

Ghost of a Chance
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"Kiely! You're needed. Airport. Now. Bring that lace dress. The spiky boots. And your character shoes."

"Nice to hear from you too, Lida Rose. Hello? How are you? How's the weather in Texas? How's your veggie garden?"

A distinct snort could be heard long distance.

"Terrific, hot as hell, wilting. Ticket waiting at La Guardia. Terminal B. Noon. Be there."

I was getting worried. I'm accustomed to Lida Rose's abrupt style, but this was beyond crisp.

"Wait. What's the problem? Why am I needed? Are you about to be a grandmother or something?"

She sighed and switched her tempo to one a bit less frenetic. "No. The twins are in Europe on junior year abroad stuff. As far as I know neither of them is planning any little surprises for me. Why would I bring you down here for that anyway? You'd just buy tons of ridiculous baby clothes and make up inappropriately absurd names. Kiely. You're getting me off the subject. Just be quiet and listen. We're doing a revival of a very old melodrama here. I need you to choreograph about six numbers and play a slutty dance hall girl. I originally just needed you to choreograph, but I lost a dancer, and you do sluts better than anyone I know."

"Thank you. I appreciate your high opinion of me."

I try and help out Lida Rose in emergency situations when possible, but I did have a question for her.

"How'd your dancer break her leg?"

"Oh--rollerblading while a teensy bit inebriated."

"You can really pick 'em, can't you? You are the worst casting director to be the best actual director I know."

She ignored this last comment. "You have four hours, and seventeen minutes left to make it to La Guardia."

"Lida Rose, I have just gotten off a nine-month tour of 42nd Street. I'm negotiating to go to Florida to play the tango dancer in Grand Hotel at some chichi dinner theatre. I can't remember the name. My agent has the info. Why come to Texas?"

"Oh, sweetie. You've played the tango dancer at least 1000 times. This will be fun. Totally different. A real live melodrama. I have money. Good money. Far better than dinner theatre pays. And remember Ted and Margaret?"

Ted and Margaret Wyler are financial wizards and great patrons of theatre and other arts. Lida Rose and I have known them for eight years. She's sucked them dry for at least seven.

"Sure. What have they got to do with this?"

"They're going to Cancun for three months and need a house and dog sitter. They just rescued a puppy and don't want it given away to some awful person somewhere. You love dogs. You can never have a dog since you're touring all

the time. We haven't done a show together in three years. I miss you. And you'll love this theatre. Lights, sound and house are totally renovated. Well, almost. But there's a brand new stage." She paused for breath. "And Kiely? This is perfect! There are six, count them, six gorgeous men in this show. All single. And straight. I think. I'm not that great at telling."

Warning bells screamed louder than the car alarm wailing on the street below.

"You almost had me, you witch! A fun show, a dog, a house to live in. Then you had to poke your prying, pimping, surgically altered little nose into my life. Leave me alone!"

"Now, don't go getting your drawers in an uproar. I won't set you up with anybody if you don't want. Honest. And I do need you to choreograph. I'm being absolutely sincere. Now be quiet and listen for a change. The East Ellum Theatre has been in existence for over 100 years. They did melodramas for the first 70 or so. We're bringing back the good old days. Bad Business on the Brazos will be the 100th Anniversary gala event. And the theatre's haunted. So, it's going to be an even bigger deal here and be written up in all the papers in North Texas and I want it to be a great show. Please come?"

I missed this entire explanation. My ears and brain were impervious to everything after "Kiely! This is perfect!" Four little words that portend nothing but trouble when spoken by Lida Rose Worthington, my best friend and worst plague since we met performing *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* twelve years ago. I was backstage doing warm-up stretches before rehearsal for the *Hard Candy* Christmas number when a soprano voice pierced the dark quiet.

"Holy Mama! Splits against the wall. Effing amazing! Painful, but amazing."

A witch's cackle rang out. I lowered my leg, turned and got an eyeful of what appeared to be an overripe gypsy. Costumed in a fuchsia T-shirt, multi-tiered, multi-colored ankle length skirt with a gold sash dissecting top from bottom, the woman stood 5'10" tall in flat pink sandals, and displayed a bust a ship's prow might envy. Bottle-dyed, black, big Texas hair framed a porcelain complexion. Her expression was that of a child swiping the last cookie from the jar.

No gypsies in *Best Little Whorehouse*, I mused. Carnival escapee? Reader from the Ukrainian tearoom in Deep Ellum?

Chubby fingers boasting a ring on each digit grabbed my hand; squeezed.

"Lida Rose Worthington. Playing Miss Mona."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Wait. Let me explain. I have a whole routine you need to hear."

