A man with a beard, wearing a grey button-down shirt and a dark tie, is looking up at a woman. The woman, with long dark hair, is wearing a bright yellow dress and is leaning over him, adjusting his tie. They are in a brightly lit room with large windows in the background, suggesting a city setting. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

A  
*Start Up  
in the City*  
NOVEL

**KELLY  
RIMMER**

*Unexpected*

'Emotional, satisfying, sweet, and oh so good' **Kylie Scott**

# *Unexpected*

*Kelly Rimmer*

## Chapter One

*Marcus*

“SO, I WANTED to talk to you about something tonight...”

There’s a strange little wobble in my best friend and roommate’s voice tonight, and when I glance at her, she looks away. I’m immediately concerned, but I’ve just walked in the door after a thirteen-hour day at the office and I’m so hungry I can barely think straight. As curious as I am about whatever’s going on with Abby, I need to get organized before we to talk.

It’s Monday night. That means we eat dinner early because Abby meets her gaming friends online at 8:00pm, and it also means that it’s my turn to cook. Tonight, I’ll be ‘cooking’ Thai, courtesy of Seamless.

“Just let me quickly get this order in, then I’ll be all ears, I promise. Do you want the chicken laksa? Or do you feel like seafood tonight?” I double-check the detail, because while I know her orders by heart, the chicken-vs-seafood in her curry-soup debate has been going on for a while and still seems far from settled.

“Chicken please. And, listen, I’ve thought about this a lot, and I have my reasons—this isn’t a whim.”

“Sure...spring rolls?”

“Most definitely. Actually, can you get me a double serving?”

“Of course.”

“No, wait....”

“Let’s get a double and if you don’t finish them, I will.”

“Okay.”

I finish the order, then sit the iPad back down onto the coffee table and turn to face Abby. We’re sitting on the couch in our usual places, our postures mirrored. I’m on the right, next to the arm rest where the remote controls live, because according to Abby I’m a control freak and I need to drive the TV. Abby is on the left, because it’s closest to her bedroom and thus her bathroom, and she seems to pee every five minutes.

“Now, what were you saying?” I prompt her gently. Abby’s gaze is distant as she absentmindedly runs the pad of her finger around the rim of the half-full wine glass she’s nursing. Before she can speak, the iPad makes an odd sound—a notification I don’t immediately recognize. Abby raises her eyebrows and points to the device.

“Check it,” she says pointedly. “It might be a problem with the dinner order and I *cannot* deal with Hangry Marcus tonight.”

I flash her an apologetic smile and reach for the iPad, but the notification isn’t some obscure Postmates error—the only thing on the screen is a Facebook message. When I recognize the icon, I almost put the iPad right back down...but then the words on the screen actually register in my brain.

Warwick Chester wants to connect with you.

I turn the iPad to Abby, who squints at the screen, then gasps. For a long minute, we just stare at each other in disbelief. Then I sit the iPad firmly on the coffee table, screen down.

“No,” I say. My voice is rough, so I clear my throat, then try again. “Just...no.” I draw in a sharp breath, then huff it out heavily. “Yeah. Let’s just forget that even happened. Now, what did you want to talk about?”

“Are you kidding me?” Abby squeaks. “No, we are *not* talking about my thing right now. Are you going to open the message and see what he has to say for himself?”

“No,” I say, but my gaze keeps drifting back to the iPad. “Fuck. I don’t know. Do you think I should?”

“Yes!”

I move to reach for the iPad again, but at the last minute, I hesitate. Whatever this message says, it’s too little, too late. What’s reading it going to achieve? Maybe I should just block him.

“Hey,” Abby says softly. Her hand lands on my forearm, and she gives a gentle squeeze. I glance at her, and she offers me a reassuring smile. “Let me?”

I nod, and she takes the iPad, punches in my code, and opens the app.

Warwick Chester is my biological father. He was an excellent parent, right up until a few weeks after my seventh birthday, when he left for work and never came home.

All I remember from the first weeks after he disappeared was feeling impatient. I was so sure that he loved us too much to leave us forever, so I *knew* it was only a matter of time before he came back.

It’s been twenty-five years, and the message Abby is reading right now is his first ever attempt to contact me. He *did* show up at my grandfather Don’s funeral last month, but he sat at the back and left as soon as the service ended. No acknowledgment of me or my twin

brother Luca. I wouldn't have seen him at all if I hadn't joined Mom on stage to support her as she read the eulogy.

It was a confusing day even before I noticed Warwick. My Grandpa Don loved his family fiercely, but he had a mean streak, especially with me and Luca. Mom was devastated to lose her father, but my feelings on his passing were more complicated. I didn't have the brain space to try to figure out how to feel about Warwick's presence that day, so I chose to simply ignore it.

"It's a group message to you and to Luca," Abby tells me. I guess that makes sense, as much as any of this makes sense.

"Do you remember when he first left?" I ask her quietly.

"I was what...five years old? I do remember sitting in the treehouse with you and Luca while you tried to figure out where he'd gone."

"You cried with us," I say softly. Abby offers a sad smile.

"I remember wishing that I knew where he was. I thought I could go just get him for you guys."

Abby, Luca and I grew up in Syracuse in upstate New York. My mom and stepdad Jack still live in the house I was raised in. On the other side of the small park next door, Abby's parents still live in the house *she* was raised in. Abby's two years younger than me and Luca, but for as long as I can remember, she and I have been best friends.

It's fitting that she's helping me navigate this, because she's been there for all the other key moments in my life, too.

"Should I read this to you?" she asks quietly.

