The Sea

by lotta_lena

Summary

Krashlyn-Preath AU and nothing but AU: hard and dangerous work, tough girls, sweet romance, passion and emotion. No soccer, sorry...

New Chapter 19:

Preath:
Lia touched the tip of Tobin's nose. “You want her back?”
Tobin nodded, close to tears.
“Then do something”, Lia said. “Now. Before it's too late.”

Krashlyn:
Ash put on the biker jacket, collected her daypack, and walked past the flight attendants off the plane and followed the crowd through the connector bridge and through the the arrival gate towards customs and immigration.
The sun came out and she blinked into the bright light and thought that this was a promising start into... Well, she thought. Into what? A new life?

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Okay, she thought. So that’s the other side of the Atlantic. Far enough? She doubted it.

She put on her biker jacket, collected her daypack, and walked past the flight attendants’ good-bye-smiles off the plane, suddenly part of a crowd which flooded the connector bridge then washed across the arrival gate towards customs and immigration.

„Good afternoon, Mrs. ...“ The officer looked at her passport. „Mrs. Harris. What’s the reason for your visit?“

„Business“, she said, handing him the folder. If they wanted paper, here they got it. She waited while the officer checked her passport against whatever national security databases they had over here.

„Very well“, the officer said, looking at the documents: long stay visa, work permit...

He came to the interesting part, her job description. He looked at her again and something had changed in his attitude and he was smiling. „Welcome to Norway“, he said. He stamped a few documents, then stamped the passport and handed the folder back.

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Ash queued for her duffle bag then walked past customs and towards the waiting area.

The woman was in business attire, dark blue blazer and skirt, white blouse, low heels. She held a cardboard sign saying „Harris“.

Good legs, Ash thought. Then she saw the hair and held her breath: dark waves falling to her shoulders and below, casually held together by a thin ribbon.

Ash walked over to her trailing her bag, slipping the daypack to the other shoulder.

„I’m Harris“, Ash said unable to take her eyes from the hair.

The woman smiled.

„Welcome to Norway“, she said. „May I ...?“ She reached out for Ash’s bag.

„Don’t bother“, Ash said. „Not heavy“, she lied. Showing off? She asked herself. What are you? Some kind of teenager with crush for a pair of legs and hair to die for?

She followed the woman, inhaling the fragrance of her perfume.
„How was the flight?“ the woman asked.

„Boring“, Ash said. „Slept most of the time.“

„I can’t sleep on a plane“, the woman said. „Tried everthing from pills to booze. Just can’t.“ She led the way to the parking deck.

A walker, Ash thought, finding herself staring at the woman’s legs and butt. And what a walker!

„This way“, the woman said. „Over there.“ She pointed to a Volvo Estate, her hair swinging with every step she made.

She opened the rear door and helped Ash to load her luggage into the car. Then she slipped behind the wheel.

The seats were leather and Ash enjoyed the cool touch. She stretched her legs, suddenly realizing how tired she was, jetlagged after the long flight with only a short stop to change planes at London Heathrow.

„You’re comfortable?“ The woman’s voice brought her back to the present.
Ash opened her eyes.

„I’m fine“, she said and meant it. „Thanks.“

„You’re a long way from home“, the woman said, starting the car. „I know how you feel.“

Ash looked at her. So close to her it was as if she saw her for the first time.
She wasn’t exactly pretty, but she was ... Ash was lost for words. She was ... a woman! Ash thought.
And only then she realized that the shoes were handmade, that the watch slipping down her wrist when she shifted the drive to Revers was a golden Patek, and that her business attire was tailored, because there was no shop which sold clothes like those, so perfectly hugging her body ...

„You did a good job in the Texas Gulf“, the woman said. „In fact the guys over there think you’re the best thing since sliced bread. Plus you hold all the necessary certificates ... Company’s happy you’re here. Closed your seatbelt?“

Ash was wide awake. She stared at the woman who seemed to know a lot about her.

„Who are you?“ There was an edge to her voice.

„So sorry!“ The woman put a hand on Ash’s arm. „Believe it or not ... I simply forgot to introduce myself.“ She shifted to Forward, and Ash was kicked back when the car sped towards the exit. „I'm Katja Olsson."

„Olsson?“ Ash could only go on staring. „THE Olsson?“

The woman threw her head back laughing.

„You're my boss!“ Ash couldn’t believe it. „And everyone else’s!“

„Well...“, Katja Olsson smiled. „On a piece of paper."

„And you pick up employees at the airport?“
„Wanted to have a word with you before McLowry puts his claws into you“, Katja Olsson said.

Wanted to check me out, Ash thought. Wanted to see if you drew a blank ...

„McLowry wants to see me?“

„Sure. He wants to tell you that he doesn't like you and doesn't want you in his company but was cheated into hiring you by me.“ Katja Olsson stepped on it, and the Volvo hit the afternoon traffic.

„You two don't get along very well?“

Olsson's voice was suddenly sugarsweet.

„I'm on the friendliest terms with the chairman, but let's say: it's one of my hobbies to piss off Angus McLowry.“

The phone rang and Olsson switched to hands-free. Her Norwegian was loud and apparently to the point.

Ash didn't get a word of what she said, but she listened with fascination to Olsson snapping at the caller's throat, then sinking her teeth into it.

„Moron!“ Olsson slapped the hands-free button on the steering wheel with disgust.

Traffic was heavy for such a small town, but Katja Olsson just didn’t care. She drove fast, simply scaring other cars away. They were going towards the harbour and Ash got first glimpses of the sea, grey under a sky full of heavy cloud

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Katja Olsson stopped at the barrier. The armed security guard looked into the side window, recognized Olsson and waved to the guard house.

The barrier opened and Olsson drove on, following the road that ran along the pier towards the warehouse complex. She parked under the sign which read 'Northern Oil and Gas'.

Ash saw the motorbike when she climbed out of the car, a BMW R1200 RT keyless, the helmet locked to the front wheel.

„Whoah“, she said. „I have a bike at home. But ...“

„I know“, Olsson said. She dug into her briefcase which was an expensive designer piece, then threw Ash a BMW key fob.

„Courtesy of 'Northern“ she said. „You would want a pair of wheels to get around. Mind, we have a lot of bad weather around here, but right now it’s quite nice. Just take care.“

She handed Ash a folder and a pen.

„Sign here, here and here. And if you don’t want it anymore, let the car pool know and it goes back to bike rental.“

She ripped the form apart and gave Ash a copy.

„Ask HR about your driver's licence“ she added. „I'm not sure how they handle US licences here, but HR'll find out for you.“

She walked towards the administration block of the warehouse complex and through the glass doors.
„You’ll spend a lot of time around here“, she said. „Guys’ll show you where to powder your nose, and how to get something out of the hot drinks machine.‟
She walked on, waved to the man at the reception who waved back, and Ash just followed her, because Olsson’s energy was like the wake of a destroyer pulling her along, followed her across the entrance area and through the doors on the other side and onto the wharf.

Cold wind hit Ash and she suddenly smelled seaweed and salt water and heard the screech of seagulls and the din of hauling and maintenance work.
She had to squint into a sudden burst of sunlight.

Then she saw the ship.

The hull was painted orange, a helicopter platform towered like a huge roof over the bow in front of the white superstructure which steeply fell off towards the long low working deck dominated by a massive crane.

Aurora Borealis, Ash read. UT304.

Nothing about the ship was less than huge and heavy, radiating sheer brutal power but only mirroring what the vessel and its crew would be up against: dangerous work in an arena where they were hopelessly outnumbered by the forces of wind and sea.

Ash felt Olsson’s hand on her arm. The woman bend over to her and spoke into her ear to be heard over the noise.
„Your ship, Captain Harris.‟

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She checked her phone.
There where a few messages from home, but for the rest of the world she seemed to be dead.

Out of sight, out of mind.
No great loss actually, but only ... right now she would've loved to get a bit of silly texting by silly girls ...

She dropped the phone into her bag.
Here for less than 24 hours and already homesick? Come on, Harris, she thought.

She leaned back, looking out of the huge wall to wall window which also went from ceiling to floor and which gave her a stunning view of the city and the harbour.

She was on the top floor of Northern’s headquarter building, close to the city center, the land of silence and hushed voices where the senior executives spent their working days.
Somewhere up here was the office of Katja Olsson – and the office of Angus McLowry.

The reception area was a carefully designed space, carpeted, dominated by two huge paintings which were artists’ interpretations of the company logo, with incredibly comfortable club chairs arranged around low tables with tops of heavy glass, a space vast and empty.
Or, almost empty.

The woman sat across the room, holding a gift-wrapped box on her knees. She seemed to be lost in thought, her eyes focussed on something distant, probably the place where the sea was hidden by mist and clouds.

Ash looked at her and then couldn't look anywhere else.

Thick fur lined the hood of the woman’s parka, the long hairs stirring ever so lightly in the air-condition as if they were tenderly caressing her cheeks.

A heavy Aran Troyer seemed to embrace her body in folds of some expensive material, probably silk and cashmere, the collar zipped open, showing her fine neck and the deep valley of skin and muscle where throat and collarbones met.

A golden bracelet had slipped from her sleeve and gleamed on her wrist which was delicate, almost fragile, and Ash suddenly felt the urge to simply go to her and kiss her.

The woman turned her head.

Ash felt blood rush to her face as their eyes met because it was too late to look somewhere else.

She swallowed, cleared her throat.

„Your husband's birthday?“ she asked, saying the first thing that came to her mind, cursing herself immediately because that was definitely none of her business.

The woman just looked at her, eyes steady, cold.

No! Ash screamed at herself. What the fuck are you talking about?

„Your husband’s with the company?“ She listened to herself talking crap and she could've strangled herself for not simply shutting her trap and minding her own affairs.

What do you want from her, you stupid bitch?

I want to hold her in my arms, she thought. just hold her and, if only for a brief moment, inhale the scent of her long, dark hair, of her smooth skin ...

The woman’s lips were a thin line, her jaw set. she still held Ash's eyes.

„Mrs. Harris?“ the assistant had stepped into the room. „Mr McLowry is available now. I'll show you to his office.“

„Er ... okay.“ Ash's voice was hoarse. She pushed herself up from the chair, still feeling the eyes of the woman upon her as she walked to the glass doors.

„Hey!“ She stopped and turned when she heard the woman's voice. The woman was still staring at Ash.

„I'd rather kill myself than go near my husband“, she said.

Ash stood, unable to move. The pain and rage in the woman's voice cut through her heart and was almost too much to bear.

„Mrs. Harris?“ the assistant touched Ash’s arm. „Mrs. Harris? This way, please!“
“Mrs. Harris!” McLowry got up from his chair and came to her from behind his desk. They shook hands. “So pleased to meet you!”

He touched her arm slightly above the elbow and led her to the four padded chairs arranged around a low table. A folder was lying on the tabletop.

“Thanks, Luisa.” He smiled at the assistant and the woman left.

“So ...” He reclined in his chair. “You’re the replacement for Captain Koslovsky.” His smile deepened. “Not that he can be replaced”, he said, “A senior captain, very senior. With us for ... well, many years. Experienced, very experienced. Reliable. First choice for a ship like the Aurora. Biggest we have, represents a huge investment ...“

He let his voice trail off.

“I really appreciate ...”, Ash started, then suddenly she realized that McLowry was not listening. He was browsing in the folder.

“My co-chair Katja Olsson thinks that you are the best we can get on short notice ...“

He browsed, talking almost absentmindedly.

“Your contract ...“ He adjusted his glasses. “... seems to terminate in six months,“ he said. “Have you got any plans for afterwards?“

He looked at Ash, smiling.

Ash’s heart skipped a beat. This guy was telling her nothing less than that she would be without a job on Christmas!!

“Hang on a second!” She sat bolt upright. “My impression was ...“

McLowry no longer smiled.

“Mrs. Harris, you can’t go back to the Gulf. We already posted another master on your - on our - PSV. And you’re certainly aware that when Captain Koslovsky is well again, we’ll give him back his ship.“

He looked at Ash, studying her face, waiting for a reaction.

Ash cleared her throat.
“How’s Captain Koslovsky? I mean ...“

“Fine,” McLowry said. “Fine. We are looking forward to a speedy recovery.“

Again he browsed in the folder.

Ash’s mind was racing. This was ... She felt rage slowly building up inside her. She didn’t come all the long way to get sacked on her first day! No, Sir ...

“You’re single“, McLowry suddenly said, still browsing. “No children ...“

And now what? Ash thought.

“Doesn’t make things easier, up here“, McLowry said. “Being a single woman and no kids.“ McLowry turned a few pages.
„They believe in family in this country. They love kids.“
He leaned back again.
„Public opinion seems to be that a woman with no kids, well ... there must be something wrong ...“
He shrugged.
„Not my point of view, of course“, he said. „Although ... I’m from a large family, you know. We were five kids, three lads, two lasses. Nothing wrong with a lot of kids if you ask me.“
His smile widened.
„Well, you’ll probably be glad to transfer to another station as soon as possible. Perhaps we can let you off earlier. I’ll see what I can do.“

„Listen, Mr. McLowry ...“ Ash felt it was time to cut through all this shit. „The world is full of issues. And certain features of the Norwegian culture are not my top priority. I’m in charge of an AHTS and my job is to earn money for Northern. So ...“

McLowry was still browsing.
„You lost a ship, Mrs. Harris...“ His voice was soft.
Ash felt the cold almost the same instant, a cold from the past, a memory deeply buried but never ever to be erased.
„Yes“, she said.

McLowry turned a page.
„One crew member died ...“

Ash felt her palms get wet.
„Yes“, she said.

Her muscles were tight, aching, as if she was pushing against ... a door, desperately trying to keep it shut, desperately trying to keep out what was on the other side and about to force its way into the present, into her world: a nightmare ...

„You were the skipper of a racing yacht. But since you held a master’s licence for commercial deep water vessels, the incident and your conduct were subject of an inquiry under Admiralty Law ...“

„Yes“, she said.

„You were cleared of all ...“, McLowry paused, he looked up from the folder and into her eyes. „We want a good captain on the Aurora, Mrs. Harris. The best we can get. Fit for the job we do out there: hard and dangerous. Fit to make the right decisions when it matters - when lifes are at stake.“
He still looked into her eyes.
„Are you really fit for the job?“ he asked.
A clock was ticking somewhere.
„Are you really a good captain, Mrs. Harris?“

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Ash stared at the assistant’s behind as she followed her.
The woman’s butt was quivering with each of the quick steps she made in her high heels while she walked Ash back from McLowry’s office.

Probably married, Ash thought. She was so furious she was trembling. Three kids, She thought. fourth planned - just to make her piece-of-shit-boss McLowry happy.

„Captain Harris!“

Ash stopped. The door to Katja Olsson’s office was open.

„Captain Harris! Come in!“ Olsson had kicked away her shoes and walked barefoot on the carpet. „Come in“, she said. And: „It’s okay, Luisa. I’ll take care of Captain Harris. Thanks. “
She closed the door in Luisa’s face

Olsson walked back to her desk. Even without shoes she was tall. She let herself fall into the leather padded chair.

„Take a seat!“ She leaned back. „How was talking to Angus?“

Ash managed a smile but her lips were a thin line.

„That bad?“ Katja Olsson shook her head. „Forget Angus“, she said. „You’ll probably never see him again.“
She leaned forward.
„Sorry about the termination clause. McLowry sneaked it into the small print. Just forget it. Hire and Fire is my department, McLowry has no say in it. I need you at least for two years, probably much longer. We’ll draft an addendum to the contract cancelling Angus’ shit and that’s it.“

„But he said that Captain Koslovsky is fine and wants ...“ Ash was lost.

„Fine? Fine my ass!“ Olsson banged her fist on the desk. „They’ll do surgery on Koslovsky in two days. A third time is already scheduled. Fine?“

Olsson shook her head.
„He was barely alive when they pulled him from the car. The guy driving was dead. Both drunk, pissed to the nines. Smashed into a timber truck on their way back from Sweden. Car packed with booze. You know ... they buy the stuff over there. Much cheaper. Here you have to put a loan on your house to get a decent bottle of beer.“
She relaxed, leaned back again.
„Listen“, she said, massaging her foot. „You have to share accomodation with another girl. Sorry. But apparently we are short of company apartments right now. It’s only for the next few days, then you’ll be at sea anyway. Meanwhile I’ll fix you up with a property agent. They’ll find something nice for you.“

„Hotel would also do ...“, Ash said. Not her day apparently.

Olsson laughed.
„You wanna burn your cash on a box at the Radisson? Captain, this is the country where money vanishes like water in the Gobi Desert. Simply evaporates from your bank account.“

Olsson leaned forward, lowering her voice.
„One more thing. You’ll find it difficult to meet people. I mean, it’s hard to make friends up here. But woman, single, no kids – that’s like being ...“

„A freak?“ Ash offered.

They laughed.
„Catch!“ she said. „First step towards a successful integration."

Ash stared at the coin in her hand, then at Olsson.

Olsson laughed, throwing back her head.

„You’ll need that to unlock a shopping cart at the supermarket“, she said. „And shops close early, by the way. So you better get going."

Ash grinned.

„Thanks“, she said. „You saved my day.“ She walked to the door and opened it.

„Glad you’re with us, Captain!“
Katja Olsson meant it.

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Ash stopped. The door to the apartment was open.
Well, she thought. Roomie already in.

She leaned her shoulder against the door, stepped into the apartment trailing her dufflebag.

„Hello?“ she said. „Anybody there?"
No answer.

She walked down the corridor.
Daylight came through large windows, the few pieces of furniture were made of polished wood combined with steel and were as good as new.

She walked through the nearest door.
The kitchen was large, open to the living area.
Everything was state of art, stainless steel again, and a lot of it.

„Hellooo ...?“ she dropped her luggage, set the shopping bags onto the granite countertop of the kitchen island.
She walked into the living room.

The woman was standing in front of the window, looking at the huge clouds which were sailing on a brisk northeastern wind.

The roomie.
„Hi“, Ash said.

The woman turned.

Blood rushed into Ash’s face.
No, she thought. Please ... No!!
The woman stared into Ash’s eyes, her face pale against her dark hair. She was even more gorgeous than the image that had been in Ash’s memory since the encounter in the reception area, an image which wouldn’t go away, as wouldn’t the memory of her coldness, of the pain in her voice, of how she brushed off Ash’s clumsy, stupid attempt to ... do what?

Yeah, Miss Olsson, Ash thought. You were right. A looker, definitely.

The fur lining of the woman’s parka seemed to bristle, the high collar of the Arran Troyer was pulled up, zipped, as if she needed a lot of protection, needed something to keep her safe and warm. Her hands were pushed into the pockets of her jeans, that is, three fingers of each because the designer pants fitted her like a glove.

„Oh ... you“, the woman said.

Ash wanted to reply something but couldn’t. She heard the wind in the railing of the large balcony, the only sound in a silence that seemed to weigh tons and seemed to grow heavier each second.

„What made you think I’m some executive’s wife?“ the woman suddenly asked.

Ash cleared her throat.

„Er ...“, was all she could manage.

Say something! she yelled at herself. Say something, now! This is what people call a second chance! Talk!!

„You are ...“ she started only to stop a second later. „It’s because ... because you are ...“ she paused. „Well ... you are...“ Her throat was tight.

„Because I’m the type?“ the woman tilted her head, still looking straight into Ash’s eyes.

Just say it, Ash thought. Tell her. Plain and simple.

„Yes. No... I mean ...“ Do it! She thought. Spit it out! „You are so ... so ... beautiful“, she said. „Like ... like somebody who deserves to be .... like a model...“

Ash simply couldn’t talk any more. She felt her heart throb inside her chest, her cheeks were burning, her throat was dry.

Then she saw the woman’s smile.

„I take that as a compliment“, the woman said.

She came to Ash, suddenly so close her that Ash held her breath.

„Krieger“, she said. „Alexandra. Ali“

Ash didn’t dare to move, as if she was afraid to break something rare and precious. „Ashlyn Harris“, she said. „Ash,“ she added. Then she summoned up all her courage. „Listen ... the thing you said ... about your husband ...“

She looked at the floor.

„You ... shouldn’t talk about killing yourself. Shouldn’t even think about it. I couldn’t stand the thought of you ...“

She looked at Ali, afraid to see again the ice in her eyes.

Ali softly touched Ash’s biker jacket.
„Didn’t know why I told you“, she said. „But it’s nice, what you just said ...“

Ash was about to reach out and take her in her arms but she didn’t.
She swallowed hard.
„You know what? Kill your husband instead.“

Ali suddenly laughed.
„Well ... I better get sorted.“

„Yeah“, Ash said. „Got to unpack.“

They took their luggage and walked into the corridor, stopped in front of the two bedroom doors.

„Okay“, Ash said. „Wait ...“ She dug into her pocket, found the coin and held it up. „Head right door, tail left“, she said.

Ali frowned. Then she snatched the coin from Ash’s fingers and closed the fist around it before putting it into the back pocket of her jeans.

„Left“, she said, opening the door.

Ash was speechless.
Chapter Notes

The WS fandom gives a wide choice of great stuff – so, many thanks for also coming to my story. And many thanks for comments and kudos. That’s a lot of encouragement.

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Ali was in front of the open freezer.
,,Salmon, soja drink, green stuff,“ she said, turning to look at Ash.

Ash took a deep breath. The black t-shirt was hugging Ali’s body like a second skin. And what a body!
Now, barefoot and wearing flip-flops, she had to look up to meet Ash’s eyes.
,,Microwave Pizza,“ Ash said.

Ali frowned.
,,I’m the push-a-button-then-eat-it type,“ Ash apologized.

,,Well,“ Ali said, ,,there’s always hope, Captain. Even for guys like you.“
She held up her hand, the coin between two fingers.
,,Don’t wave money in front of an underpaid marine engineer,“ she said. ,,You might never see it again."

,,Regard it as a loan to set you up in this country,“ Ash grinned.

,,Wow,“ Ali’s voice sounded like ... It was the voice Ash had always associated with Barbie talking to Ken discussing issues of their relationship.
,,How can I ever pay back such a fortune to you, Captain? I’m in your hands now, and I count on your feelings towards me being of the purest and most honorable sort ...“

They both laughed, Ash’s intentions plain, simple and totally straightforward: she wanted to hold Mrs. Krieger in her arms and make love to her ...

,,Okay,“ Ali said, brushing against Ash as she began to collect pots and cutlery.
She opened the top drawer of the kitchen island and selected a heavy knife.
She pointed it at Ash.
„You cut, I cook.“

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The fragrance of spices was hanging in the air, and Ash was still overwhelmed by the food she had eaten, simple but yet ...

She was balancing on the tilted chair, listening to the humming freezer and the soothing sound of the dishwasher, sipping her coffee, eyes half closed, trying to keep the images from barely an hour ago alive.

... Ali pushing back her long hair and, struggling with a rubber band to hold them together, something Ash would have gladly helped her to do but didn’t dare to.

... Ali feeding her a piece of ... whatever, the taste of herbs, and something sweet, and something hot suddenly bursting on her tongue, the touch of Ali’s fingertips suddenly on her lips.

... Ali moving effortless between cabinets and butcher block, fridge and oven like a girl on the dance floor.

... Ash cutting herself because her eyes had been on Ali’s fingers gently prying apart green salad leaves, drops of water glittering in the overhead lighting.

... Ali helping her with the band aid, so close that she felt her breath on the cheek.

Ash was dead tired but it was ... well, she thought. It was like home, whatever that meant, but if it meant something like this she could use a lot more of it.

She listened to Ali, listened to her voice, a voice of which she couldn’t get enough, even while the story was a sad one.

„Money’s good,“ Ali said, „very good. Pays for a lot of things: top health insurance, pets, family holidays ..“, „Better than a supermarket checkout,“ Ash said.

Ali smiled her sad smile.
„Downside is ... I miss the kids so much.“ She had to clear her throat.
„Checkout girl doesn’t have to skype to see her kids.“ She took a deep breath. „They are so small and already so ... strong ... I think they cope better than I do.“

In the silence Ash suddenly felt how lonely the girl across the table was and thought how good it would be if she could just take that girl in her arms and give her, well, some comfort, just show her that she wasn’t alone.

„What ...“ Ali hesitated. „What brought you ... I mean ... you’re a captain, and ... just curious, you know ...“

Ash closed her eyes.

„Sorry,“ Ali said, „I didn’t mean to ...“

„The sea always has been the only place where ....“, Ash said. „An open door, sort of. You see ... even when I was just a kid ...“

She stopped, sipping from the coffee mug.
„I had the chance to sail a little dinghy, now and then. One morning the guy who owned the boat caught me getting on board with a dufflebag, and a cooler box full of stuff, you know, candy bars, and ...“ Her voice trailed off.
„Where the hell do you think you’re going?“ he asked.
Eyes still closed she smiled.
„Well, there was a regatta starting the next day. A single-handed race across the Atlantic. And I – you know - had decided to join. And mind: I was eleven!“

„That’s ...“ Ali leaned forward. „And ... what happened?“

Ash shrugged.
„He had to wrestle me down to keep me from going. I punched him on the nose, he had blood all over his shirt - oh my ...“ Ash covered her face, starting to laugh.
„It’s so embarrassing, still, after all these years.“
She shook her head.
„Probably just wanted to sail away from all those ...“
She pushed back her hair.
„The day I graduated from high school I filled in the application form for the Great Lakes Academy.“

„Far from home?“ Ali said.

„Yeah,“ Ash said, looking into some distance, speaking as if to herself. „Would’ve gone to the Northpole ... only to get away from ...“

„Hard times?“ Ali’s voice was soft.

Ash didn’t answer. She was still staring at things only she could see.
Suddenly she pointed to the oven.
„Where did you ... learn to ... to do...“

Ali smiled.
„Well, my mom ...“ She stopped.
„Listen,“ she said, „we shouldn’t allow some ... ghosts from the past to spoil this evening.“
She rose from the chair.
„You stay here.“

Ash took a deep breath.
„With your talent ... I’d expect you to be ... well, a chef in some fashionable big city place, you know.“
She watched Ali taking a stainless steel pot from a cabinet.
„I mean, what the hell brought you to ...“
She smiled.
„Maybe diamonds are, but oil rigs are definitely not a girl’s best friends.“

Ali laughed.
„Nobody ever offered me diamonds. So ...“

She was busy at the fridge.
„The waves,“ she suddenly said, „I love the waves, always have. And the math involved in dynamic wave models ... it’s complex, as beautiful as the waves ...“

She poured milk into the pot.
„You know ... ships can avoid a lot of trouble by changing the course. Or they just roll with it.“
She took a spoon and tasted what was cooking in the pot, licking her lips like a cat. „The platforms ... they’re different from ships: they’re static, have to take whatever hits them.“

She opened a box with spices and rubbed them in her palms, then let them fall into the pot. „A broken riser bundle ... it very often means environmental damage. On a large scale. A platform hit by a Big One ... People injured, people dead. We can save lifes.“

She added something from a glass jar, again warming it in her hand before sprinkling it over whatever was cooking on the white ceramic top. „And that’s what I’m here for,“ she said. „I’ll stick lots of electronic gadgets all over the two Haakon platforms like putting candles on a Christmas tree, then wait for the next storm and see what happens.“

Ash frowned. „The next storm?“

„Due within two or three weeks.“ She slipped her hand into an oven mitt and lifted the pot from the cooktop. „Some interesting low pressure areas are building up over the North Atlantic right now ... Apparently they want to merge and become something ... large. Probability for a full force storm is already high.“ She concentrated on filling two big mugs.

„You’ll be on Outpost when ... ?“ Ash didn’t like what she heard.

„I’ll be stationed on that big thing, Bravo Nine,“ Ali said. She carefully set down the two mugs to the table. „But yes ... when the storm comes I’ll have to be on, what do you call it? Outpost?“ She laughed. „Outpost - like ... Fort Apache?“

Ash narrowed her eyes. „Why can’t you just stay in the Ritz and remotely, somehow ...“ She bit her lip. „Look,“ she said, „Outpost hit by a gale is no place you want to be, I mean ...“

„It’s exactly the place I have to be if I want my research to lead somewhere.“ Ali laughed again. „What did you call Bravo Nine? The Ritz? You guys are incredible ...“

„Administration, accommodation and recreation: the Ritz - on stilts. In the middle of nowhere,“ Ash smiled. „But it’s not a joke,“ she said. „You shouldn’t be out there when ...“

„Close your eyes,“ Ali said.

„What?“ Ash stared at her.

„Stop worrying about me, Captain. And close your eyes.“ Ali gently put her hand over Ash’s eyes. „Close your ... that’s it.“ She guided Ash’s hand to a mug with something hot. „Don’t look,“ she said.

Ash sniffed, then inhaled deeply. The scent flooded her head, made her brain spin. She opened her eyes. She was looking at a mug of hot chocolate.
„Taste it,“ Ali said.

Ash took a sip.
She had to close her eyes again.
„I’ve never ...“ Memories suddenly flooded her mind, things from her childhood, long forgotten, bittersweet like the chocolate she was drinking ...
Her tired brain was reeling under the impact of whatever this damned Mrs. Krieger was feeding her, almost reducing her to a sobbing pussy ...

„Black pepper,“ Ali said as if reading Ash’s mind. „And raspberry powder. Goes well with chocolate."

Ash was fighting for control.
„Listen,“ she cleared her throat. „I need to ...“
She tried to get up but couldn’t because Ali’s hand was on her shoulder.

„I know what you need,“ she said. „You need to drink this. And then you need to go to sleep, Captain."

Ash suddenly felt how tired she really was.
„Guess you’re right,“ she murmured. „Was a long day."
She had to close her eyes.
Then suddenly she felt Ali’s hand against her cheek brushing away a strand of hair.
And she knew that tonight all the nightmares she feared would stay away, outside this place, like the wind and the rain she heard against the windows.

At least tonight she would be safe.

***

Ash studied the diagram which her chief engineer, Komarov, had unfolded, putting a bolt on one edge to keep it from flying away in the wind.

They were standing on the working deck which extended over more than half of the ships length, a flat, empty field of steel, with only minimal freeboard, a vast space exposed to wind, rain and water when the ship was at sea.

The electrical engineer, Mortenson, looked over her shoulder, her first officer, Daltry, pointed at a section in the middle of the chart.
„Here,“ he said. „Right, Chiefy?“

Komarov nodded.

Not much of a talker, Ash thought.

Some time ago she had let her hair grow. Then she had toyed with the idea to wear it short but was still undecided. Today she had braided it into a thick tail which now had the colour of gold as suddenly the grey sky opened and the sun was shining.
She wore her overall, a bright orange thing, with the word ‘Captain’ printed across the back. A life
jacket, a white hard hat, boots and gloves completed her safety equipment.

The crane towered above them, casting a deep shadow in the sunlight: tons of steel, electric cables and hydraulic pipes.

The bosun, Panjang Budiharto, together with a seaman, pulled away a crate, so they could look at the enormous bolts of the crane’s foundation.

„Refit completed two months ago,“ Komarov said. „Seems to be okay, but I think we can run into trouble when ... „
He traced the lines of the diagram with a finger, then pointed to a section of the foundation which secured the monster to the ship.

She nodded.
„Operating in the outboard sector ...,“ she said, „with maximum load and even below ...“

„I’m not saying it’s insecure,“ Komarov said, „but ...“

„I don’t want the ship spend more time in maintenance than necessary,“ Ash said, „burning money instead of earning, and I see this happen because we’ll have a lot of wear and tear – here and here ...“
She tapped on the diagram. „More than we should have.“
Suddenly she had an idea.
„Let me talk to an expert. See if we can do something about it.“

„Expensive,“ Mortenson said. „Controlling wouldn’t like it. They’ll jump about like monkeys when they see the figures.“

„My problem,“ she said. „I’ll make them look at the whole picture, the balance of lost operational time against costs.“

„Crew’s in the mess, Captain,“ the bosun reminded her.

„Thanks,“ she said. „So let’s go.“

They walked back towards the superstructure, a sheer cliff of white steel rising close to the bow, punctuated by a few windows and portholes.
High above them Sunlight reflected from the glass of the bridge.

My working place, Ash thought, squinting.

***

„Three shore leave, one sick leave,“ the First officer said.
He opened the door to the mess room.
„The Captain,“ he shouted and the sound of voices faded away.

She walked into the mess, walked towards the service door which led to the gantry. There she turned, facing the crew.
She put hard hat and gloves on the table in front of her, unstrapped her life jacket and pulled down the zipper of her overall.

She smiled.
„Name’s Ashlyn Harris,“ she said. „I’m your captain.“
She let it sink in.
„First of all,“ she continued, „first of all: Captain Koslovsky came out of surgery the day before
yesterday and he’s doing fine. I saw him at the hospital. He says ‚thank you‘ for the get well cards.
Was surprised to get all the mail because he always thought none of you guys could read or write.‘‘

The crew laughed.

Ash collected her thoughts. As the vessel’s master she didn’t have to give anything to anyone. But
that wasn’t the way it worked. So ...
„I was first officer on a container vessel,“ she began, „then switched to the offshore oilfield service
fleet and was captain of a PSV in the Texas Gulf. Acted as first officer on two of their largest
AHTSs to get the feeling for that sort of job. And now I’m here.‘‘
She paused.
„Nothing much will change. You’re an experienced crew and you know what to do. Now and then
you’ll come across something new. Then just go with it and you’ll find that it was implemented only
to make things better: faster, more efficient, easier, safer.‘‘
She looked at the crew.
„Questions ...“ she said, knowing exactly what was about to happen.

A guy wanted to speak, holding up his hand.
„Okay,“ Ash said, „give me your name when you talk.‘‘

„Ali Rachman,“ the guy said.
„Ali Baba!“ a voice from rear added.

The crew laughed. Ali Baba turned and stabbed at them with a volley of Tamil.
„Okay, okay,“ Ash said, holding up her hands. „You wanted to ask something ...“

Ali Baba cleared his throat.
„You ... Captain ... you... really fought with the shark?“

Ash smiled.
„No,“ she said. „You can't fight a shark. If it wants to eat you, it simply does. That one wasn’t
hungry. Just came to look.‘‘

„How big was it?“ another one asked. „My name’s Tuah Osman.‘‘

They are just curious, Ash thought, feeling her palms get wet while she was fighting a memory back
which suddenly tried to surface. Just get over with it.
„I didn't see it,“ she said, „only the big fin and the tip of the tail. The rest was under water.“
She had to stop and she fought the urge to wipe her hand on her overall.
„I think it was at least as big as, let's say, our life boat.‘‘

The crew was stunned, silent.

Ash waited but question time was over, apparently.
„Okay,“ Ash said. „We’ll get to know each other while we do what we are paid for: earn money for
the company. So... if there are any more things you want to get off your chest, just let me know and
we’ll find the time to talk.‘‘

She picked up her things and walked to the door, the officers following her.
Now, she thought, the other thing.
She took a deep breath to steady her voice and stay calm, although she was no longer afraid of the blunt instruments with which she had been hammered all her life: crudeness, stupidity, and plain and simple meanness – just because she was what she was.
It still left her exhausted, sometimes, and sometimes with body and soul aching.
But now she was a grown-up, no-shit bad girl.
And now was the right moment to give them a taste of it.

Hand reaching for the door she stopped, then turned.
„By the way,“ she said, „just in case somebody intends to stick a picture from a smut magazine to my door ... I mean if, against good judgement and despite the fact that I’ll make your life a blazing hell, somebody just can’t help it and is driven by some irresistible force to ... you know ...“

The crew began to laugh, heads turned, they were grinning at a huge guy with a lot of ink on his arms and hands.

„What are you looking at me...?“
He was offended.

Ash smiled.
„So ... if you ....“ she paused for effect. „I’d prefer a girl“. 
Chapter 4

Ash’s phone buzzed. She picked it up: Ali!
She read the message.

‘Still jetlagged?’

You bet, Ash thought. She was irritated by even the smallest things that were missing, not in place or broken.
The crew avoided her.

‘Feel like sh ...’ she typed then stopped. 
She deleted it.

‘Much better’ she wrote. ‘Choc helped’

She was at her desk at the Captain’s office, going through the pile of paperwork Captain Koslovsky had left her.
Thank you so much, Captain, she thought.

‘Hows bike?’ Ali wrote.

‘!!!!!!!!!’ was Ash’s reply.
And ten exclamation marks didn’t even come near to what Ash had felt riding the BMW in the early morning, the thing flying like a bat through the dawn, air still cold, the city waking up, major roads already busy, trucks going to the harbour, trucks lining up at the barrier of Northern’s pier, the security guard waving her through, ‘Good morning, Captain!’, Ash revving up the bike for the last stretch, and, finally, huge and towering and floodlit: her ship.

‘Thx for dinner’ She wrote.

‘My plsre’ was the answer.

There was about a ton of paper piling up on her desk. And there were other things to take care of, the safety check of the port winch, the issue with the starboard power line, the ...
It was defenitely not the moment for texting with Mrs. Krieger. No. Back to work.

‘Hows ur day?’ she wrote instead.

‘Meetgs. Katja is great help’

Katja? Doing what? Ash pushed away the phone. Telling you that you’re a looker?
She muted the phone and tried to concentrate on the report of the safety inspectors.

The phone display lit up. Ash managed not to look.
For 10 seconds.

‘Pity not c u in morng’

‘Early start’ Ash typed. She wanted to send but ...
‘Woke u up?’ she added.
Would’ve loved to, she thought. With a kiss.

‘No. Reading. Meetgs stuff’
Could’ve come to say hello, Ash thought. Wonder why she didn’t.
The image of Ali krieger with tussled hair, a bit drowsy, standing in the bathroom door, smiling, suddenly blanked out anything else.

,'U wr in hurry‘ Ali wrote. ,Not wntd keep u'
followed by ,but c u tonite‘

And suddenly Ash wanted this day to end, wanted to get out of here and to her place ... their place ... so badly that suddenly the scent of Ali’s hair was back as if she was standing behind her, brushing away Ash’s hair right now ...
And suddenly each moment without her seemed to be a waste of time.

She got up, walked to the window.
She took a deep breath.
She touched the cold plated glass trying to find something solid to hold on before she was swept away.

,C u tonite‘ she wrote.
Then she left her office and climbed the stairs to the bridge because right now she couldn’t stand the cramped space any longer and needed to see the sky.

***

Ash was kneeling on the floor plates of the bridge, groping around for – how long? 2 fucking hundred years? - feeling the rage boiling in her.
Suddenly she realized that she was not alone.
She turned.

She saw someone leaning against the forward main console and looking at her butt: a girl in a grey overall and boots, gloves tucked into the huge pocket on her left thigh.

They had said that the guy from Northern’s Air Service would come ... when? She looked at her watch.

It wasn’t a girl but a woman and she brushed back the mop of hair and smiled.

It’s the smile, Ash thought. It makes her look like a girl. And who can resist such a smile?
She saw the emblem of Norther’s Air Service division on the left breast pocket of the woman’s overall  together with the symbol of the Norwegian Search and Rescue.
She read the name tag.

„Heath?“ she asked. „You’re the ... pilot?“

„You mean you can’t tell from my outfit?“ The pilot looked at her overall. „Took me hours to dress for the occasion. And now you’re telling me it has no appeal for you? Buh huh, sob sniff“

Ash was laughing.

„I’m Heath - Tobin,“ the pilot said, her smile widening. „What are you doing down there? Lost your stripes, Captain?“

„Fucking pen,“ Ash said, getting up. „Rolled from the top. Apparently the only one around here. Can’t find it. And if I can’t fill in all those forms, ship will go nowhere. “
Tobin Heath reached into the breast pocket of her overall. „Take this one“, she said. „Courtesy of Olsson Airline.“

It was a cheap plastic thing with an ad saying „Mario’s Take Away Express“. „It’s gifts like these which deepen the bond between the airline and our customers.“

Ash took the pen. „So, what brings you to my ship?“

„You’re a celebrity, Captain,“ Tobin Heath said. „Can I have an autograph, please?“

„Celebrity?“ Ash frowned.

„Sure,“ Heath said. „You’re the only female captain in this outfit. You’re Shark-Crusher Harris. And on top of all this you now have the title of ‘Most Famous Dyke’ around here...“

Ash stared at Heath, her eyes narrowing. „Who had it before?“ she said.

Heath winked. „Take a guess,“ she said.

Ash still stared. „You mean ... ?“

„Yep. Plus: I’m the only female helipilot around here. So, may I have a look?“

„At my butt?“ Ash raised a brow.

Heath smiled. „Wouldn’t mind looking at it all day ... but no: it’s your new helipad I’m interested in. Could be one day I’ll have to land the bus on it, so ...“

„Sure.“ Ash waved towards the bow. „Feel free. Who’s the other guy I see out there?“

„Co-pilot,“ Heath said. „Mikkelsen.“

„Get him and yourself hard hats,“ Ash said. „You also need a life jacketed when you want to climb onto the pad. Ask the Chief, he’ll fix you up. Safety regulations ...“

„Aye, aye, Captain,“ Heath said. She was fresh, frank, pretty in a boyish way ... in other words: extremely nice.

Ash already liked her.

Tobin Heath didn’t move. „Heard McLowry tried to fuck with you,“ she said.

„Heard from who?“ Ash couldn’t believe it: 48 hours in town and her affairs were already company lore.

„News travels fast,“ Heath said. „And welcome to the club. Olsson, myself, and now you. Plus a certain very, very attractive marine engineer who’s the roommate of a certain captain ...“

„What club?“ Ash definitely felt like the new kid in town.

„The ‘Piss Off McLowry’ club. The great Angus hates women doing what he calls ‘Men’s Jobs’. Especially hates girls like us, you know. Probably afraid we might steal his wife from under his
nose."

„She that good?"

Heath made a step forward.
„She that good??? You have no idea what you're talking about, Captain. She's a high-maintenance racing car! Everybody in town and offshore is daydreaming about shagging her!“

„You ...?“ Ash couldn’t help smiling.

Heath came closer, lowering her voice.
„Am I dreaming ...? Captain: the only time I'm not dreaming about making love to that bitch is when I’m in the air. And even then."

„You're incredible!“ Ash said. „And how did you get past McLowry and into the pilot job?“

Heath shrugged.
„Olsson gave it to me. Worked for a Huston VIP heli service. Was her shuttle pilot whenever she did business in the US. She loves to make McLowry unhappy."

„She seems to be a nice girl, though ...“ Ash said.

Heath stared at Ash.
„Olsson? a nice girl?"
The pilot shook her head as if she felt pity for Ash.
„Face it Captain. She’s not only after McLowries head – she wants to rule the world. And she’ll sell your kidneys if she thinks that helps her getting there."

„So you're one of Olsson's tough girls?“

„Yeah,“ Heath said. „Plus I'm a good pilot. Top tier: I also fly the executive chopper, giving all the big shots a lift when they feel like it. It's like 'Asshole Air', you know."
She smiled.
„But the bonus is that I can take a good look at lovely Mrs. Mclowry when she goes to fundraising events and gallery openings in Oslo. And I wear a smart uniform, dark blue with a white shirt, a tie and four golden bars."
She turned and took in the bridge.
„Nothing compared with what you have, of course. This is like an executive suite. Sikorsky’s pilot area is a can.“ She sighed. „Okay. Back to work. Helipad.“ She waved. „See you."

„Don’t forget to see Chiefy,“ Ash shouted.
She was back on her knees.
The pen was a gift from a friend.

***

The woman was waiting for her.
She stood in front of the two starboard windows, silhouetted against the light.
She crossed her arms when Ash entered the captain’s office.

Ash looked at five inch Italian heels, the kind of legs for which tight jeans were made, a nice, hard
body which even the folds of an oversized sweater couldn’t hide.
She saw long hair, dark, shining, saw the furrow between her eyebrows deepen.
Her jaw was set, her lips a thin line.

„Who are you?“ Ash stopped in the doorway.
„Where’s your Visitor Pass?“

„It’s really you,“ the woman hissed and her voice seemed to cut like a sharp knife. She held up the
the cardboard visitor pass then crushed it in her fist and let it drop on the floor. „I wouldn’t believe it
when they told me. But you’re here."

Ash walked into her office.
„This is a ship, not a trash can!“
She picked up the pass.
„And you need this signed by a deck officer to get through security again when you leave the pier.
And you have to be with a crew member on board this ship all the time – for your own safety.
Where’s the guy?“

She was now close to the woman, so close she could’ve touched her.
She held the piece of paper up in front of the woman’s face ...
And suddenly she remembered her.
And it came as a shock.
Her heart began to race.

„You still like to push it, Captain?“ The woman was breathing faster now. „Push it to the edge? And
further? Until someone dies?“

Ash stared into her face.
The woman looked different now, but her eyes hadn’t changed. The hate was still there.
She had been a celebrity of some sort ... athlete, a pro. Tennis? No ...
Her name ... Chris, Christen ...
And Ash remembered her talking to the media, telling them that Captain Ashlyn Harris ...

„She died because of you,“ the woman could barely speak, choked by her rage.

„What do you want?“
Ash’s voice was a hoarse whisper. How the hell did she get over here and right into her life?

She heard someone running through the corridor.
A seaman came through the door.
„Sorry Captain ...“ He was breathless and embarrassed. „But ... the lady ... Mrs. McLowry ...“

Christen McLowry stared at Ash.
Ash stared back.
Mrs. McLowry, she thought, unable to do anything else but stare.

„Where’s Heath?“ the woman still held Ash’s gaze. „I want to talk to the pilot. Where’s the pilot?“

Drops of sweat began to show on the seaman’s face.

„It’s okay,“ Ash said. She found it incredibly hard to control her voice. „Show Mrs. McLowry to the
mess and ask Cookie to get Mrs. McLowry a nice cup of coffee. And when the pilot has finished her
inspection she’ll see you there, Mrs. McLowry."
“Aye, Captain ...“ the seaman was sweating even more. „If you please come with me, Mrs. McLowry ...“

„And you better slip out of those,“ Ash pointed to the high heels. „You wouldn’t want to ruin them on the floor plates. And you wouldn’t want to break your ankles on the stairs.“

Chris just stared.
Then she made a step back, still looking into Ash’s eyes.
„You were her skipper,“ she hissed. „You should’ve protected her. But you let her die."
She trembled with rage.
„Burn in hell!“

She turned and walked through the door and Ash heard the clatter of her high heels on the floor and then, once again, her voice, spitting at the seaman:
„Fuck your coffee!“

Ash took a deep breath.
Mrs. McLowry, she thought. High maintenance racing car and wife of the great Angus.
It had been because of her that the court inquiry had attracted all the attention: a good-looking girl with a fan base, radiating hate like radioactivity, telling the media guys, with a choked voice, a story of grief and loss, a story about a skipper hooked on danger ... who had killed her teammate and closest friend.

***

„Where is she?“ Heath was breathless from running up the stairs.

Ash just pointed with her head down to the wharf where, about 50 feet below the bridge level, Mrs. McLowry was stabbing at her phone with her long nails.

She was leaning against Heath’s car, a vintage Mustang with a magenta paint job, now and then glaring at the ship as if she wanted to burn holes into the hull to sink it, and her black Porsche Cayenne was parked right in front of Heath’s car as if to block any escape route.

Tobin looked at her, smiling.
„Isn’t she cute?“ Tobin’s voice was soft. „She probably wants to go to Oslo. Needs the chopper. And a pilot.“

Ash stared at the woman.
Christen Somebody, now Mrs. Lowry, pro athlete and celebrity, adding media value to a high seas desaster which everybody including herself was struggling not to remember too often.
The TV and magazine guys had been there because of her.
And because of the shark ...

Fuck you, bitch! Ash thought. Stay away from me. Or I’ll kick your hard little ass. And that of your piece-of-shit big shot husband, too!
„What do you know about her?“

Tobin couldn’t let her eyes off her.
„Former pro soccer player. Chris Press - if that rings a bell ...“

„And McLowry snatched her ... for his private little soccer games?“
Tobin began to draw with her finger on the plated glass of the bridge window.

„Story is that they hit it off at a party after a photoshoot for a glam magazine. Check it on the web. Shows a lot of skin for the camera ... She’s ...“ Her voice trailed off.

Ash’s voice had an edge.

„A hot piece? Publicity hungry?“

„Yes. No. I mean ...., Tobin frowned. „She’s different. She’s lovely. Special ... somehow“

„There must be money in pro soccer,“ Ash said. „A career. Wonder why she let herself get turned into a decorative item ...“

„She’s unhappy ...“ Tobin eyes suddenly narrowed. She stared at Ash. „You don’t like her!“

„You have a crush,“ Ash said.

„Nooo ...“ Tobin shook her head, embarrassed. „She’s just ... like you said: a hot piece.

„A crush of the crushiest sort."

Ash looked at Mrs. McLowry pacing the wharf, fist closed around her phone.

Tobin’s cheeks were red.

„She’s just ... someone I happen to carry to Oslo and ...“

„Just one of your VIP passengers? You're shitting me ...“ Ash said.

Tobin tried to smile.

„Just a VIP passenger, right. And it’s ,Good morning, Mrs. McLowry‘ and ,How are you today‘ and ,Have a nice day, Mrs. McLowry‘ ...“

„Now you ARE shitting me ...“

Ash shook her head. She was angry now. She didn’t have time for all this.

„You really want to tell me you don’t chat her up and haven’t already planned how to make your move? Come on ...“

„Chat her up?“ Tobin made a step backwards. „And what do mean by ,move‘?“

Ash couldn’t believe it.

„Well ... if your idea is to go beyond occasionally hauling Mrs. McLowry’s precious self from here to Oslo and back ... ,“

She saw Tobin’s eyes widen with ... panic?

„Frankly,“ Ash said. „I don’t see how ... you know ... without rising, between the two of you, the topic of ... you know ...“

„Helloooo ...??“ Tobin pointed at herself. „I’m a girl, in case you haven’t noticed. A girl with a taste for other girls.“ She shook her head. „Now look at her! She ... she was constructed and manufactured at the Straight-Wives-Factory! Genetically engineered to keep her man happy who, on top of all this, happens to be the Great Angus! Chat her up? Make a move?? Are you crazy??“

Poor pilot, Ash thought, not feeling too much pity. It made her skin crawl thinking of a lovesick Heath, hovering above her heli pad, trying to land a 14 ton Sikorsky while daydreaming about fingerling her boss’ wife.

She looked at Christen McLowry who was talking into her phone.
This wasn’t over, she thought.
Never will be.
Too many lifes changed, too much pain and grief and hate in our souls, and the shockwave of what
had happened out there still makes us tremble and wakes us at night.

She’ll go for my throat, Ash thought.
I would.

She took her mug. The coffee was strong and hot and she drank it as if it could erase the echoes of
the past.

„Nice car,” she said, pointing to the wharf. „The Mustang. Like the colour.“
„What the hell are you doing here?“
Mikkelsen shook his head.

Tobin was standing at the open watertight door, right beneath the word EXIT, and tried to peek around the steel collar of the frame at the wharf.
„She still there?“ Tobin hissed.

„Who?“ Mikkelsen played stupid.

„You know who!“ Tobin hissed. „Mrs. Mac!“

Mikkelsen stuck his head out.
„Yeah,“ he said. „And if I read her face correctly you better get your ass out of here, and quick, or she’ll skin you alive and nail your hide to the wall. Or turn it into a handbag.“

„How do I look?“ Tobin pointed at her overall. „I mean ...“

„What the hell are you talking about?“
Mikkelsen couldn’t believe what he heard.

„She’s never seen me in this before ...“ Tobin whispered as if Chris McLowry could hear her.
„I’m always in uniform and ... and my ...“ She ran her fingers through her hair. „I must look awful, it’s all messed up ... the fucking hard hat ...“

Mikkelsen rolled his eyes.
He grabbed Tobin’s shoulders, turned her towards the door and pushed her out.

***

Chris McLowry’s face was hard as stone although her cheeks were streaked with tears and ruined eye makeup.
„WHAT??“ she snapped as she realized Tobin was staring at her.

Tobin saw that she had stepped out of her high heels and held her left ankle.

„Slipped on the fucking floor plates of the fucking vessel, OKAY??“ Her voice was vibrating with pain. „Fucking heels ...“

Tobin came closer.
„I’m sure you’ll feel much better sitting in the car ...“
She opened the passenger door of the Porsche.
„And I think ...“ She summoned up her courage. „I think ... I should do the driving - take you home, I mean ...“
She hesitated, then reached out to help, but Chris shrugged off her hand, gritting her teeth in pain when she slowly slipped into the seat.
„That’s it,“ Tobin said. „Just try to relax. Be back in a sec.“
Mikkelsen was waiting by Tobin’s car.

„Listen, Mikki,“ she said, a little out of breath. She pointed at her Mustang. „Do me a favour and get it back to Sola. I think I better take care of Mrs. Mac and drive her home.“

„She crippled or what?“
Mikkelsen seemed to be unhappy.

„Something like that“, Tobin said fumbling for the car keys.
„Here,“ she said.

Mikkelsen looked at the keys, then at the Mustang, then at Tobin.
„It’s pink,“ he said.

Tobin looked at the Mustang then at Mikkelsen. She frowned.
„So?“

„What if ...“ Mikkelsen was searching for words. „What if I run into people who know me? I mean ...“

Tobin’s eyes narrowed.
„Yeah – what if? They’ll probably think you turned gay, and your wife will leave you and file for divorce, and you’ll never see your kids again. But who cares? You gonna make new and very interesting friends in no time ...“

Mikkelsen stared at her.
She came closer.
„Yeah, it’s pink. But it’s also got a five point eight litre V 8 engine: it’s not a sissy clockwork toy car like your’s.“

„It’s not a sissy ...“ Mikkelsen was really offended. „It’s an environmental friendly, family proof ...“

Tobin dangled the car keys in front of Mikkelsen’s face.
„It goes ‘thraaghhhh’ when you hit it, not ‘beep-beep-beep’ like your environmental friendly little tin can,“ she said.

Mikkelsen took a deep breath.
„Okay,“ he said.

„My man!!“ Tobin threw him the keys.

„You owe me!“ Mikkelsen shouted after her.

***

Chris was staring ahead when Tobin opened the door and slipped into the driver’s seat.

„Okay,“ Tobin said, catching her breath.
„It’s on the other side of town, right? Your home, I mean.“

Chris didn’t move.

„Must be on the GPS,“ Tobin pushed the buttons of the navigation. „If you just tell me ...“
"I don’t want to go home," Chris said.

"Sure," Tobin started the car. "Probably better if you see a doctor."

"No," Chris said.

"'kaaay," Tobin tried to smile. "Where ...?"

"Just take me somewhere", Chris said. "Away from here."

***

It was a self-service restaurant with a gas station on the road to Sweden, the only place Tobin knew because for a while she had dated the girl who worked the late shift.

They sat at a corner table and Chris stared out of the window.

Tobin looked at her and her heartbeat almost blanked out the sound of the passing cars and trucks.

"You ... wanted to talk to me?" Tobin barely managed to get out the words. "You need the chopper ...

Chris looked right into Tobin’s eyes.

"What did she tell you?"

Tobin swallowed hard.

"Nothing. Wondered why you quit pro soccer."

Chris still looked at her.

"And? What about you? You don’t want to know?"

Tobin’s throat was tight.

She looked away, traced the pattern of the wooden tabletop, found her hand trembling.

"Why did you ..."

"None of your fucking business," Chris snapped.

It was like a slap in the face and it hurt.

"Listen ..." Tobin said, pushing away her coffee. "Whatever happened on the ship – don’t take it out on me! Okay? I’m only here to help!"

Chris wasn’t listen.

"Don’t tell me you didn’t talk about the accident. I’m not stupid!"

"Don’t shout at me," Tobin hissed. "People might think we are lovers ..."

"That’s ridiculous!" Chris was looking left and right. "Do I look THAT desperate?? I don’t think so ...

"You’re right!" Tobin’s voice head an edge. "Ridiculous - because who wants to be with such an arrogant, stuck-up bitch?"

They stared at each other, silent.

Then Chris pointed at Tobin’s face.
“You better ...“

“What??“

Tobin turned and looked at her reflection in the glass of a framed travel poster: a dark streak was on her forehead, dirt from the helipad.

“Fu ...!” Tobin’s cheeks were burning. Mikkelsen! He should’ve told her, that piece of ...
She grabbed a paper napkin, almost spilling her coffee, and tried to get rid of the greasy stuff while feeling Chris’ eyes on her, frantically rubbing her skin, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Suddenly Chris reached out and took the napkin out of Tobin’s hand.
She leaned across the table and began to dab at Tobin’s face while she held Tobin’s chin to steady the head.
“Sorry,” Chris said. „Should’ve told you earlier.“

„No ...“ Tobin wanted to stop this. It was humiliating, it was ...
„Don’t! just leave it and ...“ She pushed away her hand. „People are looking at us!“ she lied.
„Probably wondering if you try to pick me up ...“

Chris leaned back, her fingers clenched around the napkin.

