



Royally Drawn (Resplendent Royals #3)

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Category: Sport

Description: Drawn to the flame against all reason, is Ingrid about to get burned?

Princess Ingrid is taking the equestrian world by storm. When a teammate invites her to a pre-wedding party aboard a yacht, she gets more than a little fun in the sun.

When Prince Keir arrives for his cousin's stag-hen party after a long deployment, he expects relaxation and debauchery. He doesn't anticipate a new arrival, the much younger Princess Ingrid. To his chagrin, his stepbrother Lars sees her first. While they've never come to blows over a woman, Lars and Keir are used to competing for the same prizes. After a wild night, Keir throws down the gauntlet, and all bets are off.

Ingrid enjoys her springtime game of cat-and-mouse with Keir but isn't convinced he's worth the stress of a long-term commitment. He's a cocky womanizing pilot—in contrast to his sweeter stepbrother. But as everyone loses themselves to a fever pitch of competitions and royal weddings, Ingrid cannot deny the undeniable chemistry she has with Keir.

When push comes to shove, will Ingrid follow her heart and give Keir a chance? Will Keir convince her he can give her the love she deserves? And will they crash and burn or ride off into the sunset together?

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Sun and Sand

INGRID

The sun and sand of Aruba provided a healing distraction from a fall off my mount at an event in Wellington the week before. I basked in the sun on a quiet day aboard a yacht, setting aside the stress of riding horses in the Florida sun. Preparations for a summer of competitions, weddings, and social obligations before me would still be there when I returned to them.

The company didn't hurt, either.

Cecilia, Crown Princess of Norway, invited me and my sister, Astrid, to her bachelorette weekend. Tall, statuesque, and charming, Cici was my big sister in the horse world, and I couldn't wait to celebrate her wedding to Prince Isak of Denmark. The yacht—a massive floating town—was his parents' prized possession. They liked to rub their brand-new, shiny yacht in the face of their Norwegian counterparts. Norway had its own yacht—a classic, sedate, older vessel. Vintage boats were lovely, but there was something extraordinary about relaxing in a hot tub on the bow of a brand-new yacht.

“Refills?” Isak asked in Danish.

A total gem, he appeared to wait on Cici .

“Beer, please,” Cici answered in English.

“Can we please, please stick to English, Isak?” Cici’s cousin Betty asked.

Betty, Cecilia’s youngest cousin, was the baby of the Norwegian royals. As the fourth of four daughters—nearly a decade younger than my oldest sister, Queen Alexandra—I related to her. She also trained with our eventing coach in Wellington.

“Learn, Dansk,” Isak teased.

“I can read it. But I cannot understand a word you say..” Betty pulled a face. “And let’s think of Ingy.”

“Ingrid speaks Dansk,” Isak said.

“It’s a weird, bastardised version,” I giggled. And I only read it well enough to cause trouble.”

“Your swears are legendary,” Cici giggled.

“Blame Rick,” Isak said.

Isak knew my brother-in-law, Rikard of Lundhavn. Lundhavn was a tiny Scandinavian nation that spoke a Danish dialect. I’d learned quite a bit from him on sailing holidays, where I took to the water gleefully. It was our thing. Now, we were joined by my nieces and nephew. He was sharing that bit of himself with us—the side otherwise drowned out by the Francophone Neandians.

“Indeed. You can take the prince out of Lundhavn but not take the Lundhavn out of the prince.”

Prince Lars popped into view, coming to see what was going on. Lars was Cecilia’s cousin and Betty’s older half-brother. A fellow equestrian, he’d always hang around

and help with the horses whenever we visited Norway.

“I would like an Old Fashioned,” Betty announced with a flourish,

“No, you don’t,” Lars told her. “You’ll have a beer. You don’t even know what that is.”

“It’s posh,” Betty said.

“It’s not,” Cici laughed. “It’s whisky, and we’re on a yacht before noon. Go for the beer.”

Betty pouted but said no more.

“Ingrid, what about you?” Lars asked .

“Uh, I’ll take another mimosa if you will deliver it. I’m not getting out yet.”

Cici laughed and laid her palm against her forehead, pretending to faint. “You messy basic bitch! I’m not leaving this hot tub, so bring me a mimosa.”

“If the Princess wants a mimosa, she gets one,” Lars said. “Who am I to judge?”

“Yet I don’t get an Old Fashioned?” Betty called back.

“You are a baby. You get what you get. It’s not even legal for you to drink liquor at home,” Lars said as they left.

“I fucking hate it,” Betty groaned. “Everyone treats me like a damn child.”

“They do, yes,” I said. “I get it.”

“And how do you deal?”

“I left the country. The only one who gets it is Odette. She’s my ride-or-die. We were always the ‘little girls.’ We were still young when Alex and Rick married. Since our parents passed away, they were the closest thing we had to parents.”

Odette was two years my senior. She was the typical middle child but recently struggled in ways we did not discuss publicly. Despite some personal setbacks, she remained positive and dedicated to the family. I doubted she’d ever leave Neandia.

“So, I must go abroad?” Betty laughed. “Well, mission accomplished.”

The boys returned with our drinks.

“First class service by a shirtless bartender,” Cici mooned.

Isak kissed her. “Yes, elskling.”

“I am a lucky woman.”

“Oh, stop it. I’m going to puke!” Betty groaned.

I laughed. It was sweet.

“And both princesses get whatever the hell they want.”

Lars delivered our drinks. “Betty, you got what you asked for. I didn’t leave you hanging.”

Betty gleefully took a sip and pulled a face. Unwilling to admit this was a poor choice, she smiled. “Thanks. ”

I snickered. “And thank you, yes.”

“Anytime,” Lars said.

At that moment, I realised Lars may want more from me than just the friendship we’d established hanging out at the barn. Or was I reading too much into it?

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Welcome Aboard

KEIR

A ruba in April was paradise and a perfect long weekend escape for young royals looking for sun and parties. With a yacht, anything was possible. My brother Nate and I were due to arrive at the vessel where things were underway. The sun bounced off the waves as we sailed across them on a fast, tender boat. Soon, we'd be aboard the majestic ship awaiting our arrival. Until then, we'd take in these sights and soak up the sea breeze.

"You've been smiling since we landed. Jesus, I forgot you even knew how!" Nate ribbed me.

"Nathan, it's been a long time. I'll grant you."

"Test pilot school is bad for your brain."

"No, it's the inverse," I said. You can only get in with a broken brain. It's a feature, not a bug, for us."

I'd barely returned to the UK, only to agree to fly us out from London, where my brother lived. I'd been training on a new aircraft in America following a lengthy deployment. We both needed some time away. I only wished the time away wouldn't be spent with Duncan. Duncan acted like a buffoon most of the time. I rarely thought of myself as terribly mature. I lived in the RAF mess with a bunch of my men, I had no steady girlfriend, and I didn't even own my own home. However, I was more

mature than the twenty-six-year-old head case that was our cousin. Moreover, I figured Duncan would be insufferable on a stag-hen-do weekend.

Arriving at the Danish super yacht, we were immediately greeted by the groom, Prince Isak of Denmark. The bride, our cousin Cecilia, was nowhere to be seen. Isak beamed in excitement as he said hello. Duncan and our younger brother Ollie, for some fucking reason, were belting out “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey.

“Don’t look so bothered.”

I saw our cousin Leah talking to one of Isak’s friends. Leah was a live wire—slightly older than me but no more mature. True to form, she was hanging back with the boys.

“I didn’t realise you’d make it!” I laughed.

“I was in Paris and dipped down,” Leah said.

She gave me a tight hug. “You look tan.”

“I am,” I said. “The fucking desert does that to you. What is happening in Paris?”

“I’m shooting a small part in an indie project for a friend,” Leah answered. “Between things, I’m setting up the Sweet Charity revival workshop.”

As an actress, Leah’s life was probably more exciting than anyone else’s on this boat. Sometimes, I wish I had even a teaspoon of her talent.

“Ignore them,” Leah nodded at Duncan and Ollie. “They started drinking at eleven.”

I pulled a face.

“What? It’s a stag party.”

“Duncan should know better. Didn’t he fly out here?”

Leah giggled.

“What?”

“He can drink. Let him be. We’re all here to get rowdy, Dad .”

“I expected more maturity from the matriarch of the family.”

Leah rolled her eyes. “Meh. I’m bored and hoping to get laid.”

I snickered. “Well, what’s the lay of the land like? ”

“More girls than boys. Unfortunately, you are related to many of them. Edina’s here.”

Crown Princess Edina was Isak’s older sister. We hooked up plenty of times. She was very uptight. I got her walls to come down, along with her knickers, better than anyone. However, it would never work. We weren’t really friends—she never got vulnerable. I wasn’t opposed to hookups or friends-with-benefits, but I was looking for something more than the fight that would ensue the following day if I dared make her a cup of tea. She was a magnificent yet odd duck.

“Meh.”

“Meh?” Leah shook her head.

“What is the plan?”

“We’re going out tonight?—”

Leah kept talking, but I was unable to speak, captivated by a short woman with an adorable ass crossing into my line of sight with an adorable ass. Wavy blonde hair fell from the ponytail atop her head. Oversized sunglasses blocked her eyes from view, but I somehow knew they were beautiful. She was gorgeous.

“Hey, are you listening?”

“Uh...” I wanted to ask who the hot blonde was but knew she’d tease me.

“Oh, you found the recruit. That’s Ingrid.”

“Ingrid?”

“She’s Princess Alexandra’s youngest sister and a friend of the bride. Cici and Betty call her Ingy.”

“Oh my God! You’re here!”

I heard a shriek. My half-sister Betty threw her arms around me. Given she was young and impressionable, I hoped she would stay home. Now, I’d have to watch her like a hawk while behaving myself.

“You’re not old enough to be here.”

“I am,” Betty said.

“You’re drunk,” I noted.

She shrugged, then giggled and ran off.

“This weekend is going to be a mess,” Leah said. “We have so many loose cannons and amateurs.”

The blonde turned our way. Damn, she was beautiful! I’d be dumb not to pursue her. She was fresh meat—it was a bonus we were not related. Besides, she had one hell of a smackable little ass and a fabulous pair of tits. I hoped to see more of her.

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Overboard

INGRID

Refilling my drink at the bar, I ran into another handsome prince. The Lyons boys were everywhere. It rained tall, gorgeous men for the British royals—starting with Queen Natalie’s only child, Prince Duncan. Then, there were the four sons of her late brother, Paul—Princes Keir, Nate, Edwin, and Oliver. I’d met all the younger three but never Prince Keir, the British spare.

“You’re the new girl.”

“New girl?” I asked. “As opposed to the old girl? I think the oldest person here is like thirty-five.”

“I just meant new-to-us.”

I rolled my eyes. “New to you lot. Not new to Cici and the Norwegians.”

“You joined the Scandinavian cult.”

“You were one foot in, one foot out last I heard.”

All I knew about Keir was that he and his brothers had spent time in Norway from a young age. Their mother was half-Norwegian, half-American.

“It’s complicated.”

The Brits and Norwegians had intermarried like vines growing together. Keir's Aunt Kiersten, Cecilia's mother, left the UK to marry the now-King Olav. After Keir's father died of cancer in his early thirties, his mother remarried the Norwegian spare, and the whole family moved to Norway. It was an interesting multicultural, somewhat incestuous mishmash of what you'd expect from royals.

He took a long swig of his beer. "Everything is. At least with all of us."

I didn't have a pithy response. I was too focused on his jawline and trying not to stare at his bare chest. It was neither completely hairless nor too hairy. I hated to admit I did find chest hair somewhat sexy. I much preferred hyper-masculine men to those who were a little sweeter. A strong brow and chin that could cut glass drew me like a moth to a flame.

"Even you? It cannot be so complicated for someone like you," Keir said.

"Uh? Someone like me? Why's that?"

"Last I heard, you're beautiful, charming, and talented. Also, you're the youngest, which is the best one to be, right?"

I blushed, looking for a witty comeback. I cracked jokes for fun. However, as his green eyes fixed on me, I struggled to make a sound. What was happening? And was he flirting with me? That seemed impossible.

"I... I suppose," I answered. "I mean, being the youngest. It's... fine."

I awkwardly leaned forward in the small bar area, reaching into the tiny beer fridge. There was no way he wasn't staring at my ass. As I came back up, I realised he wasn't even trying to avoid me catching him.

“Take a picture. It will last longer,” I said, annoyed.

“Oh, she’s fiery!”

He grabbed a beer from a box under the bar and stepped forward to restock the fridge before closing the door. At least he was thoughtful. We stood there, face-to-face, too close. I could feel his eyes on me, even though I looked down at his sandal-clad feet. They dwarfed my bare feet and tiny toes.

“I gotta... go,” I murmured .

“How do you figure?”

I thought he was holding me there as he placed one hand on the counter behind me, blocking my exit from the small bar.

“Excuse me?”

Keir handed me a bottle opener. “Unless you want to ruin your pretty teeth, I don’t know how you’d open that. Just looking out for you.”

I flushed red hot. Fuck!

He took the beer from my hand as I stood there, mouth gaping. Adeptly popping the cap, he smiled and handed it back.

“Now you can go and do... whatever you need doing?”

“Uh... sure... merci .”

“ De rien ,” he said back in masterful French.

I shouldn't have swooned, but I did. Something about his gaze made me flutter. I was sure he was toying with me, but what if he wasn't?"

I ended up back down near the diving platform on the back of the ship. We could see nothing but other yachts and boats bobbing for miles. I loved sitting on a lounge under the shade of the deck below. The Swedes, also there on a rented yacht, swam over from their ship. Even with all the space on this yacht, there wasn't enough room for everyone. We needed multiple vessels.

"It's lovely," one called out.

"Lovely for who?" Leah, Cici's cousin, called back. "Lovely by Scandinavian standards?"

They beckoned her to jump. Cici, Betty, and Isak were already in the water.

Leah looked over at me. "If she goes, I'll go. She's a neutral party."

"What? She's not Switzerland," Duncan said. He was the wild but sexy mountain of a man. I suspected he was having too much fun.

"Did they not teach you history at Cranwell? Neandia remained neutral in the Second World War," Leah said.

"After Belgium dragged us through hell in the First World War and there was an invasion of enemy forces," I explained, "we decided to sit that one out."

"But didn't it improve your fortunes?"

I looked over and spotted Keir.

“Well, we did become an independent nation, yes,” I agreed. “After the Great War, as you’d call it. But it wasn’t as if it was easy .”

“A banker’s paradise,” Keir said. “I hear it is nice, however—charming, even.”

“Who did you hear that from?” Duncan scoffed.

I glared at him. “At least our weather isn’t shit, we have decent coffee, and the men are generally attractive.”

“Ooooooh!”

Laughter rang out from the crowd watching. I’d gotten him good. And, in a way, I’d hoped to nail it to Keir, too. I sensed he believed himself superior in that his mere interest turned my brain to mush.

Duncan, either cross or thinking I was flirting—I wasn’t—seized the moment. He tossed me over his shoulders like a potato sack and spun me around.

“I take that as a great offence to my country, Princess!” Duncan declared. “And for that, you must walk the plank.”

That was how I ended up unceremoniously tossed into the Caribbean, cursing the asshole that was the Prince of Wales.

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A Hopeful Victor

KEIR

I stepped forward, attempting to grab Duncan before he tossed poor Ingrid into the sea, but I missed. I watched in horror as she flopped into the water with a loud crack! It was a dick move in response to little more than a joke. She had biting wit—something that only made her hotter—and he'd deserved it.

“Why are you such a knob?” I asked. “That was shitty.”

Ingrid's head bobbed up. Lars stepped forward, concerned now. I sensed he also wanted to punch Duncan.

“Can you swim?” He called out.

The Swedes swam closer.

“Yes, I can swim,” Ingrid groaned. “Fuck you, Duncan!”

Then, a litany of French swears emerged before she realised the Swedes were coming closer.

“Don't come over here!”

“Why?” One called back.

“I’ve lost my top.”

Suddenly, without a thought and like a fool, I jumped into the water to find it. By now, it was no doubt gone. I came up to see Lars doing the same. He was so keen to land her first. I wasn’t sure if I should be annoyed or sympathetic, as he would undoubtedly lose. In one night, I’d turn Ingrid into putty and win this competition fair and square. He hadn’t a hope in hell.

“What are you doing?” Ingrid asked. “Trying to take a peek?”

“No, we were trying to help,” Lars answered. “But it’s gone.”

“You’ve been sunbathing topless on the top deck,” Leah laughed. “What is the damn difference?”

Leah had zero hangups about her body and gave no fucks. That was just the way Leah was. She didn’t get it.

“I’m surrounded by men!” Ingrid said, suddenly looking very vulnerable.

“Can someone grab her a top?” Cici demanded. “For the love of God, boys, use your damn brains!”

“How?” Duncan asked. “I’m not going to go through her wardrobe.”

“Yes, please don’t!”

Duncan shot himself in the foot. He assumed she’d fall all over herself for him. Instead, she took him for a massive prick. I liked this girl more by the minute.

“You’re all a bunch of idiots!” Leah turned from us.

Duncan looked away, definitely mortified, as she unlaced her bikini top.

Tossing her top to him, she said, “Someone bring this to her. We both have big tits, so hopefully it fits. Then, she stormed off to presumably put something else on.”

Lars swam towards the boat to assist but was cut off by Betty, who played the go-between.

“Uh... thanks,” Ingrid said, glaring at Duncan and the rest of us.

She swam a return trip, climbed back on deck, and left in a huff.

“Why did you have to be such a goddamn knob?” Nate demanded. “You upset her.”

“I thought it was a joke. I thought it was... peak banter.”

I shook my head, treading water and glaring. “Banter would be... you know... joking, or if you just spun her around and put her back down. That would have been playful. This was an escalation.”

“It was a shit thing to do to my friend,” Cici said. “Why? Why must you always be such a fool?”

Duncan sensed he was wrong—only after it was too late. “I’ll apologise to her later after she calms down. You’re right. I don’t know her well enough to do that.”

Leah came back, diving off the platform, before shouting, “You don’t know me well enough to do that, Duncan. Or, rather, maybe you know me too well. Like wake the fuck up, dude!”

He rolled his eyes. “I didn’t mean to come off like that.”

“Someone should check on her,” Lars said.

“She doesn’t want you to bother her,” Cici groaned.

“I could at least bring her a damn towel and apologise on behalf of everyone!” Lars pulled himself out of the water and stormed off after her.

Cici was right, but I also wanted to watch him crash and burn with her in the friend zone and pick up those pieces later.

Leah swam over and shook her head. “That act of desperation you pulled did you no favours.”

“What?” I pretended I didn’t understand her.

“You cannot just pull something like that and expect her to thank you. You made her uncomfortable. You should have offered to go get her some clothing—not dive towards her like a horny schoolboy.”

“I reacted to the situation.”

“You know, she’s gorgeous, and I’d hit it if she wasn’t straight and I wasn’t already involved elsewhere. Unfortunately, she is so very much out of your league.”

Leah had been linked to an American businessman and politician for the past few months. He was too old for her but charismatic. They screamed “power couple” in all the most annoying ways.

“I disagree!” I was offended.

“Uh-huh. You’re a head case of a pilot who has never had a relationship lasting more

than what... six months?"

"Says the girl who once flew all around to hook up with different former castmates in the same forty-eight-hour period?"

"When I was twenty- five!"

"Do you not always break up with someone and end up shagging Lourdes?" I asked.

She smacked me. "Lourdes is my best friend!"

She was. Lourdes and Leah played characters together in Victoria the Great . Leah earned her first Tony playing Queen Victoria, and Lourdes played the Princess of Wales. Lourdes was fabulous and beautiful and swung both ways. They had a painfully wholesome dynamic but couldn't keep their hands off one another. I once joked that it was as if they were uncomfortably close siblings, but it fell flat.

"She's also your default ."

"Old habits die hard. And for you, that means leaving a jar of hearts by the bed. Monogamy? I can take it or leave it. But you can neither entertain polyamory nor remain good to someone long enough to foster anything real."

"Ouch!"

"Since I'm not a royal, I can be wild. As a prince, you cannot. Anyhow, you hate sharing. I don't mind. Deep down, you're a serial monogamist who loves aircraft more than the idea of settling down."

Her words hurt. She was right. She wasn't a royal. Her father left the monarchy to marry her other father, and that was that. Leah lived like any "normie." She was

correct about my chequered past, too.

“It’s not my fault. The job is hard on a relationship. Ask Auntie Nat. She’ll tell you the same.”

“Then, what? Do you think you’re going to hit it and quit it? Sweetie, she will be at every social event between now and October. Do you want to deal with her scowl whenever she sees you? Heed my words, back off.”

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Backing Off

INGRID

Duncan hurt more than my pride. He hurt my feelings. I wouldn't say I liked the idea of being thrown overboard. What was a game to him was malicious to me. Swimming around half-naked, even accidentally, felt demoralising when you added to it. Maybe Leah didn't get my added shame, but I wasn't ready to be topless in mixed company. I didn't have her I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude.

"Hey," Lars said.

His face was sweet and gentle. He wasn't being an opportunist as I expected Keir might have been. He brought me a towel and my beer. It was sweet.

"I am sorry for Duncan. He's a fucking idiot."

"Don't need to apologise for him. He does," I said.

Lars sat next to me on the lounge where I'd holed up. "I think he realises now you didn't see the joke."

I wiped away the tears on my face, embarrassed to be crying.

"I'm sorry I got so upset. I was mostly mortified since... you know... my boobs were on full display."

“No one saw anything,” Lars said. “Promise. And no one thinks ill of you.”

“Leah thought I was?—”

“No, she didn’t. She just... she’s Leah. If anything, she used it to inflict some humour into the situation. That’s how she is. She plays court jester and runs before the train to break up the tension. It’s not malice. She generally doesn’t get into spats with the women around here—just us men.”

“I’m not like her. I was completely cut off from society until I was about thirteen. So, there wasn’t anything for me to do.”

“I understand,” Lars said. “I mean, I don’t. My family is fucked up in its way, but... I know Neandia is much more conservative.”

I was raised very Catholic and only recently opened up. My sister and brother-in-law tried to turn our lives from lockdown to open doors. Rick was raised in a very bohemian society with loving parents. We had no living parents and were raised by a tyrant. Even with a bit of sunshine, we Deschamps sisters struggled.

“I am not one of you.”

Lars handed me my beer. “You’re part of the family. If Cici includes you, then you stick.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She’s not like the Americans or the Brits. Believe it or not, she doesn’t make friends with everyone. She likes you because you’re talented and kind.”

“I don’t know if I count as talented.”

“I’d trust her judgement,” Lars said.

I smiled slightly. His gaze was overly familiar. I thought he might kiss me momentarily, but he pulled back.

“Thanks. I’m going to change,” I said.

I stood, taking my beer with me to my stateroom. I disrobed and threw a few options onto the bed, opting for a one-piece with cutouts. It wouldn’t fall off as quickly, and maybe everyone would stop objectifying me. If I could just hide , perhaps the princes would leave me the fuck alone?

I’d never been chased before. I wasn’t the girl who set men ablaze. I was still green, which made it complicated for me. If either of them knew I was a virgin, they’d cut and run fast.

I needed to nip this in the bud. I should tell him my feelings. While most of me wanted them to calm down, I also enjoyed the thought of them chasing me endlessly. I wanted to be wanted.

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Unavoidable

INGRID

Shaking off my funk after the Plank Incident, I steered clear of Duncan and hung out with my girls instead. Dresses were short, makeup was dark, and we all tried to look as utterly scandalous as possible. Our Caribbean holiday presented a rare opportunity to, as Leah said, “slut it up.” With no photographers bothering us, we lived like normies.

Betty and I ran into some boys visiting Aruba from their posh American university on spring break. They had darling accents and were not afraid to flirt. Dancing just to dance was fun. Dancing and being the object of someone’s desire was better. Best of all, it was dancing while being desired by a gorgeous, fit man who would buy you drinks and fawn over you forever.

If there was one thing about the trip I could not complain about, it was the eye candy. Everywhere I looked, there was a fit man. I swam in a sea of beautiful men. My transition from a Catholic private school for girls to showing horses with a troop of women was acceptable, if not predictable. Here, I was like a kid in a sweets shop.

Back on the boat, the chaos continued. We arrived before the men did, but all bets were off once they did. Leah was the table-dancing live wire. She’d led the charge all night, dancing and acting like an idiot.

I wished I had her confidence, if nothing else. She got Duncan and Ollie on their feet. I soon tired of our fun but silly dance, slipping away to the bar just off the main deck,

where I ran into Keir.

“I’m making mojitos. You want one?” He gestured to his supplies.

“Sure.”

I had no idea what a mojito was, but I was drunk, no longer annoyed with him, and appreciating the way his shirt emphasised his incredible shoulders. Even his shoulders did things to me! I wondered what it might be like to wrap my arms around them. Where did that come from?

“You didn’t bring any boys back?” Keir asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Why, you worried about competition?”

“Not at all.”

“I gave an American my number. Might see him tomorrow.”

Keir raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Why waste your time?”

“He was fit and a good kisser.”

“Do you even know what that means?”

I scoffed. “You don’t think I know good kissing from bad?”

“What is your sample size, Ingrid?”

I scowled at him. Why did he need to make me feel bad about my lack of experience?

I'd kissed a few boys. The first was a kid from a neighbouring school who I asked to a class social. His kiss was so wet it reminded me of the slobber from a snaffle bit after hours of working on impulsion drills with my dressage coach. The other was a boy I met at a charity event. I only saw him a couple of times before I was on the road too much.

"You don't know me well enough to judge."

"I know your sister," Keir said. "And she's not wild. Astrid is opinionated, direct, and clever. However, she and Parker are like old married people. Sheltered is how I would label you. But you could learn."

I shook my head. "Sheltered is not me! Alexandra and Astrid were, but I had the most freedom of the four of us. You know nothing about me."

I may have been a virgin and inexperienced, but I knew what felt good. He was being an ass.

"Okay, you're right. For the record, I am not doubting your ability to kiss properly. I am wondering what you deem a good kiss."

I blushed. "You cannot say I know nothing and imply I am a good kisser."

Keir passed me a clear drink garnished with a lime wedge. "No. But you have full lips, and I would bet any money you're fun."

The flushing on my face only heightened. I sipped the drink to avoid thinking about his lips pressed against mine. I tried not to want to find out. It made me tingle to think about—an impulse I'd felt earlier with the American now heightened by Keir's continued flirtation.

“What is a good kiss, Ingrid?”

I stirred my drink. “This is very good, by the way.”

“Oh, she sidesteps the question.”

“No, I... I think it’s about a slow start, then pressure, then just a bit of tongue. And then you ramp it up... more. But it’s not overly forced or intense. It should tease you a bit,” I said. “And not wet like you just got rained on.”

“No, but perhaps it should make you wet like you wouldn’t believe if someone does it right.”

Was he saying what I thought he was? If so, he was vastly overstepping. Either way, I had no words. It made me feel all sorts of things. I got wetter just thinking about him.

“Did you make that for someone?” I gestured to the second drink on the bar, which was now unclaimed.

“Oh, um, yes. Nate,” Keir answered.

“We should get back.”

Keir nodded, nodding that I should lead the way out. I gathered it was so he could look at my ass. And yet, I didn’t much mind. Whether it was the drink or my lack of sexual fulfilment, I gave over to this unavoidable desire to have him lust after me. He could chase me if he wanted. It would only please me more. Whether I gave in was my decision alone.

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Playing Games

KEIR

I 'd riled Ingrid up by talking about a good kiss making her wet. It was low-hanging fruit. She'd changed the subject, but I'd watched her bite her lip and contemplate it. She had the most beautiful little mouth. I'd loved to have taken the time to kiss her properly. I wondered what she could do with those full lips beyond kissing. I watched in agony as her hips swayed with each step on our return trip to the rest of the party.

Things devolved there. Leah was sprawled out, her head in Cici's lap for some reason. I didn't ask. She was too much like her father, my Uncle George, in that she always needed to be the centre of attention. As she was the life of the party, we obliged her.

"Get up, you're taking up too much space," Cici laughed, smacking Leah's arse.

"I'm a bad girl," Leah joked, getting up and flopping down next to Duncan.

"You need to be cut off," I said.

"She called her boyfriend and had phone sex in the car on the way back to the harbour," Betty groaned .

"Betty," Lars sighed, "you know nothing about phone sex, or sex, for that matter."

"Bull-fucking-shit," Leah giggled. "Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit."

Betty giggled.

“But yes, I did get... mildly inappropriate on the phone. I didn’t know anyone could hear me.”

“The beauty of being American is you think no one can hear you, but we all can,” Duncan said.

“I am only half! Same as most of you, I’ll add! People find my accent adorable.”

I snickered. “Leah, when you get bored of being on your PR campaign, let me know.”

“Oh, my publicist has an easy job unless I’m fucking the wrong person at the wrong time.”

“Does anyone mind? Betty is precious,” I said, running around to cover her ears.

“Agreed,” Lars added.

She smacked my hand away. “Stop!”

“And yet you are both thirsting over Princess Ingrid as if she is the second coming. No offence to you, Ingy. You’re downright fuckable, but neither of them can hold back. You realise she’s only two years older than Betty, right?”

Lars and I looked at one another, then Leah. Yes, it was true. That everyone else saw it and Leah called it out was the painful bit. I wanted to riot.

“Oh, stop. She’s right,” Cici said. Isak nodded along. He almost always let her do all the talking.

“I am not a baby! I refuse to accept anyone’s opinions on this matter. They are wrong!” Betty declared.

I sat near Ingrid—the only seat left—as the rest of the party weighed in, arguing in a short moment of distraction. I finally dared to look over at her. Arms crossed, she sat, bothered by the frank, sarcastic talk of our company of unruly and undisciplined soldiers. If these were my men, I’d never have tolerated this.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as chatter continued. “I don’t think of you like that. ”

“So, you think I’m ugly?” She asked, hopping up.

I contemplated my options. I spied Lars distracted. Everyone now cringed over an argument between the Swedes and Leah about whether she lost her virginity at sixteen or eighteen, depending on how you sliced it. I needed to apologise to Ingrid. Leah had a point. I objectified her, and that wasn’t fair. I appreciated her for more than that.

I found her back in the bar, staring at the fixings for another mojito, confused.

I approached her gently, “I don’t think you’re ugly. You’re gorgeous. But... you aren’t an object. I’m trying very, very hard not to objectify you. And I am sorry for the poor impression my family is making right now.”

“You all are too much.”

“I’ll grant you that. It’s hard to come in from outside the family—for anyone.”

She nodded and sniffled.

“Do you want me to make you another? You slammed the first one,” I laughed.

“Can you teach me?” Ingrid asked, her face lighting up.

“It’s not difficult.” I gave her a cheeky grin. “But sure.”

It was about the simplest thing you could make, but she willingly gave me points here.

“You muddle the mint.”

“Muddle? That’s a word ? Like muddling through?”

“Exactly.” I demonstrated.

Ingrid leaned on the bar top, peering to see what I was doing. I attempted to make something straightforward look impressive.

“Next, put sugar in the shaker. Or, since they have simple syrup, we’ll go for that. It’s cheating a bit.”

“What makes the syrup... simple?”

I laughed. “It’s just sugar water.”

“Oh.”

“After that, lime juice and rum.”

I closed the shaker and debated handing it off to her for not-so-innocent reasons, given that I knew she was wearing a dress without a bra. I needed to behave, so I shook the drink momentarily and poured the cocktail over ice.

“And then you just garnish the damn thing. It’s not complicated.”

“I don’t even know how to cut a lime,” Ingrid winced.

“How?” I laughed.

“I wasn’t even allowed near a kitchen growing up. None of us can cook, but Astrid—and that’s only because Parker can.”

I shook my head. “That is no good. You should learn. It’s a life skill.”

Ingrid took the drink, slowly rotating it as if it were something special. She gave me a small smile and said, “Thanks.”

“I owed you for being a real wanker, so yes.”

“You weren’t. Not directly.” She softened.

Ingrid’s overly sweet face tempted me more over time. She looked so damn kissable . There was no looking away from her. She lit up a room.

“So, we’re good?”

“We’re still friends, yeah,” Ingrid said.

“I’d love to be more than that, but I’ll settle for not being sworn enemies.”

She might see Lars as a friend, which was fine, but I didn’t want that. Lars was stuck forever in limbo, and I was not.

Biting her lip, she ran her finger around the rim of the glass.

“You realise what that does to me, don’t you?” I asked.

Ingrid looked right at me and said, “No. What does it do?”

I chuckled nervously, deciding what to say. “Everything, really. You know what you are doing. Although, I still have doubts you’ve ever been kissed properly.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, and you could do it better?”

“I could, yes. I am certain of it.”

Ingrid sipped the drink slowly, then asked, “And if you’re wrong?”

“Then I’ll be mortified. However, I haven’t a doubt I could make you plenty happy.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You like it when I say naughty things, don’t you, Ingrid?”

She bit her lip again. She was craving so much more .

“Of course, I’d like to do much more than kiss you—much, much more.”

I almost did kiss her when we were interrupted.

“You alright?” Betty asked, breaking up our gathering.

Thanks for the cockblock, sister!

Ingrid snapped out of it, clearing her throat. “Oh, me? I’m good. I was getting another drink. Or, rather, Keir was keen to teach me to make one.”

“I tried,” I said, never taking my eyes off Ingrid.

“Well, you’re being rude, Keir,” Betty said, rolling her eyes and grabbing Ingrid.

“Keeping her from the party is bad form.”

Betty pulled Ingrid from me. She was gone for now but never completely out of my grasp.

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A Simple Touch

INGRID

I sat next to Keir on one of the couches on the ship's main deck. Things slowed, calmed more by a fire in the fire pit before us. I was running ragged but couldn't pull myself away from him. After multiple flirtations, I only wanted to throw myself at him. Still, I knew I'd see him a dozen more times this year. Worse, I was friends with his sister. It was a bad idea on many levels.

I gathered Keir was a playboy. If he had me, I'd be a notch in his bedpost. Was that how I saw myself losing my virginity? I didn't think so. Then again, I thought about how he talked to me—the dirty things that spilt out of him—and I longed to have him say even more depraved things to me.

It did not help they packed us onto the couch like sardines, and his hand kept brushing the side of my thigh. I gathered it was no accident. Every time his hand brushed me, a shiver radiated from my core. I wanted to pull him inside and put his hand up my dress. I'd never felt that impulse before, but I needed it.

Who was this man? And why did I find him so irresistible?

"I'm headed to bed," I said. "I'll see you all in the morning."

"Sleep well, love," Leah said .

"Yes, dear. Sleep tight," Cici echoed.

I went into my stateroom. I was lucky not to be sharing. They'd expected me to travel with Astrid, but I ended up in a private room when she couldn't come. I filled a glass of water and sat it by the bed. I tried to focus on chugging it, knowing how crucial it was to me to survive our onshore excursion tomorrow.

However, I was unsettled no matter what I did or how much water I drank. I found myself in the dark, thinking about the man who made me feel things, longing to know what he might do to me. Powerless to resist, I ran my hand down to my knickers, playing with my clit through my panties. They were already wet and had been since this flirtation began.

The feeling of my fingers running over my knickers felt naughty and tempting, but it wasn't where I wanted to end. I pushed my hand inside, exploring my wetness with two fingers. Annoyed with the limits of my thong, I tossed them aside, now free to touch myself however I chose.

I slowly rolled a finger over my clit, thinking about how it might be to have put Keir's hand up my skirt. God, how dirty would I be to let him do that with people about? I bit my lip to the point it nearly hurt. My breathing picked up. I felt a delicious, warm flush reach my chest. It took a little more work than it would with my trusty vibrator, but I was desperate to climax.

I let out a low moan as I hit the perfect spot that made my toes curl. I moved my hand to where my wetness spilt out of my entrance and slid one finger deep inside me. All the while, I thought about what it would feel like to have his fingers inside me—to have his cock deep within. How would it feel to have him enter me?

I didn't know. I knew only how to pleasure myself. I moaned louder as I thrust two fingers inside my centre, feeling the full warmth and wetness of my pussy. I pulled them out, now playing with my clit with my thumb. The slickness only heightened the sensation as my pleasure built.

My fingers dipped inside my pussy again. I tightened around them, feeling myself getting closer and closer. I imagined how good it would feel to have Keir deep inside me—our bodies meeting with every thrust—as I moved my fingers in and out.

Picking up speed, the sound of my hand against my wet pussy became audible. I cared little. It felt so good to give over to pleasure and visualise what it might feel like to have someone inside me—someone who made me feel so deviant and beautiful. I gasped now, the feeling of my orgasm rolling over me.

“Mmmmm.... oh, ouais ,” I moaned.

My pussy tightened and pulsed as I climaxed, my orgasm making my legs quake and fall apart. I lay there, my hand pressed against my centre, looking up at the ceiling of my dark stateroom, totally satisfied. Or, at least, I thought I was. If I was missing something, I didn’t know yet.

“Fuck,” I moaned quietly. “I needed that.”

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Eavesdropping

KEIR

I turned in soon after Ingrid, hoping we'd beat everyone else up in the morning if we got some shut-eye. I wanted to get one-on-one time with her. Everyone was still drinking with no signs of stopping. I blamed Duncan and Leah for whipping everyone up publicly, but more than likely, it was the Danes who were the issue. Crown Princess Edina stayed in town with one of the Swedes and returned after everyone else.

I wandered towards the shared lavatory to clean my teeth. As I did, I heard a noise and stopped. It sounded like someone was hurt. Then, I realised that wasn't it at all. It was a moan . A woman moaning . I made a mental note of who was still above deck. The only person down here was Ingrid.

I debated whether I should go or stay. It was voyeuristic to stick around. The place wasn't well soundproofed. She moaned again—louder. I could hear her panting as I stood outside the door. My cock stiffened, a bad thing given I was wearing sleep bottoms, and it was now very apparent I had a massive hard-on. I shouldn't listen, but I couldn't walk away.

She had to get off because I tortured her. I debated knocking and interrupting. Was it so wrong to offer my services? I set it aside because I knew better. Secretly, I enjoyed listening to her bring herself closer and closer to the point of inevitability, knowing she was fantasising about what I could do to her.

The idea of it made me even hornier. I rubbed my swollen cock over my pants, torturing myself.

“Mmmmm.... oh, ouais ,” Ingrid moaned—all too loudly.

She’d cum. It was a beautiful sound. I’d brought her pleasure even if I never laid a hand on her. Now, all I wanted to do was to be inside her and listen to her scream my name. I knew I could do it if I tried.

“Fuck... I needed that,” she said aloud.

I smiled. She needed a lot more. And I was about to think about that as I dashed to the head. I leaned against the wall over the toilet with one hand, gripping my shaft in the other. I thought about fucking her from behind, my hands gripping her arse hard. Then, in mere seconds, I came, thinking about cumming all over her back. I longed to make a massive mess and then wipe the tip of my dick on her ass. That would be altogether satisfying.

Finished and calm, I turned to my nighttime routine, packed up my shaving kit, and returned to bed.

I woke mid-morning to a quiet ship and headed up on deck. To my surprise, Ingrid sat cross-legged, looking at boats on the horizon, with a sketchpad in her lap. A floppy hat nearly covered her face, shielding her as she drew.

“You draw?” I asked.

Ingrid didn’t turn as she answered. “I do. I spent several years taking art classes at the institute in town after being granted my freedom from my evil grandmother. I’m not terrible, not wonderful.”

“You do it because you love it?”

“Exactly.”

“I feel that way about photography,” I said.

“Really? ”

I nodded. “But no one ever lets me take photos. So, I mostly take pictures out of plane windows. People think I’m odd, I’m sure.”

Ingrid turned to me and giggled. “You are, but that’s fine.”

I smiled. I couldn’t help but adore her laugh. It was only second to the sound of her absolute ecstasy from the night before. I debated telling her I’d heard her. I knew I needed to appreciate this bonding moment and let it go. I wasn’t about to waste this opportunity. She was so natural and free out here drawing the boats.

“I like how you are drawing their sails,” I said.

“The rigging matters, right?”

“Yeah, I think so. It looks good.”

“I did take a creative liberty or two. I drew this little guy aloft.”

I was surprised she knew what aloft meant. That wasn’t a word most non-sailors knew.

“Aloft? Do you sail?”

“I do with Rick,” I said.

Ah, Rick the Prick .

The Prince Consort of Neandia rehabilitated his status over the years, but when he was my age, most of the royal women in Europe dubbed him Rick the Prick. He had a bad reputation for womanising, drinking too much, and behaving like a prick, and it stuck even now. He still competed in summer sailing competitions with his father and brother.

“Do you?” She asked.

“Oh, yes, of course. I go out with my brothers anytime we can.”

“We compete against them,” I heard Lars say.

He was there with two cups of coffee.

“As promised, no sugar, just cream,” Lars sat one mug down next to Ingrid.

I wanted to glare at him but kept my cool. The bastard managed to get up before me? And now he was moving in? Impossible!

“Oh, thanks, Lars,” Ingrid said sweetly.

“Friendly competition,” I added.

“Yes, because we will always win,” Lars countered. “The Norwegian teams are world-class. The Brits cannot keep up. You’ve seen us race, Ingrid. ”

He invoked familiarity now. Lars was better at this than I anticipated.

“And yet I’ve beaten you,” I said. “Cute, that.”

Over her coffee, Ingrid asked, “How is it then... growing up under one roof as enemies?”

After she took a long sip, Lars and I stared at one another, unsure what to say.

“We are friends,” Lars said. “But there is always a healthy competition.”

“The twins are closer to the Norsk family,” I said. “They grew up in Oslo with Mamma. Then, there is Betty.”

“Betty is the one we all love most of all,” Lars admitted. “She’s our mascot, Pappa says. She’s the one who brought us together in a way we never anticipated.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because his father got mom pregnant when I was twelve,” I groaned. “And then we were all stuck together.”

“They were engaged when it happened, Keir. C’mon,” Lars said in Norsk.

Technically, it was true, but I wouldn't say I liked it. I hated feeling that a man I'd considered to be an excellent friend of the family moved in on my mother, Sanne, after Dad died. I still missed my father every day. While Lars's father, Peder, was a good man and always stood by us, I'd never quite gotten over how the whole thing went down.

“Betty is a doll, and I’m not casting stones about unplanned pregnancies.”

Ingrid understood that much. The word for engaged in Norwegian and Lundhansk

was the same. The more I learned of her, the more drawn I became to this clever woman.

“She is,” I agreed. “And Peder continued to teach me to sail after Dad passed away. He got Nate and me out of a massive slump. We owe him lots of gratitude.”

“Pappa loves them, too,” Lars said. “But no one loves everyone as much as Sanne.”

“Not even your mother?” Ingrid laughed.

“Nei,” we chuckled in unison .

“My mother is a fucking nightmare,” Lars said. “Sanne is a patient angel in comparison. And her mother took me as a grandson. Sanne is the best stepmother I could ask for.”

“You have good families. That is nice,” Ingrid said, focusing again on her drawing.

“I forget,” I said. “You don’t have any living parents. I’m sorry if?—”

Ingrid looked over at me, then patted my knee. “It’s okay. I appreciate you thinking about it, but I don’t remember ever having parents. It’s much harder for Asti and Alex. I’m grateful for my sisters and Rick. They’re always there for me. Cici’s parents are close to becoming extended family. You all are wonderfully warm.”

“Funny to ever hear anyone say that about Norwegians.” I joked.

“Not really,” Lars said. “You are too kind. Much like my aunt.”

“Kiersten?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Warm, bubbly, clever.”

Ingrid gave me complete eye contact. “Clever? No one has ever called me that.”

I smiled. “Yeah, clever, of course. It’s a shame no one says that. You’re quite witty and smart to pick up on things.”

Ingrid blushed and turned back to her drawing. She said nothing, but her reaction said everything. I was winning her over. Indeed, she already won me over. It wasn’t the big blue eyes. It wasn’t the complete look of her. It was the comebacks, the willingness to make me uncomfortable, and now this—her artistic vulnerability.

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Competition

INGRID

“ I ’ll give you my number in case we can’t link up. I trust you more than the others to be responsible,” Keir said. “If something changes or you need help, text me.”

I thought Keir’s motives were probably more dubious than practical, but I relished the idea of him feeling superior for having his number in my phone—as if it were an exclusive club. I unlocked it and handed it over to him.

“Here. If you think I’m responsible, that’s cute.”

He sniggered. “More responsible.”

Keir passed my phone back, having sent himself a text. I read it.

KEIR

Hey, sexy

I rolled my eyes. “You’re a child.”

“Perhaps, but you still can’t quit me. Admit it.”

“We’re pushing off. Everyone good?” Cici called out.

Our party was packed like sardines into two tenders about to go ashore .

“I think we’re good,” Lars called back from the other side of the boat.

I couldn’t deny there was something there any longer. Lars tried so hard in some perceived row with Keir to jockey for my affections. He was sweet and oh-so-accommodating. Lars was less aggressive than Keir in his attempts to woo me. Keir wasn’t hiding it, and while no Norwegian man would ever admit to hitting on you, Lars was trying very hard to convert me to his side.

I should have hated it. On paper, the idea of being an object two men sparred over didn’t appeal. In reality, I was flattered and found it hot. Last night, I’d been all about Keir. This morning, I had one of my regular chats with Lars. He’d brought me coffee and been overall darling. So, there was more in the mix now.

Keir threw his weight around in quite a fabulous display of hubris. He stretched to put his arm around me as the boat sped along. It lurched, sending me into him. I didn’t mind that he caught me. I longed for it to happen again. I looked up to see if he was staring at me. Instead, he stared at Lars with a “back off” look across the boat. Lars looked about to lose it.

Once we made it to shore, Lars approached. “Here we split. If you need anything, you have my number.”

Nearby, Keir loomed with a look of derision.

“Yep. I’ve got it,” I answered. “And Keir’s too. If I need anything, I will shoot you a group text?”

Crickets. I played dumb, lapping up everything I did to them. Each looked dissatisfied in a way I found delicious.

