



Camilla Isley is an engineer turned writer after she quit her job to follow her husband in an adventure abroad. She's a cat lover, coffee addict, and shoe hoarder. Besides writing, she loves reading—duh!—cooking, watching bad TV, and going to the movies—popcorn, please. She's a bit of a foodie, nothing too serious. A keen traveler, Camilla knows mosquitoes play a role in the ecosystem, and she doesn't want to starve all those frog princes out there, but she could really live without them. You can find out more about her here: camillaisley.com and by following her on Twitter or Facebook.

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Love Connection

(A FEEL GOOD ROMANTIC COMEDY)

FIRST COMES LOVE

BOOK 1

CAMILLA ISLEY

One

Two Weddings



Saturday, June 10—New York, JFK Airport

“You’ve been staring at those two plane tickets for almost an hour now. My role as bartender compels me to ask: what’s the big dilemma?”

I stare at the guy behind the bar for the first time since I sat on this stool an hour ago. He has a broad smile and a friendly face.

“If you stop pretending to be drying glasses just to peek at my tickets and pour me another drink,” I say, “I’ll tell you.”

“Sambuca, with ice?”

I nod and shift my attention back to my tickets. Maybe if I stare at them hard enough, the letters will magically move and spell out a solution for me. In the background, I can hear ice tingle as it hits the bottom of a glass, then crack when the bartender pours the Sambuca. These sounds mingle with the general noises of the airport: flight announcements, passengers chatting, and luggage rolling on the floor.

“Here you go.” The bartender sets my drink on the glassy surface of the bar in front of me.

“You added coffee beans,” I observe. “Nice touch.”

“Pleased to please. But isn’t 7 a.m. a little too early for double heavy spirits?”

“I’m on U.K. time, and believe me, I need the double heavy

spirits.”

“Which brings us back to the tickets. I’ve earned an explanation.”

I sip my Sambuca and take a closer look at the guy’s face. Young—mid-twenties, I’d say. Short sandy hair, intelligent eyes, and always the big smile. He’s back at his occupation of drying glasses that don’t need drying. Probably one of those people incapable of standing still with nothing to do.

On the screen behind him, a report about a fire at Miami International Airport is taking over the news. The screen reads that the fire has been contained with no casualties, but the airport will sustain heavy delays throughout the day.

“Looks like they’re having troubles in Miami,” I say, jerking my chin toward the screen.

“Trying to change the subject, are we? You’re not going to make me beg for your story, are you?”

I swirl the ice in my glass. “Is this on the house?”

“On the house, along with the free advice.”

“All right. One ticket’s for San Francisco, the other one for Chicago. There’re two weddings today, and I need to choose which one to go to.”

“Two close friends?”

“You could say that.”

“Oh, okay. Let’s see, do you have a particular role in one of the weddings? I mean, do both your friends expect you to show up? Don’t you usually need to RSVP months in advance for this kind of thing?”

“Mmm, this wedding...” I push the Chicago ticket forward. “I’m supposed to be the maid of honor. This wedding...” I slide the San Francisco ticket next to its twin on the countertop. “I’m not invited.”

The bartender snorts. “Seems pretty straightforward to me.

Why would you want to bail on a friend to go to a wedding you're not invited to?"

I look him in the eyes. "To stop it from happening."

"Woo-oh. And the plot thickens. My morning just got a lot more interesting than I was expecting. Is it about a guy? Is he the one who got away?"

"Yep." I take another swig of Sambuca; it burns my throat as I swallow. "You don't make burgers here, by any chance? I'm starving."

"Burgers at seven in the morning?"

"I told you, I'm on U.K. time. And burgers are my favorite."

"Sorry, but the kitchen's closed. I can give you some tortilla chips." He opens a new bag and pours them into a wooden bowl. "So, what's his name?"

"Jake."

"Jake." The bartender pauses. "The name has appeal."

"Not just the name." I sigh.

"You want to tell me what happened?"

"We first dated in high school. After graduation, he wanted to go to Stanford, and I wanted to go to Harvard."

The bartender whistles. "The war of the Ivy Leagues. What do you guys do?"

"I'm a lawyer. He's a surgeon."

"So what happened? You fought over schools, went your separate ways, and drifted apart during college?" he asks, his tone saying, "*Same old, same old.*"

"No. I went to Stanford instead, to be with him. He assured me we'd go to Harvard for grad school."

