



The Engagement Party

**A Short Story in the
Something True Series**

Kerri Carpenter

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About the Author

Award-winning romance author Kerri Carpenter writes contemporary romances that are sweet, sexy, and sparkly. When she's not writing, Kerri enjoys reading, cooking, watching movies, taking Zumba classes, rooting for Pittsburgh sports teams, and anything sparkly. Kerri lives in Northern Virginia with her adorable (and mischievous) rescued poodle mix, Harry. Visit Kerri at her website (www.kerricarpenter.com), on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram (@authorkerri), or subscribe to her newsletter.

"Have you picked a date?"

Emerson stifled the eyeroll that desperately wanted to make an appearance. Instead, she plastered a smile on her face and turned to focus on her impeccably-dressed mother. Beatrice Dewitt, along with about twenty other friends and family members, had made their way to The Wright Drink, her boyfriend, er, fiancé's bar, to help her and Jack celebrate their very recent engagement. Recent, as in earlier that day.

"We haven't even been engaged for twenty-four hours," she said gently, hoping her mother would take the hint.

"Of course, of course." Beatrice waved a hand in the air. She toasted Emerson with her wineglass. "What about a season? Fall weddings are so popular now."

Apparently, the hint was lost on her wedding-obsessed mother.

"Um, we haven't really *had the time* to talk about it yet, Mama," she said brightly.

"You know, you might want to think about booking the Saturday before Halloween." Beatrice tapped a French manicured fingernail against her lips. "Or the Saturday right after Halloween."

Still only been engaged for less than twenty-four hours, Emerson thought, calling on the inner recesses of her patience.

"Of course, a winter wedding can be so..."

"Em!"

Emerson thanked all her lucky stars when her sister, Amelia, rushed across the room and engulfed her in yet another hug. She couldn't remember a time when she'd been hugged more, and she was loving it.

"Dad said he wants to see you, Mama."

Beatrice frowned. "But I really want to discuss possible wedding dates with Emerson."

Amelia coughed delicately. "He *really* needs you. I think it's pretty important."

Emerson knew instantly that her sister was lying. *Thank you*, she mouthed as her mother went off in search of her father. Good luck to him.

Emerson and Amelia giggled.

"Let me see it again."

Of course, her sister was referring to the beautiful ruby ring that had belonged to Jack's mother. Emerson was more than happy to oblige, holding up the sparkly ring and wiggling her finger.

"Ohhh." Amelia offered the obligatory appreciation. "It really is gorgeous. I love that it's a ruby and diamonds. So unique."

"I love that it was Jack's mother's. I feel so honored to wear it."

Her heart was bursting with love and gratitude today. After all, it had only been earlier this morning when she'd feared she'd lost Jack forever. She'd assumed he was going to sell his father's bar and leave town.

To her shock, Jack decided to keep The Wright Drink and stay in Alexandria. More than that, he'd rushed to her mother's bridal boutique and asked her to marry him.

She woke up devastated but would go to sleep happier than she'd ever been in her entire life.

“So, I know it’s early, but have you guys thought about a date yet?” Amelia trained serious blue eyes on her.

Emerson deflated. “Not you too.”

“I know you guys just got engaged.”

“This morning. You were there,” she said, exasperated.

“But you need to move fast on these kinds of things. Venues book up well in advance. You know all about that.”

As an event planner, Emerson definitely did know all about venues and parties and caterers and anything event-related. Fortunately, she wasn’t looking to get married in the next three weeks, so she was pretty sure she was safe in terms of picking a ceremony and reception site.

“I think it’s going to be fine,” she said to her little sister.

“There’s so much to think about. Your dress, food, flowers, photographer. Not to mention, the guest list and the honeymoon.” Amelia gestured with an almost empty glass.

Emerson jumped on the opportunity. “I think you need a refill.”

“What?” Amelia took in her empty flute. “Oh, you’re right. Hm. But, we need to discuss—”

“I could use a refill myself. Would you mind?” Emerson knew her sister wouldn’t refuse her.

“Of course. I’ll be back.”

Great. Emerson let out a long breath.

As Amelia rushed off to the bar for more champagne, a ball of adorable light beige fur came barreling around the corner and headed straight for her.

“Cosmo!”

The poodle-mix had no idea what was going on and why there were so many happy, laughing people in the bar. But Cosmo didn't care. He was more than content to join in the enthusiasm by wagging his fluffy tail uncontrollably while wiggling his little butt.

Emerson picked up Jack's dog and snuggled him to her chest. She peered into his very human-looking green eyes. “You aren't going to ask me if I've picked a date, are you?”

