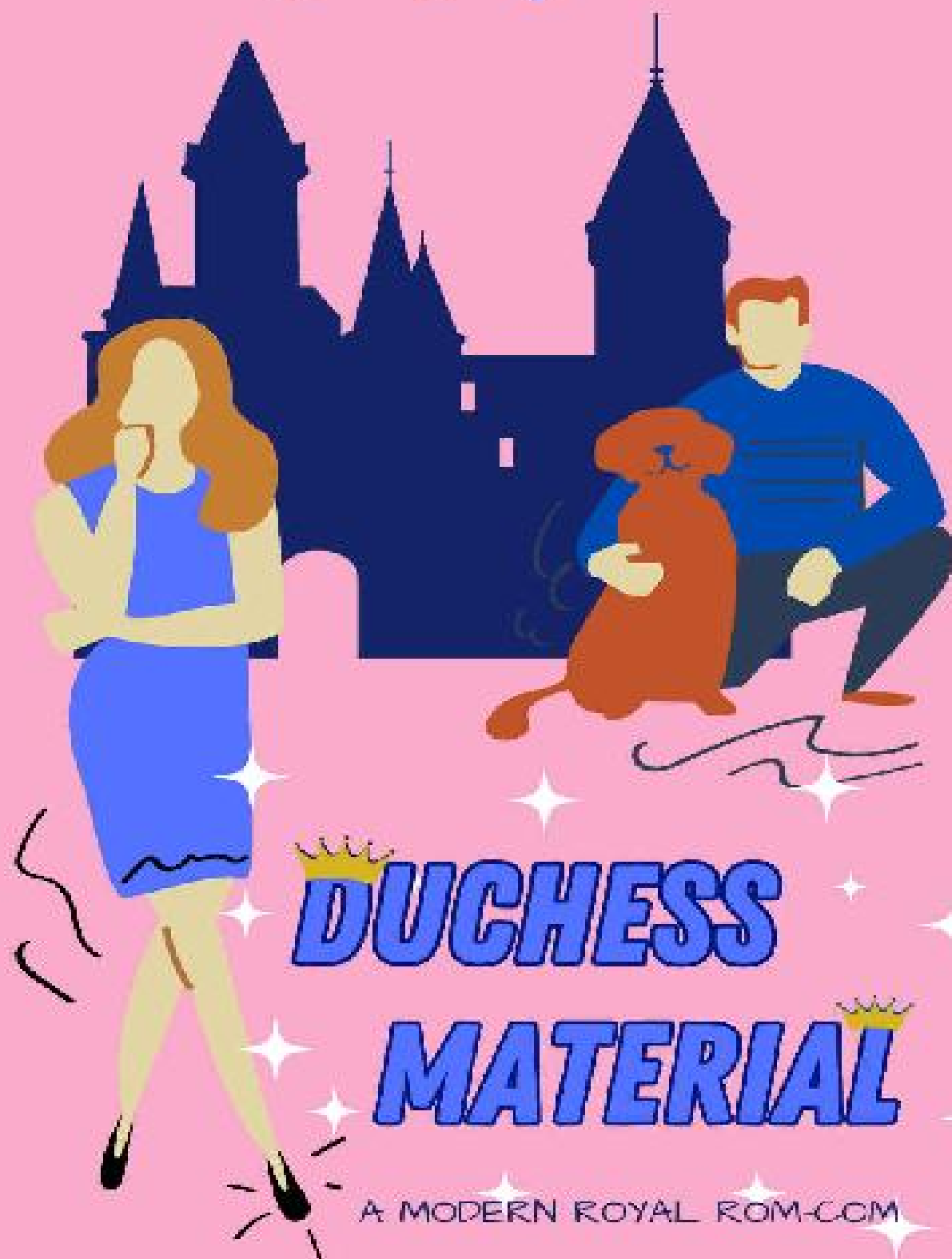


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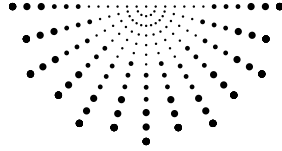


Maude Winters

DUCHESS MATERIAL

SPARE CHANGE

BOOK TWO



MAUDE WINTERS

Edited by
DANIEL FLASPOHLER



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Cover by Gwendolyn Sams

✿ Created with Vellum

*To my daughter, may you grown into the bravest, wildest, and
boldest woman imaginable.*

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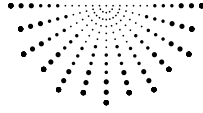
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A BUMP IN THE ROAD



The heir to the throne and presumptive Princess of Wales left London with a company of staff, luggage stocked to the gills, and a mountain of run-of-show cue sheets. Her right hand, Lucy Chandler had enough highlighters to paint a herd of manic unicorns to dayglow perfection. She had notation strips in every colour of the rainbow. Her laptop was either running on empty or precariously dangling on her lap attached to a mobile charger. She worked from anywhere and everywhere. She was assigned to clear the way so Princess Natalie could be her charming, relatable self. They would spend the next four weeks jetting and driving across Sub-Saharan Africa on the Princess's first overseas tour.

The tour's first two weeks were flawless. Natalie was heralded as a triumph. She met with pilots, spoke on women's empowerment, learned about sustainable development, rocked evening gowns, danced with children, and ate local food with nary an issue. Lucy was exhausted just watching, but Natalie shone. Lucy heard from the King's staff that they were nailing it. She was showing her worth now. Lucy was high on life. Natalie was getting a much-needed royal confidence boost. The girls were like a dream team. Then, came the bump in the road.

Lucy's problem was not her boss or her job. She was at a career peak. Of the palace staff, she outranked all but the private secretaries for the Queen and King themselves. At the tender age of twenty-eight, she had gotten the post most would work decades for. Instead, her malaise was physical. People warned her antimalarials could make you sick. She felt a bit

off but settled. It got somewhat better before the terrible seasick feeling kicked in around week two.

The feeling was exacerbated by rough roads. Once you got into the hinterlands, they were sketchy at best. One dodgy road after another wore on Lucy. Natalie rode out severe turbulence without sweating, while Lucy struggled. One morning at dawn, they were in a convoy near a nature park in Uganda when Lucy felt the need to fly out of the back seat of the 4-Runner.

“Stop the car! Stop the car!” Lucy shouted.

The driver complied. Lucy flailed, getting out just in time to vomit on the roadside.

Lucy finished and hunched over a moment until she spied a pair of pink flip flops. A little girl with braids and a school uniform bent to stare at Lucy. Lucy gradually stood up. She knew Natalie’s security was livid with her at this point. She couldn’t help it, though.

Before she could blink, four or five excited children screamed, “Mzungu!”

It meant “white person”. It was the Sub-Saharan version of “Gringo” from what Lucy could glean. Natalie popped her head out of the car and waved. She could charm anyone. She handed them some snacks and Lucy tried not to get invested in the fact that Natalie broke protocol.

Lucy ducked back into the car. “I’m alright.”

A security guard shook his head. Lucy had embarrassed herself. She had no street cred.

Lucy nodded. “It’s the antimalarials.”

It was.

Natalie tried to make Lucy feel better. “They are a bit shit. I’ve been on everything, though. Every jab, too. The don’t go easy on you in the military.”

Lucy was *not* military grade. She was promised she would adjust. Her body did *not* adjust. A day later, they were at the Ugandan Parliament building, walking with some legislators

when Lucy again lost her lunch—in a legendary way. Lucy tried to make it to the trash.

It didn't help that she called out, "Trash can!"

It took the other British staff ages to process that she meant a rubbish bin. The Americanism had not helped.

In the aftermath, a mortified Lucy tried tipping an annoyed worker to clean up the vomit. She offered to help, further embarrassing herself and offending the woman who merely said "keep your money" in a flip way.

Lucy was mortified. She felt terrible.

"I think I just screwed up." Lucy said. "I embarrassed that poor woman!"

She and Natalie transited to their accommodations in Kampala. It was time to transform Natalie for an evening reception.

"You couldn't help it. It's not your fault, Luce," Natalie said. "Miscommunication."

"I just puked all over a government building."

The local guide was kind. "You are not the first person to do it on these drugs. Try taking them before bed. It helps, I think."

Lucy took the advice. Still, the next morning, she felt even *worse*. She was exhausted, nauseous, and had terrible backpain. Then, it hit her that something much more sinister was going on. Natalie asked her to pack super tampons for the road the next day. And as she did, Lucy realised she hadn't had *her* period. Lucy and Natalie spent more time together than apart. As such, the two were mostly in sync with their cycles.

When they arrived on the tarmac in Libreville, Lucy knew she needed to change her approach to life until they returned to London. They rode through town to their new residence. Gabon was a small, beautiful country. The girls stayed on the oceanfront in a fabulous house. Lucy appreciated the change in scenery, but fear of a potential pregnancy lowered the excitement quotient.

The place was immaculate. The staff assisting them were warm. There was fresh fruit laying out, something that normally appealed to Lucy. Her food aversions made her steer clear. It was stifflingly hot. She stuck her head in the big refrigerator and looked for something safe to drink. The thing was loaded with Guinness. Someone must have heard it was the Princess's preferred beverage. They had been swimming in Export Stout since arriving.

It was those Guinness bottles that haunted Lucy now. Water was hard to come by, as it was unsafe to drink. Lugging bottled water was tiresome. Everywhere, they were offered beer or a fizzy beverage. She lived on bottles of pop. She mixed gin with Fanta, as one of their guides suggested. Lucy tried to fit in and keep up with Natalie. That was a farce, of course. Her friend could drink her under a table every day of the week. Lucy also worried about her antimalarials. Were those dangerous, too?

Lucy helped Natalie prepare for her gala and handed her off to the social secretary, Carolyn, for the evening. Lucy took a load off, relenting and letting the chef attending to them cook her a proper dinner. It stayed down. Lucy was hungry. She shovelled rice into her stomach until she felt she might explode. Unfortunately, after that, she sat on the couch and scrolled on her laptop. Researching "antimalarials and pregnancy" taught her that antimalarials made the pill less effective.

"Well, shit," Lucy groaned.

That called for the heavy guns. Lucy broke into the stash of cookies that Natalie's mother overnighted them via the embassy. It was like heaven. She realised that the unplanned extracurricular she had gotten up to the night before the tour may have sunk her. She wondered if she should take a test.

No, it would put the mission in danger. The press would do anything—including go through the Princess's trash. It was the *last* thing Natalie needed. So, Lucy decided to keep everything spinning, to beat her worries down, and to deal with it when she got home. Winston deserved to be there when she found

out, right? But did he? They weren't *together*? It was all so confusing.

Lucy fell asleep that night, knowing that Natalie was out parading around in an evening gown outshining the sun. She felt guilty and selfish for being sick. She felt bad for the pang of excitement. She felt robbed that her first taste of motherhood may have come at the worst time. She felt unprepared to make a choice about the possible baby. She feared Winston would find out sooner or later. She knew she would tell him. She wasn't sure she could terminate this pregnancy. What on Earth would he think of her? Could she keep her job? She'd never be able to look his family or Natalie's in the eye again.



ED WINSLOW unpacked while his mother, Margaret MacDonald, put things away in the kitchen. His father, John Winslow, ignored it all, camping on the couch and watching telly. Ed had not asked his mother to do this. She never put anything where it belonged. Half of his dishes would be lost. Ed dropped the rope. He did not die on hills like this. It was pointless. He was keen to make his new place feel like home before his girlfriend returned.

“You ever watch this sort of thing and think to yourself, ‘How did I land that?’” John asked.

Ed looked up from his box of pictures and saw a newsreel of Natalie. She attended an evening gala with politicians in Ghana. She looked flawless. Of course, she'd whinged about that dress thinking it made her bum look huge. Ed could now confirm that the dress made her arse look huge, but in the best sort of way. He tried not to think about it.

“Nah. Not like that. There is Natalie and then Princess Natalie. I separate the two,” Ed replied.

“How, son? She's a goddamn princess.”

“Well aware.”

Margaret interjected from the kitchen, “Do you ever think about the fact that she will be queen someday?”

“Try not to, mother.” Ed rolled his eyes.

Always with the questions.

Margaret came into the living room, hands on her hips. “Johnny, she should ask *herself* how she landed such a sweet, handsome young man.”

“Margie, she could have anyone. I told you that you should stop modelling pants, Edwin. Must be mortifying for her parents. Does she not get offended?”

“I am not modelling pants!” Ed protested. “I’m making money with what I must to avoid becoming a bloody politician. I won’t have my looks forever. Trust me, I hate it, but I like financial security.”

He did not respond to the final portion. Natalie fawned over Ed in a way that both made him feel like a god and embarrassed the hell out of him. He only put up with it because he knew she was sincere.

John pulled a face. He *was* the politician.

“I love Nat. She loves me—despite the ridiculousness of it. I’m sure her parents loathe it.”

“If she asked you to stop?” John asked.

“It depends. If we were very serious, sure. I don’t know we’re there yet.”

“You’re not seeing other women?” Margaret scoffed.

Ed looked horrified. “No, mother! We are exclusive.”

“But does the *world* know it?” Her words turned the screws.

“No. We haven’t crossed that bridge yet. That is a sticky wicket.”

“We liked her,” John said. “She’s a stunner, just like her mother.”

“Dad!”

“Jonathan!”

“What? I’d have to be blind to ignore either one of them, Margie.”

“She’s beautiful, but that’s not why I love her. She’s witty and she drives me up a wall with her competitiveness. I live for it.”

“She’s clever,” Margaret said. “I can tell. Arabella was *not*.”

“Mam, you don’t need to shit on her. We all know how it ended and how ridiculous it got.”

He could have gone on about how ill-advised things were with the ex-wife. She came in like a wrecking ball and left like a nuclear disaster. He was head-over-heels with her quickly, but it was ill-conceived. Ed was now much more cautious. He loved Natalie but wanted to proceed with a clear head. He knew things for Natalie were different. If they did the going-public thing, he would be on public parade every day of the week. Ed was not ready to be known as some sort of pants model who fell for a princess. He was happy to have her for now.

The problem with Arabella was her different level of investment. She saw Ed as a status symbol. She loved the idea of Ed—almost as a conquest—but bored of him quickly. He soured of her controlling behaviour and their lack of conversation. Ed wasn’t happy with a marriage of convenience. He wanted the whole thing.

“She’s just... she is still so hateful.”

“Yes, Mam. But does it do any good to engage?”

“I am just glad you’re getting out there,” John said. “But I worry that you won’t be able to stay out there, son.”

“Why not?”

“You always run around or go out with friends! Do you even get time to one another?”

Ed chuckled. “I can assure you that we get plenty of quality time together. I’m good.”

Margaret shook her head. “You men worry too much about sex. They’re in their thirties. What do you think they get up to?”

“But... how?”

“There are workarounds, Dad. I am not going to explain how I manage it, thanks. She was at the flat a lot. You just never would have known it.”

“She came to your shit little flat over the garage?”

“Often unannounced.” Ed smiled a bit at the thought of it.

Margaret sighed, “She must love you.”

John snickered.

Margaret began unpacking the photos. “I worry she is a wild lass, and you aren’t getting younger.”

“Are you suggesting my girlfriend is unable to commit? That I am?”

She didn’t take the bait.

“Look, we haven’t discussed anything in detail. You’re freaking out over nothing. Nat is brave and outspoken but she’s not too *wild*. She’s brilliant at pushing me out of my comfort zone. Yes, she can be exhausting at times. I am she’d say the same.”

“I can relate.” John looked at his wife.

Margaret rolled her eyes. “You want children, Edwin.”

“She will want them eventually. She isn’t opposed to them. She worries about being maternal enough.” Ed left out the implicit “she has no choice in the matter” part.

“Well, not all women. That’s no fault. And, anyhow, if she’s anything like Queen Margaux was, I would bet she’d delegate it to you,” Margaret said of Natalie’s grandmother.

“What?”

John explained, “Her husband, the Duke, he raised those kids. Quite modern of them. I can’t imagine the King would do the same.”

“I disagree. If you had seen him with George’s boyfriend’s kid, you’d know. He loves babies. I think you don’t give the King enough credit.”

“Really?” John scoffed. “The idea of King Robert changing a nappy!”

“Dad, did you ever change a nappy?”

Margaret snickered. “Well, played. The answer is no.”

“I think I changed at least two.”

“Changed at least two!?”

“What, you plan on being the man who changes nappies?” John laughed.

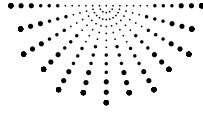
“I mean, why should a father *not* change nappies? That’s essential.”

Margaret shook her head. “She wouldn’t expect it, Ed. People like us... people like Natalie... they have *people*.”

“I wouldn’t want people raising my kids,” Ed said. “It’s not for me. I’m assuming they would go to a nanny or a care centre, but I would want to be the parent otherwise.”

“Uh-huh. Maybe get a dog first?” John chuckled.

HOLLY



After a short visit to Belgium to visit her cousins, Aunt Beth, and Uncle Louis, Natalie returned to London. After pulling strings, she went right to her quarters to meet with the only person she wanted to see. Ed sat on the couch, waiting. It was the best homecoming present.

He rushed to sweep her up in a kiss. “You’re here... and alive?”

“I am.” Natalie kissed him back.

It felt better than she remembered.

How had a month felt like a lifetime without Ed? She wanted to stay with him forever, but they only had a long weekend. She wanted to stay wrapped up in his embrace for ages. Natalie was dying for him to haul her into the other room.

“Can I take you to bed or do you want food? Or whatever?” Ed asked.

“Take me to bed. I couldn’t focus on anything else if I tried.”

To Natalie’s surprise and delight, Ed took her words literally. He picked her up and ran her to the bedroom, throwing her down on the bed in what could be best described in lustful exuberance. They kissed for a bit, fooling around in the dark before giving up on it, turning a light on and trying to undress. Clothes on the floor, Ed went to work.

“You don’t have to—”

Natalie stopped talking, her head falling back into the pillow as he sucked on her clit and gripped her hips. He was so dutiful. How could she turn him down? Instead, she pushed her hips towards his face and gripped his hair. He needed a haircut. In this moment, though, she couldn't have cared less about the follicles on his head. She let him do the thing. She came, shouting his name, her hands interlaced with his hair. Natalie's legs quaked as he kissed his way back up her torso and kissed her neck before looking down at her.

"I have been fantasising about that for weeks," Natalie sputtered.

"And this?" Ed wondered, pulling her towards him and putting her legs around his neck.

"Oh, this is even better," Natalie replied.

It was. She loved this position. She had full view of him. It felt spectacular.

She gripped the covers tightly. "You make it so difficult, because I have nothing to grab onto."

"Maybe I don't want to give you anything to grab onto? Maybe you should wait a moment rather than be selfish?" Ed remarked.

"But I am allowed to be selfish."

"Says who? Get on your hands and knees."

Oh, we're doing this now? Natalie was surprised by his insistence. As he pushed her head into the pillow and gripped onto her hips, she faded into the fun of it.

"You can't order me around, damn it!" Natalie protested.

"I can't? I just did." Ed smacked her arse playfully.

Natalie was into this. All day long she oversaw everything and everyone. Now, though she still held all the cards, Natalie could give into the fantasy of being ordered around.

"You're too much," she moaned.

"You protest a lot but seem to be enjoying yourself."

Ed smacked her arse harder. "Get on top."

Natalie was happy to. She wanted to get off again. She kissed him and straddled his body. Natalie went slow at first, speeding up as she got closer. Ed knew she was at the point of no return, holding onto her hips and thrusting until she came hard. She fell towards him, catching herself and kissing him again.

"I hate when you steal my thunder," Natalie pouted.

"Oh, really?" He was unconvinced. "Go on."

He smacked her on the arse a third time. Natalie found this altogether kinky and irresistible. Ed watched her like she was the embodiment of sex itself. She revelled in it. Natalie watched his face start to make a tell-tale stupid little smile. He grabbed her hips again, as if bracing. Natalie smile, pleased with herself. She kissed him as she bent back down.

"You are so hot," she said before rolling off to the side.

Ed looked over at her. "Me?"

"Yes, don't look surprised."

"You were beyond help."

"Sorry, I've been celibate for more than a month. You are so good. I commend you on changing it up," Natalie said.

"How so?"

"You were rough with me. I loved it."

"It wasn't *that* notable, I didn't think? Was I too much?" Ed blushed.

"No one has ever been so rough with me. Don't stop. Don't get self-conscious, Ed."

He smiled over at her.

"What?"

"You're so fun when I give you directions. You are telling me than no other man you've been with has read you so well?"

"No. I don't think most men would dare to tell me what to do. After all, I'm a precious little jewel, aren't I?"

Ed burst out laughing before leaning over to kiss her. “Even diamonds are sharp enough to cut glass. I don’t think you’re precious. You are a sexy human who turns to putty when I push the right buttons.”

“Never stop seeing me that way, and we’ll be golden,” Natalie said.



LUCY ARRIVED AT WINSTON’S, greeted by not three but *four* dogs. There was a scruffy black dog in the mix. The dog wagged its little nub tail adorably. Frida looked primed to jump into Lucy’s arms. The weary traveller bent down to hug the excited puppy. Winston could not have been happier to see her. She looked knackered, but still as sweet and wonderful as he remembered. A month without her had been lonely. He’d been in love with her for years, but the past month apart illustrated he loved her more than he had previously believed.

Winston had let Lucy move in after her legendary crash-and-burn relationship breakdown with George, Natalie’s brother and his second cousin. When George had left her, she’d settled in here reluctantly at first. Winston had room and Lucy needed a safe place to flee. It was Winston’s brother’s idea, but turning Lucy away was not in Winston’s purview. Now, almost half a year later, she was a dog mum to Winston’s three dogs. They were living in what some had described as “domestic bliss”. It wasn’t Winston’s intention to trap her. She did not know he was in love with her at the time. He never meant to tell her.

The night before she left, Winston told Lucy his true feelings for her after too much wine. And, to his surprise, she’d been interested in exploring it. She’d left the next morning with no resolution. They were not dating. They were not housemates. They were in a bizarre grey area. Winston was unsure what they were, but he was sure he loved her. He worried she would break his heart, but he could not deny his feelings.

“Hello, my darling,” Lucy cooed to Frida. “And the rest of you.”

“They have missed you, Luce,” Winston said.

“What about the new dog?”

“Her name is Holly.”

“Short for?” Lucy asked.

“Warhol.”

“Of *course*, she is.”

“I missed you and saw her posted on the shelter page. She’d been without a home for six months, has some medical issues, and I couldn’t say no. Her owner died. She was a lovely pensioner.”

“Sweet girl. Winston, the timing on the dog is shit.”

“There is never a good time to get a fourth dog. I realise. I’m mad. I get it. But I am a sucker.”

“No, she’s darling. I think I am losing my fucking mind saying this, but I don’t care about the dog. Not really, anyway. I have bigger issues to discuss—”

“I knew it. I’m sorry. I’ve made it weird—”

“No, Winston, no,” Lucy looked sad. “It’s not that—”

“Then what?”

“Can we just sit down?” Lucy took off her mac and hung it up.

“Sorry, sorry. Come, sit, I will get you a glass of wine, whisky, whatever—”

“No, Winston,” she said sharply. “Just water.”

He looked at her confused but obliged. Lucy sat on the couch cross-legged. He brought her a glass and waited for her to start.

Lucy’s head hung low. “I’m not myself. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’ve been on the road for weeks.” Winston was nervous.

Was this the “I’m not interested” speech incoming?

“Yeah,” she admitted. “I think I’m pregnant, too. That’s the worst part.”

Winston’s jaw dropped. “You’re... pregnant? Or did I mishear—”

“I might be. And if I am, it’s yours. Please don’t doubt me —”

“I’m not. Shit, Lucy.”

Lucy burst into tears. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Lucy, you don’t need to apologise. How did... I thought you said...”

“The Palace Physician forgot to mention the antimalarial medication can render your birth control useless. So, all the faith I put in taking my pill like a good girl, it was pointless. I am so angry, Winston. I am so sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. Shit. I’m not upset. I’m... what do we do? I mean, what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I need a test. I need to take it. But I’m about two weeks late. So, I don’t think it could be anything else. The timing was right on the nose with when we—”

Winston nodded. He didn’t want her to finish. It was as if she would speak what they did into existence and label it. And if she labelled it, what if it was *just* sex and she felt nothing for him?

“If it is... I think I need to move out because... this is awkward for you—”

“Luce, if we are having a baby, why would you move out?” Winston chuckled, nervously.

“Because we’re not having anything. I’m having a baby and if you don’t want anything to do with it—”

“Lucy Chandler, I love you. I told you. I am not blowin’ smoke up yer arse!”

“You sound remarkably Scottish. I’m momentarily confused.”

“I am. It comes out when I’m nervous.”

“See, you’re nervous—”

“I may have just found out I would be a dad! I think it’s warranted, Luce.”

Lucy shook her head. “I don’t want you to feel obligated. It’s going to be a scandal. What if Natalie has to fire me?”

“She wouldn’t sack you. Why?”

“Her Dad is going to lose his mind.”

“His daughter’s boyfriend is shirtless on a billboard in Piccadilly Circus. He has worse things to complain about,” Winston said.

“What?”

Winston groaned. “You missed some things.”

“I can see.”

Winston held her hand. “If it is, I’m here for you. Whatever you decide to do. I would never fault you for this. I love you, Lucy. If you want to move out, I must respect it. Of course, I’d rather you stayed here so I could, you know, parent the baby. Also, take care of you.”

“Winston, what are we going to do?”

“We have four dogs. We’ll be the mad people with four dogs and a baby.”

“You make it sound lovely.” Lucy laughed through tears.

“Because it is. Or rather will be, Luce.”

She smiled and touched his cheek. “You are so sweet. I don’t deserve you, Winston Ferguson.”

“You do.” He leaned in and gave her a kiss. It still felt new, but it was good.

She pulled away. “You probably assumed things were going down tonight, but I am so, so tired. All I want to do is

crawl into bed. Test tomorrow. Sleep tonight.”

Winston kissed her head. “I am bringing you some food, tucking you in, and putting you to bed with Frida. We’ll run to Boots tomorrow.”



ED AND NATALIE stirred at a knock. They were lying peacefully. Natalie was her most adoring after sex. She would spend all day endlessly tracing lines up and down Ed’s chest. He loved it but would never admit to *how* much he loved it. It was odd. She could be so prickly around other people. Here, she was sweet and calm. She was all his.

“Yes?” Natalie called out.

“Oh, it’s Dad. I’m sorry, were you asleep? I brought a good whisky. Thought we could chat. Celebrate your tour’s success?” It was King Robert.

Because, of *course*, it was.

Ed wasn’t expected to be there. He probably was unwelcome. This was about to get awkward.

“Shit... uh... um... give me a second.” Natalie stirred, hopping out of bed. “I had only... laid down...”

“I’ll be in the sitting room,” Robbie said. “Pour you a glass?”

“Uh... okay.” She was grimacing as she pulled on her knickers.

Her voice was pained.

“What do I do?” Ed whispered.

“I don’t know what is going on.”

“Do I need to jump through a window or something?” Ed asked.

“Nah. Hang out here. We’ll have a drink, bond, and then he’ll go home to Mummy.”

Natalie leaned and gave Ed a long kiss. She pulled her shirt on and dashed out. Ed didn't have time to argue. Nor could he do anything to stop her. Instead, he got to hear the entire conversation through the door. For being such a big, fancy place, the walls were impressively thin.

Robbie began, "You did a bang-up job. I wanted to congratulate you. It was an impressive tour and a heavy lift. I'm immensely proud of you, Natalie."

"Thanks."

"Is everything alright?"

"Um... yeah."

"Why are you being so odd?"

"I... I wasn't expecting you," Natalie said.

She was a dreadful liar.

There was a pause. Ed heard the King say, "Is there... do you have a visitor? Oh, you do. No, no... I'm so sorry, Nat."

"He came to see me. It'd been so long and—"

"Well, what did you do, shove him in your wardrobe? Invite him out, Natalie. You're a grown woman. It would have been fine to say so."

Ed snickered to himself. She practically had.

"With you, I never know." Ed could see her rolling her eyes in his mind.

"As long as he's... you know... decent."

"Dad, he *does* own shirts. I know it is an utter surprise." Natalie laughed before calling out, "Darling, Dad comes in peace. You are released from hiding to come drink with us."

"I don't want to intrude," Ed yelled back.

"No, no, you aren't, Edwin. Come on now! He insists."

A moment later, Ed Winslow emerged, nervous. He bowed, awkwardly. Robbie waved him off. Ed sat down next to Natalie, who poured him a glass.

“What is the occasion?” Ed asked, as if he hadn’t heard the whole conversation.

“Celebrating Natalie’s success,” Robbie said. “Very proud of her.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

“Do you not think she did well?”

“No, no, I do. We never *talk* about it. I must get enough grief from my parents about what Nat is up to. Of course, I’m also proud of her.”

“Dad, back off,” Natalie said curtly.

“I’m sorry. I get quite protective.”

“I am aware,” Ed admitted. “I’m happy for her. I’ve missed her terribly.”

“Well, you’ve been busy with your face all over town, Edwin.”

Ed felt that one.

“Dad, I swear you are treading on thin ice.” Her tone was reminiscent of her mother’s you’re-in-the-doghouse voice. Ed had been around the family enough to know.

“I was joking, I was joking.”

“I cringe. I had no idea I would be all over the place. I am absolutely mortified every time I pass the thing,” Ed said.

“No comment, darling.”

Ed asked, “Have you seen it then?”

“I saw it coming back here while leaving Heathrow.”

“I am about to die of embarrassment.” Ed knocked back his whisky.

“You’re going to regret it.” Robbie chuckled. Still, he refilled Ed’s glass.

“Oh, no! I must embarrass you further. When I saw it, I announced to the entire car ‘That’s my man!’ and Carolyn died of pure mortification. It was delightful and I’m not sorry.”

“I’m going to die. Natalie, I am... why?”

“Can I not gawp? I am the one person always allowed to gawp.”

“What do your parents think of this, Ed?” Robbie asked him.

“Oh, my dad takes the piss relentlessly, refers to me as an ‘old pants model’ and my mother always compliments herself on how much I took after her. For the record, I have no desire to model pants and never had.”

Natalie giggled. “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“Dad wanted to know if it would make you feel insecure,” Ed snickered.

“What? Why? Does he think I am fragile? I can see you. I know you are attractive. I also know you have zero game with women.”

“Excuse me!”

“You insert your foot right in your mouth, darling.”

“Okay, maybe a bit.”

“I’m also a poor judge of flirting, I suppose,” Robbie admitted. “Well, your mother would say.”

Ed snickered. “Like father, like daughter. I had to tell her I fancied her after she confronted me about it.”

“That is true, Edwin. Dad, Mum never worried about women throwing themselves at you?”

“No. The summer we met, I had all the competition in the world. I never should have won your mother’s affections. She could have landed someone more handsome. I suppose I did okay for myself.”

Natalie shook her head. “Because she loved you. You two are saps.”

“I am a sap. Your mother is my moral compass.”

Ed chuckled. “My mother often reminds my father she doesn’t generally fancy English men. However, his knowledge

of Shakespeare and general demeanour impressed her. I wonder how they ever made it work. She drives him batty and he's an absolute child at times."

"That's all men." Natalie rolled her eyes.

Robbie snickered.

"I feel more evolved."

"You feel a great many things, Edwin."

He shook his head but stared at her lovingly. Ed had nothing but adoration for her. She was the strangest person he had ever met. How they managed to find one another again after nearly a decade was a thing of wonder. But damn if she wasn't electric. Ed was so glad Natalie was back.

"What was your favourite part of the trip, Natalie?" Robbie changed the subject.

"I think seeing all the planes. In terms of meeting with people, I got to meet this group of women who were fixing cars in Kampala. They had babies strapped to their backs and were wrenching like it was nothing. So badass! Women are warriors. There is nothing we cannot do. You will not tell me otherwise."

Robbie smiled. "True. True. There is a reason man did not evolve to carry children."

Ed sat his drink down. "I couldn't fix a car. I have an English degree. I don't know an engine from a carburettor."

Natalie patted his leg. "A carburettor is part of an engine. It mixes gas and air."

"See, I learned something," Ed said.

"You slay me, darling."

Robbie shook his head. "Well, I am glad you met many interesting people. You earned a few days off. Your mum and I are over-the-moon with your progress, Natalie. You're wonderful at the job. I will leave you kids in peace. Nice seeing you again, Ed."

"You as well, sir," Ed replied.

“Thank you for the whisky, Daddy,” Natalie said.

The King left. Natalie turned to Ed, looking for an analysis.

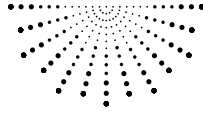
Ed shrugged. “What? He was surprisingly fine. Is he planning to skin me alive or something?”

Natalie giggled. “No. He was relaxed.”

“I don’t think he likes the ad campaign.”

“I don’t care what he thinks. You are *dead* sexy. And you are *all* mine.” Natalie leaned in and kissed Ed. He had not a care in the world.

AND THEN THERE WERE FIVE



Lucy woke the next morning to her period—a dreadful, awful period. She had to give Winston the good—and bad—news. She found him making a massive fry up in the kitchen. Bless him, he’d run to Boots, too. There was a pregnancy test on the kitchen island. He pulled out all the stops. She wondered if this would make him pull back or not. Part of her had already fallen for him so deeply over the past month, she could not help herself. The other part of her was guarded. She was worried she’d sabotage herself before it ever had the chance to grow legs.

Lucy marvelled at how fortunate she was to wake up with this person who treated her like gold. No one ever doted on her as Winston had the night before. He was so wonderful. She had a pang of guilt for *not* being pregnant. He was there with the dogs—all four looking at him like he hung the moon. If anyone deserved to be a dad, it was probably Winston. He’d make a remarkable one someday.

“Winston,” Lucy said.

“Yes, Luce?” he asked.

She shook the pregnancy test and discarded it. “Well, good news is, I have my period. Bad news is, it is a whopper of one and... well, you’re going to want to avoid me for quite some time.”

His face dropped for a moment. He sat the spatula down and rushed to hug her.

“Why would I avoid you, Luce?”

Lucy held him tight. His arms around her were comforting.

“Because I’m pretty useless for a bit—”

“Lucy, I love you. I waited years to see you naked. That’s not what I am after. What I want is for you to be okay, alright? Even if we aren’t together, I care about you as a friend, Luce. A lot. I love you. So, you don’t need to worry about me. What will help?”

“Bacon,” Lucy laughed. “And you should attend to yours.”

“Shit! yes!” Winston departed.

Lucy sat at the kitchen island. She was glad the dream wasn’t over. He loved her despite all of this. He was patient. Winston was altogether too good. There had to be something the matter with him, right?

“How do you feel about it?” Winston asked.

“Cramps are bad. Terrible headache,” Lucy groaned.

“I meant emotionally. Are you relieved?”

Lucy was unsure how to answer.

“Um, I dunno. Both relieved and sad.”

“Sad?”

“I had this intense connection with whatever I thought this thing inside me might be,” Lucy admitted. “I wanted to be a mom. Even if like you and I couldn’t be together. I wanted to have what I thought was a baby.”

Lucy was promised happiness and security before, but it went to pot. Lucy was done living on the promises of men. Instead, she was planning to freeze her eggs. Or, rather, she had been.

“Well, they’re going to do the eggs thing, right?” Winston asked.

“They’re supposed to,” Lucy sighed. “Or were. I called it off like an idiot. I can reschedule it. I... I needed some time to figure out what I wanted to do either way.”

Winston nodded.

“And you?”

Winston shrugged. “I didn’t expect it, but I am a little sad. It sounds mad, but if I must have a surprise baby with someone, I hope it is with you. Luce, you’re going to make a great mum someday. I promise. On one hand, I’m relieved. This would have caused you lots of stress. On the other, I could have seen us doing okay.”

Lucy nodded. “Strange, isn’t it? I could have seen it, too.”

“It was all a dream.”

Lucy admitted it probably was. But was it *so* strange? Lucy and Winston shared household duties like old married people. They were great friends. They traded off on the washing up, shared in cooking, and hosted friends and family together. Lucy knew she found Winston attractive. They’d had fabulous sex. Both wanted children. There were worse options. On the other hand, she was here before with George. Putting all her eggs in one basket—figuratively and literally—bit her in the ass. It left her stranded in a foreign country, having recently applied for citizenship, and with no place to live. She had ended up in a financially precarious situation. She was demoted from possible future queen to average staffer again.

Eventually, she found her feet. She did well. She was grateful for the opportunity to manage Natalie’s staff. She and George were on good terms. His friends and family had not deserted either of them. She was forever indebted to Winston for his kindness. Still, she was guarded. Lucy never had an easy life. She had trouble trusting any man. George had been the last in a long line of men who had not shown up. Winston only knew the half of it.

Lucy was tempted to pull back, but something about Winston made her feel safe. Something about this felt *different*. She should have wanted to run away, but she didn’t. Lucy looked over at their dogs—*their* dogs. They waited for a bit of food. These were their babies for now. They raised them together. How could you raise dogs with someone and not acknowledge some sort of domestic success?

Winston delivered Lucy a plate.

“It’s perfect, thanks.” Lucy dug in.

“Glad for it. I wasn’t sure if it would sit with you.”

“No. It’s what I need. You know me all too well.”

“Frida is waiting for you to give her some of those eggs. I can tell.”

“She is, yeah. She can *wait*,” Lucy said to the dog.

Lucy shovelled in food like she hadn’t eaten in weeks. She hadn’t. This was her first day off medication. She could finally eat like a proper human.

“I was thinking we could go meet Gerry and Sheena out on the sailboat,” Winston said. “Unless... you know—”

“Yeah, I dunno. I was thinking we might go look for another dog.”

“What!?” Winston laughed.

“Maybe a fifth dog to keep Holly entertained?” Lucy asked. “I might need a project. Because I’m crazy.”

“I love you for it. We’re officially mad dog people.”

“You made that leap when you got the third dog. And then the fourth because you missed me.”

“We’re having a baby... dog?”

Lucy laughed. “Yeah, I guess.”



ED LAY in bed with Natalie, listening to the street sounds below. Rain hit the window but all he could do was run his pointer fingertip up and down every curve of her body. She lay there, pressed up against his chest, breathing deeply. He had longed for this moment—her, his new place, alone in the peace and quiet. Someone called to a friend below. He thought about what it would feel like if they knew he had the Princess of Wales in his bed, naked as a jaybird. He smiled.

Ed murmured, "As unwholesome as it is with us, I do love you very much, Natalie. In the most wholesome way."

"We had loud sex and I'm lying here naked. Far from wholesome." She stared at him, her green eyes so big and so deep.

He loved them.

"It feels right. I don't know."

"I love you. I would give anything to stay here every night. It's a nice place."

"But it cannot be," he sighed.

"It cannot."

They lay there, Ed still tracing the lines of her soft milky-white skin and her moaning happily when he hit a spot she particularly liked.

"I want a baby," Natalie said out of thin air.

"What?"

"Someday. I want a baby. And I think I want to have it with you. Not anytime soon, of course. I could see myself doing it with you."

Ed paused, confused.

"Well, now I fucked it all up." In a panic, Natalie sat up.

"No, no, wait, Nat. I was... it came out of left field. Yeah, I want kids. I want kids with you if it works out. I love you. If this keeps up, that's the plan, right?"

Natalie shrugged.

"Where did this feeling come from?"

"Stuff. Things. Meeting mothers every day for the past month. It was eye-opening. I decided on it. I dunno. I feel like you would be a good dad. I think I could be a badass mum. Not your normal mum who shows up to class things necessarily, but... I could teach her how to shoot a gun or cook a steak or ride a horse."

"Or fly a plane?" Ed asked.

“Correct.”

“Who says she will be a girl?” Ed laughed.

“I would hope for a baby girl. So much. But I’d take a boy, too.”

“You really are open to the idea?”

“Maybe not with someone else,” Natalie said. “But given how good you are to me and how easy it is to get on with you, I think yeah. Also, I am ovulating and the look of you is always making me horny.”

Ed snickered.

“I will continue to objectify you. I can promise you.”

“I can manage.”

“Ed, I don’t want to go public yet, but I am trying to make it all work. At some point, it won’t. Someday, the press will find out about this beautiful existence. They will follow you needlessly.”

“I know.” Ed traced her face for a moment.

“What?”

“I know they will come for me. And I will probably hate it. But then, I will think back to the last time I had you like this—naked, lovely, willing, sweet—and it will fade away. I will not care.”

She blushed.

“Natalie, I am virtually addicted to the sight, smell, and taste of you. It is altogether distracting. I am so glad I am retired now and can properly focus on something as wonderful as satisfying you in every possible way.”

She bit her lip.

He chuckled. “Tank is empty, Natalie.”

“I figured. Mmm... God, I love you. Can we please run away together and ignore all else for a week?”

“Make it so and I will be at your beck and call. Better yet, make it a place where I can see you in a bikini every day and I

will go down on you relentlessly to say thank you for the visual.”

Natalie giggled. “That is sort of your M.O. I will see what I can do. Oof, sometimes leaving here kills me.”

“Yeah, I’d rather you never leave.” Ed gave her a slow, longing kiss.

“Maybe someday. When they finish my renovation at KP, you can come stay and never leave.”

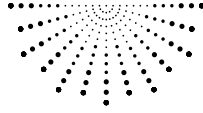
“I’d not mind. You want some sort of bum like me hanging around?”

“You, sir, are the world’s most notable pants model. It would be an absolute honour to have you.”

He snickered. “What does that make you?”

“Your proud girlfriend, pants man,” Natalie sniggered.

DOG MUM



“*W*hy on *Earth* are there five of them?” Rita’s voice rang out across the foyer as she stepped into Winston’s house in Kensal Green.

Mairead Sanchez-Ferguson, often known as Rita or the Duchess of Lauderdale, rarely came so far north in London. She infrequently left zone one. As the Queen’s right hand, she stayed close to the Palace. While her official title was The Mistress of the Robes, she could have been called The Maker or Breaker of Society. Rita knew everyone. The daughter of the previous Queen’s right hand, Princess Sabine, Mairead was in the know on everything. As the Queen’s best friend, she kept nonsense to an absolute minimum. She had little reason to come visit her sometimes antisocial artist son’s digs in North London. He usually came to her.

“The puppy is new,” Winston said.

“Winston, the puppy? There is a black dog there I don’t recognise.”

“I got her while Lucy was out of town. Dreadful backstory, that one.”

“You cannot take in every dog on earth with a devastatingly sad backstory.”

“You sound like Lucy,” Winston sighed.

The fat, happy puppy waded over to his mother and attempted to climb in her lap. The puppy struggled to get up onto the couch. His fat rolls and tiny, useless little legs made it impossible.

Mairead picked him up and plopped him in her lap. “Here you are, darling. What is name and why do you have him? Tell me he is a foster or something.”

“He is Lucy’s puppy,” Winston answered. “She got him because she wanted a puppy and Frida wanted a friend. He’s a puppy mill dog. Look at how his one ear is a mess? We don’t know what happened. But he had an infection. He’s better now. He’s a Shar-Pei. He goes everywhere with Lucy when she’s home. It’s him and Frida following her around like she is a goddess on earth.”

Rita chuckled. “And what is this little cutie’s name?”

“Vince. For Van Gogh,” Winston chuckled. “Lucy’s idea. The black dog is Holly for Warhol.”

“Fitting. Well, she’s adorable, too. So, is she yours or Lucy’s?”

“I mean, they’re our pack of misfits.”

His mother shot him a look. “Uh-huh. Winston, you mean to tell me that the two of you are just getting dogs together now? But there is *nothing* going on?”

Winston crossed his arms, uncomfortably. “Well, we live together.”

“Uh-huh.”

She wasn’t buying it.

Winston wanted to explain what was going on. He had loved Lucy for years. It was only recently Winston had been able to tell her for a variety of reasons. But what *were* they?

“Winston, you mean to say you have no feelings for Lucy and things aren’t already ‘complicated’?”

Yes, they *were* complicated. Yes, they *did* have feelings for one another. Things were far more complicated than either he nor Lucy could explain to anyone without sounding mad and ridiculous.

“Mum, I have it under control. Whatever is going on with us, we’re taking it a day at a time. I can’t say much more than

other than we have a nice life here and we like it this way.”

“Alright. Well, I will once more remind you Lucy is a nice girl. She is also Natalie’s right hand. So, mind yourself. I warned you about this situation—”

“Yes, mother. It’s not complicated in a *bad* way. All is going well. I don’t have a word for it. We are trying to give ourselves some time.”

“While adopting a dog together?”

“I don’t expect other people to get it, okay? Did anyone get you and Bruno when you began? When you decided to have a baby without being married first—in your forties?”

Winston’s sister, Nina was the product of Rita’s second marriage to a man a decade younger.

His mother smoothed out her skirt and shrugged. “Fair point. You clearly have feelings for that girl. I won’t point out the additional complications with her—”

“No, no,” Winston sighed. “I know well what you mean, Mummy. So, what have you brought me?”

“I have brought you a partnership agreement we need to sign since we’re both on the account. This is for the leaseholder,” Rita handed him a pen and paper. “It’s nothing much. I figured I’d be nice since I never get up this way and you said you were in the middle of editing.”

“I appreciate it. But don’t lie. You wanted to make sure I was alive and so were the dogs.”

“I also wanted to tell you your brother has set a wedding date. Did he tell you?”

“He did. June. Back home. We talk all the time. I’m very happy for him. And Sheena, obviously.”

Winston’s younger brother, Gerry, had been in a relationship with Sheena for years. He’d recently proposed. They planned to marry at the local parish church near their family’s estate in the Scottish borders. Winston spent much his early life there until his mother returned to London and enrolled him in school. His parents had an ugly divorce when

he was ten. Winston had a terrible relationship with his own father, but was close to his mother and stepfather, Bruno.

Winston signed the document and handed it back. As his mother's heir, he was often a second signatory. The older he got, the more he did. In general, his younger brother managed the horse breeding operation. Winston wasn't much for the horse business and preferred London to Scotland. He'd have to make the change someday. For now, his brother and mother managed most of the ground game. Winston was an unlikely choice for a duke as an artist with a podcast.

"Well, I will be out of your hair, then. Goodbye little Holly and darling Vince." Rita set the puppy aside and stood.

Winston hugged and kissed his mother. "I promise to come to dinner this weekend, okay?"

"Well, I know I have a better chance since Lucy is scheduled to be travelling with Natalie to Belfast on Sunday."

Winston blushed.

"I won't say it's uncomplicated, Winston," his mother said. "But if you do love her, say it already. And do something about it. Don't hold back. You will never find a perfect arrangement or perfect timing. Lucy is a lovely girl. And you two coexist in relative peace."

It was true. They were great together.

"I will," Winston agreed.



"HELLO, MY BABIES," Lucy laughed, arriving home to her pack of unruly mutts.

Lucy smelled dinner already on offer. It was heaven after a long day at the office preparing for her trip with Natalie to Belfast. The sheer number of engagements and media appearances was daunting. Natalie, now the Princess of Wales, had taken over when her brother, Lucy's ex, abdicated. After much confusion about how her role would work and her

changing from military service to service directly in her father's employ, she was finally settling into the role. Parliament passed the bill granting George's title to Natalie.

Winston laughed as she entered the kitchen. "They've been waiting at the door for you for an hour. You outrank food."

"I'm such a dog mom. What is up for dinner?"

"I put in a chicken and potatoes," Winston replied.

"You're the absolute best." Lucy kissed him quick then helped herself to a glass of wine. "How was editing?"

"I did alright," Winston already poured himself one in her absence. "How was work?"

"Fucking crazy, as per usual."

"Well, you will get to eat dinner as soon as this chicken is ready."

Lucy set the table, flanked by the dogs, as Winston cut the chicken. They were finally ready to eat. Lucy was the better cook, but Winston did okay for himself when he stuck to his strong suits—a proper roast and his Bolognese sauce. The latter of those was legendary.

"Thanks again. This is great," Lucy said. "My compliments to the chef."

"It hit the spot after my sad lunch of biscuits and a bit of cheese. I got lost in my edits."

She smiled. "Much better, then."

"My mum came by. And found Vince. She's now worried about our sanity. And I think she's questioning anything now."

Lucy laughed. "We are crazy. I don't question it. It is confirmed. Five dogs. Three was bad enough. Four was worse. Five is insanity. And what do you mean? Are we not alright?"

Winston sat his silverware down and dabbed his lips with a napkin.

"Well, I mean, what would we say? What could we say, Lucy?"

“I don’t know,” Lucy said. “The truth is too out there for anyone. The only one who has an inkling is Nat. And that’s fine for now but... maybe it is time to talk about it, I guess.”

Winston hadn’t wavered. He still loved her. Lucy supposed she loved him deep down, but she wasn’t sure the *chemistry* was there. She worried they were better as friends. There was also the matter of their histories. Her ex was Winston’s second cousin, the former Prince of Wales. It was an ethical grey area for them both. Lucy wanted to fall for Winston but was always nervous to take the plunge. They’d been on the bubble, trying to figure out life together for the past month.

“I love you, Lucy. I don’t know what more to say. I worry you’re on the fence.”

“I am,” Lucy admitted. “I will be honest with you. All of this—our life—it feels right. I couldn’t imagine a more blissful existence with anyone else. All the domestic discord I’ve had before... it isn’t here. Still, the conflict with your family... it’s a mess.”

“You don’t even know there will be conflict. I’m willing to take the hit for a bit to love you, Luce,” Winston insisted. “But I need more.”

“It’s not the same for you as it is for me, Winston. Natalie is your cousin. She’s George’s twin and his bestie. She’s also my dear friend. And their mother and father are technically the big bosses. If I run off with you and they are offended by my falling for you, I could lose my job.”

“Given my mother suspects something is up, isn’t upset, and is the Queen’s everything, I don’t think that’s going to be an issue, Lucy. She protected your position on staff after George left. She will continue to do so.”

“The King is a dude. This is a potential dude code blow up.”

“You know Vanna is the end-all-be-all and he will defer to her. And Natalie already knows and hasn’t made an issue of it. She’s been supportive of you, right?”

Lucy shrugged. “Not that we’ve talked about it in certain terms. I’ve made it clear I don’t quite understand what *we* are.”

“What are we? If you could name us?” Winston pushed her on it. “What are we, Lucy?”

“I want you to answer first,” Lucy replied.

“No. I asked first! C’mon, Luce.”

“Partners. I’d like us to be able to be partners in every sense of the word but... you’re my partner, Winston,” Lucy said.

“Well, I want the same.”

“You want to call me your girlfriend and make it clear, though?”

“Yes.” Winston shrugged. “I love you. I want to own it publicly. Not to own *you*, but I’d like to be clear we’re together-together not only flatmates, Luce.”

She smiled almost gleefully. “We could give it a shot.”

“Okay. Then can you please move up to my room and let’s call it a day? I want you to. I want to feel like we’re all in. I need it.”

Lucy looked at him, taking in his sweet face. He was always the most loving soul. Lucy could not have asked to be loved by anyone more caring. She never wanted someone to respect her more or to step up when she needed a voice of reason or a helping hand. She had not found anyone more accepting of her bizarre job, her life experiences, or her quirks. Winston was perfect. But was he *too* perfect? And would she ever get to ‘I love you’? She’d never know unless she tried to get there. She’d never get there if she didn’t let her walls down.

“Okay,” Lucy agreed. “If it means so much.”

“What are we holding back for?” Winston asked.

“Nothing, I guess. I worried I would hurt you... and me. You’re right. This feels good. It would be stupid to look a gift

horse in the mouth. You're the best person I know, Winston. And you've been more than patient."

Winston squeezed and kissed her hand. "I love you, Lucy. I've waited this long."

"And that's why I am willing to give it a shot, Winston."

She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. "Partners. In every sense, okay?"



"I DON'T WANT you going but I won't stop you," Ed caught himself as he said it.

It was a terrible admission. He realised immediately he sounded like a controlling prick.

Natalie's eyebrows went up as she spun around from where she was cooking over the hob in the kitchen. "Excuse me?"

Ed cringed. "'I... shit... I didn't mean it like that. I meant it sort of as a joke. I meant... you being away in Northern Ireland for four days sucks. I will miss you."

"Uh-huh," she said, as if she didn't quite believe him.

"I mean it, baby," Ed sighed. "I didn't... I don't..."

"You don't get to tell me what to do." Natalie shook her head and turned back to the wok. "You are truly treading thin ice."

He hated her tone, but he still loved the grumpy version of Natalie. Ed was sad because she was once more leaving. These days, they spent almost every night together either at hers or his. It was so remarkably *normal* despite their abnormal lives. The mundane evenings in with Ed scratched some sort of itch. For Ed, it was everything he could have wanted from a relationship—quality time, great sex, and lots of laughing. What he hated was her mad schedule and being gone routinely.

He was lucky enough to have a flexible schedule. Yet, Ed couldn't travel with her. It was a no-no.

She turned back. "I love you, Edwin. Fiercely. I love you. I miss you when I am gone, trust me. But this is my job. And if you can't handle the job—"

"I can," Ed insisted. "I'm whinging and joking. That's all."

Ed had a remarkable way of putting his foot in his mouth with all women, but especially Natalie. She overpowered him. It was funny. Their dynamic was usually one of her wanting to defer to him. However, if she sensed he would control things, she stamped on the brakes hard. Natalie was strong, she was proud, and she expected respect. He was always trying to make a joke. Sometimes it landed, sometimes he annoyed her.

"You think I am a grump." She pouted in a way that drove him mad.

Ed kissed her forehead. "I don't think that. What I think is you take things literally—an inherited trait—and I am shit at jokes."

She kissed him back, slowly. He had half a mind to turn off the burner and run her to the bedroom. He cupped her bum, and she smacked his hand.

"Down, boy! You'll get what you want but not until I have eaten. I spent all day out, then at the barn, and I'm bloody well exhausted."

Horse girls. She made it sound like a job to play with ponies. Ed admitted it looked complicated. Having sat on a horse only a few times and tried to keep up with Natalie at what she described as a "slow jog", he was humbled. He found the beasts intimidating, but they were everything to most members of her family. From racing to show jumping to polo, the horses reigned supreme. If you wanted to impress a royal, you needed to speak horse.

Ed tapped her on the arse as she turned back to cooking.

"You know, you are lucky I put up with you," she reminded him.

“Oh, I know. And boy, sometimes I’d love to tell people about it.”

“You don’t?” she laughed, knowing full well he did not.

“No. But... no one would believe me.”

She shook her head and declared the food was done. They had a nice meal, drank a couple of beers, and watched the previous episode of *Eight Out of Ten Cats*. Natalie would always miss the words, but she would always whoop him in the numbers. She also loved to gloat. Ed was naturally competitive. He was a swimmer. It was all he had known until retirement. He was *still* a swimmer. Natalie had been a hotshot pilot and the top of her class, though. She was an ace, and she knew it. The two of them could be competitive. It sometimes led to a row.

Natalie got a text. “Hmmm... Winston and Lucy are wondering if we want to meet at that jazz place round the corner. Fancy a drink before you send me off?”

Ed fancied taking her to bed but dared not say it. Upon return, they would have wild sex. He’d touch her ever so slightly in ways she found irresistible over the next couple of hours, ramping her up to the point of no return. It would be worth it. Plus, if he said no, she would whinge. She was adorable when she did. He’d eventually say yes but would have spent political capital he wanted to keep.

“Sure,” Ed agreed.

He pulled on a pair of semi-smart trousers and a different shirt. Natalie, already dressed in jeans and a jumper, didn’t bother. She was so low-key when they went out. On the off chance he was ever somewhere where she was dressed up in an evening gown or nice dress, she took Ed by surprise. In those cases, she didn’t feel like his girlfriend. She felt like Princess Natalie.