"Oh. I sense that promise didn't come true. So you stayed together through college as well. And...?"

"Stanford offered him a scholarship for Med School. Everything paid for. No student loans, no living expenses. It was

an offer no one could've refused."

"And that's when you broke up?"

"No, not yet. I hadn't applied to Stanford Grad School, so for me, it was either lose one year or move to Boston. Harvard was my dream, Stanford his. It wouldn't have been fair for either of us to have to give up our dream school."

"So you left?"

"Yeah. We spent the summer in California and I moved to Boston at the beginning of the fall term. We thought three years apart would be manageable. That's when we found out why everyone says long distance relationships don't work. School was demanding for both of us and catching a six-hour flight over the weekend became more and more difficult. We settled on leading different lives. We were used to sharing everything. Every day, every moment. Suddenly, we both had this huge chunk of life with different things in it. Things the other couldn't understand or get excited about. It was hard. We started arguing, and..."

"And?"

"Depends who you ask. If you asked Jake, he'd probably tell you it was a miscommunication issue. He'd say I overreacted to him telling me about a job offer he'd received in San Francisco. If you asked me, I'd give you a slightly different version..."

"Was your career really that important?" the bartender asks.

"It wasn't that I valued my career over my relationship with Jake. It was the sensation of always coming in second after *his* career. I'd given up my college dream for him. I'd waited all of graduate school... it was his turn to put me first. To put *us* first."

"If he's still in San Francisco, what's made you change your mind now about being together?"

"I'm not sure I *have* changed my mind."

"So why buy a ticket to San Francisco if you're not even sure

you want to try to work things out with him?”

“It was a rash, stupid decision. When I found out Jake was getting married, I panicked. My first thought was that I couldn’t let him do it.”

“So what’s changed?”

“I cooled off and thought about it.”

“And?”

“And I realized flying to San Francisco and confronting him was crazy. I mean, what are the odds, really, of us getting back together? I live in London, and he lives in San Francisco. I haven’t seen him in forever. I know nothing about his life. We ruined everything once already. How can we possibly make it work this time?”

“And yet here you are, staring at a ticket for San Francisco and contemplating crashing his wedding.”

“I can’t stop asking myself the ‘what if?’ question. I’m tired of living in a world of what ifs.”

“Meaning?”

“I might’ve been a tad unreasonable after our break up,” I admit.

“As in?”

“As in I moved to the other side of the world and ignored all his calls, emails, and messages. I wanted a fresh start, so I cut him out completely.”

The bartender grabs the now-empty wooden bowl and refills it with tortilla chips. “Why?” he asks.

“I was sure he could talk me into moving back to San Francisco if I gave him the chance.”

“And you didn’t want to quit your job for him?”

“I couldn’t. I owed it to myself to make the best choice for *my* career. But the fact remains that moving to the other side of the world didn’t help much in forgetting him. I’m still in love

with him. He's the only one I ever loved."

"How long ago was this?"

"Three years."

"And you haven't seen him or spoken to him since then?"

"I'm a mess, I know."

"How did you find out he was getting married?"

"Amelia told me—my best friend, the other one getting married today. Amelia, Jake and I are all from a small town near Chicago. She moved to London after getting her bachelor degree and she lives there with her soon-to-be-husband William. But she wanted to get married at home. Anyway, Amelia and Jake had some guests in common, they told Amelia about Jake's wedding as they'd already RSVP'd 'Yes' to him."

"Do you know the girl he's marrying?"

"No." I shake my head decisively. "I don't know anything about her, and I've forced myself not to search Google for intel."

"Aren't you curious?"

"Yes. But I can't give her a face. I'd never be able to crash her wedding if I did. She has to stay a ghost."

"When are the weddings?"

"This afternoon."

"Whoa. What's so special about June 10 that everyone wants to get married today? And you're hard-core. Shouldn't you have tried to talk to the guy a little sooner? Are you literally going to barge into the church and yell 'STOP!' in the middle of the ceremony?"

"I'd decided not to go at all."

"But you brought the ticket all the way from London, just in case."

"I did. Having the ticket, even if I knew I wasn't going to use it, made me feel calmer."

"And now you've changed your mind?"

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“I don’t know. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“When does the plane leave?”