I had no time to watch things percolate, though. The women took lunch at a five-star resort before hitting the spa while the boys did fun, slightly dangerous things. I preferred fun to spa but also didn't want to head out with a bunch of men on quad bikes through the rainforest. If Astrid, Odette, and Alex were here, they'd roll their eyes at my wild reticence. They loved a spa day.

"Hello, gorgeous," Leah said, draping her arm around my neck.

As drunk as she got the night before, I was impressed she was upright. "Are you having fun torturing them both?"

She was onto me .

I shook my head. "I am torturing no one. Men are stupid and do it to themselves."

"I commend you. It's almost ridiculous that two men in their thirties are about to throw punches over who gave you his cell number first. I apologise for them both."

"It's fine. I am enjoying it a bit. Although I worry, they're both about to get hurt."

"Oh, the lady rejects all the men?"

I shrugged.

"Far be it from me to cockblock them, but this is a fishbowl."

Leah was older and wiser. Her words held the same wisdom Alexandra or Astrid would have passed down. Don't shit where you eat, right? I was bound to see both these men—often simultaneously—over the next six months. Whether I relished the idea of a fling or not was secondary to my circumstances. If I shagged one of them, I'd have to deal with both of them. It wasn't worth it.

“I know. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” I laughed it off as if I never once considered it.

I would heed Leah’s advice and let this go. It was a fine game, but letting it go beyond that was playing with matches.

Mouse Meet Cat

KEIR

I tried to spend even a moment with Ingrid all night to no avail. Lars wasn't the top challenger I feared. That was fucking Leah. Wherever I went, she acted like a fence, preventing me from saying anything to the object of my affection. Meanwhile, Ingrid remained a foot out of reach, looking gorgeous in some slinky dress I'd love to throw to the floor.

"What is your deal, Leah?" I asked. "And don't tell me you've thrown your hat in the ring because I swear to God, Natalie?—"

"You can stop invoking my given name right now. I agreed to fucking monogamy with the boyfriend so you can calm down," Leah agreed. "It's not that. You do realise that is not how any of this works, right? Get your head out of straight-man sapphic fantasy land, bro. Also, she's hot but young. I don't want to teach her everything. And all of that matters not because I'm convinced that girlfriend is straight as a board."

I backed off.

"I'm cockblocking the both of you because you're acting like randy high schoolers trying to get her to go to prom with you. One, it's absolutely fucking ridiculous. Two, it will threaten everyone's peace when punches are thrown when this blows up. I won't have that at Cici's wedding."

I grumbled, “We’re more mature than that, Leah.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“It’s true!”

“That’s why you got into a fistfight with Ollie two years ago over a game of Monopoly?”

“He fucking started it!”

Ollie threw the first punch. I may have deserved his ire after embezzling money out of the bank to fuck with him. But it was just a game, right?

She rolled her eyes. “Leave her be.”

I wanted to believe it was a terrible idea. Yet, I also had yet to even look at anyone but Ingrid. The fact that I couldn’t have her only tempted me more. I wanted her. I would have her—even if I couldn’t talk about it. Deep down, I knew she wanted me, too.

Leah left, and I returned to the bar to drown my sorrows alone. By this point, I was annoyed with everyone. To my surprise, Ingrid joined me.

“Oh, hello,” I said. “You want a beer?”

“Don’t act like you didn’t want me to follow you here.” She was suddenly direct. “And don’t pout. I don’t fancy it.”

I chuckled. “Oh, darling, I never pout. Promise.”

“Hand me a beer, please.”

I obliged her, popping it open and handing it over. She took it, then took a long swig, staring straight at me like she had earlier. It was those eyes . Her gaze seared into me. Some sort of electricity always washed over me. She was petite and sweet, but that look was powerful. It lit a fire under me to do more.

“What do you want?” Ingrid asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Liar, liar.”

“Okay, I want you. Or rather, I want to make you scream.”

She bit her lip and moved closer. “What makes you think I would do that? Or that you could get me there? ”

“I heard you last night. Last night, when you got yourself off. I heard you lose it. I know I did that to you, even if you dispute it.”

She looked horrified. I’d frightened her, thinking it might excite her. Instead, she stepped back and crossed her arms, not disputing my accusation. Then, she set her jaw, determined. Maybe whatever guilt she’d first felt was rolling off?

“Why are you so cruel to me?”

“Cruel?”

She stepped forward, back to where she stood before.

“Yes. You say these things to get a rise out of me.”

“You like it when I am cruel. It gets you off,” I said, perhaps too defiantly.

She stepped closer now, nostrils flaring. “Do you think you’re the only man in the universe I think about?”

The urge to kiss her overwhelmed me. I wanted to kiss the defiant smirk off her face. I longed to make her melt even if she swore, I was of no interest to her. I knew otherwise.

“I think last night, I got you flustered. You couldn’t help yourself.”

She looked up at me, her chest rising and falling quickly. I took a chance, leaning down to kiss her. I cupped her face in my hand and grazed her mouth with mine. To my surprise, she reacted by wrapping her arms around my neck, hips thrust against me. Before I did anything more, I needed to confirm she was as excited about this as I thought.

“So, Princess, too wet?”

Her face flushed red. She wasn’t thinking back to her fable about kissing.

“The kiss,” I said. “Too wet? Just right?”

Ingrid turned her head, looking overwhelmed. My hand remained on her back possessively, but our bodies began to part. She didn’t want to admit it was good for some reason. I wanted to curse Leah for intervening until something changed. Then, Ingrid turned back.

She was close enough to kiss me again. Grabbing my shirt collar, Ingrid said, “You’d

like to fuck me, wouldn't you?"

Yes, of course ! Saying that wouldn't square with this little game we were playing. So, instead, I said, "Depends. Are you fun?"

I wanted her to bite her lip the way she had earlier. She leaned closer. I leaned down, our noses almost grazing. I wanted her to kiss me . I favoured assertion over aggression. I only wanted her if she wanted me. The ball remained with her.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Ingrid whispered, then pulled back.

I watched her leave, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She knew what she was doing. She was torturing me.

Touché, princess .

Weakness

INGRID

I turned in for the night, pacing in my stateroom. I'd tortured Keir. Or was he torturing me? Was it mutual? I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't help but worry I'd get burned. And what did I even know?

I was flattered by a man who had a decade on me, was much more experienced, and would probably bore of me in five minutes. Still, that was why I was flattered. This gorgeous man who could have anyone wanted me. He was even willing to blow things up to make it possible. At the same time, if he did bore of me—and I was sure he would—why would it even matter? We could remain friendly and get this out of our systems, right?

I debated it. Could I lose my virginity to a sexy, fit prince? I'd be stupid to tell him no, right? Or was it wasting something prized and special? The virginity myth was nonsense, but shouldn't a first time mean something ? Was it enough to feel good ?

Fuck. What was I doing?

Climbing into bed, I pulled my covers up over my head as if they would protect me from dirty thoughts and itchy fingers. I wanted to text him. I tried to booty call this man. Who was I? Put on a ship with a bunch of hot men, my resistance dwindled!

I pulled my phone off the charger and texted him.

ME

You up?

KEIR

Hello, Ingrid. Are you bored already?

ME

Depends

KEIR

My interest depends on your interest.

I rolled my eyes.

ME

Do you want to fuck me or not?

KEIR

Suddenly, you want me?

ME

Do you want me?

My interest declines over time.

He typed, stopped, and again typed.

KEIR

I am trying to come up with something sexy to say.

I thought of something sexy to say

ME

It's fine. Your words can fail you. I can think of a dozen other things your mouth could do other than speak.

I could... a bit. I figured he probably knew a few more than I did.

Who was this woman? How did she even know how to say these dirty things?

KEIR

I could say the same.

ME

Do you want me or not?

KEIR

I need to let people settle if we're going to get away with this.

Gimme a sec

I smiled at my attempt to drive the man crazy. Then, I panicked. Was I even prepared for a man to come to my room? How did you prepare for that? I had no time to ask anyone for advice. I wasn't exactly in sexy clothing—an old competition T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Would it be better if I was naked? Or would that look desperate?

I debated when my door opened, and Keir poked his head in. He didn't bother knocking, probably to avoid making noise. Not that it would matter. If we started fucking, we would probably make too much noise to ignore, right? He looked at me eagerly, even as I sat awkwardly in bed.

"I'm not exactly dressed sexy," I said.

"You're fine. You'll probably be naked in a few minutes," Keir tossed his shirt aside and climbed into bed.

I never got over how good his chest looked. He was fit.

"Don't be so confident," I said. "You think highly of yourself."

Keir grazed my face with his open palm, cupping my cheek for a moment, then laced his fingers through my hair. Slowly, he pulled me in for a kiss. Our lips pressed together gently at first. Then, the pressure increased as my lips parted. Our tongues tangled, and my breathing picked up. He gripped my hair tighter, and I liked it. I played into the fantasy of him owning me, but only because I was getting off on it.

Keir pulled back, "Too wet or not?"

"You can get too wet?" I asked. I was wet. I had been since he said he caught me .

He chuckled, "The kiss, Ingrid. Last night, you said it could be too wet. But you? I don't think you could get too wet."

He let go of my hair and ran his hand down my cheek, stopping to brush my lips with his thumb. I didn't know why that appealed, but it felt good.

"Are you wet, Ingrid?"

"You'll have to find out."

I watched his face as I threw my shirt to the floor. Let him kiss me again, one of his hands playing with my bare nipple. I'd fooled around before, but it never felt so good.

"That feels... keep doing that," I moaned.

Keir chuckled and kissed my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. I lay back, knowing what I wanted. He kissed his way down my torso, sucking on each nipple. It was as if he was giving every inch of my body attention as I'd never felt before.

With each movement, he checked back in with me. It wasn't forced or nervous, though. Keir parted my legs and slid his body between my thighs. He leaned over me, looking down. I silently stared up at him. I wanted to lose it, just feeling his cock rubbing against my pelvis.

"You're so fucking beautiful when you do that," Keir said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"Bite your lip. You're fucking gorgeous. It drives me mad, Ingrid."

He kissed me again. I ran my hands through his wavy strawberry-blonde hair and luxuriated in his body pressed against mine. He was so warm and adoring. I expected something else—something rough or hungry. I thought that was fine, but this was better. There was a hunger and a craving, but it was coupled with tenderness. He

wanted me to enjoy this even more than he wanted to. That was sexy.

I ground against him, torturing myself. My hips had a mind of their own leading the charge now. I moaned into his mouth.

“Oh, she is impatient. Look at that,” Keir said. “Too bad those shorts are in the way. Let’s take them off.”

He pulled on the waistband of my shorts, not dropping my gaze. I shimmied out of them, still staring at him. His uninterrupted stare made my palms sweat. He finally pulled back, helping me toss my knickers and shorts aside. Now, I was naked and vulnerable. Yet, I wasn’t worried. I trusted he wasn’t going to hurt me or insult me. He made me feel sexy and adored. I was all he wanted right now.

I didn’t know what to expect, but I didn’t fear the “what next” of it. Keir kept me at ease, slowly sliding his fingers over my clit. I tried to be quiet, but a low moan passed through my lips. Watching him watching me only made this hotter.

“I’m sorry. I’m not... quiet,” I said, breathless.

“I’m not. I want to hear what I do to you. How badly you want this. You’re beautiful, Ingrid.”

Beautiful . He repeated it. Did he think it, or was this pillow talk? I didn’t care either way. He could call me beautiful, gorgeous, sexy, and all manner of things until he was blue in the face, and I would eat it up. This handsome, tall, sexy man found me desirable. In my little, inexperienced mind, that was everything.

I expected him to come back up to me and kiss me. Instead, he pulled back and paused.

“You still want to...” my words left me. I was suddenly worried he’d changed his mind.

“Fuck you?” He asked. “Yes, I do. If you do?”

I’m lying naked in front of you, so please, yes! He was the first man to see me naked. I’d never been so vulnerable, but Keir neither knew that nor needed to. It was fine.

I nodded.

“I need you to say it, Ingrid.”

“I want you to,” I said, voice quiet. “If you want to.”

“Very much. Do you have any condoms?”

I went deer-in-headlights. I didn’t. I hadn’t planned to hook up with anyone. I didn’t even own condoms—something Astrid chided me on. She told me they were necessary for much more than just preventing pregnancy. I knew that was true. I was also very, very horny and didn’t want to give up on this dream.

“I’ve got an IUD,” I said.

That was Astrid’s idea before I left Neandia to sort out my life. I felt so special going to the posh gynaecologist with Alexandra one morning. She got hers taken out, and I got mine put in. Since then, Alexandra had fallen pregnant, and I’d gotten zero chance even to see a man naked. Well, until this moment, as I sat propped on my elbows, thirsting over Keir’s tan skin and incredible abs. Initially, I regretted the device due to the pain it caused, but it came in handy right about now.

“That’s fine, but... it takes two. I’ll get a condom,” Keir said, leaning back down to

kiss me. “Don’t worry.”

He pulled his shirt back on and darted into the hallway like he knew what he was doing. Suddenly, the guilt was creeping in. What if he thought I was terrible? What if I was so unremarkable he never spoke to me again? Somehow, that was worse than the alternative of him hating me. At least if he hated me, he would remember me.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:25 am

Playing with Fire

KEIR

“That was quick!” Nate murmured, still on his mobile, watching football highlights as I returned to our stateroom.

“I’m just here for protection. Nothing more.”

“Oh, look at you being responsible!”

“Shut up,” I groaned.

“Me? I’m not the problem here.”

You could hear very little over the sound of someone going at it down the hall.

“Who is it, though?” Nate asked.

“It’s Edina,” I sighed. “She brought that Australian back, and I think they’ve been below deck most of the time.”

“How do you?—”

He stopped himself. I patted my brother on the shoulder and turned. Edina was an okay lay, but she was too needy. She was the type of girl who’d swear she wasn’t looking for anything serious but would want you to cover her with words of devotion

for the next twenty-four hours—all while giving you nothing in return. Then, she'd tire of you and move on. I wouldn't say I liked feeling simultaneously suffocated and used .

I tried not to think about Edina as I returned to Ingrid's room. I didn't care if Nate knew. I couldn't just disappear without him knowing I merely needed to keep it under wraps from Lars. I wasn't trying to ruin Cici's wedding with a row with my stepbrother.

I ducked back into Ingrid's room. She was still waiting for me. Of course, in dealing with the sounds of Edina and the Australian and talking to my brother, my erection disappeared. I needed a moment to harden back up. But, given how lovely Ingrid looked lying there naked, I didn't think it would take too long.

“Sorry. I should have brought one with me, to begin with, but I didn't want to be presumptuous.”

I tossed my shorts and pants aside, threw the sleeve of condoms on the table, and crawled back into bed with Ingrid.

“You think we're going through all of those?” She laughed.

I chuckled. “Well, I needed redundancy built in. Of course, if we used them all, we would both be very sore in the morning.”

I lay there on my side, taking in every inch of her once more. Ingrid turned to me. Her lips met mine, and we kissed again. She was a fantastic kisser. I was only sorry she had such bad experiences with men who couldn't do her justice. She smelled like honey and flowers. I loved to run my finger through her cornsilk-coloured hair and pull it just slightly. In return, her teeth grazed my lip with anticipation.

I ran my hand down to her breast, stroking her nipple gently. She almost fluttered as I rolled it between my thumb and forefinger. Then, she pulled away from my kiss, whimpered, and looked down at my fingers at work. Ingrid had beautiful, soft, full breasts and perfect pink nipples. I would have gladly kept playing with them, but she seemed intent on moving the ball forward.

Ingrid reached down to play with my cock, as if curious at first. She ran her thumb over the head, then slowly stroked down my shaft. By now, I was plenty hard again. Having her naked body pressed against mine turned me on like a switch.

“You like it?” I asked.

Ingrid looked me in the eye, still gently stroking my cock.

“It’s... nice.”

“What? Not what you expected? ”

“No,” she giggled. “No. I’m sorry. It’s...”

“What?”

“It’s a lot bigger than I expected,” Ingrid admitted. “I thought the tale about tall guys and big feet was an utter myth.”

“Size isn’t everything, I’m sure, but what can I do?”

I wasn’t legendary. I wasn’t small, either. I was a grower, not a shower. Maybe she thought the outline of my flaccid dick was all she could expect? Either way, I hoped she’d return to seriousness again before I felt embarrassed.

“Sorry, it’s lovely,” Ingrid said. “Is it odd if I say you have a beautiful cock?”

“No,” I snickered. “You can say whatever you want about it as long as you admire it.”

I tried not to moan as she tightened her grip around my shaft. She looked down, watching her hand pump up and down as precum began to lace the head of my cock. I knew I needed to put a condom on fast, if only so I didn’t let her keep doing this. Her grip felt fabulous.

“I think it’s time for a condom,” I said, rolling towards the nightstand.

She let me go, lying again flat on the bed, head still on the pillows. I rolled the condom over the head and down my shaft, once more feasting on the sight of her. She watched everything I did as if studying me. That was how she was—always looking at people with great awareness. It was some impressive intelligence.

I wanted to shake her out of that, so I pulled her down the bed by the ankles. I parted her legs until I was in between her thighs once more. I looked down at her face, stunned. With a satisfied smile, I leaned in to kiss her. She reacted by running her hand down my back, digging her nails in as I pressed the tip of my cock against her very wet entrance. She was slick and more than ready.

“You want me inside you then?”

She nodded.

“I need to hear you say it, Ingrid.”

Breathless, she complied. “Yes, I want you... inside me.”

I slowly slid inside her tight pussy, spreading her out slowly at first. I watched her face as I thrust gently. She gave over to me, digging her nails into my lower back. She flushed as I picked up steam, slowly rolling into her with one thrust and then another. She smiled up at me now, satisfied. That was what I wanted.

“You like that?” I asked.

“You feel so good,” Ingrid whispered.

I kissed her. “You feel amazing. Smooth like silk. So warm and sweet.”

“God, don’t stop,” she moaned.

“Say it in French,” I whispered.

“ Baise-moi ,” she moaned. “Fuck me. Please. Plus fort .”

The mixture of English and French worked. She wanted me to pound her harder? I could do that. I put her feet on my shoulders, picking up a good rhythm. It enhanced her pleasure while delivering more sights and sounds for me. Her tits bounced everywhere as she gripped onto the pillows behind her for dear life.

She tensed more and more around me. I watched, enrapt, as her toes curled, and her nostrils flared. She was about to climax. Maintaining a grip on her right leg with my left arm, I dropped my right arm to play with her swollen and soaked clit. I had no trouble dialling her up to eleven with only a few strokes. She moaned louder, then growled.

“ Ouais ! Yes! More!”

I stroked her pussy faster and pumped harder. She gave over to the orgasm, eyes

rolling back into her head. Her legs shuddered.

“Oh, fuck!”

I couldn't help but smile. Her whole chest and face were read. She panted like she'd just run a marathon. She was spent.

“Good?” I asked.

“Yes, Keir. Ouais .”

“The only thing is, I thought you might throw me a bone and scream my name,” I sighed, playing it cool.

“Well, you have more chances to get it right, yes?” Ingrid asked.

She bit her lip as if summoning me back down to kiss her. I couldn't resist. I slowly ground into her as our lips met, pulling her hair at the roots like before. She moaned every time I went in deep, as if desperate to have all of me inside her. It was satisfying to feel her fall apart. This was heaven. I knew I shouldn't play with fire lest we all get burned, but damn she was electric. Who was I to hold back?

Seeing Red

INGRID

Keir took his time to warm me up, slowly thrusting before giving me what I asked for— more, harder, faster. While I'd worried I'd be in pain, I felt little beyond a short tinge the moment when he entered me. I'd had one fantastic orgasm with my feet on his shoulders. It'd been curtains as soon as he touched my clit. Now, I felt like I could go again anytime as he slowly pumped in and out of me.

It wasn't just the way his cock made me feel, either. It was how attentive he was. He pressed my arms behind my head, taking his time to ensure I enjoyed it. I sensed he'd pull right back at the slightest discomfort. For a man who'd been drinking since noon, his reaction time was good.

"More, please, harder," I moaned. "Deeper."

He gave it all to me, now dropping my hands to pin my hips to the bed. He thrust in and out so hard and fast that an audible slap could be heard at each interval. While that noise should have disturbed me, I only felt sheer pleasure. Every thrust tickled a part of me. My fingers never reached. It sent shivers down my spine and made me claw at the covers for dear life .

"Oh, fuck, oh mon dieu !" I cried out. I was so close. The tell-tale itch crept up my nose as if I might sneeze.

"God won't save you, Ingrid," Keir said.

“Oh, Keir, ouais, ouais! Ne t'arrête pas !”

He let me cum again, listening to me cry out with great satisfaction and delayed his happiness for me. He proceeded, happy to have satiated me. I was his to take now. Still thrusting, he continued with renewed purpose until he tensed. Then, he groaned and grabbed my hips for dear life. He landed with his forehead pressed to mine for a moment, panting.

We were both delighted, sweaty, and messy. For a moment, I felt like a goddess—the one who managed to do all that. As I lay there, I soaked up how it was to be desired, wanted, and cared for. I had done it. I was no longer so green! I had sex with a fit man with a beautiful cock, and it felt terrific! It wasn't scary or intimidating.

Yet, when he said nothing, I looked down to see him staring down at my pussy as if something was wrong. Then, I saw red—bright red blood.

“Oh shit,” I panicked, sitting up and pulling myself back across the bed.

“It's okay. You just started your period, I think. I've never... It's really red. I... are you alright, or did I hurt you?”

He was right. It didn't look like period blood because it wasn't. I'd figured as long as I'd been pleasuring myself and riding horses, there was no way I'd still have a hymen—at least not enough of one to cause this much trouble.

“You didn't hurt me,” I said. “Promise. I... I think you finished off my hymen, so... it's not my period, and I am sorry.”

“Your hymen,” Keir laughed. “You're so funny, Ingrid!”

“No, I'm... I'm serious, Keir,” I said.

I pulled my legs to my chest as he wrestled a towel from the small wardrobe that held linens to the side of the en suite.

“It’s convenient you have a toilet. We didn’t get a loo or anything. You women got the better rooms,” he said.

Mortified, I began to mop the blood off of myself and then the bed. This was Edina’s yacht—not mine! And she’d be horrified to find out I’d bled all over the bed, right?

“Edina’s going to kill me,” I murmured.

“She won’t care. The staff will fix it tomorrow. And you don’t have to lie. It’s okay. I know periods exist. You don’t have to lie to me. I’m?—”

“I’m not,” I said, my voice wavering. I fought tears. His doubts somehow made me feel worse.

Keir pulled his boxers back on and stopped to stare at me.

“Did I really hurt you?”

“I told you what is going on!” I said. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“Oh, shit. Really?” I guess he did now.

Suddenly, I waited for him to blow up or get all weird. Instead, he took a minute, scratched his head, and shrugged. “Well, I hope I lived up to expectations and was patient enough. You could have given me a heads up, Ingrid.”

“Why, so you could run away screaming? I didn’t owe you shit.”

“I guess you didn’t. But thanks for telling me. I’m sorry if it was bad or?—”

“Stop, please. It was amazing, and I’d like you not to fucking ruin it now.”

I wanted him to assure me, but he didn’t. He ignored me as he filed through the cupboard.

“Ah, new sheets!”

Instead of ignoring me, Keir focused on fixing things.

Keir gestured. “Get up. I’ll take care of this. You do whatever.”

“What do you mean?”

I don’t know why I asked. As soon as I was off the bed, he was stripping the sheets and going to work.

“Can you get dressed enough to grab a first aid kit from the galley?” Keir asked.

“Sure,” I agreed. “Just... give me a sec.”

I pulled on clothes, secured a pad in my underwear to catch whatever annoying blood was left, and rushed down to the galley. Returning with a first aid kit, I watched Keir neatly folding the discarded sheets. Who did that? Why was he doing this? He wasn’t fussed, just fastidious.

“Find the thing of hydrogen peroxide,” Keir said. “Then put some on the bed and dab it with a washcloth. It will come right out.”

I did as he asked, dabbing the small stain from the mattress protector covering the

bed. I was impressed.

“It will get blood out of anything white,” Keir said. “That includes a bed, I figured. But for me, it’s more parts of a dress uniform if you manage to cut yourself shaving but don’t discover it until after.”

I snickered.

“I hate shaving,” Keir sighed. “Oh well, I do it.”

“Thanks for helping. You don’t need to stay.”

“Are you not a cuddler?”

“I could be. But... I don’t know.”

“You really don’t know?” Keir shook his head. “God, you are so fucking lucky.”

“Why?”

“Because when I lost my virginity, I had no idea what I was doing. You held everything there—every bit of power—and never once let on that you had no idea what you were doing.”

I glared. “Keir, I knew exactly what I was doing. You got yours. Are there complaints?”

“No, ma’am,” he chuckled. “No complaints. Did I... I hope I haven’t fucked this all up?”

“No.” I tossed the washcloth aside and kissed him slowly. “You’re good. Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being so fucking good at whatever it was we just did. And for caring for me in the aftermath rather than leaving me in a shame spiral.”

“You should know I don’t leave people behind, Ingrid. I’m also a legendary cuddler. I have my self-interest here,” Keir said.

The Morning After

KEIR

I woke to the gentle rock of the yacht and my phone buzzing beside me. I turned and saw Ingrid stretched diagonally across the bed, her legs wrapped in mine and facing the opposite wall. I left her to sleep and rolled out of bed. Turning off my alarm, I pieced myself together as best I could, putting my shirt back on. Last night had been a wild fever dream punctuated by sex I'd like to remember and a bit of ridiculousness in the cleanup phase.

I padded back to my room and changed into some fresh clothes. Nate was still asleep. This was all according to plan. I'd be exhausted and hungover but hoped I could avoid getting into it with Lars on our last day at sea. Tomorrow, we'd head back to Europe and out of paradise. While I had nothing but an amazing go with Ingrid, I wasn't about to start a family war over it if it could be avoided. I wasn't a dunce.

I decided to do a HIIT routine on the main deck and was still planking when Leah came out, holding a book. She pretended like she might sit on my back before giggling and falling onto the couch.

"How the fuck are you awake right now?" I asked her .

"I went to bed and put in earplugs to drown out the sound of people fucking. And you? Did you have the foresight to do the same?"

I came up from a burpee, unsure what to say. Maybe Edina's wailing had given us

cover? That would be an unexpected turn of events. I expected Lars might be blissfully unaware of me sleeping with Ingrid, but I expected better from Leah. She always just knew things.

“What?” Leah took my slow response as an invitation to ask questions.

“Uh... nothing. Just... slept.”

“No, I don’t buy it. Did you...?”

She didn’t have to say the words. I shrugged.

“God damn it, Keir!” She threw her book down

“What?” I shook my head. “What?”

“You are a beautiful, stupid human, you know that? It’s going to cause panic.”

“It won’t if little Miss Gossip doesn’t say anything about it,” I told her. “No one caught us. You and Nate know. That’s it.”

“She’s besties with your sister and Cici! Everyone will know soon enough.”

“Yes, but the women of this family are much better at using their brains and keeping secrets, yeah?”

“No, we’re just not idiotic people who are ruled by their genitals.”

“Oh, Leah, you should talk!”

She glared at me. “Being bisexual doesn’t make me some sort of super-sexed

animal.”

“No, that’s not it. You have the libido of a sixteen-year-old boy. You’ve been mercilessly letting everyone around you know about it since before I could legally drive.”

Leah chuckled. “Fair. But straight people can be the same way. Duncan is just as bad. I have no shame. I don’t regret anything, either.”

“I know,” I smiled.

“And yet, you’re out here doing serious manly aggro things? So, it was no good?”

“You are so fucking curious. God, Leah, can anyone not ask?”

“Me? No. I must know everything. I’m too invested. I told her not to fuck you. ”

“Excuse me?”

“I am keeping the peace for the sake of Cecilia and her sister. Astrid’s wedding will be massive, too, and we’ll all have to go to Neandia for it. Well, maybe not me. But you will. I am unwilling to pick up the pieces you leave behind.”

I grumbled.

“What? Is she that bad? Cold fish? I guess she could get away with it being as hot?—”

“No, Leah. Jesus Christ. She’s not,” I sighed. “I’m trying to shake it off, though, and keep myself on the right track so I don’t cock it all up, okay? No, she was… wow.”

“The chemistry with you two is too much. I’m not surprised, just annoyed. Lars will be heartbroken because she is a kind soul, and he likes chatting with her. You know how shy he can be. It’s not easy for him like it is for you.”

“I can be shy, too!” I protested.

She rolled her eyes, “No, you can’t. You’ve never been. Neither of us knows the word.”

“I could be.”

“You could also be the PM, but you’re not.” Leah poked my chest. “You aren’t a wallflower like Lars, Mr Sexy Pilot. And while I cannot see the two of them ever working, she doesn’t end up with you, either.”

I crossed my arms. “And why not?”

“You sleep with her once, and here we go? The next time someone makes a U-Haul Lesbians joke about Lourdes and me, I will send them your way, Keir Robert!”

“I don’t mean it like that. I meant, theoretically.”

“Women aren’t theoretical. And I know she’s some sort of wet dream of yours—blonde, short, perky, a big ass—but like... she’s a sweet girl. And I think we all scare the shit out of her.”

“Give her more credit than that, Leah. Just because you don’t like her?—”

Leah shook her head. “Keir, I do like her. She’s funny and clever. I appreciate her ability to take all you men down a peg. But she’s young and ambitious. She is not the type of girl who’s going to wait around for you as you zig through the sky like a

human crash test dummy. With her legs and ass, she doesn't need to."

I knew Leah was right about all of that, but I didn't want to give up on the fact that maybe this could be not permanent but more regular.

"I was thinking a summer thing could be good?"

"What? So, you can anger Lars? The thing you said you didn't want to do?" Leah asked. "You need to figure out what you want and what you're willing to do. My advice? It was a hot hookup. Time to walk away."

While I suspected that was all it was yesterday, I couldn't help but think about how excellent Ingrid was. I couldn't ignore the way she made me feel or how electric it felt to kiss her. It wasn't just the look of her. It was her smell, her taste, and the sound of her climax that sent me over the edge. I was drawn to her. I wanted her—and I didn't want last night to be the end of it.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:25 am

Let Down Gently

INGRID

Everyone took their time waking up on the last full day of the trip—everyone but Keir and Leah, who'd already managed to work out on deck before anyone else even opened their eyes. I was mostly sad to hear I'd not been there to watch. I couldn't stop staring at him. It was a problem. I tried hard to play it cool, but I was lousy at acting like he wasn't a gorgeous, statuesque man who could melt me with little more than the stroke of his fingers.

And even after the chaos of last night, he'd only grown on me. He'd respected me, cared for me, and held me. My news took him by surprise but didn't turn him off. Our world hadn't imploded overnight like I'd feared. Instead, we packed out for a Jeep safari to a waterfall. Unfortunately, in my attempt to be "cool" or "chill", I'd ended up in a car with Lars, Betty, and Ollie. Betty was insistent she wouldn't go with any of the couples and was afraid of letting her eldest brother drive. I was also avoiding Keir, so I hung back with her.

"Don't put me back here! The backseat makes me nervous!" Betty said as we mounted up.

"I'll sit back here if you want to hop up front," I agreed.

"Ollie's driving," Lars said in Norwegian .

"Damn straight. Because I don't drive like an old woman," Ollie said in English.

I giggled but soon found myself in the backseat with Lars on an incredibly rough road. To say it was awkward was an underestimation. I lurched around, Lars helping steady me at some point when I felt I might fly out of the jeep.

“Can you slow the fuck down?” Betty demanded. “Jesus fucking Christ! I didn’t want to go with any of the pilots because I thought they’d be too intense.”

“They’re more reliable, aren’t they?” I shouted. “Since they... I don’t know... fly things?”

“Leah is lucky to have a driver’s licence still,” Lars laughed. “Honestly, so is Keir. Why anyone lets them fly planes, I don’t know. Neither one is to be trusted—both are lead-footed.”

“I thought she didn’t drive now?” Betty said. “She refuses to.”

“Because she’s famous, and people chase her,” Lars said. “Famous people are always too busy to drive.”

I laughed. “She’s famous? And Keir isn’t?”

“It’s a different type of famous. The press doesn’t have to be kind to Leah,” Lars explained. “They don’t have to worry about Queen Natalie’s wrath with her wild, non-royal niece. You get special treatment due to a status Leah doesn’t have. We all do.”

I’d never considered that celebrities differed from royals. But I supposed we weren’t mere celebrities. At one point, all of us were believed to be ordained by God to command nations. Now, we were just dependable, unelected figureheads. Even as sixth-in-line—soon to be seventh—I was protected and in many ways beyond criticism.

“Even more, the British press is merciless,” Ollie said. “They’re dreadful there. Just the worst. This is why I prefer America and Norway.”

“It’s true. They hate the royal women. Thankfully, right now, there’s little going on there,” Lars said. “Duncan, Keir, and Nate aren’t doing shit on that front. No girlfriends to throw to the wolves.”

Thrown to the wolves ? Was it that dire?

“So, do you consider yourself more Norwegian than British?” I asked Ollie. “You realise you are British, right? ”

He looked back at me in the mirror. “On paper, but I don’t remember living there. Bestemor and Mamma raised Win and me with Lars and Betty in Oslo. Keir and Nate left to go to school in the UK. Do I technically report to Aunt Natalie? Yes. But who do I defer to? Uncle Olav and Aunt Kiersten. London doesn’t feel like home to me.”

Lars patted my knee. “You’re headed there next. You’ll get it after some time. Doesn’t your sister complain?”

“Astrid is a nerd, and Parker is a handsome hermit,” I laughed. “They prefer books to parties. She’s not exactly getting up to much in Edinburgh.”

Astrid and Parker had a lovely house in the Scottish countryside, complete with a beautiful garden and a herd of horses. The crown jewel of their listed Georgian house was the library—their most lived-in room. I loved to visit them there to escape the world. Compared to the highlands, London felt a million miles away.

“We’re not going to be in London anyhow,” Betty said. “We’ll be in Norfolk... wherever that is. I find the geography of that small island confusing. I go where I am told to and do not question much.”

Ollie answered, “Aunt Kiersten’s house is north of London, but it’s a quick train journey to the action. London is alright. It’s got everything. Norfolk is boring as hell.”

When we left this place, our marching orders sent us to a Scandinavian-owned training facility in the British countryside. The dressage, showjumping, and eventing riders converged. Cici called it Summer Camp. It must have felt as much. The massive stately home that occupied the place and its cottages was perfect for hosting large gatherings—including scrimmages with the British riders. It gave little teams and riders from tiny countries a leg up.

Cici’s mother was a full-fledged eventer-turned-dressage-queen. She’d competed only once in the Olympics—held back not by talent but status. She qualified but never attended her second Olympics because she was Norway’s newly crowned Queen. Instead, she devoted all her time to coaching Cici, her only child, and breeding horses to attend international competitions. Her breeding operation allowed riders to compete on horses they’d never be able to afford. There was a joke that Kiersten was Britain’s best gift to Scandinavian equestrians—its most prolific turncoat.

“I am looking forward to it,” I said. “But I will enjoy going back to Oslo off and on.”

“You’ll have to come sail with us,” Lars said. “We have big plans before the wedding. I assume you can come out?”

I smiled. “Yes, I think so.”

Secretly, though, I wished it was with the other brother—not Lars.

We arrived at the elusive waterfall. Unfortunately, only a few were brave enough to jump after staring down at it. After my tragic bikini experience on the yacht, I’d

decided to wear my one-piece suit this time. I was going to jump off that waterfall, and my boobs weren't going anywhere .

“I promise I won't throw you off,” Duncan joked. “Truce?”

“Truce,” I agreed. “If you try something, I will put you on blast.

Cici stood atop the cliff, ready to dive in. She gave a little flourish.

“Just fucking jump, bitch! You're not a fancy diving girl!” Leah shouted from down below.

“You shut up!” Cici said, hands on her hips.

She then took a moment and dove in flawlessly. Cici was so athletic. I wished I was anything other than a gigantic disappointment at sport. Edina came next. One Crown Princess refused to be outdone by another.

“See, Isak, your sister can do it, can you not?” Cici called up to her fiancé.

Isak was the calm dressage rider to Cici's insane eventing persona. His expression suggested fear, not excitement.

“I love you, but I cannot,” Isak said in Dansk.

His sister taunted him. I didn't understand the words, but the context was clear.

“Nei!” Isak shook his head. He left, walking down the stone path to get into the pool the longer way.

Keir stood atop the ledge now, looking fucking gorgeous. I marvelled once more at

his shoulders and how the indents in his lower back moved as he stretched. The man practically glistened. I tried not to drool. How the hell had he been naked in my bed last night ?

He dove in, looking like he did this every day. Duncan and Nate followed him in quick succession. This left Ollie, me, and Lars since Betty noped out immediately. She wasn't about to dive in anywhere in her tiny bikini. Instead, she'd already popped a beer and was swimming below.

"Come on, Ingy!" She called up. "You are next."

I stood on the ledge, looking way down. I wasn't much of a diver, even if I was a competent swimmer. I knew I'd be safe, but damn, it looked intimidating!

"You can do it, Ingrid," Keir said. "It's not that bad."

"Better than being thrown off a yacht, right?" Duncan joked.

Leah smacked water at him.

I snickered. "Okay, here goes nothing."

I held my arms out over my head and leaned forward, pushing off towards the water. I dove down into the waters below, then popped back out, the mist of the beautiful waterfall hitting me in the face. I spun around to spy the others swimming over.

"See?" Cici laughed. "Look at you, darling!"

"I did it," I said. "Finally! It was nervy."

Lars dove in next and swam over before I could reach the others. It was another

awkward moment. He was still trying. I felt terrible knowing there was not a chance in hell he'd land me. Part of me wanted him to find out so he could move on. If he knew I'd been with his brother, there was no way he'd want me, right?

"Hard to believe this is all the time we get in paradise," Lars said as we swam toward a rock.

"I know. I don't want to leave. Especially when you've made England sound awful."

"Ah, it's not so bad. I was planning to dip down. And maybe... help you all... if you don't mind."

I pulled myself onto the rock into a little ray of sunshine, unsure what to say.

"I think I'm just trying to settle in, honestly. Coming all that way?—"

Lars followed me. "I don't mind. Honestly."

I wanted to let him down gently. Saying anything else felt wrong. Lars was a sweetheart, a good friend, a lovely big brother, and a kind soul. He deserved better than me to lead him along—even to spare trouble for Cici and Isak. I'd take my lumps with them if I had to.

"Uh, Lars, I think there's... I think there's been a misunderstanding."

He furrowed a brow.

"I like you... a lot—as a friend. And I get a feeling you might feel like you... like me more than that. If so, I'm flattered. But I cannot return that. I'm sorry."

His face fell. "Oh... I..."

“Don’t apologise, please. Don’t. I just wanted to be precise. I’m... flattered. I do care about you. I value your friendship, and you’ve always been so well?—”

He hopped off the rock. “Well, that’s fine. Thanks for letting me know.”

I watched him swim away in a huff, but trying to fix it was useless. Lars needed to calm down. I felt eyes on me and looked over to see Keir with a curious look on his face. I gave him a little smile, then turned back. I didn’t want to be obvious about it. Betty swam over and hopped up on the rock next to me.

“What is going on with you and my brother?”

“Uh... I...” I panicked. Shit!

“He seems like he’s in a horrible mood. Is he being nice to you?”

She meant Lars. I was relieved. Too many brothers!

“He has a crush on me. I like him, just not like that.”

“Oh, thank God because... ick!” Betty said. “You’re my friend.”

She squeezed my hand. “And men are dumb.”

“That they are.”

I felt even guiltier. Betty was my friend. And here I was, dying to shag her other brother again. Why was I so intent on continuing despite the risk of a rift? I knew better.

Here We Go Again

KEIR

Lars was in his feelings after I assumed he and Ingrid discussed his affection for her. Leah glared at me as if I caused his dreadful mood. I didn't, of course. I slept with Ingrid, but it wasn't like I could force her to be nice to Lars. I didn't ask her to be mean to him. And, by all rights, she hadn't been.

We had dinner on the ship. It was laid back—a nice wrap-up to the weekend. I couldn't stop finding reasons to check in with Ingrid. I knew we couldn't be overly lovey-dovey, but I wanted her to know I cared. I did. And not just because I wanted her ankles around my neck later. No, because I did like her. I adored her. There was this instant pull towards her I couldn't fight. I'd always poo-pooed magnetic attraction, but with Ingrid, I understood it. There was a reason we'd all fought over her.

“Okay, okay, before we go,” Isak said. “I just wanted to thank you all for attending our little gathering. A special thanks to Lars and Edina for organising it. You all did a great job.”

“Oh, my brother thanks me for something for once,” Edina said.

“I said thank you. Is that not enough?” Isak scoffed .

“No, it's just nice, is all.” Edina was delighted with herself—even for Edina.

“To Cici, though, I just want to say I cannot wait to marry you. We’ve been on this journey together for several years. We’ve had a lot of distance, stress, and life lessons to overcome,” Isak said. “But I love you. And I always will. I’m glad we got to spend a few days in paradise before the chaos of this next month kicks in.”

Cici was unexpectedly emotional. She rarely cried but was tearing up. True love made you lose your mind a little—even stubborn Scandinavians who always played tough. Cici’s mother cried at the drop of a hat, and her father was the world’s biggest sap for the two women in his life, but you’d never know it by his public persona. Cici herself never showed emotions in public. Isak usually brought out her best. Right now, she couldn’t have loved him more. It hit me in the feels to see her so happy.

She’d be the first of our generation to take the plunge, much to her father’s relief. Marriages led to babies—a precious commodity in royal families. At thirty, time ran thin to pop out a few. I never really shook that feeling, either. I had more time than she did, but it might be incumbent on me to save the line of succession someday. Duncan might never find a woman to put up with him long enough.

“You’ll make me puke, Cici, but I’m so happy for you,” Leah said. “I adore you both, but my God, please stop being so downright adorable.”

“I promise we’ll have a big row soon enough. Would that please you?” Cici laughed.

“Not on my account. I personally hope you have many beautiful years together,” Leah said. “May you always have one another.”

“Leah, are you crying?” Duncan teased.

“She’s not even been drinking!” Ollie snickered.

“I have to fly home, so I cannot,” Leah said. “I also must sleep tonight, as must Keir.

We're boring."

Leah and I had our aircraft to manage in the morning. The good thing about having a family of pilots was that there was always a way to catch a ride. Leah was a confident pilot in her own right. Our Aunt Natalie and Leah's father, Uncle George, taught us to fly.

"Yes, we must be responsible."

"I didn't get the okay to fly myself," Duncan sighed. "So, I must behave. Anyway, I'm off to bloody Spain for a summit."

"Oh, dreadful," Ingrid teased. "There's beautiful weather in Spain, and you're whining. Do you live for dreariness?"

"Do you just live to torture me?" Duncan asked.

"No, she saves her cruelty for others," Lars said under his breath in Norsk.

"Lars," Betty said, annoyed. "What is your problem?"

"You're going to have to ask her," Lars said, annoyed.

"Anyone want to explain to me what this disturbance in the force is about?" Cici asked. "Because you've been in a mood this whole day, Lars."

"It's nothing," he said.

"Nothing? Nothing? You have acted like a kicked puppy," Isak joked. "What is your problem with Ingrid?"

I fought the urge to toss Lars's lanky ass overboard. Ingrid didn't deserve that comment. If I interjected, it would make things worse. He would have come for me if he thought we were together. Since he didn't, I couldn't engage. If I did, I'd have to answer that question. I was trapped as Ingrid melted down.

"I'm allowed to have opinions, Lars," Ingrid said. "I told you the truth."

"You certainly waited long enough to!"

"Lars, let it go," I said.

"Oh, this opens the door for you, doesn't it?" Lars shot me an angry barb.

"You're being an asshole to her," I clapped back. "Leave her alone. She's a nice girl, Lars."

"One you'd like to have to yourself," Lars said.

Leah looked at me, then Ingrid. Tears welled in Ingrid's blue eyes. I wanted to punch my stepbrother for acting like a petulant child.

"He's drunk," Duncan sighed.

"Fuck you!" Ingrid shouted. "I'm not an object to be won. All of you—every last one of you beside Cici and Betty—have been placing wagers on who would win this contest. It's terrible. The lot of you should be ashamed! I'm not a goddamn piece of meat!"

She stormed off.

"Good job, fuckwad!" Nate said, slapping Lars upside the head.

“Why did you do that?” Betty asked, hopping up to chase after her friend. “She’s never going to revisit Oslo after that.”

I glared at Lars.

“Oh, don’t give me that look, mate. You wanted her just as much,” Lars said.

I still do . Even more.

Objection

INGRID

“ I ’m sorry for my stupid brother,” Betty said. “He’s drunk and in his feelings. I think he really liked you.”

“I don’t care what he thinks,” I protested. “He doesn’t get to talk like that to me.”

Betty was sweet, but I needed a moment. I was sick of Lars’s sniping and upset that it seemed like Keir couldn’t care less. What did I expect? Leah was right. I was the one who fucked this all up—for everyone. If I just held it together and ignored them, I’d have done us all a favour. I’d have been able to spare Lars’s feelings with less guilt.

“Sweetie, it’s not your fault.”

I spotted Leah standing in the doorway.

“It certainly feels like it is,” I sniffled.

“What was your crime? Being unrelated to us and hot? I refuse to punish a girl for either,” Leah said. “Betty, sweetie, can you leave us for a moment.”

“You okay?” Betty asked.

I hugged her tight. “I am okay. Thanks for checking on me, dear.”

She left, Leah and I both watching her close the door to my stateroom as she did .

“She’s going to verbally abuse Lars,” Leah said. “She has her mother’s ability to scare men into submission. I’m sorry for my fucked-up family.”

“It’s... you all are a lot . Coming in as an outsider is fucking intimidating. Everyone is so outspoken. Being with just the Norwegians... it’s not nearly as chaotic as all of you together. I’m used to women, right? A lot of them. Men are still new to that. And I do not like it if I’m being honest.”