“Mmm,” Natalie kissed him before they departed.

“You wanted to get that in?” Ed chuckled.

“I couldn’t help myself.”

They had to be careful in public to avoid possible trouble, walking down the street like friends. All dating took place in groups for plausible deniability. He couldn't show physical affection in public, no matter how badly he wanted. Ed lived for being able to wrap his arm around her or set his hand on her knee. However, he did so at his own peril. He would settle for lightly grazing her back or squeezing her hand under the table. Any slight sign of possession or true expression of PDA was teetering on the edge. There was a fine line to walk. When he did, Natalie responded.

They took a seat in a booth at the back of a club with laid-back cocktails. There was always a band playing—either local jazz or blues. Winston and Lucy, having walked from just north, arrived shortly after. It must have started raining because they were both bundled up for bad weather.

“It’s pouring?” Natalie asked.

“Yes,” Lucy groaned.

“The American hates our weather,” Winston said, jokingly.

“She’s one of ours now. So, you couldn’t spend eight hours without me, Luce? You’ll see me in the morning bright and early.”

“We made a decision about something,” Lucy said. “And sort of wanted to share. Plus, yeah, I wanted a drink.”

Winston nodded.

“We. There is a *we* now?” Natalie looked at Ed.

Ages ago, Ed predicted Winston had it bad for Lucy. Everyone else decided that was an impossibility. He felt vindicated.

“We’re partners,” Winston said, happily. “We’re together. Properly. And we wanted you to officially know.”

“Thank God!” Natalie said. “Christ, it’s been killing me. Ed was right. He predicted it.”

“I never say I told you so,” Ed admitted. “But I’m happy to hear it. You make a nice couple.”

“We figured we should just do it,” Lucy said. “I’m nervous. I am afraid to say anything to his mum because she’s going to tell your mum—”

“Why are you worried about my mum? She adores you. She’d trade one of us for you—specifically George,” Natalie joked.

“Well, because of George,” Winston clarified.

“What? Does George own her? No. I think it is clear you love her,” Natalie said.

They looked at one another, surprised.

“Oh, come on, you do. Don’t you?” Natalie asked.

“I love her, yes. Enough to risk George hating me forever and a day.”

“Well, George is no longer in London. He’s gone to Chicago with Patrick. And Lucy is still here. If you love her, don’t let her go,” Natalie said.

Ed smiled. “I think it’s great. The two of you are good together. She’s a saint. And you’re a good guy, Winston. You’re lucky to have her.”

Lucy made something clear. “I’d like this to come out only *after* we return from Belfast.”

“Why are you worried?” Ed asked.

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Because of George. It’s stupid. You don’t get it. Mum and Dad are both embarrassed with how George handled things.”

“Well, because they were never too keen with him dating staff.”

“Meh, they got over it, Luce. They tend to get over things... even me dating a pants model.”

“I’m not a pants model, Nat!”

The rest snickered.

Ed rolled his eyes. “One deodorant campaign and I’m a pants model.”

“You were shirtless. It was amazing. Own it.” Natalie took his face in her hands and kissed him. It was surprising. It was dangerous. He wasn’t going to say no.

Lucy played handler with a gruff, “Mind yourself, Nat.”

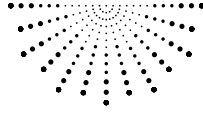
“Oh, shit, sorry,” Natalie said. “God, I was overcome with lusty thoughts.”

“God, please, stop,” Winston whined.

Ed snickered. “You embarrass yourself, baby.”

“And you. But you love me all the while,” Natalie smiled.

CLOSE CAL



Natalie and Ed packed to leave the bar, having had a few. They outstayed Lucy and Winston. When Natalie's detail approached. Her lead PPO delivered the bad news.

"We've got company, ma'am."

"How? How on Earth did they find us up here?" Natalie wondered.

They were out of the view of the front of the club, but Ed would have to get out alive.

"Natalie, I'll take them out the front, you escape out the back."

"Ed, you think they are here for you?" Natalie scoffed.

"Look, Princess, these folks are going to want to secure you first. They can bring the car 'round back. I'm throwing myself in front of the train."

"No, Winslow, no." Natalie shook her head. "We'll hide you."

"*Hide me?*"

"Don't ask questions," Natalie said. "Just listen to orders."

"I'm sorry, Squadron Leader, but this isn't a military exercise—"

"Edwin, do you want to make this worse or listen?" Natalie said, voice short.

He backed off, finally realising Natalie wasn't in a joking mood. The minute he went out there, they would be tied together. Right now, they were linked because Lucy was spotted at the joint and they had visual confirmation of her leaving. They knew Natalie was not too far behind. If someone had called in a spotting, they could implicate Ed now regardless of if they saw the Princess. She hated this. She loathed the running around. She despised the questions and the dodging.

“What do I do then?” Ed said, falling back.

“Um... hide under a blanket in the boot?” Natalie winced.

“Nat, I'm thirty-six fucking years old! I'm not doing that!”

“I don't know what you expect me to do here. It's complicated and—”

“Is it? I love you. You love me. Is it complicated?” Ed demanded as the PPO looked on.

Natalie had been here before years earlier. She had been here throwing *herself* in front of a train. That time, she was convinced the best approach when getting out surrounded was leaving on the arm of her brother's love interest, giving him a hell of a kiss in public and then climbing in a car to leave. Ten years later, the reel would not age well as George and Patrick came out to everyone.

“Where is the car?”

“Out front, ma'am. But we can bring it around- “

“That's fine. I can take it,” Natalie said. “Ed, can you order an Uber?”

“Yeah, of course,” Ed replied, confused.

“Ma'am you cannot ride in—”

“It's not for me. It's for him. And we're meeting up at Ed's. You will drive the long way and sneak in. Ed, you will have the Uber drive you to the train station at Kensal Green, pretend to get on the Overground, and then leave the platform. You have an Oyster card—”

“Yes, I have an Oyster card. I’m surprised you know what one is.”

“I am not an idiot. I do not live under a rock!” Natalie protested.

“Okay, Princess. Take the car to Kensal Green station. Get on the Overground. Uber should be here in about thirty seconds,” Ed confirmed.

“You won’t get on it. You’ll get on the tube to go back to yours.”

“Ah, got it,” Ed said. “Okay. So, I’m walking back in the end?”

“I will be there already in hiding.” She took Ed by the hand, purse slung over her shoulder. “Follow me.”

She pulled Ed behind her, marching through the line of press and keeping her head down. She held onto his hand tight. Natalie was aware what she was doing. She knew there would be hell to pay the next day and the day after. However, she was about to do the thing. If Ed was sick of hiding, she would oblige him. He was a big boy.

Natalie pulled him as far as the car. The door opened and Ed almost went to walk away. She held his hand tight. Grabbing the collar of his shirt and wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him with abandon.

“Fuck,” he whispered, staring back at her.

“Be good,” Natalie said over the sound of the hooting photographers trying to rush them in the middle of the street.

“Be naked when I get there,” he whispered before stepping back.

Natalie was in her car and away on a wild goose chase. They took the motorway and lost the sole chasing car. They had figured she was headed home. They were wrong. Natalie looped back to Ed’s apartment, using the key he’d given her a few weeks before, to let herself in through the back. She climbed up to Ed’s first floor entry and unlocked the second door, making it in. Meanwhile, her security made themselves

comfortable in the convenient ground floor apartment below his flat. Ed owned the entire building. He'd planned to rent it out. Instead, he was renting it to Natalie for a reduced price so she could visit whenever she wanted.

Natalie stripped her clothes and did as Ed asked so, when he finally made it, she was lying on the bed on her stomach, legs kicking playfully behind her, naked as the day she was born.

Ed smirked, taking her in. "I didn't think you'd do it."

"I follow orders, sir," she laughed, flipping over and now lying on her back.

"What the fuck was that then?" Ed asked, shedding his shirt and trousers.

"You said you didn't want to hide so I said, fine whatever, and here we are. You're now dating a princess. Congratulations and welcome to the roving bonfire that is..."

He had jumped into bed and was now pulling her towards him.

"That is my life," Natalie arched her back as he folded her legs around him and thrust inside her.

"Yeah... that's your life?"

"It's yours now, too, Edwin." Her face flushed.

"I know. God, I want you so badly. I wanted this all night and you put me off and put me off."

"Maybe I need a spanking then?" Natalie raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, you'll get one," Ed assured. "There will be plenty of retribution for your behaviour."

She loved when Ed talked dirty. She lived for it as he held her wrists down. She pushed back, always struggling when she was close to keep it all in. He loved watching her get off. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and he kissed her as she began to come down again. It felt so good.

“Flip over and grab the foot of the bed,” Ed told her. Natalie followed his directions, ending up attached to the footboard looking slightly to her left at the mirror on his wardrobe. They were all on display. It was hot.

“You like to watch?” she asked.

“Two angles are better than none,” Ed replied.

He was fabulous. Ed may have been a man of few words except here where she leant him the illusion of control. She wanted to let him pleasure her, knowing her own satisfaction brought him all the happiness in the world. Ed, despite being full of talk, didn't last much longer. He stopped, falling forward and then lightly biting her shoulder before rolling off the bed to deal with the nuisance was the ever-present prophylactic. They might have been able to snog in public like teenagers but there was no way around baby paranoia.

Ed kissed her when he returned. He was loving and sweet.

He wrapped her up in his arms and sighed, “What now?”

“Uh... we pretend everything is normal until the morning when my father calls and shouts at me about the inevitable.”



“YOU ARE BEAMING.” Lucy giggled as she sat on the couch at his place.

Their place. Winston could say that now.

“I am. Because we finally confirmed it. It feels real now,” Winston said.

“I'm glad.”

“I know it has been hard. It's been shit. I don't want you to think this is some sort of power move in which—”

Lucy burst out laughing. It could have been the booze, but Winston was sure it was more.

“What?”

“Just... you... power move? Winston, sweetie, you are big and *could* throw your weight around but you’re a dog dad who sings the ‘time to go on walkies’ song to the dogs when it’s about time to go out.”

Winston had to laugh as she attempted his accent.

“It’s cute when you try to sound English. Try Scottish,” Winston told her.

“No. I would insult your proud people. I can take the piss with The English all day. Winston, I don’t expect this is a power move.”

“Well, I never know—”

“Winston, things have been... off. And complicated. And you’ve gotten no benefit with me.”

“Lucy, *you* are the benefit. I have spent years longing for you,” Winston insisted. “Years. I have wanted nothing more than to call you mine. Not to sound desperate, but I have hung on your every word and basked in you here on this very couch. Okay? I am in no rush. If I’m lucky, I’ll have the rest of our lives together to do all sorts of wonderful things.”

She smiled and nodded. “Okay. I do want to. But... I’m a mess.”

“I can assure you it isn’t. But you’re still putting yourself back together. It’s okay to say you need time.”

“Honestly, though, why? You’ve already seen me naked, Winston. We live together. Does it not bother you—”

“We put cart before horse in so many ways. We are living like a married couple who had sex *once*. I’m basically in love with you and you’re trying to convince yourself it’s okay to try and love me,” Winston said. “Honestly, lots of people wait awhile to have sex after they start dating. I’m not here to pressure you, Lucy. That would make me a rapey dickhead.”

“It’s remarkably common—”

Winston’s tone turned stern. “It’s wrong. Wankers like my dad might posit that. They also would have thought you should

be putting out this entire time. But, Lucy, did you ever feel possessed to do anything to please me?”

“I wanted to be kind and make you food. I would bring you things. Little things, I mean,” Lucy said. “Because I do love you... in some way. I may not still love you in the way you love me. I hope to, but... I do love you, Winston. You are the best person. You are patient and kind and loving. You are probably the most stable and considerate person in my life. When shit hits the fan, you always show up. I have an abandonment complex—especially after George. But... I’m beginning to set it aside. I think that’s why I’m insulating myself right now.”

“I live here, Luce. And I didn’t mean to insinuate you aren’t sweet. You’re lovely. You’re helpful and always so thoughtful. You make me laugh. You are more than enough.”

She blushed and looked down. Lucy was terrible at taking a compliment. Winston always struggled to get her to accept one. Everyone struggled.

“Look, when you get back,” Winston said. “Back from Belfast, I can take you on some proper dates?”

She looked up at him. “Like... normal people? You would take me out... in public? Like... alone?”

“Yes, terrifying, isn’t it?”

“I haven’t been on a date since university,” Lucy said. “Forgive me. I don’t know how.”

Winston realised she was probably right. She and George had never gone public. She had been *rumoured* to be with George, but her plausible deniability was she was a friend of George’s friends and close to his twin. One did not *date* the Prince of Wales. One became *engaged* to the Prince of Wales. It was the same reason Nat and Ed were virtually in always hiding. It was sad. Lucy deserved better.

“I think you will be fine. Yeah, a proper date—in public. Tell me what you want to do or where you want to go.”

“We can go on a normal date,” she said, as if it were a novelty. “We can be normal. I can call you pet names in public

and hold your hand and kiss you?”

Winston chuckled. “Do you have pet names for me?”

“We’ll have to work on it. But I want to have one. I want to do all the normal things with you. Never had that before.”

“Really.”

“Don’t call me Winny,” Winston made a face.

“Or Tony?”

“I feel like you could get away with that—only you and my mother.”

“You must really love me.”

Winston played with the hem of her blouse and nodded. “I do.”

“You’re going to have a harder time to make up a pet name for me. I think possibilities are limited. Don’t call me Lou.”

“What about Lulu?” Winston snickered.

“I’d kill anyone for using it,” Lucy admitted. “Probably anyone but you. We’re ridiculous.”

“We’ve done this backwards, Lucy. I’ll take you on a proper date when you get back from Belfast,” Winston promised.



“LUCY, I must speak with my daughter.” The King’s voice was frantic.

Lucy looked over at Natalie who shook her head and held up a clipboard.

“She’s in the process of her pre-flight briefing, sir,” Lucy said, nervous. “We’re waiting in line for the tower or whatever. I don’t know but given she was in the middle of flight things—”

“Yes, yes, fine. She’s stalling and ignoring my calls while the press office has my head on a spit. Remind her it’s hers on a spit next,” Robbie said, tersely.

Overnight, Natalie had caused chaos. The kiss with Ed on the street had broken the Internet. The reel of them kissing like they were horny teenagers was everything to everyone. Even Lucy’s younger sister had messaged her about it. Natalie was in a good mood, but only because she was also avoiding her father like the plague. Now, he was blowing up Lucy’s phone.

Lucy did not like being the DMZ between the King and his headstrong heir. Natalie felt she had every right to do what she had done. She did. Any normal, healthy girl in her early thirties was going to kiss her boyfriend in public occasionally. Lucy salivated over the idea of doing the same to Winston. She made herself a promise. When she returned, she wouldn’t hold back. She could *date* him. It was a novelty not lost on her.

Royals did not do this. She’d never—not once—kissed George in public the entire time they dated. This was despite the fact George was an affectionate person in private. She assumed it was Ed who was sweeter and a bit more handsy. She didn’t assume Natalie was the instigator. Maybe she was wrong? However, Lucy knew the rules. Natalie poured gasoline and lit the match.

It was further complicated by the salacious nature of their hook up. Ed was a *celebrity*. And he wasn’t *just* a celebrity. He was a national treasure, one of the most decorated Olympians of all time, and super-hot. Most straight women and many gay men would describe him as ideal, handsome, and drop dead gorgeous. Even Lucy wondered how Natalie restrained herself. While Ed was reticent to discuss his ad campaign, it was the elephant in the room.

Together, Natalie and Ed were iconic. They were two beautiful young people. They could have been a power couple. They were also unlikely bedfellows. Royals didn’t date celebrities who posed shirtless for ad campaigns. They avoided athletes. Robert was having a meltdown because his daughter had gone far into left field. What did he expect,

though? Ed was most definitely Natalie's type and his son had left the Firm to live his best life with a footballer.

To the public, it was a big deal because they were a hot couple, and she was clearly head-over-her-heels. For old guard Britons and the terrible press, Ed was now a threat to the line of succession. To that lot, Natalie was a fire breathing dragon of a woman—a loose one not fit for the title. In their eyes, the minute she'd shown the least bit of interest in a bona fide celebrity, she'd gone from national war hero to princess out of control. Ed was recently divorced, making it worse. It was unconventional. It was steamy. The press were running with this primetime soap. They would print money with this story.

Robbie was notified when they landed. The King knew all. He was again blowing up Natalie's phone and Lucy's. While Natalie could get away with ignoring her father, Lucy was compelled to respond now they were on the ground.

"Miss Chandler," the King said. "I *must* speak with my daughter. This is an *order*."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I was getting her on the phone."

"Have her ring me at once!"

The King hung up.

"Natalie, you need to call your dad. He is now yelling at me. I don't need to get into this. If for no one else, please do it for me."

Natalie groaned and picked up her phone, deciding she couldn't outrun her father anymore.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

He went on and on.

"Yes, I understand. I was flying us to bloody Belfast. Do you realise? Also, please stop terrorising my staff. Lucy thinks you're about to sack her. Stop! I need them to be on their best right now not afraid of your moods!"

George wouldn't speak to his father this way. Of course, George never would have defended Lucy so passionately. Lucy wondered if Winston would. She would bet, despite his

easy-going persona, he would have. Lucy had been the protective one. Meanwhile, whether it was good or not, Natalie would take her father to task. She and the Queen were the only ones who would tango with him. And despite the frustration this caused, King Robert just went with it. He wasn't insecure.

Lucy texted Winston they'd arrived. Something about them felt *new*. They had been through so much over the past month and half. Lucy couldn't help but feel butterflies now. They hadn't had sex last night, but now she wished they had. She'd make good on that feeling when she returned home. Instead, she'd spent the first night in his room, curled up in his arms with way too many dogs in their bed. It still hadn't hit her they were a couple. She'd been nervous about it. Now, things felt good. She was happy to be his.

"God!" Natalie hung up. "Lucy, when we get to the house, you will call the press office and sign off on the damn release from us. I am so sick of my father's meddling. He acts like I killed puppies live on air and need to atone for my sins."

Lucy snickered.

"I am sorry he went off on you. He will probably apologise. He knows better."

He knows better. It was always remarkable to hear Natalie openly chide her father. Lucy wished she could be so brave.

"Was it worth it?" Carolyn, Natalie's social secretary, asked.

"Um... yes," Natalie laughed. "We had hot, hot sex after. It was beyond amazing. I regret nothing. Cat's out of the bag. For the first time in my life, I can openly date someone."

Lucy realised it must have felt good. How wonderful it could feel to care about someone and show affection openly!

"Lucy, why are you smiling like that?"

"Oh, sorry. Ignore me," Lucy replied.

"No, no, speak up," Natalie said.

“Winston said he wanted to *date* me. I had to tell him I had no idea what dating felt like because I’d never done it since uni. George and I never got to go on actual dates, you know? It feels all new. I feel like a schoolgirl again.”

“You are grinning ear to ear. Look at you!”

“I am falling in love. Is this normal?”

“It’s amazing.”

“It’s great,” Carolyn added. “I’m with Natalie. This is amazing.”

“I want to go out with him and fall in love with him. I want to *let* myself. It’s frightening.”

“It’s wonderful. Let it happen,” Natalie said. “I felt all of it. You leave something you think is forever. You orient your worldview around a person. Don’t let yourself get in the way, darling. Lean into it. Love him. Embrace it. The two of you are so cute together. It will be wonderful.”

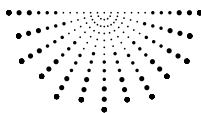
“I wasn’t aware this was a real thing,” Carolyn said.

“We’ve been sort of on the bubble. We ended up having this big moment and then things got complicated.” Lucy shook her head. “So, we’ve been not-together but still acting like we are. He said it was cart before horse and he was right, you know? Because we’re living like an actual couple—old married people—and yet we’re not together. So, we agreed we were partners... in every sense. And... it feels really good this morning.”

“He loves you,” Natalie said. “Ed called it.”

Lucy shrugged. “I only wish we had known it would work. I don’t know. Maybe it won’t.”

FROM PANTS TO PRINCE



For Immediate Release-

After much media speculation, we can confirm that Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales is in a relationship Mr. Edwin Winslow of Notting Hill, London. Clarence House will not respond further to questions, as it is personal matter. However, by confirming this relationship, we ask that the media respect the privacy of Mr Winslow, a private citizen.



“*F*rom pants model all the way to future prince?” John Winslow asked.

“Dad, please. I was never—”

“You always protest. Many people wish they were able to be a pants model,” John noted. “No shame in it.”

“What were you thinking, Edwin?” Margaret asked.

“Mother, I did nothing. I did exactly as I was told.” Ed was irritated.

He and Natalie were out in the open. As predicted, people lost their minds over a simple kiss. It was an amazing kiss, but a kiss all the same.

“That’s a first,” John snickered.

“I don’t know if you know this about Nat, but she can be very exacting. You either listen in a crisis to her or you fail. She’s quite good at... controlling chaos. You don’t argue.”

“You make her sound like a leader,” Margaret said.

“Yes, mother. She was a senior officer in the RAF. And whether I consider it or not, she will be queen. She’s downright authoritative. I only did what she told me to do. She drug me through the paps after I called a car. *She* kissed *me*. I did not kiss her. If you watch the damn video, that much is obvious. Wait, don’t! I’m mortified!”

John chuckled. “You were married to Arabella. I would hope you got up to more than that before.”

“Yes, Dad. I’ve had sex before.”

Sunday roast was less-than-ideal, but Ed was determined to catch up while Natalie was out. His mother had practically killed him with her usual guilt trip.

“I bet the King is livid, huh?” John asked.

Ed took a big swig of this drink. “He was unimpressed, to say the least. Blindsided, but Natalie does as Natalie does. No one really controls her.”

“He will need to handle her.” John shook his head.

John’s wife rolled her eyes. “She’s not obedient? Shocker! Dangerous woman!”

“Dad, have you handled Mam? I think the King can pick the hills he is willing to die on—like you. As strong willed as Natalie is, you’ll only anger her. She’s terribly clever. If you dig in, she will best you strategically.”

“I am impressed he lets her talk back at all,” Margaret said. “I think he’s a vestige of the colonial past that should go by the wayside but... at least he’s not an ogre.”

“If he did, he’d start a mutiny.”

John cocked his head. “With whom? Who on earth would challenge him. Doesn’t he run the Firm?”

“You underestimate how much influence the Queen exerts.”

“I always thought she was very well behaved and never spoke out of turn. She’s perfect for the role.”

“You’re mistaken, Dad. He defers to her. Natalie describes her father as obsessed with her mother—always has been. Based on my interactions with them, I agree. She’s not a pushover.”

Margaret smiled. “Good. I always worried for that girl. Her mother-in-law loathed her. And you all know what I thought of Queen Maggie—”

Edwin winced. “Mother, please never share these opinions with Nat and her family.”

God forbid she ever meet them properly.

“I think that is quite old news, Margaret. So, what is it like, son?”

“Is what like?” Ed wondered.

“Dating a princess?”

“It’s life,” Ed shrugged. “The press are a small price to pay.”

John guffawed. “A small price?”

“To see her openly? Yes.”

“Why don’t you have Natalie over for dinner next weekend?” Margaret asked.

“Can’t. She’s in Stockholm. I am debating going with. I’d tag along—not officially.”

“Ed, you are the laziest man—”

“Dad, she’s travelling all the time and I’m the one with the flexible schedule. Besides, I’m doing those swim club visits next week. It’s not like I’m doing nothing,” Ed asserted.

“Well, the week after?”

“She’s in Paris.”

“When is she not somewhere?” his mother asked.

“Schedule mid-week.”

Margaret scowled. “Who schedules a dinner in the middle of the week?”

“Her parents... for the reasons I described to you. Natalie’s schedule is madness. She won’t be free until Christmas. Even then, Christmas is a family-only event. I won’t see her.”

“Yes, they do the stupid Christmas walk.” John rolled his eyes. “Archaic.”

Ed said, “She’d agree. I’m sorry. It’s a busy time of year.”

“So, when do you see her?”

“Whenever I can, Mam.”

“It seems odd to have a girlfriend you cannot see. That’s all I’m saying, love.”

“Yes, I know, Mum. But... it’s fine. It’s better than fine. Worth it.”

“You’ve traded up. Not sure why she’s with you, though.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Dad, for all the confidence.”

“What, what? You’re a divorced-athlete-turned-pants-model with a modest trust fund, a spartan house, and an electric car. Your girlfriend is a Princess with a duchy printing money, a palace, and a classic Ferrari.”

Margaret snickered. “Don’t forget the plane.”

“She doesn’t live in a palace—not at present.”

“Will she not be?” Margaret asked. “I am sure she will again someday.”

“Semantics. You understand my point, Edwin. You know, you’ll never run for office as it stands.”

Ed snapped his fingers. “Oh, damn. Guess I gave up the ghost too soon.”

“You’d do well to try.”

“Jonathan, he’s too introverted.”

“No. I hate politicians. She and I have that in common. You, father, are my greatest liability.”

“Oh, really? Not your mother and her motor mouth?”

Margaret slapped John’s arm. “You mind yerself! I am your best patron.”

“You’re also the love of my life, darling. Did I mention that?”

“Nice attempt at a save, Dad.”

His parents weren’t normal. It was not quite a marriage of convenience but gave John the financial capital to rise to cabinet minister. In contrast, Margaret was a horrible gossip often turning the screws. Born into a wealthy republican family in Belfast, Margaret could not be tempered. Ed did not wade into their marital waters. Compared to his parents, Natalie’s family seemed downright average. Ed was desperate to keep a wall between the two camps. Meanwhile, his parents were intent on getting into Natalie’s good graces. Ed tried to prolong the assured sense of calm that came with a lack of parental meddling. It would be a long time before he willingly brought her into his own family life in any real way. They were fascinated. Ed was reticent.



“IF I TELL YOU SOMETHING, can you keep it quiet?” Winston asked Gerry.

“What?”

The men stood facing their mother’s extensive museum-like liquor cabinet.

“Lucy and I are... dating.” Winston said.

He brimmed openly since Lucy agreed to it. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but Lucy was not ready. Gerry was different case. Lucy would tell Natalie, meaning Gerry was Winston’s one tell.

Gerry patted Winston on the back so hard he almost dropped his glass. “Well, fucking finally, bruv! You got brave?”

“Yes. I mean, it’s been a long time coming,” Winston said. “We weren’t sure what to do. This wasn’t instantaneous. We took time to consider it. Lucy wanted to be cautious because of our whole living-together-in-harmony thing.”

“Well, I’m happy for you. Your whole ‘thing’ was strange. It’s like the two of you are old married people.”

“It’s a bit like that, yeah.”

Their sister Bernadina approached with a cocked eyebrow. “What is a bit like what?”

Nina, as she was known, just started university. She was home for the first term break. Only their second biological siblings, she was their full sibling in heart. She’d won the genetic lottery with Rita and Bruno, Gerry’s Mexican-Swiss expat stepfather. Unlike her brothers, she was compact. More like her father, she had a tanner complexion with fewer annoying freckles. She was the lone non-ginger child. She had their mother’s cheekbones and big blue eyes that could win her anything. She was the baby and they certainly spoiled her. Nina was smart as a whip and quick with a comeback.

Winston shifted his weight nervously. “Nothing.”

“Don’t be a wanker. Tell me. I hate when you infantilise me.”

Gerry looked at Winston, who relented. “You have to promise to tell no one.”

“Oooh, a secret!” Nina rubbed her hands together.

“Lucy and I are dating.”

“What? Georgie is going to punch you in the face!”

Bruno entered the room at the worst time.

“Why is Georgie going to punch someone?”

“Winston is dating Lucy!”

“Nina! I told you not to—”

“Loose lips sink ships,” Gerry sighed.

Sheena, following Bruno, perked up. “Wait, you and Lucy? Really? FINALLY!”

Their mother was the last to bother them. “What now?”

Bruno looked chuffed. “Winston and Lucy are dating.”

“Winston, darling, you told me—”

“I told you what my best information at the time was. We had a conversation before she left for Belfast and—”

Rita beamed. “Good.”

“You cannot say anything to Cousin Vanna!”

“Oh, I can,” Rita said. “But I won’t. I am assuming this is coming from Lucy?”

Winston shrugged.

“Vanna would never take it out on the poor thing. She adores Lucy. Robbie would lose his mind if we lost her. Natalie is completely reliant on Lucy for getting places and knowing things.”

“George is gonna be cross!”

“Nina, calm down. Don’t be ridiculous. He’s with someone else—”

“Men are idiots about possession, though!”

Bruno was noticeably quiet.

Rita looked at her husband. “What?”

Bruno shrugged. “I sort of agree with Nina. And perhaps the difference is a cultural one? But if I started dating my cousin’s ex-girlfriend, he’d have every right to be pissed off.”

“Look, I am not saying he will,” Gerry said. “But as his best mate, I can say dear George can be rather petty. It comes from insecurity. Expect some blowback. Don’t let that stop you. Lucy took the high road so well. George is loving his life. She deserves happiness, too. As do you.”

“She’s a saint,” Sheena said. “She deserves someone who will take care of her and put her first. Besides, Natalie has been protective of Lucy. She’ll tell George to fuck off.”

Bruno snickered.

“What? We should all be terrified of Cousin Natalie,” Nina said. “In the zombie apocalypse, I’m nominating her as leader.”

Rita sighed. “Even if he whinges, there is no ownership of women in this world. We don’t own people. Vanna and Robert won’t tolerate such nonsense from any of the kids. He can go pound sand. Vanna would tell him as much.”

“Yes, but is it a moral grey area?” Gerry wondered.

“No,” Sheena said. “Not unless you’re a knob or a misogynist who believes shagging someone grants ownership. And if genders were reversed, then what? This pool is so shallow. Everyone shags everyone anyhow.”

The dating pool for aristocrats and royals was more kiddie pool than ocean.

Rita waded in. “Duncan lost out to Robbie on Vanna—famously—and ate crow for punching Robbie in the face over it. I doubt Robbie would even let it be said.”

“I still cannot believe Duncan and Robbie fought over Vanna.” Gerry shook his head.

“I can. She was the prize of the summer. She was drop-dead gorgeous—still is. Who didn’t want her that year?” Rita chuckled. “Bringing her back here was the best thing I could have done for her.”

Bruno sighed, “Don’t break your arm patting yourself on the back, baby.”

“Well, if that’s the case, who do you have to thank for the introduction to Lucy?” Sheena asked Winston.

Winston groaned. “George.”

Nina pointed at Winston. “See, grey area!”

“It’s not!” Rita rolled her eyes. “Winston, be happy. Ignore anything anyone says. It’s far from a scandal.”

Winston felt little guilt. Yes, she was George’s ex. Yes, he loved George. They were raised together since infancy. Winston didn’t owe George. George didn’t *own* Lucy. She had complete agency, right? She got to make the choice. Winston hoped Gerry was wrong. Meanwhile, he would not apologise for loving Lucy. He was incapable.



NATALIE SPENT her time in Belfast answering questions about Ed Winslow. She had not expected people to care. Then again, Ed was half-Northern Irish, the product of an interfaith union with parents who had *very* different political opinions on issues of state sovereignty. Natalie gave little thought to macro geopolitics her entire life, so this was a new foray. She had always been a warm body following orders.

Ed was a local hero in Belfast even if he didn’t *know* it. People everywhere wanted to talk about Ed. She expected the paps and tabloids to go mad and torture Ed. She didn’t expect constituents to treat him as a future consort from the get-go. People spoke with Natalie as if he was already on deck for deployment. This was challenging. After all, Natalie had never confirmed a relationship publicly. A blog—*Based*—known for its nastiness, proclaimed, “She’s probably not gay!”

No, she was *not* the gay twin.

Ed was a saving grace. He was an unusual choice, but a beloved one. Ed was a national treasure and a media sweetheart. Shirtless pictures and divorce aside, he was well-liked.

When Natalie returned to London after her time in Belfast, she was encouraged by the success of their relationship’s “launch”. Ed tolerated it, relieved he could come and go as he pleased—more or less.

Natalie arrived home to her digs at Clarence House late and immediately went to bed. After she texted Ed a simple status update, things got steamy fast.

I'd be glad to run over there and eat you out.

Natalie seriously contemplated the offer. Alas, there was a 9 AM all hands with her father the next morning. At the same time, she only had about 36 hours before she had to leave to go to Stockholm.

9 AM, baby. I'm in early.

I could be there in 20. You know you want me.

She *did* want him. Natalie looked over at her nightstand. She pulled out her most diligent vibrator. It was too late. Asking him to come there was too much. As soon as she turned it on, it died. She tried her second-in-command. It was dead, too.

“Fuck!” Natalie groaned and texted him again.

You can't be serious!

I could show you how serious I am.

Fine. Get over here.

Leaving now!

Somehow, this was easier than going to sleep sexually frustrated. God, he was *so* good at oral. She craved it now.

Ed arrived, not fucking around. “I'm glad you're home.”

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

“I am, too. I have little time and even less patience.”

Ed pinned her against the wall. They did not make it to the bedroom. Ed kissed Natalie deeply, one hand cupping her face. She bit his lip as he pulled back a bit and moved the other hand down her torso. She bit his lip harder still as he put his

hand up the oversized t-shirt she was wearing as a nightgown. She breathed harder, panting as he kissed her neck.

“Take you knickers off. “

Natalie was surprised by his demand but tossed them aside. He dropped to his knees, pressing her against the wall and buried his face into her pussy unexpectedly. She pushed her head back hard into the wall and arched her back. Standing on her tip toes, she let him lick and suck as much as he wanted to, almost reaching climax before he stopped.

She panted, “Why are you stopping?”

He stood back up. “Because. I wanted you to wait for me.”

Natalie almost wanted to smack him. However, the way he was looking at her, she couldn't have been too cross. God, why was he so gorgeous? Why did he make her so *weak*? She hated how much she yearned for him. Ed's chill lack of awareness to this fact added to the mystique. Ed picked her up and pressed her into the wall, pushing her against it. She wrapped her legs around him, still so close. Ed knew this and basked in the power of it. She hated and loved him for it all at once. It didn't take long before Natalie swore she saw stars.

“Oh, Ed, don't stop,” she moaned, digging her nails into his back.

She came, feeling like rubber. It was taking every bit of her remaining wits to stay upright against the wall. The visual of Natalie losing it made Ed climax soon after. He stopped, pinning her to the wall. Ed slowly dropped her body until both her feet were firmly on the floor. He panted and attempted to pull himself together.

“Have you done that a lot?” she asked, also out of breath.

“No. Never,” Ed said. “I've seen it in... well, I've seen it.”

“In porn. You can say porn, Edwin. We're not five. I'm not going to rag on you for wanking to dirty movies. In fact, if you hadn't come her and my vibrator hadn't been without a charge, I would have probably found some myself and gone to town. Or, rather, just thought of you eating me out tirelessly. That usually does it.”

Ed blushed and shook his head. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Why? Why would it?”

“Some women get... upset about it.”

“I’m not your ex. There is no way a video of some woman with fake tits is going to compete with me. I’m way more fun.”

Ed chuckled. “You are so different, Nat. You called it.”

“I found your porn stash. In your wardrobe while I was looking for a shirt to steal. How is it your own *physical* porn? How fucking old are you?”

“I’m a pensioner in the swimming world.”

“A pensioner who can fuck me against a wall. Oh, take me then,” she giggled.

“I thought you were tired. That you didn’t have time? And now... exuberant?”

“Oh, you did me good. I can’t possibly wind down. It’s a blessing and a curse, Edwin.”

“You are odd. And I love you.” Ed gave her a quick, sweet kiss. “So do you want me to get lost?”

“Can you rub my feet while we watch some telly?”

“Rub your feet?!” Ed feigned surprise before smiling. “Yes, Nat, I can.”

She gave him an excited kiss and then sat down on the couch.

“I missed you. I’ll miss you again. God. I swear you are more gorgeous than you left me.”

She put her feet up on his lap. “I am haggard, my makeup is gone, and—”

“No, you’re lovely. I’d have you no other way, Nat.”

She blushed as he rubbed her feet. They flipped through the channels, landing on a panel show. Their life felt like the perfect balance of white-hot sex and domestic bliss. With her ex, she’d had domestic bliss and good sex. It would never have

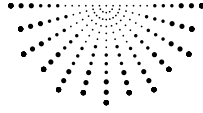
been described as white hot. He never would have gotten on his knees to eat her out or fucked her against a wall. Natalie didn't want to call it, but she could get used to this. It was perfectly peaceful.

“What will I do without you again?” Ed sighed.

“I think you'll be liberating your old-man porn stash, yeah?” Natalie giggled.

“Don't you judge!”

A REAL GIRLFRIEND



Lucy crawled into bed late next to Winston, afraid to wake him. He'd been passed out when she arrived. She'd debated whether waking him was selfish, but he was insistent he wanted her up in *his* room now. So, along with the puppy and Frida, she climbed into bed. Winston groaned a bit and then wrapped his arms around her like tentacles. He held her close. She faded into his arms, falling asleep right away. The tour was a slog. She desperately needed the sleep.

She awoke to the brutal sound of her alarm the next morning. Winston grumbled and moved next to her.

"Sorry, sorry," Lucy insisted. "The King scheduled this morning meeting and—"

She hopped out of bed.

"No, no, it's fine."

He curled up in a ball. It was sort of adorable. Winston had a large footprint. And there he was, sleepy-eyed.

"Hi," she said, lovingly.

"Hi. I missed you."

Lucy bent down and kissed him. "I missed you, too. And I swear, tonight, I will be much less distracted and—"

"Let me take you out," Winston said.

"What? No. You don't have to—"

He lay on his side, propped up on his elbow. "I want to."

“Oh... okay,” she agreed.

“I will plan it. All you must do is show up.”

“Well and know what to wear.”

“Correct,” Winston said.

“So... you’re taking me on... a date?”

Winston nodded. “Does that suit?”

Lucy blushed. “Yes.”

She was touched. It had been so long since a man had taken her out and about like a proper lady. She hopped on the Tube, trying to make it in one piece and avoid traffic. It meant a longer walk to a different station, but the weather was fine, and she wanted to bask a bit. On her walk, Winston texted.

How does dinner and a musical sound?

A musical? Willingly?

She passed the security checkpoint, flashing her badge at the gate. Everyone knew who Lucy was.

Her phone buzzed as she made it inside.

Yes. Six is on. I can get tickets. Mum is on the board.

She was thinking about what to text when she heard Natalie.

“What are you grinning about? Biting your lip and looking adorable, eh?”

Lucy looked up and flushed bright red.

“Winston is texting you, huh?”

Lucy shrugged.

“Uh-huh.” Natalie said, far too animated for this time of day.

“Are you a bat? Do you ever sleep?” Lucy clapped back.

“No. I work well on five hours. I can be sleep-deprived for days and still best everyone at target shooting. Just watch me!”

“I’d rather not be sleep deprived. Whatever you do, wherever you go, so must I. No thanks.”

Natalie tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Stockholm is gonna be bomb as fuck. We shall have a blast. Yes?”

Lucy smiled a bit.

“You missed him. You *actually* missed him!”

“I did.”

“Ah! Oh my God, I love this. I love this.”

“He’s taking me on a date.”

“A proper date?”

Lucy nodded. They let out an out an excited squeal.

“He’s taking me to see *Six*.”

“Oh my God, yes, darling. Yes. Okay, let’s get you dressed for this. What are you wearing? Something that makes you look divine, obvi,” Natalie said. “Hmm...”

“I don’t know. I purged my closet.”

“What? Why?”

“Stuff George bought me. Wasn’t feeling right. I sent a big box to my sisters in the post. I now have like 15 pieces of clothing.”

“We can sort it out later. A breakup purge—finally. You *must* be serious.”

“I wasn’t at the time,” Lucy admitted. “But it felt right. I needed to do it.”

“Ah! A date!”

“A real date. In public! It’s a novel concept.”

“We will have to double. When we get back, I mean. Because we officially can now. Something nice? Fun.”

“I think we could yeah. Is it weird I am excited?”

“No. You *should* be! It should be exciting and romantic!”

“What should be?”

Lucy looked over to see Queen Vanna. *Oh, no!*

“Lucy has a proper date,” Natalie said. “We’re just planning now. She needs an outfit. She’s going to spend time at the theatre tonight.”

“Oh, really? Lucy that’s wonderful,” Vanna said. “And who is the guy? Anyone special?”

“She won’t tell you even though she should.” Natalie elbowed Lucy in the ribs playfully.

“Oh, why? Unless he’s a serial killer or an ogre, what’s the issue?” Vanna laughed.

“Luce, c’mon. She’s going to find out. His mum is going to squawk.”

“Wait, his mum knows!?”

“Sheena knows so I’m assuming—”

“I’m going to murder him.” Lucy groaned.

“Who is it? It’s clearly someone we know,” Vanna said. “I don’t know who his mum is but... wait. Does Rita know? Are we talking about Rita?”

Lucy blushed in an incriminating way.

“Oh, it’s Winston,” Vanna guessed. “Is it? Well, that makes all the sense in the world, Lucy. Oh, I’m happy for you both.”

“She was paranoid you’d be cross with her!”

“I’m sorry if it makes it all weird. We are dating in a weird cart-before-horse way. We decided to give romance a shot since everything else was downright idyllic.”

Vanna smiled. “Well, that’s wonderful. Why would I be offended?”

“Well, George and Winston are cousins—”

“And he’s Rita’s son!” Vanna laughed. “Oh my God, he would deserve someone as sweet as you. She must be over-

the-moon. I'm his godmother. I'd be a lousy godparent for being upset."

Rita arrived outside the conference room.

"Are we gossiping?" She whispered and rubbed her hands together.

Vanna smacked her arm. "Mairead, thanks for leaving me in the dark!"

"About what?"

"Winston and Lucy. I heard they are dating!"

"She guessed," Lucy winced.

Natalie snickered. "We assume you know."

"Yes, but I was sworn to secrecy by my son, so... I was on good behaviour for fear he would get cross. I am chuffed."

"She was worried," Natalie said.

"Oh, stop. Why? Darling, Bruno and I have wanted to hear this news for months. Thank you for finally putting him out of his pining, unrequited misery. All I ask is you be good to him. I know you will be."

"I intend to be," Lucy said. "So very much."



WINSTON ENDURED a performance put on by all of Henry Tudor's wives. It was interesting even if not his preferred way of going. It was worth it to see Lucy happy. She beamed. He was now in on the jokes. Lucy, Natalie, and Sheena regularly quoted the soundtrack. Lucy loved it. That alone was worth the trip and the suit for the evening.

They grabbed drinks after the show and Lucy was still all smiles.

She sipped her gin cocktail. "So, like are you any relation to the Tudors? I know it's like... different?"

“No, unless there is something I don’t know,” Winston said. “My late grandmother was *not* the biological child of Princess Bethany of Kent. So, she wasn’t Queen Margaux’s full biological sister. Instead, she was her father’s niece. He adopted her as an infant after her mother died. She was raised a princess and had the title, but she wasn’t related to the royal side of the family. The Duchy isn’t connected to the Tudors. It was instead connected to the Norwegian house. My great-great-great grandmother was a Norwegian Princess. Given that line and intermarriage... a tiny bit? Through the British line and then the Norwegian line.”

“Wild.”

“What about your family?”

“Um... who knows? Americans. My dad was Scots Irish... supposedly. My mum’s family is straight up Polish. That’s pretty common in Chicago. They immigrated in the early 1900s, but you can still find my grandmother and mother making pierogi together.”

“What is that?”

“Dumplings. Amazing, delicious dumplings.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Winston replied.

“Much better food culture than Scots Irish, you must admit.”

He chuckled in agreement. “You are closer to your mum’s side?”

Lucy nodded. “We don’t talk to my dad’s side. He doesn’t have any siblings. But if you think your family is big, I have 25 cousins.”

“First cousins?” Winston looked shocked.

She nodded.

“Are they... Catholic?”

“Don’t say it like it’s the end of the world, okay? I’m not a practicing Catholic so you needn’t worry. I’m not really anything.”

“But were you baptised Catholic?”

Lucy shrugged. “Yes. They were Poles and brought religion with them. My mom went to Catholic school. It was awful, I think. I was a public-school kid. I could go to mass and know what to do but I don’t consider myself Catholic. My mom does. Her whole family does.”

“So, like married in the church sort of?”

“Oh, my parents weren’t because of my dad. They conveniently dance around that topic. But if I ever marry, it will be a topic of conversation. It was a controversy with George. I avoided talking about it. He never met my family. I never should have told you this—”

“No, no, it’s okay. I don’t care, Luce. It’s not complicated. You would have had to convert. His mother thinks rainbows shoot out your arse.”

Lucy snickered. “That is ridiculous.”

“It’s the truth,” Winston reasserted.

Winston wasn’t sure what to say. The idea of someone marrying in as a Catholic was not unheard of. Bruno had been raised Catholic but was an atheist. Winston’s mum was firmly C of E but baptised in the Church of Scotland. Winston had been baptised at St. George’s Chapel in Windsor and raised C of E. It baffled him to think of anyone as culturally Catholic. It would have been a massive scandal had Lucy married George. In fact, Ed’s mother being a Catholic was a big deal. However, they would have gotten over it.

“You never told George?”

She shook her head. “God, that sounds awful.”

“It doesn’t sound awful. No judgement. I’m just... I would have thought it would come up early on.”

“We were kids. At least... I was. I was an innocent, clueless virgin. I had been a good girl—a nerd. George was exciting and fun. To make it work, I contorted myself into this role of perfect would-be princess. I realise now—older and

wiser—I couldn't have kept it up forever. It speaks to the level of vulnerability we both had.”

“Or the level of *denial*?” Winston winced.

“Fair, fair. Look, I'm no saint. I've lived a life. I've made poor choices. I am a full-grown woman now. I admit I have much to learn.”

Winston smiled slightly. “We all do. I spent ages denying I was a weird hipster attempting to fit myself into a god damn box. I dated girls who bored me. I dated the girls society *expected* me to. George and I have that in common.”

“So, I'm not the expectation?”

“George and I are different there. At least we were. I was allowed to be wild and exciting. My family has money and power, but we're not royals. George's family has money and power but is inherently stoic and conservative. Whoever married in would need to be unimpeachable—a Vanora type. You would have fit the bill wonderfully. But would you have been happy?”

Lucy shrugged. “Not if George wasn't happy. I love my job. I may have gotten bored.”

She took a long sip. “So, why am I unexpected?”

Winston joked, “You're too good for me. You're ambitious, you're motivated, and a task master. You're beautiful, yes. That's expected. You're different. You're stable and well-behaved. I think no one saw it coming for me since I'm a weirdo. I... uh... I was wild earlier in life, you know?”

“I do recall.”

“I want a family. I want to settle down. I don't want to be dating models focused on their shoe collections. I'm not talking about people like Nira, but... a certain type. I fancy them, but there is nothing *there*.”

He referred to another second cousin, Nira, a semi-retired supermodel. She was a book nerd and outspoken critic of the shitty press.

“She's smart. A nerd. I get it,” Lucy smiled.

“Yeah. I am too old for that shit. And those women wouldn’t have been capable putting up with the estates, the business dealings, or playing duchess. Touch wood, my mother will be a duchess for many years.”

“She’d have to be duchess material, then?” Lucy joked.

Winston ran his finger around his rocks glass. “Yes. I’m not vetting potential women through that lens. I just don’t think I could be with someone who couldn’t handle it long term. I didn’t choose to be born first, but I was.”

Lucy understood. “Compatibility in this world plays a role, Winston. You want to raise your kids in a nice, loving household. You want to have a happy partner. My parents fought *all* the time. Marriage meant constant discord, shouting, and my mother making herself small. As I see it, I did that last one with George.”

“I can see why you might be primed for it.”

“It’s going to sound so weird, but getting to know George’s parents was... it was important for me. I had never seen a normal relationship modelled. His parents love and respect one another as equals. I was unprepared to see the King defend the right of his daughters to just *be*. It’s weird. My father was career in the military. If one of us had decided to serve, he would have tortured us for it.”

“Really?”

“That’s not what girls *do*. He doesn’t agree with us all being working professionals. We should marry and pop out babies.”

Winston choked on his drink. “That seems unlikely for any of you. None of you are shrinking violets.”

“I know. Dad controlled Mom, so we chose to make our own money.”

“My mother would echo your comment,” Winston said.

“Not to take the piss but your mother is worth billions. She was the daughter of a duke and a princess. It’s different when your parents couldn’t even afford to buy a house,” Lucy said.

“I don’t talk about being raised poor because it makes people uncomfortable, and I hate sympathy. Like, I’m not a charity case. I...”

“You worked so hard. I know. It is something we all admire about you. Forgive us if sometimes we... we forget about the fact your family isn’t flush with cash. I’m clueless, Luce.”

“I know. You also aren’t a dickhead.”

“Thanks?” Winston laughed.

Lucy smiled and changed the subject. “I’m falling for you in every way. I love how gentle and kind you are. I adore patient you have been. I won’t take you for granted, Winston.”

“I know. You aren’t the type.” Winston smiled back.

They packed and left, returning home. *Their* home. Winston had painstakingly reworked an old parish church into a beautiful home. He fell in love with the area. He melted at the light coming through the remaining stained glass. It was perfect for him, but Lucy fit right in. She was lovely as could be.

Winston gave her a long kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. I’m also not putting you off, but I am knackered and—”

“I want it to be good. The next time we... I want it to be good. I know you aren’t putting me off. Besides, I don’t expect anything but a kiss after a first date.”

“Okay,” she laughed, “third date rule as a target?”

Winston couldn’t have been upset with her. He wouldn’t have turned her down, but he did not expect it. It was an excellent first date. They could talk all day and night. Winston could have hung on her every word forever. The thing that made it different—for better or worse—was they climbed into his bed at the end of the night, separated in part by a host of dogs who shared the bed these days.



LUCY LEFT the shower the next morning when Winston entered the room she used to call home, about to ask a question. He realised she stood topless in her panties, trying to get her shit together and leave the house. Cue awkward moment. What were the rules? Lucy wasn't sure. Winston turned away nervously.

“I am so so sorry. The door was—”

“Hey, it's no big deal. You've seen... it's not a big deal,” Lucy stammered.

“Yes, but... I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable,” Winston said.

Lucy pulled on her bra. “No, no, I left the door open. I thought you would sleep in and—”

Winston turned. “I was only going to ask if you had time to grab breakfast.”

“I could grab a pastry, but I have to get to the airport—”

“Let me drive you.”

“You don't have to. Really- “

“I want to,” he said. “I'll miss you anyway.”

She smiled, unable to tell him no. It was sweet.

“Look, there are no rules here, I get it. But... I think we should agree we've both seen the other naked. So, there's no need for modesty. I'm not bothered by it.”

Lucy straightened her dress and stared at Winston as he gazed at her sweetly.

“Are you... are you listening, Winston?”

Winston shook his head. “Yes, I am sorry. You look great. I... sorry, Luce.”

Lucy gave him a kiss. “Let’s grab food on the way to the airport. Can we bring Frida?”

Winston guffawed. “Everyone else will hate you.”

“I don’t care.”

She and Winston departed with Frida, stopping for coffee and breakfast sandwiches at a cosy café up the road.

“When you get back, I’d like to take you out but...”

“I’m going to America soon after. Yes.”

They drove on, listening to Frida knock back the small piece of baguette they brought her.

“Um... one idea. And I am sure you’re like... super busy but... I mean, you could come *with* me?”

“With you? I don’t have a bag—”

“Not to Stockholm. To Chicago,” she answered. “Like for the week I am there.”

“You want me to come with you?” He looked surprised.

“Yeah, I mean, I think it’d be fine. Don’t judge me by my family. My mom and sisters love you but... my dad. And... yeah.”

Winston hosted her sisters and mother in summer as a buffer for Lucy.

“Would your parents put me up? I don’t want to cause trouble...”

“Winston, I’ve booked a hotel. It’s not the ritz, but it’s a nice room at a suburban hotel. So, you could theoretically come and not engage?”

“God, no. An American Thanksgiving? It sounds brilliant!”

“So, you’re on board?”

Winston nodded.

“This is either the best or worst decision I will make. We can plan to do something fun in Chicago.”

“I hope it’s the best,” Winston said. “Could be a disaster. We’ve never travelled together.”

“I know. Could be fun?”

“I’m down if you’re down,” Winston said.

“I am, yes. Hell, I’ve never brought anyone home. They’ll be relieved I have a boyfriend I haven’t run off yet.”

“Luce, you and George were together for years and years,” Winston said.

“And they don’t know. Nor will they. I can’t handle them saying anything about it. My mother doesn’t understand bisexuality. As in, she doesn’t think that’s a *thing*. Don’t make me explain all of this because it doesn’t make a lick of sense and—”

Winston snickered. “Nothing has to make sense. When you meet my dad, you will understand.”

“I get the feeling he’ll hate me.”

“Why, Luce? You’re lovely!”

“You describe him as a snob. After spending a week with me back home, you will be aware I am not from money. I am far from posh. You’d be smart to keep me far away.”

“I promise you if he ever says anything at all to you, I will tell him to fuck right off,” Winston insisted. “He’d be so lucky to have you and Sheena both in the family. I probably won’t subject you to him if I am smart. But... it’s not because you aren’t wonderful. It’s because you *are* wonderful and I would like to keep you, Lucy.”

Frida climbed on the centre console to kiss Lucy’s cheek.

Lucy laughed. “Well, hello, do you feel left out?”

“She is worried Mummy is about to leave her again.”

Lucy played with Frida’s ears. “Before you know it, darling, I’ll be home. Wait... who will watch the dogs?”

“I’ll call the dog sitters,” Winston said. “While you are up there. We’ll get it worked out.”

“We have *five* dogs.”

“I am well aware, Luce.”

“Who are we?”

“The pet parents to five dogs.”

They reached the gate of the private terminal and handed over their IDs. Lucy explained the situation and they were waved through to the waiting plane.

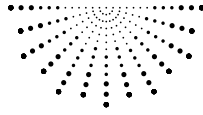
“I gotta go,” Lucy leaned to kiss Winston.

He returned the favour, giving her a kiss that made her tingle and wish she didn't have to board the plane.

“I love you. Fly safe.”

“I will,” Lucy said, then scratching the dog behind the ears. “Be good to your father. I'll be back soon.”

A FAMILY AFFAIR



“So, you’re dating a normie?” Crown Prince Olav asked.

The two old friends watched oft-serious Nobel Laureates dancing like idiots to Swedish pop music before them. Natalie swivelled, her head feeling weighted down by her headgear. Tonight, was a tiara evening. “Yes. He’s lovely.”

“Victoria referred to him as ‘sexy as fuck’ which made me... want to vomit.”

Natalie snickered. Olav, despite being Norwegian, was a laugh. A sometimes-grumpy sleeper hit. He was also Natalie’s cousin Victoria’s first cousin. At a party, Natalie’s Uncle Duncan introduced now-King Gustav to Natalie’s Aunt Rebecca’s sister, Christine. They’d married just before Rebecca and Duncan, soon producing Olav. Despite the cousins all being close, Rebecca and Christine had a sometimes-contentious relationship.

Natalie giggled. “He’s like a God and I’m not sorry.”

“And your dad? He’s... fine?”

“What do you think, Olav?”

“I’m surprised if he didn’t shit his pants.”

Natalie laughed. “He is adjusting.”

“Word on the street is your private secretary is seeing Winston. Has this been ferried back to Brother George?”

“Olav, where do you get the goss from?”

“Nira and Victoria, naturally.” Olav took a long drink of his wine.

“Lucy lives with Winston.”

“But they aren’t dating?”

Natalie shrugged.