“Does he want a kidney?”

“What? No! Why would you even think that?”

“Seems odd that he’s suddenly messaging us on Facebook like a long-lost camp buddy,” I mutter. “He wants *something*, right?”

Abby extends the iPad towards me, and I take it with a sigh.

Dear Marcus and Luca,

Maybe it’s unfair of me to drop into your lives again like this, but your Don’s passing last month has left me in a difficult position. Now that he’s gone, I’m going to lose track of you altogether if I don’t speak up and take the risk that one or both of you might be willing to try to rebuild some kind of a relationship with me.

I have no excuses to offer you for my absence—only a depth of regret and sadness that is impossible to convey in this message. Will you consider a call with me?

Warwick

I exhale, then set the iPad on the table again. Abby throws her arms around my waist. She rests her cheek against my chest with a sigh.

Abby smells like strawberries. I think it’s her shampoo, and I really like it. In fact, I like it enough that I’m momentarily distracted by it. We are firmly just friends, although for a brief moment earlier this year, I hoped we might be more. That’s passed now and the only artefact from my fleeting insanity is that occasionally I notice endearing details about her...like the fact that she smells heavenly all the time.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I can’t even imagine how you’re feeling right now.”

“I’m fine, Abs,” I tell her with a quietly confident laugh. Of *course* I’m fine. I’m thirty-two years old, for God’s sakes. I have a great apartment and amazing friends and I’m the co-owner of a software startup that’s growing so fast, my life feels like some delicious dream.

Abby isn’t fooled for a second. The piercing look in her big brown eyes forces me to interrogate my own reaction.

The pain of it finally hits—and for a second, I don’t feel like a successful thirty-two-year-old man at all. I feel an awful lot like the seven-year-old kid who kept sneaking out bed to sleep on the rug in the foyer because he needed to keep an eye on the front door in case his dad came home.

“Don’t even bother pretending this isn’t a huge fucking deal,” Abby says flatly. “We’ve been friends for way too long for that macho bullshit. You know what? You need a drink.”

I laugh weakly and rub my chest, trying to push away the awful, uncomfortable emotions bouncing around in there. All at once, I’m confused and resentful and upset and...hopeful. I need to squash that last one *real* quick.

“Yeah. I guess I do.”

Abby fetches two glasses of scotch from the liquor cabinet, and passes me one as she returns to the sofa. We knock our glasses together, down the drink, and share a matching grimace at the burn. She sets both glasses onto the coffee table in front of us...and for maybe the first time since she moved in with me two years ago, she actually uses the coasters.

I know that gesture is just for me, and I laugh softly. Abby smiles reluctantly too, then murmurs, “That message makes it sound like Warwick has been in contact with Don for all of these years, keeping tabs on you guys. Do you think that’s true?”

“No fucking way,” I shake my head without hesitation. “Don would have mentioned that at *some* point over the last twenty-five years. It’s not like he shied away from talking about Warwick.” Sure, pretty much everything Don had to *say* about Warwick was an insult, but he still mentioned him enough that I know it would have come up in conversation if the two men were still in touch.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Does he deserve a reply? There’d be some kind of poetic justice in me just ignoring him, the way he ignored us for all of these years. Right?”

With anyone else I’d be embarrassed at my bitter tone, but I know she won’t judge me. That’s not how this friendship works.

“Maybe you just have to do whatever feels right here. If ignoring him feels right, then go right ahead.”

“There’s no chance I’m going to fucking *meet* with him,” I sigh. I run a hand through my hair then rub the back of my neck. “I guess I should call Luca and see how he’s doing.”

A fleeting shadow crosses Abby’s face.

“Well...” she says carefully. “Maybe you need time to process this on your own before you talk it through with Luca.”

Abby gnaws her bottom lip, and there’s a crease in the space between her brows—a sure sign she’s worrying about something. My gaze drops to her hands on her lap—she’s tapping her fingers against her thigh.

I reach for her hand and squeeze it. “Hey. This is annoying, but I’ll be fine.”

She nods, but I can see she’s still unsettled. I’m touched by the depth of her concern, even if I am a little confused by it. I watch her closely for a minute, but she looks away again.

Hmm. Something else is going on here.

“What was it you wanted to talk to me about tonight?” I ask her carefully. She shakes her head.

“It’s nothing. Anyway, we’re *not* talking about it tonight. Not now.”

I know Abby better than I know myself, so I’m very familiar with that stubborn tone. But still, I’m concerned enough that I want to push her some more, and maybe I will...once I’ve had a little more time to get my head straight after *that* message from Warwick.

I pick the iPad up again, load the message, and stare at it. I click on Warwick’s profile picture, and his face fills my screen. He’s standing on his own at the front of a bluestone building, his head cocked to the side. He’s wearing jeans and a knit jumper. He’s smiling, but the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

It’s eerie staring at a photo of Warwick Chester because it’s like getting a glimpse of the future. Warwick would be in his sixties now, and Luca and I are identical twins who share most of Warwick’s facial structure and that same dark, curly hair. Warwick’s hair is still thick, but sprinkled with silver. Luca wears his hair long now and keeps it perennially pulled back into a man-bun, but Warwick and I have a similar hairstyle—we both leave our curls long on top, but the back and sides are shorter.

I click on his Facebook profile, hoping to find more photos, but he's locked the profile down...and I'm sure as hell not ready to send him a friend request.

Several minutes pass where we don't speak, although Abby sits patiently beside me while I stare at the iPad. The silence is gentle—Abby and I know how to be silent together. There's freedom in the easy, familiar rhythms of my life with her. This isn't the first tough moment we've navigated together, and it won't be the last.