Leah snickered. “I honestly love both sets—for different reasons—but I appreciate the camaraderie of a woman-centric space. I just never got it all that often. I had two dads and only one sister. And other than Cecilia and Betty, it’s boy cousins for days. In the family, there aren’t many girls. Sorry. I understand if you nope out and avoid us like the plague, but I’d still be sad.”

“What? Why?”

“You’re a little firecracker,” she laughed. “I wanted to come and tell you not to dull your shine because Lars is being an asshole. He’ll get over it. He always does. He has his father’s whiny streak.”

I snickered. “And temper?”

“Cecilia’s father is the aggro one. Peder was always the brooding, whiny one of the two brothers.”

“I’m swimming in brothers,” I groaned. “I’m so stupid.”

“Why? Because you slept with Keir?”

My mouth dropped.

“He told me,” Leah said. “Or rather, I tortured him until he told me. I am the only one who knows, and I’m not saying anything to anyone. My lips are sealed on this, sweetie.”

“It was stupid.”

“You were smitten—although maybe not as much as he was.”

“I feel stupid because does he even like me, or was I just a prize? He’s not here.”

“Cut him some slack. If he comes to you, he must defend that choice to Lars and risk rocking the boat. I mean, after last night...”

I snickered. “You really can’t help yourself, can you?”

“With the puns, no. They result from genetic defects passed down from my grandfather—the king of a dad joke—to my Papa. ”

I giggled. “We have Rick and Rick-isms.”

She smiled. We sat quietly as I gathered my thoughts. I felt safe with Leah. She was so easy to talk to.

“Look, I don’t know if this is stupid, but I hate feeling like an object. It goes beyond ‘the patriarchy,’ as Astrid says. No, it’s due to my history. I was a caged animal for the first twelve years of my life—used for my grandmother’s sick political gain. And when people talk about me like I am a chess piece, it kills me.”

“I don’t think anyone gets that. We all grew up weird but sheltered. My dads took

great pains to keep us safe. They didn't let me book anything until I was eighteen, and I hated them for it. I was talented, and I wanted to work. When I got my first big gig—Victoria—my life was easy and quiet. Then, everyone wanted to know what I was wearing, who I was fucking, and who I hated every goddamn day. The paps chased me everywhere. It was open season. Now, I get it.”

“But I had no say. And even now, Rick and Alexandra are so protective. I'd much prefer to focus on my horses. I'm a goddamn athlete. I'm a fabulous mariner. I am much more than 'the hot one', but that is what I am reduced to. Alexandra is the regal one, Astrid is the smart one, Odette is the kid and charitable one, and I am 'the hot one'. I sprouted boobs overnight and, at fifteen, blossomed into a swan, I guess? Now, all anyone can write about me is that I am hot. Sure, it's easier to be pretty, but it gets old .”

“I starved myself until I turned thirty. And then one day, I told Lourdes, I've got two Tonys, a Grammy, and I am why people go to movies. So, why am I fighting fifteen extra pounds? She was like, 'fuck 'em', and I just stopped caring. Of course, by then, I was established and could tell directors to fuck off. Now, I will be a director—of a big-budget prestige drama someday. But all anyone can ask me about is when I will do a nude scene.”

I grimaced. “I'm so sorry. That's terrible.”

“It is,” she agreed. “It's awful. For the record, I think you may have started as a hot commodity. However, I think Keir cares about you. Even if you two are in a weird place right now, he appreciates you. He thinks you're smart and funny—not just gorgeous, which you are. I dunno. He rarely stays hung up on anyone long but has made it clear he likes you.”

“Still? Even this morning?”

“Especially this morning,” Leah snickered. “Deep breaths. Ignore our idiotic family, please. Just be you. Return to England, focus on horses, and ignore my idiotic cousins.”

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A Good Grovel

KEIR

I knew I needed to apologise to Ingrid. She deserved better than what I gave her. Why must it be so hard? Why did we have to worry about any of this? She warranted much more than my limited inaction. My impulse was always to defend a person I cared about. If anything, past girlfriends got annoyed at it. But with Ingrid, I could do little.

However, as Nate pointed out, I could text her and grovel a bit.

ME

I'm so sorry. I wish I could have done something.

Lars will calm down

INGRID

Will he? He's acting like an ass

ME

He's upset.

You hurt his pride.

INGRID

That's his issue, not mine. I let him down gently.

ME

It's not your fault.

INGRID

I wish you could do something.

ME

You feel put out?

INGRID

Your family is a lot

ME

Fancy chatting on deck? Everyone else is in bed.

We could sneak out?

INGRID

Main deck in five?

ME

Sounds good.

I'm prepared to grovel.

"I'm gonna see Ingrid above deck," I said. "Just to chat."

"Uh-huh," Nate looked doubtful.

"As friends," I said.

"Uh-huh. I'll never believe that. If you all were just friends, you would have apologised via text and moved on. Instead, you want to comfort her and talk her down."

I smacked him with the book on his nightstand. "You're a wanker."

"And you're hung up on her. Which is worse?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I need to give it a proper, good grovel."

Ingrid was already settled above the deck, sitting on a couch under a blanket. She'd brought out two cans of Coke.

"I figured we needed to drink something , but I'm not keen on drinking anymore, and I know you can't," Ingrid said.

It was thoughtful. I should have expected no less by now.

"Thanks. I appreciate it," I said, sitting next to her.

She threw the blanket over my legs. If she was sharing a blanket, it wasn't curtains

for me .

“I am sorry for my family. I love them—yes, even my idiot stepbrother—but they are a lot.”

“I assumed it would be like dealing with Cici and the other Norwegians. I was wrong. The English lot of you is wild.”

I snickered. “English. American. Whatever you want, we’re wild and loud. Leah and Duncan inherited their parents’ boisterous love of life. And both are pig-headed—Duncan, most of all. I wish we could tie him down.”

“He’s immature. And don’t tell me I’m twenty-one and can’t say that about him because he’s older, damn it.”

I snickered and popped the top of the Coke—what my mother always called “pop.” I winced to think that Ingrid was twenty-one . She was only two years older than Betty but miles more mature.

“You don’t infantilise me,” Ingrid continued. “It wouldn’t work if you did.”

“Why would I? I’d be a creep.”

She snickered. “True. But people do—lots of people do.”

“You’ll have that. You’re the baby. But I understand that while you were sheltered, you also had to grow up fast.”

“It’s a complicated mix.” She moved closer to me. “I’m not simple, Keir. I will warn you. I have seen shit.”

“I was about eight when my father died,” I said. “It was excruciating. I remember the day of his diagnosis. I remember Mamma crying all the time. She’d save it for sobbing behind the bathroom door. I have trauma, too, Ingrid. We all do, but I was the oldest and shouldered so much. It’s why I’m different. And much like Alexandra and Astrid, we tried so hard to shelter Win and Ollie. They were so young when he passed and don’t remember him. God, I’m sorry to dump on you.”

She was so easy to talk to. I shouldn’t have said so much, but chatting with someone who understood was comforting.

“I don’t remember either of my parents. Alexandra and Astrid do. It’s so difficult. I basically killed my mother, so there’s that.”

I stared in disbelief.

“Sorry. Dark humour isn’t funny, but it definitely haunts me. She died just after my birth—complications. Alexandra’s been through this three times, and it’s always nerve-racking. She’s about to do it again.”

“Alexandra is pregnant again?” I asked.

Ingrid giggled and raised a finger to her lips.

“Yeah. It’s early days for her, but she’s pregnant with baby number four. She claims this is the last one. We all worry. She is always so sick in early pregnancy. I don’t know how she manages it. Either way, it frightens me. I have no idea why I’m talking to you about babies right now. Jesus Christ!”

“It’s okay. Look, I enjoy our chats. You’re wickedly funny, Ingrid. And you get it. I... I won’t jump into anything, but I enjoy you.”

She smiled, still looking down.

“What? It shouldn’t surprise you, darling. I still might blow my family up over sleeping with you.”

“Foolish to think it could ever make up for it?” Ingrid joked. “Sorry. I am sure it wasn’t worth it.”

Ingrid was a dream curled up under a blanket, sitting in the moonlight. I couldn’t shake how beautiful her hair was tucked behind her ears or how she looked at me. This was more than just a one-night stand. I was hung up. I ran my hand through her hair.

“It was well worth it,” I said. You were wonderful, and i t was tremendous.”

“It was a disaster.”

“Why? Are you saying that because you didn’t enjoy it or because you think I didn’t?”

“It required a clean-up crew. By the way, you owned mad points for helping. That was... unexpected.”

“Well, I like to surprise a woman,” I chuckled.

“No, it was good for me—better than I probably could have asked for. I guessed I’d have someone who would fumble through things with me. I wasn’t expecting what you gave me.”

“And that was?”

“Fabulous sex,” Ingrid said, leaning in to kiss me.

I shouldn't kiss her out here. It was risky, but Ingrid was irresistible. She gripped my hair tight, and our tongues tangled. There was already an ease to kissing her you didn't get with a random hookup. She breathed deeply and pulled back, a look of satisfaction crossing her face .

“You are devilish,” I said.

“And you love it. If I were a good girl, you'd be miserable, wouldn't you?” Ingrid bit her lip the way that drove me up a wall.

“I would, yes. I don't like well-behaved women. I prefer mine wild and demanding.”

I kissed Ingrid again. She reacted by pulling me back onto the couch. I pressed her down, unable to resist. The risk only made the reward even hotter. I moved my hand to her breasts and then down to her shorts. I slowly slid my hand into them. She wasn't wearing knickers.

“You don't have any knickers on?” I asked.

“I told you I was a bad girl.”

“You planned for this?”

“I didn't, no,” she giggled. “I slept in the nude and didn't bother to put any on as I came out here. I was just being lazy.”

“I like lazy in this instance,” I agreed.

Ingrid let out a little moan as I kissed her neck. “We shouldn't do this here.”

“I want to. It’s pitch black. No one can see. Everyone is distracted. It will be fine.”

I wanted to take her like this above deck. The urge for danger was too strong. I owed her a good grovel.

Bad Choices

INGRID

Keir kissed me, pressing my body into the couch. Physically, I was ready. It was as if when he kissed me, I couldn't help but bend to him. Or was it even bending to his will? Was he not here to please me? We had an unspoken agreement. He pleased me first—always taking care of me before he got to have me. And with his fingers rubbing against my clit, I got wetter and wetter. It was overwhelming.

“Have you ever done this out here?” I laughed. “Above deck is a bad idea, Keir.”

I was protesting and knew we shouldn't do this here, but I felt naughty. Naughty felt good.

“No. It'd be a first,” Keir said. “But I'd like to.”

Me, too .

“I want you,” I whispered. “I crave it. But, Keir, if I bleed out here, it's...”

I didn't even know what to say. I couldn't make sense as he thrust one finger, then two, deep into my centre.

“You're so wet,” Keir whispered. “I want to get you off.”

I moaned, unable to resist.

“I am being practical.”

“I can just go down on you. Would you like that?” Keir asked.

“That doesn’t seem fair.”

“I’d love to taste you. Trust me. It would be fair. Has anyone ever done that for you—gotten you off with their tongue?”

His words sent me into a whirlwind. They hit me, only making me wetter. He wanted to taste me? No one had ever dared go there, but should I let him? His naughty, tempting words made me want whatever was on offer. He kissed my neck again, sending shivers down my spine. What did I lose if I gave in?

“Never,” I gasped.

“Then I must. You deserve to feel it,” Keir said. “Do you want me to make you cum, Ingrid?”

“So much,” I moaned. “Yes.”

He disappeared under the blanket, but I threw it back.

“I want to watch,” I said.

He pulled my shorts off, leaving them wrapped around one leg. Keir parted my legs and kissed down my torso. I watched him kiss my clit, then lick it slowly. I shuddered.

He came back up.

“It’s amazing. Don’t stop,” I said. “Unless... you don’t like it.”

“I love it. Be a good girl, and let me eat you out,” Keir said.

It was so delightfully dirty. I drove him mad, something I didn’t even know was possible for me. Keir slid between my legs again. I reached back, grabbing a pillow to sit up a bit more.

“Dirty girl, you want to watch the whole thing?” He asked.

“Get to work,” I said, pushing his head back into my pussy.

I wanted to watch him please me. Involuntarily, I grabbed his hair. He was the blondest of the brothers—still slightly ginger. I soaked up the look of him submitting to desire, my pale legs draped over his gorgeous, broad shoulders. He was so sexy. How had I managed to tempt this man?

“Oh, don’t stop,” I moaned. “That’s the spot.”

He didn’t stop. Instead, he slid a finger inside me to tickle my G-spot. It only brought me closer to ecstasy. I wanted to savour this—the warm feeling, the absolute pleasure, and the release. I’d given it to myself many times before, but doing it with him was addictive. I gripped his hair tighter, pressing my hips into his face harder. I had no control. My toes curled. I panted. I climaxed, unable to stay silent as I hoped.

“ Ouais! Oh, mon dieu! Fuck! Keir.” I don’t know what came over me when I orgasmed. It was uncontrollable. My body shuddered. I couldn’t keep it in.

Keir kissed my thigh, a satisfied smirk on his face.

“You couldn’t even hold back.”

“I... that was... brilliant,” I gasped breathlessly.

He wiped his face and pinned me to the couch again. “You’re amazing.”

His erection pressed against me. I wanted him again—so badly—but I was paranoid.

“I’ll have you again,” Keir promised. “I’ll get much more out of you. We’ll meet again, and I will once more make you scream my name.”

“I... I’d like that,” I admitted.

These were terrible choices, but I needed more. He was so good at unwinding me. He unleashed this sexual side of me I didn’t even know I had. I never doubted I was capable of shagging someone—that level of denial and doubt was Odette’s thing—but to know I was capable of being so demanding and assertive was powerful. I wanted every bit of him again and again. I was addicted to this devotion to the pleasure he gave.

Adaptation

INGRID

Norfolk was picturesque. Horses grazed in lush green fields. Adorable stone houses dotted the landscape. The Georgian house Cici's family owned was what you expected—ample, a bit cold, and perfect for a big family of equestrians. While the house was grand in places, it was unfussy in most ways—built for practicality. Every entrance had boot brushes. Boots littered the “mud room” at the back of the house. A dog sink occupied one corner of this room. Dogs greeted you immediately in the morning, hoping they might get to run down to the barn with you.

The decor looked less like a British period piece and more like a house reclaimed by Scandinavians and brought into modernism. Rick would have approved, and Alexandra would have deemed it “too sparse.” They differed in decor preferences. Alexandra joked Rick would have preferred an IKEA showroom to Versailles.

“The place is elegant and simple,” I said over breakfast with the rest of the riders.

The place came with an entire staff—as you'd expect—but Breakfast was relaxed.

“It's typical for us,” Cici said.

“So, did your father win the decorating wars?” I joked.

“Oh, no, this is all Mor,” Cici said of her mother.

“Aunt Kiersten wears the trousers,” Betty giggled. “Uncle Olav defers to her on most things.”

“Pappa is a sap,” Cici said. “He loves Mamma endlessly and lets her do as she pleases ninety per cent of the time. He manages the rat race—now often with me—and Mamma is the public champion of everything. He doesn’t tell her what to do, though. She does as she pleases. The women in our family aren’t doormats.”

“It takes a man willing to put up with that,” Isak joked.

“Yes, but a wonderful one.” Cici gave him a quick kiss as she rose to get more eggs. The woman ate so many eggs of all kinds. She said it was what powered her on cross-country.

“What is the plan today?” Betty asked.

“We’re going to hack down to Sandringham.”

“We can just... do that?” I asked.

“Mamma has carved out a bridle path most of the way there. There are some quiet lanes. The horses love it. We’ll ride over for lunch with Auntie.”

She meant Queen Natalie. Well, that was unexpected! I’d make sure to put on my most matchy-matchy kit. Our horses were getting a nice rest before we headed to Badminton. It was my international debut—no pressure—and they’d only landed a week ago. We’d skipped the Kentucky Three-Day this year to focus on international competition. Unlike the British and American teams, we didn’t have nearly the depth in our house to have horses on two continents just waiting. I supposed Cici could have had that if she wanted, but she tended to alternate each year where she began the big international competitions. This was a major weekend for us.

“Have fun,” Isak said. “We’re about to dip into training for the day. Go play with your ponies.”

They were adorable together. If they were anyone else, I’d have found them cringe.

“We’ll go have a nice day. Auntie decided to stay here for a couple of days—inconveniencing everyone so she could see Betty and me and welcome you, Ingy. ”

“Me?”

“Yes. Now, get dressed, and we’ll take the horses out.”

It flattered me that Her Majesty even cared to greet me. I wore a tailored pair of slate grey breeches, my teal and brown field boots, and a long-sleeved teal blouse. I figured I’d look presentable enough. Back home, Alexandra and Odette always perfectly matched, and I’d turn up in almost anything. Riding was about being productive and pretty astride a horse—not in a barn aisle.

We did some work around the stables before tacking up. Kraken perked up as he spotted me. The old man was never too bored for a good hack. Despite his name, Kraken wasn’t much of a fire-breathing dragon. He was a packer—a dependable five-star-tested gelding. We’d bought him from a French rider about to retire. She saw me coming up in the world and agreed to sell him to us almost two years ago, knowing I’d keep him going. Alexandra bought him for me as a twentieth birthday present. When he arrived, I cried and cried out of sheer happiness. His arrival allowed for what the Chronicle described as a “meteoric” rise of a young rider.

While Alexandra wanted to keep me home for a few more years before setting me free—her maternal instincts overrunning her—she knew I needed to move on. Moving to America with Cici and Betty had improved my cross-country by leaps and

bounds. I was more confident, which allowed my horse to shine. It was heaven.

We rode to Sandringham in good weather, but packed rain gear just in case. Our horses were coming off a few days' rest, making for a few happy bucks as we picked up a trot. If everyone behaved, we'd gallop them a little on the way back. We didn't want to take too much edge off or risk injury. They would need to let it out in a few days at Badminton. I tried not to overthink. We'd have a four-hour drive southwest to the estate to settle in before dressage began tomorrow.

Sandringham was more extensive than I anticipated. Guards waved us through, and we rode up to the Queen's line of stables. Her beautiful string of riding horses greeted us. To my surprise, she called out from a stall where she'd just watched one of her mares deliver a foal.

"Oh, there you are!" Queen Natalie said warmly. "Lovely to see you all. Are you keen to have lunch? "

"We've had an enjoyable morning and could do luncheon, yes," Cici answered. "Auntie, I think you've met Princess Ingrid before?"

I bowed slightly. We'd only met briefly.

"In passing," Queen Natalie answered. But it was so lovely to host you. Any friend of Cici's is a friend of ours. And Betty, how are you?"

"Good, Auntie," she answered. "Trying to keep up and learning lots."

Betty was still green and wet behind the ears regarding competition. She excelled at dressage but struggled with confidence over fences. She had an enviable seat but struggled to convince her horse to follow her. They were working on trust more than gymnastics these days.

It amused me that she called Natalie her aunt. Technically, Betty was Keir and Lars's half-sibling and not directly related to the Lyonses. However, as with most things with this rowdy family, one's blood origins didn't matter much if they were in the fold. These people were mad but loved hard. I sensed that no matter how idiotic he could be, Duncan would show up for Betty if needed—regardless of whether he was her blood relative.

“It is nice to see you all. We have a few guests for lunch,” Her Majesty explained. “But I think they will be glad to see you all, too.”

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Guess Who's Coming to Lunch

KEIR

When Her Majesty called you north, you went. I usually took morning meetings with my aunt when not on post at Buckingham Palace. However, she'd been in Norfolk for the weekend and didn't want to leave. So, I took my plane to RAF Marham, dumped it, and climbed in the waiting Rolls. When I arrived at Sandringham, she was down at the barn with the horses. Why call me north if she wasn't even going to be around?

This was my aunt in a nutshell—the world revolved around the Queen, and she could change her mind. Besides, what else was I up to besides thinking about Ingrid naked and kicking myself for not doing more with my time in paradise?

"She'll be up soon," my uncle Ed explained. "They had a foal arrive and something-something about a retained something, and she wanted to check in this morning. You know how they are."

"Sure," I sighed. "I do. All-too-well."

I played polo as my late father had. I grew up hacking out and hunting with Auntie Natalie. Mamma rode growing up but wasn't as horse-obsessed as everyone on my father's side. Uncle Ed was not a horse person. He was petrified of them and stayed out of his wife's way. He never battled over two issues—aircraft and equines. Reasoning with his former fast jet pilot wife over either was an exercise in futility.

"She said some people were coming for lunch," Ed said. As usual, I know nothing."

The butler arrived. “Your Royal Highnesses, Her Majesty has returned from the barn with The Princesses.”

Which princesses? That was vague. As we proceeded to the dining room, I was greeted by Cici, Betty, and Ingrid. Ingrid’s mouth dropped. I tried not to react. It would be true torture. I couldn’t get a moment alone with her. And she looked beautiful in whatever tight breeches she was in under this table. I’d miss out on her arse. Damn it!

“Long time no see, cousin,” Cici laughed.

“No one tells us anything,” Ed grumbled to his wife.

“You wouldn’t listen anyhow, Edwin.”

“You didn’t think to text me, Betty?” I laughed, giving her a big hug.

“I didn’t know. We had no clue you’d be here. Why the hell are you here?”

“Yes, indeed,” Ingrid said, suspect of my intentions.

Now, she thought I’d orchestrated it to see her! I wish I’d had that foresight. She gave me too much credit.

“Oh, I didn’t know if you’d make it out, so I didn’t tell your brother,” Aunt Natalie explained. “I stayed here on a wild hare and forced him to come to me. We’re checking in. Please don’t blame him. He’s not spying on you, Betty.”

Betty shrugged, also suspect.

“Are you just waiting for Mamma and Pappa to arrive?” Cici asked.

“What do you think?” Uncle Ed chuckled.

“Are they coming in?” I asked. No one told me anything, either.

“Yes,” Aunt Natalie answered. “Tonight, your aunt and uncle will be by.”

“For what?” I asked.

“Badminton, you idiot!” Betty laughed. “Good God, Keir! Catch up.”

“When is that?” I asked .

Complete with unison eye rolls, the girls answered, “This weekend.”

“Oh, apologies, ladies. I was unaware.”

“I was going, of course. So why not wait around for Kiersten? I figured Olav would prefer Ed to come with.”

“I do not care. My job is to be arm candy, darling.”

Ingrid giggled.

“Dear, Ingrid is a bit overwhelmed by us,” I explained. “We’re unhinged. She finally got a taste of all of us together last weekend, and I fear we might have frightened her.”

“Give me more credit than that, Keir,” Ingrid said, staring me in the eye with that intense, sultry stare she always gave.

Her gaze sent a shiver down my spine. We were still doing this, weren’t we? And

why the hell was that jumper emphasising her tits? Even out on a hack, she looked goddamn perfect.

“We were a lot .”

“I assume Duncan and Leah outdid everyone in that competition?” Aunt Natalie sighed.

I wanted to say that her son was the worst behaved of all the lot, but that honour went to Lars. Of course, feeling guilty about what provoked our brother didn’t seem right. At the same time, Duncan didn’t deserve the blame for once. Betty spoke as I debated things, outing Lars.

“Oh, no. I mean, Leah was Leah to the nth degree, and Duncan was an ass to Ingrid at the beginning, but it was Lars who took the cake.”

“Poor Ingrid. What did our son do?” Uncle Ed asked.

“Shenanigans,” Cici sighed. “He threw her overboard.”

“He felt it was a joke,” Ingrid said, blushing.

“Not a funny one,” Cici groaned. “But Lars nearly ruined everything.”

“Lars?” Aunt Natalie was surprised. Yes, even perfect Lars could misbehave.

“He had a crush that got out of hand,” Cici said. “And we’ll leave it there.”

Betty didn’t pipe up, and I said nothing .

“Fighting over women. Men are daft,” Aunt Natalie sighed. “Neither of you should

argue with me.”

My uncle shook his head.

I raised my hands as if backing out. “I won’t argue with you. I can get quite whipped up against my own better judgement.”

“You’re young. I wish you would get whipped up over someone—anyone right about now, Keir. Duncan, as well. See your cousin. Is she not deliriously happy with Isak? Could you boys not stand to try ?”

No pressure, Auntie!

Ingrid flushed bright red. I wish she hadn’t. It telegraphed everything. I hoped no one noticed.

“No one in their right mind would bother to settle down with him. He’s all planes, planes, planes,” Betty laughed. “Poor woman!”

“He’s old enough to retire. Mark my words, Keir, it will get old,” Aunt Natalie said.

“I have two years. And then I can decide what I will do. I agree it’s not an easy life.”

“Never fall in love with a pilot,” Uncle Ed said. “That’s my advice, ladies.”

“Says the man who has been happily married to me for thirty-three years.”

“Look, I didn’t say I was clever.”

“You have a degree from Oxford. Two, actually. Hush.”

As long as I could remember, they argued like an old couple. Both were competitive, but my aunt had my Olympian uncle beat in her love of competition. It surprised people. Uncle Ed was still the most decorated swimmer in British history. I appreciated the banter because it gave me more time to sit quietly. Unfortunately, it also gave me more time to look at Ingrid and think about her.

“So, you’re going with Cici to support her?” I asked, trying to distract myself. “Betty and Ingrid, I mean...”

“Ingrid is riding,” Betty said. “I’m going to watch and be moral support. She and Cici are riding.”

“It’s Ingrid’s debut at a five-star,” Cici said proudly.

“I am nervous,” Ingrid said. “Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t be,” Aunt Natalie said. “Kiersten says you’re a brilliant talent, a little prodigy. Own it. Never make yourself smaller, darling.”

“Well, that’s lovely,” I said. “Exciting.”

“You won’t come with?” Betty pouted. “What are you even doing, brother?”

“She has a point. What are you doing?” Natalie asked. “You wouldn’t want to support Cecilia?”

Cici glared at me. “He’d never care so much about an event.”

I turned to Ingrid, expecting something .

“I suppose I could go, but I doubt I’d be all that helpful.”

“You can tack horses and hold them, yes?” Ingrid asked.

“Of course!” I was offended by the question.

“Then you can play groom for us,” Ingrid said. “Unless that’s too much?”

If it meant I got the chance to shag Ingrid, I’d toil day and night right about now.

“Come on, it will be fun,” Betty said.

Oh, dear Betty, if only you knew! She was the worst cockblock. Still, I figured I could swing it.

“It’s dreadful to wander around looking at women in breeches, right?” Aunt Natalie joked. “Oh, come on! Your Aunts and Uncles would like to see you. You can stay with us.”

“You’re all staying in one place?”

“Yes,” Aunt Natalie answered. “Good God. We always do. If you ever came to watch your sister and cousin compete, you’d know, Keir Robert!”

Betty crossed her arms. Who was I to deny her?

“Well, if it wouldn’t be too annoying for you all, I can come and play groom,” I sighed.

Cici laughed, “You and Isak are so fucked. We’re going to be relentless and annoying.”

“I can handle it,” I said, meeting Ingrid’s gaze again.

It was on.

Badminton

INGRID

“Hooof black,” I handed a tin off to Keir.

He suffered at my hands in the run-up to my dressage test. The trot-up was only twenty minutes out, and I was bringing up the rear. I wanted my horse to look impeccable. Kraken was a big black Trakehner with lots of chrome. The hoof black made his stockings pop.

“You are so posh, aren’t you?” Keir laughed.

“Are you whinging about it?” I asked. “I thought you were at my disposal?”

He looked up from where he crouched in the aisle of the stables, giving me a look like he’d enjoy throwing me up against a tack room wall. Against all reason, I wanted to try it out.

“No, princess, I’m not arguing.”

“Good boy,” I said, returning to my current task—plaiting my mount’s tail.

Queen Kiersten rushed up. “Let me finish that. You need to get dressed, darling.”

I groaned .

“Let her,” Cici called from where she sat in front of her horse’s stall. “She’s brilliant at plaiting—better than most grooms.”

I relented. I’d change into my dress for the morning, then finally my dressage kit. It was my first big trot up, and the press photographed me. I needed to look good. I hoped Astrid would be here to hold my hand and help me, but the train was delayed. She would be lucky to make my dressage test at all. I was grateful for Queen Kiersten’s maternal energy.

Pulled into a pretty pink dress from a fabulous resort collection and a pair of dependable flats, I was ready to go. Men got to wear dress shoes, but we didn’t get that benefit. Kraken’s trot was wild. I’d be running full steam. Heels only spelt trouble.

“You look adorable,” Betty said, giving me a hug and a kiss. “Let me work on your hair.”

I took the help, standing in the aisle as Betty brushed out my hair. I’d pulled it down from my morning ponytail.

“You’re lucky your hair is straight. Makes it easier,” Betty sighed.

“You got five minutes!” Cici called down the aisle. She’d been one of the first to trot up this morning and was watching the queue.

“Tail is done!” Queen Kiersten declared.

“Are the hooves alright?” Keir asked, stepping back.

“He looks lovely,” I said. “Many thanks to you both.”

“I’ll do Anything to help,” Queen Kiersten said. “He’s such a beautiful, big boy, isn’t he?”

“His feet are the size of dinner plates,” Keir chuckled. “Thankfully, he’s calm.”

“For now,” I said. “We’ll get in the lineup, and he’ll be a complete dick. Just wait.”

It was true. By the time we made it out, we had to hurry into the vet inspection queue. Kraken was calling out to his friends and dancing around like his legs were on fire. He was 17.2 hands of pure muscle. He was ready to go after being stabled the past day and not working properly for a week.

“You think you still have your giblets, don’t you?” Betty joked, waiting with me.

“He’s ridiculous,” I sighed. “Terrible. Calm down! ”

Finally, our number was called. I didn’t have to do anything to move my normally calm old man into a good trot. We looped down, did our inspection, and left clear. It was time to throw a saddle on him and go to the warm-up.

“Half pad?” Keir called to me from the stall that housed all our tack.

“No. No half pad,” I answered.

He was surprisingly good at playing horse show boyfriend. I adored watching him toil.

“Okay. Numnah and saddle,” Keir said. “Go get dressed. I hate to say that and wish I could say otherwise.”

I stared at him, surprised.

“You can’t just boss me around without paying for it,” Keir whispered.

“You should mind yourself,” I said.

“You’re thinking about it, too,” Keir said.

He swatted my ass as I passed with my helmet and the garment bag holding my kit.

I was. But I had to keep my eyes on the prize. Of course, thinking about shagging him was a nice distraction from my intense nerves—only made worse by my sister’s absence. I’d hoped she and Parker would be here to make me feel more at home. Instead, I relied on Keir’s family and our coach to settle me. Keir was staying the night. I shouldn’t hope for anything and should avoid him like the plague, but I knew I wouldn’t. If he booty-called me to his room, I’d go in a heartbeat. I feared he’d moved on from our week in paradise, but he was still game. This sealed it.

I emerged from the changing room to see my sister and Parker chatting with Keir.

Astrid rushed over to give me a big hug. “I’m so sorry, darling. I meant to be here?—”

“It’s okay,” I said. Queen Kiersten, Betty, and Keir helped Cici and me so much. They treated me like one of their own.”

“Good. That’s so sweet. Queen Kiersten is supposedly the nicest person. ”

“She is so sweet. She insisted on plaiting Kraken’s tail.” I giggled. “Keir did his hooves.”

“Uh-huh. And he’s here even though his sister isn’t riding?” Astrid laughed.

I rolled my eyes.

“Did something happen?” Astrid asked in a low voice. She continued to stick to French.

“Um... so what if it did?”

“Oh my God!”

“You cannot say anything. It’s a mess. Cici and Betty don’t know—and I don’t want them to. Besides, Lars got into it with me. He had a crush, and... well, I was crushing on his brother.”

“I told you that man fancied you!”

“Yeah, he got agitated when I told him I was uninterested. And he’d probably lose his mind to know Keir was here helping me. Betty and Queen Natalie guilted him into coming. That’s his excuse, anyway.”

“He’s hot. I had a mad crush on him once.”

“Astrid!”

“What? He’s objectively hunky. He’s fit as fuck!”

Parker walked up. “What are we talking about?”

“Nothing, baby. Mind your own business,” Astrid said. “Girl things. You wouldn’t understand.”

Parker groaned before hugging me. “I am sorry we missed the running thing.”

I giggled. “Trot up or jog up, Parker. Now you get to see the fun bit, don’t worry.”

Horse Girl

KEIR

Cici was a notable favourite going into the dressage. A dressage queen—born to a literal queen—with a pedigree of nothing but horsewomen for miles, she had it all going for her. She'd been on the international stage for a decade. The British riders remained her primary competition—the home team and group with the deepest bench. I may not have known when things were happening, but I could grasp the broad strokes after growing up here.

Cici led coming out of the dressage, but waiting in the wings was a dark horse—one Princess Ingrid of Neandia—two princesses, both dressage queens, running into the balls-to-the-walls cross-country competition. And while I wish I could say I didn't care, I was invested. Ingrid was a beautiful rider aboard her giant gelding. He was less monster and longer couch, but she made him look better than I thought possible.

“Yes, she's good. Don't trip over yourself,” Cici laughed as we watched Ingrid's ride from Her Majesty's box.

“What?” I tried to deny I was watching her like anything other than just another competitor.

“You were so surprised she'd even be riding yesterday. She's remarkable—confident, strong, and has an amazing leg. I wish I had her Velcro skills. She could sit a bull.”

I tried not to think about her sitting anything at present.

“I’d love to see that,” Duncan chuckled.

Upon hearing I was out here, Duncan came to support his cousin in her quest for her first Badminton win. That was what he was telling people anyway. I had a feeling it was because Ingrid was here.

“She’s a baby , Duncan. Be good,” my uncle said. “I heard you threw the poor girl overboard.”

“It sounds so intense when you say it like that. It was all in good fun.”

Betty turned around from the row in front of us. “Until she lost her top!”

“She lost her top?” Lucy Ferguson, the Queen’s best mate, asked.

“For the record, I doubt she’d like us discussing this,” I said, feeling strangely protective of Ingrid.

“She did,” Duncan snickered. “And then Lars and Keir jumped in to assist. They couldn’t. In her infinite wisdom, Leah threw her hat in the ring by throwing her top to Ingrid.”

“Can we stop talking about this and focus on the work Ingrid is doing?” I asked. “She’s doing some... dance thing.”

“It’s a bloody passage!” Betty said, annoyed. “Good God, you’re useless!”

I threw Betty’s bright red ponytail over her head. “Okay, horse girl.”

She shook her head and slapped at me, not turning away from the competition. As much as she protested about adulthood, Betty would always and forever be my

lovely, sweet, horse-crazy baby sister—our family mascot and one who brought us together when we frayed at the edges.

“She’s going to get top marks with that transition,” Aunt Kiersten mooned. “Better than yours, Cici.”

“He has the impulsion to make it easier,” Cici protested. “Warmbloods, you know?”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Warmbloods are superior in dressage,” Betty explained. They are built for it. Over fences, they are bigger, rounder, and slower. And they tend to break down faster. That’s why Irish Sport Horses and Thoroughbreds make up most of this field. Kraken is a Trakehner, but he’s been a beast.”

“He does beautifully in the dressage,” Aunt Kiersten sighed as if she were about to die of happiness.

“And he’s an old gentleman over fences,” Cici said. “He’s taught Ingrid so much. She’s supercharged with Kraken. I was over the moon when Alexandra purchased him. She earned a proper mount. I watched her in a rodeo on a greenie two years ago. She may have been crying and swearing, but she never came off and kept riding. That horse had a dreadful habit of dumping riders.”

“They couldn’t just find a better horse, could they?” Duncan asked. Are they not able to purchase horses?”

“Don’t ask such a stupid question,” Uncle Olav said. “One does not simply purchase a horse. They are invited to purchase a horse, or they breed the damn thing, feed it for a million years, and maybe it’s good enough to work out.”

“Why would you want to do that? It’s not even going to earn money like a racehorse. Every horse has a price.”

“Not all do, Duncan,” Aunt Kiersten said. “I once decided to date my older sister’s friend just to move to Norway for a horse.”

She laughed, looking over at her husband.

“Thank God that pony was irreplaceable to your coach,” Uncle Olav chuckled. “I’d have not stood a chance otherwise.”

Ingrid saluted. She gave her horse big pats on the neck and hugged him as she came out of the ring.

“She did beautifully!” Aunt Kiersten clarified. “That’s going to be a great score.”

“She will need it for X-C,” Betty confirmed. “He’s not fast like the TBs.”

“She’ll return to it in the stadium,” Cici said. “He has the most beautiful round jump. He makes it look like a gorgeous, handy hunter. It’s ridiculous. They’re as pretty as a picture. You’ll see, Mamma.”

“We should go... help,” Duncan said .

“You will not be helpful, Duncan,” Aunt Natalie laughed. “Let Cici and Betty go.”

“I’m supposed to toil,” I sighed, pretending I did not want to see Ingrid. “So, I should go.”

I followed my sister and cousins to the stables, finding Astrid and Ingrid chatting about her ride while Parker nervously stood as far away from the horses as possible.

The man was a bit of a hermit—a kind one when he finally adjusted—but he was no horseman.

He asked, “It went well... I think?”.

“It went brilliantly if you ask the people who know,” I said, patting him on the back.

“There are only about ten more riders,” Betty said. Do you want to join us in our box now that she’s done?”

Astrid looked at Parker.

“I can just stay here. I’ll torture myself,” Ingrid said.

“Why?” Cici laughed. “You did an amazing job. People are asking why they’ve never seen this beautiful dressage rider who showed up.”

“Until they see me on the course tomorrow.”

“We have beer,” I offered. “If you’d like to take a load off, we have food and drink.”

“You’re famished. Let’s go over there,” Astrid insisted. “You did a great job.”

I was relieved but soon tortured by Ingrid sitting beside Betty in the first row, chatting alone. It was like I didn’t exist—or couldn’t. I gave up on anything happening—for now. Later, I’d make a move.

Not Losing Hope

INGRID

By some miracle, my international debut went alright. Out of nearly 100 horse and rider combinations, I was ranked ninth going into cross-country. So, on Saturday, I was in a great mood. I'd left in my horse's braids, too in love with these plaits, to pull them out. The protocol for small events was to leave them in. While I had time to change things up at this massive competition, I preferred Kraken dapper and left them in.

"He's a princess pony," Betty cooed, kissing Kraken's nose. "So handsome."

"You'll embarrass him, Betty," Keir laughed.

He was holding the horse—as if it mattered. Kraken had long gone to sleep, in his zen state going into day two. He would wind up when I took him into the warm-up, but now he slept lip drooping.

"He's chill," I said.

"He's alright for a giant." Keir patted the old man on the shoulder.

While we'd gotten up to approximately nothing, I wanted to. He was so good at taking directions as I gave them. Best of all, he looked good doing it. If you came up with a perfect hunky horse boyfriend, Keir would fit the bill. He stood where you asked him, could catch a horse, and occasionally wiped the sweat off his brow using

his shirt. This revealed a glimpse of his abs, attracting the view of any woman within a fifteen-mile radius.

“You’re going to get mucky,” Cici warned. “And it will be fine. Trust the studs on his shoes as best you can, but slow down. I pulled back because I worried about a time penalty. That tells you the course is okay. But you’re going after me now. The course will get worse with more riding and more rain.”

Cici was finally changed after being covered head-to-toe in muck. I drew a short straw today. After a beautiful ride yesterday, we were down to bad weather.

“I will take him when he returns,” the groom said.

Our cohort shared grooms. Alexandra had yet to spring for one permanently, and several Brits didn’t have one. So, I shared at competitions. I was hopeful if I did well, Alex would see a reason to get me someone permanently. Of course, I wouldn’t mind a groom like Keir. Maybe I’d luck out with someone hot? He didn’t need to be a prince.

“Thanks,” I said. “He will be a disaster.”

“Expected in the British weather, ma’am.”

We departed the stables for the warm-up. Keir nearly threw me onto my horse as if I were a cheerleader on a pyramid. I looked down at him, surprised.

“What?” He chuckled.

“That was a hell of a leg up,” I said.

“For a hell of a rider.” He patted my boot. “Kick some ass and take some names,

Ingrid.”

I smiled. “I will try.”

I worked on stretches during our warm-up. We did bending exercises to round Kraken out and distract him. He knew his job in this tack and was hyped watching the other horses ready for a race. By the time we reached the starting box, he’d be a bundle of nerves. I had enough of those for both of us. Solid fences terrified riders with any sense. I didn’t have sense. Eventers were wild and reckless. Still, this was next-level. There was no way to recreate such a thing. You ripped the band-aid off and let it go. You trusted your walkthrough and your horse’s dutiful strides. By the time we broke from there, I’d give over to it and let go of my fears.

Astrid and Parker initially waited with me, but I didn’t speak to them. When the bell tolled, we took off. Boom! Kraken was on—too excited by the first fence. We needed to pace ourselves, as Cici warned. If you finished too fast, you got a penalty. If you finished too slow, you also got a fault for that. It was a dance, and I was the most inexperienced partner.

I pulled him back slightly and headed to the bank ahead. The course was like nothing I’d seen before, and the rain didn’t help. The crowd held its breath as he made a dodgy leap—too excited. I knew I needed to get his attention. Fighting him was pointless, so time be damned, I pulled him into a circle before letting him go again. This time, Kraken slowed. He returned to me, focused not on chasing every fence in the course but on collecting like a good boy.

I spoke to him only in French, calming him. I knew there would be an issue on the table coming up. It was my least favourite obstacle to clear, and he tended to take these short. I readied my crop. I kept it on my right side to move him left. Otherwise, he’d go right and chip in like an idiot.

“Don’t rush,” I said. “Listen to me.”

My talking was probably more for me than the horse, but I would talk to him the whole course if I had to. I was white-knuckling coming into the table. I wanted to close my eyes as we flew into the air, clearing its expanse. We took off like a rocket. I couldn’t help but grin.

“Get them, girl! Get them!” Cici shouted. Despite the wild crowd, she screamed and jumped up and down with Betty. I had a cheering section. They’d go loop to the end of the course.

I was on cloud nine, checking my time. We were okay. I let him out a bit at the next gallop. He deserved it after that fence.

“Good boy. You’re doing beautiful, Kraken!”

My boy didn’t disappoint in the middle of the course. He took another bank into a timber fence like it was nothing. We soared like a plane, winding up the course at a good clip. I didn’t expect faults—surprising myself most of all. Then, we faced a simple hedge. It should have been nothing, but the slippery footing caught us both off guard. We came into it like a freight train coming off the track.

Kraken was a saint, as always. He would try to save it at all costs. I only prayed we had the steam to make it out. I held my breath and felt him take off almost vertically. It would be a miracle to land on his back, I thought. I braced for impact on our dodgy landing. I felt the air between my thighs and the saddle and realised I was going clear over the pommel to land on his neck.

Kraken halted obediently. I was barely aboard, hanging onto his mane like a rag doll. I was exhausted. My arms hurt, and I wanted to give up. The judge nearby approached, ready to disqualify me. I had two options—hop off and give up or try to

find some way to right myself. I could still salvage this if I didn't meet the ground.

"Don't give up! Stay up there!" I heard Betty's voice.

"You got this!" Cici added. "Pull up!"

"C'mon, Ingy!" Keir shouted. "Don't fucking lose your grip! You can do it!"

"Grab the pommel!" Cici shouted.

"Use all your might, sweetie!" Astrid called in French. "Don't give up! Keep at it!"

I held on with one hand, pulling with my legs as best I could. I moved my leg back, first over the cantle, then gripped my saddle with my thighs. I'd sprayed them down for best sticking ability. I used my core strength to force myself up, grabbing the pommel. Stunned, I pulled myself up. And without even my cue, Kraken took off to the next fence. I patted him and rode along like a passenger.

I didn't even have time to bother with stirrups. I barely had my feet back in them when I met the first of the last two fences. Another hedge awaited me. Then, we had to jump through a timber fence with an enormous halo of twigs. I knew he'd be golden and fearless.

"We can do it, baby! We have it, boy!" I said, tears in my eyes.

Coming into the final fence, I was sore, exhausted, and not at my best. Despite our bruised and battered look, Kraken took off and landed easily. I screamed out, so happy to be home and pulled my dutiful mount back down slowly into a relaxed canter. After a circle or two, we went to a trot laced with happy tears .

"Good boy, good boy. You are the best," I said, patting him. We cooled down before

I handed the horse off to my waiting groom.

Hitting the ground, I hugged my coach and the waiting cheering section of other riders. Then, I returned to our stable row to drink and snack. Keir, Astrid, and Patrick waited for us there.

“You were amazing!” Astrid said. “You’re so tough. I would have come off!”

“I reckon any of us would have,” Cici said. “Damn. You are a legend now, kid!”

“I tried,” I laughed. “I gave it all I had. That was the best I could ask for. And Kraken was the best boy. I credit him with it. On any other horse, I’d have come off. He’s just a good boy.”

“Well, you made it. And you’re clear to the arena tomorrow,” Betty said. “You’re going to finish in the top twenty, I’d bet!”

“Shhhh!” Keir laughed. “You’ll spoil it, Betty.”

I was in shock. Making the top twenty was a pipe dream for an international debut. I just wanted to finish, and that was my only goal going into it.

“You’ve got an audience,” Parker said.

“What?” I turned to look in the direction he nodded.

An expectant group of reporters stood arguing with the security detail that kept the normies at bay.

“What for?” I asked.

“You’re a legend. Like I said!” Cici said.

“Go, woman! Enjoy your moment!” Astrid urged.

Taking Orders

KEIR

Ingrid was a machine. I expected someone mad for horses. I even expected bravery. What I got was far different. Ingrid's stunt impressed everyone. She was hard, tough, and determined. It only made me want her more. That wasn't like me. I usually preferred sweet, feminine, slightly submissive women. Ingrid wasn't that girl. She was a badass who held her own. I'd underestimated her. She had grit, and I needed more of that in my life.