“I don’t buy it.”

There was nothing to buy. Lucy arrived at the plane that morning loved-up and in a stellar mood. She and Winston were good together. While everyone was firmly in the “Lucy can live her life” camp, Natalie worried her brother might whinge over Winston moving in on Lucy.

“Well, I don’t know.” Natalie shrugged.

“How is your brother?”

“He and Patrick are living in Chicago, and all is well. Last I heard, they were decorating the apartment they have downtown and looking at buying a lake house.”

“Sounds downright idyllic. He gets to chase his dream and fall in love, and you’re stuck here covering the bases in his absence and fighting the war he left,” Olav said.

Natalie did not argue. The twins were impossibly close. She loved him fiercely, but something changed when he stepped away and left with Patrick. She expected it in some ways. People find their people. They grow up. With Lucy, the three had been so close. The aftermath had been Natalie’s to pick up. In America, George was an international hero. He was a freedom fighter. Back home, as a suddenly-out bisexual prince who pulled himself from the line of succession, he was still persona non grata. Fair or not, Natalie was stuck trying to hold it together while championing his right to leave. She wished she could change the rules—ignore the church and let him be happy. It was not so simple.

“Sometimes, it feels heavy,” Natalie admitted.

“And does the pretty boy help you with this?”

“First of all, let’s be fair to Ed. He’s beautiful. He’s also very kind. Adorkably awkward. He is a good listener. He is book-obsessed and can talk for hours about things which fly well above my airspace. Honestly, I love him.”

“Good for you. You’re doing the thing. So, royal wedding in the future?”

Natalie burst out laughing and patted Olav’s arm. “Oh, oh, my God, you *slay* me. Not anytime soon. I’d be daft to think so far down the line yet.”

“I’ve never heard you gush about anyone. That is the word, isn’t it? Gush?”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Yes, I was gushing.”

“You’re so girlish. I cannot process it. If that’s the case and you aren’t serious...”

“I am serious. I love him. That’s serious—”

“Serious but no plans about marriage. Oh, dear Nat, you and I both have the same job description and a similar CV—”

“Put next to one another, I’m the courageous and brave one. Don’t short me here, Olav.”

Olav chuckled. “Yes, yes, no one would deny you were a bonehead. Always a competition with you, Nat. No. Point being... if you aren’t headed for marriage, what *are* you headed towards? Put the poor boy out of his misery if you aren’t serious. You’re no better prepared for marriage than I am.”

Natalie’s mouth gaped and she slammed the remainder of her whisky. “I’m gonna get some air.”

Natalie knew even with his humour and poking fun, Olav was right. And he knew her well enough. They grew up in the same circle, often spending time together in the summers. She’d once had a terrible, cringeworthy crush on him as a teenager. That faded quickly, thankfully. She didn’t have the liberty to ignore the obvious flashing lights before her. Ed was lovely. Ed made her feel so good. She craved him when she

was away like no one else. But was it enough to surrender herself?

Marriage felt like giving in. It meant being vulnerable. Your life was shared and no longer your own. Your money, your house, your dreams, and your things were all *shared*. Natalie's fierce independence couldn't survive. That strength and confidence which once kept her alive and gave her grace under pressure in stressful, impossible circumstances was now a liability. She hoped she'd soon be willing to acknowledge the room's elephant—before Ed assumed she was ducking him. She wasn't there yet. She was still trying to see if she could ever *accept* the idea of marriage. It was humbling. Natalie did not wish to be humbled by matrimony.



ED WASN'T A PARTICULARLY jealous type. At least, in the past, he hadn't been. He hated that about his ex-wife. Arabella was the definition of controlling. However, seeing a picture of Natalie laughing next to the Crown Prince of Norway at the Nobels made him uneasy. There was something so genuine about the way she slapped his arm. She did the same to Ed.

Ed knew there was no way he competed with this guy on paper. This was the type of bloke Natalie's family *wished* for. He wasn't known best for being a half-naked spokesperson of a multinational toiletries brand. He was some blue blooded, boring prick who could dance well and looked consistently stuck up. Ed guessed he rarely broke a smile *except* in the company of pretty girls like Natalie. It was impossible to resist Natalie dressed like that, anyhow. She was stunning as ever.

The *Daily Mail* asked, "Trouble in Paradise? Is Natawin Splitsville?"

Not to Ed's knowledge. Maybe they knew something he didn't? While Natalie was still palling around with Scandinavian royals, Ed was being chased into his gym, the paps demanding to know if they were still together. The press were more and more annoying.

When Natalie returned, she invited Ed over. He tried *not* to be in a mood. He also didn't want to be overconfident about his place in this world. Natalie's lack of regard for the headlines made Ed uncomfortable. As they ate dinner in the small kitchen she shared with her sister, he couldn't resist asking for more details.

"Are we not going to talk about the elephant in the room?" Ed asked.

"What elephant, darling?"

"The thing with the Prince?"

Natalie cocked her head. "What thing?"

"Don't be daft, baby."

"No, really, I'm not."

"The press are insistent you are cheating on me with him. And they are chasing me down for details. Are you not even going to say something about it?"

"No. Because it's ridiculous. You aren't seriously worried about it, darling. I mean... stop." She went back to her pasta.

"It has not an ounce of validity?"

Ed knew as soon as he said it, he'd fucked up. Natalie pulled a face reminiscent of her father's unimpressed look. She sat her utensils down and smoothed her napkin out on her lap.

Tone cool, she said, "I'm sorry. You don't get to accuse me of anything when I have *told* you there is nothing going on. Olav is a friend. He's my cousins' cousin. We were raised together. We are old friends. Nothing more."

"I wasn't implying you did anything wrong, but the photos were cosy, Natalie. You were laughing and laughing—"

"He's funny. I'm sorry if you don't understand it, Ed."

"Well, that's fine. But could you not *say* something?"

"Are you mad? No. And after the stunt I pulled with you, Daddy would go mad over me responding to rumours about an affair. It's nonsense, Ed."

“Well, it’s not nonsense to me,” Ed protested.

“I am sorry but I’m not doing it. God, drop it!”

She was now in a mood. Ed had done it. He could have let it go. Why did he do this? Why was she so cross? Why was she so unwilling to move on this? Why did she never *compromise*?

“There has to be a middle way, Nat—”

“Bloody hell, Ed, I said no. If you don’t trust me to handle this... it’s not going to work,” Natalie said, voice sharp.

“Nat, I didn’t mean—”

“No, maybe this won’t work.” Her face was pained.

“Baby, I didn’t mean to insinuate—”

“Either you trust me, or you don’t,” Natalie insisted. “If you don’t—”

“I do, Natalie. I hate being raked over the coals in the press.”

“Then this won’t work. “I think you should go, Ed. Spare yourself. I’m not for you.”

Ed’s throat was closing. “Na—Natalie, I love you. Very much. I wish I had been there with you as all.”

“You don’t own me, Edwin.” She did not look at him.

“I didn’t mean to insinuate—”

Eyes still averted, she said, “I think you should leave!”

Ed pushed out his chair. He wouldn’t beg her. She’d just broken his heart. What was wrong with her? She was usually so affectionate. He touched a nerve. Maybe a wound? What could he do to fix it?



NATALIE ARRIVED at her mother’s bedroom door, sobbing.

“Mummy!”

Vanna called back, “Natalie? What do you need?”

“I just... I want to talk to you. I am sorry but I need to talk to you.”

“Well, come in, darling,” her mother said.

Natalie entered to see her parents reading in bed. Oh, joy. She assumed her father was still in Scotland. He’d been there in the morning, their planes passing within miles of one another as she’d returned home. She didn’t want to see him when everything was falling apart. Natalie was suddenly embarrassed by running to her Mummy’s bedside at age thirty.

Vanna spoke tenderly, “What is the matter? Are you alright?”

Natalie shook her head.

The King put his reading glasses down and rubbed his temples. “Natalie, it cannot be so bad.”

Robbie could tolerate everyone else in the family having a meltdown. Everyone but Natalie. Her entire childhood, she’d had a short fuse—like her father—and had been admonished for it by everyone *but* her mother. Her mother was always there to work through her emotions. Her father treated her like a third son. He allowed Georgie and Paul to have their brooding and vulnerable spells, but Natalie was exempt from this empathy. It was death by a thousand cuts.

Sobbing, she shouted, “Can you fucking not be a dick right now, Dad? I don’t have any fucks left to give—especially for you.”

“Natalie,” he said, “you need to calm down—”

Vanna glared at her husband and spoke calmly, but strong. “Robert, be nice. Let it go.”

“I just... does she need to talk to me that way?”

“You are dismissing her pain. Is she not allowed to ever cry without you reacting like it’s the end of the world?”

He didn’t respond. Vanna hit the nail on the head.

“Come, sweetie.” Vanna led her daughter to a sitting room.
“What is it, sweetheart?”

Natalie collapsed into her mother’s arms and sobbed for a bit before answering. “I think I unintentionally broke up with Ed.”

“How? Sweetheart, that’s not a thing... I don’t think.”

“I think it is now.”

“What happened? Can you tell me everything?”

“He was being very sensitive about the press. He was wondering if I would release a statement, I wasn’t cheating on him with Olav or that we hadn’t broken up or whatever. Of *course*, I’m not. I am with Ed. I’ve never cheated on a boyfriend. I don’t intend to. I explained to him we don’t *do* that, but he wouldn’t let it go.”

“Oh, sweetheart, you went nuclear?”

Natalie nodded.

“You shut down?”

Natalie nodded again.

“Oh, sweetheart,” her mother sighed. “It’s not over. I promise you. It’s possible to apologise and fix it. I promise you. This happens sometimes. Your father does it. I hold him accountable but... it happens. You’re spinning your wheels.”

“I don’t even know what I am. Maybe it’s for the best? Putting him out of his misery? Because he deserves someone normal. He can’t handle the heat?”

“Do you believe that is best?” Vanna looked doubtful.

“I love him.”

Vanna straightened the hair on Natalie’s shoulder. “It’s not best. You know best what you need but you shouldn’t speak for Ed. You’re very good at protecting us. However, Ed is plenty wise. He can make his own decisions. You need to *talk* to him and work through it. You don’t need to *protect* him. Because by making those choices for him, you’re removing

his agency. He loves you. Let him love you and make his own choices. He's not a baby."

"I know, I know. But if this bothers him now—"

"You two haven't been up to this long. Did he ever, at any point, just say 'I can't do this' or 'I won't be able to do this, Natalie'?"

"No, but Carson knew he couldn't from the onset. It was fine back then because I wasn't Princess of Wales. It was all good. Carson and Ed are different. If he has any doubts, it won't work. That's what I know—"

"Any doubts ever?" Vanora laughed. "Oh, my God! Natalie, if only you knew."

"What?"

"Sweetheart, I wasn't convinced I wanted to marry your father because of the job. I did it because I loved him too much to run off. For the first six months of our relationship, I was holding back. I ran away three weeks before the wedding because of something your grandmother did. Ran away. Left. Didn't indicate if I would come back."

"What!?" Natalie was appalled.

"I loved Daddy, so I came home. I got over it. He let me have my freakout and loved me even more for choosing him. It hasn't always been easy. In fact, it has *never* been easy. It is easy to love your father. It is not so easy to love the fishbowl."

"But then why do you do it?"

"Because I love your father. The rest of it... meh. He protects me. Fiercely. I know it won't destroy my life. If he were less assertive or wishy-washy at all, I'd have run. You can't make it work."

"So, you think if I am that person... he might survive?"

"Oh, sweetheart, yes. I can't promise he will stick around anymore than I could have promised I would have been here thirty-three years ago. But you need to give him the *chance* to love you."

Natalie groaned.

“What does he mean to you, sweetheart?”

“Everything right now. He’s so wonderful. I miss him when I’m away. I want to crawl into bed with him just to be there. The sex is... so mind-blowing. I don’t think I have ever experienced such chemistry with anyone.”

Vanna smiled. “Then you know what you have to do, don’t you?”

“Grovel?”

“If you’re like your father, you’ll be excellent at it. Oh, sweetheart, these things happen. This is what a real relationship looks like. I know you and Carson were together for a while but there was always a wall. This is what the messy, wild life is like when you are head-over-heels for someone.”

“It’s terrifying,” Natalie admitted.

“Loving someone that much should be. The rewards are worth the risk.”



WINSTON TOOK Lucy to dinner at their favourite Persian place after she returned from Stockholm. She was in an excellent mood. She practically threw herself at him afterwards. They ended up in bed together quickly. Winston was surprised she was so forward. There was no in-between with Lucy. She was either a “no” or all-in.

Naked, they kissed like horny teenagers paranoid they could be interrupted by parents at any given moment. Winston barely knew her like this. After all, they’d shagged only once. It was odd. He knew what her hair smelled like. He knew what her skin felt like. He had been sleeping next to her all this time. Winston knew what she looked like with messy hair in the morning. However, he didn’t remember much about the outlines of her body.

Winston took the chance to get a better read on her. He ran down her body and sucked on her nipples. She was easy to please. Lucy seemed to vibrate. Her breath quickened and she almost squeaked. She was loud. He loved it. Her tits were one thing he had not forgotten.

They did not know one another well yet. At least, not in bed. Winston read the pressing of her hips towards him as he worked on his nipples as an invitation to go down on her. However, as soon as he attempted it, she panicked.

Lucy sat up slightly. "Uh, you don't have to."

"I want to," Winston said.

"I just... can you not. I thought you could... can you just fuck me?" She suddenly went from demanding woman to meek girl.

Winston recalibrated, wondering what that was about. It was strange. He didn't want her to think he was selfish, but his opinion didn't matter. Not about to press the issue, he kissed Lucy again and they continued, him obliging her. Lucy was easy to bring to orgasm, almost instantly so. His job was easy. Lucy gave direction well. Her moans and panting explained things her words didn't.

The trouble was, Lucy's screaming and moaning only made Winston want to cum. He was trying so hard to last an eternity. She screamed his name, and it was over. She was the only one who could call him Tony in such a way and *not* anger him. He thought it was a curious choice, but it was hot as hell. Lucy had been brave. She knew she'd done *something* right.

"Sorry," he apologised, rolling off to the side for a moment. Back to Earth.

"Why? I had fun," Lucy said.

She lay on her side, tits inches from his face. He could have died happy right there.

"I am glad. I... I wanted it to last longer but you are... you're a lot of fun."

“It was great. I needed that more than you knew. I was thinking about it the whole time I was gone.”

Winston dealt with the condom. “Oh, really?”

Lucy stood to let the whining dogs in. Winston appreciated her arse from across the room. The dogs stormed the bed, lying at the foot now. By the middle of the night, Frida would insert herself between them. She was terrible about it. And, more than likely, Holly would do the same.

“It was good, then?” Winston asked.

“If you were doing awful, I wouldn’t have reacted the way I did. I’d have said something. It was great for me. I’m glad we got a hotel room. Because I am going to fuck the living daylights out of you while we’re there.”

Winston wished he wasn’t so knackered. He’d have taken her again. Maybe in the morning?

He kissed her slowly. “I can accommodate you. God, I love you, Lucy.”

Lucy still wouldn’t return his sentiment but looked like she was getting closer. Instead, she put her hand on his cheek sweetly and gave him a long, slow kiss. It said more than she could have in words.

Winston pinched himself. He was in a state of disbelief. He’d wanted every bit of this for so long. Here he was with the woman he’d never been able to get. He was in love with her—every bit of her. He was lucky enough to wake next to her, to kiss her goodbye in the morning, and welcome her home in the evening. And here she was wrapped in his arms. It was heaven to have her warm, soft, naked body pressed against him.

Her practical side returned. “So, are we okay with travel arrangements?”

“Yes,” Winston replied. “Reservation made for my flight; ticket upgraded for yours. Got us a suite at the hotel. It was... meagre but... it’s something.”

“I told you it wasn’t the Four Seasons.”

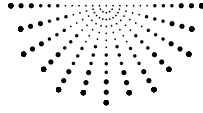
Winston didn't want to make her feel bad. The Hilton seemed *fine*. It wasn't a place his mother would have stayed at. She'd have whinged incessantly about it. However, it would do to be close to the city and Lucy's parents. He'd also called The Four Seasons to see if they had any availability. He'd even considered asking George to call *for* him before realising it was a *terrible* idea. Only a George or Natalie could have secured something slyly, but he had none of that pull. Instead, Winston would settle for a nice hotel with his girlfriend and let it go.

"Well, it's fine as long as I have you there," Winston said. "I'm happy to be spending time with you. Oh, and dog sitter is sorted. It's all good."

"Uh huh." Lucy drifted off.

Soon, the sound of her long, deep breaths overwhelmed him. She was out. Winston fell asleep next, at peace.

THE FUCK UP



Ed woke the day after his breakdown with Natalie, hoping it was only a nightmare. Usually, Natalie sent him an early morning message. Today, it was radio silence. He was gutted. He was knackered. Ed barely slept after coming home. He'd turned into bed and stared at the ceiling for seemingly hours.

It was awful. He did not want to move on. What happened? How had a simple question led to her throwing him out? To complicate matters, Ed had to meet his agent today. There was a proposal on the table.

Ed dusted himself off. He looked nonchalant as he headed into central London for his meeting. He wanted to shout at the paps that they ruined everything with Natalie. He should have been livid. He should have wanted to scream at her. However, he loved her too much. All he wanted to do was talk to her. He wanted to make up. He wanted to assure her he *could* handle it. Still, maybe she was right? Maybe Ed would never be enough? He felt firmly she was The One, though.

Ed tossed his keys to a valet and trotted off to the meeting with his agent, Jason Mitchell. Jason was sought-after. To even get represented by such a star as a swimmer—not a footballer or rugby player—was remarkable. Ed had someone clung to acclaim despite being a washed-up-has-been in his own mind. Anytime he tried to keep up with youngsters, he felt his mortality keenly.

“Ed, glad you could come by today,” Jason said.

Ed sat. An assistant entered with cappuccinos.

“Thanks,” Ed said to the woman. He turned back to Jason. “Glad to be by. What is it about?”

“NBC Sports in the States... you know them?”

Ed furrowed his brow. “I do.”

“They want to have you host the events coming up to the swimming and diving world championships. You’d be on a panel with Tom Rhodes and Katie Morrison.”

Tom was a storied British Diver and one of the UK’s most beloved Olympians in recent history. Morrison was an amazing swimmer with a career like Ed’s—wunderkind, top-notch education while she swam, marked by many Olympic runs.

Ed stammered. “Wow. I’m honoured. Uh, that would be a dream team. I met Katie when I was a kid at a swim camp in California and she was... just a force of nature. A hardass but... amazing. And Tom is always a joy.”

“So, you’ll do it?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I’m guessing it’s not the most lucrative thing and I’m not looking to spend the rest of my thirties shirtless.”

“It’s not too lucrative for a footballer, but the money is decent for a swimmer. More than decent, alright?”

“Then what is the issue, Jace?”

“Oh, well, you’re in a relationship. And I’d not bring it up but... I didn’t think you’d want to spend weeks on the road over the next eight months. At the same time, if the three of you work well, you could be the swimming panel for the Olympics. BBC could tap you, of course.”

“That’s the dream!” Ed chuckled.

“Of course.”

“I am not going to give up on it,” Ed said. “She’s always on the road.”

Ed wasn't about to admit that, as of last night, Natalie was out of the picture. If they had been together, he would have talked to her about it. Today, Ed had no such obligation. Ed would take the contract.

"I'm in."

Jason grinned. "I will get back to them, then. Well done, Ed. Should be an adventure, yes?"

"Sure. Thanks, mate. That's... it's great."

Perhaps, the day wasn't so shit. Ed lunched with his dad. He didn't talk about Natalie at all other than to say she was back from Stockholm and doing well. He could confirm that much. Ed knew how to lie about relationship trouble. He'd done it for years before his divorce. Likewise, Ed wasn't about to let their fight ruin his day. He'd done a big thing. Then, as Ed walked back to his car, he got a sudden urge to call Natalie. He wanted to celebrate with her. He wanted to take her out to dinner. The victory felt strangely hollow.

Ed's agitation built as he returned home. He parked his car, wondering if he should have, instead, gone to buy overpriced champagne and gotten drunk while playing Halo endlessly. That would distract him, wouldn't it? He could swing by a bar. No. The press would follow him. If he was seen chatting a woman up, it would be curtains. Still, shouldn't he get her back? Give her a taste of her own medicine. Ed decided he wasn't there yet.

Then, he worried. Through the front dormer, he saw the hall entry light. The door was locked, but he worried he had been robbed. This was *just* what he needed. It was odd. He unlocked the door and shouted, "If you've broken in, I'm about to kick your arse!"

"Don't, don't. It's me. I let myself in. I left the light on for you. I'm sorry." It was Natalie.

Ed groaned, annoyed.

"I put my key on the kitchen counter. I... I wanted to apologise but... I can understand if..."

Ed climbed the steps to find Natalie looking like a kicked puppy in his apartment. She wasn't here to make trouble. It broke Ed's heart. He wanted to shout at her and hold her all at once. The little pout on her face drove him mad.

"Let's... let's talk," Ed said.

They sat in his living room on opposite sides of the couch. She looked deferential. It was so unlike Natalie to come down from that place. She was vulnerable. She was frightened. She was being honest. Ed could only love her.

"I am so, so sorry, Edwin. Because I love you. I love you so much. I was being a prick. I freaked out because I thought I was doing you a favour. I wasn't. I was making it easy on myself because you frighten me."

"I frighten you?" He'd not even raised his voice.

It felt unfair.

"Well, just because I love you so much," Natalie clarified. "It makes me feel weak and confused. You drive me mad. And... I just want to protect you from everything, but even I cannot stop them from being shitheads. This is part of life with me and—"

"I don't love it, baby. I was also out-of-line. You were trying to explain it was no worry. I do trust you, Natalie. I was being possessive. I couldn't help it, but it's not excuse. I don't consider myself a controlling wanker but... maybe I am with you?"

"No, I think... I might feel the same if I saw pictures like that of you with another girl. The difference there is I would know it was likely the press being arseholes. Not you are cheating on me. I grew up like this. You didn't. I gave you no grace. I should have been kinder and more understanding. I should have *discussed* it with you. I must get better at it."

Ed scooted closer and squeezed her hand. "It's alright. I get it. We both were a bit hot. Shit happens."

"You don't hate me?" Natalie winced.

Ed kissed her forehead. “God, I wish I could have. Nat, I love you. A lot. I couldn’t. Not over something so petty as this. Don’t do it again, alright?”

She nodded, “I promise I won’t. This was a learning experience. I am new to this. I’ve never felt like this about anyone. I have loved before but not like this. Not with someone I feel like I’m building something with. Because I do. With you, it feels like far more than anything I’ve known, Winslow.”

He smiled, “I know what it feels like.”

“I don’t want to leave you again—not like that.”

“I know,” Ed winced now. “Nat, I must tell you something. I did something and you may hate me for it—”

“What? Please tell me you didn’t fuck someone else! I mean, I can’t control that or even punish you for it. Since I threw you out but... I would feel hurt—”

“No, no, God, no. I was a sad sack who only wanted you to come back and talk to me about it. I was heartbroken, baby. No. I’m yours and only yours.”

She smiled.

“It’s work. I took a job with an American sports network. They wanted sports casters for the major events leading up to the World Championships. It’s with two people I respect so much. It’s a dream job, Nat. Since I thought you were never coming back... I jumped at it.”

Her sweet look turned to sadness. “Well, if it’s your dream... I can’t stop you.”

“I didn’t do it to run us into the ground. And I haven’t signed anything—”

“No, no, you don’t owe me anything. We’re not married and—”

“Nat, I love you. So very much. I promise you I will be around as much as I can. I won’t do anything stupid. You trust me?”

“As much as you trust me. We’ll figure it out. I’m happy for you, Ed. How could I not be? It sounds like a great opportunity. I mean, my man on American telly? How could I object?”

He laughed, relieved and surprised. “Nat, why are you putting up with this?”

“Because I love and admire you. Also, my father and yours will both be relieved to see you on camera with clothes on.”

Ed chortled. “Fully clothed Edwin Winslow.”

“Upgrade from pants model?” Natalie giggled.

“I guess so.”

She played with the collar of his shirt. “I’ll miss your pecks. We’ll have to make the most out of reunion sex.”

“How do you feel about reunion sex and a spenny dinner?”

Natalie kissed him and unbuttoned his shirt. “I love the idea. And I know a place we can go that’s chill but will blow your mind.”



“WE COULD HAVE SPRUNG for car service,” Winston said. “Honestly, darling, it’s no bother at all.”

“Look, if we show up with a driver at my grandmother’s, it’s gonna be crazy,” Lucy said. “I can’t handle the questions. You asking for this damn upgrade is bad enough.”

“You already want to strangle me, Lulu?” He packed their luggage in the hatch of the Escalade he’d insisted on.

Only the best for the Earl of Lauderdale.

“You can’t sweettalk me, baby. No. I don’t want to strangle you. I want you to be *slightly* less posh to appear... normal, alright? Be your normal down-to-earth self. Exude less ‘British aristocrat’ energy, alright?”

“Sure, sure,” Winston agreed. “Sorry.”

“You’re nervous?” Lucy could tell he was a bit keyed up.

“Is it obvious?”

Lucy giggled and left the parking lot. “Don’t be. My grandmother doesn’t take shit from anyone—including and especially my dad. He’s the one who is likely to be an asshat. Ignore him. His opinions don’t matter. My Mum and sisters adore you, okay? Don’t worry about it. Grandma will, too.”

Winston nodded. “I hope so.”

They made their way onto 294 and eventually south on 355. The drive enthralled Winston.

“I am glad you’re here, Winston,”

“I am, too. I would have been miserable without you. I’ve barely seen you, Luce. It’s hard,” Winston said.

“It’s a busy time. Christmas will be... well, I guess we won’t see one another.”

“Let’s not say that,” Winston said. “Let’s leave the door open.”

Lucy smiled a bit to herself.

“Are you going home?”

“Hell no!” Lucy replied. “No. This is my first trip back in years and it will be my last for a bit. If people want to visit us, they can but I’m not around otherwise.”

“Well, let’s think on it.”

They drove towards New Lennox before heading to Warwick, a tiny up crop between New Lennox and Mokena. There, lived Lucy’s grandmother Jane Pokorski in a small, neat little house not too far from the world’s best pizza joint.

Lucy pointed out the place as they passed. “That pizza is bomb. We can agree to go get the pizza tonight. Get a drink while waiting for it. It’s an easy walk. It’s amazing.”

“Pizza is great. You do this every year?”

“The night before Thanksgiving is a night the women do *not* cook. They get the night off. Tomorrow, it will be all hands

on deck.”

“But the men do fuck all?”

“You know it,” Lucy said.

They turned onto a modest little block where they’d be parking their hundred-thousand-dollar luxury rental.

“This is a cute neighbourhood.” Winston was generous.

“We’re going to be the talk of the town. But it’s quiet. Lots of old people now. Safe, nice. I grew up riding my bike all over here.”

He smiled. “Idyllic, really. Couldn’t say that in London. Or even on our estate in Scotland. I mean, you did get out but... not with other kids. Our other kids were our cousins.”

“Same. I mean, mostly. That’s the beauty of a big family.”

They left the car towards the house. It was late afternoon, but they couldn’t check in until four. They decided to go straight to dinner with Lucy’s family before heading over. In all honesty, Lucy was excited to see her little sister, Francie. Winston was about to be overwhelmed, but Lucy figured he could handle it.

“Hello, hello!” Lucy called out as they entered the small three-seasons room off the back of her grandmother’s house.

She kicked off her boots while Winston removed his shoes in an orderly fashion.

“Lucy!” Francie nearly took her older sister out at the knees. “God, I’m so excited! You’re here.”

“She is. She’s alive,” her mother, Brittany Chandler, said. “Look, you are on this continent for once!”

“I got away... finally,” Lucy laughed.

Jane appeared in the doorway and hugged Lucy before nodding at Winston. “And who is this?”

“Grandma, this is Winston Ferguson, my boyfriend. Winston, this is my grandmother, Jane Pokorski.”

“The one who makes those dumplings you rave over?” Winston asked, as if on cue.

He was masterful at this. There was a bit of his mother in there.

“Yes. Pierogi. I was telling him about them.”

“Well, isn’t your accent the most adorable thing you’ve ever heard?” Jane said. “Well, come in, come in, honey. You’re English? I wasn’t expecting an English boyfriend.”

“I’m not,” Winston said. “I’m technically Scottish but the accent... it’s a let-down, I know.”

“Far from it, honey. Can I get you something to drink?”

Winston was already being inducted. It was going surprisingly well.

“Boyfriend? And Winston?” Brittany wondered. “When you said you were bringing your boyfriend—”

“It happened, okay?” Lucy groaned. “And you love him, so be nice.”

“Really, though? How did you two hide that the whole time we were there?” Francine wondered.

“Because we weren’t together yet. He told me later. It’s... it was complicated and now we’ve decided we’re together and yeah. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Well, I am surprised,” Brittany said.

Jennifer, Lucy’s older sister walked up. “What is Winston doing here?”

Winston could be heard from the kitchen explaining tea to Jane in detail.

“He’s Lucy’s boyfriend,” Brittany said. “Now, anyway. Per her.”

“Wait, *that’s* the boyfriend you told us you were bringing at last minute? Like... why the rush?”

“Because he’s barely seen me all fall,” Lucy answered. “I’ve been busy as can be. And I thought it would be good for

him to meet everyone. I don't expect you all to understand but... he's my boyfriend. We're a thing."

"Well, I'm surprised. I'll introduce him to Tim."

Lucy nodded, "He'd like that."

Lucy was interested to see what Winston thought of Jenn's prick of a boyfriend. He was an attorney with parents who lived in a McMansion. She suspected he would find him to be surprisingly new money and not like him much. However, as Winston was British, he'd never tell that to Tim. He'd ignore it and be polite.

Lucy helped herself to a beer in the kitchen. She could have one. While she did, her father approached. He was already at least three beers deep. *Oh, joy!*

"Do I at least get a hello from our turncoat?" Dwight asked. "You fancy, high-flying thing? Or is my daughter too good to talk to her old man?"

"Hi, Dad," Lucy groaned. "It's not about me being fancy. We just got here."

"And yet, your sister introduced me to him?"

"She pulled him out there to meet Tim. I wasn't trying to be rude. I hadn't made it out there because Mom and the girls interrogated me. Apologies."

She had been avoiding him and didn't care about being rude. Lucy loathed her father.

"Well, we didn't know if you'd ever come back."

"Of course, I would. I was on the road with Natalie so much. It was hard," Lucy insisted.

"So, what's with the guy?"

"He is a long-time friend. We're dating now."

"Your mother said you are living with him?"

"I was living with him but we're together now. We were only friends," Lucy explained. "No one gets this but it's the truth."

“The Caddy out front yours?” Lucy’s grandmother entered the kitchen.

“They were out of everything but the tiniest car,” Lucy lied. “And Winston is tall, so I didn’t want to squish him. I can assure you I don’t drive a Caddy.”

“No, your mother says you drive a Range Rover,” Dwight chuckled. “Slumming it.”

“They’re not as expensive in the UK. I need a car that can haul people and things for work.”

It wasn’t true. That car had been impossible to procure. It had been a big gift from George. She’d kept it after the breakup. Dwight had no idea she and George had ever dated.

“You know that one prince is here, right? You gonna hang out with him?” Dwight asked, as if aware she had just been thinking about George. “He’s the one who’s a f—”

Lucy cut him off. “No. Not at all. However, he doesn’t deserve to be called a slur. It’s despicable. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Well, as long as you’re not one, we’re good, right?” Dwight asked.

Jane rushed to Lucy’s defence. “Unacceptable, Dwight. No. That boy seems sweet. Doesn’t he?”

“He is. And he’s Winston’s second cousin, so you’ll not say things. He’s my boss’s brother. Mind yourself, Dad. If you even can? Maybe slow your roll?”

“Fine, whatever. I’ll be a good boy and not embarrass you in front of your rich boyfriend!”

Dwight opened the fridge loudly, grabbed a beer, shook his head, and slammed the door. As he left, Lucy wanted to cry.

“Ignore him, sweetie. He’s trying to get a rise out of someone. Your mother already warned him. She’s happy for you. She says the Queen and Princess are both lovely. He just misses you.”

He didn’t. He missed *controlling* Lucy.

“Well, it was my choice to go to school there and to leave. I’m a citizen now but it’s petty to bring that up. I came home to see you and my sisters and mom. That’s it. He can pound sand. If he pulls that in front of Winston, Winston will put him on his arse. Ass, I mean... like... sorry. It gets to me.”

“You’re practically one of them!”

She *was* one of them.

“Winston seems gentle.” Jane said.

“He is. He’s also protective of his family. And he knows Dad can be a dickhead.”

“He can, yes. I’m happy for you. I’m not much for redheads but he’s cute. What does he do?”

“He does a podcast and he’s an artist,” Lucy answered.

Jane looked at her granddaughter suspiciously. “And he can support you? Your mother said he lives in a church he made into a house. A great big one...”

“He does. He doesn’t have to support me, grandma. I make good money now. And, anyway, he’s fine.”

She did not want to say, “He’s worth millions and his mother is worth billions.” Nor did she say, “If only you knew the real estate he will inherit when his mother dies.” And Lucy did *not* point out Winston was an earl. She wasn’t digging into that. At the end of the day, Lucy was self-made. She was doing good things. She was a mover and a shaker—Winston or no. His money would never define her. She’d worried about that with George. She’d become more protective over time with it.

Lucy met up with Winston and checked in. He was happy.

“It’s been fine. Your grandmother is a hoot.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“That Tim...”

“Oh, yes,” Lucy giggled.

Almost on cue, Tim clinked his glass of cheap champagne he probably thought was liquid gold.

“Toast, toast!” Jen announced.

The other cousins and aunts and uncles assembled.

“I just wanted to say I appreciate you all welcoming me here so warmly,” Tim said. “I know we won’t be around tomorrow but we’re both happy to be here.”

“We are, yeah.” Jen beamed at him like a lovesick puppy.

They were spending Thanksgiving at his parents’ pretentious catered country club dinner. It was an annual thing. Grandma’s amazing, brined turkey was better. Lucy was sure of it.

“It means the world to me to have your support. I love Jennifer so much,” Tim said. “She’s smart and sweet and gorgeous, of course.”

“Yes, of course,” Lucy whispered to Winston, trying not to roll her eyes.

He stifled a snicker.

Tim continued, “Which is why I wanted...”

Tim got down on one knee as Jennifer started sobbing and covered her mouth.

“I wanted to ask you the all-important question. Jennifer Chandler, would you marry me?”

“I would, yes,” Jennifer screeched. She stole the ring box out of his hands and planted a kiss before putting the ostentatious diamond on her hand. *Oh, the status symbols!*

Everyone clapped. Women cried. It was so over-the-top. Maybe for anyone else, Lucy would have been less bitter and genuinely happy. She’d been over-the-moon for Gerry and Sheena. When Sheena had asked her to be in the wedding, she’d been all-too-glad to say yes. Now, as her sister mooned over her mall-bought ring, Lucy could only fake a smile and wait to share her feelings until she and Winston retrieved the pizza.

“It’s gonna be a nightmare,” Lucy said. “His parents are assholes. Mine are a nightmare. And my sister is going to

expect us to attend a bunch of stupid, annoying events I won't be able to make since I have a job and live abroad. And Mom will give me grief about it."

"It's okay," Winston said. "She'll be too self-absorbed to care too much. Trust me."

Lucy snickered and squeezed his hand. "I love you, Winston."

And as soon as the words escaped her mouth, she didn't even wish she could take them back.

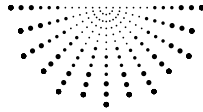
"I love you, too, Lucy." He beamed.

She loved that he didn't make it a big deal.

"Partners in crime?" Lucy asked.

"In every way," Winston agreed.

SWEET HOME CHICAGO



Winston was out of his element in Chicago. He was happy to go along with Lucy as she reverted to a past life. Unless you stood on Jane Pokorski's block and took it all in, it was impossible to visualise the vast chasm between Lucy's current and past life. The little houses were modest. The late model cars were affordable. The place wasn't posh, but it was warm. Everyone but Dwight was kind.

Winston always imagined Lucy's life had been like Cousin Vanna's American childhood. He'd assumed her parents had well-regarded occupations. He envisioned they drove nice cars and lived in the expansive houses, as did the Americans on the telly. Or, maybe as Bruno's family did in Mexico. He never dreamed she had grown up like this. Winston began to realise just how hard Lucy worked to buck tradition. She'd fled to the UK for university and by the time she arrived in their social circle, she'd fully assimilated. She was poised. She knew when to bow, when to speak, how to sip tea, and how to hold a fork. Lucy had picked up her life, from nothing, to travel to a strange country as a teenager. It was all she could do to escape her dreadful father.

Where most Americans couldn't aspire to this transformation, Lucy had flawlessly integrated into the Royal Family's sphere. Eventually, she was a commendable partner for George. Winston assumed Lucy hid her humble beginnings as an act of survival and reinvention. Who else could pull it off? Lucy was a cut above—a chameleon—but at what cost? She hid this from her closest friends. Lucy was *family*. Did she think Natalie and George would have rejected her?

So, in Jane's little house on Hoover Road, Winston found himself eating a festive, proper American Thanksgiving meal surrounded by curious Catholic iconography. Winston never experienced anything like it. Winston watched Lucy and Francie rib one another, occasionally exploding into fits of laughter as they told stories. Lucy rarely exploded in laughter. It brought a smile to his face.

As the meal progressed, Dwight imbibed too much. His drunkenness directly correlated with Lucy's level of discomfort. She'd warned Winston it could get ugly, but Winston was unprepared for how the night unfolded. Winston got terrible secondary embarrassment, so Dwight's progression down the rabbit hole was difficult to watch.

Winston packed away food at an alarming rate, encouraged by the matriarch's insistence he was "too skinny". As dinner wrapped, the women cleaned up. The men were due to depart. It was archaic. In Winston's world, there were often staff. Without staff everyone pitched in. In their social circle, if someone made a meal, everyone else cleaned up. The cook sat at the bloody table and chilled. Winston's mother and Natalie would have never tolerated it. Lucy insisted this was "The Way" as if she were speaking to Boba Fett himself. Winston assumed Lucy found clean up an excuse to avoid Dwight. They had spoken only briefly this entire time and sat far apart at dinner.

Dwight left for the living room. Lucy's uncles and Winston followed. The entire Pokorski-Chandler clan was made up of short people. Winston walked like a giant among them. Dwight's need to point this out every five minutes suggested an insecurity about his height.

"So, you're the one she refuses to talk about?" Dwight sat, sloshing cheap blended whiskey on his trousers.

"What? Me?" Winston asked.

"Yes, Winston. She told us nothing about you."

"Lucy is an enigma. I think she didn't to make a big deal out of it. We're old friends. It's nothing—"

Dwight slurred, “Well if she’s calling you her boyfriend, it must be something. We were sure she was into the ladies by this point.”

“No. She’s married to her work a bit. She’s got a top job. She’s on the road a lot.”

“And how does that work for you? Wouldn’t you rather have a woman at home waiting on you?”

Winston chuckled. “I relish being her partner-in-waiting after a long tour. She has an important job. I admire her work ethic and dedication.”

Dwight shook his head. “I am surprised she still has her job. She could have come home and made more. Why stay?”

“Her whole life is there.”

“What, so she can be a servant?”

“She is far from a servant,” Winston stammered. “First, we say staff. Second, a private secretary is the highest-ranking member of one’s staff. She’s Natalie’s right hand, but she was always integral to the Queen’s staff, too. Natalie took her on because she needed someone good in this transition and Lucy knew everything. She took her from pilot to princess in one fell swoop. They are joined at the hip. I’d argue Natalie sees Lucy as her most important confidante. Your daughter is beyond amazing. She herds cats and makes miracles happen. People respect her like you wouldn’t believe!”

“Uh-huh. And your parents? They let her eat at the dinner table?”

Winston looked appalled.

“What? I’m asking. You know she’s not from fancy stock. We’re not the sort of people you’d ever talk to. Thank God she’s pretty, right?”

Winston breathed deeply, beating his anger down. “Sir... she’s more than pretty. She’s beautifully brilliant. And... my family... they adore Lucy. She and my mother have worked together—worked as a real sense—for years. My mother couldn’t be happier that she’s with me. Lucy is invited to

everything. You can find her sitting with Natalie at the Queen's behest. She is family. In fact, I think she will attend family Christmas with us this year."

Winston stuck his neck out about Christmas. He was sure that could have been a disaster waiting to happen, but he loved Lucy. He would have spent his life with her in a heartbeat. He hoped he could.

"You don't mind she's poor?"

"She's not poor, sir. We come from a different financial background, but Lucy is one of the best-connected women in London. She has riches beyond measure. She's got a lovely brain. She has compassion for people and animals like you wouldn't imagine. She takes care of everyone around her. Not everything can be measured in money, sir."

"Well, I live in the real world. it matters. I always hoped she'd be married by now and have kids, but no dice."

"No dice? Sir, she's not even thirty!"

"If she works, she shouldn't be having kids. By the time she gets around to it, she's going to be too old or they're going to be demented or somethin'."

Winston looked over to see Lucy standing there, lip quivering. Lucy was melting down. The pressures of womanhood constantly beat Lucy down. Her father wasn't helping. As Winston brainstormed a way to extricate them—an excuse, a chore, anything—Dwight made it worse.

"Well, eggs aren't good forever. Thank God your sister's boyfriend finally got off his ass and did something about it. This working stuff... it's selfish, you know? She should have settled down by now."

Lucy cried.

Dwight rolled his eyes. "Oh, here come the waterworks. Stop being a baby, Lucy! Your mother had you young and you turned out okay. You're risking never having children out of your own pig-headed reasons for what... being a servant to a princess?"

Winston was paralysed. What did he do? He wanted to pick Lucy up and run off with her, fleeing the nonsense.

He stood, determined. “Dwight, I think you’ve had enough for the evening. Your daughter doesn’t deserve that commentary.”

Dwight matched Winston, only coming up to the younger man’s chest. “Oh, as if you’d know, red!”

Lucy looked suddenly mortified. Winston tried not to laugh. It was silly. Dwight took one swing and then fell over, right on his head. Winston instinctively jumped in to pick him up. It looked like a nasty fall.

“I’m alright, I’m alright! Get the fuck off me!” Dwight batted Winston away.

Brittany rushed in. “What happened? What happened?”

“Dad, stay on the ground,” Lucy said. “You could have a concussion.”

“Nah, nah.” He stood and fell again.

Winston couldn’t tell if Dwight’s bell was rung, or he was just too drunk to stand.

Lucy explained, “Dad tried punching Winston for telling him to leave me alone.”

“What did you say to him, Lucy?” Brittany demanded. “What now? You always set him off.”

Lucy burst into tears. Winston wanted to throttle her mother. He’d seen that defence before. He’d seen his mother try to manage his abusive father by blaming herself for his drunken outbursts.

Winston jumped to her defence. “She said nothing. She literally said nothing.”

Brittany laughed nervously. “I’m sorry he tried to brawl with you. He does this sometimes... gets a little too wild. It’s all in good fun, ya know?”

“He needs to go to hospital surely!”

“The VA will take one look at me and tell me to fuck off. I’m fine. I’m not some sort of European pansy who runs to the doctor after a little spill.”

Winston backed off. He didn’t take the bait. By now, Francie arrived. She looked on in horror.

Lucy wiped her tears away and hugged her sister. “I think we’re going to go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Well, I don’t have a ride to the Metra station—”

“I can take you,” Winston insisted. “We can drive you there.”

“You okay to drive here? You won’t kill us?” Lucy asked him as Francie gathered her things.

“I’m good. I’m sober. You’re in no shape to drive, Luce.”

She acquiesced. Driving Francine and taking directions in a strange place was confounding, but they returned her safely to the commuter train. With Francie gone, Lucy burst into tears. Winston, unsure what to say, let her cry until they reached the hotel, parked, and made it to their room.

“I am so... so embarrassed. Sorry. Please don’t think I’m a terrible person.”

Winston squeezed her tightly in his arms. “Oh, darling, you did nothing wrong. Jesus Christ! Your Dad is a trainwreck. I am mostly dumbfounded by your persistence. It’s a wonder all you girls turned out okay. I am sorry you ever had to deal with his abuse. He’s sick. You aren’t at fault for that. I love you, Lucy.”

She looked up at him, chin on his chest. “Warts and all?”

He wiped tears away with his sleeve. “You haven’t a wart in sight. Dwight is a wanker.”

“I am so ashamed he did that. I... I should have left.”

“Don’t be.”

“You deserve someone with class—”

Winston wanted so badly to fix things. “Oh, baby, I want you. I don’t give a flying fuck what your father does. He’s a sperm donor—much like mine. You forged a life without him. Don’t let him take away from that, Lulu.”

“I shouldn’t but hearing that... my inability to procreate. it set me off. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not. It wasn’t dumb. It was hurtful. I am sorry you had to hear him say those things. Don’t let him steal your shine, Luce. You are so wonderful. You move mountains with your tiny shoulders, alright? Don’t let him rain on that parade.”

“Do you think that?” Lucy asked, voice small.

“Of course I do! Lucy, you’re on my team. I’m so lucky! You get things done. Don’t forget that.”



LUCY SLEPT IN LATE, waking as Winston brought her room service. She needed that. The night before had been a mortifying disaster, but Winston never left her side. They watched shitty American kids cartoons on WGN while eating breakfast. They agreed to meet Francie downtown but postponed the call to fit in a round of sex. Finally, Lucy asked if she wanted to go to Nieman’s. Winston was about to spoil them. He couldn’t help himself. He was also convinced American shopping would be the best shopping yet. Lucy suspected he might be disappointed.

They met Francie at what was once Marshall Field’s on State Street. They took in lunch at the legendary Walnut Room, which Winston found charming. He made friends with a baby sitting near them having lunch with her mother and older sisters. It was sickeningly sweet. Lucy was dying of cute. Her ovaries cried out for help.

After some perusing in the purses, the three made a long walk down to Nieman’s. Winston’s day of taking the commuter train, the El, eating at the same department store which inspired Selfridges, and even more was about to get

even wilder. Francie insisted they take a picture of him by The Bean, like any tourist. Winston was game. They walked down Michigan Ave, pointing out the beautiful buildings, across the Chicago River and Wacker Dr to the Wrigley Building, Lucy's favourite. Like tourists, Francine insisted she take a picture of them there. Winston kissed her, making the photo even sweeter. It made Lucy blush. She had such a mix of emotions—trauma from last night and true love for Winston from that morning. She was falling in love in the best way possible.

Lucy held Winston's hand as they entered the lobby of the luxurious store.

"It's not anything too big, baby," Lucy laughed. "See."

"Oh, whisky bar!" Winston stared like a distracted toddler.

She grabbed him playfully by the shoulders. "We can end with that. Earth to Winston. Focus!"

"Okay, okay, sorry, it's all new. I'm excited."

"It's cute. We'll forgive you, Winston," Francie giggled.

"Why don't you girls go shop for whatever you want, and I'll go look around? Range. Text me when you want to meet up."

"Winston, you don't have to—"

"No one is making me swipe a card but let me spoil you. Forgive me."

"Okay, okay. Where are you going?"

"Probably to look at shoes," Winston replied. "Daps."

"Oh, please don't call them daps. So, cringe."

He departed.

Francie shook her head. "God, let him pay already. He wants to spoil you and isn't at a loss for cash. Let him have this, alright?"

"I hate it."

"Look, if I had a boyfriend like Tim or Winston who wanted to shower me with gifts, I'd just let it happen."

“Don’t use it as a free-for-all,” Lucy said. “You have to carry it all home.”

“I was thinking of getting a couple small, nice things, alright? Gloves maybe. I need some new gloves.”

They girls proceeded over to the gloves and hats, looking at calfskin this or that. Meanwhile, they received shit service. Lucy wanted to try on a lovely red pair, but the shop girls were unresponsive. She then discovered why they were being ignored. As if the city were not big enough for the two of them, she looked over to see none other than Patrick and George at the counter on the other side.

“Bloody hell,” Lucy murmured.

“What? Are we doing that now?” her sister took the piss.

“Yes, we are. Shit. Look away, sneak away!”

“What? Wait, isn’t that Prince George?” Francie said too loudly.

“Yes, and...”

George looked over and spotted Lucy. Their eyes met and she tried to communicate he should leave her alone. Patrick waved.

“Say nothing. Let me do all the talking,” Lucy said.

They approached.

“Oh, it’s Lucy Chandler! Lucy, how the hell are you?” Patrick asked as if they were old friends.

“We’re good. Trying to buy gloves,” Lucy said casually.

“Good, good. Same. Someone is *still* unprepared for a midwestern winter.” Patrick glared playfully at George. They were *adorable* as ever.

“Dreadful. Fancy seeing you here, Luce?”

“I’m home for Thanksgiving. Out shopping with my sister. Francine, this is George. George, Francine.”

“Do I bow?” Francie whispered.

George shook his head. “No.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Francine,” Patrick said.

A shop girl arrived. “Can I help you?”

“Do you have these in a size small?” Lucy asked. “Or an extra small? Really small?”

“Some of them only go down to a medium. Which is usually small enough—”

“Not for her.” George shook his head. “She has tiny hands. It’s a bitch to find gloves that fit.”

“We have the Burberry ones in an extra small,” one of the women said.

Lucy made a face. “No thanks.”

“Well, I’d like to try them in say a small,” Lucy’s sister said.

Lucy knew George’s utterance was incriminating.

“Well, we won’t keep you,” Patrick said.

George took the bag one woman handed him.

Lucy faked a smile. “Sure. Well, nice seeing you. Have a good rest of your holiday.”

“You, too, Luce!”

George and Patrick left. Her sister didn’t want the gloves, so they went to the designer collections to look around.

“You didn’t want to tell him his cousin is here?” Francie asked. “Why did you act so weird. You obviously know them —”

“It’s complicated,” Lucy said, curtly.

“I am not stupid. How did Prince George know what size gloves you wear? That’s like a bizarre thing.”

“Because he knows such things.”

“Well, like, yes, but *how* is what I am asking...”

Lucy took a deep breath. “George and I were together. For a long time. So, he would know, I guess.”

“Like together-together? Or like you were his beard?”

“I wasn’t his beard! He did leave me for Patrick, that’s true. We had a normal, seemingly straight relationship. This isn’t to get back to Jen or Mom, you hear me?”

“I get it. No. They’d be frightened. But you and Winston —”

“Now you know why I didn’t want to raise that flag?”

“Yeaaaaah. Wait, did you move in with Winston to get in his pants? If so, well done.”

“God, no! Winston has been in love with me for years, I guess. Wild, right?”

“Not too wild. I thought he had a major crush on you when we were there. He clearly loves you.”

“I know. I love him, too.” Lucy sorted through little black dresses.

“This Miu Miu is cute,” Francie said, holding up a short little mini dress to her body.

“You could pull that off with your legs.”

“You and George... really? You could have been queen!”

“I realise it would have been a disaster,” Lucy sighed, leaving out that they were almost engaged. “Anyhow, now you’ve met Pat. He’s great. I couldn’t hate him if I wanted to. I want them to be happy. I don’t quite understand it all, but I know George did the best he could to protect me in the end. I love him for it, still. But... things with Winston are good. They’re real.”

“Why didn’t you tell George about us?”

“I knew Dad would frighten Georgie off.” Lucy shrugged. “And... somehow... I knew Winston could handle it. George would have been terrified to find out I was raised Catholic let alone know my dad was a bumbling piece of shit who would try to punch him in the face over defending me. George is... different than Winston. Winston is unshakable. He’s a better match for me, I think. I need someone *less* neurotic than I am

not someone I have to manage. I do enough of that for Natalie.”

Francie snickered. “How can you work for them still?”

“His mother was as much a mother as anyone has ever been to me, Francie. And working for her gave me purpose. Natalie has been one of my closest friends since I landed in London, okay? Work is my safe place. I was offered a golden parachute, mind you. I just didn’t take it. I doubled down.”

Francie grinned. “Chandler girls don’t run off.”

“Damn straight. What about this one?”

“Girl, your tits in that... *love* that for you.” Francie nodded. “Try it on you.”

Winston happened upon them as they browsed another set of racks.

“I ran into your cousin,” Lucy said. “And no, I did not give up your current location.”

“Shit, really?”

“Correct. He was here with Patrick buying gloves. It was fine.”

“Eesh. We need to have a conversation. I will have that conversation,” Winston said. “What did we find?”

“Minidresses,” Lucy said. “Hers is impossibly short. I can’t bring myself to go shorter.”

“She should, though, right?” Francie giggled.

“She should. She has great legs.” Winston smiled.

“She thinks she has the legs of a cow—her words.”

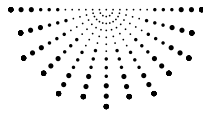
“No way.” Winston gave Lucy a quick kiss. “She has lovely legs.”

Lucy could only think about them being wrapped around his hips earlier. God, they had had fantastic sex that morning. As awkward as the situation was with George, now all Lucy could do was fantasise about what she’d do with Winston later and luxuriate in his affections. He was adoring. She couldn’t

have asked for better. Winston was the end all be all now. He was the standard which she was measuring it all against.

This was the best feeling! There was something wonderful, but sneaky about it. However, she was *Winston's* and unapologetically so now. He was going to come clean, and they would be above board on all fronts. He was picking *her*. He needed *her*. Lucy wanted everything with Winston now. She wasn't sure what happened next, but she knew she wanted it with him.

THE CHRISTMAS RUSH



Natalie glanced at the clock, wondering how long she had before her staff would bang on her door, reminding her that Lucy was waiting outside. Natalie's bags were packed. However, in a moment of weakness or simply true abandonment, she pulled Ed back into bed with her because he swore to go down on her relentlessly as a send-off.

She pulled his hair and arched her back. Natalie was about to lose it.

“Don't stop. Don't stop.”

Ed, being the good boy he was, continued. Face flushed, she let out a loud “fuck!” before her legs became spaghetti. Ed, pleased with himself, journeyed northward and decisively pulled her towards him, legs now up on his shoulders as he thrust inside her. The beginning always felt so good. Natalie was beyond help.

“How is it you look so good? God, you are... I can't even. I don't want to spend four days without you.”

“I will miss this,” Ed panted. “Especially this vision of your tits nearly smacking you in the face. It is... so good.”

He wasn't going to last. They had been all over one another that morning. It started with her last run-through over clothes in the wardrobe. Then, they'd fucked in the shower. After the shower, he was supposed to leave but she didn't want him to. They were barely on the bed, but made it work.

“I'd rather have you than be in the Cotswolds,” Ed told her. “Any day.”

Natalie bit her lip. Ed went for broke, pushing her head down. The pillows obscured her face. She batted them back, staring up at Ed again. He grunted, panted, and shook his head.

He flopped over to the side, chuckling. “I fucking hate when you... stare at me like that. Why?”

“Do what? Stare at you... with my face?” Natalie giggled. “Oh, how dare I, Winslow!”

He pulled himself together for good. “Look, princess, it’s just the *way* you stare. It drives me mad. I want every inch of you and then... well, I think about every inch of you and stare at every inch of you and—”

“Ed, do you think maybe going down on me forever might *also* have something to do with it? You did it like it was life or death and you were hell bent on saving me.”

Natalie held her arms out. Ed tossed the shirt at his feet to her.

“I love that. I love listening to you lose it. I love feeling you become putty. It is so, so satisfying.”

Natalie pulled her shirt on. “Don’t get drunk on power.”

“I won’t.”

