

The Town Drunk

Presents

A Bouquet at Twilight

Lisa Mantchev

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I stabbed the organic greens on my plate and scowled at the tabletop holo-ad. The damn things were getting more invasive. You couldn't even go to the loo without a smarmy ad for toilet tissue serenading you in the stall.

This one for PheroTherapy was particularly offensive because the scanners had put *my* face on the girl in the commercial. I watched as pseudo-me strolled along the sand and frolicked in the waves with an absolutely gorgeous guy.

“Chemically engineered passion in your lunch hour. No more lonely nights!”

Close-up on a passionate kiss while the narrator touted the marvels of pheromone receptor therapy. I doubled my scowl and stuck out my tongue.

“Your face will freeze like that, Keira.” Seelie dropped her purse and slipped into the chair across from mine.

“You’re looking...” I searched for the correct adjective. “...healthy.”

Not just healthy—my sister positively glowed. I hadn't seen her in a few months, but she was the female half of the only Soul Couple in our social circle. No doubt she'd spent the morning in bed with Marcus.

Bitch.

Well, it wasn't fair, was it? Everyone else had to wash down their compatibility meds with Aphrodise and hope for fireworks. The ruby-red bottles sparkled on at least six neighboring tables. True Soul Couples were scarcer than a day without Class III smog.

“When did you get back?” she asked.

“Just this morning.”

“Nice vacation?”

That was her way of reminding me that I’d run away from home and mortally embarrassed the whole family. I signaled the waiter. “I’ll take a refill.”

Seelie glanced over the menu. “I’ll have the bean sprouts and grilled chicken.”

“That’s extravagant, even for you.” I resumed poking at my salad.

“I need the vitamins.” Something in her tone made me look up. She radiated suppressed triumph and excitement.

“You’re pregnant!” I screeched.

Heads turned. Her hands flew to her belly. “Sh! Not so loud—”

I bounced around in my seat. They’d been waiting for the paperwork to clear for ages, but now I was going to be an aunt. “Did you pick a boy or a girl?”

“Marcus wanted a girl.” When I toasted her with my wineglass, Seelie gave me a very disapproving look. “How much of that have you had?”

“This is my second glass.” It was my fourth, but she didn’t need to know that. “I can drink more than two sips without keeling over, remember?” I’d inherited my tolerance and my sturdy figure from our father. Seelie took after Mom with her willowy waist and devastating practicality.

Her food arrived. While she ate, she chattered about tiny clothes and nursery colors, names and preschool registration. I listened with half an ear and watched my smiling face reflected in the stranger/lover’s eyes.

“Hello.” Seelie waved an impatient hand in front of my face. Her brilliantine wedding band could’ve signaled passing ships. “Have you heard a thing I’ve said? Where are you?”

On the beach, in Quinn’s arms. Angel Beach, where we used to set off fireworks...

I counted off all the things wrong with that daydream. Quinn and I were over. Despite both our families being so certain we were meant for each another, there was no spark between us. Mortified, I’d broken up with him and taken off on a “work-abroad program” and then an “extended vacation.”

I hadn’t laid eyes on him in months.

“I was just thinking that I should check myself in and fall in love with a stranger, just for a laugh.” I pointed at the PheroTherapy ad.

Seelie frowned and didn’t get the joke. “For crying out loud, Keira. What would people say?”

I bristled. “I couldn’t care less. It’s nobody’s business but mine.”

She sipped her pomegranate juice (no doubt it was rife with antioxidants or some such garbage) and studied me over the amber rim of her glass. “What about Mom and Dad?”

“I’ll ask them tonight at family dinner.”

“You’ll give Dad another attack!” She set her glass down with extreme force. Garnet liquid sloshed over the rim and spangled the wipe-clean tablecloth.

I glared at her. “You make it sound like I gave him the others.”

“You know they worry about you.”

“Sure. They wonder why the daughter of a Soul Couple can’t be more like her perfect S-C sister.”

“I’m not the one who brought home the punk guitarist or that loser bartender, am I?” She cut her chicken with precise, deliberate motions.

“You were just as wild before you met Marcus, or have you forgotten the remolecularized black hair and the cinnamon cigarettes?”

“I was in university then! Besides, we were talking about you. Why don’t I talk to Quinn for you—”

I cut her off. “I’d rather stick this fork in my eye. And if you say anything to him, I’ll stick this fork in *your* eye.”