"I suppose I should slow down," Ingrid said. "This is my one glass of wine."

We sat at dinner, recounting the equestrians' efforts around the table. I wasn't drinking. I'd have to fly to Wales tomorrow right after the event.

"You will appreciate it in the morning," Isak said. It makes a difference, especially since I think you'll probably need to pop a paracetamol."

"You're going to be stiff as a board in the morning," Cici laughed.

"All worth it," Aunt Natalie said. "For such a triumphant comeback."

I smiled, proud of her. Cici was poised to win it all, but it was Ingrid for whom I couldn't stop cheering. I was in her corner. And while I would have liked to say and do much more, I couldn't. She'd gone to bed at nine the night before. I didn't take it as her avoiding me, though. She was focused. I wasn't here to distract from that.

Unfortunately, this was my last night here, and I'd not so much as kissed Ingrid.

"I should probably turn in," Ingrid said. "I'm exhausted, and I want to read before bed."

Well, that seals it.

"Take care of yourself, darling," Astrid said affectionately. "Such a big day."

I couldn't fault her. If I had the pressure on my shoulders she did, I'd do the same. I was competitive and proud. I wouldn't risk it, either. I only hoped there would be other opportunities.

I remained at the table, listening to Duncan go on about a Spanish princess annoying him, when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

INGRID

I know we haven't had time to talk but do you want to?

Talk, I mean.

ME

Just talk? I thought you were reading.

INGRID

I could be. Or I could do something more fun

I tried not to chuckle at her emoji. This was more than talking.

ME

I could say I needed some rest and slip away.

INGRID

Come to my room then. We'll talk.

She was cheeky, if nothing else. I waited another few minutes and decided to turn in. Everyone looked at me like I was a disappointment, but I was walking on cloud nine. I changed into my typical old T-shirt and shorts. I wouldn't be found in the hallway by anyone in jeans and my shirt from the day before. I remembered to bring two condoms, hopeful I might get to use at least one of them. I'd not be darting back into the hall.

Ingrid was in bed—naked. Talking wasn't what she wanted.

"I don't want to talk, and I can't stay up all night," she said. "But I feel like I've had no time with you. And if I don't get you, I might expire."

"Oh, really, baby?" I asked, pretending to be inconvenienced. "You said you needed to talk. We might discuss your big day."

She rolled her eyes. "Every time you get an opportunity to grab my ass, you do, Keir. You want me. Here I am. I need to blow off steam—sore legs and arms be damned."

"Well, it'd be rude if I wasn't at your service, right? To the victor go all the spoils."

She smiled. "Is that what we're calling it?"

"I'd call it whatever you want to if I could be balls-deep inside you right about now."

“Fuck me, then,” Ingrid said.

I disrobed in record time, wasting not a second. I climbed into bed and kissed her. Ingrid’s soft, sweet curves felt like perfection beneath me. I’d been waiting a week for this, and there was no telling when I’d get her back again.

“Condom?” Ingrid asked.

“One sec,” I said, hopping back out of bed to chase one down.

“You have such a nice ass,” Ingrid said. “Not that all of you isn’t nice. But it’s not flat. I rather prefer it that way.”

“You’d objectify me, princess?” I smirked. “What now?”

“You love to be loved, I suspect. You live to be adored.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“And you, Ingrid?”

I rolled a condom over my hard cock and climbed into bed again, pressing her onto the pillows.

“You worshipped me the other night,” she whispered. “I ate it up as much as you devoured me.”

I had. I’d relished it. Listening to her cum out in the open like that was dangerous and addictive .

“I like both,” I said. “To be adored and to adore someone.”

“So, you like this?”

“Chasing you is flying too close to the sun, princess,” I said. “But I’d risk my wings to take you again.”

Ingrid pulled me into a kiss, grinding against me. She continued until I slipped inside her. As I did, she moaned into my mouth.

“I won’t ask you to risk your wings,” Ingrid said. “Not if you do this properly.”

We were electric. She may have been green. She may have been younger than I’d prefer, but the chemistry was uncanny. I didn’t fawn over girls like I did Ingrid. I didn’t like taking orders, but I wanted to please this woman so badly. If she asked, I’d have gone to the moon and back right now. Watching her lose herself, pleasure rolling over her, Ingrid was everything I shouldn’t have wanted but needed. Her eyes rolled back into her head.

“Oh, Keir, fuck me,” she moaned, nails digging into my back.

I sped up as she collapsed into the bed, going limp as she came back to reality. Her tits bounced like ripples on a pond, then like they were hit with the waves as I went for broke. It was satisfying, but I’d lose it this way if I kept going. I wanted to get her off again.

“Get on top,” I said. “I want to watch you.”

“I’m sore,” Ingrid pouted. “I want you to do the work.”

“Are you getting lazy on me, Ingrid?”

I couldn’t resist that face.

“Get on your hands and knees,” I said. “You deserve punishment for being so disagreeable.”

Ingrid bit her lip and flipped around. I’d have to be satisfied with the view of her ass as I pounded into her. It was firm but still plenty smackable. I forcefully pulled her hips towards me and gave her a good swat.

She moaned. I liked a woman who enjoyed a spanking. I thrust inside her slowly, trying to be gentle. Every time we did something, I reminded myself she’d never done it before. It was easily forgot since the woman didn’t hold back.

Ingrid looked back at me defiantly as I pumped into her. Then, as if in a sexy act of protest, she reached back with one hand to touch her clit as I continued to rail her. That was hot. How did she know what to do? She was an enigma.

“You’re a naughty girl,” I said.

“I want to cum hard,” Ingrid said. “Fuck me harder.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I agreed. “But you should mind yourself.”

“Why? Am I not your peer?”

Ingrid’s moans and protest led to more desperation. I was determined to get her off again. She was so wet, warm, and tight now. She was close. I felt her tighten even more around my hard dick. By now, she dripped down my balls.

She let out a scream, “Oh, fuck! Ouais! Don’t stop!”

The melange of words made it hotter. She pulsed around me and collapsed into the pillows. I pressed her head down harder.

“You make too much noise, Ingrid.”

“Just fuck me and mind yourself,” Ingrid growled into the pillow.

I gave her arse another swat, then gripped her hips and railed her. She was spent but a good sport. I didn't last much longer, desperate to cum inside her wet, tight pussy. I came, holding onto her to steady my knees. I didn't want to leave her. She felt so good. Still, I had to. I couldn't stay deep in her like this forever.

I pulled away, watching Ingrid roll onto her back. She was flushed, panting, and as she fell, her breasts bounced, rippling until they settled. She was gorgeous. I wanted to burn this image of her into my memory.

“I gotta deal with this,” I gestured about the condom. “But I'm coming back.”

“If the servants find that, will they freak?” Ingrid called after me.

“Nah, I doubt they will bat an eye,” I answered, tossing the annoying thing aside.

Condoms were an occupational hazard. I'd loved to be inside her, nothing coming between us, but that was risky.

Ingrid giggled as I returned. “You just jump when I say how high.”

“Don't get drunk on power, Ingrid,” I said, pulling her into my arms. “We both wanted the same thing. That is all.”

“I felt dreadful leaving you after the night on the boat. And you... you've been such a good boy. ”

She brushed my chest hair as I traced my finger up and down her hip.

“I promised to be helpful.”

“Why?” Ingrid looked up at me.

“Because you’re tempting, and I am a weak man.”

She smiled. “I wish we had another night. Many more, in fact.”

I kissed her. “Same. What is your plan for next weekend?”

“I planned a quiet weekend of doing nothing. Half the riders are going to another horse trial. I can’t keep up. I don’t have a second-stringer that could compete at that level. I have a dressage lesson on Friday morning, and after that, nothing.”

I thought about what I was asking.

“I’m going to Wales to do some ceremonial stuff next week. Duncan will be there for part of it. But I have my aunt’s house all weekend if I want it.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’d risk it?”

“As I said, too close to the sun.”

“If someone finds out, it could be a scandal.”

“No one will find out,” I assured. I ran my fingers through her hair, mesmerised again by its softness.

“And how would I even get to Wales?”

“I’d come to collect you,” I offered. “I’d fly into Marham, see some mates, and return

with you. I'd deliver back on Sunday afternoon."

She smiled cheekily, then looked down as she ran her finger up and down my chest. She was considering it, but I suspected she wanted to torture me a bit. Two could play at that game. I ran my fingers over her nipple, then slowly rolled it between my thumb and forefinger. She shuddered and moaned.

"You don't want two uninterrupted days of shagging? Of me showering you with praise and giving you as many orgasms as possible?"

Ingrid looked up at me, smiled, and leaned in slowly to kiss me. I felt the warmth of her body against me and longed for more of this. I loved the feeling of her mouth on mine, her tongue slowly pressing into my mouth, and the way she moaned when I traced her hip with my finger and dipped south. I lived for how she ground her hips into me when I hit just the right spot. I wanted to make her cum again so badly.

So, I did. She hadn't said yes, but I knew she would. I ran my hand between her legs, finding her still-swollen clit waiting for my fingers. I longed to hear her say my name and cry out before losing all ability to speak. She moaned and clawed at me as if trying to steady herself before she fell back against the bed, looking up at me as I stroked her wet pussy.

"You'll come to Wales," I said. "And you'll cum for me again now, won't you?"

She nodded her head as if in a trance. I held all the power here. She trusted I'd get her off. I trusted she'd soon scream my name. I slid two fingers inside her in a torturously slow way.

"More," she moaned. "I want more."

I couldn't go again—not this soon or after being so knackered from being out in the

rain and slogging through the mud all day. Even I had limits.

I slid another finger inside her. She moaned louder.

“More,” she begged.

By this point, I had four fingers inside her, my palm slapping against her pelvis. She swung her hips up towards me, showing me, she was close again. Ingrid came so beautifully. She was still in those early days when the novelty of sex was far from gone. But the way she directed me, you’d never know it was so new. She knew what she wanted and how to ask for it. I knew how to please her.

“I’ll come to Wales. Oh, Keir, don’t fucking stop! I’m... I’m...”

She came tight around my fingers, gripping my wrist with one hand, her hair tight in the other. So, she did like her hair pulled. I noted it. Satisfied, I pulled my fingers slowly from her swollen pussy. She watched me, still panting and beside herself with pleasure.

“You think I’m wrapped around your finger, but you’re willing to waste it all for a booty call,” I said.

“No, my stakes are low,” she said. “And you’re willing to do just about anything for a taste.”

As if in agreement, I licked her taste from my fingers. That part wasn’t wrong. I was. And while the stakes were higher for me, defiling her was my new favourite pastime.

Velcro

INGRID

I rode a fine round in the stadium, leading to a ninetieth place in the finish. It wasn't painful watching Cici get the big prize. Queen Natalie beamed as she presented the trophy to her niece. It was hard-won for a princess from a small country. I beamed with pride alongside Betty, so happy to see Cici grab this achievement. Her season would now take a massive pause as she readied for her wedding.

Unfortunately, Keir didn't get to stay. He knew Cici would probably win when he left, but there was no time to stick around. He had orders to be somewhere with Duncan early the next day. He sent me a text apologising for leaving. He congratulated Cici but then was on his way. His leaving was followed by Duncan, who looked bored. Keir was genuinely happy for us. His face telegraphed his regret.

Disappointed not to have another night with him, I packed to head back to Norfolk in the morning. We'd get a well-deserved rest and turn our horses out for a week's break. I'd ride my greenest horse instead, trying to get her head on straight. She was the type with oodles of potential but no chill.

While I did all of that, I would play that image of Keir licking me off his fingers on repeat. At night, I couldn't help but touch myself thinking about him. He loved the taste of me. It was so dirty but so sexy. I'd never even imagined a man would care—let alone want to do such a thing. I frantically pleased myself as if desperate to get it out of my system.

Try as I may, it didn't. The house was quiet for the week. I used my shower head for far more than washing more times than I would admit. I thought about the way he gripped my hips, slapped my ass, and pressed my head into the pillow. I loved the way he owned me in those moments. I wanted to be owned, to be his. I didn't desire a relationship but all of him—every last inch of him ploughing into me with great force.

Friday finally rolled around. I packed myself up for a weekend lounging around the house and looked forward to flying with him somewhere. That was sexy, right?

He sent a car for me, natch. I was surprised when I had to hand my driver's licence over at the gate of a military base and ride to what I thought was a runway. Keir was there talking to someone in uniform and turned as I approached.

“Velcro, you made it!”

I cocked my head.

“I was just telling Rowan your callsign should be Velcro, Ingrid,” he explained.

I suspected the guy in a uniform was Rowan.

“Callsign?” I asked, confused.

The driver brought my bag forward, but I barely saw him. I was too focused on the odd, old plane before me. Certainly, this wasn't the plane we were taking. This must have been Rowan's.

“What you're called over the radio,” Rowan said. “You don't choose it. I heard you rode some bucking horse last weekend?”

“He wasn’t bucking at all. He was a very good boy. Stock still,” I explained. “We landed poorly. I pulled myself back on and kept going.”

Did he brag about me? That was promising.

“Well, we should head out. Gotta get back to Valley,” Keir said. “Hopefully, before traffic gets too bad.”

“Have a good one, mate. Nice to meet you, Velcro.”

Keir didn’t bother introducing me, but I waved after Rowan anyway.

“Hermes. It’s so on-brand,” Keir quipped, slinging my bag over his shoulder.

“Don’t be an asshole,” I said. “What do you mean... on brand.”

“Horse girl. I expect it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you always just say things to get under my skin.”

“You love the cruelty. You come back for more.”

He brought the bag into the plane I most feared. I stared up the steps and called to him, afraid to step aboard.

“Is this... a joke?”

Keir poked his head out, having to duck. “What? No. Why?”

“It’s like... a propeller jet.”

“I’ll forgive you this once for you saying that,” Keir said. “A jet it is not. Jets don’t have propellers.”

“But it doesn’t have... engines.”

“It has two. It’s a twin-engine piston aircraft,” Keir said.

I didn’t understand the difference, but if he quickly corrected me, there had to be one.

“But... is it okay?”

“This is a classic,” Keir said. “My pride and joy. Don’t hate on the old girl.”

I relented, worried I was about to die for what Astrid would refer to as “the good dick.” How dumb was I?

“This is an Aerostar 601, and she’s fun,” Keir said, moving aside.

“Where do I sit?” I winced, looking around the very tiny cabin.

“You will be to the right—up here in the cockpit. Have you never learned anything about aircraft?”

Perplexed, I shook my head. “Why? Why on Earth would I?”

“Because it’s fun?”

I wasn’t sure I agreed. He pulled the door closed and pulled out a tablet computer.

“What is that? Do you fly the plane with that?”

Keir snickered. “It’s not a game. This is my checklist and my flight plan. Are you frightened, Ingrid?”

“No,” I answered. “I mean... a little.”

“I have seen some shit and done a lot of stupid things—a couple of which I got a lashing from the big boss about.”

“A general?” I asked.

“We don’t have generals in the RAF, darling. No, my aunt.”

That was worse, somehow. The woman could be intimidating.

Keir flipped switches and talked to himself, virtually ignoring me. Then, he handed me a headset, not specifying if I should put it on. I did, assuming that was a signal I should.

“Should I not help you?”

“Sure,” he answered, handing me the tablet. “Just hold this.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You asked. You ask stupid questions; you get stupid answers.”

I scoffed, “It wasn’t stupid. It was an offer .”

“Do you want us to lose our place or die?” Keir asked.

That made me feel worse.

“I’m kidding—sort of,” Keir said. Relax. I would never endanger you—or anyone other than myself.”

I wasn’t sure that was a comfort or that this bucket of bolts would get us off the ground. He chimed in on the radio, repeating something with technical jargon I didn’t understand.

“Yes, Chef, we read,” some guy said.

“Chef?” I laughed.

“You don’t pick your handle, Ingrid. It’s like we said.”

I guess I was stuck with the Chef for this weekend—if I made it out alive. I had more questions than answers.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:26 am

Chef

KEIR

“C hef, though? Why Chef?” Ingrid asked.

“I can cook... well,” I answered. “I got razzed a lot, even if everyone loves it. My mother didn’t let us get out without a proper culinary education. She wanted us to be useful people.”

“Betty really cannot cook.”

“Betty is just bad at cooking. We tried.”

She smiled. “Okay, fair.”

That satisfied her. Ingrid wasn’t into aviation. I’d have to convert her. She grew visibly nervous as we stayed far behind a fast jet bound for the Mach Loop. I wished I were going with him, but I sat this one out. Ingrid didn’t understand how anything worked—including the bit where we waited our turn like everyone else.

“It’s funny they’re all... lined up like cars,” she noted. “How do they not crash into one another?”

“First, most of these blokes fly in tight formation, so they are spatially aware. Second, the controllers are good. They make sure we aren’t in trouble.”

“Oh. How do they teach the guys to fly like that? ”

“It’s learned. There’s trust in it. You learn over time.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“It’s not without danger, but I’d argue riding that horse of yours over what seems to be just a bunch of downed redwoods isn’t much better, Ingrid.”

She snickered. “I cannot fall out of the sky.”

“You can... just differently. But you are courageous. I admire that in you so much. There is a fearlessness there I relate to.”

I looked over as she grew quiet. She was blushing, trying to come up with words. I’d been too genuine, perhaps. I didn’t know how else to be with her. I didn’t like the idea of lying to her as she was too clever to fall for anyone’s bullshit. She gave as good as she got. Thankfully, my final clearance over the radio came to rescue us from awkward silence.

“Cleared for take-off,” I said.

“Do I just... hold on?” Ingrid panicked.

“You’re in the seat and fine,” I laughed. “Stay where you are. This is not going to be a rough ride. We have beautiful weather.”

I spun up the engines and released the brake. We were off running. The 601 was a pilot’s dream. It was zippy and fun to fly. It wasn’t as simple as a comparable Cessna, but who wanted to be bored? The only pain point was that this thing guzzled fuel like my mother inhaled iced coffee in summer. Which was to say you filled it up on every

trip. The one time I got cocky with this beast and ignored my aunt's advice, I ended up coming in mostly like a glider with a pan-pan call. To say she was disappointed in me for neglecting her would be a vast understatement. Today, we were full up. Nothing impressed a woman less than running out of fuel.

We took off, the wind lifting us, and headed southwest. We could do a visual flight without issue, as visibility was unseasonably good for Norfolk in May, and everything was coming up roses today.

"Are we done now?" Ingrid asked.

I tried not to laugh as I checked in. "Climbing to 5000."

"Roger. You got it, Chef."

"Don't you have an official rank or something? Like a Colonel or Chancellor or something?"

I laughed at that, unable to hold back. "Oh, Ingrid, I'm sorry. Do you not have armed forces in Neandia?"

"We have not for years. I have never shot a gun, nor do I intend to. I consider myself a pacifist, so why would I care? I think it's men with a small man complex blowing shit up. So, apologies if I don't know any better. We're a neutral country and have been for two centuries."

She crossed her arms. I gathered her overreaction came from embarrassment, and I'd hit a nerve.

"I didn't mean to offend you. I promise we're not up here to fire any missiles. I leave that to my daily driver."

“Which is? Another old plane?”

She thought I was having fun at her expense. Unfortunately, I was annoyed she'd just shat all over what I did for a living as if it were silly.

“A bomber,” I answered. “That blows shit up. But I promise you I'm not going to do anything wild. This aircraft is near and dear to me. I do have a rank. Up here, I'm Squadron Leader Inverness. And you can disagree with what I do when we get down to the ground, okay?”

My voice was hot. I'd only wanted to impress her, but she wasn't that simple. It seemed when I was in bed with her, she was easy to please. Now that we had to converse, I struggled. The playing field levelled. She tilted her body, resting her head against the window, ignoring me. Fuck, I needed to grovel again. Flying with a person that hated your guts wasn't much fun. I dialled in the autopilot and sighed, thinking about what to do next.

“I don't like people acting like I'm stupid,” Ingrid said. “I'm clever. Not like Astrid is, perhaps. I'll never be Dr Deschamps, but... I am not just a walking pair of tits. It gets old. I'm not trying to be a bitch, but you're acting like I'm an idiot. You do not get what my life has been like... okay? What it is. So, stop treating me like I'm an idiot. Also, English is not my first language. Don't make fun of me for not knowing technical terms.”

I looked over at her, her voice calmer. “I am sorry, Ingrid. That wasn't my intent. I... I don't mean this in a bad way, but... you don't know anything about aviation. You know less than pretty much anyone, and... I thought you were being silly.”

“I lived under lock and key until I was thirteen,” Ingrid said. “And even then, I was still quite sheltered. My first flight came when Rick and Alexandra took us to Lundhavn for the first time. I don't have brothers, and Rick's a dandy. What was he

going to do? Talk to us about planes. No.”

I snickered at that characterisation. “Ah, that’s not totally fair to Rick the Prick. He’s quite the mariner. If he taught you about those things—and you know quite a bit about sailing—he’s not too much a dandy.”

She looked at me, then giggled. “The nickname never dies.”

“No, Velcro, it doesn’t.”

She softened. “Okay, so tell me about the plane. I’m sorry I insulted him... or her... or it.”

“I will stick to basics because you do not care about everything, I could tell you. This plane was the first one I ever worked on. My grandfather flew it for years. It sat disused and was destined for a museum. When I turned twelve, my aunt decided to refurb it. In the span of a summer, we rebuilt the engine and put it back together. I learned a lot. I got my instrument rating in this thing before I could even drive, of course.”

“Your aunt... the Queen?”

I chuckled. “Yes. She has a hangar and rebuilds things. She’ll hide away there if she wants to be left alone. You know those people you hate for being gifted at all things?”

Ingrid nodded. “In our case, that’s Astrid.”

“Well, she’s like that. She taught me much about flight, and we still sometimes rebuild things.”

“That’s sweet,” Ingrid sighed, turning her body back towards me.

“I didn’t want to fight with you, Ingrid.”

“Do you really admire me?” Ingrid asked. “Because I’m going to sleep with you. You don’t have to continue to puff up my ego or sell me?—”

“I’m not. And I do,” I said. “You already made your mind up?”

“I climbed on a potential death trap with you to get some, yes,” Ingrid said. “It’s probably the most ridiculous thing I’ve done—maybe second to riding a pony through a flaming hoop.”

“I am sorry, what?”

“Oh, I had a pony. He was a real knob at times. He loved to bite you or even lay a sucker punch or a kick on you. However, he was brilliant over fences. Point-and-shoot and would jump anything. I was with my schoolmates. We all rode, you know? We decided to rig up a jump and set a ring on fire. None of the horses were dumb enough to manage it, but Chance did. And that is a story I never tell anyone because I will get told off still to this day.”

“That’s the bone-headed bravery I appreciate, Ingrid,” I laughed.

“Well, it’s what you’re getting. I am a loose cannon.”

“Same.”

We flew on until we got to pick up the tower from Valley. We were entering restricted airspace, so I had to do a couple more things than if we were just on a pleasure cruise.

“Hello, you old bastard, what are you doing?”

The voice on the radio was more than familiar.

“Ah, Wales, you are on desk duty today,” I said.

“All weekend. You knew that. And yet you decided to go out and fly around?”

“I didn’t know that,” I protested. “I thought you were in Surrey.”

“Shortage. Stuck here.”

“Well, put me down. I’ve got the 601 out.”

“Mum’s favourite, yeah? Lucky bastard. It’s a nice day to fly, and I’m stuck here.”

“Is that Duncan?” Ingrid mouthed silently.

I nodded back.

“I’ve got you in the rotation. I couldn’t believe it when I saw you come up. I thought you were doing something else.”

“Like what, Duncan?”

“Golfing?”

“I don’t golf.”

“At your age, it’s time to start.”

It must be slow as fuck if he was going to take the piss like that. If I'd been his CO, I'd have written him up for the chatter.

"You're cleared whenever you want to enter the pattern," Duncan said. "At your discretion, Chef."

He gave me a vector. We got the plane down as smoothly as ever, even if Ingrid looked like she was preparing for a mid-air breakup. I tried not to take offence. She had no frame of reference.

"How did he end up on that side and you out here?" Ingrid asked.

"Duncan is the heir and an only child—a miracle baby. Auntie Nat didn't want him hurt. So, he got stuck with ATC. I get to do the fun stuff. And now you can see one of the reasons we struggle to get on properly," I said.

"He's jealous?"

"He is, and I don't blame him. If the roles were reversed, I'd be just as cross."

"But now he knows—or will know?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "Fuck my life."

"And mine."

"Duncan will not stir the pot."

"Uh-huh."

I lied to myself. I'd need to beg and plead with Duncan to ensure we weren't under

extra pressure. I would owe him massively, but hopefully, it would be worth it. I looked at Ingrid as she adjusted the hem of her skirt. I thought about what it might be like to get her out of that sundress. And I realised no matter what, it was worth it. We'd have a few hours to shag like teenagers whose parents left town for the day before Duncan came and ruined it all.

In the Act

INGRID

“So, we’re not worried about him?” I asked, stepping into our cosy, modern home base for the weekend.

“Nah,” Keir answered. “I’ll talk to him. It will get sorted. He might punch me, but I can take him.”

I stared, deer-in-headlights.

“Ingrid, darling, it’s okay,” Keir said, pulling me close. He rested his hands on my hips. “It will be fine. We’re not so uncivil. I planned a relaxing weekend, and I will stick to it. He’ll likely be too busy drinking with mates on post to even bother with me.”

I knew that was probably wishful thinking, but I wanted Keir to kiss me so badly that I didn’t care. Thankfully, he leaned down to do just that. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he kissed me slowly and deeply. The world—the stupid plane, the argument, and Duncan—all faded. I was here with him. We were about to fuck like animals. It would all be worth it.

“Where is the bedroom?” I asked.

“The lady is... direct.”

“Have I ever been otherwise? My mother was Scandinavian. ”

“I knew we got along for some reason.” He smacked my bum. “Upstairs and to the left.”

I ventured ahead as Keir toted my bag. The house was lovely and lived in. I could tell it was a retreat rather than a palace. This was solitude and everything you wanted in a country escape. Instead of bright whites and gold, it was decorated with calm shades of cream, brown, and sea green. The furnishings looked nice, but like any other wealthy family lived here.

“There’s a pool?” I asked, peering outside. “In a greenhouse.”

“My uncle’s pool, yeah. Duncan will probably dip out there at an obscene hour out of habit. This is my aunt’s house. We stay here when we’re either in Wales or on post.”

“And it’s okay if we do?”

“Sure,” Keir said. “She doesn’t care. It’s our family house.”

“Keir,” I asked, “are you Queen Natalie’s favourite?”

He feigned surprise. “Yeah, I have been accused as such. Look, for about five years, she was certain Duncan would never happen. He was a happy accident. We have a special bond, and I help out where I can. I am close to my aunt and uncle. Nate and I used to live with them. So, don’t be alarmed.”

“Oh, that’s... sweet.”

Keir set aside the bag and joined me by the balcony’s window. He draped his arms around my shoulders and kissed my neck. I melted as he unwound me once more.

“When you do that, I lose my mind,” I murmured.

“I know.” He chuckled. “Why do you think I do it?”

I moaned now as he ran one hand down to my breast.

“What do you want me to do?” Keir asked. “What would make you lose it? I want to drive you mad.”

“Throw me on the bed and take me,” I said. “Relentlessly. Like you’re dying to have me.”

Where did I learn these words? Was it Astrid’s ever-growing collection of dirty books? Was it the porn that I rarely consumed and only watched with the volume off? Or did it just flow from me when I got aroused? Was that how it worked? I didn’t know. What I did know was that Keir threw me down on the bed like I asked, pinning me by the wrists. He hung over me, our faces only centimetres apart. I breathed heavily, already wanting more.

“Why should I give you what you want?” He asked.

“I’m being good,” I whimpered, playing along.

He pressed against me, his erection poking into me very obviously. I rubbed my pelvis against him. He pressed me harder into the mattress. It hurt slightly, but also felt so good to have him dominate me. I didn’t even know why I liked it. I just wanted him like this—to be cruel at a moment’s notice, and all because I allowed him to.

“You cannot just tease me like that, Ingrid.”

“Like what?” I asked, pressing my pelvis up and grinding against him again.

“I’m going to have to punish you. That’s the only way.”

He took both my wrists in his left hand, running his right down my body. I shivered as he pulled my dress up and moaned as he pulled my thong to the side and ran a finger over my clit.

“I’ve been so good, though,” I whimpered. “Why would you...”

His fingers slid inside me. My head rolled back involuntarily as he tickled my G-spot and moved his fingers in and out of me in a rhythm that guaranteed an orgasm.

“I shouldn’t let you cum,” Keir said, pulling back. “I should get off and torture you in the meantime. You don’t deserve to cum.”

“No, please, please,” I begged, pushing back against his grip on my wrists.

He pressed me back against the bed. “You will stay here and be good, or I will spank your arse until it’s blue.”

I bit my lip.

“Don’t even think about it, princess,” Keir said. “Stay right here. If you behave, I might let you cum.”

I stayed perfectly still until he came back, slowly rolling a condom over his dick. He climbed on the bed, pulling me closer towards him by the thighs and slipped inside me quicker than ever before. I gasped in surprise. He stared down, nervous for a moment.

“I’m good,” I said, breaking the spell of our game.

“Tell me if you’re not:” He kissed me sweetly—too sweetly—then switched into this role he inhabited. “You don’t get to cum unless I say, alright?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll be good.”

He continued fucking me, his body knocking into mine with every thrust. It was noisy—not just because of the bed creaking. The sound of skin on skin and my growing wetness made this audible clap that I worried might be off-putting.

“It’s... loud,” I moaned.

“I like loud. You’re so wet. You must have been thinking dirty thoughts all this time.”

“I don’t think dirty thoughts.”

“You’re lying.”

I was, of course.

Keir slowed, bending closer and gently rolling his cock into me. It was torturous in the best way.

“Do you want to cum, Ingrid? If so, tell me... when was the last time you touched yourself?”

“This morning.”

“This morning?” He looked surprised.

“In the shower. Before I came to meet you.”

“How was that? What did you do?”

“I used the shower head on the hardest setting to get off.”

“Dirty girl,” Keir chuckled. “And what were you thinking about?”

“You licking me off your fingers,” I answered. “How satisfied you looked. How I made you feel.”

Keir smiled again and pulled out. “Get on top of me. That reminds me, I didn’t get to have that last time, and I am dying to watch you from that angle.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I asked.

Keir rolled me over onto my stomach and smacked my arse harder than before. It smarted—but only a bit and in the best way. “You’ll get more of that, Ingrid.”

I pressed up on the bed, sitting back up. He lay there, cock hard and slick from my arousal. It was fabulous just watching him watch me, knowing I was the centre of his universe. I was drunk on power.

“Should I take the dress off?” I asked.

“No. Leave it on. I rather like the idea of fucking you with it on.”

I climbed astride him, pulling my knickers to the side, and lowered my body slowly onto the full girth of him. His cock slipped slowly inside me. I remembered Astrid saying that being on top was pure bliss and that she could do it all day. Now, I knew why. Grinding against him, he hit every one of the best spots simultaneously.

Meanwhile, he got to watch my breasts bounce and my face turn as I lost control.

“You are so bad. You wanted this all along,” Keir said with a cheeky grin. “That’s very, very naughty, Ingrid.”

He spanked me again. I picked up speed, closer and closer to climax with each gyration. God, he was so good at getting me to the point of no return!

I moaned, throwing my head back.

“Don’t do it, Ingrid. If you?—”

“Oh, fuck! Fuck!” I screamed. “I’m...”

And I came. Feeling like I was headed to the moon, my climax took me to new heights. I braced, my hands on the fronts of his thighs, catching my breath.

“You are naughty,” Keir growled. “And undeserving of that orgasm.”

“I’m greedy,” I said. “And I want another.”

“No,” Keir said, grabbing me by the hips.

Now, he bobbed me up and down as if I were his plaything. What should have annoyed me only made me want more. I dug my nails into his chest and whimpered.

“Please, Keir, let me cum. I want to cum. Please, baby.”

“I’ll give you one freebie,” Keir said. “And that’s it.”

By that point, words left me. I skyrocketed back up. The warm, tingly sensation

overtook me. Keir continued to bob me up and down until he reached his climax. Then, he clamped his hands on my hips to keep himself as deep inside me as he could be. Breathless, I watched him come back to me, a satisfied smile on my lips. He chuckled and shook his head. He may have gotten all of me briefly, but I had complete control now.

Aftermath

KEIR

“ I ’m simultaneously exhausted and still horny,” Ingrid groaned, resting her head on my chest.

We arrived hours ago but hadn’t left the bed. This was round three. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t keep my hands off Ingrid. She was irresistible. Ignoring her was torture. And lying naked in bed with her could have cured any man’s ills.

I kissed the top of her head. “I hate to tell you I’m done, but I am done. There is a limit, Ingrid, and you’ve reached it.”

She stared up at me, pouting. “Forever or just for this evening.”

“I need eight uninterrupted hours to recharge,” I explained.

“Hmm. So, I’ll wake you at four-thirty. Anyway, I’m hungry,” Ingrid said.

“Why don’t you dress, and I will make you dinner?”

“Late dinner?”

“It’s still dinner, darling.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

I pulled myself out of bed, dressed, and padded to the kitchen to make a garlic butter chicken dish she'd die for. It was simple but came out delicious. If there was one dish I could count on to impress a woman, it was this. Not that I needed to impress her. I don't even know why I bothered. I had every ounce of her in the palm of my hand. I set her ablaze with just my fingers.

Duncan appeared as I was laying out the ingredients. Fuck!

I wasn't sure how I forgot this ripple in my plan, but I did. I'd have to come clean before Ingrid appeared, and this got beyond awkward. It was best to be honest.

"What are you making? And can I eat it?" Duncan asked, dropping into the chair at the small kitchen table.

"Garlic butter chicken. I don't know," I sighed. "I am not cooking for you."

"Who did you shag? Do you have a girl here?" Duncan asked. Even he was onto my usual go-to recipe.

"I..." I turned from where I prepped the broccoli and stared at him. "You're like an annoying younger brother, so I will be honest with you, Duncan."

"Uh-huh. So, there's totally a girl upstairs. You thought I would be gone, but I can't leave. So, I'm cramping your style. Is she hot?"

"Duncan, can you get any more immature?"

"What? It's a valid fucking question."

"Is it? Yes. Of course, she's hot."

He wanted more answers out of me. I decided to give them to him.

“It’s Ingrid.”

“Ingrid? Like... Cici’s friend? The Neandian girl? The smokeshow?”

“Yes.”

“She’s here... and you’re trying to get in her pants?”

I shrugged.

“Oh, wait. Have you already fucked her? God damn you! Does Lars know? He’s going to beat you to a pulp?—”

“Lars isn’t going to do shit. And... I’m not getting into details.”

“Is she fun?” Duncan asked. “Fuck, I bet she’s fun. I bet she’s a screamer.”

He’d bet correctly.

“Well, if she is, keep it the fuck down. ”

“I’m on the other side of the house from you. Don’t be a whiny little cockblock, okay?” I pointed the chef’s knife at him.

“Does that count as a threat?” Duncan joked, then looked at the doorway.

I turned to see Ingrid coming in wearing only one of my T-shirts. As soon as she saw Duncan, she panicked.

“Oh shit! Oh my God! I forgot and... shit!”

“Calm down,” Duncan sighed. “It’s just me. I know about you now. He just fessed up. Apologies for surprising you.”

She choked in French, “I’m going to change now.”

She disappeared, and Duncan sighed. “She’s so hot. How did you manage to hide that? I mean... I’d not be able to get anything done.”

“I’m a human, not a dog,” I said, annoyed. “I can manage things, okay? And yes. She’s fucking beautiful. But this stays here. Besides you, Nate, and Leah, no one knows.”

“Leah knows?”

“Leah is good for wing-womaning,” I said.

“That’s because Leah thinks she’s hot.”

“Leah is friends with her.” I rolled my eyes. “You are perpetually twelve, Duncan.”

Duncan ignored me. “So, at what point is this a thing, then? Because we’re off to Cici’s wedding in a week. And Lars is going to?—”

“Fuck off about Lars. He doesn’t need to know. Unless you tell him, we’re chill,” I said. “This is between us.”

“So, you’re just shagging her? Because if you’re seeing her, you might want to let at least your mum know so she can prepare everyone. She would help you.”

I wanted to say yes, it was just sex. I tried to play it cool.

“It looks like more since you’ve flown her here. You’re making her dinner.”

“I can make a woman dinner.”

“Yeah, but this is like the crown jewel of dishes. And you only trot it out when you like a woman.”

I groaned.

“You like her—really like her. Just admit it. She grinds your gears. It’s fine.”

But was it?

“I’m not taking advice from you, Duncan.”

“If you don’t tell your mum, you’re a fool to think the two of you can keep this under wraps the entire time. You won’t fool your mum, and she’s one of four people who can talk Lars down. The other two are the father and mother of the bride, and then...”

“Your mum,” I sighed.

“And you don’t want mum involved. Now, are you making me dinner or what?”

A Rough Sketch

INGRID

I sat my sketchpad down, sipping tea placed beside me. The cuppa was a nice gesture, but the taste was not. I slightly puckered and tried to hold back from looking so out-of-sorts. I did not like tea, even if these Brits loved the stuff. Neandians were proud of their coffee culture.

“You don’t like tea?” Duncan asked.

“We’re coffee people,” I grimaced. “But I appreciate your kindness. It’s... nice. It looks better than it tastes.”

Keir chuckled. “You sound like Peder.”

“Scandinavians are coffee people. Apologies to the British part of you, but I agree with your stepdad here,” I said.

“Mamma is a coffee drinker, too. In the summer, she’s perpetually toting around a tumbler of iced coffee,” Keir said.

“She had four boys. I can understand why.”

I said it but didn’t look up. Instead, I was focused on drawing and tracing his nose’s outline with shading.

“If I came, would you not offer me tea?” Duncan asked, looking offended.

I shrugged, still sketching. “No. We would be as accommodating as ever and talk to your people to get what you like to drink. When Parker visits, we have his preferred tea shipped in.”

“Oh.” Duncan quietly backed off.

“You look for anything to get offended by, Duncan. We’ve never shorted my brother-in-law, and we wouldn’t short you.”

Keir snickered.

I ignored them both, trying to sort between which features defined which parts of them in my mind. We’d been sitting here this morning with nice light—the last morning here. Soon, Keir would fly me north, and I’d not see him again until we were in Norway together, celebrating Cici and Isak. Right now, I sketched the two of them as they were.

Keir read a service manual for an aeroplane. I wondered why anyone would do this, but I recently discovered that “plane people” were as mad as horse people. He slowly paged through it, occasionally furrowing his brow and making a note here or there. I adored his grumpy or concerned looks most. I was trying to capture that strong brow and the cleft in his chin as I continued to shade in the outline I’d drawn earlier.

Duncan was sitting with his legs over the arm of a chair—sideways—and watching a stupid reality TV show. I’d picked it last night, he’d gotten invested, and now I was pretty sure we were continuing to watch it because one of the girls had a nice arse. Men were so simple. I try to make his expression look more dignified than vacant. It wasn’t that Duncan was a dunce. Instead, everyone looked unattractive when staring mindlessly at a TV.

Keir stood up and stared down at what I'd drawn. "You make me look better than I do."

"I was thinking I wasn't doing you justice," I laughed.

He bent down to kiss me and said, "I'm going to get more biscuits. You didn't bring enough, Duncan."

"Your girlfriend ate them all!" Duncan pointed at me.

"I did not!" I laughed. "You had a roll of them yourself."

Neither Keir nor I denied the girlfriend characterisation, but it turned my stomach. It wasn't that I wouldn't have been happy to have a boyfriend like Keir or that he didn't bring me joy. He brought me joy and oh so much else. It was just the wild lives we lived. He had his things, and I had mine. I wasn't about to think of him as more than someone I enjoyed. And I didn't want to put more pressure on him than that.

"I will get more," Keir said.

He padded off to the kitchen.

"What are you drawing then?" Duncan asked.

"Just life. I sketch what I see."

"Why?"

"I dunno. It helps me take things in, notice things."

"What do you notice about this?"

“Uh, the fireplace stone is gorgeous,” I laughed. “It frames the room. I sketched it with the clock alone up top. I really like it.”

Keir returned, putting an entire tin of biscuits down on the coffee table.

“Put them further away, then!” Duncan protested.

“You ate them all. You can walk,” Keir said.

“What about us?” Duncan asked. “You’re drawing us?”

I smiled. “I’m drawing you, yes. Uh, both of you are similar. It’s uncanny how much you all look alike.”

“I disagree,” Keir said. “My father looked very little like his other siblings. He took after his mother. And I take after him. Mamma says we all came out carbon copies—all but Win, who takes after her.”

“Why Win?” I asked. “Why not Edwin?”

“My father is Edwin—that’s his namesake,” Duncan answered. “Everyone calls him Ed, so that was out.”

“Our father said Eddie sounded odd. Win just stuck. I dunno,” I said.

“I suppose names are limited in our families. Ah, the joy of royalty!” I snickered. “It’s like Leah. I always wondered how she got to Leah from Natalie.”

“Mummy is Nat or Natalie. Uncle Georgie and Uncle Pat just always called Leah that. How did you become Ingy? Does that annoy you?”

I worked on Keir's hair. "I don't know. We all have pet names—Alex, Asti, Odie, and Ingy. It doesn't bother me. You all look similar—even Cici bears a resemblance. I did a sketch of Cecilia ages ago— something so ridiculous and dramatic. She was lying on her side on this couch, but I had her staring off. So, she has this beautiful profile."

I flipped through my sketchpad and handed it to Keir.

"She looks gorgeous. You just did this for fun?" Keir asked.

"Yeah. I used to bring my sketchpad with me everywhere. It was how I made it through bad days. I'd mostly sit in this beautiful walled garden we had. I'd paint sometimes, too. I painted a lot of squirrels on the garden wall."

"That is odd," Duncan said, walking over to observe the picture of Cecilia. "She looks prettier than in real life."

"Hard disagree. She's fucking beautiful," I said. "And given how attractive her parents are, it seems impossible that wouldn't be the case."

Cecilia had her father's height, legs up to her neck, and her mother's megawatt smile. I wished I looked more like Cici. I figured everyone probably did. The grass was always greener.

"Why squirrels?" Keir asked.

"Squirrels got to leave. They would climb the wall and disappear," I said. "I longed to be free."

Duncan and Keir both made the same face of genuine sympathy.

"See, there it is!" I declared. "You both make that sad puppy face when you hear

something sad.”

My reaction was genuine—I delighted in pointing this out—but it also allowed me to deflect. Opening up about childhood trauma proved difficult. I didn’t know Keir or Duncan well enough to gauge their reactions ahead of time. I couldn’t predict how they might perceive me.

“I dispute this,” Duncan said. “We really don’t.”

I flipped back to my current sketch, Cici, and back. “You all do. Very much.”

“Can we not say the same about you and your sisters?” Duncan asked.

“Well, first of all, we are sisters, not cousins. Second, not really. We’re all several shades of blonde. Astrid and Alexandra look alike. Odette and I also bear a resemblance. But she’s more womanly and slightly taller. We’re split. Alexandra and Astrid take after our father. Odette and I take after our mother.”

“How much?” Keir wondered, pulling out his phone.

“I honestly only know what people tell me and what I see in paintings and photographs of my parents. My mother died the day of my birth, and my father passed shortly after her from a broken heart,” I said.

Keir scrolled and pulled up a photo of Mamma—a portrait of her painted when she was about Alexandra’s age. She wore the tiara. Alexandra occasionally broke out for state occasions. It was extravagant and heavy. I always wished it was mine. I relished any time I got to wear a tiara. Mamma looked happy, peaceful, and at ease in the painting. She had this small but elegant smile. Her blue eyes were bright, her lips full, and her cheeks rosy.

“You’re her dead ringer,” Keir noted. “She was beautiful.”

I smiled, taking the phone for a minute. “We do look alike. I wish more people talked about her. It’s difficult to know anything when no one talks about my parents. Or, in Dad’s case, they only talk about his mental illness. It’s like he wasn’t even a person...”

Keir rubbed my back, pulled me close, and kissed my forehead lovingly. His tender gesture surprised and comforted me. His touch was genuine.

“I get it,” Keir said. “All too well. You’re like Win and Ollie. They never knew Dad, but at least they had some pictures.”

“I have one,” I murmured, choked up. “It’s Mamma holding me the day I was born. She bled out and died only minutes later. She was beaming. But that is all I have.”

I sniffled. Duncan handed me a tissue, showing unexpected kindness.

“I’m sorry to bring the mood down.”

Keir rubbed circles on my back. “You’re not. Win used to ask Mamma about his birth story—how he and Ollie came to be. It would drain her batteries, but he was insistent that he knew how much Dad loved him. He wanted to know everything about how he came to be because those were the photos she kept on display. He fell while she was getting an epidural—passed out—and had to get a CT scan. No sooner had they brought the twins home than Dad was told he had terminal cancer. His decline was steep. So, she doesn’t display the photos of him with the twins as toddlers. He’s thin and looks nothing like the man we all want to remember him as.”

I curled closer to Keir and thought about the dozens of times I would climb into Alexandra’s lap like a baby and demand she tell me about the day I was born and

how much Mamma and Papa loved me. It was as if I needed it to feel less guilt for taking my mother away from us all. I didn't say it. Perhaps I didn't need to? I gathered Keir understood.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That's awful."

"It was better to have known Dad," Keir said. "I feel guilty they didn't know him. Nate and I got to feel his love and attention in a way they never did. We were his pride and joy—all of us. He only ever wanted to be a dad, you know? And... Mamma says sometimes it's hard to believe he ever left. She still expects him to walk into the house when she visits us here in the UK."

"That's rough. I don't know what I would do. Four boys and widowed in my thirties? I couldn't cope."

Papa hadn't. And we'd lost him all the same.

