



Royally Benevolent

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Description: After an unexpected accident, two hearts collide—will love take shape or shatter under pressure?

When Princess Odette's bike collides with a distracted driver, it shakes up her life in more ways than one. A handsome stranger jumps in to catch her beloved dog at the scene. By the time they part, she has a crush on the American hero who rose to the occasion. Wyatt Worthington is out grabbing a cup of coffee when he spots a cyclist in trouble. He doesn't know the girl on the bike is a princess and she doesn't know he's actually a benevolent billionaire. As their paths continue to cross, their friendship grows. Wyatt isn't too bothered by Odette's status and Odette doesn't treat Wyatt differently because of his. They dig in to improve safety for the citizens of her beloved city, but is that all it is? Sparks fly as they find common ground in their love of service and shared history of loss. Wyatt is a widower with a young son and Odette lost both her parents in childhood. With their past and mental health struggles keep them apart?

Will they overcome the odds and let love grow, or will history hold them back?

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PART ONE

RESTORATION

1

AN APPOINTMENT

ODETTE

It was an icy morning when I threw my leg over my bike and set off through Ville de Neandia's quiet mid-morning traffic. Grieg, my beloved King Charles Spaniel, bundled in his little dog parka, sat in the front box of my beloved Dutch cargo bike. Cold be damned, I cycled out in the sunshine. As I passed the palace gates, I had donned a virtual cloak of anonymity.

A new bike highway greeted me as I entered the city centre. I passed mothers with children in prams and businessmen on their mobile phones. Delivery men dodged me as I raced, picking up steam downhill. Moving with confidence and speed brought me joy.

When I arrived, Grieg waited patiently as I locked up my bike. Trotting alongside, he sat—tail wagging—as I buzzed us into the waiting room. I sat reading with Grieg in my lap until Elisa appeared.

“Are you ready?” she asked cheerfully.

I nodded. Grieg trotted into her office, knowing the drill. I plopped onto a couch where I'd sat seemingly a million times. She brought me a cup of coffee. Most people didn't have a therapist get them coffee, but most weren't Elisa.

"How has the week been?" she asked.

"Cold," I laughed. "And exhausting. I've been busy helping with the children's choir and trying to get out as I can."

"And how is that?"

"Good," I answered. It occupies me well enough. I went riding with Ingrid, too. She's returning to America and will be in the UK all summer. I'm so excited."

"You'll miss her."

I nodded. "Of course. We are so close. But I still have Alex and... yeah. Astrid will be home soon for a dress fitting."

"How long until the wedding now?"

"About six months," I said.

"But it's coming up?"

"Faster than you know." I folded my hands in my lap. "Big royal wedding of a Princess to a British Duke. The stuff of dreams."

In September, our sister Astrid would marry her long-time boyfriend Parker at the city's lone non-Catholic cathedral. Parker and Astrid met as grad student rivals but were making it official.

“Something is up. You can tell me anything, Odette.”

I took a deep breath, looking at Grieg as he slept with his head on my foot. He could rest anywhere if he touched me. His love grounded me. Without him, I’d be lost.

“I... I saw Guy.”

“Oh. Okay. And how was that?”

“It was as good as it could be,” I answered. “He has a girlfriend. He’s fine.”

I’d been thinking about him all day—the man who broke me. I knew I needed to do the work, acknowledge the intrusive thoughts, and let it go, but I couldn’t. When I was at my most vulnerable, he tossed me aside.

Elisa nodded sympathetically. “And you, Odette?”

“I wish something would happen—anything.”

“The possibilities are endless, Odette. You are an old soul with all the advantages of a youthful body and opportunities. How are things coming with work?”

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“Alexandra is still paranoid about delegating much,” I said of my older sister. “But... I am making inroads. I want a patronage—a real calling to prove my worth, but it seems like she’ll never delegate anything to me.”

“She worries. Just stay the course. She’ll come around.”

In the last year, everything went wrong behind the scenes. It was Alexandra who sailed the ship so I could get better. She remained steadfast in her love for me but worried I’d regress. As Queen, she had to keep the flock safe, but I worried she’d never trust me again.

“I don’t want to end up like my dad,” I said. “Someone who lost his wife and then lost everything.”

“Your father didn’t get help,” Elisa reminded me. “He lived behind a wall. Instead, Odette, you bravely sought your family’s love and support. A genotype is not destiny, and knowing yourself is half the problem. You are so strong and have so much to be excited about. Don’t let those worries creep in. They’re?—”

“OCD. Yep,” I agreed. “Label it and drop the rope.”

Elisa nodded.

Grieg perked, hearing distant sirens. I bent to scratch behind his ears. He looked at me with all the love in the world. I couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re doing a great job, Odette. Stick with it,” Elisa reminded. “It pays off.”

I hoped she was right, but I couldn't help but feel lonely. Everyone else's life seemed so much fuller from the outside looking in.

2

COFFEE BREAK

WYATT

"Mocha and a flat white, please."

I paid and stepped back from the counter of a local so-called "bakery and beanery" around the corner from my office. Neandians took coffee seriously. Unlike in the States, where coffee options were often middling, here you got the best stuff. The trade-off was that Neandians weren't particularly good at customer service and were as slow as molasses. I'd been here on and off for more than half a decade and still struggled with the pace of life.

"Wyatt. A minute?"

I turned to see my assistant Stephen on his phone. He gestured about something wildly. I nodded at him, waiting for further instruction.

Stephen was blessed with boundless energy. He joked no one would have believed he'd been on Broadway in a past life, but I would. He held people's attention like none other and was unmatched at getting investors to open their wallets. I was the ideas guy, but Stephen counted the signatures and assured people they were part of something bigger than a line item.

He muted the phone, "Are you going to the Vision 360 launch?"

“I am,” I agreed. “Well, if I can land childcare.”

“I will personally watch Theo if you cannot. You must go. The head of the transit board seems?—”

He stopped, listening to the phone. “Yes, sir. He says he will be there.”

“Flat white!” A barista bellowed in a heavy accent.

I stepped up to grab it for Stephen, who was still busy kissing the ass of a Neandian bureaucrat. I handed the coffee off as he entered the car.

“You’re a doll,” Stephen sighed. “Good God, that man! He cantalk. He wants facetime with the boss. Maybe he has a crush?”

“Please, let’s hope not. I have to pray my tux even fits,” I said. “He’ll only be disappointed with the reality.”

“Wyatt, you could afford a new tuxedo,” Stephen laughed. “Perhaps you should invest in one.”

“In two weeks? Unlikely.”

“My tailor makes miracles happen, Wyatt. I will put it on your calendar.”

“Thanks,” I said.

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“Mocha!”

I went to grab my drink, remembering I should tip. The barista glared at me as I pulled out my wallet. Then, I remembered where I was. If I tipped him, he’d be more offended. That was just his regular face. This hipster area wastoo coolfor suits like me. I didn’t fit in here. Sadly, they had the best coffee for miles, and my day didn’t start unless I hit this place up first.

People passed on the sidewalk. Down here, it was mostly younger folks working at Neandian tech startups run by hedge funds. Known as a tax haven, the tiny country was a retirement village for elites wanting to store their cash. Despite that stodgy image, it became more desirable to younger folks as the art scene lit up. The new progressive government and a socially conscious monarch, Queen Alexandra, attracted young innovators with new business programmes. We located the firm here to tap into young and hungry talent along with healthy subsidies.

Stephen said, “Let’s run through your schedule...”

My attention faded from him to a girl on a bike riding towards us. She smiled broadly, dressed head-to-toe in what could only be described as a superfluous amount of pink. I missed riding around on a cargo bike. It looked like so much fun. As she passed, she left the bike highway and returned to a semi-protected lane. Then, I saw a cyclist’s nightmare.

With a green bike signal, a “no right turn” light warned drivers in the right turn lane to stop. A driver ignored its warning, turning into the cyclist. I braced. She tipped over, her belongings spilling. I saw her fall, but she didn’t look hurt. I rushed over

instantly, ensuring the driver stayed.

“Oh my God! Are you okay?” I approached, hoping she spoke English.

“I’m okay,” she answered in a vaguely British accent. “Just shaken.”

The driver appeared. I righted the bike, moved it to the sidewalk, and engaged its impressive double kickstand. It was a nice bike. Thankfully, it looked rideable. I returned as the driver apologised to the young woman, who remained visibly shaken.

“You must obey the no right turns signal,” I said. “You could have killed her!”

The women appeared speechless. Maybe she didn’t speak English? I tried in angry French. “She was wearing high-vis, for fuck’s sake!”

“I am so sorry. I was in a hurry with a baby in the car trying to get to daycare,” the driver explained in French.

“It’s not an excuse,” I said. “You’re late now, and you put your baby in danger, too. I get it—I’ve been in your position—but we are driving death traps. It’s on us.”

“Understood,” the driver said. “I am so, so sorry, ma’am.”

The young woman—far too young to be “ma’am”—smiled at me as the driver left.

“Thanks,” she turned back to the sidewalk. “It was...”

Her voice trailed, and her face sank. “Oh, fuck!”

Confused, I looked around. Stephen was on his phone, guarding the bike.

“What?”

“My dog was right there. Now he’s gone!”

“You had a dog?”

“He was in the bike box,” the woman sobbed.

“Okay, okay. Let’s find him. Stephen, push my ten! We’re looking for a dog!”

3

ESCAPE

ODETTE

“He’s black, brown, and white,” I explained. “He’s a King Charles Spaniel, weighing about six kilos. He’s a little lap dog. He’s my baby!”

I panicked. Where was Grieg? He’d been waiting for me before disappearing. He never ran off. I was grateful he’d walked away okay and that a careless driver injured neither of us, but I didn’t know what I’d do without him. The kind stranger who laid into the driver—rightfully so—was keen to help. His friend helped, too.

“Let’s split up,” the stranger said. “Stephen, can you walk the block? Let’s go to this park over here and see if he’s hiding.”

“Good plan,” I said.

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Stephen nodded. “What’s his name?”

“Grieg,” I answered.

We split up, covering more ground.

“Like the composer?” The stranger asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “How did you?”

“I like music, too. Interesting choice.”

We crossed the street and headed to look around the park.

“I am not like obsessed with Grieg. But we got him from some friends.”

I did not explain more than I had to. Grieg’s parents were the product of Norwegian stock originally bred by Queen Kiersten of Norway. She’d given a breeding pair to my brother-in-law’s mother, Queen Karolina of Lundhavn, as a birthday present. Grieg was brought to me by Karolina at my darkest hour. He’d been handed to me as a precious twelve-week-old puppy. Caring for him got me out of a stupor. He’d given me only love in a time of need. I was desperate to find him unscathed.

“Dogs are special. They’re smart. We’ll find him,” the stranger said.

“He’s everything to me. I take him everywhere. He’s the best boy.”

“Of course.”

“Grieg!” I called.

The stranger and I split. I looked in every bush, shouting his name.

Ten minutes later, I heard the best words. “I found him!”

Racing over, I found Grieg cowering in a bush. I knelt to coax him out.

“Come on, baby,” I said in French. “Are you alright? Let Mama take you home.”

The dog emerged, tail wagging hesitantly. I scooped him up, showering him with kisses. It was such a relief.

“He was rattled. Poor guy,” the stranger said.

“Thank you for your help,” I said. “It meant so much. Now, let’s pray my bike is still back there.”

“Stephen didn’t wander far. I bet it’s fine. People here don’t steal stuff like they do back home.”

“In the States?” I asked.

He nodded. “Sorry, I’m Wyatt. I should have said. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Odie,” I said.

He had no idea who I was, but the driver did. It was blissful to be incognito, and my bike made that even easier. No one suspected me out here cycling about, but I didn’t

have the heart to tell him I was Princess Odette—the Queen’s second-youngest sister.

“Nice to meet you,” Wyatt had a crooked, handsome smile.

He was thinking about something. I couldn’t tell what it was, but I thought for a moment it might be me. He was cute with kind eyes. I flushed at the thought of this handsome American crushing on me. It was flattering but too much. I wanted to say something else—to find another reason to talk—but I couldn’t. It occurred to me that maybe he knew who I was now. Wanting to avoid the awkward dance of him bowing, I spun around and beelined towards my bike with Grieg safe in my arms.

I settled Grieg into the box. I worried he’d be scarred, but he jumped right in. He was ready to go back home to warm comfort.

“You have a good, safe rest of your day,” Wyatt called.

“Thanks. This intersection is a disaster.”

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“I’ve noticed.” Wyatt pointed. “A curb bump out could solve problems by slowing cars down.”

“I guess, yeah.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but these seemed to.

I took off, swinging my leg over the bike and leaving the brave stranger behind me. As I rode, I thought about his kindness. The short, handsome man in a suit had been my knight in shining armour.

I returned my bike to the storage shed and carried Grieg into the house. As I passed Alexandra’s office, I mentioned nothing. I didn’t want her to worry too much and ground me. Ingrid, my littlest sister and closest confidante, appeared in my bedroom doorway with questions. She sensed something was off.

“What’s up? How was therapy?”

“It was fine,” I said, dwelling on what happened would do me no good.

“I sort of lost Grieg for a moment, but a kind stranger helped me find him—a cute one.”

“A cute one? Tell me more.”

Ingrid was the pretty one—boy crazy as they came. She’d want to dish.

“I dunno. He was lovely and found my baby.”

Grieg sighed long, having no time for this retelling.

“Did you get the name of your Prince Charming?” Ingrid giggled.

“Wyatt,” I answered. “He’s American.”

“Hotter still. You’ll have to try to find him again, Odie. And, if so, I need deets.”

I smiled, then fought a pang of sadness. Ingrid was off to compete abroad. No longer would my best friend be here. I sensed she would not return under her own volition once she flew the coop. It meant the end of an era.

“Oh, stop it!” Ingrid sensed my worry. “We will have more stories to share. Hotter stories. Exciting ones. Everything is going to be bigger. Now, where did you see him?”

“By the coffee shop,” I answered.

“Go back there! Look hot! Go get your prince, girl!” Ingrid said.

I vowed to return there sometime soon. Maybe she was right? Perhaps I’d run into him. It’s not like Neandia was a big place, after all.

4

BACK OUT THE TOWN

WYATT

“So, bedtime is at eight,” I said. “Start winding him down with a cuddle and a book at

seven-thirty. He needs time with some lower lights. We struggle with sleep otherwise. He may need you to stay in there with him for a bit. I usually sit with him for ten minutes until he nods off.”

Janette, the new nanny, looked at me like I had two heads. She was younger than the others I’d hired but similar to all the stiff-upper-lip German and British nannies filling the books of Neandian childcare agencies. I gathered that Neandians found their fancy credentials too attractive to ignore. Theo struggled without me. To date, these caregivers called him “whiny” and “ill-adjusted.” Without compassion, Theo returned to introversion. I’d have to rebuild him every time. He was four. He didn’t need to qualify his needs beyond that he was a child and necessitated love and comfort.

I bent to eye level with Theo. His blonde curls were a disaster from running around like a madman upstairs while I got ready. He used the hallway like a track. He recently learned how to somersault and now did them all the time.

I hugged and kissed him. “Be good for Janette, alright?”

Theo nodded, unconvinced and slightly suspicious.

“I love you, little man. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Love you, too, Papa,” Theo said.

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I backed out, knowing he'd cry and throw a fit if I drew it out. My mother taught me it was better to leave with little fanfare. So far, so good. I exited the waiting car, closing the side door. I waited, hoping not to hear him collapse into tears. Thankfully, nothing. My guilt didn't completely subside, but lessened.

"Mr. Worthington," Hugo, my driver, held the door.

"Thanks. How are you tonight, Hugo." I sat in the back.

Hugo settled in his seat. "Brilliant, sir. How are you?"

"Uh... you know how it is leaving Theo."

"I do, sir," Hugo said. "Hard when they're little. But you're going out. It is a good evening for an event."

"I suppose."

I took a deep breath, panicking slightly as we headed into the city centre. Still unsteady, I called my mother.

"Why are you calling me, Wyatt?" Mother asked.

"Mom... I'm going. Before you worry, I am going."

"Good. Are you behaving yourself?"

“Yes, mother. I’m freaking out.”

“Deep breaths. I know this is new again, but you must get out. Also, I shouldn’t need to remind you, but this is a cause you care about a lot.”

I did. The Vision 360 board was near and dear to me—perhaps too important—which made it so difficult.

“I know. Theo didn’t want?—”

“Theo is four. He doesn’t know what he wants. When you ask, he can barely choose between apples and oranges. He has to learn how to separate from you, Wyatt. If you go out and meet people, it might be good for you.”

People. “People” meant women. Mom knew better than to say that much.

“I am trying to step out in a tux and not feel awkward without Isla. Can we focus on that without me needing to do more?”

“I am only saying if you did meet someone, it wouldn’t be bad. It shouldn’t be.”

“Fine,” I sighed.

I wanted it to stop. More than three years passed since Isla died. It felt like yesterday. As if on two simultaneous timelines, my life rolled on—forever a single father raising an ever-growing child on one and as a husband living with his college sweetheart in perfect bliss. Moving on wasn’t in the cards—at least not for a long time.

Moreover, the type of women you met at charity events weren’t what I wanted. They were exhausting society types who were already divorced from Neandian millionaires or would soon be. My new, well-tailored suit didn’t give insight into the things

Ididmost value. I wasn't much of a social butterfly.

"It's a muscle," Mom said. "You have to move it to make it work. It gets easier. I promise. Just give it a shot."

5

INDEPENDENT WOMAN

ODETTE

I left the house for a benefit in an evening gown, dripping in a parure Alexandra and my brother-in-law, Rick, gave me for my birthday last year. Alexandra suffered from severe morning sickness during her fourth pregnancy. She and Rick were due to attend a Vision 360 benefit—ironically, aimed to stop pedestrian deaths. Given my recent run-in with a car, I probably was a little too close to the action.

Princesses were expected to attend such occasions. However, I'd been sidelined with school and life. Alexandra only let me out alone because she was desperate for coverage. Ingrid was at a horse show. Thus, I was all she had left at her disposal. Rick said he'd go if I couldn't, but Alexandra truthfully wanted him to stay. It was a bluff. He wasn't about to leave her, either.

An organiser greeted me at the hotel's service entrance with a broad smile. Despite my nerves, her grin reminded me to have fun.

She bowed efficiently. "Your Royal Highness, we are so excited to have you."

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“Her Majesty and His Royal Highness send their best,” I said. “But she is quite under the weather.”

I left it there. It was the early days of Alex’s fourth pregnancy.

“Of course. And we hope The Queen recovers quickly.”

In a few more months. Alexandra had been pregnant for much of the past six years—despite agreeing only to produce the prerequisite heir and spare. Alexandra and Rick remained broody. I was secretly pleased to get a fourth niece or nephew shortly. I adored my niblings.

I aimed to make a splash, prove myself, and assume this patronage. But to do that, I had to shine. I needed to be trusted not only by Alexandra but also by her staff. Tonight, I knew I could make the case for more responsibilities if I did well. She needed more people to help, and I would be that girl.

While I quite literally glittered, I worried about the press droning on about my “constant weight gain.” The twenty pounds I’d starved myself over for years were back to stay. Yes, I was the “chubby” or “thick” sister. I was a whale to hear them tell it, but I ignored their commentary. I had thick thighs, a big ass, and the biggest bustline of the four. It took months for me to embrace my “new” body—the one I was born to have—but when I started cycling, I found its power. My strong thighs were a motor. My ass looked great in cycling shorts—no shade. And in this dress? It displayed every curve in red perfection.

“The board is dying to meet you,” she fawned. “I cannot wait to introduce you. I heard

you were a cyclist.”

“I am,” I said. “I love cycling in the city and mountains. I took it up in high school and haven’t stopped.”

“It’s great. I am so excited you were able to join us.”

“I am passionate about making things safer,” I agreed. “It’s essential to all of us that people get to work, school, and play without a fuss and safely.”

“If only! The Prince’s support has been invaluable in moving the ball forward with the government.”

Rick was a moderniser—that’s what happens when a Scandinavian marries into the family. He didn’t understand why public transit here was so dismal. Alexandra ignored his meddling because she secretly loved it and said he “needed hobbies”. She preferred this to sailing.

After a maze of back hallways and the busy catering kitchen, I reached the ballroom to make my rounds. I listened as my private secretary, Karin, pointed out critical information about notable donors and board members. I wished I had my sister Astrid’s exceptional recall for such minor things, but I did not. I could memorise entire choral works in an afternoon but was terrible with names.

“And a board member, Wyatt Worthington. He’s also designed the transit network GPS improvements.”

I stared at a man in a tuxedo with broad shoulders. He wasn’t tall but had dark, sexy, salt-and-pepper hair. I only saw the back of him at first. Then, he turned, speaking to another person. As he patted a guy on the back, I discovered I knew him. He was the kind stranger who helped find Grieg. I might not have remembered his name, but I’d

have spotted his warm smile from anywhere.

“I know him,” I whispered.

“Worthington?”

“He helped me find Grieg when he ran off a couple of weeks ago,” I said. “He’s amazing.”

“He’s a billionaire intent on improving traffic here—an American who moved here for some reason and stayed.”

He’s lovely. I tried not to swoon openly.

“Can I speak to him first?” I asked.

“Negative. There is a procedure,” she answered.

I pouted. Why couldn’t I just see Wyatt?

I was pulled around for forty-five minutes talking to people who thoroughly bored me. I wanted to speak only to Wyatt, but I was unlucky. I kept tabs on him, finding his vibe interesting from afar. Wyatt was busy with something else, so I had free time.

“Let me take this one,” I told Karin.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine. What? You have a crush on the handsome billionaire?”

Well, yes.

“No. He’s just a nice guy, and I will catch up.”

I approached Wyatt. He was finally free, getting a refill at the bar.

“Mr. Worthington?”

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He turned, staring at me momentarily before putting it together. Nervously, he bowed, then broke into a handsome smile. He hadn't recognised me before, but did now.

"You were the girl on the bike!"

"Odie," I said. "Yes."

"Princess Odette. Your Royal Highness? I... uh... I had no idea. Forgive me."

"It's okay. Really."

It dawned on me he still hadn't realised who I was. I basked in this. I'd have to speak shortly, and the whole thing would go to pot.

"I've been thinking about you," Wyatt said.

Oh, have you?

"About the other day," he corrected. "I was thinking about that intersection. I have so many ideas. You're involved with Vision 360?—"

"I am," I lied. I wasn't really, but I was tonight.

"Ever want to connect about it? We could use more support from cyclists—especially one with the ear of leadership. You must know some others and have an in?"

I didn't. That was the perilous social life of a princess trapped in a tower.

"Sure," I lied.

He patted his inner jacket pocket. I looked at how the suit's cut perfectly emphasised his broad shoulders. He couldn't have been more than five-foot-nine but still had a good five inches on me. It wasn't his height that was striking, though. It was his lovely, strong jaw and compact, fit body. Damn. It was too much. I did have a crush.

Wyatt handed me a card. "That's my email. We should set something?—"

He stopped as a noise drowned out his words. The klaxon of the fire alarm blared.

Fuck!

I looked to see if Karin tailed me. She hadn't. Suddenly, I realised I had a chance to improve my circumstances. I could either lament my luck or take advantage of the chaos. I chose the latter.

6

SAVED BY THE BELL

WYATT

This vision of Princess Odette differed from the girl on the bike, but Odie's bright eyes and generally upbeat persona were unmistakable. In the short time I'd spent tracking down a dog with her, I realised she wasn't easily shaken. I hadn't forgotten about that morning since it happened. Instead, I focused on the thought of preventing it from happening again.

I hoped I didn't frighten her by jumping in head-first, but she seemed receptive enough. She had no idea why I was so invested in this, and I didn't care to explain it all that much.

"That's my email. We should set something?—"

The fire alarm went off. I groaned internally. Well, there went a productive conversation I actually cared about!

People filed out. Odie covered her ears.

She shouted over the alarm, "We should get out of here. Should we continue this conversation?"

"I would love that," I admitted.

"I know a place."

Odette grabbed my hand and pulled me after her. She knew where she was going, so I followed. When I set out tonight, I expected the same old nonsense one gets when being courted by a group that needed my money and influence—instead, a princess pulled me through a kitchen like a meme. My life was in her hands, but I didn't hate it. It turned a bland evening into something much more entertaining. She dropped my hand and trotted ahead playfully when we ended up in an alleyway.

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“Sorry. I’m probably overstepping. This is a passion project for me. I swear. I can be insistent. Tell me fuck off if you aren’t interested.”

I grimaced. Could I say fuck off?

“Sorry. I shouldn’t swear. I am sure that isn’t something?—”

“Swearing isn’t prohibited in the royal household, believe it or not.”

I flushed, not sure how to respond. Was she interested or just being polite?

“It’s probably boring.” I shrugged.

“I am very interested, but not sure if I’m capable. This is not in my wheelhouse.”

She glanced at her phone as it buzzed.

“Emergency?” I asked.

She took a moment. “I guess. I actually must go. Apologies.”

“Oh, that’s too bad, but I understand.”

“I’ll email you,” Odie said. “We can continue this. I’d like to know more about the whole funding thing.”

I doubted she would follow up, but I hoped she did.

“Great,” I said. “Sounds good.”

She slammed the rest of her cognac and disappeared, looking nervous. Although she looked young, she was busy. It made sense. She had royal commitments or whatever it was princesses did. I couldn’t keep her. At least I’d gotten a moment of her time.

I listened to the piano music a little longer, appreciating the solitude and company of adult strangers for a moment. I’d leave soon and go home, hoping to find my child in bed. For now, I was out in the world doing my best. I tried hard to be myself again. What did that even mean, though? I was different from the man who’d ducked into a seedy college party for beer almost twenty years ago and spotted a pretty outgoing brunette who shook his world to its core.

7

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

ODETTE

I wanted to focus on Wyatt—this gorgeous man who talked about transportation like it was his magnum opus. His kind brown eyes and slight stubble captivated me. However, my phone kept buzzing with Karin’s threats. She knew I’d slipped out without my detail or her. I feared the press spilled the beans. God, he was beautiful! Why could I not have a fair shake at this and charm him before the press took a bite?

Karin

I know you escaped. Ring me NOW or I will send the police door-to-door.

I ignored her message, continuing my investment in this blissful moment. I was womanly—a desired being. Once I left, it would end. I decided to wait her out and

soak it up. She could threaten whatever, but I knew that would be considered a waste of police resources. She wasn't dumb, just annoying.

I needed to focus on this—whatever it was. I wanted to think about how he swirled the drink, how his slight smile looked under low lights, and how hot he looked when he loosened his tie. Damn. I don't know why that was the thing that set me off.

Wyatt continued, filling me in on the process. A slight blush came to his face, revealing he was a little nervous but always passionate. Wyatt's grin was earnest in a way I hadn't seen before. He didn't want to offend me. He also cared about our conversation enough to want it to go well. This man was trying. Then, things went completely off the rails.

He explained something about funding, then said, "Tell me fuck off if you aren't interested."

I giggled as my phone buzzed. Damn it.

Karin

I'm going to ring the palace and tell Her Majesty you are missing!!!

I knew I had a few minutes before she did it. If she lost me, the blame was partially hers. I was an unreliable twenty-something princess. She was a thirty-something professional who couldn't keep tabs on me in an emergency.

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“Emergency?” Wyatt asked, sweet face concerned.

“I guess. I must go. Apologies. I’ll email you,” I said. “We can continue this. I’d like to know more about grants.”

Wyatt nodded, looking slightly disappointed. I made an impression—only to be pulled away. I could have strangled Karin if it wasn’t her job to handle me like this. She was only doing her best to keep my world spinning.

Me

I’m coming, okay? Don’t squeal. I’ll meet you at the back door.

I crossed the street, praying no one saw me sticking out like a sore thumb in an evening gown. Annoyed, I entered the car.

Karin glared. “Don’t do that again.”

“How did you know I ran off?”

“Because we pulled the security footage. You escaped with the billionaire. He’s more than a decade older,” Karin said. “It’s ridiculous.”

She was always blunt, but why did she seem so cruel today? I’d lived a moment of freedom; all she could do was pull me back down and remind me this wouldn’t work. I set my jaw defiantly as the motorcade rolled back to the palace. I wouldn’t apologise for getting a rare moment to myself.

“I will not say anything,” Karin agreed. “But only because I think you don’t want to be put back on desk duty again—nor do I.”

“Thanks.”

I wasn’t as grateful as I was relieved. I didn’t know why everyone around me got to be wild—everyone but me. I had to be an angel.

At the palace, I slumped on the family room couch, watching a reality show. Contestants were allowed only to text one another and given nothing more than a messenger handle. They had to propose via text and marry in a month.

“That show is terrible!”

Rick entered and sat on the other couch.

“Says the man who married the woman he was set up with,” I chuckled. “In record time, too.”

“I still wish you saw it as a fairytale,” Rick sighed. “You finding out it was a setup and our love only a happy accident broke me. Ingrid was too nosey.”

Rick and Alexandra’s marriage had been one of convenience—initially. However, they fell for one another. By the time they said ‘I do,’ they were in full-blown love. Alexandra sanitised most of this because Ingrid and I were still so young. We looked at it with rose-coloured glasses, thinking Rick was a white knight who had come to save us from the regency and evil grandmother who controlled our lives.

“Ingy is always nosey,” I said. “She and Astrid are too clever.”

“Damn them both.”

We both watched TV for a moment.

“It might be nice, honestly,” I said. “Any recommendations? It’s my only chance to find someone, Rick.”

“Nonsense.”

“Why are you up?”

“I had a toddler yowling at me. I didn’t want Lex to wake,” Rick said. “He’s settled now. Why are you back so soon?”

“The event ended when the fire alarm went off. I have no idea if it was legitimate.”

“That’s too bad. But it was otherwise fine?”

I shrugged.

“What aren’t you telling me, kid?” Rick asked affectionately.

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“Can I tell you something in confidence?”

“Sure. I’ll just put on my big brother hat.”

He gestured as if settling an enormous cowboy hat on his head.

“Stop it!” I laughed.

“I’m serious. What is it, Odie?”

“I have a stupid crush on someone. Turns out he’s Wyatt Worthington?—”

“The billionaire?”

“Yes. I ran into him in town. He didn’t know who I was back then. And he’s... well, I find him utterly charming. Anyhow, we escaped together. Karin nearly skinned me alive over it. She threatened to tell Alex. I swear I’m not acting out. This isn’t mania?—”

He smiled. “No, it’s just a crush. On a man much too old for you.”

“You should talk!”

Rick chuckled. “Perhaps. Don’t worry. I won’t say it. It’s okay. I see all your work and how hard you try to stay healthy, Odette. I know what it is like to be the flake. My only excuse was I am stubborn and often selfish.”

“I disagree,” I said. “Not about the stubborn bit, but the selfish one. Maybe you were. I don’t know. But now... you’re only going to take care of us. It takes someone lovely to take on four sisters and a perfect dad to manage this chaos.”

“I’m touched you think that, Odette. My point, though, is it’s unfair that you constantly beat yourself up over it. I get it. I was labelled the fuckup. I’d know.”

Rick smiled kindly, knowing what really worried me. His voice softened, “You aren’t your dad, Odie. Alexandra and I aren’t Celeste. We aren’t here to torture or judge you. I know it’s hard sometimes, but let that go and live. What is it you want out of life, sweetheart?”

“I want respect,” I said. “I want to be loveable—admirable.”

“You are, Odie,” Rick assured. “You are always loveable and very admirable. I am sorry you don’t always see that. You will someday.”

“But will I ever meet someone who feels that way?”

“I think you will,” Rick said. “If I could find the person who saw the good in me, I have hope for you.”

“I’ve settled on being the family spinster,” I sighed.

“Come on, you got a billionaire to follow you... where did you go? Should I ask?”

I laughed. “It wasn’t too sinister. We went to Keys.”

“Ah, that’s on-brand.”

I snickered.

“Well, he chased you there, Odette. You charmed him. I think it’s good for you. He’d be stupid not to see how smart and kind you are. Give yourself some credit.”

I wished I could believe Rick.

“Overall, other than the boy—man—you found, how did it go?”

“Really great,” I answered. “I felt good. Can I tell you another secret?”

Rick smiled. “Anything, kid.”

“I want to prove my worth to Alexandra. I want this Vision 360 patronage to be mine. I know I can help her.”

“I can try to put in a good word—maybe point it out?”

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“You want to help us find a nanny?”

“Yes,” Mom answered. “I do. And I believe you stand a better chance with me in your court.”

I smiled. “I know you do. I will send you a plane. You don’t need to book a ticket?—”

“No, have Leona book me a ticket. I like the food on that airline I always fly. And the lounge has ahunky bartender.”

I snickered. “Alright, alright. I will tell Leona to call you later. Sorry for all of this.”

“It’s okay. You know I will always rush to help you or Becca.”

Becca was my older sister. The three of us were bonded so close.

“I know you will, Mom. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Take care of our boy,” Mom said.

I hung up, exhausted from the nanny search, but comforted that trustworthy, lovely help was coming.

ODETTE

“It’s appalling... your food culture.” Alexandra pulled a face and turned from the girls and Scandinavian delights their father provided for breakfast.

Under the table, Grieg positioned himself between Alexandra and Rick’s daughters—Linny and Kari—waiting for the children to drop food. He wagged his tail and flicked his head between them. Little Christophe, their youngest, slept somewhere across the palace after his late-night party.

I snickered.

“It’s fine. It’s sweetandsavoury,” Rick said of the Brunost on toast the girls ate.

“It’s terrible, baby. Terrible.”

I agreed with Alexandra. Our pastries were a vast improvement on whatever these crazy Vikings got up to.

“They’re quiet and eating. Hush, Lex!”

She rolled her eyes. “Odie, how did the event go last night?”

“It was a catastrophe,” I sighed.

Concern rolled over my sister’s queenly face.

My face flushed red. I immediately defended myself. “No, nothing I did.”

“Some idiot pulled the fire extinguisher,” Rick said. “They had to flee, but Odette made inroads with one of the big fish.”

I didn't deserve his kindness, smiling back in thanks.

"Oh?" Alexandra raised her eyebrow. "That's brilliant, darling. Who?"

"Wyatt Worthington," Rick continued. "Wasn't that right, Odie?"

I nodded. "Um... he was there. We discussed safe streets and a particularly hazardous crossing. He had some ideas. I was fascinated."

"That's great," Alexandra said. "Well done."

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“Would it not make sense to give Odette a patronage, baby?” Rick suggested. “You know, Vision 360?”

“I don’t know that we are ready for that. Besides, Rick, you enjoy the road commission folks.”

My heart sank. I said nothing. There was no point in arguing. She’d make up her mind that I was deficient, even if Rick was delusional in thinking otherwise. I knew my place.

My phone buzzed.

Rick

Speak up for yourself if you want this!

I groaned internally and took a deep breath. Rick was right. I rolled over and gave up because it was easier. Fighting meant more emotional investment for what? For her to call me broken and to deny me in the end? I thought about my argument. I had a good one last night. Was I willing to launch into it and risk rejection?

“Well, I disagree, Alex,” I said.

Surprise spread. I have the floor!

“I... uh... I believe I would be an excellent choice for the campaign. I am a cyclist. I care deeply about safety. I’m perfect for it.”

I nodded for added confidence, even if I was nervous. I'd fake it until I made it.

"She is," Rick shrugged.

"I don't know, sweetheart," Alexandra looked at me before becoming distracted by the children.

She admonished her middle child in what I described as maternal French. It was deep and sharp. "Kari, stop torturing Linny right this minute. Forks are for food, not hair!"

The girls stared at their mother, then their father, who didn't give in.

"Sorry, Mama," Kari said.

"Let's be kind to one another, alright?" I echoed. "She's your sister. You'll need her to have your back for years and years, Kari."

"Someday, Karolina, she will be your boss. You don't want her to remember the worst bits and be a tyrant, do you?" Rick looked instead at Alexandra.

Ouch, Rick, tell us how you really feel!

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "Odette, do you think this is too much, or would it be good for you?"

I perked up. "It would be great, honestly. I think this is what I need."

"Fine," Alexandra agreed. "You have a patronage. But if I begin to worry?—"

"Alexandra, you cannot threaten me every time with that," I protested. "My recovery isn't linear. I have good and bad days, but... I am working so hard to do better. It

isn't easy. Worrying that you are waiting for the other shoe to drop is invalidating."

Her words hurt. Usually, I'd remind myself her intent was good, but I needed to push back. She deserved to know how it made me feel. The more I spoke, the more confident I became.

Alexandra's face pulled in pain. "I'm sorry, darling. I will try harder to be more supportive. It would help if you didn't feel I am waiting for you to fail. You've been so brave and strong, but I worry about you like a mother would."

"I know, but I'm a grown woman," I said. "I want to live like one. Treat me as you would Astrid if she were here."

Alexandra nodded. "I will try to remember that, Odette. I'm sorry. Please manage to get that American on board. We will need his goodwill and financial firepower to make a dent with the council."

"I thought the government approved of it?" I asked.

"The national government did, but the local planning commissions must report to the Mayor. Mr Mayor is a fucking buffoon who hates people and bikes," Rick said. "I hate that dick. He is sitting on a huge surplus."

"Rick, language," Alexandra sighed.

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“You shouldn’t say dick, Pappa,” Linnea reminded. “Or asshole. Or knob. Or wanker. Or fuckwit?—”

“That’s more than enough, Linny, thank you,” Alexandra glared at Rick.

Rick winced. “Vocabularies are like diets—best when colourful and varied—right?”