Natalie hopped up, pulling on her knickers, and reaching for her jeans. She did a pants-dance when someone knocked.

“Your Royal Highness, we need to start loading the vehicle. Miss Chandler and Lord Winston are outside waiting.”

Natalie fell into Ed’s arms, sighing. “Of *course*, they are. I’ll be out in a second.”

Ed looked lovingly at her. “We cannot do this again, Nat.”

“Hmmmm, no.” She lay her head on his chest, basking in the smell of his aftershave.

“I love you, Nat. I will see you again soon. Text me when you arrive.”

“Same.”

“Pray for me. The drive... it could go poorly. My father informed my mother he fancied a girl on Love Island, and she took it *far* too personally. They’ve been rowing.”

Natalie snickered. “Have fun, darling.”

Ed kissed her. “I shall.”

Natalie swatted his bum. “We should go.”

“We should.”

Natalie and Ed stopped at the service entrance for a parting snog. Winston laid on the horn to annoy Natalie. She flipped him the bird, still kissing Ed.

Ed walked to his car.

“Love you, Winslow!

Ed climbed into his fabulous toaster car. “Love you, too, Princess!”

Natalie climbed into the back of Lucy’s Range Rover. Two dogs stared back at her.

“You driving her car now?” Natalie wondered after doting on the dogs.

Lucy shrugged. “The dogs prefer it, I think.

“God, you two are terrible.”

“She wants the dogs to protect her from ‘bad vibes’,” Winston chuckled.

“What bad vibes? You have the best of it. Formal dinner tomorrow night and no church service on Christmas. You stay at the big house, eat endlessly, and sit in front of a fire while we toil and greet the well-wishers. I envy you.” Natalie shook her head.

“You know why,” Lucy said, flatly.

“Why” was George. Winston had told him. It had not gone well. Winston had filtered the conversation when he explained it to Lucy. George let Winston have it. Natalie protected Lucy by telling her father to put George and Patrick in the main house. She made the excuse that as Patrick’s family were

visiting, it made more sense. It killed her a little, but George was being a knob. He would get over it eventually, but maybe not over *this* holiday. Better safe than sorry. Lucy was suspicious of Winston's rosy read. She knew better.

"And you didn't want to leave?" Winston asked.

"No, God, no. I didn't want to, and I didn't want to leave Ed."

"I don't understand why I'm allowed to come, but you aren't allowed to bring Ed," Lucy said.

"Because who I bring matters too much. Also, Ed's parents wanted him to come with them."

Winston was hopeful. "Maybe next year?"

Natalie shrugged. "I have no idea."

Lucy said. "Yes. He will be there because you love him. What were you up to? Avoiding us?"

"No, I was lying there with his head in between my thighs only minutes before you all pulled up."

Winston looked pained. "Nat! God!"

"She asked. This is how Lucy and I talk. He's brilliant at it. I am loved the fuck up. Count your blessings, darlings. I am in a good mood."

Lucy snickered.

Winston glared over at Lucy, suspicious. "I hope she doesn't tell you anything."

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know?" Natalie giggled.

"Nat, be good to me and don't mention it. Women talk. They always claim we compare notes. No, it's women who do."

"Sheena and I know all!" Natalie announced.

Lucy turned to shoot Natalie a look. "Not all! Just some. Take a nap, Natalie!"

Natalie took the advice. She settled with the dogs and dropped off as the caravan drove north. She awoke as they

were pulling into the drive at Anmer. That's when she realised all was not going according to plan.

The butler greeted them with bad news. "Ma'am, the boiler is on the fritz. Went out this morning and the service company says it will be a week for the part. They will attempt short-term fix tomorrow. "

"What? So... what? We have no heat?" Natalie groaned.

"We have the fireplaces, but the place is already drafty."

She looked at Winston and Lucy. "We've got no heat. But they think they can fix it tomorrow. Thoughts?"

"We can survive by fire light," Lucy said. "It sounds sorta romantic."

"If you're down to try, it could be fun." Winston shrugged.

"Here goes nothing." Natalie said.

She wished Edwin were there to warm her up.



ON CHRISTMAS EVE, Winston woke shaking in the frigid cold. Lucy stole all the blankets in the night. The fire was out. The romantic evening of cuddling under blankets and making love by moonlight was now a frigid morning with Lucy buried under all the warmth while Winston, quite naked, calculated which was worse—moving to don warm clothing or staying in bed.

Winston decided, for their sake, it was best to start the fire. To do so safely, he needed to dress in warm clothes. Winston's teeth chattered as he pulled on pants, a pullover, and joggers before rushing to start the fire once more. As it took, Winston crawled back in bed, wrapping his arms around Lucy who groaned sweetly. The dogs glared at him for disturbing their peace. Lucy spooned Frida. The dogs were warmer than him at this point.

"I'm cold," Lucy whined.

“Yeah, so am I. I started the fire again. It was out,” Winston said.

“You’re shivering, Tony.”

Winston held her tighter. “I know.”

“I’m so cold.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy. I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe some tea would warm us up?”

“That would be lovely.”

So, all out of love, Winston left the bed and her warm body. He tucked her in tight and kissed her on the cheek. In the kitchen, Natalie sorted through her email. She was unfussed with a beanie on her head and an RAF hoodie with “Lyons” emblazoned on it.

“What? You alright?” she looked up as he passed.

“I am here in search of tea. Are you not fucking freezing?”

Natalie was nonplussed. “I have good layers on, and I have suffered far worse.”

“Lucy is dying.”

“Lucy is precious.”

“Well, she may be but we’re both freezing.”

“It will be okay. They’ll be here in thirty to fix the thing.”

He put the kettle on and rubbed his hands together, shivering. “Making some tea for Luce.”

The butler arrived. “Your Royal Highness. The man for the boiler is a bit early.”

“Great! See!” Natalie patted Winston’s back.

He wanted to punch her for encouraging this. She’d gotten Lucy all keyed up like it would be a fucking slumber party. And, for a while, it had been romantic. Now, he was sure his entire body was shutting down.

Gerry strode in, looking frozen. “It’s so bloody cold!”

Winston shot Natalie a look.

“What are you here for?” Gerry asked.

“Tea. I am supposed to bring tea for us. Lucy is freezing.”

“So is Sheena. I am regretting staying here with you,” Gerry said. “Everyone else had the right idea.”

Winston steeped the tea as the boiler man entered. He bowed and introduced himself to Natalie, looking starstruck.

Natalie shook his hand. “I’m so grateful you could do this what with the holiday and all.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am. Well, my men tried but the solution we thought would work isn’t working. It will have to wait for next week.”

Winston let out a long groan and Natalie shot him a look.

“Ignore my cousin,” Natalie said. “Okay. Thank you for trying.”

“I am so, so sorry ma’am.”

“What do I owe you?” Natalie asked.

“Nothing, ma’am. For the trouble... we didn’t fix it. I will get you what you paid—”

“No, no, keep it. Take the money and whomever needs it today, cover them, alright? Better they should have heat. We can go up to the main house and get warm.”

“Oh, ma’am that is very generous.”

“It’s only logical. Happy Christmas to you and your family.”

“Happy Christmas, Your Highness.”

He left. Gerry sighed, “Well, up to The Big House we go.”

Winston grumbled. “Fucking Christ! We gotta go home. I can’t—”

Natalie quickly assured Winston. “He won’t do shit. If he says even a word to Lucy, I will put him on his arse. He’s sore over you winning in some bizarre, masculine sense. You make Lucy happier than he ever did.”

“Really? You think?” Winston looked at her surprised.

“Yes, Winston. Yes. She loves you. Roll with it.”

Winston rubbed his temples. “She’s not going to be happy.”

“It will be okay. He’s not *that* petty. He’s not about to ruin Christmas over it. That’s stupid.”

Winston hoped Natalie was right.



LUCY HUNG back when they arrived at The Big House. She clung to Sheena and Natalie like they were a lifeboat. She did not complain when George was nowhere to be found for the first hour. Instead, she warmed before a roaring fire with hot coffee and biscuits. She laughed about a post on social media trying to understand why Ed was spotted out with his father in the Cotswolds the evening before at a pub. A herd of thirsty women hoped he was single again.

“God, even in a shit photo, he’s a snack,” Lucy said.

“I know. I hate myself for allowing him to go!”

Vanna looked up from her book. “It’s healthy to spend time apart.”

“What is a snack?” Patrick’s mother, Penny, asked.

Natalie, Sheena, and Lucy burst into laughter.

“Um...” Lucy snickered, “it’s a term for a very attractive man.”

Natalie shrugged. “I’d say he more a whole meal but, you know... to each their own.”

“Oh, stop, stop!” Vanna tried not to lose it.

“Your boyfriend is the handsome swimmer?” Penny asked.

“Correct,” Sheena answered. “Someone took a dreadful photo of him and she’s still over here salivating. He’s

gorgeous. She complains because she *misses* him.”

“The women of the socialverse are disagreeing with you, darling,” Lucy giggled. “They’re on him like a moth to a flame. I think it’s the shoulders if I’m being honest.”

Natalie disagreed. “The shoulders? The pecks. Shoulders are overrated.”

Vanna shook her head. “I disagree. Shoulders can be downright amazing.”

Natalie pulled a face.

“What. I have eyes, Natalie! He does have lovely shoulders, honey.”

The door peeked open. Patrick’s daughter, Charlotte Roughy, toddled in wearing an adorable red plaid smock dress. Charlotte was the product of Patrick’s marriage to a woman. They kept things *looking* above-board while he kept his Premier League career afloat. Patrick came out as he shifted to less-competitive MLS play in his mid-thirties. Charlotte’s mother was out of the picture. It appeared she was glad to have her life back. Her interest in parenting was limited. Lucy had to hand it to him and George. They made wonderful parents.

“Aww, look at you,” Lucy sighed. “You’re darling.”

Patrick followed. “Mom chose the outfit. She’s... she’s adorable, right?”

“She’s precious,” Lucy said.

“I love your bow,” Natalie cooed. “You and George did not come up with this?”

“No, God, no. I don’t buy any of her clothing—thank God.”

Charlotte walked over to her grandmother and climbed into her lap.

Patrick asked, “What are you all doing up here? Bored?”

George arrived. Spotting Lucy, he crossed his arms.

“Our boiler has gone tits up,” Natalie answered. “And everyone feels they were freezing.”

“Natalie, not all of us are looking for a combat experience for Christmas,” Sheena pointed out.

Lucy looked at her hands in her lap. “No, indeed.”

“So, they will be staying up here with us,” the Queen said, happily.

“We thought we might take the little one to town after a bit,” George said. “Anyone want to join us?”

“Well, I will,” Natalie said. “But I need a long soak before I can even contemplate it.”

“That’s fine. She needs a nap,” Patrick said. “We’re trying —”

“We’re trying in futility,” George added.

“We’re trying to get her to stay on some sort of schedule,” Patrick said.

Vanna looked sympathetic. “It’s very difficult. Don’t feel bad if you cannot. I can still remember Australia and New Zealand with Kiersten when she was still so young. Nightmarish. Give up on the time zones. She sleeps when she sleeps. I know that’s not what you want to hear.”

“We were told to *try*. The nanny is insisting we *try*. I guess we will hang out until The Princess deigns to join us?” George looked at his sister playfully.

Patrick was over it. “I’m still jet lagged. I’m taking a damn nap.”

“That sounds lovely,” Lucy said. “I don’t think I slept well last night at all. I was freezing to death!”

“It wasn’t so bad!” Natalie scoffed.

“It was *five* this morning!” Sheena insisted.

Lucy could still feel the cold in her bones. There was nothing like a drafty English country house. Without a boiler, the fireplaces did little. Back in the day, people had barrages of

screens and blankets to cloister them in front of a roaring fire. Without these accompaniments, houses were frigid. Lucy had learned to wear layers to any country house from September until June.

“It’s not a combat mission, Nat,” Lucy said.

“Well, you’d not make it. I’m glad you aren’t mine to babysit!”

“Isn’t Lucy *your* babysitter?” Patrick joked.

Natalie burst into laughter and Lucy snickered. It wasn’t too far off.

“No comment, darling. Lucy is... essential.”

Winston entered with his brother and Paul. George noticeably refused to acknowledge Winston, who claimed their short text conversation on the matter of Lucy was simple, sweet, and not-too-contentious. In the moment, all signs pointed to George being a petty asshole. The previously copasetic relationship between George and Lucy had given way to cooler feelings. George teetered between malaise and contempt.

“Well, should we all take a break? Settle into our new accommodations?” Natalie asked. “And then in a bit after the kid has had a lie down, I join you. Paul, do you and Kiersten care to come to town with us?”

“Nah.” Paul shook his head. “Kiersten is out at the stables. I doubt she’ll be back until it’s time to get ready for dinner.”

Winston agreed to go, saying nothing to George. They proceeded up to the guest rooms where they stayed. Lucy and Winston found themselves catty-corner from George and Patrick. *Great*. It was too close for comfort. At least they weren’t sharing walls.

Upon seeing the room, Winston said, “It’s not ideal.”

They stepped inside, Lucy closing the door. “Tony, he’s angry with you.”

“Oh, I’m aware. I swear he was fine—”

“Via text? Could you even tell his frame of mind?”

“No,” Winston winced.

“Well, there you are. Look, Winston, I love you so, so much but this is... it’s awkward as hell. I feel like I’ve put you and your family in some sort of—”

Lucy never finished the thought. Winston wrapped her up in a kiss for the ages. Her worries would have to wait. Her neuroticism faded as she kissed him deeply, passionately, and let him lead her over to the bed. It was a terrible idea. Given they’d not been able to get up to anything in the morning, she assumed he was finally warmed up enough to give it a go. Ever since they started down the track to couplehood and confessed their love for one another, the sex became white hot. Lucy craved it. They couldn’t keep their hands off one another. She wasn’t sure if this was a power play by Winston but did not care.

Lucy closed the world out as they continued to fool around in bed. Winston made no bones about what he was up to, sliding his hand down her yoga leggings and then her panties. It felt so good. Lucy decided to toss her panties and leggings off to give him more room to work. Winston seemed content to work at it. He was doing the thing she loved and hated. He would wind her up only to slow down. He wanted her to beg. It led to a miraculous climax, leaving her to feel she’d entered the gates of heaven.

Lucy choked out, “I feel... it feels. like I don’t know... too much?”

Winston laughed. “What?” He then went back to work all while kissing her neck.

“The spot you’re hitting,” Lucy whispered.

She felt great pleasure while simultaneously fearing she might pee. It was odd. His fingers continued to hit this lovely spot. It felt so different. Lucy was as curious as she was concerned. She had not felt like she was working on a full bladder at the onset of this.

“Relax,” Winston whispered, biting her earlobe.

It felt so good. Lucy gave herself over to the momentary pleasure and then the release. She felt her legs go weak. She felt her body recess into the mattress as she had the most spectacular orgasm. She let out an uncontrollable screech. Winston began to kiss her, trying to quiet her, as his fingers were still inside her. It was hot. Unfortunately, when he finally pulled away, she had other issues to deal with.

“Why am I... so wet?” she said. “Did I piss the bed?”

Winston answered, “You squirted. Have you never done that before?”

Lucy shook her head.

“It’s fine,” Winston said. “It’s hot. Unless it didn’t feel good...”

“No, it felt fucking fantastic. But... holy hell. I didn’t know I was capable. I thought that was the stuff of fairy tales and porn.”

“Fairy tales and porn is an excellent name for a band. But it is... possible.”

“You’re... gifted. And you should fuck me before I chicken out.”

He smiled at her lovingly. “At your service.”

Winston finally undressed and fumbled through his luggage for a condom. He came right back to bed, kissing her. They went at it like depraved, sex-starved people. Lucy was loving it, but the bed was creaky.

“Get on your side,” Winston said.

“What?”

“Can you trust me?”

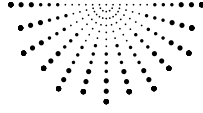
Lucy wasn’t about to argue with the man who worked a miracle on her pussy. Why argue with perfection? She flipped on her side. Winston pulled one of her legs back and took her from behind. She came again, his hand on her clit as he thrust quickly. She cupped her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming. It was almost too much. She couldn’t help herself.

When they finished, Winston letting her leg recess back to its normal place, they lay there breathing heavy, exhausted, and contented.

“That was... fire,” Lucy admitted. “You are...

“Knackered?” Winston laughed. “And you are... a joy.”

MEDUSA OF THE UNDERWORLD



“We should go around the table and say what we are most grateful and excited for,” Robbie said.

The family took in their formal Christmas Eve dinner. This adults-only celebration was a tradition long as anyone could remember.

Natalie hated this tradition. To date, her excitement was related to aircraft. No one, but Uncle Duncan would understand. This year, she had little to say unrelated to her boyfriend—a thorny issue with her father.

Robbie went first. “I am grateful everyone pulled together as George took a step back and did what he needed to. I am grateful for Patrick in helping him navigate that. I am most excited we might get to spend more time with little Charlotte in the coming year and to see what all of you kids get up to.”

Robbie looked to Natalie. She was already irritated because she saved the family from a succession crisis but had not gotten a mention.

“Well, I don’t know how to respond, and you know how I hate this.”

“Natalie, you have nothing to be grateful for?” Vanna asked.

“No, I didn’t say that. I am grateful for all our health. And I don’t know what I am most excited about.”

Kiersten crossed her arms. “Nat, that’s a cop out! You must be excited about *something*, right?”

Natalie took a deep breath. “I am most grateful for Ed as the best distraction this year. I am also grateful for Lucy’s compassion and steadfast support. Without Lucy and Ed, I’d be a ship off its moorings. I’d be bitter and bored. I’m excited to see what the new year brings for us—all of us but especially Ed and me.”

“Aww,” Lucy said, “you’re too sweet.”

“I mean it, girl. You’re my rock.”

George was cross. When he’d ditched everyone—right reason or not, Natalie had been out at sea. So had Lucy. It was the best thing to have a partner in crime. Lucy had held her together and put her back right so many times. It was only fair she get credit where it was due.

Robbie cleared his throat. “Well, I didn’t realise things were so serious with Ed... I hope it is a good year.”

Paul went next. “I’m probably most excited to spend some time in the U.S. with George and Pat playing polo.”

“Polo, really?” Cousin Victoria razed him. “Good lord, mate. There is so much more out there than polo.”

It was true, but Paul could be happy with the most basic sort of thing. He missed George like the rest. George had been so central to their lives and now was gone. Natalie felt a large part of her heart separated from her body when he was in America. Paul would probably benefit from going to the States to play polo with George. It was surprising Robbie would let him.

The round continued until they reached George.

He stood. “Well, I am most grateful for everyone’s support, as I did what seemed impossible. I am glad you all believed in me and took my leap of faith in stride. To Natalie, you are still my rock, and I am forever indebted to you. To the rest of you, know I don’t take you for granted. And as for the next year, I think Patrick and I both have a lot to be grateful for.”

Oh really? What was this? An announcement?

“We’re going to have a wedding and we’re starting the process of giving Charlotte a sibling.”

There was an eruption of excitement as George and Patrick explained they were planning to marry on a by-week in September over Labour Day—a big American holiday. The wedding would take place at their newly purchased Lakeside compound. The baby was a whole separate issue. They were using an egg donor, a surrogate, and Patrick was going to the biological father. This was all fine and lovely. Natalie was happy for him. She was also a bit jealous. Why couldn’t people be this excited for *her*? She and Ed were together nearly as long this time around. They were in love. However, if she announced they were engaged, her father would have denied her consent to marry. Moreover, if they had announced an engagement, it would be largely overshadowed by her brother’s own engagement. And here he was with one child and about to have two! Natalie was feeling her slipping fertility keenly in this moment.

George said, “And, of course, you’ll be in the wedding, Nat. I want you to be my best woman, of course.”

“Is that a thing?” Kiersten laughed.

“Yes, certainly. I mean gay weddings are the wild west,” Patrick answered.

Natalie was chuffed. “I love you. I would be honoured.”

“And Paul, you’ll be in the wedding, too, I hope?” Patrick asked.

“Sure, sure. I am happy to be in it.”

“What about me?” Kiersten asked. “I get the shaft?”

“I mean, you can be involved. There is room for everyone. American weddings are lawless in the best way,” George gushed.

Lucy looked understandably quiet in the moment, graciously offering her congratulations. Winston did as well. George ignored them both, rudely and noticeably. *Awkward!*

When things got around to Winston, he was noticeably flustered.

He chuckled nervously. “Well, two weddings in one year. How do I follow up? I think I am most grateful for my family this year—both biological and chosen. And my fur kids, of course. And for Lucy who is... she’s wonderful and I am happy to have her by my side.”

She blushed. George looked ready to flip a table.

“For next year? I am looking forward to all the big events and having Lucy there with me. It’s nice to have a partner. I’m simple.” It was endearing. He loved Lucy.

Lucy looked nervous. “Well, I’m not family—”

Patrick said sweetly, “Neither am I yet. Go on! You must be grateful and excited about *something*.”

Lucy’s voice was quiet. “You’re too sweet. Um... I’m grateful for everyone who was supportive. I fully expected to be cast aside. I would have understood it, but you all are wonderful. Um... and for next year... I think I am excited about all the events, too. And Winston and our dogs.”

“*Your* dogs?” George scoffed.

Lucy shifted nervously and looked at her plate.

Winston set his jaw. “Yes, they are our dogs. We live together. We have dogs.”

“You’ve barely been with her. It’s ridiculous and—”

“George,” Patrick said, sternly, “if you bring this territorial, straight energy in here, you’re about to ruin things.”

“I’m sorry but Winston is shoving her in my face!” George declared. “This has to be getting back at me, doesn’t it?”

Patrick shrugged. “Technically, I just shoved it in her face.”

Winston’s voice came in hot. “I have been into Lucy since forever. I’d be ashamed to admit how long. I never acted on it... until after you two were long broken up. You left *her*, Georgie. You don’t own her! Stop being a dickhead.”

“Winston,” Rita groaned.

“No, Mum. He’s being a prick!”

“There is a code—”

Patrick looked unimpressed. “Among possessive, toxic straight people. Lucy, I am happy for you. I am grateful for your grace. It takes strength and compassion to let things go.”

“Thank you,” Lucy squeaked.

“So, this isn’t about winning?” George asked.

Natalie sat her fork down decidedly. “No, George. It’s about being in love with someone and having them love you back.”

Irritated, Robbie said, “Let it go. George, this is unbecoming of a person of your age—”

“Oh, I’m sorry you didn’t have to suffer the agony of hearing them going at it. Luce, have you ever learned to keep it down? Can you try tonight to shut up?”

“George!” Patrick covered his face, mortified.

“George, you need to apologise,” Vanna insisted.

“I needn’t do—”

Lucy burst into tears and dropped her napkin.

She stood. “I’m gonna go.”

Winston followed suit. He roared, “I should beat your arse!”

“You don’t get to fucking talk to me like that!”

“You’re a private citizen, same as me! Fuck off into the sun!” Winston used a phrase Lucy planted in his brain.

Winston slammed the door. The room fell silent. Natalie looked at her father, pleading with him to say something. Her mother was near tears. Vanna always cried in a conflict scenario.

Robbie was clear. “You should be ashamed of yourself! George, that girl has been nothing but gracious! She is fiercely

protective of this family and its secrets. She could have gone out and made millions with a damn memoir. She could have sued us. Still, she stands by Natalie's side. And, to her credit, your sister has masterfully taken over. If this runs Lucy off, you've made Natalie's job difficult, you've alienated one of your best mates and your cousin, and you've embarrassed us. Listen to your fiancé. This is rubbish behaviour!"

Natalie was in disbelief over Robbie's affirmation. but thankful he stood up for Lucy.

"You'd be angry," George quipped back.

Robbie was about to speak when Duncan interjected.

"I punched him square in the face over your mother and what good did it do? Vanora is a saint and, still, she held it against me. And I don't blame her. And guess what? We got the fuck over it. I apologised and moved on. I already had. Look at Patrick. Do you love him? Is he not the reason you blew up the life you knew? Is squabbling over Lucy is good for him? Productive? Signals maturity and readiness to enter a lifelong commitment?"

Everything Duncan said was spot on.

"I couldn't have said it any better myself." Robbie endorsed his twin brother's diatribe.

"I don't hold a candle for Lucy. Patrick knows."

"No, but it's embarrassing, Georgie. It's terrible that you think she should suffer and be unhappy. For what? What is Lucy's crime? Loving you when you were clearly emotionally involved with me? Being understanding as you found yourself? Loving your family? Defending you and taking the high road? Being lovely with Charlotte? What? I don't care about your arguments with Winston. I think they are stupid and embarrassing, but... Lucy? You only embarrassed her."

"It was loud—"

Rita snapped to her feet and bellowed, "Are we not adults, George? God, if I had a dime for every time I have heard your mother and father, I'd be a rich woman!"

“Mairead!” Bruno groaned.

Vanna glared at her. Rita was pissed.

Nina stole her mother’s wineglass. “Mummy, we’re cutting you off.”

“Well, it’s true. We’re all adults here,” Rita said. “I refuse to apologise for Winston’s supposed indiscretion. One, I love Lucy dearly. Two, he loved her unrequited for ages. Out of a courtesy for you, he never said anything, George. Never. It’s not my fault you all were too blind to see it. He treats her like a queen—as she deserves. You left her to pick up the pieces. We love you are happy with Patrick—we adore him and Charlotte. But as the person who changed your nappies more times than I can count, young man, I will not sit by and let you throw the poor girl under the bus. If you ever loved and respected her, you need to bloody well apologise immediately and stop this nonsense!”

In a last-ditch effort, George looked to their mother.

She took a moment. She stared down. She was not about to give George an out. He looked bereft.

“You must apologise or you’re sleeping in the doghouse,” Patrick said.

“Pat, why do you care—”

“Because, George, any woman who welcomed our kid after your decision is worthy of nothing but grace. I’m still the chivalrous type and a terrible mama’s boy but... she is the sweetest girl. Women put up with too much from men. And if someone said something like that to Charlotte, I would beat his ass!”

“Fine!” George let out a long groan and left the table.

Robbie apologised for his son. “I really am mortified. Penny, you and Henry didn’t deserve to see our drama on full display.”

“Nah,” Henry, Patrick’s father said. “My brother once got into a full-on fist fight over dinner. We only had boys. It was too much testosterone. Penny has been embarrassed for us all.”

“Boys are... a joy,” Penny said, flatly.



“LUCY, MAY WE SPEAK?” George called into the drawing room.

Lucy was a disaster. Winston was dabbing her eyes with tissues.

“Like hell you can,” Winston growled protectively.

“No, it’s... let him talk,” Lucy said.

George stood before her, looking like a kicked puppy. “I want to talk... apologise. I come in peace. We need to put everything on the table.”

Winston balled his hands into fists. “She doesn’t owe you anything!”

“No, she doesn’t,” Lucy said in third person. “But she would like to discuss this for once and for all. That is, George, if it never comes up again.”

“I promise to bury this. Patrick is about to kill me, and my father put me on my arse. You deserve much better.” George sounded contrite.

Winston looked from Lucy to George. “Okay, fine. I will leave you, but if you say two words—”

“I will be a good boy. I’m still cross with you. Not her.”

Winston walked past George, shooting daggers as he left.

George took a seat next to Lucy. “Luce, I’m sorry. It was totally below the belt. I’m angry with Winston—”

“You shouldn’t be, but it is between the two of you and not me, Georgie.”

“I know. Um... I know you could have ruined me. Perhaps I deserved it—”

Lucy wished she believed George. She wished she could be angry at him for doing what he did, but she was well past anger.

“I don’t hate you. Not now. Not ever, probably. I realise we were hiding things from one another—both of us. It would have ended in disaster and unhappiness, and I never would have been the one to end it.”

“Wait? What were you hiding?”

“Everything about my family. Everything I share freely with Winston I knew I couldn’t with you. And I shared him with them. I never wanted to do that with you. It was—”

“Wow. What a shit thing to say!”

“You know what, George, I have a mind to tell you off anyway! You want it? You got it! You could have my life, leaving me holding the damn bag. God, if I don’t still love you in ways you may never understand. God, if I don’t wish I could hate you! Jesus fucking Christ, you left me in limbo with your family! If they were any less understanding and kind, it could have gone so wrong. You inflated my abandonment complex—”

“Your abandonment complex? Oh, please, Lucy!”

“No, you wouldn’t know because I didn’t tell you!”

George exploded now. “And whose fucking fault was that!? You are fucking him to get back at me—”

“I’m not. I love him. I bask in the way he adores me.”

“As if I didn’t spoil you mercilessly! Next, you’re going to say you never loved me, all the sex was a lie, and I was cruel to you!”

Lucy was quiet. She thought through her words. “No. The sex wasn’t a lie. I did love you. I know you loved me—and this is proof you were invested and still are probably too invested. You were never cruel to me. However, you always wanted this perfect version of me. I cultivated it because I loved you and wanted acceptance. Yes, I am clever and put together, but I’m also messy deep down. My family is a

fucking embarrassment—a disaster. Winston loves me despite it. He adores me despite it. He lets me be me and I don't fear retribution.”

“Oh, yes, I was the uppity, judgemental prick!”

“Stop putting words in my mouth! Stop it! You said yourself Patrick gives you that! You can just *be*. You are flourishing. You have absolutely everything we ever wanted together—everything I have ever wanted. You have the partner. You have a kid. You're going to welcome more. Do you know how much it hurts to see you do that with someone else? It's fucking miserable. It's humbling. You left me wondering if I was worthy of such love. I'm still considering freezing my eggs. I don't want your indecision to cost me happiness. You've given me a complex across the board.”

“Lucy, I am sorry you feel that way, but people move on. They live different lives.”

“Yes, but I can't live mine! You know what I would like? To feel desirable rather than to worry about if I am good enough. Every time Winston is in sight of my vulva, I worry it's repulsive—that it broke you or repels men—”

“It isn't... wasn't... that's stupid, Lucy—”

Lucy cut him off. “Yes, but you don't have to worry about your genitals repelling people or your body not being good enough or any of the above. You don't have to question if your pussy is like fucking Medusa turning men to stone.”

“I don't think your pussy is capable of turning men to stone.”

“Well, I wouldn't know because you cast me aside fast without any explanation. How could I be enough? How would you have felt if I left you for a woman?”

George sat there a moment. He was considering this for the first time.

“I'd be upset, I guess? You were beautiful. I used to crave you. Then, I didn't. Things changed. I was in love with Patrick. It went on too long. You're right. I could have felt as strongly about another woman, and it would have—”

“It would have been different because of internalised misogyny and homophobia and all.”

He nodded. “I loved you, Lucy. You were a fun lay which is why I am most bothered by overhearing you.”

“I am mortified. I can’t look anyone in the eye.”

“It’s okay, Winston’s mother told me off for mentioning and then pointed out my mother is loud, so—”

“Oh. My. God.”

“Yeaaaaah,” George grumbled. “I loved you, Lucy. I should have done better by you when I left. Perhaps, it is why I am also acting out a bit? I don’t like the idea of you with Winston. Maybe part of it is because I sense you’re a better pair?”

“I deserve love and happiness, too.”

“I know you do. You are the best type of person. You are more than I have ever deserved. You are saintly with Charlotte, as Pat keeps reminding me. He thinks you are every bit class and grace. I can’t disagree.”

“I love him for you. I figure if you are going to end up with someone, they ought to have been worth the nonsense. He is. Even if it hurts to see him get what I wanted, I wish you the best. Honestly, it’s never been about Patrick. It’s been about feeling life has been wasted with us here and I’ve lost out—”

“Lucy, you’re young. Winston has been in love with you for years. The two of you are aggressively cute together. It makes my stomach turn. If I wasn’t bothered by it, you should worry. You needn’t worry. Any man would be lucky to have you. I certainly was.”

“I struggle to take the good memories now.”

“I don’t.” George shrugged. “You and I have had a lot of good times in this very room. I have so many happy memories with you. You made me into a better person. You nurtured me. You gave me the strength to believe I could be myself. In a way, I needed to grow with you to be brave enough to be the

real me. I will be forever indebted and grateful to you, Lucy. I mean it.”

“I guess we needed to lose one another to grow up a bit. I guess we were only a stop on the ride of life?”

“A great one. God, we went through so much together. Don’t ever think I regretted it. I only regretted I hurt you in the end. I’m not ashamed of you. Ask Patrick. He thinks you made me a much better person. He appreciates you.”

“How?”

“Gay men... they don’t get offended by such things, I guess?” George winced. “I’m terrible at it. He says it’s a straight problem. The world is different when the pool is small, secrets are big, and life is just... out of the ordinary.”

“Okay but like... that’s always been your life.”

“Not the same. Part of me may always wonder if I could have spared myself the hassle and we could have been happy.”

“Nah,” Lucy said definitively. “I look at the two of you and think now it was always Patrick. Maybe you did need to lose him to come back and realise it? Maybe we did improve one another? I guess we did. And while I didn’t see it, I love Winston. He is everything I would have asked for in a partner. It’s weird. The two of you are alike in some key ways and different in others.”

“He’s a carer. Like Patrick is a carer. And like you are, I guess? Lucy, you deserve care, too. You will put everyone before you but... he’s going to be there. He’d fight to the death for you.”

“He would. I hope he never has to. But it’s so nice to have him to come home to. He doesn’t fuss at me about it. He waits. He loves me. He relishes the time we get together. He takes care of me. It’s everything I never thought I would ever see in a partner. It’s rare for men, you know?”

“I don’t think so.” George shook his head. “Okay, maybe but... I am a bit off.”

“Why?”

“I think I loved you a lot because you’re a lot like Mummy. I’m a total mummy’s boy, after all. But you need someone like Dad who is protective enough of you... who can care for you. Dad waits on Mum like that. I guess I never thought about it until now. The sun rises and sets with her. In a way, that’s Patrick for me. I hate to say that to you. It feels weird but... I could do anything for him—would do.”

“I know. I can tell,” Lucy admitted.

George was right. Vanna was worshipped by Robbie. He did do anything for her. He praised her above all else. He gave up so much for her. Vanna was everything Lucy wished she could be some day—accomplished, organised, and generous. But, above all, a doting and loving mother. It was sad to boil her needs down to just that. After all, Lucy was married to her job. But, if she could choose one thing, it would be someday to build her life around her children. Motherhood wouldn’t define her, but it would anchor her. She would care for them and give them everything she could in a way her parents hadn’t been capable of—emotionally or financially. So, maybe George was right? Maybe Lucy was a Vanna type? And maybe Winston was her Robbie?

“You deserve him,” George said. “I don’t think he deserves you. I will reserve judgement. I wish you such happiness, Lucy. I am still a bit broken up over it. That’s a me problem.”

Lucy nodded. “Yes, it is. I forgive you. I am mortified.”

George stood and held out his hand to Lucy. “Don’t be. We’re all drunk.”

George pulled Lucy to her feet. They stood there a moment in front of the massive Christmas tree. Suddenly, they were friends again. She knew he remained cross with Winston. Lucy wouldn’t wade into those waters. She had the closure she needed. They had said all they needed.

Lucy kissed George’s cheek and hugged him. “I appreciate you for being honest. I wish we had done this months ago.”

George sounded choked up. “Yeah, me, too.”

“A wedding and a baby?”

“Yeah. Wild, huh?”

They stopped before reaching the dining room.

“You’re gonna be a dad.”

“Fingers crossed.”

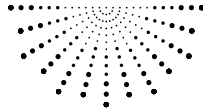
“And a husband,” Lucy added.

“Yeah. And before long, I suspect you’ll get your happily ever after, Luce. And I swear...”

George said, “I am not going to ever interfere in it again. If ever loved you—which I very much did—I should only help you be happy.”

“Thanks,” Lucy smiled and nodded. “Same.”

THE AFTERMATH



Ed had a whisky on ice for once. He was feeling it might be too watery. What had Natalie done to him? She'd be taking the piss about now. He'd gotten used to taking it neat now. Ed always missed her when they were apart. After their minutes-long pause, Ed was even more committed to proving to her he wasn't a wuss who couldn't handle the heat.

"Nice whisky then," John remarked. "She has good taste."

"I think it was her mother's taste specifically. She's the expert."

"Well, Her Majesty has remarkable taste. Cheers to our fair Queen. And her fairer daughter."

"Cheers." Ed clinked his father's glass.

The whisky, along with a set of crystal glasses, was a gift from Natalie to the Winslows. Margaret was chuffed. She loved anything beautiful bestowed upon her. She was a veritable crow. Ed wished he cared about such things.

"She is good at gifts?"

Ed chuckled. "Dreadful, actually. She's... she's busy and it's not her thing. I am ninety per cent convinced she delegated it to Lucy. She got me a watch, though."

Ed showed off the new Longines timepiece Natalie *supposedly* procured. Ed didn't much care. The thought was lovely. It was also a watch he'd never have bought himself. Natalie was dreadful at gifts self-admittedly. Ed was also difficult to shop for.

“Who is Lucy?”

“Ah, sorry. Lucy is Natalie’s private secretary. She’s also Natalie’s best mate. She’s dating Winston.”

“The Duchess of Lauderdale’s son?”

“Yes. I suppose he is *technically* The Earl of Lauderdale. We call him Winston. Lucy is a sweetheart and, clearly, thoughtful.”

“It’s a nice watch. Expensive. Of course, I’m sure she can afford to spoil you. I told you to get a rich woman to keep you!”

“Yes, Dad. But she doesn’t. We’re not like that. She’s not so demanding. Nor am I. We have a lot of fun. It’s not about conspicuous spending.”

“Well, you’ve gotten off lucky. What did you get her, then?”

“A vintage Cartier bangle. Jade and gold. I did ask Lucy what she might like. I still don’t understand jewellery in a real sense. What is more curious is I find all dressed up version of her nearly intoxicating.”

“Because it’s novel and because it’s how she’s meant to be.” John shrugged.

“Really? Meant?” Ed looked appalled.

“Was she not born to be like that? She’s practically been raised to wear a tiara and go around in a ballgown, right?”

Ed shook his head. “If you ask her, Natalie was born to be a pilot. She has always seen herself that way. She feels awkward in an evening gown. You’d not notice.”

“I don’t buy it. Women claim to be self-conscious about everything.”

“I don’t find her particularly self-conscious. Sometimes, though, her walls come down and I am surprised by her vulnerability.”

“As she has emotions?”

“No, I never doubt those. She’s so damn competitive and focused. Sometimes, she’ll lose it and be sad. She’s so brave, Dad. I don’t know how to explain it. She’s unflappable most of the time.”

John topped up his drink. “I feel the same way about your mother. It’s fucking terrifying. I suppose one of us must be fearless. I’m a pansy. And one of us had to have a baby.”

“I think the idea of childbirth frightens her. Both of us.”

“She doesn’t want children after all?”

“No, she does. Just finds it a bit nervy. We’ve talked about it.”

“And any thoughts on the other big thing then?” his father asked.

“What other big thing?”

“Marriage, Ed.”

Ed froze.

“Well, you must be thinking about it at this point. Why wouldn’t you if you’re together every night she’s in town?”

“Firstly, I am going to be gone on the road a lot the next few months. Second, neither of us seems willing to mention it yet.”

“So, then, is it only fun for now?”

Ed topped his glass off and shifted in his chair. “No, no. We love one another, Dad. Nat’s got a life and I’m not sure... well, I’m trying to... I’m trying to be a part of it. But it’s hard. We had a blow up and she sent me off. We were both in the wrong.”

“Couples fight, son. They fight and they work through things. I know you and the ex avoided one another, but it’s unhealthy. The fact you both copped to being in the wrong is a good sign.”

“It feels like a failing.”

“What happened?”

“I accused her of making eyes at Crown Prince Olav. I took the media bait. And I believed her when she denied it. She didn’t do anything wrong. I’m certain of it. However, I asked her to say something to the press and then got angry when she refused to put out a statement.”

John snickered. “Never complain, never explain son. She’s allowed to keep this private. I’d never have dignified such a stupid rumour with an ounce of credence. What? She was laughing at an old friend’s joke? The horror!”

“I know, I know.”

“You are jealous?”

Ed shrugged.

“Look at you. You’ll marry her. Mark my words.”

“Well, I will be waiting quite some time before we do anything. I learned my lesson. No thanks. I am in no rush.”

His father chuckled. “Well, if you say so. Just know her family has expectations. You can’t take forever.”

“What? Shouldn’t it be us—”

“You think that? There is a law on the books. She cannot marry you without King Robert’s consent. She’s one of the first seven in the line of succession. As such, she must ask his permission. He’s picky. People go mad about their daughters and the men they marry. You’re wise to take a proper gig rather than to approach him as Ed The Pants Model.”

“Dad, I was *never* a pants model!”

“Well, does he see it otherwise? Has he been inviting you around?”

“No... but... Nat and I keep these things separate.”

“I really wish you’d invite her around more. Your mother feels snubbed, and she whinges.”

“Fine, fine. I will try to find an excuse to bring her around formally,” Ed sighed. “Before she heads off again and before I head to America.”

“How did she take it?”

“She is genuinely happy for me,” Ed said proudly. “She understands it. She has been proud of me. It means a lot, you know? I never knew what that was like.”

John smiled. “Sounds like a winner.”



“SO, WE SURVIVED,” Winston said.

Lucy tossed herself onto the living room’s big couch. They landed back in London.

Face down on a pillow, she said, “Yeah, we survived. I feel like I can finally breathe again. It was... something.”

Winston snickered at her remark. She was rarely *silly*. She must have been knackered.

“You did beautifully. And, while you may regret going, I don’t regret having you.”

She groaned loudly.

“What?”

“I still want to die.”

“You don’t actually want to die.”

She didn’t.

Lucy sat up and shook her head. “Winston, I don’t want to go back to work. I’m dying here. It’s not Nat or the job, really. I love that. Tomorrow, though, the gates open.”

“The gates?” Winston was confused.

“Tomorrow, I am set to go through the start of egg-freezing cycle number two, Tony.”

“Okay, so, why...”

“Because I cannot wait around much longer and feel secure it’s going to happen. I want it to happen someday.”

“You’d still do it on your own?”

Lucy shrugged.

Winston could not wrap his head around volunteering to have children as a single woman with no help. The world was cruel to single mums. Of course, with Lucy’s career trajectory, she could soon afford to hire a nanny and do everything on her own terms. She was so strange. Winston wouldn’t have wanted to raise a child on his own.

“I couldn’t imagine. I just... I could not be a single parent by choice.”

“I figure if having two parents fucked me up, maybe one isn’t so bad? I don’t know. I don’t have the answers. I only know what my here-and-now is. The reality is my ex dumped me after promising to propose to me. He is now marrying a man and having a baby via surrogate. Not that I don’t love you, Winston. I do. However, nothing is promised. At least if I have eggs on ice, I’m in control.”

“Control in life is an illusion, Lucy.”

“Okay, but why do you care?”

“Because I love you.”

Lucy shook her head. “You don’t get it. Should I hope you choose me and gift me this thing? Winston, you love me now but... give it five years.”

“Lucy, where is this coming from?”

Her mood shifted from normal to down at the drop of the hat. “Where are we going, Winston? And tell me truthfully... not that all of me will believe you.”

Winston tilted his head and sat next to her. “I think we’re in a serious relationship. Maybe down the road, we’ll get married? Maybe we’ll have kids.”

“But we don’t know. That’s my point.”

“I want that, Luce. If you asked me tomorrow, I’d say yes. You complete my life in an unexpected way. You are my

partner. I don't want to lose you. Maybe you don't feel it, but —”

Lucy kissed Winston impulsively. Did she believe him? Did she want him to shut up? Winston pulled back, confused.

“What?” Lucy asked.

“What? What? Lucy, you jumped on me after claiming this wouldn't work. What is going on up there? Are you alright?”

She rubbed her temples. “I'm a mess. I'm doing this thing where I'm trying to sabotage things for us. I shouldn't. You are so wonderful. Too good to be true. And that's why I do it.”

Winston shook her shoulders playfully and laughed. “Well fucking stop, Luce!”

She giggled and playfully smacked him.

“I love you,” Winston assured. “I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here. Like I said, I am hopeless. I would march down to the guildhall right now and not look back, Lucy.”

“You're crazy, Tony.”

“I am not, Lulu. I would.”

“You scare me,” Lucy said after a moment.

The look in her eyes was one of contemplation.

“I frighten you?”

“Yes, you do. You're so sure. And... I can't deny it. With you, I'm convinced I'm just as nuts as you are. I mean, what have you done to me, Winston? We're surrounded by dogs!”

Winston realised they had five sets of eyes staring at them, likely expecting a treat.

“Dogs?”

“I don't like dogs. Well, I *didn't* like dogs. I swore I was not a dog person. And you were unfussed. You're like ‘oh, you'll get used to it’ and were convinced I would fall in love with them. I did. When I came here, I was a wreck. Perhaps, I still am? I dunno. I love these stupid dogs and I love you. I

don't have a doubt in my bones about it. Even when I thought I was pregnant, I still somehow assumed it would be okay."

"*That* was mental."

"It was. I cringe a little thinking about it. I know we're only starting but... I'm so happy. I felt like a selfish bitch running headlong into Sandringham with you. Now? It feels like we made our peace. We're a thing. Like it or leave it. I've never been so sure about someone. I wasn't like this with George. I was being this version of myself... you don't care for her, I don't think."

"I love the silly part of you," Winston said. "I love the part of you that baby talks to the dogs and the girl who sings in the shower. I love the way your hair smells and the how you are anal retentive about the shoes in the entry."

"So, you don't think the not-pregnant-thing was some sign from the universe?"

Winston was confused. "What type of sign?"

"I felt like it might be punishing me."

"That's the Catholic guilt," Winston laughed.

"Oh my God! It is!"

"Nah. I only think the universe wasn't quite ready for it. I don't think it's forever, Lucy."

"The universe wasn't ready for it, yet." She nodded and stood up, digesting.

"Where are you headed?" Winston asked.

"To give the dogs a treat and to get us some beer. We have more than earned it."

Lucy was the future Winston wanted. He wasn't sure if the dogs had *sold* him. He was sure Lucy loved him. He knew they had something. He'd been persistent enough. He was assured they would fall asleep that night together. It was a tremendous feeling.

Lucy returned with her canine followers. She made them all wait patiently for a treat and then shouted at them to go

away, pretending she didn't like them one bit. She did, though. She loved them all.

Lucy handed Winston a beer. "So, what do you think about freezing embryos?"

"What?" Winston wondered, taking a pull of the beer.

"Like if I was to go through all of this and then you contributed half?"

Winston almost choked. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Well, it's a thought experiment. I'm not saying I would bet on you."

"I would say if you wanted to go that route, we should just have a kid, Luce. I mean, really, we'd be opening ourselves up to doing it ten years from now—"

"So, what is different? You don't think we'll be together in ten years?"

"I want the security anything I'm producing isn't just... out there in the world," Winston protested. "And I do think I will still have you in ten years. I think we'll have a couple of kids, in fact. That's why I think this is all silly."

Lucy shrugged.

"You are so peculiar."

"I am not! Tony, this is a real question."

"I know. And it's a real answer. If you are willing to have science kids with me, why wouldn't we get it over with? As you said, nothing is promised, but I'd like to think we could at least see how silly it is."

"Science kids?" Lucy giggled.

"Well, I mean, they aren't people. They are embryos. But they *could* be people—with science."

Lucy snickered. "Do you always get so wrapped up in reproductive terms? Are you always so... imaginative, baby?"

"Look, my family breeds racehorses. I think I lost all hope of innocence at a particularly young age. Reproduction is

largely mechanical. Embryos are embryos, you know?”

“Okay, fair. But you’d... go for it.”

“We almost did!”

“Okay, well, I can put it off. I’ll give us a year to figure out what we are going to do,” Lucy shrugged. “I’ll call it off *again*. I doubt they’ll see me.”

“I doubt you’ll need them. I would bet money that in that time you’re already pregnant.”

“Winston, you’re nuts.”

“I know.”

They drank their beer in peace, continuing to throw a treat or two to the dogs. Frida, dumb as a box of rocks, missed most throws. At the last minute, she’d miss and then one of the others would jump in. She had to be handfed. It was hysterical to watch. The dogs could be as good as the telly some nights. It was nice being back together.

“So, is this all a litmus test?” Winston asked.

“What? The eggs thing? I tried to pawn it off as such but... no. I was serious.”

“Hmm...”

“What? Are you walking back on your statement?”

“No! No! I... I didn’t know.”

Lucy nodded. They sat quietly. Winston debated whether they should get another beer or order a late-night pizza. That sounded good. Lucy would approve. Winston looked at her. She was thinking about something. She had this look on her face suggesting her mind was turning.

Lucy finally said what she was thinking. “I have a litmus test for you. It’s cringey stupid.”

“What is cringey stupid, Luce?”

“Just... it’s going to make you laugh and you’re going to feel weird, I’d bet?”

“Does it involve some sort of turkey baster because I’m not—”

“No, God no!”

“So what?”

She blushed and shook her head. Now, she was walking it back.

“Come on, come on. I am *dying* to know, Luce.”

“You’ll think I’m a child...”

“No, I won’t. You’re five years younger than me. That’s not exactly a *child*. What does it involve? What is your test?”

“It involves your face,” Lucy said, unexpectedly kissing him again.

Kissing was fine. He could do with kissing. Winston was still confused about what was going on. Lucy could get so self-conscious about the strangest things. Winston wanted to lean her back on the couch. He started to move that way when Lucy pushed him back.

“I want you to go down on me.”

Finally! It had taken literal months before she’d allowed him this. It was the strangest thing. Winston could have had Lucy six ways from Sunday. He’d made her squirt in the middle of a busy house in the afternoon. They’d gone at it all over the house here. Yet, she always stopped him from doing this. And how was it a litmus test? Had previous lovers been bad at it? To his knowledge, Lucy hadn’t *been* with many people. He known her a long time.

“Sure, sure,” Winston agreed, nearly jumping to pin her back on the couch. He ripped off her jeans and knickers like a man possessed and then she stopped him.

“Not here,” Lucy said.

Winston looked up at her, “Huh?”

“The dogs. They’re right there and I—”

“They don’t matter, Lucy. They are always around—”

“Not all five of them and this feels so... private.”

Winston gave her a look.

She fired back. “Really? You’re protesting moving the party upstairs?”

“I am right here. And I’m a lazy man.”

“Why do you even care?”

“Because it has been *months* and I haven’t been able to do this.”

“Do you *want* to?”

“If you could feel how hard I was right now, you’d be aware of how much I do want to, Lucy.”

One of the dogs whined. Winston acquiesced. Boner or no, the party had to move upstairs. Lucy hopped up. She was now wearing only a bra and racing up the stairs. Winston followed until she ducked into what was still technically “her” room. Winston threw her back on the bed and drowned in her pussy. It was now a quest to prove how good he was at this, so she’d want to do it again. Wait, was that the test?

Lucy was in her head at first. He could tell. The usually loud woman wasn’t. Winston usually got *something* back, but he was undaunted. He tried something else and felt her hips tilt into him. He heard and then, looking up briefly, saw her grab the bedspread. Okay, it was working. Slowly, she wound up. She pulled on his hair, she moaned loudly as ever, and she swore.

“There! I swear to fucking God if you move an inch!” Lucy panted.

Her legs braced. He was not moving.

“Oh my... fuck! God! Shit!” Lucy screamed. A dog whined outside the door. It was probably Frida thinking her favourite person was murdered.

Lucy writhed for a bit. Winston kissed her on the inside of her thigh as she came down. He climbed back up, lying next to her as she caught her breath.

“You didn’t have to stop. We could—”

Winston shook his head.

“What? Was it awful?” Lucy panicked.

“Was what awful? Was I awful?” Winston asked.

“No, no... just me... it?”

“Your pussy?” Winston snickered. “Was it awful? Your pussy? Can you say it?”

“Stop! Do not take the piss, okay? I’m sensitive about this.”

“What? Why. It is perfectly serviceable. I have zero complaints. Never had and I’m sure I never will,” Winston assured. “Why the insecurity?”

“I worried it was like Medusa.”

“That your pussy is a gorgon?”

“Well, sort of. I mean...”

“There is nothing wrong with it. It has *nothing* to do with what happened. You are very fun to get off. Has no one ever... done that for you?”

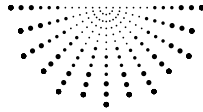
“No, I mean, I’ve had plenty of experience it’s... I was so paranoid I would ruin you,” Lucy winced.

“Ruin me? No, my love, you couldn’t,” Winston assured her.

“Thanks for your patience. Now, want to fuck me?”

Winston chuckled. “I thought you’d never ask.”

BAPS



“So, where are we staying?” George asked.

“You can take your old room if you want,” Natalie replied. “I figured Charlotte would land in my old room.”

“No, she’ll sleep with us if the bed is big enough,” Patrick said. “On the road, she never wants to be alone.”

“I don’t know how anyone can sleep like that.”

To Natalie the idea of permanently sharing a bed with any human was a bit off to Natalie. The idea of agreeing to share it with your partner *and* his tiny child sounded positively awful. How did they ever have sex? Was she not the cutest little cockblock known to man? Natalie’s mind wondered how *anyone* managed to have sex after one child. She spiralled.

“Pull up! Nat, pull up!”

She looked at George.

“Shut up. Don’t mock me!”

“What is that?” Patrick asked, confused. His eyes remained fixed on Charlotte. Neither he nor George were fully engaged. They were always one eye on the conversation and one eye on the kid. It seemed exhausting.

“It’s the GPWS alert,” George replied.

“Ground Proximity Warning System for the uninitiated,” Natalie said. “He thinks it will break me out of my funk.”

“Well, it worked, sis.”

“It’s a dreadful thing to hear when you’re flying. Annoying, though, if you know what you are doing, and it goes off.”

“Know what you are doing?” Patrick looked at George as if paranoid.

“Don’t worry. She’s the best. I don’t attempt the shit she does. I live a boring life in the cockpit. Not compared to Natty Lite here.”

“Natty Lite?” Patrick snickered. “Oh, he’s an ass, isn’t he?”

“No, no. That’s my handle. Well, I didn’t choose it. We were in California—test pilot course—and there was a Nat Heavy. He was Nate. Lucy fucked him actually... this summer.”

“Whyyyyyyyy, Natalie? Whyyyyyyyy would you tell me that?” George pulled a face like she’d murdered a puppy there on the spot.

“No edit on either of you.” Patrick shook his head like a perturbed librarian.

“No, quite right,” Natalie laughed. “Um... yeah. So, he was Natty heavy. You don’t get to pick your name, I’m afraid. It’s not all top gear and woo-woo hoo-ha fun times.”

“Woo-woo hoo-ha fun times are what my grandmother wished I got up to.” Patrick snickered at George, who burst into a laughing fit.

“Okay, what is it? What did I say?”

“Hoo-ha is American slang for pussy,” George said. “That is how people refer to it. Playfully.”

“We also don’t toss ‘pussy’ around,” Patrick reminded him. “People use the euphemism. Pussy is bedroom talk.”

“Hoo-ha?” Natalie stammered as the doorbell rang. “Ridiculous.”

“Your Royal Highness!” her butler called out. “Mr Winslow for you, ma’am.”

“Darling!” Natalie ran into the entryway to give Ed the biggest kiss. He held flowers in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. Natalie nearly knocked him over, but he stood firm and let her kiss him.

“Ooooh, you smell so good,” she groaned, still close.

She bit his lip a little and then pulled away.

“I... bathed?” Ed said, confused. “And shaved.”

“Shaved as in your face or...”

“Force of habit. I cannot go to the pool covered in hair. It drives me mad. How are you? How was everything. I saw your little hat.”

Natalie rolled her eyes.