She took a breath, then launched into a monologue about her birth. "Eugenia Grace Worthington's contractions began in the middle of Act Two, Scene Two of *The Music Man*, May 9, 1957. Eugenia Grace anticipated this possibility. Being a polite, as well as avid, theatergoer, she had requested, and been given, an aisle seat. Eugenia Grace and her husband, William James Worthington IV, calmly and quietly walked up the aisle and out of the theatre. It surprised neither that a taxi waited curbside.

"Less than thirty minutes later, Eugenia Grace brought forth a baby girl in the delivery room of St. Vincent's Hospital on West 59th Street. Still feeling somewhat loopy from the nitrous oxide, Eugenia Grace insisted the child be

named Lida Rose. William James was in the waiting room reading the Wall Street Journal, fuming, then phoning his broker. He learned about the name too late to object. Lida Rose Worthington had been entered on the birth certificate by an overly enthusiastic young nurse.

"Thus, as Robert Preston was belting out the last notes of Seventy-Six Trombones, I was belting out my first notes of life in the very same key."

About a year after hearing this monologue, I expressed my opinion to Eugenia Grace that if she had to pick a song title from The Music Man for her darling daughter, it should have been Trouble. I say this because Lida Rose causes a magnitude of trouble -- usually for someone else. The Someone Else on the receiving end is most often me. I admit that gullible is my middle name. But Lida Rose doesn't have to keep that item stored in the scrapbook of her brain and take advantage of it on a yearly basis.

But I digress. Backstage that day, I didn't know the full extent of Lida Rose's ability to create mischief. I was so impressed with the tale of her birth I forgot my manners and stood silently gawking until Lida Rose nudged me.

"So? Who are you? Other than some leggy contortionist."

"Oh, sorry. Kiely Davlin. Playing one of your girls."

Her face brightened. "Keeley? What kind of name is that?"

"One 'i', one 'e'. You had it pronounced right. Like Key. From my grandmother's side. County Cork, Ireland."

I bowed. "Aye, lassie, ah'm one those. Irish on both sides of the lucky penny."

She nodded so vigorously I feared her pendulous earrings would tear her lobes out, then she immediately changed the subject.

"I must admit, Ms. Davlin, your split against the wall was intimidating. I, however, have a pure four octave range, which is how I can play this ridiculously low role when in reality I'm a coloratura soprano."

"But can you cook?"

She grinned, flashing white, pointed teeth.

"Best blintzes outside of Brooklyn."

"Brownies," I stated stoically. "With chocolate chips, walnuts, and Kahlua."

We sighed, contentedly in sync, and became best friends on the spot.

Since Lida Rose was playing the proprietress of the infamous Texas Chicken Ranch, I naturally began calling her the Madam. I still do. She has always had the grace not to call me one of the best little whores. I appreciate this.

Lida Rose. Trouble. The words go together like Tequila and sunrise. Like narrow and escape. Like sun and burn. The inferences are too numerous to list.

Every summer since we first met, she's done her best to ruin my life. Admittedly, there are signs that such ruination is imminent. The words, "Kiely, this is perfect!" are a good clue. Upon hearing them, I try to run towards the imperfect, the past perfect, or the pluperfect. Anywhere Lida Rose is not. Other than that first summer, when she died my hair platinum blonde, the trouble has been primarily male-related. (I'm a curly redhead with the freckles and blue eyes that often accompany same. The result of the yellow dye job was me resembling one of those best little you-know-what's with bad fashion sense.)

Lida Rose's efforts then veered almost exclusively towards matchmaking. The role of Miss Mona obviously went to her head. She believes she truly is a madam. I've repeatedly told her I don't need a seventh generation Manhattan Episcopalian turned Southern Baptist Yenta in my life. But the woman possesses a low learning curve when it involves the concept of single and happy. This is the fault of George Rizokowsky, with whom she's shared wedded bliss for over 20 years. George is five foot seven, with a slight build, balding head, gray eyes, a brilliant mind, and a gentle disposition. He's also a tiger in the bedroom and the best chef this side of Paris. (The last two tidbits are courtesy Lida Rose's confidences.) George teaches European History in a Dallas high school, where, I'm told, the students worship him.

George and Lida Rose met at Dayton Pre-School in New York when they were three, fell madly in love, and stayed that way. I don't think either ever dated anyone else. Lida Rose just keeps the Worthington name professionally. It looks better on a marquee and she hates trying to spell Rizokowsky for the media. Because she was lucky enough to find this paragon as her mate, Lida Rose assumes I too am searching for that perfect significant-male-other. I've tried to explain that I'm happy dancing my way across America and that her taste in men (aside from George) is unbelievably atrocious. Nonetheless, she persists.

Case in point. Three summers ago she was directing Pippin in Dallas. I stupidly accepted her invitation to come choreograph. (I say stupidly because in my haste to do this show I neglected to listen to those words, "Kiely, this is perfect!" as Lida Rose was uttering them.) She already had three men lined up for me.

