truly don’t. You are more than suited to the work.”

“It’s more the subject matter.”

“And who better to be an eagle-eyed judge of good writing than one who is not overly sentimental, one who is not so overcome by emotions that she isn’t capable of seeing out of place semi-colons and unresolved character arcs,” said Anne-Marie.

“I’m just...”

“You’re just not a romantic,” Anne-Marie said. “Which is sad, because romance is a beautiful thing.” She sighed down the phone, whether out of frustration or because she was thinking of romance, Trix wasn’t sure.

“Anne-Marie...”

“I will give you twenty four hours to decide,” Anne-Marie said, brusque now. “The position can’t remain open longer. The decision is really yours.”

Trix opened her mouth, but the line was already dead and Anne-Marie was gone.

She lowered her phone to the bed.

So much for honesty being the best policy.

THE SUN SHONE brighter than it had a right to and Trix swore as she spilled juice on the counter.

“I’ve got that,” said her father, swooping in with a cloth. “And you look like the living dead. Good night out with Em?”

Trix said nothing, just took her bowl of cereal and juice to the table.

“Pancakes?” said her father, lifting one out of a sizzling pan.

“Those abominations aren’t pancakes,” Trix said.

He looked at the spatula then grinned. “I forgot that the English only eat those weird thin things that leak lemon juice and sugar all over your fingers,” he said, plating pancakes for himself. He took a seat at the table. “So what’s wrong, kiddo?”

“Nothing,” Trix said, with no intention of telling him a thing about her personal life.

“There’s only you and me here,” he pointed out. “And I am a certified professional. If you’re going to spill your heart to someone, then it might as well be me.”

Trix rolled her eyes.

“Give it a shot.”

She sighed. “Fine.” In short sentences she told him about Anne-Marie’s ultimatum.

“And you don’t know which option is best for you?”

“I don’t want to lose my job. I love my job.”

“Then surely over-seeing the romance department isn’t that bad.”

“Bad?” spat Trix. “It’s unbelievable, unrealistic, and downright stupid.”

“So *Pride and Prejudice* is garbage?” he said. “*Jane Eyre*? *Wuthering Heights*? *A Room with a View*?”

“No, but—”

He put up his hand. “No. You have a terrible attitude, Trix. Has anyone ever told you that? Looking down on an entire genre of books because of what? Because the writers don’t use long enough words? Because they don’t discuss deep, philosophical ideas? Because instead they write about one of the most defining experiences a person can have?”

“You’d know,” she said, without thinking.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that. You’d know. You’re the one that falls in love again and again.”

Her father put his coffee cup down. “Twice. Twice. Because I was lucky. But I’d do it again and again if I could. Love, romance, is the most beautiful thing in the world and it breaks my heart that you don’t believe in it, Trix.”

“How could I?” she said, getting angry. “How could I after what happened between you and mum? The fairy tale wedding of the year, the great romance of the century, and then a few months later you’re gone and I grow up without a dad.”

“Ah.” He moved back a little from the table. “So now we get to the heart of it.” He nodded but didn’t look angry. “The reality of the situation is that sometimes things don’t work. Your mother and I were young, too young. But would you like to know something?”

Trix shrugged, not at all sure that she did.

“I’d do it again,” her father said. “I’d do it again tomorrow. Your mother was the love of my life.”

“But you left her.”

“Because we couldn’t live together, sometimes it happens.”

“And anyway, I thought Vanessa was the love of your life.”

“Then maybe I need two lives,” he said slowly. “Because in their time, both your mother and Vanessa completed me. In different ways, for sure, but the result was the same.” He leaned forward again. “Trix, you can’t possibly not believe in love.”

“Why not? You showed me not to.”

He shook his head sadly. “You’ve never felt it, not even the beginnings of it? The excitement in your stomach when you see someone for the first time?”

She thought instantly of Kel’s face, hair half hanging over her cheek, dimples flashing, then shrugged. “What does it matter? Reality gets in the way.”

Her father laughed. "It does," he said. "But that doesn't stop the process. You fall in love first and then, well, then reality either shows you why it won't work or why it will. It makes you stronger or breaks you down, and since when have you backed away from a fight, Trix? Sometimes it doesn't work. Most of the time it doesn't work. But all that pain of break ups, being alone, regrets, that's the price you pay for the time or two that it does work."

She closed her eyes, took deep breaths. "Why weren't you there, dad? Why didn't you come?" The questions came out without thought, spilled out really.

"You want to know why?" he said, softly.

She nodded.

"Because it hurt to look at you, Trix. Because when I looked at you I saw all the things I could have been if I'd been a different man. I was weak and foolish and your mother married me despite knowing that. Vanessa..." He smiled. "Vanessa married me despite that and then fought to make me better, stronger somehow. I can't explain it."

"Try."

He bit his lip. "She made me more than me. In a way that can only happen when you really love someone. When you're truly in love, then you work not just for yourself, but also for the other. It improves you in ways you didn't know you needed improving."

A long night, Kel slumbering by her side, flicking through the pages of a romance novel. Trix's heart got faster.

"I think," said her father. "That falling in love makes you believe. Believe in what, I'm not quite sure, but believe in something. It gives you reason, it gives you motivation, it gives you confidence. It changes you indefinably. And in the end it makes you better."

Trix felt sick. Felt sick because all of a sudden, she understood. She understood that Kel had made her believe. Not by doing anything, just by being there.

“Why did you decide to be honest with your boss?” asked her father.

Trix shook her head. “Because I was honest with Kel about not wanting her, about not wanting a relationship and I thought... I thought that had worked out well, thought that she’d taught me to be honest about things and I should use that lesson.”

She’d had no intention of opening her heart to her father, yet here she was.

“And you were wrong,” he mused. “That wasn’t the lesson you learned from Kel at all, was it?”

She shook her head.

He picked up his coffee. “Let me ask you something. Do you smile when you say her name?”

Trix frowned. “I guess.”

“Does she make you feel like you’ve been in her presence forever even though you just met her?”

Kel sleeping beside her, something that should have seemed so uncomfortable and yet hadn’t. She nodded.

“It’s possible to walk away from love. It’s possible to go your whole life without ever seeing her face again, without touching her, without being with her. But can you go your whole life without remembering that one moment?”

She knew instantly what moment that was. Looking into Kel’s deep green eyes on the dance floor, feeling her hand on her waist. “No,” she said. “No, I don’t think I can.”

Her father shuffled even further forward. “You know, for someone that doesn’t believe in love and romance, it sounds an awful lot like you might be falling in love.”

“Can I stop it?”

He shook his head. “Why would you want to? Why would you want to stop someone making you a better person? At some point you have to decide, Trix. You can live your life guarded and closed off, or you can open yourself up to what

may be a tremendous experience. If you're too afraid to jump out of the plane then you never get to experience the thrill of sky-diving."

"I can't do this. Because life gets in the way. Because dreaming is unrealistic. Because there are money problems and logistics and... and everything."

"And love conquers all," he said, grinning. "Trust me. Take care of the heart and the rest will take care of itself. Solving the rest together will make you better, stronger."

"It's too late anyway, she's gone, I've told her I'm not interested."

This time her father rolled his eyes. "You know, your mother used to send me videos of you. And when you were a very, very little girl you used to be in love with this stupid puppet show at the park."

"Punch and Judy," she said, smiling at the memory.

"You watched and shouted out and screamed and loved it. But the part that always got me was right at the end, the man would come out from behind the stage, puppets still on his hands. It was obvious to me that he was controlling them, but to you, those puppets were just as real as they'd been up on stage."

"What's your point?"

"Suspending your disbelief is easy when there's something you want to believe in. It happens without thought, without trying. And I think that you want to believe in this, Trix, but you're fighting yourself. Let go. Focus on the puppet show for a while, not the puppeteer."

She sat still as could be, heart throbbing hard in her chest.

"Jesus Christ, Trix. Go and get the girl, put us all out of our misery, put you out of your own misery. Don't deny yourself something just because you say you don't believe in it."

"But... how?"

He laughed. "You're the one with a stack of romance novels to read. Figure it out, kiddo!"

Chapter Thirty Two

Kel was staring at an empty sketchpad when the knock came. She opened the door to find Joey standing there, a folder of papers clutched to her chest.

Kel bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"No," said Joey. "You probably shouldn't have since I'm your boss and all. But since I'm also your friend, then yes, you should have, because you were right."

"I was?" Kel asked, surprised.

"Can I come in?"

Kel stood back and let Joey inside. Joey looked around then cleared some clothes off a chair and sat down. "Nice place."

"Tiny place, also crazy untidy."