“My mother loved your outfit, by the way. She wanted me to tell you as if you would care. And if I don’t bring you for dinner soon, she might disown me. And, while tempting, I think it reflects poorly on me as a son.”

Natalie gave him another kiss before taking the flowers—a big bouquet of red roses.

“I didn’t know quite what to get. My father said flowers were a good housewarming gift.”

“I think he meant like a plant. I think that’s the thing, but these are lovely. You, Ed Winslow, are the best housewarming gift yet.”

Ed pulled her close, hand in her jean pocket. He tilted Natalie’s face up with the hand not holding the champagne and kissed her slowly. It made her knees weak. She was fine until she heard someone clear their throat.

“So, you going to come and have dinner?”

Natalie turned. George leaned on the doorway. He looked like a shorter version of their father. His arms were crossed. He looked unimpressed.

“Get going,” Natalie waved the flowers at him.

“I didn’t realise we had company?” Ed said.

“Don’t sound deflated. We have a child. She’ll need to go down at nine and... well, I’m the bitch on duty tonight who will lie with her an hour while she climbs all over me and steps on my face. She will finally fall asleep going horizontally across the bed and then it will be over. Patrick, meanwhile, will find a place to tuck into a book. The two of you can go at it like teenagers without us bothering you.”

“Well, I did bring a magnum of champagne. This, though, was not for me,” Ed offered up. “This is from Dad. He and Mam. They are happy you finally got your own place.”

“Oooh! Yes, let me give you the tour,” Natalie offered up.

She came home to her new place at Kensington Palace. Her things were moved while she was in Sandringham. Apartment 1A may have languished for a bit in disuse but she had polished it back until it shined. With Lucy’s organization and her mother’s creative energy, the place looked surprisingly feminine and acceptable for a young woman. Still, it was more meant for a family. It certainly gave her more space to spread out. Most of all, it gave her privacy.

Natalie led Ed up and around the bedrooms.

“I think this is where we were conceived, yeah?” George laughed as they hit up the big his and hers suite.

“What?” Ed wondered.

Patrick and Charlotte ran down the hall on the other side of the door, distracting Natalie for a moment. Rather, Charlotte ran. Patrick chased her. She thought it was a game. He wanted a nap.

“It was my parents’ bedroom. But he’s joking. We were conceived—if you believe my mother’s oversharing or Rita’s corroboration—in an inn in Canada. And given Mum and Dad needed a bit of help in the pregnancy department, I am inclined to believe they knew when and where it all happened.”

“Wait... you lived... here?”

“Yes. We grew up here. I was just two doors that way. Nat was next door. Hmm... I wonder if the porn I shoved in the

small crevice of my walk-in wardrobe sliding door is still there?”

George trotted off, excited by nostalgia.

“Girl porn? Boy porn?” Natalie called down the hall.

Ed looked overwhelmed.

George answered, “I think boy, but it could have been either. I doubt you ever hid any.”

“No. I never had any such things.”

Natalie and Ed followed George to his old bedroom. Back in the day, it would have been lined of band posters, pictures of models, and polo regalia. In contrast, Natalie’s would have been lined with photos of planes, horses, and the Lionesses. She always got a laugh considering this contrast. No wonder people assumed she was the gay one.

“You have an entire drawer full of sex toys!” George pointed out. “God, what a night that was trying to find your extra tweezers. I thought Lucy would faint.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Ed snickered. “I mean, I know about the vibrators. That’s just Natalie, but—”

“That’s just me? I lived most of my life on a military base. I’m sorry if that’s just me!”

“I’m saying it’s fine. Baby, I’m not taking a shot at you. But, George, go on.”

George filed through his old wardrobe now. Patrick arrived with Charlotte. She immediately took books out of the small corner bookshelf, stacking them neatly.

“George, what are you doing in the closet?”

“Oh, wouldn’t we all like to know?” Natalie giggled.

“Low blow, Lyons. No, no Lucy and I were in Nat’s room one night. She told Lucy she had another pair of tweezers. But Lucy can’t tell her left from her right—”

“Thank God Lucy doesn’t fly,” Patrick interrupted George.

“For real. She gets frightened. I try to get her to calm down, but I think you scarred her, bruv.”

“Nah, not me. I am an excellent pilot. Anyhow, Lucy and I are trying to find these tweezers and we, instead, stumble on Natalie’s... collection. I died laughing because it was so awkward. Meanwhile, Luce closes the drawer, steps back, pretends nothing happened. She walks to the other side of the bed to retrieve the tweezers. All the while, she looks about to expire.”

“You Americans *are* prudish,” Natalie said.

Patrick patted Ed’s back. “You’ll have to be the judge, Ed. Still coming to stay with us?”

“I will be there.” Ed planned to stay with the boys while in Chicago covering a competition.

“I will try to make it,” Natalie said. “Oh, I miss you already.”

“Barf,” George said flatly. “You may come but don’t carry on too much. I don’t want to hear it.”

“I promise we will be quiet at church mice... at yours. It’s my house so... fuck off?”

“It’s beautiful, Nat,” Ed said. “I am going to be happy to steal beer out of your very large fridge and sleep in that huge bed.”

“Ah-ha!” George pulled out a magazine.

He held the old, glossy thing out for all to see. Charlotte was safely absorbed in a book about navigation.

Patrick grabbed and flipped through it with Natalie staring over his shoulder. “*BAPS?* Really?”

Natalie laughed. “What’s the provenance of this?”

“Someone gave it to me.”

“You didn’t steal it off your dad?” Ed joked.

“Fuck. No. I am pretty sure our dad would have a heart attack with anyone suggesting he ever *looked* at such a thing.”

Natalie snickered, knowing George was right. “Well, Georgie, you have to tell us.”

“Do I?” George looked offended.

“Yes,” they said in unison.

Charlotte played with the cabinet door, slamming it back and forth. The mechanism fascinated her.

George groaned loudly. “More than likely... it was Winston.”

Patrick almost toppled over with laughter. “Oh my God! You’re killing me!”

Natalie gestured at her chest. “It’s come full circle then. Your shared love of baps.”

“Leave Lucy’s tits out of it,” George groaned.

Charlotte now hid under the bed as Patrick carefully thumbed through the ridiculous magazine. “Why naming them after buns? ‘Baps’ is not sexy.”

“Men are daft,” Natalie said.

Patrick shook his head. “Not for me. I can’t say any of this ever titillated me. I *tried* to care. My older cousin left me a couple in a strategic location once when he went off to college. I thought if I studied them, something would change. Oops.”

George said, “I wouldn’t have left anything in here too incriminating. The Internet was too tempting. If someone found this, they would have ignored it. Mum never would have brought it up. Dad would have buried it.”

“I had a computer in my room. Nuff said. Honestly, the threat of being aroused in a swimsuit probably scared me off admitting I was attracted to *anything*. Puberty is a fucking disaster,” Ed said.

“With you in your tiny shorts?” Natalie giggled.

“Stop. You’ll make him cross, sister!”

Ed blushed red like a Christmas bow. It made Natalie smile.

“Charlotte! Come back here!”

“She’s fine, Pat. There’s nothing she can hurt here we haven’t already tried to destroy. My parents raised *four* of us here.” Natalie said.

“But it’s your new house.”

Natalie shrugged. “Meh. It’s meant to be lived in.”

Charlotte popped out from beneath the bed, hair a mess. “Papa! I found a hole!”

George got down on the floor to see what she was pointing to. “Darling, that is just a vent. Don’t put things down there.”

“You should mind the laundry chute,” Natalie said.

George said from beneath the bed, “Uh-huh.”

“So, she calls George Papa and you Dad?” Natalie clarified. “This is new.”

Patrick said. “It just started. George has made a couple friends back in Chicago with kids. It’s been nice. Interesting to see families like ours.”

“I’m basically a carpool mum,” George called out.

“He embraces it. Drops her at the little preschool by our house. Goes shopping. Picks her up.”

“You’re Mum. Of course, you are!”

“If only. I am a hot mess.”

“Mum had help, Georgie. You lost your nanny.”

George shrugged. “Well, we have the part-time nanny, but you’re right.”

“We have a magnum of champagne and we’re wasting it,” Patrick pointed out.

“It’s alright. This is life. Life with my darling niece.”

“It’s fine,” Ed said. “I’ve missed the chaos Natalie brings. And Charlotte is a doll.”

“She really is,” Natalie sighed, happily.

“Nat is falling in love with being auntie,” Patrick joked.

“It’s all I could ask for. Come on, darling. We have biscuits for days.”

“Cookies,” Patrick clarified. “Do you want a cookie, sweetheart?”

Charlotte and George emerged.

“Cookie? Yes!” Charlotte screeched.

“She’s bilingual. He’s trying to indoctrinate her,” George told Natalie. “But I will win this war.”

“We’re raising them in the States. They need to understand American words!”

Back downstairs, the adults drank through the bottle of champagne in the cosy family room off the family kitchen. Natalie’s house had one big staff kitchen downstairs and a family living area complete with a den and smaller, practical kitchen. Charlotte played with a puzzle until she started to nod off on Patrick’s lap. George spirited her away to put her down for the night.

Patrick soon left, citing he was tired, leaving Natalie alone with Ed.

“I’m sorry for the additional people—”

“No, Nat, don’t,” Ed assured her. “I mean, yes, I had thought I would rush in here and take you right to bed but, it was nice to catch up. Charlotte is a sweetie. It’s alright.”

“I love her. She warms my cold heart.”

“Your heart is not that cold, Natalie. You can be remarkably warm when you try.”

Natalie pulled a face.

Ed played with her hair. “You’re trying not to think about me leaving?”

Natalie nodded.

“I will come home. I swear. I’m in Indy for a week and then home.”

“I will be here being boring.”

“Says a woman who has never been to the wasteland of Indianapolis, Indiana.”

“You’re going to Vegas without me.”

“It’s not going to be about having a good time, my love. It’s work. You’re off to Paris without me. How fun will Paris be?”

“I’m going shopping, so relatively fun. But I see your point. You trust me?”

“Yes,” Ed answered. “I trust you. And I will be back here as soon as I get off the plane.”

Natalie playfully laced her fingers through his. “I was thinking I might be at yours—in bed waiting there.”

“Naked?” Ed wondered.

“Of course,” She leaned in and kissed him slowly. It felt so good to touch his lips.

“I think I am going to need to take you upstairs, Natalie. I’m feeling... exhausted.”

Natalie bit her lip. “Same.”



“MUMMY!” Winston called.

He stood in the foyer of his ancestral home on Regent’s Crescent. His mother invited him for tea. Still, the house appeared deserted. There were no staff to greet him. There was a silence.

Nina bounded in, “Sorry. Mummy wanted to take tea in the solarium. Did no one tell you?”

“No, kiddo.” Winston shook his head. “You’re here still?”

Nina rolled her eyes. “You can’t send me off to school whenever you choose, Winston.”

Winston smiled slightly and followed her to the solarium where Rita and Bruno hosted a surprise guest.

The Queen was laughing with his parents and taking tea. It wasn't far out of left field to see his mother with her best friend. However, it was odd for her to be over at their house unannounced.

"Your Majesty," Winston said.

"Oh, stop." Vanna laughed. "Hello, Winston. How are you?"

Winston sat. "Very good, thank you, ma'am."

Bruno looked perplexed. "Since when are we formal? Sit yourself down."

"I wasn't expecting to see you here, Vanora."

"I know. Sorry to scare you. I wanted to escape for a bit. The press are going crazy over this idea of an announcement and it's anyone's guess."

"How did you evade them?" Nina asked as Winston added milk to his tea.

"People mover," Vanna said, happy with herself. "Effective."

Rita shook her head "You have all the tricks."

"You taught me all the tricks, dear."

"What brings you here, darling?" Rita asked.

"You invited me."

"But you *came*. I didn't expect it."

"I know the answer," Vanna said, locking eyes with Rita. The two descended into a fit of laughter like schoolgirls.

Nina rolled her eyes and pointed to the tea set. "Did you put booze in this?"

"Apologies," Rita snickered.

"Lucy is on the road with Natalie in France," Vanna said. "That was all I meant."

“Ah, I see. Well, that explains it,” Bruno chuckled.

“It’s not like I only come around when she is gone—”

Rita took a long sip of her tea, looked doubtful, and declared, “But you do.”

Winston rolled his eyes. He changed the subject. “So, what is the announcement?”

“George’s engagement. We’ve told them we’re doing an announcement. Didn’t say what.”

It explained Lucy’s general meltdown this morning over a pair of shoes being scuffed. Lucy was a capable woman. Winston was certain she could fix nearly anything. He knew something was up but wasn’t about to pry on their way to the airfield.

“Are they doing an interview or anything?” George asked.

“No. Not here at least. We’re not sure how it will go. Robbie and I are over-the-moon as you well know. But the boys... we shall see how people accept it.”

“Well, I hope it’s for the best,” Winston said.

The Queen stood. “Well, darling, I should go. Robbie and I have an engagement this evening and you know how it goes.”

Rita stood with her. “I am aware.”

The women gave one another a kiss on the cheek and Vanora departed. Winston was relieved. Queen Vanna was a lovely, but the situation with George complicated things. Winston didn’t want to offend his godmother.

Rita picked up on her son’s apprehension. “You’re fine. She’s not upset. You can calm down, Winston.”

“I am not saying she’s anything less than diplomatic—”

“She adores you. She loves Lucy. Calm down. The thing with George and Patrick is separate. How is Lucy? Is this affecting her?”

“She called her shoe a ‘needlessly frustrating cunt’ this morning before tossing it across the room,” Winston answered.

“Lucy is even *capable* of saying ‘cunt’?” his sister scoffed.

Bruno groaned. “Don’t repeat that, mija.”

Nina shook her head, annoyed.

“She was having a meltdown over something. I talked her off the ledge. I knew there was something else going on. She was so flustered. It was silly. She never breaks down over the big things.”

His mother agreed. “She holds it together so tight. I suspect she’s nervous about the press. They didn’t dig deep last time because they were focused on bothering Patrick and such. However, they’ve linked the two of you. It would sell papers like hotcakes, as the Americans say.”

“Should I be concerned?” Winston asked.

“I think you should be cautious. Lucy will be okay while she’s abroad. But prepare yourselves.”

“Do they know we are together?”

Nina said, “The two of you were photographed together leaving the party at New Year’s. You looked cosy, Winston.”

“Well, but we’ve moved on and—”

“Everyone has moved on. *They* never move on. If the press knew Duncan had tried to land Vanna first, they’d still be running that story. They still run a ‘Vanna hates Bex’ story once a month.”

“No, it’s as if they think women can’t get on at all. That we’re always warring, Mummy. Don’t you know?” Nina looked unamused.

“You men could all die tomorrow,” Rita continued. “Vanna, Rebecca, and I would live out our golden years happily alone.”

“Brutal.” Winston snickered. “Mummy, that is dreadful.”

“Well, Bruno will outlive me, so I can make that joke.”

Bruno was a decade Rita’s junior.

“I’d rather not,” Bruno said, sweetly. “Life without you is ___”

“Oh, stop it now. I love you, too!” Rita shook her head.

Bruno blew her a kiss. She ignored him. Winston found the jokes between Bruno and his mother endearing. There was something sweet about being so comfortable with one another. Winston had been lucky enough to witness his mother’s love story with Bruno from up close. Bruno slowly integrated into their family. He had been the father Winston and Gerry needed. He’d modelled how to treat a partner by always taking care of their mother. It was in stark contrast to the screaming matches, broken glass, and pushing around of his parents’ marriage. An image of his biological father shouting at Rita and grabbing her by the wrist, treating her like a ragdoll, was forever emblazoned in his memory.

Neither was perfect. His mother was wild and loud. She hosted big parties. Bruno was quieter, preferring smaller groups. Bruno adored Rita and put up with her neuroses, family drama, and the time she spent with Vanna. He loved the children. The boys never felt different to their younger sister. They were all his kids far as he was concerned. Winston had often been asked if he was jealous of Bruno when he’d arrived or if he worried Bruno would take his mother away. Instead, Winston was so happy to have someone to *help* take care of her. Rita had been through hell in the press. She was lonely and isolated at the time. Bruno brought her happiness and settled the boys into a routine.

“Winston, don’t worry. She’ll be fine,” Rita insisted, sensing her son was off in his mind.

“Oh, I know.”

“And you all are right?”

“Yes, Mum. We talked about having a baby,” Winston answered, immediately wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

“I’m sorry... what?” Nina scoffed.

“I just... I meant... we talked about things... the future. We’re unconventional, okay?”

“I needn’t remind you, Winston you must have *legitimate* heirs, right? You don’t get to have a good time.”

Bruno gave his wife a humorous look. “Says the woman who gave birth to a child several months after she was married to husband number two.”

“Winston was born legitimate. We were *also* unconventional but... Winston, you must be wise. The poor girl has been through so much. She deserves a normal marriage and a child. If you can’t—”

Winston blurted, “I’d marry her tomorrow. I have been in love with her so long... that I’d do whatever she wanted.”

“What does *she* want?” Bruno asked.

“To be happy. She loves the life we’re building. She worries I am having a good time before I cast her aside. I never could. She’s everything I have ever wanted. There is no one I would rather see every day. It sounds delirious.”

“No, it sounds like you’re in love, Winston. And she is in love with you, or she wouldn’t have put herself through the wringer or dealt with your twenty-seven dogs. She always hated dogs, as I recall.”

“Mum, she loves the dogs. And *we* have *five* dogs.”

“See, they are already raising children!” Nina took the piss.

Winston flicked her off and she returned the gesture.

“Stop, stop.” Bruno admonished both.

“If you want to propose to Lucy, I won’t stop you. You’ve never been normal, Winston. I say that with love. Lucy is a grown woman who has lived a life. If she is interested in marrying in, I can assume she knows well what she is getting into. I adore her. I think she takes good care of you and you of her. I’m unconventional, too. I understand it.”

“Marriage isn’t everything, mother—”

“Winston, to you, it is. You will be a duke someday. You need a legitimate heir. Moreover, I suspect it is important to

Lucy even if it is not for you.”

“Lucy was about to freeze her eggs to buy herself time. It sort of put a wrench in it. She still swears she will if this goes south.”

“Freeze her eggs?” Nina scoffed. “Why?”

“Why indeed? She is a beautiful girl with many prospects!”

“Bruno, George destroyed Lucy’s sense of normalcy. I don’t doubt it is troubling for her. She would have children with you, Winston?”

Winston nodded. “As I said.”

“I suspect, like Bruno, Lucy would prefer marriage to shacking up for an eternity. And she should. She should be Countess and have all the trappings of it. Winston, life for us is complicated. Lucy’s family is not wealthy. We should meet them, actually—”

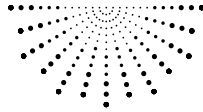
“No, no. I will let Lucy manage it. Her parents are...” Winston tried to find the words. “They’re a complicated bunch. Her father is, anyway. I don’t think she’s about to call them and invited them over here en masse.”

“Well, when you decide to propose, let me know,” Rita said. “I have Granny’s ring and it’s yours to offer.”

“Mum, that’s—”

Rita smiled and left it. “Just think about it.”

PRINCELY PETTINESS



For Immediate Release-

The King and Queen are happy to announce the engagement of their son, Prince George to Mr Patrick Roughy of Chicago, Illinois, United States. Prince George met his partner a decade ago at an engagement for youth sports. They remained friends and reconnected recently. The two live together with Mr Roughy's daughter, Charlotte Roughy, in Chicago. Mr Roughy plays football for Chicago Fire FC and spent fifteen years playing for Paris Saint-Germain, Tottenham Hotspur, and Manchester City. The King and Queen, along with the Princess of Wales, Prince Paul, and the Princess Royal, all wish the happy couple the best. The pair will marry in an intimate ceremony at the end of the summer in the United States. There will be no associated holidays or official state engagements leading up to the wedding.



*T*he circus began. Natalie opened a conference on nuclear disarmament and “using the atom for good”. The event was booked for George. It was George who would have been a better choice. Natalie, the war hero, was an interesting selection. In other words, she was the only one left

to take over. Her brother's engagement announcement hit the same day and the press were in some sort of fervour. Everyone wanted to know about "the royal wedding".

Natalie wanted to scream.

Natalie pivoted as a reporter asked her about wedding details. "I'd rather discuss the topic of the day."

"Yes, but you have to admit, it is exciting. Or are you not excited?"

Natalie set her jaw. She knew she looked so much like her father. She *hated* looking like her father.

"Of course. My brother is so dear to me. I am ecstatic. But nuclear weapons are terrifying—"

Another reporter chimed in. "Ma'am we know that. Not exactly exciting—"

Natalie clapped back, completely off book. "Oh, I am quite sorry. Have you ever *flown* a plane loaded with nuclear weapons?"

Natalie saw Lucy from the corner of her eye shaking her head, but she ignored the warning and continued.

"Have you ever locked on to a target and blown it up knowing that there were people inside? Because, if not, I can assure you, it's serious. All of this is *serious*. War takes lives. Nuclear war destroys nations. My brother's wedding is lovely, but we are here to discuss the very real potential of a nuclear war and how to avoid it. We're here to discuss de-escalation and peace."

The room fell silent.

"Does *anyone* wish to ask me about the matter at hand or should I text my brother and ask him what colours they will be using and who their wedding planner is, as many of you are keen to ask?"

No one came forward. Lucy stepped up to the mic. "Any further questions for Her Royal Highness?"

Nothing.

“Thank you.” Natalie stepped back, still shaken.

“Nat, you cannot do that,” Lucy said as soon as they were unmic’ed and free to go.

“I am sorry, but this is a *nuclear summit*. You don’t get to talk to me about floral arrangements! I do not give a flying fuck about all of that! What I *do* care about is stopping unnecessary military engagement. I care about sending poor Americans into battle like cannon fodder with a promise of an education. Because you and I—especially you—know what all of this is really about.”

Lucy let out a long groan as they walked to the lift to take them up to their suite.

“You know I am right, Luce.”

“Look, I would rather talk about *anything* other than George’s stupid wedding. I would. You know how tense I’ve been. I wanted to vomit this morning as people shouted at you. I know they are one step away from chasing me down back in London. I don’t want it any more than you do. But, Nat, c’mon. Throw me a bone here. You’re not supposed to go off on a tirade—”

Lucy looked at her phone. “And that would be the home office.”

She answered it. Natalie didn’t care. She hadn’t given away state secrets. She had done her job. So, what if she’d wandered a bit? Natalie shot a text message to Ed.

I’ve been a bad girl.

It normally took Ed a bit to text back. However, he replied immediately.

Oh, really?

I’m in trouble.

Hmmm... how so? And what are you wearing?

Natalie rolled her eyes and the bit her lip as she replied.

I'm in a suit. Don't get excited. The Home Office has had it with me.

You deserve a spanking.

Natalie was keenly aware she did not possess a vibrator, had no time to get off, and wanted to end this. At the same time, Ed was so good at sexting. They had been up to no good ever since he left. The thought of him bending her over the bed, smacking her ass, and railing her made Natalie wet. She *hated* when he did this.

“Nat! Natalie!”

Natalie looked over at Lucy as she waved.

“You alright?”

A guard opened the door to their suite and Natalie marched in.

“Yes, yes. I was texting Ed.”

“Get your head out of the gutter.”

“I have a feeling you're about to bring me back down to earth at Mach 9.”

Lucy shook her head. “Um, yeah. So, you can't go off in this way again or else the PM and Home Secretary will have your ass. Also, your father has sent me an email. You're on a leash, Natalie. Please don't make me muzzle you.”

“Okay, I will be a good girl.”

Lucy looked doubtful.

I'm being put in time out.

Cheeky girl, you've been had. I'll ring you in a moment.

Natalie thought about going to her room given that she might a bit of privacy. The phone rang and she answered it.

“Hello? Are you still awake? I've been admonished already. But maybe I need a little more punishment? A

spanking?”

“Natalie?”

Natalie felt faint. This was *not* Ed.

“Uh, Dad, hi,” Natalie said. “I thought you were... well... Edwin and...”

“I am not Edwin. Natalie, how can you *dare* think about anything but what you said right now? Is this some sort of joke?”

“No, no. Dad, of course not. Ed was—he’s abroad and—”

She looked down as her mobile began to vibrate once more.

“Shit. He’s calling me.”

“Do *not* put me on hold, young lady! Natalie Mairead, do *not* hang up on me!”

“Calm the fuck down a second. I didn’t say anything. I thought my boyfriend was calling me. I apologise for the saucy bit. I’m mortified.”

“Maybe don’t enter into the fray in geopolitics, then!” Her father’s voice was cross.

“Dad, you sent a former fighter pilot to deal with nuclear disarmament. You sent a pilot who is sore about the death of her certification on her Lightning—the plane she loves the most. And you sent me here on the day that George’s fucking engagement was announced. These people would trivialise nuclear war to call my brother a slur out one side of their mouth while entertaining the idea of the gayest wedding on earth selling even more papers. Sorry if I refuse to apologise.”

The line was silent.

“Did I lose you?” Natalie asked.

Robbie grumbled, “No, you did not. Fine, fine. I gather I would have been a bit hot as well. Did you need to talk about nukes?”

“The whole fucking thing is about nukes! Dad, you are being *ridiculous*.”

“I am asking you—”

“I will behave myself, shut my mouth and be a good lady.”

“That is not what I—”

“Ta-ta now.” Natalie ended the call.

“What happened?” Lucy furrowed her brow.

Can't talk, international incident.

Natalie dialled her Uncle Duncan, exasperated. If there was another pilot who could understand her, it would be the man who taught her to fly. If there was a person who had been through the gambit with her father before, it would be Duncan.

“Hello, ace,” Duncan answered.

Natalie groaned. “You’ve seen it?”

“It’s a great clip.”

“I hate the media.”

Duncan chuckled. “Keep that to yourself, sweetheart.”

“They are *insufferable* about the wedding. We’re dealing with nuclear war. The Americans are never going to be held accountable and they’re using the wedding to distract from it. Sorry, not sorry.”

“You know who you sound like?”

“No.”

“Your father.”

“Fuck. Off.”

“Look, kiddo, the way I see it, you did nothing wrong. From your perspective, anyway. The Home Office probably sees it differently. Your Dad—”

“He’s calling me,” Lucy groaned.

“Fuck. Now, he’s calling Lucy!”

“Well, you’re going to have to explain to him your reasoning because he won’t get off your back.”

“Fine,” Natalie sighed.

“You are tough as nails, kiddo. Don’t let him frighten you out of standing up for people. But also realise that you will have his job someday. You might grant him some grace.”

Natalie considered that as she hung up her phone. Lucy was shoving the secure line over now. She mouthed, “Sorry!”

All Natalie wanted to do was just not take the press conference.

“Natalie, you must listen to me.”

Natalie’s voice roared. “No, you do! I understand where you are coming from, Dad. I do. But you sent me here. You told me the talking points. I stayed within that frame in my remarks—peace, cost of war, international co-operation. The Home Office is jumping on me because they don’t want the Americans to get their feelings hurt. The Americans are actively hurting queer people, while also asking about the damn wedding. The whole delegation is pro-war-machine slime which has never, ever been held accountable. I handed them something they didn’t like, and they want to send it back. They don’t get to.”

“I am so glad this is a secure line.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck. Their repeated escalations cost lives, Dad.”

“I realise this. I don’t like it any more than you do. The Home Office is far less sympathetic.”

“The Home Office and Ministry of Defence were all too happy to send me on my merry fucking way into a warzone. They handed me a jet and sidearm and said ‘go mad and kill those other guys’. Which, I did. I did a *damn* good job. But they don’t then get to come back to me and say, ‘don’t have a fucking opinion’ because none of those bureaucratic shitheads have ever seen a minute of combat and would shit their pants over what I’ve seen.”

Robbie didn't have a comeback. Natalie's father seemed to search for the words.

"Natalie, it is a serious thing. I gather you have strong feelings about it—"

Natalie's throat tightened. Tears welled. She choked out, "I have seen people die. People I eliminated. People I fought alongside. People."

"Yes, well—"

"No, don't tell me how to fucking feel. These people are advocates of attaching nukes to drones. They have no skin in the game, but they would kill millions. Yeah, I have some opinions about that, Dad. Have you ever seen someone shot out of the sky and wondered if it were you next? Dropped a bomb knowing you probably also killed civilians?"

She was crying now. Natalie was livid. The experiences she never talked about were all coming back. The feeling of helplessness, fear, and wanting to crawl into her mother's lap all while trying to keep a plane in the air and wondering if this was her last moment on earth hit her again. The anger she felt when she found out that the target she just hit likely had wives and children. No one had told them. They weren't to know until *after* the damage was done. Natalie had been cleared of having PTSD. She didn't have torturous, vivid nightmares. She didn't tense up in the cockpit. However, she had emotions. She felt things. It was all bubbling up.

"Natalie, sweetheart, I am sorry." Her father sounded emotional. He was not a robot. He had feelings, too. "I love you. I am proud of you."

Natalie burst into tears. "You think I'm a big fuck up."

"Oh, sweetheart, no. I think you are braver than I ever was. Perhaps I take that for granted? You're right. They sent you into a warzone and didn't give it a second thought. And all of us at home were just glad you came back alive. Your mother and I worried every night you were out there. Every time. I forgot about it as much as I could."

Natalie sniffled. "Nice for you. I couldn't if I tried, Dad."

“I know. That... I am sorry I wasn't aware of it. I will try to be more mindful, alright.”

“As will I. I am sorry. I'm in a bad place.”

“Don't be, sweetheart. Let me handle it,” Robbie said. “Mum sends her love.”

He hung up the phone and Natalie burst into tears again, flopping on the couch next to Lucy who looked over at her sympathetically. Natalie didn't want her friend's sympathy.

“How can I help?”

“Just... make it all stop. Stop the wedding talk. Stop the Americans from being shitheads—no offence to your former countrymen—”

“None taken. Fuck 'em!” Lucy laughed.

“I must don a tiara on and act bubbly and deep down, my heart hurts. And the best part? No one understands at all. They couldn't if they tried.”

“I could try,” Lucy offered.

“Lucy, when you look at a man who has been to war, what do you think?”

“I'm not the girl you want for that question. My dad is a nasty alcoholic who made me hate men in uniform. But I see what you are getting at.”

“Everyone sees a man home from war and uses the term 'hero'. People understand why maybe he's a little off. With me, they just assume I was some showpiece. They think I'm the diversity hire. They have no idea how good I am. They don't care. What they want is for me to put my tits out and smile for the cameras. They want the magical princess to show up and dance a waltz. They want me to be the queenliest version of me. I don't even mind that sometimes. I don't. However, when they deny me the three-dimensional version of myself, I'm not allowed to be serious or to grieve. Fine, they don't want to praise my accomplishments or call me a hero. I'd rather they not. But they don't get to talk about war like

they know what the fuck it is. They don't get my rubber-stamp endorsement."

Lucy smiled and gave a slight nod. "And I'd agree with that. All of it. We aren't granted a fully fleshed existence as women. Let alone as soldiers. Women aren't given any credit for being fully formed humans even as we keep the world running with a baby on our hips. I've seen you at your best, Natalie. You're amazing. Those dickheads don't deserve one word with you. They don't deserve the tea on George, either. They'd be just as happy to denigrate him and Patrick if it sold more papers."

"Without a doubt."

"I will back you," Lucy said. "And if you want to call out sick—"

"Nope. I will go and hold my head high. If I'm not sufficiently charming, they can all fuck off. I'm not here to make friends or enemies. I'm here to do my job and go home."



A CAMERA FADED in on famed announcer, Rob Ruder. It then pulled out to reveal the illustrious panel of talking heads joining him.

"We're here at the Kellogg's Grand Prix and I'm joined tonight by two people who have won more events here than I can probably count, Ed Winslow and Katie Morrison. And, of course, the wonderful Tom Rhodes. Tom, Katie, and Ed, so nice to have you here."

The three athletes nodded.

"Now, Katie and Tom, you've been with us for the swimming and diving championships for several years now. We're just welcoming Ed to the ranks. How would you say it's been for you all?"

Katie chuckled. "He's fine. I've known Ed for a while. Well, I knew him before he became super famous, and you

saw his face everywhere.”

Ed flushed bright red.

“And before he kept such interesting company,” Tom snickered.

Ed was keen to pivot. “It’s been good to be here. Doing some interviews with the athletes scratched an itch. There is nothing like being poolside at an event like this and thinking about the immense pressure these athletes are under.”

Tom nodded. “First meet of the year. It’s an interesting time.”

“Lots of nerves,” Katie said.

“And staring down your rivals?” Ed joked.

“Look, you gotta get in someone’s head. We can’t all be the ones joking around in the warmup like you, Winslow.”

“He was a joker?” Rob asked.

“Ed is the nicest guy you will ever meet. One time, I saw a Brit lose a heat. She was livid. I was coaching at that time, and I said something encouraging as she was stepping back. We’ve all had bad runs. And then she looks up where the men are in the cheering section and Ed is literally doing a hoe-down to get her attention.”

“Louise Carleton, yeah,” Ed said.

Rob asked, “The gold medallist?”

Ed nodded. “Proof even the best swimmers can have the worst day and come back from it. She had a relay coming up. This was the Olympics. She only had one solo event and two relays. She was the anchor for our 500m relay, and I didn’t want her to feel she couldn’t turn right around and nail that. And she did.”

“Teammates make the difference,” Tom admitted. “They really do. And I can confirm that this scamp is hysterical.”

“I don’t try. It’s unintentional most days.”

“Your girlfriend puts up with it?” Tom joked.

Ed, at a loss for words, chirped, “No comment.”

“Well, for now, we’re going to turn to the diving well,” Rob said. “This morning Tom caught up with superstar Trevor Ferniss to talk about the challenges the 10-metre platform.”

They cut away, to a segment. Ed said, “If you all keep bringing it up, I’m going to lose it.”

Katie patted him on the back and said, “Oh, buddy, it’s low-hanging fruit.”

“She hates it. It gets her in trouble. I am begging for mercy here.”

“What, she’s embarrassed to be seen with you?” Katie raised her eyebrows. She wasn’t buying it.

“No, it’s not that. You know how things are.”

“Who is this girlfriend?” Rob asked.

“Are you under a rock, mate?” Tom wondered. “He’s dating the bloody Princess of Wales.”

“What!?”

“I call her Natalie and yes that is her official title.”

“Why are you here, man? Does she not mind you being over here?” Rob asked.

“She’s in Paris right now. And she made our government very angry by talking about war at a nuclear summit, so she’s in the doghouse. I’m trying to make it an *easy* day for the poor thing. And she supports me in this. She’s a gem.”

“I’m gonna puke,” Katie laughed.

“I’ve met her. She’s prettier in person even. Now, the brother. Well, I prefer him.”

“We all know, Tom.”

“George is a nice guy. As is Patrick. Her father frightens me but beyond that, all is well.”

“And we’re back in ten!”

Ed took a sip of water and waited for them to do the count in. “And three... two... one.”

“That was touching, Tom. Imagine growing up in Alaska and becoming a diver! You don’t have much space to practice.”

Tom smiled. “He’s a great kid. Persistent. You need that spirit.”

The others nodded. Attention faded over to diving. Tom was the colour commentator for a bit. Ed was released. He stepped aside to get a cup of coffee. Katie joined him.

“But really, how is she?” Katie wondered. “Because she’s gorgeous.”

“She is, yes. Katie, I swear. She’s a relatively normal person in an utterly ridiculous system. But she’s very normal.”

“You keep your cards so close. If I was banging her, I’d probably be telling everyone.”

“And *that* is why I manage, and you do not, Katie.”

“Will I get to meet her?”

“You will. She’s going to meet up with us in Chicago. We’re going to stay with her brother.”

“What? And you didn’t invite me?”

“I feel like maybe George and Patrick couldn’t handle Tom. He might be too much.”

“No such thing as too much. It’s just a bunch of queer folks and then you two straights. And you don’t think the world could handle it? C’mon.”

“I will talk to George. I know Tom is a bit of a gay icon. Perhaps Patrick will swear by it.”

“Um... hello? I’m not?”

“You’re a *lesbian* icon?”

“Nice attempt at a save. You’ll have to do better than that with Her Highness. She seems smart.”

“She’s terribly clever, yes.”

“You *love* her.”

Ed grinned. “Of *course*, I do. I miss her like mad.”

“Good that you get to see her all over the news every day—even here, huh?”

“She’s going to watch the highlights reel. It’s embarrassing how much she talks me up.”

“Aww, that’s downright sickening, Ed. I love this for you, sweetheart.”

“Thanks.”

“And she’s... good to you? This is not—”

“This is not an Arabella situation. It’s not that she doesn’t want to travel with me. It’s that she can’t. I can’t travel with her, either. We’re making it work, okay? But it’s not that. She’s truly amazing. I miss her now, thanks to you.”

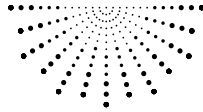
Katie smiled broadly and shook her head. “There is no shame in that. What *would* be a shame is if you were all this way here, jet lagged, and not missing her. That would tell you what you need to know.”

It was true. Arabella, Ed’s ex, had never been keen on travelling to events like this without the promise of something more. She didn’t like him palling around with female swimmers—even if most of his female friends were gay—and she ran off his male friends who were single for fear they would launch him into a world of strippers, prostitutes, and cheating. She was afraid of everything. In the lead up to the last Olympics, Ed had been battling injuries and fighting with her more than he wasn’t. When he would go out on the road, he would be relieved to be done with the arguments. It should have been a sign. The red flag came when she didn’t stay for his last event at the Olympics. He tore his rotator cup and had to be shipped home. When he arrived there bruised and battered, he was greeted with a set of divorce papers.

Ed did not miss his ex-wife. Natalie was different. She wasn’t pushing him forward or making demands. She wasn’t causing trouble or calling out his friends. She was just loving and supporting him. Her life was messy, but it seemed a small

price to pay for her affection, support, and ability to drive Ed absolutely mad. He would miss her on the road. There was no doubt.

THE OTHER MAN



Lucy knew what was going to hit before she made it back to London. She expected things to go sour but perhaps not as much as they did. Lucy and Natalie were gifted one free day in Paris shopping after their conference assignment finished. It was supposed to be a day of freedom. What it turned into was Lucy going out to grab them a morning coffee at Natalie's favourite café to the sound of clicking shutters. She was being papped. Natalie was used to this. Lucy, apart from a bit of a blind-item-brouhaha post-breakup, had been largely unbothered.

A photographer chased her as she was carrying drinks back to their hotel room. "Lucy! Lucy! Did you begin dating the Earl before you broke up with The Prince?"

It had taken Lucy ages to understand who they were talking about. Who was The Earl? What earl? After a moment, she realised it was Winston and knew where this story was going. Lucy made a beeline for the hotel door, its VIP elevator, and the suite. She found Natalie sitting on the couch painting her toenails a loud shade of green.

"There are paps everywhere," Lucy announced.

Natalie didn't look up. "What? Still over the war comments?"

"Not for you, Natalie. For me."

"What?"

"They are putting together this love triangle. Apparently, it was *Winston* who broke us up. I turned George gay by fucking

Winston. It all makes so much sense.”

Natalie snickered.

“Fuck straight men and their stupid stories. Nat, I put all my eggs in one basket. I did everything I could for George. I loved him freely and then he left me. That’s on *George*. We’re good. He’s happy. I have found this person I love so much, and I’d pleasantly spend the rest of my life with him. Now, though, I’m a cheating whore and Winston is the other man.”

Natalie let out a laugh. “Patrick is the other man.”

“It doesn’t matter who fucked who. It’s no one’s business ___”

“Correct. But to them, it does matter. Because it’s the story they can sell to the world. No one knows that you’re a saint or Winston is a puppy dog who would never dream of sleeping with someone else’s girlfriend. They don’t need to. The narrative they have crafted is the only one the care to affirm. If you give them nothing, it will die. It’s like the Olav thing. It died. Neither of us acknowledged it. Ed kept his head down.”

“Knowing Winston, he’d just invite them for tea rather than risk being rude.”

“Winston knows how to behave. And you do, too, darling. Get over it. This, too, shall pass.”

Natalie was so cool about it. Lucy couldn’t be like that. This wasn’t her world. She wasn’t sure this was for her. Lucy followed Natalie because that was the right thing to do. However, she groaned and grumbled as the press chased them from shop to shop. Natalie bought Lucy two pairs of shoes to try to soften the blow of being hounded. She appreciated Natalie’s attempt at a cheer up, but she still felt like her life was ending. The press weren’t new. She dealt with them daily. Dealing with them as a subject was very different than dealing with them as *their* subject.

Natalie drug Lucy into a bespoke lingerie shop. “I don’t like how this looks.”

“For me? This is nothing new. My mother loves this place, for God’s sake!”

“No, for me. If I go in here, they’re going to paint me as a sex fiend.”

“They’re going to do that no matter what, Lucy. C’mon, Chandler. You know what it’s like. Nothing you actually *do* will correct their revisionist history.”

“I’m not really a lingerie person.”

“You should be. Buy something nice and distract yourself. You’re going home tomorrow. Buy something nice for Winston if nothing else.”

“He really doesn’t care.”

“He says he doesn’t. They all appreciate the thought.”

Lucy groaned as a shopgirl approached and asked if she could help.

Natalie picked up in perfect French. “Hello, my friend is looking for something fun to surprise her boyfriend with.”

“Nothing too wild,” Lucy insisted, looking around at the lace and straps galore.

“Maybe a chemise or a teddy,” Natalie clarified.

“What do you usually wear?” the girl asked in English.

“A nightgown or an old t-shirt?” Lucy winced. “I’m not much for fancy things.”

“Well, you deserve something nice,” the girl said. “Silk. How do you feel about silk?”

“I love silk,” Lucy admitted.

The girl pulled them into an area full of silk chemises in a seemingly endless array of colours. Lucy looked around as Natalie jumped in, claiming one for herself already.

“See, they’re not too sexy. I can assure you,” Natalie insisted. “They just make you feel pretty. That’s all. A nice change of pace.”

“You really think so?”

“My mother has dozens of these and wears the longer ones to bed nightly. If she can pull it off, so can you.”

The shop girl looked her up and down. “They feel good against the skin as well. I promise. You have a nice shape. You should show it off—not hide it.”

Lucy’s face flushed. The girl and Natalie pulled reds and fuchsias and blues. Lucy tried on a dozen things. And then Natalie pooled both things together and slapped her AmEx down on the counter. 15 grand went out the window like poof. Lucy felt guilty about it. It sent her into a spiral of worries.

“Can I pay you back... somehow?”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t understand... that’s my parents’ rent for a year,” Lucy insisted. “Their *rent*. Because they’ve never managed to buy a house, Nat.”

“Lucy, would you go out shopping with Rita and Nina?”

“Of course.”

“Do you think they would let you leave holding the bill? Did George ever leave you holding the bill?”

“No,” Lucy replied. “And it was awkward.”

“You and Winston are literally raising fur babies together in a house you refer to as *yours*, Luce. The two of you are as much a couple as one could be—”

“You’re not Winston—”

“Look, I will cover you knowing he’d like me to. He’s my cousin. Someday, you’ll do the same for me or you’ll host Ed and I for an excruciatingly long time in Scotland or something. Let it go. Okay?”

She said it like any of this made sense. Lucy wouldn’t argue. It was pointless. Natalie’s world and hers would never been commensurate. Natalie’s way of seeing the world would never make sense to her.

“I’m not saying be dependent on any of us, Lucy. I can feel you pulling back and buttoning your lip. But... live a little. Winston would gladly spoil you. I would, too. You’re my dearest friend, darling. Let me distract you. This shit—the

press, the stress of life, and the wonder about tomorrow's next story—it's hard. I don't want to say that blowing money at a shop makes it better, but it doesn't hurt. I'm sorry your parents couldn't buy a house. I'm sorry you feel guilty about that. Luce, that's not your world anymore. If you didn't realise all of us choosing to lift you up in a time of need, let me point it out. We love you. If we spoil you, it's just because of that. Let us."

Lucy smiled. She sighed, "Okay, I am dropping the rope. I do feel guilt, though."

"I know. I cannot pretend to understand what you go through, Luce. I don't. What I will say is this is *your* life. It's what you want to make of it. And you're allowed to ignore the paps, ignore the hype, and ignore your parents' troubles. What you do every day—the ringmaster thing you do—it's brilliant. So, what if I spoil you a bit? You held my hand and let me survive this event. Forgive me if I'm feeling a bit sappy and in the mood to spoil."



WINSTON COULD GO NOWHERE without being assaulted by a barrage of flashbulbs or people shouting at him about his affair with Lucy. Winston wanted to shout back at them about how he'd waited for years watching George not fully appreciate Lucy and her wonderful way of being. He wanted to tell them that he'd never meant to fall in love with Lucy. He wanted to discuss his own self-loathing. However, he couldn't say anything. Responding to them would result in heartache.

Lucy and Winston were living in fear after she came home. She was petrified.

"I feel like I'm being punished for what *he* did," Lucy said. "I just want to come home to my house and not deal with these goons. He did this to me. We didn't do anything wrong but I'm paying for it."

Winston just wanted to stop the bleeding. Lucy looked so pitiful. He pulled all the drapes on one side of the house closed, knowing that the vultures were taking photos from just on the other side of the gate. He put Lucy to bed after a glass of wine. She was exhausted from Paris. Lucy was a capable human being. She also liked to be tucked in and left to sleep from time to time. It was strange the things you could find adorable about a partner. It was simple and bizarre, but Winston loved to take care of her. It made him feel like even the most formidable of those around him still needed a pick-up once or twice.

Winston left her there with Holly, Frida, and Vince. He settled back on the couch, ruminating. Winston was still cross with George. He couldn't understand *why*. George had to leave Lucy for Winston to have ever been able to confess his feelings for her. Winston never would have taken that to his grave otherwise. What was it then?

Winston realised that thing which bothered him most now was that George had never openly acknowledged Lucy. She was never legitimated. Part of that was Lucy's fear of going that far. Part of that was George's worry about commitment when he was still, clearly, in love with Patrick. Lucy had given George five happy years. She had been loyal and kind. Couldn't he remedy this?

Winston rang George in the off chance his cousin might answer.

"Hello?" George answered.

"George?"

"Yes, coz. What is it?"

"Ummm... not sure how to ask this or even *what* I am asking but... could you ask the press? Could you call off the dogs so to say?"

"About what?"

"Lucy is upset. She's frightened. The press chased the girls around Paris—"

"They do that anyway—"

“No, they don’t. They chased Lucy. They have linked Lucy and I and now claim that I broke you up.”

“Oh, so this is about you, then, not Luce?”

“No,” Winston said, already wanting to lose his mind.

“Well, then what is it?”

“It’s not me. The press can call me dozens of names and I will just let it go, Georgie. No, it’s Lucy. She is mortified. She feels she’s being punished. She feels like she’s a marked woman because it looks like she was up to something. I can assure you, George, we weren’t up to anything. Lucy has never been anything but loyal. There isn’t a bone in her body that—”

George cut him off with a terse, “I know, Winston.”

“Then... can you do something?”

“Do what? Make things worse for Lucy? Mate, what would you have me do? I could ring the *Mail* tomorrow and say ‘hello, yes, I’d just like to know that I dumped Lucy because I saw an unhappy future with her. My cousin decided my second pickings were his best bet and he took full advantage of me fleeing the country.’ Yer?”

“George, that’s not completely accurate—”

“Did you not go for what I cast aside or what? This is just getting back at me for what? Two girls you believe I stole out from under you.”

“You’re being a dick, George. She’s... Lucy is a wonderful human.”

“She is. I never said she wasn’t. But you and I went round and round before about this—even before Lucy.”

In university, George and Winston had gotten into it over a girl. After a bit of a row, they both went to their separate corners and nothing serious happened between George and the girl. George was reading much too much into this.

“And you were apparently thirsting over her for *years*. I was the last to know, I guess. You never *once* made a move? I

don't believe you."

"Of *course* not! George, I was in love with her. I also would never do that to you. I swear that I tried to avoid all of this, but I do love her. She loves me. We are *happy*."

"Then why do you care what I do?"

"Because I am watching her suffer because a man she loved and trusted never stuck his neck out for her—"

"And she never stuck hers out for me!"

"George, there is a massive power imbalance there. First, she has stuck by your entire family in time of crisis."

"That's her job. I never said she wasn't a good person. I tried very hard to make sure she had some level of stability before I left. I was never unkind to her while we were separating. Nor am I being unkind now. Talking to the press will not work, Winston. It will prolong things for her."

"She could have left! She could have made more money talking to the press. She wouldn't do that."

"I don't see the power imbalance." George was playing daft.

"Don't be petty here, George. You know what I mean. You were the heir to the throne. She was a girl who grew up on the wrong side of town. She got lucky with a scholarship and remade her life in Britain as a social chameleon."

"Winston?"

Winston turned to see Lucy standing there, looking bewildered. How much of this conversation had she heard?

"Um... gotta go," Winston said, hanging up.

"You think I'm... I'm just from the wrong side of town? That's how you see me? Like a project?"

"Oh, Lulu, no," Winston said nervously. "I never thought that about you. I was explaining to—"

"You were talking to someone about how out-of-it I am? How much I don't fit in? How much I don't belong. You

know, I know my family is shitty and fucked up but they're still my family, Winston."

"Oh, darling, that is not what I meant."

"No, it's fine," Lucy said, tears welling. "I know where I stand with everyone now. It's fine. I'm like a sideshow attraction."

She turned and walked out. Winston hopped up and chased her up the stairs.

"Lucy, I swear, I was just trying to explain something in hopes the press might back off—"

"Why, to protect *your* reputation? Am I that embarrassing? Really?"

"I never would say that. Lucy, there is nothing about you to class as 'embarrassing.' You are absolutely spectacular. I love you. I don't think I could ever call you that—"

Lucy stepped inside her old room. In an angry voice, she said, "I want to leave. But I can't. Because if I go out there, they'll devour me. I can't do this. I can't live my life feeling like I don't belong anywhere. I can't live thinking I'm not good enough. You're right... I'm not like you. I will never be like you. I will never fit into your world no matter how much you love me—or claim to."

"I do love you. More than words—"

"But this is all a distraction. I'm not duchess material, Winston. Just admit it. I'm not the one you end up with. I wasn't the one that George ended up with. I am always half a measure away from being good enough—"

"That's not true, Lucy. I don't know what I would do without you. You don't understand it—"

"To think that I trusted you... that I loved you and believed maybe, just maybe, we'd end up together."

"You took my words out of context, Lucy—"

"There is no context in which 'wrong side of town' and 'social chameleon' aren't a neg. Winston, you think I'm a

climber! An undeserving street urchin living in your house!”

“Lucy, I do not. I was trying—”

“I can’t. I can’t.”

Lucy slammed the door.

“Luce, darling, I am sorry. I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

It was radio silence. Winston retreated to the room they should have shared. He climbed into bed with her dogs. Their judgemental eyes all looked at him like a weak replacement for the lady of the house. Winston tossed and turned, listening to the sound of Lucy crying in the room below. He was gutted. In retrospect, he never should have engaged with George. It had fucked everything up. Why did he always fuck everything up with Lucy? His timing was always off.

Winston woke the next morning. Lucy’s work bag was gone. He checked her wardrobe. Thankfully, her clothes and overnight bag were still there. At least she hadn’t run away for good. There was still hope. Winston wasn’t sure what to do. He phoned his mother like any good mama’s boy would do when in a bind. Rita could solve nearly any crisis.

“Mum, where are you?”

“I’m in Windsor with Vanna. We have mares foaling out, you know? What do you need? How is dear Lucy?” Rita asked.

“Can I just come talk to you?” Winston wondered.

“Well, sure. Are you alright?”

“Not really.”

Winston packed up for the barn where his mother and Vanna kept their pet projects. While they each had their own strings, their families had been intermingling racing stock for years. It was foaling season. His mother lived at the barn, as did The Queen. Winston found them in a barn aisle laughing, sitting in camping chairs watching a baby run around a big, plush foaling stall. The little thing was torturing its mother.

“He’s got springs for legs,” Winston noted.

“He’s a joy,” Vanna said. “Fresh as a daisy, too. We’ve had an interesting day.”

Rita patted Winston on the cheek sympathetically. “You look like hell.”

“I’m aware.”

“Coffee?” The Queen offered up a thermos.

Rita shook her head. “It has whisky in it.”

“No, thanks,” Winston said. Apparently, middle-aged women got up to shenanigans when left alone.

Vanna shook her head. “Gotta stay warm out here. Sit, sit. Tell us your problems, honey.”

Winston pulled up a grooming stool and sat down on it, suddenly about the same height as his mother.

“Uh... Lucy is very cross. I fucked up. And I am desperate to un-fuck things.”

“How did you manage to fuck it up? I thought you were about to propose days ago?” Vanna asked.

“Do you keep anything secret, Mum?”

“Vanna knows all.”

“I was happy to hear it. I’ve thought the two of you would make a lovely couple for ages. And she deserves that. What did you do that you think has hurt you, sweetheart?”

“The press are all over both of us. She’s... she’s crumpling. She’s such a good egg that even a feeling that things might not have been above board has set her off. She did nothing wrong and is being punished for it. She’s broken up. I decided to try to improve things. It fucked it all up, though.”

Rita took a swig of her somewhat-coffee. “What on earth did you do, darling?”

“I called George and pleaded for him to say or do something. I don’t even know what I thought I was doing. I guess, I thought I was defending Lucy’s honour. However, she

overheard my conversation. I thought she was asleep. She heard me explaining the power imbalance between the two of them. George doesn't get it. He never acknowledged her as his partner, so the press are treating her cheaply. He made some good points about why it wouldn't help. But I miscalculated in this explanation and all she heard was the bad stuff."

Vanna asked, "What did she hear, Winston?"

Winston winced. "That I said he was the heir, and she was the girl from the wrong side of town who lucked into a scholarship and because she's a social chameleon has survived here. All of that is true. I meant it to plead her case, but it offended her—"

"Winston!" His mother cut him off.

"What? Her parents are a wreck. Doesn't change my love for her. I still love her. You don't get it. Her father is an abusive nightmare. I wish I could have beaten the shit out of him. She grew up in what can only be described as very humble beginnings in a town rife with poverty. It's... stark, Mum. And she did luck into a scholarship and reinvented herself. And it takes a clever person to come here from America and pick it all up."

The Queen sounded off in disbelief. "You've described her as a climber."

"I don't think that, though. I just think she is clever and doesn't let her guard down. She's brilliant at her job and has never looked out-of-sorts socially. Who does that?"

"Vanora does," Rita said. "But you are correct in that she's more like Rebecca than Vanna was when she arrived on the scene."

"With all due respect, Princess Rebecca's family is squarely middle-class."

"It doesn't matter, Winston. Your mother is right. She heard 'she's a climber who *lucked* into a scholarship.' I mean, do you know how she got that scholarship?"

Winston shook his head.

“She was in the top one percent of all graduating seniors in the country. She graduated a year early, mind you,” Vanna replied. “She was at the top of her graduating class from uni. I don’t think you quite get *how* hard Lucy worked to leave that behind.”

“Trust me, after meeting her father, I do. I was just trying to acknowledge that.”

“In an offensive way.” Vanna crossed her arms. Winston had never been dressed down by the Queen. She could be terrifying in her own right.

“I... I guess, yes?”

“What do you want for Lucy?” Rita asked. “What will make her life better? Well, as far as you are concerned?”

“She just wants to feel safety, security, and acceptance, Mum. I have hurt her when trying to do the opposite. I only wanted to vent to George in hopes he could see what he did.”

Vanna offered up her view. “George will never see what you see. We will never see what George sees. Lucy isn’t cross with George over this. Nor should you be. George also tends to make things like this worse. Ignore him is my advice. I love him, but he has Robert’s ability to go out all guns blazing. And, unlike Natalie or Kiersten, he can trip over his words at an alarming rate.”