10

MR MAYOR

WYATT

“He’s going to want snacks. Don’t give in,” I said. “He won’t eat actual food. I don’t know how to fix it, but it became... a crutch. How do you fix that?”

“You don’t,” Mom laughed. “Sweetheart, you ate two foods between the ages of two and six—bologna and hot dogs.”

“That couldn’t be good.”

“You made it where you are just fine. Children are picky. His choices aren’t a mandate on your parenting, okay? He’s been through so much. If he wants nothing but apple slices this morning, he will get them.”

I grumbled, wishing he’d be the adventurous eater his motherswore he’d end up if we just kept trying.

“It’s not your fault. Some kids are picky. Some aren’t. By the time they go to college, they all eat whatever,” Mom said. “Go, you have an important meeting. The more you drag it out?—”

“He won’t mind me going if you’re here,” I said. “He has been losing his mind over you coming, Mom.”

She rolled her eyes. “What is it that has gotten you all wound up?”

“Nothing,” I lied.

I still waited to hear from Odette as the next board meeting loomed. We needed to strategise if she would do me a favour and attend. Instead, it was radio silence on that front. I didn’t know why it bothered me so much.

Mom patted my back. “Go say goodbye and head out, Wyatt.”

I entered Theo’s playroom and sat on the floor.

“Papa!” Theo raced over. “I was building a train track!”

“I see that.” I wrapped him in a big hug.

“It will have two engines!”

“Even better,” I said. “We can play with it when I get home. I have to go.”

“Why, Papa?” Theo whined.

“Because I have business. Grandma will stay with you. That’s fun, right?”

“I miss you, Papa.”

“I know,” I said. “And I would much rather stay here and play trains with you, little man. But right now, I have to go meet some people?”

“Who?”

“The Mayor and a prince,” I sighed.

“What is a major?”

I chuckled. “May-or. He’s like the president of the city.”

He's a real piece of shit.

"Can I go?"

"No, sweetie. It's not that type of day. What about we go to Legoland this weekend—just the two of us? Is that something to look forward to?"

"Yeah, I guess," Theo groaned.

I gave him a big kiss on the cheek and hopped up. "Be good, buddy."

Today, I had to converse pleasantly at a ribbon cutting for Neandia's first smart bus rapid transit system station. It was the first of a dozen to be deployed in the next two years. This bus highway was designed based on data we mined, and it was meant to adjust over time to user needs and behaviour.

Prince Rikard—known to most as Rick—waited for me. Secretly, I'd hoped Rick would be replaced by his sister-in-law. The Mayor was deeply invested in a conversation with cronies. So, as awkward as it was talking to a prince, I sucked it up and approached the other stakeholder I needed to impress. Yes, they'd paid us for this. Yes, we'd done it for less than I might have charged any other government. But at the end of the day, it was a contract with much meaning. I cared about this relationship.

"Mr Worthington!" Prince Rikard gave me an incredibly firm handshake. "How are you?"

"Fine, you, Your Royal Highness?"

“Oh, doing well, thanks. My wife sends her regards. She’s still a bit under the weather.”

“Apologies,” I said. “And thank you. What are we waiting on?”

I was hoping it might still be his sister-in-law.

“Mayor Blowhard,” The Prince whispered.

I snickered. “That’s a good one. I’ll remember it, but remind myself not to call him that.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t, but I must,” Prince Rikard said. “He asked me if my youngest sister-in-law was single. She’s twenty-one. I told him that’s not my business, and he asked me for her number.”

I shuddered. Mayor Bouchard was a tall, thin man in his seventies. His face drooped like a Saint Bernard’s might. Given his many spottings at live sex shows across the Low Countries and noted history of being thrown out of said shows, it was safe to assume the Mayor wasn’t beyond hitting on a twenty-one-year-old princess. I suspected she’d never consider it, but also that Rick would have physically ended the old man over any advances made to his younger sisters-in-law.

“Appalling.” I shook my head.

I didn’t dislike Prince Rikard. He was affable, fairly casual, and nothing like his wife. She was what you might expect from a queen—quiet, controlled, formal. Rikard was the life of the party, but hanging with any royals was awkward.

“The bastard never reads the room. Well, anyhow, enough about that dickhead. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. I’m ready to see this project finally underway here.”

“Me as well. Even Blowhard didn’t stop it.”

I laughed and shook my head. I looked down the street to see a woman in head-to-toe pink winter riding gear flying by on a Dutch e-bike. I knew it was Odie. I smiled and tried not to think about her.

Rick followed my gaze. “There she goes. Odette probably would have enjoyed being here today but had other things to do.”

Other things. Either she did have other things, or she was avoiding me. I grimaced. She never emailed back, and there she was out in the world. I worried maybe I frightened her by being too insistent. Perhaps it was pointless? I was a little annoyed. I’d thought there was something there—a hope for progress, possibly. I shouldn’t think about her, but she was so positive. I’d wanted to believe her.

He knew we’d met. By the look on his face, he suspected this caught me off guard.

“She said you all talked the other night,” Rick explained. “She’s taking over that patronage and got Alexandra and me up to speed.”

Oh, really? Then why did she blow me off?

“So, will she be around at future events?” I asked.

“Yes. Today, she had a long-booked appointment that wouldn’t have given her enough time to make it. I know she is much more charming than I am.”

I coughed nervously. “Oh, that’s not what I meant. I meant... she’s passionate about bikes! I appreciate her interest in fixing that intersection. It’s dangerous. If she is

supportive, a charm offensive might get the Mayor on board with allowing a traffic survey for that junction?”

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Or has she allied herself with the old asshole?

Rick stared off and shrugged. “If our family can be useful in a charm offensive, we’ll try. The place needs to be safe for us and our children. Odette shares in that.”

“I appreciate it,” I relaxed a bit.

Rick patted my back. “We’ll get the bastard one way or another if it kills me.”

Maybe she hadn’t blown me off? Maybe shewasjust busy? After all, shewasa princess. I wasn’t sure what they did, but it must have been a busy life. I’d have to wait around to figure it out. Either way, I couldn’t give up on the intersection—Odette or no Odette. It was an irrational fixation I couldn’t quit. Watching her fall, nearlysmashed and terrified as she searched for her dog, I knew the time for inaction was over. I could bring this small, positive change if I stayed the course.

11

REAL TALK

ODETTE

“Isee you’re proud of your patronage. That’s good. Look at you integrating your favourite thing into work—your bike!”

I looked over at Grieg as he slept beside me. Elisa read my mind.

“Well, after Grieg, of course. Either way, that is a meaningful way to give back, right?”

I’d been so excited about my patronage that I’d sent Elisa a message. I’d done so while trying to avoid sending Wyatt the message I’d drafted half a dozen times already. It lived rent-free in my mind and always in my drafts folder.

“It feels good,” I said. “It’s a great opportunity.”

“See, your sister came around!”

I nodded. “She relaxed a little. And you’d be proud of me. I advocated for myself!”

“Good for you! Why do you look much less excited than I thought you would?”

“There’s more to it. I have a crush on a guy, and I’m pretty worried about it fucking everything up.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not gone well for me in the past. I just got myself into some rhythm.”

I played with the dog’s ears, distracting myself from opening up.

“If you are trying to get me to talk you out of having a crush, I won’t,” Elisa said. “I think having feelings—regardless of acting on them—is good for you. I’m not here to be your jailer, Odette. If you are using me as an out to deny yourself a step forward, I won’t give it to you.”

Your jailer. The words resonated so much that I picked Grieg up and held him on my lap. For the first fifteen years of my life, our grandmother served as our jailer. Until

Rick married Alex and freed us, I'd never attended school with other children. Talking about it hurt, but I trusted Elisa.

"I don't know what to do without a jailer," I said.

"Do you worry that you will always need someone to tell you what to do?"

I shrugged. Grieg nuzzled my stomach and fell asleep again. Before I spoke, I listened to his quiet breathing to soothe me.

Elisa looked at the clock. I knew already our session was over.

"You have a lot to think about," Elisa reminded. "Celebrate this win and stop getting in your own way."

"Okay," I agreed.

I cycled home, wishing things could be easy. I wanted some sign about what was right. I needed to talk to someone, but Ingrid wasn't around. I couldn't drop this on Alexandra. She was too sick and too busy to care.

Thankfully, I knew one person who wouldn't judge me, and he looked to be in his office.

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“Hey, Odie,” he said. “What’s up?”

“I want to send an email, but I’m scared.”

“About what? What is so frightening about an email? Better an email than a meeting that could have been an email.”

I sat down in front of his desk.

“Wyatt wants to strategise about improvements. He told me he’d talk me through the funding structure.”

“So, email him and say that.”

“But what if I have a massive crush on him, and he finds out?”

“Then, he probably realises he has a cute princess chasing after him and gives it a go. Or he says, thanks, but no thanks.”

“And what if he does find out, and then we, like... I dunno. What if he was to ask me out? Like, what if I am actually vibing with him and reading it correctly?”

Rick furrowed his brow. “Then, you’d go on a date.”

“Okay, but I’m me.”

“Yes, being a princess sucks sometimes. It’s loads more fun to be a prince. However,

kiddo, he'll get over it."

"Why?"

"Because you are you," Rick said. "You're an angel. He's a nice guy. He'll get over it."

"But what about... you know?"

"What?"

"My bipolar disorder."

"Thanks for spelling it out because that was the farthest thing from my mind. No. That is something you don't say on a first date."

"But what about when I don't?—"

"What if I get mowed down by a stampede of wild horses tomorrow? Can we even prepare for what-ifs?"

"I hope you do not. I almost got hit by a car," I said. "That's how I met Wyatt."

"Really?"

"It was okay. The driver didn't see me. He wanted to see if we could fix the intersection. I didn't expect to see him again. Don't tell Alex, or she'll take my bike away."

"Wait, so that is how you actually met him?"

“The first time,” I winced. “He helped me save Grieg. Grieg ran off.”

“This is adorable,” Rick said. “The dog brought you together. Yes. I do hope it’s more than just an email. I hope it turns into a ridiculous rom-com like Astrid and Alex are obsessed with. It’s too adorable.”

I grimaced.

“I’d like to say I cared that he’s too old for you or whatever, but I think it’s cute. I’m happy for you. Don’t let your mental illness prevent you from being happy. If you like him, tell him! If it goes somewhere, you’ll know when you let him in the harder stuff. You’ll know.”

12

A PINK WORLD

WYATT

February in Neandia was often a rainy slog, but sometimes it threw you a bone. While it was still chilly, the sun was bright on a lazy Saturday. I brought Theo downtown to grab coffee and play in the park. We had a ten AM appointment, but I figured it would be good to stretch his legs. Either way, I'd be miserable if I didn't get a coffee. My mother was only capable of producing "church lady" coffee—a weak, terrible pot that left me depressed.

We walked to my favourite shop, a glare making it hard to see. Theo took off like a shot, making me so nervous. I raced after, panic-stricken. He ran just out of sight, around a corner.

"Doggy! Chien! Doggy!" Theo shouted

"Theo, come back here and slow down!"

"He's fine!" A voice called in English.

I finally passed the glare around the corner and was face-to-face with a woman in head-to-toe pink. It was Odie. Theo focused entirely on the dog in the bike basket. He must have seen them ride by.

"Grieg, right?" I asked.

"He loves children, don't worry about it."

“Papa, it’s a doggy!”

“I know, buddy. His name is Grieg. And this is Odie,” I said.

I was glad she caught him. My heart slowed, happy he hadn’t bolted into traffic. However, I stared awkwardly at the woman who still hadn’t emailed. I tried not to make it weird, but I was hurt. She never followed through. If she had time for a Saturday morning ride, didn’t she have time to email?

“You’ve got a runner,” Odie said. “My niece is the same way. She’s fast, like a racehorse. She will drop your hand and take off.”

“We’re... working on it,” I said, annoyed.

“Kids... they’re predictably unpredictable,” Odie said, adoringly.

Was she unaware I was frustrated with her? Or was she just really good at ignoring tension?

“He’s your son?”

“Yes,” I answered curtly.

“He’s a doll. Honestly. Absolutely adorable.”

Odette removed her helmet, unveiling her soft blonde hair. She smiled and focused on Theo. Her eyes shone bright and kind. Theo beamed back at her, patting Grieg too intensely.

“That might be a bit too much love, friend,” Odette said in sweet French. “What is your name?”

“Theo! I’m four!”

“Oh, such a good age,” Odette tucked a piece of stray hair behind her ear and turned to me.

I didn’t know if it was the sheer kindness in her gaze or her broad, unrelenting smile, but I couldn’t stay mad.

“I didn’t know you had a kid, Wyatt.”

“Sorry, I didn’t... mention him,” I said.

“It’s okay. You should have gloated!”

I was relieved to see she liked kids. Business associates rarely wanted to hear about my kid. My team knew he was the centre of my universe—like it or not. And sometimes, when I brought it up, I got dreaded sympathy. Oh, look at the poor widower and his young son! Let’s pity him!

“He’s great, yeah.” I needed to leave.

She was kind, but the longer I didn’t talk about the email, the more frustrated I became. Why didn’t it bother her that she didn’t keep to this commitment? I supposed someone her age was too flighty to remember.

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“So, anything major happen at the ribbon cutting?” Odette asked.

“I think Rick probably filled you in.”

“Oh.” Brows furrowed in confusion, she asked, “I don’t imagine you have time to talk?—”

Annoyed, I cut her off, “We were going to play in the park. I shouldn’t bother you. I know you’re busy.”

She picked up on my tone. It was too severe.

“Wyatt, I’m not too busy. And... I am sorry if I offended you. I felt stupid about emailing you. I didn’t know what to say and thought no matter what I said, it would sound silly since you know so much more.”

“Odie! Look!” Theo flipped Grieg’s ears up on top of his head and laughed.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realised I was carrying. She hadn’t ducked me on purpose. She’d not known what to say any more than I knew what to lead with now. I’d hurt her feelings.

Fighting a sad expression, Odette smiled at Theo. “He’s got the best ears, doesn’t he?”

“Yes! I luff him!”

“Uh... I do have time to talk if you do. I planned to get coffee and watch him play in the park... if that works?”

“Sure. Sounds good!” Odette beamed, tossing her helmet in the bike bucket.

“Do we need to do something with the dog?” I asked.

She nodded. “Grieg knows to wait for us.”

We entered the coffee shop and got in line. Thankfully, it was early, and the line was short.

“I like your clothes,” Theo stared at Odette.

She giggled. “Oh, thank you. I do like the colour pink, I suppose. Pink and red are my favourite colours. What about you, darling?”

“I like violet,” Theo said.

“That’s a wonderful colour.”

I tussled his hair. “It is a good colour.”

“It was Mama’s favourite colour,” Theo proclaimed.

His mother’s life was a colour-coded dream of every shade of purple you could imagine. She knitted him a violet blanket before he was born. We weren’t sure if he was a boy or a girl, and she doubted whether we should let him have it. For my life, I couldn’t imagine why he wouldn’t get a blanket just because it was purple. He slept with it to this day.

“She is dead. But she loved me lots,” Theo added.

I tried not to make a big deal out of talk about Isla—especially Theo’s proclamations. He was four. This was how he related to the world in big swaths of black and white. People never knew how to handle the dead mom or dead wife chat. People got all weird for fear of making me sad. Talking about Isla made me happy, not sad. I predicted Odette would gloss over it, but she didn’t.

“It sounds like she had great taste. It is a lovely colour on you, too,” Odette said.

“Latte for me, please. Large with a bonus shot,” I ordered in nervous French. “And a cafe au lait for the kid. Oh, two croissants, too.”

I turned to Odie. “What are you having?”

“Oh, you don’t?—”

“No, no, I insist,” I said.

“Cappuccino. Large, please,” Odie said. “And one of the cinnamon buns. Thanks.”

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“What does that make your sidekick? Neurotic Girl?”

“Oh, you’re far from neurotic, Odette,” I laughed. “Give yourself time and children to come into that level of concern.”

“I have enough neuroses for both of us, trust me.”

“You’re in good company, then.”

Odette looked me in the eyes, face going from happy to serious but not severe.

She squeezed my hand and said, “Don’t stop fighting for people, Wyatt. This place is beautiful, but it needs improvement. You’ve shown me that twice in the past month. The world needs more people like you. Don’t ever apologise for wanting to make it better.”

How did she know I needed to hear that?

I stammered, looking for the words as I held her hand in mine. We’d done this at the hotel when fleeing the scene, but how she cradled my hand in hers felt different. How did such a small hand support mine like this?

“I... I won’t. But will I have your support as well, Odette?”

Odette brightened, looking at my hand in hers and pulled back. Her affection was genuine, but I suspected she had to behave well publicly. Holding my hand—even if it was just platonic—was overly familiar. Still, I’d enjoyed it. I shouldn’t have. It was

an overstep.

Odette beamed. “Yes, of course.”

“Can we meet up to chat about the next steps?” I followed up.

“I’d love to,” Odie said. “Tell me what works. You’re the one with the kid. And I swear I am much more comfortable chatting in person. I didn’t mean to ghost you.”

“I get it,” I said. “Let’s meet up.”

13

NEXT STEPS

ODETTE

Ididn’t want to read into what shouldn’t be a thing. My heart fluttered. Watching Wyatt playing with Theo made him even sweeter. Theo alone had my heart. He was precious. I loved kids—especially ones at that age. They could express themselves but still had adorable baby voices. If Wyatt wanted to meet, I had no choice but to oblige him, right?

“How do I... reach you?” Wyatt asked.

“Just call me.”

“You have a cell phone?”

I giggled. “Yes, Wyatt.”

I did not mention that we weren't allowed to use cell phones in the past. Our abusive grandmother, Celeste the Jailer, forbade any communication with the outside world. I hated telling those stories.

I freed my phone from my jacket pocket, unlocked it, and handed it over assertively. I was more than willing to insist a mantextme. I'd have him put his number in my phone, too. This was my chance to take back the narrative.

"Cool," Wyatt tapped away to add his number, smiling as he returned the phone.

I found "Wyatt" andtexted him a hello.

He looked down at his phone and chuckled. "Thanks."

"Text me what works," I said. "I understand kids and their bedtimes take precedence. We all work around Alex and Rick's schedule. And their schedule works around the kids."

"Really?"

"Believe it or not, they're standard issue parents with extra help. But Alexandra and Rick put a lot of emphasis on the kids having them around more than they don't. So, it matters to them—and the rest of us even if we don't have little ones of our own yet."

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Wyatt grinned. “I can appreciate that. Without his mom, it’s been a challenge. I cannot keep a nanny. They are all so... severe... here.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Losing your wife and the mother of your child had to be dreadful. It happened to my father. I flashed back to one of the few memories with him. He sat in a rocking chair with a blanket on the veranda of a castle in the woods. I sat in Alexandra’s lap, afraid to approach. He was gone already—nothing remained of the man he’d been by that moment. The vacant look in his eyes frightened me.

“You alright?” Wyatt asked, concerned.

My face telegraphed my emotions and discomfort.

“Sorry, my father... he lost my mother when she was giving birth to my little sister,” I said. “We all lost her. It just reminded me of that. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s awful. I’m sorry. Did you know your mother?”

“I was two when she died,” I answered. “So, no. Did... did Theo?” Sorry, if that is?—”

“It’s fine,” Wyatt shifted on the bench. “This is our life.”

“I didn’t mean to make it?—”

“You didn’t,” Wyatt assured. “My grief therapist always reminded me that it is better to address it and say the things I miss than to deny her—and deny Theo—the

memories.”

That hit me in the feels. “I get it. My sister—Alex—is always so caught up that it is always hard for her to talk about Mamma. She raised us. But she never got that maternal figure she needed—that we got in her—and it took until motherhood for her to unpack it. We benefitted. As she mothers the kids, she’s the mother she needs. So, she talks about Mamma more and more.”

Wyatt sniffled. “You have a way with words, Odette.”

“Therapy,” I snickered, breaking up the mood. “Therapy has taught me a lot.”

“Same. I lost my father at a young age, too. I could have unpacked that about 20 years before I did. Mom worked so hard for my sister and me. Uh, as far as Theo goes, his mother passed when he was a year old. She went out for a run and never came home.”

Unable to cover up my emotions, I looked back in horror.

“She was mowed down by a driver blowing through the pedestrian signal not far from our house in the States,” Wyatt said. “So, if I appeared shaken up, that was why. If I’m being overbearing, please tell me. I care... too much.”

I squeezed his hand. I knew I shouldn’t touch him, but the impulse was strong. That couldn’t have been easy for him. He didn’t pull back. He returned the squeeze.

“Nonsense. In my book, you cannot care too much, Wyatt. I want to help. Just text me when you get a moment. Let’s figure out a plan. I want to make the world safer for everyone. It cannot bring Theo’s mom back, but I can try to be on the right side of history. What was Theo’s mom’s name? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Isla,” Wyatt answered. “And your father was?”

“Christophe. Mamma was named Linnea. And it’s why my oldest niece is, too,” I said, realising I still held Wyatt’s hand. “Sorry. I should go.”

Theo raced up. “Where are you going?”

“I have to go, darling,” I said. “But maybe I will see you again soon?”

Theo looked at his father. “Please, Papa!”

“Another day, buddy.”

“Goodbye, pink girl!” Theo declared.

I fought a hearty laugh. “Until we meet again, Theo.”

14

THE FRIEND

WYATT

Isat on a bench—fighting tears, watching Theo play with another child on the slide. Odette may not have known how much asking Isla’s name meant to me. Having someone acknowledge that she existed felt validating. Every day, I thought about what life might look like with Isla here.

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Most people danced around emotional subjects. Instead, Odette didn't hold back. Her kindness wasn't soon forgotten as I packed Theo to his art and music class. Whenever we were in Neandia, we made it work. He thrived with art—not unlike his beautiful, brilliant mother.

When we finally returned home, I saw Odette had already texted.

Odette

So, not to impose, but I heard you mention you have childcare issues. Do you mind if I make a recommendation?

Was she already thinking about my predicament? Had I mentioned it in passing?

Me

No, not at all. Please.

Odette

I'll send you the contact info for Alex and Rick's agency. Rick said they won't send you a "stuffy Neandian" if you tell them you don't want that.

I chuckled heartily. Stuffy was a kind way to describe the average Neandian nanny.

Me

Send it. Thank you. And thank them for me.

Odette

Sure. Text me when you are ready to work on the big project and we can work on it.

My phone rang with the shared contact information for the new agency, and I was smiling when my mother arrived in the living room.

“What is so exciting?” Mom asked.

“Oh, nothing. A friend texted with a new nanny service rec. I mentioned in passing that I was up shit creek.”

She laughed. “It’s not that bad. You have me.”

“And you are thebest. But this is not how I wanted your retirement to go, Mom.”

“I don’t mind,” Mom said. “Theo, how was your morning?”

Theo ignored her, absorbed in a colouring book.

“I’m about to try and force a nap,” I sighed.

That got his attention. “Papa, no!”

“You’ve had a busy morning.”

“Gramma! I saw a girl who looked like Barbie,” Theo declared, spotting Mom.

“Who?”

“Papa’s friend,” Theo answered.

I needed to say something, registering my mother’s surprise first. Suspicion took hold.

“A friend of mine,” I said. “We ran into her.”

“She had a puppy!”

“It’s Wyatt,” I answered.

“Mr Billionaire? I knew it!”

“What?”

“Lex, she’s got a crush on Wyatt Worthington. I knew it. So that text was about his kid and the nanny situation?”

“Yes,” I blushed. “I don’t have a crush, though!”

“Your face suggests otherwise, princess,” Rick said.

“Odette, he’s too old for you. Let it go.”

“I am not planning to have a relationship with him,” I argued. “I am his friend. We are working on some advocacy for Vision 360. We need a strategy. I can champion improvements and make Neandia safer. He’s the experienced one. I’m trying to be a good partner. That’s all.”

Secretly, I wanted it to be different. He made me nervous, and I felt things I shouldn’t. I loved his smile, and seeing him with Theo only drew me closer. Despite how perfect it felt, there had to be something wrong with him. Alexandra was probably right.

“It’s okay to fall for someone older, Alexandra,” Rick said. “You should talk!”

“He’s what? Your age? He’s too old for little Odie!”

Little Odie. I set my jaw. “I’m grown, Alex. I have every right to be my own woman! Can you just let it go and see me as human, please? That’s all I want.”

She sighed and made eye contact with Rick, whose face telegraphed admonishment. It was funny. When Rick arrived, I couldn’t imagine anyone fitting into our world. But soon after, I may have had a girlhood crush on him. Then, he became like our dad—a cool dad who let us be wild. He didn’t try to stifle my creativity or tell Ingrid to pipe down. Alexandra struggled to let us be free. It wasn’t her fault but a factor of her status as monarch. Her role demanded it.

Alexandra’s face softened as she considered her words.

“Odie, I’m sorry. Youhaveworked hard. And things are going well with you at work. I appreciate your stepping up. I should give you more credit.”

I smiled. “Thanks for saying that.”

“I still think he’s too old for you, and you should avoid someone with children. That seems complicated.”

More complicated than a man who used me, led me on, and dropped me like a hot potato when things got rough?

“I don’t think I will end up with anyone my age,” I protested. “Men in their twenties are petty little boys. You know this full well.”

Rick gave her an I-told-you-so glance.

Watching him win this round was strangely satisfying.

HOSTING

WYATT

“Wyatt, can you explain why two men are doing a ‘sweep’ of the place?” Mom asked.

I couldn’t easily explain it unless I told her my friend was a princess. That would only further complicate things in her mind. I hadn’t expected an entire security team to show up at my residence and inspect the place. The leader of this sweep approached before I could answer.

“Mr Worthington, the place is clear,” the man said in French. “This is a suitable location. Plain-clothed men will remain outside your residence until this business is finished.”

Business. Was it that deep?

He continued, “The Princess will arrive shortly.”

I winced, looking at Mom’s expression. Tonight wasn’t going to plan. Theo was still awake. Now, Mom knew what was up. We’d had the houseswept. What more could go wrong?

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“Thanks,” I said, unsure what to say to the guard.

“Did he just say princess?”

“My friend is Princess Odette. I didn’t realise there would be such a commotion, Mom. Honest. She’s just a normal person. When I met her, she was just Odie. A normal girl.”

Yes, a normal girl. A totally normal girl living in a palace with a queenly sister. What was I thinking!?

“And she’s coming here?”

“Sure, why not? We’re working on our strategy for Vision 360. It’s work, I guess? But I think she’s a friend.”

“It’s not friendship if she’s just a work acquaintance?—”

“It’s both,” I said. “I am helping as a friend. But we’re working for the betterment of the cause. When you meet her, you’ll get it, Mom. Promise.”

I only hoped it was true as I nervously waited for her arrival in the living room. I bounced my knee and sat silently, mulling over what I could say. How did you welcome friends? How did you make them feel at ease? It was as if I had forgotten how to be normal.

The doorbell rang. I looked at Mom, who stared up from her book expectantly. Get

the door.

Odette greeted me with a warm smile, dressed in a bright red coat. Did she own anything that wasn't bright? Her whole wardrobe was cheerful. The colours matched her sunny personality. Odette held a bag. Had she brought a present?

"Come in," I waved her in.

"I apologise for the hubbub. When I mentioned the why of this, they insisted on coming along."

She waved back at her security team. "I tried so hard to explain you're a friend and all, but sometimes they don't listen."

When I closed the door, Theo stood in nothing but underwear. He raced over to hug her.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry," I pulled him back.

"Oh, don't worry." Odette squatted on his level. "I am glad you're awake. I brought you something, Theo."

He clapped his hands, grabbing the bag from her and rifling through the paper. Inside was a tiny stuffed dog—one that looked just like Grieg.

"Doggy! Chien!"

"Exactly. My nephew has one and loves it," she said. "Hopefully, that's okay?"

Odette looked up at me. I nodded to confirm it. "Of course. He'll love that. Theo, what do we say?"

“Merci!”

“De rien. You’re so welcome.”

She hopped up.

“Can I take your coat?” I asked.

“Oh, God, yes! Sorry. I was distracted.”

Odette pulled off her coat, which I hung in the closet as Theo distracted her. His lack of clothing mortified me. I worried she would think I was a terrible parent, as I was sure her sister’s kids behaved far better.

“I am so sorry for the mess,” I said. “He’s fighting bedtime, and we’re still in flux?—”

“Stop apologising. It’s fine. He’s lovely.” She patted his head sweetly. “You’re very awake, aren’t you?”

“Yep!” Theo declared before my mother appeared.

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“It’s okay. I’m good. How do I help you save the world, Captain Paranoid?”

“We have got to come up with better superhero names, Odette. This is pathetic.”

“That will be our next order of business after fixing all the roads in this charming but poorly designed city.”

“So, step one, save the world? Step two, choose superhero names?” I joked. “I think that’s putting the cart before the horse.”

“Or the basket before the bike? Hey, that works for the Dutch. It’s good enough for me.”

“Let’s focus on a plan first,” I said. “Then, choose superhero names?”

“Sounds great,” Odette smiled. “How do we plan to save the world?”

17

HOW DOES IT WORK?

ODETTE

I closed my small notebook and sipped wine. We drank the entire bottle in three hours and outlined a plan for the future. Wyatt had ideas and knew the players, so I would mount the charm offensive.

As Wyatt gushed about Theo, I only thought about how much I adored him. Rick was right—I had a full-blown crush. The man was handsome. He was also a sweetheart. More than that, he was interested in what I had to say. He cared about me as a person. I hated to leave, but it was late.

“I have so loved this,” I said. “It was nice. I feel like I have ideas. Now, I have to implement them at our next meeting. However, I have a super early morning. I must go, Wyatt.”

He looked down at his smartwatch and flushed red. “Oh, shit! Yeah, it’s late. I am so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I assured. “I enjoyed this, Wyatt.”

I could have talked to him all night. Now, I knew the feeling was mutual. I rose to my feet, a broad smile too hard to fight. I adored this man. Why did he have to be so cute? Why did I have to feel so nervous around him all the time? Wyatt stood and nervously rubbed his hands on his jeans.

“So, the next meeting is in a week?” I asked, trying to make it less awkward.

Wyatt followed me to the foyer and took my coat from the closet. “Yes. I will be there if you are.”

“I’ll text you. We should get together again. Somehow. Between now and then? I will have a concrete plan about how I will approach it.”

“I can do that,” Wyatt handed me my coat.

Our hands brushed, leading me to bristle. I longed for him to kiss me. I stared into his eyes and thought about wrapping my arms around his neck and leaning into a big

kiss. Where did that come from? I wanted not to think about it, but I also longed for him to do it. He was so handsome, and his eyes so kind.

“I should... go.” I hoped to prompt a goodbye kiss.

I was so bad at dating. I didn’t know how to do this. Guy had just made a move. I suspected that wasn’t Wyatt’s style. It was so odd. I expected this aggro businessman. Instead, he was a total sweetheart. I wanted him to do more. I thought of his lips pressed against mine. I needed him to pull me close and give me everything.

“Sure. Yes. I will see you soon.” Wyatt opened the door, still too close. For a moment, I thought he might kiss me. Instead, he smiled awkwardly and moved to open the door.

Sails deflating, I stepped back towards the partially open door. It sent a chill up my spine. I wanted so badly for him to kiss me but couldn’t will it. I climbed into my waiting car and gave up on the dream of a steamy kiss with my crush.

He waved in a friendly way as my car pulled away. Confused, I rang the one person I trusted to counsel me. I knew she’d be up.

“Has someone died? Is it Celeste?” Astrid answered.

“Astrid,” I groaned. “That is...”

“No, it’s not unkind, Odie. You are too nice, darling. Fuck her!”

I agreed that our evil grandmother’s death would, in some ways, be a blessing, but I fought the urge to admit it out loud. I couldn’t bring myself to allow that to be an acceptable response. I felt the best revenge was living well and rising above it. Astrid was out for blood. She’d spent her teenage years trying to think up ways to poison

Celeste.

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“I need help. No one has died.”

I could tell Astrid thought this was something serious. I wondered how long it would be before my sisters assumed “needing help” meant I was on suicide watch.

“It’s a boy,” I clarified. “A man, rather.”

“Oh? Tell me more!”

Her tone changed once more.

“How do you tell someone you want to be more than friends?”

“Uh... no clue. I hated Parker, then I was shagging him, and then we were together. I honestly think we became friends after we hooked up—not before. You could throw yourself at him.”

“No thanks,” I said. “That won’t work.”

“You could wait for him to make the move. Parker?—”

“He’s not like Parker. I mean, he is the nerdy type, I gather.”

“So what is wrong with him?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He has the kindest eyes. He’s so warm and caring.”

“But...”

“But I think he is waiting for something. Maybe he’s timid? Or maybe the whole princess thing is intimidating?”

“The princess thing requires work with anyone who has social awareness.”

“So, how did you manage that with Parker?”

“Parker lacks social awareness. His solution was to get me off in an elevator.”

I cringed.

“Oh, come on. Get on with it! Do you like the man? If so, you might have to make the first move.”

I groaned. “Do I have to?”

“Do you want me to tell you otherwise, darling?”

I didn’t. Astrid was right. If I wanted Wyatt, I would need to take a chance and set things into motion.

18

JUST A FRIEND

WYATT

“Your friend stayed awhile,” Mom raised one eyebrow. “I heard you still gabbing at eleven.”

“I needed that,” I admitted. “You are right. I need a social life. Talking with Odette was good. I didn’t know I missed social contact, you know?”

“Odette is... very pretty.”

“Mom, please,” I groaned.

“She is pretty, Papa,” Theo chimed in. “I like her.”

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I groaned. “Mom, she’s a princess. They swept the place. There were armed guards on our doorstep. That is not what Isla wanted for Theo. Having her around more—even as a friend—is complicated. Having her around more as more than a friend would be too much.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Mom agreed. “But I hope maybe feeling something for a woman since Isla’s death opened your eyes to possibilities.”

19

CUNNING CONSPIRATOR

ODETTE

“So what now?” Ingrid asked.

I finally caught her while she was riding in America. She’d been lucky to be selected as one of only a few European riders to ride in Florida over the winter months. While I rode, I wasn’t the star that Ingrid was. My little sister was a superstar. We were close, so I was so far from her and hated it.

“I must attend this meeting and try to push for these improvements. A curb bump out.”

“Why is that controversial?”

“Exactly,” I laughed.

“Do these people love cars more than people?”

“That is a great point. One I could make,” I said. “A distracted driver ran over Wyatt’s wife. So this all matters quite a bit to him. I want to keep it professional but try my hardest to protect everyone.”

“And Wyatt is the hottie billionaire?”

“You spoke to Astrid?”

“Of course. I’m about to be right in town with her. We talk.”

Of course you do. I fought jealousy. Ingrid wasn’t returning to Neandia. She was throwing her hat into the uber-competitive British eventing circuit, which meant she was in Astrid’s territory. Sometimes, I wanted to find a reason to go to the UK, but I worried it would never work for me. I’d miss my nieces and nephews. Ingrid and Astrid were so brave.

“Well, yes.”

“So, he’s the hot, widowed single dad of your dreams? This shit writes itself, darling.”

She was already dropping darlings. I blamed her Norwegian and British compatriots for her changes in vernacular.

“I don’t know why you all love romance novels so much,” I sighed. “My life is not a perpetual book.”

“C’mon. Curl up with a delightful book rather than your usual thriller. You will love it. Promise. I will send you a list of reads.”

I let out a long sigh. “Fine.”

She’d not stop offering. She wanted to get a rise out of me. No one could call Ingrid boring. She was cheeky and loved fun. I missed her light-hearted ribbing.

“I looked him up. He’s cute. A little nerdy—not like Parker.”

I snickered. “Leave Parker alone. He’s a sweetheart deep down, even if he cannot buy proper shoes.”

“A duke with dreadful shoes—but with a heart of gold and a brilliant mind. Again, shit writes itself, right?”

“Wyatt is kind, and his son is adorbs. You’d love him.”

“I am not as big about children as you are, sister. I will take your word for it. Call him daddy.”

I cringed. “Ingy! Jesus! Calm down and step off!”

“Again, the joke writes itself. Tell me you don’t want him to give you orders, sister. He’s a bit brooding.”

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“Parker is brooding. Wyatt is sweet. He’s exactly what you’d expect from an American—an open book.”

“You two will get on, then.”

“Ingy, I gotta go,” I said. “Meeting.”

“Go kill it. Say hi to Daddy Wyatt.”

“Ingrid!” I groaned.

She giggled. “I’ll send you the list. Read it.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Love you. Bye.”

I ended the call. I’d never get off the line otherwise. She’d continue ribbing me. Shelivedfor it.

I needed to focus. I was a grownup. I smoothed my work dress, looking professional, and departed the palace. The meetings took place at our beautiful baroque city hall. The board president, a stuffy old man named Claus Gautier, and the mayor were already assembled in a conference room, the former jury room. They greeted me with polite bows. I thanked them, not waving them off as others arrived.

Wyatt filed in just before the meeting started. He was barely on time—focused on other matters. We’d only spoken on the phone since I last visited. He had an unplanned work trip come up. Disappointed, I hadn’t seen him since I’d been on his

couch with a glass of wine. I shot him a kind smile.

The meeting began with the excitement of paint drying. We followed the procedure I'd long since memorised, voted on adding some disabled parking spaces, and approved a new bike corral. Then, it turned to new business and my chance to add something to the docket. I smiled and crossed my hands before speaking up.

“Mr President, I'd like to speak if I could.”

The entire room stared at me, surprised I'd bothered to open my mouth.

“Yes, Your Royal Highness?”

