

****This sample is from an 80k contemporary romance. Length of memo will vary.****

Thanks so much for giving me the chance to work on this novel! First and foremost, remember that my feedback is only an opinion—and every editor will have a different one. It's up to you to decide which of my suggestions fits your vision for the manuscript. You can incorporate all my ideas, some of them, or none of them. As the author, you have the ultimate decision. You know your story and characters best.

That said, I hope you find my notes helpful!

Overview:

Overall, the majority of this manuscript is very solid. I can see where others might have had trouble—this doesn't quite fit the usual parameters. But the choices you are making enhance the book, in my opinion, and since you are going indie, you don't have to worry as much about making it fit neatly into a box.

The emotions in this novel are top notch. Their reactions and feelings felt genuine and organic, which can be really tricky. It's easy to move plot points; it's much harder to inject emotion if it's missing. Once you got into your groove, this moved pretty smoothly—I think the beginning is a little rough and we will address that. My notes are more about nudging and tweaking than major overhauls.

Setting:

Tellisford is darling, and you make us feel like we are there. Small towns are very marketable right now! I did think you could be a little clearer on how small. At first I thought this would be an “everyone knows everyone” town, but it doesn't seem to be quite that small? She knows Brandi at the hospital, but not the doctor, and she doesn't seem to recognize people at the convenience store, etc.

The reason I think clarifying this is important is because she is hell bent on staying away because everyone knows about the video, everyone knows her as the junk shop girl, etc. This makes accepting her moving back hard for the reader, too. But if we understand that this place isn't quite that small, and her perception of “everyone” isn't quite reality, then we can understand how she might change her mind. An easy way to do this might be to casually mention the size of her high school class. When you are describing Tellisford, say something like, “In a class of 300, only about half the students ever stuck around after graduating.” (or something similar.)

Pacing:

The pacing is a little off in the first half, but I think that's mainly due to the struggle you are having with when to reveal all about the video. I think your instinct on this is spot on—she can keep it from her friends until chapter 12, but the reader has to be let in on the secret much earlier. Keeping it from the reader that long keeps us at a distance, and it's really hard to stay engaged with a manuscript when the main character is actively keeping the reader at arm's length. (I made a note in Ch 2 about how I was already getting annoyed as a reader, and we don't want that!) Once the reader knows, we can sympathize appropriately and really root for her, which is very necessary in a book that is focused on her.

Telling her friends early would remove a necessary motor from the plot, so I think this is the best compromise.

POV:

Kiki and Russell's POVs are great and give us so much insight. As for them sounding alike, hello, they grew up in the same town, had shared experiences, and are a similar age. Of course they sound similar! I would only be concerned if I wasn't clear on whose POV we were in, and I didn't have any issues with that. I went back and forth about Stephen's, and here's where I landed:

Adding the POV makes him feel more rounded, and helps us sympathize with him. It makes the reader feel like he might be redeemable. I also think that having that POV really makes the manuscript stand out, because you don't often see the POV of a character like this, and it adds a complexity to the story that isn't there without it. (It's unusual, so I can see where "by the book" readers would question it.) However, I think it does make some of Russell's actions need justification (see Characters for my suggestion).

If you wanted this to be a bit more cut and dried, and fit into a neater box, I think Stephen's POV would have to go. Personally, I think this is the kind of risk that indie pubbing is made for.

Writing Style:

You are a seasoned, clearly talented writer. I didn't see any consistent issues here.

Plot:

The overall plot is great. Engaging and surprising in the best of ways. Just a few little tweaks:

The Ebola jokes fell a bit flat for me. I wasn't quite sure what to think, since it's a lie that's so easily proven wrong. Maybe migraines, allergies, or something wacky like "my sixth toe is acting up again." Weird is fine, but it has to skirt the line of believability.

Regarding her art, I think it should stay as is. You mention in the beginning that her art was dark, and then we see her transition to the lighter stuff with the wardrobe, etc. I think if all we saw was dark stuff, it would make it really hard to believe she was emotionally capable of being in a relationship. To me, the art evolution mirrors her emotional journey—from panic attacks at the beginning to being able to stand in the same room as Stephen by the end.

I did think it was a little odd that she felt she had left Tellisford behind, when she is commuting distance away. Either she or Heather or Terence needs to admit that it was probably a little naïve of her to think she would never run into anyone from there again, as they are an hour away, and visiting big cities is pretty common. Maybe throw in how to a small town girl, Atlanta felt like another planet, and sometimes she forgot Tellisford was so close.

Also, why didn't she see the names of the sponsors on the marketing materials? One of the main reasons to sponsor something is because the name of the company is all over the marketing. So how was she caught unawares about Tellisford Estates? This one is a little tricky. I can't think of any good reason why a sponsor might be a surprise (that they would announce at the event). And changing the name of the company to one she wouldn't immediately know seems a hassle. The only other thing I can think of is that she wasn't the only one on the project, and maybe the other person saw the name more? That's probably the best explanation, along with her acknowledging that she doesn't know how she missed the name. 70 hour weeks were clearly taking a toll, etc.

You mention they haven't seen each other in 20 years, but it's confusing why until much later when you mention he went to a different school far away. Could you mention that in the beginning?

Why is Martin's shop the lynchpin of Russell's plan? I wasn't quite clear on this. He makes it seem like all his plans go down the toilet if he can't get the junk shop. Why? Superficial reasons are fine, we just need to spell them out a bit more. "It was an eyesore, and one that customers had to pass because of where the parking lot was. One investor had already been scared off by it."

The legalities of Kiki using a different last name seem too complicated, so maybe you can just clarify that Kiki Keller is how she signs her art? That would cover any

objections, I think. Sort of like a pseudonym—no one questions how that works with banks and whatnot.