Winston was surprised by George’s own mother admitting his fault.

“Don’t look so surprised. My children aren’t perfect. Neither are you. Nor am I. What you are, Winston, is a bumbling man in love. Thankfully, women tend to forgive them. She might be upset. I would be. Been there, done that. She’ll come around if she loves you as much as I suspect she does.”

Rita nodded and asked, “What is Lucy’s biggest fear?”

“Me leading her on for years and then me pissing off with some other woman. The very idea of her dying having been robbed of the idea of having children. She thinks she is doomed and being punished for working. I think she still

believes she did something wrong to make George not love her enough.”

“Well, it’s not fair for her to expect you to fix that,” Rita admitted.

“I know. And we all have hang ups. Lucy will be the first to admit she has an abandonment complex. I think we’ve worked through some of it, though. She took me home with her. It was unfiltered. We talked about it. She’s so resilient. I’d like her to not have to be. That’s why I’m so sore over this.”

“There was nothing any of us could do for Georgie. He was always supposed to leave,” Vanna sighed. “I felt it deep down for years that Natalie was better suited. It hurts that he’s left. Robbie struggles with it so much. In fact, he forgets that Natalie is even human since she takes it on the chin so well. George was never right for it. Lucy was loving. She was perfect. It was nothing she did. She fears never having children most?”

Winston nodded.

“Well, that’s ridiculous. A pretty girl like her!” Rita scoffed.

“No, it’s not. Rita, I thought after I lost Nate that I would never have children. Remember that? I didn’t expect to be widowed at twenty-five. I expected two kids by thirty. I would bet Lucy is in a similar boat. And this frightens you, Winston?”

Winston set the record straight, “No, no. I’d marry her tomorrow. We’ve talked about having children together. I firmly believe we are meant to be parents. I know it sounds a bit mad, but we work so well together. There is no one I want more than Lucy. And there is no one I’d rather have children with. She’s just wonderful.”

“And she knows that?” Vanna asked.

Winston nodded.

“Winston, stay out of the press nonsense. You say she’s resilient, right?”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Then trust that she is and don’t meddle. Remind her. Be kind to her. Support her. Remind her of her self-worth. Do not engage with that line of reasoning. It will die out. If I had a dime for every time I watched Robbie climb down that rabbit hole for you, Vanora, I’d be worth more and more in dividends alone.”

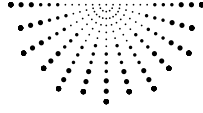
“Apologise, for one. And not for yourself but for her. Tell her everything you’ve just told your mother and me,” Vanna said.

“I love her. I just want her to be happy,” Winston agreed.

“I know what we can do. And hopefully it will make her realise this isn’t changing,” Rita said. “But you must *trust* me, Winston.”

“I will, Mum. I guess I have nothing to lose.”

AGAINST BETTER JUDGEMENT



“*Y*ou’re here, actually here,” Ed remarked.

“I am here. I am in your bed. I am naked. All as promised,” Natalie said.

Ed raced through disrobing. He’d just arrived off a transatlantic flight to join her for a few days before they both shipped off again. Natalie was headed to Iceland. Ed was headed to Las Vegas and then Chicago. He would be on the road three weeks this time. His trip would end with a race in California. Natalie would miss him. But, after Iceland, would get some quality time with him in Chicago. Right now, though, she was looking forward to spending the day in bed with him.

“You are a sight for sore eyes,” Ed said.

He kissed her as he settled next to her under the covers. She ran her right hand down to his cock. Natalie hoped her hands weren’t too frigid. She’d been waiting there about an hour just playing on her phone. Either way, Ed didn’t seem to care. She’d gone over this reunion in her head dozens of times. She’d blow him within an inch of ecstasy, demand he reciprocate, and then they’d have wild sex, probably with him taking her from behind. The mere thought of it made her body tingle.

Natalie signalled she was about to go down on Ed. He stopped her, his hand holding her chin up.

“No. I have zero patience now. I want to fuck you.”

“You’re turning down a blow job?” Natalie scoffed.

“I haven’t seen you in ten long days. I want the whole thing.”

Ed sat up and decisively pulled her towards him. Natalie was confused but she rolled with it. Ed parted her legs and slid inside her. It felt like a relief. God, ten days, and it was this bad now? Ten days and they were miserable? How bad would this get for them. Natalie was aware he wanted to watch her. He pinned her arms back and kissed her, body suspended above hers through some magic Natalie didn’t understand. Ed pulled away, staring down at her as she came. She must have looked a mess. Her face flushed. She fought his grasp as her eyes rolled back and her toes curled.

“God, you are as hot as I remember,” Ed scoffed.

“Winslow, it was *ten* days.”

“It could have been ten years.”

Natalie kissed him back. His tongue felt good pressed against hers. She wrapped her legs tighter around Ed as he pulled back a bit. He let her arms go and she dug her fingernails into his back again, cumming again quickly. The anticipation had them riled up.

“I love you,” Natalie gasped.

He continued. “I love you, too, but this isn’t about love.” He was a man on a mission. When he came, he fell on top of her, all reserves tapped for the time being. Natalie smiled to herself. He was now putty.

“You’re amazing, always, baby,” Ed said sweetly.

“You should talk. Damn. Also, what is this... chest hair?”

“I am lazy. I tried it. I am not sure about it.”

“I like it. Leave it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re so demanding.”

“I am the opposite of demanding.”

“When it comes to this!”

Natalie shrugged.

“God, I want to fuck you again, Nat. I can’t. I barely slept on that flight. I fought a boner for the past two hours before I got here. I hoped you were honest about it.”

“I got here this morning early and waited for you, yeah.”

He sucked her right nipple. “You deserve a medal.”

“A gold medal?”

“Several, baby.”

Ed’s mobile vibrated on the table.

“I bet it’s your mother,” Natalie predicted.

Ed flipped over to check his caller ID and Natalie playfully swatted him on the arse. She had missed his bright white bum. He answered the phone.

“Yes, mother. You’re ringing me why? No, the plane crashed into the ocean. Yes, clearly, I’m alive. Uh... resting.”

Natalie snickered, trying to keep it down. *Resting*. Was that what they were up to?

“No, I’m with Natalie today. Mam—you can’t—”

He rolled his eyes as he flipped onto his back. Natalie resisted the urge to bother him. She wanted to. Natalie rarely felt the need to just *touch* someone for the hell of it. Ed was different. He was irresistible.

“I can ask her, yes. If she says no, I will not force the issue, Mam.”

He hung up the phone and rolled on his side. Natalie played with the peach fuzz on his chest. She kissed him slowly. “Let me guess, she wants us to come for dinner?”

“Lunch, actually.”

“Fine, whatever. You can fuck me afterwards. It will help you regain your strength. And I will have to keep my hands off you.”

“You have no idea what you are agreeing to, Nat.”

“I do. I’m ready for it. You parents love me.”

“I don’t want you to put clothes on, Nat.”

Natalie giggled, “It’s a small price, darling.”



LUCY RETURNED HOME after a long day avoiding Winston. Natalie was with Ed. She wasn’t going to bother her on their reunion day. Sheena asked Lucy if she wanted to go try on reception dresses at Whistles. Lucy jumped at the chance and proceeded to buy two work dresses she didn’t need and probably couldn’t afford. Retail therapy appealed once more. Lucy’s closet was exploding now. She now knew why Natalie and Vanna rotated their wardrobes. Even an impressive walk-in closet was no match for such a collection.

Lucy’s momentary distraction had given her clarity. Or, rather, Sheena had pointed it out. Lucy had to admit she could fantasise about her own dress preferences a bit. She could see life with Winston enough that she was capable seeing it. She could even form *preferences*. Sheena pointed out that Lucy had never done that with George. It was true. In five years, Lucy had never once fantasised about a wedding dress. She’d given George some rings she’d liked and called it a day. After all, a royal wedding wasn’t up to the couple. With Winston, she could almost see how it would work.

Lucy knew she wasn’t about to go from wedding daydreaming to breaking it off with Winston. So, she retreated to his house—their house—and was greeted by the usual suspects. Winston was making dinner. Ah, he was grovelling. Lucy wished that pleased her but seeing him upset did not satisfy her. Lucy kicked her shoes off, ready to settle in, and marched into the kitchen. She caught Winston off guard with a big kiss.

“I don’t want to fight you, Winston,” Lucy said, pulling away.

Winston stood there in disbelief.

“You fucked up. You know you did. I don’t need to prolong your agony. I love you. I don’t know what you were up. I just won’t ascribe malice to what I can say is probably incompetence.”

Winston sat the wooden spoon down and held her face in his hands. He kissed her, slowly. “I’m sorry. I regret wading into it. I shouldn’t have involved myself in it. I had to trust it was all we could do just to live our best lives. It *will* fade.”

“I know.”

“I am glad you are home. You frightened me. I probably deserved it.”

Lucy shrugged and looked around. “You have outdone yourself Tony. Bolognese, wine, a vase of flowers. Who are you?”

“A man-eating crow.”

Lucy smiled slyly and shook her head.

“I must leave this to simmer. You got home sooner than I expected. For the record, I know you were with Sheena.”

“Oh?”

“I wasn’t being a stalker. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Natalie nearly chopped my head off for bothering her.”

“She went to lunch with Ed’s parents. She wants to be left alone, though. They’re catching up.”

“I know that *now*, Lucy.”

Lucy wrapped her arms around Winston’s waist and held him close, burying her head in his chest. He smelled like basil and garlic.

“I love you,” Lucy murmured.

“I love you more.”

“Want to leave the stuff to simmer and leave the kitchen for a moment?” Lucy’s chin rested on Winston’s chest. She

looked up at him, hoping she convince him.

“I was thinking we could have a conversation,” Winston said.

“Oh, God, why Winston? I’m offering makeup sex.”

“Oh, I wasn’t sure.”

“You’re silly. Of course, I was.”

“I want to have an actual conversation, Luce.”

“Okay.” Lucy took his hand and followed him to the couch.

Lucy wasn’t sure what this was about. His face wasn’t upset, but Winston looked serious. They sat down on the couch. Winston held her hand as if looking for the words.

“I regret my words, Lucy. I know it made you feel like you weren’t good enough and I want you to know that simply isn’t true. I know how hard it has been to fit in and how beautifully you’ve done so. At the same time, I’ve done a lousy job fitting into your life—”

“You haven’t, though.”

“I have,” Winston insisted.

“No. I think it’s just hard for you to understand. That’s not your fault, though. It’s just something we must work on, baby.”

“I would agree. That is my point. I want to put you completely at ease here. I am not comparing you to anything. There is no test for whether you’re good enough. Last night was a misguided attempt to protect you and to defend your honour—”

“I don’t need that. And, anyway, Natalie does enough of it.”

Winston laughed. “Okay, sure.”

“Don’t. Okay? I know I was born poor. I know my parents are a nightmare. I know you probably want nothing to do with that all—”

“No. I know you don’t need saving. You do quite well on your own, Luce. I just want you to be the safe place to land you deserve. You are resilient, but I’d like to ensure you don’t have to be so resilient, baby. I want you to feel like this is our home. You must know I’m in your life—now and forever. I don’t want you to freeze your eggs or worry that I’m about to run off with some daughter of an earl.”

“Oh, Winston, I... I don’t know what to say.”

“I only want you. Just you. For so fucking long that it’s embarrassing to admit. I promised myself when this whole thing started that I would try not to fuck it up. After you got back from Africa, I worried you’d run away. I wouldn’t have blamed you. But I was fully committed then. I remain so. I know you are road-weary here. God bless you for even trying, Luce.”

Lucy was confused by Winston’s speech. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m shit at this,” Winston admitted. “Also, underprepared. Give me a second, please.”

Lucy watched him rush over to his desk and then come back over. He looked nervous now. Then, as if without worry, Winston got down on one knee and said, “Lucy Chandler, if you would do me the absolute honour, I’d be the luckiest man on earth as your husband. Could you find it in your heart?”

Lucy was dumbfounded. There was Winston looking completely vulnerable. In his hand, a ring box that she was hoping held something beautiful. Lucy was convinced it probably did. She looked at him and nodded.

“It’s too soon, Tony. Against my better judgement and because I trust our insane plan, I would love to give you that honour.”

Lucy kissed him before taking the box in her hands, now shaking. His probably were, too.

“It’s... an heirloom,” Winston said nervously. “If you hate it—”

Lucy peeled the box back and stared at an impressive pear-shaped solitaire set in what she assumed was platinum. Lucy had little knowledge of jewellery personally. However, she had handled more tiaras than any woman had business doing. It was stunning.

“It’s perfect!”

“I am glad you like it, then. We’ll have to size it but... it was my grandmother’s ring.”

“It’s sweet. Yes. I think you’re nuts, Winston, but God if I don’t want to hop onto this train.”

Winston stared at Lucy as if she were the only woman on earth. “I love you, Lucy Chandler.”

“Soon to be Lucy Ferguson.”

“Soon to be Lady Lucy Chandler, Countess of Lauderdale.”

“That’s crazy,” Lucy giggled.

“Nah. It’s fitting.”

“Your parents will be—”

“Mum is in on it. She’s supportive.”

“Really?”

Winston chuckled. “The woman is a born romantic and Bruno eggs her on, Luce.”

“But you and Gerry both getting married?”

“We will figure it out.” He gave her a big kiss. “All good things are sorted in time.”



“JUST STAY,” Natalie told Ed on Monday morning. “Don’t go. Stay all day and fuck me at lunch. I’ll be home for forty-five minutes or something.”

“I need to hit the gym, Nat.”

Ed was packing up to leave KP. She did not want him to go. They'd had a beautiful long weekend of nothing but luxuriating in one another. Natalie had never had so much sex. She was loved up and desperate to stay this way. Ed would soon leave for work again. Natalie wasn't ready for it.

Ed gave her a long kiss. "I love you. I will take you out on a proper date tonight. You will be just fine, baby."

"I'm not enough of a workout for you?"

"Unfortunately, no. You might kill me if I don't keep myself in peak fitness, though."

"I love you," Natalie sighed like a lovesick schoolgirl.

"I know or else you wouldn't say it like that. I promise I will see you later. Just enjoy the day."

Ed gave her a sweet kiss on the forehead before departing, his gym bag over his shoulder. It was time to move along and get ready. Within the hour, she'd have to be at the all-hands morning meeting. Natalie would have much rather been in bed with Ed. She wondered if something were wrong with her for a moment. Was it normal to think this much about one man? Was this the mark of a lifelong relationship or simply lust? She almost envied Lucy. It was odd. The girl didn't seem to lust after Winston as much as she adored him and wanted to be home to cuddle with him. Natalie liked a cuddle, too, but she'd rather get railed. Did people who ended up together use the term 'get railed'? Was that a sign of immaturity?

Natalie pulled on a suit and reported for duty, ready for a mind-numbingly boring meeting followed by a rousing day of ribbon cuttings in the bitter cold. She gathered her portfolio in her office before Lucy appeared, holding a cup of coffee.

"How did you know?" Natalie asked. "I love you."

"I love you, too. And I knew because your alter ego was on twitter at 2 AM."

"I couldn't sleep. I get what I deserve. I woke Ed up again and then couldn't settle while he fell right back."

"Are you able to walk?" Lucy laughed.

“Yes, thank you very much. But he claims he must hit the gym to keep up with me.”

Lucy giggled.

“You wanna tell me why Winston bothered me looking for you?”

“Not really. It’s a long story. I had a momentary freakout. The press are keeping me down. Rita helped him mend fences.”

“What did he buy you? Please tell me that he bought you something,” Natalie said. She was fixated on the latte in front of her. Lucy made the best coffee.

Lucy shrugged and then handed over the day’s run-of-show. In a flash, Natalie witnessed Winston’s legendary apology gift.

“My God! You’re not?! Are you?!”

Lucy nodded, and then broke into a wide smile.

Natalie shrieked and lifted Lucy up, spinning her round. She sat her back down and said, “Are we happy? Relieved?”

“Both and just over-the-moon. We basked in it all weekend. I love him so much, Nat. Like, truly. It’s crazy, right?”

“It’s amazing. You two are the most adorable couple on earth, so it is perfect. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

Natalie was happy for her friend. It was soon but Winston was an artist, always marching to his own beat. Lucy was perfectly organised and never did anything impulsive. Yet here she was ready to make the biggest commitment of her life to Winston. It was inspiring. Natalie may not have been ready to call it, but she knew that Lucy and Winston were good for one another. She’d never seen Winston so happy or Lucy so at-ease. She was radiant.

“Ladies?” it was the Lord Chamberlain, James Hewlett, sent to bother them.

“Yes, Lord James. We’re coming,” Natalie replied, taking her portfolio in one hand and the cup of coffee in the other.

The girls arrived in the war room each with a cup of coffee. Lucy, the self-described beverage goblin, also had a large bottle of ice water which her assistant brought with her. Lucy had a way of doing these things. She could be higher maintenance than even Natalie was. Lucy kept the world spinning. Natalie didn’t question her standard operating procedures.

The King entered with his staff, sitting down, and filing through his papers. He passed down a detailed agenda. Oh, when didn’t Natalie’s father love a detailed agenda? Natalie’s mother was the last one in. She entered with her staff and Rita who was going on about something.

“Yes, Rita, what is it?” Robbie sighed. He wanted to get it over with. “What are you on about?”

“On about?”

“You are quite jovial. Mind to share with the class?”

“Rita looked across the table at Lucy who was now a shade of crimson.

Robbie didn’t look up from his agenda. “What is it, cousin? Anyone wish to tell me?”

“I think Lucy has something to say, really,” Rita said. “And it’s unrelated to what I was on about. But notable.”

Natalie elbowed Lucy.

“Uh, so, while we were out, I got engaged.”

“What?” Robbie looked up and stared at Lucy, concerned.

“The right thing to say is ‘Congrats!’ Robert,” Vanna said, annoyed.

“Yes, yes, of course. This is Winston? You are marrying Winston? Your son, Rita?”

“There is only one Winston, I think, Dad.”

Rita clarified, proud as could be. “Yes, our Winston will marry Miss Chandler.”

“Best of luck, Miss Chandler,” Lord Hewlett said, sounding genuine. “Her Grace is no doubt pleased at this development?”

“As punch, James. Bruno and I are over-the-moon for them both. And I needn’t clarify that Gerald and Bernadina are also excited.”

“Well done, Miss Chandler. But will you be leaving us then?” Robbie asked.

Lucy and Natalie looked at one another, confused.

“I’m sorry, sir... why?” Lucy asked.

“Well, you wouldn’t need to still work, would you? You’ll be a Countess. Or will you stay around in an unpaid position like Mairead?”

“Robert, I am here because Vanna asked, yes. I don’t believe marrying my son demands Lucy quitting her job.”

“Dad, way to be a misogynist,” Natalie scoffed.

“I have no intention to leave my post currently. We don’t yet have a wedding date or venue or anything. Winston and I both intend to keep working. I love my job.”

“Good. She needs you. I was mostly panicking. Apologies if I assumed.”

“She will thankfully still be here. She will just be Lady Lucy,” Vanna tried to smooth her husband’s bad behaviour over. Lucy still looked confused.

“Well, we shall need to know when the nuptials are scheduled so we can attend, right, Vanora?”

“Of course. How could we not attend Winston’s wedding? Our dear godson.”

“Two weddings in one year, Duchess. How should you keep up?” Lord Hewlett wondered.

“Oh, we can make it work.”

“Lucy, I haven’t seen the ring yet,” Vanna tapped the table, demanding a look.

Natalie could tell her father was losing control of the meeting as well as his mind. He wanted the wedding talk to end desperately. George’s wedding was enough of a nightmare to deal with.

Lucy offered up her left hand.

Rita said, “It was Mummy’s, as you well know.”

“Yes. Oh, it’s exquisite on you.”

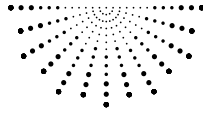
The King cleared his throat. “It is lovely, Miss Chandler. Now, can we please proceed? Full agenda here.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean to disrupt it all.”

“No, of course not. It is happy news,” Robbie said. He sounded understanding for once.

Lucy nodded and focused again on work. There was something so strange about your best friend getting married. And, in Natalie’s case, both her brother and Lucy were getting married. A year ago, she had assumed they would marry each other. This year, they were marrying different people. Natalie marvelled at how fast the world turned. She wondered if the universe had new plans for her as well. Either way, she knew that Lucy and Winston would be happy. The unexpected trail worked for them. Natalie thought about whether she’d want to do this with Ed. She was open to it but had no grand plan in mind. Marriage seemed so far off. She was happy loving him for now, but maybe someday?

RICHARD THOMAS STEPHENS



Winston did not anticipate the news of his engagement would break before his mother made an announcement. Unfortunately, Winston's father heard by way of the press. Lucy was still a hot commodity in the news cycle. The press caught on as Lucy accompanied Natalie to a charity summit. In the photos, the women chatted briefly while Natalie handed Lucy her handbag. Lucy tucked her blonde hair behind her ear the way she always did when she was thinking about something. The paps saw her hand, now decorated with a hell of a ring, and pounced.

The headline on *Express* ran, "Duchess Material?"

Ah, *duchess* material.

Winston's father must have seen it and rang him. The messages continued incessantly. Winston had long divorced himself from his father's opinions and did not care what Richard Thomas Stephens had to say. In fact, when he was twenty and Gerry was eighteen, they both elected to drop their hyphenated names of Ferguson-Stephens and go only by Ferguson, their mother's maiden name. It wasn't only about their father. Bernadina also primarily went by Ferguson. She was technically Sanchez Ferguson, something handed down to her by her Swiss-Mexican father. Their new names brought the siblings closer together, but angered Richard.

Gerry stopped talking to Richard. In fact, Gerry wouldn't have invited the man to his wedding at all if Sheena's parents hadn't seen his invite as mandatory. Gerry referred to his father as a sperm donor. Richard had the emotional maturity of

a sponge and Gerry had no tolerance for it. Winston continued to talk to his father—superficially— a couple of times a year. They were not close. However, Winston would have preferred to have broken the news to Richard before it was released. Naturally, Richard considered this a slight.

“Hi, Dad. I’m sorry I missed your calls. I was meeting with our sponsor company and—”

“Winston Keir Stephens, what on Earth were you thinking?”

“Look, I didn’t realise what happened was going to go public but, yes, I’m engaged to Lucy Chandler.”

“George’s sloppy seconds? Well, that’s if you believe the papers.”

“Please don’t refer to her as such. She will be my wife. There is nothing second-best or sloppy about her. She’s wonderful. She did date George. They broke up. She works for Natalie now. She’s worked for the family since she left uni.”

“Oh, she’s the help?”

Richard was a climbing, obnoxious prick. Winston now found it difficult to believe Winston’s mother had ever put up with him. Richard was proof positive that even the brightest and most wonderful people could be blinded by illusion. Winston’s father could be charming. He could also be controlling, abusive, and a pathological liar. That was the thing with Richard Stephens. You never knew if he told the truth.

“She’s Natalie’s private secretary. She and mum keep everything rolling. Lucy is terribly clever and beyond kind.”

“So, you met her through George?”

“Yes. Many, many years ago.”

“And recently?”

“Well, we live together, so that’s how it all started.”

“She *lives* with you? You’re playing house and all that?”

“We just call it life, Dad.”

Winston's agitation increased. His father's classism was unveiled and unbridled. His jokes about playing house made it sound like Lucy and Winston were children rather than people in their twenties and thirties who had previously engaged in long-term relationships.

"What is it about her?"

"She's sweet," Winston said. "She makes me laugh. She takes care of me, and I take care of her. She is the best person I know. I love her very much."

"And she doesn't look too hard on the eyes, either."

"Well, no. She is pretty, but that's not why I love her."

"That's a hell of a rock on her finger, son! Of course, I think it's smaller than the one your brother gave that girl of his... Sarah?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Dad. It's *Sheena*. They have been together for years. If you forget it, just think of The Ramones song about it and you won't anymore. And I believe hers is bigger but that's not the point—"

"Won't the little woman get offended?"

"No. The ring is Gran's," Winston was short. "It is Gran's ring. It meant everything to Lucy. She loves it. It suits her. Anything bigger and it would be impractical for her."

"Why? Women prefer big things."

Winston cringed. "Dad, she has small hands. She's a tiny sprite of a thing."

"Tiny hands can be good."

Winston shivered. His father could make any *sentence* sound repulsive.

"How about you bring her around on Sunday?"

"Let me see if she is otherwise engaged," Winston replied, as if managing Lucy's diary. He did get a daily copy of Lucy's diary and could look it up if he weren't so lazy.

“Well la-di-da. She must be some sort of girl to turn down lunch at a country house. Where are her parents from?”

“Not from London,” Winston replied. “You will see when you meet her. You’ll love her. Everyone does.”

“Well, let me know.”

Winston hung up and let out an exasperated, “Fuck!”

Frida looked up from her nap at him.

“Yes, yes, give me the stink eye, Frida. Daddy is having a moment today.”

Winston knew that Lucy would agree to go. He just didn’t want to subject her to it. She’d want to for the same reasons he had. Lucy would not believe how bad it could be until she saw it with her own eyes. She might finally understand why Gerry never spoke to Richard while Winston was understanding of her father’s nonsense.



The Duchess and Duke of Lauderdale are proud to announce the engagement of their eldest son, Lord Winston Ferguson, 32, Earl of Lauderdale, to Miss Lucy Chandler, 28, of London. The Earl graduated from The Royal College of Art with a degree in fine arts. He attended the University of Edinburgh to study broadcast journalism, graduating with an MA. He currently takes painting commissions and hosts an art podcast, Inspired Goods. Miss Chandler graduated from University College London with an BA with honours in politics and a minor concentration in public relations. She presently serves as Private Secretary to HRH the Princess of Wales.

Miss Chandler and Lord Ferguson were introduced by relatives years ago but recently reconnected, began dating, and now live together in London with their five dogs. Lord Ferguson proposed with the engagement

originally given to HRH Princess Rikhild of Norway and handed down to the Earl's grandmother, HRH Princess Sabine, Duchess of Lauderdale. The two plan to marry in the late summer in or around London, shortly after the marriage of our youngest son, Lord Gerald to his fiancée, Miss Sheena Brown. The latter couple will marry at Thirlestane Castle in Lauder, Scotland in June.

The Duchess and Duke are keenly excited for them and wish them a happy and healthy life together.



LUCY DIDN'T KNOW MUCH about her father-in-law-to-be other than he and Gerry had never gotten on. Winston described Richard Stephens as “emotionally stunted” and a “virulent misogynist”, so Lucy was already concerned. The pair drove to Hertford, where Richard owned a country house. Richard greeted them with his wife, an uncomfortably young woman named Elisa. She appeared closer in age to Lucy than Richard and nearly the same age as Winston. Their little luncheon began with tea in the observatory.

Richard was in his late sixties but in good shape and good health. Lucy couldn't help but note that Winston looked most like his mother, rather than his father. Somehow, this was a relief. Richard signalled from the onset he was out to embarrass his son. Lucy's father and Richard had much in common.

“I must say we were *surprised* to hear you were engaged when we weren't aware you were dating.”

Richard spoke as if trying to make Lucy feel inferior.

Winston set his tea down. “It was never a secret, but you never asked.”

Richard never called. Winston also hadn't volunteered that information.

“Lucy, you’ve said nothing to this point, dear. Have you a voice?”

Lucy was introverted and deferential. This was her natural way of going in a new social situation when dealing with aristocratic people. She’d learned it ages ago. It suited her well. She wondered if this would soon change.

“Sorry. Just a bit nervous. Your house is lovely,” Lucy chirped.

“You’re... American?” Richard looked concerned.

“She’s British now, Dad.”

“I am. I was born in America but—”

“Well, she’s American, then.”

“She’s no more American than Cousin Vanna, Dad.”

“Does it really matter?” Lucy asked, confused by this argument.

“Well, you’re going to have children, right? They should be raised properly British.”

“Well, I don’t plan on leaving the UK. I’ve been here since I was 18.”

“You plan on having children?”

Elisa made a face. “Richard, please.”

Winston glared. “Yes.”

Lucy was relieved he quickly answered the question but felt things going south quickly.

“What about you, Miss Chandler. How do your parents feel?”

Wasn’t that a curious question? They did not know. Her family did not exactly follow obscure engagement announcements of The Duchess of Lauderdale in the *Times*. Lucy put it off. She and Winston figured they would call her parents this evening and tell them. She got sick thinking about it. Her mother and younger sister would be happy for them. However, her older sister would freak out, feeling her own

spring wedding was now overshadowed. Her father would ruin it somehow. The idea of him drunk at their wedding was enough to make Lucy vomit.

“We’re going to tell them soon. They’re in America. My sister’s wedding is taking up a lot of time.”

“Your sister is getting married?” Elisa asked.

“Her fiancé proposed over Thanksgiving while I was there,” Winston said. “It was thrilling, really.”

“Yes. They’ll be married in June. I must go to a bachelorette party in Florida soon.”

Lucy made a face involuntarily. It sounded like a nightmare.

“A hen party,” Winston clarified.

“She as pretty as you?” Richard asked.

“Dad!”

“It’s an honest question. She’s very pretty. Good for you. You’re marrying up in that regard.”

Lucy shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. She turned to Winston. He appeared calm, but she sensed he teetered on the edge of screaming at his father. Lucy squeezed his hand. She’d been here. She knew that feeling all too well.

“What do your parents do?”

“My father retired from the service. He was career,” Lucy answered. “My mother is a homemaker.”

“Oh, well that’s... normal.”

Normal wasn’t good.

“Her family was welcoming and lovely, Dad. They are good people.”

Well, some of them. Winston was too kind, as usual.

Richard crossed his legs and stared across the coffee table at Lucy, eyes locking onto her like a target. “So, do you, as an average American, always date wealthy Brits? Was George your golden ticket?”

Lucy shut down and tears welled. She would never be enough. Even Winston's father said it. Lucy could not respond. She was losing it. Adrift in her own emotional turmoil, she could only watch on in horror.

"I didn't bring her here so you could eviscerate any sense of self-worth she has, Dad!"

"Well, you brought her here unprepared. Although, I suspect that is the case across the board. She should put more effort into her act. She *does* realise that the money is all tied up in your inheritance and it doesn't work the same way here like it does in the States, right? If she wants an easy life, she should have stuck closer to home."

"Richard, please," Elisa pleaded.

"No. it has to be said, Elisa. What is it? Is she pregnant? You made a mistake and are trying to do right by it?"

"Dad, what the actual fuck!? Are you *mental*?"

"No, just honest."

"This is not honesty," Winston said. "This is *cruelty*. I will not have it! This is why we don't tell you anything!"

Then, feeling her body in flight mode, Lucy fled. She ran out of the observatory, through the dining room where the staff prepared an elegant lunch which would impress even the King and Queen. She apologised as she bobbed and weaved. It tested Lucy's castle running abilities, but she eventually made it to the car. Of course, Lucy didn't have Winston's keys. This was an epic disaster. Her coat was inside. She shivered. Why on Earth had she agreed to this? Why did Winston choose *her*? Why did she love him enough to endure this shit?

"Lulu, come back in—"

Lucy turned to see Winston standing in the doorway, flustered. She merely shook her head. The words didn't come.

"Okay. Uh... just wait there," Winston said.

Elisa appeared with Lucy's belongings, looking downright mortified.

Lucy sobbed as it started to sprinkle. She was so angry! Why? Why this? She was miserable. Winston barrelled towards Lucy, her coat and handbag in his hands. The door to the car unlocked and Lucy centred.

Winston put the car in gear. He panicked. Lucy sensed he had no idea what to say.

Lucy spoke first. “Tony, take me home *now!*”

“One second, alright?” Winston turned down a lane.

He put on the parking brake and shut the engine off.

“I am sorry, Luce. I... I didn’t expect that from him. Even though he’s an absolute tosser most days, I didn’t—”

Lucy finished his thought. “Call me a gold-digging whore while sitting next to a woman half his age?”

“Yeah, well. It’s wrong. You’re not. I am sorry he doesn’t understand you’re wonderful. I am at a loss for words, my love. I regret everything—”

“You did warn me.”

“I did. I didn’t anticipate this, though. It’s worse than I could have imagined in my wildest dreams.”

Winston began to rummage around the car, leaning over and going through his glove box.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you a bloody tissue, Lucy.”

“Oh.”

He handed her a stack of tissues. “I love you, Luce.”

“But does it matter?”

“That I love you? That I want to marry you? That we’re both ludicrously happy apart from our fucked-up family drama? Yes, it does matter. At least, to me.”

“They will never accept me, Winston. Do you not see that?”

“That’s not how any of this works.”

“How would *you* know?”

“Because my godmother was maligned by her mother-in-law for years and has a reliably divisive mother who still calls her fat. Yet, she’s probably the most beloved person in the royal family. Lucy, whatever your father and mine see, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that anyone who knows you loves you. When George peace’ d out, we rallied for you. Why?”

“Because you secretly wanted to get into my pants.”

Winston smirked. “That is a simplified answer for me. The honest-to-God answer is that we loved you. All of us—Gerry, Sheena, Natalie, Cousin Vanna, Mummy. We wanted you to be happy. Because you’re a gem. The rarest kind. I couldn’t do this without you, Lucy.”

“You did before me—”

“I did, but now that I’ve got every day with you, I don’t want to go back. I would marry you standing next to a bin fire in central London traffic.”

He was on the verge of tears.

“What do we do?”

“We get married, Lulu.”

“And your father and mine? They ruin the wedding and bring me to tears? I can’t survive it. I love you, but I don’t want to subject your family to that. I don’t want your father doing the same.”

“So, we don’t invite either?”

“No, that won’t fly. It would be better to elope. Not that that’s an option...”

Winston looked confused. “I thought you wanted the big wedding?”

“When Natalie finally gets over her internal dialogue about being an independent woman who refuses to compromise, she will marry Ed. I will be tasked with planning that damn wedding. Forgive me if it sounds exhausting.”

Winston chuckled.

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t just elope easily here. This isn’t Vegas. And a marriage in Vegas wouldn’t be good. Nor would it be valid—”

“We can file a marriage license and wait a month. No one could complain. We can have a party later if you want. Make it fun. Lower the stakes. No one objecting or anything.”

Lucy looked at Winston’s sweet face. His eyes showed genuine love and care. She brushed his cheek with her cold hand. She’d never had anyone say they’d marry her next to a trashcan in the middle of a crowded London street. On paper, she realised that would not look good, but those were somehow the sweetest words he had ever said to her. It didn’t matter to Lucy *where* it happened.

“I don’t mean to suggest that it’s not... that we shouldn’t have a proper wedding—”

“What is a proper wedding, Winston?” Lucy asked, her face going from concern to a slight smile.

“You know. A great big wedding. The whole thing. Big white wedding dress. Flowers. All of it.”

Lucy laughed. “I don’t need a huge wedding, Winston. I need you. I want to build a life with you and start a family.”

“But the church?”

Lucy giggled. “Like the one we live in? I wake up in a church every morning. Really, you’re doing me a favour. There will be no debate about being married by a Catholic priest.”

“Want to apply for marriage licence tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Lucy laughed. “Let’s do it.”

“We still must tell your parents.”

“I know. “But the pressure... it feels... gone. What will people do?”

“They will either be happy, or they won’t be. Lucy, we will make it out alright. We always do. The finish line is so close.”

“I know.” Lucy leaned in and kissed him.

It felt ridiculously good. Everything about it felt *right*. He knew she was enough. Lucy might take some time to believe it herself, but he reassured her.

Winston’s lips against hers felt like heaven. He played with her hair the way she liked—slowly running his hands through her tresses and the pulling ever-so-gently. It was slightly possessive. Winston ran his hand over and up her dress. Lucy pulled away as he kissed her neck. It was intoxicating.

Lucy gasped, not wanting to shut things down. “We’re so far from home.”

“The backseat is pretty spacious, you know?”

“I’ve never done it in a car before,” Lucy said. “What if we get caught?”

“Out here? Nah. This is all Dad’s property.”

“You just want to stick it to him by sticking it to me?”

They both broke into laughter. Lucy finally reeled him back in, kissing him slowly before squeezing over the console into the backseat and tossing her shoes and tights aside. Winston ran around to the backseat. Thankfully, the G did have the room to accommodate them.

Lucy vibrated with excitement of the bravery she mustered in the moment. She was powering through her worries to have sex *in public*. It was thrilling, if not terribly uncomfortable. It was lovely to kiss Winston knowing that they’d just made this big declaration. She was his. He was hers. Nothing would change. A year ago, she’d been trying to carrot-and-stick an engagement with a man she loved but wasn’t getting the same in return from. In contrast, Winston declared his intent to marry her—anywhere, anytime. The big wedding faded. It didn’t matter. What mattered was his love.

The sex wasn’t slow and sweet. It was passionate and swift. It was raw and impulsive. The aftermath left them breathing heavily in a car. The windows were steamed up. Lucy couldn’t have loved Winston more. She wanted to do this forever. That was the point.

Lucy touched his face again. “Thanks for just loving me.”

“Thanks for putting up with me, Lucy.”

“I will always do my best, Winston.”

“I know.” Winston pulled away. “I want you to be happy. That’s all, Lulu. I just want to see you happy and assured.”

Lucy beamed, fighting tears, “You make me delightfully happy. We’ll have a beautiful life together, Winston.”

“We already do, Luce.”

It was true.

“You’re right.”

“We should head back,” Winston said.

They packed up and Lucy smiled all the way back to town. Their naughty little sidebar had been fun, but it was their wonderful secret that won out. Nothing about them had ever been *normal* or *predictable*. Their story was perfect in its imperfection. Things might go tits up, but Lucy knew she and Winston would work out.

They reached home. Lucy called her parents, flashing happy smiles as she displayed the engagement ring proudly. Her mother nearly fainted. Her father was tight-lipped. As predicted, Dwight couldn’t even choke out a reasonable congratulations. They phoned her sister, catching Francie on the way home from the gym, screaming excitedly at the news. It was a sweet moment. Lucy had a pang of guilt when she hung up.

“We need to plan a party for later. Maybe late in the summer after your brother’s wedding gets its due? We need a plan before we tell everyone, ‘Surprise, we got married!’.”

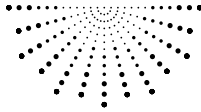
“Fancy planning a post-wedding celebration in the next month?” Winston joked.

“We can at least pick a date and a location, right? We can manage.”

Lucy was assured now. It would happen with a predictable detour in perfect Lucy-and-Winston fashion. She loved it. It

was not what she had seen herself doing a year ago. In her mind, she'd be preparing for a royal wedding with dressmakers all at the ready. She'd be toting a tiara down Westminster Abbey's central aisle. Now, Lucy was happy to avoid it all. She didn't care.

PRINCE PETTY



“*I* just want to say it is a *surprise*,” George said.
“That’s all. I wish them the best.”

“Yes, okay, that’s why you are being so petty?” Natalie asked.

Natalie and George prepped dinner like a well-oiled machine at George and Patrick’s expansive flat. It was nothing but million-dollar views of beautiful Lake Michigan. In the living room, Ed and his friends entertained Patrick. Darling Charlotte was asleep in her bedroom. Natalie had gleefully read her a book and tucked her in. Being an aunt was the best. She was in love with that sweet little girl. Natalie’s heart was so full.

“It was just a surprise.”

“I think your declaration of an engagement over Christmas dinner as well as calling Lucy out on her having good sex with Winston was more of a surprise, yer?”

George waved a knife and pointed. “I hate when you try to guilt me, sister.”

“You know, if you threaten me, George, a team will rush in here and take you down.”

“Okay, so when you punched me in the gut twenty years ago for telling you that you couldn’t shoot a rifle because you were a girl, did you get taken down?”

“We were *children*. And I stand by that. I do recall Dad wanting to kill me.”

“He did. He called you ‘just like Duncan’.”

“I thought it was a compliment. Still do.”

They both laughed.

“She’s happy, Georgie. You’re happy. Let it go. You’ll only insult Patrick. He won’t understand why you care. Quite frankly, *I don’t understand why you care?*”

“I spent five years with her, and she’s already run off with Winston? Why Winston?”

“Winston is darling to her. He hangs on her every word. They are oddly perfect, George. Need I remind, in five years, you never decided to bloody well propose. Your loss. If you liked it, then you should have put a ring on it.”

“Thank you, Queen Bey.”

“She’s happy. Let them be happy.”

“What is the barometer around the palace?”

“Dad was... Dad.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And Rita and Mum are all wound up.”

“Predictable.”

“Dad assumed Lucy would stop working because she’s marrying ‘up’ and all that. Confused us all. It was... ouch. He was called out and apologised. I don’t think he thought about what he said before he said it.”

George chuckled, “Surprise there!”

“People are happy for Lucy.”

“They care?”

“Lucy is a beloved member of the household, so yes. And she’ll be Rita’s daughter-in-law. It’s a big deal, George.”

“Is my wedding even on the docket?”

“Yes, George. This isn’t about you. Everyone is happy you are marrying Patrick as well. We can be happy for the both of

you. And, in some way, isn't that sweeter? You both found the right people eventually."

"I'm surprised neither of them has shoved it in my face."

"George, why would they?"

"I don't know."

Natalie scoffed. "George, are you insecure?"

"Shut. Up."

"Well, I am sorry, but you shouldn't be. They are adorably wrapped up in each other. Drop the rope before you hang yourself."

George glared, knowing she was right. He reserved his judgement. Instead, they turned back to cooking. Dinna was a luxurious rack of lamb. They delivered the meal, everyone tucking in.

"This is so fucking good," Katie said. "I didn't even know I was a fan of lamb. It's amazing. Now, I feel bad for making fun of you Brits for eating it. You two are fabulous cooks."

"Well, it's the recipe more than it is us. Plus, the posh thermometer thing that George bought," Natalie said.

"Can I ask for the recipe? Because I feel like there is a girl out there this would impress."

"Katie, it's just lamb. Delicious lamb, yes, but I doubt it will get you laid. The recipe isn't mine to give. It's from a friend, but it's fab."

George glared at Natalie again. The recipe was Lucy's. It was impeccable. He found it to-die-for but would not admit it.

"Plead with that friend. I need it."

"I will text her," Natalie agreed.

"Where did the two of you learn to cook?" Tom asked.

"Mum," they answered in unison.

"The twin thing really gets you, doesn't it?" Tom chuckled.

Patrick rolled his eyes. “It will get worse as the evening goes.”

“I think Natalie is a better cook than I am. She lived in the mess a long time by herself. She probably was the only one using the officer’s kitchen?”

“There were a group of us. We’d make something and rotate,” Natalie replied. “I lived for a flight lieutenant—Singh—to make whatever he did. It was going to be no doubt the best meal of the rotation. I’m not a fab cook. I’m fine.”

“You’re a lovely cook,” Ed said.

“You say that because you cannot cook, darling.”

Katie snickered. “Day-um. He just gave it to you.”

“Oh, she will. She can be downright infuriating.”

“Only makes you want me more, though. It works for me.”

“Naaaaaat,” George groaned.

Ed chuckled, entertained by all of it. He knew he’d get his comeuppance later. Natalie struggled to focus. She wanted to jump his bones. God, he was so hot. There were few men who could have brought Natalie to her knees. And, even then, she had to be in the mood for it. Ed, though, could have done anything at all and she’d still be weak for him.

George shook his head. “Ignore them. They’re embarrassing.”

“Oh, and you two aren’t? Puh-leez, Georgie. You and Patrick are just as bad.”

“Not possible. I haven’t been known to suck face in the street in front of the press for funsies.”

“Guilty as charged—with yours and mine,” Natalie giggled.

“I live for this. I mean, she’s a good kisser. Not my type, obviously. But she *sold* it. It *looked* impressive. Maybe your family is just genetically designed to be good at kissing? All I know is, people bought it.”

“She can sell a kiss, yes,” Ed admitted. “And get herself in lots of trouble.”

“I don’t regret either. One, it bought you two time—years in fact—and two, such poor behaviour let Ed and I skip the rumour mill. I don’t regret that for a moment.”

“Okay, for the idiot in the room,” Katie said. “Can you please elaborate?”

“Katie, don’t you have a degree from Harvard?” Ed laughed.

She clapped back. “Ed, don’t you have a degree from Oxford? Who kissed who?”

George groaned, as if in great agony.

“Back when they were both in the closet, I was probably the first to find out what was going on.”

“She walked in on us,” Patrick clarified.

“So, in my brilliant mind, I know we have the press surrounding Patrick’s building. And I’m there with a female friend because I secretly hoped *I* would be hooking up with Patrick. I thought that was the plan, George?”

Katie and Tom laughed.

“So, we must get out of there. I tell George to take my friend to the car and get in. And then Patrick walks me to the car, and I lay a massive kiss on him. I tell him to go along with it. We sold it, okay? I felt nothing, obviously, but I gave it all I had. And you all got to stay under-the-radar for years.”

“Well, except Dad was convinced you were shagging Patrick.”

“Correct.”

“What?” Tony scoffed. “Okay, I need this story.”

“Dad was concerned that I was dating a footballer because he observed me talking to Patrick at the polo. He thought we were too chummy.”

Ed guffawed. “He’s paranoid about you ending up with an athlete.”

“Yes, well. He should be,” Natalie met Ed’s gaze.

They stared at one another as if they shared a conclusion. Neither spoke. George continued the story. The rest laughed, but Natalie couldn’t. She was too focused on Ed’s face. It took her some time to come back to Earth. When dinner finished, Ed pulled her into the hallway. They were like kids sneaking away at school. It was as if he’d never kissed her before. In fact, it felt like that time they had stolen away at Buckingham Palace during the Garden Party. It was as if her admission that they may end up together—or, likely would, led them down an incredible, passionate road.

“What are we doing?” Natalie asked. “We’re going to be missed.”

“Let them miss us. I love you. I missed you. I just want to soak you up.”

Natalie let Ed kiss her again, pushing her up against the wall. She allowed him to kiss her neck before pulling his face towards hers once more. She bit his lip and basked in the feeling of his body against hers in a dark hallway.

Natalie eventually came to her senses. “We should get back to it.”

“Give me a minute. I’m not going out there with a rager.”

“What should I talk to you about? Football?”

Ed pulled a face. “That will definitely end it.”

Ed was no fan of footie. It was what made the press accounts that he got on with Patrick because of their “shared love of sport” sort of ridiculous. Yes, they did have a shared love of sport. It just wasn’t about football.

“It would be dreadful for me to end up with you, Ed,” Natalie said, playfully.

“Yes, what would I want with that?” Ed asked.



ED WOKE next to Natalie the morning after the dinner party. He couldn't sleep. She was jetlagged and sleeping in. He looked at her dishevelled, tiny figure lying there. She seemed almost unreal. Having her back felt like heaven. He padded to the kitchen and found Patrick hitting a protein shake like it was his job.

“Morning reps?” Ed asked him.

Patrick nodded. “Scrimmage today. Are they both still asleep?”

“Nat is exhausted.”

“George is lazy.”

Ed smiled.

“What happened with you two last night?” Patrick asked. “She got all quiet for a bit there.”

“I think we decided we're going to give this a genuine go. I don't quite know *how* I know that, but I am desperate to be with her full-time. It is physically painful to think about her leaving in a few days. She's amazing. I think we're going to try.”

“You're already together.” Patrick pulled a face and shook his head.

“That bad?” Ed joked, nodding at Patrick's shake.

“This stuff works, but it tastes like shit. I'm old. It helps.”

“I creak when I move. I feel you. I'm looking at another surgery on the opposite shoulder,” Ed sighed. “Natalie isn't helping. She is relentless.”

Patrick snickered.

“Sorry. That was TMI. She is exhausting.”

“Is it not better to have her be exhausting?”

“It is better. My ex and I weren’t sexually compatible at all.”

“I couldn’t relate,” Patrick joked.

“How did that ever work?”

“It didn’t. I thought it could. It didn’t. Charlotte’s mum was a good sport at first. She was a good friend. It got complicated. It fucked with her head—and mine. I regret it for everything other than Charlotte. And now we’re using a surrogate. It’s just so much better. Not really an option in the UK. I don’t know how gay couples there manage.”

“Well, your sport doesn’t make it easier.”

“Given how often I hear a slur from a supposed fan, yeah. It’s funny. Gays have more rights in the UK. Across the board, they are much better protected. Here, they have almost no rights. Yet, George and I are gay icons in America. There, we’re just meddling and destroying the world.”

“That’s just royalty for you, mate.”

“It’s pervasive. How do you manage?”

“Uh, I take the insults about me wandering around perpetually shirtless on the chin and take comfort because I get to spend most of my time home with Natalie. Strangely, it makes all the bullshit worth it. Of course, it’s not easy. She’s so hard to reach about this stuff. She just ignores it. I struggle. Rumours are devilish things, aren’t they? She’s always having an affair if you’d believe the papers. Any royal under the age of 50 and over the age of 20 is a threat.”

“That’s because they are desperate for their perfect princess to end up with a prince.”

George entered and put the kettle on. “Tea, Ed?”

“Sure, thanks, mate.”

George gave Patrick a kiss. “You need a shower.”

Patrick grumbled, “I will. Gotta slam this shake first. You are so annoying.”

“How can you stand to be so near to him at present?” George asked Ed across the kitchen island.

“I think both of us are immune to sweaty humans in the vicinity. Is love not being able to tell your partner that they stink?”

“It is, I believe,” George answered.

“I will jump in the shower in a moment, Georgie.”

The kettle shut off. George poured two mugs and sat a tin of sachets on the table. Ed chose his favourite and steeped it.

Out of the blue, George said, “She wants to marry you.”

Ed looked up, confused.

“She hasn’t said it, Ed, but she wants to. I know my sister. I have never seen her this wrapped up in anyone in her life. You make her weak in the knees—girlish even. My father hates it. He’ll get over it.”

“How did you even know? Because I think we both came to the same conclusion last night even if we didn’t say it...”

George took a moment. “It’s twinsense.”

“That’s not a real thing, baby!” Patrick snickered.

“It is, too. I know her better than I know myself. She absolutely does want that. The question is... does Ed?”

Ed fought for the words. “I think so. Honestly, last night when she indicated we would end up together, my heart burst. It sounds stupid but I... I I just love her so much. I cannot imagine life without her. I know it’s too soon.”

“Lucy is marrying Winston after like five months of dating. You could be more reckless.”

“George, I don’t know that it’s reckless. They’ve been living like an old married couple since she moved in. Some people are just so perfect together you can’t imagine them apart. I’d argue the same about you.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” Ed said. “You two are so perfect together that the idea of you apart doesn’t even cross my mind. Or even Lucy’s, really. That’s what she’s told Nat, anyway. I feel like that with Natalie. She came into my life like a demanding cyclone but damn if I could quit her.”

George smiled.

“He loves her. See,” Patrick said. “I told you it would happen.”

“Patrick has been convinced the two of you would end up together since he first met you. He claims to know these things.”

“Look, I ended up with you. Crazy things can happen, Georgie.”

“Yes, but I must swing impressing your father, right? Some stupid, archaic rubbish there.”

“Try to get to know Dad. Demonstrate that you care about Natalie. It’s not hard watching you two get on,” George assured Ed. “Try. Dad sucks at that, I’ll grant you. He’s not all bad, though. He loves us. Bit mental with the girls. Nat is different because she’s the heir. He wants to make sure that the two of you aren’t doing something impulsive. More than that, he wants to make sure this won’t break you. He’s protective of the institution.”

“He gives me a fright every time we talk.”

“Stop worrying about it. Be confident. He will come around. He’s protective, but not a total asshole. That was our grandmother. The woman had a complex about Mum. It caused all sorts of issues.”

“I cannot imagine disliking your mother. Even my mother, who is suspicious of any English person, likes her.”

“She’s technically Welsh, so maybe it helps?”

“Nah, she likes Natalie, too. But I find they have more in common than they don’t. Neither of them will be muzzled and neither has ever known fear.”

“At least you admire that in Natalie. She’s brave as hell, but a hard nut to crack. You’ve done that. Dad finds it unnerving. He’ll come around.”

“You’ll succeed. You love her. You’ve been there and you’ve never wavered.” Patrick sounded sure of it.

Ed sighed. “I hope you’re right. Guess I’m going to try to make nice with the King.”



“WE’RE NEVER GOING to plan a covert wedding at this rate, Lucy,” Winston said.

Lucy scheduled an appointment at the registry office. The mere idea of applying made them giddy. Winston was convinced they would never get out of bed. While he wanted to stay, he also had a podcast in need of a guest and no leads on who add in. He also had a commission deadline looming. Still, lying in bed with Lucy was too tempting to turn down. Unfortunately, they had started this task in Winston’s room at the safe, wound up back in bed, and when Lucy went to find her documents, they ended up in bed in her old room.

“What do we still need then?” Lucy pulled on a shirt.

“The list says: passport—”

“Check. Got that.”

“Not your American one. That’s not—”

“Dude, this is my British one,” Lucy said, incredulously.

“What? It’s blue.”

“Diplomatic passport,” Lucy beamed. “Top job, fancy passport.”

“Alright, miss posh-o. Come on now. I didn’t know.”

“This one is my personal. I’ll bring both. I don’t know what they need. And I’m not super fancy. The King doesn’t even *have* a passport. Think of that!”

“We’re stalling, Luce.”

“Okay. What now?”

Winston was focused on her arse. She was bent over sorting through papers in a drawer.

“Winston?”

“Sorry... yes, alright—”

“Were you looking at my ass?”

“Yes,” Winston winced.

“Driving licence.”

“In my purse.”

“No name changes for you. I have my papers. So, we’re good.”

“Wait... am I changing my name now?”

“Are you?” Winston asked. “I don’t have a dog in this fight. I would hope our children would remain Ferguson but ___”

“We have many dogs, but no fight.” Lucy giggled. “But... Chandler... it’s not my name. It’s my dad’s name. I always swore I’d rather be Pokorski. Ferguson is better. I’d be Lucy Ferguson. This is all so wild!”

Winston smiled. Her joy was contagious.

“Do we have everything then?”

“Yeah,” Lucy answered. “Let’s do it. Well, I need a bra and proper clothes but... then let’s do it.”

Winston chuckled. “I’m not even wearing pants at present, so you are further along.”

About thirty minutes later, they headed to the local register office in Wembley. They arrived at a desk where an old woman in a bright red jumper greeted them with a wide smile.

“Well, are you here to get hitched?” she asked in a thick cockney accent.

“Yes,” Lucy replied cheerfully. “We’ve brought everything, I think.”

Lucy had carried it all in her work bag. However, since it was a Mary Poppins bag, there was a lot there. Instead of pulling out her passport, she handed work badge to Winston, and then laid out three tubes of lipstick—one labelled “Nat”—and two pairs of sunglasses. Finally, the packet they needed emerged.

“Buckingham Palace That’s quite a place. You *work* there? And you’re *American*?”

“She’s the private secretary to the Princess of Wales.”

“My, my that Princess... she’s a laugh, isn’t she? Such grit, I think. Well, she and her mother. Love them both.”

“I worked for the Queen before I took this post. She’s great,” Lucy confirmed. “And, so is the Princess, of course.”

“Well, that’s exciting. Most interesting thing I’ve seen all day.”

The woman handed them each a clipboard as she took stock of the documents. They filled out the forms. Lucy seemed fine. Winston was looking around wondering if they were about to be outed. He suspected not. No one had any idea what was going on here except the sweet old lady in the bright jumper.

“Now, do ya want to see the ceremony room?”

“Sure,” Winston replied.