“I'd like to add something else to the list of priority projects for the VisionFunds if possible.”

Wyatt smiled broadly before pulling it back. We were scheming. We had orchestrated a tiny but impactful queue. I loved that we shared this. Wyatt Worthington and I were partners in crime. I lapped up my rare moment in the spotlight—no longer my beautiful queenly sister's chubby younger sister. Instead, I was the patron and a board member. And I was Wyatt's friend—maybe his crush? Only time would tell.

“Certainly, ma'am.”

“I would like to add a curb bump out on Rue Montblanc and Avenue Capitale,” I said. “It's a busy road turning onto a street just off a park. The turn into the bike lane is a common pain point for cyclists and pedestrians. This would slow trafficturning right.”

“Well, if only cyclists followed the rules,” Mayor Bouchard joked at my expense.

I turned a steely gaze to him. “Sir, a car nearly ran me over there. I was knocked off my bike. I wasn’t going at an impressive speed. My dog and I were out for a morning ride, returning from an appointment, as anyone might be. Traffic wasn’t dense. A woman didn’t pay attention. It is my understanding—after some research—that this is a very affordable way to protect cyclists and pedestrians in a place where we should prioritise family foot traffic. And we have plenty of funds, do we not?”

The Mayor set his jaw. The President yawned.

“Ma’am, we have to be careful with these funds. They are not for pet projects.”

Wyatt spoke up. “This is a known accident zone, as Her Royal Highness said. I witness near misses or crashes there all too often.”

I opened my portfolio, pulling out the official figures I’d printed on my stationary. I passed them around the table.

“What is this?” The Mayor asked, annoyed.

“A list of accident-prone intersections in Ville de Neandia. This is one of the worst. Listed, you will see the number of pedestrian and bike accidents. There was a near-fatal accident only six weeks ago. It’s also a common place for people to run red signals on a right turn and cause crashes.”

Everyone stared. Wyatt smiled at me, grinning ear-to-ear. It melted me. He didn’t expect this. Last minute, I’d gone off book and armed myself to the teeth with evidence. I’d had to consult Astrid and Alexandra about where to look, but I’d managed.

“These came directly from the Ministry of Transport,” I said. “This is a hazardous intersection.”

“You did this... all on your own?” President Gautier asked.

“Of course. I take my patronages seriously,” I said—not mentioning that I only had one. I had a feeling I’d have more once I proved myself.

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The President and Mayor exchanged a surprised, if not slightly disgruntled, glance. Then, the President spoke up.

“We must vote on The Princess’s motion. Do I have a second?”

“Second,” Wyatt said.

“On using Vision funds for a curb cutout, how do we vote?”

The roll call began. The Mayor and President grudgingly voted yes, making the vote automatically a majority. I didn’t expect it, but I assumed they voted with me to pad my ego. Either way, we got our first small victory in the war. I beamed, satisfied that even little old me could be a cunning conspirator. And given Wyatt’s satisfied expression, I’d pleased the person I longed to impress most.

20

THE PLAN

WYATT

“In favour,” I voted, sealing the unanimous support of Odette’s proposed measure.

“With seven votes in favour, the measure passes,” Gautier said.

We’d had them over a barrel, but Odette shone brightest. She’d duped them and surprised me. Her toothy smile made me grin from ear to ear. We’d done it, and she

wasn't apologising for her victory. Impressed with her grit, I gave her a proud nod. She'd done so well—for her cause and mine. I felt less guilty for leaving her hanging earlier. When I'd been called to Italy on business, I had to shuffle everything. In the meantime, she'd schemed big.

“Great. Can I make another motion regarding the budget?” Odette asked.

“You... have the floor.” Gautier checked his watch.

“I'd like to consider an initiative to do a thorough review of the top twenty dangerous intersections in the city,” Odette said.

You could have heard a pin drop.

“What?” The Mayor asked.

“I did a preliminary investigation. The curb bump out is probably the easiest remedy for many, but I think a dozen small improvements must be made. I rode around to all of these on my cargo bike this morning and took photos. I'm no expert, of course. The city engineers could give us better ideas for improvements, but I think it could work.”

Quickly—and with no discussion—Gautier raised his gavel. “On this motion, how do we all vote?”

He railroaded her.

I raised my hand, “I move to table the motion.”

Odette's face fell. She didn't understand I wanted to save her proposal. Instead, she assumed I was out to get her.

“And request a five-minute recess before we address the art contest winners and my last agenda item,” I added.

“Those are two separate motions. Do we have a second on the matter of tabling The Princess’s proposal?”

The Mayor raised his hand.

Gautier banged his gavel. “It is tabled. On the matter of a recess, I will second.” He banged it once more.

The group broke. Odette slowly got up and walked down the hall. I followed her, desperate to explain my thought process.

“Hey, I wasn’t trying to throw you under the bus,” I said.

Odette turned, confused. “What?”

“I admire what you did in trying to use that momentum to push through the study. It’s a great strategic move. Unfortunately, you must chip away at it with these old bastards.”

She snickered at my coarse language.

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“We’ll talk about it again during the next working session. I suggest we come in with a budget number.”

“Rookie mistake?”

“You just accomplished a lot. You’re a little bit of a rookie but a charming pro otherwise,” I said. “I’m on your side.”

“Same team?” Odette asked.

Her smile could have melted the coldest ice. She was sunshine on two legs.

“Same team,” I agreed.

We returned to the conference room to vote on the winner of a student art contest, then had one last item to address. I blamed myself for dragging this out.

“Now, onto Mr Worthington’s measure,” Gautier said. “You are attending the Vision International Summit in Cologne. And you are looking for another attendee?”

“Correct,” I said. “I was going to extend the offer. Originally, Ms. Morrissey wanted to attend but had to bow out.”

“Apologies,” Samantha Morrissey apologised. “My mother’s surgery was scheduled for that week.”

“When is it, Wyatt?” The Mayor asked.

“Next week—I leave Thursday and return Monday,” I answered. “It’s a great opportunity to interface with other Vision members and get new ideas. Either way, I’ll attend and bring back what I learn.”

“I’d like to attend.”

It was Odette. I turned, surprised. “Oh, Your Royal Highness... I am sure you are much too busy.”

“I don’t have any engagements next weekend... per my schedule. I would love to attend.”

“It would add credibility, certainly,” Gautier noted. “Your Royal Highness, that is generous.”

“De rien.” She shrugged and looked down. “Just trying to assist, and I know many of you are busy with your families. It’s short notice and all.”

A silence took hold. I realised they were waiting for me to say yay or nay.

“Oh, shoot. Yes, of course,” I said. My voice squeaked. I got my nerves under control, deepening it. “I would love to have the help. And it would make a big impression.”

“Great.” Odette beamed. “I can’t wait to learn more.”

I had no idea what I’d gotten myself into. Was I really about to travel out of the country with a princess? Half of me jumped for joy to have company. I’d missed our chats. The other half was paranoid. Was I reading too much into this? Did this look bad? Even if it was all innocent, the two of us being seen out together looked like something, right? A wealthy older man accompanying a much

younger princess on a diplomatic trip raised alarm bells.

As the meeting ended, I pulled Odette aside. “Are you sure you’ve got time for this? Because I can go by myself.”

“Absolutely not,” Odette assured. “I’d like to go. All this research has interested me in what would have been possible if we had the support. Rick is invested, too.”

“It won’t be trouble?”

“Not if Rick supports it,” she snickered. “Alexandra will fuss for five minutes but won’t die on this hill. She’ll give us our fun.”

I marvelled at how bizarre it was for her to speak casually about her sister and brother-in-law. To my American sensibilities, this ridiculousness did not compute. To Odette, this was the norm. But with her bubbly excitement and casual manner, everything seemed fine. She had a way of making it all seem so normal.

“Cool,” I said.

“And you have someone to watch Theo?”

“My Mom is sticking around. We’re trialling out a new nanny.”

“Fingers crossed. How is he?”

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“Do you... want to get coffee? I know you’re probably busy,” Wyatt looked down. “I just... I know you like coffee and I could use some.”

The words were like music to my ears.

Beaming ear-to-ear, I announced, “Yes!”

Irritated with the change in plans, my security detail acquiesced to a quick walk across the square to a quiet cafe. His hand brushed mine as we waited for our orders, sending a shiver down my spine. I wanted to link my fingers with his and squeeze his hand tight.

Whenever we went anywhere together, I was desperate for more time—more words, laughs, and smiles. He had the best smile.

“We make a decent team,” Wyatt said.

“It’s exciting,” I admitted. “And now we will learn more at the conference.”

“I don’t know how exciting that will be, Odette,” Wyatt chuckled. “It’s not a big party. It’s more of a business meeting.”

“Well, I like to learn. That’s my favourite thing.”

“You are very resourceful.” Wyatt grinned boyishly. “I nearly died when you pulled out those stats. You kicked ass. Can I say that?”

“You can say that,” I said.

The barista called our order, and we sat at a table in the corner. Wyatt took off his jacket. I tried not to marvel at the outline of his shoulders. What he lacked in height, he more than made up for in shoulders. Oh, mon dieu!

“How is the kiddo?” I asked.

“He is very exuberant. As per usual.”

“I adore that little guy. He’s such a sweetheart, Wyatt. You’ve done a great job with him.”

Wyatt stared at his coffee.

“It’s okay to admit you are good at parenting that kid,” I said. “Promise. I know it’s true.”

“Sometimes...” Wyatt said, “It doesn’t feel so much like that. It’s a slog. And I constantly wonder if Isla would be proud of the job I’ve done or shudder in horror.”

“She’d love that boy,” I said, confident. “And she’d love to watch the two of you together. It’s incredibly sweet. You’re his safe place to land. You’re everything. I know parenting is hard, but you’re doing a great job.”

I couldn’t help but grab his hand as I said it. I fully expected Wyatt to pull back. I shouldn’t do this in public. We weren’t together. I had a crush, right? Instead, Wyatt smiled sweetly.

“Thanks, Odie. That means a lot.”

I couldn't stop smiling. Seeing him relax made me so happy. Then, I spotted people gathering over his shoulder. Out the window, two people pointed at me. I pulled back, my smile fading.

“What?” Wyatt asked.

“I've been spotted. I'm going to have to go. But now... well, shit!”

Wyatt looked over his shoulder, then stood. He rushed over to the barista. Confused, I followed.

“Is there a back way out of here?” He asked in nervous French.

The barista shrugged.

“Through the kitchen, maybe?”

“Ouais.”

Wyatt turned. “You should go out that way.”

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I knew this trick, but he didn't ask me. He just took charge and remembered our escape from weeks before. After ages of hoping for a sign that he cared about me, Wyatt took over. I was torn between freaking out over a crowd that grew by the minute and swooning over a man who rushed into action when I needed him.

A man from my detail approached.

"Bring the car around to the alley," I whispered. "There is a way out."

He nodded affirmatively.

I grabbed Wyatt's hand, then dropped it.

"It's okay," Wyatt said. "I'll see you soon. Just go. Get out and be free."

"Where will you go?" I asked.

"Same place. Out the back. I'll take a nice walk to the office. We'll catch up soon."

I wanted so badly to kiss him goodbye but refrained. It got more complicated every time.

22

AFTERMATH

WYATT

Aguard said, “Ma’am, we must go.”

Odette said nothing—shooting me a sweet goodbye look and marching off. I waited in the shop a few more minutes, gathering my thoughts. Why did I trip all over myself? I was hardly a hopeless teenage boy, but the last two times I’d seen her, I’d lost my train of thought more than I hadn’t.

Stephen met me back at the office.

“Are you quite alright, sir?”

I shook my head as if to do a hard reset. “Uh... I am.”

“Do you need a moment? Did the meeting go off the rails?”

I cleared my throat, “No. I need you to confirm travel details with the palace regarding the Vision 360 conference.”

Stephen raised one eyebrow. “What?”

“Princess Odette was the board member who accepted the invitation to attend with me. So, we will work with her team. I believe her person is named Karin.”

“I recall that, yes. I will reach out.” Stephen’s face suggested he was holding back.

“Yes, Stephen?”

“You’re spending a great deal of time with her. There’s... nothing going on?”

My mouth dropped.

“Well, is it out of the question? She’s an attractive young woman. You appreciate her company?”

“You sound like my mom, Stephen.”

He shrugged. “Maybe there is something there.”

“I’ve not been with anyone since Isla,” I said. “And Isla was slightly older—not what? 12 or 13 years younger? She’s too young and too sweet.”

“But you find her attractive?”

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Heknew. How? I refused to admit I found her attractive.

“Even if Idid, we’re just friends and colleagues. I couldn’t—and wouldn’t—make a move.”

“If I were single and a twenty-something fit man came onto me, I’d be hard-pressed to deny myself, Wyatt. Don’t do yourself a disservice and look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Just talk to the palace, alright?” I groaned, not dignifying that with a response.

The truth? I couldn’t stop thinking about her ass or her thighs and how good it would feel to be between them. That was a downright confusing, befuddling feeling.

Time for a cold shower.

23

PRIOR AUTHORISATION

ODETTE

I made it back to the palace in the evening. After the meeting and two parties, I crept in. Unfortunately, Alexandra and Rick were still awake. Alexandra was splayed on the couch, feet in Rick’s lap. She ate a bowl of ice cream as they watched yet another bit of Scandinavian Murder Porn. For such nonviolent countries, their shows were very dark. She looked adorable, and a little bump started showing through her

clothes.

I kicked my heels off and climbed onto the chair right of her.

“You look knackered,” Alexandra said.

“I am,” I chuckled. “But I did some cool things.”

“I heard the music conservatory went very well,” Alexandra said.

“How do you hear things?” I asked.

“I hear everything,” Alexandra said.

“How was your first meeting as a patron?” Rick asked.

“It was good. I got to vote. And I got my curb bump out.”

“I have no idea what that means, but good for you,” Alexandra said.

“That bad intersection Wyatt and I targeted is getting a fix that protects pedestrians and cyclists better. We were successful.”

“Beautiful,” Rick said. “Who doesn’t love some trickery?”

“Don’t get too political,” Alexandra warned. “This benevolent billionaire brings out something competitive in you.”

I set my jaw. “Wanting to protect people from being killed in a traffic accident isn’t political.”

Rick gave her The Look. As expected, she backed off.

“I look forward to hearing more about your adventures while I’m mostly sidelined,” Alexandra said.

“Well, about that...” It was time to suffer. “I can attend a summit on the matter. The Vision International Summit is happening next weekend.”

“Oh, interesting. Here in Neandia?”

I shook my head.

“Brussels?”

“Cologne,” I winced.

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“Landlords hate pets. If they even will rent to you, you’ll have to pay an obscene deposit. It’s awful.”

“That sucks. Pets need homes.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“I want another dog. I want to adopt one. But I don’t have time to train a second right now.”

“That’s sweet,” I agreed.

An unexpected silence overtook us. Odette was easy to talk to. So, why was this hard? Was it the elephant in the room of me pretending that I did not find her pretty? At this point, denying attraction was silly. Yes, she was beautiful. She had perfect, round cheeks that grew wonderfully rosy with a laugh or smile. Her ass—to be frank—was remarkable. She had a beautiful softness to her, but none of this changed the fact that we were colleagues, she was a princess, and I was a tired old fuck with a kid. She’d never get it, and I’d never hold her down.

“It’s a road trip,” Odette said. “Isn’t it?”

“Unlike any I’ve ever experienced, Odette. A Royal Road Trip.”

She snickered. “You don’t love it, do you?”

I shrugged. “I love our chats. I would have preferred to take my car out for once.”

She blushed. Love our chats! Where the fuck did that come from?

“Our chats make me happy, too. Thank you for not making me feel stupid about my lack of experience.”

“What? You’re masterful at negotiation—and charming. People cannot deny you.”

“Nah. They want to impress me, Wyatt.”

“No, it’s true. You can charm anyone. With that smile, how could anyone say no to you?”

What the fuck, Wyatt? Why are you digging yourself into this hole!? You’re making it fucking weird now!

What about Odette made me trip over myself like a schoolboy? It was proof of her irresistibility. But why? What was this pull? And why was I stupid enough to keep talking to her like this? Given her flushed face, she thought I was coming onto her. C’mon, Wyatt!

My voice shot up, “Of course, that’s just... you did so great the other day. That’s all I am saying.”

“Of course.” Odette dropped my gaze, petting the dog.

I’d made it weird. I panicked, trying to think about how to distract from my awkward flub. Road trip, road trip. Think, Wyatt!

“Do you usually have a soundtrack to a road trip?”

“A mix. A playlist,” I answered. “Are you calling me old, Odette?”

She giggled. “No. I’ve just never been on a road trip—a proper one. Trust me.”

“Oh, well, yeah, playlists are fun. My wife was the playlist person. She had one for everything. Isla was a runner. So, she needed it for motivation.”

“I don’t understand running. More power to her. Runners are mad.”

“A little,” I chuckled. “She loved it. Liked time on a bike, too. I

“It’s good to have something you love. My bike is freedom. Well, if you made a playlist, what would it have on it?”

“Probably the blues,” I said. “I find the blues soothing. It was the only thing that settled Theo as a baby.”

“Blues is great,” Odette said. “Mine would be Motown with a mix of Jazz these days. I love standards.”

Her choices took me by surprise.

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“Don’t look all befuddled, Wyatt Worthington! I love the stuff. I amshitat the trumpet. I tried, but I’m a pianist.”

“That’s awesome,” I said. “Theolovesmusic, but I don’t play anything. He’s big into the arts right now. One of the challenges thus far has been to find a nanny willing to put up with his nonstop art projects.”

“How isthat going?”

“So far, so good. But it’s only been a few days. The person they hired is young and seems interested in interacting with Theo like he’s a person.”

“Good. He’s a person—a little person with a big personality.”

I smiled. Shegotit.

“You love kids, don’t you?” I asked.

“Of course! I live for kids. I’d like a few someday. We’ll see if it ever happens.”

“I said the same when I was your age.” Still making it weird, Wyatt.

“At least you admit it. Most men won’t. It’s okay to like children if you’re a man, right?”

“Right.”

“I never suspected Rick and Alex would have this many kids, but Rick loved having the one so much they did it again... and again... and again.”

“I thought they had only the three?”

Odette gave a cute audible wince, fixing her hair nervously.

“Well, Alex is pregnant, so she’s been sick. This will be four. Please, please don’t tell anyone. I shouldn’t have run my mouth?—”

“My lips are sealed. Congrats to them.”

A conflicting mix of emotions rolled over me. She’d shared this with me because she trusted me. That was new and exciting. Then, the loss came back—grief is always there. Grief because we never got to have that second baby. Grief because Isla so badly wanted another. Grief that Theo would never have a sibling. Happiness never won out. Even here, happily rolling along with a person I connected with—despite all odds—I wasn’t happy. Would I ever be satisfied?

25

THE VEEP

ODETTE

Vision International was precisely what I predicted—bright, big, and exciting. The American Vice President brought the hype with her. She was tall, pretty, and glamorous. I couldn’t wait to meet her but tried not to fangirl too close to the sun. It would surprise people to know that even royals get starstruck.

“She’s so cool,” I whispered to Wyatt. He was on his phone, looking through the

panels on the summit's app.

“What? Who?”

“The Veep,” I answered.

He chuckled. “You want an introduction?”

I gaped. “What? You know her?”

“Odie, I fundraised for the campaign, and she's an old friend. Yes. I can introduce you to her. She's just a normal politician. Curb your enthusiasm.”

“She's a horse girl, and she loves Alana Grace. I would die if I met Alana.”

“Who is Alana?” Wyatt asked.

“The pop star. You're American. Why don't you know these people?”

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“Odette, I’m old, out-of-touch, and America is fucking massive. I am glad you think I am so hip.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Wyatt.”

He smiled and nodded in the Veep’s direction. “Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

Mary Porter turned as we approached, face breaking into a warm smile.

“Wyatt! How the hell are you?”

He shook her hand. “Great, thanks. Excited to see what this thing is about this year.”

“Well, I hope I don’t trip up the stage.”

VP Porter notably tripped walking onstage at her party convention. While the other side exploited her flub, it made her America’s sweetheart. As a klutz, I found this relatable.

“Let’s hope. I have faith,” Wyatt said. “Vice President Porter, this is my colleague and friend, Princess Odette. She is on our Vision 360 board.”

“Well, that’s so cool!” Mary said. She was so effortlessly casual. “Nice to meet you, Your Royal Highness.”

“And you,” I extended my hand. She knew the etiquette. She was both sufficiently formal and chill. How could I learn to do the same? Mary Porter was approachable

and official all at once.

“What do you think of all of this?” Mary asked.

“I am loving it. Learning lots!” I said, too cheerfully. I backed off. No need to seem desperate, Odette!

“Oh, well, that is cool. How did you get roped into this?”

“Odette is a cyclist,” Wyatt answered. “A very competent one.”

“We are working on protecting pedestrians and cyclists at high-hazard intersections,” I added.

“Okay, transport isn’t the sexiest thing. Wyatt makes it sexier than it is.”

Was that flirting?

Wyatt got weird again. He went from being a confident businessman to a confused nerd, and I didn’t understand it.

“Oh, I’m hardly able to do that on my own. But it’s a cause I care about,” Wyatt said.

“Odette got clipped by a car one morning. That’s how we originally met.”

“Oh? And then he just... roped you in?”

I shrugged. “It was a bunch of things. My sister assigned me the patronage. I didn’t know him, and he had no idea who I was. I was just out for a morning ride with my dog.”

“Adorable,” Mary said. “Well, hopefully I see you around again. Wyatt, we need to

catch up.”

Wyatt nervously shifted his stance. “Sure, sure. Maybe the three of us can get a drink and talk some shop? Not too much. I promise.”

I’d all but confirmed it. She was either into him, or they’d already hooked up—maybe both? Well, there went my dream. She’d never married. Ofcourse,she’d be interested in him. Who wouldn’t be? He was gorgeous, sweet, and wealthy. Why would he choose a fully-grown woman over the too-young hopeless virgin?

We left the Veep, stepping up to a table serving an afternoon treat. They were everywhere. I’d grabbed so much free stuff! I loved it.

“What is this called?” I asked.

“A vendor booth. This swag is normal for an expo. Everyone wants you to stop by and get you to buy something.”

“But everyone here wants for nothing.”

“Rich people like swag, too.” He pointed at my bag playfully.

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I didn't mean for it to come off so sharp, but it did. I watched Wyatt's face twist in concern or confusion. I couldn't tell which.

"See you in the morning."

I retreated in defeat. Since my ex, I'd had no luck. I hadn't even looked at another man until Wyatt. I'd been relatively happy—satisfied with my dog, bike, and music. I'd told myself it was enough. Then, I got excited.

"You never should have believed in it," I whispered. "It was stupid to think he would end up with you."

Tears welled as I approached my hotel suite. Security rushed ahead to open the door for me. There, waiting, was Grieg. In his mouth, he held one of my socks—the sweetest peace offering. I sat, crying now, and hugged him. He crawled into my lap, licking the salty tears from my cheeks.

"At least I have you," I said. "At least you'll never leave me, right?"

27

SUDDEN DEPARTURE

WYATT

"See you in the morning."

Odette turned away on her heels with military precision. Confused, I looked over at Mary. Everything was fine... until it wasn't. I'd asked an organiser if we could be at Mary's table because I thought Odette would enjoy talking to her idol. Now, Odette left in a huff. She claimed she had a headache, but that didn't track. She looked upset.

"Was it something I said?" I asked.

Mary smirked. "You haven't gotten better at this with age, have you?"

"What?"

"It was what I said," Mary said. "I think I upset her. I am sorry."

"How? She loves you. She thinks you're so 'cool'."

"Wyatt, I think she sees me as competition."

"For what?" I was even more confused.

"For you. Are you really that dense? You're hopeless! This is why Isla had to make the first move. Remember how I joked that I thought she'd have to hire a skywriter?"

"Yes, but I always thought that was stupid. We got drunk at a party and slept together."

"You two were always running in the same circles—for months. It was painful watching her throw herself at you while you ignored her. You underestimate your appeal."

"She was always too good for me," I chuckled.

“We both pick women we don’t deserve. But in your case, you somehow manage to keep them.”

“You sell yourself short,” I assured. “I am sure Odette is just having a headache.”

I didn’t buy it, but I also didn’t think Odette liked me—not like that.

“Wyatt, she has a crush on you. A huge crush!”

“I doubt it. She thought we were interested in one another—she teased me about it. I assured her I wasn’t your type.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Shit. Was she jealous?” Mary might be right.

“Yes. I think I cockblocked you, Wy. That is, if you’re interested in dipping a toe into that pool. Maybe you don’t want to? Although I did once dip my toe into a royal pool, and it wasn’t bad.”

“What?”

“Leah Roughy. The Queen’s niece. She and I had a thing. It’s old news.”

“The actress?”

Mary smiled broadly, as if proud of herself. Leah was a sex symbol. I marvelled at Mary’s ability to chase beautiful women without apologising for it.

“I bow to you. That is... impressive.”

“She’s way cooler than I am. Anyhow, Odette doesn’t know I’m gay. We assume everyone does.”

“She’s a bit sheltered, I think.”

“But smart. Pretty. Too good for you,” Mary ribbed.

“She’s too young, a princess, and impossibly kind.”

“You’re gushing.”

“She’s great with Theo. Adores him.”

“Still gushing.”

I groaned. “You think she’s into me?”

“Wyatt, this is silly. Yes. She’s angry with me. Someone needs to assure her that nothing is going on. And, if you like her, you need to say something about it.”

“I am not ready for?—”

“For what?”

“To fall in love with someone. Everyone wants me to move on and replace Isla?—”

“No one wants you to do that. Nor could anyone replace Isla. She was amazing. But you’re still young and relatively attractive. She’s a fox. You’d make a cute couple.”

“People would think I was just a billionaire having a third-of-life crisis.”

“You’re approaching middle age, my friend. Don’t flatter yourself. Do you like her?”

“I think she’s beautiful. We can talk for hours. That’s a new thing.”

“You realise you can date and care about someone without marrying them. That it’s not that deep unless you want it to be?”

“But Theo... he matters.”

“She adores him. What is the problem?”

“He likes her.”

“Again, I see no issues. Are you just trying to be miserable?”

“You sound like my mom.”

“Well, as I recall, she’s pretty no-nonsense. And I would defer to her here.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Wyatt, tell me you don’t think she’s cute.”

I crossed my arms.

“Tell me.”

“I think she’s gorgeous, yeah. I think she’s kind and funny and unusual in a good way. I don’t think she’s going to want to?—”

“Since when do you get to make choices for women in your life?”

I cringed.

“Go tell her the truth, at least. And if you have any feelings for her, tell her. Life is short. She’s sweet. Most of all, you deserve to be happy.”

28

BILLIONAIRE BOSSES

ODETTE

Me

You sent me nothing but recs with sexy billionaire bosses.

Ingrid

I know. Isn’t it great?

I had to ask Astrid for recs. But we can buddy-read Billionaire Bosses from Beantown. That's one I want to read.

Me

It's got multiple bosses.

Ingrid

There are multiple men, yes. Four, in fact.

Me

Not for me. What are you thinking!???

Ingrid

Calm down. It's a fantasy. But if Wyatt wanted to invite someone over and he was hot, would you say no?

Talking about Wyatt—even in text form made me feel ill. I ignored my sister's silly texts, returning to my bottle of wine and pound of chocolates I'd ordered to my room. Nothing hit like grossamounts of sugar and very grown-up red wine. I had to get how Mary and Wyatt carried on out of my head.

I looked at the first page of the Billionaire Bosses book. The heroine was their new secretary. It was workplace harassment. Not for me, right? But I read on. It was my first why choose romance—a trope I'd never been brave enough for. It was spicier than I usually went for, but I learned plenty as I snacked on chocolate truffles. Suddenly, Grieg hopped up, nearly blasting into the stem of my wine glass, and ran to the door. I soon heard voices before security dipped in.

“Ma’am, Mr Worthington is here and has brought food. What would you have us do?”

I considered turning him away, but that didn’t seem polite.

“Is he with the Vice President?”

“No, ma’am.”

He came alone?

“Of course. Let him in.”

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“Well, let’s call it a night and resume this after a full dinner—an actual date if that’s a thing you’d like?”

“You want to take me out on a date?” Her tone surprised me.

“Yes, Odette. Very much.” I kissed her on the forehead. “But you’re too sweet. You deserve all of that.”

Odette flushed red again, the colour that escaped moments before returning to her cheeks.

“I adore you, Odette. I want to take you out if you want to go.”

“We’ll attractso much attention.”

“Nah,” I answered. “I have ways of getting around that. When we get back, I’ll show you.”

“Okay. I’m amenable to that.”

The smile on her face suggested she wasmorethan amenable to my plans.

30

INSTANT SWOON

ODETTE

“I’ll see you at the breakfast for private-public partnerships tomorrow?” Wyatt asked.

What was I going to say? He could have proposed almost anything, and I would have said yes. His taste still lingered on my lips. Vibrating with excitement, I only nodded yes. A small, almost bashful smile crossed his face. The lines around his eyes creased slightly—as they did when he was relaxed and happy. Wyatt wouldn’t throw a parade to announce his feelings, but he would be honest. He would tell the truth.

“Good.” Wyatt kissed my forehead and stepped back to depart. “Sleep well.”

A quiet “thanks” slipped through my lips.

I marvelled as he left the hotel suite, casually as he came. Grieg stood at the door, whining as it shut. Even he missed Wyatt already. I sat in the quiet, trying to deconstruct the reality of what transpired. My entire body tingled. I wanted him to do it again and again—and all over my body. I shuddered, thinking about how good it felt to have his hand on my breast. It was too soon and I was out of my depth.

But he didn’t want to do more? I wanted to do everything against every fibre of good judgment left within me. What good did waiting much longer do?

Grieg returned, sniffing the food Wyatt brought. I decided to pivot and see what he’d brought me. A steak and potatoes. He had no idea I was a vegetarian. At least he’d tried. That was more than my ex would have done.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table. Astrid’s face popped up. I answered.

“How’s the conference? I haven’t heard more from you. Alex was sick, so I thought I’d bother you for her.”

I smiled, her voice settling me. “It’s good. I... I’m good. I just had dinner with the

Vice President.”

Well, for a moment.

“Amazing. She’s got to be brilliant, yeah?”

“Totally! She was so cool. She’s a friend of Wyatt’s.”

“Oh, interesting. Anything happen there?”

I looked at Grieg. His ears pricked, encouraging me to spill.

“Well, he just kissed me. And then I kissed him. And it... well, it spiralled but ended, and I’m so confused and...”

“And what?”

“Horny?”

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“You say that like it’s a question! Ofcourse,you are if it was good.”

“But he said he wanted to date me properly and that this wasn’t... fair?”

“Oh, we stan a short king who can treat a lady!”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s notthatshort. You and Alexandra just ended up with super tall guys.”

“I’m not dunking on him. He’s hot. Wait, how did you kiss him? Is hethere?”

“We travelled together because... he asked if anyone from the board wanted to take the second spot.”

“Does Alex know that?”

“I didn’t think it was relevant.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, are you going to do more?”

“We leave tomorrow. He wants to take me on a date. I’m frightened.”

“Why? That’s adorable.”

“What if we get caught? Alex will kill me.”

“Why? You’re a grown woman dating a perfectly nice man. He’s not a murderer or war criminal.”

“He’s thirteen years older than me.”

“And she’s married to someone a decade older. If anything, you should worry about Rick’s toxic masculinity resurfacing. And he can also tangle with me if it does.”

“He’s been sweet and trying to help me get out more. I’m pretty sure he won’t care.”

“Never underestimate the caveman lurking inside a perfectly serviceable male.”

I snickered. “Your view of men is so negative.”

“My view on people is negative. Men just aren’t sending their best.”

I agreed. My experience suggested this was true.

“So, go out with him. Say, ‘Thanks, Daddy, for dinner.’ If all goes well, enjoy him. If he’s willing to take you out properly, he’s probably not too selfish, right?”

I had nothing to gauge things against.

“I didn’t have sex with Guy,” I said. “Not all the way.”

“Not intercourse. That’s fine. He probably won’t care. I worried and worried no man would want me because of it. Instead, Parker worked harder to ruin it for the next man.”

“He was successful?”

“There was no second man, so yes,” Astrid sighed. “Sex isn’t magic. It’s great, but it’s not a secret potion. It’s fun. Don’t focus on it like it’s this stressful, massive thing, okay? Let it happen when it happens.”

“So I shouldn’t worry he’ll think I’m hopeless?”

“Nah. I had all those fears. Instead, Parker just worked harder. I cannot fault the man for trying. God, my first time was way better than it should have been. But you’re not there yet. If the kiss was good, do it again. Go on a proper date! That’s a good thing. And he’s a widower... it might take him a bit to be ready. Men are people, too. Contrary to what you’ve been told, they’re not always ready to go just to go. Many of them have boundaries—the ones worth keeping, I think. I don’t see you as having a casual fling. I could have handled it, but you and Alexandra? Nah. Wouldn’t work.”

“Excuse me! I’m cool,” I laughed.

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“Uh-huh. I mean, my love, you are cool, but you’re in your feels more. It will be even better when you’ve got that connection. It was for me.”

I hoped she was right.

“So don’t panic?”

“He fancies you! Enjoy dating someone you like who wants to treat you well.”

“He said I deserved to be treated like a queen.”

“Swoon. Instant swoon.”

I blushed. “That’s what butterflies are, right?”

“Total butterflies moment. Lap it up. Enjoy the lovesick new relationship energy,” Astrid said. “And be happy. You deserve happiness and love. If he gives it to you, ignore the ugly voices telling you otherwise.”

31

THE VEGETARIAN

WYATT

One thing led to another. I kissed Odette. I touched her more than I should have. I pulled back and promised to treat her properly. Then, somewhat ashamed of myself, I

went back to my room and masturbated furiously, thinking the most impure thoughts I'd thought about anyone in the past three years. Surprisingly, I didn't feel guilt so much as I did excitement for what was next.

The heavy feelings hit the following day when I called Mom and Theo, and he wanted to know when Papa was coming home. I listened to him cry. Suddenly, lusting after my twenty-something colleague seemed petty and selfish. My son needed me, and we were trapped here until the evening before our return.

On an emotional rollercoaster, I reported to our working breakfast. Odette arrived shortly after, looking impeccable in red. Her skirt clung to her hips, which swayed dizzily as she walked. I'd love to grip her there as she fucked me.

Who was I turning into?

There, the guilt came out. But it wasn't because I felt I was cheating on Isla. Instead, it was because I was objectifying her. She was young and sweet as I thirsted after her. Who was I to reduce her to this? I smiled right back at her cheerful face as she took a seat.

"There's bacon." I tried to distract myself from the way her cleavage peeked out slightly from her dress. "They've hidden it in the back."

"I saw it," Odette said. "But, Wyatt, I'm a vegetarian. Have been for a couple of years."

Mortified at last night's flub, I stammered, "Oh, shit. I brought you a steak. I just assumed?—"

"Don't apologise, Wyatt. It's fine. Your heart was in the right place. I did give a bit to Grieg. He says thanks."

Her graciousness was appreciated, but I made a note. Wherever we dined, we needed a hell of a vegetarian menu. And if I ever invited her to dinner, my typical Midwestern meat-and-potatoes approach wouldn't work.

The speaker this morning was rather disappointing.

“Typical corporate speak,” I sighed as it ended.

“It was... well, he tried,” Odette said.

“You're sweet to be so charitable.”

“I have been told I am benevolent, but hedidtry.”

“The thing is, we're patting corporations on the back for doing the bare minimum—planting trees sometimes. That's not good enough.”

A wry smile crossed her face.

“Okay, I get the irony of that statement coming from me, Odie.”

“Yeah,” she giggled. “Given how much I assume your company might make on the deal with Neandian Transit.”

Mary stared in disbelief.

“I stopped eating animals a bit ago. I love them too much. It’s a personal thing. My sister loves meat and thinks I’m ridiculous sometimes, but it’s important to me. Don’t worry. I’m not here to judge those who eat meat, but I don’t want to eat it.”

“That’s fair. I’ve dated enough vegetarians and vegans at this point. Nothing phases me,” Mary said. “Wyatt loves a steak.”

“I can handle vegetables,” I protested, annoyed.

“Grieg got some steak. That’s my dog,” Odette said. “He’s back in my room.”

“That’s fucking adorable,” Mary said.

She’d torture me about this in the future. I just knew it. Yes, she was obsessed with her dog and didn’t eat meat because she had a bleeding heart for animals, but Odette was a sweet soul. I could manage more vegetables and pets if it earned me a smile.

32

THE STORM

ODETTE

The rain picked up as we left Cologne. Cooling, it turned to a mix of rain and late-spring frozen glaze. A quiet fell over the car as it slowly continued in the motorcade

carrying us. I'd wanted Wyatt to kiss me all day, but we'd been on best behaviour. I felt like a hopeless schoolgirl chasing her crush around. I wanted him to make out with me, but I had to calm myself. It wasn't professional.

The driver lowered the partition.

"Ma'am, given the freezing rain, we are struggling with this road. The lead car is asking if we can go south. They believe it might be better."

"How much longer will it take?"

"Another hour."

Wyatt checked his watch, concerned. I had nothing but time. He had a child to return to.

"Let's wait it out," I said. "Can we just go a bit further?"

"It's a sort of now-or-never situation about ten miles up if we want to stick to motorways."

Wyatt stared out the window, nervous and disappointed.

"I'd like to try to stay on our current route rather than double the time. There's no guarantee we will make it otherwise. Is it that bad?"