Bachelor number one was a cattle baron from Ft. Worth, who stood all of five feet tall, had crooked teeth, and smelled like a stockyard. Mind you, I'm not totally averse to dating men shorter than my 5 feet 8 inches. I've even been engaged to two. But I have a good nose for bad breath and Brahman bulls. I also failed to understand why anyone this wealthy couldn't shell out a buck or two to get his teeth fixed. Exit the beef.

Candidate number two was a drag queen who spent his weekends impersonating Bette Davis at gay bars. I enjoyed watching Andy perform his routine and we became great friends, but I kept envisioning annulment papers citing Lack of Conjugal Consummation tacked to my door.

Number three. I shudder. Not that he wasn't cute. Au contraire. He looked like Mel Gibson in Lethal Weapon. And he was undeniably charming and intelligent and (unlike Mel) over six feet tall. But, as I later told Lida Rose, I just wasn't comfortable being involved in a car chase down Central Expressway that lasted twenty minutes. Watching as my date was hauled off in handcuffs for stealing the new Corvette we'd been in made me nervous. Luckily, one of the cops handling the arrest was a high-school buddy of mine who loves theatre. He knows Lida Rose. In fact, if he hadn't been happily married with three kids, she would have tried to match us up. No explanations were necessary once I mentioned Lida Rose's involvement. He understood the situation and kindly gave me a lift home.

I tried to pull my focus back to whatever information I'd just missed from the troublemaker on the other end of the line.

"What's the name of this extravaganza again?"

"Bad Business on the Brazos. Last performed 50 years ago. Same theatre. Very historical."

Visions of puppy dogs danced in my head. I also liked the idea of working at a famous old theatre.

"Kiely? You now have four hours and thirteen minutes before your plane takes off. Enough time to grab a couple of drinks at the airport so you forget you're flying."

I was silent for a moment or two. It did sound more fun than dancing a role I could now do in my sleep. But I've learned not to give in too soon with Lida Rose. It only encourages her to think up more ways to ruin my life.

"Tempt me some more. What's the plot of this thing?"

She knew I was leaning. Caving in was closer to the truth.

"Pretty basic melodrama. Rancher gambles away his ranch in a card game to a villain who cheats. His daughter wants it back. She tries to enter the game on a riverboat going up the Brazos. The hero gallantly offers to take her place since he also has a score to settle with the villain. Lots of great characters, fun songs. And Kiely. Remember, Joe Hernandez? He just opened a place two doors down from the theater. He's calling it El Diablo's."

Ouch. That got me like nothing else could. My last authentic Tex-Mex meal had been nearly a year ago. Manhattan is many wonderful things and offers many wonderful restaurants. Authentic Tex-Mex isn't one of them.

Tex-Mex two doors down from the theatre. Tex-Mex owned and operated by my favorite cook in Dallas. I added visions of tacos to the chorus line of puppies in my head.

"All right, you evil woman. I'll do it. For whatever pay you can offer. Doesn't matter. Just meet me at the airport and drive me straight to El Diablo's. The devil. Perfect. What'd Joe do anyway? Name it after you?"

She wisely ignored this last rhetorical question. We went on to discuss my salary, the flight arrangements, and the schedule for the show. Then she casually tossed in one last possibly relevant piece of information.

"By the way. Did I mention the theatre is haunted? I'm sure I did. You were in another time zone or you would have snapped that one up."

I was silent for so long Lida Rose started tapping the phone checking to see if we were still connected.

"Kiely? Are you there? Kiely! Answer me!"

"I'm here. And after that last remark, it's where I'm likely to stay. Have you lost what's left of your mind? Or have you dyed your hair so many times your brain has absorbed all those toxins and just shut down?"

She sounded slightly miffed. "I am not crazy. The theatre is haunted by the ghost of the actor who played the villain when they did Bad Business 50 years ago."

"Lida Rose. I will come down and do this show primarily because I want Tex-Mex three times a day and I miss not having a dog. But do not go out there and play your version of Dolly Levi and try and get me married off. And don't scare me every five minutes with stories of headless actors wandering the theatre

howling at the moon. You hear me?"

"Of course I hear you. All of Manhattan probably hears you. Really, Kiely, there's no need to shout. I'll meet you at the airport late tonight. Bring cool clothes Hon, it's already 100 here."

"Okay. I'll see you later."

The receiver was in my hand. In the act of replacing it, I realized the Madam had completely ignored my comments about matchmaking and ghost stories. I desperately wanted to know why she thought the theatre had a ghost but again, one does not provide the ammunition for Lida Rose to fire up her schemes. Her voice came back over the wire.

"Oh, Kiely?"

"Yes?"

"Did I tell you why the villain haunts the theatre?"

"Oh, Lida Rose?"

"Yes?"

"Did I tell you I don't want to know?"