“Which one?”

“Tell me both times.”

“San Francisco’s eight thirty. Chicago’s ten forty-five.”

“So you have less than...” He pauses to look at his watch.

“Twenty minutes before they start boarding for San Francisco.”

“That’s correct.”

“What’s Amelia’s take on the situation?”

“She got mad at me at first for even thinking about ditching her wedding. But then again, she’s always been a huge fan of Gemma and Jake.”

“Gemma?”

“That’s me. We all grew up on the same street, and we’ve been friends forever. Anyway, she’s marshaled a back-up maid of honor and she told me to follow my heart.”

“And what does your heart say?”

“My heart’s telling me it loves Jake. But this is too big. As you said, I can’t run into the church and beg him to cancel the wedding.”

“What time’s the wedding?”

“Six p.m.”

“What time does your plane land?”

I look at the ticket. “Noon.”

“So you’d have plenty of time to get there before the ceremony starts.”

“Mmm, I’m not so sure. The wedding’s in some fancy winery in Napa.”

“That’s barely an hour’s drive. You’ll still have all the time you need to get there and talk to him before he goes to the altar.”

“But what am I going to say?”

“Say that you love him.”

“And?”

“Nothing else. If he’s in love with you, it’ll be enough.”

“Say he doesn’t laugh in my face and tell me to leave. Say he admits he still loves me. It doesn’t change anything. I’m still in London, and he’s still in San Francisco.”

“You’ll figure something.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“You said it yourself: you don’t want to live in a world of what ifs, right? So it seems pretty obvious you have to try.”

“But I’m so scared.”

“Do you anything to lose?”

“No, not really.”

“Then why not go?”

“What if he doesn’t love me anymore?”

“Then he doesn’t, and it will suck, but at least you’ll have your answer. But if you don’t go, and you don’t ask, you’ll never know, and you’ll regret it for the rest of your life. If you love him, go.”

My face becomes suddenly hot and an electric prickle spreads from my heart to my fingertips. “Right. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“They could arrest you for crashing a private party. Or the bride could sue you for emotional damages. Or...”

“I’m a lawyer; I can take care of myself in the law-department. Are you on my side or what?”

“Of course I am. So, what’s the next step?”

“A car. I’m going to need a car in San Francisco. I need to rent a car.” My pulse is racing. I pick up my phone and tap away frantically. “Uhhuuuhhu. It’s done. I did it. I’ve booked a car. I’m really doing this. Oh gosh. I’m doing it! Is it too lame if I want to high five you?”

“No, not at all.” He raises his palm. “Shoot away.”

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I slam my hand into his. “I have to tell Amelia so she can get her maid-of-honor-plan-B rolling.”

“All passengers. Flight UA 730, with destination San Francisco, is beginning boarding at gate B 25. We’re going to start boarding families with small kids and passengers with special needs. Then, we’re going to board first and business class passengers. And finally all other passengers...”

“That’s your flight they just announced.”

“It’s my flight. I’m going.” I fumble with my bag and carry-on luggage and almost fall from the stool. “How much do I owe you?”

“It’s on the house.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah. You go tell your man you love him. Go catch your love connection.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I hurry toward the gate.

“Hey,” the bartender calls after me. “Let me know how it goes! I’m on Facebook.”

“What’s your name?” I shout back without stopping.

“I’m Mark Cooper. And you?”

“Gemma Dawson.”

Two

One Choice



Saturday, June 10—New York, JFK Airport

“...Isn’t 7 a.m. a little too early for double heavy spirits?”

“I’m on U.K. time, and believe me I need the double heavy spirits.”

“Which brings us back to the tickets. I’ve earned an explanation.”

I swirl the ice in my glass. “Is this on the house?”

“On the house, along with the free advice.”

“All right. One ticket’s for San Francisco and the other one for Chicago. There’re two weddings today, I need to choose which one to go to.”

A female flight attendant with long strawberry hair interrupts me.

“Please don’t talk to me about weddings. Not today.” She plonks herself on the stool next to mine and says, “Mark, can I have a drink? Make it strong, please.”

She’s remarkably beautiful. Tall, with amazing lips and flawless skin. But her blue eyes are filled with so much sadness.

“What’s up with you ladies and drinking so early in the morning?” the bartender asks.