"It's the rain and slick roads. We don't know, but we have a better chance going south."

I winced and took a minute to think. If we had a few more minutes, I could ask Wyatt his thoughts. I contemplated the change, but looking at his face, I knew the direct

route was better.

“Let’s just?—”

But before I could say anything, the car fishtailed. I watched in horror as Grieg flew to the floor. That was it. For a moment, I panicked and came back to reality with my body restrained by my seatbelt, airbags deployed to my right. Wyatt was on the other side of the car, panicking and suspended by his seatbelt. Grieg hopped onto my lap, shaking, but otherwise, he was okay. Once more, I was grateful.

“Ma’am, stay still,” the driver said. “We’re in the ditch. Are you alright for now?”

I saw his face poking through the partition, frightened.

“I am. Wyatt, are you?”

“I am alive.”

“I will go get help!” The driver departed into the storm.

“I...” he was in a trance. “I cannot get out of here.”

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“Your seatbelt is locked. Just unclip it,” I said.

“I will fall on you.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I will be okay. You can’t stay up there forever.”

I put Grieg on the floor again, beckoning Wyatt, “It’s okay. That has to hurt.”

“I’m okay,” Wyatt assured.

“You’re not. Come down.”

Wyatt unclipped the belt and slid down the incline—resting nearly on top of me. Our faces were only inches apart.

“You are... okay?” Wyatt asked, still panicked.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Are you?”

“I’m perfectly fine. I just... I was shaken and worried about you.”

I reached up to brush his face with my hand. “I’m good, thanks.”

“That’s... good.”

I couldn’t help it. His body pressed to me was so lovely, and the smell of his cologne overcame me. Although this was not the right time or place, I kissed him. It was slow

and easy.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Wyatt whispered.

“Me, too,” I said. “And you, too.”

Wyatt’s door opened, and terrible cold, wind, and rain flooded in. In the dark of the evening, I spotted a security officer with a torch.

“Ma’am, we need to remove you from the vehicle. Are you alright? Do you need to see a doctor?”

“I think I will be sore, but I’m okay.” I looked awkwardly past Wyatt. “Please take my dog first. His leash is in the hatch.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to open it,” the officer said.

Wyatt scrambled, handing the dog to me and slowly turning to stand on what was now the window. I watched as he released his seat, pulled it forward, and reached in the back to grab our coats and the leash without fail. He turned back after putting the seat back down.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“Parenting hack,” he answered.

It was strangely hot. He was much cooler under pressure than I anticipated.

“You get your coat on and hand Grieg to the guards,” Wyatt said. “I’ll boost you up—no funny business—and then I will get out.”

“Okay,” I said.

Following his directions to the minute, I pulled on my coat, handed my stunned dog to the guard on the other side of the door and climbed out awkwardly—flashing everyone but mostly Wyatt. It was awkward, but we were okay. That was all I could ask for.

Standing on the side of the road, Grieg shivered.

Wyatt emerged from the car and checked on him. “Little man is cold. Here.”

He picked Grieg up and tucked him into his coat as best he could. “It’s all I can do. Don’t want him to freeze.”

It made my heart swell at the worst time.

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“Ma’am, we need to transport you somewhere until the roads are clear and we can get you a new car. It isn’t safe for them to come yet.”

“Well, that won’t work. We have to go home,” I said, frustrated, tears welled.

“I am sorry, Your Royal Highness, but the ice caused this. There is no other way. We can get to the next town and find a place to wait.”

“But we need to get home.”

I felt such guilt. Wyatt needed to see Theo. I was responsible for this, wasn’t I? I should have made a choice sooner. Again, it was entirely my fault. This is what I did. This was how I hurt people. I began to sob, unable to make a decision—as if there was one to be made.

33

SOONER THAN EXPECTED

WYATT

Odetta broke into tears over our complicated situation. She was in a dress, shivering with bare legs. We were on the side of a perilous, icy road. She appeared paralysed. I had been, too. Until I realised we were all okay, I had seen it all flash before me. This was how it ended, right? It was okay, though.

“Odie, it’s going to be okay.” I rubbed her back.

She turned, looking so broken. Her walls came down.

“Wyatt, you need to get home to Theo. It’s my fault. This is all my fault.”

“Do you control ice storms now?” I asked. “Odette, it’s not your fault. Sweetheart, it’s no one’s fault. We’re okay—a little shaken but safe. We need to venture to town slowly. Grieg will freeze out here.”

I knew mentioning the dog would help. If I could keep her focused, she would come back down.

“I need my bag! I need my bag immediately!”

It was more panic. I recognised the signs. She was having an anxiety attack. Odette’s breathing picked up to the point of wheezing. Unfortunately, her security team couldn’t do anything.

“Where is her luggage?” I demanded.

“In the tailer car,” one answered.

“The Princess asked for a bag. Someone needs to get it.”

“Sir, we?—”

Odette descended, crouching on the ground, unable to breathe. Did no one understand she was having a panic attack? These people had zero compassion. It was my number one frustration with Neandians. Here was one of their own, flailing. I sensed what was in her bag was a medication she needed to take.

I handed the dog off to the nearest guard. “Keep him warm. Take him to the car with

the bags, and we will follow.”

He didn’t argue.

I dropped to Odette’s level, rubbing her back, and spoke calmly. “Odette, sweetheart, let’s get you to the car. You can decompress in the warmth. We will get your bag, okay? You’re just in shock, and you’re having a panic attack. Come on.”

“I cannot... I cannot,” she gasped.

I ignored all logic and picked her up, gingerly carrying her to the car while she sobbed. It was ridiculous, and I’m sure she felt embarrassed, but staying out in such cold on an icy road wasn’t safe. I settled her into her seat and turned to security again. They’d found her hand luggage, knowing somehow what this was about.

“Medication?” I asked. “I assume you have something?”

One nodded and handed me a strip of tablets.

“Water?” I asked. They scrambled to produce some.

Odette swallowed the tablet and rested in the foetal position with Grieg in her lap. She held onto him so tightly. He remained steady, looking up at her very protectively. He knew she needed him. No wonder she preferred to take him everywhere. Sensing her embarrassment, I wanted her to know there was no reason to worry.

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“Should I take the two of you to your room? Or would you like to start elsewhere?”

“Kamers,” I said. Rooms.

He stopped. In Dutch, I explained, “We will need two rooms.”

The butler nodded and looked back at Wyatt, confused. “Of course, of course. Does that suit you if I show you to your rooms?”

Two footmen took our coats, leaving me holding Grieg alone. I worried it might not be polite to let him roam.

“I think it’s best if Her Royal Highness sits down and relaxes,” Wyatt’s inflexion was protective and strong. “She has been knocked around a bit. I think she needs to take a load off.”

“Of course. I will have the staff put your bags in the rooms Her Majesty has assigned, and we will go from there. Can I get anyone a drink?”

“I will just take a soda. A Coke if you have one. I’m not drinking,” I said, feeling silly.

“Same for me,” Wyatt spoke up.

Jens looked offended but nodded at a maid standing by to bring us our soft drinks. Then, he led us into a cosy, simple living room. The Dutch Royals knew my sister and her children well. I didn’t realise The Queen had a house here.

“We have a guardian angel of sorts,” I said.

“It appears that way. Breaking down right by this place. Your sister called ahead?”

I nodded. “She didn’t admit it, but she did. You can do that when you’re a queen.”

Grieg sat on my lap. Wyatt plopped down next to me. “The Queen’s house, huh? So this is how the other half lives.”

“Says the tech billionaire,” I teased. “Wyatt, you’re American and may not be of royal blood, but you are far more than the other half.”

“You’re right, but Americans always think Europeans are more cosmopolitan.”

“Do you think that about me?”

“In twenty-four hours, I have heard you speak four languages. So, yes.”

I blushed. “It’s all I could do for years. I didn’t have a normal school day. I didn’t have a normal anything. Astrid was the general brains of the operation. Alexandra was a queen. Ingrid is the beauty. I had to distinguish myself somehow.”

A maid set down our drinks.

“Thanks so much,” Wyatt said with overwhelming kindness that frightened the poor girl. Americans and Brits could be aggressively warm. I loved it.

I took a sip, but Wyatt focused on me, his eyes never leaving.

“You can say what you want, Odette, but you’re gorgeous.”

“You’re too kind.”

“I’m not.”

“I’m the chubby one,” I said.

“Well, if you truly believe that, I prefer a woman like you. A woman who has hips and thighs and... everything else.”

He wanted to say more but stayed well-mannered.

I blushed.

“Who did this to you?”

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“What do you mean?”

“Who made you feel like this? Odette, you’re a wonderful person. A person I don’t deserve to have around. Who broke you down?”

Guy Lupine.

“It’s objective.”

“It’s not. You don’t have to tell me. But I know it’s some guy who fucked with your head.”

Jens reappeared. “Is everything fine?”

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

“We will be glad to serve dinner. Does a roast chicken suit?”

“She’s a vegetarian,” Wyatt said. “So, we’ll need something meatless.”

“Oh, interesting to note. Of course. We will accommodate you as best we can, ma’am. Give me a moment.”

I turned back to Wyatt. “I... it was a lot. My grandmother used to weigh us. She was hardest on Alexandra because she was the oldest, marriageable one. However, the larger my body grew, the more derision it attracted. And then... well, there was my ex.”

I grimaced at the thought of Guy's hands on my thighs, pulling back out of this lovely, vulnerable moment we were having. The panic response slowly rose, and my throat felt once more like it was closing.

"Shhh, shhh," Wyatt was calm and sweet. "Hey, stick with me, Odie. I didn't mean to freak you out. Whoever it was... he's a piece of shit. I'm sorry that happened."

I trusted Wyatt's honesty. He held my hand, never dropping his gaze. His blue eyes were soft and kind, but his brow and the wrinkles just above it furrowed ever so slightly. He was concerned but not panicked. He cared. This was what it was like to have a man not in my immediate family care about me. I nodded as a thanks. Jens reappeared.

"We will have a marinara sauce with pasta if that suits you. It will be about an hour."

"That's great, thanks," I said.

Jens left, satisfied. Wyatt's eyes searched my face, wondering what to do next. I took his hand and pressed it to my cheek. Unsure why I did it, I almost stopped midway, but the impulse overcame me. I needed his touch to ground me. Wyatt stroked my cheek affectionately, then tipped my chin up slightly. He leaned in and kissed me. A shiver fled down my spine, coursing straight to my centre—the place he'd made warm and hot yesterday with just a bit of touch.

Wyatt pulled back and brushed hair behind my ear. "You deserve better."

35

DRAMATIC ENDING

WYATT

I ended up in Odette's room, kissing her on her bed like a teenager who'd snuck over after her parents left. I wasn't supposed to be here. I had no business bringing her back here after a night of supreme ups and downs. We were both stone-cold sober and acting like horny teens. I kissed her neck, running my hand into her dress, but was deterred by the sturdy bra that bolted her tits down like the gates of Fort Knox.

"I can take it off," Odette panted. "If you want."

"Only if you want," I said.

Odette sat up and pulled her dress off, revealing the red and pink bra underneath. It was intricately embroidered with delicate flowers. It wasn't the industrial garment it felt like. Whoever designed it knew what they were doing. I tried not to think of bra engineering, however.

Odette's body was like porcelain. She shivered as I ran my hand down to her breast again, playing with her nipple through the lining. She moaned, thrusting her hips towards me like she was aching for me to do more. She was ready to go, but was I? I didn't know. I figured there would be some sign. To date, all signs pointed to "go."

"Do you want to see all of them?" Odette asked.

"If you'd like to show them to me." I kissed her slowly.

She reached around to unhook the thing with one hand magically. Slowly, I pulled the bra off, only feeling my way down her breasts and around her soft nipples. I pulled back to stare at what she'd revealed. They were perfect—full and pillowy, and her pink nipples beckoned for more attention.

I dipped down, taking the right one in my mouth first. I slowly sucked on her nipple, then used my tongue—flicking it only a bit at first. She moaned and pressed herself

into me harder. I wondered if she could feel just how hard I already was. It was then I realised I remained fully clothed.

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“Shit, you’re half naked, and I haven’t even taken my shirt off,” I said.

“It’s okay,” Odette said. “I don’t mind.”

“I do,” I said. “In solidarity.”

I unbuttoned my shirt and tossed off my undershirt. Turning back, I realise she’d taken off the tights she was wearing when this whole thing started, revealing the matching pair of panties to her impressive bra.

“What?” Odette looked concerned.

I decided I’d do the same if she’d gone that far. I tossed my pants aside, leaving only my boxers.

“Nothing. I was... admiring your matching undergarments,” I couldn’t say it without laughing slightly. “Sorry, they’re just sopretty. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like them.”

“Really? I like pretty things even if no one gets to see them.”

“I think they are wonderful,” I said, kissing her again. “Just like you.”

To my utter surprise, Odette wasted no time running her hand down to my very excited cock. She rubbed her hand over it at first. Then, she unbuttoned my boxers and began to stroke the length of my shaft with two fingers. She pulled away and bit her lip most temptingly.

“So, uh... do you like that?”

“Well, yes, but I should ask you the same?” I slid my hand into her panties. She was wet—soaking them.

Odette through her head back, shivering as I played with her clit.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yes,” Odette answered.

“Always so polite,” I chuckled. “The ball is in your court, Odette. Whatever you want, I can give you.”

“I want you to... you know...”

“What?”

“Fuck me,” she whispered as if those two dirty words were too much to utter.

“Oh, you’d like me to fuck you? Well, I suppose I could.”

I told myself I wouldn’t. I told myself I should take it slow and treat her respectfully. Instead, here we were in this bed, both almost naked. I pulled her panties aside and slid two fingers inside her, eliciting a beautiful gasp. Odette’s eyes fluttered. How could I tell her no? Then, reality took hold.

“Odette, I don’t have a condom.”

Her face began to drop. “What? Really?”

I didn't want to tell her that I hadn't used a condom since I could legally drink. I'd been with Isla so long, and we'd been committed, so there was no point.

"I haven't been with anyone since... since I lost my wife," I admitted, realising I was about to go soft.

She pulled back, gently running her fingers up and down my arm. "That's okay. Another time? I... I'm not on the pill. It didn't work great for me. My doctors had to sort of triage the most important bits and... well, I haven't even been remotely intimate with anyone since I broke up with my ex a long while back."

"Raincheck?"

"Raincheck." Odette gave me a sweet, assuring kiss. "I mean, I can go down on you if you'd like."

I cocked my head. "Why? You don't have to do that."

"Well, I'm a tease if I don't."

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“Oh, God, Wyatt, yes. Fuck yes!”

He chuckled, then kissed me sweetly. “You are a lot of fun. I’m sorry I came before I could warn you.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

Wyatt grabbed his boxers. He cleaned me up first, then went about his business.

“That was... wonderful,” I said. “How did you learn to do that?”

“What? Finger you? Odette, you don’t have to pad my ego. You’re not difficult to work with. You’re like an oil slick and aren’t hard to read.”

“I wasn’t padding your ego. It felt delicious.”

Wyatt tossed his boxers off the bed and kissed my forehead. “You were amazing. Thank you. I promise next time, I will be prepared to fuck you properly.”

Fuck me properly. Oh, hell! I’d felt silly for saying “fuck me” a few minutes ago. Now, I realised I could listen to him talk about fucking me for ages and ages. To him, I was wonderful. Nothing else mattered. He was a kind lover. It was more than I’d had in the past. It was more than I felt I deserved. But tonight, I could lie on his chest as we talked like old friends. I could put the fears aside to live in the moment. I was filled with endorphins, and I was safe.

NO REGRETS?

WYATT

I woke with a woman for the first time since Isla's fateful morning run. Odette breathed slow and deep as she lay adjacent, still naked from our exploits of the night before. Her pale skin, less rosy-hued than in the throes of ecstasy, brushed up against me as I held her—the big spoon this morning. I expected laying in bed with someone to feel good, but it was better than I remembered. The sheer softness of her was remarkable. I'd missed this.

I climbed out of bed, finding my destroyed boxers on the floor. I supposed it would be an interesting moment racing across the hall commando. Odette stirred, rolling over. Grieg, sleeping at her feet, lifted his head.

"Oh no. Are we late?"

"They haven't bothered to knock, but I gotta leave," I said. "I didn't mean to sleep over. I just sort of... fell asleep. Now, I need to race across the way and... not get caught."

"Uh-huh," she faded back into sleep, and Grieg settled.

I carefully zipped my pants and balled my boxers. Before I left, I kissed her on the head. She was out. I raced across the vast hall—back to my room—without notice. I took a nice, long shower and considered the evening's events. We'd gone from zero to sixty on a day that frightened us both. Two days ago, I'd told her how I'd felt after Mary pointed out the obvious. And this morning, I'd woken up naked in bed with Odette.

Emerging from the shower, I checked my charging phone. My assistant tried to reach

me.

I dialled Stephen back.

“Oh, hello,” Stephen said. “I was just calling to check and ensure you’d be back by the afternoon.”

“I will, but I don’t intend to meet with anyone,” I answered. “I want to spend the rest of the day with Theo.”

“Alright, we are pressed for time with the delay and move them to...” Keys clicked as he scrolled. “Uh... next year?”

I groaned. “Can they do a dinner meeting?”

“Yes,” Stephen said. “It’s that analytics firm out of Paris. The meeting was virtual. Did you not read your schedule?”

I cringed. “Nope. I was preoccupied last night.”

I was very, very distracted.

“Well, it was virtual. They are coming to town next Friday. I can schedule them for a dinner meeting then.”

“Great,” I agreed. “Book the chef’s table at Renoir. We can try to sweeten the deal. We need them to play ball to make this price point work. They will kill us in data storage fees if they can.”

“Got it.”

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“I can take a call with them either on the ride back or around four,” I sighed. “But it will have to be on the phone.”

“I will reach out,” Stephen said. “Typing them a message now. And... sent.”

“How are things going with the commission?” I asked. “Any word on what is happening with the Mayor’s next proclamation on high-speed rail?”

“The Prince Consort’s office reached out and said they are transferring us to a new patron. The Queen is expected to rely more on her husband for diplomatic duties. Everyone expects he’s knocked her up again. No idea who will be appointed, but when I know more, I will say.”

“I sort of hope it’s not Odette,” I said aloud.

“Oh, is there a problem with her?”

I winced. “Not quite.”

Nope. No problems... just me with my entire hand in her pussy last night.

“Oh, there we are. They just responded. It will be this morning. I will ping you when it’s time.”

“Great,” I said. “I will be available.”

“You sound relatively chipper, given the eventful evening,” Stephen said.

“I had good company.”

“I will not ask anymore.” Stephen remained strait-laced as ever.

“However, can you pencil in a free evening tomorrow night?” I asked. “I would like to have plans.”

38

PLANS

ODETTE

I wasn't sure what we were yet. Wyatt had given me so much in one evening to digest. The next day, we were back to business. Apart from a quick kiss in the car while dropping me off, we had little more to do with one another. He took a work call. I filtered through emails. I was sore—not from our clandestine rendezvous, unfortunately. A car rolling into a ditch—even slowly—can make one very achy.

Wyatt rifled through his briefcase. “Uh-huh, yes. We see eye-to-eye.”

He sat back up, handing me a bottle of pills. Covering the receiver, he whispered, “Take two. It will help with the shoulder pain.”

“Oh, thanks,” I mouthed.

I grabbed water from the seat's back pocket and swallowed two pills. They were an anti-inflammatory, but I hoped they would work. I could barely bend my neck with a full range of motion. I didn't know how Wyatt was functional while I was sobroken.

He hung up and looked over. “You looked uncomfortable. I know I'm sore.”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“It’s okay to say you feel like shit, Odie.” Wyatt’s face was kind.

“Okay, I feel like shit,” I laughed.

“You never swear.”

“Guilt or something like it, Wyatt. You bring pain meds with you?”

“One, see how you are after thirty-five, Odette. Two, I cannot function with a headache and a crying child. I can only eliminate one factor, so I prepare for it.”

“Thanks either way.”

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“Of course. I hope it helps. When you get home, take a long bath. And if you can get a massage, do it. I should take my advice, but timing. I’m sorry for multitasking.”

“It’s okay. You’d rather spend the day with Theo, I’m sure.”

“Yes. But... I wanted to talk to you. Tomorrow night, I’m free. I was wondering if you might want to do something.”

I did. I wanted to do everything. But as I struggled to move my head one way or the other sufficiently, I didn’t think it would amount to much.

“I’m so sore.”

His face fell. “Oh, of course, sure. I’m... I just thought I would ask.”

“I want to,” I said. “But I won’t be much fun like this.”

“Sure. When you feel up to it, I’d like to do something. If you’re still okay with it?”

“I would be,” I assured. “It’s not that I am opposed. I want to be mobile—fully mobile.”

“We would both prefer that, I think.”

I would need to be fully mobile for our next meeting. His gaze gave me goosebumps. This man wanted me. I’d thought Guy wanted me, but it wasn’t like this. Wyatt made his intentions clear, not with fanfare but with a look like he wanted to devour me. I

bit my lip involuntarily and looked down. My face flushed bright red.

By now, we'd returned to Neandia—headed to the palace to drop me off. Wyatt insisted I make it home first. I hated that the trip was over. My freedom waned once more. While abroad, I'd been important and independent. Now, I returned home under my sister's enormous shadow. I was untouchable once more.

The palace gates loomed large as I returned to my gilded cage. A footman rushed to open the door, but Wyatt leaned to kiss me before he did. It was a fabulous, slow, sweet kiss. Whatever pain ailed me fell by the wayside as he brushed my hair back. Then, the world returned to normal as he retreated. At least, I think it did for him. I sat there like an idiot, trying to speak English and failing miserably.

"Bon soir." I made a face. Bon soir!? It's not even noon yet!

To make matters worse, Alexandra stood in the service entrance doorway with Christophe holding onto the hem of her dress. She looked perplexed but also somehow impressed. Grieg followed, running up to Christophe.

"Are we macking in the car now?" she asked.

"Macking?" I asked as the gate shut.

"Old-timey slang that Rick uses," Alexandra said. "Making out. Snogging."

"Sorry. I didn't think he'd go for it," I said, mortified.

"It looked like a hell of a kiss."

It was.

“I... some things happened while I was away.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn’t go away with that intent, but things... some things--“

“Auntie, I wuv you,” Christophe attached himself to my leg.

“Aww, thank you, darling,” I responded. “I love you, too. And your little ears are far too precious to hear anything more.”

“Oh, really?” Alexandra looked excited. “Well, I’m about to drop him with Rick. We can catch up.”

I followed her to Rick’s office, where he was on his computer watching a video recap of a Swedish reality show he didn’t actually watch. I blamed Ingrid for this problem. She’d caught him up to speed one night, and he’d gotten addicted to videos of people gushing about couples on the show or dispelling rumours. He also lived for the conspiracy theories.

“There’s my little mudlvarp,” Rick cooed.

“When you call him that, it makes me feel ill,” Alexandra groaned.

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The child climbed into Rick's lap and immediately went to pick another video from the sidebar. He knew too much about the Internet already.

"Moles are cute, Lex."

"Only your people think that," Alexandra said. "I am going to catch up with Auntie. Be good for Pappa, okay?"

Christophe was already bee-lining for a video. He didn't have a care in the world.

Alexandra and I went to the drawing room near her office for tea. She and Rick usually hosted people here. Upon arrival, I felt special, getting genuinely royal treatment, but the rigid furniture didn't help my back and neck.

"I'm in so much pain, honestly," I said. "That's all I can think about."

"I'll ring the palace doctor."

Within five minutes, the man was there, fussing over me. He handed me a muscle relaxer, and I waited to feel like jelly after he left. All the while, Alexandra asked me questions.

"So, you two are... a couple?"

"I wouldn't call us a couple."

"How did it start?"

“I got jealous of his friend who is... a lesbian. I’m an idiot.”

“Who is the friend? Was she pretty?”

“Yes. The Vice President.”

“Oh, you live such an exciting life!”

“You went to the opera this weekend!” I declared.

“Fine, the opera is yours. Next, I need to know more. Is he a good kisser? What all did you get up to?”

I rolled my eyes. “Lex, I don’t kiss and tell.”

She was bursting. “Yes, yes, you do! I need to know. I am dying to! He’s cute and sweet, and obviously, you fancy him.”

“Just because you are sex-starved in pregnancy doesn’t mean the rest of us can make up for your lost time,” I sighed.

“First of all, I am unhinged while pregnant. Why do you think Rick is in such a good mood? Second, ouch. You’re being mean.”

“Really?” I pulled a face.

“Yes. It’s fun. You’ll understand when you get pregnant someday. Oh, this is exciting. So... did you two?”

“No,” I said. “Things were done. People were satisfied. I don’t want to say more.”

Talking about my sex life gave me hives. I wanted Wyatt to pin me to the bed and fuck me as soon as I was physically in shape for it. At the same time, I didn't want to give Alex a play-by-play.

“Oh, boo.”

“I'm not Astrid,” I sighed. “Wait until Ingy gets a boyfriend, and it will get interesting again.”

“But he likes you? And you like him?”

“I adore him,” I said. “He's gorgeous. And so incredibly sweet. Thoughtful, even. Grieg loves him, too.”

I looked over at my boy as he slept beside me.

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Alexandra sweetly said, “He is a good judge of character, so we all must approve.”

“Rick isn’t going to freak out?”

“Rick wants you happy, sono. He would love for you to find someone worthy of your time.”

The implication was someone better than Guy. And the more Wyatt took care of me, the harder I fell. Maybe Wyatt was too old and complicated, but he’d only shown me respect. That was more than I could say about my ex.

39

A LITTLE PRINCE

WYATT

Odette was under the weather the following day. I gave her the number of my massage therapist. Post-appointment, she thought things were better but still wasn’t up to going out. I was sad that the first free night without a nanny disaster was a bust. I finally found a woman I could see myself spending time with—only for a car accident to upend it. And even thinking about that made me sick to my stomach. My focus remained on putting fewer cars on the god damn road.

“Papa,” Theo whined, throwing the book at my feet. “Read my book.”

“Please?” I instructed. “Can you say please and be polite?”

He grimaced, took the book back, and returned to his corner, where he had a stack of building supplies a mile high. He'd been working on a castle all day—per him. I could not see the castle, but he had a powerful imagination.

“I’m off then,” Mom said. “Are you sure you want me to go?”

Mom was headed out to a trivia night hosted by the American Embassy. It didn’t sound all that entertaining, but she had some friends she’d met in her lap swimming group. I hugged her.

“It’s good. Go. Have a good time,” I said.

Theo ran over and hugged her leg before running back to his castle.

My phone buzzed. Odette was calling. I worried something terrible had happened.

“Hello?”

“Yeah, sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you. Uh, Astrid came to town for wedding stuff on a lark. We’re having a big dinner. Alex wanted me to ask if you wanted to join. I’m still a wreck, but I’m up for dinner.”

I watched Theo play quietly, wishing like hell I could say yes. However, I couldn’t call the nanny back on duty to see Odette.

“Sorry. My mom went out, and I don’t have a nanny until tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Odette said.

“Another time?”

“I meant that you’re welcome to bring Theo—only if you want to. He can play with the nibblings.”

“Oh, I couldn’t?—”

“No, seriously. They would love him. I bet he would get on great with Karolina. They’re about the same age.”

“The kids are going to be there?”

I assumed royals ate separately from their picky children. Perhaps I didn’t understand these people at all.

“They have to eat. It’s not a late dinner,” Odette said.

Not by Neandian standards. Only old people ate before eight.

“Oh... well... he’s already eaten.”

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The kicker was when Princess Astrid spoke.

“Wyatt, will you join us as Odette’s plus one for the wedding?”

My look of sheer surprise did me no favours.

“Um... we haven’t discussed it,” I said.

“Asti!” Odette groaned. “Let it go.”

“I am leaving it out there as an option. We’d love you to join us,” Astrid said.

That wouldnotbe happening. I had to end this idea of anything serious before it began. I once had a plan for life—a simple, calm life with the person I loved. It wasn’t meant to be grand, but instead comfortable. This wasn’t it. I panicked. Now, I did nothavea plan. I’d been holding the things all this time, unable to look forward. Until Odette’s interest, I’d not even contemplated what prospective thinking could feel like again. And now? Now, I was sure this was headed in the wrong direction.

40

SILENCE

ODETTE

“Are you alright?” I whispered to Wyatt.

“What?”

“You’ve grown quiet.”

“Oh, I’m just... tired.”

“Look, what Astrid said, I don’t want it to freak you out. I did not know she’d start on that?—”

“It’s okay,” Wyatt said.

A smile crossed his face—one that was put on for my sake. Had I miscalculated here? He’d wanted to see me. I figured it might be fun for Theo. Now, he didn’t look happy at all. I worried I’d done something wrong to upset him or made it weird somehow. Was it because I didn’t kiss him upon arrival? Given that we weren’t together and Theo was there, that seemed inappropriate.

“Oh. Sorry.”

He didn’t look at me.

Down the table, Linnea helped Theo butter a roll. These were the moments I felt so grateful for. These were the reasons I loved being alive. It sounds trite, but moments like these anchored you if you’d ever circled the drain and wondered if you were more trouble than you were worth or if living mattered anymore. Connection, love, and family pulled me through. I knew my family loved me and my nibblings needed me.

As dessert arrived, the children exploded in sheer excitement. They had no idea how lucky they were to get dessert. We weren’t permitted any processed sugar as children. Our lives were joyless and regimented. Well, at least mine and Ingrid’s. I lived to see

their happy faces light up as they dipped into a slice of chocolate gateau. They had all the good stuff I never did.

“Look, I don’t think I can stay much longer,” Wyatt said. “He’s got bedtime and I’m totally exhausted.”

“Oh.” My face fell, even if I was trying to remain pleasant. “Okay. Well, another time?”

He nodded.

I felt him pulling away. I picked at my dessert. Confused about this bizarre rejection, I questioned everything. Hours before, he checked in and begged me to spend time with him. Now, he couldn’t be bothered to even smile. What had I done wrong?

After dinner, I walked with Wyatt and Theo to the service entrance. He packed Theo in the car and waited by the driver’s seat door.

“So, another time? Maybe when we’re both feeling better?” I asked, hoping he would say yes.

“I’m going to be busy,” Wyatt said. “I uh... I’ll see you at the board meeting?”

My heart sank like a stone. I fought tears, returning to my dead poker face as I stepped back. I struggled to conceal my emotions, unlike Alexandra and Astrid, who had mastered this ability. Wyatt didn’t look at me for even a moment. He drove away, and I worried what I’d done wrong.

WHIPLASH

ODETTE

“Ain’t No Sunshineagain?” Rick entered the music room.

“That’s enough judgment,” I said.

“It’s been all morning. Why are you down, Odie?”

He sat on the couch in my eyeline, holding a book of French swears.

“What are you reading that for?”

“I am broadening my horizons. You don’t want to know why,” Rick said. “I can assure you. Answer the question, Odette.”

I grimaced. If that had to do with Alex’s weird fantasy, I definitely wantednothingto do with it.

“Oh, get your head out of the gutter! I have a bet with a buddy I cannot fluently swear in French. I had to read up since neither you nor Alex will teach me, and the deviant ones are abroad. Does this still have to do with the accident?”

“No,” I sighed. “I talked that out in therapy. It’s stupid, and... music is how I process things.”

“And while you are a beautiful musician, and I can appreciate that, I need some variety.”

I started playing Adele’s “Hello.”

“Nope. Not that. Try again.”

I snickered. “So, it’s weird. Ever since I invited Wyatt to dinner, he’s like... shut down. I shouldn’t care, I guess. We weren’t dating.”

“Okay, but I can tell you like him. I also think the feeling is mutual. So, have you asked him what is up?”

“No,” I winced. “I don’t want to feel stupid.”

“Why feel stupid?”

“Because I don’t want to throw myself at him in a desperate attempt.”

“Desperation is trying to do anything to fix the bride’s wedding dress days before the wedding, hoping she won’t ignore you for the rest of your married life. And sometimes desperation works.”

“Okay, but I didn’t do anything wrong. What am I guilty of? Beingtookind? Trying to invite him over? Maybe I’m just too extra.”

I looked down.

Rick approached, gesturing. “Scootch.”

I moved just enough so he could sit on the piano bench beside me. I watched him

play a terrible rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

“Kari does a better job,” I giggled.

“Well, I took a shot. You miss all the ones you don’t take.”

“I could teach you to actually play,” I offered.

“Nah. I have to learn how to swear.”

“Priorities,” I snickered.

“For real.”

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“What if I’m backsliding, and this is just mania? Like what if I am reading things in and he doesn’t like me or?—”

“Stop,” Rick said. “Does your therapist think it’s mania?”

“No. She said these are normal emotions for me, and I should give it time.”

“I’d agree with her, Odie.”

I groaned and slammed the keys angrily.

“I know it’s not just you thinking things up. The way that man looks at you doesn’t strike me as ‘platonic’.”

“Okay, but what about something else.”

“Like?”

I looked at my hands. “I don’t want to get into it. It will gross us both out, but things were... done. And now... what if he’s finished?”

“As a reformed slut,” Rick said, “let me assure you that isn’t it. Men who want nothing but nefarious things do not show up with their sons at a girl’s family’s house for dinner. He wouldn’t pick up the phone if that were the case.”

I glanced at Rick, doubtful.

“Kid, he lost his wife. I would bet money he hasn’t been with anyone else since then.”

True.

“And because of that, maybe it is taking him some time to ease into it. Give him space. Forcing it will only backfire. He will come around.”

“You can’t just say that.”

“I can.” Rick rubbed my back. “And that is because, Odette, you are like a fucking ray of sunshine. That man needs more sunshine. He won’t want to miss out on you.”

I rested my head on Rick’s shoulder. “Are you sure?”

“Kid, I am sure as shit he will not run. He needs time. I’ve known him longer than you have. He’s an honest guy. I would have tried to scare him off if he weren’t.”

42

WRITTEN OFF

WYATT

“Motherfucker!” I shouted.

I dropped my travel mug, dumping coffee over the kitchen floor. The nanny stared at me. Theo glared.

In French, he said, “Papa, that is a bad word.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Don’t repeat it.”

I looked over to see Mom glaring with her hands on her hips.

“What?”

“Your temper has been too short since you returned from Germany. What is going on with you?”

“I... I dunno. I’m fine.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr Worthington, but I must take Theo to school now,” the nanny said.

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I continued mopping the mess. “Apologies. Just be careful on the wet floor.”

I finished my cleanup. Theo was happy to follow the nanny almost anywhere, which was a relief.

“So, your time spent with the royals has nothing to do with this?” Mom continued.

“Uh... only that... it’s too weird, and I don’t need that whole thing in my life.”

“Whole thing? Didn’t Theo have a good time? He said he loved Princess Kari. He said he’d marry her!” Mom laughed. “Oh, Wyatt, he made friends. What on earth did they do to you?”

“I almost slept with Odette while I was out of town.” Word vomit spewed from within me. “And probably would have if circumstances differed. But... she’s not for me. It was stupid. I cannot lead her on and?—”

“Princess Odette?”

I shrugged.

“And does she... reciprocate these feelings?”

“Yes,” I answered. “She’s lovely and gracious.”

“But her family are mean?”

“No, they’re funny and not what I expected. Rick and Alex have relatively normal, perfectly imperfect children like Theo.”

“So, what is the issue?”

“It’s not what I want. That life with her would be anything but what I want. It’d be life in the public eye, parties, and a bunch of showy bullshit. It’s not me. Most of all, it’s not what we ever planned.”

“First of all, you’re you. You already live life in the public eye. Second, you already have to go to parties. Aren’t you doing a fancy dinner tonight? Third, who is we?”

“Isla and me.”

My mother’s face grew sad but kinder. “You and Isla had plans, but someone ended that too soon. Sweetheart, those plans are nearly four years out-of-date, and you’ll never replace Isla. You’d die trying—alone—and that’s not what she’d want.”

“That’s what she wanted for Theo.”

“She wanted Theo to be whatever he wanted to be and to be raised around a family of people who love him. I don’t think she ever considered royal life. However, I think she would approve of how well Odette does with Theo. Also, let me remind you that wanting to have an intimate relationship with someone and wanting to blend a family with them are two different things?”

“It’s too complicated to do one without the other.”

“Uh-huh? And all of this has made you basically what? Miserable. Sad. Unfulfilled?”

It had. I was perpetually in a lousy mood. I wanted something I couldn’t

have—someone like Odette without Odette’s baggage. And where the fuck would I find a woman as kind, patient, and clever as her?

“I think she deserves a bit more credit than you just writing her off. If she makes you happy—even to see her—then that’s a good thing. You do not have to marry Odette to make this thing worthwhile. What did you feel like before you got into your head and began comparing Odette to Isla?”

“I didn’t?—”

“Wyatt Edward, do not lie to me!”

I groaned. She was right.

“I felt only good things, you know? I connected with her. I felt happy to feel seen and to have conversations that didn’t focus on Theo. I got to be myself. And for the first time in years... I felt like I had a future somewhere—even if it wasn’t with her.”

Mom patted me on the shoulder. “Then you know what you need to do. Give her a chance.”

“It’s silly. She’s too young, and I’m too?—”

“Wyatt, if you have feelings for her and have told her about them only to pull back and say nothing, you’re cruel. Either completely end it if you are done or see where it goes. Don’t cravenly string her along.”

I knew she was right.

“It’s not silly. Men in your position date younger women all the time.”

“And people laugh at them.”

“It’s no one’s business,” Mom said. “Again, don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“I will think about it,” I said. “But I need to stay focused on this dinner tonight.”