Tobin swallowed hard, her throat was dry.
„Look ... why don’t you tell me about this ... accident?“

„Ask her!“ Chris dropped the napkin only to pick it up again. „Maybe she tells the truth to you ...“
She looked at her coffee, cold by now, then again out of the window.
A truck roared across the parking lot and past the restaurant, making cups and spoons rattle.

„You two .. are you ... together?“ Chris suddenly asked.

Tobin needed a moment to understand.
She went pale.
„I don’t know what you mean, but ...“

Chris crushed the napkin and threw it on the table.
„You know exactly what I mean. Everybody knows you’re into girls ...“

„Gawd!“ Tobin shook her head. „So that’s what it’s all about. And you think because ... You think I go for the next available pair of tits because ...?“ She was trembling with rage.
„And every time you were in my chopper you were afraid ... I might ruffle your nice expensive haircut? Afraid I might slip my hand into your bra and tease your nipples?“ She laughed. „Now I know what’s wrong with you: You’re simply afraid you might like it!“

Chris pushed back her chair, spilling her coffee.
She stood and stared at Tobin, almost panting, her eyes dark with rage, her cheeks flushed, and for a brief moment Tobin was afraid she would hit her, and then she thought that Chris was the most beautiful girl she had ever seen.

„Good bye“, Chris said, then turned to leave.

„Don’t be silly!“ Tobin was out of the chair, putting a hand on Chris’ shoulder to stop her.
„Listen ..“ she said. „It’s been the first time I ever met her ... the captain, okay? She’s been around, she’s a professional: yes – I like her.“
Suddenly feeling foolish she pointed at the coffee.
„Let me get you a new one ... Tell me what happened. And then I drive you home.“
Chris shugged her off.
Suddenly she looked into Tobin’s eyes.
„You really think I’m scared of you?“
She was so close that Tobin could feel the heat of whatever was burning inside her on her own skin.
And then she kissed Tobin on the mouth.
It was like a stab, short and violent, and Tobin stumbled against the table, feeling a sharp pain when Chris bit into her lower lip.
„Like the taste?“ Chris asked, wiping her mouth. „The flavour is called ‘arrogant stuck-up bitch’ ...“
Then she smiled, her eyes cold.
„Oh ... and you better take this!“ She threw Tobin her rain jacket. „It’s going to get wet. And It’ll probably take you some time to get hold of a taxi out here. You even may have to walk.“
Then she turned, went to the door and was gone.

***

Tobin stood in the drizzle trying to find the number of a taxi service on her phone.
She wore Chris’ jacket and the scent of Chris’ perfume was still in the fleece lining and there also seemed to be some of her warmth still in it.

She looked up when she heard the hiss and whine of air breaks and the growl of a diesel engine right beside her.

A Volvo truck had stopped next to her, a huge thing hooked to a trailer which carried a 40 foot Maersk container.

Tobin knew what was going to happen and opened her mouth to say ‘Fuck off’ ...

„Need a ride?“

Tobin shut her mouth.
The driver was a woman. She had short, blonde hair and a hard, attractive face.
She smiled down at Tobin from the open side window.

„You going into town?“ Tobin asked.

The woman still smiled.
„Harbour.“

Tobin shrugged
„Okay.“

„Get in“, the woman said and Tobin climbed up on the passenger side and into the truck’s cab, and a second later the truck’s engine roared and they were going, across the parking lot, picking up speed, taking off into the stream of early evening traffic.

The truck’s license plate was EU with FIN for Finland but Tobin was sure that the girl was from Russia.
She wore the outfit of the arctic circle truckers: boots, camo pants, tight white T-shirt, showing off what was underneath, usually the paunch of a fat guy, but in her case a lot of muscle.

The woman looked at Tobin from the corner of her eyes.
„You’re a pilot right?“ she pointed at Tobin’s overall, the SAR emblem, the helicopter symbol of
Northern’s air service. „How come I find you on the ground, at a service station, far from home – like a little bird with broken wings ...?“

Tobin looked at her again, closer this time. A lot of ink was on her bare arms, flowers and skulls together with kyrillic letters - works of real artists. But the two hearts on her right hand, not more than a thin, shaky line, and the three tiny stars on the inside of her left wrist were amateur stuff – done in prison.

„You doing this ... for a living?“ she asked. „Always on the road?“

The woman laughed. „Here today gone tomorrow, as the song goes,“ she stopped laughing. „Keeps me out of trouble, the road.“ She pushed the truck through the right lane at top speed, passing slower vehicles.

„She your girl?“ she asked suddenly.

Tobin took a deep breath. „What ...?“

The woman laughed. „Saw you at the self service. She ...“

Tobin frowned. „Listen ...“

„You’re in love“, the woman said. „I saw your eyes. You couldn’t take them off her.“

Tobin took a deep breath. „You’re right“, she said. „Lost my wings. She took them with her when she went away.“

The woman sighed. She seemed to be a romantic. „She’s a straight girl, right?“ she said. „She married?“

Tobin felt the heat getting into her cheeks.

The woman didn’t expect an answer. „To be in love with a straight girl ...,“ she said, „Only pain. For you. Not for her. You know ... those things ... the things only the heart can see: she’ll never see them. You’ll never reach her, she’ll never hear you.“ They where closer to the city now and she plowed through the rush hour traffic.

Tobin was tired and cold and even in the heated cabin the chill didn’t go away.

„It’s only a fairy tale...“ the woman suddenly said. She reached out and touched Tobin’s shoulder. „... that love will build a golden bridge and she’ll come rushing over it to you and into your arms.“ She shook her head. „It’s not good to believe in fairy tales.“

Tobin just stared out of the window and into the rain. She didn’t say anything. She was afraid that her voice would give her away. Because this fairy tale ... it was exactly what Tobin so desperately wanted to happen.
Chapter 6

Ash was desperate. She held a kitten in her arm and wanted to feed it because it was so small and hungry and wet, and she was looking for something but she couldn’t find anything, and she was searching cabinets, pulling out drawers, looking everywhere, and there were rooms and rooms and corridors with many more doors multiplying into infinity, and she ...

Ash woke with a start. She was still sitting at the kitchen table, her head resting on the diagram of the crane foundation, and the coffee mug had left a dark ring on it.

„Hey ...“ Ali was smiling. „Feeling better?“

Ash stretched, blinking into the light. „How long ...?“ She was still dizzy, a little embarrassed.

Ali laughed. She was stirring in a pot, her eyes on Ash. „Quite a while. Found you like this when I came in.“

Now Ash was really embarrassed. „Why didn’t you just ...?“

„Couldn’t,“ Ali said, blushing. „You looked so ... cute, like a ... sweet little girl.“ She looked away, busied herself at the cooktop. „Thought you’d be hungry when you wake up.“

„Look,“ Ash shook her head. „You don’t have to do this. Let’s go somewhere nice and have dinner ...“

Ali tasted the soup. „I like to show off my cooking skills, now and then. Not that many people care, but ...“

„I do,“ Ash said.

„I know ...“ Ali put a basket with French bread on the table.

Ash reached for a piece but Ali slapped on her wrist. „The bread goes with the soup! Mind your manners! Or you’ll get no dessert!“

„Sorry – aunt Alexandra ...“ Ash had to laugh.

„Hey ... what’s that?“ Ali looked at the diagram. „That your ship? Crane and crane foundation – what a monster!“

„I think there’s an issue with ...“ Ash hesitated. „I just wondered, you know ... if you could perhaps take a look ...“

„Interesting ...“ Ali came closer, tracing the lines of the diagram with a finger. She took the French bread, ripped off a piece and began to eat. „I think ...“ she said, mouth full of bread „I think I know what your problem is.“ She brushed away a few crumbs.
„Didn’t you say ...“ Ash pointed at the bread.

Ali wasn’t listening.

***

"It's okay,“ Ali said."Definitely. But ..."
She sat at the table, sketching on a paper napkin, an old-fashioned pocket calculator in front of her. "On a ship like your's a foundation like ... this ...“
She made a few bold strokes which undid a thick strand of her hair and she brushed it back behind her ear.
" ... would be better. You see ... the distribution of forces is much improved, especially the shear which happens around here ..."
One more stroke made her bracelets ring.
"And here ... when you operate in the outboard sector ..."

She leaned back taking off her glasses.
"Of course somebody has to do the math. And they should run a computer simulation. They have the equipment at the Damen shipyards. Also the Navy can ..."
Only now she realized that Ash was looking at her, wide-eyed, her lips apart.
"What!?” She was suddenly embarrassed. "You don't like my glasses ...” she lowered her eyes.
"Well, I know they're not pretty, but ..." She stopped, still aware of Ash’s glance.

Ash couldn’t believe what she saw: Ali was so beautiful – like a precious gift which fate had brought to her. And suddenly she was afraid.
“Do you ... really have to be on Outpost when ... ?” Ash bit her lip. She knew how she would react if somebody tried to tell her how to do her job. But ...
“I mean ... I saw the latest weather forecast this morning ... it looks nasty.” She toyed with a spoon.
“It’s just ... I mean ...”

Ali frowned.
“Hey ... we’re professionals, right? And you’ll be doing the same ... I mean, you’ll be out there, on a ship ...”

Ash shook her head.
“No. No way. Believe me: the Aurora’ll sit safely at her berth and I’ll be behind a desk on dry land. I’m not that crazy ...”

Ali touched Ash’s hand.
“Look ... it’s part of my job, okay? And ... I have to take care of two kids, and I’d do anything to ...” She took Ash’s hand.
“But accidentally I like what I do. And I’m good at it. So ...” She smiled suddenly. “As they say: only death, delivery or marriage count for an excuse not to ...”

"Then ... marry somebody," Ash said.

“Somebody?” Ali raised an eyebrow.

Ash leaned back.
“Why, marry me,” she heard herself say. “As long as it keeps you away from ...”

Ali stared, frozen. But suddenly she threw back her head, laughing.
"Now I see through your diabolic scheme, Captain. All you want is a personal chef who can also pimp your ride."
She suddenly reached out, caught Ash's ponytail and pulled hard.

"Ouch!!" Ash tried to get free but Ali pulled even harder until Ash's face was close to her.

"If you were a guy I'd kick you in the you-know-what," Ali whispered into Ash's ear. "Who do you think I am?" She slapped her with the end of the thick tail of blonde hair, but it was more like a caress.

"Let go!" Ash begged.

"You have beautiful hair," Ali said, running her hand along the braid. "Let me ..." She suddenly began to undo the tail.

"Hey! Stop it!" Ash protested. "It took me an hour to ..."

Ali wasn't listening. She shook the hair loose, running her fingers through the blond mane.

"Why don't you ..." she looked at Ash's face while she rearranged the hair until it came down on her shoulders.

"Hey, Miss!" Ash caught Ali's wrist. "I can't command a vessel looking like Barbie on vacation. My ship is not the Pink Camper, you know ..."

Ali got up from her chair. With a few steps she was behind Ash, and Ash felt Ali's fingers slowly moving through her hair.

Ash swallowed hard, breathing deeply. She wanted to jump up, to escape ...

Escape? From what? Where to?

She couldn't move.

She closed her eyes.

"See?" Ali said, her voice soft. Carefully she rearranged the hair. "You could just put a comb here ... and here ... and ..." She looked at the golden swirl, holding it in place. "Yeah ... " she said, talking to herself. "It shows your lovely cheekbones and ..."

Ash's heart was racing. She was helpless.

This can't go on! This has to stop! She thought while at the same time she wanted it to go on forever.

***

They sat in the kitchen and the silence grew heavier with each second.

Then Ali spoke.

"How could you!!" she was slowly shaking her head. "How could you!? What are you?" She said, her voice choked. "Some animal?"

"Look ..." Ash tried to be reasonable. "I just ...

Ali still shook her head.

"It's disgusting ..." She was unable to look at Ash. "People with your tastes should go to jail," she
burst out. "It's against nature! Society should be protected from your kind ..."

"I'm so sorry ..." Ash muttered.

Ali’s shoulders began to shake.

"To put ..." She looked up, tears in her eyes, fighting the laughter. She pointed to the bowl of soup in front of Ash. "To put ketchup on marinated tofu ..." She couldn’t hold back any longer. "Where ...," she panted. "Where are you from ... you silly ..." She hid her face, bending forward.

"Florida," Ash burst out, shaking with laughter.

"That ..." Ali was fighting for air. "That explains a lot ..."

"Wait a minute, Lady ..." Ash panted. "There's nothing wrong with ...

Ali tried to get at least some air into her lungs.

"Well, we are out of tofu, veggi and salmon anyway. So from tomorrow onward it'll have to be microwave pizza. And you can splash as much of the red stuff on it as you like, won't make any difference."

Ash was slowly recovering.

"Actually - it does!" she managed to say. She threw a napkin at Ali to stop her from bursting out again.

Ali wiped away the tears as she tried to smother her laughter.

"In Florida ... perhaps ..." She barely could stay on the chair, her body shaking. "But ... nowhere else ..."

"Oh my g..." Ali suddenly panted, putting a hand over her mouth.

"What?" Ash was gasping.

"I think ... I'm gonna pee myself" Ali wheezed.

Ash suddenly stopped laughing.
She didn’t think. She just did it...

She kissed her, kissed her where jaw and neck met, just under her left ear, following the scent of her skin, her hair ...

Ali had closed her eyes, her lashes trembling.

Ash stopped.

Ali’s eyes where sill closed. She didn’t move.

Okay, Ash thought. That’s it. You blew it. Just couldn’t keep your hands to yourself, Harris. Had to push it, right? Like some lovesick teenage boy.
She searched for words but her mind was flooded with panic: She’d never see her again. Never ever.

But it was Ali who spoke.
Eyes still closed she took a deep breath.
„Why don’t you do it again?“ she whispered.

Suddenly Ash's phone buzzed.
With a start she came back to the present.
What the hell is going on here? She thought. Are you crazy?

She picked up the phone.
"Yeah?" she said. "Harris ..."

Ali watched Ash listen to the voice of the caller. And she saw Ash's face harden.

"'kay," Ash said. "I tell her." She pressed the button and dropped the phone.

"What?" Ali said, all the fun and joy and warmth suddenly gone, leaving her exhausted and cold.

Ash took a deep breath.

***

„Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to HUET, part two: the scary part.“
Tobin Heath was in a wetsuit, a hoodie covering her upper body with something like a college crest printed across the chest.

She stood in front of the group, grinning.
„You already did part one which is taking notes and checking the right boxes. But you should know by now what’s waiting for you here, today ... Helicopter Underwater Escape Training: it's all about the routine in case of a wet crash. In other words, how to save your ass when the heli goes down into the sea.“

Tobin crossed her arms.
„Okay gentlemen. Sorry - ladies and gentlemen.“
She winked at Ali and Ash.
„What you see here is a Sikorsky helicopter without a tail and minus almost everything else but the passenger and the pilot seats. You’ll board the thing, take your seat, and close your safety belt.“

She paused, studied the faces in front of her.
„Then the crane’ll lift the can with you inside and ...“ she paused again for effect. „... drop it into the tank."
She pointed at the water which looked cold, deep, and somehow dirty.
„The heli will sink to the bottom. That’s where the fun part starts."

She cleared her throat.
„For some of you it's the first time, the first of several because you'll have to do this again and again. If you miss a training, you cannot board a heli. If you cannot board a heli, you'll loose your job."

She took a deep breath.
„That’s the bad news. The good news is: we’ll dunk you twice. Second time upside down."

They were lined up close to the edge of the tank which occupied the main part of the Falck training center.
They were in survival suits, inflatable life jackets around their necks and strapped to their bodies - the standard gear for offshore helicopter flights.
Ash looked at Ali.
Her face was pale under the red protection helmet, her lips a thin line.

Uh-oh, Ash thought. Not good. And Heath ... What the hell’s wrong with the girl? Why’s she trying to piss off everybody?

Ash stepped sideways, then squeezed in between the short guy and Ali.
„First time?“ she whispered.

Ali just shook her head, staring at the tank.

Tobin Heath enjoyed the event and her role as the representative of Northern’s air service. „This is also known as the popular show 'Who Panics First' and will be broadcasted nationwide,“ she said. “It's hosted by our much celebrated Mrs Kay Olsson. So give her a big hand, guys.“

Only then Ash realized that Katja Olsson was sitting close to the door, checking messages on her phone. When she heard the clapping and a few catcalls she waved to the group.

Tobin turned around and pointed at the three guys who stood next to the Sikorsky airframe. „Let me now introduce to you our Falck safety instructor, Jens Ole Stensson. And our rescue divers, Torben and Pia.“ Tobin stepped aside. „From here on Jens Ole takes over. And since my certificate is still valid I’ll enjoy the game from the sidelines.”
She smiled her biggest smile.
„Showtime!“

***

Ali was coughing up the water which was still in her throat, almost choking her. She tried to breathe, calm down, but the fear wouldn’t go away. She steadied herself against the tiled wall, desperate not to give way to the incredible weakness which made her knees tremble.

Ash came into the locker room. She hesitated then walked over to Ali and put her arms around her.

Ali began to cry. „I’m so sorry ...“ She could barely speak.

„It’s okay,“ Ash said, holding her.

„It’s always the same ... ,“ Ali whispered. „It’s the cramped space ... I just can’t stand ...“

„Ssssh,“ Ash was rocking her gently. „You did fine. Just relax.“

Ali leaned her head against Ash’s shoulder. „I’m so embarassed ...“ The tears started again.

„Come ...“ Ash gently led her to the wooden bench. Then she opened the straps of Ali’s life jacket and dropped it on the floor. Then she unzipped Ali’s survival suit and began to peel the heavy fabric from her shoulders and arms.

„I’m not a baby ...“ Ali protested. „I can do that myself.“ She began to squirm out of the suit, still weak, but angry now.
Yes, Ash thought. Show your teeth. Better angry than frightened.

Ali furiously yanked away the insulated, waterproof fabric which wouldn’t give, then suddenly stopped, panting. She looked at Ash, calming down, tears still running. „Good you’re here,“ she said. Then she leaned forward and kissed Ash.

„Heeey!!“ Tobin Heath was in the door. Now, close up, Ash saw that the circular pattern on her sweatshirt was not a college crest. It was two girls doing it sixty-nineish. The caption read 'Girls Do It Longer'. „Here you are!“ She winked at Ali. „You bolted from the final event, the Panic Prize presentation."

Ash stared at Heath. She still felt Ali’s kiss, still tasted Ali’s lips, was still dizzy from the fragrance of Ali’s hair and skin.

Tobin came closer, smiling. „How does it feel to be this years winner, Miss Krieger?“

Ash saw Ali’s pale face, felt her body harden. And only then she realized what was going on. „You have two seconds, Heath,“ she said. „Then you’re a dead pilot."

„Well ...“ Tobin raised an eyebrow. „I see that you just don’t appreciate all the effort ...“

„Two!“ Ash said, rising to her full height.

Tobin Heath was already through the door. She stopped, turned. „See you guys later!“ She blew a kiss.

Ash was about to go after her but Ali grabbed her wrist. “Don’t,” she said. “Let her go ...”

Ash still stared at the empty doorframe. „That little piece of ... what’s got into her?”

“She was hurt,” Ali said.


“Don’t you see?” Ali leaned back, still holding Ash’s hand. “Something happened. And now she’s lashing out. She’s desperate ...”

There was a knock on the doorframe.

Katja Olsson came into the locker room. She was in high heels and carefully avoided the wet puddles.

So why don’t you stay outside if you’re afraid of water? Ash thought, still angry. And no one invited you anyway.

„You girls okay?“ She came to the bench and sat down beside Ali. „Nothing to feel bad about,“ Katja Olsson said, gently brushing a few strands of Ali’s wet hair from her cheek. „It’s scary stuff they do here."

She opened her briefcase. „Here,“ she said.

„Thanks.“ Ali took the tissue and blew her nose.
“Listen,” Olsson said. „There’s a party ... tonight. My place. I’d like you to come over. Booze, grub, socializing. Sorry for the short notice, but since you’re the new kids you should start meeting people as soon as possible."

„Well,” Ash grumbled. „I’d rather ...“

Katja Olsson smiled.
„If you don’t come, you’re sacked,” she said.

„A party?” Ali wiped away her tears. “Why?”

„My birthday,” Katja Olsson said.

***

They were standing outside the Falck building in the sun looking at the huge clouds coming in from the sea.

Ali was hugging her daypack, still shaken up.
And it broke Ash’s heart to see her like that.
„Listen,“ she said, softly touching Ali’s cheek. „Let’s get back to the flat, okay? I think we need a nice hot shower and a coffee.“

Ali frowned.
„On this?” She pointed with her head to Ash’s BMW motorbike.

„Why not?” Ash said. „There’s nothing to it. You’ll like it!“

„I’ve no helmet ...“ Ali stared at the bike as if it was something that ate female marine engineers.

„There’s a spare one.“ Ash pointed to the boxes at the rear of the bike. „Should be okay for you.“

Ali made a step backwards and shook her head.
„I’ll take a taxi.“

„You mean ...“ Ash was confused. „You mean you ... have no problem to be on a heap of junk like the Outpost rigs in a gale, but you are afraid to take a ride on a high tech piece like this?“

Ali shrugged.
„Outpost doesn’t move on two wheels ...“

„Outpost Alpha has only one leg!“ Ash said.

Ali smiled.
„On Outpost A there’s no crew. It’s fully automated!“

Ash grinned.
“See? That’s what smart guys do: stay away from trouble, far away, at a place dry and safe ...”

Ali chuckled.
“... and don’t ride on nuclear powered megabikes.”

Ash gently touched her arm.
„Some other time,“ she said.

„Some other time,“ Ali agreed. „Perhaps."

„Hey! You know what?“
Ash laughed.
„You call your cab, I get on my bike.“ She winked. „And ... who’s first in the flat is first in the shower, okay?“
Tobin walked across the parking lot fumbling for her phone.

„Heath ...“ She tried to open her car while holding on to her bag and the mobile.

„Tobs, darling ...“ Sweet Agnetha, the queen of Air Service Administration, also known as The Sexiest Girl North of 58th Parallel. „How are things?“ Women hated her, guys worshipped the ground she walked on. Her voice matched her looks: the purr of a lazy cat.

Tobin pushed her bag into the car.

„'Neetha ...“ She slipped into the driver seat then changed the phone to the other hand and shut the door. „What's up?“

„Please open your little red notebook, Tobs. Take your pencil and write: next coming Monday, eight a.m., Mrs Mac to be carried on golden wings to Oslo. Got it?“

Tobin throat was suddenly tight. „Listen, 'Neetha … let somebody else fly the chopper, will you?“

„Tobs, sweetheart … she keeps coming back to me – just to make sure it's you who's flying the chopper."

To do what? Tobin thought. Give me a second round of abuse?

„'Neetha ...please!“ Tobin felt her heart race. „Tell her … I'm sick. Burned out. Lost my licence. Whatever. Just get her off my back, will you?“

„Look, Tobs - what she's telling me, essentially, is: she can't live without you and if she can't get you as her pilot ... she'll raise hell. So ...“
Tobin shook her head. „Forget it! Tell her I left the country. Tell her I'm dead! Tell her ...“

„Tobin – she needs to go to Oslo! She's chairing this Refugee Aid thing and ...“

„Tell her to get into her fucking Cayenne and DRIVE to fucking Oslo!“ Tobin turned the key. The V8 came to life with a growl. „Tell her to get a train ticket! Tell her to WALK!!“

„But Tobs ... you're the VIP chopper pilot. It's ... well ... your job to ...“

Tobin revved the engine.

„I quit! You hear me? I quit!“ She pushed the button and threw her phone on the back seat. She shifted into reverse and stepped on it.

The V8 pushed the car backwards with a deafening roar, tyres screeching.

It slammed into a garbage container.

„Shit!!“ Tobin hit the wheel with both hands. „Shit, shit!!“ She wanted to shift into forward, but somebody opened the door, reached into the car and pulled the key. And in the sudden silence Tobin heard her ears ring and her heart throb.

Katja Olsson stood beside the car, arms crossed, holding the car keys.

„Get rid of your pink suicide machine,“ she said. „One day it'll kill you."

And suddenly Tobin's rage was gone, leaving her drained, panting. She could just stare.

Katja Olsson stared back.

„When you come to my party tonight, you'll NOT come in ... this.“ Olsson pointed to Tobin's hoody with the caption 'Girls Do It Longer'. „Or in your overall. Or in whatever your idea of appropriate clothing is.“ She held Tobin's eyes. „You'll dress like the pretty woman you are. And you'll bring somebody. Somebody nice who keeps you from pissing off people."

Tobin wanted to say something but had no idea what.

„And coming Monday,“ Olsson said, „coming Monday you'll carry Mrs Mac to Oslo and back. And you'll be polite, efficient and professional."

Tobin felt cold, weak and embarrassed.

„I can't hear you,“ Katja Olsson said.

Tobin nodded.

„Was that a 'Yes'?“

„Yes ...“ Tobin's throat was dry.

Katja Olsson shrugged.

„Didn't want to listen in on your call. But you yelled like mad ...“ She came to the car and bent down until her mouth was close to Tobin's ear. „Sort out your love life,“ she whispered and put the keys into Tobin's hand.
Then she walked away, her heels klicking.

Fuck you Olsson! Tobin leaned back and closed her eyes. Then she felt the tears.

Shit! She thought, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand, but they kept coming.

Bring somebody nice? She searched for a tissue. I'll give you nice!

She grabbed her phone, scrolled through the phone book entries, the numbers suddenly blurring, and she wiped her eyes while she listened to the dialling sound.

„Hey … little bird!“ A voice with a Russian accent. „Grounded again? Need a ride?“

„Alina …?“ Tobin cleared her throat.

„You crying, little bird?“

„No, it's just the ... Listen, Alina ...“ Tobin blew her nose. „You still in town?“

„Yep,“ Alina said. „Still waiting to get my cargo. Hear that custom's crawling all over my truck, searching for drugs.“

I'll give you nice, Olsson! Tobin thought. Meet Alina, the girl with a prison record, Urka tattoos all over her, a girl who likes to wear boots and camo pants, probably swallows booze like water, probably's into trafficking drugs for the Mafia: just perfect.

Tobin took a deep breath. „Would you like to go to a party?“

„A party?“ Alina was delighted. „Sure! When?“

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Ash tiptoed into the living area.

Nobody there. Good.

She had arrived long after Ali because, ignoring the GPS, she had taken the wrong exit and hadn’t found her way back to the main road. She looked for her phone, fetched it from the chair, then listened.

She heard the water running. She smiled. What if she simply stepped into the shower and joined sweet Ali as if that was the normal procedure ... ? Cut it out, Harris! She thought. Don’t even think of it.

Then Ash heard the voices.

„Who’s she?“

„She’s her girlfriend.“

„Woah! I like her tits ... And all the ink! Faces and plants and ... stuff!“

Ash turned. Ali's laptop was on the table, open, and she looked at what seemed to be a Skype
window. She saw huge glasses, a nose distorted by a webcam into something very big, the face of a
guy.

„Who are you?“ the guy asked.

„She’s fucking her, sure as hell.“ Another voice. „Are you fucking her?“

„Shut up, Dude!“ The voice of a girl. „You’re disgusting.“

Ash was speechless.

„Gorgeous legs!“ The guy called Dude popped up on the screen, mainly a mop of yellow hair
and a suntan. „Say – do you also do guys or are you girls only ...? Just curious. Maybe we run into
each other one day and ...“

„You’re a sexist pig, Dude,“ the girl said.

„Sexist pig yourself,“ Dude snapped.

„I’m a girl,“ the voice said. „Girls can’t be sexist pigs.“

„I could say a lot against that proposition ...“ another voice cut in.

„And my boobs are bigger,“ the girl said.

Ali came into the room. Her XXL t-shirt showed a bare shoulder and almost every inch of her
legs. She briefly glanced at the laptop.

„Just ignore them,“ she said.

„What the hell ...“ Ash had found her voice again.

„Hi Kriegs!“ the group shouted. „Look good, Kriegy! Show us more skin, Kriegs. Just a peek!“

„Shit!“ Ash suddenly realized that she was naked, just holding on to a towel and a phone. She
wrapped the towel around her hips.

„Hey, Kriegs!“ A guy nicked ’Duffy’ appeared on the screen. „Saw the weather report?“ He held
up a picture showing a huge wave. „It’s coming, Kriegy! And it’s coming after you!“

„You really want to go out there and meet the monster??“ It was Dude again.

„Sure she will!“ The girl's voice. „She's Wonder Woman. She saves the world!“

Ali walked towards the laptop.

„Nobody invited you,“ she said. „Get off my machine - now!“ She clicked the shutdown button,
but the computer didn’t react.

„We invited ourselves!“ the guy with the nick ’BotNet’ declared.

Ali hit the OFF key and the screen went blank – and came back again.

Ash only stared.

Ali closed the laptop.
„Hey!“ a voice whined. „That's unfair!“

„Fuck yourself,“ Ali said.

Silence.

„We are still here,“ a voice whispered.

„Just let us listen when you two ... go down on each other, okay?“ The voice of Dude.

Ali fetched the laptop and slipped it into a plastic bag. Then she opened the door of the freezer and stuffed it on top of milk and cheese. She slammed the door shut.

„What the hell was that?“ Ash was still pale.

„Them?“ Ali shrugged. „Just the Nerds. Don’t bother.“ She smiled. „Shower’s free,“ she said, running a fingertip along Ash’s tattoos. „Oh,“ she added. „And that’s my towel.“

She pulled it away. Then she walked to her room.

„What …?“ Ash grabbed something to cover herself with and went after Ali, through the door and into the corridor.

She followed Ali to her room while trying to make a knot into a very small red and white table cloth.

„Listen ...“ The door was only half closed and Ash was about to push it open and ... She froze - and was back in the corridor.

Ali was naked, and what Ash had seen was simply breathtaking. Ash leaned against the wall, head spinning.

„Sorry,“ she muttered. She cleared her throat. „I mean ...“ she had to clear it again. „I mean ... will I have to live with ... them ... while we are here?“

„Just don’t bother!“ Ali was rummaging in the closet. „They’re just ... kids.“

Ash closed her eyes. Her heart was beating hard and fast. Ash had seen the naked body of a lot of girls, but Ali ...

„You know ... they're CalTec and MIT. They're just having fun ...“ She heard Ali dig into her suitcase. „A few years ago I wrote a research paper ... waves, you know, the big ones .. what they call Rogue Waves ...“ Ali opened the sliding doors of the wardrobe.

„I ... came up with an idea how to predict them - if we had all the data from all the oceans ... predict height, frequency ... a lot of math ...“ She pushed hangers aside.

„The kids ... they found the stuff on the internet. You know how kids are ... Rogue Waves, striking out of the blue, with no reason at all, the big mystery ... They turned my math into computer code ... and ...“ Something fell to the floor. „Shit!“ Judging from her voice Ali was now under the table, picking up things.

„Anyway ... they decided to be my fans and followers and ... they're telling everybody that they can predict the next hit and ...“

Ash tried to concentrate. „You mean they can tell ...?“
“They say the oilfields, the Outpost rigs, will be hit by a Big One within the next two to three weeks … with very high probability.“

Her throat tight, Ash tried to think clearly but was still behind, just couldn't take her thoughts off Ali's body.

“...they can predict the next hit? And they say that Outpost ...?”

Ali laughed. „Don't be silly. There's no way to predict Rogue Waves … that's why they're called well ...rogue.” Apparently she was back from under the table. „They think it's funny, you know, to scare me a little bit. For them it's just a ... a big Halloween Party, complete with Tales of Terror and hijacking my laptop and ...“

Ash's head was spinning. She tried to get rid of the image which which dominated her thoughts: Ali, close to window, the sudden burst of sunlight, her naked body almost golden ...

„What are you doing out there?“ Ali stood in the doorway. „Just come in! I don't want to talk to you having to shout all the time!“ She was in bra and panties, the bra still open, straps dangling, and she had to hold it in place, gently cupping her breasts with both hands. She was so close that Ash could feel the warmth of her body.

„You like it?“ Ali looked down at the lingerie. „London,“ she said mistaking Ash's stare for a question. „The shop at Mayfair. I just ... had to get in and ... buy something.“ She giggled. „Pathetic, isn't it? The name alone: Aubade – like a little piece of Paris!“ She turned. „Would you ...?“ She lowered her eyes.

Ash reached out, and, fingers trembling, closed the tiny clasp of the bra. Then, gently, she slid each strap over Ali's shoulders.

Ali smiled, pushing her hair back, adjusting the cups with her palms. „Come ...“ She took Ash's hand, pulled her into the room.

Ash followed as if in trance, her eyes on Ali's back: long muscles moving under the skin, the perfect curve of her butt ...

„Sit down,“ Ali said, patting the edge of the bed. „I have to hurry. There's a meeting in an hour. Head of engineering, lot of technicians. Video link with diving support."

Ali took two pantyhoses from a drawer.

„Nude or black? What do you think ...? Ali held them up, looking over her shoulder. „That what a professional should wear? I mean ... “

Ash cleared her throat. As far as she was concerned Ali could wear rags – or better: nothing.

„I'm not a meeting guy, you know ...“

Ali smiled. „Rule one,“ she said. „No skin. So ...“ She dropped the nude one, then sat on the bed across from Ash. She slipped one foot into the pantyhose, wriggling her toes. Then, slowly, she rolled the pantyhose up her leg, checking for runners.

Ash took a deep breath when Ali slipped into the other leg and carefully smoothed it with both hands over her knee and thighs. It wasn't that she was simply beautiful, perfect ... There was something else, something which made Ash want to hold her, so close that what was so very special about Ali would become part of her ...
Ali walked to the closet. She took out two pairs of shoes, one in each hand.

„Left or right?“ She asked.

„What?“ Ash stared: A pair of black high heels, a pair of flats.

„Okay,“ Ali said. She stepped into the black pumps „What do you think? Too much of ‘fuck me’?“ She looked down, showing off her feet, her hair falling over her face, like a veil. She giggled, looked at Ash from under her hair.

„Not what I should wear at a meeting, right? More what I should wear … when ...“ She stopped, suddenly nervous, as if aware of Ash for the first time. She kicked the pumps away and walked to the table close to the window. She sat down in front of the mirror and put on her glasses.

„I hate this ...“ Ali muttered. „Too much effort for a bunch of ...“

She searched for a brush, choose a lipstick, pushed it out, dipped the brush into the paint and slowly, carefully, drew the it across the full flesh of her lips, the brush slightly pressing into it ... And suddenly Ash wanted to feel those lips between her teeth and gently, tenderly, pinch them, softly, not to hurt - or maybe just a little, just enough to show her how much she was longing for her ...

In the mirror Ali watched Ash watching her. She saw Ash's face … and what she saw made her blush.

Their eyes met and Ali looked away, cheeks burning.

She ripped a tissue from the box, almost irritated by Ash's attention, blotted her lips. She fetched the hairbrush, fingers trembling. Clumsily she began to pull at her tangled hair.

„Let me ...“ Ash came to her and took the brush and slowly ran it through Ali's dark mane, still warm from the hairdryer.

Ali closed her eyes and leaned back.

And while Ash worked her way through Ali's hair she couldn't stop looking at Ali's breasts, rising and falling when she began to breathe faster, her nipples suddenly pushing against the cups of the bra ...

„There's a white blouse in the wardrobe …“ Ali said, a little breathless.

Ash put the brush back. She opened the sliding doors and found it, new, crisp, on a hanger.

„Yes, that's it …“ Ali said. She rose from the chair.

Ash held the blouse and Ali slipped into it. She buttoned her blouse, leaving one button open.

Ash turned Ali around. She followed the curve of her throat with a finger. Then she opened one more button.

„Two?“ Ali frowned, looking down, a strand of hair falling over her face. She brushed it back.

Ash nodded. „They won't mistake you for a slut just because … trust me."

Ali smiled. „There's a box on the table,“ she said. „Would you … I mean … I'm not really good
Ash opened the jewelry box: A choker of white perls lay on a blue velvet cushion. She put it aside.

She lifted the cushion and … Yesss! She thought. The neck ring was made of silver, solid, cool, like a piece of moonlight ... She took it from the box.

„You really think …?“ Again Ali pushed back the strand of hair. „I don't know. I mean … I've never used it before ... Isn't it a bit … ?“ She swallowed hard. She closed her eyes. And, lashes trembling, let Ash put the circle of metal around her neck.

„Open your eyes“, Ash said.


„Do you … “ Ali's voice was barely more than a whisper. „I mean, do you … like it?“

Ash smiled.

„Perfect,” she said.

Ali blushed even deeper.

She rose from the chair and took her black skirt from the bed. She stepped into it, steadying herself against Ash. She wanted to pull up the zipper, but Ash did it for her, standing so close that Ali felt her breath on her neck.

She put on the flats, then slipped into her black jacket.

„Oh ...“ She fetched her her briefcase, opened it. „Where's … ? Here!“ She held up a business card. „Katja gave it to me. I'm sure you'll find something nice for tonight.“

Ash just stared.

Ali laughed. „You don't want to show up at your boss's birthday party in jeans and biker jacket, right?“

Ash took a deep breath. The party! She simply hadn't thought about dresscode. In fact she had forgotten about the whole bloody show!

Ali came closer.

„Just drop by when you go to your ship. I'd just love to come with you but ...“ Suddenly she looked at her watch. „Gawd! I've to hurry! Taxi's due in ...“ She turned away from Ash. „There's still a lot to coordinate, and tomorrow I'll go to the platform and ...“

Ash pulled Ali towards her, and there was no resistance, and suddenly their lips were close, so close that they almost touched.

Almost.

And then Ali put a finger between Ash's breasts, exactly where she felt Ash's racing heart, then brushed over the smooth, taut surface of her belly, slightly dipping into her navel, moved on, downwards ...
Ash knew she should do something, regain control, but couldn’t.

Ali touched the the ridiculously tiny table cloth and it just fell to the floor. And suddenly Ash was aware that she was naked, her nipples hard, burning, aware that she was … wet. She felt Ali's eyes on her, felt her fingers continue the journey - just a little further …

The door buzzer was loud, almost menacing.

Ash's voice was raw. „The taxi...“

The buzzer again and again. Impatient.

Ali looked into Ash's eyes. „Thank you,“ she whispered. „For letting me touch you … “

Ash softly kissed Ali's cheek, careful not to ruin the makeup. „You must go“, she said.

The door buzzer went off, two, three times, angry now.

„Go, Wonder Woman!“ Ash smiled. „Save the world!“

Ali grabbed her Parka, the briefcase. She walked to the door. Hand on the doorknob she stopped, turned.

„See you at the party,“ she said. Then she was gone.
Daylight was fading and the two starboard windows no longer showed the clouds but the evening sky, dark blue like velvet. Ash switched on the desk lamp. She browsed through the safety report concerning the larger of the two winches and made notes in the margin.

The pone buzzed.

„Coleman and Poulsson, estate agents.“ The voice of a woman. „Mrs Harris … Captain Harris?“

„Yeah,“ Ash said. „That's me.“

„I'm Elin Bjömsdottir, Captain. Katja Olsson of Northern informed us that you're looking for an apartment. And that you'd need it for a period of about two to three years …?“

„That's right,“ Ash said.

„Okay,“ Apparently the woman browsed through a file. „We have two very nice flats I'd like to show you and I'm calling to make an appointment so we can meet and ...“

„Sure.“ Ash checked the diary on her smartphone. „I'll be at sea for the next few days, so ...“

„No problem, Captain. We can hold the apartments for you and I call again end of week.“

„Great!“ Ash was exited. „Talk to you then.“

She scanned the phone book, hit the dial button.

„This is Alexandra Krieger. Right now I'm not available, but I'll call you back as soon as possible. You can leave a message ...“

Daltry came through the door. „You busy, Cap?“

Ash put the phone down. „Come in“, she said. She wanted to push back her ponytail. Only it was no longer there. Instead there was big golden swirl, held in place by three combs.

„Nice, your hair,“ Daltry said. He slapped a stack of forms on her desk.

What next? Ash thought. Bosun telling me how much he likes my pretty overall? Electrician complimenting me on my life jacket? She was about to snap at her first mate but thought better of it.

„Easier to take care of“, she muttered while she angrily slashed her signature across the bottom of each paper.

„Loading’ll start seven o'clock„ Daltry said. „Departure scheduled for nine thirty. Coastal Pilot’s expected nineish.“

Ash nodded, signing the last forms. No free booze tonight, she thought. And only a few hours bedtime.

„The other thing ...“ Daltry dug into his back pocket. „Made a few calls. They say she’s hooked on that stuff. They sell it here ...“ Daltry handed her a business card. „Import from Switzerland. Expensive. I can send one of the guys to get a box for you if you want.“
„Thanks,“ she said. „That'd be great.“

„Oh ...“, Daltry was about to leave but stopped. „They brought the ... things ... you bought, you know ... It’s all in your cabin. They say they couldn’t make all the changes in such short time, but you’ll look gorgeous in it anyway ...“ He cleared his throat. „’s what they said.“

„Okay, okay,“ Ash felt embarrassed but why? Because Daltry and the crew had a captain who went shopping for a party outfit? Can’t go to Olsson in my overall, right? she told herself.

„Capt’n ...“ Daltry left the bridge.

When Ash was alone she leaned back and took a deep breath.

Truth is ... she thought. Truth is you want to look good because ... she felt her heartbeat change. Because of ...

The phone!

She saw Ali's number.

„Hey ...“ She smiled as if Ali could see her. „How're things?“

„Blah, blah, blah ...“ Ali sounded tired. And pissed. „You wouldn't believe what kind of bullshit ...“ She sighed. „Hey ...“ she said. „Good to hear your voice.“

„Listen,“ Ali leaned back. She swiveled in her chair. „Believe it or not but Katja fixed me up with an estate agent, and they called, and they have a couple of apartments which they want to show me and ... isn't it just great? I mean ...“

There was silence.

„Oh ...“ Suddenly Ali voice seemed to come from far away. „You ... gonna move out. Place of your own ... good."

Silence again.

And Ash knew that she had made a big mistake.

„I ...“ she searched for the right words, the words she needed to ... undo what she just now had done. „I'd love you to come with me ... and look at the ... you know ...“

She stopped, then listened.

„Sorry,“ Ali said after what seemed to be an eternity, and she was so far away now that Ash felt ... cold. „I've to hurry. Next meeting, guys are waiting ... See you later.“

The phone went dead.

Ash closed her eyes.

She still felt the cold, and now she knew that what touched her like ice was Ali's loneliness, knew now that a minute ago she had made that lonely girl even lonelier than before.

She grabbed the phone, pushed Redial.

„This is Alexandra Krieger. Right now I'm not available, but I'll call you back as soon ...“
Ash dropped the phone.

For a moment anger flared up.

Why didn't she just tell me how … stupid I am! Why doesn't she just say that she wants me to stay and …

You stupid fuck up! she screamed at herself. She did! Many times … not with words, but … And instead to give her all the tenderness you have you just told her that you can't wait to get away from her.

And suddenly there seemed to be something in her chest which felt like a rock.

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Olsson came to the door. „Good you're here, Captain,“ she said. She wore a plain black dress which must have cost a fortune. It revealed every bit of her body plus most of her legs. She walked on the high heels as if she had been born in them, and with every step her long hair heaved and shifted.

„Thanks for inviting me,“ Ash handed the tiny package to Olsson. „And happy birthday, Boss.“

Olsson smiled. „Is it what I think it is?“ She took the package, carefully, as if it could break.

Ash nodded.

Olsson kissed Ash’s cheek.

„I'm your's forever, Captain!“ She stepped back pulling Ash with her. „Come in, Captain. Meet the rest. And by the way: You look stunning! Where did you get this … tuxedo-like … it's so … Yves Saint …“ Her eyes were shining.

The apartment was packed with people, and Ash was looking for the one familiar face, Ali's face, but the faces Ash saw were the faces of strangers.

She didn't come! The thought turned her stomach into a hard knot. That silly … just because of a few … stupid … words ...

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The pilot was just gorgeous. Her clothes were precisely calculated to match her boyish features: a Tang jacket, the high Mandarin collar almost touching the huge earrings, black trousers, strappy heels showing off her polished toenails.

„Wow!“ Ash said, taking the stool next to Tobin at the improvised bar.
„You making a pass at me, Harris?“ The pilot gently touched the tip of Ash’s nose.

„I’m not sure,“ Ash said, smiling. „Could be ...“

Tobin studied Ash’s outfit. „Dangerous,“ she said. „On you it’s something to make girls desperately fall in love ... Hearts will be broken tonight.“ She raised her bottle.

Ash raised her glass. „So ... you’re the beer-from-a-bottle type?“

„Glass is too much effort,“ Tobin said. „An unnecessary element in a basically simple line of events. Cheers.“ She took a swig. „Nice what you did with your hair.“

„Easier to take care of,“ Ash said automatically.

„Hah!“ Heath grinned. „I’d rather say it’s the influence of a certain ultra – and I mean ULTRA! – feminine roommate who happens to hold a marine engineering degree ...“

„What are you talking about?“ Ash shook her head. „Ultra what? You don’t even know her, besides scaring her to death and then pissing her off!“

„Do I know her?“ Heath’s grin widened. „DO I KNOW HER??“

Ash saw Tobin look towards the buffet and she turned to look, too.

Her heart leaped

Ali was talking to Katja Olsson, and while Katja pointed out the specialties to her she put a bit of this and one of that on Ali’s plate, even fed her a tiny piece of what looked like caviar on toast.

Ali looked beautiful. It wasn’t because of her dress – a simple, elegant thing; it was because ... Ali herself was beautiful.

Ash didn’t know what to do. So beautiful, so easy to hurt ... Go over! She thought. Get her away from Olsson! Talk to her! Tell her that ... She didn’t.

The two were chatting, like lifelong friends, Ali touching Olsson’s earring, and Olsson taking Ali’s hand, holding it, looking into Ali’s eyes ...

„Wave to her!“ Tobin said. „Come on!“

Ash pretended not to look. She rolled her eyes when Tobin waved, blowing Ali a kiss.

„If you don’t want her, I take her,“ Tobin said. „That is if I’m fast enough. Looks as if Olsson is about to pull her between the sheets.“

Olsson? Katja Olsson? Jealousy suddenly stabbed through Ash’s body like a rapier.


„She’s into guys and girls, if you ask me,“ Tobin said as if reading her thoughts. „Yeah. That would be like her. Why settle for one half if you can have it all? Take what’s on offer.“ Tobin took another swig.
Ash pushed away her glass. „You're a sick individual, Heath. You know that?“

„I can picture them, easily.‟ Tobin said without paying attention to Ash. „The gorgeous girl and her boss, she going down on her, Olsson grabbing her hair, guiding her to all the sweet places ...“

Ash covered her ears. „I can’t hear you,“ she said.

Tobin came closer. „... to all the sweet juicy places ...“

„Blah, blah, blah,“ Ash said, pressing her palms even tighter against her ears. „I can’t hear you! Blah, blah, blah!“

Tobin Heath grinned, moved her face close to Ash’s, then, slowly, she crossed her eyes. When she had Ash’s full attention she parted her lips let her tongue slip out, slightly curling the tip ...

Ash squeezed her eyes shut.

That stupid Heath!

Suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder. When she opened her eyes, Tobin was gone. And Ali sat on the bar stool next to Ash.

„You belong to the guys who think if they close their eyes and stop their ears, nobody can see them?‟ She shook her head. „Believe a girl with an engineering degree: it doesn’t work.‟ She ate from a cracker then put it away. „The say salt helps against headache. Doesn't work either.‟

Ash cleared her throat, suddenly feeling very stupid. „You ... okay?“

„My head ...“ Ali closed her eyes for a moment. „Too many people, too much noise. But I think it's still The Tank, you know. Too much dirty water, if you ask me ...“

Ash said what came to her mind, just to say something, and because she didn't dare to do what she desperately wanted to do: take Ali in her arms.

„Katja ... you two seem to get along pretty well ...“

„She’s so nice!“ Ali said. „And funny. And isn’t she gorgeous? I mean: look at her dress! And those heels! They cost a fortune!“

To hell with Olsson, Ash thought. She didn't want to talk about Olsson.

„Look ...“ she started. „I ...“

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Tobin came back, holding two glasses.

„Get lost, Harris,“ she said. She squeezed herself between the two. „I want to be alone with the lady.‟

Ash groaned. She suddenly felt the urge to break Tobin in half like a toothpick.
Two minutes!” She raised two fingers, then pointed one at Tobin, imitating a gun. „I need to wash my hands anyway. When I come back – you'll be gone."

Tobin shrugged. „Sure, Marshal Earp.“ She placed a drink in front of Ali. It was the color of blue neon with a pink float. Attached to the straw was a cardboard heart on which she had scribbled the word SORRY.

Ali stared at the drink then at Tobin. „I’m really mad at you!“

„Can’t blame you,“ Tobin said.

„You know…“ Ali played with the straw. „I just can’t stand being in confined spaces …“

„Don’t I know what you’re talking about?“ Tobin said with a sigh. „First time I did escape training I almost drowned. Couldn’t find the way out, you know. I was knocking about, blind with fear and couldn’t even find the EBS air tank … the divers had to get me.„ She turned to Ali and softly kissed her cheek. „I’m really sorry. I have a talent to piss people off. I know.“

„Thanks for this,“ Ali said, stirring the drink with the straw. „What is it?“

„Some atomic Mint Curacao … I think. “ Tobin took a sip. „Minus booze for me. I have to fly the bus tomorrow …“

„Are you with somebody?“

Tobin pointed with her head towards the buffet.

Ali craned her neck.

„Heyyy! Who’s she? Look at her black cocktail dress … a classic! And she’s a looker! The short hair …“

Tobin glared at Alina who talked to Katja Olsson.

„Truck driver“, she said.

„You're kidding!“

„Thought … would be fun to add some … flavor from the road to this … extravaganza.“ Tobin shook her head. „But look at her. What's the world come to if Russian truck drivers are just It-girls in disguise…“ Tobin stirred her drink and watched the float dissolve. „Say … you wear a bra?“

„Excuse me??“ Ali stared at the pilot.

„I don’t,“ Tobin said. „Nothing to hold, nothing to push. That’s my fate - no tits, small ass, too much muscle: teenage boy with a cunt. Cheers.“ She sucked at the straw.

Ali raised her hand as if to slap Tobin. „You’re so pretty. And you know it. And you just want to make me say it!“

Tobin grinned. „And now look at that lady’srack,“ she said, pointing to Katja Olsson. „No wonder there was nothing left for me. Would be like her to grab my share as well.“

Ali was trying not to laugh. „Keep your voice down,“ she said. „You can’t…“

Tobin pretended to get off the bar stool. „Lady!“ She reached out to Katja Olsson who was now at
the far end of the living area, chatting with people. „Half of what’s jiggling in your J-cups is mine! I want it back! It belongs here!“ Tobin began to unbutton her Tang jacket.

Ali was shaking with laughter. „Stop it!“ She grabbed Tobin's arm and pulled her back. „She’s our boss! Are you crazy??“

Katja Olsson, not knowing what was going on, waved.

Ali waved back, blushing, giggling.

Tobin sat down and stared into her empty glass. She toyed with the cardboard heart on her straw.

„I’m in love ...“ she said. „The girl kicked me badly ... but I'm in love. Just can't help it. But ... what chance do I have to ... „

Ali gently touched Tobin’s cheek.

„You’ll get your girl,“ she said. „And you know why?“ She smiled. „Who can resist a pilot?“

„Yeah“, Tobin hit the bar top with her fist. „Right. We are the masters of the universe. We say fuck gravity and all that. We turn thin air into a highway, we make straight girls go queer ...“ She stopped. She looked to the entrance where Katja Olsson talked to a group of new guests. „Shit!“ she hissed. „She's here ...“

„Who?“ Ali couldn't follow. „Who's here?“

„She!!!“ Tobin tried to hide behind Ali.

„She - who? Oh, yes, sorry. where?“ Ali searched the room. „Oh, there, oh! OH MY ...! That a dress? It barely covers ... but on her it’s ... cute!!“

„Don't stare! She's not alone!! She's trailing the big Angus ...“ Tobin hissed. „I don't want to ... shit! She's looking!“

„What?“ Ali tried to understand what was going on.

„I better ...“ Tobin looked left and right.

„Did I miss something?“ Ali frowned. „I mean ... I thought ...“

Tobin slipped off the bar stool. „You haven't see me ... okay? If somebody asks ... you haven't ...“

„But ...“ Ali had no idea what this was about.

Tobin was gone.

Then somebody touched her arm and she turned.

„Here you are!“ Katja Olsson smiled. „Come ...“ She took her hand. „I have something for your headache.“

***
Ash stopped at the table which was in front of the window. The birthday presents piled high. She saw a golf iron, a card attached: 'Next Saturday again? Angus.'

Well, better take care she doesn’t split your skull with it, Angus! Ash smiled at her thought.

Then she saw the orchid. An explosion of colors, carefully arranged in the middle of the display. Ash frowned. Ali! She didn't want to but she took the card, turned it and read, 'Happy Birthday, Katja. Thanks for everything. Ali.'

Everything what? Ash thought. She dropped the card as if it was hot.

She looked to the bar. No Tobin. And no Ali.

She scanned the room.

Ali and Katja Olsson were walking to the staircase which led to the second floor. And Ash watched as they climbed the stairs, watched Katja putting an arm around Ali's waist, then brush away Ali's hair from her ear and then, leaning closer to her, talk to her, lips almost touching her cheek, watched them disappear.

Without knowing she gritted her teeth.

Then she saw her gift box: ripped open, half of the Swiss chocolate gone. So glad you like it, Boss! Ash thought. And now you think you gonna swallow … her, too? And you think I don't mind? No, Ash thought. You don't think about it at all. And if: you just don't give a shit.

And suddenly she realized how much she wanted to be with Ali.

Without thinking she crossed the room and walked to the stairway, pushing through the groups of guests, ignoring a guy who, apparently encouraged by a lot of drinks, suggested something to her which sounded, even in Norwegian, not very tempting.

She hesitated when she reached the stairway, hand on the rail.

Don't, she said to herself. you'll regret it.

***

The din of partying had faded away with each step she had made. And now Ash stood at the top of stairs in a large, silent room with a glass front which opened towards the roof terrace. She turned, saw white leather club chairs, a fireplace, saw paintings on the walls. She was attracted by the light from a door ajar and walked towards it, her heart suddenly racing. She came closer, peered through the opening.

She saw a mirror, body length, curtained windows, a wall to wall carpet, a dresser …

She hesitated again, palms wet. She stood, listened to the silence.

Her fingers trembled when she touched the door.

Don't, she said to herself. Just walk away. Now.
She pushed the door open.

“Isn't it beautiful?” The voice came from close behind her. „Look at the bed. Too good to just sleep in it, right?”

Ash stared at the empty bed. Then at the woman behind her.

“I just couldn't resist,” the woman said. „I had to come up here and look … “ She smiled. „I'm Alina.“

Ash smiled back, suddenly relieved. „I'm Ash“, She said. „And yes,“ she lied. „Couldn't resist either.“

Alina wore a short black cocktail dress with long sleeves which fitted like a second skin. She was barefoot, a pair of black pumps dangling from her left hand. „You know what?” she said. „I wonder what the bathroom's like … let's have look ..“

She turned.

And Ash stared at the long, v-shaped slit from neck to butt, not only showing that Alina didn't need a bra but also revealing a breathtaking Japanese koi tattoo, a pattern of undulating lines and blazing colors.

„Like your hair,” Ash said. „I'm toying with idea to wear it like your's.“

The woman smiled, running her palm over the crew cut which was dyed almost white. Then she touched Ash's swirl. „But your hair's great,“ she said. „I love it when a girl wears it long.“ She took Ash's hand. „So, lets find out where and how Katja takes a bath.“

Ash laughed. „You sound as if … you'd like to join her …“

„Do I?“ Alina held on to Ash's hand. „You shocked? No, you aren't. “

„What makes you think she …?“

„Don't know./ Alina said. „But … isn't it all about finding out? I mean it's part of the fun, right? And Don't tell me you haven't thought about …“ She winked. „She's a … real woman. Strong. Dangerous. To make her …“

„Take care she doesn't make you …“ Ash said.

„Who knows./ Alina smiled. „Come on,“ she said. „Bathroom must be over there.“ She pointed to a door. „Just one look. Perhaps I should write something on the mirror, what do you think? My phone number? A suggestion ..?“ She pulled Ash with her.

Ash wanted to say that Katja Olsson wasn't the type who needed suggestions or phone numbers or invitations of any sort to get what she wanted but didn't because Alina opened the door ...

***

The room was an office, complete with visitor chairs and executive desk. A couple of monitors showed stock prices.
Olsson sat at the desk and was talking to McLowry. „If they want me to put my three crosses on the dotted line they have to do better than that!“

„But ... Kay ... listen...“

„No,“ she said. „This isn't good enough. Airbus can sell the six Eurocopters to whoever wants them but not to me. Not on these terms. I ...“ she looked to the door, saw Ash and Alina.