“I don’t give a damn about the time,” the flight attendant says. “I’ve changed so many time zones in the past week, I’m not even sure if it’s day or night for me.”

“Did I miss something?” Mark asks in mock shock. “Is I-can-

drink-at-7-a.m.-because-I-have-jet-lag the new black?”

“I just need something to calm my nerves and survive the day,” the flight attendant pleads. “Make it a shot, please. Quick and painless.”

“What happened to you, love?” Mark asks her. “You’ve got a dark aura today.”

They seem to know each other well.

“The whole of Miami Airport almost went into shutdown today. An idiot started a fire, but the firemen caught it before it spread and everything was solved quickly. Otherwise, I would’ve been stuck in that swamp for the entire weekend.”

“Oh, come on, darling. Miami’s hardly a swamp. What’s really up with you?”

“Nothing. Is my drink ready?”

“Give me a sec.” Mark starts fumbling with various bottles and a shaker. Who knew you could put so much work into a shot? “Aren’t you supposed to go home, honey?”

“Too depressing. I might drink myself to death if I go home now. At least here you can keep tabs on me.”

“Will do, but for now... here’s your drink. A pink starburst shot for the nerves.”

I’m kind of jealous. My Sambuca, albeit with coffee beans, looks a little beginner problems-of-the-heart-at-7-a.m.-drinker next to the pink starburst. At least, I’m assuming the flight attendant is going through a heartbreak. Nothing else could drive a seemingly non-AA woman to drinking so early in the morning. I should know.

Anyway, I don’t have much time to admire the pretty pink starburst. As soon as Mark puts the glass on the bar, she grabs it and drains it in a single swig.

“Better?” he asks.

“A little bit.”

The vodka did add some color to her previously ghastly cheeks.

“Is this dark mood about your professor?” Mark prompts.

The word professor has barely left his lips before the flight attendant starts sobbing her heart out. She’s hiccupping one word for every two or three sighs.

“Never... if... mine... engaged all along... wedding... today... she blonde...”

Mark looks at her, eyes wide, mouth slightly open. “You may have to repeat that, sweetheart.”

I should be offended that my own wedding troubles have taken a back seat in the conversation, but this girl seems to be doing a lot worse. Plus, I could use a break from my ticket staring.

“Tissue,” she pleads.

Mark offers her a paper napkin, and she blows her nose loudly. After a few more sobs, she seems calm enough to speak.

“William,” she says, spitting the name in a way that tells me she hates and loves the guy at the same time. “He’s been engaged all this time. Never had the guts to tell me until he was practically at the altar. Too bad men don’t wear engagements rings. We should shackle a band on their fingers—an irremovable one—the moment they propose. At least that way they couldn’t walk the world free to string along perfectly innocent, stupidly over-trusting naïve girls like me.”

Ouch. She’s really having it rough.

“Engaged?” Mark asks. “But how’s that possible? You’ve been with him... how long?”

“A year!” the flight attendant wails. “Twelve months down the drain. Bam, just like that. A year of my life, wasted. I was already seeing him as the father of my unborn babies, and he’s probably going to make one with another woman. Tonight!” If

she were a cat, she'd be wheezing. "He always said he couldn't stay in New York for the weekends. Remember how he always flew back to London the minute his last class of the week ended? It was because he had a fiancée to go back to. And she's blonde."

"Do we hate her?"

"No, we don't hate her. She doesn't have any fault in this. She's getting married to a lying, cheating, sorry excuse for a man, and she doesn't have a clue."

"Don't you think she *should* have a clue? It sounds to me as if she's marrying a man she doesn't know. How could she not suspect anything?"

"Same applies to me. I didn't suspect anything. I didn't have the slightest clue. Believe me, he's that good."

"Esther, I'm so sorry," Mark says. "I thought the professor was The One."

"Me too."

"How did you find out?"

"The bastard told me. Two weeks ago. He just said it: 'I'm sorry, I'm getting married in two weeks. I thought I'd have the strength to call it off, but I don't. I love you, but I can't see you anymore.' That's what he had the guts to tell me. More or less. In one awkward conversation, I was gone from his life."

"But you really never had a teeny tiny suspicion? Didn't you check his Facebook profile?"

"He doesn't use Facebook. He says it wouldn't be dignified for a professor."

"Ah, never trust a guy who doesn't have a Facebook profile."

