

GRACE FINDS KEL

a comedy

SYNOPSIS:

A social worker wants to provide accommodation for a homeless man. But he loves his freedom.

CHARACTERS:

KEL, mature homeless man

GRACE, young female social worker

SETTING:

A secluded wild area in a public park

TIME:

The present

KEL is outside his tent, cooking greens in a frying pan over a fire pit.

GRACE enters, carrying a bag of takeout food.

Gotcha. GRACE

Busted. KEL

Honestly, Kel. A public park? GRACE

I hoped I was hidden far enough away. KEL

You weren't. GRACE

How did you find me? KEL

Guess. GRACE

Can't have been the smoke. KEL

Why not? GRACE

This is a Dakota fire pit. The flame's buried. Practically undetectable. KEL

I didn't need visual clues. GRACE

Then how did you hunt me down? KEL

Social Services has eyes everywhere. GRACE

KEL

Satellite tracking? On your budget? Huh!

GRACE

We have eyes on the ground. Support from the general public.

KEL

So it was that couple who'd wandered off the track.

GRACE

What on earth are you cooking?

KEL

They were totally lost.

GRACE

Here.

KEL

I showed them the way out.

GRACE

Have a real meal.

KEL

I've got my own dinner.

GRACE

They look like dandelion leaves to me.

KEL

They are.

GRACE

You're joking.

KEL

Every part of the plant is edible. From the flowers to the roots.

GRACE

Kel. I'm so sorry. I had no idea you were so close to starvation.

KEL

I'm not.

GRACE

You're reduced to eating weeds.

KEL

Weeds are plants growing in the wrong place. These were right here. Nice and handy.

GRACE

This is premium takeout. A burger and fries.

KEL

Junk food.

GRACE

Healthier than weeds.

KEL

Dandelions are highly nutritious.

GRACE

But hardly tasty, I bet.

KEL

Want a sample?

GRACE

No, thanks. You try this.

KEL

Grace. How many times do I gotta say it? I don't take charity from a government I despise.

GRACE

I thought hunger might tweak your principles.

KEL

Then you don't know what principles are.

GRACE

What if I stand upwind and waft the smell over?

KEL

I'm taking my tent down! Goodbye.

GRACE

I've arranged accommodation for you.

KEL

Pass.

GRACE

Warm and dry.

KEL

My tent's waterproof. And insulated.

GRACE

You're getting on, Kel. Think of your health.

KEL

I put my mental health first. That's why I left the rat race.

GRACE

You should look after your body too.

KEL

This old thing. Still gets me around.

GRACE

Reward it with a little comfort.

KEL

Ever notice how life insurance and health insurance differ?

GRACE

Health insurance is taking care of yourself. Life insurance takes care of your loved ones.

KEL

Nope. Health insurance shows you're obsessed with money. Life insurance inflicts your mania on unsuspecting victims.

GRACE

Do you have family, Kel?

KEL

Don't ask me. It's a while since I checked.

GRACE

That's so sad.

KEL

No, it isn't. Relatives don't understand my lifestyle. Best to spare them the embarrassment.

GRACE

Compassion. That's a start.

KEL

A start? Do you assume I'm a novice at basic kindness?

GRACE

Sorry.

KEL

Where's your faith in humanity?

GRACE

In my job, it's constantly put to the test.

KEL

Oh, dear. There I go, lacking empathy. Proving your point, Grace.

GRACE

You're more generous than me. How do you keep so cheerful?

KEL

Hard work.

GRACE

Does your faith in humanity never waver?

KEL

Just now, it did. Hearing that couple reported me. After I guided them back to civilization.

GRACE

They didn't report you.

KEL

Who was it then? Park staff? That'd be much worse. We're old buddies.

GRACE

It wasn't park staff. I extracted your location from that couple.

KEL

Extracted?

GRACE

They put an innocent post on Facebook. "Big shoutout to the rough sleeper who rescued us. Without him, we'd have spent a cold night among the trees."

KEL

And you...?

GRACE

Went to their home. Armed with my laptop. I sat on their couch. Bombarded them with statistics. Reports highlighting the vulnerability of the homeless. Official recommendations on providing suitable shelter. Your couple didn't stand a chance. I refused to budge till they'd given me your precise coordinates.

KEL

Grace. You're a devious con artist!

GRACE

Sorry to destroy your faith in humanity.

KEL

You haven't destroyed it. You've restored it.

GRACE

Come again?

KEL

You're a government employee. I don't expect anything from you. The important thing is, no fellow citizen betrayed me—without being manipulated into it. I'm thrilled.

GRACE

That's a relief. Now, let's go. I've brought a van for your gear.

KEL

I'm not leaving with you.

GRACE

You have to!

KEL

It'll be dark soon. I'll wait till you've gone. Then find another hideout.

GRACE

You don't understand, Kel. I need to rehouse you. To meet my quota.

KEL

Quota?

GRACE

We have targets. I'm so far behind it's not funny. If I don't achieve a "successful intervention" by the end of this week, they'll lay me off.

KEL

Are you serious?

GRACE

Government departments are brutal.

KEL

Bastards!

GRACE

I can't afford to lose my job.

KEL

Yes, you can.

GRACE

The market's so tight, I'll land on the scrapheap!

KEL

Might seem that way, Grace. But trust me. This could be the best thing for you.

GRACE

I can't take your leap. Call me a coward.

Grace turns away, sniffing.

KEL

Didn't mean to pile on the pressure.

GRACE

Can I have some water, please?

KEL

Sure.

Kel gives a bottle to Grace.

GRACE

Thanks.

Grace takes out some pills and swallows them with the water.

KEL

What are those?

GRACE

Pain meds. My head's splitting. I can't stand all this stress.

Pause, as Kel makes a decision.

KEL

So... What's this "accommodation" like?

GRACE

You'll be with people like you. Down on their luck.

KEL

Fellow victims?

GRACE

Kindred spirits.

KEL

That doesn't sound so bad.

GRACE

You'll come?

KEL

Why not? I rave on about humanity. It's time I started showing some.

GRACE

What about your principles?

KEL

Helping others comes first.

GRACE

Thanks so much.

KEL

I'll miss the tent. Still, best make a clean break. Clean slate.

GRACE

Where you're going, you can shower several times a day.

KEL

I don't hold with overcleansing the body. The mind's more important.

GRACE

Try convincing someone standing downwind. Sorry. That was rude.

KEL

Na, it's good to be honest. You gotta have a clean conscience.

Kel starts taking down his tent.

Grace is torn with guilt.

GRACE

Wait. Stop! I lied. There are no quotas. No targets. No layoffs.

KEL

I know. You're devious, remember.

GRACE

I was only trying to help.

KEL

That's been your game all along. Well, good news. You've converted me.

GRACE

What?

KEL

I still want to lend a hand.

GRACE

Really?

KEL

Sure. I'll get a buzz out of it.

GRACE

I'm blown away. I'm not used to this. Someone making a sacrifice for me.

KEL

I'm not doing anything for you, Grace. You're government. The enemy. I'm letting you rehouse me so I can get close to those kindred spirits. They'll be a captive audience. I'll inspire them to break free. We'll start a colony for rough sleepers. Out here under the stars.

GRACE

Oh, no!

KEL

Your job's safe for life. Homelessness is gonna go through the roof.

End of play.