"Mamma is tough and had a lot of support—from her mother, my aunts and uncles, and Peder. Peder became my dad's best friend over the years, and... he was there to lend a hand with us. I won't say I didn't feel anger towards them getting together. I'll never be totally over it, but he is a good man, and he did right by us. Dad wanted that for our mother. He didn't want her to live in misery and, unlike your dad, Mamma had time to prepare for the inevitable."

"Heavy shit," Duncan said. "But I must say that even though I never knew Uncle Paul, he was very beloved. Anything I hear about Keir's dad is positive. He was a little unhinged, very flighty, and loved hard. He was very close to Cici's mother. Mummy was always protective of him—and still is of Aunt Sanne."

"Mamma and Auntie Nat remain close," Keir agreed. "Our mother is the biggest mama bear and had no luck with the British press. They hated her, but she trusted

Aunt Natalie and Uncle Ed to care for us and agreed to send us to Eton. We stayed with them as a compromise for the first few years. She struggled to send us abroad while she moved north with the twins Lars and Peder. In the end, Nate and I were fine, and Duncan got annoying older brothers he never asked for.”

“Could have been worse,” Duncan laughed. “He’s a real wanker this one, but he’s generally right—at least about how to behave in public.”

“If only you took my advice, Duncan,” Keir said.

“I could say the same about things Alexandra tells me,” I said. “But we’re the youngest children—or, in your case, the only, Duncan—and we will have to find it out on our own. I understand that.”

“The family shit-stirrers,” Duncan snickered. “Can you capture that essence in a drawing?”

“Afraid not,” I admitted. “It’s only a rough sketch.”

Being Honest

KEIR

I enjoyed my weekend with Ingrid well beyond expectations. What started rocky ended in us playing house and palling around with Duncan. Duncan and I struggled to get on sometimes. Ingrid held us accountable and acted as a calming force to her absolute credit. She fit in well when it was just a small crowd. I adored how quiet and introspective she could be one moment and—in significant contrast—how outspoken and assertive she could be in another. Her dry wit only improved things.

I longed for her already in ways I didn't anticipate. Was it a fling? Unlikely. Was it more? I wasn't sure what that meant. I would be off again at the end of the summer, but if I played my cards correctly, I'd have more time to spend with Ingrid. I'd do what I could to make that possible.

"I wanted to clear the air," Ingrid said on our return.

"Yes?" I was nervous about what she might say. Her face was pulled tight. She was nervous.

"I... I enjoy this... what we do," Ingrid said. "And I have so much fun with you."

But...

"But I don't want you to think... after Duncan's comment..."

“Duncan’s comment?”

“He said I was your girlfriend?”

At that moment, the remark flew over my head. “Oh, I didn’t take it to mean anything.”

Relief washed over her. “Oh, okay. I wanted to clarify that I don’t think of myself as your girlfriend. I think we are friends who sometimes end up in bed together. I like that very much, but I know we’re both in different places, and I don’t think we need that pressure. Never mind that there is the whole Lars thing. We haven’t even talked about that, and I will see you again in what? A week? We need to figure out how we do this.”

I needed to deal with it.

“I will manage Lars,” I said. “I have a plan.”

I had no plan but knew I needed one.

Ingrid squeezed my knee. “Okay.”

“Ingrid, I like you so much. You are witty and adorable. You are wonderful. I’d love to have you all to myself at times, but... I know that isn’t fair. You’re right. What we have right now is fun. I want to keep seeing you but without the pressure.”

She beamed. “Really? So, we’re on the same page?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But even with that said, I must come clean to my family. It affects them—and you. I am not worried about me. Duncan pointed out that if I try to cover it up and it comes out, you’ll be much more uncomfortable than I will be.”

“But if we did cover it up?—”

I cut her off, shaking my head. “We cannot.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I look at you like you are the only person in the room,” I admitted. “And I want to touch you all the time. I cannot help it. I cannot ignore you. You’re fucking beautiful—perfect.”

She blushed, turning towards the window.

I squeezed her hand, “Ingrid, I have feelings for you. I’m a dreadful liar. If we try to lie, I will fail you. ”

Ingrid took my hand to her mouth, kissing it. “Okay. If I can trust you won’t kill me in this flying tin can, I believe you.”

“Good,” I said, satisfied for now.

When we landed, I had to part ways for her. The airstrip was quiet on a Sunday. So, I had no audience. I wanted to say something remarkably sexy or memorable but had nothing. It was hard to be so articulate with her big blue eyes staring up at me like I’d hung the bloody moon. Wrapped up in this cocoon of new lust and discovery, neither of us was too articulate.

“So, until next time?” Ingrid asked.

“Until next week,” I answered. “I will see you then. Wear something sexy.”

She snickered. “I spent the entire weekend in your t-shirts, and you never complained

once.”

“I noticed you also stole one,” I said. “You’re a little thief, Ingrid.”

She bit her lip. I melted.

“I hope you don’t mind.”

I leaned down, our noses almost grazing. “Not too much. I will punish you for it later.”

“I will take my punishment like a good girl,” Ingrid said.

The mouth on her never ceased. Even after hours spent in bed with her—hours of dirty talk and basking in the afterglow—she still knew how to wind me up.

I kissed her, unable to think of anything too sexy to say in response. It was slow and longing, then hot and intense. Finally, I let her go back on a sweet, gentle note. She nuzzled my nose with hers and pulled away.

“I’ll miss you,” Ingrid said. “Try not to die in that bucket of bolts, okay?”

“I will try to stay in the air,” I promised. “If you will try not to fall off one of your beasties.”

“I promise to be equally reckless for all my days,” Ingrid giggled.

Ingrid climbed into the waiting car and sped away. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wanted more than this but couldn’t commit right now. I looked around at the planes in every direction. Having someone like Astrid meant giving up my vagabond life for something more straightforward. I wasn’t prepared to be that guy—not yet. So, much

as I wanted to lock her down and call her mine, I would settle for friends who had white-hot sex.

How long would that be enough?

The Hot Goss

INGRID

A strid and I flew north in Parker's private plane. While he sat listening to an audiobook in the corner, she and I caught up on gossip. We were headed to Cici's wedding along with most of the young royals in Europe, and I was much more connected to the scene than Astrid. She was too busy planning her royal wedding while living in the Scottish countryside.

The Norwegians did up their weddings big—not as big as the Brits, but historically excellent. The Norwegians almost always married other royals—at least nobles—much like our fair Neandia. The press saw this as harkening back to a simpler time. Cici's nuptials garnered similar attention to her parents' wedding and their swoony royal love story.

I was one of Cici's six bridesmaids. Crown Prince Edina, the groom's older sister, remained head bridesmaid. Then there was Betty, two university friends, Leah, and me. Cici saw Betty and me as little sisters and was dying to include us in the fun. I appreciated her welcoming heart even if the idea of being a royal bridesmaid frightened me—not that I hadn't done it for Alexandra's wedding and wouldn't do it again for Astrid's later this year. Serving abroad challenged me.

“So, what is going on with the man?” Astrid asked .

I sipped champagne and played dumb. “Which man?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Your prince! What is going on with your prince?”

I groaned.

“Oh, come on, Ingrid! Be honest! I know you two are up to something. I can smell it on you.”

“I’ve long washed him off of me,” I laughed. “So, you can stop.”

“Uh-huh. Yes, I’m sure you just scrubbed him off like you disliked it. God, he’s gorgeous. What is going on?”

“We slept together on the trip,” I said.

She raised her eyebrows. “You... does he know...”

“He had to know!” I giggled. “Oh my God, it was an epic disaster. We did the deed and discovered that, yes... apparently, I still had at least some of my hymen. He stayed to help me clean up the murder scene.”

“That bad? I barely bled.”

“He’s... large,” I admitted. “Not to say anything disparaging about Parker, but I think Keir’s huge. And, if I may, without oversharing?—”

“What are sisters for if not an overshare, sweetheart?”

I laughed and kept my voice low. “It’s... pretty... and not what I expected up close. I suppose I have limited experience.”

“I had none, and don’t apologise. Parker was wonderful—amazing!” Astrid said. “I

bled a little. At least he didn't freak out. Or did he?"

"No, he was like, 'Use hydrogen peroxide,' and helped me make the bed. He held me all night."

"Oh, so sweet," Astrid swooned. "What a good boy."

"He's good in many ways. He knows what to do to me. Like, I had no clue how. He flew me to Wales for the weekend, and all we did was lounge around and fuck. And Duncan was there but was... not an asshole. He left us alone. I think I'm his friend now. The Lyons kids are... too much."

"They are wild. Oh, but I can't wait to see Leah and Cici!"

"Same. And Betty. They've all been up there, and I've been in their house alone."

"You should have come to Scotland."

"I would have if I'd have had a pilot available. "

She snickered. "He's so fit. I love that for you, although I suspect Rick will act like... well, a prick... and get all offended."

"I'm not telling anyone besides you and Odette."

"Alex will want to know. She'll be happy for you, but it will hurt her if you leave her out."

I sighed long and looked at Parker, who completed a crossword.

"You realise that man is thirty-two-going-on-ninety, right?" I asked.

“Yeah, well, he’s fabulous in bed and spoils me with attention nearly all the time. I will put up with it. Oh, good lord, what are you going to do? You said there was some love triangle bit?”

“He swears he is talking to his family, so it will be handled . He told me to trust him. So, hopefully, he’s done that. I don’t know how we will hook up, but damn it! I will shag him! He’s so good. I never knew men could do so much with their tongues and fingers. It’s a hundred times better than wanking.”

She snickered. “But have a wank with him, and you’ll enjoy yourself. Try it. Mutual masturbation is one hell of a trip. The visual is a nice treat once in a while.”

“Noted,” I said.

I could talk to Astrid about this. She was the only one. She was open about her sexuality in a way Alexandra never allowed. Alexandra may have confided in Astrid, but never me. I was the baby. We had no reason to discuss it even though it was fucking obvious what she was up to, given their three children and a baby on the way. There was no mistaking her and Rick’s feelings for one another.

Odette and I talked about men, but not as frankly as I did with Astrid. It was primarily crushes and daydreaming. Scarred by emotional abuse and a bad breakup, Odette remained precious. On the first Christmas Parker stayed with us, we’d walked in on Astrid going down on Parker. I’d not be frightened as much as surprised. Odette claimed to be “scarred beyond measure” and cried for a few hours. She found it “degrading” even though Alexandra—painfully—assured her it was fine and normal.

“I should tell her, I guess. But the only advice I will solicit is yours. I would ask Cici these things, but... it’s her cousin.”

Astrid snickered. “Given Cici, I doubt she’d care. She or Leah tell it like it is. They

have no boundaries, I swear. But what do you want to know?"

I swigged champagne momentarily, thinking of everything I wanted to know.

"How do you... go... you know... and like... what should I expect?"

"First of all, just say, 'How do I give a blow job, Astrid?' And I will bloody well tell you."

That caught Parker's attention.

"Oh, you perk up for the words 'blow job' and nothing else?" Astrid teased.

"Any man would," Parker said.

"Go back to your stupid biography. I love you. Leave us alone unless you want tips on giving head."

"I'm more interested than ever," Parker admitted.

"The tips are for Ingy, and the object of her lust is the British spare, so... run along. Back to your book."

He pulled a face and turned back to his puzzle.

"It's not hard," Astrid said.

"Oh, I disagree," I joked. "It's tough."

Astrid giggled. "God, I missed you! Yes, it should be—or will be. But pace yourself and alternate with your hand. If he's more impressive, your jaw is going to get

fucking tired. Real tired.”

Jaw sore. Alternate. Pace yourself. I took mental notes.

“Suck and pump his shaft at the same time. Gagging might happen, but that’s fine. They like it.”

“They like it?” None of this made any sense.

“I dunno. I don’t have a dick. Um... oh, balls.”

“Balls?”

“Bullocks. Whatever you want to refer to them as. You can see what he thinks, but you might be surprised if he’s really sensitive or really into it.”

“Surprised?”

“I love how green you are. He might cum sooner than you anticipate—or even sooner than he can predict. He should probably give you a heads-up when he’s close. Spit or swallow. They don’t get to be choosy. Or talk dirty to him and have him cum on your tits or something.”

I gaped. My expression was no barrier to her ongoing wisdom.

“It’s fine. You’ll figure it out. He can teach you. Clearly, he likes that. Parker did.”

I stared in disbelief at her cavalier explanation of lurid acts. Astrid was like a sex oracle. I had many more questions but was almost horrified by all the dirty words she’d just used. Who was this girl? And did she and Parker get up to all of this? I looked at the man in jeans, trainers, and a university rugby that was a size too big. He

was up to all of this with her?

“He’s very patient with me. Sometimes, I worry he’d have much more fun with someone else,” I said.

“Darling, he could have anyone he wanted—and probably has. You aren’t doing him a disservice. If he’s still into you—enough to fly you to Wales on a lark—it’s because he enjoys you. And dare I say, probably for more than your tight little arse, yeah?”

I blushed. “We do have fun. I like him. He says my sense of humour and bravery are a turn-on. He thinks I’m mad for what I get up to.”

Astrid smiled. “That is sickeningly sweet, and I’m happy for you. Oh, look at you! Our baby is growing up!”

She hugged me tightly, squealed, and took my face in her hands. “You’re a fully-fledged woman, but I struggle to imagine it. Give Alex and me some time to grasp it.”

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Fisticuffs

KEIR

“I think Peder wants everyone to go out on the boat tomorrow,” Mamma said, setting a block of gruyere down on the kitchen island. “He did miss everyone.”

I groaned. “Must we all go?”

“Keir, you love to sail. It would mean a lot.”

I didn’t mind sailing with Peder but hoped to see Ingrid tomorrow. I wanted to go out with Cici and Isak and bring her along. She was staying with my aunt and uncle and attached to my girl cousins at the hip with wedding preparations. I was desperate to see her. One week felt like a fucking year.

“I made plans. I was hoping to go out with Cici and Isak.”

“Why not us? What does it matter? Are we not good enough?”

“Nei, Mamma. Just... I was hoping to catch up with them.

I sliced the gruyere, laying it gently on the charcuterie board that covered the kitchen island—enough for everyone coming and many more. Could we have hired a chef for the evening? Yes. Would our mother have allowed it? No. She and Peder liked to keep things “normal.” They lived on the family farm outside of Oslo—a summer home turned escape—and relished hosting everyone low-key on Friday nights like

tonight. We were a week from the main event, and the entire family was blowing off steam before it got too wild.

Peder entered, kissing Mamma on the cheek.

In Norsk, he said, “They have arrived—all two dozen of them.”

“I am working on getting this out fast, I promise,” I responded.

“It’s okay. They are early .”

“They are British. Most of them. Remember that,” Mamma reminded him kindly.

Norwegians were on time—not early. To arrive early, as Brits and Americans were prone to do, was to inconvenience your hosts. Where I was inclined to bend over backwards to at least bring out an expensive tin of biscuits I kept in case of an emergency, guests were SOL. They only got fed when they were told they would be. Coming to someone’s house did not expressly guarantee food. It was anathema to Brits.

“Oh my God, I brought so much wine—too much wine per Nat!”

My Aunt Kiersten burst into the kitchen. In a few moments, I spotted Uncle Olav dragging in an entire case of wine.

“I told you even before she did!” Olav said.

The two of them almost always spoke in English with one another. Unless they were arguing, they never spoke the native language despite Aunt Kiersten’s impressive fluency.

“It won’t go to waste,” Mamma said in Norsk.

Peder and my mother defaulted to his mother tongue. I blamed that on my Norwegian grandmother. After Dad died, we moved in with her, and she only spoke her mother tongue. The twins still defaulted to Norsk when they could out of habit—marked by their rearing in Norway. At five, we attended a public engagement where the twins spoke in Norsk to one another. The press tore into our mother over it.

“Keir, my God, you look thin. How are you?” Aunt Kiersten gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“I think I weigh the same as last time,” I said.

“And no plus one?”

Peder snickered. “Ask any of the boys that question. It will be a sad result.”

“No,” I said. “I am seeing someone, but she’s already invited. ”

The four of them turned.

“And?” Uncle Olav was a serious gossip. He wanted to know. “Well, who is she? Do we know her?”

I grimaced. “I think you know her, yes.”

“Why?” Aunt Kiersten looked elated.

“We aren’t dating. We’re just... getting to know one another. I was hoping to go out with Cici and Isak tomorrow. I didn’t know you planned to go, Peder.”

“Oh, we’re all going together with them,” Peder said. “It’s quite alright.”

Uncle Olav considered who would be going out on their sailing yacht. I saw the wheels turning. I nervously plated cheese, trying not to think about it.

“It’s got to be a bridesmaid,” he said. “But given you are related to half of them?—”

“Only Betty and Leah,” Kiersten said. “That leaves Cici’s friends and...”

“Oh, it’s Edina. Makes sense,” Olav said.

“Not this time, no,” I answered.

“There was a first time?” Peder asked.

“I’d... rather not get into it. She’s been talking to an Aussie she met in Aruba. It’s not her,” I said.

“Katrine will love that,” my aunt laughed. “She did that to herself by marrying a celebrity. Edina would take after her.”

“It’s the Deschamps girl?” Uncle Olav asked. “Oh, she’s too young for you. No. I don’t much like it.”

I cringed internally and tried not to show my disappointment.

Aunt Kiersten gave her husband an audible slap on the arm. “Darling, you should talk. TEN YEARS. Ten years. And I was twenty-one when it started. We’ve been married for thirty-odd years. What’s the harm?”

“She’s what? Twenty-five?” Mamma asked.

“She’s twenty-one,” Uncle Olav said. “We attended her twenty-first birthday shindig. Is that how you met?”

His wife gave him a look that put fear into my heart. As always, he was digging a hole .

“No,” I said. I was deployed... We met on the yacht trip. She’s clever, brave, and has a sick sense of humour. What’s not to like?”

“Uh-huh. I’m sure that is all,” Uncle Olav razzed. “She’s hard on the eyes, isn’t she.”

Aunt Kiersten shot him another look. Just keep digging .

“I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know there was anything to say. Moreover, Lars has been upset with me—but mostly her—as he developed a crush she did not return.”

“Yes,” Peder sighed. “He will be upset. I trust you all are grown enough to handle it.”

“I hope so, too. You cannot make a woman like you if she doesn’t,” Kiersten said.

“I don’t know. Your brother certainly tried until I gave in,” Mamma laughed. His persistence paid off.”

I smiled. They had not gotten on. Mamma was the wedding planner, and Dad was the groom's brother. She thought he was an absolute nightmare sent to ruin her life and upend everything in the lakeshore town where my Uncle George was marrying my Uncle Patrick. Mamma eventually fell for my father. They couldn’t have been more different, and he couldn’t have loved her more.

“I will tell Lars first,” I said. “That was the plan. I don’t want to make it so awkward.

Betty has already given him a tongue-lashing about talking to her friend like that, and... it's a mess. I don't want to put Lars in an awkward spot, but I like Ingrid."

"I am glad you do. She's such a nice girl," Aunt Kiersten said. "And you're both adrenaline junkies. She'd be bored otherwise."

"True."

As I helped the parents with the charcuterie board, I spied Lars helming the barbecue with Win. It was time to take my licks and get this over with. I approached with a plate to suit, hoping food might soften him like a ripe cheese.

"I brought you all some food."

"Niiiiiice," Win said.

"Can I chat with Lars alone?" I asked.

"Sure, fine," Win said. "But you gotta help."

I took the grill spatula from his hand, assuming the task of flipping burgers. Win walked off with half the plate like a wandering toddler.

"No manners to this day," I sighed.

"Eh, it's family. What's on your mind?"

"We sail tomorrow," I said.

"And?"

“And... I’m... I just wanted to say what I needed before you are left in the dark and feel upset.”

“What?” Lars asked, confused.

I flipped a burger. “I’m seeing Ingrid. And I didn’t want to blindside?—”

“You’re seeing Ingrid? Princess Ingrid? Cici’s friend?”

“Yes,” I answered. “That Ingrid.”

“Since when?”

“Since the trip.”

“And how?”

“We hung out at Badminton and then last weekend.”

“Define hang out.”

I didn’t think he wanted an answer to that. “I played groom for her and Cici. We saw each other. She stayed with Duncan and me in Wales.”

“So, you’re fucking her?” Lars asked. “I fucking knew it!”

Well, this could have gone better.

Lars threw his tongs on the table beside the barbecue and paced, livid about what I said. I had to take my lumps and let him get it out. He was hurt. I’d not ignored that he was interested in Ingrid, even if it was ultimately her choice.

“You saw her, you wanted her, and you took her!”

“Lars, I cannot take her. She’s not an object. Yes. I wanted her. She’s gorgeous. Everyone did.”

Everyone stopped and stared. Things went from bad to worst.

“You never let me have one thing for myself. I want something, and you steal it. Always and forever, this is what you do!”

Staring in confusion, the Brits didn’t understand our words. Meanwhile, our gestures said it all .

“I didn’t steal her. She’s not an ‘it’. She is a woman who likes me. I like her.”

“You’ll discard her as soon as you bore of her, and you know I won’t take your sloppy seconds.”

“Sloppy seconds” had no Norwegian translation. Leah walked closer, face drawn and jaw tight. She got what this was about.

“She would never be sloppy seconds! Good God, Lars! She’s not a used car. She doesn’t lose value because I slept with her. She’s just a woman—like any other woman.”

“Which is why you wanted this one? You could have had any boring, basic, fake girl, and you chose her? Why? Because I wanted her. And now she’s ruined!”

“Lars!” I heard Mamma’s voice sharp behind me. “Women are not objects. I won’t have you talk like that about the girl. She’s a nice girl and a good friend to Betty and Cici.”

Lars ignored her, moving closer to me.

“The burgers are burning. I need to turn them,” I said.

“Fuck the goddamn burgers! You don’t ever give a flying fuck because nothing ever sticks to you. You get whatever you want. You think Duncan is entitled, but you’re worse—far worse!”

“And you’re a fucking crybaby who thinks he has a right to anything he sees first. Given how you speak about women, I’m not surprised she finds you unfuckable.”

Unfuckable was another word you couldn’t translate. The Brits got little context to our argument beyond the litany of swears we uttered.

Lars glowered and backed down. I returned my attention to the burgers. As I turned back to see if he was okay, Lars sucker punched me square on the jaw.

“What the actual fuck?”

I saw red, pushing him so hard he fell back. But before I could beat the ever-loving shit out of his smug face, I was pulled off him by the bull I never fancied tangling with.

“Keir Robert, I expected better from you!” Aunt Natalie roared.

She turned to Lars. “And you. If I were younger, I’d have handed you your ass myself. Get up! Go!”

Lars, frightened, stood and scurried off.

“You two are acting like children. Over what? A girl, Keir? Why?”

“Queen Alexandra’s sister, Ingrid, and I met at Cici’s hen party. We’ve been... seeing one another since she landed in the UK, and... Lars claims to have seen her first. But she doesn’t like him. She likes me. And what does it matter? She’s not an object, and I won’t apologise. I should have beat him to a pulp for talking about her like that!”

“Peder is handling it,” Mamma said, examining the damage. Can someone get me some ice?”

“I can!” Betty called out, ever-helpful.

Aunt Natalie said no more. She didn’t come back or admonish me further. I wish she had. I wish she’d said anything. I sat down for dinner with an aching jaw, quiet. Lars sat on the complete other side of the table, glaring at me. Auntie Nat ignored me. Everyone acted as if it hadn’t happened. I sensed Cici wanted to strangle me, but getting into a verbal row wasn’t her style.

After dinner, I loaded the dishwashers and the butler’s pantry in the kitchen. My aunt found me about to start the final load.

“You are trying to make up for it,” she sighed.

“I didn’t punch him.”

She leaned against the doorframe, assessing me. “You would have maimed him if I hadn’t stopped you.”

It was true. I was stronger than Lars and much better at fighting. I knew better than to throw him around like that.

“I... he called her sloppy seconds. He implied I ‘ruined her’, which meant a lot

because...”

I didn’t want to say I suspected he thought she was probably a virgin when the thought never occurred to me. And, if true, he now saw her as less attractive—never mind that he didn’t want to touch her now.

“It doesn’t matter. He... he cannot say things like that about her.”

“You feel very strongly about her?”

I shrugged.

“Enough for fisticuffs?”

“Yes, of course. She’s... I dunno. She gets me. She’s brave, bold, and funny. I adore her. I cannot help it. It’s as if I am drawn to her by this pull. There is something I cannot quite describe. And it frightens me. ”

“Why? It sounds like love, quite frankly.”

I let my guard down, knowing my aunt wouldn’t judge me.

“Of course, we both are keen to keep this casual—not that I do not care for her or want her for me—because I just... you understand this life. She wants something stable, I’m sure.”

“She’s twenty-one. She has no clue what she wants.”

“How do you know? She seems a million years older than all of Betty’s other friends. But you’re right. It’s a mess. I should break it off.”

“That is not what I meant. You and I are too alike, sweetheart. We both push people away. We shut down and focus on work, but what does it get you? Heartache. Because someday, you will want a person to come home to. And why are you fighting it if she’s good for you?”

“You just said she’s too young to know what she wants!”

“I implied that nothing was set in stone and that life is wild. She’s young, but she’s been through a lot. Take it from me. I had a hookup with a man at a party at twenty-one and had no idea what I wanted, Keir. And you know where he is now?”

I shook my head.

“He’s in the living room chatting with everyone. Because when we found each other again, it was instant chemistry. I couldn’t avoid him. He took up all my mental energy, and I love him madly. It’s... if it is meant to be, it will be. You don’t need to rush in to label it, but calling it off is cruel to both of you, Keir.”

“It probably doesn’t matter,” I said.

“What? You don’t like her enough to say all those wonderful things about her? Not enough to play house all weekend in Wales?”

“Wait a minute—” I groaned. “Fucking Duncan!”

“He likes her, so give him a break,” Aunt Natalie said. “He thinks you two are cute together—his words—and she’s a laugh. I find her adorable and incredibly talented. Oh, what I wouldn’t give for some very horse-mad babies in the family! But, alas, we’re not going to discuss that. Duncan says you look at her like she’s a steak. I’d have to agree, having spent an entire weekend with your uncle saying, ‘I think Keir likes Ingrid’. He’s usually right about such things.”

“He is? ”

“He predicted Lucy would end up with Winston. I thought he was mad—we all did, but now they have four kids, so...”

I snickered. “Good point. I am not on board with any discussion of children. Please, God, never speak of it again. However, I do very much like her. I’ve never felt any attraction like I do to her.”

“It’s love. Love is wild. Mark my words.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:26 am

Yachting Around

INGRID

“Y ou deserter!” Rick joked as I departed back down the pier.

I left the family to set sail to the same destination on a separate vessel. Rick couldn't help but tease me for it. To arrive, he'd sailed from Lundhavn to Denmark and then across to Norway to meet us. In doing so, he brought his beloved sailing yacht and its crew with him. Alex and the kids flew in. She found the whole thing ridiculous. He'd decided we'd go out with the other families on their sailing yachts. However, with a single text from Keir, I'd chosen to go out on one of the Norwegian boats. We were sailing to the same private island, joined by the other Scandinavians.

I joined Cici aboard her father's beautiful cruiser. Rick had to be jealous about now. Leah was the first to spot me, pointing my arrival out to Cici, who came excitedly bounding over.

“So, he let you out of the asylum?” She joked.

“He gave me shit about it, and I expect him to try to beat us out there, but I doubt he will. Poor Alexandra. She couldn't care less about this, and the kids are a disaster today.”

“Oh, boo. That sucks,” Leah said. “But you're ours for now, right? ”

“Where is everyone?”

“Uncle George and Aunt Natalie are going out with Uncle Peder and Aunt Sanne,” Cici said.

“Oh,” I must have looked sad.

“Oh, don’t worry, he’s here,” Leah said. “God, the two of you are annoying. You’re lucky I like you.”

I snickered, spotting only the back of Keir from across the deck. He was talking with Isak and Nate. I approached, still a bit unsure how to handle this. Did I kiss him or even show affection, or were we still just friends? Were we friends who fucked? We swore we weren’t doing labels, but what were we?

“Hei, hei,” I said, trying to sound cheerful.

“Hello,” Isak said. “We stole you from Rick, then?”

“Yes. I think he may be dead by the end of the afternoon, however.”

“What now?” Nate asked.

“Oh, he’s been here for one night, and Alexandra is already sick of hearing about the damn sailboat, all the waves, and his navigation plans heading back. She’s pregnant, has no patience, and the kids have overrun her. I felt bad stepping away, but Odette has them covered now.”

I tried to ignore Keir because I was concerned about being too affectionate, but I couldn’t avoid him forever. He turned slightly to say something when I saw a massive bruise on his jaw.

“ Oh, mon dieu! Que s'est-il passé ?” I gasped.

“Lars happened,” Nate snickered. “This is why Lars is over there, and we are here. Aunt Natalie has me keeping them both on good behaviour.”

I gently grabbed Keir’s chin, taking in the nasty bruise and swelling.

“Officially, we were tossing a baseball around,” Keir said.

“Have you ever done that in your life?” Isak asked.

“No. I mean, maybe once or twice with Uncle Pat, but no. No one needs to know. Lars sucker-punched me, and he’s lucky to be alive.”

I pulled back, glaring. “Keir, that’s not funny.”

“It’s true,” Isak confirmed.

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” Nate asked. “He told Lars you two were together and?—”

“I didn’t say together. I said I had been seeing her.”

“What is the difference in Norsk? Dansk?” Isak asked. “It means the same.”

“No, I think it generally means you are sleeping together,” Nate said, noting his brother’s angry stare. “Which... I am shutting up now.”

“It wasn’t pretty. He’ll get over it. I might not, but he will,” Keir said.

“Don’t start things on my account. I’m not worth the demise of your entire family.”

“He might disagree,” Isak said in his mother tongue, forgetting I understood him.

Keir shuffled nervously. “I’m... can we talk?”

“We will leave you,” Nate said, poking Isak in the arm to get him to move.

Then, out of nowhere, Keir wrapped me up in the sweetest kiss. I felt like he might lift me and spin me around out of excitement. I knew I shouldn’t kiss him in public—even out here—but I couldn’t help but let him. He let me go, slowly pulling away.

“Sorry. Despite my broken face, I’m reminding myself why I’m excited to be out here today.”

“You’re making a scene,” I said, still flattered. “Was it worth it?”

He cupped my face, stroking my cheek with his thumb. “Always.”

“What happened?”

“Uh, Lars lost his shit. He punched me when I wasn’t looking. I threw him down. Then, my aunt intervened and shouted at me to back off. But, she’s not going to take it out on me, thankfully, and all is well.”

“Is this a bad idea?”

“Everything about you is a bad idea in the best way, Ingrid.”

I bit my lip. It was involuntary.

Keir pulled me close and whispered, “You’re dreadful and perfectly innocent all at

once. I want to run you below deck and do horrible things to you. ”

His words set a tingle to places unmentionable. I would have let him if I didn't think people would judge me and label me a wayward girl. Still, now I had visions of him fucking me against a wall somewhere while everyone toiled above deck.

“How can we get away?” I asked.

“I have a plan. I know the island. I have ideas.”

A look of surprise crossed my face.

“I am full of ideas, baby,” Keir said, patting my arse.

Into the Woods

KEIR

I knew there was a place on a tiny little slice of heaven in Oslofjord we could escape to. I'd thought about it all morning and decided to say fuck it. I told Isak my plans in hopes he and Cici did not have the same thing in mind. Thankfully, he didn't know what I was talking about, and no one else who knew the place had a chance of getting laid on this day.

So, after we landed on the little island, I took Ingrid for a hike in search of a little hideaway. She trusted me. I didn't know if we'd do much of anything in the little time we had to escape, but I figured we could at least catch up without the madness of Royal Wedding Fever swirling around us like a cyclone.

"Where are we going?" Ingrid asked, following me into the grove of trees near the shore.

"There is a hytta out here—a tiny cabin—and it's all ours if I can get to it," I explained.

A hytta was a small, primitive cabin that often lacked simple amenities beyond an outhouse and wood stove.

"How do you know that?"

"We often sailed here with Dad and Peder when we were babies. Then, as teens, we'd

come out here on our own. Mormor owned it. It's very barebones, but it's there. We'd sometimes stay the night telling ghost stories. It's been in the family for a few generations."

"Cute," Ingrid said, still sounding slightly concerned.

I held her hand as we marched another five minutes up a hill to a clearing where the sun peeked through. The little wooden house with bright red shutters was a welcome sight.

"It is adorable. How do we get in? Do you have a key?"

"One sec."

I rounded the far side of the house, digging under a set of stones the twins had painted when they were toddlers, and pulled out the key.

"Look at you. You trust people this much out here?"

"Meh. There's nothing to steal," I said. "It's not a big deal. And you know Norwegians mind their own business. If they broke in, they'd leave it better than they found it."

She snickered. I jiggled the door handle and pushed into it. The humidity sometimes made it stick, but it popped open. We entered the tiny living room with one couch and an old chair. The place had no electricity or gas—just a stone hearth and a portable stove you could toss out back. There was a toilet, but that was it.

"It's sparse," I said. "But it's private, and I don't know how much I will see of you."

"It's sweet," Ingrid said.

I pulled her in, kissing her irresistible lips like it had been ages. Every time I kissed her, I needed more of her. She was utterly addictive. Ingrid wrapped her arms around my neck, leaning her hips into mine. She bit my lip playfully. Kissing too deeply did draw some pain, but it was well worth it for the pleasure she'd give. She'd scream my name, and it would fade into the ether.

"You're going to fuck me here—while everyone is just down the hill?" Ingrid asked.

"If you want to—only if you do, baby."

"I could be bad and do it. Why not? We're in the middle of nowhere, right?"

"No one is coming to get us. We can't stay too long, though."

"Well, then, why are you wasting time talking? "

I picked her up and carried her to the couch. I tugged on her leggings, desperate to have her. But there was a problem.

"Bugger! I don't have a condom," I said. "Fuck!"

"That's okay," Ingrid said. "I have a better idea."

"Yes?"

Ingrid sat up. "For the multitude of orgasms you gave me last weekend, I'd like to repay some of it with interest."

"Oh?" I was intrigued.

She climbed off the couch, descending onto her knees, now staring at me. This was

an unexpected treat. I hoped she was about to do what I anticipated she was hinting at.

“Can I?” Ingrid asked, playing with my belt buckle.

“Uh... be my guest,” I said.

She unbuckled my trousers and unzipped them. The angle wasn't good, so I decided to stand.

“It will be easier like this. Trust me,” I said.

“Okay.”

Ingrid wasn't bothered by that. She freed my hard and ready cock from my boxers, taking it oh-so-gently in her hand. She kissed the tip before running her fingers over the head. She played with the precum a moment, rolling her fingers through it as if amused, before again gently pumping her fingers up and down the shaft. I wanted to tell her to be rougher. Instead, I took her hand and showed her what I wanted.

She pumped the shaft as directed before licking up and down the underside of my cock. Then, with my full attention, she slipped the head inside her pretty little lips, swirling her tongue and slowly taking all of me in. I grabbed her ponytail for stability as she slowly bobbed up and down. I gave into the delicious feeling of her tongue and full lips on my cock.

Ingrid pulled back, hand pumping and lubricated by her spit and my precum.

“Good? Am I doing well?”

“You're fabulous,” I said, overwhelmed by her looking so obedient.

She licked the tip of my cock, still looking up at me with those beautiful blue eyes. I moaned, unable to control myself and stay quiet. Slowly, I brushed her cheek .

“You’re a good girl, Ingrid. Do you like that?”

“It’s so good,” Ingrid said. “Having you like this. You taste so good. I want to take you in as much as I can and swallow everything you give me.”

She was devilishly good at dirty talk.

“Good girl. You want to take my load?”

She nodded, sliding my cock back into her mouth. She kept one hand at the base of the shaft, pumping synced in rhythm with her mouth. It was like heaven. The sound of her lips slipping sloppily up and down my shaft delighted me. I reached down and played with her nipple through her think tank top. She moaned, my cock still in her mouth. I did it again, and she moaned louder. This time, the vibrations flooded the delicate, swollen head of my cock.

“What? Are you gonna cum?” I asked her, voice breathy as she pulled me closer and closer to inevitability.

Then, she did something that sent me over the edge. She brought her right hand from where it rested on my bare thigh over to my balls. She cupped them gently. On its own, that was almost enough to send me over the edge. When she traced her finger up and down them, torturing me, I flew into overdrive. I pulled her ponytail harder and held her head down while I came deep into her mouth. Pulsing with her full lips tight around me overwhelmed me.

Ingrid pulled back, wiping her lips clean and stared up at me.

I pulled on her chin. “You are so good, Ingrid. You’re a very well-behaved girl.”

“Well, would it be naughty if I asked you to get me off?”

“Not at all,” I replied. “I think it’s only fair.”

She could have asked me to climb a mountain right now, and I would have. It had been a while since I’d gotten head that good and years since I’d gotten that level of satisfaction from any sex act. Things with Ingrid only got better and better with time. But now, all I wanted to do was bring her to the same beautiful place she’d left me moments before.

The Wedding Party

INGRID

Looking down a massive church aisle, I thought about the sheer scale of everything we did. The size of the cathedral was only part of it. The real fear was over the commitment of a lifetime Cici and Isak were about to make before a cathedral of people and millions at home.

“Don’t get stage fright.”

I turned to see Keir behind me. Smiling, I said, “I am not. I am just... taking it all in.”

“I am in awe of how cool they both are. It’s so much pressure, right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

Keir was the best man. He, Duncan, a Swedish prince, and a few uni friends rounded out the unusual bridal party. Scandinavians usually averted the big wedding party. Cici believed the more, the merrier.

“You’re not in the proper position,” Edina said in passing, annoyed.

“I think you are always in the perfect position,” Keir whispered.

I slapped him on the arm. I said in French, “ We’re in a church !”

“Rid-Rid!”

I felt a leg grab my dress, then a howling child trying to climb up it. The children called me Rid-Rid because saying Ingrid was hard. I’d fallen in love with the moniker, and now I was Aunt Rid-Rid. The day they stopped calling me that would be the saddest day in history.

I picked up the four-year-old sobbing into my skirts. It was Karolina, the second of my nieces. Her much taller sister, Linnea, stormed over. Her six-year-old face showed rage. They rowed like professional wrestlers at times—much like I assumed Alex and Asti had as young girls. Linnea usually tortured Karolina, who had recently learned to throw her weight around. Linnea looked so like her father and had gotten his height. Karolina was more compact and an easy target. However, she would let her older sister have it when provoked to the edge.

“She stole my barrette!” Linnea said in French. “And I want it back!”

“I didn’t steal it,” Karolina sobbed. “I lost it.”

“It is the same thing!”

“Linnea Karolina, lower your voice immediately!” Rick called from behind us.

She ignored her pleading father. The child attendants plagued this rehearsal. I worried we Neandians may never get invited back. Then, something extraordinary happened.

Keir bent down and said in French, “What’s your name?”

“Linny,” she said, surprised. “And you are?”

“I’m Keir, a friend of your auntie’s. Why don’t you find your Papa and look for the

barrette?”

“Because I tried!”

“What if Kari helped you?” I asked. “And you asked Papa to help you?”

“He wouldn’t.”

“I bet he would,” Keir said in English. “And I bet he’s good at finding stuff. Dads are good like that.”

“Okay,” she relented. “Be quick, Kari!”

The girls left.

“Rid-Rid?” Keir chuckled .

“My favourite name. I love them to bits.”

“With that sort of commanding presence and backtalk, she’s going to be a hell of a monarch,” Keir snickered.

“She’s so clever. It makes it worse.”

“It’s okay. Clever, snarky women make the best leaders. Better yet, if they are also fearless.”

I blushed.

“They’re cute, Ingrid. I can tell they adore you—not that I am surprised. Aunts are wonderful to have.”

“You’re good with kids, you know that?” I asked. “I fully expected Linnea to lose it on you. I think you surprised her by speaking in French.”

“I tried. I saw Rick drowning.”

“He’s good with them. But it’s a bit much when he has them all at once. And Alexandra was a total wreck this morning.”

“Oh, that’s no good,” Keir said. “Why?”

“Her back and hips are done-zo. I listened to the two of them arguing, which ended with her shouting at him that he better book a vasectomy.”

Keir snickered as the priest approached, followed by Edina and Cici.

“Places, everyone!” He called out in English, the only language our little town of Babel understood.

“That means you need to move,” Edina said, angered that I was still talking to Keir.

It occurred to me she thought she had some claim to him. I knew they had some history, but I was amused that she was bothered by me.

I squeezed his hand. “I’ll be right back here.”

I wanted to stoke the flames and get under her skin just for the hell of it.

I stood next to Duncan, who said. “Are you hot as balls right now?”

I cocked my head, confused.

“I’m sweating to death in here. It’s miserably hot. They won’t turn the AC on until tomorrow. To them, it is not warm enough.”

“I’m okay, but I’m not in a suit,” I said. Then, I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Is Edina always a gigantic bitch, or does she just hate me?”

“Uh, she was trying to get laid, and you totally cockblocked her. So, it’s just you. And the more he fawns over you, the worse it gets.”

I snickered.

“You like stirring the shit, don’t you?”

“A little.”

“Well, I, for one, am happy to cause chaos, so I welcome you to our circus.”

It was nice to feel included. I took Duncan’s arm and waited for the queue. We headed out to the recessional. This was hour three of our very long practice. So, we were supposed to join arms after the Is were dotted and the Ts were crossed.

Slowly, we walked down, following Cecilia and Isak out and pretending to bow to the sitting monarchs. It took forever .

“Here we go, bowing to our parents. Annoying as hell,” Duncan sighed.

“And bowing to sisters,” I groaned. “Could be worse.”

“Having to bow to a sibling sounds ridiculous. No, thanks!”

Making it back to the back of the cathedral, I watched Edina getting altogether too

handsy with Keir. I was less angry and more intrigued. I knew he wanted me—not Edina—and wasn’t threatened by her desperation. It didn’t stop me from walking up and wrapping my arms around him. He draped an arm around my waist and looked down at me.

“You alright?” Keir asked.

“Barely holding on. My poor feet! How are you, Edina?”

She gave me a look that could kill. “I’m fine. I have good feet.”

“I can tell,” I said. “Big, strong, solid feet.”

She was about to say something when Cici and Leah approached.

“We’re headed back to change, then to drink. Who wants to get shit-faced?” Leah asked.

I had a feeling debauchery was on the horizon.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:26 am

Creeping up the backstairs

KEIR

I snuck into the house in the wee hours by taxi from the palace. Yes, even princes could take a taxi ride. That was what you needed to do when you overstayed the night before in the room of a devilish blonde you'd fucked over a desk and then up against the wall before finally retreating to the bed. I was having far too much fun with Ingrid but wanted to keep the peace at home.

I crept up the backstairs, changed, and looked fresh for breakfast. No one even asked if I'd slept there that night. And, as long as Leah didn't squawk, I was home free. If someone knew, they didn't say much. Instead, I got out of it scot-free. This lack of consequences only increased my desire to be more reckless. We boarded a cruise around Oslofjord with all the other royals. It was another excuse to see Ingrid.

I approached her on deck, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and kissing her cheek. She faced me.

"Hello again."

"Hello. You look beautiful in this dress. What is this?"

"Versace," Ingrid said.

"It's hot as hell."

Her tits looked great, and the blue in the dress brought out the colour in her eyes. We were supposed to cruise, take in the light fading, and head back to port.

“I’m bored,” I said. “Fancy running off?”

She shook her head. “Keir, we cannot just run off to shag without impunity all the time.”

“So far, so good.”

She bit her lip, thinking about it. If she was thinking about it, she wanted to do it. Usually, if Ingrid wanted to do something—or someone--she would.

“Be quick about it,” Ingrid said.

I wasn’t about to full-on fuck her here. I hoped to get the satisfaction of getting her off in a hallway or something. The fear of potential discovery made it all more exciting, but she was plenty good enough. We disappeared below deck into a stateroom where we snogged like horny teens at the cinema. Then, things got hotter, full of longing, and more intense. She hopped up onto the bed but didn’t lie back. Instead, she wrapped her legs around me. Ingrid’s breath picked up. I pulled her dress down to suck on her nipple. She whimpered, and I knew she must be dripping through her knickers.

She took my hand and slipped it up her dress, pressing it to her clit. Through her panties, I could tell she was soaking.

“Let’s take these off,” I said.

“Okay. But I don’t want you to fuck up my hair,” Ingrid said. “I do want you to get me off. But don’t destroy my hair.”

I thought about options momentarily before saying, “Why don’t you sit on my face?”

Her jaw dropped. “I’m... I’m sorry.... What?”

I ran my hand through her hair, gripping it by her scalp. “Are you too scandalised to trust me, princess?”

“I... I don’t know how?”

I let her go, climbing on the bed. I reclined and reached out for her hand. She held back, still confused or scandalised.

“Trust me. You’re going to leave here very happy.”

Ingrid didn’t respond verbally but took her knickers off—a signal she gave over to whatever I was about to do to her. Or, instead, what she would do to me .

“We really shouldn’t do this,” Ingrid said, voice soft.

She wasn’t saying no. Her desire overrode any worries she had. But that guilt kicked in.

“Do you want to be a good girl?”

“Is that good? Like you saying devastating, horrid things to me in a church?” She straddled me, her body now pressing into my very hard, very obvious erection.

Debating her was torturous. Her tits in this dress were so fabulous. I thought about what it would feel like to throw her on the bed—how they’d nearly hit her in the face and how her face would flush. Fucking her with a dress on was a treat—one that made me feel like I corrupted her in the best way.

“I don’t pretend to be good. I also think you should suspend your Catholic guilt for a minute so I can give you an amazing orgasm.”

She bit her lip and nervously played with her hair, further drawing this out. I couldn’t wait any longer. Playing cat and mouse was only fun for a minute. I was not only impatient but also aware that the clock was ticking. Desperate to move it along, I pulled her up.

“Hold onto the headboard and sit on my face,” I said—not asking but telling.