43

RENOIR

ODETTE

Hell hath no fury like a queen who has been told that the chef’s table was double-booked. If that queen is also pregnant, say many prayers because it will not be pretty. The day Alexandra announced her pregnancy, we stepped out for dinner at a trendy French place called Renoir. It was all about white tablecloth service without the stuffiness. I sensed the food was probably pretentious—something Rick would moan about later—but we were going out to celebrate Ingrid’s return home. It was only for a moment, but she was back momentarily.

Despite a rough couple of days, I couldn’t be too down with her around. Ingrid and I went out to buy matching outfits as soon as I collected her at the airport. We sported the same collection from a new French designer. She was in blue, I was in red. All

was right in the world again. Well, until we reached the restaurant.

“Ma’am, I am sorry, but the other party is already seated. They were here first. It does appear we double-booked them.”

Alexandra looked at Rick. He knew he needed to do something, but what? His hands were tied.

Parker said, “I think the correct thing to do would be to determine who had the booking first and then let that person take over the table—regardless of who is seated.”

That was a very Parker thing to say—exacting, objective, and not at all practical.

Astrid patted him on the arm as if to say, “There, there, my love. You tried.”

“It’s going to get messy,” Ingrid whispered.

“Can we just speak with them, maybe?” Rick asked. “Or even... share the table. Is there not enough seating? It seats a dozen people, as I recall.”

“I do not want to share,” Alexandra kept her face pretty and tone low. She was not pleased.

“Baby, I am doing the best I can.”

“Do not call me baby in public.”

“It just gets better and better!” Ingrid snickered.

The evening was imploding when I locked eyes with a man across the restaurant. I

instantly tried to hide behind my shorter sister like a child might if they thought closing their eyes would make them invisible. Alas, it did not work. Instead, Guy Lupine approached, looking too casual for the environment buttotallyat ease. He got away with so much based on his vibe alone.

“Odette, how are you?”

If Alexandra had been cross before, she would have been livid now. Guy was the last person she wanted me to speak to. And given her pregnant rage, I was unsure if she could hold back.

“Uh. I’m fine,” I said.

Guy looked me over. “You look... impressively put together.”

It implied he was surprised I could look well put together. I hated everything about it.

“How’s your girlfriend?” Ingrid asked, out for blood.

“Oh... uh... we broke up.”

“Likely story,” she said in Danish.

“I’m sorry?” He cocked his head.

I flushed bright red. “Ignore her.”

“Well, you look beautiful. I’m glad to see you’re doing well,” Guy said.

I went from mortified to flattered to embarrassed for reasons unexplained. He stared at me with the sweetest eyes. Everything came rolling back—his broodiness, his talents at music, and how he could make me feel like a silly girl. I remembered the first time he told me he thought I was pretty and how I’d wanted to hold onto that moment forever. Then, only a week later, he’d told me I could stand to lose ten pounds, and he’d not let me join his quartet if I didn’t drop some weight because he had an image to uphold.

“What’s the hold-up? Have you all been put on a restricted list?”

“No. They have double-booked the chef’s table,” I answered. “So, we’re all just a bit frazzled. You don’t have the chef’s table, do you?”

“No,” Guy said. “We don’t. But... I do have space. If you wanted to join me?”

“Uh, we’re here for Ingrid and Astrid’s big moves to the UK.”

“You’re going to the UK?” Guy asked.

“Yes. To ride with Crown Princess Cecilia and her coach. I’ve been with them in the U.S. for a bit,” Ingrid answered. “I am trying to get Odie to accompany me, but she

swears she cannot.”

“Not with all that’s needed here,” I said, wishing I could fly to the UK immediately and escape this situation.

As I exchanged glances with yet another man I had no time or energy for, I realised it was about to get worse. Tonight was indeed the worst evening on record.

44

THE CHEF’S TABLE

WYATT

“Sir, I do apologise, but we have double-booked the chef’s table,” the maître’d said. “We have told the other patrons we apologise, but you were already seated. I hate to ask, but... could they share the table? We can catch them up in course two?”

I looked at the Frenchmen who were deep in their discussion of wines. I wondered why the hell this guy was even asking me this. It was not my problem to have to be at risk of losing a business deal because of their fuck up.

“Why are you asking me?” I tried to keep my voice calm.

“The other patron is... very notable and a good friend to the restaurant. She usually gets this table whenever she asks. I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t worry that I was risking some war with the press, sir. I know this is not your problem.”

The only explanation was that Odette’s sister was waiting on this table.

“Is this Queen Alexandra?” I asked.

He shrugged, confirming what I believed.

I had two options. One, I could go all Yankee Doodle and tell her to fuck off and focus on my damn meeting. Two, I could be benevolent and share. I debated the merits of each. I knew if I upset Her Majesty, she'd somehow find out and tell Odette. So, even if I changed my mind on that front, I'd be fucked. Maybe The Queen would bring some gravitas to this scenario, and I could charm these gentlemen with her help. Still, I risked losing this deal if I didn't explain what was happening. Rick and Alexandra needed me to excel here. Otherwise, this would never work. We needed them to cut us a deal on cloud hosting provisions, or it would never be within budget.

"Can I speak with this patron?" I asked.

He agreed. As I followed him into the dining room and around the host's station, I immediately spotted Her Majesty—along with all three of her sisters and Astrid's fiancée. But despite the commotion, I could only stare at Odette. She sparkled in a short red dress. The only impulse I had was thinking about how nice it must have made her ass look. My feelings for Odette weren't dead—not even remotely.

"Mr Worthington," Alexandra said. "What are you doing here?"

"I was told they double-booked the table," I said to her, staring at Odette with half a smile.

Odette, meanwhile, looked at a boy—a boy I didn't recognise—rather than give me the time of day. He ignored me. I assumed he was the artsy type of guy she usually went for. He was tall with jet-black hair. Dressed in a trendy but all-too-casual outfit, this hipster was an unwanted interloper.

"I'd like to offer for you to come back and take the other half of the table," I said, trying to hide my disdain for my competition. "But the people I am with—Luc and

Damon—are with a company out of France focusing on analytics processing. I need them to help us deal with the predictive analytics portion of the transportation design. We need their help to keep costs down so money remains for our trolley ideas. Can you handle helping me?”

Alexandra looked at Rick, whose face lit up like a Christmas Tree. “That sounds fucking amazing. We’re in.”

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Rick patted me on the shoulder and began to race towards the kitchen. The rest of the family followed. Odette looked at the hipster, then me.

In French, she said, “I must go. Glad you are well.”

“Yes, you, too, beautiful.”

Back off, Romeo! I gave him a look to kill, and he stared back at me as if I didn’t matter.

I trotted to keep up with Rick and The Queen, ending up breathless when we arrived back at the table. There, I was practically usurped by Rick the Charmer. I made introductions before Rick insisted—at the annoyance of the waiting executive chef—that he and Odette were passionate about transportation. He forced Odette to sit next to me. Stephen, who had only been taking this all in visually and trying to keep the conversation going, looked dubious.

“I’m sorry to cramp your style,” Odette said flatly as Rick led the conversation.

I could tell she was disinterested in seeing me, and I had to accept that. She texted to ensure we got home okay, but I ghosted her. I could blame it on being busy, but it came out of insecurity and unfair comparison. She deserved an explanation.

“Odie, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t. You just proved a lot in the process.”

Ouch.

“I should apologise and explain that I like you loads. I reacted from a fear of the unknown, and... we should talk more later.”

Thankfully, between Rick and Stephen, the French were entertained. Alexandra was happy to be eating the sea bass before her.

“This is glorious.” She moaned as if the food were orgasmic. “Just delicious, isn’t it?”

Odette took a bite of a vegan tart. “Delightful.”

“It’s fine. Nice, even,” Parker said. I had a feeling that was a good grade by Parker’s standards.

Astrid smacked his arm, “It’s delicious. Don’t be rude.”

“Darling, I wasn’t. I said it was nice.”

She gave him a look. The look. He calmed.

Odette picked at her food. I marvelled at how elegantly she held her fork. How the hell could that be elegant? It was like she attended a school for princesses or something. Was that a thing? Trying not to say anything else that would get me in trouble, I looked down—spotting not just a bit of cleavage but also her thighs. Her dress tucked up relatively short at this angle. The impulse to put my hand between her thighs was overwhelming. I needed to focus. I was at a business meeting with important people, concentrating on a critical task I’d worked hard to complete. Yet, instead of focusing on that, I fought an erection and wondered if I’d ever win her back.

“After this, let’s go around the block to that Jazz club,” I whispered. “We should chat.”

“You haven’t spoken to me in over a week. Do you think that wise?” Odette’s voice wasn’t cold. It was vulnerable. I’d hurt her.

“I... I... I’m sorry. I was a dick,” I apologised. “But... I got frightened and very busy with work.”

Yes, Wyatt, make her feel like she is the least important thing on your radar.

“Regardless, I owe you a drink and some one-on-one time. Could you give me the chance?”

She looked at me with her big blue eyes—eyes that showed pain, not interest.

“I don’t know if I should. Ingrid is in town.”

“Another time?”

“You don’t have to do this,” Odette said.

“I want to. I want to see you—to spend time with you.”

“Fine,” she agreed. “You have thirty minutes after dinner wraps to convince me to stay longer.”

“I can do it in five,” I lied. I hoped I was more charming than I knew to be.

45

FEELINGS IN CHECK

ODETTE

Slipping into a bar late in the evening, I had two choices—to hear Wyatt out or to stay a few minutes and cut my losses. I was full of every emotion imaginable as the thirty minutes I promised began. I’d felt uneasy about speaking with him next week at a board meeting, but here he was. And then there was the Guy Factor. Seeing Guy and knowing he was single made me feel things, too, but those things were not the same. The more I pondered my emotions, the more I felt safe that Guy would never have a chance again. I could do better. I had done better—or at least I thought I had until last week.

I looked at Wyatt as our drinks arrived, arms crossed. The hum of a bass hung in the background.

“I don’t know how to say this and have it make sense without insulting you,” Wyatt said. “Because you’re going to feel like it’s a comparison. And it’s not. Not really. But, I lived one very tangible life, and now I’m living another.”

“Well, if you’re going to say it, just say it,” I said in curt French. I didn’t feel like speaking for his ease of understanding.

“You’re good—outstanding. And you’re kind. And I want to find any fault with you about why I shouldn’t even bother trying. Because it scares the shit out of me.”

“So what is the problem then?”

“Can we speak English, please?” Wyatt asked. “I’m trying, but... if I have to do it in French, it’s gonna sound like AI, Odette.”

He looked pained. I may have wanted to shake him by the shoulders, but he was pouring his heart out. I believed him.

“Sorry. I’m being awful.”

“No. I hurt your feelings. It makes sense. Uh... the problem is... when I was sitting there with your family?—”

“I swear that’s just Parker. He’s a total sweetheart, but?—”

“No, Odie. Parker is fine. I can relate to him. You’re all wonderful. The kids are chaotic like any kids. Your sister and brother love them to death, you know? And I think all of that is great, but... it’s not without challenges. And when I thought about what Isla and I wanted with our lives, this grandiose, public existence wasn’t it.”

“So, I’m not good enough for him? Because your wife was perfect? And I’m a disaster?” Tears built up again. I wanted to crawl into a hole.

“No, no, of course not! I never considered the ‘what’s next’ or who might come into our lives. I always just saw Isla and me growing our family. After years of debates about conceiving and then struggling to do so, I figured we’d paid a penance and could just be happy. I was wrong. But... that dream is gone, okay? I must reconcile that and focus on what’s next for me and Theo.”

Wyatt took my hand. I resisted the urge to pull back in anger. His brown eyes looked almost wet in the light. He meant this not as an offence. He was laying it all out in daylight. The honesty—not brutal or meant to make me feel worse—was refreshing.

“I didn’t see someone like you coming, Odette,” Wyatt said. “I never thought I’d be brave enough to ask you out. And never in a million years did I think you’d be dumb enough to say yes.”

I wiped my tears. “I’m sorry. I’m a sympathetic crier.”

“It’s okay. I’m barely holding on here. I know I hurt you. I know I should have done a better job of things. But even now... I’m not sure how to fix it. I know this will happen again—where I need a breather. It’s not about you. It’s about me.”

I put my other hand on top of Wyatt’s and squeezed. “Just say you need a minute. It’s okay. I will get it.”

“You couldn’t possibly?—”

“Can we go somewhere?” I asked. “Not here? I know you just paid for these?—”

“Of course,” Wyatt answered. “Mine?”

“If that’s... okay?”

“Theo has been asleep for nearly four hours, so we’re good. He had a rough day at school playing outside.”

“Okay,” I said.

My detail wanted to strangle me—and Wyatt—by the time we walked back to his. It

was ridiculous. He didn't live far, and the car just followed us down the block as if it were a tank in a regiment.

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“I have bipolar disorder,” I said as we walked. “And it flared up a lot around my senior year. I held it together by a thread and did my best until the man I loved dumped me for someone else.”

Wyatt stopped, his face pulled into a scowl. I expected him to tell me to leave him and Theo out of my craziness. Instead, he shook his head. “That guy? The fucking hipster at the restaurant?”

“How did you?—”

“He looked at you—and me—as if he owned you. Men know these things. Shit. Hedumpedyou?”

“He told me I was broken, incapable of love, and everything else. I am sure I was a mess, but he wasn’t helping. The gaslighting was immense. I could never be what he wanted—not musically gifted, hip, or thin enough. None of it. He has a whole aesthetic. While I loved him, he loved it more than me.”

“Oh, Odie, I’m so sorry,” Wyatt took my hand.

I pulled mine back. Initially, it was because it was muscle memory—no PDA in the street. Then, I was just worried he was about to hurt me.

“Are you okay?” Wyatt stopped.

“We’re in public—in the street,” I said. “You can’t do that.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I’m sorry.” I shook my head. “I’m proving that dating me is arduous, dangerous, and awful. So, I’m just?—”

I spun around, about to leave, when he pulled me back towards him, ignoring my warning and wrapped me up in the biggest kiss. If my detail didn’t wish me dead before, they did now. I was helpless to resist him. His lips felt as soft ever. His hand, firmly on my back, drew me close in a way that made my hips cling to his in this desperate way. I wanted him to throw me against the city wall and have me here.

Wyatt pulled back. “I’m American, and I don’t listen to a damn thing because I don’t have to.”

He chuckled and ran his finger across my lower lip as if observing me like a painter might a subject—taking in every detail of me in this low light.

“I don’t know why you bother with me or why it works, Odette, other than you are an old soul and the kindest person. I could spend all my nights talking with you. And what you just said... I’m sorry. No fucking wonder what I did felt awful. I apologise. I should have been mature and told you I needed a beat to get my feelings in check.”

I nodded. “But I got sick. I’m telling you that I’m not perfect.”

“Odette, nor am I.” His hand caressed my cheek. “I am imperfect as can be. Would it surprise you that I ended up in a deep depression after Isla died and went to therapy for two years?”

“I... I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, but this is a lifelong...”

I sputtered and grasped for words that made sense. The look in his eyes was pure,

sweet, and without judgment. I could tell him all the awful things—the hard truths, the heartbreaks, and the worries—but I sensed he'd not hear any of it. There was an openness here with him I didn't expect.

"I'd like to kiss you again," Wyatt said. "But I'm not supposed to."

"We shall walk faster then!" I laughed, pulling back ahead.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and carried on. Wyatt was a big boy, as Elisa said. If he felt up to caring about me, why should I fight him?

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DISASTER AND DISORDER

WYATT

All I wanted to do when I returned home was take Odette to bed. Soon after arriving from Cologne, I'd made sure to pick up a box of condoms just in case. After last week's implosion, I'd not expected to use them so soon. But staring at her in the moonlight on the street, I knew this was what I wanted. I needed to suck it up, be honest, and go to that wedding. I couldn't fight it. My feelings for her were real. I wanted to run her up the stairs as soon as we entered the foyer.

We kissed like teenagers, throwing our coats on the ground rather than bothering to hang them. I don't know what came over me. Soon, I had Odette pinned to the wall, loving how her body felt pressed against mine. She moaned into my mouth and parted her legs slightly. Muscle memory overcame both of us. She wanted me to have her, and I wanted to devour her in a way I hadn't any woman since Isla. Animal attraction overcame me.

“I want to go to the wedding,” I said.

“Okay,” she panted.

I realised the wedding was the least of her worries. This wasn't about a simple invite. This was actual interest in me—in something real with me.

“I want to see you,” I bit her earlobe.

She pulled me back, pressing her lips against mine in an act of ownership I found so sexy.

Then, it fell apart.

“Wyatt?”

My sister and mother stood on the steps. I glanced at them, then back at Odette. Odette’s face went from rosy and flushed to white as a sheet in sheer mortification. Why was my sister here? And why couldn’t we ever just run off and fuck? I expected Theo to cockblock me but not my adult family members.

“Uh...”

I wanted to pull back, but my still-very-erect cock made that risky. I let Odette’s hands go, unpinning them from above her head. Strategically, I moved to her side, hoping the low light and distance would shade my erection from view. Thankfully, it was steadily deflating.

“Uh...”

“Sorry, we thought something happened because of the noise,” Rebecca said. “We’re being so rude. I haven’t met you yet. You must be Odette? I’m Becca. I’m Wyatt’s big sister.”

She approached, now standing only two feet from Odette. Odette stared at me, ready to run, then turned to Becca. The official, polite look she always held in public crossed her face.

She recovered by cheerfully extending her hand, “I’m Odette. And... I should probably be off.”

Fuck! I didn’t blame her for leaving, but I longed to wake up with her. I needed this. Every fibre of me wanted to spend the rest of the night fucking. I wanted to taste her and fill her. I had this perfect opportunity with this beautiful woman who was too good for me.

“Oh, don’t let us chase you off,” Mom said. “We are sorry. It’s Wyatt’s house... and we’re all adults.”

“No, it’s okay. I should head back. We have an early morning with stuff to do for Asti’s wedding.”

My heart sank.

“We’ll give you a minute. We’re just headed to get more wine,” Mom said, leaving.

They padded as if kids caught spying on Santa at Christmas. I waited for them to clear the entry before I spoke to Odette.

“Shit. I am so sorry, Odie. I just... I adore you. Things got out of hand. I have no idea why Becca is here?—”

She brushed my cheek lovingly. “It’s okay. Go catch up. Text me tomorrow. It wasn’t meant to be.”

“It will be,” I promised. “Some time.”

“Uh-huh.” She nuzzled my nose with hers, then gave me the sweetest kiss. “Goodnight.”

Odette departed into the ether. While disappointed, I realised the sort of thing I’d felt for Isla the night she’d told me she loved me and wanted me to take her home came rushing back. That fresh, excited energy was back. The hopes for what was to be and the desire to be in bed with someone—pressed impossibly close and not holding back—flooded in. Something within me was alive once more. It wasn’t the evening I’d planned or even planned again. It wasn’t the best outcome, but it wasn’t the worst, either.

I entered the kitchen as my mother and sister scrambled to look busy. Pretending not to have heard everything, they played it cool.

“Don’t act like you don’t know what is happening, please. It makes it worse.”

“Oh, come on, what is your problem?” Rebecca laughed. “She’s gorgeous. Way out of your league.”

“Oh, stop!” Mom said. “She’s a nice girl, but he’s also a catch.”

Mom pinched my cheek jokingly.

“Mom, please. She’s a nice woman, yes. I can’t deny she’s beautiful. But I was hoping for a quiet house. Things got... out of hand, and I’m sorry you all caught us... like that. Please don’t hold it against her.”

“Hold it against her?” Becca snickered. “Nah. Good for you both. Mom said you had this huge crush on a princess. I never thought I’d see the day when you were about to

go at it with one in the foyer.”

I glared. “Becca, why are you here?”

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“Oh, you love me. I got bored. Mom said you could use a cheer-up. Odette took care of that, though.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please stop. Please let it go. I am happy you are here.”

“You’d also like to get laid. Yeah, I get it. Selfishly, I was hoping we might duck down to the cottage.”

“I thought it might be nice to get away for a couple of days,” Mom said.

“Chris was planning on coming for a little bit to look at a brewery,” Becca added. “It was a work trip. I just added some days for fun to see you and Theo.”

“Ahhhh, you just want the compound to yourselves,” I joked.

“No, I was thinking of a family trip,” Becca said. “You could bring your Disney Princess.”

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YOU SHOULD GO

ODETTE

Wyatt

You got a minute?

I panicked as his text rolled in, wanting to avoid any awkwardness. We'd only texted briefly since his mother and sister found us snogging desperately in the foyer. I couldn't forget how much I wanted him before things were broken up, but now I was in a complete guilt spiral. I'd told no one my dirty little secret—only that we'd gotten a drink, and then I'd come home. Thankfully, no one caught our PDA on camera, so I could leave my family and advisors blissfully unaware of things.

Beating down my fears, I responded and let him ring me.

"Hey," I said, nervous.

"Hey. Are you freaking out?"

He read me too well already.

"Yeah. A bit. Phone calls—no one does them unless someone has, like... died... or they are about to break up with you, so?"

"Oh, shit. Uh, well, in my world, it's just easier to make plans on the phone or in person. And, given that I'm in Brussels, the latter is off-limits."

"You promise it's nothing bad?"

"No, baby. It's nothing bad."

Baby. No man had ever given me a pet name. My heart soared.

"Okay, so. I have a compound down here in Wallonia. My brother-in-law was already coming in on a beer-scouting mission, and my sister is keen to spend a winter weekend away. Did you want to join us?"

“Um... uh... I couldn’t,” I shut down.

“Oh, you’re busy?”

“No,” I said. “I am not busy.”

“Uh... okay.” Wyatt’s voice deflated like a sad balloon.

“I just... I couldn’t because... what happened... and being around them... it feels so wrong.”

“Did they offend you somehow? I swear they are both so sweet. They like you. It was Becca’s suggestion since she’d like to get to know you more. I promise she and her husband are great.”

They liked me? I felt like a marked woman around them! How could they want to invite me? The only explanation was they were out to get me and hated me.

“They aren’t angry?”

Wyatt chuckled. “No. Why would they be?”

“Wasn’t it like... awkward?”

“Well, for a minute, but we’re all grown-ups.”

“And Theo? You’re cool with me being around him? Are we hiding things or?—”

“Theo already knows you. I am sure we can both act like adults. He is four. He doesn’t understand much. And no matter what, at this point, he can recognise any media coverage of you from a mile away. He’s your fanboy, Odie.”

I giggled. “Oh, that’s too sweet.”

“Bring Grieg. And drive on down if you want. Or... whatever. I don’t know how any of this works.”

I can’t drive. I was too embarrassed to admit that glaring fault.

“Let me discuss it and see if I can go out of the country for a pleasure trip,” I said. “I have to get approval.”

“Oh... sure. Just text me. I’d love to see you.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I will.”

I hung up and paced until Astrid appeared in the sitting room doorway.

“What are you doing?”

“Thinking,” I answered.

Panicking.

“Oh, there you are!” Alexandra reported. “Why do you look upset? I swear to God if it has to do with that man. Or, oh God! Tell me this is not Guy doing this to you!”

“No,” I assured. “It’s not Guy, and I am not hurt. Wyatt did nothing wrong.”

“Then what, sweetheart?” Alexandra dropped to the couch and put her feet up.

“It was Wyatt. He wants to know if I can go to Wallonia this weekend. They have a place there.”

“You should go,” Alexandra and Astrid said in unison.

“What? Why?”

“Because he adores you and wants to spoil you,” Astrid said. “In my experience, you should let a man do that. It leads to the best sort of fun. Parker got a hotel room once—a suite—just because. It was magical.”

“It’s not like that,” I answered, arms crossed. “He’s going to be there with his whole family. His sister and brother-in-law are visiting, and Theo will be there.”

“So, is this about the kid?” Astrid asked.

“No. I think he’s such a sweetheart. I am sure that will be fine. Wyatt isn’t worried about that. We’ve blown through that gate—for better or worse. No. It’s that...”

I wasn’t ready to say it, but if I didn’t drop this bomb, my trepidation would seem nonsensical.

“I went back to his place with him.”

“Ooooooh,” Astrid said.

Alexandra glared at her. “Stop it.”

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“You owe me 500 Francs!” Astrid rubbed her hands together. “I bet Alex 500 Francs you slept with him before returning.”

“I didn’t sleep with him!” I refuted. “We haven’t... not all the way.”

I wanted to, though.

“See!” Arms crossed, Alexandra sat satisfied.

“I... we... well, his mother and sister just appeared. We were in the foyer kissing.”

“Adults kiss. It’s nothing,” Astrid said.

“Yes, but the way we were kissing was the problem. He had my hands held up above my head. I think if I could have... you know... right there, I would have. And he was... aroused.”

“So, he popped a boner while pressing you to the wall, and you wanted to fuck him? Okay, this is getting good. Way to go, Odie!”

“Astrid, this isn’t a joke. I care for him.”

“I didn’t say it was. I want the two of you to shag so we can get past this shamefest you’re putting yourself through.”

“Not everyone so easily shakes years of guilt, Astrid. Not everyone is like you,” Alexandra said.

She was right. I hadn't.

"Come here," Alexandra patted the couch.

I allowed my older sister to relish me with maternal attention I didn't know I needed. I clung to her, burying my head in her chest and smelling her perfume.

"You don't have to feel bad to feel something," Alexandra said. "You can just feel amorous and let it go, sweetheart. Promise."

"I feel so guilty for letting them see us like that."

"He's a hot billionaire with a cute accent. He could have any model he wanted," Astrid sighed.

"Exactly! Why does he want me?"

"Because he likes you. He finds you sweet. And he's cute," Alexandra said. "Why do you feel guilt?"

"Because I shouldn't sleep with someone. He's a dad, and we're not... together."

"He's a dad? More like a daddy!" Astrid couldn't be serious.

Alexandra glared. "Not fucking helping."

"Okay, fair. He can have kids and a sex life with his charming, cute, sweet younger girlfriend, Odette."

"People will think we're ridiculous together."

“No, they won’t,” Alexandra said. “If his sister and mother want to invite you for the weekend, they must think you are good for him—just like we told you to invite him to dinner, right?”

I shrugged.

“But what if I fall for him—really fall for him—after we, you know? But he doesn’t see it that way, and then I’m like this sad little puppy who chases him around?”

“Holy run-on, batman! Slow down, Odie. It’s not like a book where someone falls instantly in love with someone just because they have sex,” Astrid said. “Promise. I mean, did it help me stop hating Parker? Yes. Did it make me crave him? A little. However, it wasn’t fucking magic—just like I’ve told you. It will feel good. You might like him more. You’ll probably feel closer to him, but what does it matter if you two have already nearly done the deed? He wants you.”

“And you might worry about nothing since you’ll be around a four-year-old all weekend. So, it could be a nice time to bond and get to know his family.”

“Don’t pull a face!” Astrid giggled. “She wants to do it. She wants him to shag her. Odette, admit it!”

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“I do, okay? But I feel bad about that.”

“Why?”

“Because Guy and I were waiting until the right time.”

“All while you were being very good to him and getting nothing back,” Astrid said. “No. The two of you were giving over to his religious nonsense, and then he just disregarded you when he did a 180 and decided he didn’t believe in any of that anymore. Wyatt doesn’t care about that, and neither should you. The Pope doesn’t need to condone your intimate moments. No one is going to bear witness to your supposed deflowering on your wedding night. Stop feeling guilty because Celeste said so.”

“What if his mother and sister hate me and are baiting a trap?”

“Wyatt is a genuine sort of man,” Alexandra insisted. “Friday night, he looked at you like you were the only person in the room. He likes you a lot. I bet his sister and mother are nice people who want to see him happy. They are probably excited to see him take an interest in someone—anyone.”

“Anyone?” I winced.

“Anyone as lovely as you, sweetheart.” She held me tight again. “Go. Enjoy the time with his family. Please get to know him better. You deserve that. You both do!”

THE WAITING GAME

WYATT

“I am going to take Theo out,” Mom said.

“Why? Odette will be here soon.”

“He can see her when we return from the village,” Mom said. “He will have something to be excited about.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Well, it’s happening. And we’re going to keep him at ours this evening. Have a bit of a sleepover,” Rebecca said.

“You don’t need to do that. You two realise that we don’t... we might not...”

I couldn’t bear to bring up my until-recently tragic sex life to my female family members. We were close but didn’t need to be that close.

“Well, if the moment sparks, it will be an option.”

The family compound had two little houses. Isla and I bought the first for ourselves but then purchased the cottage next door. Mom usually stayed with me but elected to stay with my sister this time. I now understood her motives. I figured I’d just annoyed her.

“I don’t need you intervening.” I spied Theo coming into the living room toting the faux-Grieg he’d been carrying with him everywhere since he saw Odette on the television, dedicating a new library.

“You do need my help. You need help to save yourself from overthinking.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Papa,” Theo said. “Can we go walking later?”

“That is the plan, yes,” I said.

I didn’t mention our new arrival. Odette planned to hike with us that afternoon, but if I told him that, Mom would have to hear a million questions about when she was coming. Theo did not comprehend time.

“Come on. We’ll have fun at the museum!” Mom urged, taking Theo’s hand.

They ducked out, and I paced. I was alone in a quiet house—a rarity—and Odette was almost here. I’d have her all to myself. I did prepare properly. I had a sleeve of condoms in the nightstand. The house wasn’t a complete disaster. And we’d probably have a few hours before we had to look presentable. The prospect was exciting, but the reality was terrifying. It seemed wrong but also fun.

I was nervously unloading the dishwasher when the doorbell rang. Odette stood on the doorstep, followed by one of her plain-clothed henchmen. He, of course, held her luggage. I wondered if she’d ever carried a bag in her life. She looked cute—dressed down in a pair of jeans. She had a pink soft-shell jacket and a red and pink beret. As always, she was perfectly matched.

“Hello,” Odette said, voice shaky. She was nervous.

“Come in. Hope the trip wasn’t bad.”

“There were no ditch detours,” Odette laughed, still sounding uneasy.

She stepped in, as did the man holding the bag. I walked forward. “I’ll take it, thanks.”

He stepped back, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Where will they stay?” I asked.

“Uh, they booked a place somewhere. They take shifts. Don’t overthink it. Where is everyone?”

“Mom took Theo downtown. My sister and her husband are at a brewery. They promised to bring back beer.”

She rocked back and forth on her heels. “Sounds good.”

“We have the place to ourselves.”

“I can see that.”

“Shit! Your coat,” I said, picking up Odette’s jacket quickly.

“Sorry,” she said.

“No. Don’t apologise.”

I put the jacket in the hall closet, and she removed her boots and handed me her hat.

“I didn’t quite know how to dress.”

“You look beautiful.” I closed the closet door with more of a thud than I would have liked and grabbed her back. “Come with me. I’ll get you settled in.”

She nodded politely and followed me upstairs. Something was off. She held back too much, and I didn’t know how to fix it.

“Are we... sharing a room?” Odette asked.

“I didn’t think that was the best idea. That doesn’t mean you have to stay in here. I just... Theo tends to ignore doors. I would hate for you to be here changing and have him traipse in.”

Odette giggled. “That sounds about right. My nieces and nephews have no boundaries. I’m aware.”

“Okay, well, don’t think I’m icing you out. I’m delighted you came, and I want you to make yourself at home. I can let you get settled?—”

I didn’t make it that far. She pulled me in—grabbing me by the shirt—and kissed me. It was back again. The feelings returned once more. I pushed her against the door jam, wanting everything to come together. I also wanted to confirm that was where we were headed. I pulled away, my hands still holding her face. She breathed heavily and stared up, lips half-parted.

“Do you want to take me to your room?” Odette asked. “Or will that cause more

trouble?”

“It will cause just the right kind of trouble,” I answered.

49

THE RIGHT KIND OF TROUBLE

ODETTE

Clothes flew as we undressed in Wyatt’s room. My body wanted him to fuck me now. I didn’t imagine I’d arrive, and we’d immediately get down to business, but it felt right. I pulled off my clothes, then my bra, and was about to throw my knickers to the side when Wyatt stopped me.

“Leave the panties on for now.”

I cocked my head.

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“I just really like them,” he said. “And I’d like to have some fun first.”

“Oh... okay,” I said.

Glad to have worn one of my nice lingerie sets, I tucked into bed as he locked the door. Wyatt climbed next to me, pulling me over in one strong motion until there was no space left between us. He pressed me back against the bed. I stared up at him, a little nervous but mostly happy. I debated telling him the truth but decided against it. I didn’t owe him an explanation.

Wyatt kissed my neck, then pulled back. “You are so fucking beautiful right now.”

I blushed.

“What do you want from me?”

“I want to find out if you taste as good as you look,” Wyatt said.

I had no idea what that meant. He kissed down from my collarbone to my knickers. There, he hovered, taking me in. Over my knickers, he used his thumb to play with my engorged clit. My centre buzzed with anticipation. I wanted him inside me now. I pressed my hips up, offering my knickers to him obediently.

“You’re very well-behaved, Odette. And oh so patient.”

“I’m impatient right now,” I said, unsure what spirit possessed me.

“You’re soaking through these panties.”

“I know,” I said, out of breath. “Can you please put me out of my misery?”

“Well, since you begged...” He removed my knickers, tossing them off the bed.

I expected him to push his body between my legs and enter me. Instead, he parted my legs slightly and slung them over his shoulders as he kissed a part of me no man had ever touched like this before. Wyatt’s touch—gentle at first—devolved into licking—then sucking. And then, his fingers slowly slid into my pussy, creating that pressure I’d craved on the bed at the Queen’s chateau.

I moaned, unable to keep my voice low. The more he worshipped my body, the more a fire burned within me for more. I lapped up his praise and adoration as if it would slip through my fingers any moment. I gripped the rustic wood headboard with one hand and his hair with the other. As I grew closer and closer to the point of sweet inevitability, he stopped and looked up at me.

“What?” I panted, confused.

“Is that good?” Wyatt asked.

“Yes,” I said, playfully pushing his head back down. “Don’t stop now.”

He bit my inner right thigh and then continued on his quest to get me off. He was so wonderfully giving. With every stroke of his tongue and thrust of his fingers, Wyatt brought me closer to climax. But by the time I was cumming, crying out to a God I didn’t know, I felt ascendance. We hadn’t even begun, but the foreplay was next-level fun.

Wyatt looked up again, watching me come down from my orgasm. His eyes showed

satisfaction with a bit of curiosity. The intensity of his gaze should have unsettled me, but I loved it. I adored how much he wanted to focus on me. Everything he did, he wanted me enthusiastically on board with.

“Was I good?” I asked.

“You were good, too demanding, and overwhelmingly sweet.”

I bit my lip.

“You’re delicious. Even more than you look. I could do more?—”

“No, I want...”

Do I say it? I worried it might make me dirty or desperate to use the word, but Wyatt’s face suggested he wanted me to be dirty and desperate for him.

“I want you to fuck me, Wyatt. I can’t handle it anymore.”

“I can handle that,” Wyatt said.

He crept back up, giving me a swoony, long kiss, before crawling over to the bedside table to get a condom. He handed me the gold sachet and tossed his boxers off. Then, he took it back. I let him manage the rest and watched in both admiration and agony as he rolled the condom over the head of his cock and down his shaft.

“What, you look surprised,” Wyatt said. “Are you okay?”

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“Don’t apologise. That was amazing, Odette. Better than I could have imagined.”

“I wasn’t... bad?”

He kissed my neck. “You were... fucking perfect.”

50

THE OTHER WOMAN

ODETTE

When I entered the kitchen, I found the dishwasher open and three mugs on the counter, as if the house’s occupants had hurriedly left.

“You just left the dishes?” I giggled. “Why?”

“I was far too focused on the beautiful woman who appeared at my door,” Wyatt said.

I blushed. Wrapping my arms around him, I said, “Okay. Well, can I help?”

“No. I’ve got this. Make yourself comfortable. Do you want some lunch? We can go out, or I’ve got some stuff for sandwiches. Although I’m realising I’m a terrible host for not getting any non-meat options.”

“Peanut butter? I’m not fussy.”

“I have some of that for Theo if you don’t mind. And we have some strawberry preserves.”

“I would be pleased with that. You don’t have to fuss. I’m down with low-key on a Saturday morning.”

“You’re beyond sweet.”

I wandered into the open-plan living room.

“Can we make a fire later?” I asked.

“Theo would love that. Yes.”

“I love a nice, cosy day by the fire,” I said, looking at the pictures on the hearth.

There was one of a couple I was sure was Wyatt’s parents. They were dressed like any other couple for a wedding—lots of bridal white. A sea of bridesmaids and groomsmen flanked them on either side. I always marvelled at how big Americans made weddings. It was all so grandiose. The man beamed down at the woman as she smiled back.

“Is this your parents’ wedding photo?” I asked.

“Yes,” Wyatt said. “Dad passed when I was young. Mom was widowed about the same age I was. Heart attack in Dad’s case. Awful.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I get it. They were lovely together. You have his smile.”

“So I am told by my mother,” Wyatt said. “He loved us all so much—but he lived for Mom.”

I turned to a photo of Theo as a baby, sitting in a snowsuit somewhere outside. His cheeks were even chubbier then.

“Theo was an adorable baby.”

“Yeah. That was taken just out behind the house. He was sitting up. We took him out on a hike. He loved to be worn in the carrier when we went out. Isla loved carrying him. It was one of her favourite photos of him.”