What a bastard. How can anyone do something like that? Why get married if you're already cheating? It doesn't make sense. It's like adding Mexican chili peppers to a dish when you can't digest spicy food.

"And he said he loved you."

Esther nods.

“Do you think he was lying?”

“The worst part is that I’m almost sure he wasn’t.”

“But, darling, this whole story doesn’t make sense. If he says he loves you, why would he go get married to another woman?”

“He said he’s been with her for a long time. He said he tried to call it off, but every time he was about to tell her, he panicked. In the end, he said he just couldn’t do it. So today, he’s marrying her in Chicago. She’s from a small town nearby. I Googled her. She *does* have Facebook. Her name’s Amelia. She’s blonde and beautiful. And today she’s going to become Mrs. William Reilly.”

Amelia and William Reilly. As she says the names, a bolt of electricity runs through me. Amelia, my blonde best friend, is getting married today in Chicago to William Reilly. He’s a professor at London Business School. He also has a job at Columbia University where he teaches Financial Markets one week every month. And he doesn’t use Facebook because he thinks it wouldn’t be dignified for a scholar. It’s one coincidence too many.

I try to stay calm and not show the shock on my face when I oh-so-casually butt in.

“What did you say this guy, the professor, taught?” I ask.

The bartender and the girl turn toward me as if they’ve both just remembered I’m here.

“Excuse me. Who are you?” the flight attendant asks, unable to keep the hostility from her voice.

“Gemma Dawson, nice to meet you,” I say with a warm smile. “I apologize for interrupting, but I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation.”

“Esther Porter.” She offers a manicured hand, which I shake. “And *I* should apologize. I’m being rude for no reason.”

“Mark Cooper,” the bartender chips in.

We do an awkward round of nice-to-meet-yous.

“Why did you want to know what he teaches?” Esther asks.

“What difference does it make?”

Since I can’t exactly tell her the truth, I blab the first excuse that comes to my mind. “I read this study once, which said people who work with numbers—finance people in particular—have a tendency to live duplicitous lives.” I can’t believe the load of crap that’s exiting my mouth. But I need to know for sure if she’s talking about Amelia’s William.

“That’s absolutely true!” Mark exclaims. “Didn’t your professor teach Financial Markets at Columbia?”

“Yeah,” Esther confirms. “I’m glad to know there’s a clinical explanation for his being a cheating, double-crossing bastard.”

My heart sinks. How many William Reillys commuting from London to New York to teach Financial Markets at Columbia could there be? Just one, I’m afraid.

“All passengers. Flight UA 730, with destination San Francisco, is beginning boarding at gate B 25. We’re going to start boarding families with small kids and passengers with special needs. Then, we’re going to board first and business class passengers. And finally all other passengers...”

I hear the announcement for the San Francisco flight and my heart plummets. I can’t go. I can’t abandon Amelia and let her marry that scum. If I needed a clearer sign Jake and I aren’t meant to be together, this is it. I’m not going to San Francisco; I’m not stopping his wedding. I feel my heart break in my chest and I lean on the bar countertop for support.

“Are you okay?” Mark asks me. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. I just need to use the restroom. How much do I owe you?”

“Don’t worry, it’s on the house.”

“Everything?” I ask, surprised.

“Yeah, don’t worry,” he says with a big smile. “Hey, we never finished our chat about those plane tickets.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I tell him, tearing the ticket for San Francisco in two and throwing it in the bin at the end of the bar. “The universe just decided for me. Thanks again.” I wave goodbye to Mark and turn toward Esther. “I know it’s not much, but I hope you’ll find someone who deserves you.”

“Thank you,” she sighs. “Have a safe trip.”

I wave goodbye again, grab my hand luggage and shuffle away from the bar toward the screens with the Departures information.

“This is the last call for Flight UA 730, with destination San Francisco. All passengers please go to gate B 25 for boarding. The gate will be closing in five minutes. I repeat, this is the last call for flight UA 730 with destination San Francisco.”

Hearing the announcement is like having a jackhammer pointing to my chest and digging into my heart. It’s shattering everything it finds in its way, leaving nothing behind. Just a giant empty hole. I’m letting Jake go, I realize with a flip of my stomach. I wipe a single tear from my cheek and stare at the screen, shaking the heartbreak away. I don’t have time to mourn the loss of the love of my life right now; I have a job to do. There will be plenty of time to cry later—like, the rest of my life.

