

Once in a Lifetime Bonus Scene
Kathryn R. Biel

©2021 Kathryn R. Biel

Tokyo, 2002

Mandy:

Tonight was going to be special.

You could feel it in the air, like secret electric currents zipping and zapping us with the promise of something special to come.

We're packed into the tiny hotel room somewhere in Tokyo, the five of us practically crawling on top of each other and our luggage to get read for our big night out. Callie is the first to be ready, her burgundy velour track suit with cropped jacket looking somewhat out of place for a night out in the big city. Callie dressed her comfort up, adding a thick glitzy necklace with her name and rhinestone-studded strappy heels. Tabby and Angie are clad their typical camisole tops and barely-there mini skirts. I didn't have the confidence, nor the maturity, to wear anything so daring. Dauen, too, appears to be stepping up her fashion game, with low-rise lace up pants and an equally cropped top, her jutting hip bones and taut stomach on full display.

The only reason I wear the revealing costumes on stage is because Chester makes me.

I look down at my own low-rise, flared bottom jeans and cropped peasant top and feel out of place. It's not a new feeling for me. Back when Dauen and I were in high school—a mere two years ago—this outfit would have put me at the top of the fashion food chain. Now, compared to Callie who rivals J-Lo in her chic style, I feel like a frump off the farm.

I'm starting to rethink the chunky blonde highlights in my brown hair, too.

No wonder I'm the least noticed in the group. I wouldn't notice me either.

But I don't need to be noticed. All I need is this group of girls with whom I make up the Sassy Cats. We're on the brink, I can feel it.

The record label must too, otherwise they wouldn't have flown us all the way to Tokyo to film our music video for "Anything is Paw-sable." Granted, we filmed in a crowded shopping mall, à la 1987 Tiffany, but still, Dauen and I are a long way from Suffrage High.

Half a world away, to be exact.

I reach over, and squeeze her arm. "I can't believe we're here. I can't believe we're doing this."

"It's not like we've never drank before. Jeeze, Mandy, get a grip. Act your age." She shakes my arm off hers and adjusts a butterfly clip in her long, black hair.

This was true. We drank, quite frequently, in our apartment and the various hotel rooms we hole up in. Callie's already twenty-three and Angie is twenty-two, so the Sassy Cats can't let the fact that we're only nineteen hold us back from partying.

"Yeah, but this is the first time we're going to a bar. Like an actual bar." I have no idea what the drinking age is here, but I know it's less than twenty-one.

"I still can't believe we're going to a karaoke bar. It's like, clichéd." Callie says, boredom evident. It's pretty clear she thinks she's going to be the breakout star here, and we're cramping her style. I look down at my outfit again.

Maybe she's right.

I add hoop earrings so large I can stick my hand through them.

"But karaoke and sake bombing are like totally Japanese. We have to do that." Tabby offers.

"Yeah, it's not like we're getting to see anything else here. You'd think we'd at least get to Mount Fuji or something interesting," Dauen adds.

Callie rolls her eyes. "Okay, fine, but I'm not singing. I only sing if someone pays me."

"Whatever. If you want to be a party pooper, hang out by yourself. Let's get this party started!" Tabby loops her arm through mine, pulling me toward the door. "Pour me some sake!"

Suddenly I'm a little apprehensive about what the night will bring. We're on our own—in a foreign country no less—with no chaperone. No guidance. No one to keep an eye on things.

But once we reach the crowded lobby, relief washes over me. Our band is there—Marco, John, Ben, and Dave. They're like our older brothers, so I'm sure they'll watch out for us.

A sinking feeling hits my stomach, though, when I see Margo greet Angie in a hug that is anything but brotherly, especially as his hand snakes down to her butt. She giggles and whispers in his ear. I shift my gaze to the ground, feeling like a voyeur in the bright neon lights of the lobby.

"You gonna sing for me?" A low voice in my ear startles me. I whirl around.

"Oh, Ben" I laugh. "Um, maybe? Why? Are you gonna sing? Songs are fun. I like songs."

I could win an award for most awkward pop singer ever.

He shrugs, looking at his feet. "I dunno. I ... I like listening to you sing."

Heat fills my face. "Um, I like listening to you play the guitar." I've heard seventh graders with more swag than I have right now. I look over and see Dauen heading toward the door. I rush after her before I can say something even more embarrassing. I link my arm around hers as we walk down the block to the karaoke bar.

Tokyo is like nothing I've ever seen. Nothing like Springfield where Dauen and I grew up, and even nothing like North Hollywood where we live now. Neon lights climb all the way up into the heavens it seems, with buildings and people stacked equally as high.

I still can't believe we're here.

"We're here! This looks totes fun!" Tabby shrieks. "Come on!" She pulls me in through the door of a building that barely looks wide enough to turn sideways in. It's deceptive once we're inside, red and leather everywhere. Directly at the back, the karaoke stage is the main focus.