“I... I cannot. Won’t it like... kill you?”

I snickered and smacked her tight little arse, “No. Try it. I want to taste you. I want you to make an absolute mess on my face. Just drown me, Ingrid.”

Like the obedient girl she occasionally was, she followed orders. I would have liked to look up at her, but her skirt was in the way. Still, the fact that I couldn’t see her only heightened the moment. I’d never climbed under a woman’s dress to go down on her. It was naughty. I didn’t need to see her to read her satisfaction.

As I licked and sucked, my tongue tracing around her clit and entrance, she moaned. Her pussy ground against me in a beautiful, slow, hot rhythm. I heard her breathe quicken—faster and faster. I imagined the flush creeping up her breasts to her face and her fingers digging into the headboard. She grew wetter and wetter, impossibly warm and slick. The evidence of her pleasure dripped down my chin.

She ground faster and harder against my tongue as she came closer and closer to her climax. She was whimpering now, pleading with some force in French to end the torture of waiting. Her cries to the universe always drove me mad. She had the most beautiful voice when she was in the throes of ecstasy.

“Oh God, just... I want to... please, please,” she cried. “It feels too good! Don’t stop!”

I wouldn’t. Not now.

In English, she gasped, “Oh God, Keir, I’m... I’m cumming!”

She squealed unintelligibly and braced through her orgasm.

Sweet satisfaction .

There was little as good as getting this woman off. I couldn’t explain why. I wasn’t a selfish lover. I prided myself on satisfying any woman I fell into bed with. Still, this was different. Maybe it was the surprise of it or her sheer gratitude? Perhaps it was because she went from innocent to deviant with a flick of my tongue? I didn’t quite know.

Ingrid descended, sitting on the bed beside me, assembling herself. Still catching her breath, still flushed, she was beautiful.

“You’re amazing but badly behaved, Keir.”

“You’re the one who just fucked my face until completion,” I said.

The Bad Girl

INGRID

“Y ou must be miserable,” I said, running my hand up and down the length of Keir’s stiff cock.

He’d just brought me to the moon and back. The least I could do was satisfy him, right? I loved playing the bad girl. I looked at his cock, simultaneously soft in the feel against my hand and hard in its excitement for more. I could get used to this.

“You’re not... you don’t have to... getting you off was enough. That’s what I wanted.”

“Well, I want to get you off.”

“Ingrid, we cannot make a mess and?—”

I didn’t listen. Instead, I ducked down, running the tip of my tongue over the head of his cock. I looked up at him.

With a husky voice, he said, “Well, if you’re going to do that, I won’t stop you.”

I took him in my mouth—not delicately this time. Remembering how he liked his cock to be held, I pumped the shaft.

“Oh, fuck, Ingrid. You are so, so much better at that than you have any business

being!”

“I know,” I murmured, his cock still in my mouth .

“Fuck, fuck,” he said. “I really won’t last. You got me so...”

He growled, “Ingrid, if you want to stop, then?—”

I didn’t. I continued, taking him deeper and deeper until finally, I felt his balls pulse, and he shuddered, holding my head in place and thrusting his hips towards me. I resisted the urge to gag, knowing I’d spit him out and make a mess. His cum shot into my throat. This time, it was more than before. I gasped, swallowing his load before sitting back and watching him come back down. He panted and shook his head, looking at me lovingly.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he muttered. “I cannot help myself.”

I smiled, pleased with how out of all the women here—and there were plenty far more experienced than me—I held his gaze. It was me he thirsted after. He took a punch for me. He wanted me. He’d risk getting caught for me. I was his addiction.

We cleaned up before heading back above the deck. I fixed my makeup and went to pull on my soaking-wet knickers .

“If I put these back on, I’m going to be miserable all night,” I said. “I could wring them out.”

Keir laughed. “And that was before you were even riding my face.”

I bit my lip, thinking about how delicious and naughty that was. I didn’t even know people did that until he told me to.

“Hand them here,” Keir said.

Confused, I tilted my head.

“You don’t have pockets. Where would you hide those, darling?”

“Shit,” I giggled. “I have nowhere. I don’t suppose we should leave evidence?”

“Correct.”

I nervously handed him my thong. Keir shook his head, a cheeky grin on his face.

“The things I do to you, Ingrid.”

“The things I do to you .” I pulled him into a long kiss. I wanted him to think about me for days. I wanted to torture him.

I bit his lip and whispered, “The next time you wank, it will be thinking about my mouth on your cock. And then next. And the next. I’ve taken up all the space in your mind. Don’t argue with me. ”

Then, I walked away, knowing full well I’d given him another erection, and now he’d have to fight it as we returned to the party. He also had to stare at the sway of my hips the entire way up there like a hopeless puppy.

We returned, him immediately darting in one direction, and I found Odette and Astrid talking near the bar. I went up, grabbed a glass of champagne, and returned.

“Where were you?” Odette asked.

“We thought you’d fallen overboard,” Astrid joked.

“Nowhere,” I answered.

“Nowhere?” Astrid said. “Nowhere with no one.”

I blushed.

“What did you do?” Odette whispered.

“I think she just got laid,” Astrid giggled. “You are treading on thin ice, Ingrid. This isn’t our boat.”

“It’s not Keir’s either, but I don’t think anyone cares. He certainly didn’t. It’s his uncle’s boat, and he knows it well enough. I don’t know if getting laid was what I’d say.”

Odette looked scandalised. “Why would you... did you really?”

“We fooled around,” I said.

“Yeah, just fooled around, but he was in your room this morning,” Astrid said.

“Ingrid!” Odette laughed nervously. “We’re going to get in trouble.”

“What?” Alexandra asked, approaching. “Who’s getting in trouble?”

“Ingrid,” Odette squawked. “She just fooled around with Keir on this boat.”

Alexandra gaped. “Ingrid, what has gotten into you?”

“Keir, apparently,” Astrid giggled.

“Ingy, you cannot just... go at it whenever you choose!”

“Says who?” I asked, refusing to accept I was going to get in trouble. “No one got hurt or caught us. It’s fine.”

“Ingrid, sweetheart, I have your reputation to think about. I’m responsible for?— ”

“Don’t shame me!” I said too loudly. “Don’t tell me that. Don’t treat me like... like I’m some slut.”

“Lower your voice,” she growled. “You are making a scene. You must be drunk.”

She reached for my glass. I’d had one drink. I downed the glass in protest, which only further angered her.

“Ingrid, you think he loves you, but he doesn’t. He’s having fun with you—at your expense—and risking your good reputation. He will discard you. He’s not serious. He has a history of dating women for a few months and moving on. That’s per Rick.”

I stormed below deck from whence I’d come, past Leah and Cecilia. I fought tears, not wanting to ruin anything for Cecilia and not wanting to worry anyone. I knew I would cry. Alexandra may not have meant to hurt me, but she did. I was ashamed, guilty, and cross with her because I knew better. My “reputation” was coded language that traumatised us all for years.

Something Real

KEIR

“Ingrid?” I found Ingrid in the stateroom where we’d escaped before. She was a creature of habit, and I’d guessed well. “Darling, are you okay? Cici said?”

“I am fine.” She said it in French, sniffing as she did.

“Can I come in?”

“I’m a mess, and you’ll make it worse,” Ingrid said. “You don’t want me.”

I opened the door to find her a wreck, sobbing on the bed in the foetal position. It broke my heart. I’d been upset with Lars on the yacht last month, but this was worse. I knew her enough to know she could be fragile. She could be sensitive. Someone had pushed her to the edge. I sat on the bed next to her, rubbing her back and waited for her to speak. I didn’t press her; I just showed her I cared.

“Alexandra is being a gigantic bitch, and I cannot go back out there.”

“What?” I asked. “How? What did she do?”

“Astrid put two and two together. She and I were having a bit of a laugh about my bad behaviour—all in good fun—and Alex went off on a tangent about my fucking reputation and her being responsible for it.”

“Ingrid, people adore you. I wouldn’t panic,” I said, confused.

“You don’t get it. She thinks I’m worth less. And... she thinks I’m some slag. I don’t... I’m not. I know that deep down. But... I worry there isn’t some kernel of truth.”

“Ingrid, you were a virgin until what? A bloody month ago?” I laughed. “Even if you’d been with a dozen men or more, that’s an unfair assessment.”

“You must say that, though.”

“No,” I shook my head. “Leah has the libido of a sixteen-year-old boy. And she has all the choices and none of the chill. I’d come for them if anyone said anything to her. It’s okay to enjoy sex, and... you shouldn’t be shamed for that. Alexandra has hang-ups. She’s projecting.”

“She’d lose her mind if I were like Leah,” Ingrid said. “Not because she’s bi. She’s not a homophobe. But just because Leah is wild . And I’m giving her fits for having you stay over last night.”

“I can tone it down if I’m the problem.”

“You’re not.” Ingrid shook her head.

It killed me to see her so upset. It made me feel worse that I had something to do with this.

“She says you’ll leave me in some state of repetitional ruin. And, maybe you will discard me?—”

“I would never just discard you, Ingrid. You’re not an old shirt. You’re a beautiful,

lovely human. I could never do that.”

“But what is the longest relationship you’ve ever managed?” She asked.

I brushed her cheek with my hand. Her skin was so soft. “I haven’t been fortunate in love, Ingrid. Admittedly, my twenties were... not great. I’ve also been out of the country quite a bit. It’s not easy to date a pilot. I don’t have much beef with any of my exes. I don’t think I’ve been a bad boyfriend, but I struggle to let people in.”

“Why?” Ingrid asked.

I could tell her the truth—one I loathed and rarely shared—or I could hold it in and make a joke. Most women would have probably accepted the latter at this stage. I sensed Ingrid might find it disingenuous and immature. I wanted to be honest with her—obligated by her trust in me to be honest. I always asked her to trust me. Now was my time to trust her.

“I have a lot of baggage that... hurts,” I said, voice emotional. “Losing my dad and becoming the man of the house—a fucking duke before puberty—was awful. And I know it was far worse for you, but... it fucks with my head.”

Ingrid sat up. “Odette always says it’s not good to compare trauma. It’s not a fucking competition. That’s her experience from years of therapy.”

“That’s wise,” I said.

“Your feelings aren’t... they aren’t hard to relate to. It’s why Alexandra’s words hurt the most. Because she’s all I have—my protector and my advocate. And if she’s against me...”

“I don’t think she is. I think she wants to protect you the best way she knows how.

She's probably a bit sus about me. That's fair."

I squeezed Ingrid's hand. "My aunt said it the other day when I explained why I liked you so much."

"You told your aunt?"

I nodded. "Yeah. We're close. She worries about me—like Alexandra does about you. I told her that I end things before they have a chance to percolate. I end them because I think I am doing someone a favour. I think it's usually for the best. Most people struggle enough with my title and job. Fewer still would ever see me as more than broken."

Ingrid looked at me lovingly. In a sweet voice, she said, "I don't think you're broken. I think, like me, you use humour to deflect when you're hurt. You worry about people accepting the sadness you sometimes have. Like Alex, you probably carry a load that most people couldn't understand. That doesn't make you broken or less worthy. It makes you human, and it means you're compassionate."

"I dunno. My stepbrother still wants to strangle me."

"He will calm down," she said. "He's been all over that countess from wherever."

I snickered. "I think he thinks he's getting back at you. "

"I am only interested in you, so it's foolish if that's his plan. The point was you came clean and tried to do it right."

"If I did it right, I wouldn't have even said a word to you?—"

"That is stupid. You're allowed to like me, Keir. Why does all of that bother you so

much?”

Looking into her eyes, feeling vulnerable, I considered the why. She drew me in once more. This time, the feeling wasn't lust. I thought for a moment. It was safety. Her words made me feel seen and accepted. No one other than my mother or aunt had ever made me feel so cared for. I didn't see this moment coming. I started this as a fling, wanting to satisfy her and my curiosity. Now, as she looked up at me so sweetly, I couldn't help but want a lot more. This wasn't just attraction. For the first time, I felt drawn to someone in this pull I could not drop. I loved this woman. Really loved her.

“I don't like you,” I said.

Her face twisted in confusion. She went to stand, but I held her by the wrist. “Sorry. I didn't mean it to come out like that. I... I think I love you, Ingrid. And that's... that's the issue. I didn't realise it until now.”

She teared up again. “If this is some sort of sick game, I swear to God?—”

“It's not, Ingrid,” I said.

“You probably say that to everyone?—”

I took her face in my hands and kissed her forehead. “No. I've never said that to anyone.”

Sensing she needed space; I pulled back slightly. Surprise spread across her lips and eyebrows. She was beautiful, but I adored this delicate sweetness to her the most. I didn't expect anything in return. I didn't think she would reciprocate. That was fine. But if I said anything else, it would be a lie, and I would never lie to Ingrid.

“You... love me?”

“Je t’aime,” I said. “Yes.”

She blushed and shook her head. “I... I don’t...”

“You don’t need to tell me you love me,” I said. “I’m not going to force you to say anything. And you won’t offend me if you don’t say it back, Ingrid. I want to be honest with you— always.”

She nodded. “I’m not upset. Just... shocked.”

“That makes two of us.”

Ingrid leaned in and kissed me slowly. At least she wasn’t upset with my admission. Pressing her lips to mine felt better than before. I felt so calm, safe, and incredibly at home with her. I wanted every moment to feel this good. I never wanted to leave this little stateroom. Unfortunately, we needed to.

I pulled away. “There’s going to be fireworks in...”

I checked my watch. “Like fifteen minutes.”

She kissed me again as if to reassure me. “Okay. You go ahead. I need to fix my makeup once more and take a moment.”

“Sure.” I kissed her on the forehead and left. I didn’t want to leave her.

Above deck, I spotted Alexandra with Rick. She glared at me. I shouldn’t have stopped to speak to her, but I was also full of righteous indignation. I stopped, stared her directly in the eyes, and didn’t dare bow.

“She’s putting herself back together,” I said. “And... I know you may doubt my intentions, but... I do care about her.”

“I beg your pardon?” Alexandra said.

“I do not think you meant to wound her, but you did. For the record, I don’t want ever to hurt her. I... I love her. And... you probably don’t care about my feelings, but... you hurt her feelings.”

Alexandra’s face dropped.

“You do realise who you are talking to?” Rick said.

He was bound to call me out. I probably would have done the same in his position.

“No, Rick, it’s... fine.” Alexandra’s face softened. “I’m sorry. I said some things I probably shouldn’t. I worry about her. You’re older, and I assumed you weren’t serious. I thought it might be puppy love. She’s young, Keir.”

“There isn’t anything wrong with those things,” I said, “but if anyone is head-over-heels and over their head, it’s me. I adore her. Please don’t think ill of Ingrid for giving me a chance.”

Rick backed down as if retreating .

Alexandra nodded. “Thank you for being... honourable. But you both should mind yourselves more. Ingrid is new to everything.”

“I know,” I chuckled. “But if you have met my cousins, you would realise Ingrid is a saint. No one faults her.”

Rick nodded. “We want to take care of her. She’s... she’s the baby.”

“I get it,” I agreed. “And in your position, I understand that impulse. If we were talking about Betty, I’d probably have choice words for any man in this position, but please trust me when I say I have no intention of hurting her. I’m far from perfect, but I love her.”

Ingrid approached, face concerned.

“It’s fine,” Rick said. “Keir was just... chatting. Why don’t you all go get a drink?”

“Indeed,” Alexandra added. “Go, enjoy yourself. I am sorry for speaking to you as I did, Ingrid. It was unfair. This is a happy day. Go, drink. Be merry or whatever.”

Ingrid took my hand. We walked towards the bar. As we waited in line to order, she dropped her head onto my shoulder, leaning on me. For a moment, I could picture us happy. I could dream of us growing something real.

A Million I-Love-Yous

INGRID

Keir and I swayed to the music in the lowlights of Cici's reception. The old people retreated, and the day was done. Cici and Isak were happily wed, having already run off together for the evening. They snuck out without so much as a word. I didn't blame them. They'd been so in love all day. I cried during the wedding. I was a sap in the end.

"It was cheeky of them to leave," I said. "But ingenious."

"The prince got the girl. The kingdom got its happy ending," Keir said. "And they departed into a happily-ever-after."

I smiled. "It was sweet. It was a fairytale, wasn't it?"

"I dunno. It's funny to watch. Strange that any of us are mature enough to commit to such a massive thing in front of all those people, but I am happy for them."

"They are so happy. They work well together."

"They do," Keir agreed. "I never thought she'd ever fall for Edina's little brother. Nor did I think he'd ever manage to keep Cici's attention. Love finds a way or some such."

"I could say the same about Astrid and Parker, but now... you couldn't picture them

with anyone else. Or Alexandra and Rick.”

“Funny how that happens.”

It was. And it was funny to think he loved me—and that he’d repeated it this afternoon after we arrived back at the palace. He didn’t care that I hadn’t said it back—per him—but I wanted to say more. I just wasn’t sure I could yet. How did this man love me?

I gazed at him, happy and content. “I want to tell you what you want to hear.”

“I want you to say it because you love me, not because you feel I want to hear it.”

“I know. And I hope I will say a million I-love-yous someday, Keir. I just cannot say it yet.”

He kissed me, and the world stopped. He made my knees weak and my heart race. I wanted to stop time for an eternity. I knew it might be ages until I saw him again once we returned to our respective places. My schedule would pick up. There was no telling how we’d make it work. I wished this fantasy we lived in was never-ending.

“Can I stay with you tonight?” He asked.

I nodded. “I want you. Who knows what happens in a couple of days? I want you to do everything to me.”

“Well, obviously, I will,” Keir chuckled. “But I also just want to wake up next to you. I want to soak up the morning sun with you.”

I smiled.

“It sounds stupid. I know I sound mad,” Keir groaned.

“You don’t, baby. I live for the morning light, and I want that, too.”

I kissed him as the song ended. A booming Swedish pop song began, but we stood still, unable to tear ourselves away. I didn’t care who saw us. I didn’t care if Alex got cross with me over my ill-advised PDA. I wanted people to talk. I wanted them to know I was his and he was mine. It was incredible, but he was mine .

“Let’s go to bed,” I said.

“Sure,” Keir agreed.

We ignored all the reasons and fled to my guest room. I was grateful I had taken my tiara from earlier so as to not slow us down. Keir kissed me for a long while as I threw his tie aside and unbuttoned his shirt. I longed for him to be with me in bed—naked, warm, and making every bit of me tingle. He pulled back, taking me in. Somehow, everything changed for us.

I turned. “You’re going to have to get me out of this dress.”

He kissed the nape of my neck tenderly, then unzipped it. I melted at his touch. It was unexpectedly tender.

My dress dropped to the floor. I stepped out of it. By now, he was undressing neatly.

I giggled. “I’m a chaos goblin, and you’re Mr Perfect.”

“Force of habit,” Keir said. “Inspections. Everything must be perfectly pressed and stored with care.”

“Bra on or off?” I asked, hand on my hip.

“Normally, I’d say leave it on because it’s sexy as hell,” Keir said. “But, tonight, I just want you. Just as you are.”

He was neatly folding his trousers as I undid the strapless bra holding me together, tossed it to the side and kicked off my knickers. When Keir turned back, I stood there, completely naked. His face showed just how much he appreciated the gesture.

“You are so beautiful. I do not deserve you,” Keir said.

He kissed me, walking me back until he pushed me on the bed. I tried to settle nicely on the pillows, but he pulled me towards him by my thighs. I watched him kiss from my lips to my thighs as if fully engrossed in my body and its every curve. Then he came back up, his cock pressed against my entrance. Our eyes locked. We just stared at one another for a moment, happy in the still, quiet moment. Then, he kissed me and thrust inside.

I moaned into his mouth, feeling pleasure and release. He continued to thrust slowly, grinding against me once he was deep inside me. Over and over, he tickled the sweetest spots within me. I grabbed his ass, pushing him impossibly deep.

“You like that?” Keir asked.

I nodded. “It feels so good. So fucking good.”

He kissed my neck, accelerating. I relished how he made my whole body feel warm and how sensitive I became in these moments. It wasn’t magic, but it felt otherworldly. I wondered if it always felt like this for everyone or if we were just good like this. I hoped it was the latter.

He brought me closer and closer, pumping harder and harder, always watching my face to see my reaction. I wanted to give over to him—to this—in a way I hadn't before. He had all of my body many times now but never my whole self. Hearts were fragile things, and I knew he could still break mine. But, like he said, we put up walls.

Close to cumming, I didn't hold back. My standard stream of dirty words failed me.

"I... I love you," I gasped before cumming so hard I thought I might shatter. I lay there. He slowed down and shook his head as I caught my breath.

He kissed me and said, "You're going to have to say that again when I'm not inside you for me to believe it."

"Okay," I agreed. "Later. Promise. But I meant it."

"I want to hear it repeatedly—a million times if you'd like," Keir said.

Despite our current situation where he was balls-deep within me, it was the sweetest thing anyone could have said. I felt everything, fighting tears. I didn't know what came over me. On an emotional rollercoaster, I'd never pictured myself loved like this. I'd hoped to be in love—wanted it—but never saw this coming. Keir gave me his whole heart.

"Are you okay?" Keir asked.

"I'm fine. Don't stop. I just... I've overcome. I..."

I didn't have words in English. I didn't have words in any language.

He stopped, rolling to the side and pulling me into his arms.

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t... I didn’t want to ruin it,” I said in frantic French, now full-on crying.

“Don’t apologise,” Keir said. “You can tell me if you’re not or if I hurt you or?—”

“No, I just never thought anyone could love me like this—truly love me,” I sobbed. “And give me everything so fast it would make my head spin. I... I want this—more of it. I didn’t even know what to do. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not. It’s honestly good. I wasn’t being smart.”

“What?”

“No condom,” he laughed. “Which I’m sorry. I should have cleared. I was too caught up and?— ”

“I’ve got an IUD. It’s okay,” I said. “But we probably should be smarter.”

“Next time,” Keir said.

He kissed the top of my head and held me close. I felt the blub-blub of his heart.”

“I’m sorry. Sometimes I feel like how my life began was a sign,” I said. “Like... I always needed assurances that I was loved. Like you said with the twins asking about their birth story... I’ve done that too. Because it’s all I have of my mother. You gave me everything somehow... I could see it, and... fuck. I’m a mess.”

Keir gently pulled my chin up so my eyes met his gaze. “Don’t apologise. I am sorry if that was... hard.”

“No. It just makes me love you more. Knowing that you understand somehow. No

one does but you, mon cher .”

“It’s all way too fast. I shouldn’t have?—”

“It’s too fast,” I agreed. “But ... It feels right, somehow. I’m not ready to race down the aisle with you. That could take years, I think. You have things to do—as do I. But this? I could do this every day. I’d be lucky to have you forever.”

He let out a long sigh. “You know I cannot?—”

“I know. So, let’s not think about it right now. You have me here and now. Let’s love one another and be happy. Let’s allow ourselves to be happy despite all the doubt.”

I kissed him slowly, feeling his five-o-clock shadow bristling against my palm as I touched his face. I wanted to bask in this. Whatever it was, it was powerful. And as deliciously deviant as we often were, there was something so sweet and genuine between us. He was dutiful.

In Sketches

KEIR

Time was a curse. I had so little of it with Ingrid. Whenever I could, I flew to her. I played horse show boyfriend by day. We were happy. I felt whole when I woke up next to her in the morning. When we were apart, she was ever-present, too. I always rang her. Hearing her answer with “Allo?” always made me smile, but it wasn’t the same as having her in my bed or trying to teach her not to burn something as simple as pasta. She was so sweet and warm and present on days we were together. Things were lonely without her.

I wasn’t the only one noticing Ingrid, either. She’d made quite the splash. In eventing, she was a rising star. Her bravery and continued persistence paid off. Cici said she’d make the next Olympics if she and her horse stayed healthy. I believed it. She then caught the eye of Tatler editors.

The front cover was Ingrid in a ballgown, resting on a chez-lounge, looking at the camera with a slight, cheeky smile. They’d taken the photo in Parker’s library in Devon. The headline read, “Ingrid Has Arrived.” She had. Her gaze seared through the page. And despite this beautiful picture, I thought she was most attractive when she lay around in next to nothing sketching, looking relaxed and happy. She was just her .

“Go on, read the damn thing.”

My aunt smiled, embarrassing me over breakfast as she watched my reaction to her

receiving the latest copy of Tatler . We got everything—primarily newspapers. We were at Balmoral, all having breakfast on a rainy morning. Duncan snickered, and I glared at him, picking it up. I flipped through it, finding her article in the centre. She was on horseback in Parker’s family home.

“She’s... in the house... on a horse. How did they even manage that?” I asked.

“What?” My Uncle George, Aunt Natalie’s twin brother, looked up from his paper. “A horse in the house. Sounds like something Mummy would have done.”

“On marble? It should be fine.” Aunt Natalie looked over.

“He’s a well-behaved horse,” Nate said.

“He’s downright tranquil, but don’t let him fall asleep on your shoulder. He drools, and his head weighs about fifty stone,” I said.

I read through the article. They asked her about her career, her growing up in Neandia, and what she thought of the UK. She explained her tastes in fashion, her love of tall boots—something I found incredibly sexy—and her obsession with art. It was standard fare.

“The camera loves her,” Aunt Kiersten noted. “She’s gorgeous.”

I said nothing. Of course , Ingrid was gorgeous, but I wouldn’t go on about it.

Duncan picked up the magazine.

“It is a huge horse. Why are small women always on large horses?”

Win snickered. Mamma glared at him. I fully expected a dick joke, but he dropped it.

“Oh, well, they ask her what she likes to draw. She confirms her horses.”

“This is not a surprise, Duncan,” I sighed. “The entire thing is just navel-gazing bullshit because she’s now an It Girl. She did it because Astrid wanted her to. She was dying to see the place photographed after their renovations to the library. ”

“Oh, I’m not done,” Duncan said. He read on, quoting her now: “I suppose the other thing I draw endlessly these days is pictures of my boyfriend. It’s sad and incredibly typical, but I cannot help but do so. Also, sometimes dogs. I always love to sketch dogs.”

“You’re put in the same category as dogs,” Ollie howled with laughter.

“She didn’t say that!” I protested.

“Oh, it gets better,” Duncan said. I lurched over the table to grab the magazine back, but he held it out of reach.

“Sit down. This is just getting good!” Betty snickered, looking over his shoulder.

Inside, I died. Duncan was not that creative. I suspected he was reading the copy on the page.

“And who is the lucky man? We don’t see you out with anyone?” He read the interviewer’s question in a surprisingly feminine voice.

“She doesn’t go out,” I sighed. “She’s busy with her horses.”

“Shh!” Aunt Natalie said. “I am dying to hear the rest of this!”

“Is everyone enjoying my suffering?” I groaned.

“Yes,” the rest of the family answered in unison.

“Well, I won’t say much,” Duncan tried to match her tone ridiculously. “But he’s lovely and always supports me. Kraken adores him.”

I was mortified , but I knew she was being honest.

“And how does he put up with royal life? Does he struggle with that?”

The more Duncan read, the more I wanted to die.

Betty pulled the magazine from his hand. “She says he does not struggle and is very used to it. We ask if he has a name. She refuses. Then, she says, ‘He’s British. That’s all I will say.’”

By now, Duncan and my brothers howled with laughter, thinking my pain was utterly ridiculous.

“You all can fuck off,” I said.

“That’s a not-so-blind item,” Aunt Natalie said. “Everyone is about to be up your arse, Keir. She is downright cheeky.”

“Cheeky girls are good,” Georgie said. “But they cause chaos. You cannot be too careful.”

“She didn’t say he was a prince. And, anyway, we’re an entire basketball team of princes. Even if she had, the possibilities are endless,” I said.

“Just you wait,” Duncan said. “The press will be all over you. Don’t show weakness.”

“Weakness?” Leah scoffed. “Yes, God forbid he show her he cares.”

It wasn’t the same for Leah as it was for me. It never would be. Duncan and I were one and two—eligible bachelors expected to continue royal work. We’d marry women, making them duchesses. Inasmuch, we abided by royal rules of dating. That was to say, one never dated, never confirmed they were dating, and always just kept on walking. Ingrid knew this, but she’d floated it. She knew better and still did it.

Protection

INGRID

“ I don’t want to wait a minute more. I’ve waited long enough.”

I said it, desperate for Keir to take off all his clothes and join me in bed. Instead, he let out a sigh and shook his head. He’d come all this way, and I’d think of the most wonderful way to greet him. So, here I was, waiting up in bed naked, and there he was, still dressed and looking cross.

“We need to talk, Ingrid,” Keir said. Can you at least put on a dressing gown? You’re so distracting.”

I pulled the covers up to my collarbones and sat up. “What?”

“Let me preface this with the fact that I love you very much,” Keir said. “But I am also concerned.”

“Concerned?”

This came out of left field. We’d been tangled in the sheets two weeks ago, making love endlessly at his cottage on the Sandringham grounds. I didn’t think I even put on clothes for about ninety per cent of the weekend. I’d left there feeling so overwhelmingly in love with him. Now, he looked like he was about to end it all.

“The article was... Ingrid, you cannot... ”

“Spit it out,” I said, annoyed. “Just say what you want to say. Spare me any sugarcoating.”

“Don’t get upset with me.”

“I’m not,” I said. “But if you love me, you owe me honesty.”

Keir nodded, appearing understanding. “Everyone has to know it’s either me or Duncan. And given Duncan has been chasing tail for the past month and getting himself into loads of trouble, it’s not Duncan. So, it’s me. Your statement?—”

“I never named you.”

“That item was not blind, Ingrid. I don’t know if this whole thing excites you or if you care about us succeeding. Maybe you don’t know the rules. You’re just... inexperienced.”

I didn’t like anyone infantilising me. His words reduced me to a child who couldn’t handle the rules of engagement of royal dating.

“I am sorry I was cheeky, but I’m allowed to have feelings.”

“Oh, Ingrid, I know. Darling, I know.” Keir softened a bit, reaching for my hand.

I pulled it back. “No, you don’t know. And if I’m inexperienced, then aren’t you just some predator exploiting me?”

“I don’t mean it like that. I mean... I’ve been dancing around these questions a lot longer.”

“Maybe I don’t want to dance around them?” I demanded. “Maybe you’re just

embarrassed by me?”

“Oh, Ingrid,” Keir sighed. “I don’t mean it like that. I love you.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“Tone it down.”

“Because you don’t want people to know.”

“No, my love. Because I don’t want people harassing you, I don’t want you getting hurt. It worries me.”

“I have lived this life my entire?—”

“You don’t understand the British press. I’ve told you this before. They raked my mother over the coals in ways I cannot describe.”

“I can handle it. I’m tough.”

“So is Mamma,” Keir said, voice sharp. “You aren’t listening. You think you know, but you cannot know.”

His tone didn’t upset me as much as it worried me. I relented, giving him a look. I wanted him to explain. I knew he needed to get this out.

“Mamma and Dad... they kept things under wraps. They dated in America and came to the UK once my father decided he’d marry her. They only went public upon their engagement.”

“That sounds fucking miserable,” I admitted.

“It was for her security. Things were different then. I don’t know if you know this, but my mother had two mothers. Her older mother—the one she called Mom—died when I was younger. The younger one—she called her Mamma—died only a few years back. She lived a very long life and was one of the most important people in my life. She held us together when Daddy died. Anyhow, two moms led to many questions—namely about my mother’s parentage.”

“Why would they care?”

“She and my Aunt Linnea are twins born to a lesbian couple. It was a big deal for their daughter to marry into our family in Britain.”

“Oh, Linnea is my niece’s name,” I said.

“I know,” Keir said. “It is a good name. But the press... they couldn’t drop the rope. They chased down leads and eventually found my mother’s sperm donor—a very famous British musician who was friends with my grandmother back when she was still modelling. And... he copped to it. He went on a publicity tour. The press ran story after story, and he kept trying to get the girls to meet him. My Aunt met with him, and the press tried to get her on record about it. Mamma never did. There was a rift there between them. This happened on the week of Mamma’s wedding. They did resolve it and still love one another, but the press nearly destroyed that bond and ruined my parents’ wedding.”

“I’m sorry for that. That’s unfair,” I said.

“This is why I am protective of you, baby.”

“Things have changed, though. Certainly, things are better?”

Keir shook his head. “Ask Leah sometime about them. Years before, her fathers

confirmed her parentage to anyone in the family. It's a sore spot with her. Uncle Patrick and Uncle George both had embryos. Uncle Patrick's ended in a miscarriage. Uncle George's survived. Leah never confirms or denies which is her biological father. We know, but no one else officially knows. Yet, they bring it up nonstop."

"Is it not obvious?" I asked. "She could be a dead ringer for your Aunt Natalie."

"I know," Keir chuckled. "And yet they will not shut the fuck up. That's my point."

I backed down, feeling a bit bewildered by his words.

"I don't want them to chase you. I am so protective, Ingrid. I don't want to stifle you, but I want to ensure your safety. I must leave you in a few weeks. I only have that time with you before I will be a long, long way off. Okay?"

I nodded.

Keir scooted closer, taking my face in his hands. He slowly placed a kiss on my forehead as if he was soaking me up. I tried not to think about what things would look like when he was gone for good—when there weren't weekends of us tangled in sheets and where he was halfway around the world. I wanted everything to be like this—me feeling inventive by waiting for him naked in bed and him telling me he loved me over and over. I wasn't ready for the summer to end.

"I don't want to talk about you leaving," I said. "Not now. Not ever."

"Ingrid, it will happen."

"I know. But I want to be with you until then. Let's not focus on it. I'm gutted thinking about it."

Keir kissed me, running his fingers through my hair and sucking on my lower lip. The covers fell around me, but I didn't pick them back up. I focused on how it felt to have him here, pulling tightly on the roots like he never wanted to let me go. It was delicious.

Keir pulled back and smiled at me.

“Get naked,” I said. “I want you in bed. And you’ve drawn it out long enough.”

“You think you get to be demanding, Ingrid?” Keir asked, pushing me back on the pillows.

“When you won’t cooperate, I can only make demands.”

“Who says I will follow through?” He bent down, kissing one nipple, then sucking and moving to the other .

That same electric feeling took over—like a clap of thunder and a bolt of lightning all at once. I used my whole body to tell him how badly I wanted this. I shuddered as he ran his hand between my legs, finding me already wet. Keir continued getting me closer and closer, alternating between sucking and licking my nipple, all while he thrust his fingers in and out of my pussy.

I moaned louder and louder, hoping that Odette wouldn't hear me about to cum on the other side of the wall. After a while—having gotten so close to ecstasy—I didn't care who heard me anymore. The sound of his fingers thrusting in and out of my wet centre and his palm slapping against my clit picked up as I reached my high.

“Oh God, Keir. Oh God!” I shrieked.

My body shuddered, and my legs felt like Jello. The sweetest part was how he looked

at me—first, with deep satisfaction for what he'd done, then with love and affection.

“You still make the most beautiful sounds when you cum,” he said. “I live for it.”

“You make it sound like a symphony.”

“To me, it could be,” Keir said, kissing me.

I melted as he parted my legs and pressed me to the bed.

“Get naked,” I laughed. “I want you to fuck me.”

“Greedy, aren't we?”

“I'm offering all of me. Are you turning me down, baby?”

“No,” Keir said. “Definitely not.”

The Reason

KEIR

We went out for drinks with Odette at a local haunt. It was the first time I'd gotten much one-on-one time with Ingrid's most tender-hearted sibling. Where Ingrid had biting wit, Odette had love for everyone for days. I anticipated she was the sort to pick up a spider and carry it to safety.

"Do you actually fly planes?" Odette asked.

I snickered. "They do not fly themselves—not completely, and not to land and take off. Flying is the easy part."

"She means do you fly them," Ingrid clarified. "And yes, he does. Don't ask dozens of questions if you don't want answers."

"She is not a plane person," Odette said, pointing at her sister. "She must love you if she's putting up with it."

"I don't hate planes. But they are complicated. I don't love them like he does."

"I know," I said. "But I love that you put up with it. You're so sweet to me, Ingrid."

It was incredibly sappy and came seemingly out of nowhere. Still, I'd said it .

She gave me a quick kiss. We'd decided PDA was okay, I guess.

“You’re overly adorable today,” Ingrid said in French. “I love it.”

I wanted to make an inappropriate joke about how her ability to give head made me want to sing her praises nonstop, but that wasn’t it. It was just her . It was the sunshine she brought in that made me annoyingly, sickeningly sweet. I also didn’t hate this. She made me feel so safe. Maybe that was the point?

We stayed for another drink and then left. Odette went to see a man she was dating, and I went home with Ingrid.

“They’re cute together,” Ingrid said of the guy. “Hopefully, this ends well for her. She deserves it.”

I nodded. “I wish her the best, but of what you’ve said of her history.... is that wise?”

Odette had a mental break the year before. She ended up needing intensive mental health care to recover. I’d only learned of this recently—it was a well-guarded secret and hard to imagine given how cheerful Odette was most days.

“She deserves to be happy. I am hopeful.”

“She seems happy.”

“She’s happy. We both are—for once,” Ingrid said. “Her dog and the children have been so good for her. And, of course, I adore them, too. I miss them when I’m gone.”

“You love them so much.”

“Of course. They will always be dear to me,” she said. “We all treat them as if they are ours. It’s not a struggle to love them. Someday, my sisters will love my children just as much. While I will enjoy motherhood, their love of my children will only add

to it. Having my sisters near me is precious, and I hope my children feel the same.”

She’d thought about this. None of us had children. I loved my siblings—even Lars when he wasn’t being pig-headed. I didn’t always like them. However, I’d never considered how they might have children and that I would be in their lives as my aunts and uncles were in mine. Auntie Nat, in particular, had always been there, but it stunned me never to have considered it.

“I just don’t understand loving something you didn’t make—truly loving something as you do,” I said. “I don’t think I’m capable of it. ”

“Doesn’t Peder love you? I think he does. Behaviour suggests it,” Ingrid said.

“He does. And I am grateful for how good he is to all of us. I don’t know if I’d be capable.”

“You’re wonderful with children. I’m surprised you’d worry at all.”

“Being wonderful with children is different from parenting them.”

I wasn’t sure I saw myself having children. The pain of loss riddled me nervous about attachment. I wanted to say I wanted children and was capable of having them, but I didn’t think I was mentally prepared at the moment.

“Do you not want them?”

“Not right now, obviously,” I said, hoping Ingrid dropped the topic.

I wanted to be home in bed with her fifteen minutes ago—slowly unwinding her until she screamed my name. I didn’t want to think about impregnating her and raising children. I tried to avoid that.

“I want kids,” Ingrid said. “Eventually. Honestly, I think seeing men with babies is probably the most disastrous thing.”

“Disastrous?” I laughed. “How?”

“Oh, I don’t mean men cannot parent. Rick is a brilliant dad and loves those kids so much. It’s the extreme level of broodiness that comes with it. Again, I’m not interested in children right now, but you’ll understand. Alexandra will pop any minute, and if you’re around to hold the baby, I will want you even more.”

“Protection is good,” I said.

“Very. But that base urge is strong . I don’t know how to describe it. Seeing a hot man be cute with children only makes me realise that someday I want a baby—even if that idea is frightening. Maybe I shouldn’t say that.”

“I think most women do,” I said. “That ticking clock is a biological norm. It’s not unique.”

“Well, most women didn’t lose their mothers in childbirth.”

Ingrid’s voice dropped, leaving me feeling like an asshole. I’d made a joke, and now—even unintended—it felt like it was at her expense.

“I love you, Ingrid,” I said. “I didn’t mean it like that. It must frighten you. And... I dunno. ”

“It’s stupid. Bringing up babies was stupid. I’m just... excited because I love my nieces and nephew, and we don’t know if this one will be a boy or a girl. It’s all exciting.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Ingrid.”

“I’ll get over it.”

“Well, when someone jokes about having cancer and doesn’t have it, I get pretty cross, so I didn’t want to do that to you, my love.”

Resting her head on my shoulder, she said, “I know. I’d never assume you would.”

A Detour

INGRID

No more had Keir arrived than he was headed home. Our lot was a sad one. I'd be back in the UK for Burghley in a week, but Keir would be off for a training run in Wales. I'd not see him again until the week of Astrid's wedding. And as we sat in bed the morning of his day to leave, I wanted nothing more than to beg him to stay with me. I knew he couldn't, but I needed it.

We were curled up in bed that morning. He read the paper—in French with zero issues—and I sketched trees from my palace bedroom windows with chalk pastels.

“Do you ever think about what will happen after you leave?” I asked.

“Here? Back to the grind, reporting to our exercise at Valley? Dealing with Duncan managing us from the goddamn tower?”

I snickered. “Not that. I mean, after all of it, you will retire, yes?”

Keir shrugged. “It's not easy to just walk away, Ingrid. I enrolled in the academy at seventeen. Fifteen years in, and I still have more to do. I know I should retire and assist my cousin and my aunt. But for now, Aunt Natalie seems fairly happy to do it all herself.”

“I get that guilt,” I said. “I think about leaving. Astrid did—has. And I have, but I might come back. I think Alexandra and Rick would like it if I came back.”

Keir looked up, squinted and said, “There’s no way you stay here.”

“What?” I laughed.

“No. Your career is on the move. You’re brilliant, Ingrid. No matter what happens, you won’t return permanently and marry some Neandian noble. What would that be like for you? You’d be bored out of your bloody gourd, my love.”

“That’s probably true. But... it would be easier.”

“I have a prediction,” Keir said.

“Yes?”

“You will move abroad and make the Olympics. You will have a big career, and a man will spoil you mercilessly with horses and all manner of things. Odette will marry a Neandian and have kids. She will help Alexandra until the kids are big enough to work. By the time Linnea is of age, all bets are off.”

I snickered. “That’s probably true on the last bit. I hope Odette finds love. She deserves it most of all. As for me, I don’t know.”

“You don’t want to be married and spoiled within an inch of your life?”

“The last bit appeals. Being a wife can wait,” I said. “I’d rather delay domestic life until I’ve at least ridden in one Olympics. I’m not giving everything up for that.”

He smiled. “Do I not spoil you mercilessly, Ingrid?”

Keir’s tone was lusty, not loving. I wanted to play coy.

“Well, you do sometimes spoil me. But is it mercilessly ?”

Keir took my sketch pad and pastels, tossing them aside. He pulled me towards him forcefully and pinned me against the bed.

“I’ll show you merciless spoiling then,” he chuckled.

“You better. I deserve as much.”

“For what?”

“Three words... shower blow job,” I giggled, pushing back against him.

“It would have been hot to have a tack room blow job, but you fobbed me off.”

“As hot as it sounds , even our horse palace has mice. The cats aren’t perfect. I’d much rather leave everything attached to your body rather than be frightened to death of a damn mouse.”

“You’re probably right. That’s something that sounds hot in the movies but isn’t.”

“Exactly,” I said.

He kissed my neck slowly, then pulled back, staring at me in the morning light. I loved this version of him—a bit of a beard, love in his eyes for me, and the excellent way his hair was a disaster. I knew it was because I’d grabbed it when he was going down on me the night before. All of it only heightened his two cowlicks. This was what I wished I had every morning.

“You have nothing pithy to say?” I asked.

“No,” Keir answered. “I’m too in love with you right now to think of a single snarky comment. I’m mostly just... I don’t know how I managed this or why you bother with me.”

“Because you’re lovely—even if you could be more doting. But you’re wonderful. And I love you so much.”

He kissed me once more, giving me butterflies. Then, our happiness was interrupted by Rick, who did not so much as knock. Thankfully, Keir was on top of me, ensuring the angle hid me from view. He ignored Keir’s completely bare backside and rattled off what he had to say.

“Lex is in labour! We’re having a goddamn baby! Right now!”

“Go take her to the damn hospital!” I said.

“Going right now!” He left the door open, storming back into the hall, ignoring us.

We heard him shout out, “We’re having a baby! It’s happening! Alert all the troops!”

“Sorry,” I sighed. “He does this every time. He goes mad with excitement over birth.”

“Poor Alex,” Keir chuckled.

“Sorry about that.”

“Well, if he didn’t personally know my arse before, he does now,” Keir said.

“I was more worried it might be bothersome to you . ”

“I live in a barracks with dozens of men half the year,” Keir said. “It takes a lot to

embarrass me.”

“Sorry for the interruption as well.”

“Oh, I think it’s time we get dressed and wait for the good news. We can resume this later.”

“Well, you have to be back in the UK?—”

“I can delay my flight back a few hours. I know this is important to you, Ingrid.”

I beamed at him. “I am so happy to hear you say that.”

Keir raced over and shut the door.

“I just... I know this stuff is tenuous. Alexandra has to be nervous. I know you are.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that, but he was right.

“Alex goes into a zen place,” I explained. “And... I try not to think about losing any one of us. I refuse to live in fear. Every day, I get on a horse and put myself in danger. I cannot think about it too much.”

“You and I are very alike in that,” Keir said. “But I’d like to be here for you—and your family.”

Worrying

KEIR

The pacing began around one. News came from Astrid that Alexandra had hit “a wall” with pushing, and she was probably heading for a c-section. Alexandra wanted to avoid it, but they may not have another option. Odette and Ingrid stayed busy watching Linnea, Karolina, and Christophe. It seemed the children distracted them from their worries about Alexandra’s health.

We listened as the press gathered outside the hospital only a few blocks away. People gathered outside the gates in hopes they might see a woman who had just given birth pass through in a matter of hours. The city was initially excited—loud and expecting the Queen and her consort to emerge with a new baby any minute. Then, about the time Parker asked if we’d like to have tea for the evening, everything fell quiet. The eerie stillness made me uneasy,

The nanny took the children as Parker sat down with us, heart heavy. By the look on his face, Astrid rang him to tell him something, and now he was the unlucky victim to communicate it. I worried something happened to the baby. It had been too long since we’d heard anything.

“Astrid called,” Parker said. “And... there’s been an issue. ”

Ingrid and Odette stared at one another across the dining table, nervous. My stomach turned. Something was wrong. I felt like I was falling—as if I’d dropped backwards, but there was nothing to grip onto.