I looked at the next photo—one of Wyatt with the woman I assumed was Isla. It was a candid shot, with the camera capturing the two of them laughing and her holding her graduation cap. Wyatt was even more baby-faced then. She was brunette and tall, by the looks of it. It wasn’t what I expected.

“She was tall,” I said. “And very pretty.”

“Isla?” Wyatt asked.

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I looked back. Trepidation ran across his face.

I smiled. “Yeah. Isn’t that her?”

“It is,” Wyatt cleared his throat. “She was tall. She was the same height as me—taller in heels but rarely wore any. When she did, people would make a big fucking deal about it. Oh, God, she’s so tall! It must really bother you!”

I snickered. “It didn’t?”

“Nah. She was my wife. Was I supposed to tell her not to wear heels? That wouldn’t have worked. Isla would have told me to go fuck myself.”

She was feisty.

I returned to the final photo of Wyatt and Isla on their wedding day. Her hair was down to her shoulders in slow, beachy waves that framed her face. She wore a simple crown of tiny flowers. There was no veil. Her dress was simple. Yet, she was stunning. Everything about her seemed chic and bohemian. If this was Wyatt’s type, I had to wonder why he bothered with me. We were different women.

“We got married in Malibu.” Wyatt draped his arms around me and pulled me close. “It was a pretty simple wedding. A friend had a house there. We got to enjoy the sunset and roast marshmallows over a fire pit. It was perfect.”

He kissed my cheek. “I don’t mean to bring you down, but... damn, this brings up memories.”

“It doesn’t bring me down,” I said. “It’s your house—that you lived in with Isla.”

“Sometimes I worry you’ll feel like the other woman.”

I turned and ran my palm across his cheek. “I don’t. I know it’s not like that. I know that you can love someone so much it hurts. I cannot imagine losing a spouse. You’d never not love them, I imagine. But don’t worry about that. I won’t lie. She’s nothing like me. What do you see in me?”

He chuckled, cupping my face in his hands. “A beautiful light. Exuberance. Youthful, beautiful positivity. You two have that in common. You’re right that the two of you are very different people, but for what I lack in seeing the world glass-half-full, you make up for it.”

He kissed my forehead so sweetly that he barely grazed me.

“Thanks for understanding that, Odette. I don’t deserve someone so sweet.”

“You do,” I insisted. “Because you return the favour. Thank you for being vulnerable. Don’t feel the need to hold back, okay? I promise to try to stay open, too. I trust you.”

“Good. That’s all we can ask for from one another.”

51

PRETTY GREAT

WYATT

“She’s pretty great.” Rebecca walked around me to grab a bottle of olive oil from the pantry.

“What now?” I joked.

“Your girlfriend. The woman you’re staring at like a sap.”

I smiled, unable to hold back. Odette was reading an endless loop of picture books to Theo. When she’d finish one, the next would start. He’d pulled out all the books in his room—most of which were in French—and particularly delighted in Odette’s French onomatopoeia. He didn’t have me to rely on for that. My French did the job. I was—for sure—much better at French than Rick. However, I still had no idea what Odette screamed at me earlier. Just thinking about it made me tingle.

“She’s great, yeah. But I don’t know if she’s a girlfriend or not.”

“Oh? Well, lock that shit down. She loves the little guy.”

“The feeling is mutual. He will want to get rid of me and replace me with her.”

Rebecca laughed. “Nah. He loves Papa too much, but she might be in the running for a close third—after Mom, of course.”

“Often, Mom is in the first spot.”

“True. So, are you looking forward to alone time?” Rebecca teased.

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She couldn't help but give me a playful jab. In truth, alone time interested me to no end. Whatever this morning was, I wanted even more this evening. It was so easy spending time with Odette. And while she wasn't a fasthiker, she didn't complain. Becca talked her ear off the entire time, but true to form, all Odette could say after that conversation was, "Your sister is very passionate."

"I'm going to go relieve her. Poor thing is going to be hoarse, brother."

"It was nice knowing you," I joked and turned back to bowls of olive oil I'd prepped to go with dinner.

Odette walked up. "Can I help with anything?"

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "No. Get a beer and relax. I feel bad letting him crowd you."

"It's okay. Christophe thinks I'm part of his body most of the time. Linny and Kari constantly want me to break up a fight. I cannot imagine what it will be like with four of them. I worry this one will be a girl, and we will all be so worn down."

I snickered. "Oh, a little girl couldn't be so bad."

"I love them. I think they are adorable. They are also so trying, and they always argue. They are unconvinced you are ever right. I find Christophe clingy but otherwise easy."

"Theo can be very challenging. He's stubborn," I said. "Like me. He doesn't like to

be told no.”

“I have heard it can be harder to raise only children.”

It hit me in the feels hard—harder than I expected. Odette meant nothing by her words, but it killed me. I pulled back, then reminded myself that if I closed myself off, I’d regret it. I had spooked her once. I couldn’t do it a second time like this.

“What is it?”

“You didn’t mean anything by it. It’s a me thing. It’s just that it wasn’t my intent to have an only child. It’s stupid, but that choice... it’s not a choice and?”

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry, Wyatt,” Odette said. “I didn’t think about that.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I know you didn’t. It’s an irrational thing.”

“Parenting is an irrational exercise,” Odette giggled. “Madness. If they were not cute, us grownups would not put up with it.”

“You’re right. And I’m pretty sure having four kids is harder than one. Anyone who believes that is lying to themselves, Odie. It can be challenging in some ways since he can’t entertain himself by bothering his younger sibling, but other than that, it’s pretty nice. It’s not what I imagined, though.”

“How many did you want?”

“Isla wanted two. I wanted three,” I said. “We compromised on... two. She wasn’t sure she wanted any kids when we first met, but when we had Theo, she couldn’t have loved him more. It took a while for him to come. We had some challenges but ultimately had a beautiful, healthy baby. We wanted to wait until he was two to try

again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You want kids, right?”

“I do.”

“I am amazed by people who, at twenty-three, are certain they want kids.”

“Yeah, I love them,” Odette laughed. “Alex says I am an old person at heart—an auntie for the ages. I’m doomed to be the bluestocking and doting aunt because I want kids.”

“You? God, that would be a waste.” I checked on the pasta. It was almost there.

“Wyatt, you already got complete access to me earlier. You don’t have to flatter me.”

“In those jeans, it would be a fucking crime not to flatter you.”

Odette’s round ass did it for me—especially in jeans, as I’d discovered.

She gave my arm a playful slap. “Oh, stop it.”

“You’re not going to end up alone. Promise. At least not for now.”

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“Well, even we’re not?—”

“You’re my girlfriend, Odette.” I don’t know why I said it. “Right?”

“Uh... are we... you’re... okay with that?”

“Why not?” I laughed. “I could only be so lucky, Odette.”

“Okay, well, yeah. I didn’t think we would put a name to it.”

“We will.”

“Are you interested in coming to the wedding?”

I agreed. “Yes, baby. Of course. The only thing I’d ask is... can we not make a big public deal of it? It’s not about you. It’s about... Theo. The public outcry. I worry about it. I want to attend the reception with you and support you. I know you’re in the wedding, so we wouldn’t sit together?—”

“We wouldn’t sit together anyhow. Non-royal attendees don’t sit with royals. No ring, no bring.”

I cocked my head.

“One of the million rules.”

“Ah.”

Despite acknowledging that much, Odette seemed down. She understood, but she wanted more. I wanted to give her the world, but I had to protect Theo. I wanted her to bemine. I wasn't willing to share her.

"You deserve commitment and respect. I want to make it abundantly clear, Odette," I explained. "But I also must manage Theo and his media exposure."

"I get it," I said. "And if you don't want to come?—"

I squeezed her hand. "I care about you so much. I want to be there with you. I want to dance with the most beautiful woman in the room until my feet no longer take it."

52

A ROYAL PAIN

ODETTE

Losing my virginity felt like magic—regardless of what Astrid said. It was wonderful. I was fulfilled and loved up. I also now had a boyfriend, which hadn't been the case for a long time. My boyfriend adored me and treated me like a queen—one willing to attend the wedding with me. He did what he said he would.

For that, I was grateful. However, there was still trouble in paradise. While the pain was temporary at the moment—and well worth the release—I had pressed the limits of what my body was comfortable with. Sex was off the table for a bit. Did it worry me about him not wanting to go public? A little, but his reasoning made sense. Theo had to come first. My protective streak with the nibblings let me relax. He wanted to dance with me—to bemine.

With Theo gone that evening, we sat on the living room couch before a roaring fire. I

wasn't sure how to communicate that my body was only up for cuddling. And would that be acceptable? Was putting out one and pulling back going to make me a tease? And if I explained why I couldn't have sex again this soon, would he freak out? I worried I'd be stranded in Belgium with nowhere to go.

Wyatt brought me another glass of wine and set out a box of chocolates his mother picked up.

I took the glass. "Dinner was nice, thanks. And this is lovely."

"You're welcome as always."

"You'll have to teach me how to cook something," I said.

"Ah, yes. I can. You'll have to come over. Do you all even have a kitchen to cook in? Is that a weird question?"

"We don't," I said. "No one in our house cooks. The Brits do, and they have a 'family' sort of kitchen in their family living quarters—the part you don't see on the tour. I love that idea. The idea of normalcy is fundamental. But I'd be glad to come over more often... as long as it won't bother anyone."

"Theo will be overjoyed—especially if you bring Grieg."

"I'm sorry he couldn't come with me. It was all a lot of work. And Alexandra and the kids agreed to keep him. I wasn't sure what to do without staff to watch him when we were gone. He won't go on a hike with us in the cold."

“I understand.”

Wyatt played with my hair absentmindedly. I sensed he was about to kiss me, something I longed for. He leaned in with complete eye contact, gently brushing my face with the back of his hand, and then kissed me. He took my glass and set it on the coffee table. The ease at which he did this astounded me. Heknewhow this worked. He had it figured out. I was a lost babe in the woods, but he was glad to guide me.

I ran my fingers through his hair and pulled him closer. Our breath quickened as things heated up. I loved kissing him like this—for an eternity and with nothing holding us back. His tongue—magical only hours before in places unmentionable—never disappointed. His kiss was neither too sloppy nor too prudish. This was just perfect.

As he kissed his way down my neck, I wanted more. I couldn't have more, but I craved it. Wyatt ran his hand up my sweater, toying with my bra. He found my hardened nipple and ran his thumb over it, eliciting a moan. I couldn't help myself. The feeling of him within me and everything we'd done made me want more of it soon. I thought about how sore I was and pulled back. I had to tell him.

“Wyatt, I cannot have sex,” I said. “Not again. Not... so soon.”

He cocked his head. “Is something wrong? Did I hurt you?”

“No, no. I mean... yes... but it was very much worth it. I'll take a bit to recover. I want to do it again, but...”

My voice trailed. This was it. I either told him everything, or I glossed over why this was so notable. Wyatt gave me sad puppy eyes. He felt genuinely upset for hurting me. I couldn't let him think he'd done anything wrong. He'd been a patient, unselfish lover. I wasn't going to let him beat himself up over this.

I took his face in my hands and shook my head. "You did nothing wrong. You were so wonderful and giving, Wyatt. But... I've never been with anyone else before. I... I've done... things... but never that. Not until today. And I bled a little, and I'm a bit sore, so..."

My voice faded, and I waited for the result. His face went from concerned to empathetic.

"Well, uh... I am sorry you're sore. I probably would have been more gentle if?—"

"It was perfect." I kissed him slowly. He needed to know how much it meant to me.

"Well, okay, but... I am sorry. If something is wrong or?—"

"Stop worrying, Wyatt," I laughed. "It's nothing bad. We'll have to give it a bit. I'm sorry if I disappointed you or if this made it weird, but we need to be honest if we're to trust one another?—"

"Yes," Wyatt agreed. "You didn't disappoint me. I doubt you ever would. It's not weird. I am grateful you trusted me. That's all."

"I was so worried since you're much more experienced?—"

He burst out laughing. "Odie, baby, I am notthatmuch more experienced. I had a wife. And she taught me a lot. Thank God she was patient with me, and I could pass it on to you in a way. I am sure I was terrible the first time. You weren't. You were

great. I just... I don't have a lot of experience either. You're only the second person I've been with."

My jaw dropped, "Really?"

He chuckled, "Yes. I've only been with you and Isla. That's it. It's why I was glad not to rush things with you and didn't want to just... fuck you in the hotel room. I mean, I did. I would have if matters were different. But I wanted to savour you. That first time... I wanted it to feel meaningful. Last time, it didn't. And although it ended up being a love-of-my-life situation, I was paranoid I'd fucked it all up with a one-night stand."

"But you didn't?"

"Nah. Isla was in love with me. I finally gave her a chance. She was totally out of my league—like you are. I'm grateful you told me, Odette. But don't feel sorry for it. You don't hold back. It may take some getting used to with naughty French, though."

"I can try to stop, but I struggle and get all... I go like jelly."

"It's good. That's a sign I'm doing my job."

I bit my lip and asked, "You two never... Isla never... spoke French?"

"We didn't speak French much, period. We moved back to Neandia for the pace of life and to spend more time around her parents. But... uh... not in bed—pretty much never in bed."

"Well, that makes it feel oddly special."

"You are special," Wyatt promised. "You are enough."

I kissed him again, feeling as special as I ever could.

53

WAKEUP CALL

WYATT

I woke Sunday morning lying with Odette, the sun barely creeping in. She slept all night wrapped in my arms. We spent the evening drinking, talking, and cuddling. I did not mind the bit of time to recoup. While I could have quickly rallied when Theo left with Mom and Rebecca, I didn't mind having more time to charge my physical and emotional batteries.

This first time was meaningful for both. It was more than I thought it would be. I'd lived all this time expecting to hate myself for being with someone else. However, as Odette had said earlier, she wasn't the other woman. Isla was always in our hearts and minds. I could love Isla and adore Odette all at once.

Odette stirred, her face smiling. "Bon matin."

"Bon matin," I replied. "Waking up next to you is a delight."

She blushed, her round, rosy cheeks growing even pinker.

"I should leave your room?—"

"No. Stay. Theo will have breakfast and won't be back for a bit. I want to soak you up."

I rubbed her back. She let out a contented sigh. Caressing her soft, warm skin felt lovely. My favourite bit of her was on her hips.

“Are you making fun of my love handles?” Odette asked. “I think that is what you call them in English.”

“Making fun of you?” I laughed. “Odette, there is not a part of you I would ever joke about. You’re physical perfection.”

She smiled. “You’re right.”

“No, to me, you are. I don’t know. This curve meets your thigh—your strong thigh—and then moulds back to your tiny waist. It’s soft and strong all at once. Forgive me if I enjoy this part of you, but it’s inviting to touch.”

“Oh. That’s... the sweetest thing anyone has ever said about my body.”

I cocked my head. “Who else has seen it and said anything? It’s not that shithead from the restaurant?”

“Are you jealous?” Odette giggled. She ran her finger up and down the centre of my chest.

“Is it?”

“Yes,” Odette answered. “Guy is the only one who has ever touched me there other than you. Guy... he was complicated. Everyone hated him by the end. Honestly, Alexandra always hated him. Rick didn’t even want to talk to him. He did a lot of things that hurt me.”

“Well, he may have fucked with your head but don’t let his shitty fucking opinions live in your beautiful brain rent-free.”

She nodded. “I... I never got the best of him. And, in the end, he started seeing

someone else. It was while I was...”

Her voice faded.

“You don’t have to tell me, baby. I don’t owe you a past explanation any more than you owe me.”

“No. I... I worry it will freak you out.”

“I am pretty sure I’ve seen a lot of shit in my life. This is not going to freak me out, Odette.”

“I’m a head case. In the end... after months of attempts to stay in therapy and deal with my bipolar disorder, they put me on a bunch of meds. Which... I’m on meds now. I take them every day. When we get up, the first thing I will do is take them. But back then, the meds weren’t right. No one listened to me—including Alexandra, who was trying so hard to love me through it but believed the doctors knew all and didn’t realise all doctors weren’t the same. So, things got bad—then worse when I graduated. Everyone thought I was out of the woods but wasn’t.”

“Because your routine changed?”

“Yes,” Odette said. “And everyone just wanted me to be fixed—no one more than Guy, I think. Alexandra grew up with Dad’s moods. She assumed any one of us could be affected by them. She has patience. Guy didn’t. He always thought I was defective, but now he had a reason.”

Defective. That word hurt. It was not a word I’d ever attach to such a beautiful soul.

“You aren’t. Sounds like he was, though! What happened then?” I sensed there was more.

“I got totally off the rails—in a tailspin of depression. One night, he was disgusted by me. I was on my period, which always makes me a little off. But that’s all women. It’s normal.”

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“About Paris, sir. The hotel just confirmed, and we have the details of where you are meeting the MPs.”

“Great,” I said.

“You’ve been... distracted.”

“I’m fine.”

I wanted to stay—not go to Paris. I wanted to go down on Odette and lounge around with her. Mentally, I was with her too often. I had an idea. I texted.

Me

What are you doing this weekend?

Odette

I think I’m going shopping with Astrid

Me

Oh, too bad.

Odette

You’re out of town, Wy.

Me

I thought about bringing you to Paris with me.

Odette

Really? Astrid would understand.

Me

I don't want to waste a day with you, baby.

I have a full Friday morning and a meeting with government bigwigs on Friday night, but we can go out after.

Odette

I can shop in Paris.

Me

I endorse that plan. Buy lingerie?

Odette

I could.

Me

I promise to make it worth your while.

Odette

I will get the okay.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:39 am

In a flash, I changed into the bodysuit, deciding to take advantage of this fantasy. When he arrived at the hotel, I was waiting in bed in only the see-through confection I'd purchased earlier.

"Odie?" Wyatt called out.

"In the bedroom," I responded.

Wyatt walked into the bedroom, his tie and suit jacket on his arm. He did not expect to find me in bed waiting. The look on his face was utterly satisfying. I'd blown his mind. Now, he'd do everything to me. The wait was worth it. Fantasy fulfilled.

"I... holy shit, Odette," Wyatt stammered. "You didn't?—"

"Do you mind, baby?" I asked.

"Fuck, no. This is so hot." He quickly undid his cufflinks, still looking for a way to address things. "You are... a fucking wet dream, Odette."

I snickered. "No one has ever greeted you in lingerie, Wyatt Worthington?"

Wyatt unbuttoned his shirt. "Can't say they have. But I'd never complain if you wanted to do it every night. It's cruel, though."

"Why?"

"Because I have to suffer through watching you there and extricate myself from all of

these clothes.”

“I’m enjoying it.” I bit my lip.

“You would. Lap it up. You do the worst things to me, Odette.” He tossed his shirt.

“I know.”

“You get off on it.” He kicked off his trousers and underwear.

“I do,” I confessed.

Wyatt dove into bed, pulling me towards him in one robust and definite move. I shuddered as he pinned me to the bed and kissed my neck. I wanted all of him. I needed him.

Wyatt asked, “What can I do for you, baby?”

He wanted me to dirty talk. I was still working on this.

“I don’t know,” I played coy.

He kissed me, running his hand to play with my clit through the bodysuit’s sheer lace. I moaned into his mouth, trying to channel my worst, most naughty dialogue from my “research.” He slid the bodysuit aside, slipping one finger inside. Words left my mouth I didn’t even know I could say.

“Fuck me, Wyatt. My cunt is aching for you.”

He pulled back. “Odette, you are a very naughty girl. Where did you learn that?”

“I am a proper lady who reads literature,” I said.

“I like this,” Wyatt said. “And the fact that you are dripping. Do you want me to fuck your tight pussy?”

“Please, baby. Please,” I pleaded.

“I cannot deny you,” Wyatt said. “You don’t deserve it with such salty language, but I’ll oblige you for my sake.”

“Good. The condoms are on the bedside table.”

“Good girl,” Wyatt said.

He ripped a condom open and slid it on his cock slowly. My anticipation heightened. I craved his cock more than ever. Wyatt pinned me to the bed. He tortured me with sweet kisses down my body, taking special care of the part of my hip he adored. His body parted my legs. Bodysuit pulled aside; he slid his hard cock inside me. It was impossibly good. My body needed this, but the sweet look on his wonderful face brought me the most joy. This man loved me.

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I don't know how I knew or what brought this feeling about, but I knew it deep in my soul. We might have been up to all manner of things. Our talk may have been dirty—filthy even—but this was love. This was tender. The way he treated me was always predicated on respect. He worshipped me—my curves, my body, my mind, and my spirit. He got it.

Heart racing, I choked out, “I love you, Wyatt.”

Immediately, I regretted it.

“Oh, baby, I love you, too.”

I couldn't discount this being pillow talk, but it got me over the panic.

“Oh, god, make me cum!” I screamed. “Wyatt, make me cum!”

He pounded into me. I completely lost my mind, “Oh, mon dieu! Fuck!”

The orgasm rocked me head-to-toe. I didn't want it to end. Pleasure rolled over me. My legs twitched. My whole body shuddered. The beautiful, flushed feeling overwhelmed me after the climax hit. I panted, looking up at Wyatt as he also lost his battle with fighting his orgasm.

He groaned, pumping into me hard again, then kissed me. When he pulled back, still inside me, he finally spoke.

“I promise to tell you I love you the right way if you meant that, Odette—at a time

I'm not balls-deep inside your perfect cunt."

It was naughty and charming. In short, it was perfect.

"I love you, Wyatt. None of that was put on."

56

DROPPING IN

WYATT

I love you never came easy. At least, that was what the world led you to believe. Once I realised Isla loved me—genuinely wanted me—it was easy to fall for her. I love you came too fast for us, but I never regretted wearing my heart on my sleeve. She was quick to tell me the same. With Odette, my heart was more guarded and worn. Still, I was hers the minute she said those three little words. I couldn't say anything else. Deep down, I knew I loved her. I'd fallen for her.

My feelings for Odette became even more obsessive and genuine after a weekend with her—really with her. With Isla, the spoils of my labour came later in life—well after we'd been together for years. In this case, I could properly spoil Odette with money and time. She only gave it back in adoration. I lived to care for her. After a weekend posing as an actual couple, I wanted it every day. It was all I could think about.

When the French politicians got back to me about our proposal to revolutionise their new light rail and gather data about a new suburban line, I wasn't even remotely upset about them saying no. It was hardly a waste for the many hours I'd spent in bed with Odette or out soaking up the city. By the next day, I was over it and looking forward to Odette coming by for dinner.

She'd been busy with her family welcoming the newest member—little Manon—and ensuring the baby and its mother made it home. The Queen's delivery of her fourth child was the only thing anyone could discuss. That included Theo, who was dying to meet this new baby.

Stephen appeared in my doorway. "Sir, I have better news."

"Yes?" I turned from my computer screen.

"The St Louis proposal has netted some feedback," Stephen said. "They would like to meet face-to-face."

"Really?"

It was a dream. My hometown floated the idea of a new rapid transit bus and bike highway. They were transforming parkways to prioritise transit. With a new mayor, the plan was all speed ahead. We'd submitted a bid. For me, it was exactly what I wanted to do. With the Neandia project on its way and a lull approaching, running back to St Louis appealed. It was a dream. I could take Theo back to America for a year.

However, doing so would exponentially complicate things with Odette. When we submitted a bid, I wasn't in a relationship with a princess, which permanently tied me to Neandia. I couldn't avoid it. We'd be against legacy companies, especially the boutique subsidiary I bid on the project with.

"Do you know when?" I asked.

"Next week."

"Book it. Tell them I am excited to meet."

“Will Her Royal Highness be travelling with us, sir?”

“I will update you,” I said.

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I could use this as a way to hypeme going. Maybe I could go back and forth? Perhaps I could convert her? Either way, I wanted to show her my city. It could be fun for us, right? I smiled, thinking about taking her with me. I'd love to do that.

"I will send this email and then head out. Do you need anything before I do?"

"No, Stephen. Have a nice evening."

He nodded.

The rest of the office left for the evening. I watched Stephen pack while wrapping up emails and waiting for Odette's reply. Once Odette convinced her detail I was safe, they permitted me to pick her up at night. The office was quiet. I wanted to see her badly.

I heard the elevator buzz. Confused, I left my desk to see who was coming up. To my surprise, Odette walked towards me with her helmet in her hands, wearing the loveliest summer dress. As our eyes met, a grin broke across her face.

"Hi," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I ran off—sorta," Odette said.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and slowly kissed me.

"You smell like sunshine," I laughed.

Taking in her dimples and the freckles on her nose, I couldn't have adored her more. She was so sweet.

"You rode here?"

"Ouais! I parked it in the new posh bike garage. Yay, transit funding! The day lockers are amazing."

I snickered. "I am glad it is working out. What are you doing here?"

I asked again, as if in disbelief.

"I needed a ride—just for a bit. The weather was perfect. I packed my bag so I could stay over. I promise to be gone early."

"Don't." I rubbed her arms. "I want you to leave when you want to tomorrow. We're doing this. Theo is getting used to you being around. Please treat it like any other place. Promise."

"And your mother isn't bothered?"

"Mom loves having you around. She's been so glad to have you help plan the birthday party. Promise."

Odette smiled. "Okay. Well, I will head over when you head home. We can race back."

"Given the traffic, I bet you beat me."

"We should use that for an awareness campaign," Odette said. "Show me your office. I've never been up here."

“Your wish is my command,” I took her around. “Stephen’s office is over here if you ever need something.”

Odette nodded.

“And this is mine. It’s nothing exciting.”

Odette walked towards my windows and looked out.

“This is gorgeous, but don’t you feel perpetually on display?”

“Nah. There is privacy film on the glass.”

“I meant from the office.”

“Oh,” I laughed. “I have a way to manage that, too.”

I pressed a button on my desk to turn on the glass frosting.

“Oh my God, that is amazing!” Odette giggled.

She popped up on the front of my desk, now sitting to my right. Her legs dangled before her. I was in a trance, just thinking about all the terrible things I could do to her as she kicked her legs rhythmically.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Odette asked.

“You’re mesmerising.”

“Why?”

“One, the dress does a lot. Two, you’re doing everything for me right now just like that.”

Odette gave me a naughty half-smile. “I’m not doing anything.”

I stepped over, pressing against her enough to kiss her. I took her face in my hands and pressed my lips to hers. Odette responded by pulling me closer. From there, all I could think about was running my hand up her thigh to pull her panties aside.

“You want me to do something, don’t you?” I asked.

“Do you want to fuck me here, Wyatt? In your office?” Odette whispered.

Every time I got her to talk dirty, it whipped me up. She was so good, but she could be so bad for me. I didn't answer. Instead, I went to close my office door. I was about to make an awful life choice, but one I couldn't imagine I'd ever get to make again.

57

BAD DECISIONS

ODETTE

“Are you going to be quiet for me, Odette?”

I couldn't believe I'd managed to get what I wanted. I was now a seductress—kicking my legs while sitting on Wyatt's desk. I never thought I'd be bold enough to make this work. But after a wild sex dream woke me up the night before, I wanted him to take me on his desk. He stood, arms crossed, looking me over.

“I will be,” I agreed.

“Good girl.”

Wyatt approached, stroking my face and pulling my chin. He examined me for a moment, then unexpectedly pulled me to the desk's edge by my ass. It was so demanding. I was already weak.

“You think you can just turn up like this?”

I nodded, pulling him towards me to kiss me.

“You're a bad girl.”

“A very bad girl who must be punished,” I said.

Wyatt kissed me, running his hand up my dress until he found my panties. He tugged on them, pulling them aside. Plunging two fingers into my centre, he made me whimper. I was already wet, and my excitement dripped from his fingers. I wanted him inside me, but he was keen to tease me.

“We don’t have a lot of time. What if someone comes in here?”

“We’ll be fine,” Wyatt assured, slowly rolling his fingers against my clit.

I moan. “Oh, God, Wyatt, that feels so good.”

“Yeah? Can I get you off like this?”

“Be selfish and get me off with your cock,” I gasped.

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“You’re lucky I’m prepared,” Wyatt said.

He grabbed a condom from his wallet and undid his trousers. Barely hesitating, he rolled the condom over his cock and pulled me even closer to the edge so that I was barely there. I stayed up only on my arms, hands pressed behind me for support. My mouth gaped as I stared at him, ready for him to enter me.

He didn’t, though. Instead, he slowly lifted one leg, then two, up to his shoulders, gingerly sliding his cock into my centre. The head of his cock tickled my G-spot immediately--sending a shock through my body.

“Oh fuck!” I gasped. “Wyatt!”

“Does it hurt?”

“No,” I panted. With each thrust, he got me closer and closer. “It feels beautiful.”

“Good,” Wyatt said. “I’ve always dreamed of doing this but never thought I could attempt it.”

“The... d... desk?” I asked, feeling my climax coming hard.

“The desk and the legs. You’re so flexible, and this looks so good.”

“It feels... so good,” I moaned. “Don’t stop. Oh!”

I didn’t hold back. I let out a scream until Wyatt cupped a hand over my mouth to

keep me quiet. My pussy still pulsing, I came back down, nodding at him as if to prove I could be trusted again.

Wyatt pressed his forehead to mine lovingly. “You’re so loud.”

“That was... God, I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Wyatt said. “But right now, I just want to be greedy and get you off again.”

“Flip me over the desk,” I gasped, unsure where these words came from. Wyatt was my catnip. I didn’t know what I was doing.

Wyatt pulled back and cleared off a section of the desk where I could brace as he fucked me over it. I flipped around, letting him throw my dress up on my back. Slipping back inside me, he grabbed my ass as if going for broke. From here, I could see people walking on the street below. They were going about their shopping while I was here getting fucked by my boyfriend on his desk.

“Your ass is so fucking amazing,” Wyatt groaned as he pumped. “It’s just a sight to behold right now.”

“Don’t stop, Wyatt. Don’t stop!”

He continued, sending me back to the moon again as he pulled my hair. I held onto the desk for dear life, fighting the urge to scream. I couldn’t believe this was where I was. Who was the girl who had—months before—doubted she could ever lose her virginity? Now, in the hands of an older man, perched over a desk, she was having her second orgasm and coming back down from heaven.

“Oh God, Odette,” Wyatt groaned, pressing into me one last time.

Bracing on the part of my hips he loved, he stopped. I turned to see his flushed face as he caught his breath. I felt him slowly pull out, some wetness running down my leg.

“Well, fuck, Odette,” Wyatt said. “You’ve made quite a mess of yourself. If only you could see what you’ve done to your panties.”

He slapped me on the ass before straightening my dress.

I turned and giggled. “I have another pair, don’t worry. I’m always prepared, baby.”

“For debauchery,” Wyatt laughed.

He disposed of the condom and returned, giving me a slow, almost earnest kiss.

“My love for you may be pure, Odette, but my thoughts for you rarely are. This isn’t helping.”

58

CHEMISTRY

WYATT

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:39 am

“Go ahead and just keep stirring until you feel the tomatoes start to soften,” I said.

“Okay. How will I know?” Odette asked.

“You’ll know. Promise.”

I tasked Odette with creating a butter and tomato sauce. Somehow, the simplest of flavours combined into something magical. I tried to build her confidence. The girl had never boiled water for pasta—something unimaginable to a kid who couldn’t even afford fancy pre-made lunches to pack on a school field trip.

My phone buzzed, and I lowered my bread knife to check it. Stephen’s travel agent contact had sent the itinerary.

“Hey, question,” I said.

Odette looked over. “Am I screwing it all up?”

“No, no. You’re doing great. They’re simmering. It’s about me. Would you be able to run to the States next week?”

She grimaced. “I cannot, Wyatt. I have to be here to help. Between Alex being sick and the wedding, everything is a disaster. And I’d like to say Ingrid is helpful, but she’s not. She’s more interested in making eyes at that hunky pilot of hers.”

“Ah, the prince?” I winced.

“All the time. All the bloody time,” Odette sighed. “Anyhow, I cannot. I’m sorry. I’d love to. Is everything okay?”

“Sure. Just business. I thought I’d ask.”

She gave me a brave little smile before returning to the tomatoes, which were sweating in their buttery haven. I wasn’t upset, but we’d officially reached the point where I wished she could go with me.

“Papa!”

I looked down to see Theo. He’d put a pair of shorts on Grieg—with Grieg’s head through one leg hole. The other just hung there.

“Buddy, you cannot dress up the dog,” I panicked.

Odette turned, snickering and doting in French. “You look darling, Grieg.”

He wagged his tail. I pulled the shorts off his head and handed them back to Theo.

“Go put these back in your room, please. The dog has a coat. He doesn’t need clothes.”

“Maybe,” Odette said. “Maybe sometime you can help me pick some clothes for Grieg?”

Theo clapped his hands and hugged her so tight he nearly took her out at the knees.

“Hot things, hot things,” she said, a bit uneasy.

Many people who never had children wouldn’t have thought about the hot pan a foot

away. Odette's instinct was one of persistent vigilance—a carer worried about everyone around.

Theo left. Grieg trotted after.

“They’re bonded,” Odette said. “It’s okay. Grieg is a saintly pup. He lets my nieces play dress up all the time. He loves the attention, and—believe it or not—Theo is very gentle.”

“He’s imaginative,” I said. “It’s not my dog. I don’t want?—”

“It’s good to worry, but Grieg was bred to be a dead head. His parents are long-time companions on the Lundhavian royal yacht.”

“What?” I laughed. “I’m sorry, Odie, you’ll have to repeat it for my normal American brain.”

“Your brain isn’t normal—any more than mine is,” Odette laughed. “Are these softening?”

She poked the tomatoes.

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“Yes. Turn down the heat and toss the pasta into the big pot.”

She did as I said.

“Give it a minute,” I said. “Then you’ll take some pasta water to put in the sauce.”

I watched her mull over the “why” of that.

“Because of the gluten? Is it a thickener?”

“Bingo,” I laughed. “Yes. It’s a secret to many good Italian sauces.”

She smiled, satisfied. “Okay, well, I’m not completely out of my depth. And Grieg? His parentage goes back to the Norwegians. Queen Kiersten has St Charles Spaniels. She gave a breeding pair to Alexandra’s mother-in-law. Grieg is the result of a litter. He dug me out of a terrible hole. I owe him everything. If I worried Theo might hurt him, I wouldn’t let them run around.”

“I cannot believe you rode your bike here and then sent a separate car for the dog,” I chuckled.

“It was too hot for him. I wouldn’t make him suffer because I couldn’t resist the chance to surprise my boyfriend at work.”

“Surprise me? You definitely did that.”

Odette dipped a spoon into the pasta water and instinctively swirled it around.

I kissed her neck. “You can add another, too.”

“You make it hard to concentrate,” Odette giggled. “Do you want dinner or not? Weren’t you supposed to put that bread in the pizza oven?”

“Fuck,” I groaned. “I got distracted.”

Odette snickered but resisted saying more. I loved her for holding it together when I couldn’t. The vision of what we’d done in my office would live forever in my mind as the naughtiest—and most inappropriate—thing I’d ever done in a place of business. Even if I owned the space, it wasn’t technically okay to fuck my girlfriend on my desk after hours.

“I’m on my way out.”

Mom entered.

“The dog is being spoiled by a pile of books being read to him, Odette. I hope he likes *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.”

“He has the French and Danish versions at our house,” Odette said. “He will like the variety of English, I think.”

It amazed me how children could learn two or three languages flawlessly, while after years of trying to sound like I understood French, I couldn’t.

“Enjoy the evening, Mom,” I said.

She kissed my cheek. “You as well. Don’t burn the house down.”

“I will try not to,” Odette giggled.

Mom shot me a look as if she knew everything. I hadn't told her I'd told Odette I loved her. I only said that I wanted Odette to wake up here sometimes at a reasonable hour when the sun was out and that I'd like it if she supported that. Mom liked Odette. She didn't mind at all. She believed that what was good for me was good for Theo. And given that he'd been far more interested in Odette staying over than talking to me since I came home, I would say it was true. Theo adored her.

Mom ducked out, and I put the bread in the pizza oven to crust, having sliced a crosshatch pattern. Odette continued to add water—as needed—to the dish. She already had the hang of it. I smashed and chopped garlic for the bread's dipping sauce.

“You're a natural at that.” I nodded at the stove.

Odette blushed.

“I'm serious. It's all just chemistry, Odette. You've figured it out.”

“Sometimes, chemistry works in mysterious ways,” Odette said.

“I'd kiss you, but my hands are covered in garlic.”

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“It’s okay. You can save it up for later.”

She stirred the pasta, then looked at me. “I love you, Wyatt.”

“I love you, too,” I said, as if it were the easiest thing.

59

THE FUTURE

ODETTE

I lounged on the couch with Wyatt as the late-night news droned.

“I am sorry I didn’t have exciting plans tonight,” Wyatt said. “It’s a lousy Friday night.”

“It’s not,” I said. “Really. It’s normal. I didn’t know what that meant for a long time. Now, I see Alex and Rick on the couch in the family room lounging at night, and I realise that’s normal life. That’s a proper future and growing old together.”

Wyatt softened. “I never had that. Dad died early. You didn’t, either?”

I shook my head. “My grandfather spoiled us when he could, but he died when I was only a few years older than Theo. And he and my grandmother weren’t a normal couple. There wasn’t love there, just obligation. You’d call it a marriage of convenience.”

“That’s a shame.”

“It’s good. Rick and Alex made me feel secure. Even if they’ve had a row and gotten into it over something—they like to bicker—watching them sitting on the couch together at the end of the day was this sort of constant. It made me feel safe. It sounds stupid.”

“It doesn’t. Not at all. I felt like that when I’d see my mother up late on the screened-in porch doing her crochet,” Wyatt said. “I get what you’re saying. It’s a marker of stability. It’s what I worry about for Theo.”