„Sorry, Katja ...“ Alina waved at her. „We're looking for ...“

Kaja smiled. „Bathroom's down the corridor,“ she said. „And will you let us have the captain for a moment, Alina? Company business, you know... thanks. And please, close the door.“

„You're a captain?“ Alina whispered as she passed Ash. „Wow! If they give you a bigger ship you'll have to buy a lot of drinks ...“ She closed the door behind Ash.

Katja Olsson leaned back in her chair. „Since you're here, Captain, you can as well ...“ She nodded to McLowry. „Come on Angus. Tell the Captain what you told me.“

McLowry glared at Ash. „I'm not prepared to discuss the matter with Mrs Harris. Not at this stage.“

Katja swiveled in her chair, smiling.

„What Angus tries to bring across,“ she said, „is – and correct me if I'm wrong, Angus – that he wants you removed immediately and brought before a court of justice on criminal charges, because ...“

„That's not what I said,“ McLowry shook his head. „I just don't think that we can afford to risk Northern's reputation ...“

„Because...“ Katja Olsson was still smiling. „because you conspired with the owner of a racing yacht – what was her name? Stella Carson – to sink the boat and get a share of the insurance money in return. Anything you want to tell me, Captain?“

„You're kidding ...“ Ash suddenly had to laugh.

„Sounds like a joke, right?“ Katja's smile widened. „But the chairman isn't a funny guy, I'm afraid. Do you ever tell jokes, Angus? No ... you don't.“

„It's certainly not Northern's business to deal with criminal offenses,“ McLowry said. „But we have to protect the company from exposure to ...“

Ash stared at him. „What the fuck are you talking about?“

Katja Olsson was no longer smiling. „To use the words of the chairman: apparently there's new evidence regarding the loss of the yacht. A witness produced incriminating facts and ...“

„Evidence?“ Ash didn't believe what she heard. „What evidence?“

McLowry brushed imaginary dust off his sleeve. „I certainly won't ...“

The voice came from the door.

„I will!“

Ash turned.
Chris McLowry stood in the doorway.

What are you trying to do to me? She wanted to shout, wanted to grab Chris, shake her ... Instead she took a deep breath. „Look: I can't bring her back. I would if I ... but I can't. Nothing can. Nothing you or I can do ...“

Chris didn't listen. She scanned the files on her phone, then held it up ...

Ash went pale. The picture on the screen showed herself and a beautiful girl, the red hair like a flame, leaning against her shoulder, eyes closed, it showed the unmade bed, it showed that she and her were happy ...

She swallowed hard. „Where did you get this?“

„What was your share of the insurance money?“ Chris voice was cold. „How much did she pay you?“

„Are you crazy? Who gave you this ... ?“ Ash could no longer control her voice.

„I always thought it's danger that gives you ... a kick.“ Chris said. „But it was just money ... How big was your share? Big enough to forget that you killed ... ?“ She came closer. „I didn't know you and this ... woman were lovers. And I think the court didn't know either ...“ She was staring into Ash's eyes. „Believe me: it isn't over.“

„Are you behind all this?“ Ash was trembling with rage. „Don't try to fuck with me!“

McLowry was out of his chair. „What are you doing here?“ He grabbed Chris arm. „Why aren't you downstairs?“

Chris tried to shrug him off. „Don't treat me like a toy! I hate this ... party. I didn't want to come in the first place. I want to go home!“

McLowry's voice was menacing. „You'll stay here with me as long as it's necessary. Grow up. Behave like a woman.“

Chris shook off his hand. She turned and walked through the door.

McLowry stared after her, then he glared at Ash.

„Stay away from my wife,“ he said. „She's ... vulnerable, easy to influence. Mind your own business, Mrs Harris. Do your job – as long as you have it.“

„And now what?“ Ash looked at Olsson. „You want me to quit? Just say so ...“

Katja Olsson smiled. „Good luck tomorrow, Captain. Have a safe first trip.“

***

Tobin looked gloomily at the group which clustered around Alina.
„Oh no,“ she heard Alina say to one of the executives' wives. „Please, nothing with alcohol. But some more of the mango and pineapple juice with a lot of water would be nice."

Tobin rolled her eyes.

„Sorry – I don't smoke,“ Alina said to a guy who tried to lure her to the balcony with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, mistaking her hard body for a promise of erotic adventures.

Tobin felt let down. The girl in boots and camo pants had turned out to be the highlight of Olsson's party. And that customs was searching her truck for drugs had been a joke. Alina's new cargo was high tech equipment, and the authorities had to check each item against embargo lists and NATO safety regulations.

Now, on her own, Tobin had returned to drinking beer from a bottle, trying to do what she could to lower the standards. She even covered the 'non-alcoholic' label with her hand but no one was taking notice anyway.

She turned her back in disgust and stepped onto the balcony.

On the far end she saw stairs spiraling into the dark, towards the second floor, and Tobin decided that space, peace and fresh air were exactly what she needed. She began to climb the stairway, counting.

Twenty-one, she thought as she stood on the roof terrace, a little out of breath. The city spread below her, lights sparkling, in the distance the sea, invisible in the dark, but there was salt in the air. She walked to the railing, touched the steel. Then she heard the music. The wind carried it from the waterfront, violin, piano … the accordion: a tango. She recognized the tune and began to softly hum with the rhythm. She turned and … she stepped forward, sidestepped, the two backward steps … she crossed, swung to uncross and …

„You're a dancer!“

Tobin stopped, her heart suddenly racing.

Chris came from the shadow of the wall. She held a bottle of red wine in her left hand. „Where, I mean … where did you learn … this?“

Tobin felt the blood rush to her face. Her throat was tight.

None of your business! was the first thing that came to her mind. „Forgot to bring your rain jacket,“ she muttered, not looking at Chris. She walked to the stairs. „I'll get it back to you, somehow …“

„Show me!“ Chris said.

Tobin stopped, hand on the railing. „What …?“

„Show me – how to do this,“ Chris pointed to Tobin's feet. „The steps you just did.“ She came closer, holding on to her bottle as if to steady herself on the high heels.

„You better stop drinking,“ Tobin said. „And go back to the party. Back to your husband …“

„What's the matter with you?“ Chris took a sip of red wine. „You … afraid of me?“

Tobin turned. She gritted her teeth, anger suddenly boiling up.

„Listen…“ she hissed. „It's my job to fly helicopters for your husband's company. Okay? I'm not
here to entertain ... his wife." She wanted to go on, tell her what a mean bitch she was, and how deeply she had wounded her ...

Chris came closer. „I'm not a nice girl," she said.

„Right." Tobin grabbed the railing, knuckles white, trying to control her anger. „You aren't."

„I hurt you," Chris said.

„Yes, you did."

They looked at each other.

„Isn't it beautiful ...?" Chris tilted her head and listened to music which the wind carried through the dark.

And suddenly Tobin's anger was gone, as if the cold, hard steel had absorbed it. „Tango night at the old quayside," she said.

„I know. I was there and watched, some time ago." Chris smiled. „Somebody asked me if ... but ..."

Tobin took a deep breath. „You really want ... to do it?"

„Well ... yeah, but ..." Chris laughed, embarrassed. „I can't, you know ... I never could move ... to music."

„Okay." Tobin let go of the railing. „I'll show you."

„What?" Chris seemed to wake up. „No – I mean ... I was just joking. I've no talent whatsoever for ..."

„You won't need this," Tobin took the bottle from Chris' hand and set it on a table while she stepped behind her.

Chris voice faltered when she felt Tobin's body warm against her back. „Really ... I didn't mean to ...

„Raise your arms," Tobin said.

„I don't know ..." Chris feebly lifted one arm, then the other.

Tobin took her hands.

„Okay ... left foot forward. Put your weight on it. Right foot now ... slowly touch your left foot ... only touch! And ... point to the right ... and touch the floor ... and ..." Tobin gently moved Chris to the right. „Yeeees ...“ Tobin leaned closer, her lips almost touched Chris ear. „You see? To make a step is like ... drawing an arch on the floor ... with the tip of your toe."

Chris was breathing faster, she stared at her feet, cheeks red with concentration. She held on to Tobin's hands like somebody afraid to drown.

„Left foot now, curve backwards: briefly touch your right foot," Tobin spoke softly into Chris' ear.

„Then ... backwards and ..." Chris' grip on Tobin's hands tightened while she traced a curl on the floor.
„Now,” Tobin said. „Slightly turn with me and ... step sideways and now ... cross your left foot ... your left foot! In front of your right foot. Aaaaand ... stand on it. Good!”

Chris’ body began to tremble while she tried to keep balance. „I ... this is ...“ There was something close to panic in her voice. „How ...?”

„Simple,” Tobin said. „As all the good and delightful things ...“ She raised Chris’ arms slightly higher. „I'll help you.“ She gently turned Chris to the left, felt Chris’ fingers close even tighter and ... suddenly Chris understood, pivoted on her left foot, uncrossing, and stepped backwards, led by Tobin.

„Now left foot back ... draw a nice little arch ... „ Tobin steadied her while Chris made the move. „Stand on it and ... close the right foot ... stand on it. And that's it.”

Chris leaned against the railing, almost panting. „I wouldn't be able to remember what I just did ... and how ...“

„It's called Cross Eight,” Tobin said. „You did the follower's steps. And I can tell you: you will remember ... your body will.“

Chris shook her head. „Never. I told you, I'm too stupid to move to music and ...“

„No,” Tobin said. „You aren't.“ She reached out to her. „Let's do it."

„No ... no, I can't ... I'd spoil everything. I'm too clumsy to ... “

Tobin took her hand and gently guided her to the center of the terrace.

„I'm hopeless, I'm ...“ Chris followed her. „There's not enough room to ...“

Tobin felt her resistance. „It's just you and me,” she said. „How much space do two people need?”

„I don't know ...“

Tobin smiled. „Let's find out. We make room. We create it when we move,” she said. „Your arm goes here, put your hand there ...“

„No ...“ Chris wanted to get away from Tobin. „I'm just too stupid to ... I'll hurt you ...“

„Come closer,” Tobin said, gently pulling her back. „Closer ... And you have to stay close, so you can feel me and I can feel you.“

Chris' body hardened as Tobin began to move. „No ... I can't ...“ She looked down, at her feet.

„Don't look down ... “ Tobin said. „Close your eyes.“

„What?” There was real panic in her voice.

„Close your eyes. You don't need them. Listen to your body.“ Tobin moved forward and felt Chris respond with the first, backward step. „It's all about ... finding the perfect match.“ She whispered into Chris' ear. „As long as the music plays ...“ She moved on. „Just touch ...“ She felt Chris do it almost before she said it and ...

Chris opened her eyes in surprise as Tobin's next step led her into a slight turn, and suddenly Tobin seemed to pass her on the right side, their hips touching, their bodies suddenly gliding effortless through the next move ...
She hadn't been aware of the music, but now it was as if it flooded her body, and when Tobin made her turn to the right Chris not only remembered what to do but suddenly it seemed the only way to do it, and she shifted to her right foot, stood poised for a moment, then swung … crossed, swung again, uncrossed and …

It was a chord played by the bandoneon, like a wail, telling of the dark side of passion, of pain and misery, which brought her back …

Chris broke away from Tobin, panting, almost reeling, still carried by the momentum, stumbled, steadied herself against the railing. She turned, stared at Tobin. „I'll never learn to do it!” Chris was still breathless.

„You just did it,“ Tobin said. „And you enjoyed it. “

„Yes, I did it,“ Chris said. Her eyes were narrow. „I can do it ... when you lead. And if I'm a little drunk. And ... yes, I like it...“

„If you're a little drunk...“ Tobin walked towards her and took her head between her hands.

Chris trembled when she felt Tobin's lips, but suddenly her arms were around Tobin's neck and she kissed Tobin, savouring her lips as if they were an exotic fruit of which she couldn't get enough ...

She pushed Tobin away, confused, angry. „What are you trying to do to me!?“ She panted. „You think I'm ... something you can ... use and ...?“ She turned and walked to the sliding doors which led to the apartment.

„I think ...“ Tobin said, „you're a real princess. “

„I'm not a princess. Cinderella, more likely.“ Chris tried to open the doors, furiously attacking the handle.

Tobin leaned against the railing and watched her. „Cinderella? You mean I can have one of your nice little Italian heels?“ she said.

Chris stopped pulling at the door. She didn't want to laugh but ... She bit her lip. „You've already got my rain jacket,“ she said.

„Right. And I know where to find you – that makes me what? Prince Charming?“ Tobin chuckled. „But who's the evil stepmother?“

Chris couldn't help it: she laughed. „I didn't know you're the happy-ever-after type,“ she said. Then she tried again and this time the doors opened.

***

It was like a nightmare but Ash couldn't wake up because she was awake.

The picture … taken after making love, trying to preserve a brief moment of happiness, never meant for the eyes of others. Only she and Stella should have it. And now it had made public domain, and intimacy had been turned into 'conspiring', into something wrong. Ash was scared. How far would this go? It was supposed to hurt, to damage. And it would, and not only her but also others.
Ash stood on the roof terrace and tried to calm down, breathing deeply in the fresh air. She needed Ali. But Ali was nowhere to be found. It was almost silent up here, the music, the voices from the first floor - only a murmur. Ash walked along the railing, then along the wall of the apartment. She looked around a corner. She looked and froze.

Katja Olsson und Alina were in front of the huge windows, close to each other, looking at the city lights. And Alina's fingers were playing with Katja Olsson's hair.

Ash stepped back, then turned to walk away. She stopped.

Ali stood in front of her. She put a finger to her lips, then took Ash's hand and led her to the far end of the roof terrace, into the dark.

„What do you think is … going on?“ she whispered.

„Who knows?“ Ash said.

Ali leaned over to Ash and her breath was soft on Ask’s skin when she whispered: „Katja … do you think her …“ She held both hands in front of her chest. „I mean ... do you think they’re real?“

„Homegrown, you mean?“ Ash said, her voice low.

Ali blushed, then giggled.

„Yeah,“ Ash said. „Definitely. Mother nature’s gift to Katja Olsson. Among other things ...“

„So … you noticed her … legs ...“

Ash inhaled the scent of Ali's perfume.

„She isn't exactly hiding them ...“

„And her … hair...“

„And her …“ Ash gently touched Ali's cheek. „Look...“ She searched for the right words. „when I called you ... I ... I didn't mean to ... hurt you. I just wanted to ...“

Ali put a finger against Ash's lips. „I know,“ she said. „And I'd love to come with you and help you find you a nice place ...“ She smiled. „What I wanted to tell you, all the evening ... You look so ... You're ... adorable. “

Ash wanted to say something but couldn't. Instead she took Ali in her arms and felt Ali slip into her embrace, felt her arms around her waist and she held her close, for a moment lost in scent and touch.

„Too many people, too much noise,“ Ali whispered. „I think I better go back to our place. Was a long day. Will be even longer tomorrow. “

„Yeah,“ Ash said. „Let's get a taxi.“

***
Tonight Tobin liked her music loud. Her car was vintage, the sound system state of the art. For some reason she had selected Salsa, and the music blanked out the growl of the Mustang’s V8. She drummed the rhythm on the steering wheel, drifting through the empty roads which led away from Katja Olsson’s place and towards the City.

In the headlight of a passing car she saw a girl, alone on the sidewalk, holding a bottle and her heels in one hand while she tried to to find something on her phone with the other, her face lighted by the display.

Tobin slowed down, then stopped. She turned off the music, leaned over and looked through the passenger window. “Hey … You gonna walk all the way home?”

Chris turned and stared. “You?”

„Get in …” Tobin said. “I take you …“

Chris frowned. „Since when do you know where I ...“

„Remember? I’m Prince Charming,” Tobin said. She opened the passenger door. “I know where my princess lives ...“

***

Tobin racked her brain for something nice to say but had no idea what. She had a thousand questions: ‘Why are you walking home in the middle of night?’ was on top of the list but she didn't dare to ask them because somehow talking was not a good option with Chris: it always seemed to end up getting hurt and being upset. She turned on the music.

„Thank you,“ Chris suddenly said.

Tobin almost ran a red light, surprised to hear Chris’ voice. „What for??“

„For not asking questions,“ Chris said. „And for … dancing with me.“

Tobin blushed. She would’ve bought her pearls just to make her smile.

„I’ve never seen you before in something like … this.“ Chris pointed to the Tang jacket.

„Sorry,“ Tobin muttered. „If you don’t like it ... But … Katja Olsson ...“

“You’re looking great. Elegant. I almost forgot that you fly the offshore shuttle `copters,” Chris said. Then she looked ahead and frowned. „But ...” She turned to Tobin. “This is not the way home.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to kidnap me?”

***
“Dancing?” Chris stared at the neon sign saying 'Ozone'. “You and me?”

Tobin had parked the car close to the club’s entrance and now they watched two girls leaving the club, kiss, and walk away, holding each other close.

“That's how they like it … here,” Tobin said.

Chris, shoulders hunched, arms crossed, almost vanished into the leather seat when a group of chicks passed the car, then walked down the stairs to the club, chatting loud and excited. “You want us to get in … there? As if I were your girl?”

Tobin shrugged. She could hear the hard beat of the music even in the car, could feel its pulse go through her body.

“I'm not your girl,” Chris said.

“I know.” Tobin tapped the rhythm with her foot.

“Never will be …” Chris said.

Tobin took a deep breath. “Just for … now?”

“I …” Chris cleared her throat. “Why?”

“I want to show you off …” Tobin said. “That's why!”

“There's nothing to show off.” Chris stared at the neon sign. “My feet are dirty, I'm drunk … at least a little …”

“You'll be like a shooting star!” Tobin turned towards her. “A miracle which makes all those who see it happy.”

“And …” Chris still stared at the sign. “You'll talk about how you made me … You'll talk to .. her – the captain! And that pretty engineer …”

“Sure,” Tobin said. She had just discovered that she liked Chris better when she was mad. “And I'll post it on the web so everyone can see that sometimes an angel comes …”

Chris immediately exploded. “If you do that I'll never fly with you again! I'll take a new pilot …”

“Good!” Tobin just loved what she saw. “Already asked the guys to put somebody else on the VIP chopper.”

Chris turned to her, eyes blazing with anger. “You think I…” She saw Tobin's smile. She leaned back, bit her lip. “You … really mean all … this … about me?”

Of course I do! Tobin wanted to shout. And I love you! And that's the problem because if I say it to you …

Chris slapped her.

“Hey!” Tobin was more surprised than hurt. “That's not fair. I didn't do anything …”

“Don't look at me like that!” Chris hissed. She slapped her again. “And that's for the angel! And
for the shooting star … and for ...”

Tobin caught her wrist and Chris started to wrestle, but Tobin held on until Chris stopped fighting her. They looked at each other, breathing fast. “Let's go dance,” Tobin said. “Okay?”

“And this is a nice place? With nice people?” Chris rearranged her hair. “And you promise we'll have a good time, spend a nice evening … and you behave …?”

“Look … “ Tobin shook her head. “What do you think this is?” She pointed to the club. “The Dykes of Doom annual meeting? Complete with Harley Babes and the traditional sacrifice of a straight girl?” She smiled. “It's just … chicks having fun!”

“One drink!” Chris raised a finger. “Just to get you off my back!”

A couple of girls passed the car, one of them in a leather jacket and jeans, the other tall, her dark skin the color of polished ebony with the immaculate shine of black velvet.

“The tall one … “ Chris whispered as if she could hear her. “She stared at me! As if she …”

Tobin laughed. “Can't blame her. You look like a million dollars.”

Chris hesitated, then opened the door. “No kissing …!” she said.

***

Ash was pacing her room. She couldn't sleep. She had cast away the blanket then jumped out of the bed after almost an hour of trying to lie on the side, on her belly, on her back …

She slept naked and naked she walked from window to door and back, and each time she passed the long mirror she saw a strange girl: hair a mess, lips a thin line, muscles tight, fists clenched - when she wasn't biting a nail ... A strange girl? No. A scared girl.

She took a deep breath. Come on Harris, she thought. You look like somebody on the run.

She briefly considered a short workout with the TRX, to clear her head, to feel pain instead of … panic?

She shook her hair loose. Then she fetched the bottle of body oil and began to work it into her skin. The scent of almond calmed her down, at least a bit.

Who was the new witness? What new evidence? And how could the picture turn up on the smartphone of that bitch? She closed the bottle and threw it back into her bag. Shit! She thought.

She walked to the wardrobe, suddenly needing to be warm, protected and if by the washed out cotton of an oversize T-shirt.

Ash rummaged through her few things. Stella, she thought. Perhaps she …?

No, she thought. Not Stella. She slipped into the T-shirt, the fabric cold and smooth on her skin. Not Stella. That wasn't like her. What was like her was to …

Ash felt her nails dig into her palms. Stella … She closed her eyes but the image didn't go away.
Stella naked, on top of her ex, her body wet with sweat, moaning and panting, having sex with the guy she had sworn never to see again, never to meet again, never ever to …

Ash found herself staring out of the window at the almost full moon. She was getting cold and she went to the bed and slipped under the blanket. She wanted to switch off the light, but right now she couldn't stand the dark and she left it on, the orange glow giving the illusion of being warm and safe.

Suddenly she thought of Ali, so close to her in the back of the taxi, felt again the soft touch when Ali took her hand, holding it, resting her head against Ash's shoulder … Ali - separated from her only by a thin wall, so close and yet so far away as … Ash sighed. She wanted to make love to her, wanted to do it so badly that it almost hurt.

She half rose from the bed, to go to Ali's room, now, and …

She laid back, turned left, then right, then curled up, unable do it, afraid to frighten her, to loose her, and suddenly she was embarrassed by her own desire, imagining how it would have ended: she, barging into Ali's room in the middle of the night, a tall girl wanting sex …

Ash felt a tear on her cheek.

No. Not … sex. Sex wasn't enough. She wanted much more: She longed for Ali like a flower longed for the sun, to live, to open; she longed for her beauty because she knew: her beauty would make all that was haunting her just go away, and she would be safe and happy. With her she would be free.

All this had been easier with … Stella, the lawyer from New York City, divorcing a piece-of-shit husband like other people got rid of a torn pantyhose, stripping him of almost all his assets, just like that and crashing into Ash like a car coming from the wrong end of a one-way street and kissing her like a predator going for the jugular. And moments later they both had been on the floor, Stella snarling like a cat, her long nails digging sharply into Ash's shoulders and …

Ash's heart was beating faster.

Stella's mind worked straight and simple: to get as much pleasure as possible. And she just liked sex with tall girls and to fuck piece-of-shit men ... Stella – the bitch! Cheating on her with her ex-husband

Jealousy and rage hit Ash like a blow, even after all this time. And again she felt the urge to hurt her, to make her feel the pain she had felt, to mark her like she had marked her, to …

Ash could almost feel Stella's body, squirming, writhing, strong and hard, using lips, tongue, fingers with skill and imagination, teasing, probing, turning lovemaking into a fight, Ash grabbing her small wrists, pinning her down while her teeth dug into Ash's lips, Ash always on the verge of hurting her, always close to getting hurt, of pleasure suddenly turning into pain and pain into … Stella's marks for days all over Ash's body.

Ash was suddenly aware that her nipples were hard. She was breathing faster.

She could almost hear Stella's angry snarl when, finally, she was lying on her belly, helpless, Ash sitting on her back, pulling away the G-string while holding her down, avoiding her kicking legs, unclasping her bra while she held on to her arms with one hand, removing the cups with the other, Stella hissing with rage. And Ash, exhausted and wet, grabbed her hair and pulled back her head and kissed her throat, feeling the blood pulse under the skin, kissed her, then softly bit into her earlobe,
and Stella was still kicking but weaker now while she began to moan with pleasure.

Ash closed her eyes. Her hand was between her thighs, attracted by the pulsing, swollen folds, she began to play with her left nipple. She drew in her breath sharply, spread her legs, found her clit …

There was a soft knock on the door.

Ash slapped a hand over her mouth and gulped down the hoarse shriek that was about to escape from deep down her throat.

Ali!

She knocked again. “May I … ?” Ali’s voice was almost timid. “I saw the light and …” She slowly opened the door.

Ash pulled down her shirt, her heart racing.

Ali wore her Aran Troyer and the cashmere hugged her body in its soft folds, and Ash saw that she wore nothing else.

“Did I wake you … I’m so sorry … I …”

“No,” Ash managed to keep her voice steady and tried not to think about the wet, hot place between her thighs. “Can’t sleep …” She reached for the light switch.

“Don't ...” Ali said. “It's just... right.” She came towards the bed, holding two mugs of ...

“Chocolate??” Ash sat bolt upright. “You made chocolate for me in the middle of the night? You can read my thoughts!”

Ali smiled. She gave one mug to Ash then sat on the edge of the bed, holding her mug with both hands as if she needed the warmth.

Ash drank. “Mmmnnhh. Don't know how it works but ...”

“Chocolate and milk: there's something in the protein called Tryptophan. It's an amino acid. Combined with a little sugar it works on your brain, makes you feel warm and relaxed, just happy like … after sex.” She laughed. “I sound like a girl with a degree, right? Sorry ...”

Ash smiled. “Did you … somehow mange to talk to your kids?”

Ali nodded. “Skyped with the guys just before I went to the party. The little one's so excited because they want to go to the zoo tomorrow, and my parents promised him a ride on a donkey.”

Ash listened, watching Ali’s face, saw the light in her eyes as she talked about her kids, and just enjoyed the love and tenderness she suddenly radiated and which was like a warm touch on Ash's skin.

“My parents … my dad ... he spoils them, you know ...” Ali turned to Ash. “They think that ...” She stopped when she saw Ash looking at her.

Ash blushed, embarrassed that Ali had caught her staring. “They should be with you,” she muttered, looking away at her mug. “And … I’d love to … meet your kids, one day ...”
Tobin pushed through the crowd holding on to the drinks. She stopped short. She didn't believe what she saw: a gorgeous Inuit girl was … was she? Yessir! Tobin thought. She definitely is! The chick was trying to chat up Chris – Chris, hot and wet from dancing, hair clinging to her cheeks, a little breathless: sexy like a peach fallen from the peach tree.

“Hey!” Tobin wedged herself between the two. “She's with me.”

“So?” The girl's black, slanting eyes gleamed.

Chris was excited. “This is Nuliajuk … Believe it or not: she's from Greenland! And look at those little tattooed dots on her cheeks – they have a meaning! And she wants to show me …”

“I know exactly what she wants to show you.” Tobin stared into the girl's eyes. “Say - why don't you show it to somebody else?”

The girl smiled, all dimples. “She your girl?”

“Yeah,” Tobin said. “And now what?”

“No!” Chris' eyes narrowed, her lips suddenly a thin line. “No! I'm not her …”

“See?” The girl's smile deepened. “And why don't you just get lost, little boy?”

Tobin raised herself onto her toes and now was definitely taller than the Inuit beauty. “You wanna make me?” Suddenly she felt a hand on her butt and turned. The girl behind her was big and very pretty, and the V-shaped clan tattoo on her forehead made her even prettier. “Nice ass,” she said to her friend who was slim like a dancer and like a dancer packed with muscle. An intricate pattern of ink circled her wrists and lower arms. Her hair was cut short, and, like the hair of the big girl, of such a deep black that it reflected the light show. “You wanna get into trouble?” she asked.

“No, we don't,” Chris said. “It's a misunderstanding, sort of … And I think we better…”

Tobin grinned. “So nice of you to ask,” she said. “And … yeah. I want to get into trouble, please.” She enjoyed the perplexed expression on the dancer's face. “And now that you had your say … good bye!”

“She's so cute!” The big girl licked her lips and winked to the Inuit beauty. “If you take Honey Squash here …” she looked at Chris, “I take her …” She touched Tobin's cheek.

“I take both,” the beauty said.

“Ha ha!” Tobin pushed the big girl's hand away. “As if you knew what to do if …”

“She'd make you eat pussy, little boy.” The dancer was no longer smiling.

Tobin turned slowly towards her. “And I'd make her feel really good? That what you mean?” She nodded. “You know what? You're right. And I can do much more. I can make her really feel … at home … look!” She tuned to the Inuit beauty, hooked a finger into her low neckline and pulled away the cotton, almost exposing her breasts. Then she took one of the empty glasses from the table and …

The Inuit girl sucked in her breath, eyes wide, staring at the crushed ice about to pour into her cleavage.
Nothing happened. Then she threw back her head and laughed. Her arms were suddenly around Tobin's neck and Tobin hugged her.

“T-girl!” Her dimples were simply adorable. “How I missed you and your big mouth!”

“Lia,” Tobin said. “Long time no see, sister.”

Chris stared, her fear suddenly turning into … fury. “You know … each other??”

“Oh yeah!” Lia gently touched Tobin's nose. “We do!” She kissed Tobin's cheek. “You mind if I dance with … Chris?” She smiled at Chris. “You'd like to dance with me?”

“Sure,” Chris snapped. “I'd love to.”

“Don't do anything I wouldn't do,” Tobin said but Chris just gave her a mean look and followed Lia to the dance floor. Tobin leaned back and watched Lia and Chris dive into the crowd, watched them dance, Chris glowing with excitement and with a lot of bounce, and the feeling that spread in Tobin's stomach was plain, simple, old fashioned jealousy.

“She's straight, right?” The dancer smiled a vicious smile.

Tobin shrugged.

“What you gonna do about it?” The big girl wanted to know. “I mean ...”.

“You mean: like having her brain surgically rewired?”

“Why bother? Leave her to Lia.” The dancer laughed. “Looks like she's good at rewiring.”

“Come with us,” the big girl said. “Hey! I wouldn't mind to do you second and watch first ...”

“I wouldn't either,” the dancer said, both girls suddenly laughing. They high-fived with a sharp, painful slap.

Tobin wasn't listening. She stared gloomily at Lia and Chris, Chris more beautiful than ever, matched by Lia's immaculate looks: the perfect pair.

“Hey!” The dancer prodded her. “You're in love! Too bad …”

“You better forget her, little boy,” the big girl said. „If you’re lucky you can pencil your name into her dancing card and waltz her a few times around the floor ...”

“And of cause she’ll love the better sex we girls have ...“ The hard girl grinned.

“… but in the end ... she’ll tick you off as a curiosity,” her friend added.

“I see you know the world, gals,” Tobin said, absentmindedly.

“You bet. And a few things on top of it.” The big girl smiled sweetly.

Tobin watched Lia and Chris come back, and she couldn't help staring at Lia's arm around Chris' waist, saw Chris' fingers hooked into Lia's belt, Chris wet and a little tussled, breathing deeply.

“Woah!” Lia was really impressed. “She can dance! You know how to move, Chrissy Bunny. Thanks for that,” she said ... and kissed Chris on the mouth, long and deep, Chris simply sinking into her arms, giving her mouth to Lia until Lia was satisfied.
“I … “ Chris reeled, nostrils flaring, trying to catch her breath. She blushed deeply. “I think we better get going …” she muttered to Tobin.

Tobin frowned. “You sure? You seem to really dig this joint …”

“Come on, Tobs!” Lia was laughing. “You aren't jealous, are you? No need …” She leaned over and then her lips seemed to get soldered to Tobin's and her hand slipped under Tobin's Tan jacket, gently cupping her left breast.

“You done?” Chris voice was a snarl. “Let's go.”

“Hey!” Lia let go of Tobin, her dark eyes gleamed with mischief. “Now? Right when we are getting somewhere? Come on, don't spoil a good thing …”

Chris was already walking away.

“You're a bitch,” Tobin whispered into Lia's ear. “One day you'll get hurt …”

“You mean somebody will empty a whole glass of crushed ice on my tits?” Lia laughed. “You've got my number, T. Just call … anytime.”

Tobin walked backwards, still holding on to Lia's hands, then she let go and turned. “Hey, what's the hurry?” she called after Chris, her voice drowned by the music. “Wait…” She pushed through the crowd, making her way to the exit, Chris already far ahead. Panting Tobin reached the street. Chris was leaning against the car, impatiently tapping her heels foot, arms crossed. Tobin opened the door and Chris slipped into the passenger seat, not looking at Tobin, silent. Tobin got behind the wheel. She took a deep breath.

“Hey,” she said. “You look gorgeous when you're sulking.”


“Don't worry,” Tobin said. “Those girls - they just had a little fun.”

“I wasn't talking about those … But - You sure? I mean …” She pointed to rear view mirror.

Tobin turned and looked to the entrance of the club. “Shit!”

The two Inuit girls were coming towards the car and Tobin turned the key but it was too late. The dancer knocked on the Mustang's roof while her big, pretty friend stood in front of the car and admired her reflection in the chrome and the high gloss paint job which was like a mirror.

Tobin cranked down the window.

“You bumped into something,” the girl said, pointing to the rear.

“Can't drive, the cutie.” The big girl joined her friend and looked through the window. “Probably had a hand under her dress.”

“So long, chicas.” Tobin started the car.

“Watch out for her hand, Honey Squash!” the dancer said to Chris, stepping back.

Tobin gave her the finger.
“Hey – show some respect!” the dancer shouted.

“Oh my … !” Chris held her breath: the big girl lifted a trash can, holding it high above her head, about to throw it against the windshield.

Tobin just stepped on it and the V 8 catapulted the car away from the danger: two girls cringing with laughter.

***

„She wanted to give me something against the headache. But ...“ Ali looked into the mug. “I think ... she was about to ... kiss me, and ...”

Ash felt a hard knot in her stomach. “And you ...?” Her voice still betrayed the fear she had felt watching Ali and Katja had climb the stairs to the top floor.

Ali was silent and Ash thought: What a stupid question.

“It didn't feel ... right,” Ali suddenly said.

“It didn't ...?” Ash brushed back a strand of hair from Ali's cheek.

“A week ago ... maybe,” Ali said. “She doesn't take a no for an answer and ... it's hard to resist a woman like Katja ... I mean ...”

“What's different, now?” Ash's voice was barely more than a whisper.

Ali looked into Ash's eyes, about to say something, but she checked herself, looked away. “I think I better ... go back and ... try to get some sleep...” She suddenly rose from the bed and went to the door.

Ash pushed off the blanket and with a few fast steps she was close to Ali. She took Ali's hand. “What's different, now?”

Ali touched Ash's bare shoulder where the oversize T-shirt revealed the tattoo. „This is ...“ she whispered, „... beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like this before ...“ She traced the patterns with her fingertips.

Ash gently held her wrist and didn’t let go. „You ...“, she hesitated. „You make this a place where I like to be.“ She took a deep breath. „Has been a long time since I felt at home somewhere ... I just wanted to say ... Thank you.“

Ali looked at the floor. She drew a circle with her big toe, then gently touched Ash's ankle. She looked up and into Ash's eyes. „I’ve been alone for so long“, she said. „To be with you was ...“

Ash simply kissed her, her lips softly touching Ali's, uncertain if this was the right way to show what she felt. Ash felt Ali’s lips part, inviting her tongue, inviting Ash to relish the warm and vulnerable depth. Ash stopped, still uncertain, afraid to scare her gorgeous lover, heard Ali’s groan of protest.

„Don’t leave me alone tonight,“ Ali whispered.
Ash took a deep breath. Then she swept her up, carried her to the bed, and suddenly they were pulling at each other’s clothes, grabbing, clawing, stripping each other until there was nothing but bare skin.

They stopped, panting and naked, looked at each other and began to explore with their eyes, slowly, almost shyly, then more and more boldly, eyes wide, as if unable to believe the beauty of what they saw.

Ash was the first to reach out but she didn’t, couldn’t touch Ali. Instead she bent towards her until their lips touched, softly, afraid to unleash what was building up inside her.

Ash inhaled through wide, flaring nostrils when their lips, warm and spreading, melted into one. She felt Ali’s tongue dart forward, a quick stab, teasing Ash to follow, stabbing again as Ash lingered at the soft flesh of Ali’s lower lip, impatiently this time, and this time their tongues met, sliding along each other, playing.

She kissed her as if she was drinking from Ali’s mouth, drank like somebody who had journeyed through the desert for a long time. She heard Ali moan with pleasure and she grabbed Ali’s hair and pulled back her head, felt Ali yield to her demand, but, at the last moment, resist Ash's strength, resist her own desire, afraid to surrender too early.

Ash felt Ali’s fingers dig into her shoulders, heard her purr, a sound of pure pleasure which made her throat vibrate. Ash held her, one arm around her waist, one hand still buried in Ali’s mane. She felt Ali’s muscles, hard and trembling, still straining against her body, still not wanting to give in.

In a last desperate effort to resist what was inevitable she bit Ash.

Ash felt the teeth dig into her lower lip, but she didn’t care. She let go of Ali’s lips, sucking in air as if she had been drowning. Then she ran her tongue along Ali’s exposed throat, licking it, from the chin to the deep valley between her collarbones, enjoying the taste of her skin.

With a rasping sob Ali gave in, her body sank back, arching suddenly in a final effort to fight what was about to happen, then stretching, one arm high above her head, reaching out for something to hold on while she gave herself into Ash’s hands, the expression on her face that of pain and exhaustion, but her lips full and open and trembling, almost smiling as she bit into her knuckles when suddenly Ash’s tongue traveled downwards, stopping for a brief moment between her breasts to savor a few drops of sweat, then following the divide between her abdominal muscles, dipping into her navel, only to proceed, hard, pointed, and demanding ...

Ash saw Ali’s body tremble, saw that she could have anything she wanted, could simply take it, now …

She stopped, panting. Gently she rested her cheek on Ali’s mound, soft skin on soft skin, her breath caressing what was sheltered so tightly between Ali’s thighs. And with a soft kiss she asked for permission.

Her heart leaped with delight when she saw Ali’s thighs open, giving her most vulnerable part to Ash.

She was ... just perfect: a sweet flower which opened under Ash’s touch as she spread the outer folds, kissing them, letting the soft inner petals unfold, exposing the coral, glistening surface, sleek like silk, felt Ali shiver as she ran her tongue over the delicate skin.

Suddenly Ali cringed. „Please ...“ she whispered. „Please stop ...“
„Did I hurt you?” Ash slipped to her side, held her, kissing her hair, gently rocking her.

„It’s been so long since ...“ her voice was trembling. „I forgot that it can be so ... I ...“ She stopped, buried her head between Ash’s breasts. „It feels as if I’m pushed into a deep ... as if I’m falling from high above ...“ she dug her fingers into Ash’s shoulders.

Ash lifted Ali’s face until she looked into her eyes. „I won’t let you fall,“ she said. „Trust me ...“

She kissed her and softly cupped her left breast, felt her nipple, already hard, growing harder, gently teased it with her fingertips until it stood dark and pointed, Ali’s groans suppressed by her tongue, felt her kick and writhe and spread when her hand slid down along her body and between her legs, where it dipped deeply into the warm and wet crevice, then, with a soft bite, she let go of Ali’s lips, flicked her tongue against the left nipple, making Ali gasp, then ran her tongue in one long sweep down between her thighs, parting the wet folds with the hard tip ...

Ali’s sudden climax made her body convulse, cutting off her scream, leaving her twitching and jerking. Her fingers clawed the sheet - then she sank back, gasping for air, only to come again, shaking, this time longer and more powerful than before.

When she finally relaxed, still trembling, she was crying, tears running down her cheeks.

She looked at Ash as if she saw he for the first time. She reached out, touched her face, her curve of her lips, then ran her fingertips down Ash’s chest. She touched her breast, then bent forward.

Ash panted when Ali’s lips closed around her nipple which suddenly stood, burning, almost raw. She felt Ali’s teeth on it, felt it grow, then felt her soft, quick kisses, like the wings of butterflies. Ash arched, inviting more, felt Ali’s tongue, licking, like a greedy cat feeding on her favorite dish.

Ash’s rasping breath came faster and faster from the depth of her body as Ali’s fingers followed the curve of her belly, a long fingernail briefly pricked her navel then came to rest between the swollen lips of her sex. She gasped: Ali’s fingers opened the folds, exposing the clit which stood from its fleshy hood, and Ash felt her warm breath on it.

Ali touched it with her lips, then flicked the tip of her tongue against it, flicked and flicked again, while her finger dipped into the brimming juice, tenderly exploring, gently stretching, persuading Ash’s body to fully open, to let her in.

No! Ash wanted to scream, used to be the one in control - but couldn’t, because her body said Yes! and gently Ali slipped a finger into the narrow passage and slid along the walls which contracted, tasting, savoring the warm presence, finally embracing it while it sent ripples along the smooth, silken surface.

Somewhere deep in Ash's mind stirred what was left of her pride, in vain claiming back control, the power to resist, but her body was no longer hers. She wanted to protest but couldn’t because the only sound that came from her throat was her staccato breath while the universe collapsed into one focal point which was the tip of Ali’s tongue ....

She was no longer aware of what was happening, her body arching, her legs kicking, she tossed her head back, groaning, panting, sobbing, heels and toes digging into the sheet ...

Ash’s fingers grabbed Ali’s hair but they were too weak to do anything more then to caress her, trembling as she felt everything, the heat, the rush and throb of her blood, the hammering of her heart, blend into one roaring wave which lifted her up.

She came with a scream, cut off when the air was driven from her lungs, and desperately she held
on to Ali’s hair while her body was shaking.

***

“You almost made me … I was … I almost … pissed myself! And all the time you were just pulling off one of your stupid jokes!” Chris hit Tobin hard on the shoulder. “I thought they'd carve us up!!”

“Lia?” Tobin shook her head. “She's an IT consultant. Bought the car from her. She's not the type to pack a knife. But I'm not so sure about the other two.”

“They were … scary!” Chris was still annoyed.

“Lia … she's a bitch.” Tobin laughed. “A little threesome with two bad girls isn’t beyond her … But she'd rather do … YOU, if you ask me. Hey! You hit on a very beautiful chick, tonight! Not bad for straight girl.”

Chris’ cheeks were red. “I was drunk!”

“I'd say you were enjoying yourself … “ Tobin said.

“No – I was drunk! You made me! How many drinks did you buy … ? You made me!” Chris was really angry now.

Tobin just smiled. “Come on. You're a grown up woman! You don't have to swallow booze just because somebody buys it.” She craned her neck. “Why did you want me to stop here? I mean … this isn't the entrance …” She admired the big trees, then turned and looked down the dead end street. “A nice place for a bit of necking, I'd say. You want us to move to the back seat?”

Chris rolled her eyes. “That's the best spot to climb the garden wall, you stupid …”

“What??” Tobin sat bolt upright. “Are you kidding? This is your home … You get out your keys and let yourself in!”

“We don't have keys,” Chris said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tobin had the feeling that the evening was coming to a not so nice end.

“Entrance code. A magic word which opens the doors …” Chris said. “It's changed every month.”

“Really? Cool! What is it?”

“You think I'm gonna tell you?” Chris shook her head. “It's a secret!”

“Okay, okay. So … let's get to the gate and …” Tobin was about to start the car.

“I always get it wrong,” Chris said. “Just can't remember …”

“Ring the bell!”

“Nobody at home …” Christen closed her eyes. “Poor Christen.”
“You mean he's still ...”

“... at Olsson's place discussing the Airbus deal, the Maersk deal, the whatever deal, blah blah blah.” Chris opened her eyes and began to search under the seat. “Where's my bottle?”

“I think you had enough,” Tobin said. “What you need is your bed, I'd say. But how ... ?”

“I'll climb the wall and sleep in the grass, under the stars ...” Chris stretched in the seat.

Tobin chuckled. “You ARE drunk! Look ...” She pointed to the drops on the windshield. “It's gonna rain!”

Chris shrugged. “I'll climb through a window.”

“In this?” Tobin pointed at her dress.

“I'll take it off,” Chris said.

Tobin still couldn't believe what she heard. “I better help you ...”

“You mean ... help me out of this?” Chris looked at her dress, then laughed. She opened the door and climbed out of the car, a little unsteady on her high heels. She walked to the wall and inspected it.

“Don't!” Tobin got out of the car. “You'll get hurt!”

“Hey ... I'm a pro athlete,” Chris said, apparently looking for footholds. “You think fences and windows can keep me out?”

Tobin was thinking fast. “You'll set off the alarm.”

“Nooo.” Chris shook her head. She stepped out of her heels. “Angus always forgets to set it. Doesn't believe that anybody dares to steal his property ... “

Well, you better believe it, Angus, Tobin thought. 'Cause that's what I'm about to. “Neighbors gonna call the police,” she said.

“So what?” Chris wasn't impressed. “Prisons are nice in this country. You can take classes ... and perhaps I can play soccer again, on the prison team.”

“Let's ...” Tobin searched her mind. “... go to my place!”

“Never ...” Chris turned and stood with her back to wall. She wagged her finger. “Maybe I'm stupid. But I'm not that stupid!”

“Don't be silly! I mean ...”

Chris shook her head. “Forget it! You'll rape me ...”

Tobin had to laugh. “I'm a girl, in case you haven't noticed. Girls don't rape girls ...”

“Not so sure about that! You're a ...” Chris stopped.

“A what?” Tobin frowned.

“A pilot!” Chris said.
“Pilots never rape a girl on which they have a … crush,” Tobin heard herself say. Are you crazy? she thought. What are you doing? You sound like a lovesick teenager!

“A what?” Chris stared in disbelief. “Hello! Wake up! Do you ever listen? You know who I am, but you insist … What's wrong with you?”

“At the club …” Tobin snapped. “I mean …”

“WHAT do mean …?” Chris came back to the car, ready to attack.

“You kissed her …” Tobin said.

“What?? I never …”

“When you opened your lips I thought … And then your tongue …”

“I did nothing!” Chris was outraged. “You hear me?? I did NOTHING! She made me! In front of all those … and you …”

“And you liked it,” Tobin was glad to get it off her chest. “Every second of it …”

“I did NOT!!” Chris banged her hand on the roof of car.

“Your nipples were poking holes into your bra,” Tobin said.

“They were NOT … You … you're disgusting!” Chris hit the roof again.

“And you danced with her … as if …”

“Don't tell me you're jealous! I dance with who I like, I …” Chris suddenly stopped. She stared at Tobin. “Good bye,” she said. “And go to hell!”

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Chris had thrown her heels over the garden wall before she had climbed it but in the dark hadn't been able to find them. Now, as she walked over the lawn towards the house, she felt the wet grass under her feet and she liked it. She knew that her dress was dirty and that there was a long rip in the back but she didn't care.

She turned when she heard somebody running after her.

“What are you doing here? You wanna go to prison?”

“Well …” Tobin tried to catch her breath. “To share a shower with you … would be worth it.” She held up the hoody which she had found in the back of her car. “Put it on. You must be freezing.”

Chris took it. She read the caption running across the front. “‘Girls Do It Longer’??” She raised an eyebrow and gave it back.

“I'm not asking you to do it. All I want you to do is put that thing on – it's nice and warm.”
Chris wasn't listening. She walked towards the wall of the house.

Tobin ran after her. “You can't flit around naked on a night like this! We're north of 58\textsuperscript{th} parallel!”

“I'm not naked!” Chris pointed to her torn and dirty dress. “That's a 879,50 dollar designer piece!” She walked along the wall of the house, scanning the windows of the second floor.

Tobin tried to stay beside her. “I can see material for 9,50 – where's the rest? You'll need it!”

Chris suddenly stopped and pointed to a window. “There! That one isn't locked. Doesn't close properly. Somebody wanted to come fix it but didn't. Help me. Come on. Lift me up …”

“Not before you …” Tobin unzipped the hoody. “Put it on, come on – right arm goes here, the other … that's it. You look gorgeous,” she said. “A real bad girl, a hard case B-and-E professional.” She closed the zipper. Then she pointed to the window. “You sure you want to do this?”

“You bet!” Chris said. “Gimme a leg up, pilot!”

Tobin folded her hands.

“Bend down. Good.” Chris began to climb. Her dress slipped up when she put a knee on Tobin's shoulder and Tobin held on to her bare legs.

“Gorgeous pantie,” Tobin managed to say.

“Higher!” Chris tried to reach the window sill.

“It doesn't work!” Tobin gasped. Carefully she let Chris down and they both stood panting while Tobin admired Chris' disorder. She was dirty, hair a mess, in other words: extremely sexy.

“What are you looking at???” Chris blushed.

“Nothing …” Tobin unzipped the hoody. “Put it on, come on – right arm goes here, the other … that's it. You look gorgeous,” she said. “A real bad girl, a hard case B-and-E professional.”

She rubbed her bare feet. “Gawd! It's freezing!”

“The chair, over there.” Chris pointed to the terrace in front of the huge sliding windows. “If you stand on it … and then lift me …”

“Are you crazy?” Tobin shook her head.

“Come on. Help me with the chair …” Chris walked to the terrace and Tobin got up and followed her.

“I'll regret it,” Tobin said when they carried the chair towards the wall.

“Now get on the chair,” Chris said and watched Tobin climb on the seat. Chris shook her head. “No. Not enough.” She frowned, thinking. “The table!” She clapped her hands. “If we put the chair on the table …”

“No!!” Tobin jumped from the chair. “You want to end up in hospital?? Forget it!”

“Hey …” Chris said, suddenly smiling. “Don't be so … It's fun! Can't remember when I last had that much … We can start a career in breaking and entering …” Tobin eyes widened with surprise when Chris kissed her. “Come on. The table …”
“Okay,” Chris said. “Now lift me up.”

They were both standing on the chair which was standing on top of the table and they were both trying not to think about what height plus gravity could do to flesh and bones.

“This is insane!” Tobin felt Chris legs around her waist. Tobin grabbed her butt and began to lift.

“Higher!” Chris panted. “And don't grope …”

“I'm not even thinking about it!” Tobin tried to get a better grip.

“Eeeeeck!! I said: don't …”

“I'm not!” Tobin pushed while trying desperately to ignore that the chair was beginning to tilt. “I just try to keep you … You weigh tons! What are you made of? Concrete? We'll need a crane to lift you … Ouch!” Chris had pulled at Tobin's hair.

“I'm in perfect shape, you dork!!” Chris steadied herself against the wall while her fingertips searched for something to hold on to. “I'm almost … there …”

Tobin's grip slackened. Her head vanished below the hoody, than below Chris' dress as her body simply slipped through her arms.

“What...?” Chris tried to climb up again. “Get your face out from under my dress!”

“Don't squirm!” Tobin's voice was muffled. “We gonna crash land …”

“Get your face …” Chris struggled but just kept sliding down while her dress was pushed up.

Tobin managed to get her head free, gasping for air. She held on to Chris' almost naked body. They looked at each other, balancing on the chair.

“You had your face between my …” Chris' voice was only a whisper. “You're a pig, Heath!”

“You smell good, I can tell you …” Tobin whispered back, afraid to move.

From the corner of her eyes Chris looked down into what seemed be an abyss. “Skyfall!” she suddenly said.

“What?” Tobin didn't really listen. The chair was inching closer to the table's edge.

“This month's entrance code,” Chris said. “Double-O-Seven-Skyfall. Angus is a James Bond fan.”

“You mean ...” Tobin forced her mind away from the chair. “You remembered … right now?”

It started to rain.

“Take you hands off me and let me go,” Chris began to squirm. “I want to get off this chair and into my bed – now!”

“Don't move!” Tobin hissed. “DON'T …”
Ash walked into the kitchen, her body still hot, glowing. She opened the freezer and took out a carton of orange juice. For a moment she let the cold air touch her naked skin. She closed her eyes and pressed the juice against her forehead, unaware of the smile on her lips.

When she wanted to shut the door she saw Ali's laptop, wrapped in a plastic bag, still sitting on top of the milk. Her smile deepened when she bent forward. She flicked a finger against the computer as if to wake somebody up.

“You have no idea what you just missed, guys,” she whispered. Then she took two glasses, a bottle of water and walked back to her room.

Ali was wide awake and making love had made her more beautiful than ever.

Ash sat down on the edge of the bed and opened the orange juice. “Are you hungry?” She put down the juice. “I'll get us something ...”

Ali ran a fingertip along her back. She frowned. “You're … cold!” She slipped out from under the blanket and rolled on her belly. She searched on the floor, than under the bed, her long, bare legs kicking. “Here …” She raised her hand. “Put that on ...”

Ash took the troyer and when she pulled it over her head she deeply inhaled the scent of Ali’s skin. Then she walked back to kitchen to fetch something to eat for herself and her gorgeous lover.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I hope the new year is off to a good start for everyone. And there are still 360 days left - 360 opportunities to make your wishes and dreams come true!!

Many thanks for comments, kudos and for reading my story. I'd love if you stay with me as the story continues.

**************************************

Tobin typed away on her phone, and the SMS was close to spilling from the display: apologies, explanations … She considered to switch to email. She stopped. What the hell was she trying to do??
Or - to undo? She erased the babble and put the phone away. Better to leave Chris alone. Or even better: to vanish from her life. Because what she couldn't forget was the look on Chris' face when they had parted: it had told her to just … go away.

“Hey!” With two fingers Mikkelsen lifted Tobin's chin and inspected her cheek where a some skin was missing. “You tried to pick up somebodies wife?”

You bet, Tobin thought. And then I was sliding down a wall holding on to the girl while part of my face got lost on a brick surface … “Tripped over the polar bear rug,” she muttered.

“You've got a … polar bear rug??” Mikkelsen couldn't believe it. “That's illegal!”

Tobin took a deep breath. “Look, Mikki – that was what normal people call a joke ...” Mikkelsen just stared. “Aw!” Tobin turned away. “Just forget it, okay? You know my place! Did you ever see a polar bear rug? It's small, Mikki!” She shook her head. “The head would stick out of the front door while the tail would dangle into the community garden...”

“That your phone?” Mikkelsen pointed to the breast pocket of Tobin's overall and now also Tobin heard the buzz. “Probably flight control. Or Administration. You better check it.”

Fuck flight control, Tobin thought. And while we're at it: Admin as well. She looked at the message.

'U ok?' She read it twice, unaware that suddenly her heart was racing: Chris!

'Not 2 bad. U??' She had to correct more errors than there were letters in the message.

'Don't ask'
Tobin scrolled through the files. Something to cheer her up, she thought. Something funny … yes! She selected the first picture, a shot of Chris she had taken at Olssons's party.

'In memory of your cute dress which you killed on the garden wall' She hit 'Send' then searched for more.

'Me + Ali Kr + skipper Ash. Ash shows with 2 crackers how to out-sail guys + win regatta if u dare risk ur boat…'

"You coming?" Mikkelsen was tapping his foot.

"Yeah, yeah …" Tobin was busy typing: '… Ash wants to sail arnd world. wld like to join + learn to sail. Wh do u think??'

She mailed the picture. “Okay, okay. I'm coming.”

They walked through the rolling doors and towards the helicopter, the blue and yellow paint job bright under the floodlight. Part of the airframe was stripped, and they could see technicians work on the rotor hydraulics, high on a movable platform.

"Hey!" Tobin shouted. “Keep your fingers out of her cleavage! She's mine!”

"Too late." The supervising technician Ove Steen didn't even bother to look up. “She just decided to go straight.”

"Shit." Tobin climbed up the ladder. “I hope you know what you're doing, guys.” She shook hands with the guys and the Sikorsky representative.

“No. Not really,” Ove Steen said. “We just poke around to look busy and important.” He pointed to Tobin's cheek. “You tried to pick up somebodies wife?”

“She tripped over her polar bear rug,” Mikkelsen said.

Steen raised an eyebrow then nodded towards the hydraulics. “Had to get the spare parts from Sweden,” he said. “Checked your inbox, Heath? We copied you and your Co on all the mails. Stuff arrived early this morning.” Ove Steen was a Rosenborg soccer club fan, and Tobin could see part of a Rosenborg fan T-shirt under his overall. He kept a ball in his locker, autographed by the national team.

Tobin frowned. “How long you think …?”

Steen shrugged. “Anything between three to five hours.”

Tobin turned to Mikkelsen. “You know what, Mikki? Let's go get a nice cup of coffee. And then we go see the weather guys. I want to know what's gonna hit us out there in five hours.”

***

Ash was leaning against the main console and steered the Aurora away from the pier and towards the main traffic channel. It was kind of old fashioned captain-at-helm style, but Ash liked to feel the ship, even when she was no longer turning a wheel but using something very close to a kiddie computer gadget: she held a joystick in her right hand.
„One-twenty eight degrees“, the coastal pilot said.

„One-twenty eight“, Ash repeated. She watched the compass repeater then aligned the ship’s bow with the lighthouse on port. „Steering one-twenty eight“, she said. then: „Boy or girl?“

The woman turned, smiling. she touched her belly. „Girl,“ she said.

Ash smiled back. „In summer?“ she asked.

„Yeah,“ the woman said, turning back to look out of the bridge window. „In summer.“

Ash cleared her throat, reluctant to probe. „You gonna quit?“

„Nooo ...“, the woman said. „Maternal leave. Then back to piloting.“

The silence was filled with the hum of machinery and the vibrations of the engines.

„You really … hit the shark?“ the woman suddenly asked.