"I really do need to talk to Luca," I say eventually.

Abby nods, but that odd look passes over her face again, and my gaze drops to her hands—the fidgeting returns in an instant. I realize that both times this happened, I was talking about my brother.

"Did you have a fight with Luca?" I ask.

"Me and Luca are always fighting," she laughs weakly. Well, that's certainly true. Abby and Luca are great friends too, but they bicker like siblings sometimes—the kind of messy bickering most people grow out of by adolescence. Their 'arguments' are always good-natured and innocent, though. What's confusing is that there's nothing innocent about the guilty shadow on Abby's face.

"You're clearly anxious whenever I say his name, Abs," I say softly.

"You're hungry, and upset, and imagining things," she says lightly, but she's an infamously bad liar. Something is definitely going on. I know Abby and Luca aren't romantically involved—Luca is happily married, and Abby literally could not be *less* his type. Luca's husband Austin is a chef and restaurateur, and undoubtedly, the love of my brother's life.

I stand and walk to the nook in the kitchen counter where I store my phone, and Abby squeaks, “What are you doing?”

*Curiouser and curiouser.*

“I’m going to call Luca.”

I’m bluffing because Abby tells me everything, and I’m momentarily certain that she’s about to blurt out the truth of what’s really going on. Instead, she gnaws her lip while I pick up my phone place the call, and picks at imaginary fluff on her hoody to avoid looking back towards me. Luca’s phone rings and rings, but eventually goes to voicemail. Typical—he never answers his damned phone.

“It’s me. Have you seen your Facebook messages? Take a look, then call me back when you can.”

Abby is visibly relieved when I hang up, which only makes me more determined to know what he’s done this time.

“Spill your guts, woman,” I say firmly. “What’s he done this time?”

The doorbell rings and I sigh at the relief that crosses Abby’s face.

“Don’t think I’m dropping this,” I warn her. When we settle back on couch, food in hand, I look at her expectantly. Abby squirms.

“There is something I need to talk to you about,” she admits reluctantly. “But I really can’t talk about it tonight.”

“Don’t let that shit with Warwick put you off. I was in shock for a minute there, but I’m good now. Let’s talk.”

“I know you’re okay, but you’ve had a really full-on night, and I’d rather we just wait and discuss it

tomorrow. Can we please just watch some TV and relax for a while?”

My eyebrows rise. “Aren’t you going into your cave tonight?”

Abby makes her living creating digital content about various video games, and via a series of screen dividers, she’s converted part of her bedroom into an office that doubles as a studio for her digital content—aka ‘the cave’. Her schedule is set in stone, and Monday night, she *always* retreats for a marathon session of gaming-for-fun. She’ll periodically, reluctantly vary her routine on other days, but she *never* misses Monday night’s leisure gaming.

“Not tonight,” she says quietly.

“Abby, seriously. What the fuck is going on? I’m going to worry until you tell me now.”

“It’s nothing to worry about, I promise. I just feel like hanging out with you tonight.” She gives me a hopeful look. “Tv?” I sigh and reach for the remote, then navigate to the media center to load the sci-fi series we’ve been watching. “No, not sci-fi,” she says. “Let’s watch the news for a while.”

I nearly choke on a spoonful of my curry. I feel like I’m in a real-life Twilight Zone tonight.

“The *news*?”

“Sure. Isn’t that what you like to watch when I’m not around?”

“Exactly. ‘When you’re not around’. You’re clearly ‘around’ right now.”

She shrugs and reaches for a spring roll.

“I do not need your pity news watching.”

“It’s not ‘pity news watching’, if that’s even a thing. I just thought it might be your turn to choose.”

“If we’re supposed to be taking turns, I think mine is several years overdue,” I say, still not convinced.

Abby’s laughter fades just a little. Her eyebrows knit. “I’m not that bad.”

“You’re that *good*,” I’m laughing again, and I click the button to load the sci-fi show anyway. “You’ve trained me so well.”

“Maybe you’ve actually started to like sci-fi?” she suggests, and I grimace.

“Or maybe I have Stockholm Syndrome. In any case, let’s just see if these mutants can escape the star-ship tonight.”

“They aren’t mutants, they’re aliens,” she says, then she settles right into the couch with a sigh of pleasure as the show begins, but she can’t quite help but correct the rest of it even as the theme song starts. “And it’s not a star-ship, it’s a time machine. Have we even been watching the same show?”

I chuckle to myself and settle in to watch the awful show Abby inexplicably loves. My workload is insane right now. It’s a testimony to just how much I adore my best friend that I sit through this shit several nights a week, just because she likes it.

A few minutes into the episode, my phone sounds with a text from Luca.

I saw the message. Really need to talk to you anyway. Drinks tomorrow night?

“Is that Luca?” Abby asks. Her voice is so high, I’m sure dogs six blocks away just howled. I raise my eyebrows at her and she flushes.

“Yes, it’s Luca,” I say. “We’re going to catch up tomorrow night.”

Abby swallows. I look back to my phone with a frown.

Marcus: What the hell is going on with you and Abby? She’s acting really weird tonight.

Luca: It will only make sense if I explain it over beer. Possibly many, many beers. I’ll talk to you tomorrow night—usual place, usual time.

I set the phone down, just as Abby slides hers from the pocket of her jeans and starts furiously tapping the screen. I watch the fierce concentration on her face morph into a scowl, then she throws the phone onto the carpet near her bedroom door in frustration.