Seelie wagged a finger at me. “Genetically and hormonally, you should be a perfect match.”

“Just because you married Marcus doesn’t mean I should be compatible with his brother.”

“Biologically speaking—”

I shook my head. “There was nothing there, biologically speaking. Zippo, zilch, nada. It was like kissing a soggy bathmat.”

“You didn’t give it enough time.”

“Six months was more than enough for two lifetimes, thanks. We’re not two puzzle pieces you can wedge together, Seelie.” I shoved my card into the pay slot and pressed my finger to the pad.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll see you tonight. Give Marcus my congratulations.”

She called something after me, but I pretended not to hear.

Cranberry disinfectant and expensive wood paneling perfumed the operatory. I sat in a mesh gown, nether regions exposed, and swung my legs to and fro to keep warm. Seelie’s voice of reason attempted to sabotage my resolve.

Keira: *Right leg, left leg, right leg, left leg...*

Seelie’s voice: *This is insane. You know it is.*

Keira: *Shut up, you. And get out of my head or I’m gonna tell Mom.*

Seelie’s voice: *Put on your clothes and get the heck out of there. I’ll call Quinn and see what he’s doing tonight.*

Keira: (mental fingers in ears) *I can’t hear you. La la la la.*

Dr. Abbott opened the door and smiled. Both voices sputtered to a halt. Apparently my doctor wasn’t just the doctor; he was also the dreamy guy from the ad. He studied my clipboard chart while I checked my chin for drool.

“Looks like you’re a good candidate for PRT. Did the nurse explain the procedure to you?”

“In more detail than strictly necessary.” I didn’t know what to do with my hands, so I sat on them. “The Ancient Egyptians used hooks to extract brains, too.”

He laughed. “We’re not going to extract your brain. Just tweak your vomeronasal organ.” He handed me a sheaf of legal papers and a print coder. “You put your sig and thumbprint on those, and we’ll get started.”

“Now?” My voice squeaked up an octave.

“Your male counterpart is already sedated next door. You’re a perfect match.”

My signature looked terrible; I had the handwriting of a serial killer. “Shouldn’t we meet first?”

“It’s more a ‘love-at-first-sight’ thing.” He flicked on the IV and I tumbled into sleep.

My nose ached like holy hell, and every nerve behind my eyeballs burned. For such an expensive procedure, the clinic was sure being stingy with the meds. I forced my eyes open; the

room swirled and jiggled by turns. A nurse appeared at my side, all smiling concern and face powder.

“Easy there, dearie.” She propped me up on a pile of pillows and handed me an electrolyte squeeze-pak. “You’re in the recovery room. Lie quiet for a moment, there’s a good girl.”

Someone else groaned. The nurse disappeared around the curtain while my heart thudded and then stopped altogether.

That must be *him*.

I leaned against the bed railing and registered low voices and the rumble of male laughter. I sniffed experimentally. Nothing. I had to get closer.

“She’s resting, too,” said the nurse on the other side of the curtain. “I’ll send the doctor ‘round to introduce you properly.”

Retreating footsteps. Ignoring the nurse’s edict, I clambered out the other side of the bed and wobbled to my feet. Three unsteady steps later, I gripped the curtain. Then I made the supreme mistake of inhaling. Lust spread in waves through every nerve and played havoc with my post-op muscle control.

“Oh, yeah baby,” I think I groaned as I crashed to the floor wrapped in several meters of blue linen and plastic IV tubing.

Strong hands fished me out. For a moment, I could only absorb the tantalizing scent of his skin, the chocolate brown curls, the eyes that widened—in shock or recognition or both—

“Quinn!” My protests collided with the pheromones in an insane chemical moshpit in my brain.

Then his mouth was on mine and there were fireworks.

We barely made it through the post-op checklist, mandatory thirty-day marriage ceremony, and back to his apartment. He was phenomenal. I was phenomenal. We committed acts that violated countless hygiene laws and negated the warranty on Quinn’s mattress.

Afterwards, Quinn smoothed my hair away from my face and laughed.

“What?” I wanted him again, but vital parts were chafed and tender.

“Sorry. I was contemplating how to thank the bugs.”

“I’m lying here naked and you’re thinking about bugs?” I propped my head on my palm.
“Something cute, I hope.”

He snorted. “Stink bugs.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Thanks a lot.”

