

# Like hope, almost

Von Tea\_Kaiba

With an audible groan, she fell onto one of the rickety stools at the bar, purposefully choosing the one in the remotest, darkest corner in the hope of avoiding unnecessary attention. Her scalp was itching, but one quick look around the dark room convinced her that she didn't want to remove her hat. She might be sweaty and gross, but let your hair down in a place like this, and you wouldn't get a minute of peace all night. Frustrated, Mai rested her elbows on the counter and began rubbing her temples.

"Wow, you look like shit."

Sweet and caring as ever. Still, Tea, the showgirl-slash-bartender, had to be one of maybe five bearable people in this whole town. "So would you, if you didn't have this cushy job and had spent all day chasing down two damn fifteen-year-olds because they decided they'd just help themselves to a couple new horses," Mai grumbled.

With a conciliatory smile, Tea tossed the rag she'd been using to clean the counter into a bucket and reached under the bar for a fresh one. After rinsing it in cold water, she offered it to Mai, who gratefully accepted and pressed the cool fabric to her overheated, dust-encrusted face. "I keep telling you, sweetie. You could come work with us, or any other bar in the area, any time you want. You have the legs for it. I'd even teach you the steps." Yeah, right. If there was one thing Mai knew with absolute certainty, it was that she'd become a showgirl only the day AFTER hell froze over. Not like she was going to hold it against Tea, or any of the other girls, but the thought of showing her bare legs and shoulders to a bunch of horny men made her sick.

"No, thanks. Just get me a drink and get Wheeler to make me some dinner, will you, honey?" Tea nodded and took a freshly polished glass from the shelf above her head, before pouring Mai a generous amount of Whiskey and sliding it across the counter. Leaning forward – Mai was almost sure she'd perfected that move for the job, that *had* to get some tips from the guys – Tea casually grasped her hand and gently rubbed her thumb along Mai's wrist. "You know. I can think of a thing or two to ease your stress. Might even help with the headache."

She opened her mouth to respond, but something about the intense way in which the dancer's blue eyes were fixed on hers made her stomach flutter and her mouth dry up momentarily. Quickly, the blonde withdrew her hand and cleared her throat.

"That sounds great. Let's talk about it later? I still have to eat first, I'm starving." A cacophony of crashing sounds came from the kitchen, and Tea rolled her eyes. "Boss came by earlier, but apparently, Joey didn't take to his menu suggestions very well. Those two have been screaming at each other for at least half an hour. Let me see what I can do." As she pushed through the doors separating the bar from the kitchen, Tea's boss stormed out of the room, nearly knocking the dancer down in his enraged exit.

"What are you still doing here?" he barked and fixed her with his signature icy stare. "You're supposed to go on in five minutes and you're not in costume. Where's Mutou? His shift started half an hour ago." Tea, clearly unfazed by her boss's usual rant, just shrugged. "He'll be here. Don't worry, those guys know I'm dancing tonight, they're not going anywhere." With that, she pushed past him and disappeared into the kitchen.

Despite her rotten mood, Mai chuckled. "Why do you always have to be such a pain in the ass, Kaiba? Running around as though you own the place?" Her friend glared, and began rinsing off his hands with a disgusted expression, clearly unhappy with whatever greasy surface he'd made contact with while in the kitchen. "Because, as you'll recall, Valentine," he said her name with a sneer, pausing slightly to let the effect sink in. Well. Who could blame him. With a name like that, she really should have taken Tea's career advice. "I *do* own the place. *And* several others. And I don't have time to argue with that mutt about whether he'll add more than three dishes to the menu or not. Guy acts as though wanting to eat something besides steak and stew automatically makes you queer."

Mai shot him a sardonic look. "Uh. No. It doesn't. Staring at the sheriff's ass as often as you do, that might do it. Same goes for Wheeler, though. So I don't know what his problem is." She pushed away her already empty glass and realized Tea had reemerged from the kitchen. For some reason, the brunette looked flustered and uncomfortable. With shaky hands, she untied her apron, keeping her gaze purposefully trained on the fraying strings. "Your food will be out in a sec. Joey will bring it over. I really should... get dressed..."

Mai frowned. What the hell was suddenly the matter with her? "Could you get me some water before you go? And... I'll meet you backstage, after your performance? So you can show me your relaxation techniques?" The crimson in Tea's cheeks intensified.

"I... don't know if that is such a good idea." The dancer was still avoiding her gaze, while she clumsily filled a big glass with water from the tap and promptly spilled a nice amount of it. "If that's how you feel... nevermind. Here you go." Without further explanation, she disappeared into the back, which doubled as a store room and her dressing room.