„Nah“, Ash said. She had to laugh: incredible how such a story spread inside the community. „I was screaming at the beast. Screaming with fear. And rage. You know, I was so mad that all this shit was happening to me.“

The woman laughed, too - glad that she hadn't touched upon one of those things each of them kept hidden from the world. „This is the biggest AHST they have,“ she said, changing to a less sensitive topic. „And they gave it to you. Congratulations.“

Ash nodded in reply. Again there was silence. This time it was Ash who broke it. „You missing to go to sea?“ she asked, afraid to overstep and trespass into some well guarded territory.

„Yeah“, the woman said. „Sailed as a chief mate, container vessel, east-Asia route. I quit when we decided to have children. Was lucky and became a pilot.“

Ash knew: that was about as far as a conversation on a ship’s bridge normally went … but she had to ask. „So - you're married ... ?“

„Husband's in the Navy“, the woman said, apparently not minding. „He'll get out in two years.“

„Start a new life?“ Ash, carefully, probed deeper.

„Yeah“, the woman said. Then: „One-oh-seven degrees.“

„One-oh-seven degrees“, Ash repeated. And: „Steering one oh-seven.“

The woman turned and came back to the pilot’s seat. „Sometimes it helps to sit, sometimes to stand, but in the end the back hurts, no matter what,“ she said and stretched her legs.

Ash stepped aside. The woman turned the steering dial by three clicks, and the ship swung a few degrees to port, silently gliding along the main traffic channel. Ash looked ahead and, finally, saw the sea.

„So - good luck to you two, ah... three“, Ash said.

The woman smiled. „Thanks, Captain. And take care, out there.“

Ash gave her a nod. „Likewise“, she said.
The pilot rose from the seat, massaging her back. „Your ship Captain“, she said.

„My ship“, Ash said. „Ninety-seven degrees. Steady as she goes. Oncoming traffic three points to port, ferry crossing from starboard.“

Ali Baba stepped forward looking at Ash. She nodded and he took the pilot's seat. „Steady as she goes“, he said. „Oncoming traffic three to port, ferry crossing from starboard.“

„Okay“, Ash confirmed. She saw the pilot's transport approach full speed to pick up the woman.

„So,” the woman said. „A bit of paperwork and then I'll be off.“ She hesitated. „Have you ...“ again she paused. „If I may ask ... have you somebody ...“

Ash looked at the forms she had to sign. She had feared the question but here it was.

„Sorry, Captain“, the pilot said.

„No, no, its okay“, Ash took a deep breath. „Have I somebody ... good question.“

„Yeah“, the woman said. „I know what you mean. Sometimes it's ... hard to tell.“ She turned to walk to the door but stopped. Gently she touched Ash's shoulder. „Don't get me wrong, Captain - but sometimes, loneliness is like a ... drug. It can become a habit.”

***

Ali stood in Ash's room and listened to the silence. Only an hour ago she had woken up, in Ash's bed, alone – and Ash gone. She had made the bed, naked, carefully smoothing the sheets, had opened the window to let the cold air do the rest, had taken a shower, had made herself a cup of coffee, had walked to her room and had started to pack her two bags, still naked, as if dressing would put up a final barrier between the night hours in Ash's arms and what would come, now.

Then she had slipped into her jeans, reluctantly put on the bra, straps still dangling, her feet still bare, as if about to undress for a lover, not half dressed for a journey. Then there had been the call, the buzz of her mobile cutting through the silence, a voice telling her that the flight would be delayed, and that she had to wait until they would call again, in one or three or five hours. And now she stood in Ash's room and listened to the silence.

She touched the bed, the sheets cool. There was no trace left of the lovemaking, but she still felt her spine tingle, a faint echo of what had happened a few hours ago. Suddenly something surfaced from her memory: Ash's lips on hers, soft, tender, kissing her goodbye – or had it been ... just a dream? Something she had wanted to be true, so much that it had entered her sleep? She wasn't sure.

She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply. She remembered why she was here: the Aran Troyer. She walked to the closet. She opened the door, scanned the shirts, the jeans, the shoes, the heels, the boots. No troyer. She lifted a stack of sweaters and something fell to the floor. She bent down to pick it up.

'Thanks for making me burn, Stella.' Ali read it twice. Then she turned the piece of paper. She stared at the picture: Ash and a beautiful girl, her face framed by a mane of red hair. Thanks for making me burn: suddenly something seemed to pierce her heart and Ali dropped the picture as if it was on fire. Then she heard the door buzzer.
The company’s airport shuttle? She was barefoot and the straps of her bra still dangled, but she gave a shit: the flight was delayed and she was tired of waiting, she was short of sleep, she wanted to be in Ash's arms, she was missing her so much that it hurt - she was angry and glad to take it out on somebody. She walked to the door and opened it. „Didn’t you say you’d call? I’m not ...“ She stopped.

It was Christen who stood in front of her, and in her black tracksuit and her wrap-around sunglasses she was like a sleek, dangerous animal.

„Stay away from her“, Chris said. „You hear me? Stay away from her, you, and this ... captain!“ She stabbed a finger against Ali’s chest. „She’s not gonna go with her or … you, okay?“ She stabbed again and it hurt.

Ali gasped when Chris pushed her back and came into the flat. “She … isn't here!”

“Don't try to shit me ...” Chris looked left and right then walked down the corridor.

Ali grabbed a sleeve of Chris' tracksuit. “Who do you think you are?? You can't just come in here and ...” Her bra began to slip and she caught it with one hand while she tried to hold on with the other, trying to stop Chris.

Chris shook her off easily and opened a door.

„That's my room, you …!!“ Ali ran after her.

Chris suddenly turned and they stood face to face. “I want her to stay away from Tobin,” Chris hissed. “She already took away a … friend. This time I'll stop her. If she doesn't ...” Chris moved on towards the next door.

“She isn't ...” Ali blocked her way. “You're NOT going in here ...” Chris tried to shove her aside, but Ali caught her wrist and began to twist. “Get out of ... here, you ...” There was a powerful athlete's body under Chris' tracksuit, and Ali found herself discarded like a limp rag. She bumped against the opposite wall, trying to steady herself, trying to hold on to something – which was a steel-framed poster of Norwegian folk dancers. Glass exploded, glittering shards showered the floor.

„She's not gonna sail around the world with her. Or anywhere else, you got me?? Where is she … the captain???” Chris kicked the door open and blundered into Ash's room. It only took Ali a second to go after her. She was desperate, she only knew that she had to protect … what? She didn't know but she had to. She grabbed Chris' hair and pulled. And she pulled hard. Chris shrieked. Her sunglasses came off. And suddenly Chris' strength was gone and she just stood in the room, panting. Ali stared at her face and Chris turned her face away. But not even the heavy makeup could hide that her left eye was swollen, that blackish blood had begun to spread under the skin. A moment ago Ali had been angry. But now ... her face was pale and her lips were trembling: she knew this type of injury very well. „Who ...“, she barely could control her voice. „Who did this?“

„Nobody“, Chris said. But she knew that Ali didn't believe her. “Listen - I know what you think ... You can say a lot against my husband. But he’d never hit me. In fact stopped touching me quite a while ago ...“

Ali still stared.

“Look ... it was ... a chair on a table ... and ...,” Chris still tried to hide her face. “I was drunk and ... I tried to climb ... and I fell ... and ... It’s ...” Suddenly she began to cry. “What a fuck up ...” She slumped onto the bed.
Ali didn't know what to do. A moment ago she had been close to kick in Chris' teeth and now … You stupid bitch! She thought. Getting soft just because she's shedding tears like a waterfall, and because you can't stand to see girls getting hurt and … “You were with … Tobin Heath, right?” It was a wild guess but Ali knew she was right. “That silly … pilot and her stupid ideas …”

“It wasn't her fault!” Chris covered her face to hide her tears. “Everybody picks on her just because … she's … different. That's not fair!! It was me. I made her …”

Ali was surprised. “You … really like her …”

Chris sobbed. “Yes. NO!” She looked up, her eyes narrow. “Not THAT way!”

And here we go again, Ali thought. Her anger came back. “Listen …” she said. “I'm about to go offshore and I'm waiting for the shuttle and … the place's a mess and I still have to pack and …“

“You think I'm crazy …” Chris voice had lost her edge. She was exhausted, she felt sad. Looking for her sunglasses she saw the picture on the floor, right in front of her feet. “You know who she is? The redhead?”

“No!” Ali picked it up. “And I don't want to know.” She opened a drawer, dropped the picture into it and slammed it shut. “It's none of my business. And none of yours.”

“Stella Carson,” Chris said. “One of Northern's legal advisers. The ship … the boat … that went down and … killed … my girlfriend … a racing yacht: it was hers. And she bagged the insurance money. A lot of money … and she … the captain, her lover, was the skipper.”

It took Ali a moment to put the pieces together. Then, even before she really understood, she was mad. “What are you trying to tell me ...?”

“Gawd!” Chris studied Ali's face. “You're already hooked … on her!”

“Are you telling me …” Ali's throat was tight. “… that Ash sank the boat killing your friend and didn't care just to get the money …??”

“You are … with her, right?” Chris nodded. “You are.”

“You're … sick.” Ali was disgusted.

“You talk like my husband,” Chris said.

Ali crossed her arms. “You better leave, now.” Her voice was calm, but she had crossed her arms to keep her hands from trembling.

Chris didn't move. “You've no idea what you got yourself into - being with … her.”

Ali didn't listen. Her heart was racing and she wanted this … girl … out of the flat. Now. Her fists were clenched, nails digging into her palms. “Get out of here!” she hissed. She was so angry that she felt tears sting in her eyes. “Get out of here before I drag you out.” She meant it.

“That your phone?” Chris pointed to the door. “Better get the call … probably the Air Service guys.” Now Ali heard it too: the buzz of her mobile. The Shuttle! Her fury simply evaporated. And was replaced by … panic. She turned and dashed into the corridor. Where the hell …? She listened then ran into the kitchen, picked up the phone from the table, almost dropping it. “Krieger …” She cleared her throat. “This is …” She listened. “What?? In 30 minutes?? I'm not …”The line was dead.
30 fucking minutes?? She wasn't dressed, the corridor floor was covered with broken glass, the bags weren't packed. Shit! Then also the the panic was gone and she was simply ... desperate. For a moment she just stood and looked out of the window, just looked into the clouds, heavy with rain, coming in from the sea. Then she poured herself a glass of water and drank it. What was it Chris had said? Fuck up?? Yeah, she thought. What a fuck up!

She walked back into the corridor.

Chris was on her knees, trying to clean up the mess. “I'm ... sorry,” she said, picking up the pieces of the broken frame. She had cut herself and Ali saw the blood on her fingers.

“Easy. Don't touch it.” Ali took a deep breath. “I better get a brush.” She walked back to the kitchen. When she returned with brush and dustpan, a bin and a pack of band aid, Chris sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. She looked at the blood on her palm then at Ali. “They never found her,” she said, and it took Ali a moment to understand what she was talking about. “They never found her body. She was just ... gone. As if she had never existed. And nobody really cared! They just wanted celebrity plus ... a sad story. They gave a shit.”

“But ...you had a lot of friends,” Ali said. “You were part of a team, I mean ...” She prepared a strip of band aid, glad to concentrate on something because Chris' eyes were full of pain, and it was almost more than Ali could bear. “Gimme your hand ... okay. Now ... that's better.”

“They were nice, my mates,” Chris said. “They tried to help. But what they really wanted was ... they wanted me to forget it, to move on, to do my job ... to perform, as if nothing had happened.” She looked at Ali's face, anxious to have her full attention, wanting her to ... understand.

And Ali understood. She knew how it was when a hand seemed to slowly crushed the heart to pulp, to feel as if the self was disintegrating, to feel ... helpless, alone, powerless.

“And I could do nothing,” Chris said. ”Just sit and ... fall apart.” She touched Ali's hand to make sure she was listening. “Now my life's like ... this.” She pointed at the broken glass. “I can't sleep any more. When I close my eyes I see her, alone, out there, dying ...” Chris looked at the band aid. “I'm so sorry about all this,” she said. “ But ... I just can't stand the thought to loose her, Tobin, too ...

“Did you ever tell ... her ... I mean Tobin ... what happened?”

Chris shook her head.

“You don't ... trust her?” Ali began to sweep the glass off the floor.

“I don't know if I can reach her. She's ... It's as if she's behind some ... wall.” Chris put a hand over her eyes because the tears were coming back. “She's talking and talking and ... she's never saying what she really wants to ... say ...”

“Show her that you want to know. That you're listening.” Ali let the glass clatter into the bin.

“She's hiding behind all those... bullshit ideas and ...” Chris began to pick up the bigger pieces, carefully this this time.

“Show her that she's the girl you want to be ... close to,” Ali said. “And yes, she has a big mouth. And yes, she's full of bullshit and gets on your nerves with her stupid ideas and her dirty talk. But beneath all this ... there's just a girl.”

“I just ...don't know what to do. It's ...”
“Simple,” Ali said, knowing that this wasn't simple at all. “Find out what … you really feel. Find out about yourself. And if you don't want what she wants to give you – it's okay. Just tell her. And let her go … so she can let go. That's what you owe her.”

“She's silly, but I feel safe when … She's fun, she … cares. And at the same time I could scream at her and sometimes just hit her … I don't want to loose her!”

“She's not a toy …” Ali swept up the last bits of glass then looked into Chris' eyes. “And it's not a game.”

“But … I'm not toying with her! I'm …” Chris stopped, bit her lip. Then, suddenly, she got up from the floor. “Gimme the brush. I take care of this. You get dressed and then I'll help you pack.”

Ali didn't know what to say. She realized that she was gaping at Chris. She shut her mouth.

“Oh … and call them back,” Chris said. “Tell them you don't need the shuttle. I'll take you to the airport.”

“But …” Ali was stunned. “You really mean …?”

“Don't worry,” Chris said. “I've got a fast car. You'll catch your flight.”

***

„This is your captain speaking on behalf of Olsson airline...“ It was Tobin's voice coming through the intercom. „The only Airline run according to the three principles of no refund, no regrets, and no lost luggage ever returned.“

The Helicopter was shaking and trembling in a gush of wind, giving a taste of what was to be expected in the air.

„You get no bonus miles, no upgrades, no snacks and no drinks.“ Tobin's cheerful voice was cutting through the whine of the turbines and the guy next to Ali rolled his eyes...„In the unlikely event of the bus going down in the middle of old Briny you'll find your life vests hopefully attached to your neck, the mustang suits where they belong, that is covering most of your precious parts, and the survival kit between your knees and secured to your safety harness.“ The whine of the Sikorsky’s twin engines rose to a higher pitch. „My chief stewardess Carl Mikkelson is right now with you and checking if everything's by the book. And don't pinch his butt! That's pilot's privilege!“

„Hey …“Ali looked up. Mikkelson, the co-pilot, was beside her seat, a boyish face under the flight helmet, freckles covering his smooth skin. „Okay?“ She smiled. „Sure. Thanks.“ Mikkelson gave her a wink and moved on. Ali turned and looked to the pilot.

Tobin seemed to be almost fragile in the heavy immersion suit, life vest and flight helmet. She was talking into her headset while she looked right and left, pushing a few switches. Then she was on the intercom again. „Ladies and Gentlemen“, she said. „I just got confirmation that we're going into bad weather, so prepare for a rough ride. And in the very much likely event of you wanting to get rid of your lunch, use the bags in front of you supplied courtesy of Katja Olsson and Angus Mclowry. Thanks.“

Mikkelsen walked back to his seat. He picked up a clipboard and ticked off a few items.
Bad weather? What the hell did she mean by bad weather? Ali thought. She leaned back in her seat, trying to make herself comfortable, and then the wine of the turbines became louder and the staccato of the rotor blades merged into a roar and then Ali felt the soar and when she looked out of the window they were already high in the air and climbing and she heard the rumble of the landing gear being retracted, felt the heli tilt to the left, the landscape seemed to swerve, she saw the cliffs, houses, streets full of cars, drop away below her and then, for a brief moment, she saw the sea, gray under a gray sky and she squinted as, for a split second, the clouds opened and sunlight stabbed into her eyes.

Another gush of wind shook the helicopter. The guy next to Ali was asleep.

***

Ash was sitting in the captain's chair on the bridge. She had pushed one foot against the console in front of her, steadying herself against the ships movements. She had closed her safety belt and held her coffee mug with her left hand to prevent it from sliding across the top. She was doing paperwork, but part of her mind was with the ship and she was letting all the incredible energy pass through her body: the throb of the huge engines, the noise of wind and rain hitting the bridge, the surge of the ship in a sea which played roller coaster with her vessel as if to remind her, almost friendly, that it was not she who called the shots out here.

This was the only time she could let go, let herself fall and surrender to the rhythm of waves and wind, sometimes soft and smooth, sometimes hard, even painful, but always welcome. The only other time was when she was riding a fast bike, controlling thrust and speed, pushing it to the limit and pushing it further, her heart racing – like good sex, like ...

She took a deep breath and had to close her eyes. She still couldn't believe what had happened only hours ago. She still couldn't accept the memory of herself writhing on the bed unable … Her cheeks were burning with embarrassment, the pencil she held snapped in her fist. You stupid bitch, Harris! She dropped the pieces and wiped them aside. Just because a girl made you … a mug of chocolate. And what scared her even more was that for the first time in her life parting had been like a stab into the heart, and that for a second she had been unable to turn and walk through the door and leave that beautiful girl behind. What the hell was happening to her? No, she thought. She didn't need this. Or did she?

Ash bit her lip, stared through the toughened glass of the bridge into the sky. The ship was climbing a huge wave at a steep angle and she could feel the engines work hard to provide the thrust necessary to do what the Aurora Borealis was doing right now.

Ali Baba was in the helms' chair looking at the two radar displays and the electronic chart on the navigation screen. From the corner of her eyes she observed the helmsman. She needed to know how the crew performed when the going got rough. The helmsman was okay, relaxed, riding the the ship's yaw and pitch but always concentrating on the screens, alert even now, while the ship was steered by the autopilot, controlled by the digital voyage plan which was stored on the ship's navigation computer and appeared as a bright yellow line on the electronic chart: the ship's projected course.

Then the bow began to fall, fall and, with incredible force, hit the sea.

„Aircraft from aft“, Ali Baba said, pointing to a marker on the navigation screen. He moved the
Ali Krieger, she thought. Marine engineer. She took a deep breath, she suddenly felt her heart beat like the wings of a bird that had been caged for a long time, preparing for a voyage into the unknown. Then she looked at her watch. Still six to eight hours to go. She pulled the keyboard towards her and began to type out the status report and the new estimated time of arrival to Ritz, Outpost and headquarters.

***

Ali rocked in her seat when the heli seemed to crash into a pothole. The next moment it shot into the air only to receive two heavy blows, one from the left, the other from right. Then it dropped into an abyss. Meanwhile Ali's survival suit had become too baggy and too warm, and she had given a name to her life vest: Chuck. Because it did what 16 year old Chuck had done to 14 year old Ali: squeezed her breasts without any regard for the delicate parts of female anatomy.

Ali was staring at her knees, her jaw set, lips a thin line. Two guys had been sick, now a third one threw up. The din of the turbines, the roar of the rotor blades, muffled by the intercom headset but still too loud, the heli bucking like a mad bronco: Ali's body ached, every muscle, every bone, and she thought that if this didn't stop, and stop now, she would scream, simply scream ...

She didn't scream. A fourth guy was sick into his bag. Ali turned to look at the pilots only to stare in disbelief. The helicopter was on autopilot and Tobin and Mikkelsen were chatting while Mikkelsen browsed through a car magazine and Tobin ate a candy bar. Ali decided to hate all pilots and to kill a pilot every day for rest of her life.

„Hey ...“ She turned, her rage focused now on the guy next to her. „What??“ she snapped. „Thorstein,“ the guy said. „Technician. Outpost.“ It took Ali a second to realize that he was giving his name, function and station. „Krieger“, She managed a smile. „Marine Engineer. „ „So ...“ Thorstein sank deeper into his seat. „You going to the Ritz?“ „Yeah,“ Ali said„ „Well,” Thorstein looked out of the window. „Hope they can land the bus in this weather ...“ Ali's fingers grabbed the armrest. „What do you mean?“ She stared at Thorstein. „Well ...“ Thorstein still looked out of the window. Heavy raindrops pelted the Perspex. „Helipads are small and in such a weather ... hope they can make it.“ Ali still stared, a new and horrible thought taking shape in her mind. No, she thought. No, no, no!! „And ...“ her voice trembled. „And if they ... can't?“ Thorstein closed his eyes. „Then we'll go back. “ Ali's heart seemed to stop. „Back?“ she rasped. „You mean ...“ Thorstein was asleep.

„I think we have a passenger named Krieger?“ Tobin’s voice came through her headset and Ali sat up in her seat, surprised. Tobin chuckled and Ali could easily imagine her grin. „Now, Mrs Krieger ... if I can bother you to look out of the window - and if you're not too busy throwing up - you'll see, in a few moments, the ship of a certain captain we both know ...“ Ali sat bolt upright. The rain had stopped and the sea was the color of slate, waves rolling and breaking ... She saw nothing. Her eyes began to tear, but there was nothing out there, nothing.
She stared, narrowing her eyes. And there it was, so small, plowing through the gray sea, white water suddenly covering the bow. The ship vanished for a second then surfaced again, moving on and on: Ash's home. Ali suddenly realized that tears were running down her cheeks. She hastily wiped them away, embarrassed then looked again. The ship was gone. But what she had seen had pierced her heart because in those brief moments she had understood: The vastness, the emptiness, the uncaring, merciless desert of the sea – it was the land of choice for Ash Harris.

„Message for Krieger.‘‘ Mikkelsen’s voice brought her back to the present. „From Head of Engineering … apparently there's a change in the schedule ...“

***

Tobin stood in the hangar und looked out of the rolling doors. The wind was driving sheets of rain across the airfield, the water on the apron, like a mirror, showing the reflection of the helicopter. The Sikorsky had been refueled, cleaned and hosed down to remove the salt water and now was parked with blades secured and swinging in the wind.

Mikkelsen talked to a technician then walked back to Tobin while checking his phone. „They’ll pull the bird in if the weather gets worse“, he said, still looking at his messages.

„Okay“, Tobin blew her nose. She had caught a cold - another reminder of the cold night in Angus McLowry’s garden. „Listen, Mikki – how you feel about a beer or two?“

„Can’t.‘‘ Mikkelsen said, typing away on his phone. „Mother-in-law decided to honor us with her presence. Probably wants to lecture me again about the advantages of buying this new house which happens to be just across from where she lives ...“ He hit the send key. „You don’t know how lucky you are ...“

Yeah, Tobin thought. Hard to believe all the luck: to have this little apartment, which looks more and more like a hotel room, all to myself, and all this fast food in my freezer, all to myself, and a nice vintage car, all to myself. And on top of this the occasional one night stand. „Well‘, Tobin said. „Some other time. Take care. Stay away from her claws.“

Mikkelsen, again typing on his phone and already walking to his car, waved to her.

Tobin shifted her flight helmet to the other arm then picked up her bag and the briefcase and walked to the administration block and into the locker room. She opened her locker, put away her flight helmet and began to unstrap her life vest. Then she unzipped her survival suit, cursing while she tried to get out of the thick layer of neoprene. She kicked the suit away. Suddenly she realized that she wasn't alone. She turned.

Chris sat on on a bench, watching her. “I wanted to call,” she said. “But I lost my phone.”

Tobin swallowed hard. “It's in my car. You forgot ...”

Chris didn't move. “Thought so ...”

Tobin walked towards her. She was in socks and thermal underwear but she didn't care. She went to her knees and gently removed Chris' sunglasses. “Gawd!” She sucked in her breath when she saw the dark blood under her left eye. She shook her head. “What a stupid stunt. Why didn't we go to my place?”
“Let's do it now,” Chris said.

Tobin knew she had to say something but just couldn't. Suddenly she was scared.

Chris waited a few seconds. Then she knocked against Tobin's forehead. “Hullo?? Anybody at home??”

Tobin swallowed hard. “It's a mess, my place.”

“We can clean it up … together.”

“It's small …,” Tobin said.

“I'm not that big.”

“I've got nothing to eat … 'sides some … microwave stuff.” Tobin's voice was no more than a whisper.

Chris whispered, too. “There are at least two shops along the way – we can buy something.”

“I can't cook,” Tobin said.

“Me neither. So … better keep it simple, right?”

“Chips and … a few cans of beer?”

“Terrific,” Chris said.

Tobin took her hand. “What you think’s gonna happen?”

“Let's find out.” Chris said.

“I … might rape you.”

Chris smiled. “I don't think so.”

“Your husband …” Tobin searched for words.

Chris no longer smiled. “What about him?”

“He'll gonna miss you? Call the police?”

“No, he won't,” Chris said.

“You sure?”

Chris tilted her head. “What's wrong with you? Suddenly afraid you're trespassing?” Her voice again had the edge which Tobin feared. “That you might hurt your bosses feelings? Let me tell you: it's too late. You're already deep in dangerous territory.”

“I didn't mean to …”

“He won't miss me because … ” Chris leaned closer to Tobin. “He won't come home,” she whispered. “He'll go to Jättavagen where this woman lives …Or, more likely, he'll be with this Brit Airways stewardess, at the Radisson.”

“He's … cheating on you??”

The pain in Chris' voice made Tobin cringe. “I didn't want to ...”

“Go ahead,” Chris said. “You're welcome. First time I'm talking about all this shit. And ... don't you want to know if ... I'm getting back at him?”

“Are you ...?”

Chris leaned back. “Only one time,” she said. “With a consultant from Aberdeen. Nice guy. whispered sweet nothings into my ear until I rolled on my back.” She closed her eyes. “Should've known better because nobody dares piss off the chairman. Found out that Olsson had fixed me up. Had blackmailed the guy into shagging me. She hates Angus. She not only wants his job, he wants him out of the company. Probably thought that to attach a slut wife to Angus would help.”

“Olsson? you mean ...”

“Say, Tobs ...” Chris smiled, but the smile was cold, as were her eyes. “Did she blackmail you as well?”

Tobin winced. “Now this isn't fair ...” She tried to be reasonable. “look, if this is about you getting back at your husband ... I mean ... you don’t have to go all the way, you know. It’s okay. Just tell me and I'll drive you home ...“

“Don't you dare to give me fair!!” Chris stood up and pushed Tobin back who suddenly found herself sitting on the cold and dirty tiles. “And to get this straight ... yes, it's also about getting back at that piece of shit. And tomorrow I'll hire a blimp which tows a huge banner saying 'Your Wife Spread For Heath And Just Loved It!' and I hope he drops dead. And now what?”

“I ... I'm sorry ...” Tobin managed to say.

Chris walked towards the door. There she turned. “Get into your pants,” she said. “And then let's go. I wait in your car.”

***

When Tobin returned to the living room it was empty. “Hello?” She looked into the kitchen. “Where are you?” She ran her fingers through her hair, still damp from the shower. She checked her inbox then hooked up the tablet via Bluetooth with the Bang Olufsen system and selected ... she hesitated for a second. Well, Salsa had worked somehow yesterday, she thought. “That okay for you?” She got no answer. Tobin opened the bedroom door.

Chris sat on the bed.

“Wow!!” Tobin leaned against the door frame. “So that's what you soccer guys wear under your tracksuits - lingerie!” The camisole was silk and the peaks of her breasts stood sharply pointed under the shining surface. The delicate lace of French briefs hugged her thighs, high up.

“You don't like it?” Chris narrowed her eyes.
“You look gorgeous,” Tobin said. “A dream girl.” She walked towards Chris and Chris turned her face away to hide the dark bruise under her left eye.

“Pull that up.” Tobin tucked at the camisole.

Chris pushed her hand away.

“Pull that ...”

Chris crossed her arms. „I’m not gonna undress.“ She said. „You wouldn’t want to see what’s underneath.“

„Yes, I would ...“

„No, you wouldn’t!“ Chris tried to move away but there was no more space left on the bed.

Tobin carefully lifted the silk and for a second she felt Chris' body tense. Tobin held her breath. “Did you see a doctor?”

“Did you?” Chris snapped back.

“DID you ...?”

Chris shook her head.

“You silly ...” Tobin wanted to touch the huge discolored area which spread over her rib cage. She hesitated then kissed the bruised skin under her left breast.

Chris flinched.

“Sorry ...” Tobin said.

“It's okay.” Chris rested a hand on her shoulder. “You're doing the right things.”

Tobin gently put the camisole back in place. “How the hell did you manage to sleep?”

“Couldn't.” Chris shrugged. “Can't sleep anyway.”

Tobin frowned.

“Can't sleep,” Chris said. “Pills, booze ... just don't help. Can't sleep.” She turned to Tobin. “So?”

“So?”

“What's the matter? I thought you wanted ...”

“What?” Tobin touched her cheek. “To do you?”

Chris blushed.


“But what?” Her voice was like metal but there were tears in Chris' eyes. “You just decided I'm not your type??”

“Are you crazy?” Tobin wanted to hug her but Chris' shook her off. “look,” Tobin said. “It's about making love. Not about hurting you. And it's not like doing some ... exercises.”
“You bitch! I could kill you!” Chris tried to stop her tears. “You made me go where I didn't want to go!” It took Tobin a second to understand that Chris wasn't talking about the apartment. “You didn't even think about asking me,” Chris hissed. “And did I say I wanted to go there? No! But you … just took me and … now it can’t be undone … And now you gonna let me .. sit here, half naked and …”

Tobin wanted to hold her hands but didn't dare to touch her.

„It’s just … I want you to know that … it's okay if you don't …“

Chris voice was menacing. „I remember somebody telling me she wants to do me till I faint. Just curious: You gonna chat me into blackout? Is that how you do it? Talk until I drop?” She began to cry. “Gawd … I'm so tired.”

“You don't need sex,” Tobin said. “You need some sleep.”

“Do you ever listen? I told you ...” Chris wiped away the tears and smeared makeup all over her face.

„Well,” Tobin took a paper tissue and tenderly cleaned Chris' cheeks. “I … could read you a bedtime story …”

Chris stared and Tobin braced for something that would hurt.

“Okay,” Chris said.

“Okay what?”

“Read me a story.”

“Kaaay ...” Tobin tried to hide her surprise by blowing her nose into the tissue. Now Chris' makeup was in her face, too. “No problem ...” She was thinking fast. “Just … relax … aaaand ...” She dropped the tissue and picked up a book from the floor.

Chris lay back, frowning.

“But …” Tobin said. “Only one story. A short one. And then it's lights out and eyes shut and if I catch you reading under the blanket ...”

Chris kicked her.

“Okay, okay ...” Tobin smiled. “Let's see...” She opened the book, browsed a few pages. Then she cleared her throat. “Mona woke up. It was dark. She rose from the bunk, her skin wet from the tropical heat.” She cleared her throat again. “She felt the boat move with the sea and she heard soft voices on the deck. She walked to the stern, saw that she was alone, the other beds empty. The hatch door was open, and as she climbed the stairs she felt the warm night air on her naked body. The sky was ablaze with stars. And in the pale light she saw Beth and Shari. They were kissing, their tongues playing. Mona’s heart raced while jealousy seemed to burn a hole into her chest. She was trembling, unable to move. She stared at her friend Beth, long legs spread, groaning and twisting, Shari's finger deeply buried in her wet …!”

Chris sat bolt upright.

“You … you ...” She searched for words. “You give me smut to put me to sleep?? That's a ...” She grabbed the book. “That's porn!!” She read the cover, read it again. Then she stared at Tobin. “The APA Guide to Fiji? A travel book??”
“One day I'll go there,” Tobin said. “And swim in the blue lagoons, and walk under the palm trees, and dive to see the coral reefs, and lie on the white beaches … arrgh!” Chris had hit her with the book.

“You made it all up??” She threw away the book. “It's all from your … dirty mind, you …” She laid down again and turned her back to Tobin.

It had started to rain and in the silence Tobin heard the drops beat against the window. Bad move, she thought. Very bad.

Chris sniffed. “What's gonna happen next?”

“What?” Tobin stared at Chris' back.

“What's gonna happen next? That isn't all, right? There's more about … Mona, and Beth, and … what's her name? Sha-ri.”

“You mean...?” Tobin still stared.

“Tell me.” Chris curled up like a cat. “I mean … this girl … she watches …”

“Mona,” Tobin said.

“Mona,” Chris chuckled. “Where, for heavens sake, did you get these names? Are they real?”

“High school,” Tobin said.

“Mona?” Chris buried her face in the pillow to hide that she had to laugh. She suddenly cringed with pain. “Don't make me laugh, you stupid … It hurts.”

“The queen of bitches.” Tobin grinned. “Planned to kill her, but had to queue at the end of a very long line.”

“And … Beth?”

“A sweet nerdy girl,” Tobin said. Now she was lost in thought and began to play with a strand of Chris' hair. “With beautiful eyes behind her large glasses.”

“And you were in love with her?”

“Sure. Close to desperate.”

“And she … was in love with … you?”

“She was in love with black holes, and dark matter, and event horizons, and gravitational lenses and all the numbers and math involved.”

“And … Sha-ri?” Chris' sarcasm was like acid.

“Principal's dog,” Tobin said.

Chris tried hard not to laugh, holding her bruised body. “So … Mona is watching while … that's ridiculous, I mean nobody …”

“Well,” Tobin didn't want to discuss this … nonsense. All she wanted was to take Chris in her arms but … “You mean YOU wouldn't want to watch two girls going down on each other …”
“You mean there are girls who'd be … fascinated and …?” Chris moved closer until she felt Tobin's body warm against her back. She rested her head on Tobin's arm.

“I'm not saying that you … I mean …” Suddenly Tobin was embarrassed. “Look,” she said. “Just let's forget about it … It was just a joke. So …”

Chris took Tobin's hand and played with her fingers. “Come on … tell me,” she said. “Tell me how Mona … and I'll tell you if I'd like it …”

Tobin's throat was dry. She was still embarrassed. “I think Mona's … fascinated by …”

“She's jealous – that's what you said.”

“To be jealous doesn't mean that you don't want to …”

“To do what?” Chris chuckled. “Tell me.”

“Well …” Tobin desperately racked her brain for some really smutty stuff but for whatever reason couldn't find anything.


Tobin took a deep breath. “Er … Now … Mona's climbing the stairs, you know, and she's trembling with rage because Beth's her … you know, friend and … she's trembling but … at the same time she just can't take away her eyes from the place between Mona's thighs where Shari's finger plays with the … soft, wet … you know, Mona's got those voluptuous outer lips and Shari has gently opened them so the soft inner …” Tobin had to pause because she ran out of words. “… they just slip out of … But suddenly Shari stops and she turns and looks right into Mona's eyes and she smiles and then she beckons with her wet, dripping finger and Mona – she's … hypnotized and she crawls closer and … between Beth's thighs and Shari licks finger and then she dips it again into the … juice, deeper this time and … she offers it to Mona and Mona's just … helpless and she comes closer and licks … you know, like a kitten …”

“Kitten …” Chris murmured. And suddenly Tobin realized that Chris was asleep. She felt panic rise: something was expected of her but … she just didn’t know what and … how. This wasn't just a one night stand - this was something new, even frightening, and for a second she wanted to run but of course she couldn’t and she was afraid to move anyway because she'd rather drop dead than wake Chris up and …

And then she understood that all she had to do was simply guard the girl's sleep and keep her warm and safe. She took Chris in her arms, careful not to wake her, and it was as if they had been molded for each other from the beginning and just to hold her was better than anything she had done before.

It was getting dark. Chris stirred, now and then, breathing deeply. Tobin listened to the rain beat against the windows, then, resting her head against her neck, she listened to Chris' heartbeat.

Chris suddenly moaned, suddenly struggled as if fighting an invisible enemy, and Tobin kissed her softly, running her fingertips through her hair until Chris calmed down. Then Tobin pulled the blanket over Chris and herself and Chris settled even deeper into Tobin’s embrace.

***
Ash had to use the night glasses' image stabilizer to compensate the ship's movement. She scanned the horizon until she saw what she was looking for: the two steel structures, far away but clearly visible in the huge Steiner binos, two black shapes against the sky which was no longer black but already showing that the new day was only a few hours away. A faint light was crawling over the eastern horizon, stars already fading, the darkness of space giving way to dawn.

They were ahead of their schedule and they would have to wait until daylight. There was no hurry and no reason to take the risk and approach the platforms in the dark and unload under floodlight.

Most of Outpost A and B was still hidden behind the horizon, and what Ash saw was the accommodation block, an ugly box of steel, elevated over the platform of Outpost B, six floors high, the western side still deep in the shadow of the night, dotted with the yellow lights of windows and portholes, while Outpost A was no more than the flicker of a gas flare, high above the sea, and a set of red aircraft warning lights.

Ash took no comfort in seeing the platforms. On the contrary: they seemed to make this place even lonelier, a place far from mankind, like an alien planet.

When she lowered the binos she saw a meteor cross the sky, towards to the open sea, where the water spread beyond the horizon and where the sea bed dropped from the continental shelf into the black abyss under the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. At least Ali was set up at the Ritz, Ash thought. She smiled. Not exactly a nice place but much better than this – at least some comfort, some safety.

“Ship on starboard,” Daltry said. It was his watch and he sat in the captain's chair. He pointed to the navigation screen.

Ash raised the binoculars. She had to strain her eyes but then she saw the gray shape of a Norwegian destroyer, barely visible against the sky. She checked the screen. The Navy vessel gave only minimum information: the Freya, patrolling the oil and gas fields, moving slowly on a north western course. “We better slow down,” Ash said. “No need to appear earlier than planned.”

“Aye aye, Capt'n.” Daltry further reduced speed and the ship's roll became stronger.

Ash checked the engine information and the speed-over-ground. “Looks good,” she said. Then: “I'm in my cabin.” She left the bridge and walked down the companionway.

“Aye aye, Capt'n.” A seaman stepped back to let her pass. Ash stopped. “What about the floodlight at the starboard winch?” “Fixed, Capt'n,” the seaman said. “Okay.” Ash took the last steps. For a moment she stood in front of her open cabin door and listened to the ship's sounds then she went into her cabin and closed the door. She looked at her watch. Only a couple of hours … She pulled it off her wrist and placed it on the shelf beneath the mirror then ran the tap. She splashed cold water on her face.

No use to go to bed. She wondered if Ali was sleeping right now, dreaming … of what? Ash shivered. She wore Ali's Aran Troyer and now she held the high collar close to her face and inhaled deeply the scent of her hair and her skin, mixed with the faint scent of her favorite perfume.

She looked into the mirror. The golden swirl, kept in place by combs, was gone. The long tail, trademark of Captain Ash Harris, was back. Gone was the girl Ashlyn, a girl longing for her beautiful roommate. Back was the reality, the old life, the life Ash had always wanted. Good, she thought. Then she looked closer.

Was it the cold, artificial light? No. Not the light. It was ... She turned away from the mirror but there was no doubt: she had changed and there was a new expression in her face, around her lips -
something that had been left by Ali kisses.

This is going too fast, she thought. Too fast - and too far.
Chapter 11

Tobin stretched and yawned. She opened her eyes, still sleepy. The light of a gray dawn filled the room and it was too fucking early to do anything else but roll over and go to sleep again for an hour or two.

Chris sat on the bed, legs crossed, looking at Tobin, and when their eyes met she blushed and looked away.

Tobin smiled. Nice, she thought. Pretty when angry, even prettier when shy. “Hey...” She sat up. “What's wrong?”

Chris shrugged. “I dreamed and … then I woke up and there was this large bird sitting outside the window…”

“A Black Back.” Tobin yawned again, rubbed her eyes. “It's a seagull. Sometimes they rest on the sill. They live where they want to live, go where they want to go.”

“I'd like to do that”, Chris said.

“Like a Black Back.”

Chris smiled. “Fly like a bird, just fly away. Look...” She searched for words. “I want you to know... It was different, in the beginning. When I met him, my husband, I was...”

It took Tobin a moment to understand what she was talking about. And suddenly Tobin was embarrassed. “You... you don't have to tell me about your marriage.”

Chris shook her head. “I want you know that I'm not just a stupid stupid pushover.”

Tobin propped herself on the elbows. “I never thought that you are a stupid...”

Chris didn't listen. She was concentrating, picking her words carefully. “My life was a mess and I was scared. But suddenly... suddenly everything seemed so easy and... You know, Northern means global business, it means tankers and pipelines and drilling sites all over the world and we traveled and... “She leaned forward, wanting Tobin to understand, looking into her eyes to get her full attention. “I was on the Eiffel Tower with the lights of Paris below. I watched dolphins play in the Mediterranean. I saw the minarets of Istanbul and the Arabian desert. I listened to the music of Rio and Caracas and I saw Icebergs in the Gulf of St Lawrence. And three days later I stood on the North Pole and drank champagne chilled with arctic ice and it was my birthday ...”

Silence.

“Dreams don't last, right?” Tobin carefully probed.

Chris took deep breath. She wiped across her eyes. “It's nice, your place.”

Was that a ‘I already told you too much and now fuck off and mind your own’? Or something more like ‘It was a mistake to come here in the first place’? Was it a Good-bye? Tobin didn't dare to move. She cleared her throat. “Look, if you want to leave, it’s okay. Probably better - before you get into trouble at home.”

Silence again. Which meant - what? Tobin wasn't sure. But Chris was still sitting on the bed showing
no signs of leaving. Instead she was drawing a line on the sheet with her finger.

“Where you... always like that? I mean...”

“Like what?” Now Tobin was wide awake. Woah! She thought, careful! We're walking on thin ice!

Chris seemed to concentrate even harder on the bed sheet. “The girl thing, I mean.”

Tobin looked at Chris. She was barely more than a shadow in the gray light, impossible to read her face and Tobin tried to figure out what all this was about and where it would lead and she had no idea. Okay she thought, why not do a bit of skating.

“Nooo...” she said. “Was into dicks, full-time. Then they ran this workshop 'How To Become Queer. In Ten Easy Steps'. So I thought, well, why not … “

Chris stared, then smothered a laugh and Tobin loved her for this. She leaned forward. “Yeah,” she said. “Always have been... straight un-straight.” She decided to give it one more spin. “And what about you? Ever had a crush on somebody not... hung? Ever did it with a girl?”

Chris hugged her legs as if she needed something to hold on, shook her head. “Never.”

Tobin was on all fours now. “Come on!” She smiled. “Of course you did. And don't tell me you didn't like it!” She inched closer to Chris.

“What??” Chris eyed her suspiciiously.

Tobin gently touched her knee. “And you gonna do it again – BECAUSE you like it!”

Chris frowned. “You crazy? What are you talking about?”

“Weell …” Tobin watched Chris getting irritated which meant she was getting prettier and Tobin just loved it. “Well...” She grinned. “Every time you... do it to yourself... you make love to a girl, right?”

Chris' cheeks were suddenly red. “You are... That's disgusting!” She turned her face away.

Tobin came closer, like a cat stalking something small and furry. “Oh... I forgot: of course you're the only girl on this planet who doesn't, from time to time, make her middle finger visit her clit. Sorry.”

Chris hid her face and began to laugh. “You're...”

“Oh... okay.” Tobin nodded. “Now I got it. You do it but you hate it because you're doing it with a girl.” Chris curled up, still covering her face, shaking with laughter.

“What? I can't hear you!” Tobin was now on top of Chris, gently tugging at a strand of hair. She tried to peek through Chris' fingers and Chris squeezed her eyes shut. “You mean you aren't just a girl? You're a girl and also, at the same time... You mean it's like one half's doing the other half when you... Do You want to tell me there's a dark secret between your lovely thighs?” Tobin slipped a finger between Chris' belly and the lace of her French briefs. “Hey!! What do I find if I take a closer look? Tell me!”

Chris squirmed when Tobin began to pull. She kicked, shaking with laughter, shrieked when Tobin suddenly found the spot where to tickle Chris into a helpless bundle. “What are you hiding? What are you...?”

And suddenly the panties slipped away.
Tobin stopped. Her cheeks were burning and she lowered her eyes.

“Sorry ...” she muttered. “I didn't mean to ...” With one hand she gently covered the warm, soft place where Chris's thighs met, so sweet and beautiful that she suddenly hated herself and her crude jokes. With the other hand she tried to put briefs back into place, but it didn't work. She cleared her throat. “I'm sorry. Really...”

Chris just looked at her and then their eyes met and Tobin's fingers began to tremble because there was something in Chris' eyes that made Tobin lean forward, and her heart was racing and she leaned even closer.

“I'm not afraid of you.” Chris voice was a whisper, almost drowned out by Tobin's heartbeat and Tobin was lost in her eyes and then their lips met – or almost.

“What the hell...?” Tobin turned with a start.

Chris sat up, her face pale. “The front door! there's somebody at the ...”

They heard it again: there was a knock on the door. And a voice: “Tobs? Open the door, Tobsy! It's me, Agnetha.”

“That's this ... Air Admin bitch!! What does she want??” Chris pulled up her panties.

“How should I know??” Tobin hissed. “And keep your voice down! Perhaps she goes away when we ...”

“Tobs Darling! Open up! I know you're in!” Agnetha knocked again. And again.

“You fucking her? You are!” Chris kicked Tobin.

“NO!!! I swear!” Tobin got out of the bed and tiptoed to the bedroom door.

“That stupid piece of ass!” Chris tried to find her trainers. “I'm gonna kick in her teeth!” She gave up and walked barefoot to the door, wanted to push past Tobin into the corridor.

Tobin grabbed her arm. “You crazy? You want her to find the chairman's wife in my flat at five o'clock in the morning?”

Chris bit her lip.

Agnetha knocked again. “Come on, Tobsy!! Let me in!!”

“The bathroom!” Tobin rushed back and began to collect trainers, socks, pants and top of Chris tracksuit. “Go to the bathroom and lock the door!”

Chris crossed her arms. “I'm not gonna sit on your toilet and wait until she ...”

Tobin pushed her into the corridor. “Get dressed! I'll handle her.”

“Tobsy!! Wake up!!” Agnetha's voice was cheerful.

Tobin shoved Chris into the bathroom and threw the tracksuit and rest of her things after her.

“Thank you!!” Chris stared at her. “Very considerate!!”
Tobin shut the door. “Lock it, for Chrissake!” She heard the key turn. “Okay.” She took a deep breath. Then she walked to the entrance door and opened it.

Agnethea barged into the flat, beaming. “Hey! You look cute!” She ruffled Tobin's hair while she held on to cardboard tray with two takeaway cups. “Coffee, sweetheart!” She rushed past Tobin into the living room.

Agnethea was a Swedish girl with a taste for tight jeans, tight shirts and ridiculously expensive heels. Like Tobin most people thought it was simply unfair that wagonloads of such beauty had been dumped on a single individual, but Agnethea thought that her stunning looks were exactly what she deserved.

“How you know I'm in??” Tobin felt as if she had been run over by a bus.

“Your car's in the underground parking.” Agnetha put her bag onto the table.

“You checked...?” Tobin couldn't believe what she heard.

“Sure.” Agnetha set down the tray and opened the lids of the cups. “Let's see - sugar and milk, that's for me. Plain for you.” She sat down on a chair and began to rummage in her bag.

That was the other thing people hated Agnethea for: she could swallow any kind of sticky junk, it just didn't show - which was the only thing she had in common with Tobin. And it was a habit of Agnethea to bring sweet stuff for herself and hand out plain to the others, implying that everybody else needed a diet.

Tobin sat down as far away from her as possible. Her head began to ache. “What the fuck are you doing here? In the middle of night? Waking up the neighborhood?”

Agentha opened a folder. “Change of plan, sweetheart. Stig Loevsund'll fly the bus today. You'll be on the Exec Chopper. Katja Olsson's required in Oslo, asap. Plus her assistant, Karen Stroer, plus two more guys from Air Admin and Legal-and-Corporate. So it's white shirt and tie and epaulets and the smart blue uniform for you today.” She took out several forms and spread them in front of Tobin. “Let's see - here's the flight plan and the assignment and…”

“What???” Tobin browsed the schedule. “Right into city center? Rooftop landing on Stat-Oil Tower?? She nuts or what??”

“The Eurocopter deal,” Agnetha said. She handed Tobin a pen. “Sign here, here and here. Thaaank you.” She shrugged. “Airbus big shots coming into town from France and Germany, 's what I heard. Want to fix the deal, so…” She looked at her watch. “You've got... seventy-two minutes to make the airport and start warming up the bird.” She leaned back, sipped her coffee. “You better get dressed. And, Tobs: run a comb through your mop, will ya?”

“Why didn't you just call??” Tobin still couldn't believe all this.

“But Tobsy – why did you switch off your phone? And your door buzzer? And...” Agnetha suddenly smiled. She put down the coffee. “Hey!! You're not alone, right? Right??” She craned her neck to look into the bedroom. “Where is she?”

Yeah, Tobin thought. That's exactly what I need right now. Christen, meet Agnetha. Agnetha, meet the chairman's wife. And my best regards to Angus McLowry.

“You gonna stay and watch me brush my teeth and shower or what?” Tobin pointed to the door. “Get out of here!”
Agnetha giggled. “Okay, okay...” She collected the forms into a neat stack which she slipped into the folder and the folder into her bag. She rose from the chair, took her cup and walked into the corridor, still giggling.

Tobin followed her, praying that Agnetha didn’t need a pit stop.

Agnetha pointed to the bathroom door. “She in there?” she whispered. “Do I know her?”

Tobin blocked the door, crossing her arms. “Keep moving,” she said.

Agnetha smiled. “You’re so sweet!” She pinched Tobin's cheek. “Sixty minutes, Tobsy!” She pointed to the bathroom. “And whoever she is – give her a kiss from me, will you?”

Tobin closed the door behind her. Then she walked to the bathroom, knocked on the door.

“I got rid of her. You can come out.” There was no answer. Tobin knocked again. “You okay?” She tried the door – it was open. She looked into the bathroom. Chris was gone.

Suddenly Tobin felt cold and tired. She leaned against the tiled wall and considered to cry. Instead she stripped and stepped into the shower - with less than fifty minutes left to make it to the airport.

***

Ash stood on the bridge and looked through the roof-to-floor windows. The ship was so close to Outpost Bravo that the platform’s legs towered like skyscrapers, streaked with corrosion, casting a shadow in which the air was wet and cold.

The Aurora was riding the swell under DP system control, bursts of thruster wash foaming around the ship, Z-Drives and tunnel propellers automatically holding the vessel’s position and the first mate sat in the helm’s chair of the aft main console, checking the DPS screens and supervising the unloading.

Outside, deep below the bridge, deck hands in orange overalls were talking to the platform's crane operator via walkie-talkie and Ash felt the ship tremble and heard the clang of the twist locks when the crane hooked onto a container and lifted it from the stack.

Ash took the Steiner binos and scanned the other ship, diving support vessel Shelbourne. A thick bundle of wires and cables hung from the vessel's crane into the sea. Early this morning the Shelbourne had launched an ROV and right now the underwater robot was crawling along the platform’s legs and pipeline connections, sending data and installing new sensors.

Daltry listened to a voice in his headset. „Shelbourne capt'n for you”, he said to Ash.

Ash pushed the communication switch. „Hi, Cap“, she said. „How’re things?“

„Looks as if you still have a bit of work to do.” The captain of the Shelbourne had a strong Scottish accent. „Listen, Harris. There’s somebody would like to see you. Mind if we shoot the MOB over to you?“

Who the hell ...? Ash hadn’t the faintest idea what this was about. Somebody? Somebody who? Somebody who liked a rough, wet ride in a speedboat? „Sure“, she said. „Just go ahead. Make it port
There in a minute, Captain." The line was dead.

Ash talked into the intercom microphone. „Stand by boarding on port. Repeat: Port side.“ She raised the Steiner binos and scanned the Shelbourne again. The MOB was launched on the other side of the sip, hidden from her view, but a moment later she saw it swing around the Shelbourne’s stern, then speed towards the Aurora, a huge Zodiac, carrying a crew of two and the passenger, hooded, wrapped in waterproof gear and life jackets ...

The Zodiac hit a wave crest, jumped the next, the coxswain ducking behind the screen of the rudder stand, the other guys getting wet, and then she heard the roar of the twin outboard engines.

She looked down to the working deck. Two hands were opening the railing of the Aurora’s rescue and boarding zone. She watched the Zodiac swing alongside, slowing down, stopping. Fenders were lowered from the Aurora’s deck, she saw one of the guys in the MOB step forward, waiting for the right moment, then jump on Aurora’s deck, to be steadied by one of Ash’s crew, saw the visitor push back the hood and look up to the bridge, suddenly saw long hair flying in the wind ...

***

Ash bolted down the stairs, taking two at a time. She stopped at the bottom of the flight to catch her breath, then walked into the office.

„What a ride!“ Ali sat in the visitor chair, cheeks flushed by excitement, wind and salt water. She had helped herself to the coffee and now she leaned back and sipped from the mug. She looked around taking in every detail of the captain’s office. „Nice“, she said. „Who’s your interior designer?“ She had got rid of her protection suit and now, in fleece hoody and fleece pants, looked like a gorgeous cat and her presence seemed to make everything suddenly new, crisp, and exciting and Ash was about to take her into her arms and kiss her...

Are you crazy? she thought. Forget it! She pushed her hands into her pockets not trusting herself. „What the hell are you doing here?“ She sat down on the edge of the desk. „You should be on the Ritz platform!“

„Change in schedule.“ Ali put down the mug. „The Shelbourne arrived a day earlier to install my set of sensors. So they sent me here to see how they handle it. In the evening we’ll meet on Bravo to talk about the details of the layout and make a test run. We...“ She stopped, then lowered her eyes and looked into her mug. „I missed you,“ she suddenly said. “And I think we... need to talk.”

Ash stared, her throat dry, her heart throbbing. No, she thought. This is not the place, not the time, the girl is insane to come here, to the B deck of my ship, to the captains office. “Look ...” she tried to find the right words. “This isn’t a fun cruise. I’m in the middle of loading and ...“

Ali was not listening. She suddenly took Ash's thick, braided tail, coiling it. “So... you don't like what I did to your hair, Captain?”

Ash blushed. “What I mean is...”

“I know – you're not Barbie on vacation and your ship's not the Pink Camper.”
Ali nodded. “I know, ship at sea – open doors...” She hesitated. “What I wanted to ask...” She looked into Ash's eyes. “In the morning... did you... kiss me good-bye?”

Ash looked at her, frowning. “What are you talking about?”

Ali lowered her eyes. “When you left... Did you...?”

“You were asleep!” Ash's voice betrayed her: she was embarrassed, angry about it, impatient. “And I had to hurry. There was no time to...”

“I'm talking stupid things,” Ali said. “Must've dreamed, the kiss, I mean. I'm sorry.” The ship trembled as another container was hoisted away. “I came to tell you...” She hesitated. “I want you to know that there's no obligation, there are no ties. What happened was... a miracle – that we met, that we spent a night together... But you don't have to be afraid that I... want to make more of it than...” She stopped.

Ash felt the heat rush to her cheeks. “I didn't mean... What I wanted to say is...”

Ali shook her head. “Listen - I'm not a fourteen year old with a crush. And as much as I'd love it to go on forever, I know this can't last. We both have our lives. I have to do my job and to raise my two kids. You have your career and... the sea.”

Ash began to pace the small cabin, a caged animal. “I think ...” She stopped at the port window, her back to Ali. “I think it's time you learn a few things about me,” she said. “You probably heard that I...” She looked at the sky which showed patches of blue. “I fucked up, once. And I mean really fucked up, a one hundred percent fuck-up.” She stared for a moment, not seeing anything but some pictures from the past which she never wanted to see again. Then she leaned her face against the cold tempered glass of the window.

“Did a friend a favor,” Ash said, her voice hoarse. “I transferred her yacht from Port Louis on Mauritius to Saint-Denis on the island of Reunion. We were hit by a tropical storm and had to make it to the nearest harbor as fast as possible.” She had closed her eyes. “We smashed into a floating container – ship had lost cargo in the storm, so...” Ash swallowed hard. “The yacht went under in less than ten minutes, ripped open from bow to midships. We ...” Ash took a deep breath. “One crew member died. I was cleared in court, but... these things stick. It's like... an evil curse.” She stopped and Ali knew that this was already more than Ash had wanted to tell.

“Look...” Ash turned to Ali. “In my job you can't screw up twice. If this here...” she put her hand against the steel wall of the captain's office. “... doesn't work out, it's over. I'll never get an assignment again.” The ship shook when a container was lifted from the stack. “Sorry.” Ash managed a smile. “Didn't want to dump all the shit on you. Just thought... you should know.”

Ali rose from the chair and walked to the window. She took Ash's hand. “I also heard a story about a shark...”