“Theo has you.”

“My life is busy. It’s hard for me to be here every day,” Wyatt said.

“He knows you will always come home. For me, that was the part I didn’t know. I didn’t have a parent to tuck me into bed four to five nights a week. I would have relished that. I would have loved any physical affection.”

A look of pity crossed his face. Wyatt pulled me closer.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise,” I said. “I’m fine. I mean, I’m not fine, but I’m surviving. Sometimes, that is enough.”

Wyatt kissed the top of my head and held me in his arms tight. He was thinking of what to say. I sat quietly, giving him space. Somehow, here in the din of late-night news, we both felt the need to share.

“I struggle with the idea of anyone coming home,” Wyatt said, voice pinched. “One

day, when we were back in St Louis, Isla went on a run near our house and never came home. I told her I loved her on the way out of the house—something I will never forget—and watched her trot out the door.”

I pulled back and took his face in mine. “That had to hurt like none other.”

“The worst part was my frustration with her.” Wyatt chuckled painfully, fighting tears. “I was convinced she’d gotten held up socialising with this running group and was leaving me with a fussy baby. I was so angry with her and ready to scream when she returned. Then, the doorbell rang. It was the cops.”

I didn’t have words. “I’m so sorry, Wyatt. Did they ever get the driver?”

“No,” Wyatt said. “It’s still an open case. They never got the bastard. And... there’s a massive reward out there. We’ve had a lot of false leads, but... nothing.”

Tears welled in his eyes. He brushed them away. I leaned and grabbed a handful of tissues from the side table.

“I’m so sorry, Wyatt. You don’t have to tell me anything if it’s painful.”

“No, tell me if I shouldn’t?—”

“You can always tell me,” I promised. “Always. The future isn’t guaranteed. I know more than the average person. And a year and a half ago, I wasn’t even sure I’d make it to morning many nights.”

61

THE BRIDESMAID

ODETTE

“I’m sweating so much. I look like hell,” Astrid groaned. “I look dreadful, and I want to cry.”

“Stop panicking,” Ingrid said. “You look beautiful, and this is the fun part. Parker will come in here any moment and fall all over himself for you in that dress.”

We waited in Alexandra’s room following the change to our evening attire. I was dressed in my sister’s colours—a deep jade, beaded gown covering all my curves in peak style. Meanwhile, Astrid was in her second white dress of the day. She looked stunning in her choice. Her hair—half down, half up—gave her an angelic, urethral appearance. Parker would no doubt lose his mind when he saw her. He’d even cried during their ceremony.

A knock signalled our quality time as sisters was ending.

“Baby, we’re waiting.” It was Rick.

“Just a minute,” Alexandra called.

She took Astrid’s hand, then mine. I grabbed Ingrid’s hand. She took Astrid’s. We had one more minute together before chaos erupted, and Astrid left on her

honeymoon.

“I love you so much,” Alexandra said. “And Parker is wonderful. We are so lucky to have him officially in the family. But it is hard to watch you go and move to Britain for good. We will miss you, but you will always be here.”

“No matter where, you’re always in our hearts,” I promised.

Astrid, choked up, sniffled, “You’ll never be rid of me.”

I rushed to bring her a tissue.

“I am glad you’re staying in the UK with me,” Ingrid said. “But Alex is right. It’s not the same. You found Prince Charming and are having your own beautiful life.”

“It’s hard, yeah. I want nothing to change, even if I want everything with him.”

“You love him. Of course, you do,” Alexandra said through big tears. “But you’re beautiful—sweaty or not.”

We all laughed.

“Girls, c’mon,” Rick whined.

“Coming!” Astrid called.

She held hands with Alex as they approached the door, and I held onto Ingrid. Another sister flew the coop for good, which was bittersweet. Both of my big sisters—our protectors—were married and settled. I yearned to feel the same way and see the man I hoped was waiting for me on the other side of that door.

In the hallway, our dates awaited our arrival. Rick worried Alex was doing too much. Parker wanted to get the nervy introduction as the newlyweds over with. Keir probably just wanted to carry Ingrid off down the hall to do something dirty. I, meanwhile, just wanted to spend the night dancing with Wyatt.

Wyatt looked—as usual—dynamite in a tux. I took his arm as Parker fawned over Astrid. He could be so mushy with her in private. He worshipped her, after all.

“You look beautiful, Odette.”

I let Wyatt pull me into a delicious kiss—one I’d been yearning for all day. I wrapped my arms around his neck, ignoring everyone around. After all, compared to what Ingrid and Keir got up to, my actions paled in comparison. The British spare was a naughty boy, and Ingrid couldn’t quit him.

“Thank you. You look quite handsome yourself. Thanks for coming.”

“I wouldn’t miss the dinner and dancing. Promise.”

“I’m sorry you’re not at my table,” I said. “Protocol.”

“I will see you plenty after things break out,” he said. “Besides, how could I pass up a chance to sit with the Brits? They’re the wild ones, right?”

“Right.”

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We'd put him at the table with the other British and Norwegian attendees—Keir and his cousins. They were every wild.

“I'll have fun.”

He gave me another quick kiss. We followed the others to the door and filed in. I dropped him off with the wild royal attendees and took my place at the head table. Alexandra had elected not to be introduced as she didn't want to upstage the bride. She sat gently in her chair next to Rick. She'd nearly died in childbirth and was putting on a brave face to spare us the indignity of her lack of perfection. Alexandra was queen. She didn't get a day to look under the weather.

“Introducing—for the first time—The Duke and Duchess of Westnedge!” The MC rang out.

Despite Parker's protests, he and Astrid had the sweetest first dance to “At Last,” my pick in the battle for first dance songs. I'd picked their band after watching them dozens of times at Keys. The lead singer was an American transplant with a velvet voice.

“They're so lovely,” Ingrid sighed happily.

“They are.”

I couldn't help but imagine myself doing this someday. I loved weddings—how couples let themselves get wrapped up in the irrational, beautiful, romantic moments. I loved the idea of saying yes to forever. Still, even now, with Wyatt sitting only feet

away, I couldn't see myself getting the happily ever after. I knew somehow it would never work. I enjoyed the moments I had and focused on those. I didn't get my hopes up. I knew Ingrid was dreaming about doing this with Keir, but I discounted my feelings. I wished I could be as brave and daring as she was. They were head-over-heels for one another. I loved Wyatt so much. I wanted to spend these moments with him and only him, but it didn't feel like that.

The more I compared myself to Ingrid, the harder it became to believe anything was real. She found Keir irresistible in ways she couldn't fight. She longed to be with him all the time, craved spending every waking hour in bed with him, and was even possessive of him. He was even worse with her. We didn't have that. Our relationship was so different. If so, was it the intense connection I thought it was?

After a nice dinner, the dancing began. The couple had what was typically a parents' dance. Parker begrudgingly danced with his mother while Rick gracefully took Astrid around the floor. It made me tear up. He'd had the pleasure of walking her down the aisle earlier. Nothing brought her more joy. Rick loved us and didn't deny that his role as protector and big brother brought him purpose.

The emcee asked couples to dance next. Without hesitation, Wyatt pulled me onto the floor.

"Wyatt, I thought you didn't want to draw attention. This is drawing attention."

We picked up a nice rhythm, moving together well. He had impressively good dance skills.

"I don't mind. Are we not a couple?"

I melted inside for a moment. "We are. And your dancing is superb."

“Isla loved to dance. I was always clueless, but she taught me. It’s not too bad. I liked dancing. And Theo does, too.”

“I know,” I said. “I could spin him for days. He loves it.”

“It’s joy. Joy on two feet.”

Wyatt kissed me. I knew I shouldn’t let him. I shouldn’t be so obvious. Weak in the knees, I couldn’t protest. I never wanted this to end.

“I wasn’t going to waste an opportunity to dance with the prettiest bridesmaid,” Wyatt said. “Who knows when it will come around again.”

“You can say all the sweet nothings you want,” I said. “But I was going to take you to bed with me anyway.”

“They are the truth. You are as beautiful as I’ve ever seen you tonight. I want to lap you up, Odie. God, you’re gorgeous. And full of life. It was a beautiful day. I want to enjoy it with you.”

62

BIRTHDAY BOY

WYATT

Children rushed around the yard, chasing one another. In the mix were normies like mine and the royal brood who came with Rick to give Alex a break. He hung out with the other parents like any other, even if they were confused by his presence. Meanwhile, Odette and her sister Ingrid helped Mom prepare the cake, ensuring the falcon was on its way. When asked what he wanted as his party’s theme, Theo

answered, “Dinosaurs!”

So, with that, we racked our brains. Thankfully, Alexandra knew a falconer, and he had rescue birds who would fly around and do a show. He’d come, teach the kids about the birds, and entertain everyone as they ate cake. Raptors were dinosaurs. It was the closest thing we could find to fit the bill.

“He’s here!” Odette said in French.

“I’ll go get him. You stay,” Ingrid responded in her mother tongue.

Ingrid was around following a terrible breakup that came seemingly out of nowhere. Her ex—The Prince—deployed, and he just got up and ended it. It seemed cowardly. I felt terrible for her, but dating in your twenties was rough. However, he wasn’t in his twenties and knew better. It was cruel for him to just up and leave her. She was a nice person. This party seemed to cheer the poor thing up a bit.

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“I know. And you may always do that, but I think you realise you did the right thing and that Odette being here really helped, right?”

“It did. I love how caring she always is. We don’t deserve her.”

“You do, honey. You do.”

Mom hugged me. I always wondered when I’d tire of this need for a big bear hug from my mom, but I figured it might never come. That is why I said I would if Theo let me cuddle with him during story time every night. Time was precious and fleeting.

“I think I’m good,” I said. “I just want to dry my eyes and see this falconry thing.”

Pulling myself together, I smiled and went outside. The falconer explained to the children, in age-appropriate detail, how birds evolved.

“How did you find this guy?” I whispered to Odette.

She wrapped her arm around my waist. “He does a demonstration at our country home sometimes. It’s a real crowd-pleaser.”

“Thanks for doing all of this,” I said. “It means the world.”

She rested her head on my shoulder. “I love that you let me help. Celebrating Theo and being included by your family feels great.”

Watching Theo stand and help catch the bird as it did its pass was pure joy. Theo was

living his best life on a day that—for the first time—felt all about him. We'd gone from focusing on the day's pain to what it should be. Theo was a bright light that always got me through. And now, we had more people than ever to give him love.

63

WATCHFUL EYE

ODETTE

Rick beelined for me. I wasn't sure why he looked so concerned, but I saw the worry spread across his face. We'd been focused on Theo's party. The kids were having a lovely time together. However, he was in full concerned dad mode, and I wasn't prepared for what would come next.

He kept his voice low, "Don't panic, but I just spotted a camera over the hedge."

"What? Where?" Ingrid overheard. She was angry and unwilling to back down or take the easy way.

"What part of don't panic don't you get?" I asked, annoyed. "Where?"

Rick nodded. "I sent our detail to check it out. I think they will pull all of us."

"I cannot leave Theo," I protested. "He needs me to stay."

"Odie, it will be obvious as hell that you're with Wyatt if you don't go."

"Let me talk to Wyatt," I said.

There was no good choice. If I left, I might salvage whatever plausible deniability I

had left. I'd also hurt Theo and maybe Wyatt. Eitherway, Wyatt was about to be upset with me. We had purposefully not wanted to get caught. We'd not gone public. This would only hurt him.

I tapped Wyatt on the shoulder. He was watching Theo open his gifts. His mother was taking all the photos.

"I have to go, I think," I said. "We have an incident."

"What?"

Wyatt instinctively stepped back so we could talk alone.

"There are press. One climbed up to take photos over the fence. Rick spotted him and sicced our detail on him, but... I have no idea how long he was there, and... it's a risk we take if I stay and don't leave with my family."

"Babe, you did a lot of this. You should stay. It will break Theo's heart if you go. If you're told you must go, that's one thing. If you're told?—"

"If they connect us, we will have no way to deny we're together, Wyatt."

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He kicked the neatly manicured grass beneath his feet. “I love you, Odette. So does Theo.”

“Would you rather me stay or protect Theo?”

I could tell he didn’t want me to leave. We had no good option.

“Protect Theo.” Voice pained, Wyatt did the responsible thing.

“I will wait until he is finished with presents and then tell him.”

Theo was on his final gift—a remote control robot. It was Wyatt’s gift.

“I will set it up so you can play with it,” Wyatt offered, sounding deflated.

Feeling guilty, I knelt next to Theo. I whispered to him in my mother tongue, knowing he expected that from me by now.

“Sweetheart, I need to go,” I said. “I have an emergency, and my family needs to leave.”

In a sad, baby voice, Theo pleaded, “I don’t want you to go, Odie.”

“I know, my darling. I cannot avoid it, though. It’s the orders I have.”

He looked near tears, which killed me. I gave him a big hug and kiss. “I promise you beyond the shadow of a doubt that I will do something special with you the next day I

see you, alright?”

“Okay.”

I kissed him on the cheek and left. I didn’t know that I’d not get to make good on that promise despite fully intending to do so. I’d regret those words for the longest time in the most painful way.

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BAD TO WORSE

WYATT

The walk to Theo’s first day of his new term at school did not go as planned. I received a phone call from the nanny. She’d fled with Theo because the press were parked at his school. No longer could they walk there. I sent the driver to pick them up and take them. Theo was a mess since he got to school late. Paranoid, I told Stephen to hire security so that she’d be safe when she picked him up.

Odette and I hadn’t even confirmed we were together, and Theo was already at risk. She’d left early—something that killed me—to spare us this, but it hadn’t mattered. They were out for blood. Photos of the two of us together sold like hotcakes. Worse, pictures of us cosily watching Theo enjoy his party while Rick and his kids played in the background—were worth even more. It insinuated that not only was I with Odette, but we were serious.

Then, by midday, my life got even worse.

Stephen buzzed. “Sir, there is a phone call I believe you will want to take.”

“Stephen, I have no time for phone calls,” I said, not wanting to speak to anyone.

“Sir, it is a police officer from Saint Louis. They say it is urgent.”

My blood ran cold. I couldn’t speak. Everything was fuzzy and swirling. I realised this might be a break in the case. This might be the call I’d waited four years for. This could be it.

“Sir?”

“Patch him through,” I murmured as if in a daze.

“Hello?” I asked as the click signalled the person was on the line.

“Yes, Mr. Worthington?” A woman’s voice asked.

“Yes.”

“This is Natasha Powers, a St Louis Metro PD detective. I wanted to let you know that new information has emerged about your wife’s case.”

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“Uh... yes.” I was numb, waiting to hear more.

“Sir, a person has come forward confessing to the crime.”

“What?”

“And the car she was driving is consistent with the car that sped away from the accident the morning your wife was killed.”

Still silent, my mind reeled. They had caught the person who killed Isla. Four years later, the person finally confessed. I couldn't express what I felt. Was it excitement? Relief? Sadness? I didn't know.

“Mr Worthington?”

“I'm here, Detective Powers. I... I am trying to process this.”

“I am sure it is both a relief and a surprise.”

“That is an understatement, yes. Why would this person speak four years later?”

“The situation is complicated and emerging. The prosecutor's office is in the process of handling it but would like to speak to you. There is a possibility at sentencing that they will want victim impact statements. You can write to have someone else read, or you can attend the hearing. I will get you the details. Sentencing might be a ways off, but... many people find it brings closure to speak up.”

I rubbed my temples nervously. “Yes. I want to speak to the prosecutor in person to know more. I... I need a moment.”

“Of course. I left my information with your assistant. Feel free to call me back anytime to let me know your plans. Her preliminary hearing will be next week, and she’ll enter a guilty plea.”

“Thank you.”

Stephen immediately appeared in my doorway. “What was it?”

“They caught the person who killed Isla,” I said, tears welling. “I’m going to need more than a minute.”

“Of course.”

Stephen disappeared back to his desk. I turned on the privacy filter and let out a sob. Everything flew through my head at once. I put my head between my legs, trying to combat the feeling that I might pass out at any moment. My phone buzzed beside me. I ignored it. After a good cry, I asked Stephen to get more coffee. He sent for more liquid energy. I tried to push through the rest of my day, refusing to talk about it.

Then, matters worsened as I pulled up the Neandia Gazette, its English-language newspaper.

Wyette is Fake

Speculation has run rampant for the past week that Wyatt Worthington and Princess Odette are dating. The rumours began when inside sources said Mr Worthington attended the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Westnedge three weeks ago as the guest of our fair Princess. Photographers then caught the two cosily chatting and

laughing at a birthday party thrown for the billionaire's son.

After over a week of speculation and constant scrutiny during Princess Odette's tour of The Netherlands, the Palace finally released this statement:

Rumours of a relationship between Her Royal Highness Princess Odette and Mr Wyatt Worthington are nothing more than conjecture. Mr Worthington is a friend of the family, and his son is a friend of the Queen's children. Princesses Ingrid and Odette attended the party with the Prince Consort and his children, as any friend might have done. We ask that you grant Mr Worthington and his son privacy at this time.

My blood boiled, and I saw red. What was wrong with Odette? Why the fuck would she have them print that—to deny our relationship? I felt like I suddenly didn't matter at all to her. Before I could even speak, I dialled Odette on my work phone.

She answered immediately. "Wyatt, thank God. I saw photos of Theo this morning, and I've been trying?—"

"Odette, what the fuck is wrong with you?" I asked.

"Wyatt, I've been calling you. Are you okay?" She sounded worried.

"I asked a question. Don't answer with a question."

"Wyatt, I am fine. The press has been atrocious, but I can do nothing about that—for myself. For Theo?—"

"Don't talk about Theo. If we're not together, Theo isn't of concern to you."

"Wyatt, I adore Theo. And... are we not together?"

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“You just denied we were a couple on the record.”

“I had to. I couldn’t reach you, and when Alex told me he’d been chased at drop-off, I couldn’t hold on to that release. I had to do it to protect Theo.”

“So what now? How in the fuck do I see you? What was the game plan!?”

“Wyatt, please stop shouting.” Her voice grew tiny. Odette cried, “Please. I love you. Stop shouting at me.”

I felt terrible. I was a monster. This affected her as much as it did me.

“I don’t understand why you would do this, Odette.”

“Because I love you and Theo,” she sobbed.

“Clearly, you do not!”

“I do, I do. Wyatt, you make me so happy, but... this is a normal thing in royal circles?—”

“I cannot deal with all of this.”

She took a moment. I heard her crying and gave her time to speak.

“I know,” Odette sniffled. “I suppose that’s it then.”

“What is?”

“If you cannot deal with it, Wyatt, I don’t deserve to weigh you down.”

“Odette... that’s not what I meant.” My throat tightened. Tears crept into my eyes again.

“I... I don’t want to be the reason you cannot sleep at night. I don’t want to terrorise Theo. You deserve so much better than me.”

“Oh, Odette, no, please don’t say that!”

I regretted everything at that moment. I should never have called her whipped up over Isla. I took my anguish out on the woman who loved me so purely and adored Theo so much she’d deny herself the ability to tell the truth. I knew Odette longed to go public, but she put Theo above all else. Odette hated lies. She’d never deny our relationship for fun. She was doing the right thing for him. Or at least, she was doing what she thought was right.

“I loved loving you,” Odette’s voice broke. “I loved everything and want to love you even now... through this... but that’s selfish. Thank you for loving me. Please find someone better.”

“Odette, please don’t say that! Don’t hang?—”

The line went dead. She was gone.

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RECOVERY

ODETTE

“Odette, you need to talk to me,” Elisa said.

“I’m fine,” I protested.

“You’re not. The way you cradle Grieg and aren’t interacting with me at all says everything,” Elisa said.

“I don’t know what to say. I did the right thing. And now, I’m depressed. I wish I’d never fallen in love with Wyatt. Because if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here in so much pain.”

After hanging up on Wyatt, I had to address a group of seniors in Dutch, my most unreliable language. I went through the motions, then came home to sleep. My tour was hailed a complete success by the general public. However, in private, I was a mess. I stayed in bed for a week, barely allowing Alex in. Rick kept bringing me food and treats for Grieg. I was catatonic for the first few days. It felt so painful that I couldn’t get out of bed.

“I’m sorry it feels so raw,” Elisa said. “I know how much you cared about Wyatt and Theo. I thought things were going well.”

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“They were,” I said. “I thought he might be The One. How stupid is that?”

“It’s not stupid, Odette. Remember, negative self-talk isn’t helpful.”

“Men are bad for me. I am not equipped to handle this rejection.”

“Let’s reframe that,” Elisa said. “You were resilient enough after what happened with Guy even to try to love another person—two, in fact.”

“What good did it do if leaving him broke me like this? I’m a headcase.”

“This isn’t your deepest depression. You’re down, but considering the press intrusion and all the hubbub, I think you’ve handled it well. You’re going through a breakup—just like Ingrid did with her ex. And you’re still functional.”

“Am I?” I groaned.

“Have you showered? Eaten?”

“Yes.”

“You weren’t doing either of those when I first met you. You were so low, you couldn’t do basic tasks without reminding.”

“Everyone thinks I’m a fuck up.”

“No, they don’t. If they thought you were a fuck up, would they have sent you on a

royal tour?”

“Well, I doubt Alexandra will now. Now that she knows I’m still so fucking unreliable.”

“I doubt that, Odette. Give it time. This is just part of life. When we give our hearts to someone, the result might be painful. It’s hard to be open after so much loss. I would hazard Wyatt is also probably feeling terrible right now. However, what you do after this is what matters. You’ve learned you’re worthy of love. It didn’t work out with Wyatt, but maybe someone else is also capable of loving you?”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I do.”

“Wyatt saw me in a way no one else had—or so I thought,” I said. “But the last call I had with him, he was just screaming at me. He was so upset because of what happened with Theo. He didn’t understand why I put out that statement. It was to protect Theo. I think he thought I wanted to hurt him. I never would. But, in the end, I had. I scared Theo. He deserved better.”

“Everyone has things in childhood that are challenging. I know your impulse is to protect. Your sister’s anxiety is often through the roof with the children because of what happened. I am sure that feels similar for you with Theo.”

“I’m not Theo’s mother.”

“No, but you were a maternal figure. You have great maternal instincts, but sometimes they go into overdrive since you never had that protection.”

No one ever called me maternal before. I’d not considered myself the type who could

everbea mother.

“That whole thing—motherhood. I’d love to be a mom,” I said. “But I don’t have answers when I think about how it will look. Motherhood, for me, is like this blank box I cannot see. It’s just white nothingness—a placeholder. Why is it that others can see what I cannot? Ingrid gave Keir an ultimatum because she knows she wants marriage and children. I don’t know what I want.”

“You’re twenty-three. That’s okay.”

“Twenty-four,” I said. “Tomorrow. And still just as lonely as I ever was.”

66

THE OFFENDER

WYATT

“Jennifer Lowery is her name,” Detective Powers said.

She slid a file across the table. It was like a bad police procedural. Did people still keep everything in paper files? Did they not have a decent cloud provider? I opened the manila folder and stared at pictures of a late-model Mercedes. It was in a garage with a dented hood and a scratched grill. I fought all the tears I could, but the prosecutor, a man named Robertson, who was the size of a building with the voice of Pinocchio, handed me a tissue. I never imagined we’d get closure. And in any imagining I had of it, it didn’t look like this.

“Where did you get these photos from?” I asked.

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“Hey, calm down. I’m not interrogating you.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry.”

“I know you are under a lot of stress, and also... the thing with Odette is very fresh.”

“Odette doesn’t exist anymore. She’s made that clear.”

Mom’s face showed she didn’t believe that, but in my mind, it had to be true. I couldn’t force her to love me if she ignored my calls, texts, or apologies. And, even if she accepted these things, I feared this world with her would never work.

“I think that is what is best,” I said. “No more argument.”

67

CELEBRATION AND IMPERSONATION

WYATT

Half a year after Theo and I left Neandia, I returned for anything public or scheduled. I’d be in residence here a few days at a time—rarely did Theo come along when I passed through. Initially, I wanted to stay out of the spotlight and perpetually in the shadows like a more reliable, less agoraphobic Howard Hughes. However, two grand openings were scheduled back-to-back in April. These were important, visible things. And the company needed me.

I considered faking sick or doing anything to avoid a run-in with Odette. It wasn't that I didn't want to see her. The inverse was true. I was dying to see her. Anytime I saw her face on a tabloid, I lit up like a fucking Christmas tree. I still thought about her laugh and how she hid under the covers from the morning sun. I still looked fondly at the sound of her singing in the shower and the way Theo would climb into her lap, and she'd give him this playful, tired sigh to elicit a giggle.

My worry was out of respect for her. The only response I heard from Odette in about six months was the Christmas present she sent to Theo. This was after we sent her a Christmas card with a drawing from Theo. I hadn't expected her to return the favour, but after days of him whining, Mom broke down and let him draw something to throw in the card.

Theo took the breakup hardest. It made me angry with myself for letting Odette in. And had I never laid into her about the press that one time, I'd probably still have her in my corner. That she sent Theo a gift made me realise how much she still cared. Someone who didn't care wouldn't have responded with such kindness.

So, I attended the first of two celebrations to dedicate the new bus and train station. They added a new terminal instead of keeping the ornate original 1890s version untouched. Neandia overhauled it all with new technology—our technology—producing a shining example of new meets old.

I hoped to see Odette, but she was absent. Instead, Rick and Alexandra flagged me down.

“Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness,” I said, slightly bowing as if I didn't know them.

“How are you, Wyatt?” Rick asked as if we were old buddies meeting.

“I am fine,” I answered. “Just here for a little bit.”

“And is Theo here?” Alexandra asked

“He is back Stateside with his grandmother. We’ve had a lot going on.”

“I am sorry to hear about all you’ve been through,” Alexandra said. “Dreadful how that must have been.”

The case had gone worldwide. Sentencing finished just before Christmas. My tears gained national acclaim. The media hounded us on all fronts—jumping our back fence and harassing us on the street—for months. So, unfortunately, what happened with Odette felt minor. I felt ridiculous in retrospect.

“Thanks. It hasn’t been easy, but we’ve managed.”

Barely. Theo hated his new school. He let me know daily. American kindergarten did not suit the boy. Nothing about it made sense. It turned out Mom was right. He was as Neandian as ever, and being unable to speak French at school led to meltdowns that I couldn’t believe. I didn’t understand it and had little compassion left for his outbursts.

“Is Odette here?” I asked.

Alexandra and Rick exchanged a knowing look like any married couple.

“She is in France today,” Alexandra said. “She is representing me at a meeting. I wanted to be here for the big day.”

“I told her she couldn’t leave me,” Rick joked. “So, Odette generously volunteered to go in Lex’s stead.”

“And she’s well?” I asked.

“She’s fine. Incredibly busy,” Rick said. “She could do without working so much, but she’s fine.”

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Alexandra stared at Rick as if to say, “Stop talking,” and he backed down.

“Well, good, I’m glad she’s alright,” I said. “I hope?—”

“Life is complicated,” Rick said. “We appreciate all you have done to help with this project.”

The tone was odd. Then, I realised I was holding up the line that formed behind me. They weren’t at liberty for any more personal conversation. I moved along, unsure whether hearing that Odette was fine improved my state of mind. With my thoughts still racing, I found Stephen.

“How was that?” He judged me.

“It was fine,” I answered. “They’re well. Thanked me for my help.”

“And The Princess?” Stephen raised one eyebrow and stared down at me.

“She’s fine. Why must you just... bring up Odette?”

“Because you are still hung up on her,” Stephen said. “And I know I shouldn’t bring it up because it is not professional, but you ran off so fast?—”

“She broke it off with me.”

“If you had grovelled, she probably would have accepted it. You shouted at her, and she shut down.”

“Couples argue.”

“She’s twenty-four years old, Wyatt.”

“She’s twenty-three.”

“She turned twenty-four. All of us here knew about it because Her Majesty threw a party. She looked miserable to attend—attend without you, I suspect.”

A pained look crossed my face. I was unable to hide. Then, a question crossed my mind.

“Stephen, how did you know what happened?”

“I heard you shouting at her—the entire office did. And then I heard your breakdown after it. And I never brought it up because I knew it would embarrass you, but... sir, she was good for you.”

“Well, I did care about her. I do. I wish her well, but I don’t think she’s mature enough to handle anything long-term.”

I lied to myself because I didn’t believe that. We were both a bit broken and afraid to love anyone, but she did what she did with remarkable maturity. She put Theo above everyone else. Meanwhile, I selfishly pulled him to a country he didn’t feel was his own and put him in situations he detested. He was wilting. We’d been so happy here. I felt lonelier than ever, even in a room of more than a thousand.

ODETTE

“The bitch is dead! The bitch is dead!”

I heard it as a celebration. Alexandra’s voice rang through the house. Who was dead? What bitch? It took me a moment before I put it all together. I tossed my sheets off and opened my bedroom door to see Alexandra dancing around with baby Manon on her hip as gleefully as she could muster.

“Celeste is dead?” I asked.

“She’s dead. Dead as a doorknob! The wicked bitch is dead.”

Manon giggled, clearly happy to see her mother’s cheerful expression.

“How? When?”

I thought Celeste might never die. I worried she might live forever and never thought about the “after.” Like my worries about marriage and babies being a mysterious blank space, Celeste’s afterlife didn’t exist in live colour. Now, I was living in it.

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“She died this morning. They found her body lifeless at the Chateau. So, now, they will bring her home from France, and we will throw her in the ground and dance on her grave.”

“Alex, ugh,” I groaned. “Is that necessary?”

“She tortured us. I can dance.” Alexandra turned to Manon. “Can Mama not dance? Do you want to dance?”

The child squealed, grabbing her nose.

I didn’t want to be gleeful, but the relief of Celeste going took over. She was gone. I was truly free to never think of her again! She’d been elderly and frail since Alexandra expelled her to France but never truly gone. We occasionally entertained her to keep up the “happy family” aspects. And despite Astrid’s hatred, she was allowed to attend the wedding. It was the last we saw of her.

“So, come on. I want to celebrate!”

“Alex—”

“I am serious. We are living—thriving—and we have a celebration of death to plan. Astrid is on her way.”

“Ingrid is at a competition,” I said. “Can she stay? She has the Kentucky Three-Day?—”

“I know. She will probably have to miss it. This is a state funeral. We must look like we care.”

“Youdocare—just in all the wrong ways, sister.”

“My love, the champagne has arrived.” Rick approached with champagne flutes.

“Oh, yay!”

“Alex, it is eleven AM, and you’re drinking?”

“This is a momentous occasion, kid,” Rick said. “Come on. To the family room! Let us drink and be merry.”

“I’d rather not,” I said.

“Okay, enough with the self-pity fest,” Alexandra said.

“I’m not.”

“You are.” She handed the baby off to Rick. “Wyatt is back in town. I told her to text him and see if he wanted to talk.”

“It’s been more than six months since we talked in person,” I said. “He probably doesn’t think about me anymore.”

“Oh, please,” Rick said. “He probably still misses you. If you want to reach out?—”

“Exes are exes for a reason,” I said.

“Not if you’re miserable,” Alexandra said.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re exhausted from working too much and could use a little fun.”

“He misses you,” Rick said. “When I spoke to him yesterday, he asked about you. If you don’t miss someone, you don’t ask.”

Rick attended a transportation event with the Prime Minister and Alexandra. That is what prompted my yearning to reach out. I still loved him. Much as I wished to deny my feelings, I still loved Wyatt Worthington. Since Wyatt left, I’d set my advocacy work aside, and no more had been done on pedestrian safety. I knew I needed to go to the board again and demand a thorough investigation, but I had little hope of doing that without Wyatt’s vote.

“He was looking forward to seeing you at the ribbon cutting,” Alexandra added. “I swear he was.”

Secretly, I’d hoped to arrive looking so hot it would give me an in to speak to him. I’d tortured myself over it.

“Well, that’s done now. We’re in mourning,” I said. “Game over.”

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I retreated to my room to find Grieg asleep in bed. He lay on his side, legs straight. One ear perked as I approached, but he remained in place. I called him after me, going to the family room to get drunk while watching *Island of Love* and eating sweets all day. I'd never seen Alexandra so carefree and relaxed. Rick dealt with the children while she soaked up freedom.

Eventually, I found myself bored, tired, and drunk. So, I wandered down the hall to my old harp in the music room. Having never played drunk, I realised I should have chosen the piano. It had been ages since I'd bothered to play. It was fun but not easy when your fingers didn't sync well with your brain. Even Grieg looked unimpressed. I plucked along for a minute until I was interrupted.

"Your Royal Highness?"

I looked towards the doorway. I spied a footman holding a flower vase.

"Oh, God, it's begun!" I said.

"Ma'am?"

"Just set them somewhere," I said.

"There is a card, ma'am." He held out the card.

I motioned for him to come closer, if only because I was too lazy to bother walking for what was probably a silly card.

I opened it in disbelief. This was not what I expected.

69

WHAT DID YOU DO?

WYATT

I was at the office on a Saturday afternoon playing catch-up. I had meetings in Zurich, Cologne, and Vienna the following week. I had a lot to prep and not a lot of time. It was so compressed because I wanted to get home—three cities in as many days, and back to Theo. I'd leave for Zurich right after the tram opening. If Odette showed, we'd have no time to talk.

So, rather than enjoy my afternoon, I was heading down on a project proposal for Bentonville, Arkansas. They wanted to modernise their surprisingly busy system. My phone buzzed, distracting me. I picked it up, worried about Theo. It wasn't.

Odette

Thank you for the flowers. You really don't have to care. She was a bitch.

I was less surprised by the text than by Odette's use of "bitch." Why was she texting? And who sent flowers? And who was she? Confused, I turned to the news.

Splashed across the news sites were obituaries for Neandia's beloved Queen Celeste. Odette's text made sense and didn't. I hadn't sent them. And why was she throwing that word around? Was she a scammer? Was someone impersonating her?

I surmised only one person knew more about this than me.

“Hello, Wyatt,” Stephen answered his phone. “Can I help you?”

“I apologise for bothering you over the weekend, but is there a reason Princess Odette is texting me a thank you message?”

“I may have done something on your behalf.”

“Stephen, what did you do?”

“I did what you should have done but I know you wouldn’t do. I sent her flowers and a sympathy card on your behalf—as any good assistant would, sir.”

It was more than that. He’d wanted to make inroads on my behalf for ages and had kept the lines of communication open with the palace. It made sense from a business standpoint, even if my feelings for Odette muddled the waters.

“But Stephen, did you not send them to the whole household? Was it just Odette?”

“I could send them to the others, but it felt more personal to address her directly. Wyatt, you still love that woman. Would it not be cruel to ignore her when she’s in pain? If you ever want a chance to make a splash with her again, you cannot just desert her. She still cares deeply about Theo, does she not? She still loves you.”

I wanted to throw the phone at the wall. Stephen’s profound disregard for authority put me in an awkward situation. It came from a good place. Stephen was there through thick and thin—from the birth of Theo to losing Isla. He saw me at my worst and best and knew how much happiness Odette brought. He remained angry over how I reacted following the press involvement. I should have tried harder, but she was gone when I even bothered to send flowers. I should have run and insisted on seeing her. I should have told her that I’d rather have her live in my house every damn day than be so far off—press be damned.

“But now, who knows? She seems upset,” I said. “You don’t understand it. She was not close to this woman. The Queen was cruel and tortured those sisters. It’s... complicated.”

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“Then why not try reaching out? What do you have to lose?” Stephen asked.

So much, I suspected. At the same time, she finally reached out. If she didn’t care, she wouldn’t have.

Learning from my past mistakes, I knew what I had to do.

“Thanks, Stephen, I understand. I will see you on Monday.”

I called my car, packed up my laptop, turned off my lights, and headed to the ground floor. I gave the driver directions, and we sped the short distance to our destination. We stopped before we could get anywhere near it. People gathered and barricaded the entrance to the palace’s front gate.

“There’s the back way, sir,” Hugo said. “Remember?”

I did. There was a service entrance the long way around. I wasn’t sure what we could do. I figured they wouldn’t let me in, but it was worth a shot.

70

UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

ODETTE

Idrunkenly played the piano to pass the time, taking requests from Alex and Astrid. Astrid arrived from the UK directly, having boarded a plane to celebrate Celeste’s

death faster than I ever imagined. They lay on the couches, giggling like school girls as they hadn't in years. It was all very bizarre. Alexandra was day drunk and trying to make it through. In my delirium, I texted Wyatt a thank you for the flowers but mentioned none of them to the gallery. I knew my sisters would inflict their opinions on me.

The butler appeared. I assumed he checked to see if we needed more refreshments, but he had a message.

"Your Majesty, a visitor for Princess Odette is at the gate. Given procedures, they would like guidance. Mourning means no guests, and... though he is on the list of authorised guests, we should turn him away. I am here to request your opinion."

My heart stopped. Somehow, that stupid text changed everything. I knew it was Wyatt. Alexandra was about to learn the same.

"Who is it?" Alexandra asked.

"Mr Worthington, ma'am. He would like to speak to your sister."

Alex and Astrid sat up, staring.

"I didn't ask him to come," I said. "I merely thanked him for the sympathy card and flowers. I told him he shouldn't have bothered."

"Oh, that lovely bouquet over there is from him?" Astrid asked. "Lucky bitch. Parker is dreadful at such things."

"I didn't want them," I said. "You could have them."

"Let him in. He's important."

“Alex! Oh my god! You cannot be serious!” I flushed bright red.

The Butler hesitated.

“That is an order. Let him in,” Alexandra bellowed.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I glared at her, standing to pace.

