

THE
KEY TO
LOVE

THE
KEY TO
LOVE

BETSY ST. AMANT



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2020 by Betsy St. Amant

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: St. Amant, Betsy, author.

Title: The key to love / Betsy St. Amant.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020

Identifiers: LCCN 2020014955 | ISBN 9780800738891 | ISBN 9780800739164 (casebound)

Subjects: GSAFD: Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3619.T213 K49 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020014955>

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my precious grandmother,
Betty Jo McLemore,
and to the love story you had
with my dear grandfather, “Mr. Mac.”
Now both of you are swallowed up in heaven,
experiencing the greatest love ever known.
Thanks for always being one
of my biggest fans.



CHAPTER ONE

The only thing Bri Duval loved more than romance was a perfectly executed French macaron. Fortunately, at least one of the two was within reach.

She nudged the pastel-purple, lavender-honey macaron into position on the paper-layered tray and carefully slid it into the display case next to the petit fours. Well, maybe both were in reach—just not for her.

Casey, a single mom and one of her regular customers at the Pastry Puff, would be in shortly, per her usual Tuesday routine, seeking a dessert and a latte after dropping her two toddlers at Mother’s Day Out.

If Mabel and Agnes’s plan was as perfectly executed as Bri’s macarons, then local fireman Nathan should be right behind her for his midmorning cinnamon coffee.

“Is she here yet?” Mabel rushed through the swinging door of the kitchen, out of breath, her attempt at contouring her makeup that morning smeared across her droopy cheekbones. But her blue eyes sparkled beneath white eyebrows, as they always did when she got a chance to play Cupid.

The winged legend didn’t stand much of a chance against

Mabel and Agnes. The seventy-something co-owners of the Pastry Puff might too frequently blur the line between match-making and meddling, but they had proof of their success. And that proof was locked up tight in the bakery's backyard.

Literally.

Bri brushed off the front of her apron even though it was already clean. It'd been a slow morning. "Don't panic, Mabel. She's not here yet." She glanced at the clock ticking on the wall above the display case, its numbers black and bold against the pale pink paint.

Casey had no idea what was teaming up against her. Everyone knew and adored Casey, and the poor thing had survived more than one blind date set up by a well-meaning neighbor—hazards of a Midwest small town—but Mabel and Agnes were convinced Nathan was "the one" for Casey. And when those two were convinced of something, it was best to back out of the way—or better yet, pull up a chair and watch.

Bri was more than happy to have a front-row seat to the shenanigans. She only wished she could have been there when the arrows had flown into her parents' hearts outside a tiny Parisian bakery decades ago. Talk about the match of the century.

The chimes above the front door jingled as Casey bustled inside, early autumn leaves blowing in on the heels of her sleek brown boots. She always looked put together in public—part of her real estate agent persona—though Bri had seen Casey more than once on her front porch swing in sweats, surrounded by tissues. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to raise two babies alone.

Or to just be a mom.

Bri batted away the discouragement before it could nest. Love couldn't be rushed. Had her parents taught her nothing? She was only twenty-seven. Some things were worth the wait. And if waiting guaranteed a love like her parents', then she could chill out and watch Mabel and Agnes matchmake around her—and possibly keep picking up a lot of "what not to do" tips.

Mabel clutched Bri's arm in excitement. "She's here!" She coughed twice, in what she often attempted to be a secret signal that her sister never seemed to catch. "Agnes, get out here!" The familiar hiss of Mabel's failed whisper wafted through the bakery.

Casey politely averted her gaze to the ceiling, as if pretending not to notice the obvious as Agnes barreled through the swinging door behind the counter.

"What? Where!" Agnes's voice, three times deeper than her sister's, barked her confusion. She caught sight of Casey, adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses, and patted her no-nonsense, brown-and-gray-speckled hair, as if it had somehow dared move out of place.

It wouldn't dare. No one crossed Agnes.

The two elderly sisters were opposites, to say the least. Agnes was about as subtle and gentle as an elephant, stoic and sensible, always rotating through the same variety of dress slacks and blouses, while Mabel, wild at heart and dramatic, experimented with new lipsticks regularly and thought Bri was still the elementary-school girl who used to fall out of the oak tree in her front yard. Agnes would lecture her on climbing too high in the first place; Mabel would rush out with ice packs and homemade chocolate chip cookies. The sisters had been like great-aunts to Bri growing up, even more so after her parents died in a car wreck when she was eighteen.

Bri smiled calmly at Casey, ignoring the two living, breathing cartoon characters behind her. The sisters might be successful at matchmaking, but they failed miserably in the art of subtlety. She reached for one of the macarons with the dainty tongs she'd convinced Agnes to buy for just that reason. "The usual?"

Casey nodded. "Please." Now that she was closer, Bri noticed the stress behind the young mom's brown eyes. Casey fought back a yawn as she riffled through her coin purse. "It's four twenty-seven with the latte, right?"

Actually, it was five thirty-nine, but . . . "On the house today."

How much real estate could Casey possibly turn around in a town like Story?

Bri felt both Mabel's approving smile and Agnes's disapproving glare on her back at the same time. She couldn't help it. The woman needed coffee, and her kids probably needed new coats this winter. They grew like weeds. Every penny helped.

The bell chimed again. An extra bunch of leaves skittered across the floor, one making its way to Casey's feet. She looked down slowly, then turned.

Nathan approached in his standard department-issued black polo and utility pants. He offered a quick nod to all the ladies, then did a double take at Mabel and Agnes beaming at him. His easy smile faded into the all-too-familiar deer-in-the-headlights look Bri had witnessed many times from her side of the counter. Poor guy.