For the record, sake tastes like warm turpentine. Or what I imagine turpentine would taste like if it wouldn't kill you from drinking it. Although, I'm not sure the sake's not going to kill us too. After a shot or two—or three—I don't seem to care about the taste anymore.

My limbs feel loose and free. The music pumps through me as some Japanese guy in a suit sings "Sweet Caroline." The entire bar shouts and sings in unison.

I want everyone to shout and sing with me too. I turn around, looking for Dauen to sing with me. I don't see her. I squint my eyes, trying to scan the crowd. There's Marco and Angie. Maybe they'll—

Nope. From his hand not so subtly snaking up her skirt, I'm guessing this is not a good time to ask them to sing with me. Where's Dauen?

I'm looking left and right, but the air seems cloudy. Hazy. Is it foggy in here? Why can't I see? What am I going to sing?

I stumble to the book, trying to flip through. The words in English made about as much sense as the Japanese characters.

"Here, drink this." Ben is suddenly in front of me, putting a glass of water into my hand. The water is so cold and refreshing. I feel as if I could drink a gallon. "Did you eat dinner?"

I shake my head. We were too busy getting ready. Ben holds up a finger, indicating he'll be right back.

Seriously, this is the best water I've ever tasted.

Ben's back with a plate full of dumpling or egg-roll-y thingies. I don't know what they are. I can't exactly taste them either, but the room seems a little steadier. He hands me another glass of water. "I think you went a little fast with the sake."

I nod, my mouth full. I look down at the karaoke book still opened in front of me. I see the song I want to sing. "Lady Marmalade" has always been a favorite of mine, but since it was re-done for *Moulin Rouge* last year, it's been reborn.

I know if I get up there, the girls will join me.

And they do, before I've even finished the first verse, our voices harmonizing on the chorus. My eyes lock on Ben's, who's watching with an amused smile on his face.

Voulez-vous coucher indeed.

I hit the high notes on "more," suddenly wishing I could have more. More with Ben.

As we finish the song, the place erupts in cheers and applause. It seems as if the entire patronage of the bar is on their feet. A young man rushes up to me, shoving a drink napkin and pen in my face. In broken English he says, "You Kelly Clarkson? American Idol?"

I get that a lot.

"No, I'm Mandy Calhoun. We're the Sassy Cats." I gesture to the girls.

"Sassy Cats?" he repeats.

I nod. "Yes, we're the Sassy Cats."

The girl next to him starts jumping up and down, squeezing his arm. He looks at her annoyed. She says something to him and his face lights up.

"Kitty kitty cat, don't mess with me, Jack. I'm a feline on the prowl. C'mon over here and make me growl." He sings.

Holy crap, he just sang some of "Here Kitty Kitty" to me.

"Guys, he sang our song. He knows our song." Now it's me jumping up and down, clutching my friends for dear life.

My excitement is contagious, and soon the five of us are shrieking and yelling and hugging and crying as only we could do.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's the same young man, handing me the napkin and pen again. "Name." He makes a writing motion. I sign my name with a big flourish, adding a quick paw print underneath it. I pass the napkin onto Tabby.

Time seems to slow down. Among the din and chaos of the bar, we, the Sassy Cats, are signing autographs. In Tokyo. How is this even really my life?

The girl who was with him grabs the karaoke book and hands it to me, pointing at a song. "Here Kitty, Kitty." She nods expectantly.

Angie reaches over my shoulder and grabs the book. "We have to do it! Come on!" She takes the book, running to the DJ. No one has taken the stage since we were on last, so we march right back up.

The stage is small, but we perform the hell out of our first song. I don't think I'll ever get tired of singing this song, or of doing the choreography either. As we attempt to exit the stage, the crowd begins to press in. I reach out to grab onto one of the girls, but suddenly they're not so close. I can't reach them.

I can't reach anyone I know.

People press into me, grabbing me and touching me. The sounds are deafening, and I can't make out anything. Then I hear it. Him.

"Mandy! MANDY!" Ben's pushing through the crowd to get to me. He waves frantically until I see him.

"Ben!" I scream.

He shoves one last person out of the way to reach me. I jump into his arms, pulling him tight and burying my face in his neck. His strong arms wrap around me, and suddenly, I know I'm safe with him.

He elbows and pushes until we make it out a back door into a tiny alley. I have no idea where we are or how to get back to the hotel. Ben's still holding onto my waist, so it doesn't seem to matter that much.

"You saved me," I pant, trying to catch my breath. My heart is pounding so hard I think it's going to bust through my chest. My ears are buzzing and my eyes are trying to adjust to the neon lights again.

"Are you okay? That was crazy!" He's equally as breathless.

I look at him, nodding. Adrenaline courses through my veins and there's only one thing to do. I pull Ben tight, locking my lips on his. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before.

Ben Reynolds was not my first kiss, but from this moment on, I know he'll be my last.

I'm a goner.