His mother married Bruno in a registry office. However, that was a listed building with beautiful ceremony options. This sterile room had little light. Lucy was unimpressed, but was being her most polite, Midwestern self.

“Well, it’s... big?” Lucy said.

“You two are looking to elope?”

They both nodded.

“I don’t mean to pry. If you have a nice budget and not many people, there are a few venues where you can marry if

you're not doing a church wedding."

"The budget isn't a real concern," Winston said. "It's more that we've got some dodgy dads, and no one wants to deal with that. This is about us, you know? We just want to keep it small."

"Let me give you the list. C'mon."

They followed the woman back down and looked at the venues. One was just around the corner from their house. Something to consider.

"Can we get back to you on the venue?" Lucy asked.

"We need to know today, love."

"Why are things so difficult here," Lucy groaned. "It's just a friggin' wedding."

"We're like this. It's the sort of bizarre you quite literally signed up for, Luce," Winston said. "His Majesty's government and all that."

"I'll be sure to give him a piece of my mind when I see him tomorrow."

Winston snickered and pulled her close in hug.

He kissed Lucy on the top of the head. "Let me ring them."

Winston dialled the venue and spoke with a man named Larry. "I know this is last minute, but I was wondering if you might have any availability to host a very small elopement about thirty days from now?"

"Just a moment."

Winston heard a keyboard clicking and then the man responded.

"I have a Thursday afternoon available—the 16th. It would go into evening. You'd have the whole place. Unfortunately, we're booked every Friday and Saturday. Would you like to place a hold?"

"Give me a second," Winston said. "I have to talk to my fiancée."

Winston walked back into the office. The registrar woman had made Lucy a cup of tea and was talking about her cats. Lucy was showing the woman pictures of their dogs. Lucy couldn't go anywhere without making a friend.

"The 16th," Winston said. "What have you got for the 16th?"

"I fly to Vegas the next week. My sister is getting married. It's her hen party. I don't want to go."

Winston needed her to be faster.

She scrolled on her mobile. "I have an engagement on the books for 10."

"Enough time to get ready for a 4PM booking? We'd have the evening after that."

"If not, I can ask her to move it... maybe. Ugh. It's a joint engagement with Princess Kiersten. I guess we will see."

"Should I book it? They are full up, Lulu. I'm dying here."

"Book it. I will make it work," Lucy answered.

Winston returned to the conversation with Larry. "She says we can make 4 PM work."

"We usually add on private dining—"

"We've been to your place before it's nice. Let's do that."

"How many? Four?"

"We are just us."

"You need two witnesses, or I can't book it."

"How many can we do?"

"I can fit sixteen in that room," Larry replied.

"That's enough," Winston agreed. "Thanks."

"Cash or card?"

"I could do card or cash. Can we drop by in like... fifteen?"

"I'll hold it until the end of the day, sir," the man said.

“Brilliant. Thank you, Larry,” Winston said, relieved. He hung up and rushed back to Lucy who appeared unphased. She was the least bride-y bride of any woman he’d ever met. Gerry would have been pleased to see Sheena so calm and unbothered.

“We have to pay the deposit, but we’ve got it,” Winston assured.

“Where is it then?” the lady asked.

“The Marquis,” Winston replied.

“Posh, posh. I’ll finish up the paperwork and get you on your way. Well, done Mr...” she looked down at the clipboard in her hand. “Earl of Lauderdale. Is that any relation to Lady Mairead, that friend of the Queen’s?”

“She’s his mum, yes,” Lucy giggled. “Oh, she’s lovely.”

“She is.”s

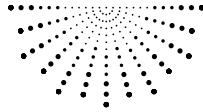
“Is she excited then?”

“She is over-the-moon. She couldn’t be happier with Lucy. Adores her.” Winston beamed. “We all do.”

“Well, I hope the best for you all. Let me check your documents and send you off.”

S

CLANDESTINE SCHEME



“*W*e need to invite at least two people. We must know the witnesses,” Winston explained to Lucy as they drove across town to a potential wedding venue.

“Hmm...” Lucy said. “Well, obviously, I will choose Natalie.”

“Natalie!? Luce, she will bring the paparazzi with her. We said we were keeping this low key!”

“I can manage this. Don’t worry about Nat. The good news is that it’s also a restaurant. Showing up there isn’t so odd.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Who will you choose?”

“I don’t know. The idea of inviting Gerry makes sense. Naturally, he’s my best mate. However, if I invite him, I must invite Sheena. I can’t exclude his fiancée. But Sheena can’t keep a secret from Mum. So, that cat will be out of the bag—”

“I have an idea, Tony,” Lucy said.

“What?”

“Let’s host a dinner. Say it’s a special thing with a cocktail reception before—make something up. If there is booze, people will want to attend. We can invite a small group—your immediate family and Nat.”

“If you invite Natalie and my mother, you’re going to get grief from Cousin Vanna.”

“Look, we can’t invite the Queen without it seeming ridiculous. No. We will stick to the script.”

Lucy and Winston entered the restaurant. It often boasted live music in its garden patio on Saturdays. They’d come down a few times for a meal and a drink since it was just around the corner. The listed and cosy venue was elegant without being stuffy. The floors were original, a bit scuffed, but well-maintained. Beautiful period chandeliers lit every room. It was perfect for them—a little different, somewhat offbeat, but nice. Winston asked for a guy named Larry. A man of five foot nothing with a loud checked tie greeted them.

“You were the man on the phone?” Larry looked at Lucy. “And this is the bride?”

“I’m Winston Ferguson. This is my fiancée, Lucy Chandler.”

Lucy nodded. “We have been here before but not on the wedding side.”

“She is *charming*,” the man said in the most flamboyant way possible. “And you’re alright getting married on a Thursday afternoon?”

“We are,” Lucy confirmed. “It’s... uh... nice. We’re fans of... small.”

The three climbed a spiralling staircase. “So, how many do you think you will have in total?”

Lucy had done the math. “Eight.”

“Eight. See, you told me four,” the man chuckled. “Well, alright. We have two spaces available. One is our conservatory. It’s larger but it could give you a much nicer look if you wanted both a ceremony *and* dinner space. We usually only hire it for Fridays and Saturdays but for an extra charge, we could make it work for you. Do you have a budget?”

“Yes,” Lucy replied as Winston gave an emphatic, “No!”

“Um, we have a budget. We *should* have a budget, Tony!”

“We don’t. I don’t think this affair will blow our budget, alright. You’re not planning a royal wedding. Calm down. What does it run?”

“There are different packages and—”

“Nicest package,” Winston was insisted. “Whatever includes the most stuff so that we can just delegate everything and she can enjoy the day. She is a planner. Logistics is her life. Her job is to get a literal princess from point A to point B every day. I want her to just be a bride and be happy. Whatever accomplishes that goal, that’s what I want.”

Larry nodded decisively. “Yes, sir.”

Lucy was impressed once more with Winston’s decisiveness. In the clutch, he always had her best interest in mind. He knew her all too well. She was starting to spin up a plan in her head. Winston was putting that to rest. Instead, now, Lucy would have to find a dress. She could manage that. She’d have to.

Winston agreed on the finer details. Lucy paid the deposit. She insisted. Winston dropped the rope because he knew arguing was pointless. Sometime soon, it would be moot. They’d be married. It would be *their* money. Lucy just didn’t want to feel like a leech. Somehow, Larry found this notable. They left after paying and finishing the paperwork.

Entering the car, Lucy said, “I love you, Winston.”

“I love you, too, Lucy,” Winston smiled. “You are delightful even when I don’t quite understand you.”

“I think you do understand me quite well. You knew I would find a way to stress myself out over money and logistics. You took that decision out of my hands. I recognise you are right.”

“The money doesn’t matter, Lucy. I know in your mind it does. However, in my world, it is not a concern. I’m not saying this to sound better or to brag. I simply want you to know that you will never need to worry about it. We will make decisions together, but please stop worrying about what things cost. I won’t hold it over your head. What is mine, is ours.

What is yours, is ours. We're a team, remember? Partners. 50-50?"

"I know. I just... it's never been my way to accept any charity. I always felt weird about it with George. We weren't married. That made it a bit odd, I guess. Still, this world that you live in is so new to me."

"You work in a palace and stay in hotel suites most people could only dream of seeing *photos* of. You ride horses with Natalie that cost more than most people's houses. You are invited to country homes of royals and stay in palaces. Lucy, you're already in the club."

"Mentally, I will always be the girl who grew up hand-to-mouth because her dad drank too much, and her mom never worked because they couldn't afford a sitter. It colours your world, Winston. The idea that we could have children and their every want, need, and desire would be met in an instant is foreign to me. I may live like you now. You treat me as any member of your family, but I did not grow up like this. I can't unlearn poverty."

Winston pulled into the garage and closed the door before turning to Lucy. "I don't know what that's like, but I want you to stop worrying about it. I don't want you to change who you are, but you don't need to fret about money ever again. I want to support you because I know you will always support me. You make my life immeasurably better."

Lucy leaned over and kissed him. Winston was so sweet. She couldn't have ever explained how she felt in that moment—how his words were safety and security. Instead, she kissed him. She continued to until they both found a way into the backseat. The car had become an interesting hook-up spot. Lucy did not regret it.



"Do you have the run-of-show printouts, Brenda?"

Natalie heard Lucy in the hall outside her half-open office door.

“Somewhere. Give me a moment, please.”

“Her Majesty is asking for them. When you find them, please run them up to Clara, alright?”

“Yes, Miss Chandler.”

Natalie heard Lucy turn, heels clicking and called, “Lucy Chandler! Come here!”

Lucy’s head soon peeked in the doorway. “Oh, hello. You’re back.”

“Fortunately, or unfortunately. Good morning, darling. You’re putting in for half a day of vacation in the middle of the week. Can I ask why?”

“Oh, it’s just... something minor.”

Lucy shut the door.

“Why not take Friday, too?”

“I’m not sure I have time. We are supposed to receive the new Dutch Ambassador and—”

“Lucy, what is happening? Are you doing the egg thing *finally*? Why? Do the two of you not want to just have sex? I know the answer to that is fuck no. Wait... are you? Oh my God! You are!”

Lucy shook her head and sat across from Natalie’s desk. “No, God, no. I’m not pregnant.”

“Oh, sorry. I just... it’s odd for you. I know you’re off the following Friday to go to Vegas—”

“Yeah, about that. If I can’t go—”

“You don’t want to go.”

“Fuck. No.”

“Well, that makes sense. I don’t want you to go—for your own sake. What is going on?”

“It’s stupid, really. Winston is hosting this thing at that place by our house—Marquis?”

“Oh, yeah, we went there once with you. Ed likes it.”

“Cool, yeah. Well, they offer private dining and there’s this cocktail dude. He does some things and sets this or that on fire. I dunno. Either way, Winston has hired the place for some sort of thing. He’s inviting his family. I feel alone. Can you come with?”

Natalie compared her calendar to Ed’s on a separate screen.

“If I can bring Ed, yeah.”

“That’s fine, sure.” Lucy smiled, looking nervous.

“Lucy, you’re a dreadful liar. What is going on? Why a Thursday?”

“You know me. I’m a cheapskate—”

“I don’t fucking buy it, darling.”

“Okay, but you cannot *tell* anyone.”

Natalie was excited. She loved surprises.

Lucy continued, sensing agreement, and brimming with excitement. “So, Winston’s dad is a massive dick—”

“Lucy, everyone knows that! Tell me something I don’t know!”

“He basically called me a whore. My dad attempted to punch Winston. It is a hot mess express. We won’t survive normal wedding. We don’t want one. Like, we’re perfectly happy to do something a bit off-beat knowing that it’s just what we want.”

“I am so jealous of you right now. Go on.”

“I know, right? He’s all, ‘Don’t you think you’ll miss it?’ and I assured him that you’re going to get married someday and I will get to plan a royal wedding one way or the other.”

Natalie snickered. “Wow, that’s true.”

“I know. So, we’re going to do an ambush wedding over dinner. People show up, they don’t know why they’re there. We’ve tricked them. The registrar marries us. Boom! And while I’m sad my sister won’t be there; I don’t want to put her in the position of having to defend her choice to attend to the rest of my family. If I write it off as a boneheaded, impulsive thing that no one really got to attend, it will be easier. Call me a bad daughter, but my father is such an evil person that he would ruin my day. I’m convinced Richard would do the same.”

Natalie was dumbfounded. “You’ve planned a clandestine wedding?”

“A little bit?”

“What are you wearing?”

“No clue.”

“I love this. We’ll find you something and the dressers will make sure it is *perfect* for you. And I insist, you’re taking at least the next week.”

“But I’m going to Vegas—”

“Have you ever taken more than three consecutive days off in a row, Luce?” Natalie knew the answer was no.

“You’re busy, Nat.”

“We will manage just fine without the Countess, alright? She can go off on a little honeymoon, a longer one to come, and enjoy her newly married life,” Natalie insisted.

“Really?”

“Yes. Would I have you come back to work the next morning to deal with the awful Dutch? And have you leave Winston hours after you married him? I’d be a shit cousin, at the least.”

“We’re gonna be forever stuck with one another—you and I.”

Natalie burst into laughter and took a moment to regain her wits. “Girl, if George dropping you like a hot potato to run off

with a man did not stop us from being friends, nothing will.”

“You’re right, I guess. But it’s formal, now.”

“I am so, so happy for you, Lucy.” Natalie felt herself choke up.

“Are you going to cry, Natalie?!”

Natalie dabbed a tear. “I might, yeah. Sorry. Forgive me but... I love you both so much. Winston has always just been the kindest soul and he deserves someone who can appreciate that in him. And you deserve someone who would drop everything for you at the drop of a hat to take care of you as you do others.”

“He’s... when we planned this thing,” Lucy let out a sigh. “Well, Winston pretty much handled it. I got angry with him. I struggle to lose control.”

“You don’t say!”

“Oh, hush!”

Natalie gave a cheeky grin. “Go on, darling.”

“Well, he told me he didn’t want me to spend all this time planning. I was complaining about money. I always worry about him spending money on me.”

“You’re about to be his wife. Stop worrying.”

“I know, I know. But, Nat, he just wanted me to *enjoy* the day. He’s thoughtful enough that he knew I would end up miserable playing private secretary to *him* if he didn’t put an end to it. It’s hard to drop the rope but I trust him in this. He knows me too well.”

“You two should have always been together. I firmly believe it. I can’t believe I didn’t think about it.”

“I am so fortunate,” Lucy sighed. “Having him is like... it’s this rush. He makes me so happy. Loving him hurts at times.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Do you now?”

“Oh, stop, Lucy. You know I do. Don’t even start. I think I’m going to marry Ed someday. Not anytime soon, mind you. But there was this weird moment when I realised if I didn’t end up with him, I’d be miserable. And he had it, too. It was wild.”

Natalie concluded that this was the next step.

“When I left to come back here. He said he would be back for good after the World Cup. He didn’t think he wanted to take the Olympics. He thought it might kill him to be away from me for another year. He asked if it would be okay if he were around more. I told him it would be. We both read into that.”

“Oh, so you’re telling me to get my vacation time in now because if I don’t, I’m not going on holiday for a year?”

“Precisely. I mean, don’t get *too* excited almost-married-lady. We have a lot of ground to cover between now and then. And if you mention this to any member of my family, I will kill you in your sleep, but... yeah. I think that’s where the two of us are headed.”

Natalie folded her hands in her lap. Lucy leaned over and squeezed Natalie’s hand.

“Well, when it *does* happen, I will be here. You are the older sister I wished I had had. And now, you’re also my cousin. So, we must stick together. I will protect you from the crazies if you also don’t tell anyone about my covert wedding.”

“You know, me and state secrets? We’re pretty good—no matter what the Home Office may tell you.”

The girls burst into a fit of laughter over the conversation’s general tenor. It was so ridiculous. Lucy was in a clandestine marriage scenario. Thankfully, Winston was no Wickham. Natalie expected that speaking her own revelation aloud would feel heavy or frightening. Instead, it just *was*. She loved Ed. She’d marry him some day. There was no doubt about that now. And until the day she did, she’d just appreciate the ride.



WINSTON SQUINTED. “I have a very clear idea of what I want.”

“Maybe something like this?” The jeweller pointed to a line of wedding bands.

“No, not any of those. Do you have a piece of paper?” Winston asked.

The jeweller looked confused but handed him what he wanted.

“And a pencil?”

The man obliged Winston, watching him sketch. Winston had a brilliant idea in his head, but no words to describe it. This was the reason he had a white board in the kitchen. Sometimes, words failed him, and Lucy needed a demonstration. Otherwise, she’d pepper him with questions like it was a game of Guess Who, only flustering him more.

“Ah, an infinity band, yes?”

“The whole way around,” Winston insisted. “But seated inside the band. It should not be too wide, either. She has tiny fingers.”

“But these will be small stones, sir.”

“It’s not about the size as much as the clarity, is it? Her current stone is near three carats. There’s no reason that it cannot just compliment it, right? I don’t want her to have to replace the stones all the time. She’s busy. She wants things to just work, and I know she won’t wear her engagement ring every day. It’s impractical. I want to maximise practicality and leave her something beautiful to wear.”

“The stone is spectacular, sir,” the jeweller murmured. “And I can obviously make something that would seat under the existing cathedral setting. But this will be minimal. You could get more sparkle if—”

Winston was determined. “No. This is what I want. And I know she will appreciate the practicality in it.”

“In my experience, women say that—”

“You do not know my fiancée,” Winston declared. “Lucy is... she will appreciate this.”

“Very well, sir,” the jeweller said.

Winston assumed he was cursing him mentally. Winston’s mother kept the place afloat both by her own purchasing habits and because she kept the Queen returning, too. The two could sink your business if they wanted to. Thus, even if the jeweller wanted to argue, he couldn’t. Winston understood. Working with other artists was frustrating. They all had their own vision. They were dreadful at compromise.

“And for yours, sir? Will she be here to choose a band for you?”

“She told me to pick out whatever I wanted. She’s going to be booked the next few weeks. I’d like something simple. Whatever you think would match hers. It’s going on and it’s not coming off, so something neutral.”

“And you need these when?”

“Three weeks,” Winston replied.

The man looked about to fall over.

“Three weeks? Sir, this is a tall order with two or three months—”

“If you can’t do it, Cartier will,” Winston said. “If my mother called you, would you tell her no?”

“We will... make it work,” the man said.

“Also, this is completely secret,” Winston said. “Do not mention it to my mother. I will never buy another thing here again if you say even a word of it.”

“Yes, sir, of course. But why the cloak and dagger?”

“We’re eloping,” Winston replied.

“Oh, very well.” The man was unimpressed. “We will make it work... somehow.”

Winston didn't care. “Great.”

Winston paid the deposit and left, satisfied with his choices. He wasn't trying to impress Lucy. He didn't need to. He wanted to make her life better. Winston returned home to the sound of barking dogs running up to him. They hoped he was Lucy. He loved them most, but Lucy was their favourite.

“Mummy will be home in a bit,” Winston said.

He sat at his computer and let out a long sigh. A week before, a guest cancelled due to a family emergency, so he was without a guest. He was still there racking his brain when Lucy returned.

She sat on the couch and stared. “You alright, Tony?”

“I'm okay.”

“You look sad.”

“I am,” he replied. “Fancy a curry?”

“Don't change the subject.”

“I need to interview someone. I have no one for the pod. I've got three weeks of content and I'm already trying to pivot because we're going to be out of town. I have no backstock for that reason, you know?”

“I do fancy a curry.” Lucy paused. “Why not interview me? I know I'm not an artist, but I'll be a lamb to the slaughter. It might get you some ratings. I'm not good for much else.”

“Contrary to popular belief, you're good for so much. My dear cousin would shit a brick.”

“Invite her round then.”

“What?”

“I know for a fact she's at Ed's right now.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I dropped her there, doofus! Ring her up and ask her if she will give her consent. Your pod is light-hearted. It’s about why people do what they do. You’ve never so much as mentioned me. I will be your sacrificial lamb.”

Winston was tempted. As Lucy scrolled on her phone, he contemplated.

“Well, she’s coming around either way,” Lucy said.

“Lucy!”

“There is nothing you can do about it, baby!”

Winston dealt with it.

“Fine. Ask them what they want—what curry suits. I’m buying,” Winston groaned.

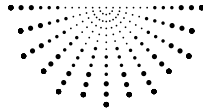
“You’ve never thought to ask?”

“You’re not an artist! Besides, I’d never ask you to do my bidding.”

Lucy giggled. “You do mine all the time! I will get their orders. They told me they are bringing whisky.”

“Well, that should make it better.”

THE SACRIFICIAL LAMB



“So, tonight, we’re changing it up. I’m here recording with my guest of the evening,” Winston said. “And for once, she’s not a spectator—”

“She’s in the hotseat,” Lucy laughed.

“Indeed. Here with me is my lovely fiancée, Lucy Chandler. Lucy, how are you doing this evening?”

“I’m... fine.” Lucy was suddenly nervous, regretting her decision to be Winston’s guest.

Natalie burst into laughter, sensing Lucy’s awkwardness.

“Ignore that,” Winston said.

“Indeed. You quite alright back there?”

Natalie called back, “Sure, sure.”

“Lucy and I are here with guests. I won’t mention who they are only that one of them is related to me and ate literally all our chicken biryani before she let us have any.”

Natalie shrugged and Lucy laughed.

“Luce, I’m going to try to stick to the script as much as possible—”

“Treat me as you would any guest.”

“Good, brilliant. So, we start off with—”

“What do you do? How did you start?”

“Proof you have sat through this a few times.”

“Yeah. I have. But it’s good. I am not an artist. I have no artistic talents—”

“I rather disagree with that, darling. You absolutely do. You’re a brilliant singer. I mean, a genuine star.”

“Can confirm!” Ed called out.

“Okay, I did sing a lot. I am classically trained. That is, however, not my primary job. Nor do they pay me to sing, unfortunately.”

“What do you do, Lucy Chandler?”

She smiled and blushed. “I am Private Secretary to the Princess of Wales.”

“And if you could write an honest job title for yourself, what would it be?”

“If I had a proper job title it would be Fixer of Things and Herder of Cats. And I can say that because my boss got me a big-name placard that says it. It’s bedazzled, even.”

Natalie burst out laughing. She had.

“I sense your employer knows what you are up to.”

Lucy snickered and confirmed. “She does, yeah.”

“What brought you to be the Fixer of Things and Herder of Cats?”

“Uh... I applied to an internship at university. I was a rep with the student union. The Queen came to visit us and encouraged me to apply to an internship. I did. I thought it was crazy. I was an American living in London, a world apart, and there was no way. I was called into an interview with June Osei, The Queen’s Private Secretary and the time, and half a dozen other people. It was super intimidating, but I must not have screwed up too badly. They called me a few days later. And, a year after that, I started working as a gopher, basically. I promoted to an assistant and then worked in the press office and finally was a junior private secretary to Her Majesty before the Princess poached me. And I’ve been working for her ever since.”

“And you like it?”

“Love it. It’s great. The family is wonderful. I’m never bored. I get to meet amazing people. I never dreamed my life would go this way.”

“What brought you to London?” Winston poured more whisky.

“Don’t top me up, Tony. God.”

“What, darling? You are being fun.”

“I am behaving, okay? Uh... what brought me here. I got accepted to UCL and jumped. I grew up in the south Chicago suburbs. Snore. As an Anglophile, I jumped at the chance.”

“Did you get what you thought you would?”

“You know, it’s funny. I told myself that I would get a British boyfriend because I find British accents divine—which is cute because that’s something Americans think exists.”

“British accents?”

“Yes. Your accent is downright English but any American listening would call it British.”

“You offend my ancestors, Lucy.”

“Sorry, you’re Scottish and you speak like an Englishman. Your ancestors will now roll in their graves. No, your accent is darling. But, in general, I really had this vision of Brits that was so ridiculous and based on outdated information.”

“Such as?”

“No one told me that Chicago was a hundred times tidier than London. No one told me that old buildings were fifty percent charming and fifty percent freezing all the time.”

“Why we sleep with dogs in the bed, right?”

“Yes, naturally.”

“British men were all you dreamed we’d be?”

“Not quite. Things get lost in translation at times.”

“Such as? I think we are a well-oiled machine, darling.”

“That’s sweet,” Lucy giggled. “Oh, I do love you. No. Sometimes, I just cannot figure it out. There is a word you won’t understand.”

“Such as?”

“Really,” Lucy replied.

“What?”

“Really.”

“Oh! Oh! I know!” Natalie announced, scrambling to take a seat at the desk.

“We’ve been invaded,” Winston said. “We have an uninvited guest.”

“Oh, calm down.”

“Lucy, who is your friend?”

“I think she should introduce herself.”

“I’m Natalie, Winston’s second cousin. He wants to strangle me at present, but I am *dying* to explain this to him. Brit-to-Brit.”

“Yes, go on.”

“So, my mother does this thing. You can use *really* in about fifty ways if you’re American. It can be excited. It can be annoyed. It can be that you are judging someone.”

“Such as?” Winston asked.

Natalie copied her mother’s accent beautifully. “I really want to go out but are you *really* going to wear that out? I mean, really, Lucy! What are you on?”

“Thank God your mother doesn’t listen to this,” Winston snickered. “Your Majesty, I apologise.”

“You’re her godson. You can get away with it. Does your mum listen?”

“Fuck if I know,” Winston laughed. “I hope not right about now.”

“Mums always listen to things. They do. But do you understand now?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“Great impression. You should do that more. You do it to Patrick. It annoys him,” Lucy giggled.

“I do. And Mum loves it, honestly. Dad always yells at me. But I’m the family troublemaker.”

“Just to clarify, Natalie, you *are* Lucy’s boss?”

“Yes. Her very dreadful boss.”

“Her wonderful, lovely boss,” Lucy clarified.

“You’re such a love. Lucy is the best person I know besides my mum. That’s really saying something.”

“Lucy are you about to cry?” Winston wondered.

“It hit me in the feels, if I’m being honest.”

“Oh, darling you deserve it.”

“You two are... unconventional.”

“Private secretaries, traditionally, are very close to their royals,” Natalie said. “You must have a rapport and ease to make it work. I’m pretty sure that Lucy would kill for me if she were capable of it.”

“Is she?”

“No,” Natalie said. “Thankfully, I can defend myself well enough.”

“You don’t think I could?”

“I have watched you shoot a gun. It’s... a mess, darling.”

“Well, at least you’re honest,” Lucy said with a shrug.

“You two are also mates?”

“Best mates, yes,” Natalie replied. “She keeps my head attached. Ed, what would you say my relationship status is with Lucy?”

Ed looked up from his book. “Co-dependent.”

“He said co-dependent,” Winston clarified. “Boy, does that spell trouble for me?”

“Your mother and mine are co-dependent. It’s fine, darling,” Natalie said.

Winston chuckled.

“So, what is the hardest part of your job, Lucy?”

“I think trying to cover all the bases and set expectations at the same time,” Lucy answered. “You might have delays. She might see a plane.”

“See a plane?”

Lucy looked at Natalie, who shrugged.

“Yeah, so if we’re in an engagement and anyone mentions a plane or there is a plane somewhere, we’re going to need to add twenty minutes. If someone has a horse or talks about a horse, minimum of ten minutes. And just letting people know that she’s a living, breathing human who needs a moment. Most people are super kind but... sometimes people just don’t understand why she’s a minute late. Alternatively, if something goes awry, I must tell her that something has exploded. And then I manage those expectations. And that’s all without trying to communicate with His Majesty’s office or her mother’s. It’s a lot. It’s my job to manage it.”

“She’s brilliant at it. When she left, Mummy cried. But she was glad I got to keep her.”

“Natalie, you’re not helping. The whole point is to let the guest explain what they do!”

“Sorry, cuz. You got us both.”

“Because Lucy invited you.”

“But you didn’t want me here?”

“I wanted the biryani, Nat.”

“Fair, fair.”

“Luce, it’s been brilliant. Natalie, I’m glad to be done,” Winston joked.

“You are the worst.”

“I’m not even the worst. You just can’t let anyone else get a word in edgewise!”

“You sound like my father.”

“No comment. I can sympathise given that he must deal with you, your mother, and my mother all at the same time. As a person who gets flustered and is grateful for Lucy to manage things, I can understand.”

“She’s good at that, yeah. Again, I adore her. She’s the best,” Natalie said. “And I’m happy you’re going to marry her because she deserves to have someone take care of her.”

“You’re going to make me cry,” Lucy teared up.

“What is going on?”

“We’re just having a love fest, Winston,” Natalie said. “And you’d be good to just let it happen.”

“This is a unique thing with women. I admire it,” Winston admitted.

“Men don’t do this,” Ed sat at the table and crowded Natalie’s mic. “We don’t. Women amaze me sometimes. I feel like media prizes male ‘bonding’, but they miss out on the truth.”

“It’s true. Your mother and mine are their own sort of love story as were your grandmother and mine before them, Winston,” Natalie pointed out. “Women support one another. We care.”

“I admire it,” Ed admitted. “And I know better than to stick my hand into it.”

“Best to step away,” Winston chuckled. “No, I’m grateful that we can both have our own friendships and it’s fine. Lucy is a gem. I don’t blame you, Natalie.”

“Don’t steal her from me, Winston,” Natalie said. “I need her.”

“I won’t,” Winston agreed. “I love her, but she likes her job too much. It wouldn’t be Lucy without her carrying the

world around with her. Whatever makes her happy.”

Lucy was choked up. “Aww, I love you, Winston. You’re so sweet.”

“The two of you are going to make me vomit,” Natalie admitted. “But I love you. I wish you all the happiness. The fact that she would even come on here is notable. Lucy does *not* talk about things. She’s remarkably buttoned-up.”

“And you, Natalie?” Ed laughed.

“Don’t know the meaning,” Natalie answered.



“So, you should have *me* charm him?” Natalie asked.

Robbie looked annoyed. Arms crossed, she said, “Do not *shout* at me, Natalie. He is fine.”

“He is a cad! A rake! An utter dickhead! You would have me join him for an evening?”

“I’m not asking you to go do anything nefarious. Attend the documentary premiere with him. It’s for charity. He asked for you, specifically.”

“I wonder *why*,” Natalie said.

“Why are you all wound up? He’s a celebrity. You deal with celebrities every day. I agreed to let you spend next week getting flight hours to keep a certification. So, you can take Mr. Walsh to the cinema at the very least.”

Natalie pulled a face.

“He’s known to be a womaniser,” Vanna said. “Really, Robert, would you think this is best?”

“He is the producer and he’s a key ally in the environmental space. What is so different about him, Natalie?”

“He’s a ladies’ man, he asked for me specifically, and my boyfriend just headed back to America. Hmm... what could I be bothered by?”

“Could you have asked her before you said yes?” Vanna sighed.

“You already said yes!?”

“You are walking the red carpet with him at a film premiere.”

“You wouldn’t let me take Ed but yes, take Allan Walsh to a film? Sure.”

“I never said you couldn’t take Ed. I only knew Ed would not be around.”

“He’s the son of a billionaire—a nepo baby—and I don’t date the sons of billionaires who are nepo babies. Never mind that I don’t date anyone right now because I am taken. I’m with Ed. I’d spend every waking hour with him at present if only I were allowed to. But I’m not and I can’t.”

“You are the ultimate in nepo babies, sweetheart,” Vanna said. “And given your origin story, perhaps don’t lean into the not-dating-billionaires line. Still, I agree. Robert, this could upset Ed.”

“If Ed is so insecure that you can’t—”

“He’s not. But I’d be livid if he stepped out with another woman like this, Daddy.”

“He goes on TV with a woman, doesn’t he?”

“She’s a lesbian!”

“Oh.”

“I have an idea,” Vanna said. “It just might work.”

“What?” Natalie now crossed her arms. Knowing she looked the spitting image of her father, she uncrossed them.

“We can send you and your sister together. You and Kiersten could both go.”

“Kiersten?!”

“What, Dad, worried she might run off with him? Actually get laid?”

“Natalie!”

“No, I was just thinking she could disrupt any concerns about... a romantic linkage between the two of you—Natalie and Allan,” Vanna explained.

“I’m fine with that. Nor will I cockblock her.”

“Oh my God, Natalie! Please never say that again. Sometimes I worry you are Duncan’s and not mine!”

“Excuse me, Robert?” Vanna glared at her husband.

“No, not accusing you. By some miracle... it’s an expression. I would never—”

“Uh-huh.” Vanna continued to shoot him a look of disgust.

“It was a careless—”

Natalie cheerfully said, “Okay, well, have fun sleeping alone in your room. I will only go if you send us both.”

The King acquiesced. Natalie and Kiersten were sent, together, to escort Allan Walsh to the premiere of an environmental documentary that he produced. Allan was attractive, but not Natalie’s type. He wasn’t nearly tall enough at maybe five-foot-nine. In heels, she towered over him. He was a pretty boy. His impeccable bone structure was fit for a man who had risen to prominence first as a member of a boy band and second as a model-slash-actor, but not suited for the sort of rugged men Natalie preferred.

As they entered the theatre, Natalie realised that she was about to be completely off the hook. Kiersten was absorbed with their charge. Now, Natalie was convinced she needed to end this and run off with her young, impressionable sister. After all, Allan was older than Natalie. Kiersten was still a baby. And she was mooning over the little rake!

They took their seats, Allan sitting between them, and watched the documentary. Ed loved documentaries to Natalie’s dismay. So, she had seen some “good” ones in her time. This was nothing more than well-shot navel-gazing with lots of celebrities moaning on about how jets and cars with gas were ruining the world. Meanwhile, they lived in places where you couldn’t grow grass but did so anyway with a lot of water, they shouldn’t have had access to. They drove fast cars and took

private jets every which way. It was an easy pick—personal behaviour over requiring companies to make more ethical choices. This was tiresome.

As they dispersed from their seats, he asked, “Either of you interested in getting a drink after this? I know a place.”

Natalie resisted the urge to tell him to fuck off back to America, but she didn’t. She would never understand the charm of an American accent. It bored her to tears. It sounded like her mum. There was nothing notable or unique about it. Kiersten had the same genetic condition their father and brother had. She found it irresistible.

“We must go home. We’re on a leash. Busy day tomorrow.” Natalie lied to get them gone.

“Nat, I don’t have to go.”

“Yes, yes you do,” Natalie said.

“Being a princess must be the worst job then,” Allan chuckled.

“It’s not all fun and games, no.”

They departed. Kiersten looked sour as they left in their car.

“Don’t look at me like that, K,” Natalie said.

“He’s gorgeous and you never—”

“He is twice your age, and you should know better. He’s a womaniser of the worst kind, darling. And his cinematic choices were dubious at best. You deserve better.”

“You realise that everyone gets laid *but* me, right?”

“Kiersten—”

“No, really. George is getting married. You and Ed can’t keep your hands off one another, Paul goes through my friends like it is his fucking *job* and here we are. In this car. A celebrity—a gorgeous one with a divine accent—wanted me and you stepped in.”

“I’m going to sound like Dad for a moment. Forgive me. But, Kiersten, you will thank me later when this didn’t end up in the tabloids. You will have your fun. I can assure you—”

“I am at uni all day. When I’m not there, I’m at the barn. I am surrounded by women. I have no access to men. I am like an animal kept apart. It is horrendous. I’ve had sex *one time* and it was a grave disappointment. So, I pulled back. Sex is supposed to be magical, yes? Wonderful and make you giddy?”

Natalie sighed and squeezed her sister’s hand. “It does... when it’s good. That’s not always the case, love.”

“Well, I wouldn’t even know.”

“Kiersten, I had the first sexual experience of my life at twenty-one. I was clueless. It was with someone a bit older—not old like bloody Allan there—and he was wonderful. The next time, I did it with someone my own age who couldn’t tell the difference between my knee and my clit. I was overly frustrated. Sexual awakening isn’t a linear process. You are still *so* young. This feels big now. I know. My twin was getting laid on a regular basis and sleeping with Patrick and these beautiful women. I felt like... why couldn’t I land someone good like that—”

Kiersten opened her mouth, but Natalie cut her off. “Yes, I do include Lucy in that. She may appear meek and mild. She’s also magnetic in a girl-next-door way that I am not. Men flock to talk to her. I was always a bit jealous George could land a 10 and I couldn’t find someone who knew how to push my buttons. Of course, we became close, and I realise that was silly.”

“Even Lucy?”

“Lucy has men fawning over her, but she’d never know it—not unlike yourself. Kiersten, out of all of us, you’re the stunner. I command you to find some hot *young* man and go wild. It gets better, alright? You won’t spend your whole twenties celibate. It will happen when you least expected it.”

“So, you eventually found a man who could... you know?”

“Bring me to orgasm, yes? A couple. Many were just shit people. Easy to find one or the other but not both.”

“And Ed?”

“Is both.”

“I will never find someone who is equal parts dashing and sweet, not to mention actually likes me!”

“I did,” Natalie said. “And you will.”

“Your first time didn’t suck?”

“No. He was gorgeous, and he took care of me first. I was so terrified; I wasn’t even able to have an orgasm at first. I had no idea why anyone would *elect* to go down on me. But it was fun. It spoiled me for others, which I have told him since—”

“Wait, is it someone we know!?”

Natalie blushed. “It was Ed.”

“Ed?!”

“We met at a party where we were both in costume, so he had *no* idea who I was until the morning after. I raced out of there and back to Nira’s room so fast. God, he was gorgeous. Still is. And he’s all mine.”

“You are absolutely mooning over him.”

“Because I love him!”

“When will it happen for me, Nat?”

“When you don’t expect it at all. You’ve got to give things up to the universe and simply trust it will work out.”

“That’s really unsatisfying.”

Natalie laughed. “I know. But it is true, Kiersten.”

Kiersten looked out at the window as they neared Clarence House.

“I want to find The One and have that magical fairy tale like Mummy and Daddy did,” Kiersten said. “Does that make me a sap?”

“No. Deep down, everyone is primed to want happiness. It looks different for everyone. I thought it was having a reliable partner and heading out from my station every morning on a loop. Watching the sun come up from the cockpit was the most gratifying thing I had ever done. It still gives me goosebumps. But now, I am happier. I don’t know. Uncle Duncan told me I’d appreciate the change and find the right person. It thought he was mad, but now I live to cook dinner with Ed in his flat and wake up in the morning next to him.”

“Does he know that he... ya know?”

Natalie laughed and took a deep breath. “He does. Now. I didn’t mean to tell him. George sort of walked him into it, also not knowing that the mystery man was Ed. Ed put it all together.”

“And?”

“He was so cross with me! He thought I was making light of it somehow. I then told him that he spoiled me for all else and to calm down. He did.”

Kiersten giggled.

“Fairy tales are what I am required to serve up to the general public, K,” Natalie said.

“And is Ed your fairy tale prince?”

“With bells on, yes. At least, in my mind. I cannot imagine life without his jawline or the way he cups my back. I cannot imagine not kissing him. I cannot fathom life in which I don’t have him to make fun of my neuroses. He’s perfectly imperfect.”

“You sound lovesick!”

“I am.”

“I’ve never been close to being lovesick.”

“Bullocks!”

“What?”

“You and Peter Nevens? Yeah? Not at all? Girl, you were practically on cloud nine after he kissed you. And you told

anyone who would listen!”

Kiersten flushed red. “I... God... I was insufferable! I’m mortified.”

“Look, I was the one who I thought fancied Patrick and George got to him first. And to cover it all up, I snogged him in public. I cringe *every* time I see the video. If any one of us has made the biggest arse out of themselves, it would be me.”

“I think dumping your girlfriend of five years while she’s on the clock and about to accompany your mother abroad is far worse, darling.”

“Savage, but fair!”

“I blame George still. I love him. I hate that he left. I feel like he broke us up sometimes. I feel like he left you here to do this and you shouldn’t have had to. I miss him, too. I have a lot of feelings. I adore Patrick and Charlotte. I want him to live his truth. I just don’t understand why he had to do it all the way he did.”

“Oh, darling,” Natalie said. “I know. But don’t blame Georgie for the failure of an institution to change. Or, really, perhaps it cannot change enough to stay relevant? Stay tuned to find out!”

Kiersten giggled.

“It’s my problem now. And perhaps I was never supposed to be The Heir, but I think I do it rather well. Daddy may not admit as much, but I do. I won’t apologise for being good at something. See how Mummy always apologises when she nails a landing? Like total butter and she’s all... yeah, sorry, I didn’t mean to be good at that? Don’t do that. She only does that because her mother and mother-in-law always got on her for having any sense of pride. Pride is not bad. Have pride in you, my darling. I don’t blame George. He was backed into a corner. He loved Lucy enough to cut her loose before they both ended up miserable.”

“And now... she’s with Winston? Really? I mean it all happened so fast...”

“Lucy and Winston are practically perfect for one another. I cannot explain it, Kiersten. I only know deep down that they will live together in wedded bliss until they die. I *know* it more certainly than I seem to know what I want. Wild, huh? But... you know what it reminds me of?”

“No. What?”

“You’re probably too young to remember anything. I am sure you are. But... grandmother was a lot to handle. Granny flew around going a million miles a minute. She was so bright, so brave, so bold. It was her downfall, too. I suppose I am like her. I have her temper, as does Daddy. But Pa loved her like anything. He loved her in a way I cannot begin to explain—I suppose as Daddy loves Mummy. It was different somehow because he was this big, strong, macho guy with this gruff accent who had seen combat. And here he was following her around like a sheep. He loved her. He fought to the death for her, as needed. He did anything with little question out of a degree of trust I may never understand.”

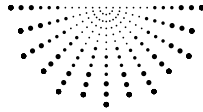
“That’s beautiful, though.”

“It is. But that is what I see in Winston and Lucy. Winston would give up everything tomorrow if she asked—not that she ever would. She is the stabilising force in his little world, and he is the person who cares for her most. I don’t think Lucy has ever had anyone to care for her as she does for all of us. But there is Winston, doing it all for her. I cannot explain it. Love and obligation only make sense to the people in love. What I do know is that when you know, you really *do* know. As George knew all he wanted was Patrick and I know I want Ed, Winston and Lucy just *know*.”

“It’s terribly romantic!”

Natalie nodded. “It is,” Natalie admitted. “Find someone like that, Kiersten.”

THE SURPRISE COUNTESS



“Come on now, off you go,” Natalie said.

They rushed back from an engagement, delayed by horrid traffic that would impede them as they headed to The Marquis. Lucy dropped papers on the table and grabbed her laptop charger as Natalie waved arms like she was landing a plane. Next stop was KP where Natalie’s team would outfit her with hair, makeup, and her wedding dress. It happened so fast. Lucy had not time to be excited. She left Kensal Rise at the crack of dawn, only giving Winston a quick kiss. It seemed like any other morning. As she packed her charger, the Queen appeared.

“Oh, there you are. Lucy, could I bother you for something?” Vanna asked.

Lucy bowed. “Your Majesty.”

“No,” Natalie answered for Lucy. “We are in a hurry.”

“Well, I was told Lucy was out on leave for the next week and two days. We have some concerns about security and your schedule leading up to Georgie’s wedding and—”

“Mother, she can email you, okay?”

“It will only take a minute.”

Lucy looked at Natalie, who relented. Lucy walked, following Vanna down to the Queen’s offices and tucked in to go over some particulars. Natalie stood in the doorway, irritated beyond measure with her charge. Lucy appreciated how invested Natalie was at seeing this through. She and

Winston had worked together to settle all arrangements. If only Lucy wasn't a workaholic!

“Okay, Mummy, are we quite alright now?”

“Yes, honey. Enjoy your holiday! It is well-deserved,” Vanna said.

“Thanks, ma'am. I will enjoy the first bit most. My sister's bachelorette... meh.”

“You will manage. Drink lots!”

Natalie took Lucy's hand and fled down the corridor to the waiting car. Speeding to KP, Lucy realised in a matter of hours she would marry the person she never saw coming. In her bag were the vows painstakingly written over the past few weeks. She meant every word. There was no way she would finish them without tears. She wondered if Winston panicked. Lucy hoped not. She hoped he could let it go and enjoy the fruits of his labour.

Lucy worried that nerves would eat her alive or that her family would intervene. Once she sipped champagne with Natalie, she fret no longer. Ed arrived from the pool at KP soon after the girls landed. He seemed confused as to why they went through this much trouble for a simple weeknight out but knew better than to ask too many questions. Natalie had not told him the real reason behind this covert operation. He elected to nap.

Natalie was good at lying about such ops. It surprised Lucy until she realised Natalie made a career out of it. There, it had life and death consequences. Thankfully, no matter what went down, everyone would leave this evening alive. Lucy felt all the happy feels as she tried on her dress—a silver, gold, and ivory Jenny Packham. There were cap sleeves, a low-cut V-neckline, and the ornate beading following an art deco pattern. It didn't scream “bridal” but in context, it would do. The dress was tea length. Thanks to the dressers, it was fitted impeccably.

Natalie's entire household was aware of Lucy's plans. The team felt invested. Lucy was one of their own. Standing in a

pair of fabulous gold heels and the dress, Lucy felt almost ready. Natalie presented her with the suite of jewellery Winston sent over. This included a pendant necklace, drop earrings, and a ring he designed himself. Natalie had been entrusted with the rings. Winston was hesitant to charge Gerry with anything, given that his mind was pulled in a million different directions with *his* wedding upcoming.

The ring meant the world to Lucy. It was a small delicate band. Diamonds, set within to keep them safe, furlled around its entirety. Inside, the inscription lovingly read ‘From Tony to Lulu’. The message was sickening but all-together sweet. Lucy could not wait to have him slide it on her finger.

“One last thing,” Natalie said. “I have a gift for you, too.”

“Oh, Nat, you didn’t have to—”

“I was not about to send a new member of this family out without a proper gift, thank you very much! Here...”

Natalie handed a velvet box, wrapped with a simple white bow, to Lucy. Lucy pulled off the bow and peeled the box open. She stared at a beautiful floral brooch.

“It was a gift from my great aunt, Princess Sabine. I received two of them. They’re so big that I rarely wear them together. I figured that you’d wear it along with me. That way, we’re always connected—even apart. And, obviously, it was a gift from Winston’s grandmother—”

“It’s gorgeous, Natalie,” said Lucy as tears came to her eyes. She gave Natalie a big hug and stepped back. “This is the most amazing friendship bracelet I’ve ever received.”

“Beats a shit camp craft, yeah?”

“I was thinking girl scouts, but yes.”

“Dab your eyes and let’s get on the road.”

“No, no,” Lucy shook her head. “Pin it in my hair. I want to wear it.”

“Brilliant, then.” Natalie looked touched and did as requested. “Lucy, it looks beautiful.”

A dresser handed Lucy a mirror to show where Natalie pinned it.

“It’s great. I will treasure it.”

And, with that, they were off to the venue. There was no stopping them now. As Lucy rode with Ed and Natalie, she beamed. The girls were too jovial. No, this was the night of her life she would never forget as long as she lived. She was going to leave that place, Winston’s wife.



WITH A COCKTAIL, Winston waited nervously for his bride at the venue. The staff were in on the surprise wedding. In the suite where the venue hosted them, flowers had been added in an understated way. It wasn’t *too* much. Just enough. Natalie had chosen roses to go on the mantle where the ceremony happened. Everyone stood as Lucy and Winston said their vows before the fireplace. The photographer took pictures of the table decorations, candles and more roses laid out on a delicate tablecloth. The venue had put out the fine China. It came out beautifully.

The registrar, Nathan, arrived just before the bride. Nathan was a jovial man in a nice suit with rather impressive shoes. He had an accent typical of the area, somewhat Caribbean or even Nigerian. Winston found his tone calming.

“There is no risk they will show early?” Nathan asked.

“No. My mother is notorious for her lack of punctuality. I expect my brother and his fiancée will arrive on time. My mother, sister, and stepfather will arrive soon after.”

“It will be a happy surprise,” Nathan said. “I have never gotten to do one like this. I told my wife just how glad it made me. It’s the best part of my job.”

“I’m glad it suits. We’re over-the-moon.”

Winston was nervous. He had nothing to do until Lucy arrived. When she did, all holds were barred. He rushed to her,

wrapping her in a big kiss before standing back to take full stock. Her dress was beautiful. Everything about her stunning. Most notable was the broad smile on her face. She was beaming. There was no stopping them now.

“You look amazing,” Winston said.

“Thanks, so do you, Tony. We’re doing this!”

“We’re doing this.”

She nodded, still beaming.

Winston turned to his cousin. “You have the rings?”

“Rings and her vows, yes.”

“And the jewellery suited?”

Lucy kissed Winston. “I’m wearing the jewellery. The ring was perfect. I’m elated, Winston.”

He could not have loved her any more than he did at that moment. She was about to be *his* in the most off-the-wall way he could have ever imagined. This was atypical for their family. Given their offbeat courtship, it seemed fitting. He only hoped his mother and Bruno could understand and that their pre-emption would not offend his brother and future sister-in-law.

Lucy grabbed a drink, taking a moment to soak up the feeling. She loved it all. It relieved Winston to see her relax. Lucy was so discerning. Thankfully, Natalie helped. In this case, her overbearing mentality was a relief.

They were prepared when Gerry and Sheena arrived, dressed for a night out and confused about everything.

“What is all this, Winston?” Gerry asked.

Sheena added, “And why are you dressed like you’re about to get married, Lucy?”

“We are,” Lucy beamed. “Surprise!”

“We decided to avoid the dodgy parents—for everyone’s benefit—and just enjoy the moment,” Winston said.

“And throw caution to the wind, as we are wont to do.”
Lucy’s smile was infectious.

“Well, congratulations.” Sheena tearfully hugged and kissed Lucy. “God, you look so beautiful. What is this?”

Lucy rattled on about her dress as Gerry gave his brother a tight handshake and pulled him in for a hug. He patted Winston on the arm and said, “Couldn’t be happier for you, brother.”

“I appreciate it. We didn’t do this as a slight. We just... we didn’t want to wait or let on that we would have rather eloped. We assumed if we just did it that it would work out.”

“You are correct. Mum would have tried to talk you out of it.”

“Dad went ballistic. Her father would have ruined it, too. We decided to take that out of the equation.”

“I commend you, given what ours has been. So stressful. You could have told me!”

“Wasn’t the surprise worth it, though?” Lucy asked.

“I suppose.”

“Winston planned all of this,” Lucy said. “All of it.”

“I had Nat’s help. But I wanted you to have a lovely day, darling.” Winston rubbed Lucy’s back.

“And now that I am here, I am.” Lucy gave him another kiss.

It felt so good. Winston could have kissed her all day.

The party continued, everyone chatting now. The registrar was just one of the family now. Eventually, the rest of their party arrived. Winston’s mother and Bruno stared, dumbfounded at the rest of them. Rita instantly knew what was happening.

“No! You didn’t!”

“What?” Bruno asked.

“Are you getting married?” Nina asked.

“Lucy and I decided that the path of least resistance was to wed in private and without any interlopers who might drown out the happiness of the day,” Winston said. “So, surprise, we’re getting married right here, right now. Nathan is going to marry us.”

The registrar raised his hand.

Bruno, choked up, hugged them. “That’s great. Congratulations to you both.”

“Yes. Thank you for inviting us. I would have killed you. Her mother still might, I suspect.” Rita gave them each a hug and a kiss.

Lucy shrugged. “She will get over it, or she won’t. It’s about us and we couldn’t imagine not having you here.”

“You’re too sweet and we are too fortunate. Winston, you know better, but it’s okay.”

“I know you want me to be happy and that you know Lucy makes me happy.”

“Oh, she does. I am grateful for her. I’ve told you that. Still, my baby is all grown up and I’ve had no time to prepare mentally.”

“You’ve had nearly thirty-three years, *mi amor*,” Bruno said. “C’mon, c’mon. It’s all very exciting. They’re in love. We can understand.”

Rita beamed at Bruno and then back at Winston. “We can. And this is a beautiful wedding already. Intimate and lovely.”

“Shall we?” Natalie said. “I’m the impromptu coordinator and you’re all taking orders.”

“Yes, Squadron Leader!” Gerry gave a weak salute.

Natalie rolled her eyes.

The lot of them assembled. There was no walk down the aisle. Instead, Lucy and Winston stood before their most beloved friends and family to swear an oath to one another. In the low light, just the two of them pledging everything,

Winston was the happiest he had ever been. Nothing could have matched it.

Nathan welcomed everyone and said, “Today, you have gathered to witness the commitment that these two people will make together. Marriage is a commitment to last a lifetime. As I have spoken with Winston and Lucy, it has become clear that they view it as a true partnership. It is all-encompassing. It is a pledge to love unconditionally, to ever-support one another, to trust in, and to affirm one’s love and respect for one another in good times and in bad.”

“Today, Lucy and Winston make the ultimate pledge and set out on a new journey together. You, as their friends and family, are called to support them. The couple has asked me to request your formal support. Do you, gathered here today out of love for Winston and Lucy, vow to support them in their marriage? To help them nurture and grow together? And to walk with them as they build a life and family together?”

“Hell yes,” Natalie was first to chime in.

Ed glared at her.

“What? It’s a civil ceremony and we’re standing by a bar. I can say that.”

The rest pledged a yes, laughing at Natalie’s excitement and exuberance.

Winston and Lucy turned back to the officiant who said, “We love to see even the very zealous supporter of the couple, yes. I must also ask if anyone here has any reason to believe these two may not be legally joined in marriage?”

The room was silent.

Nathan continued, “Grand! Now the legal bit. Please hold hands. Before you are joined in matrimony here today, I must remind you both of the solemn and binding character of the vows you are about to make. Marriage, according to the law of this country, is the union of two people, voluntarily entered into for life, to the exclusion of all others. These vows constitute a formal and public pledge of your love for one another. I am now going to ask each of you in turn to declare

that you do not know of any legal reason why you should not be joined in marriage to each other.”

Winston repeated after the officiant, “I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Winston Keir Ferguson, may not be joined in matrimony to Lucy Renee Chandler.”

Lucy smiled back at him and repeated the same message herself.

The officiant requested they make their official declarations. Winston went first in a blaze before witnessing Lucy’s happy vow.

Lucy said, through happy tears, “I call upon these persons here present to witness that I Lucy Renee Chandler do take thee Winston Keir Ferguson to be my lawful wedded husband.”

“The couple have chosen to read their own vows now,” the registrar announced. “Winston, would you like to begin?”

Winston obliged, now fighting tears. “Lucy, I knew the day I met you that you were something special. I fell in love with all your charm, your love for everyone, and your caring personality far quicker than I am willing to admit here in front of everyone. I went for years in denial of this until I finally got brave and told you. I am so grateful I did. Every day that I spend with you is the better than the previous.”

Natalie handed them both a tissue. Winston dabbed his eyes.

“Sorry, I’m a sympathetic crier,” Winston said. “Lucy, I promise to love you, uninhibited. I promise to care for you, to honour you, and to always put you first. I vow that as long as I am in your life, I will appreciate all of you—your good and challenging parts. I will always provide for you and our family in all ways—especially emotionally. I am not a perfect person, which you well know, but I will give you my best. And I know when I don’t, you’ll hold me to it.”

Lucy chuckled at that.

“I will never take you for granted, Lucy. You can be assured of this. I love you, Lucy. I am so glad to call you my wife.”

Lucy needed a moment.

She sniffled and pulled herself together. “Apologies. I’m dying here. That was... this is... it’s so much and I am so happy. Don’t think otherwise.”

“Take your time,” Nathan assured her.

“Winston,” Lucy read from her piece of paper, hands shaking. “I promise to be a good partner—your partner in all ways. I promise to walk this life with you and grant you as much patience, love, and empathy as I possess. I will put you above all others and love you with abandon. I cannot promise you much beyond my love and trust, but I can guarantee you have all of me. You make me wobbly and silly. You make me happy beyond measure. I have never had anyone lift me up or cherish me as you do. It is sometimes hardest for me to accept your love and grace. Still, I do.”