“Not you, woman. They started the pheromone research with stink bugs.” He traced the curve of my hip. Fingers strayed across my belly. I found it very hard to concentrate.

“Well, aren’t you a font of knowledge.” I swallowed. Twice.

“I did a lot of research before I went to the clinic.” One finger poked me gently in the belly button. “Didn’t you?”

“Oh yeah. Of course. Hours and hours of research,” I said with a grin.

“I just hope you love me in the morning,” he said with mock seriousness. “The female response to the male pheromone bouquet was always strongest in the late afternoon and evening.”

I rolled over and stretched luxuriously. “Evening. Evening. What was I supposed to do this evening?”

“Family dinner.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “We have to get going or it will be over before we get there.”

I made it impossible for him to put on his pants. “How do you feel about missing the main course?”

Quinn decided he could make that concession.

Our appearance under the archway of my parents' formal dining room provoked an air of general puzzlement. My new mother-in-law dabbed at her mouth.

“I didn’t realize you two were dating again,” she said.

“We’re not. Dating, that is.” Quinn squeezed my waist. I flashed my left hand at them; the brilliantine band sparked blue fire under the chemical chandelier. “We got married.”

His announcement was met with complete and utter silence. Foreheads wrinkled. Mouths hung ajar. Seelie’s expression of shock was most hysterical, but I swallowed my giggles.

“What are you playing at, Keira?” she demanded.

“I’m not playing at anything.”

“Where did you go after lunch?”

“I bumped into Quinn at the PheroTherapy lab.”

The reaction was the same as if I’d stood on a chair and defecated on the table.

“You’re joking, surely.” My father’s cheeks flooded with color. If he had another attack—well, I could just hear Seelie’s *I told you so*.

“No, it’s true, sir,” Quinn answered before I could find my voice.

“Why would you go to that voodoo center when I expressly forbade it?” His mother sobbed into her napkin.

Quinn rubbed a hand through his hair. I wanted to lick him; I bit my lip instead.

“You’ve been trying to force Keira and me together for months. Years. Now all you can do is squawk. Make up your damn minds.”

God, I wanted him again. Maybe right there on the table...

“They are married, Evelyn,” my mother said with the air of someone making a supreme concession. “I suppose we should be thankful they ended up together and not with mongrel strangers.”

“Woof,” I said, exhaling in Quinn’s ear. Laughter shuddered through his frame. My inhibitions unraveled, and I didn’t know how much longer I could behave myself.

He had even less control. His arm snaked around my waist and cupped my breast. I smothered a gasp. No one was looking; they were too busy calling the butler to bring champagne and conjecturing as to what on earth had gotten into us.

I edged towards the door, trying to calculate the distance to the stairs, the nearest closet, bathroom, guest room.

I didn’t remember the world until noon the next day. My head throbbed in time with my heartbeat, and I groaned. Champagne didn’t usually give me a hangover (even after three bottles), but this one came complete with spots behind the eyelids.

My legs were tangled up in the sheets, and a large, snoring specimen of the male persuasion occupied the other half of the bed. I rolled over and touched the tip of my nose to his. I waited for the rush, that nearly illegal surge of hormones and endorphins I’d come to associate with him.

I waited.

And waited.

He rolled over on his back and snored again. Instead of squealing with delight, I wanted to clap my pillow over his face. Instead, I tentatively snuffled his shoulder. The line of his jaw. The hollow of his throat.

Desperate, I hefted his elbow and stuck my nose directly in his armpit. The faintest flicker. I didn't want to violate him or leave scratch marks down his back. Instead, I had the completely unfamiliar urge to feed him. To squeeze oranges and scramble eggs. Worse yet, to shake him awake and ask him what he was thinking.

I stared down at him with dismay. Had my VNO rejected him? Maybe my nasal thing was damaged. Whatever it was, I couldn't stay cozied up in bed with him. I wrapped the top sheet around my painfully naked body and scooted towards the edge of the bed. He caught my toga mere inches from freedom.

“Morning, Beautiful.”

I turned very slowly, expecting—what? That he'd scream in horror at my bed head? Demand to know what I'd slipped in his drink? Certainly not that he'd give me that lazy, gorgeous, Sunday morning smile that should have played havoc with my reproductive system.

“Where do you think you're going?”

Crazy. Jail. On the first flight to a non-extradition country.

“Coffee?” I suggested hopefully. “Juice? Morning paper?”