“Yikes.” I raise my eyebrows at her.

“I want it on record that I did *not* want to talk to you about this tonight,” she says fiercely.

I reach for the remote and pause her show. “Huh. You know, I could almost have guessed that myself.”

“It’s not fair to dump this on you *tonight* after the Warwick thing,” Abby exclaims.

“Dump what on—”

“Luca is *making* me tell you and I want you to know that before I even...you know,” she exhales in frustration. “*tell* you.”

“Okay,” I say, softening my tone. “This is all Luca’s fault, got it. Now what is ‘this’?”

Now, Abby clears her throat, then she squeezes her eyes shut very tight and draws in a deep breath. When she finally speaks, her words tumble out so close to one

another it sounds like she's saying one ridiculously long word.

"I've-decided-to-have-a-baby-on-my-own-and-today-I-asked-Luca-if-he-would-be-my-sperm-donor. You're going to think this is crazy, so maybe you're going to try to talk me out of it. But I want you to trust me when I say that this is what I *need* to do. And that's final."

When she opens her eyes again, a moment or two has passed, but I'm still staring at her, slack-jawed and stupid after her announcement. I think I'd have been less surprised if she told me she was moving to Antarctica or that she'd decided to shave her head.

Abby as a mom? Yes. I can very easily imagine that. She's made no secret of the fact that she desperately wants kids.

Abby as a single mom? Sure. She's tough, caring and capable.

But Abby *choosing* to be a single mom, at thirty years old? Nothing about that makes sense. Abby is the kind of person who plans her life *obsessively*, and she's been thinking about her sickeningly stereotyped nuclear family forever. It's not just potential children she's put a crazy amount of thought into—it's also her potential future husband, and the life she wants to build with him.

"But..." Even when my voice decides it's ready to work again, my brain is still catching up. It doesn't matter, because Abby silences me with a fierce wave of her hand.

"And it's not something we're going to discuss tonight because *you've* had a tough day, it's late, and *I'm* feeling very emotional about it and I'm not even close to ready to explain to you why this is happening.

We'll talk about it in a few days when Luca has decided if he's going to do it. Okay? And don't you even think about trying to talk him out of it."

"I've never been able to talk Luca *in* to or *out* of anything, not that I'd do that to you anyway," I say slowly. "I just don't understand. You've always known exactly the life you want for yourself. What happened to the blond, gamer husband you were going to find? What about the house in the suburbs where you're going to settle down? What about the rescue dog named 'Charlie'? How does..." I'm struggling to even say the words. "How does *Luca's* baby fit into that picture?"

"It won't be *Luca's* baby," Abby snaps at me, and she stands suddenly. "This will be *my* baby. Luca will be the baby's annoying uncle, which is exactly what you will be too. No one will know any different but me and Luca and...Austin and..." She groans in frustration. "Now *you*. End of story."

I'll respect her decision if she goes ahead with this. I'll support her all the way. How could I not? Abby is a strong, determined person. She's smart enough to know what she wants, and strong enough handle all the challenges of parenthood, even on her own.

It's just that the more her announcement sinks in, the more I don't like it. Abby is the least impulsive person I know—if she's seriously considering this, there's got to be something more to the story. My suspicion is confirmed by the glint of tears. She blinks rapidly, but it's quickly apparent that she's not going to be able to control her emotions. Her face crumple even as she turns away from me.

“I’m sorry to dump this on you tonight,” she chokes. “It’s not fair that you have to deal with Warwick and now this...”

“Abs,” I say, bewildered. “You aren’t dumping anything on me. Please, sit back down and talk to me, help me understand—”

“I *can’t* talk to you about this yet,” she whispers. “Please just respect my decision and I’ll explain when I...I’ll talk to you about it when I’m ready.”

“But...”

I rise too, ready to pull her into my arms, but she shakes her head and jogs quickly to her bedroom. Before I can even take a step, she slams her bedroom door.

The sound echoes through the apartment—an undeniable full-stop on one of the most bewildering nights of my entire life.

But this is how it goes sometimes. Just when you think you know what your world looks like, it gets turned on its head forever.

## Chapter Two

Abby

Some people work out just to look good. Other people work out because if they don't, they work up a mental lather that completely clogs up their entire lives.

I do a class at my gym pretty much every day. I'm curvy and no amount of Pilates is going to change that, but between gaming for fun and gaming for work, I spent most of my life alone at the computer in the corner of my bedroom. A daily visit to my gym gets me around other humans on a regular basis, and moving my body is a key part of my strategy for maintaining my physical and mental health. There's nothing more important, and I've learned that the hard way over the last few years.

On a normal day, I do a class at 6pm. This morning, for the first time ever, I'm here for my friend Isabel's 6am yoga session. Marcus is safely out running or at his own gym, because that's where he always is at 6:00am. He returns to our apartment by about 7, and by then 7.30 I'm usually crawling out of bed and we often have breakfast together before he leaves for work at 8.

I tell myself this is going to be a fun and relaxing way to start the day, but the truth is, I'm still half asleep and I hate *everything* about the world right now. I don't want to admit to avoiding Marcus, but the only thing that would motivate me to leave the house at this

ungodly hour is the knowledge that there's something even worse to face at home.

If I were in the apartment when he returned from his workout, he'd try to make me talk about the Luca-sperm-baby situation. Marcus has my back—I don't question that, because he *always* has my back. There's no doubt in my mind that eventually he'll understand why I need to do this. But before he can understand, we need to have a conversation I'm dreading, and I'll be avoiding that for as long as humanly possible, thank you very much. At least until much later in the day, when my brain is actually functioning.