"Getting some drawing done?" asked Joey, seeing the sketchpad on the desk, which was the only clear piece of furniture in the place.

Kel sighed and sat down on the desk chair. "You know, I only just realized, but I haven't picked up a pen, pencil or paintbrush since Trix Winchester came into town."

"Which was all of like a week and a half ago," said Joey. "So don't beat yourself up about it. You had other things to worry about. And one of those was your greatest friend being completely unrealistic and impractical."

Kel managed a smile. "I was harsh on you, Joe, I really do apologize."

"You were right," Joey said with a grin. "Sometimes being helpful means listening, and sometimes being helpful means advising. But either way, telling you to idiotically and irresponsibly just follow a dream is kind of unhelpful."

"It's not that. I appreciate the support."

Joey held up a hand. "I know you do. But I have decided to actually help. So here I am. I've got a plan, not a brilliant one,

not a complete one, but somewhat of a plan. Interested in hearing it?"

"I, uh, maybe?" hazarded Kel.

"Okay, let me rephrase that. I've got the beginnings of what could become a very workable plan."

"That sounds far better," grinned Kel. "Let's hear what you've got."

She was so glad that Joey wasn't mad at her and that they were actually talking that she'd probably agree to anything at this point. She looked over at her empty sketchpad and felt a buzz of guilt.

Whatever Joey might say it was kind of a big deal that she hadn't done any work in the last week and a half. Usually she couldn't wait to sketch something, usually she drew every day. But since Trix had started occupying her mind she hadn't done a thing.

Worse, now that Trix was only occupying her mind and not anything else, like her bed, she still couldn't force herself to put pencil to paper.

She turned her back on the desk and banished all thoughts of art from her mind. For about three seconds, until Joey started talking.

"Right, here's where I'm at," Joey said. "I called Piper."

Kel creased her forehead then remembered. "Best friend, lives in England, runs a website." Her eyes widened. "Wait, could I stay with her? Just for a few days?" Her heart thrummed a little with the faint hope that was still alive.

"Piper and her wife live in a tiny cottage in the middle of nowhere with a dog big enough to be certified as a horse," Joey said and Kel's heart dropped again. "But Piper has an ex who commutes between the States and London and who teaches summer school over there. And you can stay with her."

"What?" Kel said, eyes widening again and heart remembering to bash louder.

“Lex is going to let you stay with her for a couple of months while you get things settled,” Joey said. “She’s a nice woman. Well, she was kind of a bitch and cheated on Pipes and everything, but we’re all over that now and in essence she is a pretty nice person. Just don’t date her.”

“I’m not sure older teachers are my thing,” Kel said.

Joey raised an eyebrow. “You’re a lesbian, older teachers are every lesbian’s thing. It’s just part of the deal. Regardless, you can stay with Lex until you’re settled. Now, the good news is that Piper said on a student visa you can totally work. Twenty hours a week max, but full time during vacations.”

Kel put her elbows on her knees, listening, hardly believing that she could actually do this, that this might actually be realistic.

“That means you can get bar work, which Piper says is pretty easy, and during the shorter vacations Piper’s wife, Cam, runs a construction business and you’re welcome to go and work there, she could use the help. In the summer, I’m always open to you coming back for a couple of months and running the shop so that I can take a vacation somewhere.”

“Okay,” Kel said, slowly.

“And I think that about covers it, except for this,” Joey said, pulling out a small slip of paper and holding it out.

“What’s this?” asked Kel, taking it. “Oh. Oh, Joey.”

“Don’t get all excited, I used air miles,” Joey said. “And I talked to the airline lady and she said we can change the dates if necessary for like twenty bucks or something, so it’s flexible.”

Then she couldn’t talk anymore because Kel was throwing herself at her, gripping her in a hug so tight that she couldn’t breathe.

“Kel, Kel,” she gasped.

Kel let go and moved back. “Joey, I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to thank you. I—”

“Then don’t say anything,” said Joey. “I’m doing this because I know how much you’ve helped me. Don’t think that I don’t know how often you’ve stopped me poisoning my customers. Oh, I nearly forgot.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out something wrapped in napkins.

“What...?” Kel opened the package and saw a brownie lying there, the top crackled golden brown, the rest looking chocolatey and gooey.

“Go ahead,” said Joey. “Go on.”

Kel took a breath, but she could hardly say no. Not when Joey had just practically handed her her dream on a plate. The plane ticket, that was, rather than the brownie.

She took one, small, delicate bite, holding her breath and waiting for the kick of cayenne or the buzz of salt, and tasted nothing other than the deep darkness of chocolate.

“This... this is good,” she mumbled through another bite.

“I know,” said Joey. “I followed the instructions. I took everything out of the cupboard and double checked and measured before I started. Then I did exactly what the recipe said. No improvising, no distractions. I just did it.”

Kel laughed. “So I don’t need to worry about you poisoning the population of Mount Cline while I’m gone?”

“Not as long as you promise to come back and visit,” Joey said.

And Kel was too busy crying to answer.

SHE PUT ONE foot on the ground, balancing her bike as she looked toward the house.

It had been a silly thought, but one that wouldn’t leave her head, so she’d bent to impulse and ridden over to the professor’s house, even though it was dark and late.

Even though she knew she couldn’t see Trix, couldn’t speak to her.

It was a kind of goodbye, she guessed.

She stood there for a long time at the curve in the driveway, looking at the big house with all the lights on, thinking about where she'd been and where she was going.

Trix was wrong, she knew that. She instinctively knew that she and Trix, given the opportunity, could build something.

She also knew now that she was leaving, starting a new part of her life, a part that couldn't be burdened with something like a broken heart. So she had to heal fast. Standing and looking at the house was part of that healing.

Joey had helped her and her first response had been that she didn't deserve it. But then she'd thought about it. She'd helped Joey with the business, helped her learn the books, helped her keep things running, helped with orders and recipes, helped avoid the worst cases of food poisoning the town might ever see.

So maybe yes, she did deserve something. Joey had gone above and beyond, had helped in ways that Kel could hardly believe. But now life was moving on. She was deserving. She was ready. She wanted more.

Maybe, one day in the future, that wanting more might involve someone like Trix. But not right now, she could accept that. She could accept that more complications probably weren't a great idea. She could accept that Trix wasn't ready to open up to anyone.

She could also accept that maybe she could. That maybe what she had taken away from all this wasn't just hurt and pain, but also the realization that life could be about more than just one night stands and quick fixes.

So she watched the lit windows of the house until gradually, one by one, the lights went out. Then she sighed just once for what might have been, and cycled off into the darkness.

Chapter Thirty Three

Trix flicked her eyes back and forth between her notebook and her tablet and groaned.

So far, her list consisted of buying massive amounts of flowers, sending an anonymous message to meet on top of the Empire State building, and holding up a huge old-fashioned boom box in front of Kel's bedroom window.

Given that she got hay fever, they were hundreds of miles from New York City, and Trix didn't have the faintest idea of where to get a boom box, things weren't looking good.

She had toyed with the idea of interrupting a wedding, something that appealed to her anti-romantic side, but since as far as she knew, Kel wasn't planning on marrying someone else within the next few days she hadn't bothered to put it on the list.

She gritted her teeth and flicked through to the ending of another novel on her tablet. Huh. Sky-writing, that was a new one. She quickly looked up online how much it cost and was shocked. Not that money was an issue, she decided, pressing on. Time, on the other hand, was, and the company needed at least two weeks and appropriate weather conditions before flying.

She heard the front door closing and rushed out to see her father coming in, a newspaper under his arm.

"How did you tell mum you loved her?" she demanded.

He grinned. "It was raining, classic. I was soaking wet standing at the door of her fancy house in shoes with holes in. It was like a scene out of a movie."

Trix glanced out of the window and up at the sky. Not a cloud to be seen. "Not going to work," she said, glaring at her father and hurrying back to her bedroom and tablet.

She tapped a pencil against her teeth.

Suddenly it was not only important that she do this, but important that she do it as soon as possible.

She was unshakably certain that she was falling in love with Kel. So unshakably certain that, for once, the romance tropes weren't seeming stupid. She could understand them. What had seemed so tacky, so desperate, seemed now like quite sensible ways of getting someone's attention.

Jump out of the plane or you don't get to feel like flying, she reminded herself.

She could be alone, she knew that. She'd spent most of her life alone, that wasn't a problem. The problem was that she didn't actually want to be. The problem was that sitting and reading a book with Kel sleeping beside her was the best thing, the most comforting thing, the safest and securest thing she could ever remember.