He pulled on my sheet. I followed with unfeigned reluctance. Then his lips were on mine.

I wanted his body. And yet, I wanted more than that. The reaction shook me, and then all I wanted was to get away. “How about brushing your teeth first?”

He paused, no doubt surprised by the request. “And to think I found your morning breath sexy.”

He rolled out of bed, and I averted my gaze from the important bits. Noon sunlight painted every muscle gold when he paused to stretch in the doorway. I should have melted. I should have reeled him back into bed and kept him there for hours.

The moment he closed the door, I dropped the sheet and located my clothes. Then I scrambled out the window, thankful his suite was on the first floor. I sprinted past his shocked neighbors, buttoning my shirt with one hand and hailing a cab with the other.

“You seem surprised to see me here, Dr. Abbott,” I said. The look I gave him should have singed off his eyebrows at the very least. Sadly, they seemed impervious to my attack.

He peered up my nose and made intellectual humming noises. I barely resisted the urge to knee him in the groin.

“We don’t usually see our post-op patients for three or four weeks.” He smiled. “Honeymoon phase, you know.”

The teeth next. I was definitely going to ruin that perfect smile with a well-aimed punch if he didn’t tell me soon what was going on. “Surprise. I’m early. Because I woke up this morning and my VMO was broken.”

“VNO,” he corrected and flicked on the body scan.

“Whatever!” My right hand balled up. “Just tell me how you’re going to fix it.”

He studied the readings. I knew it was bad news when the smile faltered.

“Your body acclimated to the protein binders and then rejected them. This sort of response is very rare. Only one in a few hundred thousand might react to the treatment this way.”

“How comforting.” My mouth went numb.

“We could operate again, but there is no guarantee that your body wouldn’t react with more violence. The headache you experienced this morning could progress to fits, seizures, attacks—”

I lifted my head. “Like heart attacks?”

“Quite possibly.”

“You don’t say.” I reached for my clothes for the second time in an hour. “Some privacy, if you please.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

My father sat behind his desk, uncomfortable with his role as guilty child. He toyed with a water glass, made wet rings on the shiny surface of the wood. “It was none of your damn business, Keira. That’s why.”

“Does Mom know, or did she go through the procedure with you?”

“God, no!” He looked doubly shocked, if that were possible. We stared at each other. He retreated to his drink. I twisted the strap of my purse.

“Why?” I was ten years old again, and he knew everything in the whole, wide world.

But now... now he looked old. And tired.

“A man gets to a certain age,” he finally said, “and passion fades to something more steady. Comfortable. Your mother deserved romance and chivalry.”

“So you booked an appointment.”

“I’m getting treated during my lunch hour, same as you.”

“And the attacks?”

“Side effects of repeated treatments. Must be a hereditary condition if you had the same response.”

“Like the booze.” I stared at him until my eyes watered. “Dad, Dr. Abbott advised me against repeat treatments. Why are you doing this to yourself?”

“Your mother deserves better,” he repeated, a broken sound file. “It’s worth the risk.”

“It’s worth the risk?”

I’d retreated to Seelie’s chaise lounge and covered my face with a damp washcloth. She paced with rapid efficiency, and I was reassured by the click-click-click of her shoes against the floor. Seelie always thought best on her feet.

But then she yanked off my cold compress and flung it to the floor. “So what do we do now?”

I sat up and gaped at her. “You’re the primary child, the dominant sibling. The lawyer with all the answers! You’re supposed to think of something bloody brilliant.”

She dropped onto the chaise next to me. “I’ll go back into practice just to sue the lot of them into bankruptcy.”

“Great. Then what?”

“You tell Quinn. He gets the procedure reversed, and you go your separate ways. But what do we tell Mom?”

I wrapped my arms around my knees, remembering my afternoon of passion. Lust. The fireworks at Angel Beach. “Maybe Dad’s right.”

She stopped chewing on her thumbnail. “What?”

“Maybe it’s worth the risk.” I tried to conjure Quinn’s face, his eyes, his smile, but he coalesced with the beaming pictures of Marcus that surrounded me on all sides. “Better to spend a few years or months in bliss than a lifetime in searching.”

Seelie moved toward the drink dispenser. “I’m ordering up a cup of strong tea, and I’m putting brandy in yours. You are obviously in shock.”

“You can’t drown the thought in tea.” I twisted my wedding band around and around.