“Odette, you’re in love with him. He’s here to see you. He still loves you. I will not sit idly by and let you waste this,” Alexandra said. “This is a good omen.”

“A death is not a good omen,” I countered. “It is a death. Can we stop celebrating?”

“Can’t stop, won’t stop!” Astrid said. “Hit me, sister.”

By that, she meant with the sparkling water on the table. Astrid was pregnant and due in autumn. Despite her protests about wanting to wait, she and Parker wasted little time getting the show on the road.

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“I’m not going to drop you. Promise. But if you hop like that down the hall, it will take a fucking century, Odette,” Wyatt said.

“We love an efficient king,” Astrid declared, passing a footman who stared, gap-mouthed. The place was a fucking circus.

Wyatt tried to keep up with Astrid and failed. “Why do all you women walk so fast? And how... you’re pregnant? When did you get pregnant, Astrid?”

“Oh, just before Christmas. Honestly, I was probably in that room?—”

TMI, Astrid!

She pointed to her bedroom before rushing to open mine. Grieg shuffled after us.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Astrid said, closing the door.

Wyatt slowly lowered me onto the bed and tucked me in. Sitting at my feet, he gave me a sympathetic look.

“I’m sorry for all of this, Odie. I regret yelling and?—”

“I shouldn’t have pulled back, but I didn’t know how else to protect Theo. I suspected you hated me and... that this would never work.”

“I still don’t know if it can,” Wyatt said. “But I want it to. I want to try. You made me the happiest I had been since we lost Isla and... I cannot imagine spending time with

anyone else, my love.”

My love. It was like we never stopped. The booze took over. I let out a sigh and curled up.

“Can you spoon me?” I murmured.

Wyatt kicked his shoes off and climbed into bed next to me. “When you ask me in that sweet voice, I cannot deny you.”

71

VALUE ADDED

WYATT

Odette was out like a light in my arms when I finally pulled away and sat up to reckon with it. She didn’t owe me this. She also hadn’t said she accepted my apology explicitly, yet we found ourselves entangled in her bed in the most wholesome way. She wasn’t herself, though. Something was off. We needed to talk about it.

I turned on the television to distract myself and let her sleep off her day drinking. Odette wasn’t much for getting sloshed. She was careful because of her medications and just her general persona. Odette wasn’t a party girl. She was a homebody, much like I was. I popped into the bathroom to find the stock of crystal glasses kept on the vanity top. She shared the bathroom with Ingrid. I assumed Ingrid had yet to return to Neandia but would arrive soon. Grabbing a glass, I filled it and sat it on the nightstand for Odette.

After about an hour, there was a knock. I cracked it. Rick appeared with Manon on his hip. She was no longer a tiny little bean. Instead, she was a chubby, slightly fussy

child who gave me a glare that mirrored her father's.

"Is everything alright?" Rick asked.

"She's out like a light," I said. "We should check her ankle when she wakes. She was... drunk. I suspect a hangover is just on the horizon."

"I wish Lex would have slowed down. C'mon. Let her have her rest. Do you want some food? I've got to watch Manon, but Lex, Astrid, and the other kids are watching a movie in the family room."

"Sure," I agreed.

I closed the door and followed Rick to the family dining room, where we sat. Manon gnawed on toast with some spread while Rick talked to the staff.

"What interests you? Given the circumstances, we have no plans for dinner," Rick said.

"Well, I don't want to eat before Odette wakes. She should eat."

"She will get food," Rick chuckled. "Promise."

"She just panics when she isn't sure there will be another meal."

"I know," Rick said. "It's why we always have things that any of them would eat on hand. I'm well aware, Wyatt. But if you are famished, as I am, then we should eat. Sea bass? How does that sound?"

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I was distracted by the child. She blew a raspberry at me that melted my heart.

“Wyatt, are you alright?”

I looked at Rick. “Sorry, she’s adorable. I was transfixed. Um... yes, sea bass is great, thanks.”

The butler left.

“She’s precious and probably our most devilish. Which, after her next-oldest sister, I thought was impossible.”

“This age is the one I remember most fondly. I forget everything for a bit after this age.”

“Because you lost Isla?” Rick asked.

“I did, yeah. And I feel like I lost so much of Theo’s childhood. Which is why I told myself we’d move back to the States and I’d see him more, except... I feel like I see him less, and he’s fucking miserable.”

Rick sighed. “I’m sorry, man. I am sure you feel like that. It all goes too fast. And with just the one, it has to feel much louder like you’re letting all the sand slip through.”

“It does,” I agreed. “Never supposed to be an only, but here we are. I love him to bits and miss him like crazy, but it’s a real struggle. Do you ever feel like you know what

the right thing is?”

“Never,” Rick admitted. “I am constantly failing, just a littlelesseach time.”

I chuckled. It was too relatable.

“So, you’re back? I don’t mean to pry, but?—”

“I don’tknowif I’m back.”

A staff member appeared out of nowhere to display a bottle of wine for Rick’s review. It was so bizarre. He could be casual andnormalbut was still there to approve the wine list. Rick sighed.

“More champagne?”

“It is all Her Majesty is permitting in the household at present. Those wereherorders.”

Rick rolled his eyes. “Bring whiskey or something.”

“Yes, sir.” The kid disappeared.

“Apologies for my beloved wife. She is frothing at the mouth with excitement over Celeste’s death. Please don’t see this as cruel. That woman tortured them.”

“I know,” I said. “I get the feeling Odette feels a mix of emotions and is struggling. I’ve never seen her get drunk before. It concerned me.”

“I blame Lex. She’s never drunk like that. Poor girl is going to have a hangover.”

The boy reappeared with a rare bottle of Scotch and two glasses.

I appraised the bottle. “This is impossible to get in the States.”

“Well, I believe this was a gift from Ingrid’s ex. His family sent it. That whole thing was a fucking mess. I wish they’d get back together. I still want to strangle the bastard slightly, but I suspect he thinks he was doing a favour by cutting out, and she’s still hopelessly in love with him.”

Like Odette.

“What was he protecting her from?”

“He was going on a deployment, but I think it was more than that. He lost his father when he was very young—like the girls—and I think it worried him when Lex nearly died in childbirth.”

“It was that bad?” I asked.

“We thought we’d lose her. He was here. Astrid and Parker were running things. Odette and Ingrid were back here with the kids. It probably triggered him. Shortly after, things devolved. I keep hoping he will grovel, and we can get this over with. Perhaps he could show up here in her time of need and apologise?”

I blushed.

“She thought she did you a favour, which I understand.” Rick sighed and handed the baby another piece of toast to gum. “Royal life is complicated and messy.”

“I don’t want Theo’s childhood to be even more fucked up than it has.”

Rick shrugged. “You think our kids are pretty well-adjusted, right?”

“You’ve done a great job,” I admitted. “You all are not what I expected—I say that with love. I am surprised Odette is as normal as she is, given the circumstances. That’s a credit to you and Alex.”

Rick smiled. “Odette is the sweetest person I’ve ever met. She loves wholeheartedly but it’s gotten her hurt before. If I can be candid, I think she overcorrected. She deserves to be happy.”

“I know,” I said. “But, Jesus, it’s not easy!”

“Wyatt, it’s tacky to remind you, but you’re a fucking billionaire. No matter what you do, Theo will grow up different.”

It never occurred to me how much that was true.

“I just figured he’d lay low if I did.”

“That’s not how it works,” Rick said. “We cannot choose. I will protect my children

with everything I have because that's my job, but..."

Baby Manon beamed at Rick. He turned and spoke at her, voice and face brightening. "I can only do so much, man. None of us are perfect parents. We do the best we can. We love them. And isn't it better to have two exceptional parents to protect a kid? You don't get better or more protective than Odette."

I never considered that even with Odette's status, she was value-added for Theo. I knew she was good with Theo and made me happy, but I hadn't considered how good she was for him. He missed speaking to her in French and running with Grieg in the backyard. She'd thrown him a beautiful party because she knew I couldn't.

"Without her, he never would have had a party at all," I remarked.

"What?"

"Theo's birthday is the hardest day for me. I told her this. I told her he wanted a party, and I wanted to give him one but couldn't bring myself to do it. She just worked with Mom to get it done. I love her so much for that. I focused on the press and all that, but not how happy she made him and how lost he's been without her."

"Perhaps you both overcorrected?"

"Perhaps," I agreed. "I'll be back. I've got a couple of calls to make before dinner arrives."

72

THE UN-HANGOVER

ODETTE

I awoke in late evening to Wyatt in my bed watching television. I hadn't hallucinated. He was still with me. Sitting up, I got my bearings. Wyatt looked over as I pushed myself up, his face showing a kind smile in the room's low light. I felt safe with him, relieved he hadn't left after my ridiculous display. Grieg perked, coming from where he'd been at my feet. I settled him in my lap, petting his fur lovingly.

"Have a nice nap?" Wyatt joked.

I scratched Grieg's ears, "I'm so sorry about that. Mortified. I wish I had been more articulate."

"Alexandra got you drunk, or so I heard."

"She's having a moment to process her... I don't even know."

"It's okay. I am still glad I came. I hope you don't mind me staying. Rick fed me, but he says you can have whatever you want or something."

"I'll just ring for food, yeah. Sorry, we get full service here until about ten. Not sure about food."

"You'll want to drink some water. You're probably pretty hungover."

"I've never had a hangover," I reached for the water. "Honestly, I'm fine."

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“Odette, I am sorry for everything. When I shouted at you, I should have been more compassionate. I flew off the handle thinking about protecting Theo, but never really thought about what you gave Theo.”

“Gave him?”

“A sense of stability, love beyond what I thought someone coming into my life could give, a feeling of being seen, and the whole French thing.”

“The French thing?”

“We don’t speak to him in French—at all. He may speak to me in French, but I usually answer in Frenglish. The older he gets, the more this angers him. I never thought kids could have identities with this stuff. He’s being punished at school for not speaking English. He cries about it. I cannot do a goddamn thing to fix it, either. I try, but my brain doesn’t work that way. You made him feel so seen, Odie. He doesn’t light up like that with anyone but me and Mom.”

Tears welled. My throat felt scratchy. Emotionally, I was on a rollercoaster and trying not to shut down.

“I never knew he even cared. I hoped he would like the present. It felt bad to exclude him.”

“He loved it,” Wyatt said. “It was too thoughtful. I wanted to call you for days but figured you’d never answer. He loved the gift but then sobbed for days because I wouldn’t let him say thank you in person. He hasn’t been back here.”

“Will you ever come back? Wyatt, I cannot move to America—at least not until the nibblings are older. Alex needs me to help.”

“I’m not asking you to move,” Wyatt said. “I think we’ll come back as much as that means for me with travel because he hates living there. It hurts a little because I love it there. We had this blissful time splitting life back and forth. I returned here because I felt closer to Isla and her family. They haven’t seen him in months, and it feels selfish. I should have fought harder. It was the wrong choice for all of us.”

“The press frightened you. I understand that must have been hard, Wyatt.”

“They did, but I should have taken a moment to breathe. The press release was the last straw. Honestly, as much as I do not want the press up our asses, I cannot live with denial that you love me. It felt terrible.”

I furrowed my brow, “It hurt you?”

“Odette, I love you so much. I want you with me all the time. I want us to spend Sunday mornings together in front of the fireplace, with Theo building God knows what out of Legos and you just... reading happily.”

“I want that, too.”

“What can we do to keep the press at bay—besides your denial of our relationship? Well, what was our relationship.”

I squeezed Wyatt’s hand. “I love you. Even now. Especially now. We’re together if you want to be together.”

He kissed my forehead. “I do. But we need a plan.”

“You need to get a different house. One in the country or something. At least one with more grounds and better security. I can ask Alex about using my allowance for security?—”

He cupped my chin. “Odette, sweetheart, this is not a problem to solve. I can cover security. And I never thought about the house. Maybe it is worth the fresh start?”

“I know that house means a lot to you?—”

“It was one we built together,” Wyatt said. “That doesn’t mean I cannot build a home with you and Theo. And maybe we should do that. Isla isn’t here, and even if she were, she’d want what was best for Theo.”

“So, are you looking for a house now?” I laughed.

He ran his hand through my hair, drawing me even closer. “I think we will look for a house as soon as we can figure out the move and after Theo’s school ends in May.”

“I can make that work,” I agreed. “And either way, I am stuck holed up here for the next week and a half. There is no escape. Even after the funeral, I have a month of mourning.”

“So, no tram opening?”

“No,” I laughed. “Not even trams.”

“Looks like my Monday just opened up,” Wyatt laughed. “I called off my trips. I’m going to stay. And whether you want it or not, I called Mom. She thinks I should stay after the funeral and keep Theo on, too. He misses me, and he’d love to see you.”

I rested my head on his shoulder. “I’d love that.”

BRUISED, NOT BROKEN

WYATT

“You’re lucky it’s not worse. It’s better than yesterday,” I gently placed Odette’s foot back on the bed. “You fell pretty hard.”

“Don’t rub in that I’m clumsy, mon cher.” She blushed.

“I didn’t say that,” I chuckled. “You aren’t. But it was still an impressive swan dive.”

I settled next to her, propping myself on my arm. Odette looked over, stroking my cheek with her soft palm. I’d missed this more than I knew. There was a great comfort in just being here with her in the quiet. This was day two of Her Majesty’s Celebration of Death—what we were all calling it now. I’d been here for about twenty-four hours, fitting right back into whatever we were almost seamlessly. It was as if I had never left.

“I missed your face,” Odette said. “If that isn’t weird to say?”

“No, it’s wonderfully accurate for me, baby. Looking at your face—in person—is an absolute relief. I forgot how wonderful it was. I knew it was, but it’s different in vivid colour.”

She looked down, still embarrassed by compliments.

“Don’t you believe me, Odette?”

“I do,” Odette said, “but it’s hard to believe sometimes over all the news. And after what happened, I worried I could never be enough. I still do. I have to wait, see, and trust in this.”

“I took for granted all you gave me—us,” I said. “But if I have to grovel every day for a while to remind you why I love you and why you should believe it, I will, my love.”

“I just need to believe in myself to believe in you, is all.”

“Odette, look at all you’ve done in my absence! You’ve become a beloved, trusted member of the household. People love you and live to meet you. It’s no wonder. You have the biggest heart. Why would I not want to be with you? To be lucky to have you?”

Her lip quivered. “I was broken like I couldn’t describe for a while after you left. I haven’t been pining for you this whole time, mind you. I’ve been working myself to the bone to distract from you.”

“Same,” I said. “All of it. I was a mess because I loved you, and you meant the world to me, Odette.”

A tear ran down her cheek. I wiped it away, unable to stop myself. The urge to comfort her was too strong—as ever.

“It will take me time to be back here, as I said. But when the dust has settled here, and you want to, let’s buy a house and go all-in.”

“You meant what you said?”

Without hesitation, I said, “Without a doubt, Odette.”

She kissed me, something I'd longed for since our abrupt end. Not holding back, I ran my fingers through her hair, pulling the roots. Odette gripped my shirt and slid closer. I assisted by pulling her towards me in one swift motion. Odette pulled back, eyes wide and searching for some sign.

"Don't stop," Odette said.

That was the confirmation I needed to kiss her back, running my hand to where her waist met her hip. I'd have done anything to touch her bare hip rather than her pyjamas. I wanted to kiss every inch of Odette Deschamps. I tried to breathe her in.

"Do you want those off?" Odette read my mind.

"Only if you want?—"

"I need a good distraction," Odette said.

She tossed her shorts and panties aside, then her top. The sheer sight of her was better than I even recalled. Her milky, soft skin shone bright. Every mark, curve, and freckle sprung back to memory. She was so beautiful and inviting. It didn't feel right for her to be alone like this. I followed suit.

"I'm going to give you everything, Odette," I kissed from her neck to her breasts.

"Oh-okay." She shivered and unexpectedly pushed my head down. "Why not start there?"

I loved the insistence, letting her legs settle on my shoulders. I took in the way she arched her back, presenting her pussy to me. Gripping her hips, I licked her clit, tasting her sheer excitement. Moaning, she grabbed my hair and rolled her hips. Listening to the rhythm of her breathing, I increased the tempo and slid two fingers

inside her to tickle her G-spot. Odette squealed excitedly, bucking against my face.

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“More. I’m so close,” she gasped in ragged French.

I wanted to give her the best orgasm of her life. She deserved it. As she writhed, so close to climax, I increased the rhythm of my tongue and fingers until I heard her scream my name and pulse around my fingers half a dozen times. Her legs twitched around my ears, then fell to the side. I emerged from between her legs, not distracted by her beautiful, flushed face. Mission accomplished.

I parted her legs with my body gently, minding her ankle. Pressing my cock to her dripping-wet entrance, I kissed her. We didn’t need to say anything to know we were back together in all ways. We were too good together to ignore it.

“Wyatt, we need a condom,” Odette said. “I... I haven’t been reliable with my birth control since we broke up. It’s a bad idea.”

“Oh, fuck, you’re right,” I said.

“I could get you off, though,” Odette said.

“You don’t owe?—”

“I want to do it,” Odette said. “Promise.”

I knew she’d been put on before, so I was cautious about her offering to get me off. Her sneaky grin as I rolled on my back suggested she’d have plenty of fun. Odette took my cock in her right hand, wasting no time as she bent to lick the head. I threw my head back and shuddered as she took me in her mouth. To this day, it amazed me

herex managed to get such good head and didn't bend over backwards to please her.

As I played with her hair, I said, "You are so good at this, Odette. I love you."

She pulled back. "This is me being selfish and needing you, not love."

It was dirty talk. It still surprised me in the best way.

"Well, then get to work," I chuckled.

I wouldn't last long, something she must have known. As she pumped my shaft in combination with her mouth bobbing, she pressed her tongue against the head. It always did the trick. It was by far the best blow job I'd ever had.

"Fuck," I said.

Odette pulled back, resting her jaw. "I don't want you to finish in my mouth."

"Oh?" I asked.

"Cum on my ass," Odette said.

"You want me to own you, Princess?"

"Yes, please," Odette rolled onto her stomach.

I knelt next to her. She watched me as I rolled my hand up and down my slick cock and gripped her round ass. I came on her lower back, thinking about taking her over the desk in my office. Turning back to Odette's face, I caught her with a slight grin, biting her lip.

I smacked her ass. “You’re very naughty indeed, Odette Deschamps.”

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THE LAST WORD

WYATT

Asking my assistant to grab a suitcase of clothes and “supplies” wasn’t high on my list. Thankfully, he never said much about grabbing a stash of condoms from the side table in my bedroom. I hadn’t touched them since the night before Theo’s birthday, but I needed to restock them for future endeavours. Stephen, a saint, was keen to pitch in to help Odette and her family. Neandians were loyal, if nothing else.

He arrived with the bag shortly before Mom and Theo came from the States. Queen Alexandra allocated a room for Mom. Theo would sleep on the couch in Odette and Ingrid’s sitting room to keep him close. I knew he wouldn’t sleep in a guest room, and there was no way we’d keep him in bed with us even if he fell asleep there.

“I appreciate this so much,” I said as Stephen appeared at the service entrance. “Do you want to stay for coffee or anything? I am sure Odette would be fine with that?”

“No, I’m good. Busy cancelling and rescheduling all of your business. What should I say to that?”

“That there has been a death in the family,” I answered. “Be honest.”

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He smiled. “So I should assume fences have mended?”

“Yes. We’ll be coming back here, I think,” I said.

“I will have to see you in the flesh every day again, Wyatt?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

He chuckled. “Well, there are worse things. I am glad to have you back. Theo needs to grow up here.”

“I know. I have since realised that maybe a Neandian belongs in Neandia.”

Stephen patted my shoulder. “Sir, you are wise... finally. I hope Her Royal Highness is doing well?”

“She has an unrelated sprained ankle and is still processing everything with her grandmother,” I said. “Otherwise, she’s fine. Also, can you ask around for an estate agent?”

“What for, sir?”

“After Theo returns, I want to buy a more secure house—something with some land.”

“Really?” My impulsive declaration took Stephen by surprise.

“And when we return, we will need security. I want to ensure Theo and Odette are

safe and the press are held accountable. She'll be around. I need to make sure we're okay."

"Yes, sir. Of course," Stephen said. "I can do all of that. I am glad to hear it."

He left, satisfied with the new developments. A footman returned my belongings to Odette's quarters in the wing she shared with Astrid and Ingrid. Last night, we'd determined it was time to end that arrangement. We needed a place that was ours. It made the most sense. I wanted the world with her. Theo deserved to have two grown-ups who cared for him daily, and Mom deserved to come and go as she pleased. So much good came of this time, far from the press and other distractions. We'd talked about everything, being at times painfully honest about our future. Neither of us was sure it would always work, but we were willing to try.

I returned to the family dining room to have brunch.

"Watch out, Marie Antoinette is on her way," Ingrid said.

Odette snickered, as did Rick.

"Are we talking about Alex?" Astrid asked.

"Yes," Ingrid said. "She's lost it. Truly lost it."

"Just let her have her moment to cope with it," Rick said. "Everyone is entitled to their feelings."

"Odette, stop looking sour about it. You cannot be sad that she's gone," Astrid said.

"I am happy—relieved. However, it's still sad to lose the last relative living. I think about what could have been and how sad I am that we lost Mamma and Papa. It's

complicated for me.”

“Fuck her,” Astrid said. “Sorry, but fuck her.”

Odette set her jaw. “It’s not so simple for me, okay?”

I squeezed Odette’s leg under the table.

Rick said, sympathetic as he bounced Manon on his knee, “You have every right to feel that way—as Lex has a right to feel so free. Odette and Ingrid, you both had us to advocate for you—to raise you. We weren’t perfect, but we tried to give you the best. Astrid and Lex didn’t have that, okay? Everyone can feel what they need to. And we can all go through the motions together in a week and pretend like we fucking care, alright?”

He shot a pointed look at Ingrid and Astrid. Odette was conflicted, something I’d tried to support her through. I had to be her safe space to land.

The door opened, and Alexandra entered.

“I have brought some others!”

With her, Theo and Mom followed.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:39 am

“We loved the grounds, and your face lit up there like none other.”

“But compared across these metrics—the roof needs a ton of work. We need to update the entire kitchen. It needs a new boiler, too.”

“I cannot add Odette’s happiness into a spreadsheet.” Wyatt squeezed my knee. “Odette, is that the house you love most?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I see us enjoying dinner parties in that big dining room. I see Theo running around the halls with Grieg. And Grieg will be so pleased with all that space to run. The walled garden is lovely. And I could have horses. We could get Theo a pony! And build him a fort. We should build him a fort. When he has friends over, wouldn’t that be nice?”

“But what do you like about it?”

“I can make it my own. I can do whatever I want with the decor—unless you hate that idea. I mean, I have never gotten to do that. I will be happy as long as I have some say. I can pitch in?”

Wyatt cut me off with a long, sweet kiss. “You don’t need to worry about money or any of that. That is not the point of this. I want this to be our house. I don’t care much about interior decorating. I am sure whatever you do will be beautiful.”

“It’s different from Isla’s decor. Not that her style was bad. It was just much more minimalist,” I said, treading carefully.

“I don’t need our house to be stopped in time for Isla’s memory or Theo’s benefit, okay? I’m happy as long as she can live on through stories and pictures.”

“Of course,” I said.

“So, you want the chateau?”

“I don’t...”

I wanted the chateau most of all. It made my heart happy, and I also saw us living there the most.

“Be honest, Odette. What do you want?”

“I love the chateau. I see myself in the library—I could have so many books! I see Theo happy there. That’s the sort of childhood I want him to have. Ingrid and I always played in the stream that runs through the gardens. It was our respite. Children need that. I’d like to have my horses close. But it’s almost in Belgium. And it’s... so expansive. I feel like a bigger family needs it.”

“It’s been on the market for a year. It needs a family—period.”

He tugged my heartstrings.

“We’ve been looking for weeks, Odette. We need to make some tough choices. What would make you feel better? To tell you we could fill it with children and make it feel less roomy and more chaotic?”

I cocked my head. “You want that?”

“I want more children, only if you do, baby.”

My heart melted, and tears rolled. The words hit me hard. I didn't have a way to respond except through tears. I kissed him slowly, unable to hold back. Everything had changed. Theo was back at his school here in Neandia. We had been together and stronger than ever since the funeral. I loved this man more than words. But something else changed with his statement and on this day.

"So, the chateau?"

"I want the chateau," I said. "But more... just listen to me for a second."

"Okay?"

"I have wanted this—for someone to tell me they wanted to build a life with me. But until today, I never could see it. When we were there, I could picture us happy forever. I pictured Theo growing up there, maybe bringing his children someday—we'd need the bedrooms. But until today, that had been some sort of black box. I could visualise other things in my life in ten years, but never a family or a life with someone. Now, I can. That box... it's illuminated. Theo and you brought that light into my life."

Wyatt kissed me as I sobbed through happy tears.

"I want to give you everything, Odette. It is all I want. I need us to be happy. Theo does, too. I can give you everything, so why wouldn't I do that?"

"I don't know. I need someone to pinch me. I can see it all."

"What do you see, Odette?" Wyatt asked.

"Sunday mornings making breakfast. More children. And this one is probably silly, but a wedding. A proper wedding on our lawn. One that is meaningful and important."

We cannot legally wed there, but I'd like a ceremony with Theo. And... oh shit!" I panicked.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:40 am

We never clearly discussed marriage, so my presumptuous words worried me. A grin spread across Wyatt's face.

"Do you want to marry me, Odette?"

I blushed.

"Well, I'd like to marry you. And I think that's the only way we can end up together, right?" Wyatt asked. "That's what you want... and what I should give you."

"But what do you want?"

"You. More children. A beautiful life. And if that includes a wonderful wedding on the grounds of our chateau, that soundpicture-perfect. Would you marry me, Odette? I mean, if I had an actual ring? A real proposal?"

"I think I just proposed," I giggled. "Is that not enough?"

"I want to do it up big. You deserve a big, swoony moment. It will take me a little bit, but I want to do it properly, and maybe with the house, that's what I need to think seriously about. Would you let me?"

"Propose?" I asked.

Wyatt kissed me. "Yes. I mean, I will marry you, Odette. But there are some loose ends I need to wrap up, and I want it to be a big moment—one straight out of your novels."

Tears welled again. “If that is what you want, that will be it, Wyatt.”

“Let’s buy a chateau, then. I think that is all that is left.”

“Well, and we must get a pony. Theoneedsa pony.”

“How do you source a pony?”

“Don’t worry about it. There are ways,” I said.

I kissed him again, so grateful to have found the light. I’d fought like hell to make it through to freedom. I’d fought even harder to feel this love for another person and trust their feelings were genuine. I’d never seen Wyatt and Theo coming. I’d never imagined marrying into a family that already was or feeling so close to a child I didn’t grow within me. Now, I was forever changed. I had memories to make and milestones to live. This was a beautiful forever.

EPILOGUE

WYATT

“So everything is ready to go?” I asked.

Odette nodded definitively, “I think so. I am prepared if you are.”

“I am prepared to sit there and look supportive. I am merely a concerned citizen supporting my wife in the big thing she’s about to do.”

Odette smiled, confident. She picked up her portfolio and packed it in her large Birkin Bag. “Well, I’m ready as ever, I guess.”

In the last year, there was nothing we hadn't done. We began massive renovations on our chateau, got engaged in winter, married in spring, and planned a life together. Now, it was time to check one of the most important boxes. We'd done a lot, but we had an unresolved issue that had taken one major political scandal, some parliamentary support, and a lot of patience to fix.

"I will be there in a minute!" Mom called down the hall. "I'll follow you. We're getting socks on, but don't wait on us."

Theo was attending Odette's big speech—sitting in the audience with Mom and me. It was his first time in public to a presentation like this. Odette sensed my nerves. She squeezed my hand.

"It's going to be fine, baby," Odette said. "He is so excited."

"We'll head out then," I called back to Mom. "See you there."

Odette turned to the door, but I pulled her back towards me and gave her a long, sweet kiss. It was more for my benefit than hers. It grounded me.

Odette pulled out her car keys. "I am driving."

"I can drive."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:40 am

“No, I want to,” Odette said, proud of herself.

We were nearly engaged when I discovered that Odette couldn’t drive. We quickly remedied that issue, but now she wanted to drive everywhere. I followed her to the little pink Porsche she’d picked. In a month, it would be an impractical choice of car, but for now, she enjoyed her Barbie car. The crisp fall air calmed my nerves.

We tucked into the car and sped away, Odette’s security detail following.

“I’m not nervous about you,” I asserted. “This is all your big win. You will give a wonderful speech and?—”

“I know it’s not me. It’s Theo. But trust me when I say they should see him in a controlled environment rather than chase him for a photo op. Plus, anymore, we’re going to have a hard time separating kids from public life.”

“It’s a dance,” I sighed.

Odette drove back into the city. I busied myself on my phone with email and called Stephen to distract myself. Public appearances were not my favourite thing, but Odette steadied me. I’d not taken on royal work in any official capacity, but she’d remained steadfast in her support of her sister. With Astrid and Ingrid in the UK, Alexandra needed some support. She and Rick couldn’t possibly do everything themselves.

Odette pulled into the designated garage near city hall, parked, and said, “I love you. Thank you for letting me shine.”

I gave her another kiss. “Odette, you did most of this yourself.”

“We’re a team, Wy.”

“I know. But live this day up.”

After climbing out, her security led us to a green room, where we met Alexandra and Rick. Alexandra kissed and hugged Odette and then stepped back, holding her hands.

“You look amazing. How do you feel?” She asked in excited French.

“It comes and goes,” Odette answered. “Some days are wonderful.”

“And the nugget?” Rick asked.

“She’s great,” Odette said. “Great. We saw her last week, and she’s moving along steadily.”

“Six more weeks. You look fabulous. I always looked like a walrus by this point,” Alexandra laughed.

Odette was about to burst—pregnant with our first child together and still full of energy. Things hadn’t been easy. She’d had to spend time coming off her medication and then getting back on it again in the second trimester. There were a lot of tears and a lot of stress, but we managed it. I couldn’t get over Theo finally getting a sister, but I wouldn’t feel like it was real until we brought her home.

Odette blushed and looked at me. “He put the car seat in the Mom Car. So, it’s real now.”

“Just preparing,” I said.

“It’s good. Rick always freaked out and ran around the minute I’d end up in labour. With Kari, he forgot to pack the bag, so we had to have our staff bring it.”

“I never said I was perfect,” Rick chuckled. “But I was excited.”

“First babies take an eternity. It will be fine,” Alexandra said.

Rubbing Odette’s back, I admitted, “She is way cooler about this than I am. I am freaking out over everything.”

“Rick swore I was going into labour every five minutes, so I get it.”

“Ma’am,” Odette’s private secretary approached. “They are ready for you. Please follow me. Security will take the rest of you to your seats.”

I followed the group to our front-row seats. Theo rushed me, giving me a massive hug. He took a seat between his grandmother and me. All attention soon turned to the city’s new Mayor, Elise Montague, a willowy woman in her mid-thirties. She stepped forward to do the big introduction.

“Welcome, everyone, to our first annual Vision de Neandia kick-off. I am so excited to announce that with the help of some generous sponsors?—”

She nodded in my direction. Not wanting to overshadow Odette’s moment, I did not stand.

“We were able to host everyone here today. To open the event and our street fair is a very special guest. Her Royal Highness Princess Odette joins us as the patron of Vision de Neandia. She’s also an ardent cyclist. Many of you have seen her coming in on the bike path in the mornings—sometimes even with her stepson, Theo. Odette has much to say about the five-year city plan, so I won’t take up more of your time.

But I will encourage you to stay and see who wins the vintage bike contest later today. As a reminder, free mulled wine will be in the Mayor's conference room following her speech. So, without any more fanfare, let me welcome Princess Odette."

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The room rose, clapping. All but those in the family, that was. And somehow, I realised I counted. Theo jumped up, bursting with excitement to see Odette on stage.

“Odie!” He waved. “Ohhhhhh-deeeeee! Ici!”

I tried to calm him, but his sheer enthusiasm overwhelmed my attempts.

“Hello,” Odette said. “And yes, Theo, I see you, hello!”

She gave him a little wave, which more than satisfied him. He fell back into his chair, happy to feel important.

“Thank you all for coming to this first-annual event. I am overwhelmed by the number of you who showed up to talk about bikes and walk through the streets. Those of you who joined us on the historic walking tour last night were a lot of fun. And Linda, you are still the best for bringing up the rear with me. I’m moving a little slower these days.”

The crowd laughed, giving her a chance to catch her breath. Odette was effervescent. She truly did glow.

“A run-in with a car over there—” Odette pointed to her right. “Taught me a lot about city planning. Ironically, it was that driver—tired and distracted—that knocked into me who would change my life forever. Lives are lost every day due to collisions that could be prevented by better street planning. In this case, the man who came to my rescue and helped me find my dog had already lost one person very near and dear to him in a similar way. He was passionate about fixing things. And, together, we

lobbied to have a curb bump-out placed.”

I smiled.

“The intersection went from being the most dangerous to being very safe in a matter of weeks. Since it was improved, the intersection has seen no more pedestrian or cycling accidents and fewer car collisions across the board. City planning benefits all of us, which is why I am thrilled to announce that Mayor Montague’s office has planned a full evaluation of the twenty most dangerous intersections in the city. Once the results are in, a pool funded by generous government grants and private funding will ensure intersections are safer, and the city’s traffic is calmer.”

People clapped loudly. Odette soaked up the applause, beaming all the while. We’d done it. Odette’s persistence paid off. It only took about two years, but it was done.

“Let’s ensure that every Neandian is safe so that we all make it home to our families and our children are empowered and independent. Imagine a world where your child could safely walk to school, where a bike could replace a car, or where transit is the norm. It is so reliable that the idea of owning a car seems onerous. We’d all be better off. So, thank you all for supporting a brighter future. And let’s go enjoy some snacks and some cool bikes.”

Odette closed her portfolio and stepped back from the podium.

“It is my favourite when she says it all in French,” Theo whispered.

I rubbed his back. “I know, bud.”

My French was better, but I still preferred English. Of course, Odette always spoke to Theo in her mother tongue—just as she did the nibblings. It was comforting to him. On days I missed Isla the most, I reminded myself that he had a lot of her in him. His

language was a big part of that. The fact that Odette nurtured it with him every day brought me peace.

“Can I talk to Lyla in French? Will she speak French?” Theo asked.

“Bud, let’s keep it down,” I shushed him. “Not everyone knows about the baby, okay?”

We named the baby Lyla June, bucking the trend of never knowing whether a royal baby was a girl or boy before it was born. Theo was asurprise, but Odette wanted to know ahead of time. I acquiesced. It was her first pregnancy, and she was the one growing the baby. I wasn’t going to debate her. The problem now was that only Theo, my mom, Odette, and I knew the baby’s name. We didn’t need the press discovering our baby.

“But will she?”

“I think, like Aunt Alex and Uncle Rick’s kids, the baby will speak French first and English second. The baby won’t know the difference, and we’ll all have to figure it out.”

“But how will she learn?”

“You can read herlotsof books. That is how babies learn to talk,” I held his hand as we filed through the crowd to find Odette.

He ran the last few yards right into her stomach, pressing his hand into the lower half of her belly. The Mayor looked at him, confused. Odette tussled his hair.

“He likes to get the baby to kick him,” Odette explained. “If he waits long enough, the baby will let him know its whereabouts.”

“She kicked me!” Theo shouted. “Mama, she KICKED me!”

It was like a gut check. At first, I wanted to correct him for using “she” in public and around strangers. Then, I tried not to fall to pieces. He’d never called Odette Mama—not until now.

Odette patted his head, not correcting him, “The baby is happy to see you.”

The mayor bent to Theo’s level. “Would you like some cider? A cookie?”

He nodded excitedly.

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“Can I bring him by the snacks?” The Mayor asked.

“Oh, yes, of course,” I answered. “If you don’t mind.”

“Why don’t we get some snacks and then do a little tour, Theo?”

He jumped up excitedly. “Yes, please!”

The two left as Odette took my hand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t coach him?—”

“Stop,” I shook my head. “I don’t want to ruin everything. It’s your moment. He’s allowed?—”

“I can try to get him to?—”

“No. He loves you. You have earned that title. You’re the one whotucks him in most nights and the one he asks for when he’s sick, Odie. It’s a good thing.”

Sympathetic, Odette said, “But it’s hard for you?”

“It is, baby. But it’s good.” I pulled her into me, wrapping my arm around her waist.
“You aren’t here to replace Isla. I never think about it like that.”

“I couldn’t.”

“No.” I kissed her forehead. “I knew it would happen—if not now, but when the baby arrives. I love you, Odette. I’m not upset.”

Odette smiled.

“But today is your day. So, should we go judge some bikes?”

“I think that sounds like a fabulous way to end the day,” Odette agreed. “I love you, Wyatt. Thank you for being here and... just always supporting me. This was a big deal to me—not just for me but... for Isla. And I wanted to do it for you and Theo, so it never happens again.”

“Oh, stop it, Odie,” I said, feeling tears welling. “You’re going to make me cry in public.”

“I don’t mean to get all sappy, but... it means the world, Wyatt. And I want to make sure I make a difference. I’m here, and I want to keep doing the work. You believed in me when I didn’t, so I want to do everything possible.”

“Odette, you are the best thing that has happened to me since the worst happened. I’m so proud of you—of us. But this? This was all you, baby. You stuck it out. All I did was table a vote. Don’t let me steal your spotlight, okay?”

“You never do,” Odette said. “You’re with me. We’re a team. And no matter what, we will stick together.”