Oh, sure, the sex was good. She flushed slightly, remembering the closet. The sex and the touching, the way Kel made her laugh, the way Kel made her understand things better, that was all nice. But what she hadn't understood right up until just tonight was that lust and love were very much different.

Lust and romance might seem ridiculous, did seem ridiculous. Love and romance, on the other hand, well, such a dramatic feeling seemed to warrant dramatic reactions. If having your heart try to beat out of your chest just by seeing a certain pair of green eyes didn't give you an excuse to send a hundred bouquets, then what did?

She was starting to see it. Starting to see that whilst the words in the novels she'd read might seem dramatic, might seem trite or ridiculous or silly, what they were in fact were phrases desperately attempting to describe something that couldn't be described.

She could see now that every writer was struggling to explain the hope, the fear, the complexity of falling in love. And that they failed in nearly every respect, but that didn't matter, because everyone who had ever fallen in love,

everyone who believed in love, knew exactly what the words were trying to say.

It was like describing the smell of a perfume. If you'd smelled it before, the description made sense, if you hadn't, well, the words were nice, but they hardly conveyed a scent.

She threw her pencil down and started flicking through her tablet. Somewhere in here, she was sure, there was an idea that would get her started. It was important that she made the grand gesture, it was important that she showed Kel that she too could believe.

If only she knew which grand gesture was the right one.

SHE SCOUTED THE entire outside of the store and didn't see a sign of a bike, so finally, she took a breath and went inside.

"Good morning," caroled a voice from the back. Joey appeared and a smile slid from her face. "Oh, it's you."

Trix was about to ask if that was how she spoke to all her customers when she remembered that Kel had probably told Joey everything. "It's me," she confirmed.

"Kel isn't here, which is probably for the best," said Joey.

Trix nodded. She wasn't here to see Kel. She was here in the hopes that Joey, as Kel's friend, might have some kind of idea for how she was supposed to woo the woman.

Huh. That was the first time she'd used the word woo, even internally. Things must be getting to her.

"Um, I was wondering, if, uh, if..."

"Spit it out," Joey said, leaning on the counter.

Another big breath. "I was wondering if there was anything you could think of that might persuade Kel that I'm an old fool and make her want to consider even talking to me again."

Joey raised an eyebrow. "Having second thoughts, are we?" she said.

Obviously this had been a terrible idea. Trix was already regretting it. Driving the whole way here in that huge SUV

and obviously Joey wasn't going to help her. Loyalty, friendship, these things came in the way. Something she really should have realized.

"This was a bad idea," she said, backing away toward the door. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"Wait," Joey said.

Trix hesitated, hand on the door handle.

"I'm not saying that Kel will listen to you, and I'm not saying that you should try or not try. I'm not interfering at all. But I will say that whatever you want to do, you should do it fast. Kel's leaving tonight."

For fuck's sake.

Trix backed out of the shop and hurried to the SUV. Once safe and inside, she banged her head against the steering wheel.

Why did this have to be so hard?

CHASTITY WAS SILENT on the other end of the phone as Trix poured out everything that happened. When she was done, there was yet more silence. Until Chastity finally cleared her throat.

"You know, I only phoned to ask if you wanted me to re-book your plane tickets and to tell you that AM is on the war path again."

Jesus, Anne-Marie, she'd almost forgotten about the ultimatum. How could she have? This was her job, her career. "Sorry," she said. "It's just that I've got a lot on my mind at the moment."

"Obviously," Chastity said. "Well, what about a public declaration? You know, maybe a flash mob or something. Americans are great at that sort of thing."

"Not enough time," Trix said. "She's leaving tonight. How am I supposed to find an entire mob and then teach them to... flash?"

“That’s not what a flash mob does, you do know that, right?” Chastity said. “I mean, I’m not against people flashing in general, but it is quite illegal. It’s more of a dancing thing.”

“Still, no time.”

Chastity was quiet again for a second, then she gasped. “Hold on, where is she going?”

“Heading your way, I assume,” Trix said miserably.

“London? Why?” asked Chastity. “No, wait, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter at all.” She was already starting to laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” demanded Trix.

“Because you have the chance to perform the greatest romance grand gesture of all,” chuckled Chastity. “The mad dash to the airport. Seriously, you haven’t read that one yet?”

Trix frowned, then grinned. “Yes, yes, of course I have. Right, thanks Chastity, I’ve got to go.”

“Hold on,” Chastity said. “What am I supposed to tell Anne-Marie?”

“Tell her whatever you want,” Trix said, anxious to get Chastity off the phone. “I’ve got to find out which flight Kel’s going to be on, I’ve got an airport dash to do.”

“Complete with shouting her name to get her attention so that the entire airport turns to look at you both and then applauds when you fall into each others’ arms?” Chastity asked.

Trix hurriedly scribbled that down on her notepad. “Absolutely,” she said.

“Somehow,” said Chastity. “I think that’s all Anne-Marie will need to hear.”

“Great,” Trix said. “Now get off the line so that I can call the cake shop.”

“The cake shop?” asked Chastity. “That’s a new twist. You don’t have to take cake with you, you know. Although I guess an éclair never harmed anyone.”

Trix growled and hung up without explaining herself. She had a flight to stop.

Chapter Thirty Four

Her father had said it was fine. All she had to do was get on the small road out of town, two lanes only, and follow the signs to the airport. Half an hour, forty minutes tops, he'd said. And no signs of a highway or interstate in sight. Perfect.

Still, she'd clenched her fingers around the steering wheel and had driven like an OAP the whole way. Even once she'd got to the small airport, she'd driven around the parking lot for what felt like an hour.

"Come on, come on," she hissed through her teeth as she rounded yet another level of the parking deck. "Aha."

She'd found the holy grail. Quickly she maneuvered the car into the drive through space. There was no way in hell she was going to reverse this beast. Then she jumped out and made a run for it.



It wasn't that she was sad. Okay, she was a little sad. It was more that she couldn't pinpoint quite what was wrong.

She'd lived in Mount Cline all her life, she hadn't been further than a half hour's drive from town, so it was natural that she should be a little sentimental, a little choked up.

Kel hefted her huge duffel onto her shoulder and walked.

Which was maybe kind of the point. She'd lived in Mount Cline her entire life, so why did she feel like she was walking away with something unfinished? She'd had twenty eight years to finish things.

She'd done what she had to do. She'd even dropped by the trailer yet again to try to make her mother see sense. But ma's shows were on and she was only listening with half an ear. Despite this, she'd predicted that Kel would be back within the month with her tail between her legs.

“Don’t come crying to me,” she’d said.

And Kel had shook her head, dropped a kiss on her mother’s cheek, and walked out for good.

There was nothing keeping her in Mount Cline. She wasn’t even leaving for good. She’d sworn up and down to Joey that she’d be back for the summer to work, and she’d meant it.

“There’s nothing unfinished,” she told herself as the bag bit into her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, perhaps you didn’t understand,” Trix said, thinking that her accent surely wasn’t that indecipherable.

“No, ma’am, I certainly did understand,” said the earnest young man behind the desk.

“Then there must be some kind of mistake,” said Trix.

The small airport was buzzing with business, people wheeled suitcases and announcements dinged through the air. She looked around, thinking maybe she could spot Kel, thinking that minutes, seconds from now, all of these people would be watching them meet, embrace, clapping as they finally kissed.

“There’s no mistake, ma’am,” the man said patiently. “We’re a small airport, we only have one flight a day to the UK and that leaves first thing in the morning. Would you like me to direct you to a ticket counter?”

“No,” Trix said. How was this possible? “Maybe there’s some kind of connecting flight?” she asked.

He beamed a white, wide American smile. “Well, that I can help you with, ma’am. Where would the connection hub be? Chicago? Atlanta? Miami? Or perhaps one of the European hubs? We do have a Frankfurt flight that leaves in four hours.”

“Shit,” swore Trix. She pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Give me just a minute.”

“Not a problem, ma’am.”

As she sat on the train, head pressed against the window, Kel felt like she was being physically pulled away from something. She could feel glue stretching, like when a recalcitrant sticker was pulled off a jar, tendrils were attaching her to home.

She closed her eyes and let the train speed up, let the afternoon spread into evening.

This was supposed to be good, she told herself. A new start. The start of something big. Something exciting and interesting, something she’d wanted for as long as she could remember.

It was supposed to be good and exciting. So why was she feeling beaten down and exhausted?

“She what?” screeched Trix down the phone.

“She took the train,” Joey said reasonably. “The direct flight from here was expensive and the airline wasn’t in my plan for air miles, so she’s flying from out of state. She took the train even though I offered to drive her.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Hardly eloquent, but nothing else seemed to cover it. She’d called the cake shop, had prayed that someone was still there, and now Joey was bursting her bubble.