The elderly sisters shouted in unison. "Congratulations!"

Nathan blinked twice, one hand frozen in place halfway to his wallet. "Huh?"

Mabel nudged Agnes, who shook her head. Mabel nudged harder, and with a sigh and a resigned roll of her eyes, Agnes pulled a tiny contraption from her pocket and yanked on the top.

Confetti shot across the counter, tangling in Bri's hair and landing on the sleeve of Casey's corduroy jacket. It fell a foot short of its intended target, who looked as if he wasn't sure his cinnamon coffee was worth this madness.

Casey, cheeks flushing, brushed the miniature colored streamers off her arm. Nathan pulled one out of her shoulder-length curls. "Got it."

"*Yeah* he does."

Now it was Agnes's turn to elbow Mabel into silence.

Mabel cleared her throat, a hearty pink blush working its way across her overly made-up face. "I mean, congratulations! You're our twenty-fifth customer of the day."

He wasn't. More like the sixth, maybe. If he'd actually been the

twenty-fifth, then maybe Charles Richmond wouldn't be sniffing around all the time, half joking about purchasing the place.

Nathan blinked again. "I am?" He shot Bri a glance that begged for interpretation. She hid a grin behind her hand and cleared her throat.

"Which *means*, you win free coffee." Agnes shot Mabel a pointed glare, as if to get her sister to the point faster.

"Right! Free coffee." Mabel's eyes darted to the display case. "And, uh, and macarons! Which means, obviously, you'll need help carrying them."

Nathan took the coffee Bri had already poured for him and gestured to the sack Agnes was preparing with the pastries. "That's really nice of you ladies. But I can manage one cup and a bag."

Bri gave him mental props for not punctuating that last statement with the "duh" it deserved.

He reached for his prizewinnings with the air of a man who'd rather be fighting a wildfire. "Thank you."

Mabel grabbed Agnes's arm, yanking the bag out of his reach just in time. "No, no, you don't understand." Her frantic gaze landed on Casey, who stood there sipping her latte and absently brushing more confetti onto the floor. "I meant, it's free coffee—for the *entire* department."

"Trust me, Nathan." Agnes handed the sack back over. "You need help."

Bri snorted, turning it into a cough. Agnes glared, and Mabel ignored them both.

Casey shrugged, finally zoning in on the opportunity. She straightened a little, shifting her coffee cup to her other hand. "I could help you. I don't mind."

Nathan's gaze finally rested on Casey, and he tilted his head, as if seeing her for the first time. "You sure?"

"Of course she's sure." Mabel clasped her hands under her chin, which boasted a darker streak than the rest of her face.

Bri didn't try to hide her smile this time. She should have

gotten this on video. The Pastry Puff would have gone viral on YouTube in an hour—which, honestly, would be great for business. And would serve as a reminder to Charles to back off.

A few minutes later, Casey and Nathan strolled out of the bakery together, juggling the multiple cups of coffee and bags of macarons and laughing. At their matchmakers, no doubt, but laughing all the same.

“And that’s how it’s done.” Agnes released a curt nod, the most excitement she ever allowed herself to show.

Mabel, however, sagged across the counter, fanning her flushed cheeks with her wrinkled hand. “Oh, my stars, did you see the way she stared at him in that uniform?”

“I saw the way you did.” Bri grinned and plucked a macaron from the display. They’d already given away a dozen. What was one more on the house?

“It’s your turn next, missy.” Mabel straightened, taking Bri in with her sparkling eyes that always seemed to see more than the average person. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten you.”

“Give it a rest, Mabel.” Bri bit into her macaron, relishing the rich flavors. She’d nailed it that time—maybe it was the extra dash of almond powder she’d sprinkled in at the last minute. Still, it wasn’t the missing secret ingredient to her mom’s recipe that she’d been trying to perfect for years. “You’ve already ruled out the entire fire department, half the police force, the coffee shop barista on Main, and the gas station attendant.”

“Don’t forget the hardware store owner’s son. And Mrs. Beeker’s grandson, who helps her at the B&B. Oh, and that guy who likes to pretend he’s a cowboy.” Agnes pursed her lips. “Closest thing he owned to a horse was that giant dog of his.”

Oh, the memories. “The one who slobbered all over me?”

“Hey, at least the dog slobbered, and not the guy.” Mabel chortled.

Bri winced. “You didn’t see the last half of our date.” Their first date, and their last. Story of her life. Then again, her standards

were pretty high—she wasn't convinced she'd ever find a romance equivalent to her parents'.

But she'd much rather wait for her fairy-tale ending than waste time kissing frogs.

“At least you're out of that horrid relationship with that lawyer.” Agnes shuddered. “I couldn't imagine a duller marriage than one to Charles Richmond.”

Bri shuddered. “He was pretty bad.” Definitely more sidekick than hero—he'd ironed his socks. He needed a woman less romantic than Bri, someone with an equally law-obsessed head on her shoulders. And she needed someone who could kiss her and make her foot pop like in the black-and-white movies.

The only thing Charles made pop was her bubble of expectations.

“Mark my words, Abrielle, I'm going to place your love lock on that gate outside one of these days.” Mabel's gaze pierced into Bri's, and she believed her.

Somewhere, he was out there. Apparently not at the firehouse or the police station or Johnson's General, but somewhere, he was there—a man with zero froggy intentions and a heart as romantic as hers.