In the beginning, the term junk shop is a bit confusing. Are they using it to mean “vintage-y thrift store” or “garbage dump?” It can have so many connotations. I think the best way in this situation is to have Russell mention something about how it was sad that after his wife’s death, Martin had a harder time letting go of things (using the term “hoarder” is a bit like saying “insane”—hard to tell if it’s clinical or just exaggerating). I’m inferring about his wife, but you get the idea. The town watched the shop get more cluttered, etc. The key is that we clarify what’s going on, and Russell sounds sympathetic (so we know he’s not just being a snob). Kiki can have the revelation that it was hoarding when she comes back to the house. That way the reader is clear about the situation. Also possibly Kiki can mention how others saw the store: she saw it as a treasure hunt, but others saw it as a fire hazard.

I would have liked a little more about Russell and Stephen’s mom. Russell seems to treat her like she’s incapable of major decision making—he decided what to do after his dad died, he tells Stephen not to contact her, etc. For instance, how did she feel about the fact that Stephen used college tuition for drugs? It’s unrealistic that she didn’t know. She doesn’t seem to know that Russell asked Stephen to always go through him, which would indicate Russell is trying to manage her life without her consent. It comes from a good place, but she is a grown woman. This doesn’t have to be drastic—just let us know she asked for Russell’s help in some way. When Dad died, she either told Russell (in a flighty manner) that she didn’t understand numbers, or maybe she was so overwhelmed with grief that everything was going to collapse if he didn’t step in, etc.

Can you clarify when after the video Kiki left? At first, it seems she left only days after (hence why she needed to get her GRE), but later it says she stayed a whole year. The GRE and leaving after a year aren’t mutually exclusive, but it’s a bit ambiguous right now. Maybe you mention that it took her a whole year to plan her exit, and she stopped going to class because of the bullies.

I was surprised about the lack of emotional reaction Kiki had to going to Tellisford Estates. It seems incongruous with the fact that she had a panic attack just hearing the name in the beginning. Maybe she can acknowledge that having a friend there, and having let out her secret to her friend, is helping her process everything?

The incident where Russell takes a gun to the trailer park seems very out of character. He seems less the macho type and more the “I’ll call my lawyer” type. Two choices: he acknowledges this is out of character for him, or you put

something in his background that has a bit more physicality—wrestling? Boxing? Hunting?

After all Kiki's baggage, it seemed she started using the word love pretty early. Maybe she can use language like "falling for him" for a little bit instead? Also, personally I thought it was a little icky to have her feel like she's loved him forever, considering her infatuation with Stephen. (It's fine if Russell loved her since they were little.) Other readers may feel differently; this is definitely a "your mileage may vary" situation.

Is there a reason Kiki hasn't tried to find her mother on social media? I feel like that's a pretty common route these days. I wouldn't stress over this, but if there is an explanation, put it in.

I feel like a guy Russell's age would not use "penis" exclusively. "Cock" or "dick" would definitely be thrown in there. Maybe switch it up a few times?

Related to this, I would keep the sex scenes as is. It feels like you are maybe a little uncomfortable with them? That's just going to make the reader feel uncomfortable as well. Better to stop where you did.

Kiki interprets a call from Florida as from Jenna, but why? Just clarify that the number in the address book was from Florida, or whatever reason.

I was a little unclear as to why the Josephs needed to see Kiki's store. Or why Daniel would even encourage it. Seems bad business to show someone a place you don't even own yet. This would make more sense if they had seen the other properties and weren't quite sold, so Daniel wanted them to see the store before they lost interest.

Where is Kiki getting 700 bucks? She goes into detail about not having money in the beginning, and Grandpa didn't leave any money. Maybe the botanical garden people gave her a bonus?

There are some other very minor notes about clarification in my sidenotes.

Characters:

Heroine: I love Kiki's transformation in this novel. She felt a little annoying in the beginning, but I think if you tell the reader about the video earlier, that clears a lot of it away. She doesn't really like herself in the beginning, and that's hard for a reader unless we understand why.

Hero: Russell is lovely and the "now" with him is good, but I feel like we need a little more of his background. Near the end, we finally get the "how he

ended up back in Tellisford” story, but I don’t think there’s any reason to hold this info until the end. For instance, he never mentions what his job in DC was, or how he got there (even “he moved there after grad school” helps). Plus, Daniel is such a big influence in his life and job and we have no idea how they met until near the end. We don’t need all this dumped on us in the first chapters, but waiting so long feels artificial—there’s no reason why we shouldn’t know, so go ahead and tell us.

Where he falls a bit short is with Stephen. You’ve done such a great job making us sympathize with Stephen, but you haven’t given us enough concrete details about how he hurt Russell. The imbalance makes Russell feel a bit unforgiving at times. I think if you gave us a concrete memory or two of when Stephen specifically let Russell down (or when Russell told him something and he used it as leverage), that would help us see his side. Also, if you chose darker memories, this would make Russell a bit darker without giving him any extra baggage. (He doesn’t have to be darker, but if you are adding these memories anyway, this is a good route.)

Also, a few times Russell comes off as very snobbish or mercenary, so you’ll see I tweaked the wording a bit so he is still likeable.

Secondary: I want Heather and Terrence as my friends! These two could have easily been cliché, but you’ve made them unique and real.

Conclusion:

This is in no way a disaster! (And no, I don’t say that to everyone.) You’ve got a good plot and really strong characters that make this stand out. The tweaks I’m suggesting just tidy it up a bit. I think you had readers who wanted this to fit in a box, and it doesn’t, and shouldn’t. The choices you made really enhance the manuscript, and will help it shine in the indie market.