“Wait, are you doing the airport dash?” Joey said.

Trix flushed. “Maybe.”

“And you’re about to declare undying love?”

“Maybe.” It sounded sulky.

Joey squeaked in excitement. “You can catch up with her. It’s easy. The train isn’t at all fast, you’ll get her. You’ve got the car, right?”

“Uh-huh,” said Trix, starting to see where this was going.

“It’s a straight shot up the interstate. It’s posted from the airport, just get on traveling north and wait until you see the airport signs.”

Trix’s heart stopped and a cold shiver went down her back. “Okay, thanks.”

She hung up, heart still not beating, feeling dead and heavy. So that was it.

“Anything I can help you with, ma’am?” asked the young man behind the desk.

She shook her head. “Not unless you’re about to get off work and feel like driving me to another airport.”

“Unfortunately, I’m in the middle of my shift, ma’am.”

Trix looked down at the phone in her hand.

If something’s worth having, then it’s worth fighting for, she’d heard that somewhere and it had always struck a chord. She swallowed, legs shaking, then she made the call to the only person she could think of to call.

“Trix?”

“Emily, you have to help me.”

“Sure, but I’m about to leave the house, we’ve got a flight to catch.”

Trix started walking, then jogging, toward the exit. “I need to get to the big airport.”

“It’s easy, just take the interstate.”

“That’s kind of the problem.”

The train slowed to a stop and Kel was first off, her big bag bumping against her back as she stepped out into the cool evening.

She groaned when she saw that she'd missed the airport shuttle by a mere two minutes. It was a solid forty five minute wait until the next one.

Still, she figured, as she settled herself on the platform, at least she had plenty of time to catch her flight. She was early, there hadn't seemed much point in waiting once she was packed and decided. There hadn't been that many people to say goodbye to.

She leaned her back against the wall, her butt cold on the concrete floor, and reached into her bag to get her sketchbook.

She might as well get a good start on things, she figured, as she pulled out a soft pencil and began to draw the way the metal archways held up the roof over the platform.

Within moments, her soul started to soften, her brain drifted away, and she was calm for what felt like the first time in days.

“Oh God,” Trix said. “Oh God, oh God, oh God.”

“Not sure I needed to hear your orgasm voice this early in our relationship,” Emily’s voice said over the car speakers.

“I’m merging,” Trix said. “Oh God.”

“Be calm, it’s fine, just edge out and keep your speed up, don’t stop whatever you do.”

Trix’s instinct was to screw her eyes tight shut she was so sure she was going to be pounded into a ball of metal and flesh. Cars were zooming down the interstate right beside her.

“It’s counterintuitive,” Emily said calmly. “Just speed up and start moving over, it’ll be fine.”

“It won’t be fine, I’m going to die.”

“You’re not going to die,” said Emily firmly. “I won’t allow it.”

Trix gritted her teeth and pushed down on the accelerator and moved the steering wheel a fraction until, by some miracle, she was sliding into traffic. “I did it.”

“Well, obviously,” Emily laughed. “And now are you going to tell me why exactly you’re risking your life and that of everyone else on the road by driving on the interstate? Are you running away from home? Stealing dad’s car to take a flight to Mexico?”

“No!” Traffic was moving a little slower than she was used to, which made driving easier.

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m finding solutions, just like you said I should,” Trix said through gritted teeth.

“Solutions?” There was a pause, then: “Oh, wait, you’re doing an airport dash?”

“Yes.”

“Oh well, you’d better speed up then,” Emily said. “You’ve got to make it on time.”

“I’ve no idea what the time is since I’ve no idea when her flight’s leaving.”

“Even better, a mad airport dash,” laughed Emily. “Nice.”

“You could be more helpful, you know.”

“I wish you all the luck in the world. Truly, I do. Trust me, Trix, if this is what you need to make you happy, then go for it.”

“I’m trying,” Trix said. A lorry rocketed past her. “Um, Em?”

“Yes?”

“Will you stay on the line until I get there?”

There was only the slightest pause. “I’d be happy to,” Emily said gently.

Chapter Thirty Five

“For God’s sake,” Trix said, climbing out of the car.

“Trust me, it’s better taking the shuttle than it is dealing with traffic around the airport and parking,” said Emily. “And hey, congratulations.”

“Don’t congratulate me, I haven’t done anything yet. She might not even want to talk to me.” A fact that had been preying on Trix’s thoughts the entire drive. Thankfully, her fear of imminent death in a fiery crash had somewhat taken her mind off things.

“I was congratulating you on making it down the interstate,” said Emily. “And now I’m really hanging up. If I don’t, I think Drake’s going to divorce me before we’ve even made our first move.”

Trix thanked her sister profusely whilst searching for the entrance to the train station.

It took a solid five minutes to find her way around, and she was hot and sweaty by the time she stormed down the stairs to the platform.

Then her heart stood still in her chest and her breath froze in her lungs.

At the far end of the platform, sitting against a wall, notepad on her knees, outlined in the blue evening light was a figure she instantly recognized.

Trix swallowed. There wasn’t a soul around.

With slow, hesitant steps, she started to walk.

Kel heard the footsteps but didn’t register them. After all, it was to be expected that other people would eventually come to catch the train. It wasn’t until the steps grew loud enough to interrupt her concentration that she finally looked up.

She looked up and saw a tall, willowy figure stop still in the middle of the platform. She looked up and her heartbeat tripled and her breath stuck in her throat and her pulse started beating hard enough she could feel it through her skin.

She looked up and then she smiled.

Which was precisely when Trix started walking again.

“I was wrong.”

Three words. As simple as it could get. No argument, no justification, no elaboration.

Right up until this moment, Trix hadn't known what she was going to say, but the words came so naturally.

“I know.” Kel twitched one eyebrow.

Trix exhaled. Now she definitely didn't know what to say. She scratched her nose. “This wasn't supposed to happen this way,” she confided.

“What wasn't?” asked Kel.

“My big declaration of love,” answered Trix. “It was supposed to happen in an airport where people could applaud. Or, and this would be a stretch given how tight security is these days, just as you were stepping onto a plane, when I'd run down the little corridor thing and stop you.”

“Ah,” Kel said. “The airport dash. Tried and true, some might say slightly cliched, but not a bad way to declare love. Beats the hundreds of bouquets thing, I've never liked that one.”

Trix grinned and sat down, crossing her legs and facing Kel. “I get hay fever.”

“Huh?”

“Allergies. Flowers make me sneeze. That didn't seem romantic at all.”

“So, if there’s no one here to see it, are you still planning on making that big declaration?” asked Kel.

Trix shrugged. “Dunno. Might wait until there’s an audience.”

Kel laughed. “I can wait.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” Trix’s mouth was dry, but she pressed on anyway. She had one chance at this and she couldn’t screw it up. “The thing is, Kel, that I never wanted any of this. Even when I was a little girl, I wasn’t interested in playing dress up and weddings and mummies and daddies with the other children.”

“I can see that. A little Trix bossing everyone around and forcing them to play... what?”

“Army mostly,” admitted Trix.

“Great, a little dictator.”

“Stop distracting me,” Trix said. “I didn’t want this. I didn’t think it was real. I thought fairy tales were for fools and love and romance was for the weak. Then I grew up and I saw other people falling in love and getting married and I still didn’t believe it. I didn’t want to.”

Kel watched her in the fading light, eyes deep green with no sign of her trademark half-smile.

“I learned what my parents had done, who couldn’t? I knew it was the love story of the century and then the scandal of the decade. And I decided early on that that wasn’t for me. Ever. So I pushed love away every chance that I had.”

“Until now.”

“Even now,” Trix said, glancing down at the floor. “Even now I’m not doing this properly, I’m not making a grand gesture. I’m sitting on the floor at a grimy train station giving you a million reasons why I’m the person that I am.”

Kel reached out a hand and Trix felt it warm on her leg. “It’s not pushing me away, Trix.”

Trix swallowed hard again and battled on. “The thing is, Kel, the thing is I’m still not sure I believe in all of this. In love, in romance and flowers and fairy tales. But the other thing is... that I’m not sure that matters.”

“It doesn’t?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think it does. Because you believe in those things. And because you make me want to believe. Which I think might be enough.”

“So what happens if I buy you flowers?” asked Kel.

“I sneeze, I told you.”

“And chocolates?”

“I do like chocolate,” admitted Trix.

“And what about a romantic date with candles and wine and violins?”

Trix wrinkled her nose. “I suppose I could deal with that.”

“And what about reality, Trix?”