She whirled to face me. “Are you insane? You’re going to kill yourself just to have—”

“What you have!” I leaped to my feet. Pointed my finger at their wedding holo, the Perpetual Slideshow™ of their honeymoon, the son of their unborn child. “That, that, and that! What gives you the right to tell me what that’s worth when you have it?”

“What’s the point, Keira?” Her face crumpled. “It doesn’t sound like you have anything to envy anymore.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Mom and Dad were an S-C. And now he’s in PheroTherapy trying to rekindle the flames *because something changed*. He lost his passion for her.” She put her hands over her belly. “If it can happen to them, it can happen to me.”

I watched her foundation collapse beneath her. “Marcus isn’t going to fall out of love with you.”

“Can I get that in writing?” She stumbled to the bathroom, a hand over her mouth.

“Seelie—”

“Just go, Keira. I am going to be very, very sick, and I don’t need an audience.”

The door slammed shut between us, and I fled.

I owed him an explanation, didn’t I? I couldn’t just disappear with a suitcase and some cash. I couldn’t remolecularize my hair color, hide behind dark sunglasses, and retreat to Angel Beach for the rest of my days, could I?

Yeah, I thought about it. So sue me.

I sat in the disorder of the abandoned bed and waited for him to return to the apartment. My mother would have called a maid. Seelie would have smoothed the covers up, at least. I was fine with the mess. The chaos suited my mood.

I didn't bother turning on the lights. It was too peaceful in the dark, the smell of him strong and clean. If I held very, very still, I could imagine I was a flower in some tropical jungle. My petals opened until the very heart of me was exposed.

Locks tumbled free. The door opened with a hiss.

The chemical sconces flared to life, and my eyes streamed. I blinked tears away until I could see Quinn framed in the doorway.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You've been looking everywhere for me."

The muscles under his shirt flexed with the effort, but he didn't say it. I wanted to pull the sheets over my head and howl, but—

"I have to tell you something, and I need you not to interrupt." I took a deep breath and rushed on. "My body rejected the treatment."

He didn't interrupt. That was good, right?

"Dr. Abbott advised me against repeating it."

More silence. He sure took direction well, the bastard. I scowled and threw the last bit of revelation at his head.

"Only one in a hundred thousand. Makes me very special."

He cleared his throat. "Two in a hundred thousand."

I jerked. "You too?"

"No. Your dad."

I slumped, irrationally disappointed. "How did you know?"

"He called me after you ran out of the office." He crossed the room and sat at the edge of the bed, careful not to get too close. "That was something of a shock."

"Yeah. Seelie wasn't too happy to hear about it either." I sniveled a bit, despite my best efforts. "It's all such a mess."

"But it's not our mess."

"But my dad—"

"—is going to talk to your mother tonight. They'll sort things out as best they can."

“Seelie and Marcus—”

“—are none of our business. You’ve seen them together. That’s a marriage that will last, S-C or not.”

I scrubbed my face with the edge of the sheet. “And what about us?”

“I get the procedure reversed, and we get an annulment based on non-consummation—” I choked back hysterical laughter. “Or not.”

He touched me then, very lightly, on the knee.

I shook my head. “I woke up this morning and watched you sleep. I could have jumped on you but *decided not to*. I don’t know if I have enough passion to keep this going.”

He smiled, that gorgeous Sunday-morning-in-bed smile. “You’re scared. Is that it?”

I nodded and wiped my nose on my shirt.

“We still have the rest of the month before the marriage comes up for re-op. Let’s give it a chance and see where it takes us.”

“That certainly would blow Dr. Abbott’s research all to hell.” I rested my head on his shoulder. He smelled like shampoo and clean laundry. And mint toothpaste. Something in my belly fluttered.

He kissed my hand. “I’ll bring you bouquets at twilight.”

Maybe it wasn’t a shooting star, but it was a sparkler. I could write our names on the night sky for as long as it lasted.

When not scribbling, **Lisa Mantchev** can be found on the beach, up a tree, making jam or repairing things with her trusty glue gun. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Aeon*, *Abyss & Apex*, and the SFWA anthology *New Voices in Science Fiction*. More will be appearing soon in *Japanese Dreams* and *Electric Velocipede*. She is currently at work on the third novel in the Théâtre Illuminata trilogy. You can Taste the Bad Candy at her website, <http://www.lisamantchev.com>.