Isabel is standing at the front of the yoga room stretching, but she does a double-take when I walk in, then immediately jogs over and pretends to take my temperature with the back of her hand.

"Are you sick?" she gasps. "Is your apartment on fire? I didn't even know you were physically capable of getting out of bed this early."

I roll my eyes and grunt something about insomnia, and that makes two new records for me: out of bed before 7am, and outright lying to a friend before 6.15am.

An hour of stretching and posing later, Isabel is wrapping up the class, and I have to find another excuse to avoid going home. Marcus is an ambitious guy. He's always at the office by 8.30am, so if I can stay out of the apartment till then, there is zero chance I'll have to face him this morning.

"Right," Isabel says, after she's said goodbye to the other participants. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing," I say, then offer what I hope is a reassuring smile.

“Something is wrong. You wouldn’t be here this early if something wasn’t seriously wrong.”

“Just a nasty case of insomnia!” I dismiss her concern with a laugh, but then glance at her hopefully. “Got time for breakfast before you go to work?”

Isabel raises an eyebrow and peers at me for a long moment, then she shrugs.

“Okay. But while we eat, you can tell me what’s really going on.”

\*

I’D LOVE TO vent to Isabel as we walk to the café. She’s one of those gentle, earthy types—all calmness and compassion, and that makes her a great listener. If I told her what’s going on in my life, she’d be sympathetic and supportive and encouraging. The reason I *won’t* tell her the truth is that our complicated, interconnected social group has recently crashed headlong into Isabel’s complicated, disconnected life. Marcus has two business partners at his software startup, *Brainway Technologies*—Jess Cohen, and Paul Winton. Paul happens to be Isabel’s soon-to-be-ex-husband.

Until a few months back, we were a merry group most Saturday nights—me and Marcus and anyone either one of us happened to be dating, Paul and Isabel, and then Jess and her *ever*-revolving door of guys she met on Tinder. Until Paul’s brother Miles moved to California a few years back, he often hung out with us too. Our social circle and the *Brainway* business-life had always been closely connected, but that had never been a problem.

Then Izzy left Paul, and everything went to shit. Isabel, Jess and I are still close, and Marcus and Paul still spend a lot of time together...but we *never* hang

out as a whole group anymore. Izzy and Paul have been locked in mediation for months trying to finalize their property settlement. Things are so bitter between them now, I can't imagine us all hanging out as a group ever again.

Navigating the waters of their separation has been intensely complex for all of us and I've adopted a carefully adhered-to and right at this very moment frustrating rule; I don't dump my shit on Isabel because she has enough of her own. Otherwise, I still have Marcus to vent to, and Jess at a pinch...although *she's* not exactly a gentle shoulder to cry on. Marcus is sensitive. Isabel is supportive. Jess is brutally honest at best. I love her like a sister, but I only vent to Jess when even *I* know I need a reality check.

Speaking of which, she skipped our regular dinner last Wednesday and I haven't heard from her since. I glance at Isabel.

"Did you see Jess over the weekend?"

"No, pretty sure she's still been busy with that guy."

"The accountant?"

"No, the accountant was last week. This guy's a screenwriter, I think."

"I wish I could find potential boyfriends as easily as Jess does," I sigh.

Isabel laughs softly. "Maybe if you went out every now and again *without* Marcus, you would."

I glance at her, surprised. "You think Marcus is the reason I'm going to die old and alone?"

"I don't think it," she says, opening the door to the cafe. "I *know* it."

I frown. "You actually think I'm going to die old and alone?"

Isabel ponders this for a moment. “No, so let me correct that. You *are* going to die old and single, but you won’t die alone, because Marcus will be right there beside you. You two are practically joined at the hip since you moved in with him. You may as well just hook up with him and be done with it.”

I can’t help the too-loud peal of laughter that bursts from my mouth. Several sets of curious eyes turn our way, and I press my hand over my mouth to try to contain the giggles.

“That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” I assure her, still chuckling. Isabel’s gaze grows skeptical.

“Is it, though?”

“Yes, it really is.”

“Sometimes he looks at you with this affection...”

“Oh, he’s *fond* of me,” I agree, and I know exactly the look she’s talking about. Sometimes I can see warmth burning in his eyes too. It’s understandable how someone might misinterpret that. “We’re emotionally intimate, but honestly, that’s all there is to it. And people have been trying to pair us up since we were kids. They see what they want to see.” I raise my eyebrows at her. “That’s what you’re doing.”

“Are you sure that’s not what you’re doing?” she asks me, and I frown. “I mean...if he *was* into you, would you go there?”

I *have* thought about Marcus Ross in a romantic fashion, but only once. It was an apparition—a fleeting moment of complete insanity and one of the worst mistakes I’ve ever made. I like to think of it as The Kiss Which Shall Not Be Named. The Voldemort reference fits, because speaking of it aloud would unleash all manner of evil, and the truth is, I’m not so

great at facing the dark arts. I don't even let myself think about that night anymore.

"Unless I had some nasty zombie-virus and his semen was the cure, I'd probably try to avoid it."

"But *why*? He's so great."

"He has two big/main? flaws. One, he doesn't like gaming," I shrug. "Between work and fun, I spend most of my life playing games, so I've decided I'm only going to date men who like online games too. I think that's where I went wrong with Roger. He was forever complaining that I wasn't spending enough time with him."

"Where you went wrong with Roger was that he was a fucking idiot."

"That too," I smile sadly. "Anyway, the number one problem with Marcus is an absolute deal-breaker. You said the word *date*. And what's dating, Isabel?"