Trix nodded. “It will intrude. It has to. Some days it will suck all the romance away. Some days we’ll be sick or at the dentist or just in a bad mood and the romance will all be gone.”

“And what happens then?”

“Then we fight to bring it back,” said Trix softly. “Because if something’s worth having, it’s worth fighting for.”

“Joey told me exactly the same thing,” Kel said. “And I think she might be right.”

“I need to suspend my disbelief. I need to let you believe for us until I can do that. And I’m worried that that’s not enough for you, Kel. I’m worried that you deserve more.”

“More than you?” Kel asked.

She blinked rapidly and Trix was surprised to see that there were tears in her eyes.

“I’ve been thinking this whole time that you deserve more than a poor American girl that grew up in a trailer.”

“I don’t care how you grew up,” said Trix. “But I do care that you get something or somebody that’s worthy of you. And I’m afraid that person might not be me. I’m stunted, stilted, cold and English. Is that something you can deal with every day?”

There was a long moment of silence then Kel’s hand moved up Trix’s leg until it met Trix’s hand. “I’d like to try.”

“So you think we might... we might give this a try?” Trix could barely believe it.

“We might,” Kel said. “There is one problem though.”

“What?” Her heart was starting to sink again.

“Well, considering this is supposed to be your big declaration of love and all, there is a problem. I don’t mind that there’s no one else here, and I definitely don’t mind that there’s no applause.”

“What is it then?”

“Trix, you haven’t actually told me.”

“Told you what?” Trix asked confused, then the penny dropped. “Oh shit. Right. Yes. Um, Kel, I, well, uh.... I think I might be falling in love with you.” She spat it all out in one long word.

Kel squeezed her hand tight and then stood up, pulling Trix with her. “You think?” she asked.

Trix gazed into bottle green eyes then shook her head. “No, no, I don’t.” She reached up and cupped Kel’s face. “I don’t think anything. I know. I’m falling in love with you and it’s terrifying and frustrating and absolutely and completely unstoppable.”

“I have a place to stay,” Kel began. “And I’m going to work, and—”

Trix stopped her by kissing her long and hard until she felt Kel’s body relax into hers. “Sorry,” she said, pulling back. “But you were bringing logistics into romance, and as far as I can tell, that’s really not allowed.”

“You’re telling me that?” Kel said, eyes darker green now and lips swollen.

“I’m learning,” said Trix.

“I like that you’re learning,” said Kel. She took a deep breath. “And so am I. I know that I have a reputation, Trix. But I want you to know that I want this, that I’m falling in love with you too, and that I have no intention of making this a one night stand.”

“Oh good,” said Trix. “Because I was thinking at least two nights.” She leaned in until her lips were brushing Kel’s. “Or maybe three...”

They were microseconds away from kissing when Kel pulled all the way back.

“What?” Trix said, eyes wide.

“Um, I know I’m not supposed to let reality invade and all,” Kel said, wriggling out of Trix’s embrace. “But my train’s coming and if I don’t get on it then I’ll miss my flight and I really can’t afford to do that.”

“Miss it,” Trix said. “I’ll buy you another ticket.”

But Kel shook her head. “No way, Trix. I’ve gotta pull my weight here, I’m not letting you buy me a ticket first thing.”

The shuttle was pulling into the station, brakes squealing.

“But...” began Trix.

There was a hissing as doors opened and Kel was picking up her bag. “No buts,” she said. She grabbed Trix, kissed her firmly and then let go, jumping up into the train, bag over her shoulder.

“But what am I supposed to do?” Trix asked, arms empty and lips cold.

Kel laughed. “The romantic thing,” she shouted down.

Train doors were already closed. “But what’s that?” asked Trix, starting to panic.

The train started to pull away and Kel was still laughing. “Follow me!” she shouted from the window, blowing a shower of kisses as the train picked up speed. “See you in London!”

In the sudden silence as the train disappeared into the growing darkness, Trix should have felt empty. Instead, she was starting to grin, then to laugh. Because she knew that everything was going to be okay. She knew that all she had to do was to get back home and then she’d be in Kel’s arms again.

She turned to leave.

There was only one problem left.

The SUV sat in the parking lot where she’d left it. She couldn’t call Emily again, she’d be on the way to the airport herself at this point. And she couldn’t handle an interstate drive alone at night. So just what was she supposed to do?

She took a deep breath and took out her phone. Then she called the one person who’d been trying to help her all along, the one person who perhaps needed to help her as much as she needed the help. The person she most needed to forgive.

“Hi, dad? I’ve got a problem.”

Epilogue

Kel turned over to see Trix's blue eyes watching her and she grinned.

"Oh no," said Trix. "Don't go showing me that smile, we don't have time for that this morning."

"The alarm hasn't gone off yet," protested Kel, snuggling in.

Trix opened her arms and let Kel lay her head on her chest. "It'll go off in a minute and I've got a big meeting this morning. It's going to be a long day."

"I thought you said that this was a slow time of year?" Kel asked.

"Did I? Well, today isn't slow."

"Which is why I've been thinking..." Kel propped herself up on one elbow.

"Always dangerous, but go ahead."

"I was thinking that maybe we could go to Paris? Catch the train over maybe make a long weekend of it?"

Trix blew out a breath. "I can't, not right now. And don't you have classes anyway?"

"I could skip a couple."

"Fatal words, you can't skip a thing, my dear. You're six months away from getting your degree."

"And I'm already working as an illustrator."

"A job that you'll lose if you end up not getting that degree," said Trix firmly. "Now, do you think you could let me get up?"

Kel buried her face again in Trix's chest, trying to hide her disappointment at not going to Paris. But her attention was soon distracted by Trix's fingers in her hair and the swell of Trix's breast under her cheek.

By the time the alarm was ringing, Trix's back was arching and Kel fumbled blindly to hit the button and stop the noise just as Trix cried out.

Trix walked into the hotel bar and looked around. There were three men sitting at separate tables. One had the look of an errant billionaire playboy, perfect casting for the first in a series of three novels that she'd just picked up. She filed the look away for later.

The second was older and could potentially be a duke in disguise. The third was too young to be anything other than the heroine's younger brother.

It was a hazard of the job, she supposed, assigning people she didn't know to roles in the books she was constantly surrounded by. But she really did need to choose one of them. She looked at all three again and in the end chose the duke in disguise.

"Horton Spence?" she asked as she approached his table.

"Ms. Winchester, how lovely to meet you." He stood up and held out his hand. It was slim and slightly sweaty, not at all the handshake of a duke, Trix thought.

"I'm afraid I don't have much time today," she said, taking a seat.

"Then we'll get right down to business," Spence said, beckoning over a waitress.

They both ordered coffee.

"My client has a position open that I think would be very interesting for you," said Spence, when the waitress was gone.

Trix raised an eyebrow. "Go on," she said.

It was par for the course to be headhunted, and though she hadn't actually met Spence before, she definitely knew of him. Not that she was in the market for anything new, but it paid to keep your hand in.

She made it a point to meet with a headhunter at least a couple of times a year, just to show her face and keep her resume fresh. There was no telling when she might need to move on, though Anne-Marie was showing no signs of wanting to retire yet.

Still though, the timing could have been better, she thought as she discretely checked her watch. Today of all days. She sighed and turned her attention back to the man in front of her.

“It’s a decent offer with an attractive salary package,” he was saying. “Full benefits, of course.”

“Of course,” murmured Trix, playing along. If she was agreeable and non-committal then she could probably get out of here in ten minutes.

“And far more interestingly for you,” he continued. “The position is a head of acquisitions placement.”

“Which is what I already do,” Trix couldn’t help but say.

“Yes,” he said, smiling now. “But this is for literary fiction.”

“I just don’t think she’s interested,” wailed Kel.

“Calm down,” Joey said over the phone.

Kel dodged a woman carrying four shopping bags and continued walking down the street. “But I brought up Paris and she just said a flat out no.”

Joey sighed down the phone. “You know, this might not be your best plan.”

“What? Not proposing? Are you crazy? We’ve been dating for nearly two years, Joe. It’s time.”

“But you know how Trix feels about romance. Do you seriously think that proposing under the Eiffel Tower is the way to go?”

“I wasn’t going to propose under the Eiffel Tower,” grumbled Kel. “Well, maybe. If the timing was right. I just... I

want to do this right.”

“It has to be right for Trix as well as for you,” said Joey.

“She’s gotten so much better though. She even bought me sexy underwear for Valentine’s day this year.”

“Yeah, that was more than I needed to know.” Joey sighed again. “Listen, Kel, maybe you need to take a step back and re-think this. I know that you love Trix and I’m sure that she loves you. But if you’re going to propose, well, that’s a huge step.”