It was true. She was lousy at that bit.

“I vow that I will always try to prioritise you and our family. You are the love of my life, Winston. I want nothing more than you and our little life together. So, I vow to make it the best one I can. And, with you, I know we will... together.”

Winston wanted to just kiss her already. Rita and Sheena were tearful messes and could be heard sniffing. Hell, as Winston looked back at the crowd momentarily, even Ed looked choked up. Natalie smiled but was nowhere near tears. That was predictable.

As they exchanged rings, Lucy seemed to come together. She was aware they turned the corner. No more sappy vows after this. Winston and Lucy signed the schedule, followed by Natalie and Gerry. Natalie appeared willing to throw elbows for her chance to be a witness. Winston realised that he would have to contend with his cousin for all eternity now. Much like his mother and Queen Vanora, she was there to stay. In a way, it was comforting. Lucy had never had someone willing to

throw a punch for her. Female friendships seemed altogether different, but essential to women. Winston was grateful for the love and support gathered today. It choked him up again.

Nathan wrapped it up. “I am so pleased to be the first to congratulate you both on your marriage. I wish you a wonderful evening, an enduring marriage, and many blissful years together. Congratulations, to the Earl and Countess of Lauderdale!”

And that was it. Winston kissed Lucy, the camera clicked like mad, and they basked in the bliss of this magical, surprising day. As Winston pulled away, he stared at Lucy. She was grinning like the Cheshire cat. She was perfection. All he wanted was to kiss her again. Before he could, she kissed him back, her lips meeting his as if she could no longer fight the urge to do it once more.

It was a perfect day. Winston could not have loved her more if he tried. They dispersed, taking time to have a drink before family photos. Winston and Lucy were in the clouds, unable to come back to Earth’s surface. Who cared? This day was all about them. Winston could not have imagined feeling more fulfilled. Lucy was his wife. He was her husband. It was wild and wonderful.

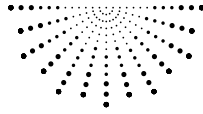
“Well, Countess, what now?” Natalie teased her friend.

Lucy giggled. “I don’t know, cousin, what shall we do?”

“I vow we eat. I’m famished,” Winston said.

“I think I could manage that,” Lucy said.

HONEYMOON PERIOD



Lucy and Winston stayed in a great big suite in London proper on their wedding night before sailing to Bermuda. Unfortunately, the honeymoon period was cut very short by Winston's plan to notify Lucy's family of the fact that they had married. Gone were the beautiful sunsets and warm weather. They were welcomed to O'Hare, Chicago's maddening traffic, and the reality of meeting Lucy's family for dinner.

Lucy knew her mother and sisters had planned something for their grandmother's birthday before they left for Vegas. She had communicated this to Winston in a series of offhand comments. Winston had taken notes and planned around it. They would crash the party and admit what they'd done. It was a disaster waiting to happen, but Winston was convinced it would be fine.

Jen and Tim hosted at their brand-new McMansion in Oak Brook. So, that is where Lucy and Winston found themselves tan, a legion of luggage in the rented car parked on the suburban street outside. Lucy only prayed that no one noticed her wedding band—or Winston's. Neither had taken their bands off since the wedding.

Jane greeted them excitedly as they arrived.

"What is this?" she scoffed.

"Surprise," Francie laughed. "Winston concocted a plan to surprise you—and Lucy. I helped."

"Happy birthday, Grandma!" Lucy declared.

Lucy gave her grandmother a tight hug and a big kiss on the cheek. She smelled like pierogi and frosting. And, in the moment, that was more comforting and less disconcerting. Jane gave Winston a big hug and kiss, too. Winston tolerated this. Jane looked ridiculous next to him. She was so tiny and slight. He towered over her. Lucy wondered if they also looked ridiculous. She never noticed the height difference.

“Hi, Francie.” Lucy gave her sister a big hug. “You are a schemer!”

“Well, when Jen insisted that Winston come, I contacted him. He mentioned that you knew about the party. We came up with a plan.”

“Sneaky!”

“I was desperate to see you and get time off on spring break. What can I say?” Francie laughed.

“Oh, you’re here!” Jen dashed out to give Lucy a hug. Brittany followed.

“Yes. We made it.”

“Why are you so tan?” Jen asked.

“Because we were just in Bermuda,” Lucy answered. “Long story.”

“I need a full explanation later.”

Lucy hugged and kissed her mother as Jen gave Winston a hug so big, it looked like it squeezed the life out of him.

“Your house is lovely,” Winston told her. “Such a nice neighbourhood.”

“Oh, you’re too kind, Winston. Come, come, I will show you around.”

Jen pulled him along, leaving Lucy alone with the other female members of her family. She didn’t get the tour.

“I should go with them,” Lucy insisted.

“No, no. Stay. There will be time,” Brittany said. “Oh, shit. I should check on the men and make sure they aren’t burning

the house down.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Get on it! You’d assume they were children.”

Lucy snickered.

Lucy winced as Francie lifted her left hand up. “Now, let’s see this ring in real life. God, it’s huge!”

“That’s what *she* said.” Lucy made a terrible joke.

She was nervous.

“It’s an heirloom. He can’t take credit for designing it like Tim did, I guess, but I love it.”

“I’ve never seen one like this. What is with the second one?”

“That’s a wedding band,” Jane said. “Lucy, you have some explaining to do.”

Lucy resisted the urge to deflect by making an *I Love Lucy* joke.

“We eloped. Last week. It was mostly to avoid Winston’s father. He’s very abusive and rude to me. We decided we just wanted something—no royal weddings for us.”

“We missed it?” Francie looked heartbroken.

“Pretty much everyone did. We did it at this place by our house. It was so simple and so sweet. We have pictures, don’t you worry. But it was so stress-free and meaningful. Please don’t hate me, Francie. I didn’t want the day to be ruined for everyone. And I didn’t want to put you in a bind.”

“I could never hate you. But Mom’s gonna be so mad!”

“I know. We’re aware. Well, Winston thinks this will go as well as it did with his family. And by that, I just mean his mum, Bruno, and his siblings. I don’t think he gets it.”

“Well, I think it’s important you and Winston do what is right for you,” Jane said. “Whatever makes you happy. It’s your wedding. You should have what you want. I am sad. I

wanted to see it, but I guess now I will get great-grandchildren?”

“I promise you there will be great-grandchildren before you are too old to enjoy them,” Lucy assured.

The women proceeded into the dining room where everyone assembled. Brittany sat the table with Lucy’s aunts. It was lively. Lucy felt nervous, but at home. Her sister really had outdone herself on the house. It was surprisingly tasteful. Neither her grandmother nor sister said anything. Winston returned, standing next to Lucy, and squeezing her hand. The rest of the party arrived. Her father and Tim were bringing in a load of polish sausage and burgers from the grill. It was snowing, but that hadn’t kept them down.

Lucy squeezed Winston’s hand back tightly as he sat next to her. Her father was visibly drunk. This wasn’t going well. Lucy worked with her new husband to come up with an exit plan if things got tense. It wouldn’t be due to her mother’s guilt. That would be secondary to whatever slurs her father hurled. She could only hope Dwight did not lay hands on Winston. That was the worst outcome.

“So,” Jane said, “I don’t want to make a speech. I want to enjoy dinner. Anyone who says anything about my age is going to hear about it.”

Laughter erupted.

“I do want to ask Lucy, however, if she may have an announcement to make?”

“We know about the engagement,” Dwight rolled his eyes.

“Well, it’s not just that.”

“Oh, you’re pregnant!” Jen said, excitedly. “No drinks for you! Wait, you have a glass of wine.”

“No, not pregnant,” Lucy said, annoyed. “This is not meant to be a big deal or to steal your thunder, Jen. It just worked for our schedules. Um... we got married? We eloped.”

A pin could have dropped.

“Well, you didn’t think to invite all of us?” Brittany demanded. “Lucy, why would you do that?”

Dwight slammed his beer on the table. “Because he’s embarrassed by her—by all of us. His snooty family wouldn’t have it.”

The beer fizzed over, and Brittany dashed to get a stack of party napkins.

Winston took a deep breath and explained. “That’s not it. My father is an angry, snooty person who had choice words to say about Lucy that made her uncomfortable. His views do not impact or reflect those of the family I regularly talk to. My parents—my mother and stepfather—and my siblings are overjoyed to have Lucy officially join us. Quite frankly, I am surprised my mother hasn’t rented out a skywriter to let the world know. She adores Lucy.”

“This wasn’t about any of you. I’m sorry if you read it that way. I can’t change your feelings and you don’t owe me anything. We did it because it made sense for us. It was a lovely wedding. I will share photos and send you your favourites. It was a small, intimate thing with just our witnesses. We had to have a certain number and had to follow British protocols.”

The fib had been Rita’s idea. She was *full* of ideas.

“I do not understand why you wouldn’t ask us.”

“They must be British, Mom. That’s why.”

“So, what, she’s your wife now?” Lucy’s father asked.

Winston nodded, confused by that question. “Yes. Lucy is my wife.”

“Missus what?”

“Mrs. Ferguson,” Jane said. “Dwight, you know Winston’s last name.”

“Technically, that is her surname, but people will never refer to her as such in proper society.”

Lucy shook her head.

“What? It is correct. You have a title. I am not going to lie about it. Your family doesn’t have to use it, but they should be aware. Lucy is the new Countess of Lauderdale and people either refer to her as Lady Lucy or Lady Ferguson.”

“No one does that but palace staff or if I were to attend an official occasion with you, Winston.”

“Mum’s staff will,” Winston said. “My point is that no one will call you Mrs. Ferguson. Mum is about to announce your title.”

“Countess? What is that even?” Dwight asked.

“Well, she’ll be Duchess when my mother is no longer around. It’s a courtesy title since I’m an Earl.”

“That is all ridiculous! Our Lucy as a *countess*? You gotta be kidding me, man!”

Winston said, annoyed, “Lucy is my wife, Dwight. That’s the important part. Regardless of what you call her, she’s my wife.”

Lucy’s father shook his head. “Fucking ridiculous!”

“Dwight!” Jane snapped. “You will calm down. You won’t curse at Lucy or Winston! I will throw you out and it’s not even my house!”

Lucy was grateful for her grandmother’s defence, but unable to speak up.

“You realise she was almost Princess of Wales, right?” Francie wondered. Lucy shut down internally.

“What?” Dwight wondered.

“Maybe you all are unaware, but Lucy was with Prince George for years.”

“As what... some sort of cover up? Well, that seems about right. Lucy *would* see herself as a princess, wouldn’t she? Nothing has ever been good enough for her. Good luck with that, Winston.”

“Lucy is the least entitled person I know,” Winston said. “And George loved her. Which, let me tell you, has made all

this quite complicated. I think he still wants to knock my block off.”

“I wasn’t a beard,” Lucy said. “That is the word you are looking for. He isn’t gay, Dad. I don’t expect you to understand that. Do not denigrate him, I won’t have it!”

Dwight set his jaw, “How did she fool you?”

“Me?” Winston was confused again.

“Yes, boy. I meant *you*.”

“She didn’t. I’ve been in love with Lucy for years—well before I said anything. I was her friend for years and years. I know her heart. I always have. She is an incredibly genuine, lovely, and caring person. There is nothing to be fooled about. She wears her heart on her sleeve. Your daughter is a credit to you, sir. I don’t know why you would ever want to put her down. She’s a brilliant person. There is a reason why she is considered the second most important voice on the royal payroll.”

“It’s all silly stuff. This royal shit!”

“I don’t disagree with you. But it matters to a lot of people. Lucy keeps the Princess’s world spinning. She almost guarantees success. Even if you think all of this is hooey, your daughter deserves credit for her work. Moreover, for being such a wonderful human.”

Winston’s words made Lucy tear up. His defence of her was always so sweet. Sometimes, it was scary how much he loved her. Unconditional love was still a surprise to Lucy. She didn’t expect it.

“Well, this is shit. She’s perfect. She’s perfect. She just deserted her entire family—her country, too,” Dwight said. “Such bullshit.”

Tim stood. “Dwight, I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“Really?” Dwight scoffed.

“I think it is best, yes. We don’t allow people to speak like this to others in our house. I am sorry you are upset. However,

this is not how we should speak to Lucy and Winston. We should be congratulating them.”

Jen looked at her fiancé also confused. None expected Tim to grow a backbone.

“Go to the car, Dwight,” Jane said. “Brittany will join you in a moment.”

Dwight took his plate and tossed it on the floor like a child.

“Dad!” Jen shouted. “That’s new China!”

“If you want to side with her, you’re fucking pissing me off!” Dwight called back.

Lucy cried, “I’m so sorry. I just made it worse for all of you.”

“You didn’t,” Tim assured. “Lucy, he has been sniping at you and causing trouble regardless. I can’t take it anymore. My own father is mortified by his behaviour. I won’t put up with it.”

“I am sorry, sweetheart,” Brittany was in tears as she came around the table give her daughter and Winston a hug. “Congratulations. I don’t know what to say other than I am sad I missed it. I expect pictures.”

“You will get them, Mom.”

Brittany left in tears.

Lucy said, “I’m sorry, Grandma, for ruining your party.”

“You did nothing wrong—nothing other than be happy, baby girl. Tim is right. He knows better. If he wants to act like a child, that’s on him.”

“Do you have something to clean this up?” Winston asked, standing over the carnage that was Dwight’s plate. “If you can point me in the direction, I can take care of it.”

“Oh, don’t do that. I’ll get it.”

“No, no, really. It’s no bother. It’s what family does,” Winston insisted.

“Under the sink,” Jen relented.

It was as if she had just accepted Winston into the fold, officially.



*From the Desk of the Duke and Duchess of
Lauderdale-*

It is with great excitement that we announce the marriage of our son, Winston Ferguson Earl of Lauderdale, to his bride, Miss Lucy Chandler. They were married near their home in Kensal Rise in a private ceremony with only a few family members and close friends to witness their vows.

We are excited to welcome another member of the family and wish the Earl and Countess of Lauderdale many happy years together.

-The Duke and Duchess of Lauderdale



WINSTON RECEIVED a strange text from George at the beginning of the honeymoon inviting them to dinner since they were in Chicago. He knew their plans because Rita told Vanna who told her son what was going on. The text was surprisingly genial. Lucy felt almost obligated to go. Winston was against it. Winston agreed in hopes they could coexist peacefully.

After the meltdown at Lucy's grandmother's dinner, Winston was less encouraged. By that point, they'd accepted the invite to some fabulous Italian place in the sky. It was too late. The dinner was happening. Lucy was less nervous. She was excited to catch up with George, Patrick, and Paul. Paul stayed with George and Patrick.

Winston smiled at Lucy on the lift to the restaurant. “You look lovely as ever.”

Lucy blushed and squeezed his hand. “I love you. Thanks. I am glad we are just laying it all there. Let’s just be adults, okay?”

“Yes. I wish you were less a grown up sometimes.”

Lucy always took the high road. She was flawless as they greeted their dining partners. George had tempered his dreadful mood. He was trying. Patrick was excited. Paul was overjoyed for them. Lucy had been a big sister to him in a past life despite only having a couple of years on him. Paul was a bit directionless, and Lucy cheered him up.

“So, let’s see the ring, then,” Patrick said. “That’s the polite thing, right?”

Lucy giggled. “I doubt you care, but sure.”

“This is your grandmother’s ring?” George clarified.

Winston nodded. “But originally given to Princess Rikhild.”

Lucy beamed. “It’s beautiful. And Winston had the wedding band custom made. I just love it. I think he did well.”

“And yours?” Patrick asked Winston.

“This is a stock band. He really didn’t care.”

“You two are so similar,” George remarked of Patrick and Winston. “He didn’t care, either. Lucy, did you get demanding?”

“No, God, no!”

“I insisted. Much like I assume you did with Pat, George,” Winston said, tone flat.

Lucy changed the subject. “So, speaking of weddings, how are your plans going?”

“We have planners now. Well, we hope we do if this wanker didn’t scare them off.” George shot Paul a look.

“What? I literally just walked into a room shirtless! I didn’t mean to upset anyone. I swear I didn’t.”

“He ruffled some feathers,” Patrick said. “And didn’t apologise.”

“What? How did that go down?” Lucy laughed.

“I had left the barn and was sweaty. I didn’t expect guests!”

“He asked if they were ‘The Lesbians’,” George shook his head. “They were the daughters of the lesbian couple who run the business. These are the best planners in the city who will not only *consider* gay weddings but do them flawlessly.”

The sommelier approached.

George insisted, “Lucy, why don’t you pick?”

“Oh, I want a red then,” Lucy rubbed her hands together.

Lucy ordered something expensive and handed it off. At least if she was making George pay for dinner, she was not holding back.

“I didn’t mean to upset them. They were twins. Twins are annoying. How was I to know any of that? No one warned me!”

“It’s our house, bud. George, it’s fine. Sanne and her sister don’t seem like the type to run off,” Patrick said.

“So, did you hire a planner for this wedding or was it just you, Luce?” George asked.

“Winston planned it. Well, with Nat’s help. He planned most of it. He insisted he didn’t want me stressing over it. It was so sweet.”

Lucy looked at Winston like he was the only person on Earth. It made his heart melt. She was *gushing*. Lucy wasn’t just putting on a show, either. She was ecstatic. Her happiness was effusive. He smiled at Lucy, unable to hold back, either.

“I just wanted it to be a good experience. It wasn’t a big to-do. If it had been, we would have invited you all. No

disruptive dads. No nonsense. She was beautiful as ever. It was perfect.”

“Stop. Stop,” Paul chuckled. “I’m gonna lose it. You’re sickeningly sweet. I am the fifth wheel. You depress the single bloke at the table.”

Lucy blushed. “Sorry, we can tone it down.”

The wine arrived. Patrick said, “You shouldn’t temper yourself on our accounts.”

“I’m joking. You know I’m happy for you both. It’s exciting. I am happy for all of you. Maybe there is hope?”

“Paul, you’re young. There is plenty of time,” Winston assured.

“So, what’s next?” George asked.

Lucy sipped wine. “Um, well, we’re going to Vegas. Unfortunately. Combined bachelor-bachelorette party for my sister and her fiancé. Bless Tony for being a trooper. I don’t know why he agreed to this.”

“One, I didn’t want to offend the pettiest of your siblings. Two, because you’re my wife. I’m not about to leave you alone in Vegas during that nonsense.”

“Or do you not trust her?” George joked.

Winston answered, “Nah. I trust her. She’s so sweet. We trust each other. She travels all the time. It’s mostly that she was loathing the idea.”

Patrick rolled his eyes. “You always ask people that. George, you do realise it’s rude, right?”

“He doesn’t have to worry about what is rude. Or, rather, he *didn’t* have to. Past tense,” Lucy said, pushing olive oil around on her plate.

“Fuck, you’re cross with me,” George snickered. “I know that look.”

“Thankfully, I cannot let you have it.”

“Oh...kay,” Paul said. “I think the goal is to leave the bride out of it, right? She gets a pass. Speaking of which, at a gay wedding, who takes the piss out of who?”

Paul was unusually skilled in his diplomacy on this evening. Winston was surprised. He usually floundered a bit.

“We’re not Scandinavian, so it doesn’t matter.”

That made everyone but Patrick laugh. “What does that mean?”

“The Scandinavians roast grooms in the most ridiculous ways,” Paul explained. “It’s fucking brilliant. There is a Toastmaster. You can even *hire* one. It’s next level.”

Lucy giggled. “See, you got off easy, Winston!”

“No big reception planned? Your mother is letting you get away with that?” George asked.

“I think she knows I’m old enough to make a decision about that. And Lucy was explicit that she had no desire to plan such a thing.”

“It’s enough to coordinate everything for *your* wedding, George. Oh, the irony. Natalie needs to be all over the place. Everything needs clearance. I have to be on calls with The White House. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“And with Gerry’s nuptials, I think I’m happy to be done with it,” Winston said.

“Nothing wrong with a big wedding, George. I am sure yours will be lovely, but it was freeing to not give a fuck, really. Of course, my family handled it about as well as you’d imagine.”

Winston looked at her compassionately.

“No, baby, it’s fine. God, we have two fucked up Dads. What more could I say?” She was fighting tears. She turned back to the three and said, “Be grateful all of your parents are normal.”

“That’s the strangest thing I’ve ever heard about our parents, but I get your meaning, Luce,” George said.

“You can’t help your parents, sweetie,” Patrick said. “Really. And none of us would hold it against you.”

“I was surprised my grandmother didn’t lose it on me for having a civil ceremony, honestly!”

“She never would,” Winston said. “Darling, she loves you. She may be a bit tough but she’s protective of you. No one was upset with you but your father. Just like no one on my side is upset but my idiot sperm donor father.”

“Oh, that’s offensive to sperm donors, Winston,” George tried to crack a joke that would land. “But, Lord knows, I understand. You’ve met his dad now, Lucy?”

Lucy nodded. “And ended up crying... a lot.”

“He was in fine form, Georgie.”

“Your Dad is an asshole?” Patrick asked.

“The worst. Gerry won’t even speak to him. We just look to Bruno and ignore Richard altogether. He’s a cheating, abusive piece of shit. I regret sharing half my genetic code with him. I only wish I could unsee him treating my mother like a ragdoll and bringing home strange women. He’s not just an asshole. He’s a monster.”

Winston realised he’d brought the room down. “Sorry, everyone.”

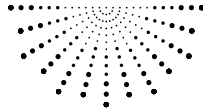
“Don’t apologise,” Paul said. “He’s a wanker. Even Mummy would say so. That’s saying something.”

Lucy snickered.

Winston was glad to let the conversation filter over to stupid Americanisms. He was embarrassed to admit to witnessing the abuse his father inflicted on his mother. Winston liked to live in a world where it had never happened—a world where his father had not once tossed his mother down a flight of stairs. He wasn’t sure she knew he saw it happen. Winston was maybe four or five. Gerry was still a baby. Winston realised he was relieved his father had no say in what he hoped would be a happy, lifelong relationship with Lucy. She was his forever, and he would never let anyone hurt

her like that. That included even her shit father. He was committed to keeping her safe.

THE WEDDING PARTY



Lucy felt her lunch about to leave her stomach as the plane lurched in turbulence. She grabbed onto the seat and tried to control the urge to vomit. It had been a rough morning. Lucy was not in the mood for turbulence. As expected, Natalie didn't even flinch. Lucy saw her yawning. God, how could anyone ignore the feeling that the plane was falling out of the sky?

Natalie furrowed her brow. "Lucy, you look sick."

"I really don't feel well. When will we be there? And will there be more bumps?"

"We've got weather. I can't do anything about that, Lucy. I am doing the best I can. And we'll be there in about a—"

Natalie didn't even get to finish her thought. Lucy raced out of the cockpit and vomited into an ice bucket.

"God, go lie down, darling!"

Lucy took her advice, flopping into a chair in the back of the plane next to the most attractive PPO on the trip. The girls were headed back from a trade summit in Italy. It was not a short trip compared to most of their jaunts, which Natalie relished. She'd also been stellar at work and was headed to Scotland to see Ed. Lucy, meanwhile, just wanted to die.

"You alright, Lady Ferguson?" the PPO asked.

It took Lucy a moment to understand. "Lady Ferguson" still caught her off guard.

They hit more turbulence. “Uh... I’m fine. Just mind the bucket. The bucket... it’s got puke in it. Sick. I couldn’t find a bag.”

“I can get you one, ma’am,” he looked disturbed by the ice bucket atrocity she created.

He dutifully brought her a bag in time for the plane to feel like it was falling out of the sky once more. Lucy completely lost it at that point.

“I’ll get you a stack,” the PPO hopped up as soon as he sat.

“Don’t kill us, Natalie!” Lucy grumbled mostly to herself before ratcheting her seatbelt tighter.

After another twenty or so minutes, the plane settled, and she could get herself a drink. She carried another air sickness bag with her.

“You alright?” Natalie asked.

Lucy took a swig of sparkling water and nodded.

“Please tell me you’re not about to get sick on me.”

“I’m not. This isn’t catching,” Lucy said, voice low.

“Oh, is it not?” Natalie asked.

Natalie caught on. Lucy shrugged.

“So, when did you find out?”

“Technically, I haven’t,” Lucy said. “But I am convinced it’s happening.”

“Uh-huh. Any reason you’re avoiding an answer.”

Lucy took another swig. “Well, I’m about to see my husband again for the first time in about a week. I don’t want to drop this on him first thing. Second, I’m about to spend a week in a castle with my ex-boyfriend and his fiancé after he got into a screaming match with my husband a few weeks ago.”

Despite George’s good behaviour during their dinner in Chicago, he doubled down on his spat with Winston while at Gerry’s stag last month. It had not gone well.

“Stop worrying about the hubby. Ignore George. According to everyone who was there, George was in the wrong. No one is going to let anyone say two words to you about anything. I won’t. I will go all mama bear on him.”

“I hope you’re right—about all of it.”

“You know I’m right. As far as my dear brothers go, they won’t be in Thirlestane for a bit. So, tell him before then. Or at least take a damn test, woman.”

Lucy suspected Natalie was right.

“You two have barely been in the same city for more than forty-eight hours. How?”

“You know as well as I do, Nat, that when every minute counts, you make it work,” Lucy chuckled.

“Rita will shit a brick.”

“And she’s not going to know—nor is your mother—until we are comfortable sharing.”

“Yes, captain,” Natalie joked.

Natalie was able to avoid more turbulence as they landed in Edinburgh. Lucy felt nervous headed to the family castle only about forty minutes outside the city. Natalie must have felt it because she reached out and squeezed Lucy’s hand.

“Why are you being all weird? This is Winston’s home. You realise it is also now *your* home, right? It’s *your* castle as much as his.”

“It’s his Mum’s.”

“It will be yours someday. It will always be yours. You’ll raise your kids there. You must own it. Where is the Countess?”

“She still doesn’t exist.”

“She does. I’ve seen her. Stop worrying about being enough. If you weren’t enough, you wouldn’t be here with me. Winston wouldn’t have married you. People wouldn’t rely on you for everything. You must start throwing your weight around in your personal life just like at work, okay?”

Lucy smiled a bit and nodded. *Her Castle*. Lucy wasn't convinced a place that big would ever feel like home. She still felt that their house in London was too big. And now, Winston was discussing buying something larger once they had kids. She grew up in shoeboxes on army bases and tiny apartments in shitty neighbourhoods. She was relieved that their children would never experience life in an apartment with a leaking ceiling and roaches, but a castle as a home did not compute.

When the girls arrived, the men were out and would be back at dinner. Upon arrival, Lucy was expecting to be shoved in *any* old room. Instead, she was taken up to one of the nicest rooms in the place. It wasn't as if the place had bad rooms. However, when she'd stayed here before, it had been with George, and they hadn't had a huge walk-in closet and a bathtub the size of Texas. No, this was special. Was Natalie right?

"Your ladyship," a maid checked in, "please do not unpack. We'll manage that."

"Oh... it's not a big deal," Lucy said.

"I will take care of you, along with the Duchess and Miss Brown this weekend. My name is Mary. I would be glad to do anything you might need. What of a bath? Does that sound good?"

"Hot but not too hot," Lucy said, paranoid.

She had read that women with her potential condition should avoid hot baths.

"Yes. And while you're in the bath, we'll make certain your clothes are tucked away just-so, alright?"

Lucy knew that the staff were doing their job, but it was unusual. She and Winston weren't the type of people to have staff. Lucy *was* staff. This was so odd. She allowed them to draw her a bath—a true treat she'd missed from the times she stayed with George towards the end of their relationship. She emerged from the bath to find a dress laid out on the bed. It was like a fairy-tale. Lucy decided to get made up for dinner,

but the fairy-tale ended as soon as Lucy opened her face cream. The smell hit her hard.

“Mother fucker,” Lucy felt very un-countess-like at present.

She filed through her toiletries’ arsenal to find the lone pregnancy test she carried since The Incident. Last time, she’d not had the satisfaction of taking a test. This time, she got to see the flash of two perfect little pink lines meet her gaze.

“Well, fuck.”

Lucy continued to dress, ignoring her skin’s need for hydration to avoid losing her lunch again. She came downstairs to find Natalie had tucked into the booze with Ed, Winston, and Gerry. Natalie never took as much time to get ready as the rest of them. It was her perfect skin. The woman had no pores. Half a dozen others had assembled—friends of the family whom Lucy sensed she was about to be introduced to. She wasn’t *quite* ready for that. Instead, she approached Winston directly.

“Hey, uh... can I have a moment of your time?” Lucy asked.

Winston kissed her. “Well, hello weary traveller. You look beautiful.”

Lucy blushed. “Thank you. But like... I need a moment.”

“Sure, sure.”

She took Winston’s hand and took him back upstairs. Winston practically launched himself at her the minute they landed in their room.

Lucy pushed him away. “Tony, no, no! I didn’t bring you up here for sex. I just blow dried my hair, so I’m not about to get it all screwed up.”

“Oh.” Winston looked disappointed.

“We need to have a chat about something.”

His face dropped even more.

“It’s not... it’s not bad.”

Lucy left him, picked up the test, and handed it to him.

“What is this?”

“Winston, don’t be silly. You know what it is.”

“This is... yours?”

“I’ve been throwing up all day. The flight back was utter hell. I feel like shit.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Lucy smiled.

Winston planted a big kiss on her. “Well, that was fast!”

“Stop. I’m not okay with telling people yet. Natalie is convinced I am pregnant and, since she’s my boss, I’m not particularly keen to keep her on the outside. She needs to know. However, no moms. None.”

“Okay,” Winston said.

“Winston, are you crying?”

“Sorry, I’m a crier!”

“I know. You’re happy? Not sad.”

“Happy. Not sad.”

“Okay. Well, shit. We’re doing it.”

“We’re doing it.”

“We hope.”

Winston gave her another big kiss. “We will, Lulu. We will.”

“Okay, well try to dry your eyes and look normal, baby. We gotta go back downstairs and act like nothing is going on. Also, you must drink my drinks and such so it’s not abundantly clear.”



ED RETURNED to the UK just in time for the Society Wedding of The Year. Ed wasn't clear on what made it so special, but he was hopeful that Gerry and Sheena would have a nice wedding weekend. The docket included chasing the King for some facetime. Ed knew to get the go-ahead to propose, he had to exert some initiative. He'd been in America more than he had been back, so his time was limited. This quest was better planned than it was implemented from the outset.

Going anywhere with Natalie was a disaster. Add her entire family and you had a total circus. She was over-the-moon to have her brothers home, spend time at Thirlestane, and see her cousins again. Ed was drowning in relatives. It was like his Irish family had reunited with bonus press coverage. Some of his annoyance stemmed from resenting being on camera while off the clock. Most of it was due the fact that he hadn't shagged Natalie in weeks and all he could think about was seeing her naked.

Absence did make the heart grow fonder. It also made Ed impatient. Natalie was *finally* off the clock for more than two days. They had an entire *week* to spend. Yet, she was having a brilliant time drinking with her cousins. She wanted Ed integrated. Usually, he enjoyed this. In this case, he just wanted her alone.

"Why are you being a grump?" Natalie dropped into Ed's lap, drink in hand. It was late. He was tired of chasing her in around trying to get a word in edgewise. She was downright difficult to be upset with when she did this. He loved it.

"I am not being a grump."

"You are being a grump, Edwin."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry if I am being a tinge grumpy. My girlfriend has been talking to everyone *but* me."

"Does someone feel left out?"

"A little." She wanted to pity him.

Natalie leaned in and kissed him, her lips barely grazing his for a moment, then deeper. He longed to run her upstairs.

In fact, he would have snogged her like a hopeless teenager right there, if that were an option. Still, she pulled away.

“You’ll get me all to yourself in about five minutes, okay? I promise you.”

“Uh-huh.” Ed didn’t buy it.

Natalie could never just *leave* anything.

Ed refilled his drink, hoping it was like packing an umbrella. Once he did it, he wouldn’t *need* the top up. That was when Natalie began singing with her cousins and all bets were off.

“She’s like her mother. You’ll never get her out of here.”

Ed turned to see Natalie’s Uncle Duncan.

“Oh, really?”

“It’s a blessing and a curse,” Duncan said. “She’s in a wild mood. Let her be. She’ll come back. I’m sure that’s no consolation with you having been gone for weeks.”

“How is anyone able to entertain so many people?”

“It’s a blessing and a curse like I said. A blessing in her line of work. A curse for you.”

Ed snickered.

“See, there’s a smile. You missed her. I know you did. Everyone does. She won’t desert you. She was counting the minutes before you go here. There’s just something about family, though. We’re a bit mad.”

“I feel like I’m in Ireland. I have dozens of cousins on my Mam’s side.”

“I could make a joke, but I won’t.”

Ed chuckled.

“I mean, I would. I should. Only one of us is married to a Catholic of the four and she has *six* children. That’s more than enough, I’d say. Why is there only one of you?”

“Because my parents know the wonders of birth control. I always joke that I only exist as some sort of campaign pledge.

Six children is mad. And they all look... identical, do they not?"

Duncan nodded. "They do. Like little Beth clones. Honestly, the older Margaux gets, the more she looks just like our Victoria. And she's a dead ringer for Kiersten. They're just perfectly close in age."

The King and Queen of Belgium had six children. They had no sons—all daughters. They were all blonde, perky, and especially excitable. They chattered. He prayed that Natalie would never ask him to raise six daughters. He wouldn't mind having a couple with her. That was nice, but six was too much.

"How did they settle on six? She doesn't strike me as religious," Ed noted.

By now, Queen Beth was on the piano. This would go on forever. She was a concert pianist. He just had no idea what that meant until he had heard her play for the first time. Belgium was having more fun than Britain these days. He suspected that it had been for a long time. Beth was a completely different animal to Robbie. Other than the two of them looking closely related, it was hard to believe they were siblings.

"Beth? God, no! She never even converted. Refused to. Let Louis baptise them in the church or whatever Catholics do."

"It's basically what you do, yeah," Ed said.

"You're not—"

"Oh, God, what if I were," Ed groaned. "No. I am not a dreaded Catholic. My father's family won that argument since Mam was keen to see him in the Commons. She didn't feel like him being Catholic would be good. Nor did she think it would help my chances of getting into a good school."

"Well, that says more about The English than it does Catholics."

Ed shrugged. It wasn't wrong.

“No, it wasn’t planned. She promised Louis two children. They wound up with one first, Margaux. Then, they were blessed with the family curse.”

“Family curse?”

“Twins,” Duncan chuckled. “Runs on the female side, so, be aware. Mathilde and Elise were born, and we thought that was it until Beth said they were having another. That was Louisa. She swore they were done. She had four. She’d replicated our nuclear family—no boys but Louis didn’t care. Then, a surprise—Wilma—and ending with little Cornelia.”

The youngest of the children was this doll-faced, tiny child who thought Natalie was the coolest person on earth.

“You want six daughters, then?” Duncan laughed.

“I have no opposition to having daughters in my lifetime. They are cleverer than boys. My mother and Natalie are good examples.”

“You have fancy degrees, though. Natalie doesn’t. I don’t, either.”

“Okay, maybe you don’t. I don’t think that’s a measure of anything. Natalie is excellent at maths. I’m not.”

“Coordinates require maths,” Duncan said. “She is terribly clever. It’s what bothers Robbie most, after all.”

Ed was brave. “What is his deal? Can I ask that?”

“Being a monarch means setting boundaries. You are deliberately a hard nut to crack. I promise you he’s not heartless. My brother is one of the kindest people you will meet. He loves his wife and his children more than words. It’s a hard life to jump into.”

“Yeah, I’m a bit shit at that. I’ve been trying to find some organic way to engage with him, but he finds me daft or petty. I’m not. I love to read. Does he read?”

“He does, actually.”

“What books does he read?”

“Boring things. Mostly historical stuff. I find it dreadful.”

Ed could work with that.

“You think he hates you?” Duncan asked after a moment.

“I hope he does not hate me, but he doesn’t like me, either.”

“He isn’t going to make the same mistake with her that Mum made with us.”

“And that was?”

“Trying to drag his feet and deny her happiness when you are a perfectly suitable partner,” Duncan said. “Whomever Nat settles down with—and I have a feeling she wants it to be you—will earn Robert’s trust eventually. Mum, on the other hand, had an irrational hatred of Vanora. I will never understand it.”

“Why? I don’t understand how it is even possible to hate the Queen.”

“No one does. It was a real headscratcher. She saw Vanora as a threat, and it simply festered. Robbie loved that woman irrationally. Still does. She didn’t approve of that or Vanna asking for him to take time off to take care of new-borns. Which, let’s be honest, he and I both did because it was the proper thing to do. Mum was the world’s biggest hypocrite at times. I try to give her some credit. Being a female monarch is difficult. Natalie will not have it easy.”

“Has she ever? I mean, I’m in sport. Things aren’t all roses for women. But I feel that the military is worse.”

“The military is bad. Becoming a pilot is near impossible. Being a leading fast jet pilot who gets to go off to test pilot training in America—as a woman—is impossible. Natalie has never let a single person tell her no. It has cause plenty of friction, but you can’t break her. I see a lot of myself in her. She also has her father’s temper and impulsiveness.”

Ed chuckled.

“Oh, you know the temper, Ed.”

“Yes, I do. I also sort of love it. I like to wind her up just to see what happens. She can be so tight about things. I like to watch her start to fray. It reminds me she’s not just some

figurehead on a television. Honestly, I don't much know who that woman is, Duncan."

"Everyone has their public persona."

"If I may, though, you are the same as I always read you. You're the cool one. The King is reserved and uptight. But he's that way here, too."

"Nah. You need to get to know Robbie. He's not that uptight. Yeah, he's anal and all, but he's not so bad. Don't expect him to dance on a table or anything."

"I would not, no."

"You really love her, don't you?"

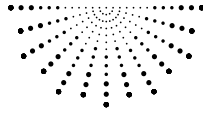
Ed nodded. "I love her. I have missed her. She is a brave, loud, lovely person."

"You're not afraid of all of this?"

"How could I not find it frightening? Of course I'm afraid! I'm also not smart enough to run away. I still hate the press, but I mostly ignore them now. Technically, in America I *am* the press. I dunno. I'm probably very dumb, but I can't help it."

Duncan patted Ed on the shoulder. "You'll get her. She will leave here eventually. As far as Robbie is concerned, just give it time. He'll see how well you treat her over time, and he'll respect that."

LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND BAGGAGE



Winston peered at Lucy as she slept. She looked pale and weak. Last night, she ate next to nothing. Pregnancy hit like a hurricane. She was so exhausted he carried her to bed. Winston understood Lucy's desire to keep it quiet, but everyone could tell she looked ill and how knackered she was. Her aversions to food were obvious to Winston from the moment they sat to dinner. Even Natalie called it. If Natalie could, there were half a dozen other people around the table who could, too.

Winston had been so busy worrying about his wife that he hadn't considered the greater takeaway. He was going to be a father—he hoped. If all went well, he and Lucy would be parents. It occurred to him that he had no idea *how* pregnant Lucy was or what that even meant. She wasn't a horse. How long were women pregnant? Nine months? But was that before or after ovulation? How the hell did you date a human pregnancy? He would have asked Lucy, but she'd been so busy between entertaining people and being ill that he hadn't bothered to ask.

Winston was at a loss. He decided that sleep eluded him. Instead of sleeping, he went downstairs to where his parents were taking breakfast in the dining room with the King and Queen. Everyone else was asleep.

“Are you ill? Why are you up so early?” his mother demanded. “Did you not tie one on like the rest of them?”

“I couldn't really bother.”

No, he'd been too busy babysitting Lucy and worrying she would vomit. He'd spent more time figuring out what he could grab to catch her sick. It was a game with only losers.

"Ah, you're all old and wise now," Bruno snickered. "Has marriage gotten to you, Winston?"

"No, no. Don't blame Lucy. I was all-to-glad to have her back, as per usual. She'd been gone an eternity. And, anyway, I barely saw her in the three days *before* she left."

The King looked genuinely pained. "I know I have been putting a lot of miles on Natalie and... well, Lucy by-proxy. The girl looks run-down. I suppose I never factored how this would affect a normal person."

Rita nodded. "I would normally say Lucy operated on fumes, but you're right, Robbie. She looked a bit down. Is everything alright with her, Winston?"

"Just knackered. She's still asleep. I didn't want to wake her, Mum."

"Well, Natalie's schedule will slow in a month. She can take a breather," the King said.

Winston nodded.

"How is she liking the house? Has the staff been making her feel at home?" Bruno asked, kindly.

He was always worried about people integrating. He'd been an outsider, too.

"She isn't sure what to do yet. She's still thinking like a guest. I hope she comes around. I'd like us to spend a lot of time here with our children then way you did with us, Mum."

"It takes time to get used to having a staff like that," the Queen said. "Especially for an American. She'll manage in time."

The King chuckled. "Or she will still infuriate some of the staff with her insistence on doing everything herself. Thirty-three years of this, Vanora."

“I know, I know. I am different. My point is that Lucy will get it.”

“Have you given any thought to living arrangements now? Maybe moving *out* of bloody Kensal Rise?” Rita asked.

“Not immediately.”

“Oh, Winston, you cannot raise children there! They’ll be drug across town to find a proper school—”

“What if we just wanted them to go to the local school, mother? Is that so bad?”

“Why, so when Natalie pops out children, yours will whinge they aren’t able to see their friends? I know how this goes, sweetheart. Have you thought about moving to be close to Windsor? Closer to us in the country?”

“Mum, we live in London. We love London.”

“Natalie will be at Frogmore as soon as she and Ed—”

“Can we not make assumptions, cousin?” The King glared at Rita.

She rolled her eyes. “We’re all thinking it.”

Bruno shook his head. “Lay off him. There is no rush. They have time before they’re carting home a new-born. You cannot help yourself, *mi amor*. Slow down.”

“I know Lucy wants children, so I just assume.”

Winston lacked a poker face. The other men at the table didn’t get it. Rita and Vanna stared at Winston, one another, and back at Winston, knowingly.

“Oh, well, maybe not forever?” Rita smiled slyly.

Winston neither confirmed nor denied it. Instead, as time went on and more people arrived, he worried about Lucy even more. Fearing she was unwell, he picked up something bland—toast, jam, and butter—along with some fizzy water and brought it upstairs to her.

“Don’t make me get out of bed,” Lucy said.

She'd been awake but couldn't lift her head from the pillow.

"I won't force you to do anything, Lulu. But people *will* talk."

"Tell them I am sick."

"For an entire week with no medical diagnosis?" He hadn't the heart to tell her that they were already onto her. "Here, sit up. I brought you toast. Do you think you could try it, my love?"

Frida wagged her tail. She'd been back on the bed when Winston arrived. Frida always missed Lucy terribly if she left.

"I can try," Lucy said, voice quiet.

"If you try, I'll rub your back."

"Fair trade." Lucy dug into the toast. "Look, I'm sorry I fell asleep, and nothing happened—"

"Luce, you don't have to apologise to me for being exhausted and unwell, love." Winston would have loved to have seen her naked and done the million things he'd been dreaming of doing to her, but he wasn't about to demand sex from Lucy.

"I just feel bad. It's not that I don't *want* to. It's just that this hit me like a brick wall. Yesterday was bad. Today seems worse. I am not sure what to do. I need to call the doctor and get an appointment. By the time we get back, we should be doing the preliminary scan."

"You're that far along? Wait... when are you having the baby?" Winston wondered.

"Second week of January? Early January?"

Winston stared, mouth gaping. That was sooner than he expected. Everything flashed through his mind. They had only a few months to prepare. They needed baby things. They needed a place to *put* a baby. Where would they have the baby? Traditionally, all future dukes and duchesses had been born in Scotland. He assumed that would be his family's preference, but would Lucy agree to that? Would her schedule

allow it? Would she need to quit her job? He had so many questions, all of which Lucy had probably already answered.

“Are you freaking out? Don’t freak out, Tony! I don’t need that right now.”

“No, I just... this surprised me. That’s... soon. I’m very excited, Luce. And worried about you. I love you. I want a healthy baby for us, but also a healthy you.”

She smiled and kissed him. “I promise you, Winston, that I will survive, and it will be okay. And I know you will take the best care of me in the process.”

“Of course, Lucy.”

“I just want to make sure it’s a viable pregnancy. I am so nervous.”

“We both are. I have a good feeling about it, though.”

Lucy smiled, “We’re absolutely nuts to do this.”

“Nothing about us has ever seemed logical to the outside world. I love that about us, Lucy. I’m going to go down again. Let you get dressed. Everyone else is having breakfast. Take your time.”

“I will. I’ll be down there before your other cousins arrive. I don’t want George accusing me of being pregnant—which he seems to do every time he sees me.”

Winston chuckled. “I doubt he would do that. He should bloody well know better by now.”



NATALIE HELD Ed’s hand as they sat in the chapel waiting for Sheena’s arrival. Gerry, Winston, and George stood at the front of the church. Everyone was jubilant. Sheena and Gerry had been a sweet couple for so long. She livened up Gerry’s serious side. He was utterly devoted to her. This was going to be a good day. The Mums were in happy tears. Natalie couldn’t help but be wrapped up in it. She wasn’t a huge

wedding person. She swore up and down a fairy-tale was nonsense, but she set those feelings aside today. As she looked at Ed and squeezed his hand on her knee, she realised maybe fairy tales weren't so far off.

Ed came back into her life at the worst time. Or so she had thought. Natalie assumed it would be a fling. She never put much stock in the fact that she lost her virginity to him a moment of drunken excitement. At the time, Ed had not even known that detail. In contrast to her previous assumption, Ed entered her life at just the *right* time. When she needed a happy distraction, he was there to entertain her. When she needed a safe place to land completely disconnected from her fishbowl life, he was glad to oblige. When she needed someone to vent to about retirement and the challenges of recentring, only Ed could understand her. She was forever grateful for Ed. In a way, they grew and took their next steps *together*. They wrote a new chapter together.

That made her hopeful for this time. It made her appreciate just how sweet love *could* be. She gave over to it in an unexpected way. She was now a hopeful sap, totally willing to admit she loved Ed with abandon. On this day, Natalie understood what the fuss was about. Marriage no longer seemed so much like a cage and more a commitment she could undertake with the right person.

“You love weddings, don't you?” Natalie whispered.

“What? Are you making a judgement, woman?” Ed feigned offence.

“No. I love you for all your sappy, romantic antics. I adore them.”

He smiled and squeezed her knee. “I love you, Nat. I also secretly love weddings even if I don't love *you* at weddings?”

Natalie looked at him, surprised.

“You are constantly busy with people and I'm always two steps behind. You're exhausting. I love you, but I want to see you more, my love.”

Lucy smiled at him. “I love you, Ed. I’m also a live wire. You will learn to keep up. I promise.”

The organ played. Everyone stood as the bridal party proceeded down the aisle. Flower girls skipped and page boys followed as Sheena came down the aisle, followed by Lucy and Nina, both playing ladies-in-waiting. Sheena’s father was in tears. Sheena looked beautiful in a big white dress topped with the same tiara that her mother-in-law wore on *her* wedding day to Gerry’s father. It had been a gift from Natalie’s grandmother to Rita. The marriage may not have lasted, but the Duchess still wore the piece frequently. It was impressive and altogether too much for the venue. However, when a normie married into the aristocracy, things got a bit mad.

“It’s a beautiful dress,” Kiersten said. “She looks magical.”

Sheena did. She was stunning. Gerry folded her veil back, grinning like the Cheshire Cat. Sheena wiped a couple of tears, and the vicar began. The ceremony was sweet. It was slightly different from the English version, but a wedding was a wedding. There were vows, rings, and readings. Natalie agreed to do one. She read from a passage in Song of Solomon Sheena requested. It was the passage she had originally tasked Paul with, but he couldn’t get through it without getting all odd. Paul, though affable, didn’t like making speeches. This late change had required a re-printing of the program insert. Their planner no doubt wanted to throttle Paul.

The minister soon pronounced them husband and wife and they left the church. Everyone stood, happy for them. A crowd gathered outside the Parish church to gawk, along with photographers. No, this was *not* a royal wedding, but it was the biggest thing the small village saw in years. And, for royal watchers, it was a treat. Gerry’s godfather was King Robert. There was bound to be an appearance. As per usual, it was not The King they were after. Instead, the calls of the most beloved member of the family were to Natalie’s mother.

Natalie and Ed slid into a car to ride back to the reception, going with Patrick and Charlotte.

“Do you think your father ever minds she’s the popular one?” Ed asked.

“No. He is my mother’s greatest fan. He’s also happy to have a moment’s peace when he can.”

“Would it bother you if Ed was the popular one?” Patrick asked as he clipped Charlotte into her car seat.

“I would welcome it. We all know he’s the gorgeous one. We can appreciate it—even I can.”

Ed shook his head and Patrick let out a hearty laugh.

“He doesn’t want to be objectified, Natalie. He’s mad now.”

“Oh, he’s so abused,” Natalie pat Ed on the cheek. He turned away playfully before grabbing her hand and kissing it.

“You moon over me.”

“I love you,” Natalie said. “I fancy you and love you so much. Take the compliment. I could have had any man of my choosing. Well, any man who would put up with this. Which, if we are being honest, thins the pool a bit.”

“You’re so humble, baby.” Ed shook his head.

She batted her eyelashes playfully. “I love you and your baggage, and you love me and my baggage. It all works out.”

Patrick let out a long sigh. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“Oh, trouble with Georgie?” Natalie asked.

“No, I love him so much. It’s not that. He’s wonderful most of the time. The thing with Lucy is infuriating but he will calm down someday. No, it’s more all of this and realising we’re a part of all of this. It’s not your family. You all love Charlotte like your own. She has three sets of grandparents who adore her. I hope that’s enough to make up for her mother’s disregard. Nah. It’s just a little crazy. You look out and see people waiting outside to demand a wave or a handshake from one of you. It doesn’t square with the people I know and love.”

“There’s the public and the private,” Ed said. “It takes a lot of getting used to.”

“Do you ever think you’d move back?” Natalie asked Patrick. “If not, I wouldn’t really worry about it too much.”

“I don’t know. Part of me wants to. I liked it here. Part of me knows everyone is still angry at George and I worry how that would affect Charlotte. We have a nice life at home. Paul benefits from being out of the spotlight, too. He’s growing up a bit. It makes me sad we aren’t closer to you all.”

“There are planes,” Natalie told him. “Who doesn’t love a plane?”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Oh, here we go!”

“What?!”

“I would love to go an entire day and see you restrain yourself with the plane talk,” Ed said. “It’s impossible.”

“I will go an entire day without talking about any sort of aircraft *or* spacecraft starting *now*,” Natalie told him. “You will see just how restrained I can be, Ed.”

“I am not holding my breath, Natalie,” Ed said. “Famous last words.”



“Do I finally get a moment with the Princess?” Ed asked.

Natalie finally left the dance floor.

She smiled at him and, out of breath, sipped his drink. “If you were up for more dancing, you’d be more fun.”

“You don’t honestly care about that?”

“I am covered in sweat, I’m quite pissed, and I am loving my life right now, but I would have more fun if you were out there.”

Ed shook his head.

“What? You don’t want to dance? I’m a decent dancer, darling. Don’t wound me.”

“I don’t think I could if I tried.”

“You could. I’m human.”

“Sometimes, I forget that. You’re too good.”

Natalie pulled his arm. Ed relented, taking her out onto the dancefloor to a slow song. He could do that much. No matter how old he got, Ed still felt he was at a school dance—boys on one wall, girls on the other. Natalie pulling him onto the floor was akin to a brave girl crossing the demarcation line on a plan of attack. He loved her for it.

“You must get better at this. If you’re to follow me places, I mean. Unless you don’t want to?”

“I would follow you anywhere, Princess. As much as I hate the idea of dancing in public, I’ll do it for you.”

“Then, get better at it.”

“I should try more, yes. And it’s not like I get a lot of time with you these days.”

“I don’t want you to go back,” Natalie whinged.

“I am under contract. I can’t afford not to, baby. But I will be back. I promise. And for good soon.”

Natalie smiled at him, “That’s your life. And mine for now. But I’d like them to intersect at some point.”

“Me, too.”

“Don’t let me lead. You’re letting me lead,” Natalie said.

“You are like the worst coach I’ve ever had.”

“You’ll thank me later.”

Ed chuckled. “You know, you’re worse than I am. I don’t know how I found a woman who is even more competitive than I am.”

“But you love it.”

Ed gave her a quick kiss. “I do.”

They continued for a moment before Natalie said, “Why on *Earth* are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“You always get so starry-eyed at me when I look like this. It’s like I put on a tiara, and you get all goofy, Edwin.”

“Because you look beautiful. I am sorry, but cannot I not admire you?”

He knew she was blushing even if the lighting didn’t allow for it.

“I don’t understand it. You’ll practically tackle me in a pair of joggers, but this does it for you, too?”

“Every little bit of you does it for me, Natalie. But this version of you is other-worldly. I don’t know. It’s a little fun. I feel like we’re up to something. It’s your alter ego. I like the version of you who is barely put together making eggs in my kitchen, too.”

Natalie shook her head. “You’re making me want to run off with you. I want it to last, but I know you’ll leave in a few days, and I’ll have to survive without you.”

The song stopped. Ed and Natalie drew to a halt. He kissed her. “When I get back here in July, it’s over. I’m not doing anything unless you tell me to. I’m done.”

“You like the work—”

“I love you,” Ed said. “I would rather spend a hundred days on the road with you than a few weeks without you. That’s the honest-to-God truth, Natalie.”

She responded by pulling him into the biggest kiss in memory. Ed struggled to put his roots into the ground. She wasn’t that heavy. Still, the force of it caught him off guard. They snogged as the music was picking up again. He pulled away.

“The music—”

“I don’t give a fuck, Ed.” Natalie bit her lip and smiled for a beat. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Ed asked.

“Does it matter? You said you’d follow me anywhere.”

She’d made a good point.

“I am not going to argue with you.” Ed took her hand and followed her through the crowd. As he did, he thought about the crowded uni party where they had met and how far they had come.

Natalie and Ed made it back to the hallway. He swept her up in a kiss.

Natalie pulled away, “Would you follow me into battle?”

“Depends on where and how?”

“You couldn’t handle the Gs. I could prove that to you. I’d make you sick on take-off. I doubt I could be all that gentle.”

Ed joked, “I’d rather you *not* be gentle. However, you have failed, Princess.”

“What?”

“You promised you’d go twenty-four hours without saying anything about planes, Nat. You failed.”

“Well, fuck. You should take it out on me, I suppose?”

“I could,” Ed offered. “But I have a feeling I’d cause a massive panic if I ran you upstairs right now over my shoulder.”

“Someone would take you out, no doubt. And not for the reason you assume. It’s the tiara. It’s worth far more than I am.”

Ed smiled and tucked a bit of hair behind her ear. “It’s a nice tiara, but there is nothing outranking you as I see it right now.”

“Care to take the risk in the library?” Natalie asked.

“Why don’t you go get the damn thing taken off your head and then we can just go to bed, stay there, and fuck off for the next two days?” Ed asked.

“Well, that works, too,” Natalie agreed.

She filed away, looking for whatever poor soul would have to pry the spenny sparkler out of her hair. As Natalie left, Ed could only shake his head. The girl could not make it a day without talking about an airplane. She couldn't make an hour without daring him to some sort of challenge. He would never define her as calm. She was demanding, fastidious, and prickly. She could also be tender, loving, and protective. Ed would never temper her. He could not imagine a world in which Natalie did not have all of him. She could not know how much he loved her, nor could Ed quantify his love for her. No, Natalie had all of him. Whether she believed it or not, he was coming home to stay.

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