"Well, I'm a little rusty on the concept," she says wryly. "But I'm pretty sure it still means spending time with someone with a view to forming some kind of romantic relationship with them."

"Exactly. So, by that definition, Marcus doesn't date. He has periodic flings with women who are happy with a no-strings arrangement, but he always maintains a very careful distance. If he thinks they're catching feelings for him, he carefully calls things off," I say wryly.

Isabel shakes her head. "Lots of people think they don't want long-term commitment until they fall in love. Take Luca, for example."

"Luca is a different kettle of fish altogether, Izzy. Sure, he used to say he wouldn't settle down, but *I* always knew he would—he wasn't nearly as cynical about relationships as Marcus is. Marcus just isn't the

kind of guy who falls in love. I've seen him flirt plenty, but I've never seen him *giddy* over a woman. Ever since we were old enough to understand what marriage even is, Marcus has been sure that's not what he wants for life. He's not going to settle down."

"Surely you can see that you two act just like a couple, without the sex?" Isabel asks me. "Why would he even think about settling down when he pretty much has a wife at home already? You're his companion and his roommate and his closest friend. And vice versa, Abby. This is what I meant when I said you're at risk of perpetual spinsterhood."

*If we're still single when we get to forty should we just get married? To each other, I mean.*

I was joking when I said that to Marcus last year, at Jess' legendary New Years' Eve party on her building's rooftop courtyard. We were both more than a little tipsy, and we somehow ended up cuddled up under a blanket together. It was completely innocent at first. Romance was the furthest thing from my mind—in fact, we got to talking about how messed up I was after I broke up with Roger, and I half-joked that I was giving up on men altogether.

I was actually hinting for him to say something more typical of Marcus...something sweetly reassuring, like, *oh Abs, you're so great—you'll find someone!* I wasn't at all serious—at least in part because I know Marcus has zero interest in a wife, even a pretend one. But his reaction really caught me off guard—he scowled, and then snapped, *You know I'm never going to get married. And anyway, I could never think of you that way.*

If I hadn't guzzled some unknown quantity of pricey champagne that night, I'd probably have told him

where to go and we'd have laughed about it and carried on as we were. But between the bubbles and his determined refusal to see me as a woman even just for *one damned hypothetical moment*...well, frankly, I more than a little pissed *and* pissed off.

So I kissed him, and nearly ruined everything.

Just the memory is enough to *still* make me feel heavy with regret and confusion. For that and a million other reasons, I have no desire to repeat the experience. I don't want us to *have* kissed, but I can't change the past. The closest I can come is to deny the incident altogether, which is why I never told anyone. Even Izzy.

It's a strategy that's worked well. It was awkward at first, but everything went back to normal within a few weeks.

"I know it's unusual for two people to be as close as we are and just be friends," I say softly. "But it's also really special, you know? He gives me grief about being messy at home and I tease him about being a remote-control-egomaniac-nazi. We couldn't be more different but...the tension of those differences is kind of the fun part for us. We balance each other. I mean, we also challenge each other and we call each other out when we're being idiots, but we never try to change one another—not really. And to quote *Grey's Anatomy*...he's my person. It's perfect and amazing as it is. No way am I ever fucking *that* up with..."

"...fucking." Isabel laughs, and I grin at her.

"Exactly."

"So let me get this straight, Abby. You're saying he's the best guy ever. You two are super close. You live together well. Even your differences are somehow

compatible. But there's *no chance* you'd ever consider anything more with him, even if he wanted it?"

I sigh and shake my head.

"Izzy, my love life is a disaster zone."

"Yeah..." she says cautiously. "You've had a run of bad relationships, that's for sure."

"I can't inflict that kind of chaos on Marcus. I'm clearly cursed."

*It's not me, it's you! Between gaming and working you're at the fucking computer fourteen hours a day. Even when you do take a break, you'd rather spend time with Marcus than me. A man needs to feel needed. If I ran into her arms, it's only because you drove me there.*

Isabel frowns. "Roger cheating on you is *not* your fault."

"It doesn't matter anyway," I say, then I clear my throat. "Marcus is the only guy I've ever known who *gets* me—really gets me. He understands that I need a lot of alone time, but he also but understands that sometimes I need to be gently nudged out of my shell to socialize, too. He is simply too important for me to take any risks with our relationship. How lucky am I to have someone in my life who knows exactly who I am, and every single one of my secrets? I wouldn't risk that for anything."

Isabel seems momentarily satisfied by this, and she starts to chat about the new seniors' fitness program she's developing at the gym. Meanwhile, I can't help the way my thoughts drift, because I just lied to her. Again. I'm losing count, but I think that's three times now. Before 8am? That's definitely a record and not one I'm proud of.

I told her Marcus knows every single one of my secrets, but he doesn't. He used to—until last month. My cycle has been a little weird for the past year or so, and I'd been putting off a visit to my gynecologist for a while. But then we went home for Marcus' grandfather's funeral, and my mom was doing what she often does and hinting at me about grandbabies and I guess that kicked my butt into gear, because I finally went in and had some tests.

It was only a few days after my appointment that my doctor called me back into her office, and she stared at me with visible pity as she delivered a blow I was completely unprepared for.

*I'm so sorry, Abby. These test results suggest a diminished ovarian reserve.*

I've spent the last few weeks alternating between pretending this isn't happening and trying to understand what it all means, but the main implication is that I'm running out of time. If I want to be a mom, I need to get pregnant now, or better still, yesterday.