“We’re ready,” Kel said stubbornly. Even though at the back of her mind there was the niggling thought that maybe they weren’t. Maybe Trix was being deliberately obtuse about the hints that she was dropping. Maybe Trix never wanted to get married at all.

“Just... just take a couple of days to think about it.”

It was Kel’s turn to sigh. “Fine,” she said. Then she brightened up a little. “Isn’t it kind of early for you to be accepting phone calls? I was planning on just leaving a voice message, I didn’t really expect you to pick up.”

There was a slight pause. “Yes,” Joey said eventually. “Crazy early. So I should definitely get back to sleep. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Fine,” said Kel.

She hung up and put her phone back in her pocket. Maybe Joey was right. Maybe she should step back a little. Not abandon the plan altogether, but maybe think of a better, more subtle way to do things. A way that was more Trix. A way that was less... less romantic.

Or maybe, said the voice at the back of her head, you should set your sights a little lower. Maybe marriage wasn’t on the cards. Maybe she should be grateful for what she already had and not push for more.

A car horn tooted and Kel jumped before running across the road. She was going to be late for class.

Chastity was struggling into a pair of tights when Trix walked into the office.

“Do you have to do that here?” asked Trix, throwing her coat onto the coat stand.

“Do you want things to be on time today?” Chastity said.

“Is everything in order?”

“Done, done and done,” said Chastity. “We’re a go on all fronts. I’ve doubled checked all the reservations as well, just in case. But I think we’re all okay. The only thing I’m not a hundred percent sure of is your half sister.”

“Sister,” corrected Trix automatically. “I’m on it. And those tights aren’t straight, by the way.”

Chastity growled as Trix picked up her phone and dialed Emily’s number.

“Where are you?” she asked as soon as someone picked up.

“Well, I’m currently sitting in a window seat on a train,” drawled Drake’s voice. “But Emily, who I’m assuming you actually want, is in the bathroom for approximately the seventeenth time since we boarded in Brussels.”

“She’s pregnant, you oaf,” said Trix. “I’m fairly sure that gives her license to use the facilities as many times as she wishes.”

“I know, I know,” Drake laughed. “Did you want to wait? Or shall I give her a message?”

“I just wanted to know whether you were going to make it or not,” Trix said.

“We’ll be pulling into St. Pancras in twenty minutes, right on schedule,” said Drake.

Trix let out a sigh of relief. Given the fact that Emily looked ready to pop at any second, there had been plenty of doubts about whether they’d make it or not. Mostly doubts on Trix’s

side, since Emily had assured her that she wouldn't miss this for the world.

"Perfect," Trix said.

"You're assuming that my wife can stay out of the bathroom long enough to witness anything," said Drake.

"Hey!" Trix heard over the phone. "I heard that." There was a rustling sound, then Emily came on the line. "We'll be there. Stay calm," she said.

"Easy for you to say."

"Trix, take a chill pill, you got this."

"Fine," said Trix. "Just hurry up and get here."

Kel's phone rang at precisely four sixteen, which was fortunate since her last class ended at four fifteen. She was just rinsing some brushes when she heard the familiar dinging from her bag.

"Kel," she said, picking up without checking to see who it was first.

"Thank God," said Lex on the other end.

"Lex?" Kel asked. She'd spent six months living in the woman's spare room, but she couldn't think of one time that Lex had called her sounding in any way stressed. Generally, she was cool, calm, and collected.

"Kel, I need your help. Do you still have the key to my place?"

"Sure," Kel said, thinking of the silver key on her keyring. "But you did insist that I kept it."

"And thank God that I did," said Lex. "I'm thoroughly locked out. I had my bag snatched and it had everything in it. Can you meet me and let me into the flat?"

Kel was already stuffing the rest of her possessions into her bag. “Of course. I can be at yours in fifteen minutes.”

“No, no,” Lex said, still sounding slightly panicky. “I’m not there yet. Do you know that little square around the corner from Trix’s office?”

“The one with all the cafes and the fountain in the middle?” Kel said, having a faint memory of having lunch there once with Trix.

“That’s the place,” Lex said. “I’m there. I’ll meet you at the corner of the street as you’re coming from the Tube.”

“Sure, I’ll be there in half an hour,” said Kel, pushing her bag up over her shoulder. “I’ll come as fast as I can.”

Chastity ran up, breathless. “She’s here. She’s coming up from the station now.”

“Is everyone ready?” Trix asked. Her knees were weak and she knew that her voice was shaking.

Chastity nodded. Then she put a hand on Trix’s arm and Trix was so distracted that she didn’t think to shake her off. “It’s going to be fine,” she said. “Really.”

But Trix was too busy feeling sick to really take it in.

Kel pressed the key into Lex’s hand. “Here you go.”

“Perfect,” smiled Lex. “Let me buy you a coffee for your trouble.”

“Oh no, it was no trouble,” Kel said, thinking about getting home and maybe getting dinner started before Trix came home. She’d said that she was going to have a long day, after all.

“A tea then,” Lex said, taking her arm and already starting to propel her down the little alleyway that led into the small square. “I really do insist.”

It wasn't like she had much choice. “Just for a few minutes then,” Kel said. “I—”

But before she could say anything else someone started to sing. She looked over and in the far corner of the square, a man with a microphone was singing without words. Then a beat started from somewhere else. She turned her head and saw a big speaker in the opposite corner of the square.

“It's noisy in here,” she said to Lex.

But Lex was pulling her into the square just as a man in a suit was whipping a chair toward her. Kel found herself being pushed down into the chair in the middle of the square next to the fountain, just as the man with the microphone started to really sing.

“Oh, her eyes, her eyes make the stars look like they're not shining...”

She recognized the song at once, a Bruno Mars tune, sappy and romantic and upbeat all at once. She looked around in a panic, but Lex was gone, fading back into the crowd of people that were suddenly moving in and starting to sway.

Kel gasped as she suddenly realized what was happening.

Four couples began dancing around her. The chairs in the cafes around the square turned and then Kel's heart shot into her mouth as the dancing couples parted and she saw her.

Trix stood, alone and spotlit, for a long second Kel could only watch her, only stare at how beautiful she was, how perfect she was. The singer quietened slightly, the dancing couples waltzed away and in long, slow steps, Trix walked toward her.

Kel's eyes were filling with tears and she wanted to stand, but her legs were shaking too much.

Which was just as well, because as soon as she was close enough, Trix dropped to one knee. She held out her hands,

revealing an open red box, silver ring shining inside.

“Marry me.”

It wasn't a long or elegant proposal, but Kel knew exactly why. She knew that if Trix had to say more her voice would crack, she knew that those two words were all she could get out without breaking down. She knew that those two words were both the hardest and easiest Trix had ever had to say.

And there could only be one answer.

“Yes.”

Trix's face lit up and then Kel could stand. She could stand and pull Trix up into her arms and hold her for what felt like an eternity.

“She said yes,” Trix mumbled into her hair. Then louder. “She said yes.” Then she was pulling Kel out, turning her around. “She said yes!”

The faces at the tables around her suddenly came into focus as they clapped and cheered.

Chastity, Trix's uber-fashionable assistant, next to Anne-Marie, her over-achieving boss. There was Lex, the traitor, definitely a part of this. Next to Lex were Piper and Cam, complete with their huge Great Dane Billy. Next to them was Joey, hand on Piper's shoulder. She'd kill her. She must have been in London when they were on the phone this morning.

Trix's mother was there, her husband Alex and their two sons both waving. And the professor, his arm around somebody who looked a lot like but couldn't possibly be Sam the mail-lady.

“We love you!” shouted Sam. Kel grinned and raised an eyebrow at the professor, but he was too busy staring longingly at his new girlfriend Sam. Kel hoped he liked cats and kittens.

Then there was Emily, so pregnant she might give birth at any second, and Drake. And a host of friends and neighbors and everyone that Kel thought she knew in the world.

All except one.

There was no sign of her mother. For a moment, Kel's heart was slightly less than full. Then Trix pulled her into a hug again and all was well.

"We're getting married," Kel said, hardly believing it. "We're getting married!"

Trix finally escaped from the cascades of congratulations long enough to get to the bar for a drink. She was parched and the relief of finally realizing her plan, finally having everything come together perfectly, was immense.

It had taken months to plan this properly, and it had taken everything Trix had to keep it a secret from Kel.

"Congrats," said a voice from next to her. Trix turned and Anne-Marie held up a glass. "Very moving. Well done."

"Thanks," Trix said.

Anne-Marie cleared her throat. "A little bird told me that you met with a headhunter this morning."