Mai looked after her quizzically, but didn't follow. Whatever her friend's problem was, she could probably explain it after her performance. And after Mai got some food into her grumbling stomach. Impatiently, she gulped down some water, but that was the opposite of helpful. Where was that damn cook when you needed him?

"There you are. Are you aware that you are late for the third time this month and anywhere else you'd already have been fired for this kind of behavior?" Grateful for the distraction, Mai turned and saw Yugi ducking behind the bar. Small as he was, he probably should have looked at least a little bit intimidated by Kaiba, but the grin he flashed him proved that he wasn't. "Ah, but in *this* place, my boss has the hots for my brother and wouldn't fire me if he thought that'd upset him. Which it would. A lot."

Mai wasn't entirely sure the sheriff would agree. He was protective of his little brother, sure, but he was also *very* into rules. Including the one where you were supposed to start your shift on time, as Mai knew from personal experience. But as long as he wasn't here to ask, Kaiba was obviously not going to take that risk. He just grumbled something vaguely menacing and glared at Yugi until the shorter one got to work.

"Medium rare with beans and fritters?" Mai had to use all her self-control not to jump up and snatch the plate out of Wheeler's hands, but she didn't have to, anyway. As soon as he spotted her, the cook hurried over to place her meal before her. "Aw, Mai. Tea should've said it was for you, I could've made you something special." With an appreciative laugh, she speared a few beans with her fork and began to eat. "Really? Like what? Put some onions on it? I couldn't accept that, I'd feel too spoiled." And it wasn't as though he really served any other food in this place. The guy might dream about being a chef, but here, his options were pretty much limited to rotating five different side dishes and burning whatever meat he could get his hands on. Wheeler gave her a mock-pouty grimace, but wasn't about to give up. "Well, fine, it's not my fault we have such a shitty menu." Kaiba looked ready to strangle him, but he simply ignored his boss. "I could've hurried a little more for you, anyway. Make sure you don't starve, cause that'd be a pity." Mai swallowed a mouthful of steak and shook her head, but couldn't suppress a grin. "Don't be that guy, Wheeler. You know I don't see you like that... and it'd be a *real* pity if I couldn't come here anymore because you can't stop yourself from flirting with me." Mostly because there weren't that many other places with edible food in town.

The other blonde shot her a rueful grin, but backed off a little. "Fine, fine. But ya know, sometimes I wonder who you *do* look at that way. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're like Tea, only after the ladies..." For a moment, Mai was so stunned that she even stopped eating, famished as she was. "First of all, Tea's what? And second of all... how would *you* know any better?"

Kaiba had been watching their conversation with quiet amusement. "Don't tell me you didn't know that. And I thought the way you keep turning her down is a pretty obvious reason to know better, but... maybe you just really don't notice how she's flirting with you?"

Feeling her face heat up again, this time definitely not from any physical exercise, Mai dropped her gaze to her plate. "Don't be an idiot. Just because you two are the biggest queers on the planet, doesn't mean everyone is into weird shit like that."

Kaiba wiped his hands on a towel and tossed it into the bucket Tea had used before. "Nobody said that everyone was, all we're saying is Tea obviously is. And by the look of you, you don't mind hearing it. Mutou, get some fresh towels in here and then get

to work. I have to go.”

Thankful that he didn't seem to be expecting an answer, Mai finished wolfing down her dinner. She was just chewing on her last mouth full of food when a few still half-hearted notes came from the piano and the men filling the barroom started cheering. The gangly, white-haired pianist flashed them a grin and gave a small wave before he started playing in earnest. Hastily, the blonde threw some cash next to her empty plate and slid out of her chair. Behind her, she could hear the cheers grow louder and drown out the approaching footsteps of someone definitely not wearing riding boots. Without bothering to turn around, she stormed out of the door.

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*Disgusting. Get away from me, pervert.  
How dare you look at me?*

*Get out. Don't ever get near my family again, or I won't be responsible for what I do.  
Desperate enough to kiss my sister, huh?*

*You just had to say something, I can give you what you need.*

Shivering, Mai drew her blanket tighter around her shoulders and tried to shake the nauseous, helpless feeling she hadn't been able to lose since Wheelers... well. You probably couldn't call it an accusation. The boy hadn't meant any harm. 'Only after the ladies' – to him, that was clearly only a laugh. Maybe a minor annoyance, if it meant he couldn't get the girl.