Ash rolled her eyes. “Gawd! The fucking shark! As if we had been on a fishing trip!” She shook her head, laughed. “It took the rescue teams a while to find us. We had to stick it out in a life raft for a while, you know. It was then we met the shark - came to look, swam away. That's it. Of course the press went nuts about the shark. They would've jumped into the ocean to interview it if they'd known where to find it.” She took a strand of Ali's tousled hair and played with it. “Say, how the hell did you make the Shelbourne cap surrender his MOB for your pleasure trip?”
Ali shrugged. „I told the captain that I wanted to look at your crane, you know, the issues with the foundation ...“

Ash tugged at the strand of hair, smiled. „So we better do it, right? Look at the crane...“ She pushed the intercom switch. „Engine - Captain here. Chiefy around?“

„Capt'n?“ A Norwegian accent, almost drowned by the noise of generators, turbochargers and all the machinery that fed horsepower and electricity to ship.

„Listen, Chiefy. The engineer, Krieger... she's here to look at the crane foundation. Give her a tour, will you?“

„Sure, Cap. On tween deck. Just let me get the Electrician join us. In ten minutes, okay?“

„Whenever you're ready.“ Ash switched off.

A container was hoisted from the stack, twist locks clanging.

Ali said nothing for a moment. Then: „Did you...?“

„Did I what?“ Ash was puzzled.

„Did you... kiss me, in the morning, when you left?“

„Why?“ Ash shook her head. „I just don't understand ...“

„I thought ...“ Ali smiled a sad smile. „Just forget it.“ She didn't look at Ash. „It's okay,“ she said. She walked back to the chair but didn't sit down.

„Why is it so important whether I ...?“ Ash stopped. She didn't know what to do. „What I wanted to say was ...“ She didn't find the words. Fuck open doors. Fuck it all, she thought. Suddenly she saw in Ali's eyes what she had almost forgotten: the tenderness, the passion. And she remembered the soft touch of her fingers on her skin. And before she could think she took Ali in her arms and kissed her, first her cheeks, tasting of salt, of the sea, then her lips and when Ali closed her eyes she softly kissed her trembling lids. „Like this?“ she whispered.

„Like this...“ Ali buried her face in Ash's sweater and Ash ran her fingers through her hair. „You really thought I could just walk away? After what had happened?“ She wanted to kiss her again but Ali stopped her.

„Don't you understand? If this goes on I'll fall in love! And then what? When this project ends I'll go back to Britain and when my little girl starts school I'll go back to the States. And you... to the Gulf of Oman or to Alaska. I don't want to end with a broken heart and my life in pieces.“

Suddenly the ship rolled to starboard, they both tried to find something to hold on to, things began to slip and Ali managed to catch her mug just before it fell to floor. Coffee spilled over Ash's desk.

„Fuck!“ Ash picked up forms and faxes before they were fully soaked.

„Bridge to captain ...“ The intercom cut through her curses.

She hit the button. „What??“

Daltry's voice and the noise of the unloading filled the cabin. „Platform asks if they can return an empty box.“
Ash tried to concentrate. “Okay. Take it on board. I'll call to shore, talk to cargo master to give us a new loading plan. Need to fit the box into the stuff we'll get from from the Gyda platforms.” The line went dead. “Please,” Ash said. “Let's talk about all this when I'm back... We work something out. When we're back we ...”

Ali shook her head. “I'll be out here longer than I thought. When I come back, you'll probably be gone. Moved to your own place.” She grabbed a handful of tissues and wiped the coffee from the desktop.

Ash dropped a few soaked sheets of paper into the wastebasket. “Nothing's decided! And we wanted to do this together, remember? You wanted to help me find a new place and... look, there's no reason not seeing each other while...”

Ali stopped cleaning. “While it lasts?”

“That's not what I wanted to say!”

Ali sat down in the chair. “So what was your idea? Tell me. Friends with benefits? A few hot nights and then... what?” Ali looked into Ash's eyes. “You already mean too much to me to just walk away in a week or two because there's no place left in our lives for... ” Love, she wanted to say but the word seemed to be so much out of place, here and now, on board this ship, that she didn't.

But you have a place in my life! Ash wanted to shout. I don't know which, but... She was searching for the right words, the words to tell Ali how much she needed her, how much she wanted to keep what was like a light, warm and bright.

“Capt'n...?” The bosun stood in the doorway, uneasy, feeling Ash's tension. “About the crane... Chiefy and Electrician are on tween deck. “If Mrs Krieger, the engineer I mean, is ready...”

Ali got out of the chair. “No reason to keep them waiting, right?”

Ash swallowed hard. “No,” she said. “Just give us a minute, Bosun.”

The bosun grinned. “Be at the stairs,” he said, glad to get away from his captain.

They heard him walk along the corridor.

“Look ...” Ash's throat was tight.

Ali took her tail and ran her fingers along the braids.

“Your hair is beautiful,” she said. Looking into Ash's eyes. “Take care, Captain.”

Then she turned and was gone.

***

“Stand by boarding! Port side, repeat: port side!” Daltry's voice boomed through the ship and Ash seemed to wake from a bad dream.

She sat bolt upright behind her desk. Ali was leaving the ship! Then realization came like blow. This had been a fucking farewell! And she had let her go!!
She almost ran up the stairs to the bridge, checked herself not to barge into the area and risk Daltry's surprised look. She walked to the port bridge windows as casual as she could manage and she watched as Ali came out of the watertight door onto the working deck, ducking when a wave broke against the hull.

And now Ash knew what she had wanted to say to her: If I loose you - what would I have? Nothing. There was light and joy as long as you were there and now there's only panic and fear. I'm about to loose my job and my reputation and now you're leaving too. And I'll be alone again. I always thought that this was what I wanted. But I didn't know better. And never before had I wanted a place in somebody's life so much.

Ali was walking along the deck, far below, small in her heavy protection suit and life jacket.

Ash pressed her palms against the cold tempered glass of the window. And what place would you give me? She thought. What more could she expect but a spot somewhere behind her kids, her family, the fucking waves and numbers and oil rigs. But it seemed that even this place was no longer available. And right now Ash would have given anything to be just there, to have that tiny spot, just to be able to say that she had a place in her heart.

Now she understood that Ali had picked this time and this place to make it as painless as possible, for Ash and for her, to cut the new, tender ties that had grown between them before they were too deeply rooted. If this is supposed to be painless... Ash almost winced when the MOB came alongside to pick Ali up, and when Ali stepped to the open railing to board a knife seemed to cut into her heart.

Ali turned and waved to the bridge. Then she put on her hood.

Ash waved back, almost shyly, suddenly aware that she had forgotten to breathe, sucking in the air with a sob. She watched the deck hands help Ali to board the Zodiac. And there was nothing she could do about it but watch her go away, watch the Zodiac pick up speed and cut across the waves, watch it disappear behind the Shelbourne.

„She really a marine engineer?“ Daltry’s voice made her start.

Ash was about to snap back, something like „that a problem??“ but checked herself. Careful now, she thought. „Yep“, she said briskly but even then there was something of the pain in her voice and she cursed herself.

„What did she say?“ Daltry had his eyes on the controls.

„That you were right, you and Chiefy.“ Ash still stared through her Steiner binos. „She’ll draft a plan. Something we can take to the big guys."

„Who’s gonna pay her?“ Daltry said.

„She'll do it for free,” Ash said still looking through the glass because she didn't want Daltry to see her tears. As a farewell present, she thought.

***

Chris had almost forgotten how it felt to be fit, how it was to feel brand new and just fine and not like a broken thing. And all it had taken to make her whole again had been somebody to hold her, so she
was not alone. And that somebody had been a … girl.

Chris was at the SATS gym, working out for the first time since … she couldn't remember. She felt so good that she had decided to step it up, like when she was on the team: 'crash week' - meaning she had pushed weights until the pain became too much and the muscles refused to work.

Now, after stretching for half an hour, Chris was on her way to the showers, knees shaking and thighs twitching with fatigue. She hated to eat protein bars but she gulped down the first chunk, then unwrapped a second. They all had the same flavor she called 'Yuck' and which came straight from the backyards of the chemical industry.

She pulled the towel from her hips and dropped it on the wooden bench, stepped into the shower and turned it on. She closed her eyes, enjoying the hot water on her body, trying not to think of the cold treatment that had to follow, trying not to think at all...

And then everything came back and it simply flooded her mind: The gray light of the morning, the silence of the early hours in which she could hear her own heartbeat while she sat on the bed, unable to take her eyes off Tobin who was asleep, dreaming...

Chris took a deep breath. She had to run the cold water but she couldn't, could not erase the memory of that moment of silence which had seemed to last an eternity, of the smooth curve of Tobin's belly rising and sinking, of her thighs, long and strong, at the same time so soft, of her panties, stretched over the plump mound, cutting into the deep fold, so warm and tender, so close she only has to reach out, inviting her fingers to explore.

She remembered how she had leaned forward, about to rest her head in the soft and warm place where the thighs met, wondering how it would be to touch it, with her fingers, with her lips.

What if Tobin hadn't opened her eyes?

What if Agnetha hadn't knocked on the door?

Chris gritted her teeth. What are you? A teenager with a crush? On a girl?? She had a life to sort out and daydreaming wouldn't take her troubles away. There was no place for something like this.

The cold water hit her like a blow and seemed to stop her heart.

***

She walked across the reception area when her phone rang. Chris dropped her bag. “Yeah?”

“Where the hell are you? And why did you switch off your phone??” Her husband's voice was loud and she held the phone away from her ear. “We have to meet the Russian business partners in less than an hour. It was planned that you take care of their wives, planned weeks ago. Don't tell me you forgot …”

The fucking oil guys from St Petersburg! She felt the heat rush to her cheekes, her throat was suddenly tight. “I worked out and... I just forgot to... I'm sorry, but I'm at the gym right now. Can't you find somebody else? Please.”

“Are you out of your mind? You're required here. At once!” McLowry made no effort to hide his
disgust.

“I'm tired. I need to rest, and I need to eat.” Chris' cleared her throat. “I just can't... Look, get somebody else, okay? Just this time. I promise next time I'll be...”

“You've got less than an hour! So stop whingeing and move your ass!!” McLowry was shouting at her and suddenly Chris was furious.

“It's not my job to keep your oil guys happy! What do you think I am?? Some kind of monkey??”

McLowry laughed. “Face it – you're no longer somebody with a big reputation. And it was your own decision to quit, mind! All you have is what you have here. Now do your part and stop behaving like a child.”

Chris picked up her bag. “Ask your secretary. Luisa'll do anything for you. Or ask that bitch, Agnetha – she'll love it. But count me out of this. And now leave me alone!”

“You stay were you are!!” McLowry's voice was menacing. “I send a car to pick you up. And I don't care whether you're hungry or tired. You'll do what you have to do. You hear me??”

“Forget it!” Chris switched off the phone. She put up the hood of her sweatshirt and began to walk. There were tears in her eyes and she almost ran against the sliding doors which didn't open fast enough. Her gym bag banged against the glass, got stuck and she jerked it free, desperate. Go! A voice shouted in her brain. Don't stop! Go! And Chris walked, walked to get rid of her anger and frustration and panic, knowing at the same time that she had no choice but to drive back and do what was expected of her.

She hurried across the parking lot. She saw that a blue BMW blocked her Cayenne and the panic was back.

“Hey!” She shouted at the driver who was getting out out of the BMW. “Move your car away!!” She began to run, almost tripped. “I said move your...”

She stopped. And stared. And suddenly a small sun seemed to spread in her chest, seemed to glow, and the fear and the panic were gone and everything sweet and new was back.

Tobin took off her sunglasses and leaned against the BMW. She wore a slightly seedy overall and her hair was ruffled and there was some oily stuff on her white T-shirt but Chris suddenly realized that Tobin only had to reach out and touch her – and she would be hers. She narrowed her eyes, frowning. “Thought you're in Oslo!”

Tobin shrugged. “Katja Olsson decided to stay for two more days. She sent me back.”

“How do you know I'm here??”

“Your au pair told me, the French girl, Jackie.”

Chris walked to the BMW, dropped the gym bag in front of Tobin. “You tried to call me at home? Talked to Jackie? Are you crazy??”

“Your phone was dead. And I had to see you.”

Chris was silent. She just stared into Tobin's eyes.

Tobin swallowed hard. “You were gone...”
“You think I wanted to meet that blonde reptile?” Chris hissed. “So she can tell everybody that we are...”

“That we are... what?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“You were gone,” Tobin said. “I couldn’t even say ‘Thank you’.”

Chris pushed back the hood. “Thank you? For what?”

Tobin took a deep breath “For sleeping in my arms. For... trusting me. For not being afraid. That was the sweetest thing a girl ever did for me.”

Chris blushed. “Nice BMW,” she said just to say something. “Where's your Mustang?”

“Body repair.” Tobin was still looking into Chris' eyes. “And now we have to do a bit of driving. So you better get into the car.”

Chris didn't move. She knew that it was impossible to go with Tobin because that would change her life, would change herself. The only thing she could do was to drive home and put on a fancy dress, then meet the Russians and try to go back to normal and...

“Okay,” she said.

Tobin opened the car's door for her, grinning, doing a curtsy and Chris rolled her eyes. In the seat she realized how tired she was but at the same time her whole body seemed to hum and she was wide awake. “I'm hungry,” she said. “Can we stop somewhere?”

Tobin, still grinning, fetched a lunch box from the back seat. “Salmon or Turkey – whatever you want. And...” she turned back again and fumbled for something stored between the seats. “Here's mineral water and coffee, if you like.” She started the car. “If you push this button...” Chris felt the backrest move. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Chris ripped away he lid from the Styrofoam box. “What about you?”

Tobin switched to reverse. “Don't worry ...” She grabbed a turkey sandwich and took a huge bite. “I take care of myself.”

Chris picked a piece of salmon from the sandwich. It tasted delicious. “Where are we going?”

“Mhhgrrmph,” Tobin said. She had the sandwich between her teeth while backing out of the parking slot.

“Meaning what?”

“You wait and see,” Tobin said, chewing.

***

The small road was winding uphill through farmland. They drove past a huge farmhouse and Tobin honked the horn and a guy with his head under the hood of John Deere tractor looked up and waved
to her and Tobin waved back. Close to the crest the road narrowed and became a track and Tobin had to slow down.

Chris stared at the fields. “Look ...” she turned to Tobin. “I'm not the romantic type, you know. Grass and trees and... butterflies...” She was rocked in her seat when the car crested the hill. “I don't like picnics,” she said. “And long walks or making out on a blanket...”

The car slowed down and Chris realized that she was way out of line. No picnic, no walk, no blanket.

The plane was white, gleaming in the sunlight. It seemed to be fragile, the wings long, the tips curved upwards. It sat on the grass of the long slope, tilted to the right, the wingtip resting on the ground.

Tobin stopped the BMW next to the Dodge Ram which was parked behind the plane and Chris could hear the wind outside the car, coming from the sea and up the slope. A tall guy climbed from of Pick-up and waved to them.

Tobin couldn't keep her eyes off the plane.

“Now look at this hot piece!” She smiled lovingly. “High performance sailplane, built in Germany,” she said. “Caspar Lund's toy – he's the guy with the smile and the suntan and the Dodge 4WD. Cas is into high altitude flying, higher than 23.000 feet, you know. You need oxygen to breathe and a pressure suit to keep you warm and your blood from boiling. But you can feel the earth turn beneath you and you ride on the jet stream.” She opened the door and the wind was in her hair when she walked to Lund.

Chris sighed. She put up the hood and got out of the car.

Tobin's put an arm around Chris' shoulder. “Cas, meet Chris.”

“Chris, glad to meet you.” Lund almost crushed her hand. “You picked a perfect day, you'll see!”

Chris buried her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. Perfect for what? Hanging out on slopes while the wind tried to push you on your back?

Tobin was checking out the plane's cockpit. It was a two seater, the backseat slightly higher than the seat in the front.

“Backseat also rigged for piloting?” Tobin's upper part vanished in the plane.


Who's stupid enough to take off in this in the dark? Chris thought. Probably people who are stupid enough to stand in the cold wind and talk about reduced flare. Suddenly a thought shaped in her mind.

“You wanna buy a plane? This plane?”

Tobin shrugged. “If I sell the Mustang and downscale on my wheels I could make a down payment on the plane. So...”

“Altimeter's adjusted, batteries charged, ballast water tanks full,” Lund said.
“kaay ...” Tobin was under the wing now, moving the flaps.

“You can rig two oxygen tanks. Just in case you want to challenge the glider altitude record.” Lund grinned, winking to Chris. “I think it's something beyond 52,000 feet.”

Tobin walked to tail tail and checked rudder and elevator “Who knows. But not today.”

“You gonna fly this thing?” Chris pointed at the plane. “Now??”

“Sure.” Tobin checked the other wing, flap, air brake and aileron. “Say, Cas … plane trimmed to carry two guys?”

“Yeah.” Lund walked to the Dodge, opened the door and pulled a bag from the backseat.

Chris no longer worried about the wind. A terrible thought made her forget even the cold.

“You're not planning to...? Are you??” She searched Tobin face for something that told her she was wrong. But what she saw told her that she was right. “You really think I'm crazy enough to climb into this... this... ?“

“Hey,” Tobin came closer and lowered her voice. “You slept in my bed - and you survived. Just trust me one more time, okay? You'll love it.”

Lund came back, opened the bag and Tobin pulled out an overall. “Better put that on. See, you've gotta kind of wriggle into the cockpit. So...” She opened the zipper. And while Chris backed off shaking her head Tobin followed her. Chris bumped against the Dodge. “Now come on ...” Tobin bent down and took Chris left ankle. “Step into the leg... that's it. And now the other one. Fine!” She pulled the overall up and over Chris' butt. “And here go your arms – right. And now we zip you up.” She took Chris' hand and led her back to the plane. She rummaged in the bag and gave Chris' a thick fleece jacket.

“Might get cold up there. Put it on... good. And that one, too.” She gave Chris a wool beanie. Then she slipped a pair of sunglasses into the breast pocket of her overall. “You look gorgeous! Oh, I forgot.” She pulled a pair of gloves from the bag and watched while Chris put them on. They were too large but warm.

“You really mean it, right?” Chris laughed nervously. She heard Lund come back from the Pick-up and turned to look. She went pale. “No!” She shook her head. “No!! Never.”

Lund grinned. He put one of the parachutes on the pilots seat, handed Tobin the other one.

Chris was now beyond fear and anger - she was simply desperate. “You mean this is the kind of trip were passengers have to put on a parachutes? Are you crazy??”

Tobin smiled. “Safety regulations. Come on, let me help you.” She held up the chute so Chris could step into the leg straps, then slip into the harness. ”Nothing to worry - packed today!” She pointed to the sticker on the chute pack while she closed the chest strap. “At SFSK skydiving club. We should go there one day for a few jumps.”

“You really want to put me into this?” Chris still had hope that this was one of Tobin's silly jokes.

Tobin brushed back a strand of Chris' hair that hat escaped from under the beanie.

“Cas says it's a perfect playground up there- sun's giving us those beautiful clouds and amazing thermals - we'll have a lot of fun.”
“The plane - it's like a toy,” Chris said.

“It's all you need to take off and fly away.”

“like a bird?”

“like a bird.”

Chris looked into Tobin’s eyes. “You mean you arranged this just because I said I'd like to fly away and...?”

***

Tobin's voice came over the earphones: “Make yourself comfortable. You can adjust your seat. There's a lever on the right side.”

“SEAT???” Chris was unable to move. Lap belt and shoulder harness where so tight that she seemed to be welded to the plane. “I'm not SITTING in this plane!! I'm WEARING it!!! You hear me???” She was shouting into her headset just to get rid of her tension. “COMFORTABLE?? My knees stick up! And I'm sitting on a parachute!!” And it was ridiculous that she was talking to the back of Tobin's head all the time because that was all she could see of her, this and the pathetic base cap with the caption 'Top Gun'.

The plane began to move and Chris tried not to think about the fact that it was attached to a steel cable which was connected to Lund's Dodge Ram. She heard the roar of the Dodge's engine and the plane moved faster. The landing gear bumped against something in the grass and the plane jumped up, then hit the ground only to jump up again.

“We're both gonna die!” she shouted.

Tobin laughed. “Well - at least we'll die together.”

Chris had no longer the energy to scream. “Now that's what I call really good news,” she muttered.

“What?” Tobin couldn't hear her.

“I said... OH NO!!!!” Chris suddenly realized that she was riding on nothing but thin air, saw the ground fall away beneath her and was pushed back into her seat when the glider, straining at the cable, shot into the sky.

Chris held her breath and grabbed the shoulder straps. She heard the cable disconnect, saw the plane's nose come down. Then the plane banked and Tobin flew towards the sun. They were already high in the air and the ground was far below and the houses, the cars, the trees, the hills and mountains seemed to be from a toy shop and Chris held on to her shoulder straps as if holding on to them was what kept the plane in the air.

“This is LNGzy take off at Høle village.” Chris heard Tobin talk to Sola air traffic control.

“Go ahead, LNGzy.”

Tobin banked the plane again. “Request transponder code for LNGzy.”
“Hang on, LNGzy.” It took a moment before the controller was back. “LNGzy - Squawk 8234.”

Chris heard Tobin enter the code.

“Squawking 8234,” Tobin confirmed.

“Looking good, LNGzy.” Which meant that now the plane was visible on the controller's screen.

“Request clearance for climb to 3500 feet for LNGzy.”

“LNGzy – clear to climb to 3500 feet.”

“3500 feet?? What are you doing??” Chris heart was racing. 3500 feet? No sane person had any business at 3500 feet!

“Relax!” She could hear that Tobin was smiling. “Just enjoy it.”

Chris held on to the harness even tighter. “I AM relaxed! And now let's get back!”

Tobin laughed. “Back? It's too good to go back. We gonna hit the lift any second and then...”

“Lift?? You mean...” Chris looked left and right, saw the long wings swing in the air stream.

“It'll take us up, nice and easy.”

“Up???” Chris didn't want to go up.

“Right to the top. And I promise you'll never forget the view!”

The plane suddenly trembled, then rocked, like a car on a dirt track. It veered to the right, seemed to bump off something, as if there was wall where Chris saw nothing.

“Eaaasy ...” Tobin was talking to the plane. “Nothing to be afraid of, just warm air ...” She steered the plane back on course, then slightly rolled it to the left, over whatever obstacle there was.

And then Chris felt the surge. She grabbed the shoulder harness again. “You put me into this flying toy and now you expect me to...” She simply forgot that she wanted to close her eyes and just stared: to the left she saw the land rise towards the mountains which towered in the distance, rivers glistening in the sun. To the right she saw the ragged coastline, a maze of islands, fjords cutting into the land, and then the sea, reflecting the blue sky and the white clouds.

“Whoaah!” Tobin laughed. “What a lift!” She banked the plane and began to circle. “Look!” She pointed downwards and Chris saw a flock of seagulls, circling like the plane, riding in the same stream of air.

“And there are more!” Tobin pointed upwards and Chris, squinting into the sunlight, saw an even greater flock fly in circles in the blue sky above her. “Seems that the thermal is steady and reaching up high!” Tobin said and Chris heard the excitement in her voice and suddenly she felt it, too: a warm glow inside her body which made her nerves tingle and her blood sparkle like Champagne.

Tobin spoke into her headset. “LNGzy, permission to climb to 6500.” A pause. Then the voice of the air controller. “LNGzy – cleared for 6500.”

The plane banked steeper and Chris saw the hands of the altimeter turn faster while the plan was climbing.
She listened to the sound of the air stream, the only sound up here, while her eyes took in what seemed to be the whole world, with her on top of it, riding in this tiny plane as if she sat in the saddle of a horse, afraid to fall but at the same time not caring, and what was below her was no longer a landscape but something far far away

“Over there's the city. And in the distance you can see Tananger harbour, the oil terminals.” Tobin pointed to the left. “There you see Otra river and that tiny spot is Enve airfield, where we would do an emergency landing in case... you know. And there's, well - the sea, and behind the horizon there are the Orkneys and Shetlands and then... next stop Canada.” Tobin laughed. “See the dark clouds lining the horizon? That's storm front Kevin. Most of it still over the Atlantic, but it's already reaching out to us. Right now a number nine gale. Gonna make number twelve in less than a week.”

The plane slightly rolled to right, trembled and shook and, for a brief moment, Chris felt the heat shoot through her veins as the plane seemed to fall. “Nooo... oh...” Chris instinctively grabbed the shoulder harness, panting, mouth wide open.

“Leaving the thermal,” Tobin said. “It's fading anyway. Look - the birds do the same.” Chris saw the seagulls drift away and glide towards the earth. “And here we go, too!” Tobin laughed. And then she let the plane dive into the two miles of air beneath them.

Chris was pushed back into the seat and it was a as if she could feel the howling air on her body and she fell towards the slowly spinning earth and she was not afraid.

“IIIeeeek!!” Chris heard herself scream, gasped when something hot seemed to fill her body, felt the tension build, somewhere deep inside, a tension she usually connected with - sex?

The plane no longer fell and the nose came up and the plane shot into the blue, like a rocket bound for the stars - only to stop in midair where it hang, leaving Chris helpless and panting.

And what was over in a few heartbeats seemed to last an eternity: the feeling of being suspended high above the earth, waiting for the fall, longing to follow the birds, screaming – with terror and pleasure.

Her body vibrated like violin string, she was trembling, anticipating the fall, the surge of energy that would rip through her body, moaning when the tension grew and became almost painful, painful but also sweet and she wanted Tobin to make it go on forever.

She heard an alarm go off, an unnerving beep-beep-beep, saw the word STALL blink on her control panel and for a split second the plane seemed to just flip backwards, like a half done pancake.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Tobin was talking to the computer. “And now shut up dim whit and let me do some serious flying.”

When the drop came Chris sucked in her breath with a sob: “Yesss!”

She felt the plane slip away from under her as it fell from the sky, tail first. She was pushed against shoulder harness and lap belt – and then she was pulled into the abyss.

The plane veered to the left, seemed to cartwheel on the right wingtip and then dove nose first into – nothing while Chris stared wide eyed at the toy landscape that seemed to spin, slowly, two miles below, coming towards her, fast. She wanted to scream but didn't. Instead she began to laugh.

Then the plane seemed to hit something solid and she was pushed into the seat and felt the blood rush to her heart, saw the plane's nose come up, saw the long wings shake and swing, and the plane no longer fell but rode the air stream, smoothly, easily. And when Tobin made it roll to the right and
banked into a downward curve, Chris opened her arms until her fingers touched the cabin cover and she would've loved to reach out into the air and to open her wings and fly away. And suddenly what she had lost and what she had forgotten was back: she was happy.

“Yo! The lady in the back – you okay?”

Chris was trying to catch her breath, high on Adrenalin and pleasure. “You're one crazy girl, Tobin Heath!”

“You know what?” Tobin said. “You bring us back.”

“What???” Chris stared at the back of Tobin's head.

“Stick's right in front of you. We are going straight back to base, rate of descent is just fine – so, fly us home. I tell you how.”

“No!!” Chris almost begged.

Tobin didn't listen “Okay. Put your feet on the rudder pedals. Take the stick - easy! Now I'm switching to second pilot control, and... Your plane, Lady!”

“NO!!!!”

***

They hadn't talked on the way back, Chris lost in thought, Tobin concentrating on the traffic which was dense, so close to the city.

“Stop!” Chris voice cut through the music from the radio. “Stop the car!”


Chris stared at the road. “Stop the car.”

There was a gas station ahead and Tobin pulled into the parking space in front of the shop.

They sat in the silence, listening to noise of the traffic passing by.

Suddenly Chris turned to Tobin. “This can't go on. And you know it, right?”

Tobin gritted her teeth. She had feared this moment, had thought she could keep it away. But now it had come. She cleared her throat. “Look...”

Chris put a finger on Tobin's lips. “I'm already deep in trouble,” she said. “But I can handle it. But you...” She ran a fingertip along Tobin's cheek. “My husband - he hates to have things taken away from him including his wife. He'll hurt you. You'll be without a job in no time. And you'll probably never fly again.”

“Am I?” Tobin's voice was hoarse. “Am I taking you away from him?”

Chris didn't answer. She lowered her eyes. “Take me back to my car,” she said. “I have to go home.”
Tobin bit her lip. She wanted to say something but didn't know what. She started the engine.
Chapter 12

Ali unlocked the door, opened it. She hesitated, hand on doorknob, then walked into the apartment. She dropped the bags, felt the heartbeat in her throat.

Was Ash waiting for her? What if she took her into her arms? What if...

Ali listened to the silence.

The door to Ash's room was ajar and she walked towards it, stopped, then pushed it open. She didn't go in, just leaned against the door frame and stared, at the bed without sheets, at the wardrobe, empty except a few hangers, the room silent as if nobody had ever lived here.

For a moment she just didn't know what to do, then she took a deep breath and walked to the living room.

Perhaps … she looked around. Perhaps Ash had left a note.

Nothing.

Maybe … She walked to her room.

No note, nothing.

She slumped down into a chair, suddenly tired, sad. The flight had been awful, the helicopter shaking and rocking in the bad weather, the survival suit hot and sticky, the life jacket too tight.

And now Ash was gone and she was alone, again.

She sat for a moment, then unpacked her laptop, plugged it in, opened it. Skype time.

***

“Mommy, when do you come back?” Saskia sat on her granddad's lap, frowning at the image of Ali on the laptop screen. She thought of herself as one of the grown-ups but was just a little girl frightened by the many thing she didn't understand.

Ali managed to smile. “When I'm finished here, I'll come back to you. And then we'll go on a holiday, we all together and…” She had to clear her throat.

“When I go to Kindergarten??”

“I'm not sure, Darling. But maybe…”

“I want you to bring me. I want you…”

“But you won't be alone. Grandma and granddad will be with you and there are several Kindergartners in the neighborhood. You'll be with Mary, Indira, Sandra, Louise, Brad and Gary
and Kevin and..."

"I hate Kevin. And Brad."

"Hey, come on. What are you talking about?"

"Brad stinks."


"Well," Ali said. "I think that's not true and you'll see ..."

"Well," her mother said. "Actually – he does..."

"He does," Saskia said. "I hate him."

"Thank you very much, Ma!!"

"Mommy – you are hurt?" Saskia had found another thing which wasn't as it should be. She becomes more and more like her grandma, Ali thought. She looked closer at her own image on the screen and saw the dark streak on her cheek. She tried to wipe it away, looked at her fingers: grease. She laughed. "Mommy's not hurt. Mommy's dirty, sweethearts. It's just dirt from the flight on the helicopter."

"Mommy's dirty! Look!"

Ali fetched a tissue and wiped away the dirt while Saskia watched her, checking if she was doing a thorough job, like her grandma checked on her when she brushed her teeth.

"Mommy – you are cold?" Saskia had found something else that puzzled her.

"Why, sweetheart?"

"You wear the...” she concentrated very hard. "The tur-tle-neck."

"Turtiekek." Seanie liked the word. "Mommy turtie-kek!!" It had been a gift for her birthday

"No sweetheart. I had to put it on, outside, you know, getting on and off the helicopter and... I had to hurry to talk to you so... look, I'm taking it off now. I'm fine. It's warm in here." Ali wanted to drop the sweater on the floor but didn't because from then on Saskia would cover the place with pieces of cloth and her mother and father would have to spend a lot of time picking them up again. She carefully folded it and put it on the table. "So... how was your day, guys?"

"Mommy", her daughter jumped up. „Mommy! We went to the zoo and ...there was a donkey ...“

Her little boy crawled towards the laptop and poked a soft toy into the camera. „Dorkey,“ he said. The madly grinning face of giraffe with huge bulging eyes stared at Ali.

„Look, Mommy!“ Saskia held up a polar bear which was at least half her own size.

„You're spoiling he kids!“ Ali said. „You shouldn’t ...“ She knew it was her dad.

“You should be the one spoiling them,” her mother said. “You should go the zoo with them, not us!”

"Ma!" She was about to get angry … no, she was angry. And she was angry because she knew her
mother was right. “Don't start this again, don't...”

Her dad moved closer to the camera, his voice low. „You spend a lot of time all alone out there ... in the middle of the ocean ... that’s what your mom wants to say ...“

„It's not a spaceship to Mars!“ Ali protested. „There are lots of guys on a platform. It’s just ... you know ... an industrial site providing resources for the world’s economy.“

„But you work in the middle of nowhere!“ her mother protested. „You should be here...“

„Ma! We discussed this again and again, talked it over and over ...“

„You should’ve taken the job they offered you at Hancock Construction...“

„Ma, I earn three times what they offered me plus a fat bonus. And it’s only temporary, won’t be forever...“

„It’s just... normal people drive to work in their car. They don’t fly in helicopters wearing life jackets. Hancock is just around the corner.“

„Dad! It was below my qualification. I love my job. I love ships ...“

„And oil rigs“, her mother added. “And I can ear the wind! It's howling!”

“It's the air condition of the flat! It's quite noisy. I'll switch it off when I go to sleep. Besides - right now I'm on dry land, in the center of a large city! You're scaring the kids!”

„That’s not what your mother meant“, her dad said. „It's ... it’s just no life for someone like you ...“ he searched for words. „Don't ... don’t get lonely, girl.“

***

Ali stood in front of the wardrobe, in underwear, unable to concentrate on what to put on for the meeting which was scheduled in the afternoon, unable not to think of her kids, of her parents, trying not to feel guilty, fighting the feeling that she was just a stupid, egoistic woman, doing the wrong things, hurting other people...

Then the fanfares of Space Odyssey went off behind her, almost stopping Ali's heart: Richard Strauss' 'Zarathustra' at full blast. She spun around, stared at her computer. The laptop screen went blank only to come to life a second later.

She saw a huge wave coming towards her, probably a rip from a surfing video but it was breathtaking and frightening. Then a cut to a makeshift platform, made of wooden stack blocs on top of which stood a Wonder Woman plastic figure. The wave again, now towering like a monstrous mountain ridge. Then somebody pushed against the structure and it fell backwards in slow motion, taking the Wonder Woman toy with it.

The screen went black again. Then four windows popped up, one after the other.

„Hey, Kriegy!“

„Kriegy, my girl! It’s us, the Monster Wave Prediction Team!“
“Kriegy! How did you like the flick?!” The guy nicked 'BotNet' was elated. You could tell that he had made the video.

Ali took a deep breath and fought the urge to bang her head against the wardrobe door. How the hell did they manage to always catch her in her underwear?

“How really want to do it? Look the monster in the eye??”

“No, she isn’t stupid. She’ll stay on dry land, safe and warm.”

“Never. She’s Wonder Woman!” The guy calling himself 'Dude' seemed to know Ali inside out. “She’ll take it on, face to face, hand to hand.”

“Don’t go out there!” It was the voice of the girl tagged 'Super Girl'. “I know you don’t believe us. But don’t go.”

Dude's mind was elsewhere. “Where's your girlfriend? The one with the legs. And the tits. And all the ink...”

“Look, guys”, Ali took a deep breath. “Nice talking to you but I have a lot of work to do. Why don’t you do something productive? Like ... design a spaceship to Alpha Centauri.” And then get yourself a seat on it, she thought.

“Didn’t we do that yesterday?“ the guy nicked 'Duffy' asked and Ali had the feeling that he wasn't making a joke.

“Yesterday I was on the beach,” Dude said.


“Come on,” Duffy shook his head. “Just because Ali’s lez you wanna be lez too. That’s embarrassing,” he said. “Besides - no one shags you.”

“Now look who's talking...” S-Girl's voice was like acid.

“Hey!” Dude was curious. “How do you girls get at it? You prefer tongue or what? And... are you on your back and she on the top or...”

Ali pulled the plug but the laptop didn't shut down, just switched to battery. Ali was trembling with rage. “I told you a thousand times not to hack my computer! Can't you just send a mail, like everyone else? And you know what it means to run an illegal server network of hijacked PC's – you can go to jail!!”

“I won't call it a server network,” BotNet explained. “It's more like a neural grid, you know, based on...”

“Tell her,” Super Girl said. “Come on.”

Duffy shook his head. “Better not. Girls are... you know.” Apparently he was an expert in which information could be safely shared with girls and which not.

BotNet couldn't be stopped. He had the printout ready: “Predicted height hundred-fifty to two hundred feet, predicted speed about sixty-five mph, that's roughly fifty-six knots – it's gonna strike within the next three to five days. That's what Deep Though says. Straight from the prediction model. You know what it means: translate this into kinetic energy - it's gonna zap you, wipe you out,
Ali groaned. “I can't believe it. I simply can't... There's no such thing as a prediction model! There's no way to predict rogue waves!!”

Dude's brain was occupied with more important things. “Say – what's your girlfriend's name? She got a phone number? E-mail? She on Facebook? Just wanna say hello. I mean, perhaps she and I can...”

Ali shut the laptop.

“Hey!” a muffled voice complained. “There's a lot more interesting data...”

She briefly considered to put the laptop in the freezer or, better, take out the battery, but she needed it for the meeting. She stuffed it in her bag, kicked the bag under the bed.

***

Ali wasn't hungry but she had to eat something. She took the remote control and switched on the TV while she walked to the kitchen area. The TV at least gave the illusion of company. She opened the freezer and took out a bottle of milk, cream and cheese while she listened to the voice of the guy who gave the weather report.

He showed a weather chart and Ali rolled her eyes. Cyclone Kevin. She didn't understand Norwegian but it was clear that the guy told the scary tale.

“Gawd!” Ali slammed the food on the butcher block. Not again. She was annoyed, as if the weather guy was talking to her personally, one more bozo telling her what to do. She saw footage from the British west coast: storm, rain, flood, waves crashing against the headlands, vessels in distress.

She fetched carrots, an orange, endives, an apple, grabbed a kitchen knife and began to chop away at the green stuff.

Fuck yourself, Mister! She thought while shredding a yellow pepper. Who do you think you are, telling me what to do and what not? She pointed the knife at the newscaster. I know exactly what I'm doing, Mister. So stop smartassing about isobars and hectopascals!

She poured cream, milk and yogurt into the mixer, added a few spices and switched it on. She peeled the orange, cut it into fillets, catching the juice for the sauce. She hated the guy by now. He looked like the type of man who had always tried to stop her, to make her step down, to abandon her goals.

And what are you looking at, Mister? Never seen a girl in her underwear making herself a meal?

She licked her fingers, staring at the weather guy who seemed to enjoy talking about disasters, just loved to comment on other peoples misfortunes, probably thought that they simply got what they deserved, stupid as they were.

Come on, say it! She thought. You think it was silly to go on board her ship and tell her, right? Excuse me! I didn't tell her to get lost!! I just did what was best for both of us! What? I'm a stupid bitch? You also an expert in... love, Mr Hectopascal? Don't say it! Let me guess: I should've kept my mouth shut, right? Like a good girl, right??
She slammed a frying pan onto the cook top, switched on the heat and threw a handful of seeds into it, inhaling deeply as the smell filled the kitchen and calmed her down a bit.

Ten minutes later she was sitting at the table in front of a salad bowl and realized that she had made salad for two, as if Ash was still with her and she'd watch Ash dig into her food which was the reason she loved to cook for her. She had also poured a second mug of tea...

Ali pushed away the fork. And then the tears came and she sat at the table crying, while a stupid Norwegian TV anchorman showed satellite pictures of the huge cyclone which was coming towards the coast.

Then she heard her phone buzz. Ash! She jumped up, almost overturning mugs and bowl as she ran to her room to get the call.

***

“So … back in town!” Katja Olsson's voice was cheerful as usual. “How was the flight?”

“Came back on the supply shuttle,” Ali said, trying to hide her disappointment. “Bumpy ride.”

Katja Olsson laughed as if Ali was talking about her adventure at an amusement park and not about a flight in the only passenger seat of a cargo heli stuffed with crates, treated like just another piece of equipment. “And now you've got the flat all to yourself, with the captain moved to her own place. Hope it's not too quiet now.” It sounded as if 'quiet' was some kind of punishment for Katja.

“Well … yeah …” Ali would've loved quiet but apparently couldn't get it.

“Listen,” Katja Olsson was already miles ahead. “I'd like you update me on the project.”

“I'll give a report in the meeting this afternoon. I thought you wanted to join us and...”

“I'm afraid I won't be able to come. I'd like us to talk before the meeting and off the official agenda. Let's see...” she checked her schedule. “I'm fully booked for today, but...”

“I can mail the report to you, no problem.” Ali was already on her knees trying to fetch the bag with the laptop from under the bed.

Katja wasn't listening. “What about lunch? That okay for you?”

Lunch? With Katja? “Sure...” She was not so sure as she made it sound.

“Good. One o'clock at the Old Custom House. You know the place? It's quite small, in one of the lesser known barrios... Well, taxi driver'll get you there. I SMS the address to you right now. Sorry about the short notice...” The line went dead.

Ali put down the phone. Lunch? With Katja?

She raised her head, saw herself in the mirror. She tried to see what Katja Olsson would see. A girl that had just cried, with a worried look in her eyes, tired, shoulders hunched, muscles tight and aching from the flight? No way! She straightened herself, raised her chin. Better. She unclasped her bra and dropped it, slipped out of her panties and looked again, pushing her hips forward. Even better! And now the gorgeous-girl outfit...
She remembered the salad and the tea and the bread and suddenly she was hungry, ravenous.

She went back to the kitchen, still holding on to her panties. She heard the voice of the newscaster and turned to the TV.

What? She frowned at the guy who was giving the latest news, another stuffed shirt with a tie. I can change my underwear as often as I like, Mister. That a problem for you?

She struck a stripper's pose with a sneer, then flung the briefs towards the screen, hitting the newscaster's face dead center. She grabbed the salad bowl, slowly turned and walked from the room, naked, as if leaving the stage of a night club after an adults-only act.

At her room she suddenly giggled, embarrassed about herself. If Ash had seen this...

But Ash was no longer here.

Ali walked to the closet, opened a drawer. She hesitated, then picked the black string and the matching bra, something close to nothing.

She heard the phone, walked back to the living room. Katja – the SMS.

She looked at the TV from the corner of her eyes. She smiled, turned, hand on hip, giving the news guy a good look at her lingerie. Yes, Sir. It was expensive. And yes, the string barely covers my... so what? You mean that's not what I should wear to a simple business lunch? What?? It looks as if I... No, I'm not expecting to strip in front of her, later! And why I want to change my underwear is none of your business! So fuck off, Mister!!

She went back to her room, holding on to the tea mug and a fork.

She pulled the black dress from the wardrobe, and from a drawer a black pantyhose, threw both on the bed.

There was still the voice from the TV.

I'm just putting on something more... appropriate, okay? She thought. She bent down and selected a pair of black heels, the ones with the four inch stilettos, simple but incredibly... sexy?? What are you talking about, Mister? Okay, okay, it's not just lunch. It's lunch with the boss, right? Right?? No, I'm not excited! No, I'm not eager to look good for... her. Yes, she is a hot piece... What the hell are you talking about, Mister??

She slammed the door to her room shut. Then she sat down in front of the table by the window, looked into the mirror and began to brush her hair. And then she felt it, worse than ever, felt what had been there since they had parted, growing, choking her, and suddenly she longed for Ash, for her company, her touch, so much that it hurt.

She was no longer hungry. She began to put on lipstick, something that matched the lingerie, the dress, the heels and tried very hard not to cry again.

***

“See you tomorrow, when I fly you to Oslo. I know you'll be busy but... hope we can talk.”
Tobin had hung up, then had waited for Chris to call back. That had been almost a day ago. Now she listened to Agnetha on the voice mail: “Tobsy, Darling! How are things? Listen... the flight to Oslo: Mrs Mac canceled the trip two hours ago. Call me right after you heard this, will you? We need to talk about your new schedule. Kiss, kiss!”

Two Hours ago!? Why’s she talking to Agnetha and not me!? Tobin had sulked for about twenty minutes. Then she had called Chris again. And again. And... No, Tobin thought. That’s enough. She put down the phone only to pick it up a second later. She pushed 'Redial', listened to Chris' voice telling her that she wasn’t available and if she wanted to leave a message please would she...

Tobin stared out of the window. Chris had vanished from the earth, had never returned her calls, not even one of... how many? Too many, Tobin thought. The last few calls she had only made to listen to Chris' recorded voice, the only thing that was left of her.

Tobin picked up the phone again. “Listen,” she said. “Just...” She hung up, only to redial gain. “I... I just want to know if you're okay, so please...” She pushed the phone away, curled up on the sofa and looked out of the window, hugging a cushion. The clouds were gray, heavy, and carried a lot of rain which would come down in less than an hour. Her throat was raw and she didn't feel too good. She sat for moment just staring. Then she looked at her watch. She jumped up, grabbed phone and car keys and on her way out almost forgot to lock the front door.

***

This is ridiculous, she thought. What are you? A lovesick bitch sniffing the high school cheerleader? She sat in the Mustang and stared at the entrance of the SATS gym. To come here is insane, she thought. Just because there is a slim chance she's working out today. Not even Chris' car was in the car park. So, she thought. You wanted to know and now you know. She isn't here. And now just drive back home. She was getting cold because she had forgotten to bring a jacket. What are you waiting for? She thought. That she's going to appear in the car park within the next - what? Minutes? Hours??

She picked up the phone, hit Chris number. She listened to the recorded voice, listened to the beep, listened to the silence. “Where are you?” She said. “Just... tell me whether you're okay...” She broke the connection, sat in the car, shivering.

No, she thought. You're not going inside and ask. Are you crazy?

***

The woman at the reception shook her head. “No,” she said. “She isn't here. But just let me check.” She picked up the phone and then talked to somebody. “No,” she said again. “She wasn't here and won't come. In fact she canceled the appointments she had with our personal trainer. I'm sorry.”

“Thanks,” Tobin managed a smile. “Nice place you have here,” she added to cover her frustration. “Always wanted to start working out. You still taking on members?”

“Sure.” The woman picked up a few leaflets. “These'll give you a basic idea of what were doing
here and how you can join.”

“Thanks.” Tobin took the leaflets. She walked through the sliding doors and across the car park to her car. It was raining now and she got wet and when she sat in the Mustang she wasn't feeling cold but hot, and her head was throbbing and her throat hurt, and she was holding on to a set of limp, dripping registration forms and PR brochures. She dropped them. Better get back home, she thought. And then some aspirin and something nice to drink, something with milk and honey for the throat. She started the car, feeling miserable.

***

Katja Olsson wasn't alone and Ali immediately recognized the woman opposite to her: the chiseled face, the short hair, blonde, the blue eyes piercing Ali’s, holding them – the Ice Queen, Torgunn Haugen, right now commissioner for social services and child welfare in the capital, going for the Ministry of Climate and Environment. Next to her sat a very beautiful girl, eyes lowered, seemingly absorbed in the study of the tablecloth and the cutlery. At her feet stood a briefcase, in front of her was a mobile phone which definitely wasn’t hers but that of her boss, Torgunn.

“Hey!!” Katja waved to Ali. “We had to meet a bit earlier, you know, Torgunn's schedule's even tighter than mine.” Ali walked to the table, feeling Torgunn Haugen's eyes on her and she was glad she wore expensive designer clothes, because the women were decked in gear which two paychecks of hers wouldn’t cover and to walk the twenty steps from the door to the table while she was sized up by them was a little bit easier in a black dress and high heels to match.

But after ten steps she was surprised to discover, deep inside her, the hot glow of excitement, the reaction to some sort of vibration that seemed to be in the air, realized how much she had missed this sort of attention: she knew she was pretty and she liked to be a woman and liked to dress so it showed, and now, after hours, days, in overalls and survival suits, in life vests, neoprene boots and thermal underwear, with damp hair and cold, wet skin, she simply needed one or two admiring glances and the company of elegant, intelligent and, yes, attractive women.

Katja beamed at Ali. “You know Torgunn Haugen. Can't switch on TV without having to listen to her opinions about how to achieve a better world. And that's Annika, her assistant.”

Beautiful Annika raised her lashes and moved the corners of her mouth into something like a smile, just enough to give the impression of being glad to meet Ali without having to say so.

Katja pointed to the chair next to her. “Come on, back me up. Right now they're giving me a hard time because of the oil leak in the Gyla field.”

“So... you're the girl who has to clean up Katja's and Angus' mess,” Torgunn said.

“Lay off, Torgunn!” Katja's aggression flared up instantly. “We're not the bad guys. We spend a lot of money and thought to do the right things.”

Torgunn seemed to ignore Katja's anger but Ali was sure she enjoyed it. And of course she wouldn't let Ali off the hook, now that she knew that hitting Ali was a way to annoy Katja Olsson. “And you think sticking sensors to the platforms helps to improve things?”

“You never did a study,” Katja said before Ali could come up with an answer. “Or anything else, except complain. And while complaining about the environment your government bags a fat portion
of the profits. You're part of the problem, you know.”

“I don't think that a pure technical approach is helpful,” Torgunn said, giving Katja a sweet smile. She turned to Ali again. “Sorry, no offense. But we need a more sophisticated approach, need to ask new questions…”

But now Katja had realized what Torgunn was doing. She just leaned back, seemingly relaxed. “Based on Alexandra's findings I will launch an initiative to make Northern's operations safer – and not only here. I'm talking global.” She smiled at Torgunn. “You think party politics, Torgunn, Norwegian party politics. I have to take all the other sites into consideration. My view is - has to be – a global one.”

Torgunn Haugn shook her head. “It's the engineers who made the problems. Sorry again, but that's the truth. I don't think that engineers will give us the solution. We need a political vision, not a technical. I want to give society a future which is safe and clean and I can't see what new aspects your study will bring that really make a difference, Alexandra.”

“I hope to persuade Alexandra to join Northern and to have her permanently on my staff, heading the environmental projects.” Now Katja looked really smug, she even touched Ali's hand. “Sorry – I should've talked to you first... but I'm not a sleek politician like Torgunn. I need to run a business, I need results and I'm counting on you to show us how to improve things.”

Ali's mind was spinning. Was that a...? Yes, she had been offered a job by Katja! It would mean... she was too excited to think clearly. It would mean a lot of money, a permanent base, it would mean a home - for her kids, for herself, more time to spend with the family, a chance to have a real life.

“It's good to live here,” Katja said as if reading her thoughts. “Perfect to raise kids.”

“You've got kids?” Torgunn Haugn leaned forward. Her eyes were no longer cold.

“A girl and a little boy,” Ali said.

“I've got two boys, twelve and fourteen. How old are yours?”

“Seanie is one and a half years, Saskia five, very proud to get into Kindergarten in a few days.”

“You're missing them, right?”

Ali nodded.

Torgunn shook her head. “The little bastards. I wish them to hell several times a day but can't live without them. Were are your kids now?”

“Britain. My parents came from the US to look after them when I took on the project for Northern.”

“She'll do a great job,” Katja said. “As a marine engineer she can not only find the facts but also plan and implement the changes.”

Torgunn leaned back in her chair, eyes cold again, as if Katja's voice had brought her back to a world with no place for tenderness and care. “As I said: I can't really believe that your way to deal with the problems will do us any good.”

Ali could feel the tension between Katja and Torgunn like a heatwave, so strong that it made her breathe faster, no longer listening to what they said but watching the two women collide and fight, radiating something that was beyond aggression, something almost... erotic.
She needed a break. “I'd like to wash my hands before we eat.”

“Sure!” Katja said, still holding Torgunn's eyes, smiling. “Let's order when you're back.”

Torgunn smiled, too. “Why don't you show her the restroom, Annika? You know the place.”

Annika didn't look as if she cared to show Ali or anybody else were to find soap and water but she smiled and got out of her chair and walked to the back of the restaurant with Ali following her.

***

Ali let the cold water run over her wrists. From the corner of her eyes she watched Annika who stood in front of the mirror, arranging a few strands of her hair which almost touched her butt, now and then checking her phone and that of her boss.

Annika wore a dress very similar to Ali's and Ali wondered if she also had the same bra and string. And suddenly she realized how much she and her looked alike, as if from the same mold, a global-corporate-employee type of slick, cold, polished to perfection, payed for with gold-laminated plastic cards and sold to girls all over the world who were just scared and lonesome and didn't know how to mend their aching hearts, trailing their bosses like trained pets, hoping that one day a tiny bit of this incredible dominant power of their masters would also be in their bodies, only to be discarded one day, exhausted and burned out.

Ali suddenly missed her kids, her parents. And she missed Ash.

She turned off the water and walked to the door.

“Don't ...” Annika's voice stopped her. Ali turned, frowning.

Annika smiled. And suddenly Ali understood.

“Oh ...” she said.

Annika nodded. “Exactly.” She looked at her watch. “Give them five more minutes to make whatever deal they came to make.” She shrugged. “Last time they met at a private sauna. I hate saunas. I probably owe it to you that I don't again sit in a hot room, flashing my pussy at them and my hair wet and limp and clinging to my face.” Ali had to laugh. She walked back and looked into the mirror, too. Their eyes met.

“You're really pretty,” Annika said. “I thought you'd be more like … you know, being an offshore engineer. You looks'll get you far. She likes beautiful girls.”

“You know her?”

Annika smiled. “I worked for her before Torgunn offered me a job. Two years. If you work for her ...” She played with a strand of her hair. “She demands much. Everything, in fact.”

“Everything?”

“You brains, your time, your life. And ...” Her eyes move over Ali's body, down to her legs.

“That why you started working for Torgunn Haugen?”
Annika shook her head. “She sent me.”

“What?”

“Olsson wanted her to lay off getting environmental about Northern’s offshore operations and she – Haugn – wanted Olsson to go to hell. So Olsson thought it would be a clever move to have somebody spying on Torgunn and her party. Only that a couple of months later they somehow... found out that they have a lot in common and since then...” She turned to Ali. “Look, all that bitching is part of the show. There are private phone calls and lunch meetings and...” she hesitated, then put the phones in her handbag. “I just wanted you to know that she's without scruples. There are no limits for her.”

“I can't really image that...”

“What do you know about her?”

Ali shrugged. “Well, she's from here and...”

Annika laughed. “See? That's part of the show, too. She's not from here, she's from Australia.”

“What?”

Annika nodded. “Yep. From a down under desert shithole. Started a career in the Aussie mining industry, made it from there into the global gas and crude oil business. On the way upgraded her social skills - from small-town bitch to global corporate henchwoman.” She stopped as if she had already told too much, had told far more than she had ever wanted to give away. But suddenly she seemed to be glad that it had slipped out. “It's... exciting to be with her, close to her,” she said. “She makes things so easy, even the bad one's. Just... be careful.”

“You're not coming back to Katja, work for her again?”

Annika was silent. Then she said: “She never asked me.”

And now Ali understood that what turned on Katja was strength, the power of an independent will, resistance: she needed a challenge, a fight – not the soft submission of Annika. Beauty alone wasn't enough. And it hadn't mattered how much Annika had wanted to give Katja all she had to offer – Katja hadn't wanted it. And no matter how long Annika would wait for Katja to call her back – it would never happen.

Ali couldn't help it: she put her arm around Annika's shoulders, smiling when she saw her surprised look. “Let's go back,” she said. “Deal or no deal - I'm starving.”

***

Tobin stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror. She looked terrible. Her nose was running and her eyes were red, her hair clung to her cheeks. She had stripped and found that also her underwear was damp. Fucking rain! She opened the medicine cabinet partly because she didn't want to see herself any longer, partly because she needed aspirin. She rummaged in the box which served as first aid kit/pill supply and found a big pack, almost full.

She swallowed three, gulped down some water and cursed her swollen throat. She took off the
remaining clothes and and began to towel her hair, suddenly feeling terribly weak. She slumped onto the toilet seat. She closed her eyes, almost dozing off. Then the aspirin kicked in and she felt better.

No, she thought. You'll not go the the house. Forget it. You're not going to lower yourself and stand in front of the gate and stare at the windows. Right? Right. She got up, steadied herself against the tiled wall. You'll make yourself a nice mug of hot milk and then lie down on the sofa and watch a nice weepy flick.

***

She stood in front of the gate and stared at the windows, hating herself. It was raining and she was wet again and her base cap didn't do much to keep the rain from running into the neck of her sweater.

Congratulations, she thought. Now you've hit rock bottom, humiliationwise, you pathetic piece of pussy. And now what? Ring the bell? Sorry Mr McLowry but may I have a word with your wife? Or lurk on the sidewalk until the neighbors call the police? No, I don't want to B&E the villa, officer. I'm just trying to get in touch with owner's wife because I love her so much...

She held on to Chris' rain jacket which had been still in her car and now was supposed to back up the story that she was here to return it, but she was no longer convinced that it would pass as an excuse when faced by a patrol car team.

Suddenly the front door opened and Tobin, squinting, saw Jackie, the French au pair, come outside, holding the leash of a small dog which sniffed around the flowerbed without enthusiasm, lifted a leg and dashed back into the house.

Tobin sprinted to to gate, trying to avoid the puddles.

“Hey!” She waved at the girl. “Jackie! It's me, Tobin...”

The girl stared, then smiled. She walked back inside and a second later the gate opened and Tobin ran to the front door.