And I do want to be a mom. I've *always* wanted to be a mom.

I've just always had this picture in my mind about what my adult life would look like. Marcus teases me a bit about it—he calls my dream guy Mr. Perfect. In my mind, Mr. Perfect was blond and tall and introverted. He'd be someone who likes nerd culture and periodically turning down exciting party invitations only to sit at home and binge-watch entire seasons of our favorite shows on Netflix.

Mr. Perfect and I would fall in love quickly—maybe it would even be love at first sight. Later, we'd get married at the church near Mom and Dad's house, and I'd ask Marcus to be my man of honor. Marcus would

grumble, but he'd do it anyway. My husband and I would move out of the city to buy a two-story house just like the one I grew up with—a house with lots of bedrooms and a big yard bordered by a white-picket fence. The yard was important. We'd need it for our rescue pup, Charlie. Eventually, me and Mr. Perfect would have our perfect pair of babies. That's why I liked the idea of my husband being blond, because then maybe we'd get one kid with dark hair like me, and one kid with blond hair like him.

I've spent an embarrassing amount of time planning and dreaming about this future over the years, but at the end of the day, it really was just a fantasy, and almost all of the details were negotiable.

I was always pretty sure this last one was not: I'd adore my husband, and he'd adore me, and together, *we* would adore our kids. I think that's what's so confusing about where I am right now. Sure, I can still find Mr Perfect and achieve the rest of the dream, even if I do have a baby with donor sperm. But now everything *has* to happen out of order, and the fact that I'm even considering this makes me feel...chaotic.

I don't do chaotic.

The very reason I've spent so much time thinking about this over the years is that uncertainty makes me anxious and having a very specific plan in my mind helps me to manage that. It's the same principle that lead me to fall into the well-worn schedule I keep each week. If I always know what's coming next, I'm always prepared.

I haven't told anyone about my potential fertility issues. I haven't told Isabel or Jess, or Mom and Dad. I'll tell them all, eventually I guess but...I haven't even told Marcus yet, and he's my go-to-person for the life-

changing stuff. Keeping this discovery to myself is a clumsy way to avoid accepting it. Once I tell *him*, it's real. I didn't even tell Luca the whole truth. I just told him I wanted a baby. I couldn't bear to guilt him into doing it.

I felt like I might have lost my shit completely if Marcus had pressed me for details last night. Everything inside me feels fragile, like pieces are shifting and shattering and I'm only just holding it all together while I figure out a way forward. So maybe I'm a coward, but avoiding an open discussion with Marcus about this until I *have* to have it is a form of self-preservation. Until I say the words aloud—*it might already be too late for me to become a mom*—I can pretend it's not true.

It's not like I haven't tried to find my happily-ever-after. Until these last few years, I dated a lot. I've had a seemingly endless series of boyfriends that I hoped might just be 'the one'...I just can't seem to make a relationship work.

"Hey," Isabel reaches across the table to wave her hand in front of my face. "Where'd you go? You zoned out on me there."

"Sorry," I mutter.

"I figured I'd ply you with organic apple juice and you'd spill the beans, but I'm starting to think you *really* don't want to talk about whatever is going on," Isabel says gently.

"I don't," I sigh, and grimace at her. "Is that okay? I'm sorry."

"Abby..." She sighs. "We've been friends for a while now, so I've learned to deal with the way uncomfortable subjects trigger your avoidance issues."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I mutter, but she grins.

“What’s my swine of a soon-to-be-ex-husband’s name, then?”

I narrow my gaze at her. “You know what it is.”

“Sure I do. I say it *all* of the time. *Paul is a swine. Paul is a robot. Paul has binary code where his feelings should be.* But you? You never say it. I haven’t heard you say his name since I called you to tell you I’d left him.”

“I thought it would make it easier for you if I didn’t mention him.”

“It hurts that my marriage turned to shit. It *doesn’t* hurt that Paul is still in business with Jess and Marcus and you’re inevitably going to see him sometimes.”

“Sorry,” I sigh. “I thought I was helping by not bringing him up.”

“Maybe that’s a part of it, but an equally big part of it is that you, Abby Herbert, *suck* at confronting things. You suck at confronting painful things, and difficult things, and most definitely awkward things—and watching two of your closest friends get divorced is about as awkward as it gets.”

I groan as I let my head flop forward onto my chest dramatically. “It’s too early for you to force me to talk about this.”

“I know you are a nocturnal creature and this daylight hours socializing is probably difficult enough for you.” Isabel laughs softly. “So just do one thing for me and I’ll wrap this up.”

“Anything,” I beg her. “Just make it stop, at least until I’ve had a few dozen coffees.”

“Say his name.”

“Who’s name?” She groans and rolls her eyes. I wince. “Oh. Your swine of a soon-to-be-ex-husband.”

“That’s his title, *not* his name.”

“If I say it, can we immediately change the subject back to something that doesn’t make me want to squirm my way out of the cafe?” I check, and her gaze narrows further.

“Say it, Abigail.”

I sigh heavily then mutter, “Paul.”

Isabel presses a hand against her mouth and blinks rapidly, as if she’s trying to dispel sudden tears. I panic and reach to console her.

“I’m so sorry, Izzy—I just *knew* if I said—”

Her expression clears in an instant as she laughs at me. “Got you.”

“That was mean!” I protest.

“No, *that* was revenge for you lying to me when you said nothing was wrong. Eat your breakfast, go home and stop avoiding Marcus.”

She’s seen right through me. I sigh and reach for my apple juice, wishing it was something stronger.

“I’m not exactly avoiding him...”