Right. I stare at the panel. The flight for Chicago departs from Gate A 47. I head there. While I walk, I take out my phone and search on Google for the phone number of Columbia University. Before I crash into Amelia’s wedding screaming, “He’s a cheater!” I need to have my facts straight.

After some pushing around of privacy laws, I finally manage to speak directly with the Business Department Dean. He

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confirms that only one William Reilly teaches Financial Markets at Columbia and commutes from London once a month.

I sit on a plush chair at the gate and text Amelia to tell her I'll make it to her wedding. I tell her to wait for me at all costs before she starts the ceremony. She texts back a shower of smiling emoticons and I can't help but feel miserable for being about to ruin her life. Only, I'm not the one ruining her life. The bastard is. Right. I'm saving her from living unhappily ever after. This is the attitude I need to keep for the rest of the day. There's no way stopping her wedding isn't the right thing to do. She will understand. She has to. I just hope she's not going to hate me for it. I was never a believer in, "Don't shoot the messenger."

Three

Speak Now



Saturday, June 10—New York, JFK Airport

“Dear passengers, this is your captain speaking. I’m glad to inform you we’re about to take off. The weather’s clear today and we should be able to land in San Francisco right on time. I wish you a pleasant flight.”

I relax back in my seat, relieved to hear we’re on-schedule. I don’t have much of a buffer as it is—if I want to get to the winery before the ceremony starts, everything needs to go smoothly. I just wish I weren’t trapped on a plane for six hours with only my crazy thoughts to keep me company. My body might start a rebellion. I haven’t slept in a day, and the idea of crashing Jake’s wedding is pumping so much adrenaline in me, I’m ready to explode. I feel worse than a beer can in an automatic shaker. I grab the armrest as the plane gathers speed on the runway and takes off.

As soon as the seatbelt sign switches off, I fish in my bag for a notepad and a pen. I like to organize my thoughts in writing. When I have a speech to give, I always prefer to follow a script. Speaking off the cuff makes me nervous, so I start jotting down some marry-me-instead speech ideas.

Dear Jake,

Mmm, I’m not really writing a letter, though.

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Jake,

Yeah, that's better. A strong, assertive start.

Jake,

I've known you my entire life and I've been in love with you for most of my adult life.

Adult life? Who says adult life? It's not romantic enough. I need to remind myself I'm not writing a harangue but an undying love declaration.

Jake,

I'm just a girl standing in front of a boy...

Overkill? Maybe I should keep it simpler and less cheesy.

Jake,

Ditch the bitch and marry me instead!

Short, concise, says all one needs to know. Pity I can't really use it.

By the time we land in San Francisco, I've reached speech draft number eighteen and I've still no clue what I'm going to say to Jake. On the other hand, my brain's positively fried. As I don't have to claim any luggage—I'm traveling light—I head straight to the car rental to pick up my car.

At the concierge there's a bit of a line—five people before me in total. Damn. I hate waiting in line. Especially after the traveling and lack of sleep. I hope all the good cars won't be gone by the time my turn arrives. The clerk seems a super slow

and fastidious one. It takes her forty-five minutes to sort through the customers before she finally gets to me.

“Good morning. I need your name, driving license, and credit card, please.”

“I’m Gemma Dawson; I’ve made an online reservation.”

“Yes, I have your booking in the server for a three day rental. Is that correct?”

“Correct.”

“Just a second.” She types away at her keyboard. “Would you like to add insurance, ma’am?”

“Yes, please.”

“All right, your credit card has already been charged for the rental amount when you booked online. I’ll add insurance and charge a deposit fee of five hundred dollars. The deposit won’t be withdrawn from your account, but it’ll be on hold, meaning it won’t be available for you to spend. Once you return the car, the amount will be made available to you in two business days to a week. Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, sure.” Deposit, plus insurance, plus the rental itself, plus the plane tickets. These will max out my credit card. I should have brought more cash.

“Okay, the credit card’s taken care of. You can have it back.” She slides it across the counter. “I just need to input the last few details for the insurance...”

“Sure.”

“Oh.”

Oh? What is she oh-ing about? I want ‘very well’ or ‘here are your keys’, not ‘oh.’