“Alexandra had complications. Astrid said she eventually gave in to the c-section, but... that was complicated too.”

Parker wavered, confused.

“Just say it,” Ingrid said. “Say what you need to say.”

“Alexandra lost a lot of blood. She had a major haemorrhage, and... she’s still under sedation as they try to control the bleeding. Astrid is in charge, and everything is fine.”

“So, she will be alright?” Odette asked.

If Astrid was in charge, the chain of command would be top of mind. I couldn’t speak for Neandia’s specific constitutional monarchy, but I knew if Duncan took over for Aunt Natalie, it was due to her complete incapacitation. The Prime Minister would have already been involved, and things would be in disaster mode.

“She’s in hospital. The hospital will keep her safe,” Parker said.

His words were confident, but his voice was shaky, and his face frightened.

“I am sure she’s in the best place she could be,” I added.

Ingrid looked about to shut down. Odette looked hopeful and had questions. Ingrid stared off into space, panicked. I felt sick to my stomach, unable to speak.

“She’ll be home with the baby soon,” Odette murmured.

“He hasn’t said the baby is alive,” Ingrid murmured, as if in a dream state.

“The baby is alive,” Parker confirmed. “She’s alive and healthy. But Alexandra still needs more blood and time. Rick is busy with the baby. Astrid is with Alexandra.”

“Why the fuck would he leave Alexandra?” I asked.

My anger didn’t come from rage as much as it from confusion and projection, but the timing was horrible.

“He had to go with the baby,” Parker said.

“He should stay with his wife because... she’s the one who could die. The baby... it’s just a baby and...”

I was now confusing myself. Ingrid put her hand on my leg as if to restrain me. She gave me a look of concern—sympathy rather than empathy—and it upset me.

“I would kill anyone who tried to separate me from you,” I said, speaking only to her. “Anyone who tried to tell me to leave, I would fight them.”

“Keir, you must listen to the doctors,” Ingrid said. “I don’t think it’s helpful to question what Rick is doing right now.”

“No. He’s doing the best he can,” Odette added. “He loves her.”

“He does,” Ingrid murmured in French.

“She’s a fighter,” Parker said, staring at me.

His gaze was one of contempt. I knew I wasn’t helping. I also knew I had little control of my emotions at the moment—the overwhelming urge to punch a wall brewed. I don’t know where my rage came from in these moments, only that I wanted

to scream and fight anyone to make myself feel something—anything to distract from the feelings I didn't want to have.

“She's going to be okay,” Parker said. “We just have to wait for her to get stronger.”

“I need a minute,” I said, standing.

“But food is coming,” Ingrid said, flat and distant.

“I just... I'm taking a walk.”

I walked up and down the corridor. I heard the children in their little room down the hall joking and laughing as if nothing happened. The noises were so quiet in reality but felt so very loud. My entire brain felt like it was shouting different words over and over—all unintelligible.

Then, I felt a hand on my arm. I turned in fear.

“Stop, stop, it's just me,” Ingrid pleaded fearfully.

“Shit. God, you frightened me!”

“Keir, are you alright?”

I started to come down, seeing the colour and range of emotion come back to her face. I pulled her close, holding her tight against me, and kissed the top of her head. She grounded me.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I should have never said anything.”

Ingrid pulled back and took my face in her hands. “It's okay. We all have fucked up

backstories. Talk to me. What is happening?”

“I don’t want to talk about me while we’re waiting for Alex?—”

“Alexandra is okay,” Ingrid said. “She is awake... just sedated... and Astrid has confirmed she is acting as head of state out of an abundance of caution. We just got the call confirming Alex is awake.”

“Well, then, it’s fine. Let’s?—”

“Keir, what did you see back there? What set you off?”

“Nothing,” I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Don’t lie and hide things from me, Keir. Tell me.”

I took her hands, pulled them down to her side, and then shook my head.

“Keir, I need you to be honest, or this won’t work.”

“I... it was the look on your face—the vacant, detached look—that reminded me of something.”

“Something what?”

“Something from when I was little. Dad went out with Peder—Uncle Peder, as we called him then—and they returned. Peder took Lars to Paris for his weekend there. His mother lives in Paris. And... well, Dad was down. He was exhausted from even just sitting on the boat. He was napping on the couch. I went upstairs to help Mamma bring things down from the linen closet. I tried to distract myself. Because if I looked at Dad and wondered if he were breathing, I’d drive myself mad.”

Her face was sympathetic. I continued.

“So, we came back down. Mamma went to check on Dad. I was coming downstairs when this bit of loo roll rolled across the floor. I looked down from where it came—like a trail of breadcrumbs—and watched Mamma sitting beside Dad on the couch. She had that same vacant look—the one you had where you stared off into space, disbelieving. And it... it set me on this journey. I don’t know why.”

“Was he... okay?”

“No,” I answered. “He was dead. I picked up the loo roll, put it in the bathroom, and listened to my mother call my aunt before she told me Daddy died and then sobbed until the authorities arrived to deal with Dad’s body. ”

“Oh, Keir, darling, I’m so sorry. That is... awful.”

I wiped my tears away. “The most disturbing part? It was hearing Win and Ollie crying and watching Mamma not hear them. They’d been napping. I went upstairs and, with Nate’s help, got them some snacks. I realised I knew everything had changed, but no one else had. I was worried somehow that I knew something there you didn’t. And... I dunno... I am so glad I didn’t.”

She squeezed my hands. “I’m scared, too. Alex is still really sick. The baby is okay. We will make it out, though. She was luckily in a safe place where they could care for her. I’m... I am grateful, Keir.”

I took her face in my hands now, slowly leaning in. I kissed her forehead and said, “Me, too. I am grateful everyone is okay.”

And though I was relieved to hear better news, the feeling of concern, fear, and loss didn’t fade. As I flew home that evening alone, I couldn’t help but worry about

Ingrid. What if something happened to her? What if they wanted to take her away from me in a moment like that? I wouldn't desert her for the baby I didn't know, right? Why was it that this detail stuck with me? I didn't understand.

Manon

INGRID

Princess Manon was born into a family panic. A great princess needed a great name. Alexandra's choice of names was always based on the family. Christophe was named after our father. Linny and Kari were named after Mamma and Rick's mother. And now, another prominent, brave woman entered the scene. While Alexandra was still sick and unable to do much, we doted on Manon.

It killed me to fly back to the UK to compete in the Burghley Horse Trials—and do poorly. I wanted to be home with my sisters and care for Alexandra and Manon. After a lacklustre finish at Burghley, I returned focused solely on wedding preparation with Astrid. Eventually, so did Keir. Being without him pained me.

He arrived in the morning while Alexandra and I watched the news over coffee. Astrid and Odette had gone to see how the floral arch was coming along at the Lutheran church across the square. Astrid didn't want a religious ceremony at all. However, their only choices for the ceremony were a church or at the tiny registry office. Ultimately, she conceded they could marry at the lone, impressive protestant church. It was a massive scandalous thing, but Parker's family would have shat a brick if invited to a Catholic wedding, and neither of them cared to fight with the old people over something like that.

Manon rested gently in my arms when Keir poked his head in.

“Hello, Your Majesty, I?—”

“Keir, come in. She’s here,” Alexandra said.

He looked over and saw me there with Manon.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t see you,” Keir said.

He came over and gazed at the baby, who was milk-drunk and unapologetically oblivious.

“So, this is the youngest Deschamps girl?” He asked, turning back to Alexandra. “She looks very much like Linnea.”

“Rick bookended them,” Alexandra laughed. “He got Linny and Manon, and I got Kari and Christophe. She’s obviously his child.”

“She is, yeah. But she’s adorable. Congrats. I am sorry I wasn’t here when you got in. My CO was already pretty enraged with me when I finally made it to Wales.”

“It’s okay. I am glad you stayed around to help. Parker appreciated the male company.”

“That poor man,” I snickered. “We’ve tortured him, I think.”

The baby smacked herself in the face. Keir dropped down and stroked the top of her head. “You mustn’t hit yourself, Manon.”

“Do you want to hold her?” I asked.

Keir looked over at Alex for the go-ahead.

“Go on, she’s number four. I have three more if you do a terrible job.”

“Sometimes, number four is the best one,” Keir said sweetly.

“I’ll trade you places,” I said, standing up. Keir sat, taking the baby in his arms, and I perched on the overstuffed arm of the chair.

I couldn’t lie. Men holding babies ranked high on my list of “set my ovaries ablaze” activities. It was highly involuntary. As I’d told Keir before, I was in no hurry to pop out babies, but the picture of Manon’s fat little face smushed to his chest was priceless. He smiled down at her, as anyone would with such an adorable baby.

“You have lovely cheeks,” Keir cooed. “You baked long enough.”

“She baked too long—the longest of all of them,” Alexandra said. “I was worried she may never emerge.”

Keir put his finger in Manon’s hand. The baby squeezed her fingers around it. Meanwhile, I melted into a puddle of hormonal tears.

“Manon is an interesting name. Is she named after the opera?”

“No. Our many-times-great grandmother, Queen Manon, was the first to be queen consort after the Belgian Occupation. She married our many-great-grandfather, King Charles. She was educated at Wellesley in America, older, and very outspoken when she met Charles in Paris, so the story goes,” Alexandra said.

“But it was a great case of misidentification,” I said. “This is a legend, but it’s a brilliant meet-cute if you believe it. He rescued her glove, not knowing anything about her or giving away who he was. Later, they were introduced in London. He was staying with the Prince of Wales, and the rest is history.”

“They called her Marie. Great-great-whatever-grandfather fell in love with her, and

his mother conceded because she was fluent in two dialects of French—and two, she was Catholic. So, despite being a child of the British aristocracy, she was ideal.”

“How did all that happen?” Keir asked.

“She was born in Canada, where her father served in the army,” Alexandra said. “I find their love story so amusing. Odette was on a kick about family history, and I have always loved the name because of the opera. But Rick and I only wanted to choose family names.”

Keir chuckled. “That is why there are fifteen Keirs, twenty Roberts, and half a dozen versions of Margaret in ours. Well, it’s a very romantic name. Seems a good choice. She’s beautiful, Alex.”

“Thanks. She eats and sleeps well, which is all that matters.”

Rick walked in. “Christophe has taken to shouting ‘whaaaaaat’ loudly whenever he doesn’t want to hear something. It drives me mad, and I worry it will flare up at the wedding.”

“Odette will manage him,” I said. “He will be fine.”

“Oh, Keir made it,” Rick said. Finally, the oestrogen quotient goes down.”

“Yes, I got to meet the latest of the Deschamps girls. She’s delightful. And complain all you might, but this beats the barracks I just fled.”

“I supposed if you had to choose between sharing a room with a random service member or Ingrid, you’d pick Ingrid. ”

“Well, it’s no contest,” Keir said. “Except the random pilot would be tidier and not

leave his clothes all over the damn floor.”

“Keir!”

“What? You leave a bunch of clothes in your wake everywhere you go. It’s as if you expect someone to pick up after you.”

“Well, they do,” Alexandra protested.

“Here, Lex,” Rick laughed. “Not many places.”

“We grew up picking up after ourselves,” Keir said.

Alexandra appeared scandalised.

“Mamma was a normie and American. She loathed staff. Bestemor was a staunch believer in doing everything herself, and Mamma kept that with her. We didn’t have staff. Mamma did it all—carpooling, cooking, laundry, everything.”

Rick and Alexandra stared at him as if he were alien life on Earth.

“When Nate and I moved in with Auntie Nat and Uncle Ed, it was a brave new world. We had a governess, then footmen and maids. It was wild.”

“Your mother didn’t even have a dresser?” Alexandra asked.

“Nope. No dresser, no lady’s maid. At least not after Dad died. We had this amazing, beautiful apartment in Kensington Palace that had staff. I remember thinking how wonderful it was and how I wanted to live there forever. But then Dad was diagnosed, we fled the country, and Mamma never found it to be home. We were raised very average.”

“Ingrid is not used to average,” Rick noted. “None of the girls are. Good luck to you.”

“I cannot say that there is much average about any of the Deschamps girls,” Keir said. “But I will break her of this habit with the clothes if it kills me.”

“Hand me the baby,” Rick beckoned. “Go, be free. The two of you must want to catch up.”

I did—very much. After several weeks apart, I only wanted Keir to run me back to the bedroom or any room with a locked door. We faded into the hall before I pulled him into a big kiss. Staff bustled around us, but I couldn’t be bothered to worry. I waited too long to kiss this man. And when the wedding was over, we’d only have a couple more days before he shipped out for six months. I wanted to soak it all up .

He pulled away, “Are we waiting on something? Plans?”

“I have three hours of nothing, and I’d like you to do everything to me,” I said.

“That sounds brilliant,” Keir agreed.

The Lies We Tell

KEIR

I couldn't help but enjoy the look of Ingrid writhing beneath me as I fucked her. I'd been unsettled since I left last time, unable to explain why things felt off. Now, though, with her here—eyes rolling back, nails digging into my back, and moans getting louder and louder—all worries faded. That was the magic of Ingrid. She could ease my mind like this.

She came for the third time, her legs locked tight around me.

“Oh, Keir! Don't stop!”

I wouldn't. I ploughed into her harder, hitting the spot within her that made me want to cum, too. I came hard and fast as she fell back into the pillow, also satisfied with our impromptu love-making session. I loved this woman but never lusted after her as much as I did when she screamed my name.

I leapt up to get rid of the condom and returned to find her still a mess, just waiting for me. Her blue eyes followed me around the bed. I climbed in again, pulling her back towards me. I spooned her now, resting my chin on her shoulder. She was tiny, warm, and soft like velvet. I loved to spend afternoons like this with her.

“I missed you,” Ingrid said .

“I missed you, too. More than you missed me, I would bet.”

“Impossible!”

I kissed her shoulder. “How has everything been?”

“Chaotic. Astrid is still upset that Alex won’t be able to walk with her down the aisle. Rick will have to do it.”

“That’s sweet, though,” I said. “He’s willing?”

“He is bursting at the chance,” Ingrid giggled. “To the point, Alexandra told him to pipe down about it. She can’t do the walk. They’re going to bring her in through the side door.”

Alexandra’s body went through hell and back. The media was still angry she hadn’t walked out carrying the new baby even though she couldn’t do the stairs yet. I felt for her. It had to be rough to miss out on so much when your sister—and best friend—was getting married.

I listened to Ingrid’s breathing slow and felt her relax into me—deeper now. Contentment settled over us both.

“I love you,” Ingrid said sweetly.

“I love you, too, baby.”

I kissed her shoulder again.

Ingrid went dark. “I don’t want you to go.”

She turned to face me, her expression killing me. I didn’t want to disappoint this beautiful woman—the woman who trusted me more than anyone had ever trusted me.

My responsibility was to care for her, not actively hurt her.

“I don’t want to go. I mean, I do. It’s my job. I wish my job could be where you are.”

Ingrid nodded, looking depressed.

“I will be back in spring,” I promised. “And so will you.”

“That’s so long off, mon cher.”

“I know. But nothing I can say will make any of this easier for you, Ingrid. You are the one I want most. You know that. The problem is, my life isn’t linear like that. It’s not like I can stay with you every day. If I could, I would.”

Her blue eyes took on that turquoise colour they did when she was about to start sobbing. My heart couldn’t handle it. This is why I avoided goodbyes. I never told anyone I was breaking up with them until I went on tour, rang them, and said it was over. I couldn’t do that to Ingrid. I couldn’t shatter her heart like that. She was different.

“I don’t mean to hurt you, Ingrid,” I promised. “I would never hurt you for the sake of making my life easier. I am not proud to admit I have before, but I won’t be like that with you.”

“Then... after this assignment. Can you stay local? Stay in Norfolk, maybe?”

“I have another year left, Ingrid.”

“And your aunt could intervene,” Ingrid said.

She was right. If I went to Aunt Natalie, I could ask for her to find me something

closer to home. She would understand more than anyone and could do as she pleased. However, I would never ask for that. It was a dereliction of duty to stay home and leave others in harm's way. It insulted me to my core.

"Let's see what happens while I'm over there," I said. "I will likely get a cush assignment next time and won't have to interfere. I promise that when you want more, I will give it to you."

Her face broke into a smile. "Really?"

I nodded. "When you are ready for whatever comes after the Olympics, I will be ready, too."

"You assume I will make it."

I kissed her forehead and said, "I know you will make it. I've never been more sure of anything. Ingrid, I know you will do great things. And while it sucks for me to be over there, you're going to be so busy training you'll hardly miss me."

I knew it wasn't true. I knew I'd miss her like I'd never missed anyone, and she'd miss me just as much. However, we told ourselves lies to make it through difficult days. The human condition required denial for survival. I sidestepped the conversation for now.

Wanting More

INGRID

“He’s very handsome in his uniform.”

The scratchy voice came from the only human who could make every word sound wretched. I saw my grandmother, Celeste, sitting in her wheelchair near the table slated for family at the reception. She’d not been placed here. Instead, she’d been seated with Parker’s mother and their family. Parker’s mother was loathsome, so it made sense to saddle them with the world’s most controlling dowager queen.

She had been watching me watching Keir as he danced with Betty. He was handsome. He was endlessly attractive, made only more by his dress uniform. He and Betty laughed. The two and a half years between her and me seemed to be an ocean these days. She was less of a friend and more of a little sister. I struggled to feel as girlish as I did six months before. My whole life changed from what it was. I’d grown up while she remained youthful and silly.

“He’s handsome, yes. And good to me,” I said, annoyed.

“Never marry a military man.”

“Why’s that?” I asked .

“Because they will break your heart. He’ll sleep with someone else while he’s over there. The first rule of keeping yourself safe is to make it impossible to be overrun.

There are too many other options outside the palace walls. It will never work for you.”

“I trust him,” I said. “We’ve discussed it.”

“And you have a concrete plan for when he gets back?”

“We’ve talked about it.” I was angered.

“That’s as good as saying he has other plans. You’re just in denial. That’s a military man for you.”

She held out a glass.

“Get me more wine. I’m parched.”

“Sorry, I cannot help you,” I said.

“You are cruel.”

“It takes one to know one,” I said in wilful English.

I turned her down in response as she did every time we asked for something reasonable, and she denied the request. It was for every time I was starving and hid a jar of peanut butter in a dresser, only for her spies to find it and for me to be read the riot act for eating food she didn’t think my growing body needed. I was upset by her need to sow discord and demand something. The old bat could rely on one of her old henchmen to get her a drink. She may have once owned me and all I knew, but she didn’t have a claim to me now.

I ordered a gin and tonic at the bar—the drink I’d come to love over the

summer—and felt so grown. Looking out, I watched Astrid and Parker dance. They stared at one another like silly, happy people. Parker never struck me as much of a dancer, but for Astrid, he would get lively on his feet. He'd do everything for her. Alexandra and Rick sat in the corner chatting with Rick's parents. Karolina, his mother, loved us as her own. Odette and her date danced together, too. All of us grew so much from the time Celeste locked us up and controlled every aspect of our lives.

I knew we'd made progress, but I couldn't shake what remained unclear. Seeds of doubt grew into a forest of trees as I thought about her words. Astrid and Parker would return to Parker's massive London home. Alexandra and Rick would continue raising their children peacefully here in Neandia. Even Odette had a boyfriend here in Neandia. But what of me?

Arms soon wrapped around me. Keir returned. He kissed my cheek and then took a pull from my drink.

I turned to look at him. "You cannot just steal my drink."

"And yet I did. What will you do about it?"

"Lay into you later," I giggled.

"I need to sit down," Keir said. "Betty will kill me."

He sat at a chair nearby.

I fell into his lap.

"Oof," Keir laughed. "Go easy on me."

I kissed him slowly, not caring who was watching. I only had two more days with this

man before he left me for months. All I could do was soak him up—the feeling of his hands on my hips, the way his tongue parted my lips, and the smell of his aftershave. I wanted to linger.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too. I didn’t go off forever. And you don’t need to fight Betty. She must give way if you want to dance.”

“No, it’s not that.”

“I’m coming home, Ingrid.”

“I know. But... I feel like we don’t have plans. You told me you’d see about it when you returned, but... Keir, I need more than that.”

“I promised you that when you were ready for the next steps?—”

“Maybe I am?” I asked. “Maybe if you asked me tomorrow, I would stupidly tell you I wanted it all, and I wanted to wake up next to you every day for the rest of my life.”

The words spilled out—from nowhere.

“Ingrid, I?—”

“You promised me a million I-love-yous, and I want to claim them all.”

I was choked up now, fighting tears.

“I will be back. And if you still want it all, we can discuss how to make that work. I promise you.”

“You don’t want it all?” I asked. “Do you just want to have me and then... leave... and never make any commitment to a life together? Because eventually, I will want babies and marriage and all of that.”

Keir didn’t have an answer.

“Keir, you cannot say these things without follow-through.”

Keir set his jaw. He sat me down on the floor, pushing me away, and stood back up.

“Ingrid, we cannot have this conversation here.”

“Where then? When? Are you just going to get on a plane and leave? Never to be seen again?”

He looked near tears. For a minute, I thought he would pull me close, give me one of those patented forehead kisses I adored, and tell me that he loved me to the end of time and would do whatever I asked.

Instead, he indignantly said, “I cannot promise you all that right now, and you know that. Don’t try to pick a fight here.”

Pick a fight ? I wasn’t trying to.

Tears welled, and I stormed ahead—out of the ballroom, down the corridor, past the throne room, and back into the family’s side of the house. Keir followed me at a fast clip. I ended up in the drawing room, staring at the fireplace.

“Ingrid! Ingrid! I love you!” Keir said, pulling me to a stop with his hand on my wrist.

I pulled it back. “You don’t love me if you aren’t being honest. You’re not. Do you not intend to come back and settle down with me?”

“Define that. Because we’re together?—”

“But you don’t want the press to know?”

“To protect you, my love.”

My love . It felt so dismissive and wrong.

“I mean sticking as close as possible so you can at least see me at the weekend, Keir. Knowing that if life is good in a year or so, you might decide to make this permanent.”

“In my eyes, it is.”

“And in my eyes, permanence is all of this,” I said, throwing my arms up. “The big white wedding, the massive ballgown, tiaras, the whole deal. And children. That is permanence for someone who has never really known it. It’s what everyone has—everyone but me. And I will not settle for less.”

Keir’s green eyes welled with tears. “I cannot promise you that right now. I don’t know if I am even capable of it. And I would never lie to you, Ingrid.”

“So, you don’t love me?” I sobbed. “You don’t love me.”

“I do love you,” Keir said. “But loving you forever is not the same as marrying and popping out babies. I never once told you?—”

“So, you don’t see yourself pulling back in two or three years? Staying close and

making a life with me?”

He struggled to find the words, but I knew the answer. It was no. He may have loved me somehow, but that wasn't how I needed him to love me.

“I've been left out by every person who ever claimed to love me, Keir,” I sobbed. “Every person says they love me, but... they fucking don't. The only people who love me are the people in this house. And I will probably die here in this house?—”

“You won't,” Keir pleaded. “Because you are beautiful, capable, and strong. You're brave. And that's why I don't understand this. You could have so much more than just children, a house, and a husband. You could dream so much bigger.”

I shook my head. “I want to build something bigger with someone—someone who wants the same. I want that first. Marriage then empire, I guess?”

Keir shook his head. “I'm not ready to tell you I will do it for you, my love. I hope with some time?—”

“No. You hope I will forget about it and settle.”

“I would never want you to settle. That is what I am saying, Ingrid!”

I shook my head. “But you want me to wait while you find the person you want? Am I a nice placeholder?”

Keir took my hands in his. “There is no woman on this planet I would prefer to you. I am convinced of it. I'm addicted to you. You make me ridiculously happy.”

“Except for the ability to opt out with impunity?” I asked. “I'm a royal woman living in a fucking fishbowl. You claim you want to protect me. If so, you'd want to

legitimate me. Because I grow stale on the shelf.”

“You aren’t bread at the shop, Ingrid!”

“I don’t make the fucking rules, Keir,” I sobbed. “And you don’t actually want me. You want to fuck me and play with me. You don’t want to have me forever. And that’s fine, but just be fucking honest. You’re incapable of this commitment. It’s not me, it’s you.”

“I am not incapable .”

“Then what do you need from me?”

“I need to... I need to finish out the mission.”

“When does that end?”

He shrugged.

“Well, when you figure it out, let me know,” I said, storming out of the drawing room.

Disappointment

KEIR

“Well, when you figure it out, let me know,” Ingrid said before fleeing the drawing room.

I stared after her, puzzled. The night began so well. We were delighted—dancing, joking, laughing. Then, it all turned. She was so sad. I broke her heart with sort-of promises. And to be true to myself, I couldn’t promise her what she wanted. I couldn’t pretend I could ever give her this fairytale where I came home every night to tuck our adorable babies into bed.

I couldn’t understand why she wanted it for the life of me. She was an athlete, brave beyond measure, and clever. She wasn’t the type of girl to wait at home. Thus, why did she care about being “legitimated”? And what did that mean? Why was she so focused on codifying all of it?

We did not want to be too focused on exclusivity at the onset. It was as if my saying I love you created a great panic in which now we needed to meet the criteria to stay genuinely “together.”

I couldn’t handle it. I defaulted as I always did. I ran. She sobbed in the bed as I packed my things. I knew all I would do if I stayed was disappoint her and everyone else she loved. So, I fled. I chartered a flight home sooner than planned and returned to London to lay low. I told myself this was for the best. I’d be off on duty in thirty-six hours, so all I had to do was keep my head down.

Unfortunately, the next day, I had a visitor who wasn't taking my bullshit.

I woke to an angry voice.

“Keir Robert, get up!”

My aunt stood over me, arms crossed.

“Auntie Nat, I just want to sleep.”

“You’ve slept for a day and embarrassed the entirety of Britain with whatever shenanigans you pulled, so get your arse up. We need to have a chat!”

“Fine, fine,” I grumbled. Debating her was foolhardy.

She hung over me still.

“I’m only wearing pants,” I protested. “Let me at least put clothes on.”

“I used to change your nappies. I promise you that in the time it takes you to get a damn dressing gown on, I won’t be scandalised. I am more concerned you will pull another runner.”

I groaned, walking over to where my dressing gown was hung on the bathroom door.

“You know, Alexandra is cross—very cross—but Rick would like to string you up by your testicles,” Aunt Natalie said.

“I did what was best for Ingrid.”

“Shattering that pretty little thing’s heart was not best. I can assure you.”

“She will find someone else in a minute,” I said. “She’s perfect.”

“And yet, not good enough for you to treat her with even a modicum of respect?”

I stared at my aunt, confused.

“I didn’t disrespect her. I let her go.”

“I thought you loved her? I thought she was different?”

“I am leaving to get shot at for six months. She wanted me to promise I’d not leave again when I returned. She was being silly—young perhaps—and I don’t have time to promise people things I cannot guarantee. ”

“Keir, you can always retire or go to desk work. If you love her?—”

“I do! God, why does everyone assume that I do not love her just because I’m not racing to marry her or go public? Do you not understand that I am miserable without her? That I hate myself for this but know it is for the best?”

“She gave you an ultimatum about marriage?”

“Not quite. She said she couldn’t stay with me if I weren’t interested in marriage and children.”

“That’s fair,” my aunt said. And I would say it’s normal for a woman in her twenties to say.”

“Well, I couldn’t promise that for certain.”

“Keir, you will get married and have children someday. Why is it that all of you boys

live in some fairytale where you get to shag as many people as you want forever without ever having to consider your actions? You do need to settle down someday. Life will pass you by otherwise.”

“People can have long, beautiful lives without children,” I said.

“They can. I thought I would have to make that for myself,” my aunt admitted. “I had Uncle Ed, and that was enough. It really would have been, I think. But that wasn’t my choice . We wanted a baby. Or, rather, I needed to have children, and your uncle was broody.”

“He was the broody one?”

Aunt Natalie nodded. “Oh, for sure. I told him I needed a few years but would give him children. I just wanted a bit more time to keep flying and living. And for me, that wasn’t very easy. You cannot be a fast jet pilot if you think you might be pregnant. I was pregnant with Duncan and didn’t know until I got GLOC on a training run. If I were flying alone, we both could have died. But I was told we never would have a baby. So, I took great pride in helping you all. I love you all in a way I don’t think most aunts ever get to. You all are my pride and joy, too. But damn it, Keir, I had to be brave and commit to Edwin. It took a lot of trying to fight it to realise I needed to slow down to die happy.”

“And what if I think being so tied down is bad?”

“Is that because you fear commitment, or is it because you are afraid if you love someone, they will abandon you? That you will lose them? ”

Her words cut like a knife—harsh but true. I couldn’t focus. I reeled.

“I... I don’t...”

“Keir, you lost your father at a tender age. But you must remember that Ingrid grew up with no one apart from her sisters. And she somehow formed this attachment to you and trusted you. Now, all you’ve taught her is that people always leave. And for you? You’ve once more supported your stupid theory that you’re incapable of being a good partner.”

“That’s not true.”

“Alexandra says Ingrid is convinced she’s unlovable. And I think, sadly, you’re convinced of the same.”

My aunt was tender now. She understood something no one else did.

“Your father wouldn’t like this. He’d love Ingrid. They are so very similar in many ways.”

She was right.

“Ingrid has the biggest heart,” I sighed. “She lives to live, and she’s stupidly brave.”

“Yes. It’s a little wild, but in a good way. She loves her family hard. But so do you. And I thought for a moment I saw a glimmer of you opening up.”

“I am not strong enough to survive. When Alexandra was sick... I lost it. You weren’t there. Ingrid was frightened, but all I could think about was losing her. I couldn’t even support her in that moment. Faced with a choice between staying with my wife or going with the baby—like Rick was—I couldn’t imagine seeing my child. I wouldn’t want to. Ingrid was that child. And I realised I wouldn’t be capable of loving a child, so I shouldn’t have one.”

“Are you done with your ridiculous mental gymnastics now? Your feelings are your

own, but... that's a trauma response. It doesn't mean you won't be a good father. When your mother almost died giving birth to the twins, I had to force your father to see them. I stayed with her. They needed him. I don't think he regretted one day that I'd forced his hand there, nor did your mother. ”

I took a deep breath. “You don't understand what life was like for Mamma after that. How she was.”

“I do. Because she wouldn't let me in for ages. I don't blame her, but it made work difficult. She did everything to protect you all—even from very irrational things. And I am sure I would have been the same in her position, Keir. But I do recall.”

“It broke her. I wouldn't survive. I'm not strong like her.”

“You learn to survive,” Aunt Natalie said. “Mummy buried her first husband before she was thirty. She buried her son in her sixties. It broke her, but she survived. She still loved us. And... you find a way. Do you think your mother would have preferred never to love your father?”

I never asked—never even thought to.

“Maybe take some time to think about what you want, huh? And maybe talk to your mother about it? Because you're spinning your wheels and potentially missing out on the best thing you ever had, Keir. I almost lost your uncle when he found out we couldn't have kids. He momentarily thought it best to leave me and let me find someone else.”

“But it wasn't.”

“No. Because people aren't replaceable, you can't swap out one groom for another. We aren't cake toppers, Keir. In our case, all I needed at that moment was him.

Because he was my person—the only one I wanted in the world. So, we figured it out together, and we’ve been stunningly happy for thirty more years. If you cannot imagine a life without Ingrid, you must ask yourself what you must do to be the person she needs to run to. ”

“Why do you care?”

My aunt put her hands on my shoulders.

“Because I love you. And because when I see you happy, it reminds me I haven’t completely fucked all of you up in this process. I think you do love this girl. Just pray another prince from some godforsaken country doesn’t roll up on her while you’re away. And then when you get back, make it right.”

“I can call her?—”

“This is not a call-and-grovel situation,” my aunt said. “It’s one for grand gestures. It would be best if you grew up a bit. Until you can articulate what would make things work for the two of you—and how I can help—it’s best you give her space. You have less than twenty-four hours before you land in bloody Cyprus, yeah?”

I nodded. “But what if it is all fucked up? “

“Well, then, you have disappointed yourself in the worst way. But if she loves you as I expect she does, I think she will still take you back. You both need to self-reflect and grow up in the interim.”

My aunt was usually right. She sometimes sucked with emotions but also loved hard. I knew if she told me to do better, she meant I needed to think about things. In the past, when I’d hit a professional or personal wall, her advice was sound. I loved my aunt and trusted her. I would have to sit back and take my lumps.

For now, Ingrid was gone. If I ever wanted her back, I'd need to be sure as hell I did and prove that she should accept me again.

Reeling

INGRID

“Y ou’ve got to get up and move,” Odette said.

“Why, so I can watch Parker and Astrid leave all happy for their honeymoon? So, I can dote on the kids while sobbing internally?”

Odette sat down on my bed. I rolled over and pulled the covers up. She climbed in with me, pulling them up over her head stubbornly. As she wrapped her arms around me, I started to sob again. This was the worst day of my life. Everything happy was over. The only person I’d poured everything out to ran off. He’d lied and hurt me.

“Take it from someone who had a terrible breakdown post-breakup; this is not the way forward,” Odette said. “Guy used me. He hurt me. I know what you mean. I know what it is like to pour your heart out only to feel betrayed. But you must move on.”

I faced her. “The thing is, I wish I could hate him. But he didn’t do anything like that. He pulled back because he was afraid or something. It wasn’t malicious, but it hurts so much, Odie.”

“I know, darling. But this whole thing about staying in bed for two days? It’s not healthy. You get one good day and must get out of bed. Come on, let’s go out to the stables.”

“I cannot. My head is all over the place.”

“Ingrid, you have always been the best rider of all of us. You love it more than anything. Never let a man take what you love from you, sweetheart.”

She had a point.

“What if I’m unlovable?”

“You keep saying that. I’ve been there, Ingy. It’s a lie. I’m not unlovable. With the right person, I can be loved the way I deserve. You are clever, loving, and funny. You deserve the best.”

“I’m sometimes too clever and too snarky. He got that. He got me . And the sex was fabulous.”

Odette snickered. “There will be good sex again. Promise. Come on. Take a bath, get dressed, and we’ll get you an old-fashioned cheer up.”

I did as she said. I had no reason to doubt her. Odette and I departed for the barn. We had an excellent old-fashioned hack on the back of reliable ponies. I rode for fun, realising it was the first time I’d done so in months. I took it in. I soaked it up. There was no hurried travel or wondering if I would make it somewhere on time for something. I appreciated that.

I wasn’t ready to have dinner with everyone, so I closed myself off again. Alexandra sent me food, but I barely ate it. Instead, I stayed up late and roamed like a ghost. I ended up in the family room around one. I couldn’t sleep, and I couldn’t get him out of my head.

Rick appeared with a fussy baby on his shoulder and a bottle in his hand as I was

deep into a trashy show where contestants went on dates blindfolded.

“You have a nanny, you realise?” I asked.

“Alexandra is in full-on angry mare mode. She does this every time. Trust me when I say it is futile to suggest that others help. Can I join you until I settle her?”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s your house.”

“It’s still your house, Ingrid,” Rick said, sounding wounded. “You are always welcome here. I never?—”

I walked back my tone. “I’m sorry. I’m just in my feelings. I know you would never want me gone. ”

Rick settled in with the baby. “I worry about you, kiddo.”

“I know you do. I know Alexandra does. Astrid noted her rage.”

“She only wants you to be happy. I want to string him up by his balls and torture him about right now, but I’m sure that’s... unhelpful.”

“Don’t,” I shook my head. “It’s not his fault he doesn’t want me.”

“I don’t think that’s it, sweetheart,” Rick said. “Ingy, he loves you. I still believe he does. That’s what makes me so angry. He broke your heart on the night of Astrid’s wedding, and he knows better.”

“He can’t help?—”

“Bullshit, Ingrid. He’s plenty old enough to know he could have handled it better.”

“He was panicked. It’s like he shut down. He says he doesn’t know if he wants kids or if he can commit to me. He says he’ll love me forever but cannot commit to marriage. Which means he doesn’t love me, right?”

“He’s panicking over something,” Rick said. “And it’s not you. Maybe it’s going off to war? My mandatory military service was hell, and I never even saw anything like combat.”

“It’s not that. He enjoys his job. Loves it even. He doesn’t love me enough to step back and take a desk job.”

Rick looked sympathetic and tossed Manon over his shoulder to burp.

“I think you need to wait him out, Ingrid. That doesn’t mean waiting around for him and ignoring other offers, but I sense he will return.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because some guys take forever to grow up. And whatever is rolling around in his brain needs time.”

“How?”

Manon let out a massive burp, provoking hearty laughs.

“So demure!” I giggled.

“Demure princesses wouldn’t last a minute here,” Rick said.

“True.”

“I can say that I had a lot of negative feelings about myself before you all came into my life. I thought I could not be properly loved and love someone as they deserved,” Rick said. “But you all taught me I was no monster. Maybe Keir worries he will hurt you? I don’t know. But that’s a him problem. My hope for him is that he can change.”

“I refuse to wait around for a man to change his mind. No one changes their mind.”

“Your sister wanted to kill me until five days before our wedding,” Rick said. “And look at us now! I practised patience, grovelled to no end, and tried to save the day. She found it in her heart to forgive me. In your case, I think the issue will be you forgiving him. You don’t have to, but I’d hate to see either of you lose out on love over this, Ingrid. If it is meant to be, it will. In the meantime, live. Be your best self. Focus on you . Be happy. You deserve all of those things, sweetheart.”

It never occurred to me that this wasn’t over forever. Maybe Rick was right, but I wouldn’t be burned twice. I couldn’t accept that.

A Call From Home

INGRID

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

Cantering around a warmup was always an excellent way to start my day. Kraken and I were competing in Virginia at a four-star international event. We rode right after Cici and Cardigan, her new Irish Sport Horse. Coming out of dressage, the two of us were sixth and eighth—with me in sixth. I was so proud of myself and excited at this chance to win an event for the first time since entering international competition. I'd come close in February at Wellington—placing third. I'd never been so proud of myself.

That would all come to a halt in the next five minutes. I pulled up next to Cici, trotting next to her.

“He looks outstanding today,” Cici said. “You’re going to kill it.”

“He’s a little wild, but that isn’t bad.”

“You’ll be great. Just go out there and give it your best. It’s enough.”

I noticed our coach waving his arms like he was landing a jet.

“I don’t know what Nils needs,” Cici laughed. “He looks so insistent.”

“He’s so aggro. What did I do?”

“Oh, darling, it’s me more than you I worry about.”

We rode up to find him there with Betty and Isak, both looking upset.

“Cici, go back,” Nils said.

“What is going on?” Cici asked.

“This is about Ingrid,” Nils said.

“You can say it to us all,” I said.

“You’re out.”

“What?” Cici and I both erupted.

“I got a call. Your grandmother has died. I have a message to relay. You are to put on a black suit and go home immediately. Your sister has organised a transport. There is a car ready to take you back to the hotel.”

“What? But I can win this,” I said. “I…”

“I’m sorry, Ingrid. Take it up with her.”

They called Cici’s number. She was in the hole.

“She’s riding this round,” Cici said. “God damn it, she’s riding it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I sighed. “You know how this goes. And I will have to scratch

after.”

“Ride for you . Don’t let that old bat take this beautiful ride and gorgeous day from you. Don’t let her take it from Kraken.”

She trotted off.

“I cannot stop you. It’s going to be all over in 20 minutes. Overjump it if you want,” Nils sighed. “Go. Be free.”

I watched Cici leave. I was only going to be a few minutes behind her. Seven minutes from now, I’d be done. Kraken wound up. We were given the green light, taking off like a shot. I ignored my time. It didn’t matter. We rode the course for fun. It was surprisingly freeing. Watching the world speed by through his ears was the best feeling. Every jump felt like freedom. I was free. Celeste was dead. I was no longer in her wake. But even in death, she’d cost me something big.

I finished strong. I cried because I was proud. I cried because my horse deserved better than a ticket home. I cried because I knew the math suggested I would have finished in the top five, at least, if I’d jumped clean in the show jumping. Yet, I would not get a chance .

Cici gave me a huge hug. “I’m so sorry, darling. So sorry.”

“I am not sad she died.”

“I know you aren’t, but just know that ride was Olympic-level perfection. You deserved to win today. And if I do, you’re getting the trophy. I rode one of my best rides for you.”

“Cici, that’s sweet, but?—”

“Darling, you deserve this. You’ve worked your ass off. Remember how beautiful that ride was, not that the woman who took so much from you continued to. Okay? Promise me!”

Betty hugged me, too. I never expected a group hug from the Scandinavians. I cried.

“You’re going to do beautifully next time.”

“I might miss Kentucky,” I sobbed.

“You will not miss Kentucky. If I must, I will call Leah and pull her off that project in Austria! She will fly you back!”

“Yeah. I’ll guilt her,” Betty laughed. “Or ring Duncan.”

I sniffled. “That is ridiculous—all of it.”

Betty didn’t mention Keir, and I was grateful. His flying me sounded dreadful. I knew he was home again, but I hadn’t heard from him, and I didn’t care to.

“Ride every day. You will finish in the top ten and cement your place for the European Championships. And you’ll get your division pick and join us back here in a year and a half.”

“I am not making D.C.!”

“You are. You will,” Cici said. “We’re going to the Olympics together, babes.”

I snickered, hugged, and kissed her on the cheek, as I had done to Betty. “Okay, I gotta go. I have a plane waiting.”

“Go. Celebrate the bitch being dead,” Cici said. “You’re a very free woman.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:26 am

Just Follow Orders

KEIR

I stood in my mother's kitchen when I got a call from my aunt. I knew I had to answer it.

"Hello, Auntie Nat," I said.

"Great. I was worried I might not get you. I know you had sailing plans."

"We haven't left yet. Lars is held up with something," I said.

I'd come home and spent a few weeks up north with my mother. While Lars and I weren't besties, we were better than we were a year ago. We often went out with Peder to improve matters.

"Good. I need you to go to a funeral."

"What? Has someone died?"

"Yes. I'm in Germany, or I would go."

"I am on holiday. Who is it for?"

"I know you are. It won't take but a minute. Promise."

“Duncan cannot go?”

“Duncan is in New Zealand.”

I groaned. The last thing I wanted to do was go to a funeral. I returned home a week ago. I wasn't supposed to be back on duty until June. I tried not to think about where they would send me next or for what.

“Where is it?” I groaned.

“The Dowager Queen of Neandia has died. We need to send someone.”

My stomach churned.

“No, no, no. Auntie, anywhere but there.”

Lars entered the kitchen, making eye contact with me like he knew something was up.

“You don't have a choice. These are orders. Are you being insubordinate, Squadron Leader Inverness?”

“Fucking hell,” I groaned. “If I have no choice, I will go.”

I soon hung up and stared at Lars.

“You got the call?” Lars asked.

I nodded. “Are you?”

“Cici is competing. She just rang me. Uncle Olav is sending me in her place. Can you

fly me? I'm just assuming?—”

“Yeah,” I said. “I have no choice. Mamma, please tell Auntie I cannot go. This is not an important funeral. The woman was a cunt.”

“Cunt or not,” Mamma said. “She told you to go. She makes the rules. If Olav or Natalie say jump, you all say how high.”

“But Neandia... Mamma, please.”

“Don't whine,” Mamma said. “You're thirty-two years old. You can handle going to a funeral.”

“He doesn't want to see Ingrid.”

I glared at Lars. “And you probably do.”

“Stop it!” My mother shouted; voice short.

Lars's girlfriend left the picture a month ago. I could only assume he'd want to move in on Ingrid now that the door was open.

“I'm not interested in Ingrid,” Lars said. “Promise. I will steer clear. I am only going because I follow the same orders you do. Anyhow, please tell me when you want to leave. We'll coordinate it.”

“It will be a few days,” I said. “But there will be all the bullshit gatherings ahead of time. Maybe we can skip them?”

Lars and I both looked at Mamma for an out.

“That’s unkind. You both know better. ”

“I’ll find Pappa,” Lars said. “Are you ready to go out?”

“Just give me a few, and I will be.”

He left, and Mamma shook her head. “Keir, I love you, but you cannot hide from that girl.”

“I tore her heart out,” I said. “She hates me—understandably—and I’m not ready to deal with all of that. I’m only going to cause her more grief.”

“Have you thought of apologising?”

“What for? She’s moved on. She doesn’t care what I have to say, Mamma. She shouldn’t.”

“You still love her.”

“I will probably always love her. She hates me. She hasn’t so much as texted me since I ran off.”

“But have you tried Keir? I’ve never heard her say an angry word about you. Cici and Betty have never said anything and are closer than ever.”

“Then she didn’t love me.”

“I don’t believe any of that, Keir. That’s bullshit. I think you were madly in love with her? I think she was very in love with you. And I think something frightened you, but you’ll regret it if you don’t apologise. Because if you love her, you owe her that.”

I growled, “Fuck my life!”

“What happened? Can you even be honest?”

I took a deep breath. “I got scared. It was a combination of things. She told me if I wasn’t interested in marriage and kids someday, it didn’t matter how much she loved me.”

“That’s a fair statement. Did she give you a timeframe?”

“She doesn’t want me leaving again. She didn’t say I had to marry her or anything like that—not like tomorrow— I expressed doubt I’d ever be up to it, and I wasn’t willing to give up on work.”

“First, you never have to ‘give up’ on work. Second, sweetheart, that’s ridiculous. I think you want to be happy someday. Happiness for you will include marriage and children—with the right person. I don’t know if that person is Ingrid. Maybe it is? You are the only one who can say if that is true. But would it hurt to make things right with her and see how it goes? ”

“I don’t think I could ever love anyone enough to risk having children with them. And when her sister almost died... it hammered that home.”

Mamma looked down and nodded. She took a moment to compose her thoughts. I waited for her to speak.

“I know that was hard for you, Keir. Watching me go through hell wasn’t easy. I am sorry that so much of your childhood was painful.”

“You did a wonderful job trying to keep us safe, Mamma.”

“It about killed me, but I’d do it all the same every time. I am... I don’t want you to give up on the beauty of having a family just because losing Daddy was so hard. You cannot live in fear of that.”