In response, the dog licked her chin.

“I didn't think so. You know what's up.”

A deep laugh sounded in her ear and Emerson turned around and settled herself in Jack's strong arms.

“Just what I needed,” she murmured against his chest. Cosmo let out a happy yip.

“My family,” Jack said, his voice gruff with emotion.

Family. Emerson wanted to melt into a puddle of happiness. She finally had the family of her dreams.

“I have a question,” Jack asked.

“What's that?”

“Are we supposed to have a date for the wedding already? Because a lot of people are asking me about it.”

She laughed mirthlessly. “You too?”

“Am I crazy or did we travel in time? I asked you to marry me today, right?”

She laughed again. “Yes, you did. I think people just get excited with these kinds of things.”

Cosmo started squirming in her arms. She placed him on the ground, and he was off like a flash to bestow his cuteness on other people in the bar.

Xander, Jack's best friend from high school, appeared at their side holding two glasses. He handed one to Emerson. "I was told by your sister that you needed this."

She definitely needed it. "Thank you."

"Having fun?" Jack asked his childhood friend.

"Actually, yes. For an engagement party, that is."

Xander wasn't the biggest fan of engagement parties, weddings, or anything matrimonial-related.

Xander took a long pull of his beer. "Have you guys picked a date?" he asked.

"Uhhh..." Jack contributed, turning a confused face to Emerson.

She couldn't help but laugh. "Xander, you've been with us all day. When would we have had time to pick a date?"

"Besides," Jack said, poking a finger into Xander's chest. "You don't believe in marriage."

Emerson sighed. She couldn't help it. Jack had told her how Xander hadn't had the best example of marriage from his parents. Plus, she imagined being a divorce attorney didn't exactly paint marriage in the best of lights either.

"True. I wouldn't suggest marriage, but that doesn't mean I can't be happy for you two." He grabbed Emerson and brought her to his side in a strong hug. "If I *were* going to get married—and that's a real big if—I would marry you."

He placed a soft kiss on her head and Emerson's heart melted for him. Xander was such a great guy, but it was clear he had issues, especially where his family was concerned. She got

that. Big time. She only hoped he could work through his inner turmoil. She'd love to see him as happy as she and Jack were.

Jack reached for her then and practically tugged her to his side. "Hands off my fiancée."

A huge grin spread across her face. Fiancée. She was someone's fiancée. She had a fiancé. She wondered how long it would take to get used to that.

"Hey, Emerson is only with you because she met you first. Now, if she'd run into me..."

"Don't finish that sentence," Jack said, pinning his best friend with a fake-mean glare.

"Don't hate the player."

Jack rolled his eyes. "I can't believe you just said that." He playfully slapped Xander on the arm. Then the two of them started a little tussle fest.

Emerson was laughing at their antics when her best friend sidled up to her.

"This is so amazing," Grace said. "I know I've said it already, but I am so happy for you."

She'd said it about fifty times already. But Emerson didn't mind. Grace was the happiest and most positive person she knew. And she absolutely adored everything about weddings and love.

"I'm not going to ask you if you've picked a date," Grace said.

"Thank god."

"But I am going to ask you to let me know immediately when you do."

"Deal." Emerson took a sip of her champagne and then placed the glass on a nearby table. She reached for Grace's hand. "You have to plan my wedding."

“What? O-M-G. Picking a wedding planner is a big deal. You need to do your research. I can definitely give you my recommendations. We can make a list. Narrow your top choices to three and then vet them.”

“Gracie, we’ve worked together. We share office space and we live together. I think it’s safe to say you’re vetted.” Despite everything she just said, Emerson could see Grace was going to protest. “And you’re my best friend. I need you.”

Grace softened as Emerson knew she would. “Em...”

“I don’t want anyone but you planning my wedding.”

A smile blossomed on Grace’s gorgeous face. If she ever grew sick of planning weddings, she could have a very successful modeling career.

Laughing, Jack and Xander finished their pretend wrestling match, or whatever they’d been doing. But Xander’s laughter faded as he took in Grace.

“Grace.”

“Xander,” Grace returned with the same unenthusiastic tone.

A long silence stretched between them. Emerson glanced between her best friend and Jack’s. She had to wonder if anyone else was feeling as awkward as she was.

“So...” Jack rocked back on his heels.

“We should toast our friends’ engagement,” Xander said, raising his beer mug.

“I already have. Several times.” Grace narrowed her eyes, as if she was challenging Xander to top that.

“So have I. But you can never toast too many times.”