Not a perversion. A transgression that'd lose you the only home you'd ever had.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Mai felt her heart leap into her throat. Only when her muscles started cramping up, she realized how her hand had gone immediately to the gun on her pillow.

Better pretend not to be home. If the sheriff needed her, he'd be knocking on the other wall, the one she shared with his office. He wouldn't come all the way around the building just to drag her out of bed. Anyone else could go hang themselves for all she cared.

Preferably soon, instead of continuing to hammer on her door like a maniac. Groaning, Mai threw herself face-down on the bed and tried to drown out the noise with her pillow. To no avail, the thing was just too damn thin. "Mai, open up. I just want to see if you're okay. Yugi told me you left in a hurry."

Great.

Tea was a sweet and caring friend and all, but her stubborn need to make sure her friends were alright could be a giant pain in the ass. Better get this over with and get rid of her.

"What do you want?"

Tea didn't answer. The already generous amounts of rouge on her face were drowned out by the natural color that suddenly flooded her face, and her eyes seemed glued just a tad below Mai's face.

"Aw, shit." Following her friend's gaze, Mai realized that the water dripping from her freshly washed and braided hair had soaked through her untucked shirt, making it all but transparent. It didn't help that she'd removed the sweaty binding that she used for support, either. Muttering a string of very unladylike swears under her breath, she turned back into the room and frantically began to search for her jacket.

Drawing the garment closed across her chest, and self-consciously checking that it *really* covered all it was supposed to, Mai heard the door close behind her.

"I just wanted to see if you're okay. Yugi said... you looked mad. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable before."

Stifling a sigh, she forced herself to look at her own bare feet on the floor. Count the clumps of dirt around them. Anything to keep herself from turning around and having to face Tea.

"You didn't. It's fine. Don't worry, it wasn't your fault."

She probably should have just made up a story about a grabby customer or some other reason for her abrupt departure. But then, Yugi would definitely have noticed that, and Tea would definitely know that it wasn't like Mai to just run away from things like this. So she decided to stick with the truth. Or at least part of it.

"It was Wheeler and Kaiba, they thought it would be funny to talk about how you were... flirting with me, or whatever it is they thought. I just wasn't in the mood to listen to their stupid theories."

Tea's heels clicked across the floorboards, and for a second, Mai almost expected her to go. Instead, the brunette reached out and took her hand, forcing the blonde to turn and finally face her.

"They're not. I mean. I was... trying to flirt with you. It was probably stupid. I'm sorry, and I'll stop if you want me to. Just... I thought you should know it wasn't their fault."

When Mai stayed silent, her sentences hung between them in the air, like their outstretched hands, suspended by Tea's grip alone. Mai's hand was completely limp, ready to let go at any moment. Not even let go, ready to swing back and pick up where she left.

"Okay. I should go. I'm sorry."

The dancer turned away, and it was only now, with the unblocked view on her almost-exposed back, that Mai realized Tea hadn't even bothered to change after her performance. She had to be exhausted. The least she deserved was an explanation.

"I just can't do it. I've been accused of... this... before. I mean." God. Where could she

even begin? Letting herself fall down on the bed, Mai reached under the wooden frame and pulled out a bottle of Whiskey, which she promptly took a healthy gulp from before offering it to Tea. The dancer hesitated for a second, but accepted the drink.

"I grew up with this family... friends of my dead parents'. They had a daughter my age. She was my first... I mean, I didn't know back then that not every woman feels like that, you know? And I thought it was the same for her. It *felt* like that when she kissed me. Like it was just... normal. Anyway, her family found out about it and kicked me out. Said if I ever came back into town they'd find my body in a ditch somewhere."

Tea just stared at her, eyes wide with horror and the search for an answer she couldn't come up with. So Mai grabbed her bottle again and continued.

"I just can't risk it. This place is full of idiots but... it's my home now. I can't lose my home again."

Instead of a response, Tea placed one hand on her neck, gently stroking the vertebrae under the cool, damp skin.

"It doesn't have to be like that, you know," she offered after a while. "People here aren't so bad about... well. You know how everyone is about Kaiba and the sheriff and about Joey and the others... sure, there's some jerks, but they wouldn't harm you. Plus, you have some influential friends now. But if that isn't enough for you... nobody even has to know."

Her words made Mai's stomach feel tight, like desire and, almost, like hope.

"Promise?"

Tea leaned forward, awkwardly bumping their noses together and finally resting her forehead against Mai's. "I promise."