“Is there a problem?” I ask, on edge. This is taking way too long.

“I’m afraid so, madam. I apologize; I should’ve checked before. Your driver’s license appears to have expired.”

“What do you mean, ‘expired’? That’s impossible!”

“Madam, it says here it expired a month ago.”

I check the expiration date. “Oh, gosh!” My palms get clammy at once.

“Have you been driving with this?”

“No, no. I live in London. Nobody drives there.”

“A U.K. driving license would be fine too.”

“I don’t have a U.K. driving license; I’d never be able to drive on the wrong side of the road with no casualties.”

“If you don’t have a valid license, I can’t rent you a car.”

“But I need to go to Napa! How will I get there without a car?”

Why is this happening to me? Today of all days.

“I’m sure you’ll find a cab outside. It shouldn’t cost you more than the rental. I’ll need your credit card back to issue a refund.”

“Here.” I take the card out of my wallet and pass it to her.

A minute later, she hands it back. “The refund has been issued and the funds will be available to you in two business days to a week.”

“Two business days?” I exclaim, bewildered. “You mean to say that my card’s still maxed out?”

“If today’s charge maxed it out, yes. It will stay that way until Tuesday at the very least.”

“Can’t you issue a refund in cash?”

“No, madam, we’re not an A.T.M.”

“So now I don’t have a car, and you’ve taken the money to pay for the cab. What am I supposed to do?”

“There’s a train to the city, and I’m sure you’ll be able to find a bus to Napa, but we’re not a tourist office. Now, I kindly need you to step aside so I can serve our next customer. Have a nice day.”

“You too,” I say. *Rot in hell*, I think.

Two trains, three busses, and four hours later I finally arrive in Yountville, the town in Napa where my final bus stops. With all the connections, I barely managed to close my eyes for half an hour here and there. I'm exhausted. But I'm not giving up. I'm a woman on a mission.

I look around the deserted bus stop to see if I can find a taxi station. Jake's getting married in some sort of fancy castle in the area, and I need someone to take me there. Yountville looks like a cross between an Old West outpost, a French country town, and a Disney park—thanks to a garden of stone mushrooms on the side of the main road. Maybe tapping one would turn them into the cutesy trolls from *Frozen*.

Mushroom trolls aside, the town looks desolate. No cars zooming on the street, no passersby, no one. The only open place seems to be a red brick building with an ivy covered wall that looks like a shopping mall. I head there to ask for some information and enter a chocolate shop with the cutest truffles you'll ever see on display. A nice looking girl is standing behind the counter leafing through a magazine. She looks up as a bell above the door chimes, announcing my arrival.

"Hello. How may I help you today? Are you looking for a present?"

"Err, no. Actually, I was wondering where I could find a cab."

"Oh."

Another oh. I don't like ohs.

"You won't be lucky today," she says. "It's wedding season, and all the taxis are working as shuttle services, booked way in advance. You'll hardly find one passing by."

"But how do people get to weddings if they don't have a

car?”

“Ah, well. Usually, transportation’s arranged by the bride and groom. Are you going to a wedding?”

“Yes, at the Castello di Amorosa.”

“What hotel are you staying in?”

“I’m not exactly staying in a hotel. I just arrived.”

She gives me a puzzled look.

“I wasn’t supposed to come,” I explain. “I changed my mind at the last minute, but I need to get there quickly. The wedding starts in one hour.”

“You’re going dressed like that?” she asks even more suspiciously, narrowing her eyes at me.

I stare down at my crumpled blouse, jeans, and traveling flats. “Yes. I’m going dressed like this because, guess what, I’m not a guest. Okay? I’m not even invited if you really must know.” All the stress, the fatigue of the past twenty-four hours, is finally bubbling out. The shaken beer can has been opened. “But I need to get to that wedding before it starts. And I need to get there fast as it’s my intention to steal the groom *before* he gets married. So if you could please tell me if there are any means of transportation I could use to get there, I’d be eternally in your debt.”

The girl claps her hands and squeals, “You should’ve told me that in the first place. Nothing this exciting has ever happened to me.” I refrain from pointing out that nothing’s really happening to *her* and let her babble on. “You’re going to be the talk of the town. Stealing the groom, like in the movies. This is so romantic!”

“So, can you help me?”

“Of course. I’m Jody, nice to meet you.”