Grace huffed, actually huffed. “If only that were true. Can you imagine having endless toasts at a wedding? That could take up hours of the reception.”

“We couldn’t have that.” Xander rolled his eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing. Just that the energy and time and money spent on things like wedding receptions are so—”

Grace’s hands went to her hips. “So what?”

“So superfluous.”

Grace snorted. “Superfluous? You’ve gotta be kidding me. What about the amount of money you charge people to get divorced? I’d much rather be part of a beautiful, romantic, amazing wedding than a horrible divorce.”

“Inevitably, married couples get divorced. It’s just the way it works.”

“Not for me.”

Xander made a big show of looking around the bar. “Oh, is your husband here?”

“My hus— No, I’m not married.”

“Oh.”

Grace straightened her shoulders. “But I will be.”

“Let’s hope you stay that way.” Xander took a step toward her. “Half of couples get divorced.”

Grace followed suit and also inched toward Xander. “How dare you, Xander Ryan. Why would you assume that my husband and I will get divorced?”

“Maybe he cheats. Maybe you do.”

“I would never,” Grace sputtered, clearly shocked by such a statement.

“Never say never.” Xander took another step toward Grace.

“How dare you talk about my husband like that.”

“You’re not even married.”

Grace and Xander were standing so close they were nose to nose. Despite the fact that they were involved in a heated argument, Emerson couldn’t help but notice how good they looked together. They were both tall and stately with dark hair. Of course, cascading down her back, Grace’s hair was a tad longer than Xander’s short, neat haircut.

Besides all that, there was something about them. Some kind of chemistry that caused sparks to shoot off when they were together.

Unfortunately, Emerson wasn’t sure if those were good sparks or bad.

“S.O.S.,” Jack whispered in her ear. “We need to defuse the situation.”

Emerson agreed and said the first thought that popped into her head. In fact, she yelled it. “We haven’t set a date yet.”

Xander and Grace both turned to her, identical expressions of confusion on their faces. It would have been comical if the whole situation wasn’t so uncomfortable.

“What?” Grace asked.

“I need another drink,” Xander said in way of a response.

“Your beer is still halfway full.”

Xander glanced down at his glass and then back up at Grace. “It’s half empty.” With that, he turned toward the bar.

Grace watched him go with an interesting look on her face. It seemed as if something intrigued her. But that curiosity quickly faded, and she huffed again, mumbled something under her breath that sounded a lot like the word “figures,” and walked toward the restroom so fast that she missed Xander glance over his shoulder at her. For his part, Xander appeared to take in every inch of Grace from the top of her dark hair all the way to the bottom of her Jimmy Choo shoes.

“I think that went well,” Jack said wryly.

“Our best friends, ladies and gentlemen,” Emerson said, sweeping her arm out toward Xander and Grace’s retreating backs.

“Speaking of our best friends…”

Uh-oh. Emerson had a feeling where this was going. “Careful.”

“I’m just saying. They’re both single. They’re both attractive.”

She’d thought the same thing, but obviously physical attributes didn’t help with vastly opposing ideologies. “They’re both irritated with the other’s general presence.”

“They’re both driven with their careers.”

“Careers that are in complete opposition. Grace is a wedding planner and Xander is a divorce attorney. She’s there at the beginning of a marriage and he’s there at the end.”

Jack deflated. “True. Do you think that’s why they don’t like each other?”

Emerson tilted her head, causing one of her curls to fall in her eyes. She batted at it. “I don’t know.”

And she didn’t know. Grace was the happiest person she’d ever met. She loved everyone. Except Xander.

From what she’d seen, Xander was a generally congenial person who was able to talk with anyone. Except Grace.

Yet, there were those sparks…

“How about this?” Jack said. “We put our crazy best friends aside for tonight.”

“That is an amazing idea.” She kissed him lightly on the lips. “We have more important things to think about at the moment.”

“Jack, Emerson,” Fred Koda, Jack’s family friend and lawyer called. “Have you set a date yet?”

Emerson looked up at her fiancé. There was a twinkle in Jack’s eye. Together, they burst out into laughter. Cosmo had returned to sit next to her and let out a bark of happiness.

They might not have a date to their wedding but at least they knew that they’d be together every date for the rest of their lives.

The End

*I hope you enjoyed **The Engagement Party**, a bonus story from the Something True series from Harlequin Special Edition. If you can’t wait to find out if the sparks between Grace and Xander are good or bad—or, if you’re dying to know if Emerson and Jack “pick a date”—grab a copy of book 2, **The Wedding Truce**, available in print December 17, 2019, and e-book on January 1, 2020.*

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