Trix sighed, she should have known. The publishing world wasn't that big and Anne-Marie had eyes and ears everywhere. "I did," she allowed.

"I'm assuming it was Spence? About that new head of literary fiction acquisitions position that's opening up?"

"It was," said Trix.

There was silence for a long moment, then Anne-Marie, as though she really didn't care, said: "And what did you tell him?"

Trix caught the eye of the bartender and ordered two vodka and Sprites. "I told him no," she said, finally turning back to Anne-Marie.

Anne-Marie frowned. "No? You said no? But I thought that was what you wanted?"

“So did I,” said Trix slowly. “So did I. But then, then suddenly I realized that I didn’t.”

“Romance is a competitive market,” agreed Anne-Marie. “You’re getting the big bucks, you’re becoming well-known, I told you this was a juicy cherry of a position.”

“You told me something else as well,” said Trix, accepting her two drinks. “Something that I think I wanted more than to be ambitious, more than to be rich.”

“What’s that?”

Trix grinned. “You told me that romance novels sell dreams. It took me a while to realize just how important that was, just how important dreams are. But now I’m not sure I want to be in any other business.”

She walked away, knowing that Anne-Marie was staring after her, mouth agape, and thoroughly enjoying the feeling.

The air was still warm as they walked home, though the sun had set hours ago. They were full and happy and half-drunk.

“You know,” Kel said conversationally. “You didn’t have to do all that for me. I would have married you anyway.”

Trix stopped in the middle of the pavement. “But I didn’t,” she said, simply.

“You didn’t?”

“Oh no,” said Trix. “I did all that for me. I did it because I wanted everyone to see, everyone to hear how much I love you. I did that because I needed witnesses.”

Kel stepped in, put her hands around Trix’s waist. “Did you? Or did you do it because you’re secretly turning into an old romantic?”

Trix laughed. “I’m not sure I’ll ever be a romantic. But I do know that I believe. And that’s down to you. You made me

believe that love could happen. I can't imagine being with anyone else."

"Just as well that you don't have to, not anymore," Kel said, taking Trix's hand and leading her the rest of the way down the block to their house. "Not now that we're getting married."

"Really?" Trix said, straight-faced. "You know that harem romance is very popular these days."

"You'd better be kidding," said Kel.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm sure I couldn't handle more than one of you." Trix took the door keys out of Kel's hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Opening the door, of course," Trix said. Hands steady she unlocked the front door and opened it, before standing back. "After you."

And Kel couldn't help but laugh as she let Trix usher her through the door and into their warm, perfect house.

Outside, the night grew cooler and a faint breeze rattled through the trees that lined the streets as slowly, one by one, the lights in the little house went out. Until only one remained, a cozy bedroom under the eaves. And that light stayed on for a very long time...

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The Revenge Plot

Chapter One

The hair was blonde, which wouldn't have been a problem except Elizabeth was a brunette.

She held it up to examine it better and then, for lack of a better place to put it, replaced it on Eli's jacket. It shone slightly in the light streaming in through the hallway.

Elizabeth's heart beat a tad faster, her mouth was a little dry, but all in all, she thought she was handling herself admirably. In fact, this was probably more of a comment on her house-keeping skills than anything else, she told herself. She really should have taken the jacket to the cleaners last week.

She stood and stared at it for a moment longer, toes itching in her new shoes, until the taxi outside beeped its horn and she remembered that she had places to be and people to see. It was a Tuesday, after all.

It was drizzling and cold enough that she should be wearing a winter coat. The cab, on the other hand, was warm and stuffy enough that she had to roll down a window as soon as she got in.

"Where to, love?"

She huffed. "Portman Square," she said sharply. She disapproved of being called 'love.' Not just by the balding, overly cheerful taxi driver, but by anyone at all. Even Eli never called her that.

She settled into her seat and let herself be driven. And the hair preyed on her mind.

In another world, she wouldn't have noticed it. In another world, she'd have taken the damn jacket to the cleaners when she was supposed to. In another world, she'd have been less observant and more in a hurry to get into town for lunch.

Unfortunately, she lived in this world, with its drizzle and rude cabbies and long, blonde hairs. Why blonde? She just

knew it was dyed, could tell by the shine of it. So common. She flicked back a long curl of her own dark brown hair as she thought about it.

Eli and a blonde. She found it hard to picture them together, not just because she didn't have a face for the blonde, but because Eli had always chosen brunettes before. Maybe just so that he didn't get caught out as often.

She'd heard that clever men brought their mistresses the same perfumes as they gifted their wives, so that they'd always smell like home. Eli was definitely clever. He was a financial analyst, after all. Not that Elizabeth had any idea what that was, other than that it provided for an enormous deposit in their joint bank account every month.

So it wasn't beyond the imagination that Eli might restrict himself to indulging in extra-curricular activities with brunettes just so that there'd be less evidence.

Until now, of course.

"You alright, love?" asked the taxi driver, glancing into the rear-view mirror.

"Perfectly, thank you," said Elizabeth crisply.

Of course, the most sensible approach would be to clone one's wife and then have the affair. That way, there'd be no clues at all. Though she supposed that probably defeated the purpose of cheating. 'Eating away from home,' her mother had once called it. Which implied that it was normal, desirable even, because who didn't enjoy lunch in a restaurant every now and again?

The cab was approaching Hyde Park and had started to rumble along more slowly now that the traffic was worse.

"Gonna be a few minutes, love," said the driver. "Traffic's always a nightmare around lunch."

"I'll get out here," Elizabeth said. Apart from anything else, she didn't want to be called 'love' again.

"Please yourself."

She handed over the fare, considered deducting the tip and then didn't because it would be rude, and got out. She extended a plain, black umbrella over her head against the incessant drizzle and began to walk.

It wasn't far. A block or two at most.

As she walked, she composed a mental list of anyone she and Eli knew that had long, blonde hair.

"DRINKIES ARE ALREADY in," boomed Amanda as Elizabeth was shown to the table.

"Lovely to see you, dear," said Arabella, standing up and dropping a kiss in the vague region of Elizabeth's cheek.

"Horrid weather we're having," Alexandra said, not bothering to stand up. "Do sit down, you must be gasping, you poor thing."

The three As. Elizabeth wasn't exactly sure how she fit into an equation that by definition really shouldn't include her, though Arabella had once tipsily suggested that they change her name to Augusta.

She was sure that the three As were her normal Tuesday lunch date, and that throughout the rest of the year there'd be a sprinkling of invitations to garden parties, dinner parties, and the occasional special event.

Which she supposed made them her friends. No, she was being uncharitable. They were her friends. They shared recipes, complained about their husbands, and in the case of the three As had an awful lot to say on the topic of school fees.

"So Angus and Amy did get in," Amanda was saying, as if to prove Elizabeth's thoughts. "And now George is making the most God-awful fuss about the fees. Honestly, you'd think that we were sending them to Eton or something."

Arabella and Alexandra both grimaced in sympathy.

"Don't get me started," Alexandra said. "I hate talking finances with Alessandro, but he just will not accept that in England we don't talk about money the same way as the Italians do."

Alexandra was far too fond of dropping the fact that her husband was Italian into the conversation. As far as Elizabeth knew, no one had ever mentioned how distinctly odd it was that the couple had practically the same name.

“Hugh says that the Italians have no idea how to make money,” said Arabella. And she should know, Elizabeth thought, since her husband was high up in some bank or another.

Which meant it was time for her to inject something into the conversation. She blinked, remembering how the sunlight through the front door reflected off the blonde hair on the dark jacket.

“Oh poor old sausage,” said Amanda. “We’re wittering on about our husbands and here you are miserable as sin. Eli off on another business trip, is he? Leaving you all on your own again.”

Elizabeth could spot a life-raft when she saw one. “Yes,” she said simply.

“He’ll be back soon, don’t you worry,” Alexandra said, just as large glasses of wine were placed in front of each of them.

He’d be back tonight, Elizabeth thought. She made a mental note to take his jacket to the dry cleaners this afternoon. That way neither of them would have to look at it.

Elizabeth wondered if Alessandro ever played away from home. He was Italian, after all, and didn’t they have some sort of cultural pass for infidelity? She wanted to ask, but took a large sip of wine instead.

At least she could imagine Alessandro cheating, with his wild dark curls and his lean figure and his eyes like pools of chocolate. Elizabeth resisted the temptation to fan herself. She was sure that she wasn’t the only one around the table that occasionally fantasized about Alessandro.

Apparently, Queen Victoria had advised her daughter to ‘close her eyes and think of England’ on her wedding night. In north London the saying might as well be ‘close your eyes and think of Alessandro.’