“Gemma.” I shake her hand.

“Let me call my brother. He has to go there to deliver some

hay; there's a pretty farm near the castle. I'll see if he can give you a ride."

"Are you all right back there?" Jody's brother, Mike, shouts from the cab of his tractor half an hour later.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I shout back. At least as fine as I'll ever be riding on the back of a noisy tractor, perched on a stack of hay bales. It turns out Jody's brother drives a one-seater tractor.

If this was a chick flick, I'd be thoroughly enjoying watching the adventures of the female lead as she struggles to reach her one true love. But I've never been more aware of how much TV can make anything appear cool, when *it's not*. Like riding on the back of a tractor. And this not being a movie, I'm not even sure it won't all have been for nothing.

As the castle gets closer, I worry less about if I'm going to get there in time, and more about what Jake's reaction will be. Does he still love me? What will he say? Will we look into each other's eyes and run away into the sunset, holding hands? I hope he'll look me *only* in the eyes, as the rest of my body can't be much to look at right now. I probably smell too, and the hayride isn't helping.

The tractor stops. "All right," Mike shouts, killing the engine. "We're here. I can't go up the hill with this, but there's the parking lot, and the entrance is just behind it."

I hop off.

"You need help with the bag?" Mike asks.

"No, I'm fine, thank you," I say, pulling my trolley bag off the hay. "Thanks again! You saved my life."

"Good luck," Mike yells, before restarting the tractor and blowing a dark cloud of exhaust on me. Just about all the freshening up I need.

I check the time on my phone; it's already past six. The ceremony must be underway. There goes my plan of a discreet talk before everything started. I guess it'll be "burst inside and yell in the middle of the ceremony" instead. I hurry up the hill, dragging my hand language behind me, and reach the castle's entrance.

There's a guy guarding the door.

"I'm sorry, madam, we're closed for a private event today."

"Yes, I'm here for the wedding," I say nonchalantly.

The guy eyes me suspiciously. "You have an invitation?"

"Sure," I lie, and open my trolley to pretend to look for it inside. "I can't seem to find it right now... I'm already late. Is there any chance you could let me pass? The ceremony must've started by now."

"I'm sorry, madam, I need to see an invitation before I can let you through."

"Sure, I'll find it. I'm sure it's here somewhere." I try to appear calm and unconcerned, but inside I'm panicking. What if this guy doesn't let me in? Will I be on the other side of the wall while Jake says, "I do"? How pathetic would that be? No, it can't happen. I came here from the other side of the world; I won't have this stupid, sorry excuse for a bouncer keep me out. I need a distraction; just a few seconds to have him drop his guard so I can slip through the door.

I'm still rummaging inside my luggage when an idea hits me. I position the trolley bag so that the wheels are facing downhill and push it. The bag rolls down the slope, sprawling some of my clothes along the way. I yell in surprise and bouncer guy instinctively runs after the rolling bag. As soon as he turns his back, I duck inside the castle.

I run down a random corridor, having no idea where I'm going or where the ceremony's being held. Someone shouts

behind me, but I don't turn around. I keep running through a pair of wooden doors, under an arcade, and through another door, until I find myself in a square courtyard crowded with many elegantly-laid round tables. They must be for the wedding reception. I'm getting closer, but where is the ceremony?

"You stop right there, miss," bouncer guy yells from under the arcade. He's running toward me at a menacingly fast pace.

A bunch of closed doors overlooks the courtyard. I slalom through the tables and launch myself at the door straight ahead of me, bursting inside just as bouncer guy catches up with me. I've made it into a frescoed room full of people.

Someone's speaking.

"Should anyone here present know of any reason why this couple should not be joined in matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace..."

I made it. I'm in.

"Gotcha." Bouncer guy grabs my elbow forcefully.

"STOP!" I yell. "You have to stop! Let me go. Let me *go*."

Bouncer guy has grabbed me from behind, lifting me from the floor, and he's carrying me outside while I'm kicking my legs furiously in the air. "Stop!" I scream again. "You have to stop. I speak! I want to speak now! STOP!"

"Gemma?"

The groom turns toward me and the entire room falls silent. I freeze, one leg kicked out in midair. If ever someone could master the make-you-feel-like-the-only-person-in-the-room stare, Jake was your man. Suddenly, I don't seem able to talk anymore.

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