“Hey...” She stood under the awning, shivering, arms folded, trying to keep warm and to ignore the cold and the water that trickled down her back. “We talked on the phone, a while ago...”

The girl beamed. “Tobin, yes... What's up?” Inside the dog barked like mad, classifying Tobin as a suspicious character with no right to pop up at the front door of this respectable house.

“Listen...” Tobin was trying to deliver her story as casual as possible. “Er... I was wondering if Chris...” She held up the rain jacket. “I still have this and I thought I better give it back to her...”

“Oh, sorry, but she isn't in. In fact they're both away, on a short holiday.” Jackie lowered her voice. “About time, you know. She needed a break and she looked really happy when they took off to the lodge. SHUT UP!!” she shouted, making Tobin jump, causing the dog only to really get at it.

“The lodge?” Tobin manged to get out the three words without betraying her shock.

“It's at Vågsli Lake, very quiet. I think it'll do her a lot of good, you know, to get away from the city and all her engagements.”
Quiet? Tobin thought. That's another word for confinement at the end of the world. As far as she knew Vågslí Lake was somewhere in the mountains, a part of the country where people believed in trolls and gnomes and ate each other when the winter was too long.

“Just give it to me,” Jackie said and snatched the jacket from Tobin who was still thinking of Chris fighting bears and wolves and Angus McLowry. “I see that she get's it when she comes back in two days, okay?”

Tobin stood, unable to move. Now the last item reminding her of Chris was gone. She listened to the rain and suddenly felt the cold wind.

“Thanks,” she muttered. Then she turned and walked back to her car, the barking of the dog following her.

***

Katja waved good bye while Torgunn waved back, her limousine moving towards the parking lot exit, driven by a guy who looked very much like a bodyguard, Annika next to Torgunn in the back of the car, with lowered eyes, checking the phone calls and messages for her boss.

“That calculating bitch!” she hissed under her breath. “Could strangle her.”

“They say she wants to become Minister of Climate and Environment...” Ali wasn't sure Katja listened to her because she still stared at the limousine’s red taillights.

Katja sneered. “That's what she wants people to think. She wants to become party leader, much more interesting. More power. Travels on the environmental ticket. I have to keep her from making Northern the target of her campaigning. She's more or less trying to blackmail me. We have some very old platforms, like the Outpost cluster. Heaps of junk, more or less. She wants us to replace them, but at our costs! If we do she'll take the pressure away from us to other companies.”

But that's not the whole story, right? Ali thought. It's about... domination, about who yields first.

“It was them who built those junk piles, back in the eighties!!” Katja said, still staring at a car which was long gone. “They were glad we took them over and kept them operative, years and years, taking all the risks and paying a fortune for maintenance and security.” She took a deep breath, then turned to Ali, smiling, looking straight into her eyes. “Thanks for giving us all the project details. Hope you could still enjoy the shrimps salad. They make a good one, here.”

Ali had to clear her throat which suddenly felt tight. “Very good.”

“Listen – the job offer...” Katja came closer, running her fingertips over the fur lining of Ali’s parka, slightly touching her cheek. “Maybe it sounded as if I wanted just to show off in front of this arrogant, egoistic... Valkyrie. And yes: I did. I was so annoyed... Sorry, I shouldn't have blurted it out in front of them, should've talked to you first. But you understand how important your work is for Northern. It takes a lot of pressure from us, with you looking into all those environmental safety issues. I really mean it: I want you. Think about it, okay?”

Ali nodded.

Katja stepped back again, looked at her watch. “Christ! Almost forgot! Workout time. Half an hour
in the pool. Still love to do a few rounds. You know I always wanted to get into the Australian team, as a kid?"

“I always thought you're from here...”

Katja threw back her head, laughing.

“Lady, I'm from down under. Dad's from here, my mom from Russia.” For a moment she stared into the distance, seeing something only she could see. “I have the name, the language plus one or two of their dialects, so they tend to mistake me for a native. Sometimes quite helpful.” She started to walk to her car but stopped. “You know what? You come with me. You'll love it: warm water, even music. Place belongs to friends of mine, they have an indoor pool and I can use it whenever I want. We can talk some more and relax.”

“There's the meeting starting in half an hour, and...” She knew that Katja would simply brush aside what she said but she had to because she suddenly felt as she was loosing herself, immersed in the strength, the power which Katja radiated, the attention of Katja, which made her breathe faster.

“Forget the conference. They can do without you. And from what you told me I can see that everything's in place and moving. Come on, let's go swimming.”

The thought of warm water, of sharp, even painful exercise, of a tired body, finally relaxing under a hot shower... Why not just go with this surge of energy, she thought. Why not just let it happen... Katja was suddenly close again and Ali was aware of her perfume, of her presence which blanked out everything else and seemed to take the air away. “I've... got no swimsuit,” she managed to say.

“Me neither,” Katja said. “Who cares? We have the whole place to ourselves - my friends are off to their finca on Tenerife.”

And Katja was making it easy, as always, so easy, like Annika had said, and for a moment Ali wondered how it would be to let Katja have what she wanted, how she would feel after making love – exhausted? Beaten? Powerless and used? Probably. And probably also wanting more, hooked, as if introduced to a sweet, dangerous drug.

But she couldn't.

It was ridiculous, even pathetic and she was embarrassed about herself, almost annoyed, feeling Katja's eyes on her, trying to find out if she was just playing hard to get, just rising the stakes.

But she just couldn't. Not now. And she couldn't because she had been touched by someone else, touched like she had never been touched before, deep inside, in a way that had changed her.

Suddenly Katja smiled, and it was a warm smile.

“I like you.” She touched Ali's cheek. “I like you very much. You are very good at what you do. And you're a very strong woman.” There was a glow in her eyes. “Some other time, maybe?”

“Better get myself a taxi, right?” Ali said.

“You know what?” Katja put an arm around Ali's shoulder. “I take you back to headquarters. You don't want to be late for the meeting and barge into the room with everybody staring at you, right?”
Vågsli Lake... Tobin sat on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket, sipping hot milk from a mug.

McLowry, that piece of shit! Hloiday? Holiday my arse, she thought. Moved her away from the city, away from me!

She swallowed more aspirin, followed by a gulp from the mug. No wonder she couldn't reach her. Vågsli Lake: the invention of electricity had probably left that place untouched and a mobile phone network was unknown up there.

She scanned the internet. Vågsli Lake: the map showed one road leading to the lake and there seemed to be a tiny village at the southern end.

She had looked happy? Tobin thought. At least that's what Jackie had said. Happy – about what? To spend quality time with McLowry? She bit her lip. That's not fair, she thought. Why didn't she tell me what was going on? To leave me dangling just like that, not a word from her, and me desperate to find out what all this was about.

She picked up the phone again and checked the distance. A three hours drive, maybe four...

No, she thought. No way. You go to bed now, that's were you belong. And you stay there and stop driving yourself crazy.

***

“It's over there,” Karen Stroer, Olsson's assistant, pointed to the far end of the twelfth floor. “The one to the left.

It's Sylvia Jensen's office but she's on maternal leave and you can use it whenever you need it.”

“Thanks...” Ali picked up her briefcase and the laptop. The huge office space was full of people behind their desks or talking in small groups or making phone calls, people in front of computers, wearing headsets, conferencing with people somewhere as far away as Alaska or Oman. Three clocks showed the local time of Houston, Texas, of Riad, Saudi Arabia and Novosibirsk, Russia.

Ali walked through the buzz of voices and noise, careful not to collide with a few guys holding on to brimming mugs. “Oh ...” She heard Karen's voice and turned. “You've got a visitor! Waiting in the office!”

Ali managed a smile. The meeting hadn't been too good, Northern's Head of Engineering had demanded last minutes changes to the setup which weren't really necessary and she hadn't been able to make her point. All she needed now was a coffee and a few minutes alone in a quiet place – but what she got instead was another guy who wanted to talk business.

She pushed against the door and stepped into the office. She stopped short.

One wall was glass, floor to ceiling, and the view was stunning: the city, spread out beneath her, the
harbor, a huge cruise liner moving in, slowly, and in the distance the sea, and all this under a sky dominated by the towering clouds, rolling in from the Atlantic.

But it wasn't the view why she stopped.

Captain Ashlyn Harris sat in a chair tilted against the wall. She was asleep, the coffee in front of her cold. The thick ponytail was curled up like a cat over her shoulder, golden on her blue navy sweater.

Ali closed the door, careful not to wake her. She leaned against it, unable to do anything but watch Ash, and suddenly something, something she hadn't been aware of but which seemed to fill her chest, something dark and heavy like a rock, something that had been crushing her heart, was suddenly lifted away.

Ash opened her eyes, for a second not knowing where she was. Then she saw Ali. She smiled.

“You look just... gorgeous,” she said.

***

Half an hour ago Tobin had stopped to believe what the navigation app on her mobile told her.

Half an hour ago she had swallowed the last aspirin and now the pain seemed to split her head and she felt hot while, at the same time, she shivered, freezing.

The rain had become torrential and banks of fog lingered across the road and the only thing she saw through the windshield was what her wipers managed to show her and that was only a blurred vision of the road ahead of her.

She knew that outside the car was what people called 'nowhere' and that she was right in the famous middle of it. She knew that she had lost her way long ago.

The navigation app insisted there was a small town somewhere ahead and Tobin hoped it had a pharmacy or drug store or whatever where she could get something to keep her going. She knew that she'd never make it to Vågsli Lake and she only wanted to buy aspirin and a coffee-to-go and then turn back and get home and go to sleep.

She was dead tired and her back was killing her.

She braked when something furry with antlers darted across the road.

“Shit!!” The phone had slipped from the passenger seat and now was somewhere on the floor. “Fuck!” She tried to find it while she pushed the Mustang through rain and fog, one eye on the road, fumbling for the phone under the seat.

It was the blast of a air horn which made her pop up again, staring into flashing headlights, realizing that her car had swerved into the opposite lane and that she was about to smash head on into the only other car that traveled on the narrow road - a truck, coming towards her at full speed, loaded with timber.

***
Chapter 13

Tobin still clutched the phone. She sat by the roadside, shaking, cold, while at the same time she was hot as if on fire, trembling with terror. She couldn't remember how she had avoided the truck, how she had managed to control the skidding car and why she had ended up in the ditch. The only thing she remembered was the piece of old barbed wire which had cut her left hand when she had climbed from the car and struggled through the dirt to get back to the road.

The tail of the car was hooked to a tow truck which slowly pulled the Mustang from the ditch, yellow lights blinking in the rain, reflected in the puddles on the tarmac.

Somebody put an arm around Tobin.

“What are you doing here?” Alina was worried. She took off her rain jacket and draped it over Tobin's shoulders. “Gawd – you're hot,” she said. She put a hand on Tobin's forehead. “You're ill!” She grabbed Tobin's arm and helped her up. “You should be in bed!” She led Tobin to the battered, camouflage painted Toyota pick-up which she had parked on the other side of the road.

“I'm so sorry,” Tobin muttered. “But I didn't know what to do so I called you…”

“Good you called. Probably the only sane thing you did during the last twenty-four hours.”

Tobin's legs were shaking when she climbed into the car. “I just wanted to see her,” she said. “Just wanted to talk to her. I fucked it all up…”

“Shut your mouth and listen.” Alina took off her base cap and put it on Tobin's head to keep her warm. “Car is okay. One headlight's broken but that's it. They gonna tow it to the garage next town. They say owner's into vintage cars, he'll take care of it. We'll come back and get it when you are better, okay?”

“She's out there, alone and…” Tobin was close to crying.
“I said: listen!” Alina was looking into Tobin's eyes to get her attention. “They need your road assistance membership, the card, you know?”

“It's with my things, in…” Tobin tried to concentrate.

Alina picked up Tobin's day pack. “In here?” She rummaged through it, raised an eyebrow when she found the big, empty pack of aspirin. “You stupid bitch,” she said, taking the card from the wallet. “You could be dead.” She put back the day pack. “You stay were you are.” She pointed a finger at Tobin’s face. “I'm gonna sort out things with the service guys, be back in a second. Don't move!” She pulled a handkerchief from her jeans and rolled it into a ball which she put into Tobin's left hand. “And now you hold on to this and as tight as you can. It'll stop the bleeding.”

***

“Vagsli Lake?” Alina shook her head. “There's no village at Vagsli Lake. It's a luxury holiday resort – sauna, jacuzzi, indoor pool, gym, two star restaurant, high speed internet, whatever you want, provided you can pay the room rates.” She pushed the pick-up towards the city, now and then looking at Tobin, from time to time feeling her forehead.

Tobin was too weak to object. The handkerchief was knotted around her hand, serving as a makeshift bandage, soaked with blood.

“She's at their lodge... I thought I should go there and see her and...”

“The lodges?” Alina shook her head again. “They are all over the area, along the shore and in the forest. It's impossible to find a lodge if you don't know where it is. There are no roads, only a few tracks, for the forest rangers and firefighters. The guys who are rich enough to own a lodge are also rich enough to go there by helicopter. They have security patrols 'cause they don't want people like you and I hang out at the lake and spoil the view.”

“You know the place?” Tobin, wrapped in a blanket and wearing Alina's jacket, began to doze off and despite her blazing headache she felt warm and safe, a feeling she had almost forgotten.

“Worked on a building site for a couple of month, in spring, when they extended the resort.” Alina stared through the windshield. “Look,” she said. “I think it's time you wake up. She just used you - to get back at her piece-of-shit husband. And after they worked things out she simply dumped you. Now she's massaged and jacuzzied and you're history. What I mean is: forget her.”

Tobin shook her head. “Chris is not like that.” She closed her eyes. “Gawd, I'm thirsty...”

Alina pointed to the glove compartment. “Must be something in there.”

Tobin opened it. First thing she pulled out was a half empty bottle of vodka, then an open carton of cigarettes.


Tobin raised the vodka bottle considering a good swig. “Genuine stuff, Russian, prime quality. What's wrong with it?” She offered it to Alina.
Alina smiled. “Thanks. Not for me. Don’t drink, don’t smoke. And you keep your hands off, too, in your condition.”

Tobin put it back, then sipped from the water bottle. “You a saint or what?” Alina didn't answer. “Sorry,” Tobin said. “I didn't mean to...” She pulled the blanket closer around her. “Thank you,” she said. “For coming to get me out of this mess.”

Alina dismissed it with a shrug. “That's what friends do, right?” She switched on the radio, searched for music. She didn't find anything she liked. “Don't drink, don't smoke because that's what brought me into jail,” she suddenly said. “Stood in front of a club at Yekaterinburg smoking a cigarette when this woman came to me and asked for a light and I fell in love. Six months later I hated her so much that I drank most of this...” she pointed to the vodka bottle in the compartment. “Then broke the bottle on the kitchen sink and cut her face.” She cleared her throat, squinting into the rain. “Three years. That's why I stopped drinking and smoking.”

Tobin shuddered. “Three years in jail?”

Alina laughed. “Jail?” she laughed again. “They didn't like what I did, they didn't like my face, they didn't like my attitude, and they didn't like that I like shagging girls. So they sent me to a women prison camp in Siberia. I thought I wouldn’t live through it. But I did.” She reached out and touched Tobin's cheek. “She was a married woman. Don’t make the same mistake. Forget her.”

****

Ali took a deep breath. This was exactly the sort of insanity which she had wanted to end, the racing heartbeat, the wet palms, the tingling skin, and she hated herself. You should be at the office, working, she thought. But she was here and Ash was so close that it was like sparkling wine going straight to her brain, making her high and – yes: happy...

Ash was staring ahead, then stepped on it, making the car lurch forward, overtaking a huge container rig, then another truck carrying steel pipes.

From the corners of eyes Ali was looking at Ash. And right now she would have loved to grab her ponytail and pull hard, to make her listen, to tell her how much she needed her and how much she longed for a word from her and right now she would've settled even for a sweet lie, like that everything would be fine and...

“Shit!” Ash hit the brakes as a truck was backing out from a factory gate, sheet metal stacked high on the flatbed trailer. She slammed the fist on the wheel giving the truck a blast from the horn. “You blind or what? Idiot!”

Ash turned into a lane which led towards the water, warehouses towering left and right. She stopped at a barrier and Ali read the huge sign: Molvik Marine Solutions.

Ash lowered the window and the smell of oil and the din of steel cutting saws, of hammering and welding suddenly flooded the car.

The guard looked at their faces. He grinned. “Skipper... Boss's at the office.”

“We'd like to have a look at the flying saucer,” she said. “Can we just...?”
“Sure,” the guard pointed to the waterfront. “Park your car over there. I call the boss. He'll join you at dry dock C.”

Ali frowned. “Flying saucer?” But the real question was: Why was she here? Just because a girl in a navy sweater and the four gold bars of a captain had told her that she looked gorgeous? And she wondered how her dress and her heels would survive this dirty, smelling industrial site.

***

Ali stared, wide-eyed, at what towered above her, sitting on keel blocks and steel supports. She no longer cared for her dress.

“I've never seen something like this before...”

She carefully avoided cables, wires and hydraulic pipes while she walked in the neon light, walked around toolboxes and crates with spare parts, unable to take her eyes off the thing and the huge letters which were part of the glossy designer paint job saying 'Flying Saucer'.

She reached up and carefully touched the sharp edge of the main hull's bow, than ran a finger along the immaculate surface, reflecting her image like a mirror. A fragile steel framework connected the main hull to the port and starboard outriggers, only a little smaller but even sharper, reminding her of huge razor blades and she could almost feel the water hiss and rush along the curved flanks of the trimaran, raised on the long, sword-like keel which protruded from the main hull close to the stern.

“This will go fast,” she said.

“About thirty-five to forty knots - when everything's fine.” Ash watched her, smiling, no longer tense and worried, asking herself if she was doing the right thing. She couldn't get enough of Ali, lost in admiring the beauty of the ship, touching it, like a girl in a fairy tale, looking in wonder at a miracle, not because this was a high tech masterpiece but because she could see it at sea, driven by the wind, flying like a bird across the ocean towards a faraway coast...

Ali stopped, pointed. “Are these...?”

Ash nodded. “Hydrofoils. They're unfolded by hydraulics. You speed it up to seventeen knots and then its lifted from the water by the foils and goes like bat...”

Ali still stared, exited. “What's it inside?”

“You'll like it.” Ash said.

***

They sat on the soft, almost white leather, Ali looking around, Ash looking at her, enjoying her excitement, her sparkling eyes.

There wasn't a lot of space but it was like a luxury hotel suite complete with kitchen, two bedrooms and two showers. Only the navigation and communication electronics close to the stairway to the
pilothouse suggested that this was more than a billionaire's crash pad.

“Who's the owner?”

“Guy's rich. Stinking rich. Worked for Nokia, then started his own business. Money to burn.”

Ali leaned back. Everything was brand new and still covered with plastic sheets but she closed her eyes and she could almost hear the water lap against the hull, feel the ship move, gently, riding at anchor, moving with the wind, the tide and with Ash so close to her that she felt the warmth of her body she thought of the Caribbean...

Suddenly she heard steps on the stairway. The man was tall, massive. He had to duck when he came towards them, smiling.

“Skipper...” He shook Ash's hand.

“Torben Molvik ... Ali Krieger.” Ash made room for the guy to sit. “She's the marine engineer I told you about.”

“Glad to meet you.” He looked at her dress. “So that's what you guys wear working at the shipyard?”

Ali smiled. “I'm a consultant,” she said. “With Northern right now.”

“So - what do you think?” Molvik patted the white leather.

“Built in France, at DCNS shipyards,” Ali said. “You're doing the refit?”

Molvik was impressed. “You know your stuff. Seen it before?”

Ali shook her head. “Heard about it. Broke several speed records.”

“Torben's the owner of the company.” Ash said. “The boss.”

Molvik raised his hands. “Bank's the owner. I'm just the guy who pays the interest and keeps them happy.” He turned to Ash. “Made up your mind, Skipper?”

Ali frowned. “About what?”

“The rich guy wants his toy in the Caribbean,” Ash said. “He's looking for a skipper to take it there...”

“And you...?”

Ash shrugged.

“But...” Ali looked at Ash as if she saw her for the first time: the girl with the golden hair was a dreamer! “That would be a long voyage. How...?”

“I could take a long vacation,” Ash said.

Molvik turned towards Ali.

“So – you want to go to Haakon platforms?”

me. Why you asking?”

Molvik hesitated.

“Tell her,” Ash said.

“Tell me what?”

“Molvik was there,” Ash said. “When the wave hit the platforms, back then...”

“You were there?”

Molvik shrugged. “Was a young guy. Wanted to learn the family business – shipbuilding. My dad said first learn to work like a man, then come back and I'll teach you.” Molvik grinned. “Was a hard son-of-a-bitch, the old man.” He leaned back. “Anyway... went to the offshore oilfields. Pay was good. Got a job on the Haakon cluster, Haakon B, what they call Outpost – 'cause it's so far out, exposed, first to get hit by anything that comes to this side of the Atlantic.”

“What happened?” Ali had never met somebody who had seen a rogue wave and she was fascinated.

“The gale...” Molvik said. “That was something. Force Twelve, they said, but I think it was something beyond. Hit us in the evening and went on all night and into the early morning. Christ, what a noise. Hours and hours and we just sat there, behind watertight doors, dozens of hard guys, and were close to crying.” He laughed, nervously. “When it was over our ears were ringing.”

“It just stopped?”

Molvik nodded. “Waves still large but coming in slower, regular, like a clockwork. And we collected our stuff, survival suits and boots and hard hats and gloves and whatever and went to start our shift...” He paused, looked at his hand and Ali suddenly saw a drop of sweat on his forehead. “I was walking down the passage, to the stairway when the alarm went off...”

***

They sat in the car, raindrops running down the windshield. They watched Molvik hurry to the office block, wave to them and then disappear into the building.

Ash spoke first, no longer able to stand the silence. “Look... I'm sorry. I know you're angry because of that Outpost thing. It's just... I hate the idea of you being out there and...” She stopped. “You heard it – the foundation held but there was considerable damage on the platform's lower decks – a larger wave could make the superstructure cave in and collapse like a house of cards!”

Ali didn't say anything. She looked out into the rain, then drew a circle on the steamed window. “That's a long voyage,” she suddenly said. “From here to the Caribbean...”

Ash stared, surprised. “From here across the North Sea,” she said. “Then into the Channel...”

“Along the French coast...” Ali said, slowly drawing a spiral.

“Bay of Biscay...” Ash said.
“Bad weather.” Ali wiped out the spiral. “Fleece jackets and protection suits...”

“Along the main shipping route to the Strait of Gibraltar and Africa. Then south. And you can feel the sunshine and smell the summer and in the night you can hear the voices of the wales...”

“The Canaries...” Ali said.

“A few days of sunshine, stocking up, repair if necessary. Then to the Cape Verdes. And from there...”

“Across the Atlantic...” Ali said.

“...picking up the tradewinds and let the beauty fly: Good bye, Old World!” Ash suddenly leaned over and she was so close to Ali that her breath was tickling Ali’s ear. “I'll do it if you come with me,” she said.

Ali rested her head against the glass, feeling the cold.

“What a beautiful dream,” she whispered.

***

Tobin sat on the edge of the bed while Alina stripped her. She stopped when she saw the fading bruises on Tobin's hips and ribs. “What happened?” She dropped the T-shirt on the floor, on top of the jeans, socks and sweater.

“Tripped over the polar bear rug,” Tobin muttered.

“I'd say somebody used a baseball bat on you.” Alina looked closer at the scratch on her cheek, healed, but still visible. “You should stay away from other guys' wives,” she said, gently touching it. Then she undid the knot on the handkerchief and began to unwrap the hand. Tobin flinched because the fabric suddenly stuck to dried blood. “Where do you keep the first aid stuff?”

“Bathroom,” Tobin said. “Cabinet on the wall, behind the mirror.”

Alina pointed to the slip. “Get rid of this, too,” she said, walking to the door. “I want you naked when I come back. Have to do a bit of cleaning before you go to sleep.”

Tobin grabbed her phone, scanned the directory: the picture of Bugs bunny mistaking a stick of dynamite for a carrot – Mikkelsen. On Mikki's phone she was Snoopy the dog as WW1 fighter ace with goggles and skull cap. She began typing the SMS: Had accident. I'm ok. Won't come tmorow. CU T.

***

Tobin was lying on the bed, naked, asleep, when Alina came back with a bowl of warm water and a first aid kit. She took away the phone and began to clean the hand. Tobin woke up when Alina dressed the wound.
“Where's my phone?” Tobin's voice was barely audible. She struggled to get up. “I want my phone. Maybe she calls and... Maybe she needs help...”

“Shut up and stay still.” Alina fixed the bandage with a band aid. “You better get her out of your system as fast as possible. Believe me – she's not the cure, she's the disease,” she said. “And I stay here until I'm sure you don't go after her again.” She dangled the keys to the flat in front of Tobin's eyes. “You're grounded.”

Tobin barely managed to sit. She was incredibly tired. She leaned against Alina, rested her head her shoulder.

„Call Northern,“ Tobin muttered. „Tell them I can't fly the shuttle tomorrow. The number's on my phone, Air Admin, the girl's name's Agnetha. Tell her what happened. She needs to put somebody else on the shuttle schedule...”

Alina unfolded the T-shirt she had found in the bathroom. She pulled it over Tobin's head. “Careful with your hand,” she said.

“My most secret wet dream comes true...” Tobin's voice was just a whisper. “In bed with a Russian trucker...”

“Will you never shut up?” Alina said. “Do I have to knock you out to make you sleep?”

Tobin didn't hear her. She was breathing deeply, her eyes shut, her body finally relaxed, and Alina gently laid her down and covered her with the blanket and she switched off the light when she left the bedroom, leaving the door open.

****

The door buzzer woke Tobin and she didn't know where she was. It was dark and her hand hurt and she was thirsty. For a moment she felt panic. Then she remembered. She looked at the clock. She had slept two hours. She heard the door buzzer again. She rose from the bed and walked to the bedroom door, her knees weak and shaking.

Alina saw her leaning in the door frame. “What are you doing there??” Alina hissed. “Back to bed!” She walked to the front door and opened it. She looked at the stunning girl which stared back like a frightened rabbit, at Alina's short hair, her hard, attractive face, the tattoos which covered her arms and shoulders. Alina smiled which seemed to be something dangerous because the girl's blue eyes widened. “I'm Alina,” she said. “Who are you?”

“I'm Agnetha...” The girl's voice was trembling. “We talked, a while ago, on the phone...”

Agnetha!! Tobin shut the door as if she was slamming the lid on Pandora's box – only to open it again, carefully and only a fraction, unable not to peek and to listen.

“Agnetha...” Alina's smile was suddenly warm. “You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Why don't you come in?”

Agnetha suddenly blushed, her lowered lashes fluttering. “Thanks,” she whispered, holding on to the shopping bags. “How's Tobsy? I'd like to see her...”
“I think we better let Tobsy sleep.” Alina closed the door and leaned against it as if blocking the only way of escape. “Why don't we look at all the nice things you've brought us?” She took Agnetha's hand and steered her towards the kitchen door.

Tobin couldn't believe what she saw. She stared after them, especially at Agnetha's butt which shifted with every step under the tight dress while she walked down the corridor, balancing on her heels. Tobin pushed the door open. “What the fuck is going on??” she hissed.

Alina, about to follow the blonde girl into the kitchen, turned. “I said: back to bed!” she whispered. Then she grinned. “Mother of Christ... to listen to her voice on the phone was already an event. But this...” She came back and touched the tip of Tobin's nose. “Didn't expect you've got such gorgeous friends!”

“She's not my friend!” Tobin held on to the door frame afraid her knees would give. “She's a bitch! The female version of a snake! What the hell's she doing here? Don't say you invited her because her voice turned you on!!”

Alina grinned. “So what? She came, that's important. She brought things: she cares! She IS a friend. Although I don't really see what good two packs of jelly beans will do you. But there are also three bottles of a very respectable Chardonnay and she brought a huge loaf of organic bread. And believe it or not: the bread - she did it herself!”

“The jelly beans are for her, not for me,” Tobin said. “And I don't want her as friend. I feel much better when I can just hate her.”

Alina wasn't listening. She sniffed the perfume of Agnetha that still was in the air. “Gawd! I'm gonna eat her alive!”

“She's straight as a railroad track,” Tobin said.

Alina inhaled even deeper. “You know what?” she said. “I think that can be changed...”

***

Tobin's hand hurt and her head was still bad. She was only half asleep when Alina sat on the bed and gently touched her cheek. “Guy calls himself Mikkelsen wants to see you,” she said. “Tells me he's your copilot.” She lowered her voice. “Looks a bit like Bugs Bunny if you ask me...”

Tobin looked at the clock. It was early in the evening.

“Hey, Tobs!” Mikkelsen stood in the door frame, not daring to come closer. “You okay?”

“Mikki?” Tobin pushed herself up.

“You look like shit, Tobs,” Mikki said.

“You know what, Mikki? I feel like shit.” She squinted. “That flowers you're holding on to?”

Mikkelsen looked at the bouquet in his hand as if he saw it for the first time.

“You bought flowers?” Tobin couldn't believe it. “For me?” Suddenly the tears started.
“Thought you might like it...” Mikkelsen stared at Tobin. “I didn't want to upset you...”

“Don't worry,” Alina said. “That's a girl thing.”

“She's crying! I didn't mean to...” Mikkelsen was pale.

“It's okay,” Alina said. She put her arm around Mikkelsen's shoulder and Mikki suddenly looked a bit uncomfortable. “We better leave her alone, go find something to put the flowers into.”

“Er...” Mikkelsen wasn't sure if that was what he wanted but the girl with short blonde hair and the muscles seemed to know what was good for him.

Tobin wiped away the tears while Alina and Mikkelsen disappeared into the corridor. “You know Agnetha?” she heard Alina say. “She's in the kitchen cutting bread.”

“Agnetha??” Mikkelsen's voice was trembling with panic. “Oh my gawd...”

“Oh, you know each other...” Alina seemed to be delighted. “She brought a very good Chardonnay. Say Mikki, you like jelly beans?”

Tobin didn't hear Mikkelsen's reply because they shut the kitchen door. Flowers, she thought. She tried to remember the last time somebody brought her flowers but couldn't. Flowers, for me. The tears started again.

***

The two girls were young, immaculate, almost unreal. Anna Nikolayevna Zharkova and Natalia Vladimirovna Yegorova were the most expensive luxury items their husbands had acquired to mark their status and success. They ate only tiny morsels from the buffet and drank like little birds trying not to ruin their lip gloss. They were bored.

“Love your dresses,” Chris said.

“Givenchy.” Anna's eyes didn't really see Chris, seemed to look through her. “We went to Paris, saw the collection and couldn't resist. So we bought a dozen.”

Natalia smiled, showing her perfect teeth. “You've got such a lovely... little place. And it's such a nice party. Any more people to come?”

Chris swallowed a big gulp from her glass of Champagne. She had no idea how she could live through this without getting insane and had decided to try booze. “Hope not,” she muttered.

“Before we left Paris we had a farewell party. Three hundred people or so,” Anna said.

Chris tried hard but just couldn't look away from Anna's cleavage. Although mother nature handed out breasts of stunning beauty Chris was sure that Anna's hadn't come free but were the products of South American cosmetic surgery.

Natalia sighed. “Hope they make their deal tonight. I'm dying to get away from here. The weather's disgusting.”

“We'll go to Barbados,” Anna said.
“Mikhail has a villa on the island,” Natalia explained.

“And a yacht,” Anna added.

“Say...” Chris was suddenly curious. “Your guys’re real multi multi billionaires?”

Anna shrugged. “Guess so...”

Natalia laughed. “They don’t show us the books, you know. But who cares as long as there’s money to spend and things to enjoy, right?”

“Where did you meet your husband?” Anna took another glass of stuff much stronger than Champagne from the buffet. Apparently she had made the same decision as Chris.

“At a party,” Chris said.

“You were a pro athlete, they say.”

“Soccer,” Chris said.

“I had a girlfriend who played.” Anna downed most of what was in the glass. “CSKA Moskva.”

Natalia was checking the internet “Look at this!!” She held up her phone. “You’re really cute!”

Anna stared at the nude glam shots of Chris. “You modeled?”

“Not really...” Chris waved to a guy from the catering service and pointed to her empty glass. She definitely needed much more Champagne if she was expected to discuss her life with those two.

“We did, after we quit sports,” Natalia said, flicking through the slideshow.

“What sports?”

“Gymnastics,” Anna said, looking over Natalia’s shoulder, still fascinated.

The catering guy had ignored Chris. He was busy hovering around Zharkov and Yegorov, filling their glasses whenever they were empty, probably expecting a fat tip from the Russian businessmen. Chris’ temper was now on the evil side. “You any good?”

“Sure!” Anna was annoyed. “Trained at Ozero Krugloye!”

“So why did you quit?”

“I was injured,” Anna said. “Besides I felt I should do something else with my life.”

“Come on...” Natalia giggled. “You were close to sixteen and with all your broken bones your performance slumped. They didn’t let you start any longer.”

“And you couldn’t swallow the candy,” Anna hissed staring back. “So the coach found somebody else.”

“Candy?” Chris looked from Natalia to Anna.

“Steroids, diuretics... the whole bag of sweets,” Anna still stared at Natalia. “Wasn’t her thing. She got sick all the time, almost had a heart attack.”

“And she did soft porn after they kicked her out.” Natalia didn’t even blink while she gazed at Anna.
Perhaps she thought if she stared long enough Anna would drop dead.

“Listen to this cunt. Who knows what you did?”

Natalia held up her phone. “Look – she's all over the internet, showing her pierced clit.”

Chris was impressed. “That you?”

“You bitch!” Anna snarled. “Put that away!” She tried to grab the phone but Natalia held it high over her head.

Chris looked at the two girls, simply stunned. She had nothing in common with them, she lacked 'smooth', she lacked 'gloss', she wasn't sweet, and 'soft porn actress' was not her idea of beauty. But suddenly she felt as if she was looking into a mirror, at her own image, distorted, but the difference was only small: she was a trophy, too, an item, a thing, the property of a rich man. But the worst thing was that, without thinking twice, Anna and Natalia had immediately seen what she was, had taken her for the same type of woman they were, and it made her cringe. She suddenly felt like getting sick.

“Excuse me for moment, guys,” Chris muttered although nobody was listening because Natalia and Anna had started to shout at each other in Russian while Zharkov and Yegorov hurried to prevent real damage. Chris turned and picked her way through the crowd. “Excuse me...” She smiled at people. “May I … thanks.”

“Chris?” She heard the voice of her husband. “Christen!” She walked faster. “Excuse me...”. She slipped through the kitchen door, sidestepping a girl from the catering service who carried a huge a tray. She stopped at the table where a guy prepared the drinks. He looked at her and she could see that he asked himself what the hell this wife of somebody with too much money was doing here. She smiled, pointed at a magnum bottle of champagne. He reached for a glass but Chris shook her head. He raised an eyebrow. “The bottle?” He was good-looking, cute and nice. “That's a lot to drink.” He grinned. “May I help to get rid of the stuff?” Chris smiled, blew him a kiss. Then she walked through the backdoor. “Hey!” the guy shouted. “It's raining. You'll ruin your dress!”

Chris didn't listen. She walked towards the parking lot, enjoying the rain on her skin, the wind playing with her hair. She kicked off her heels, picked them up, felt the wet ground under her feet and just loved it. She opened the door of her Porsche Cayenne and climbed into the car. She put the bottle on the passenger seat, started the car and switched on the navigator.

“Christen!” She looked up, saw her husband coming out of the lodge. He raised a hand, ordering her back.

She stepped on it and dirt and gravel exploded left and right when the car shot forward, fishtailed on the wet, narrow driveway then sped away from the lodge, as fast as possible.

***

Tobin was on her way to the bathroom. She passed by the living-room door which stood ajar.

Alina and Agnetha sat on the floor, Alina talking while she played with a strand of Agnetha's hair, her voice hushed. Agnetha's eyes were glued to Alina's face, her lips slightly parted, she was breathing faster, the color of her cheeks was a well known hue called 'Enchanted'.
Tobin rolled her eyes. What was Alina telling the bitch? Probably the story 'Alone with Hundreds of Sex Starved Women. My Prison Camp Years.' She shook her head. This was no longer a chat up, they were way beyond that stage. The moment Alina stopped talking Agnetha would simply fall on her back and... How the fuck did she do it, this... trucker? What did she have Tobin hadn't? A criminal record? A wagonload of muscles? A ton of ink spread over her body and a low, fascinating voice? And that was enough to pull a chick like Agnetha? Well.. it was, obviously.

Tobin walked on, steadying herself against the corridor wall. She thought of Chris.

***

Ash stopped the car. It was getting dark and the streetlights began to glow.

Ali looked at the buildings. “Where are we?”

Ash turned to her. “I didn't mean to move out just like that, no message, not a word. But everything took place in hurry and there was simply no time to...”

Ali looked again, left and right. “You mean... this is where you've got the new flat?”

Ash cleared her throat. “I'd love you come see the new apartment. But if you don't want to... Just say so and I bring you right back to your place...”

Ali laughed. “You silly girl!” She tugged at her ponytail. “Where is it?”

Ash pointed to a building across the road. “Over there. Top floor.”

“With a view?”

Ash nodded. “With a view.”

Ali opened the door. “What are you waiting for? Show me!”

***

One side of the living room was a window with two huge sliding doors which led to the balcony. She watched the raindrops hit the glass, listened to the sound of wind and rain. She looked at the roofs of the city, glistening in the downpour, and in the distance she saw the the harbor lights. She turned. Ash sat on a cushion on the floor, the table in front of her was a tray on top of a moving box full of books. She poured some more wine into Ali's glass as if this would lure her back to the center of the large, empty living room, where a bottle of white Burgundy, two glasses and a candle made a tiny island of comfort in the growing darkness.

There was another large cushion for Ali but she was glad there was some distance between her and Ash – she simply didn't trust herself: a word, a touch and she would just fall into Ash's arms...

“It's large. Large enough for a whole family. It must cost a fortune.”

“It does,” Ash said. The candlelight made her hair shine like gold and Ali took a deep breath, then she walked over and sat on the cushion. She removed her heels, crossed her legs and took the glass,
just to hold on to something.

“So...” she sipped from the glass. “No longer riding a motorbike?”

Ash smiled. She pointed to the window. “In this weather? It's in the underground parking. Besides... You don't like to ride on a bike. So I rented the car.” Ali knew she should be angry with Ash, angry about her interfering again with her job, again telling her what to do and what not, as if she was a little girl, too stupid to take care of herself. But she couldn't. The truth was that there weren't many people who cared for her, for her safety, for her comfort.

Ash toyed with the glass. “I'd love you to help me... you know, I'm not so good at buying the nice things, and the kitchen stuff...” I'd love you to stay here, with me, was what she wanted to say, so this would become more than just another place where I sleep and eat.

“You're tired,” Ali said. She leaned forward and touched Ash's cheek, then brushed away a strand of hair which had escaped from the braids.

“Sorry,” Ash muttered. “Was up all night. One of the starboard power lines... we tried to find what's wrong but couldn't. I'm fine...” She slipped from the cushion, and, suddenly close to Ali, took her hand. “I can't pretend you don't exist. To know that you and I are in the same city and I can't see you... that you're here and I can't be with you, should never touch you again...” She was searching for words. “Things between us went terribly wrong. What I mean is...”

“No,” Ali said. “They went right, like in a dream. But I can't dream. I need a future for my kids and my family. And I don't want to dream because I wouldn't be able to stand waking up and find myself alone again.”

“It won't happen!” Ash held on to her hand. “There is a way... must be!”

Ali suddenly smiled. “You still have my troyer?”

“Sorry...” Ash blushed. “I didn't mean to keep it. I'll get it.”

“I want you to keep it,” she said. Don't forget me, was what she wanted to say. Even when this is not meant to be - don't forget me...

“Let's do it!” Ash suddenly said. She held on to Ali's hand almost desperately. “Let's take the yacht to Barbados. Come with me.”

A gust of wind hit the windows, the sound of the rain suddenly loud in the empty room.

Then the screen of Ali's phone lit up with a buzz and Ali's heart was throbbing and she realized how close she had been to saying 'okay'. She grabbed the phone, opened the mail. 'Meeting tomorrow, 5 pm. Bring project folders + all the numbers + put on your killer heels: Torgunn + her guys want to hear more. What about job offer? Say yes! I'll take care of everything else. Trust me – you'll love it. PS: Don't forget swimsuit – if you think you need one. Katja.'


Ali handed her the phone. Ash took it reluctantly, as if the message would bite or give her a nasty infection. She read the message, gave the phone back. She felt her anger rise. Katja, the bitch! “I think you better go without swimsuit.” There was ice in her voice. “I'm sure she'll love it...”

Ali put the phone back into her bag, not longer looking at Ash. “She works out every day,” she said. “At her friends' place. Private pool. Invited me to come... Nothing wrong about it.”
Ash bit her lip. Nothing wrong? She thought. Everything is wrong! It was like fingernails scraping on a blackboard, but Ali apparently couldn't feel it. She cleared her throat. “I'm sure the job is good. You'll be in the middle of things, right where you belong, business and politics and technology. You'll earn a lot of money. Good for you, good for your kids. Take it. And enjoy the swim.”

Suddenly Ali was angry. Why was Ash acting like a bitch? And then she was angry about herself: Why did she suddenly feel guilty? About what?

“You mean without swimsuit, right?” she snapped. “You mean that's what I should do to get a good job? Do you really think I need to...” Ali sucked in her breath when Ash suddenly grabbed her wrist. She wanted to pull away but Ash's fingers closed even tighter. She stared into Ash's eyes which were dark and dangerous, she struggled to get free and it began to hurt but she still fought against Ash which only made it hurt more and Ash pulled her closer and suddenly their lips met, almost violently, as if two cats were going at each other, teeth searching for soft flesh, searching for something to bury into.

Ali instinctively grabbed Ash's ponytail when she felt Ash's fingers dig into her mane, then their lips parted, their tongues met, pushing, probing, deeper and deeper while Ash's hand slipped into her blouse and Ali remembered their first lovemaking, the climax, ripping through her body as if tearing her apart, and she knew that it needed only one more touch to turn her into a panting, helpless bundle...

She began to struggle, then slipped from Ash's embrace, trying to calm down. No, she thought. She didn't want it, that single explosion of lust which would leave her exhausted, then sad. But how could she ever explain to Ash that she was longing for something else, for more than just that. How could she make her understand what she really needed, and needed so much - but for what she had no words.

She brushed back her tousled hair, adjusted the left strap of her bra, tried to smooth her disheveled blouse.

Then she grabbed her briefcase and opened it. And without a word she handed the photography to Ash.

Ash took it, confused, out of breath, her heart racing, her nipples hard, pushing against her shirt. She looked at it.

“What the fuck...” her eyes narrowed.

“Found it in a drawer. Thought you might want it back. Probably missed it already...”

Ash looked at it, at herself and the red haired woman, so gorgeous, so greedy, a picture taken after making love.

Ash took a deep breath. Her body was aching. “She's Stella Carson,” she said. “Lawyer from New York City...” Her fingers suddenly trembled. “This was taken exactly a week before I found her in bed with her piece-of-shit ex husband, making love as if she needed it so badly like the air to breathe, only a week after she had told me that she never wanted to see him again.”

Ali carefully closed the top buttons of her blouse, one by one, so she didn't have to look at Ash. “You don't have to tell me...” What the fuck are you doing? She shouted at herself. Why couldn't you leave that picture alone, Why couldn't you just forget it??

“It's over...” Ash said, her voice betraying her pain. She started to rip the picture to pieces.
“Don’t...” Ali suddenly leaned forward, touched her hand to stop her. “Don't. She meant a lot to you, right? You were in love - so don't do this. Do not remember what was bad. Keep it – to remember when you were happy.”

Ash swallowed hard. “You sound as if you're on her side... She's just a piece-of-shit cheat...”

Ali came even closer. “So you think a cheat deserves to be alone and miserable, deserves all the hate she gets, all the bad things that happen to her?”

Ash didn't answer, her lips only a thin line.

“Well - I am a cheat,” Ali said. “My jaw was broken, a rib cracked and my life ruined. So that's what I deserve, right?”

“What??” Ash dropped the picture, stared in disbelief.

“I was young when I married,” Ali said. “Thought this was how to do the right thing: date guys, make out even if you don't like it, marry because all your friends do it and tell you that it's important, a home, a husband. Have a child, be a good mother and try to be happy and think maybe things will get better, will feel better, and if things get worse maybe you haven't tried hard enough.”

Ash had forgotten her anger. She only saw Ali eyes, saw the pain that seemed to surface, blanking out everything else.

“This... woman moved into the neighborhood,” Ali's voice was no more than a whisper. “We met and...” She paused. “She showed me that I was different and that what was right for others wasn't right for me. She showed me what I needed.”

“You were...?”

Ali nodded. “Lovers. For over a year... until...”

Ash went pale.

“My husband... He was so mad. I was pregnant with the little boy but he hit me, he hit me like he would hit an enemy, as if he was fighting for his life. And he did, right? I took away everything from him. I can't really blame him...”

Ash couldn't believe what she heard. “You really think it was your fault...?”

Ali wasn't listening. She smiled, sadly, and it broke Ash's heart. “I ruined the life of my husband, of my kids and my own,” she said. “I'm a cheat. I cheated my husband, my lover, my kids, my family. I lied, to them and to myself – thinking that this would go on and somehow come to a happy end. I swore to never again believe in impossible things.”

“Are you crazy??” Ash grabbed her shoulders, about to shake her as if this could make Ali wake up, make her see how wrong she was, how insane it was to find an excuse for this dirty bastard which Ash would've killed without a second thought...

Suddenly she realized what she was doing. She saw it in Ali's eyes, saw the fear, saw how much Ali was afraid – afraid of her, scared by her strength, by her aggressive power, and suddenly she was ashamed, so much that she found it hard to breathe and she asked herself how often she had scared Ali instead of giving her what she needed and that was tenderness and love and suddenly she knew what was the right thing, the only thing, to do. She took Ali in her arms and held her and felt her body tremble and Ali clung to her as if she was drowning.
“I need a future for my kids, for my family,” Ali whispered. “Not a love affair which will turn my life upside down and myself inside out...”

“We'll work something out!” Ash's voice betrayed how desperate she was. “We'll find a way, trust me!” And she no longer looked like a captain, like the one in command, tough, too tough - but she was a girl again, a girl holding on to a dream. And it was exactly this girl Ali loved so much, the girl who longed for an impossible love, who wanted to go with her to the magic islands where they would live happily ever after under a tropical sun. And whatever willpower she still had was simply washed away when Ash took her hand, kissed her fingers, her wrists and said “Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry...”

Ali knew she was lost when their lips touched and Ali closed her eyes to better feel the curve of soft flesh, trembling with desire but not wanting to rush it, not wanting to spoil the very first moment of giving and taking, Ash so close, so sweet and open, unguarded, even vulnerable, her lips melting on hers, warm, and soft...

She just couldn't stop kissing Ash, and kissing she pushed Ash's shirt up, and it was Ash who let go of her lips, pulled the shirt over her head, dropped it to the floor, then Ali's mouth was back, her teeth pinching Ash's lower lip while she unzipped Ash's jeans and yanked them down and Ash kicked them and her pantie away and then she opened Ali's blouse, feeling the blood pulse when she touched her throat, the heartbeat when she touched the place between her breasts, the ripple of muscles when she touched the curve of her belly, warm and smooth, her fingers trembling when she opened the last button and Ali shrugged the blouse off as if shedding an old skin while she took Ash's mouth, greedily, as if relishing an exotic fruit, her tongue parting Ash's lips, and she unclasped her bra, slipped the straps over her shoulders, impatient to feel hot, naked skin on hot, naked skin, her nipples hard as if reaching out to Ash, desire flooding her body like a hot wave and sweat made Ali's skin shine in the candlelight. Her heart was hammering, blood was rushing to the place between her thighs, and she let go of Ash's mouth, gasping for air, as if making a final effort not to fall into the bottomless void that had opened before her.

“Don't be afraid,” Ash whispered while her fingertips traveled along Ali's spine, then dug into the hard, bulging muscles of her butt. Slowly she pulled away the black string, a tiny triangle of lace, so tiny that it barely covered Ali's sex, pulled it away and down her legs, caressing the inside of her thighs, kissing her knees, her ankles...

Ali was no longer in control, her body responding to what Ali did, making her moan and stretch when Ash's hands traveled back, briefly touched her mound, then slid along her belly, and Ali stretched even further, offering her breasts, the tender white flesh of her armpits, and Ash grabbed the thick wave of Ali's hair, and pulled back her head and she looked into Ali's eyes while the tip of her finger circled Ali's hard nipples, making them even harder and Ali felt the blood throb and the folds of her sex swell and open.

She took Ash's hand and guided it to the fleshy hood which enveloped her clit, arched when Ash touched her, touched and found the slippery bud. She held on to Ash almost desperately, loosing herself in Ash's eyes. Then their lips met again, tongues sliding along each other like sea animals making love, long and slow, in the warm, wet bed of their mouths while Ash's finger was on her swollen, hot folds, then again on her clit, touching, circling, leading Ali towards the point beyond delight, beyond ecstasy, towards the sweet agony which would blank out everything. She threw back her head, groaned, her nerves vibrating like a violin string.

Ash held her close, cradling her head. With the tip of her tongue she touched Ali's left nipple, the point, touched it softly, delighted how hard it was, played with it while she made love to Ali's wet, tender opening.
Suddenly Ali touched Ash, touched her sex, her finger slipping between the wet folds, picking up a drop from the soft, quivering petals of her inner lips, and, still looking at Ash, she slowly licked the juice from her fingertip.

“Now let me...” Ash’s voice was a hoarse, breathless whisper. She touched Ali, with one finger, then with two. “There’s so much of it...” She licked her fingertips, one by one, then her fingers came back for more.

Ali gasped when suddenly, deep down in her body, a hot sun started to burn. She stared at the sweet, golden haired girl and she knew that Ash was in the same place where she was, the place where nobody could go alone but only together with somebody special, unique, and Ali felt the hot sun grow and everything seemed to swell, her nipples standing, still growing, her breasts taut, quivering with the beats of her hammering heart, her body wet, reflecting the candlelight like metal...

“Come,” Ali whispered and her hand was between Ash's legs where the juice began to drip, and she caressed the wet, silvery skin, and Ash threw back her head, panting, when Ali gently spread the smooth passage which led into the hot, coral colored depth of Ash’s body and she felt the flesh ripple, then contract and Ash's orgasm was so violent that it simply took Ali along and the hot sun in Ali’s body finally turned into a white flame and she held on to the golden haired girl while the first climax ripped through her body, then the next...

***

Agnetha was walking along the corridor. She was naked and so beautiful that it simply took Tobin's breath away. Something made Agnetha turn and she saw Tobin. She covered her breasts and dashed into the bathroom and locked the door, and even her quivering butt seemed flushed with embarrassment.

Tobin smiled. She walked into the kitchen and drank a glass of water. Suddenly somebody hugged her from behind.

“You feeling better?” Alina asked. She was naked, too, and it was warm and cozy in her arms.

Tobin put down the glass. “You did her on the sofa or on the carpet?”

“What are you talking about?” Alina whispered in her ear.

Tobin grinned. “Maybe I'm ill,” she whispered back. “But there's nothing wrong with my ears.”

“Didn't make a sound!”

“I'm not talking about you,” Tobin said.

“Did I make her wake you up? Sorry...” Alina gently kissed Tobin's neck.

Tobin shook her head. “Couldn't sleep anyway.”

“Thinking about her? This... Chris?”

Tobin shrugged. “I'm just.. worried. I wonder if she's okay...”

“I bet she's fine,” Alina said. “Sits with a big smile in her luxury lodge and enjoys all the nice things
money can buy.” She ruffled Tobin's hair. “And now back to bed. You need to sleep to get well.”

***

Ash opened her eyes. It was early morning and she squinted when suddenly the light of the rising sun seemed to bleed through gashes in the heavy gray clouds. The bed was just a mattress on the floor but her sleep had been deep and undisturbed because Ali was with her, so close that she had felt the warmth of her body even in her dreams.

Ali stood in front of the window, outlined against the light, wearing Ash's navy sweater, naked underneath.

Ash knew what she was thinking, knew it because she was thinking the same, all the time: that in a few hours life would go on.

“Come back,” she said. She pulled away the blanket and opened her arms and Ali came back to her and they held each other as if this could stop the clock and they would never have to part.

****

Tobin walked along the corridor, from room to room, then into the kitchen, still a bit shaky but feeling much better. The early morning light made things appear as if under water, colorless, somehow blurred.

Everything was cleaned up, no trace left, the place was silent, she was alone. It could've been a dream if not for Mikki's flowers sitting on the kitchen table and a faint trace of Agnetha's perfume still in the air.

There was a note on the kitchen table. A heart, a bit shaky, by Agnetha. And in bold capital letters Alina's farewell: “Forget her.” Plus a PS “Take better care of yourself.”

Tobin sat on a chair, toying with the piece of paper. Forget her? How could she. Be like Alina? Never fall in love? Just take what's on offer and good bye? No, she thought.

She got up and walked to the bathroom. In front of the mirror she looked at her face, then she stripped and looked at her body: Mikki had been right, she looked like shit, thin, worn out, the dark spots of the bruises fading but still visible, the bandage on her hand with traces of blood.

So that's what I got in return for falling in love, she thought. For trying too hard to make a fairy tale come true. Perhaps it was time to let go, she thought.

She turned on the hot water.

***
Tobin was wrapped up in a towel, hair still warm from the hairdryer. She walked to the kitchen, suddenly hungry. She opened the fridge. Pizza? Pasta? A beer??

The door buzzer made Tobin start. Alina. Probably forgot her phone with all the numbers of the girls she was shagging. She walked to the door while the buzzer went off again. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Tobin unlocked the door and opened it.

She stared at Chris, at the magnum bottle of champagne she cradled in her arms.

Chris stared back, at Tobin's pale, drawn face, her tired eyes, at the freshly bandaged hand.

“What happened?” she whispered.

Tobin's heart was racing and she had to steady herself against the door frame. “You were gone...” she said.

***
Chapter 14

Chris was wet, her dress crumpled, her hair a mess. She held on to a huge bottle of champagne. “You letting me in?”

Tobin didn’t move. “You never answered my calls!” She almost choked on the words. “No message, just silence!” She stopped, her voice failing her. “You just dumped me. As if I were... shit!”

“I'm here”, Chris said. “At your front door - in case you haven't noticed.”

“Maybe you like to turn people on? Me - and your husband??” Tobin wanted to stop but couldn’t. “Did you tell him about us? Just for kicks? You’re aware that those little games can ruin my career?”

Chris pushed Tobin aside, walked into the flat, turned and stared straight into Tobin's eyes. “Your career? Fuck your career! Maybe YOU just want to go to bed with me, so you can tell all those... Lias and Tias and the others of your... kind that you're such a super dyke that you can make the wife of your boss spread for you??”

“Why are you here?” Tobin was pale, trembling with anger. “To tell me to get off your back? That you two decided to start all over again, turn a new leaf, have kids, two, probably, so you can have a meaningful life?? Plus a status boost, from trophy to upper class mom??”

„You little pathetic ...“ Chris searched for words which matched her disgust. „,... pilot! So that's what's bothering your fucked up brain. It's all about 'Chris needs dick'! Thank you! Thank you very much!” She was shaking with rage. „If dick is so important to you... say – why don’t you call your buddies at Airbus? They can fix anything, you don’t get tired of telling me. I’m sure they can fix this dick problem between your legs for you as well!“

She blocked Tobin’s arm only a second before the hand was in her face.

„Don't you dare to hit me, Heath! You no-tits miserable piece of shit.“ She held the bottle in her right hand, by the neck, raised like a weapon. “I'm gonna break this right on your stupid head!”

Tobin was shaking. „Oh my g...“, she whispered, realizing what had almost happened. „I’m so sorry ... I’m ...“ She choked.

Chris came closer, grabbed Tobin's oversize T-shirt. „I tell you what I'm gonna do: I apologize. I have a big mouth, and I said things I shouldn’t have said. But if you ever try to hit me again, I'm gonna take something heavy and split your skull and piss on your brain.“ Chris still clutched the shirt, and she was so close that Tobin could see the tiny flakes in her irises, glittering like metal. „I drove all night“, Chris said. „And I feel like I've been dead for a thousand years. And calling on you I get nothing but abuse. You know what I want? Desperately? So much that I'm prepared to kill for it?” her voice was a whisper now. „I tell you: I want a shower!” She let go of Tobin's shirt. „My Gawd – you have no idea how much I need a shower...“ She gave Tobin the bottle. „Put it in the fridge. When I'm back from your bathroom a want a glass of this – cold.”