She gave a little shudder and moved on. Arabella was talking about the new wine merchant she'd found. Which was probably just as well, because Hugh did like a drink. Not women though, as far as Elizabeth knew. In fact, Hugh had that red-faced look of someone that would deny an affair with his male secretary until the cows came home. And Arabella would stand by him too, prim and proper as the papers snapped pictures of Hugh hanging his head.

George, on the other hand, was devoted to Amanda and as cynical as Elizabeth was, even she wouldn't deny that. Every now and again she'd catch George glancing at his wife during a dinner party, or at a barbecue, or during a Christening, and he looked as though he couldn't believe his luck.

Which was more or less surprising because in her most private and least kind thoughts she did think that Amanda looked rather like a prize bull dressed in a Liberty print dress.

She downed the rest of her glass of wine and ordered another one.

"What is it, old stick?" Amanda asked as the waiter walked away. "You're all out of sorts, care to share?"

She thought about it. The words were on the tip of her tongue and the shining golden hair was at the forefront of her mind. But then she saw Arabella's frown of pity and heard Amanda giving out advice and knew Alexandra would roll her eyes at the indiscretions of English men, and so she didn't.

"The damn Aga," she said.

And that was enough to get all three of them talking about the temperamental stoves and how best to deal with them, leaving Elizabeth time to sit back and sink another two glasses of wine and nibble at a salad before the bill came.

"No, no," she said. "It's absolutely my turn." She pulled out her purse and slid a credit card out, slipping it discretely to the waiter.

When he brought it back, she settled it back in with the others and spared all the cards a small smile before she zipped

her purse closed again. Because being married to Eli did have its advantages. She really did need to remember that.

Chapter Two

When Poppy Robbins opened her curtains to reveal the gray, drizzly morning she grinned so hard her face started to hurt.

There was nothing like a rainy day to make her feel like she really was living in England. Plus, there was the chance to wear the bright yellow rain boots that she'd picked up at the charity shop just yesterday.

"Pops?"

"Yep?" She sat down and started pulling on her socks.

"Did you use the last of the coffee?" Mel, best friend, roommate, and current psych student- though this was her third attempt at a degree and her sixth new career- stuck her head around the door.

"I get enough caffeine at work," Poppy said, sitting up straight to see a look of gloom spread over Mel's round face. "What?"

"You haven't packed anything," said Mel, sliding into the room fully.

"I will, don't worry."

"Two weeks and we've got to be out of here. Roger was pretty definite about that. I don't think he's going to let you squat or anything. His sister needs the place."

"I know, I know, don't worry about it."

Mel sat on the edge of the bed. "You know how you are, Pops. You can't just wait for something to change the circumstances. These circumstances aren't going to change. You need to box up your stuff. You need to find a new place to live."

Poppy grinned at her. "You worry too much. Probably a symptom of not enough caffeine. I'm guessing you'll find the coffee in the fridge."

"Is that a Canadian thing?" Mel asked suspiciously.

“It’s a... coffee thing.”

“There is a coffee jar,” pointed out Mel.

“There was a coffee jar,” Poppy said. “You packed it already.”

Mel sighed and patted Poppy’s leg. “I am sorry, you know.”

“About what?”

“About all this blowing up.”

“It’s not your fault that Roger’s sister needs the flat, it’s fine.” She still felt a little thrill using the word flat rather than apartment, though after five years it really was second-nature.

Mel wrinkled up her nose. “Stupid sisters.” She patted Poppy’s leg again. “And I’m sorry that my sister can’t put you up as well. What with the baby and everything, there’s just no room right now.”

“It’s fine, I completely understand. Rather you than me, changing all those diapers.”

“Nappies,” Mel said, laughing. “But yeah, I’m pretty sure there’s going to be a price to pay for a couch to sleep on.”

Mel had been her best friend since she’d moved to England and they’d met on a tube platform. Poppy had been marveling at the fact she was actually in the real London tube, and Mel had been hurrying from university, a stack of books in her hands that she dropped all over the platform when she’d bumped into Poppy.

The rest was history. They’d been friends ever since and room-mates since the year before. A situation that was now changing.

“You gotta find a place, Pops,” Mel said, getting up.

“It’ll all work out,” said Poppy, absolutely certain that it would. After all, most things did. She was here, wasn’t she? She hadn’t given up hope, even after everything had gone wrong. Even after Evelyn had dumped her and her whole reason for being in the country in the first place had disappeared.

Mel had stepped up, given her a place to live, and then there was always work. Shit. She checked her phone. Work that she was definitely going to be late for if she didn't get a move on.

"You don't want a cup?" called Mel on her way to the kitchen already.

"No time," squeaked Poppy, looking under her bed for the yellow boots.

When she finally emerged, three minutes later, her blonde hair tussled and a boot in either hand, Mel was standing in the doorway again, a cup of coffee in either hand.

"I put extra milk in so it's cool enough to drink," she said, passing one over. "And you've got dust in your hair." She plucked two dust bunnies out of Poppy's curls.

"Thanks, you're an angel," said Poppy, slurping down the coffee. "God, I know I shouldn't say it, but this instant stuff is so much better than the fancy stuff at work."

"That's probably because Canadian coffee isn't really a thing," Mel said, leaning against the door frame and sipping at her own cup.

"Yeah, well, you try explaining that to Jeremy," said Poppy, draining the rest of her mug and handing it back to Mel.

"Your boss is an idiot," Mel said.

"My boss is anxiously awaiting my presence," Poppy said in the poshest accent she could muster.

"Not bad, not bad at all. We'll have you working at the palace yet," Mel grinned. "Go on then, off with you. I'll grab you some boxes from the supermarket on my way home from class. At least that way you'll have somewhere to put your stuff when you're living under that bridge."

"There won't be a bridge," Poppy said, pulling on first one boot then the other. "I told you, something will turn up."

"Not if you don't start looking," said Mel, but Poppy was already halfway down the hall.

“Bye, don’t wait up,” she shouted as she stepped out into the cool morning.

RIDING THE TUBE was one of Poppy’s favorite things to do. It was the most foreign thing that she did daily, and every time she got into a silent carriage it made her smile. There was something about the smell, the people buried in their phones, the quiet, that made it distinctly English.

The train shuddered to a stop somewhere between stations and a garbled announcement was completely incomprehensible. There was a murmur of grumbling and a rustling of newspapers, but no one complained. Poppy hung on to the arm strap and waited until a short while later the train rumbled and took off again.

Three stations later, half the commuters got off and Poppy snagged a rare seat. She jumped straight back up again as an older woman got on.

“Thank you, dear,” said the woman, as she settled into Poppy’s seat.

Poppy grinned and went back to swinging from the arm strap.

Five years she’d been here and she had no thoughts of going back home. No thoughts of anything other than just gently living every day with a smile.

The tube rolled to a stop again, and this time Poppy got out.

“Morning, Paul,” she said as she reached the top of the stairs to the street. She dropped twenty pence into the homeless man’s cup.

“Cheers, Poppy.”

“You doing alright in this weather?”

“Warm as toast, don’t you worry,” he said. “And you’re running late, Jeremy will have your guts for garters.”

“Don’t say that,” she said, pulling a face. “I’ll just make it. Pop by after the lunch rush and I’ll see what we’ve got in the kitchen. Might be nothing, but I can at least promise you a warm drink.”

“Ta very much.”

She rushed out onto the sidewalk, turning right and practically running down the street to the corner. Only when she'd turned the corner and seen that the lights were on and there was no queue of people out front, did she slow down.

The Canadian Coffee sign glowed, a red maple leaf on either side of the name, the light a beacon on such a gray morning.

It had been no use explaining to Jeremy that Canadian coffee wasn't really a thing. He wasn't stupid, he knew that. “But it'll be a thing,” he'd said, and Poppy hadn't had the heart to try and dissuade him. Besides, she'd needed the job, and Jeremy had been cutely over-excited about having a real, actual Canadian working for him.

At the beginning he'd wanted them all to wear uniforms. Poppy had said that Canadians really didn't do uniforms and Jeremy had said that the Mounties certainly did and Poppy had pointed out that Mountie uniforms were probably terribly expensive. Jeremy had given up on the idea after that, though he did still make the baristas wear aprons.

She looked down at her rain boots, bright yellow against the dark, wet sidewalk, and deliberately walked into a puddle. Immediately, her left foot felt cold wetness seeping in. Huh. Well, she supposed there had to be a reason that someone had donated them to the charity shop. At least her right foot was alright. She made a note to herself to remember only to puddle hop with her right foot, then she squelched on down the sidewalk until she reached the steamy windows of the coffee shop.

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