“You’re out of the apartment before noon, Abby,” she says wryly. “We both know you’re avoiding *something*.”

\*

THE TEXT ARRIVES from Luca just after lunch.

It’s a no from me on the sperm thing.

It’s a pretty typical Luca-text. Blunt, to the point, not quite enough detail—and unapologetic. I picture him at work on a job site. He’s probably standing on a ladder with a paintbrush in one hand and his phone in

the other, bashing out the text to me, then getting right back to it without another thought.

Marcus is charming; the quintessential ‘people person’. His twin, on the other hand, was born without a filter. I took a leaf out of Luca’s book yesterday when I invited him for lunch. I don’t think I even said hello—I just opened with *Luca, would you consider donating sperm, so I can have a baby?*

I really thought he was a good candidate for this little project of mine—he’s attractive and healthy and smart, and although Luca and I have a thirty-year-long relationship almost entirely based on verbal sparring, he *is* a wonderful guy. Luca has been open about his plans to remain childless, so I thought maybe he’d consider an arrangement where he could make an anonymous donation and have no responsibility for the child. I thought he’d make a few light-hearted, awkward jokes, then shrug and tell me he’d talk to Austin about it.

I didn’t realize, though, that Austin desperately wants kids too. They’ve only just started trying to figure this out themselves, and he’s not sure how he could help me have a baby when his husband wants a family too. Luca isn’t even sure he’s on board with *that*.

He also asked me to tell Marcus and promised he’d talk to Austin about it, so I clung to a shred of hope, even though, on some level, I did realize he was probably going to say no.

I haven’t logged into my instant messaging system today—because I know the moment I do, Marcus will try to talk to me. However, talking to Marcus is the only thing that’s going to ease the ache. I log into the

chat client and as expected, a message pops up immediately.

Marcus: Have the kidnappers returned you already?

Abby: Kidnappers?

Marcus: Well, you weren't in bed when I got back from the gym, so I assumed someone had taken you against your will. I spent the whole morning figuring out how much ransom money I was willing to part with to get you back.

I laugh softly, wipe my cheeks with the back of my hands, then reply.

Abby: I'm priceless, we both know that. You'd have given them every cent you have and it would still have been a bargain.

There's a pause, then I see the indicator flash up to indicate that he's typing again, so I beat him to it.

Abby: Still not ready to talk about it. Besides, Luca said no, so it's not happening anyway and I'm super pissed at him for making me tell you for nothing. So really. Don't get me started. Not today.

On that note, I scoop up my phone and start to draft a furious text to Luca for making me tell Marcus unnecessarily. The computer sounds before I can send it and I glance back to the screen.

Marcus: I'm really sorry, Abby. If you don't want me to push you, I won't—but when you're ready, let's talk

about it. Until then, you just tell me what I need to do to support you.

There's a flush of something warm inside my chest—relief? Gratitude? Affection? Marcus is the most important person in my world, but at times like this, I can't help but think back to *The Kiss* and I kick myself all over again. That was the only time in my entire life I've taken a risk with this relationship and I still can't believe my stupidity. I *need* Marcus. He's the *yin* to my *yang*, the icing on the cake of my life, my moral support, my sounding board and my living, breathing motivational poster. I draw in a deep breath, thank him, and then delete the angry text to Luca—instead, I reply with something a little more mature.

Thanks for letting me know, Luca. Of course, I'm disappointed, but I do understand. And for the record, if you and Austin do decide to have a family one day, you're going to be a great dad.

I send it, but then I read it again, and realize how sappy it is. That's definitely not my style with Luca, so I hastily add:

A super-annoying dad, mind you, but a great one.

But then I feel completely shit, because I suddenly remember what else Luca and Marcus are dealing with right now, and there's a good chance that Marcus wasn't just looking for me this morning because he wanted to hear me talk about *my* problems.

Abby: Are you doing okay with the Warwick thing? We got so sidetracked last night with my shit, and I feel awful that I wasn't here for you today.

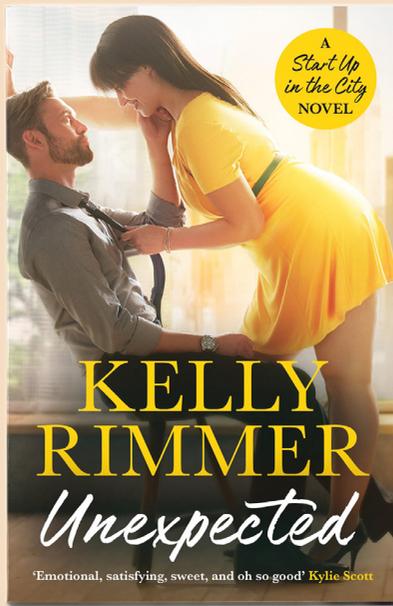
Marcus: I'm just fine, Abs. I'm not even thinking about it. Still don't even know if I'll even bother to reply.

I'm not really sure about any of that. I can't predict how Marcus is going to deal with Warwick's reemergence—it's too left field. I do have my own stuff to deal with, but I really need to do a better job of supporting him while he figures this out.

I sigh and open my *Brainway* browser—of course I use the software Marcus' company develops. I stare at the address field for a long moment.

I don't want my baby's father to be a stranger, but I don't have any other way forward. I'll never forgive myself if I don't even *try* to have a baby before it's too late.

My fingers move slowly, but I force myself to type the URL for the fertility clinic I'll be visiting next week. I login with the account information they sent me, and ignoring the sick feeling in my stomach, I navigate to the sperm donor database.



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