***

Chris turned off the water. She opened the glass door and grabbed the towel. This was the second
time she was in here, and it was already familiar, already like a home of some kind. She hadn't slept but she felt good, and it was because of this place and because... yes, because Tobin was here, and it was her place, and it was her shampoo and her body wash and her towel, a big towel, big and comfortable. She buried her face in it, as if she could find a trace of Tobin in there, the fragrance of her skin, of her hair. The only thing she got was the sterile smell of tumble dried cotton.

She laughed at herself, a little embarrassed, and stepped out of the shower. Cold air touched her skin. The bathroom door wasn't closed, and she remembered that she had left it open, only a little, just enough not to be alone, to somehow feel that there was somebody with her, to let Tobin know that she was not afraid of her. She shivered. Better close the door, she thought, but she didn't. She just stood, as if waiting for something to happen. She wiped away the steam from the mirror to look at herself, and suddenly her heart was beating so strong that it seemed to pulse in her throat, and heat surged through her body and into her face...

Tobin stood behind her and their eyes met in the mirror and Chris clutched the towel, covering her breasts, her sex, holding on to it, and she closed her eyes, as if this would make Tobin go away. She felt Tobin's hands on her shoulders, Tobin's lips on her neck.

Don't, she wanted to say. This is not what I meant, this not how I want it, this not what I dreamed about. I dreamed about a beautiful voyage, she wanted to say, not about something happening in a bathroom, and she held on to the towel, held on almost desperately when Tobin pulled stronger, and suddenly she inhaled with a sob because she had stopped to breathe – and she let go and the towel dropped to floor.

Tobin ran her hands along Chris' flanks, her hips and back again, over her rib cage and along the steep curve of her breasts, nipples suddenly hard against her palms, bit her neck and let her hands travel along the soft curve of Chris' belly and felt the blood pulse under the skin.

Chris moaned, couldn't believe what happened to her, couldn't believe the brutal lust which was suddenly driving her towards the edge, like a raging thirst, a merciless hunger. She struggled, like in a nightmare, wanted to get away from what was about to happen but couldn't, too weak, too heavy, as if sinking into a bog of desire, and her body was no longer under her control but a helpless bundle of flesh and nerves, and suddenly she just wanted to let go.

What happened was nothing she had expected or experienced before. What happened was like a sheer, sudden drop, a fall from a great height, a fast, terrible, insane rush towards a blinding explosion.

Tobin held Chris in her arms while she was hit again and again by the fierce, furious force of her orgasm, held her until her body relaxed.

Chris opened her eyes, blinked, as if surprised, like a girl who had lost her way and now found herself at a strange place. She moved away from Tobin, crouched against the wall.

And suddenly Tobin was embarrassed. “I didn't...” Tobin could only whisper. “I didn't mean to...” She had wanted to make love to Chris, gently, tenderly, not just take her and unleash this dripping hot insanity.

Chris was silent. She couldn't talk because she didn't find words to match what was happening inside her. She trembled with shame, ashamed of her groans, her sobs, the happy madness that had swept her away. She couldn't look at Tobin because what she saw was no longer the boyish, dirty minded girl she had known but a strange, demanding lover who seemed to know the most secret places of her body, places she hadn't known herself, now unveiled, unfolded, uncovered, opened, spread and touched.
Suddenly she was furious. How could Tobin dare to turn her into a panting bitch, into a senseless, burning bundle of desire, reduce her to nothing but hot meat, nothing but a convulsing body. How could she, without her permission, without asking her, rip down every bit of self control and pride, open her, invade her, and make her burn, drip, moan,groan, shriek and pant, make her want to be played with and...

She grabbed the towel and covered herself. She couldn't stand to feel Tobin's eyes on her, the memory of her helpless agony.

“I didn't mean to... harm you.” Tobin's voice failed.

Chris suddenly felt exhausted, cold, empty. The fury, the shame were gone but she was still unable to tell Tobin about her dream, a dream born in the early morning light, when she had watched Tobin, who was asleep, unaware of her, the dream of softly, slowly exploring Tobin's body, inhale the scent, feel the warmth, take in and savor the tiniest detail, stopping here and there, adore, admire...

“I better go now”, she said. She got up from the floor.

Don't go away, Tobin wanted to say. But she didn't. She rested her head against the glass door of the shower and closed her eyes while Chris walked from the room.

***

Ali paced the office listening to her phone. She was calling back her mother, and she was close to a nervous breakdown because of her mother's message.

She stopped at the glass front which gave a view of the city, the harbor and the clouds. With clouds people usually associated white, fluffy things, sailing high I the blue sky – these were a solid, looming mass which seemed to lie heavy on the city, and although it was close to lunchtime the daylight was gray. It had started to rain an hour ago.

Come on, she thought. Get the call for Chrissake!

“Ma??” Her voice betrayed her panic. “Ma? I got your message... What's wrong with her??”

“Don't worry”, her mother said. “She'll be alright. She'll sleep and tomorrow she'll feel better...”

“Why didn't you call me yesterday? WHY THE HELL DIDN'T YOU...” Ali was barely able to control her voice. “You waited until today. Why?”

“Don't you why-the-hell me, Miss!” Her mother's voice was cold. “There's no need to give me that language. It's not my fault you're hundreds of miles from your home and your family.”

Ali took a deep breath. “I'm sorry”, she said - and she said it because she knew it was what her mother wanted to hear.

“It's nothing serious”, her mother said. “It's just the excitement, you know. Kindergarten is for a little girl like a voyage on the Amazon for us. We didn't want to bother you because we know that you're always busy and have other things on your mind than...”

“That's not true! You have no idea how it feels to be either worried to death or sick with missing
them so much that...”

“Well, so why don't you just take two days off and be here when she goes to Kindergarten? That's all she needs. And I don't think that the world economy will go bust just because Alexandra Krieger is not available for two days... Okay. Your Dad wants to say hello.”

“Hey, kid. You okay?”

“I'm okay, Dad. It's just...”

“Go on with your job. Saskia's asleep right now and tomorrow everything will be fine. We all love you, kid.”

“Love you too...” The line went dead and she put the phone away.

There was a knock on the door and Katja Olsson came in.

“Got everything you need? Office okay? Sylvia Jensen's on maternal leave so you can use it as long as you want. If there's anything you want – let Karen Stroer know. She'll take care of it.” She frowned, suddenly aware of Ali's pale face. “What's wrong?” She closed the door and came to Ali.

Ali managed a smile. “I'm alright. It's just... my little girl, she's ill. Going to Kindergarten is just too much for her little mind, she's... you know.”

“Don't worry. You know what? Tomorrow we meet at my office and fix everything, the whole job package. You'll see how easy life will be for you. You sign the contract and move to Norway. Northern provides a very good Kindergarten and as an employee you'll have access to a few very good schools as well. And when you're away the company finds you a Nanny.”

“I'm sorry to bother you with this. I'm okay, really”, Ali said. She pointed at her laptop. “I finished the presentation. You want to look?”

“No, it's not necessary. I know you're doing a great job.” Katja ran a finger along Ali's cheek. “I'll just lean back and watch while you make Torgunn Haugn and her guys gawk. I know you can be stunning...”

Ali was afraid to blush and put on her glasses to hide it. “You have an idea who she'll bring to the meeting?” She walked to the desk and checked the mails in her inbox.

Katja followed and sat on the edge of the desk. She crossed her legs and dangled her heels. “Guys from the Ministry of Environment, from her party, probably.” She pushed back her black mane. “Don't be afraid of them. You're a girl with a degree, and they are unable to read a sentence longer than five words – that's the reason they are in politics.” She ran a finger over the glossy polished surface of the desktop, touched Ali's hand. “You just tell them how you want to manage the project, that's all.” She took Ali's hand. “Listen, I better tell you now. Expect stupid remarks, silly questions and little things that are intended to hurt. Just ignore it. I'll handle Torgunn and her clowns.”

Thanks very much, Ali thought. Could've warned me earlier. And holding my hand doesn't calm me down. “Sounds scary”, she said.

Katja took Ali's other hand. “The meeting's not about environmental issues or the safety of our offshore operations. It's about Torgunn's political career and about money. Truth is, they want a greater share of Northern's profits. The success of your project is our weapon to fight them back, so they want the project to fail.”
Ali had to clear her throat. “That's really scary...”

“I know and I'm sorry you have to go through this.” Katja took a strand of Ali's hair and played with it. “Don't worry. You're not alone. I'll be with you. If they try to hurt you I'll break their necks.”

Ali had never been so close to Katja Olsson. For the first time she was hit by the full power of her presence. It made her nervous.

Suddenly she heard her phone and picked it up.

Ash!

“Sorry...” She turned away from Katja, glad that the spell was broken, glad to put some distance between her and Katja Olsson.

“How's your day?” Ash's voice was distorted by the noise and din of wind, of loading and maintenance work, and Ali pictured Ash on board her vessel, in red overall and hard hat. “Busy”, she said, smiling, as if Ash was with her.

“Don't want to keep you”, Ash said. “Just want to remind you: 6 PM, my flat. Okay?”

“I promise”, Ali said.

***

Tobin was waiting in line with all the other guys and girls. The coffee shop was full of people because it was lunch break, and everybody only wanted to grab a coffee and a sandwich and get going. Tobin was shivering despite the thick sweatshirt, the beanie and the hood. She hugged herself, hunched her shoulders, but the cold wouldn't go away, she couldn't stop shivering, and she couldn't stop thinking about what had happened: what should have been a dream coming true had turned into... what?

She had found the bathroom door slightly open, like an invitation, and she had been standing in front of it, listening to sound of the water, listening to her heartbeat...

What had made her open the door? She couldn't remember. She only remembered suddenly standing behind Chris, touching her, feeling her body tremble, Chris holding on to the towel almost desperately, and she had pulled stronger, her lips on Chris neck, tasting the tiny drops on her skin, kissing Chris' throat, hearing Chris groan, the taste of water and sweat flooding her senses.

And she remembered holding Chris in her arms, Chris not happy but confused, thrown off balance, wounded, scared...

Tobin was pushed forward by the guy behind her who was pushed by the others behind him, and the girl behind the counter was staring at her, waiting for her order.

“Sorry”, Tobin muttered, blushing. “Americano. Big, please.” She pointed at the sandwiches. “And two of these.”

She payed, digging the money from the hoodie's pocket, waited again for her coffee, glad when it arrived and she could get out of the shop and into the street. She almost collided with a guy who was
trying to catch a bus, and it was as if she had to swim against the tide when she walked back to her flat, people brushing past her, carrying shopping bags, women pushing strollers, people talking to each other, people living in her neighborhood but who she had never met before, and suddenly she was aware that she was nothing but a stranger here.

She turned right and into the small street in which she lived, and the rain started and began to soak her hoodie, and she hunched her shoulders even more, as if this would give the rain a smaller target.

“Hey!”

Tobin stopped when she heard the voice, turned. The car was parked at the other side of the road, and the girl in driver seat had lowered the window and waved to her.

The girl was gorgeous. Her jet-black hair shone like metal and the smile made two deep dimples into her cheeks, and the tiny dots and dashes of her Inuit clan tattoos only heightened the exotic beauty of her face.

Tobin looked, blinked, looked again but the high gloss magenta paint job and the whitewall tires could only mean that the car was her car. And the girl in the driver seat was...

“Lia??” It took Tobin a second to recognize Lia Alaku.

“Hey! Snoopy! Brought back your car. Come on! Get in!” Lia opened the passenger door and Tobin dashed across the road and slipped into the passenger seat. “Man - you look like shit.” Lia kissed Tobin on both cheeks. “Coffee!” She grabbed the to-go mug and ripped off the lid. “You don't mind, do you? I'm starved for coffee...” She drank, drank again. “That's better!”

Tobin pushed back the hood and took off the beanie. “How did you...? I mean...”

“Johan Svensson called me”, Lia said, sipping from the cup. “He's the guy who owns the garage where they took your car after you landed it in the ditch. He's into vintage cars and there aren't many 1978 Mustang King Cobras in this country, and he remembered that it had belonged to me. So he thought better check if everything's straight and according to the law.” She grinned. “Couldn't resist to drive it one more time, sorry.” She gave Tobin the car keys and Tobin listened to Lia talk, getting only half of what she said. “The headlight's fixed but it's not genuine Mustang. Johan's trying to get an original spare part from the States, but it'll take some time. What do you say?”

Tobin said nothing. She embraced Lia and held her close.

Lia wrapped one arm around her while she tried not to spill the coffee.

“I heard you're doing bad things”, she whispered into Tobin's ear. “Messing with the chairman's wife – you nasty girl.”

Tobin let go of her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Small town”, Lia said. “Dirty stories travel fast.”

“You mean the garbage they always talk about?”

“Don't even try to deny it”, Lia said. “Jean Alaku, cousin of mine, works at Northern Headquarters. She knows all about it.”

“You mean it traveled not only fast but also that far?”
Lia pinched Tobin's cheek. “I mean you probably need an escape route when they turn on the heat.”

“It's that bad?” Tobin leaned back and sank deeper into the seat.

Lia drank from the mug. “Listen... The company I work for, we're doing IT stuff for a client, a couple of guys who are starting a business.”

“What's that got to do with me?” Tobin muttered.

“Just hang on. Guys are father and daughter, father's the money man, daughter'll be the boss.”

“You talking about a boutique?”

Lia laughed. “I said: hang on! Oman, that's where they're from. The father's money, money, money. The Daughter - she's a bitch and her father's sweetheart. She's very good when it comes to business, a genius, but, too bad, a woman – 'cause where she comes from 'woman' means stay at home and keep your mouth shut. So they found a work-around: her old man's fronting for the business, she runs it.”

“So it'll be a very big boutique...” Tobin said.

“Heli service. Five EC135. VIP stuff. Shuttle the rich guys from their yachts to shore and back.”

“Yachts?” Tobin frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“French Mediterranean, Nice. You know? The place with the palms and the big casinos... Listen, they are looking for pilots. A dream job! Money, sunshine, beaches, high tech toys which you can fly... Are you listening?”

Tobin stared at the window and watched the raindrops hit the glass. “You mean... leave her?”

“You really thought this would have a happy ending?” Lia laughed again, coughed, spilling some coffee. “Man - you have to save your neck! And no one can blame you!”

Tobin shook her head. “This is gonna hit her, too. I can't just run away and leave her behind.”

“If you ask me: that's her problem. She knew what she was doing, right? You do what's good for you, Snoopy, and that's run for the next exit.”

“I can't.”

“Granted: she's a cute little package. You know what? Put her into your suitcase and take her to the sun.”

“And what's she supposed to do down there?”

Lia smiled. “Get a suntan... and when the sun goes down make sweet love to you.”

Tobin stared at her. “You dirty minded... Eskimo!”

Lia's dimples grew deeper, her dark eyes glittered. “Don't tell me that's not what you already had in mind.” She leaned closer to Tobin. “Say – you still sniffing her or... did you already do her?”

“Get outta my car!” Tobin pushed herself up in seat, trying to be bigger than Lia.

Lia ruffled Tobin's hair. “Boy - you're in love!” She pried into the sandwich box, took one out and
looked between the slices of bread. “What’s that? Veggie? I've no idea how you can survive on these.” She began to eat. “So, you not gonna give me details of your love life? Pity…” Still chewing she swallowed the last gulp of coffee and crushed the empty mug in her fist. “Call the rich girl. Talk to her, just talk – no obligation.” She dropped the mug on the floor, picked up her bag and opened it. “Where the fuck did I put... here…” She gave Tobin a business card. “That's her number. And don't let her fool you. She'll try to make you work for nothing. Don't buy any of the crap she'll feed you. Make her bleed. They have money to burn.” She opened the door.

“I drive you to the office”, Tobin said. “I owe you.”

“Don't be silly. I take a taxi.” Lia was already half out of the car but turned around and grabbed the second sandwich. “Not bad, the stuff.” She got out, stretched, closed the door and looked into the window. “And you better go back to bed. And you should eat more.”

***

Ali walked through the door and into the conference room, a vast space dominated by the long table and the twelve chairs around it, the huge windows giving a view of the the harbor and the sea and the clouds which had become even heavier and darker and made the afternoon look like evening. She was early and the room was empty, silent, and that was what she had wanted - a few moments alone, a few moments to concentrate on the job ahead.

She walked to the end of the table where her laptop was connected to the projector. She opened her briefcase and took out the folder with additional material and she began to flick through the stack of paper just to check one more time if everything was in place, and suddenly she realized that she wasn't alone.

Ali held her breath. She couldn't help but stare.

In front of the windows and looking at the dark sky was one of the most attractive girls Ali had ever seen. Tall, slim, in a black, tailored business suit, with a wide, voluptuous mouth, with green eyes under long lashes, but also with a strong jaw and heavy cheekbones. Never before had Ali seen such a delicate balance of male and female, confusing, almost haunting. She had to look again: thick, black hair, cut into a tousled mop, combed back carelessly but the work of a top hairdresser. A men’s shirt, white under a beautiful dark jacket, the collar open, revealing the slim, beautiful neck of a ballerina, the trousers, made to perfectly fit the long legs, the shoes, two tone, wingtip Gibsons, handmade - all this radiated an aggressive, erotic tension which threw Ali off balance and for some reason made her angry.

She wasn't aware of Katja Olsson until she put her arm around Ali's shoulder. “I'd like you to meet somebody”, Katja said and led her to the glass wall. “This is Claire Foucault. She came over from Brussels. She's with the financial commission of the European Union. Claire, This is Alexandra Krieger. She heads the engineering project and will give us the all details.”

Claire Foucault slowly turned her head, briefly looked at Ali, her green eyes without expression, as if she was looking through her at somebody else, and simply turned her back to Katja and Ali because Torgunn Haugn entered the room, followed by Annika, her assistant, and three guys of the suit-and-tie variety, who seemed somehow drained of color and energy in Torgunn's presence.

Torgunn smiled, a politician's smile which didn't reach her eyes. “I see you already met. Claire's an
expert in the funding of environmental projects in the EU,” she said. “We asked her to join our meeting and advise us on how we should handle Northern's proposals. I hope you don't mind.”

Claire walked across the room to join Torgunn, ignoring Katja and Ali and Ali was suddenly furious. Bitch! She thought. Who do you think you are, you...

Katja put a hand on Ali's arm. “Isn't she gorgeous? Saw you stare at her...”, she whispered and Ali blushed. Katja grinned. “No reason to be embarrassed. Couldn't get my eyes off her, too. Wondered how she'd look in a dress.” Ali blushed even more because the same stupid thought had been crossing her mind only seconds ago. “Same effect, probably: everybody itching to pull away her panties to check what's inside, guy or girl...” Katja chuckled. “Listen, I've no idea why the Norwegians brought the EU in, and I bet gorgeous Claire's nothing but trouble. Be careful, okay?”

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Claire Foucault had a low, slightly rasping voice.

“Who'll monitor the experiment? Or do you just stick a few sensors on the rig and hope...” She spoke English with a French accent.

“I'll be out there”, Ali said

Claire smiled. “You? You want to be on the rig? Do you know what you're talking about? The Cyclone only brushed the British Isles and did a lot of damage. But what's gonna hit you out there will be the center of it, force twelve and beyond – have you ever been in a gale like this?”

“No, I haven't. But what are you trying to tell me?” That I'm a silly girl? Ali thought. Who thinks she can handle a tough job but should better leave it to...

Claire played with her pen. “You better let the crew handle this experiment.”

“Most of the crew was evacuated yesterday”, Ali said. “The rigs of Haakon and Gyla field shut down operations.” She shrugged. “I'm doing this because there's nobody else.”

“You could've asked for experts, experienced guys, who know what they are doing. And there's still a skeleton crew on the rigs...”

“...with a lot of problems of their own. And what experts? Do you know any who are available? There are only five companies on this planet which are familiar with that sort of work, and their engineers are right now doing Tsunami research off the Japanese coast and structural analysis in connection with the Deepwater Horizon accident. Not many alternatives, right?”

“The whole setup costs a fortune, part of which is payed by the Norwegian government”, Claire said. “They certainly don't want this to fail just because you insist on doing a job in an environment where you don't have any experience. I mean...”

“You mean I don't look the part and should stay behind my desk where I belong.”

“I think you've no idea what you're getting yourself into. And yes – frankly, you don't look, as if you can play it rough.”
“Thanks for your concern”, Ali said. “I really appreciate it. Well, I'll find out soon, right? You may call me when it's over. I'll let you know what it was like.”

Claire wrote something on the paper in front of her. “How do you collect wave data?”

“I've got three CDIP buoys anchored on a submarine plateau about one nautical mile northwest of Haakon Alpha…”

“CDIP? They only measure small waves with a period less than a minute…”

“We had the CDIP's modified at San Diego. They give us speed and height and shape, and we can calculate energy and mass. They can now record periods of up to fifteen minutes. That's enough even to register a Rogue Wave.”

Claire looked at Ali, silent. “You wrote a paper on Rogue Wave prediction…”, she said after what seemed to be an eternity.

“This project is not about Rogue Waves, so I don't see what…” Ali was alarmed. What the hell was the bitch getting at?

“You know that there's no model to predict a Rogue Wave.” Claire still looked at Ali. “But you tell us that…’’

“I never…” Ali felt her palms get wet. This was no longer about the project. Claire simply tried to make her look like a silly girl with stupid ideas.

“Well, if Northern wants to pour money into the ideas of somebody who likes to speculate…” Claire said. “But you want the Norwegian government to finance a substantial part of Northern's environmental activities. I'm here to find out if the Norwegian taxpayer gets something back or just gives money away to boost the profits of some US Energy Holding.”

What's going on here? Ali looked to Katja but Katja Olsson was sitting in the back of the room, staring at her phone, scrolling through her mails.

You bitch! Ali wanted to scream. Put down you phone and help me! You promised! But Katja didn’t look up, seemed to be absorbed in her communication. And Torgunn Haugn? She seemed busy reading a printout but Ali was sure she listened to every word that was said.

Fuck you two, Ali thought. You and your games. She put on broad smile. “You didn't read my paper on Rogue Waves, right?”

“Excuse me?” Claire sat up, frowned. Ali had her attention now. Good, she thought.

“You heard what I said. You're just pretending that you did, right?”

Claire laughed, uneasy. “Alexandra, don't be silly…”

“…because if you had read the paper, you would've come across the two errors I made. And you would know that the issue is what I messed up, not whether I speculate.”

“I have no idea…” Claire's voice suddenly had a metallic quality.

Ali still smiled. “To make it simple for you: I got the math wrong, in two places, where I discuss the Fibonacci grid approach. But you don't know what I'm talking about because you didn't read the paper.”
“Alexandra...” Torgunn Haugn was no longer interested in her mailbox. “I think we can assume that Claire...”

Ali ignored her. She still looked at Claire. “Or you didn't get your mind around the math.”

Don't be too sure of yourself, little girl, Claire's eyes seemed to say. You really think you can bite back? I haven't even started. I can make you fall apart in front of everybody if I want to. I can make you cry.

Maybe, Ali's glance said. But you'll regret it. You think you can turn me into your plaything? I'll fight you every inch. I'll make you bleed.

“A couple of kids found the errors”, Ali said. “Students, Caltec, MIT. They published a paper based on my theory with the math straightened out. But you didn't read that one either, right? Or didn't understand it, whatever. If you really want to know what it's about I'll be glad to show you. And now let's get back to the project and do some serious work, okay?”

***

Claire was on the balcony, smoking a cigarette, talking on the phone, and Ali heard that she spoke German.

Will there be somebody when she comes home? Ali thought. Somebody waiting for her to come back, waiting for her to call, longing to hear her voice? No, she thought. There was no room for love in the heart of Claire Foucault, and the merciless aggression, the arrogance, only masked her loneliness.

“Don't let her scare you”, Torgunn Haugn said. “In fact she's impressed by the way you handle things.”

Ali didn't answer. She was still annoyed. All this had been so unnecessary, a waste of her time. She felt used.

“You okay?” Torgunn put her arm around Ali's shoulders.

Ali suddenly realized how exhausted she was. “My little daughter is ill and my parents just called me and...” She sat down on one of the chairs.

Torgunn sat down beside her. “Listen – I'm sorry Claire's such a bitch. I know she's a killer but she's always looking for new talents. And I thought... What I want to say is...” She hesitated. “Look, you need stability for you and your kids. What if you can get a job with the EU, with Claire? They pay the highest salaries in the business, you'll accumulate a fat pension on top of it, exquisite health care, and later your kids will have the choice of all the top schools and universities in France, Germany, Britain, with their network in the US and other countries.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Katja Olsson had been listening and now stared into Torgunn's eyes. She pointed at Claire. “And why is she here?”

Claire threw her cigarette over the railing and came through the sliding door into the conference room. “Elle est mignonne”, she said to Torgunn, smiling coldly. “Je vais la emmener a Bruxelles. I think she can play it rough. I think she even likes it.”
“Tais-toi, Cherie”, Katja Olsson said. “You really think you can come into my arena and take away what's mine?” She lowered her voice. “Casse-toi, Claire!”

Ali stood up from the chair. “I never said I want to work for...”

“Claire's department is looking for offshore experts”, Torgunn said. “I thought she should meet Alexandra.”

“So you decided to pimp my engineer? Sell her arse to this EU bitch?? Why? Let me guess... sabotage my environmental initiative?”

“Come on... don’t be silly...” Torgunn leaned back, trying to look cool and relaxed but Ali could feel her tension.

“You need Northern as the bad guy to speed up up your political career, right?” Katja Olsson pointed a finger at Torgunn like a gun. “You want to make me your stepping stone to... what? Party leadership?”

Torgunn's face was like stone. “Frankly I've no idea what you're talking about. Alexandra's a single mother and with the EU she’ll get everything she needs.”

Katja just laughed. “Brussel's a shithole. Too much politics and too many stuffed shirts. If that's all you can offer to Alexandra...”

“Stop it!!” Ali was shaking with anger. “Both of you! What do you think you're doing? That's my life you're talking about and that of my family!! That's not something you can use in your... games!!”

Katja and Torgunn stared at Ali, surprised.

Ali's phone buzzed and she grabbed it, as if it was the reason for her anger. “What??!”

There was silence on the other end. And suddenly Ali knew who was calling. “Look...” She tried to calm down. “I'm busy right now. I...”

“You wanted to be here an hour ago,” Ash said.

Ali felt the blood rush to her face. She got up from the chair and walked away from the conference table. “I'm sorry”, she said. “The meeting's still on and I don't know how long...” Again the silence, and Ali's anger came back, even stronger than before. There was no reason to sulk or make her feel guilty. “I can't just leave. It's my job and...” Did she really have to explain this to Ash? It was as if she had to defend herself!

“You'll go to this... pool party?” Now Ash sounded like 'The Captain', something Ali really hated. “What do you want me to do? Tell my boss to get lost? Just because you're...”

“Just because I'm jealous?? You want to know what I'd like you to do? Make a little room in your life, for me and you. And don't tell me that nude pool parties with your boss are an important part of your career! Or are they?”

Was Ash really shouting at her? She was and Ali barely controlled her urge to shout back. “What the fuck do you think this is? A girls-only orgy?” Ali had enough. First her Mum, giving her the usual guilt trip, then this arrogant French bitch and now Ash and her stupid possessiveness. “They all go, Katja, Torgunn Haugn, her assistant, Annika... That's how they make their deals, Katja and Torgunn, in private: saunas, restaurants, pools... And yes, I'll wear a swimsuit - if that's what bothers you!”
“What bothers me is that you just don't give us a chance. You convinced yourself that there's no place for another person in your life, that there's no future for...”

“Future? You mean like that silly dream of yours? The Caribbean fairy tale?”

“That's not fair...”

“I'm a mother of two kids, I can't live on romantic dreams.”

In the silence that followed Ali heard the blood pulse through her veins, like an echo of what had been said and couldn't be unsaid.

The line went dead.

Ali gritted her teeth. She was staring out of the window and into the fading daylight. She felt a hand on her arm.

“I'm sorry...” Katja brushed back a strand of Ali's hair from her cheek. “It wasn't fair to make you part of this.”

“It's okay”, Ali said, knowing that nothing was okay. “You're doing your job. And I'm just a bit... tired.” Tired? She thought. As if everything will be fine again after a few hours of sleep?

“I'm sorry, really”, Katja said. She looked at her watch. “Well, meeting's almost over. Did you bring your swimsuit? We'll enjoy the pool and relax, okay? Just us girls - Torgunn, Annika, me and you.” Katja's phone rang and she gazed at the display. “What the hell...” She took the call. “Angus? Angus... what's so urgent? I'm very busy right know. Angus, listen. Listen... What?? No! I'm not gonna sack one of my pilots just because you say so...” She listened. “Okay, okay, Angus... I'll come to your office and we talk, okay?” She ended the call, shook her head. “Looks like I've to see the chairman, sorry. Don't go away”, she said to Ali. “I'll be back in no time. And we'll have fun. No politics, no business - I promise.” Her eyes were warm, wide. “You were just... great”, she whispered and suddenly Ali felt her lips, gently and sweet, and Ali closed her eyes, and when she opened them again Katja was gone, but Ali still felt the kiss and did no longer know what to do.

She stood and stared at the windows. It was dark outside and the windows reflected the room like huge mirrors and suddenly she saw herself: a strange woman, her eyes dead, her face without expression, as if the life was drained from her body, as if she had been too long in the cold, thin air which seemed fill the world of Katja and Torgunn and Claire and Annika. She was shocked about her urge to hurt Ash, going for the spot where she was most vulnerable, treating her like an enemy, ripping her apart. Only a few hours with Katja and Torgunn, a cheap victory over Claire Foucault – and she was already like them, fast, vicious, eager to bite, going for the throat.

She took her phone and dialled Ash's number.

“Ashlyn Harris. I'm not available right now. Leave a number and I call you back.”

Ali bit her lip.

Without thinking she began to pack her things, collected the folders, shut down her laptop, slipped it in the bag.

She called again. Still no answer.

She grabbed her parka, bag and briefcase and began to walk, towards the door and into the corridor, walked faster, towards the elevators.
“Alexandra? Alexandra! Where are you going?” She heard Annika’s voice behind her. “Torgunn and Claire would like to talk to you about...”

Ali walked into the elevator. She pushed the ground floor button, pushed it again and again. Go, she thought. Go! The doors closed and the elevator began to move and she leaned against the wall, breathing fast, as if she was on the run. Her head was spinning, she couldn't think straight. Only one thing she knew: where to run to. And that was Ash.

***

Tobin opened the front door and stared. Katja Olsson stared back at her.

“Boss?”

“Shut up.” Katja Olsson pushed Tobin aside and barged into the flat. She walked straight into the kitchen, slammed her briefcase on the table. She opened the cabinet, took out a mug and poured herself a coffee from the espresso machine. She took a sip. “What the fuck is this? You're a senior pilot, I pay you a fortune and you can't buy yourself a decent kind of coffee??” She sat down on one of the kitchen chairs.

“Boss... ????” Tobin was confused.

“You totally off the rocker or what??” Olsson's voice sent a chill down Tobin's spine. “Chairman calls me in the middle of a conference. Tells me he wants you sacked, fired, erased. Zeroed. Not here any more. I tell him to get lost. But he goes on and on and guess what I learn: you're trying to play doctor with the chairman's wife.”

Tobin opened her mouth.

“You shut up”, Katja Olsson said. “This is not a conversation. This is a one-way thing: I talk, you listen. Got it?”

Tobin nodded. Now she was frightened.

***

Ash dropped the kitchen towel when she heard the doorbell. Her fingers trembled. Ali!

She almost ran to the door, thinking Ali, Ali, Ali, anger and frustration gone, forgotten, and she opened the front door, smiling.

The woman was smaller than Ash, with long legs and a slim body and her smooth, porcelain skin added to the impression that she was easy to break, to be handled with care.

What a joke, Ash thought. Nothing could be more wrong. The woman was a corporate lawyer with a reputation for merciless slaughter. And having sex with her had felt like wrestling with a cougar, dangerous, thrilling, exhausting.
Stella Carson took off the Borsalino trilby and the hair came down over her shoulders, red like a hot flame.

“You won't ask me in?”

Ash just turned and walked away.

Stella Carson sighed. She followed her, not bothering to close the door.

“Wow!” she looked at the table, forks and knives, glasses and plates reflecting the candlelight. “What a welcome. A cup of coffee would’ve done, sweetheart.” As always her sarcasm was finely tuned to hurt, not too much but enough to feel the sting. She followed Ash to the kitchen where Ash turned back the heat in the oven.

“Captain Ashlyn in the kitchen!” Stella Carson looked around. “You're in love, I'd say.”

Ash was silent. She walked to the living room, opened a drawer. She rummaged in a shoe box, took out a key and dangled it in front of Stella Carson's face.

Stella slowly walked to the table where she took a piece of French bread.

“You don't have to give it back”, she said.

Ash spoke as if she had to force each of the words out of her throat. “It's your apartment. It's your key. I don't need it anymore.”

Stella ate from the bread, she looked at the key, at Ash. “I like to think that as long as you have it... maybe one day you'll come back and...”

Ash put the key on the table. “And again find you riding your Ex's dick? No thanks.”

“I know I hurt you”, Stella said.

Ash couldn't keep the pain out of her voice. “Wow! Thank you! Now I feel much better!”

“Look...” Stella walked over to Ash.

“What do you want?” Ash moved away from her.

“Talk to you? Apologize? What if I want you back? And don't look at me as if I'm something crawling from the crypt!”

Ash said nothing. She crossed her arms.

Stella dropped the the piece of bread on a plate.

“I'm here to warn you. I have business at Northern's headquarter. So I thought... Listen - there's a rumor that sweet Stella – that's me - decided to get rid of a dead asset... and that her lover - that's you – sent the ship to the bottom of the ocean and got a fat share of the insurance money on top of Stella Carson's pussy.”

“That shit already hit me. Anything else?” Ash took the plate, walked to kitchen and dropped the bread into the trash can.

“Somebody told me that the parents of the dead girl are seeking legal advice”, Stella said.

“Somebody else told me that they may try to reopen the case. Plus the guys on Northern's board are
asking questions. And McLowry's really happy mainly because he sees a way to make Katja Olsson look stupid because she hired you.”

“Olsson will back me up”, Ash said while she put the plate in the diswasher.

“Don't count on it. They want her on the board of Northern's US holding, and she certainly doesn't need any dirt on her while she climbs the career ladder.”

Ash said nothing. She took a fresh plate from the cabinet and put it on the table. When she wanted to go back to the kitchen Stella blocked her way.

“I tell you something that's still a secret. She'll leave the company. British Petroleum has offered her a job, same thing she does now but on a global scale. You'll be alone.”

Ash stared at her. She bit her lip. “Did you give them the picture?”

“I know you hate me”, Stella said. “But I didn't know how much. You really think I would...?”

“Only you and me have it.”

Stella suddenly hit Ash, a hard blow against her chest. “Hey! It wasn't my fault the picture went viral and turned into evidence of an insurance scam, okay?? By the way - where's yours?”

“At a safe place.”

“You sure?”

Again Ash bit her lip, arms still crossed, still staring at Stella. “In the trash can.”

“You really hate me...”

Ash suddenly turned, grabbed the shoe box and pulled out a picture: torn to pieces, put together again with scotch tape, held it up.

Stella looked at the picture. “Gawd... We were so happy.”

Ash gritted her teeth. For a brief moment she longed so much for Stella's straight, uncomplicated desire that it hurt, longed for her childish instinct to grab, to touch, to take everything on offer, longed for her passion, longed to just do what Stella was waiting for: take her to bed, do what they had done on the day the the picture had been taken.

And as if Stella could read her thoughts her eyes said: yes, I want it, too. And her lips slightly parted, inviting Ash's kiss...

Ash put the picture back and closed the drawer, carefully, as if she never wanted to open it again.

“Did you know that... she's here?”

“The chairman's hot wife? Yeah.”

“You could've warned me.”

“I didn't know where to find you. You walked out on me and were gone. Vanished. Look – don't take her serious. She was crazy for this girl. Friend or crush or lover, I don't know. What I know is she's a nutcase!”

Ash shook her head. “No, she isn't. She's a scheming bitch full of hatred and after my head because
she thinks I killed her girlfriend.”

“It was an accident!” Stella walked to the table and sat down on a chair. “The court said so. Everyone involved knows it! People die when ships go down...”

“You have no idea what you're talking about.” Ash walked back to the kitchen. She took a glass from the cupboard, ran water from the tap until it was ice-cold, filled the glass and drank.

“You're right, I know nothing about the sea.” Stella stood up and followed Ash. She took the glass from her hand and drank, too. “I know nothing about ships, or boats, or whatever you call them. The yacht was my Ex's toy which landed in my lap after the divorce.”

“She was a beauty. She didn't deserve to die that ugly.”

Stella emptied the glass. “Insurance paid! So fuck the yacht!”

“I'm not talking about the boat. I'm talking about the girl.”

“I never liked the yacht”, Stella said. “Looked like a razor, like something you can kill with. And it did, right? Kill, I mean. The girl - it wasn't your fault.”

“I was her skipper...” Ash closed her eyes, her head suddenly ached.

Stella put a hand on Ash's back, gently massaged her shoulders. “It's a miracle you and the others survived. And it's madness to think we planned to get rid of the boat this way. Would've been a suicide mission. Those guys, the parents, the chairman's wife, they won't get far but they'll stir up enough dirt to hurt your reputation, your career. Look, I feel guilty. I'm part of this. I asked you to bring the yacht to Reunion Island, and the favor you did me turned into hell.”

Ash stared at her hands. “Everything we had turned into hell.”

“I don't want it to end like this. You mean too much to me.” Stella leaned her head against Ash's back. “Come back with me”, she said. “Friend or... whatever you want.”

Ash took a deep breath. “I can't...”

“I know”, Stella said. Then she took Ash's face in both hands and her lips met Ash's, warm, moist, hungry, as if to remind Ash of what Stella and she had shared, as if to make sure that Ash would never forget.

***

Ali took the last stairs in a hurry. She wanted to be with Ash almost desperately, she didn't know why, only that something seemed to pull her towards a this place.

The door to the flat was open. She pushed against it and walked into the apartment. The lights were on and she heard voices and she knew everything would be alright and she was smiling when she walked into living room.

She saw the candles, the glasses, the plates and she could smell that there was food in the oven. She walked into the kitchen and her smile froze.
She knew the woman from the picture, the red hair, the beautiful skin, the long legs: Stella Carson. She turned, walked out of the door, fast, was on the stairs, and she was running, and she heard Ash's voice: “Ali... don't! Ali, come back. Please, come back!”. And she ran faster, to get away from what she had seen: Stella Carson and Ash holding on to each other as if they were drowning, kissing, as if there was no tomorrow.

***

Ash stood in the middle of the street looking left and right but Ali was gone.

Somebody grabbed her shirt and pulled her back and onto sidewalk. “You wanna get hit by a car?” Stella gave her a sweater she had found on the sofa. “Put that on.”

Ash was pale. “She knows about us. She knows who you are. And she thinks I still love you.”

“You didn't tell her that you hate me?”

“I don't hate you”, Ash said.

“But you don't love me anymore, right?”

Ash didn't answer.

“Go find her”, Stella said. “Tell her. She'll understand. Don't let her run away. Don't make the same mistake I made or you'll lose her like I lost you: I should've gone after you but I didn't.”

“You think that would've undone what you did?”

Stella shook her head. “No. But it would've made a difference.”

***

Ash ran down the stairs and into the underground garage. She ripped away the cover from her bike, dropped it, kicked it into a corner. She unlocked the helmet from the front wheel and put it on. She mounted the BMW and started the engine.

She had forgotten to put on her jacket, only wore a sweater and jeans and it was raining.

Fuck the rain she thought. Fuck everything.

The front wheel came off the ground when she let the R twelve-hundred go, the back wheel screeching and burning rubber when she shot through the underground parking space towards the exit.

She had no time to lose if she wanted to save what went to pieces only a few minutes ago.
Katja Olsson's played with the coffee mug.

“I told the chairman to keep his wife away from my pilots. Why not tuck her away for a while, a nice little break to sort things out. Told him why not go to his piece-a-shit millionaires luxury lodge at this piss puddle...”

“Vagsli Lake...”, Tobin said.

“What??”

“Nothing”, Tobin said.

Confused Katja Olsson gulped down a mouthful of coffee, all her taste buds instantly protesting and she pulled a face. “He told me he already did that but it didn't work and so I say Hey, Angus, why not remove your wife to Oslo, and you go too and why not take the two Oligarchs as well...” She pushed the mug away. “So he agrees to go, wants to visit headquarters anyway, VIP flight on a Northern chopper, the chairman, his wife, the Russians and their girls. But he doesn't want you as pilot, wants me to replace you with Stig Loewsson. And I can't blame him. But I said forget it because it would look as if I agree with the chairman and I'd rather drop dead.”

Tobin wasn't really listening to what Katja Olsson said, and she wasn't no longer worried about loosing her job. She was thinking about Chris, about herself. Was she really such a stupid, careless person like Katja Olssen said she was? Thinking about nothing else than how to get the next piece of pussy? Unable to tell crush from the real thing, dream from reality, lust from love? Was she ready to let Chris into her life, to not just consume but share, the good things and the bad?

Katja Olsson leaned back, stared at Tobin. “So what's gonna happen is this: you'll take him and the Russians to Oslo and you'll be invisible.” Katja Olsson tapped a finger on the table. “You'll not talk to the chairman's wife, not even look at her. And if she wears one of her tiny dresses and shows her tits to you, you'll not even blink - or you're history!”

Tobin nodded, just to do something, while she asked herself if she would be able to fight for her dream, for a future no one wanted her to have, a future with Chris? But perhaps Chris was right, Tobin thought. Perhaps it'll never work out. And trying harder will make things only worse.

Katja Olsson shook her head. “The chairman's wife... I hope this hasn't gone beyond a certain point.” She saw the look on Tobin's face and knew the answer. She groaned. “Gawd! You try to commit suicide? If he finds out you did her you're dead meat!” She read Tobin's face like a book. “You think how the hell should he find out?” She laughed. “Cause she tells him?? Blurts it out just to annoy him?? Listen... I'm not going down with you. You're gonna crash land alone. And tomorrow you and Mikkelsen will work the transportation schedule, as if nothing had happened. You're no longer on sick leave. Consider yourself cured.”

Ash ran up the stairs, fumbling for the key to the company apartment. She wanted to open the door but hesitated. It was no longer her home, she no longer lived here. She pushed the button of the door.
buzzer, once, twice. She knocked. “Ali? Ali, please... Let me in...” There was no answer. Ash took a deep breath. She opened the door. “Ali? Ali, I'm sorry, so sorry! I...” The place was dark and silent. Ash turned on the light and had to blink. She walked into the kitchen, walked into the living area. “Ali?” She went back into the corridor, stopped at the door of Ali's bedroom. “Ali?” Silence. She opened the door. “Ali?” The light was still on and she saw the wardrobe, doors open, shelves empty, drawers pulled out: Ali had been in a hurry. And Ash knew why and something seemed to cut her heart in two. This place had been their home for a short while, here they had spent their first night together, made love... and now Ali couldn't get out of here fast enough because she had known that Ash would come here and she didn't want to see her again.

Suddenly Ash felt how cold she was, drenched by the rain, her jeans clinging to her legs. She must be somewhere, she thought. She doesn't know many people who can help her. Where is she?

***

The rain hit her when she climbed out of the taxi and the cold wind blew into her face. “Thanks very much, that's really nice.” Ali took the bag and the daypack which the driver pulled from the trunk. She walked to the entrance of the apartment building and looked for Tobin's name on the plates next to the bell buttons. She was about to push the button when the door opened.

“You?” Katja Olsson stopped short before bumping into Ali. “What are you doing here? What happened?” She touched Ali's cheek. “Christ! You're... cold! And wet!” She picked up Ali's bag. “Come on... Get out of the rain, into my car. It's over there.” She walked to the Volvo Estate and opened the doors with car remote.

Ali didn't move. Say something! She thought. Anything! “Look... Just don't bother... You've got to go back. They are waiting for you and...”

“Come on!” Katja opened the passenger door. “I want you warm and safe. I'll bring you to my place. And you tell me what happened.”

Ali still didn't move. Don't look at me like this!! She thought. I'm beginning to like when you touch me and when you look at me... The tears started and she searched for a tissue, blew her nose.

Katja suddenly looked worried. “Are you running away from me? I didn't mean to... you know. Look, I'm sorry. The kiss - I just couldn't resist. You did such a good job. And you're so sweet... Did I scare you?”

Scare me? Ali thought. Oh yes. But much more I'm scared by myself because I'm weak, hurt, alone, so alone that it feels as if I'm dead... and I'm about to go with you and let everything happen... “You promised them a good time in the pool”, she said. “You can't... That wouldn't be fair.”

“Fuck the pool party! You make yourself comfortable in my flat and I go see Torgunn and the guys and wrap up the meeting. And when I'm back we talk and see what we can do to make you smile again.”

How the hell do you know that this is what I need to hear right now? Ali thought. Does it show in my face? In my eyes? You picked the right moment... just when I need somebody to hold me and make me forget my broken heart, and you would be perfect, I know that you would do a good job, would make me feel special and desired - for a few hours, but that would be much more than I have
Ash hammered against the door. “Open up, Heath! Ali! Please, let me in!”

She slammed her fist against the door, bruising her knuckles. “Heath... where is she? Tell me –

where is she??”

“There's nobody at home, Captain.”

Ash turned, breathing fast.

Chris was sitting on the stairs to the top floor, a gym bag at her feet.

“What are YOU doing here?”

“Could ask you the same question”, Chris said. She stood up, took her bag. She walked down the
stairs, slowly, walked past Ash who was staring at her, ready to fight. Suddenly she stopped. “Tell
me”, she said, not looking at Ash.

Ash clenched her fists. “Tell you... what?”

“What happened, out there... the night she died.”

“Are you crazy? You were at the court. You heard what was said. You know what happened!” Ash
was almost glad she had run into Chris. She was ready to rip her to pieces.

Chris still didn't look at her. “I want to hear it from you. Here. Now. Only you and me. Tell me.”

“The picture, it's about the picture, right? How the fuck did you get the picture??”

“They sent it to me, her parents”, Chris said. “Somebody gave it to them, I don't know who.”

“You look at the picture, you see two people in love and that's enough for you to...” Ash was about
to hit her but suddenly her fists seemed to be too heavy and her rage was gone and only sadness was
left. “Look... I'm tired of this. It wasn't a scam to rip off the insurance. It happens, but not this way.
They usually burn down yachts, make it look as if the cooker exploded. Of course the insurance
knows how it's done, and the police knows and the guys go to jail.”

“I don't care about the scam thing”, Chris said. “I want to know what happened.”

Ash was tired, so tired that she steadied herself against the door. “Go away.”

Chris didn't move. “Tell me.”

Ash closed her eyes. “Leave me alone.”

Suddenly the lights in the stairwell went out and only the glow of the streetlights came through the
small windows.

“When it's dark it's worse”, Chris said. “I lie in bed and I can't sleep and I can't stop thinking about
Ash leaned her head against the door, enjoying the cold, and she only wanted to stay like this and listen to the silence on the other side and she was surprised to hear her voice because she had decided long ago never again to talk about this. “I just did a friend a favor”, she said. “Just a a nice trip from Port Louis to Saint-Denis.” She squeezed her eyes shut although she knew it wouldn’t help. “A tropical storm was right behind us and I thought I could outrun it. Second night we crossed the course of a container vessel. Had lost part of her cargo and in the dark we smashed into the floating containers. The ship was ripped open and went down like a brick...” She couldn’t go on because suddenly she was back on the deck of a sinking ship and she was shouting ‘Stay together, hold on to each other’, the life raft exploding from the container, unfolding, the floodlights suddenly dead and the next moment the ship is gone and there is only water below her and she is alone in the dark and the water is cold as ice, the sickening smell of the sea almost choking her, and she is pulling herself towards the raft, hit by a wave, swallowing water, the next wave lifting her up and close to her the blinking marker lights of life jackets and Ash counting her crew, one, two, three, four, five and...

Ash fought her way back to the present, only grief stayed with her like an echo. She tried to concentrate. “The raft had been damaged and sank after a few hours and we had go into the water and the girl... she fell into coma an hour later and I held her in my arms to keep her head up.” Ash paused a second, hoping her voice wouldn't fail her. “It was dawn and I saw that her thermal suit was ripped open and that she was soaked and cold.” She concentrated hard, surprised that suddenly everything came back, clear and crisp, as if it was happening again. “The shark came with the first daylight...” She swallowed hard, saw the animal right in front of her. “It was the biggest shark I've ever seen”, she said. “And when it was close it rolled on its side and looked at me with its dead eyes and it talked to me and it said: you're a fake, Harris. Just a little girl pretending to be a captain, pissing your pants when it matters, too yellow to do the right thing, too frightened to face the storm, running away from it so fast that you wrecked your ship. And it said: Harris, you fuck-up, the girl in your arms will be dead in less than an half an hour and you killed her just because you want to play skipper...”

Ash stopped, couldn't believe what she had heard herself say but that was the truth, the truth Chris had wanted, the truth that hadn't been told, not at court, not at the Coast Guard hearings.

“I must've passed out and I woke up when somebody slapped my face and shook me and shouted at me and it was a rescue diver and a helicopter was over us and when a wave lifted us up I saw a Navy ship standing by... They say I was screaming 'Where's the girl? Where's the girl?' But there was no girl. They say I refused to get into the chopper and struggled and called the girl's name and they thought I was over the edge. Later they found out that one crew member was missing and that was the girl...”

Suddenly she felt the tears run down her cheeks. Shit! She screamed at herself. Shit!! She tried to stop crying but couldn't Why now? For years you couldn't shed a tear – why now? Why not when you held the girl in your arms and knew she would die?

She wiped away the tears with her sleeve. “I should've turned to the open sea”, she said. “Right into the storm, but I didn't. I should've turned away from the main shipping route, where the risk to smash into floating cargo was high. She died because I was too afraid to go into the storm. You are right: I killed her.”

They stood in the dark stairwell, Chris and Ash, listened to the cars go by outside, in the rain. Then Chris picked up her bag and began to walk down the stairs but stopped. “You're looking for your girl, right? The Engineer?” Chris hesitated. “When I tried to park my car I saw Olsson come out of the door. And she, Krieger, wanted to go in. They met, they talked...”
Ash felt a pain spread in her chest and suddenly she had trouble to breathe.

“I drove away”, Chris said. “Didn’t want to meet Olsson. When I came back...” She paused. “What I saw was that your girl... She talked to Katja Olsson. And I think she went with her.”

***

Tobin watched the lights change, stepped on it and the V8 catapulted the Mustang across the intersection. She reached into the side pocket and took out a pack of tissues. She handed it to the girl in the passenger seat.

“Thanks.” Ali wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“Good you came to me”, Tobin said. “Lia's okay, she'll set you up and no questions.” She slowed down a bit. The Norwegian police loved to stop cars for speeding. “You were lucky not to run into the Evil Queen of Numbers. You missed her by seconds...”

“I didn't “, Ali said.

Tobin had to clear her throat. “And what happened?”

“I said 'No' to her.” Ali blew her nose again.

Tobin laughed. “A miracle you're still alive.”

“I think I... hurt her”, Ali said. She looked through the window, into the dark. “I didn't want to hurt her. But I had to. I was about to do something...”
Chapter Notes

Guys! It's great you're here and ready to get more of your favorite drug: Preath and Krashlyn.
I hope you enjoyed the summer and had a good time and could do all the things which are fun only on a hot day or in a warm night.

----------------------------------------------------

It was three o'clock in the morning but the floodlights on the pier were already on and the light seeped through the curtains of the cabin windows. Ash was wide-awake. She lay on her bed unable to sleep while the night hours ticked away on the digital clock, unable to stop her mind going through endless, painful talks with Ali that would never happen but were more real than life, like scenes from sad, sad movies with no happy ending...

(Location: A cold and windy street. Rain. Ash had caught Ali before she could run away, now she's holding on to her arm, Ali struggling to get free.)

Ash: Don't tell me it's because I kissed that red-haired bitch. It's because you wanted it all the time: to be with her, to be touched by her...

Ali: You're unable to make room in your life for me. You want me, but you're afraid that things might change and you'd have to change with them. You're just jealous, that's all.

Ash: You think she'll give you a job, if you give her your... body? I tell you something about your new friend. She'll leave the company. You'll get nothing from her, no job, no future. She lied to you to get you into her bed. And you were stupid enough to believe her! She turned you into a slut. And you let her! She used you and will leave you behind.

Ali: (Pale. A tear starts to run down her cheek)

(Cut)

Ash turned to the other side and closed her eyes, but that made it worse. She turned again and, lying on her belly, buried her face in the cushion. It was too hot in the cabin, and she pushed away the blanked and felt the moisture on her naked body, and she grabbed the cushion, groaning.

It was so easy, she didn't even have to close her eyes to see them, Ali, Katja – Ali in her arms, Katja making love to her...

Was she still in her arms, now? Still asleep? Or saying good bye, before the morning light would make them part?

She turned again, looked at the clock, then sat on the edge of the bed, running her hand through her hair. The ship was still silent, the pier empty, wet from the rain, somewhere a cable was swinging in the wind, clanging against a metal wall.
She could imagine every detail of how they woke up, after a few hours of sleep, in the second floor bedroom of Katja's place, the faint echo of lovemaking still in their bodies, ripples of what had happened only hours ago still in their blood...

She got up and walked to the small bathroom and drank from the tap, splashed cold water into her face.

Would Ali do something which she knew she would regret later? Which she wasn't sure if she really wanted it to do? Which was just what she needed but wasn't right?

Yes, Ash thought. I would in her place. And Katja - she would do a perfect job, give her whatever she wanted, whatever she needed, the sweetest of sweet nights, wipe away her tears, put out the burning rage, mend the deep cuts of humiliation with kisses and passion.

She took a towel and dried her face, wiped the sweat from her skin. She looked into the mirror. What she saw was a girl almost choking on her jalousie. It was so powerful and hurt so much that it was almost like plain sexual desire and it made her tremble, with rage so strong that she was no longer able to tell if she wanted to hurt Ali back or make her scream with pleasure, whether she hated her or whether she wanted her, as if Katja's lovemaking had made Ali even more desirable, as if her body was now an arena in which she wanted to compete with Katja, wanted to show that she could give more heat, more pleasure...

Ash stared at her image in the mirror, barely able to breathe, still trembling from what had happened in her imagination, embarrassed, as if she had been caught watching.

Suddenly she was cold, shivering. She dropped the towel and felt how tired and exhausted she was. And suddenly she was afraid that she had lost something she needed like food, like water, like the air she breathed. No, she thought. This isn't the end. It can't be, it simply can't. Please, she whispered, and she no longer talked to herself. Please, she said like when she was a little girl, saying her prayer before going to sleep. Please – bring her back to me.

***

Dawn had turned into a gray, rainy day, and the truck passing Chris on the opposite lane showered her car with with water. Her phone rang. Chris saw the number, bit her lip. Then she pushed the button on the steering wheel.

"Where the hell are you?" Her husband's voice betrayed his anger, and Chris' palms were suddenly wet and her throat tight.

"Going to the gym." She didn't go to the gym. She moved fast along the coastal road towards a place she knew close to the shore and high above the sea, on top of a cliff.

"Be on time for your flight to Oslo. I'm sick and tired waiting for you."

"Don't shout at me! There's no reason..." Chris wiped a hand on her jeans, then the other one.

"Seems to me that's the only way to make you listen..."

"You said things to me I didn't want to hear!" Now it was Chris who shouted.
“What do you expect? That I look the other way while you and this pilot...? It's disgusting.”

“You mean it's okay if it were just a guy? But a woman is no good?”

“Don't be ridiculous! Just do what I told you: end it - it's over.”

“Don't tell me what I'm gonna do and what not! I make my own decisions!”

“If you're really fond of her you end it, because she's already facing a lot of trouble, and it will get worse. But I ask myself if you'll be able to stop bothering about yourself and for once do something for somebody else. I'd be surprised. I fact I doubt it.”

“You're not gonna hurt her – you hear me? You'll not...”

The line was dead. Walls, walls! She hit the steering wheel with her fist. Walls wherever I turn! She was desperate, felt cheated. What about my dream?? she wanted to scream, in which the world is no longer spinning, time has stopped, only her and me, the soft light of sunrise on her skin, turning it into the color of gold...

She gritted her teeth. She let the car go faster and faster as if she wanted to crash through the invisible barrier which separated dreams from reality, as if speed could stop what was about to happen, listened to the roar of the six cylinder turbocharged engine as the the Porsche Cayenne shot towards the place high above the sea, the place with a stunning view, the place where lovers met - and where sometimes desperate people drove their cars over the cliff's edge to end whatever pain they couldn't take any longer.

***

Tobin was in her blue uniform, in shirt and tie, gold bars on her shoulders, ready for VIP chopper duty, straight from the Chief Pilot's briefing. She pushed the Mustang through the usual morning traffic, trying to get out of town, but it was not a morning like every day: the fairy tale was over, the magic carpet had crashed before it had even taken off. Fairy tale? Tobin thought. In reality what had happened was... she found no expression for it.

