

Otherwise Engaged

Laura Young

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Call it Terror Incognita. Travel writer Kate Kelly has visited some strange places on her beat, but none as bizarre as the Lexington, Kentucky horse farm where she finds herself one weekend, pretending to be engaged to a dim-witted underwear model she'd met only a few hours earlier. He needs her services, he explains, because his real fiancée has gone missing at the last minute, and he dare not disappoint his mother, who, although she has never met his betrothed, intends to make his impending engagement party the social event of the season. Kelly is dragooned into this slippery charade by her cousin, Adam, a restaurant consultant and former schoolmate of the faux bridegroom. The groom's family is a real can of mixed nuts. Besides the loony mother, there's a flinty, all-business father and a jealous, horse-obsessed older sister, who treat Kelly like a cold sore. Every ingredient is in place here to spark murder—not to mention cluster bombs of situational and sardonic humor.

Kelly hasn't even unpacked at the Bluegrass Winds farm when the first killing occurs, and it's not long before someone starts trying to kill her. While she's activating her reporter's skills to find the murderer, she's equally busy keeping up the pretense that started the plot rolling. As in all good mysteries, the author provides plenty of suspects. Apart from the sinister family members, there's a villainous veterinarian, a chip-on-the-shoulder trainer, a ubiquitous and pushy photographer, and a flamingly gay party planner, each of whom seems to be operating on a short fuse. Kelly's only moorings in this storm of conflicting personalities are Adam, who's accompanied her on this fool's errand, and her chain-smoking editor and best friend back in Washington, D. C.

The author, who has worked as an assignment editor in the newsroom of Louisville's CBS affiliate and is now a writer and award-winning video producer for an independent public relations firm, tells this story in first person, a device that lays bare the heroine's wry outlook on her own credulity and on the patent insanity of the world around her. Meeting her "intended" for the first time, she is momentarily skeptical. Then her hormones take over: "Once I got past the perfect teeth, the aristocratic cheekbones, and the scent of expensive cologne, all I could see were eyes a vibrant shade of turquoise, flecked with little shavings of sea green that one could stare at for hours. Or days." So much for reportorial objectivity.

Otherwise *Engaged* moves along swiftly and believably. But the bubbling in Kelly's mind is just as fascinating as the shock-a-minute plot.

EDWARD MORRIS (September / October 2004)

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