“Her mother died giving birth to her.”

“So, this is just a worry about losing Ingrid?”

“No, it’s more than that,” I sighed.

She cocked her head. “What do you mean?”

“Do you regret marrying Dad and having us? Would your life have been less painful if you’d just married Peder?”

“First of all, Peder was taken, and we weren’t interested in one another until well after your father died,” Mamma said. “There was never anyone but your father. I turned someone down who wasn’t right for me. I would have rather been alone than with the wrong person.”

“So, then you agree marriage isn’t the end-all-be-all.”

“Keir, let me finish. I don’t regret giving over to your father and loving him completely until his last day. It was painful in the end, but the beginning was beautiful. And without you all, I’d be incomplete. I don’t look at it as an ugly thing. I look at it this way. I am lucky to have two great loves in my life. I felt loved by your father the way I only thought existed in movies. I didn’t think I could be adored and loved as he loved me. I want that for you. I don’t want you to fear that.”

She was in tears. Peder and Lars entered the kitchen to see Mamma wiping her eyes on the kitchen roll. I felt terrible.

Peder, confused, asked, “What is wrong?”

He looked at me, not my mother.

“I was explaining to Keir that not loving someone because there is a minute possibility he could lose her is irrational. I told him that if he loves someone, it is better to love and lose them in that small chance because his life would be incomplete.”

Mamma took my face in her hands. “You deserve to be happy. I deserved to be happy. I wanted you all. I am grateful for that life with your father—if only for far too short a time.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Go sail. I need a minute. And don’t make the biggest mistake of your life, Keir. Just follow orders.”

Unavoidable

INGRID

I sat with Alexandra as we reviewed a list of royal attendees and their sleeping accommodations. We had a palace and a castle worth of people to house. While Celeste may have been a monster to us, she was well-liked among people who never had to be told that despite their D-cups at twelve, they weren't permitted a bra because "it gives men ideas" or that "no man will want a girl who eats bread in public." People wouldn't speak to the scars on my wrists or the beating I endured the day I started my period at age eleven and dared use the tampon Astrid gave me. They couldn't know about all the times she slapped Alexandra across the face for daring to speak out of turn or knocked Astrid down for standing up for us. It was as if Celeste was two people—the kind old lady people knew and the abusive tyrant controlling us.

Alexandra quietly declared this would be our chance to celebrate. We'd call our afterparty a "celebration of life," but it would be a celebration of death. We were finally liberated. It was so sweet for Alexandra, who had been worried for years that something terrible might happen to the girls at Celeste's hands. Even after she left our house, her existence hung over us. This was a sweet relief .

Royal funerals were fussy and demanding. Alex was trying to plan a royal death celebration, and I was her only lackey. Odette was off in la-la-land about something, and Astrid was pregnant in her "oh, isn't life beautiful" phase—one I'd never seen coming. Everyone expected me to be happy, too, since our jailer was now in the sod. And while I was, I also resented that I'd given up a surefire placing in the top ten at a world-class event.

“Here’s a list of Heads of Government,” Alexandra said. “I’ve made decisions about where to put them.”

“I will add them to the spreadsheet,” my sister’s personal secretary said, taking the paper with Alexandra’s scribbles. “The UK and Norway are coming here the day before. They will miss the luncheon but make the royal attendees dinner.”

The UK and Norway . That struck fear in my heart. I knew Cici wasn’t coming. She couldn’t.

I glanced down at my list of attendees to assign to rooms at the castle in the countryside where Celeste expired. I flipped to a list of names for the palace, listed by designation. On the back of the page, under “United Kingdom”, was “The Duke of Inverness.”

“Fuck!” I declared, interrupting Alexandra.

“Ingrid!”

“I’m sorry, but why is The Duke of Inverness coming?”

“Queen Natalie chose him. I understand she is abroad, and the Prince of Wales is on a tour of New Zealand. Someone had to come.”

“But Keir?” I winced.

“You will be seeing him off and on for the rest of your life,” Alexandra said. “It will be fine. You must need to learn to live with it.”

I checked the other names. Lars would represent Norway, and Edina would come from Denmark. I pictured a terrible world in which Lars hit on me and got offended

when I turned him down. Even worse, I imagined getting drunk and sleeping with him to get back at his brother. Then, I thought about Keir sleeping with Edina—or anyone, really. My life would be over. Tears welled.

“I need a minute.”

“Take all the time you need. I’ve got this,” Alexandra said.

I fled from her office, down the hall, and past Rick and his mother, Karolina. They managed the children like a barn hand might manage horses coming into the stables for the evening.

“Ingy, are you okay?” Rick called after me.

“Nope!” I called back.

I rushed to my room to let it all out. I pulled the curtains on my canopy bed tight as I had done in childhood when I needed to feel safe. I wished Odette was here. The door opened.

“Ingrid... come outside.” Rick’s voice rang out. “The kids could use some time with you.”

“I just need a minute. I’m a mess.”

“That’s okay. I have a baby here who might cheer you up.”

I poked my head out to see Manon crawling towards me, her blonde curls framing her face like a halo. She was adorable. When she reached the bed, she pulled up on the bed frame. She blew a raspberry to melt my heart.

I hopped down, picked her up, and held her on my hip. Taking in that sweet baby smell, I kissed her head. She was everything I needed.

“See, you need to come out with us. It’s a beautiful day. You can play with the kids in the creek.”

I relented. Karolina sat in the back garden, watching Linny ride laps on her bike. Odette gave all the bigger kids a new bike. My favourite was Chris on the balance bike. He would ride everywhere with no pedals at an alarming speed.

“What is bothering you?” Rick asked as we sat on a bench by the creek banks that passed through the garden.

“Keir is coming, and I just... I haven’t spoken with him since the day. I’m not ready to see him.”

“Oh,” Rick said. “Well, you’ll see him forever. It will be fine. And maybe you two can... talk.”

I glared.

“What? You still loved him when we last had a brotherly-sisterly heart-to-heart.”

Chris jumped in the creek, now wet head-to-toe. I smiled.

“See, you’re thinking about him.”

“No, Rick,” I laughed. “I’m watching the little man in the creek. We used to go out there. ”

“I remembered. When I first met you, you were trying to splash Odette.”

“I remember thinking you were an asshole. A handsome asshole.”

Rick snickered. “You thought I was handsome?”

“I was twelve and knew no men. Literally, anyone qualified as ‘handsome’.”

“I cannot believe you are so grown, Ingrid. I miss you when you’re gone, and I also forget you’re a grown woman.”

“Well, I have been for a while.”

“I know. It goes by so fast.” He bounced Manon on his lap. “And with babies, it is gone in a flash. I try not to think about this being our last.”

“Did you hope for more?” I asked.

“Nah. I didn’t. I closed that door. Alexandra took the hysterectomy hard. I don’t know if that was a lack of choice or because she wanted more.”

“Lack of choice can drive you mad. We never had it, and it can be traumatising. She didn’t have it until she was married to you, Rick. Things are so different for us.”

We watched Chris kick water at Kari. She was giggling so hard she fell over.

“If I’d done any of this, Celeste would have beaten me. And I did, but if she’d found out?—”

“I’m sorry for that,” Rick said. “You deserved so much better. But I am pretty sure that’s why you’ll make a wonderful mother someday. It’s what makes Alexandra so fiercely protective of this little pack of dogs.”

I smiled because it was true.

“I dunno. I hope I will be. It’s not all I want, and maybe I shouldn’t even bother wanting it.”

“To be a parent?”

“I’m still so young,” I sighed.

“You’re the same age Lex was when she had Linny. It’s okay to want something. It doesn’t mean you want something tomorrow. In my experience, knowing what you want is the most important bit. The key is to be honest about it, Ingy,” Rick said. “Because when you aren’t honest... everything falls apart. I almost lost Lex over it. I wished I’d been honest with her from the beginning.”

“Hindsight is 20-20.”

“It is.”

Manon fussed in Rick’s lap, reaching her arms out for me. “Maaaa.”

She referred to all of us as “Ma” or “Mama,” driving Alex mad.

“Rid-Rid,” I laughed. “Not Mama.”

“Ma-Ma.”

“It’d be nice if you ever said ‘Pappa’, Manon. It’s not like I spend every waking hour with you or anything,” Rick said.

I took the child in my arms, holding her against me. Taking in the way her fat legs

dangled—rolls and all—from my lap and her giggles filled the quiet garden, I was momentarily satisfied. I was grounded like a tree with strong roots. Then, I looked away and realised I couldn't stay here forever. I knew what I wanted.

“I shouldn't let anyone take that away from me,” I explained. “I get to live the life I know I want.”

“You do. And no one should. But, Ingrid, don't get in your own way, either,” Rick said. “Take it from the king of getting in my own way.”

The One

KEIR

I'd pictured the day I saw Ingrid again happening at a barbecue Cici and Isak would host—probably to celebrate that they were pregnant or maybe a baby's first birthday. I'd have to share air with Ingrid. She'd spot me, nod, and maybe we'd briefly chat. I pictured her in summer clothes—perhaps because I most wanted to remember her that way—with wavy sun-kissed care in a short dress. She'd be carefree and relaxed. She'd be off-limits—with someone else. And while I could lie and tell myself that she was perhaps with dozens of men while I was away, it didn't matter.

One, I didn't care who she was with while I wasn't around. We weren't together. I didn't own her. I'd have her all the same, even with a body count in the hundreds. Two, I'd already gone down that rabbit hole from my mother's couch yesterday while scrolling gossip blogs. The only times Ingrid came up were odd weekends when she came to London with Leah and Astrid or in the pages of Horse and Hound or The Chronicle of the Horse, where she was seemingly everywhere. If aircraft consumed my entire life while I was gone, she'd thrown herself entirely into riding and becoming an even better athlete.

The results of that last bit were altogether too precise. Her ass could not have looked better—even in mourning gear. Our first meeting post-breakup was anything but a kind glance across a room. Instead, Ingrid ignored me. She didn't make eye contact and kept to her nieces and nephews exclusively. She looked elegant, composed, and controlled. In contrast, I didn't have my shit together.

I wanted to hate her—to want her less. Instead, she looked more tempting than I remembered. She was gorgeous. Her laugh—spent on her nieces and nephews—was still lovely. I still loved this woman. There wasn't a doubt in my mind.

“You do need to say hello,” Betty said, pulling on my arm. “You’re being impolite.”

Betty jumped on a plane three days ago to help Ingrid. She did so without telling anyone—even me—so when I arrived, she was there.

“You shouldn’t tell me about social decorum when you showed up unannounced. How the fuck did you get a room so late?”

“I’m staying with Ingrid,” Betty said.

“We’re all staying here,” I said.

“No. In Ingrid’s room. There was no room. So, I’m staying with her. I’m going back to her. I don’t need your salty attitude.”

Betty left. Lars snickered.

“What is so funny?” I asked. “Is my pain funny?”

“No. I mean, a little? Someone from our household is in bed with your ex. It’s just the wrong one of us,” Lars said.

I pretended to pull back and throw a punch. Lars nearly hit the floor.

“Woah, mate. I swear, I’m not going to. It’s a bloody funeral.”

“Knowing our past, I require clarity, Keir.”

I patted him on the back.

“For the record, Keir, you should at least say hello. The vibes are off.”

“I don’t think I can say anything to her without a bout of verbal diarrhoea, Lars.”

“You’re going to be here for two days. That’s a hell of a long time.”

“She is welcome to approach me.”

“That would never happen,” Lars said. “She isn’t going to chase you. Nor would you want her to. That’s not your thing. ”

He was right. I would have felt it was needy. I wanted her to play hard to get. That ground my gears. It’s what started this whole thing. I contemplated how I could approach her and restrain myself. I didn’t know how to say a mere “hello” to a woman I still knew was The One and The Only. It was Ingrid, or there was no one. I was still mulling it over when I felt something tugging on the leg of my trousers.

Looking down, I spotted a baby. It had to be the youngest Deschamps girl.

“Manon, have you gotten loose?” I asked, picking her up. “Did you break out of jail?”

“Did she just get loose? Do you have four kids and not care if you lose one?” Lars joked in Norsk.

“I should go return her, right?” I asked Lars.

Lars nodded. “You’re obligated.”

Despite our protests and wise manoeuvring, I must talk to Ingrid. I approached the child on my hip, drooling and babbling away. She looked at me as if she wanted anything but this.

“This little bundle found me,” I said. “I figured I should return her to you promptly if you were looking for her.”

“She was with Rick,” Ingrid said. “He must have put her down, and she ran off. I don’t know where he is.”

“Hey!” Linny shouted, annoyed. “Aren’t you Aunt Rid-Rid’s boyfriend?”

I stared—deer in the headlights—for a moment.

“We are just friends,” Ingrid said.

The kiss of death .

“Oh,” Linny pulled a face and skipped off.

“She’s... apologies,” Ingrid said. “Give me the baby.”

“She’s fine. I can find Rick and help you out. You’ve got your hands full.”

“It’s not trouble?—”

“No, it’s not. I don’t care. I can tote her for a bit if it helps,” I insisted.

“You don’t like children,” Ingrid said, her words biting.

I chuckled nervously. “I probably earned that one, Ingrid, but... that’s untrue. ”

“Oh, that’s right,” she said in surprisingly good Norsk. “It’s not that you don’t like children. It’s that you don’t want to have them. Especially with women who lay their entire heart out before them.”

“You’ve been learning Norwegian in your spare time?” I changed the subject rather than explode into a defence of why none was true.

“I have been bored. My Danish is better, too.”

“Brilliant. You put us all to shame,” I said.

“I don’t need your judgement or your praise,” Ingrid said, irresistibly setting her jaw.

“I am not judging you. I’m... Ingrid, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t need your apologies. You’re not getting back in. You don’t deserve me,” she said in very terse Norwegian.

Only Ingrid would be so petty to learn the word deserve in Norsk in preparation for a time she may use it to stab me in the heart. I’d have found that insufferable if I hadn’t thought it was hot.

“I... I... I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t disagree with you. But I wish you would give me even five minutes, Ingrid.”

“So, you can break my heart in this room again?” She said it in French. She was hurt—not vindictive.

“Oh, there you are!”

Rick arrived. He was a terrible actor. This was a set-up. He’d sent Manon

deliberately.

“She just came out of nowhere,” I said, returning the child. “I was about to find you.”

“Yes, he wasn’t staying,” Ingrid glared at me.

“Well, it’s alright. Come on, Manon. Let’s go find Mama.”

He left. I shook my head. “He parent-trapped us.”

“What?”

“He tried to get us back together after some time using an adorable child. Fucking hell. That is... impressive.”

Ingrid snickered. “He’s such a ridiculous sap.”

“I cannot blame him,” I said. “I only thought he wanted to kill me. That was the last word from my aunt on the matter.”

“He wants me to be happy,” Ingrid said. “As long as you didn’t come here to make me cry, you’re safe.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I don’t ever want to do that again.”

I resisted the impulse to run my hand through her silky strands. I so badly wanted to touch her—to pull her close and smell her floral, bright scent. Standing this close brought all those feelings back in a way they never had with any other ex. She was still The One.

Ingrid sensed it. Her face softened momentarily, her brow relaxed, and her lips curled

almost into a smile. Then, she returned to her uptight, strict persona.

“We can coexist,” Ingrid said.

“Ingrid, I don’t want to coexist,” I said. “I want... can we just talk for a moment?”

“No,” Ingrid said. “We’ve said enough. I won’t have you killed, okay? Nor strung up by your balls. Good?”

“I would like?—”

“I need to go deal with Chris before he knocks the dessert table over,” Ingrid said, chasing after her nephew.

“You need to grovel more than that.”

Betty approached.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Wait her out. She’s stubborn, brother. But she’s also my best friend. She’s still in love with you. It’s what makes everything so fucking confusing for me.”

“She’s been learning Norwegian.”

“We only speak to her in Norsk, she insists. I think secretly, she thought she’d privately eviscerate you in it.”

Only someone as clever as Ingrid perfected her language skills to spite her ex. People didn’t waste energy like that on people they didn’t care about.

“I appreciate that level of dedication.”

“Just don’t fuck it up. Try to be your most charming self. Lars and I will try to help you. I cannot promise we will be successful. But when it works, you owe me forever,” Betty said.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and squeezed her tight. “Betty, I will owe you gladly if I can win her back.”

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:26 am

Celebration of Death

INGRID

“O h my God, fuck her for that!”

Astrid’s voice boomed through the stone walls of the crypt under the chapel at our country house. I followed her voice until I found her there with Alexandra. They were sitting on the floor laughing. I didn’t know what this was about.

“What is going on?” I asked. “Odie and I have been looking for you all day.”

“Sit, sit,” Alexandra said, clearly drunk. “Drink with me. It’s a Celebration of Death, darling!”

She held out a bottle of whisky.

“This is costly stuff. Where did you get it?” Astrid asked, passing it to me.

“Her Majesty Queen Natalie. Keir’s auntie,” Alexandra said. “Good stuff. I stole it before Rick and his brother pilfered it.”

I took a big swig. “She has good taste and an absolutely awful nephew.”

“Oh, fucking stop it! You love that man!”

“I do not, Asti!”

“You two have been eye-fucking all night. I’m stone-cold sober, and it’s painful to watch.”

“I am not interested,” I said. “I am focused on returning to Kentucky to ride in the Three-Day. Even from the grave, Celeste may have sunk me as an Olympic hopeful. I am not interested in annoying princes.”

“Fuck her,” Alexandra said. “Live your life. Fuck all the men—out of spite. I hope that every time I have non-procreative sex from this point forward, it stabs her in hell or something.”

“Alexandra!” Odette groaned. “She was awful, but that’s... more awful.”

“Quote me to The Pope. I could give a fuck,” Alexandra said. The woman was gone .

Odette took a swig and coughed. “Bless you, but I cannot manage that garbage.”

I snickered. “You’re such a sweetheart, Odette. Why can’t I be more like you?”

“Because you’re delightfully devilish,” Alexandra said. “The one who always tells us what she means.”

“Except right now,” Astrid said. “Because she’s not even honest with herself.”

“Excuse me, bitch?” I giggled, taking another big pull from the bottle.

“You’re obsessed with him.”

“I’m dick-blind. That’s not the same thing as being obsessed. And it’s not a reason to fuck him again. It’s not a good reason to let him break my heart again, either.”

“Can we stop talking like this?” Odette asked. “Around the dead!”

“What are they going to do to us?” I asked.

“Someone could... report us.”

“To whom? The Queen?” Astrid asked.

She looked at Alexandra. They both burst into giggles.

“I was dick-blind once,” Astrid said.

“And then what?” Odette asked.

“Well, presently, I get this thing called lightning crotch, and that’s a result of it persisting. ”

“It’s a real thing!” Alexandra said. “The baby is sitting on a nerve. It’s so bad. Pregnancy is awful. I hated it.”

“And did it four times ?” I said.

“I have four beautiful babies to show for it. I wouldn’t change it, darling. I’m still dick-blind. I want to kill Rick half the time but damn if I don’t always let it go.”

“Parker can do no wrong as long as he properly grovels and goes down on me endlessly,” Astrid said. “It’s true.”

“You all are terrible,” Odette said. “A woman died. She was a bad woman, but she died, and here we are talking about sex.”

“Good,” Alexandra said. “I have all sorts of hangups because of that bitch. Fuck her! I hope she rots in hell. I am happy she’s gone. No longer can I worry that she will do something to steal one of my babies from me.”

“You thought that?” Odette asked.

“She did that to our mother, Odie,” Alexandra said. “Rick and I were always prepared to call the authorities to put her on blast. I feel like I can breathe again—for the first time since Mamma was alive. I can only hope our children never feel like that.”

“They won’t,” Astrid said. “Our daughters will be secure in their self-worth.”

“We don’t have to work on that with Linnea,” I giggled. “She got the memo.”

Odette snickered.

“We’re having a little girl,” Astrid said. “I know. She’s a girl. And I’m excited and terrified.”

“That’s thrilling!” Odette said.

“Beautiful,” I agreed.

“Parker is so excited,” Astrid said. He has a list of names a mile long. There are so many scientists, so little time.”

“That’s adorable,” I said.

“What will we tell our daughters?” Astrid asked. “About all of this? Because this was horrendous. We survived. I don’t want to scare our girls, but I want to be honest with them. Because I’m still not completely okay—I never will be. ”

“Be the parent you wanted and needed,” Odette said. “And be honest. See them and let them feel seen. That’s all kids need.”

“But we have more responsibility with the girls,” Alexandra said. “Because they are most at-risk in this goddamn fishbowl.”

“We raise them to raise hell,” I said. “And tell them to choose wisely. And to never sit down because the patriarchy said they should smile more.”

“Damn straight!” Astrid said.

“To raising our daughters to raise hell!” Alexandra said, raising the bottle she’d taken from my hands.

“To that,” I said, pretending to raise a glass.

“She never took our shine completely,” Odette said. “We thrived despite her—not because of her. And let’s never forget that. We love each other hard and always show up for each other. Let’s teach our girls to do that. Well, hopefully, if I ever have one.”

“You will, God willing,” Alexandra insisted. “You’re going to be a great mom to a daughter someday.”

“Thanks,” Odette said.

I let out an involuntary depressed sigh.

“Tell him!” Astrid said.

“What?” Alexandra asked.

“Ingrid, tell him. Tell him you love him.”

“Yes, tell him already! Have you even spoken to him?” Odette asked.

I drank more of the bottle than I wished I had, putting it back down on the cobblestone floor with a bit of a clatter. I caught it, eventually.

“Shit, sorry. Uh... I did talk to him—not by choice. Rick released Manon into the wild, so we’d be forced to talk.”

“Cheeky bastard,” Astrid giggled.

“Indeed. He came over and apologised, but I just dressed him down in Norwegian.”

“Why?” Alexandra asked.

“Because she had a plan,” Odette said. “A petty plan in which she learned Norsk properly just to sling barbs at him. Who does that if they aren’t invested in someone?”

“Who has time?” Alexandra asked.

“I’m lonely,” I sighed. “I haven’t... I cannot just move on. It’s depressing.”

“It’s not. It’s because you love him. Like Astrid once told me, the man is an asshole, but he’s your asshole. He loves you,” Alexandra said.

“I don’t think that was the exact quote about Rick, but sure. It fits. She’s right. You still love him. He’s right here. Just tell him he hurt you; you need to see changes and love him. You’ll regret not giving him another chance,” Astrid said.

“I cannot risk him breaking my heart again.”

“If you don’t risk it, sweetheart, you’ll never know,” Odette said. “The heart is more resilient than you believe. And you’re stronger than you think. We all are. If Celeste couldn’t bring us down, no one could. But living alone forever? Is that what you want?”

“I want happiness, someone to come home to, and kids. I am not sure if I can ever trust him again.”

“Life is hard. You can’t love if you don’t risk it all,” Astrid said. “But you’ve never shied from danger, kid.”

She was right.

No Escape

KEIR

“S he wants to go to Kentucky, Keir,” Betty said.

“Who?”

“The woman you’ve been staring at all night,” Lars said. “Ingrid. She wants to go to Kentucky to compete.”

“With Cici?” I asked. “She should go.”

“She has very little time. If only she knew a pilot with a jet that could get her there...” Betty said.

“Betty, the last thing either of us want is to be trapped in the thing over the Atlantic when she’s not even speaking to me.”

“Maybe that’s what you need to get the move on,” Betty said.

“Betty—”

Ingrid entered the room, followed by her sisters. They’d disappeared somewhere while the rest of us sat around trying to talk politely about the monster who imprisoned the four of them. The idea of it made me sick. I couldn’t even drink to forget how it all made me feel, either. I had to fly back to Norway in the morning. I

couldn't very well get pissed. I was being the good boy.

"Ingy!" Betty said, waving her arms at Ingrid.

"Are you trying to land Air Force One?" Ingrid asked, walking up .

"We're going to Kentucky tomorrow," Betty said.

"Betty, there's a lot that needs to happen. Alex hasn't even told me if she will pay for the flight."

"We have a jet ready," Betty said.

"Indeed," Lars said. "We're set."

"Are we?" I asked.

"Okay. Uh... when do we leave?" Ingrid perked up.

Betty was right. All she wanted was to compete. They were throwing me a bone rather than throwing me under the bus.

Lars and Betty looked in my direction.

"I need eight hours," I said. "And to file a flight plan. I can do that. But you have to let me do that, Betty."

"Oh, no, no," Ingrid's face fell. "I didn't think... no. This is?—"

She began to stalk off.

“Get your woman!” Betty said. “Are you going to let it just end?”

“Fuck,” I groaned. I hopped up, chasing her down the hallway. I grabbed her arm and pulled her towards me.

“Ingrid, please... please, can we call a truce?”

“Why? By trapping me in a plane. For what? What if the plane like... went down or...”

“I would die. My sister would die. Lars would die. And you would die. So, would that be the plan? Killing three people that I love?”

She looked like she was fighting tears. She said quietly, “Two people and me,”

“Three people,” I said. “Three people, including you, Velcro.”

She softened.

“I love you, Ingrid. I am sorry I was such a knob. I know I broke your heart. I never meant... I never should have said what I said. Because it’s... it’s not true?”

“Rid-Rid! Can I have a lolly?” Christophe interrupted us.

“Give me a moment, darling,” Ingrid answered. “Or go find your Papa.”

“But I can’t find Papa!”

“Find your Mama.”

“She won’t give me a lolly!”

I knelt. “I promise I will scour the land to find you a lolly if you just give me a few minutes to talk to your aunt.”

He glared, looking very much like his mother, then left.

“Keir, you don’t have to fly me to America?—”

“You love a grand gesture, Ingrid.”

She rolled her eyes. “Stop being charming.”

It was working.

“Was this your whole idea?”

“I am pretty sure my aunt and your brother-in-law somehow conspired. Betty masterminded the transportation plans against my will,” I said. “Well, my will originally. I would love to transport you now if you trust me not to kill you.”

She looked down and let out a long sigh.

“I know it may take ages to get back in your good graces, but Ingrid, I want to. I have missed you every day since our last meeting. I love you.”

“Fine. You can fly me to Kentucky,” Ingrid said. But mind yourself. This is no funny business. I’m not playing copilot. I’m sleeping because I must perform when I get there.”

“You do your job. I do mine, princess. Got it,” I said.

This wasn’t over—it was just beginning. I had an in, and I wasn’t about to lose it.

Betty may be the best schemer known to man.

All Booked Up

INGRID

T ravelling to America with him at the controls of his private plane wasn't how I anticipated starting my first Kentucky Three Day. It was the crown jewel of the American eventing season, and I could not refuse. I was supposed to ride my second horse, Bea. Cici kept her fit while I was gone. Everyone pulled for me. So, Keir or not, I sucked it up and proceeded.

Lars wasn't cleared to fly. His Uncle called him to attend a remembrance ceremony for something. King Olav and Queen Kiersten already arrived to see Cecilia compete. So, Keir, Betty, and I headed to America together. Betty and Keir crewed the plane while I slept all the way there. And, somehow, we made it. It was late when we arrived, but we made it to the hotel in Lexington.

Betty retreated to her hotel room. I was about to do the same—hoping to just sleep through until the early morning hours when I could go get my horse and do a warm-up. Once I was back at the barn, I'd feel much better. However, as soon as I planned to leave Keir at the check-in desk, I was confronted with another problem. I wasn't sure if he was waiting for me to thank him so he could go or was expecting much more.

“You're relieved,” I said. “Thank you for your service, Lieutenant.”

“You know I haven't been a Lieutenant in years, darling,” Keir said. “But you're welcome.”

“Go on. Can’t you just… fly back?”

“I’m grounded,” Keir said. “I’m just waiting to get a room.”

The desk attendant returned. “Sir, we truly do not have a single room. Everything from Louisville to Cincinnati is booked.”

“I have no idea what any of that means,” Keir said. “But I am assuming that is not good?”

“It’s a no-go,” she winced.

“You can just fly back,” I said.

“No, Ingrid. I legally cannot. I just flew for twelve hours between flight and prep. The clock is up. I’m done. Legally, I’d risk my licence—not to mention my life.”

Fuck . I’d put him in this pickle. He hadn’t orchestrated being stranded in Kentucky during its busiest two weeks of the year. He’d done this for me—out of love. I may not have wanted to jump back into bed with him, but I didn’t want to leave him sleeping on a bench in the cold, either.

“Can I get another room key?” I asked the desk attendant.

“Sure,” she agreed. “You’re 544?”

I nodded.

She clicked the keys and slid me a second room key. “Here you are, ma’am.”

“Thanks,” I said, handing the car to Keir.

I turned, expecting he would follow me. Instead, he didn't.

"Are you daft?" I asked. "It's a key to my room. If you want to sleep somewhere, you have to follow me. We're still stuck together, Keir."

"You're not going to kill me?"

"You just saved my ass, so no," I said. "Come on!"

He trotted after me. We climbed on the lift together.

"I will be on my best behaviour," Keir promised. "I am too knackered to do anything anyhow."

"Is flying really that exhausting?"

"Over the Atlantic? It's so boring," Keir said. "But you get body sore. It's a real thing. "

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologising? I'd do it a dozen more times if you'd talk to me like I existed, Ingrid."

I was wounded, fighting tears. I could have written it off as him just trying to get into my pants again. I could have said he was just being selfish, but any selfish man wouldn't take up his holiday time chasing a princess across an ocean to a horse show. That wasn't a thing. It was like he said—he loved me.

The room was a welcome relief. I changed and tucked into bed. Keir tried to throw himself onto the sofa in the corner. It was ridiculous.

“You can sleep in the bed,” I said. “Just mind yourself. You’ll be miserable over there.”

“I’m good.”

“You don’t look it.”

“Ingrid, if I go over there, I’m just going to be honest with you... you’re will weasel your way into my arms overnight through some annoying magic.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“And I’m going to be hard as a rock—again, whether I want to be or not—and freak you out. Because even if I am exhausted, I cannot quit you, Ingrid.”

Fuck . Now, I couldn’t stop thinking about his cock. I was exhausted, emotionally fried, and frightened about competing. Still, I wanted him inside me.

“So, I’m gonna suffer on this couch. It beats sleeping rough out there or in many places I had to sleep in the past eight months.”

“Fine, suit yourself,” I said, trying to beat down the urge to throw myself at him.

I flicked off the light and lay there in silence. I thought about what it might be like to wake up next to him in the morning—how it would feel to touch him again and to have him do everything to me. I was too awake and too horny to rest. I contemplated getting out of bed, thinking I could run to the bathroom to shower and get myself off. It would work.

“Ingrid?”

I stopped.

“I am going to die over here,” Keir said. “I talk a big game, but this is the world’s most uncomfortable couch. If I promise to behave, can I please sleep in the bed? I could be gone before you even wake?—”

“Just come to bed,” I said. “Really. It’s fine. I trust you.”

Whether I really trusted him was immaterial. The image of Keir tempted me as he climbed into the bed. He lay a foot away from me, looking up at the ceiling just as I was.

“This is so fucking awkward,” Keir said.

I giggled. “So awkward. Betty couldn’t have expected this to happen. Of course, she’s proud of herself.”

“She really is. I must hand it to her. It’s more of a grand gesture than I ever imagined. And then only one bed? It’s like a movie.”

I smiled and looked over at him. “What did you imagine then?”

“I thought about writing you a letter,” Keir said. “I wrote and rewrote it hundreds of times, but I could never get it quite right. I also considered trying to engineer a sailing holiday where you ended up on my sailboat.”

“You just like shagging me on boats.”

“Anyone would like shagging you on boats.”

I snickered.

“There wasn’t a perfect way. I spent eight months thinking about you—eight months torturing myself and wondering what I could do to fix it,” Keir admitted.

He met my glance. I wanted to say something, but there was nothing to say. I reached for his hand and squeezed it. He turned. Even in the dark, his eyes showed so much love for me.

“I fucked up. I only wanted to promise you what I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt. The thought of losing you made me think to love you and to risk it all for kids... if you died, I’d end it all. I couldn’t do it without you.”

“And what’s changed?” I asked.

“I was without you for eight months, and it wasn’t better than with you. I dunno. I thought it would feel freeing and better, but I immediately regretted it. And I couldn’t say anything to you about it because.... I wasn’t around. ”

“I didn’t want you to stay back,” I said. “Of course I did. But I didn’t expect you to, Keir. I just wanted to discuss what would happen after we survived that six months. And you... you broke my heart. You couldn’t... wouldn’t even talk about it.”

“I wanted to be honest with you because I loved you—I do—even more, Ingrid. The minute I saw you again... I was hit with this same feeling. It’s you, or it’s no one.”

His words cut me to the core. It was me or no one .

“But it won’t work unless?—”

“I want you. I want a life with you, Ingrid—the whole thing. I’d be miserable if I didn’t try, okay? I’m ready when you’re ready. I will do what you want me to do. Take a desk job... whatever you want.”

“I don’t want you to give everything up for me,” I said.

“I won’t. I have about a year left. I will stay stationed at Marham and talk to my aunt about that—and we’ll have a nice little life in Norfolk until we figure out what is next. You can have your horses. I will play groom as much as I need.”

Tears welled.

“I will do whatever I need to earn your trust, Ingrid. Please.”

I crawled across the bed, landing in his arms. Resting my head on his chest, I let out the tears I’d been holding in for longer than even I knew. I let them flow. I didn’t have words. I was broken. I was happy. I was exhausted. I was in love. I was everything. There were no words for everything all at once. Keir held me close. He said nothing as he rubbed my back and let me get it all out.

Finally, I pulled back and looked at him.

“I want happiness. I deserve happiness. If you can promise more of that than what we’ve been through, I will give you a chance.”

“I love you, Ingrid. I’d give you everything—a house, kids, fifteen dogs, a thousand horses.”

I snickered. “A thousand horses? Really. That’s too much. Even for me.”

“I don’t care. Whatever brings you happiness. I am sorry I suggested you were simple for wanting any of it.”

“But do you want it? Or are you just trying to make me happy? Because making me happy won’t solve your problems if you aren’t. ”

“ You make me happy. I want us again. I want to wake up with you next to me, sketching something. I want to lounge in bed with you all day and follow you wherever you want. Ingrid, it’s you. It’s just you. Only you.”

“You still owe me almost a million I-love-yous,” I said.

“I will make up for it in earnest if you’d let me.”

I brushed his cheek, realising I wasn’t the only one who’d shed a tear. Keir pulled me into a kiss, running his fingers through my hair. My lips parted. Our tongues tangled, both of us hungry to quench this burning feeling. I had never wanted anything more than the security of knowing he was mine—forever—and that he wanted me to be happy. It was everything

He pressed me back against the bed and then stopped.

“I don’t want to do this right now,” Keir said. “Not while we’re both exhausted. Not before you have time to think it through and?—”

“Keir, I want this,” I said. “If you’re too tired, that’s fine, but... I’m not. I have thought it through, and this is all I want.”

All I Ever Wanted

KEIR

“This is all I want,” Ingrid said.

I lingered over her, debating my next move. She was so warm, sweet, and tender. We’d gone from sparring at worst to tolerating one another at best, then back to this place where she was safe and secure in my arms. She looked up at me like I was the only person left on the planet who mattered. And, in my eyes, that was true.

“I don’t want it to be a grave disappointment,” I said. “I’m fucking knackered, Ingrid.”

“Oh, it won’t be. And if it is, then we’ll have to keep trying.” She bit her lip. “Unless you don’t want to?”

“I’m not the type to give up that easily,” I said.

I slid my hand down to her breasts as I kissed her neck. She felt exactly as I remembered. I’d missed the way her hips curved towards me and how she panted every time I barely even stroked her nipple. I could have blown on it, and she would have reacted the same.

She pushed me back slightly. “I’m... I need to get naked.”

“Yeah, I think you do,” I laughed. “I won’t stop you.”

We both disrobed, now lying naked and wrapped up together. I decided I'd do anything to make her happy—or happiest. I kissed down Ingrid's body to her pussy. I parted her legs and pulled her towards me. Throwing her legs over my shoulders, I dug in, licking her wet, ready clit.

Ingrid arched her back and let out a long, low moan.

“Good girl,” I said.

“I'm going to be loud. I can't control it.”

I stopped and looked up, rubbing her clit with my fingers.

“Remember when you recorded yourself getting off and sent it to me?”

“Yes,” Ingrid said. “As I recall, I was drunk, horny, and in Ireland.”

“Correct,” I said. “That may have been responsible for getting me through most of that tour. So, your service is greatly appreciated.”

“You really kept it? And wanted to listen to it?”

“The sound of you cumming is like music, Ingrid. It is the best sound. Be loud. Please don't hold back.”

She nodded, fighting the urge to say more as I slid my fingers inside her. I returned, my face pressed against her pussy and my tongue doing most of the work. She tightened around my fingers and moaned louder. I wanted her to cum so hard that she was beyond words. I needed her to scream my name to prove she was real, not just a post-flight delusion I'd dreamed up.

“Oh, Keir, fuck,” she gasped.

By now, her wetness ran down my chin.

“Oh, God, Keir, I love you!” She screamed. “Fuck!”

I felt her clench, then pulse around my fingers. She shuddered and pulled on my hair. It was perfection. It was everything. We both needed it. I pulled back, taking in the sight of her breathing heavily there. Her breasts bobbed, and her nostrils flared. She was mine. She was all mine.

“What are you waiting for?” Ingrid asked. “Just fuck me.”

“I would,” I said. “But I wasn’t expecting this to happen. I wasn’t prepared.”

“Have you been with anyone else?” Ingrid asked.

“No,” I said. “That would have felt like cheating.”

“I can say the same. Just fuck me. I want to cum inside me. I want us both to leave her satisfied. I need that,” Ingrid moaned. “I have to compete tomorrow. Give me a good send-off.”

Who was I to refuse? I pulled her towards me by the hips. Ingrid stared with defiance as if daring me to do it. I slipped inside her, slowly at first. It felt incredible, as if I’d never left this ride. She gasped, shuddered, and moaned. With each pump, I brought her closer and closer. Fighting the urge to give over to my pleasure, I focused on giving her everything she deserved. I kissed her neck, feeling her moans grow louder and louder as they vibrated in my ear.

“Oh fuck, please, Keir. Let me cum,” Ingrid pleaded.

“Cum for me. Be a good girl and cum.” If she didn’t cum soon, I would disappoint us both.

She dug her nails into my back and screamed, “Je t’aime! Fuck! Keir! Oh my God!”

I laughed, “You want to throw more languages in there, or was it good enough.”

“It... was... good,” Ingrid panted. “Cum... I want you to.”

I wanted to as well.

“Does my pussy feel good?”

“It feels amazing, Ingrid. I couldn’t want more.”

I gave in to the sight of her there for my taking. She was so beautiful. I pumped one last time, ploughing my hips into hers, then panting as I stared down. It felt terrific to cum inside her. I hoped it wasn’t the last time I got to.

Still inside her, I stopped to appreciate this woman fully. Brushing her hair off her face, I said, “I love you, Ingrid Deschamps. I’d go to the moon and back and say a million I-love-yous if you’d be mine.”

“I love you, too,” Ingrid murmured. “Don’t leave me again. Keep it up like this, and I will be yours forever.”

We lay together in the aftermath, slowly drifting off to sleep. I hoped I’d wake to her in my arms, cuddled with me—warm, soft, sweet. Instead, I awoke alone. I panicked, sitting up. I felt a piece of paper next to me. I unfolded it and stared at it.

It was a picture of me—the one she’d drawn in Wales. How had she kept it all this

time?

Inside was a note, as well, on hotel stationery.

Mon cher ,

Sorry, I rushed out. I knew you needed sleep. I wanted you to have this after all this time. I've been carrying it in my boot bag since I finished the sketch. So, I was never really over you.

I love you. I know it more than ever. Please come when you can and help. I ride at 2 PM, but I'd welcome you anytime. I'm going to win, and I want to be there to celebrate it with you.

-I

Tears welled. She'd kept it all this time. If there were any doubts before, there were none now. I was off to the stables, knowing my life was back in one piece. The exciting bit of my life being a human test dummy was over. I knew there were growing pains to come. I'd miss that excitement. I also craved being there for Ingrid as she hit her milestones. My girlfriend was exceptional, brave, and strong. I didn't want to miss any more of this wild life with her. Aunt Natalie was right; I'd have always regretted it if I hadn't taken a chance now. I cashed in my horse show boyfriend chips and buckled up, knowing she'd always be mine.

My future wasn't in a cockpit. It was waking up with Ingrid every morning, watching her vault over fences taller than herself, and holding a horse in a stable aisle. It was cooking dinner with her—jumping in after she burned something. Everything I needed now was possible. I closed one chapter and began another.

Rolling into the stables, I found Ingrid with her chestnut mare, painting hooves.

“I’ve got this,” I said.

Ingrid turned, surprised. “Oh, you made it.”

I hugged and kissed her, trying to avoid the hoof black in her hand. “I wouldn’t miss your win for anything in the world.”

“Atta boy,” Cici laughed. “Put the man to work. She’s going to kill it, Keir. ”

“I know,” I said. “She’s going to do so beautifully. I’m so fucking proud of her.”

Ingrid kissed me back, looking tearful. “I am so glad you’re here. Uh... hoof black. Thanks a million. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said. The words were perfect.

This was where I needed to be.

INGRID

It all came down to the final day at the European Championships. If I managed to ride clear, I would likely finish in pole position for the Olympics. Even a single penalty would keep me home. Kraken and I prepared for the ride of our lives. Well, I did. Kraken was just the same good boy he ever was.

“You’re going to kick their asses,” Keir said, shining my boots as we waited by the gate. “Don’t think about them, though. Think about you.”

“Ride for you,” Cici said. “Ride for your horse making these games again. He deserves to go once more, right? And you deserve to go for yourself—for the first time.”

I patted Kraken, the Olympic vet. He flicked his ears back, waiting and listening.

“You’re going to be fine,” Betty promised.

“Better than fine,” Keir added.

“Scandinavian fine, which is excellent,” Cici clarified.

I snickered and bent down to give Keir an awkward kiss.

“You’re up,” Cici said.

“Kick ass and take names!” Keir called after me .

I intended to. I circled and trotted, winding Kraken up. He didn't need much encouragement. Even at his age, he could still get up and go with the best of them. I visualised the round. I rode like it was my last ride—ride for me. We took off and headed for the first fence. I basked in the roundness of Kraken's impressive jump and how smooth he landed.

We had a hair-raising moment where I knew we knocked a pole, if only by the gasp from the crowd—then clapping. It held. I let Kraken out, headed for the next fence. We had this long combination, and I trusted him to know the line better than I did. All the frustrating gymnastics practice in the world—enough to make the laziest hunter pony look snappy—would either pay off or not.

I nearly closed my eyes as we landed from the final fence. Clear. The final wall lay ahead. It was a tricky gallop across the arena to get there—an attractive design that had thrown off at least four riders in their approach. Again, I trusted my horse to know best. I got off his mouth, glad to be a passenger and let him enjoy his job.

“You got this, baby!” Keir shouted.

“Go, go, go!” Cici and Betty cried out.

Somewhere in the stands, I knew all three Deschamps sisters and their children cheered me on. I beamed as we came to the fence. Kraken switched his lead on the way there, clearing it like he had another metre to give. We were clean. I minded our time. We'd done it. With only three riders behind me—much lower ranked—I knew I was about to place third and go through. Somehow, I'd had the best event of my life and pulled this off.

I arrived at the gate to a crush of riders and my coach, all jumping up and down. I bent forward to squeeze Kraken's massive neck and give him all the kisses. I hopped off into the arms of the man I loved the most. Keir picked me up and swung me around, kissing me.

He put me back down, my face in his hands, and said, “You are the most wonderfully brave person I know.”

“You’re sweet.”

“I’m honest, my love. You’re amazing. I’m so, so proud of you!”

“Come here!” Cici shouted, also picking me up and swinging me around. “You’re going! We’re going! ”

“We will take over the world,” I giggled.

I kissed my horse on the nose and handed him to a groom. By that point, the family had arrived. The children were confused but excited.

“Give her the flowers,” Rick said to Chris.

“Why? I want them!” Chris said.

“She’s going to the Olympics,” Alexandra said. “They are a congratulations.”

Chris held them out. I took the flowers before handing him back a rose.

“For being my biggest fan,” I said. “I love them. Thank you all.”

“You are so good!” Linny announced. “The best!”

“Oh, I did not beat cousin Cici,” I laughed. “But I did try.”

“In time,” Cici said, squeezing my shoulders.

A reporter approached.

“Princess Ingrid! Congrats! You made the Olympics!”

“I am off to DC next year, I guess. And so grateful for all my friends and family,” I looked around. “And Kraken, who is the best boy.”

“What is next?” The reporter asked.

“Uh, a holiday, Burghley, and some well-earned rest for myself and my horse.”

I had to speak to more reporters than even Cici did. My “meteoric rise” attracted attention I never anticipated. Eventually, I returned to the stable aisle to dote more on my horse. It was in a barn in Germany where something wonderful and unexpected happened.

“Ingrid, can I bother you a minute?” Keir asked.

“Sure,” I agreed, throwing my arms around him.

He pulled back. Confusion spread as he got down on one knee right there.

“Ingrid Deschamps, would you marry me? Would you be my wife so we can walk the rest of our lives together?”

He held out a beautiful ring. I knew it was his mother’s—the one his father had given her years before.

“Yes. Because you still owe me at least 700,000 I-love-yous,” I said, tears in my eyes.

He hopped up, kissing me as my entire entourage cheered. I suspected they were in on it. But Kraken nudged my back before I could slip the ring on my finger. I turned to rub his face.

“Someone is jealous,” I laughed. “And wants treats.”

“Mummy and Daddy are getting married, and this is what you do, mate?”

“He’s excited... and hungry,” I giggled. “And It’s perfect. All of it is so fucking perfect.”

“It really is,” Keir said. “I couldn’t wait a minute longer.”

“I am glad,” I said, giving Keir a long kiss. “I’ll be yours forever.”