What will Chris remember of their time together? Dirty talk, a few silly pranks – and a few minutes of shabby sex on a bathroom floor?

She shuddered thinking about how close she had been to turn Chris into just one more chick to eat her. It would've been so easy to make her go down on her knees, confused, naked and vulnerable...

The faster I'm gone the better, she thought. And when I'm gone she'll be safe. Make it quick and no tears, make it cool and no apologies.

Something like... She raked her mind for the right words, but quick and cool wasn't something which came easy while she imagined Chris looking at her. Sorry, she started. But I think it's better if we... No, she thought. Bullshit. She began again. Sorry, but you're just not the girl I expected you to be so... Bullshit again, she thought. Sorry, but it'll never work out, you know, queer and straight, that's... What a stupid nonsense. She sounded like a character in the Muppet show, talking with a borrowed voice, speaking words of other people with a hand up her ass making her lips move. The only real word was the 'Sorry'.

“I’m sorry”, she said aloud and it was true and she really meant it. “I’m sorry”, she said again and even louder and she meant it because she had landed Chris in trouble, she had created the fucking disaster, she had made the terrible mess Chris was now into up to her eyes. I’m so sorry, she said. I thought it was a game we could play and which would be fun and suddenly it was more than that, much and then...

Now she knew how desperately she had wanted to change her life, to change herself, to learn how to stay by somebody, how to live with somebody, how to make a relationship work, no longer to be alone but with Chris, and suddenly tears blurred the traffic in front of her.

***

Tobin stopped the Mustang, got out of the car and dashed through the rain to the black Porsche, opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Got your message in the middle of today's briefing”, she said. “Came here as fast I could.” She looked through the windscreen at the ragged coastline. Waves were coming in from the west and crashed against the headland, dark clouds moved fast. “Nice place”, she said. “We should've gone here earlier.”

“To do what?” Chris said. “Sit in the car and watch the fucking sea?”

Tobin leaned back. She was so tense that her body hurt. Her mind was empty, she was unable to remember what she wanted to say.

“How bad is it?” Chris suddenly asked.

Tobin swallowed hard. “They'll relocate me within the next three months”, she said. “Alaska. Cook Inlet. Northern's Kenai offshore service base.”

“Nothing you can do about it?”

“Either that or...” Tobin ran a finger across her throat. Like Chris she stared at the sea, both not daring to look at each other. “And you?”

“Russia”, Chris said. “Saint Petersburg. We'll stay for six months, then go to Moscow. Angus wants be there when they set up the new headquarter for the Russian business.”

“Made sure we're not gonna see each other again, ever.”

“You'll take me to Oslo, later today...” Chris' voice seemed to come from far away, as if she was already fading from Tobin's world.

“Pilot and passenger. That's not what I'm talking about.”

Chris took a deep breath. “Look, I've got only a few minutes.” She tried to sound businesslike, in control. “So I better tell you right away: I lied to you...” Tobin wanted to say something, but Chris kept on talking because she didn't know if she could go on with this if Tobin said something like 'I love you'. “I was so mad at him, always bossing me around and no longer taking care of me, so...” she stopped because it sounded so embarrassing stupid.
“You mean...” Tobin cleared her throat. “You just wanted to get back at your husband?”

“So what?” Chris snapped. “I'm not a nice girl, remember? And now get out of here. I have to go.” She was trying to make parting easier – for herself, for Tobin, and she knew that Tobin knew, and she tried hard, but it didn't work. Instead she suddenly realized how strong they were already tied together, the ties invisible but already deeply embedded in body and soul, and they had to be cut and torn and pulled out by force, and it hurt and Chris was close to screaming with pain.

Tobin took her hand, afraid that she would pull it away but Chris didn't. “So he isn't fucking a chick at Jåttavagen and no Brit Airways stewardess at the Radisson?”

Chris didn't move. “No.”

“You made it all up?”

Chris nodded.

“I don't believe you”, Tobin said.

“You better do.”

“And what am I supposed to say now? That I did it just to find out if I can twist a straight girl?”

“Don't do that...” Chris tried to steady her voice.

“Just had to shag my boss' wife?” Tobin said.

“Stop it!” Chris turned to Tobin. “I'm trying to get this done...”

Tobin stared through the windshield, into the distance. And suddenly she couldn't go on, acting as if this was some stupid, nonsense screenplay and not the painful end of something that had been the promise of a new and exciting future. “I'm so sorry”, she said. “It's all my fault. I never meant to just... do you. I wanted to hold you, to be close to you, to be with you, every day, because... I love you...” She stopped when Chris clutched her hand.

“Now you ruined it, Heath!” Chris' voice was choked. “As always!” She began to cry. “We were doing just fine, like grown ups, doing the right thing, doing what's best for us, sensible, but no - you couldn't just go along! You had to start talking about... fucking love!!! Now!!!”

Tobin held on to her hand, desperate. “I know I didn't give you what you wanted. I...” She searched for words. “I'm so sorry.”

Suddenly Chris hit Tobin, pushed against her chest, hard. “Get out of the car! Go!” She hit her again. “GO!” Tobin opened the door, hesitated. “Look...”

“Get out!!” She pushed Tobin and Tobin almost fell out of the door. She stumbled back, away from the Porsche, and the engine started with a furious roar and the car shot forward, the open passenger door banging shut, gravel exploding from under the tires.

***

There was a lot of work waiting for Ali, and the desk at her office was stacked with stuff she had to
take care of: reports to be signed and mailed, there was a conference call scheduled with the Head of Engineering, another one with her boss in Britain, and in a few hours she had to catch the offshore shuttle helicopter, and she didn't know how she could get all this done before she took off to the platform, and she had to start, now, but she couldn't - because she couldn't forget what had happened: Ash kissing that woman, Stella Carson, kissing her like she had kissed Ali not so long ago.

She knew she had made a mistake, running away. She should've stayed, should've fought, should've returned some of the pain that had seemed to burn her heart and which she still felt.

If she came through this door, she thought. I'd tell her! She closed her eyes. She could see it: Ash standing in this room and she telling her, telling her how she got into Katja's car, how they drove to her place, how she loved the silence, the deep soft carpets, the warm glow of affection, how she suddenly knew that this was what she wanted, to give Katja what she desired, everything, how she finally sank onto the large bed and...

She bit her lip. How she ALMOST got into Katja's car, almost made love to her, ALMOST!

It suddenly frightened her how much she wanted to hit back, wanted to hurt Ash, using Ash's jealousy as a weapon, that stupid jealousy which she hated so much because it turned her into a slut, ready to go down on whoever was hitting on her.

Yes, she thought. That's what she thinks. I cheated my husband for over a year, pretending to be a caring wife and mother while I secretly longed to be I the arms of another woman. Once a cheat, always a cheat, that's what she thinks...

Suddenly Ali was aware of somebody behind her. She turned.

“Sorry...” The girl stood in the door frame, a heavy seabag hung from her shoulder. “I didn't mean to sneak up on you, but the door was open, so...” She wore an overall with the emblem of the offshore technical service, and she was so young that Ali couldn't believe that she was the IT technician they had decided to send out together with her.

“No, no... It's okay.” Ali needed a few seconds to get rid of her dark thoughts. The girl was pretty, her short blonde hair cut in a boy's fashion. She still lingered in the door, shy. “Come in”, Ali said. “And get rid of the bag, I bet it weighs tons.”

The girl dropped the bag, she blushed. “I'm Patricia Doyle...” She made a step into the office, stopped. “I'm the technician. Call me Pat.”

“I'm Alexandra”, Ali said and walked towards her and, not knowing why, put an arm around her shoulder and led her into the office and to the chairs. “So... what did you do that they're sending you out to the platform and right into a gale?” A sweet girl like you, she was about to add.

“I volunteered”, Pat said.


Pat nodded. She sat down on the edge of the chair as if it was too comfortable for her.

“I...” she hesitated. “I read your paper on Rogue Wave prediction and...”

Ali pushed the button of the espresso machine.
“The paper?” She laughed. “The one where I got the math wrong?”

“I also read the paper which those guys did, the Nerds, you know, in which they turn your math around and...” she stopped and Ali was sure that now Pat's cheeks were burning. “Sorry”, Pat muttered. “I didn't mean to sound smart. Didn't get half of what you wrote about. Or they.”

Ali took the two cups to the table.

“Where the hell did you find the stuff? I mean, it's not what people usually come across when they're looking for some entertainment.” She had been right: Pat's cheeks were burning, and Ali could've hugged her, but she just placed the cup in front of the sweet girl and sat down in the chair next to her. And suddenly she knew why she was so fond of her.

She's like her, she thought and her heart began to beat faster. Like she must have been, many years ago, a sweet, young Ash, shy, not so sure about herself but already full of energy and courage, bold, determined to move forward – and already used to be on her own and alone.

“I found it on their website”, Pat said, sipping from the cup which she held with both hands. As if drinking from a mug, Ali thought. Ash holds a cup like she does, to keep it steady, in wind and rain and on the rocking decks of ships: the trademark of people who live far away from the warmer, more comfortable places, away from the places where most of the other people live a softer life, laughing and talking and enjoying to be with each other.

“Website?” Ali raised an eyebrow.

“They run a website, the Nerds”, Pat said as if she had to apologize for something. “They post their project, the computer grid, and tell about the prediction model and they...” She looked into her coffee. “They call you Wonder Woman.”

Ali laughed, a little nervous. “Sounds a bit wacky, right?”

Pat still couldn't look at her. “I think you're doing a great job. It's one way to make things safer, to predict the big waves and...”

Had Ash been like this? Ali wondered. Looking for somebody she could be close to, somebody she could admire, somebody she hadn't found - in her family, among the people she had met?

“They say...” Pat hesitated. “A big one's gonna hit the platforms within the next forty-eight hours.”

“And you want to be there when...” Ali shook her head. “Look – a prediction model tells you if there's a high probability. That's different from 'gonna happen'. Besides it's impossible to predict the big waves.”

The girl shrugged. “Well, it's like riding a roller coaster. It's supposed to be safe and nothing's gonna happen, but you can't stop thinking: What if? And it makes your stomach go butterflies and...”

What does she want to prove? Ali thought. And to whom? Ali suddenly wondered: Did Ash do the same, as a girl? Take on every challenge, to prove - what? That she wasn't afraid? Afraid of nothing? Not even to be lonely?

“Have you got a friend? Probably worried to death. What's a kick for you must be hell for a guy who fancies you.”

Pat blushed even deeper. She shook her head. “Nothing steady. It just doesn't work. I'm away most of the time, at sea...”
Will it ever end? Ali thought. Or go on forever: always a next challenge, bigger than the last, the next test of courage, a greater risk - on offshore drilling sites, on ships, in gales, in monster waves...

“Sorry. None of my business, right?” Ali touched her shoulder the way she liked to touch Ash, to feel Ash’s hard muscles, her strength, which she loved and which sometimes scared her because there was something in it, something dangerous, something she now felt again, together with the warmth of a young woman's body, not as powerful as Ash's barely controlled energy, but already present and growing and... Her fingers suddenly trembled. She pulled back her hand as if she had been burned.

A terrible thought surfaced like a black cloud. No, she said to herself and tried to push it away, but it stayed, grew stronger, filled her mind. No! She thought.

Yes, the black, shapeless cloud said. She did. She did sink the ship!

She's not like that! Ali tried to shake the cloud off but couldn't.

She is, the black cloud said. Just look at the girl, it said. Alone, already hooked on danger. That's how it starts...

“Hey! I see you already met!” Karen Stroer walked into the office. She was a small, pretty woman, and the years she had spent as Katja Olsson's assistant hadn't left a trace: her smile was genuine and she still had something of a schoolgirl and her blue eyes sparkled and she she loved to be busy. She carried a couple of folders which she dumped on the table in front of Ali and Pat. “Sorry, girls – but there's a change in plans. Shuttle flight's off, weather too bad. We have to get you out a different way, which means paperwork all over again.”

***

Tobin's hair was still wet and tousled from the walkaround inspection she had done earlier. It had been raining, the wind giving her a shove as if asking if she really wanted to do this, leave the ground and play, up there.

Everything had been A-okay and speckless, so clean that she had seen her reflection in the glossy paint job on the helicopter's skin and in the almost black tinted glass of the windows which made the chopper look like a machine from outer space.

She closed the shoulder straps of the seat belt and felt the helicopter tremble when a gush of wind hit it and looked once more at the weather briefing sheet on her clipboard which said north-westerly winds. It meant strong headwind during take-off and in the departure corridor which would lead them far out over the sea. It meant wind from the side when they had to curve back towards the coast, taking away power from the main rotor while the tail rotor's workload would increase. But lower wind speed was expected during the trip towards Oslo, getting even lower the closer they would come to their destination so everything would work out nicely.

Tobin turned on the the BAT master and pushed the CPDS switch on the overhead panel and watched messages pop up on the front panel liquid displays while the computer tested the warning systems for engine low fuel, rotor rpm, trim, cargo smoke.

She pushed the fire check button and with a loud 'Bing' the word FIRE appeared on the screens. She activated the VEMD test and scanned the messages on the monitoring display for engine and vehicle.
A dark blue Mercedes van came from behind the heliport terminal. It crossed the apron and stopped close to the chopper. The ground hostess, Sonia Maersk, climbed out first and opened the sliding door. Tobin saw McLowry get out of the van, followed by the Russians, Yegorov and Zharkov and their blonde wives. The wind was ripping at their clothes and they were hurrying to get into the chopper, shouting and laughing, the girls giggling while the driver of the van loaded the luggage into the rear of the helicopter.

When Tobin saw Chris her heart skipped a beat. She wore a plain but expensive dress which hugged her body and gave away most of her legs. Her make-up was perfect and a highly paid professional had turned her hair into a warm, shimmering cascade, and Tobin just wanted to bury her face into it, and loose herself and forget the world and the stupid flight to Oslo and the airport and the rain.

Chris walked straight to the chopper, not looking at Tobin, like the first time Tobin had seen her and immediately fallen for her, the classic VIP chick, ignoring the small people who made life easy for her like au pairs, gardeners, chauffeurs, pilots...

Tobin heard her laugh, heard her chat with Russian girls, heard their heels click on the tarmac.

She forced her mind on the things to do, trying to forget the scent of Chris' hair, the taste of her lips, her skin, warm, soft and sweet.

She activated pilot to airport communication. “Sola Ground, Northern ten-ten, stand sixty-three, request clearance for visual departure to Oslo Gardermoen.”

The voice of the ground controller was much too cheerful for her dark mood: “Northern ten-ten, cleared to Oslo Gardermoen, ETROM One Whisky visual departure, runway eleven, climb on runway track to eight-hundred feet, squawk four-three-six-oh.”

Tobin readjusted her seat position but still felt uncomfortable. She entered the transponder code while reading back the instructions to the ground controller.

“Northern ten-ten, read-back is correct, report ready for startup and taxi.” The guy sounded even more cheerful: he had probably realized that he was talking to a girl and Tobin tried to put a bit more of fighter-jet-pilot into her voice: “Wilco, Northern ten-ten.”

She heard the thump as Sonia Maersk closed the door. The warning lights blinked, then changed to green: all doors shut and secured.

She watched Sonia step back from under the rotor. She looked great in Northern's blue Flight Service uniform, and even the orange and yellow safety vest couldn't ruin her sex appeal. She gave Tobin thumbs-up, and Tobin blew her a kiss, and Sonia rolled her eyes.

Tobin called the cheerful guy of Sola Ground: ”Ready for startup, Northern ten-ten.”

“Northern ten-ten, roger, startup approved.”

She had thought that it would help to clear her mind of Chris by concentrating on the job or looking at Sonia's legs, but it didn't help because she knew Chris was only inches away, the only barrier a few strips of titanium and a layer of sound and fire proof padding.

She activated the prime pumps, checked the hydraulics, and step by step she moved closer to the moment she usually enjoyed most, the moment when she could forget physics and technology and just took off as if gravity didn't exist any longer, the moment when she was touched by magic and could fly. But today all the magic had disappeared, and what was left was the tedious, endless routine she had to follow to get these three tons of machinery up in the air.
Shit, Tobin thought. Why didn’t I just call in sick again. Why didn't they take a commercial flight but insisted on the chopper treatment?

She started the generators, rechecked the power indicators, then pushed up the two switches of the automated engine control, and the whine of the first engine filled the cabin while the second engine started and the message ‘IDLE’ appeared on the engine control displays.

She saw 'Beacon' go green, saw the red flashes of her beacon lights reflected in the puddles on the apron and in the van's windows. Okay, she thought. Here we go.

She pushed the Dual Engine Control to 'flight', the word 'IDLE' disappeared from the display, and the sound of the four blade rotor filled the cabin. She activated the white strobes.

Sonia held her cute little cap in place and hurried to the van while the rotor sent ripples over the puddles on the apron and climbed into the sliding door before she got really wet.

“Sola Ground, Northern ten-ten, request taxi.”

“Taxi to runway eleven via taxiway Hotel. Stop short at holding point and contact tower on one-one-eight point three-fifty. Bye-bye.”

Tobin read back the instructions. “... Northern ten-ten bye-bye.”

Rotor RPM shot to one-oh-one percent when the helicopter took off, the right skid first, left skid still on the ground as if jumping into the air, and she lost ground contact a second later and was airborne, and the sudden gush of wind which made the chopper swerve only added to the feeling: she had turned a heap of steel and plastic into a weightless bubble which hovered six feet above the ground, trembling as if impatient to go up and ride the air.

But today there was no joy, no triumph – today it was still only a machine, a contraption which made her fly, noisy, clumsy, filled with poisonous fuel, smearing a trail of hot and dirty exhaust fumes across the sky.

She scooted along the taxiway, a bit too dashy perhaps, but that was what she needed right now and nothing wrong with waking up the big shots in the back and making the girl's little hearts beat faster. She stopped at the holding point, steadying the chopper while the wind seemed to tease her, seemed to say: okay, chika – let's rock-and-roll.

She switched to tower communication. “Sola Tower, good day, Northern ten-ten at hold Hotel, ready for departure.”

“Northern ten-ten, Sola Tower, good day, line up and wait runway eleven.”

She let the helicopter go and moved towards the line up point where she stopped and hovered again and switched to intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen, Good afternoon”, she said. “My name’s Tobin Heath, I'm your pilot on the short trip to Oslo. Weather condition here are not so good, mainly strong headwinds which will give us a bit of trouble while we're doing the big departure U-turn over the sea so keep your seat belts closed. It'll get better when we're back over land, and we'll have a smooth flight to Oslo with a clear view of the mountains and the countryside. Estimated flight time will be under one and half hours.” She paused, checked the instruments again. “We're going to take off in a few moments, when the big military plane you see passing on our left side is off the runway. It's a Royal Air Force Tanker back from refueling the weather planes which are right now keeping an eye on cyclone Kevin - that's the dark cloud cover which you can see ahead and it's Kevin who'll be responsible for any inconvenience during the initial phase of our trip.”
She watched the tanker roll away and Sola Tower called her a second later: “Northern ten-ten, wind three-hundred ten degrees twenty knots, runway eleven cleared for takeoff.”

“Cleared for takeoff runway eleven, Northern ten-ten.”

Released from hover the helicopter accelerated forward and into the headwind, and immediately Tobin felt the additional lift, a surge which seemed to pull the helicopter up, and the runway markers blurred into white and orange streaks and then vanished below her, and she passed the floodlight cluster at the runway’s end, reached the coast, and a moment later she was over water, big waves rolling in from the Atlantic, the wind kicking and shaking the chopper.

Sola Tower delivered the farewell speech: “Northern ten-ten, at Flatholmen contact Sola Radar on one-one-nine point six-hundred - bye, bye.”

Tobin read back the instructions, raindrops suddenly hitting the glass in front of her, and Flatholmen island appeared straight ahead and came towards her fast, a slab of rock, with grass on top, fringed with white surf, and she switched to ATC communication.

“Sola Radar, good day, Northern ten-ten with you eight-hundred feet on ETROM One Whiskey visual departure. Request IFR clearance.”

The Air Traffic Controller came back instantly. “Northern ten-ten, identified and cleared, climb FL thirty on ETROM.”

Tobin passed Flatholmen lighthouse and the old lighthouse keeper’s building. “IFR cleared and climb FL thirty on ETROM, Northern ten-ten.”

She let the helicopter go into the headwind, towards ETROM, a waypoint on the departure corridor, where she would switch to autopilot, climb to flight-level thirty and turn east and towards the coast and could relax a bit when they were ‘dry-feet’ again.

And all the time Tobin was aware of Chris, and it was as if she not only carried Chris across the sky but also all the moments of happiness and excitement they had shared, and it seemed to be too heavy a load for her, a load which seemed to pull her towards the ground and which would turn a swift and easy trip into ninety minutes of struggle, of wrestling with wind and gravity, into ninety minutes of heartache.

The sky ahead was almost black, clouds covering most of it, reaching out to where she was now. The storm was coming and coming fast.

***

Over the past hours the ship had changed, from a dead floating piece of machinery to a pulsing, vibrating thing, and Ash felt the ship’s heartbeat when she touched the walls, the console, when she looked at her mug and saw the tiny ripples spread on the surface of her coffee: nothing could muffle the flow of energy, generated deep below her by twenty-three thousand BHP, and even here, high above the engine room, it made things hum and rattle, made her body tremble, and like the ship she was ready to go, engine and bridge, officers and deckhands waiting for her command to cast off.

Ash ran her hand over her hair, trying to become familiar with the new cut. Her hair was short, the braids clipped and swept away, the braids which Ali had loved to touch - gone, like Ali. But Ash still
felt them, like she still felt the presence of her.

“Captain?” The bosun stood in the doorway to the bridge. “Captain?”

“What??” She was short-tempered, the lack of sleep made her edgier than usual.

“The coastal pilot, Captain.” The bosun stepped aside and let the man behind him pass onto the bridge.

“Captain...” The pilot took off his cap and put down the briefcase. “First... “ He nodded to Daltry who sat in the captain's chair supervising the unmooring operation. Daltry raised his hand while listening to the ship to shore communication. The pilot took off his uniform jacket and put it over the backrest of the pilot's seat. “Weather's not so good. You'll just make it back before the cyclone hits the area.”

Ash shrugged. “The usual business. Nothing we can't handle.”

“Thanks.” The pilot took the mug of coffee Ash gave him. “Outpost and Gyla platforms?”

“Yeah...” Ash leaned against the main forward console and drank from her mug. “Gyla if the weather holds up. If not it's just Outpost.” She looked out of the aft bridge windows at the crates, containers and pipes stacked on the working deck. “Incredible what they ship to the platforms per week. They eat the stuff or what?”

The pilot chuckled. “Ever had lunch on a platform? I had – and judging from the taste you're right: that's exactly what they eat.”

Daltry listened into his headset. “Okay”, he said to somebody. “I tell her. Captain?” He turned to Ash. “Captain, looks as if we get passengers.”

The pilot frowned. “Passengers!”

Daltry shrugged. “All shuttle flights canceled, and we're the last transport going to the platforms.” He listened to the voice coming through his earphones. “Taxi just passed security, here in a minute.” He shrugged again. “Wonder who the hell wants to go... Captain?”

Ash didn't turn. “I heard you”, she said. She still stared out of the starboard windows, not looking at anything, just staring because she knew who the passenger was, because there was only one person mad enough to go where nobody wanted to be. “How many passengers did you say?”

“Two”, Daltry said. He pressed the intercom switch. “Passengers boarding. Repeat: Passengers boarding. Stand-by.”

Ash didn't move. She just stared, stared as the taxi appeared on the quay, came towards the ship and stopped at the gangway, stared as the passenger door opened...

Ali seemed so small and although her face was almost hidden by the hood of her parka Ash saw that she was pale and hadn’t slept and she seemed to be cold, as if she needed somebody to keep her warm and there was nobody. The fur of the parka's hood bristled, like the first time they had met, and Ash's heart throbbed, and all she wanted to do was give her the warmth she needed so much, the tenderness she couldn't get enough of, tell her how much she needed her, how much she loved her.

But how could she? Go to C Deck and barge into her cabin? And find nothing but disgust in Ali's face? The thought made her sick.
A very young, blonde girl was with Ali, wearing the standard outfit of Northern's technical service, the dark blue rain jacket and the orange overall. She shouldered her seabag and followed Ali who was lugging her own bag along the gangway. A deckhand helped her and she smiled. She didn't look to the bridge although she knew that Ash was there, vanished through the watertight door.

“She's a technician”, Daltry said, pointing to the young girl. “I know her.”

“The other one – what does she want, out there?” The Pilot shook his head. “She looks nice, pretty. Has a lot of courage.”

Too much of it, Ash thought as she watched the crew pull in the gangway and close the railing. Or too much fear, which is the same: fear to fail – her kids, her family, herself. Ash took a deep breath. “Okay”, she said. “Let's get going.” She pushed the intercom button. “Stand by engine!”

With the Chief’s voice came the engine room noise: “Engine standing by.”

Ash took her walkie-talkie and pushed the button. “Stand-by for let go, bow and stern!”

“This is bow, standing by for let go!” The voices crackled with static as if somebody crumpled a piece of paper. “This is stern, standing by for let-go!”

Ash pushed the button again. “Single up! One headline bow and stern!”

Daltry and Ash watched the line handlers cast off and the fore and aft station crew pull in the lines.

Then Ash turned to the coastal pilot. “Your ship.”

***

“Meaning what?” Tobin couldn't believe what the guy had just told her.

The chief mechanic stared at her and she could tell what he was thinking: in his world women on an aircraft were either passengers or flight attendants - they were not sitting in front flying the bird because they were always breaking things.

“Meaning...”, he said, rubbing in his attitude by giving her the stupid-chick version, “…meaning: it won't fly.”

Tobin slammed her briefcase onto the desk. She took a deep breath, tried to calm down. “How long?”

The chief mechanic shrugged. “Two days if we're lucky.”

“Two days??” Tobin shook her head. “In two days the the chopper will go nowhere because in two days a monster cyclone will be kicking our asses across this country and back! I want to get it out of here before they close the coastal airports!”

The chief mechanic leaned back in his swivel chair. “We'll see what we can do. Oh, by the way...” He opened a drawer. “We found this when we stripped the padding in the passenger cabin.” He pushed a mobile phone across the desk. “And next time make sure the guys switch off their mobiles.”
Tobin took the phone and pushed a button. The screen lit up. It showed two girls on a soccer field, hugging each other and one of them was a very young Chris.

Tobin swallowed hard. She put the phone back. “Belongs to the chairman's wife. Better get it back ASAP. Air Admin can tell you where they stay.”

“Hey!” The mechanic was annoyed. “We're not a fucking pizza delivery service! They are your passengers. ASAP it yourself!”

Tobin stared, her eyes dark with fury.

“What?” the chief mechanic enjoyed the situation. “You're a grounded pilot. You'll go nowhere, so you you've got all the time in the world to get that back to your boss' wife.”

“Thanks! A Lot!!” Tobin grabbed her briefcase and picked up the phone. “That's really helpful!” She walked from the office.

“Leave us your number! We keep you updated on the status.”

“Don't worry”, Tobin said. “I'll be here every day. And I'm gonna spend a lot of time with you guys. You can give me all the details first hand.” She walked from the chief mechanic's office and through the hangar where her Eurocopter stood in a corner, the tail rotor cover partly dismantled and a few guys in dirty overalls crawling inside the cabin. “Hey!” she shouted. “Take care – this is white leather! I don't need a set of your fingerprints on the seats!”

She got out her phone and dialed Northern's Air Admin number while she walked through the rolling doors and towards the office building.

“Yes, it's me!” She was shouting, partly because a huge Sikorsky was starting up, partly because she was furious, partly because right now she couldn't stand Agnetha's sweet voice which gave her a headache. “No, I'm not mad at you. Listen – I'm grounded, stuck with a chopper defect.” She covered the other ear and turned her back to the Sikorsky and shouted louder and was hit by water and dirt when the Sikorsky's rotor began to spin. “Right, it won't fly. I'll send you the details. No, I won't come back today.” She reached the office building and walked through the sliding doors, her headache worse. ”Yes, they'll have to fly commercial if they want to get back earlier. No, I'm not gonna tell them. I'll stay away from them as far as possible. Yes, that's what it means; YOU’ll have to tell them. Correct, chairman'll kick your pretty ass around the floor. Yes, I'm sorry”, she lied. “No, that's all for now...” Besides could you tell me if you're still fucking Alina? She thought. “Hang on...” She put down the briefcase and stretched her back. It hurt. “Be a nice girl, 'Neetha – call Travel and have them book a room for me. Two nights, option for more. Something close to the airport, will you? I want to step on their toes, see that they do it as fast as they can.”

***

Pat Doyle was lying on the lower berth, arms under her head. She wore a fleece jacket and fleece pants and warm socks. They were two hours away from the harbor and the ship had begun to roll and pitch so the bed was a good place to be.

Pat watched Ali unpack her laptop.

“You gonna see the captain?”
Ali shook her head. “She's too busy.” She had to steady herself against the wall.

“She's scary”, Pat said.

“She seems to be...” Ali managed to get a chair between her legs. She opened the laptop. “But she isn’t”, she said, more to herself.

“They say she... wrecked a ship to get the insurance money”, Pat said and Ali suddenly felt that in a way Pat was impressed.

“She would be in jail if she did, right?” Ali switched on the laptop.

Pat was silent, thinking. “They say she made it look like an accident.”

Yes, Ali thought. She is impressed. Suddenly she was irritated. “That's very difficult”, she said. “And extremely dangerous.”

“A crew member died. A girl...” Pat sounded as if death had turned an accident into something bigger than just an accident. A tragedy? An achievement?

“You better not believe everything what the guys at headquarters or on the rigs tell you”, Ali said. “She wouldn't risk the life of her crew for just money.”

“You know her?”

“I think so”, Ali said.

“Good enough that you're sure she didn't... you know... do it?”

Ali had her back to Pat and she was glad because she knew her face would give her away. “I like to sleep close to floor”, she said because she was afraid to answer the question. “If I take the lower berth - that okay with you?”

“I don't care. I don't think I'll sleep.” Pat got up and started to unpack her overnight bag.

“Don't be silly. Just relax. We've still a long way to go.” Ali put on her glasses and browsed through a few documents, now and then stopping the laptop from sliding from the table.

“Have you ever been in a gale on a platform?” Pat threw a few things onto the top berth then climbed up, lay down on the bed and stretched.

“No”, Ali said. “First time. Have you?”

“Two or three times”, Pat said.

“Is it bad?”

“No. Not really. It's - I don't know.” Pat stared at the ceiling. “You feel more alive, more real. I love it. It's intense. It's scary, but also... it pushes you towards some edge. You don't know what's gonna happen, but...”

Would Ash tell her the same? Ali thought while she listened to Pat. About the edge? About being more alive, out there, when it gets dangerous? Had it been like that when the ship had gone down, intense, more real, was not knowing what was going to happen part of the - kick?

Suddenly she wanted to know. And because she couldn't ask Ash, she asked Pat and because Pat
was so very much like Ash she knew she would hear the truth.

“Would you...” She cleared her throat. “Would you sink a ship, for insurance money? Let it go down in a tropical storm? Risk your own life? Risk the life of your crew...” She stopped. She turned around.

Pat was asleep.

Ali got up from the chair, walked over to the bed and pulled the blanket over the girl. She brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes. A fluffy toy dog was in her arms. Or was it a teddy bear? Years of cuddling had blurred the features, but the glass eyes stared at Ali like the eyes of a jealous lover.

Don't be silly, Ali said to the dog-bear. She's yours, forever. You're her first true love – she'll never forget you. Is Ash my first true love? she thought. Is that why I can’t get away from her – no matter how fast I run, no matter where I run to? She went back to the laptop but couldn't concentrate on her work.

If she did it, she thought, she did it for love. Yes, she thought. Love, the reason to do many things: good things, like giving yourself to another person, your soul, your mind, your body - and bad things, like staging a shipwreck and killing somebody.

***

Ash sat in the captain's chair, safety belt closed, riding the ship's pitch. The bow suddenly crashed into a trough and salt water hit the bridge windows. Then the ship leaned to port and began to climb the next wave.

In the dark somewhere behind Ash the latest weather report came out of the printer.

The door to the bridge opened and for a second shapes appeared in the red light from the stairs: the main console, the navigation station, electricity control panel, backup engine control, safety monitoring center...

“Get me the fax”, Ash said without turning and reached out to grab it, but suddenly her blood seemed to flow faster, a hot surge made her cheeks burn: the faint fragrance of a certain perfume was in the air, the scent of long dark hair...

Ash turned. She looked into Ali’s eyes for what seemed an eternity and all the words she had wanted to throw at Ali like stones were gone.

“Weather's deteriorating fast...” Ash's voice was hoarse. “I'm not sure if we can unload and get you off the ship.” She didn't know why she said this, but it was the only thing that came to her mind.

The ship hit the next wave crest and Ali, thrown off balance, grabbed Ash's navy sweater, holding on to it and Ash grabbed Ali's wrist. “Better get into the chair and put on the safety belt”, she mumbled still holding on to Ali.

“I feel quite safe where I am”, Ali whispered. The ship leaned to port and Ash's fingers closed hard around Ali's wrist, hard and painful, telling about rage and jealousy, about hurt pride, and, at the same time, about her joy that Ali was back and that she never ever wanted to let her go. And suddenly, as if she lived in Ash's heart, in her soul, as if she could read the language of her body, Ali
knew what filled Ash's mind like poison ...

Almost! She wanted to say. I almost went with her, I almost had been in her bed, in her arms – almost!! At the same moment she realized that the 'almost' made no difference because it was so tiny an 'almost' that it was as good as a night of real lovemaking with Katja.

Who told you? She wanted to ask. How can you know? But she didn't ask because she would've known, too, in Ash's place. Instead she wrapped her arms around Ash's neck, and Ash closed her eyes, and Ali brushed her cheek against Ash's short hair.

“I like it”, she said.

“Easier to take care of”, Ash muttered. She squeezed her eyes shut. So close to Ali she was suddenly afraid to find something she didn't want to find, something that Katja had left, like a fingerprint, something strange, unfamiliar, a new way to move, a new way to touch, to yield, a new resistance, introduced by a new lover, the traces of teeth and lips, left on her skin in a moment of passion...

But there was nothing, only the sweet scent of her skin and her hair.

They were silent, in complete darkness, only the dim glow of radar and navigation screens reminded them that they were still on planet earth and not on a spaceship, rocked and shaken by the invisible powers of time and gravitation, but on a vessel, plowing through the waves of the Atlantic. Ash held on to Ali's hand and her fingers no longer hurt, just held on firmly, to keep Ali safe and Ali understood that nothing was more important to Ash than to be with her.

“I don't love her anymore”, Ash suddenly said. “The candles, the food – that was for you...”

“I know.” Ali put her hand on Ash's shoulder and Ash's strength immediately flooded her mind, her body. “Say – did you have a teddy bear?”

Ash laughed. “No”, she said.

“A toy dog? With glass eyes?”

Ash shook her head. “I had a crocodile.”

Ali frowned. “A fluffy crocodile??”

“Yep. I loved it so much that I took it everywhere.”

“With glass eyes?”

Ash shrugged. “Can't remember. Was probably the first thing to come off, with all that hugging and tucking it in to sleep next to me.”

Now, Ali thought. Ask her. Ask her if she did it, if she sank the ship and killed the girl...

But Ash leaned her head against Ali's arm, still holding on to her hand, gently, warm - and suddenly Ali realized that she would never be able to ask. Because she was afraid, afraid of what she might hear, even more afraid that Ash might tell her a lie. Because she would know. And it would break her heart.

Ash turned to her. “I'm sorry if I ever scared you. All I want is...” She stopped as if talking about the future, about their future, would destroy it, would make all that was still possible vanish and only a gray, sad world would remain. “Try to sleep”, she said. “We still have a few hours to go. You'll need
any sleep you can get.”

Ali shook her head. “I don't want to sleep. I want to be here. With you. Sailing into the dark.”

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“I'm Mr and Mrs McLowry's pilot”, Tobin said. “We found Mrs McLowry's phone on the chopper. Would it be alright if I leave it with you?” The huge hotel lobby was crowded and full of noise, and she had to raise her voice to get the concierge's full attention.

“Certainly”, the concierge said, but Tobin knew exactly what all the polite efficiency meant: she was only a no-tip-nuisance, and he was not the errand boy for an ordinary chick dressed up in a pilot's uniform. The concierge consulted a computer screen. “Look - we are very busy right now, and she probably wants to get the phone as fast as possible. I see that the chairman and his wife made a reservation at the top floor restaurant. If you just go up... I'm sure she'll appreciate to get the phone back that quick.”

“I don't know...” Tobin was thinking fast. That was not what she had planned to do.

“Thanks very much”, the concierge said. He pointed to the elevators. “Take number three to the top. And then just ask the manager. He'll get Mrs McLowry for you.”

Tobin opened her mouth to say that she definitely wouldn't go to the top and meet Mrs McLowry, but the concierge was already talking to an older couple who, judging by the concierge's smile, did belong to the big-tip category of hotel guests and therefore deserved a fat slice of his precious time.

Tobin went to the elevator and joined the small, impatient crowd already waiting and when the doors opened she was pushed in until she found herself flattened against the back wall and going up. She was tired, she was tense, she didn't want to do this, but did, too tired to say no. She didn't belong here, this was for a different sort of people, she felt out of place, a girl in a pilot's uniform among tuxedos and evening dresses, going where she shouldn't go, and she held on to her briefcase as if it would help her to get this done and stared at the floor numbers lighting up one by one.

At the top floor she simply went with the crowd, went where everybody seemed to go and moments later she stood at the entrance of the restaurant, not knowing what to do. She walked to the fancy host stand while she craned her neck, tried to look into the huge room, tried to spot McLowry, the Russian oligarchs, Chris...

“Can I help you, Madam?” The manager's smile was part of his professional outfit, belonged to his tuxedo and the white tie.

“I'm Mr and Mrs McLowry's pilot. Mrs McLowry left her phone...”

“I know. Concierge phoned me. I'll get Mrs McLowry for you. Just a second.” He started towards the entrance but stopped. “I'm sorry, but...” He walked back, consulted his computer. “Mrs McLowry hasn't yet arrived, I'm afraid. But I can get the chairman. I'm sure Mr McLowry will...”

“No. No!” She was about to grab the guy's sleeve to stop him. Easy now, she thought. She cleared her throat. “Listen – I don't want to intrude. Can I leave it with you?”

“Sure. I give it to her. No problem.”
“Thanks very much.” Tobin opened her briefcase and handed the phone to him. “Give her my regards, will you?”

“But of course”, the manager said. “And have a nice evening, Madam.”

Madam yourself, Tobin thought. She managed a smile and walked back to the elevator, walking faster and faster. Woohah, she thought. No need to run - get out of here smoothly and then enjoy your nice evening, like the guy said, which would consist of two Coke from the minibar, followed by stomach trouble and satellite TV, and then the tears will start and you'll be crying all the night...

The down car was empty and that was good because she didn't know if she could stand one more tux and evening dress parade, and she closed her eyes and leaned against the wall while the went down – only to stop a few moments later.

The doors opened. There was a crowd outside, waiting to go up: guys and their wives, excited, loud. They looked at Tobin as if it was a crime to go down when they needed to go up and when the up-elevator arrived they began to rush into it as if it was a matter of life and death.

And then she saw her.

Chris was alone, slowly following the people, standing out from the crowd, like always, and it wasn't because she was so beautiful but because she was... well, she was Chris.

Tobin stared at her, watched her while she slowly walked away, as if some cruel fate had decided to give her one more glimpse of what she had lost, and Tobin was paralyzed, turned to stone. What had she done to deserve this?

Suddenly Chris raised her head and she looked into Tobin's eyes and she stopped.

“You coming, Christen?” A gray haired guy kept the up-elevator's doors open.

Chris didn't move. She stared, pale.

“Chris? What's the matter, Chris?”

The doors of Tobin's elevator began to close and she wanted to do something about it but couldn't, and they closed, and a grinding pain spread in her chest and cut off her breath, and Tobin thought she would die.

Then the doors opened again.

Chris took her finger from the 'open' button. She stepped into the elevator and the doors closed behind her and it started to go down, floor numbers lighting up, like some sort of insane countdown, where no one knew what would happen when the last number came up.

“Are you crazy?” Tobin whispered, her heart pounding in her throat. “And now what?”

Chris leaned against the steel wall. “I've no idea”, she said. “You tell me.”
Chapter 16

They sat at a small table, away from the entrance and the glass front of the coffee shop, hidden among other people who had decided that they needed a moment of peace before they moved on and took whatever the cold and rainy night had for them. It was a small place, open all night, a place where things ended - or started.

Tobin stared into her cup. “You can still... go back”, she said.

Chris stirred her coffee. “Sometimes I wonder how a chick so stupid can be a pilot. Listen - I made a choice back at the hotel.”

“I'm sorry.” Tobin ran her fingers through her hair. It was late and it had been a long day full of surprises. “I didn't mean to... I thought you... stay with a friend.”

“I've got no friends”, Chris said.

“We can get you a hotel room.”

Chris shook her head again. “And I pay with what? You think I've got a pack of credit cards hidden under... this?” She pointed to her dress which was as tight as a second skin.

Tobin took her hand. “You're cold! You're shaking!!” She pulled the rain jacket from the backrest of her chair, dark blue with Northern's Air Service logo and the golden bars of a senior pilot. She got up and draped it over Chris' shoulders. “Come on, let's get out of here. Let's go to where I stay.”

Chris didn't move. She toyed with spoon. Tobin sat down again. “What's wrong?” She tried to read Chris' face. “Listen – you'll be safe. They won't find you. It's not a hotel. ’Neetha fixed me up, place of a friend who's abroad. As long as she doesn't talk...”

Chris looked at her cup as if in there was something which could help her explain to Tobin that she didn't want to feel like a slut which had just dumped her man only to crawl into the bed of the next hot lover. “You mean we're hiding?” She said, only to say something. “We're on the run?”

Tobin drove a vintage Mustang with V8 engine and loved loud music and liked her sex simple and in large quantities – but she wasn't brain-dead. What had happened in her bathroom only two days ago came back to her mind like a blow and her cheeks were burning. Yeah, she thought, that's probably what I deserve: the girl thinks all I want is a rerun of that... she was too embarrassed to find a word for it, to even think about it. “Listen...” she started, not knowing how to go on.

Chris looked straight into Tobin's eyes, for the first time. “Let's do it right”, she said and took Tobin's
hand. “Let's pretend that it's a... a date. Let's go somewhere. Somewhere nice.” Her grip tightened and Tobin could feel how scared Chris was, and not about her big shot husband who would come after her – it was because she had made a choice and had entered uncharted territory: what was easy and simple for Tobin was new and frightening for Chris.

“You know - I love dates. And you're the most gorgeous date I ever had.” Tobin smiled. “How about... I know a place...”

Chris frowned. “Not again one of your dyke dens where you know all the girls on the dance floor.”

Tobin beamed. “Trust me. You'll like it.”

***

It was dark and they seemed to be removed from the outside world, part of a crowd but, because of that, apart from everybody, separate, as if they were the only people left on the planet.

Chris looked at Tobin and Tobin looked at the screen, Chris fascinated by Tobin, Tobin fascinated by the movie. She was eating from a large bag of sweet corn, crumbs on her shirt, unaware that Chris had been looking at her for most of the time, trying to find an answer.

What is it? Chris thought. Why am I here, with her? Is she pretty? No, not really. Too much boy in her face, in her body. Too much I-give-a-shit in her appearance. Nothing really fits together. But still - she’s... just right, perfect, and in her own way even... beautiful. Chris' body was huming, her thighs were warm, her heart was beating faster. She leaned her head against Tobin's shoulder and held her hand and together they watched a pink bus go through the red desert of Down Under, and Tobin couldn't take off her eyes, even when the final credits began to roll.

They remained in their seats, close, warm, too happy to leave, stared at the names on the screen without seeing them, people stepping around and even over them, pushing towards the exits.

Chris laughed. “Priscilla, Queen of the Desert???. I didn't know you're into nineties movies.”

Tobin inhaled deeply. “I just love it. Whenever they show it I try to make it.” She stretched.

Chris smiled. “I'm sure it's on DVD, or on streaming, meanwhile.”

“That's not the same. It has to be a cinema, a small one.”

“And a large bag of popcorn and a... chick?”

Tobin shook her head. “Nobody ever wanted to come along. So... it's only me.”

“Not today”, Chris said.

“Not today.”

Chris picked crumbs of corn from T's jacket. “The pink bus - that why you had your car painted pink?”

Tobin grinned. “Are the guys gorgeous, or what?? The drag alone, I mean did you ever see such... dresses?”
Chris laughed. “You mean you're into guys as long as they're drag queens? You mean a bit of lipstick and false lashes turn a guy into a girl?”

“No... there's more”, Tobin was excited. “They aren't girls, but.. they're also no longer guys. They are something new, different. They turn the world into a magic land where... I mean...”

“You mean there's a magic land and the door is somewhere in between... men and women?”

“Not in between... But you always have to cross a border to find magic.”

There was a voice from behind. “Girl's? Show's over. Need to clean under you feet, so...”

Tobin turned. A very pretty girl with rubber gloves and a plastic bag looked down on her. “Okay, okay. We're off, sorry.”

The girl smiled. “Enjoy your evening.”

Tobin and Chris got up.

“Nice dress”, the girl said to Chris.

Chris blushed. “Thanks”, she said and followed Tobin.

On the stairs Tobin took Chris in her arms and she felt Chris' heart, beating fast.

“You're a success with girls – and it's always the beauties who hit on you...” She kissed Chis on the tip of nose. Chris blushed deeper. “You mean she's...?” “You bet”, Tobin whispered.

Chis toyed with Tobin's hair. “Why don't you show me where you stay?”

“Now?”

Chis nodded. “Now.”

***

Ali took off her glasses, rubbed her nose and put the glasses back.

“The crane should be moved towards the bow. Doing this we'll get more room for the new foundation.” She traced the lines of the diagram on the laptop screen while the ship rattled and groaned, pushing it's way through the heavy seas. “Here are the numbers. And...” She caught the laptop which had started to slip from the table. “And...” She had trouble to concentrate because for a second she had touched Ash's hand.

“Here...” Ash put back the wireless mouse which had landed in her lap. “Sorry...” She had brushed against Ali's wrist and for a second wanted to take it and pull Ali towards her and kiss her... Instead she pulled back her hand as if it had been burned. “Sorry”, she said again and meant that it had been a bad idea to take Ali here instead to her cabin, just because there was a plate with sandwiches under plastic wrap and fork and knife laid out at the head of the large table, the captain's place, her place, but suddenly all this seemed to be absurd.
Midnight had passed a while ago, and the officers' mess was deserted. The cold seemed to come from the neon lighting but it was the cold people felt when they wanted to be in bed but had to stay up, when they wanted to be in each other's arms but weren't.

They sat in a corner where the light seemed to be a little warmer, and because they were together they had created some space of their own, small, somewhere between day and night, where the world was shut out, the ship's sway and surge, the bad weather.

Ali took off her glasses again. She shut down the laptop, closed it and put it back into her daypack. All the time she had known that Ash wasn't listening, and she hadn't cared but enjoyed to be so close to her again. She reached out to collect the papers, and their fingers touched again, and this time she didn't pull her hand back.

“When did you sleep last time?”

Ash shrugged.

“Let me get you the food.” She stood up.

“I'm not hungry”, Ash lied.

“Yes, you are. And you're dead tired.” She pulled the sweater over her head and dropped it on the chair, and Ash couldn't get her eyes off her, off the body under the tight blue T-shirt, the body she knew so well, the beautiful neck she had kissed, and when Ali opened the ribbon which held her hair together and shook it loose Ash couldn't believe how beautiful she was, and she wanted to press her lips on Ali's skin, roughened a little by wind and water, and she knew she would taste the salt of the sea.

Ali went to the large table, swaying with the ship's movements, as if dancing to the rhythm of the waves, and Ash watched her as she picked up the the plate of sandwiches, the coffee pot and the mug and came back and placed everything in front of Ash.

“Okay...” She ripped off the wrapper. “Let's see...” She inspected the work of the ship's cook and raised an eyebrow. “That's all they can do for the Captain?”

Ash smiled. “That's what everybody else gets.” She leaned back and for a moment closed her eyes. Tired, Ali thought. Tired, cold, alone. And she understood that Ash's loneliness was the armor against all which had hurt her and still hurt, and that behind the armor she was still dreaming of love and affection, still longing for tenderness. She took a piece of sandwich. “Come on”, she said. “Eat something.”

Ash opened her eyes. She took the piece from Ali's fingers and smiled.

Ali sighed. She opened the coffee pot and filled the mug. “At least this smells like the real thing”, she said when the ship suddenly leaned to starboard. She tried to catch the mug. “Shit!” hot coffee soaked her T-shirt and the mug hit the floor.

“I'm so sorry!” She blushed, steadied herself against the wall when the ship leaned to port. She ripped a few tissues from the pack on the table and went to her knees and vanished under the table. “Now look at this! What a mess!” She started to cover the puddle with tissues. “Gimme some more. I need to clean this up before somebody slips on...” She began to pick up the pieces.

She stopped because suddenly Ash was beside her, on her knees, under the table, and she looked into her eyes and...
They both started to talk, stopped, laughed.

“You first”, Ali said.

“No, you.”

They were silent, just looked at each other.

Kiss her! Ash thought. Forget what had happened and kiss her, kiss her like the first time you met her, and everything will be alright and... She didn't. She knew that, however badly she wanted it, she couldn't turn back time, undo what had been done, by just by pretending they were two girls with a crush, playing silly games under a table. She knew that it needed more to start all over again, that she needed to find the right words, pick the right moment, knew that right now she didn't know what to say, knew that this was not the place where a miracle would happen.

Ali lowered her eyes. She still trembled with anticipation, eager to feel Ash's lips on hers, her arms around her. But nothing happened. And suddenly she was aware of the wet T-shirt clinging to her ribs and the hard floor which hurt her knees. She felt the ship hit a wave, heard tons of water crash against the hull, heard the wind shriek and wail outside. She rolled the soaked tissues into a ball and sat down on the floor, too tired to get up. “Seems that I always spill coffee on your ship”, she said.

Ash sat down beside her. “A grown up woman with a degree and two kids and a captain - under a table on a dirty mess floor...” She put her arm around Ali's shoulder to make her more comfortable, and Ali leaned against Ash, enjoying her hard, powerful body. “I'll kick a few asses for the sloppy floor cleaning job”, Ash said. “By the way - how's this tech chick, the one who's trailing you like a doggy, the little butch with the crush on you?”

Ali kicked Ash's ankle. “That's not fair...”

Ash grinned. “Wouldn't be surprised if she crawled into your bunk and waits for you, wearing nothing but her butterfly tattoo and the cute little clit teaser perl she's got pierced through her tongue...”

Ali sat up, annoyed. She bumped her head against the table top. “Why are you talking like that?? Why are you so... mad??” She rubbed her skin.

Because I'm afraid! Ash wanted to yell. Afraid you went with Katja, afraid she gave you things I can't give you and not only in her bed! Afraid that she took you away into her own land where I can never reach you again!!

She closed her eyes again, suddenly exhausted by jealousy, by rage, and she didn't want to feel it anymore. “I'm sorry”, she said. “It's only... I was like her, as a girl. I would've done it, crawled into your bed, so fucking sure of myself that I'd have thought it would take just... a sassy move to make you eat pussy. I hate this piece of shit little-blonde-bitch attitude.”

Ali touched Ash's hair. “The girl Ashlyn's gone. Now you look very... take-no-shit-I'm-the-captain, sort of...” She ran her fingers through Ash's hair because she really liked it when the short hair brushed against her palm. Suddenly she ruffled it. “Yeah – that's better. She's back – at least some part of her.”

Ash smiled, tried to smooth her haircut but couldn't really and she gave up. “I didn't like her very much, the girl Ashlyn.”

“I would've”, Ali said.
“The girl Ashlyn thought she was tough and knew all the answers. But she was afraid of many things – of too many.”

“You were never afraid of anything.”

Ash laughed. “When it counted... the girl Ashlyn turned and ran. I hate her...”

“And you think you can get rid of her that easily?”

“She was always too scared to do the right thing.”

“But she's part of you, don't you see? And it's also her who makes you so strong and...”

“Strong?” Ash had to laugh. “Strong is what you are. To raise two kids, to care for a family...”

“Don't be silly.” Ali covered her face with her hands. “What kind of a mother am I? What will they remember, later? A woman, away for most of the time?” She shook her head. “You know - today's skype day... and I'm here, at sea, when I should be talking to the kids. It's those small things that count. They don't care who cooks the meals. But they care who reads a bedtime story, or tucks them in. Or pops up on a laptop screen to say 'hello' and 'sleep well' and 'be good' and 'I love you and will be back soon'.”

Ash held her close and she took Ali's hand and was amazed how small and delicate her wrist was. And suddenly she understood that Ali didn't need a lover – that would still leave her incomplete, vulnerable. Two people could do better than that, much better. They could be something for which Ash had no a name, but which, she suddenly knew, was strong, powerful and could take on easily whatever challenge life would come up with: they could be invincible.

***

Tobin had showered, twice. She had brushed her teeth, very carefully, had brushed her hair, also very carefully. She had used skin oil until there was no patch of skin left that wasn't shining like velvet.

Now she sat on the rim of the bathtub. She knew she had to do something but was scared stiff. Leave the bathroom and slip into the double bed? After what had happened two days ago at her place? Impossible. Stay here until... what? Chris got fed up and left?

Tobin bit a nail. She wanted to do the right thing but didn't know how. She considered brushing her teeth again when the bathroom door opened.

Chris stood in the door frame. “You gonna stay here all night?”

Tobin wanted to say something but her throat was tight, and it didn't help that Chris was naked.

She came into the bathroom and stood in front of Tobin and Tobin looked up to her and Chris took Tobin's hand. Tobin got up, the blood was hot in her face. “Come”, Chris said and she led the way and Tobin followed her. Hand in hand they walked across the corridor and through the bedroom door, like two girls in a fairy tale, entering the gate to the magic land.

Chris stopped in the middle of the bedroom. She took the hem of Tobin's T-shirt, pulled the shirt
over Tobin's head and dropped it on the floor.

Tobin was unable to move. Her heart was hammering, she felt Chris' eyes on her body, her cheeks were burning.

Chris led her to the bed and Tobin followed her and they laid down and the sheets were cold and crisp and Tobin wanted to switch off the light, but Chris stopped her.

“Don’t”, she whispered and her breath was teasing Tobin's ear and made her spine tingle, and suddenly Chris sat on top of her, flushed with excitement, and Tobin shut her eyes because Chris was so beautiful that it hurt, whereas she... She covered her breasts and her sex, and she wanted to cover her whole body because it was too hard to be sexy, her breasts too small, her legs too strong, her...

“Take your hands away”, Chris said. Tobin shook her head. “Take your...” Chris grabbed Tobin's wrists. Tobin squeezed her thighs together and started to giggle in panic.

“Take your...” Tobin squirmed under Chris, trying to get away from her fingers, giggling and unable to stop it. She panted with surprise when Chris suddenly slapped her, playfully, but hard enough to show that she meant it. Tobin stared at Chris and Chris stared back. “I said...” Chris was panting, her voice choked. “I said take away...” She slapped her again, still playfully but hard enough to make Tobin blink. Slowly, almost reluctantly Tobin took away her hands and suddenly her nipples hardened and she felt that she was wet.

“Yes”, Chris said. “Oh yes, that's better.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, as if she was talking to herself.

Then Tobin felt her lips, as if a butterfly touched her. Tobin had never been kissed like that before, and she had always thought that it was only a tale, the legendary first kiss, shy and, at the same time, greedy; without skill but already with the promise of madness and ecstasy. And legend wanted it to be exchanged between two very young and very beautiful girls, exploring the land of lust and passion – and not between a queer grounded chopper pilot about to loose her job and her boss' straight wife.

Also, according to Tobin's book of lesbian lore, it should have been Chris who was trembling and shy and confused, while Tobin was bold and strong and demanding – and not the other way round and she was about to protest...

Lesbian lore evaporated when Chris' tongue slipped between Tobin's lips, and Chris touched the rock hard peaks of Tobin's breasts, gently pushing, just to feel how hard they were, making them throb, making them harden even more while her tongue began to explore, deeper.

Her body was hot against Tobin's, seemed to melt against her naked skin, perfectly matching in shape and size, and they kissed, their lips joined, so tightly sealed that each girl was no longer able to tell herself apart from her lover, tongues rolling, darting, probing and dancing – then resting along each other, only to play again, chasing, flicking, slipping back into their dark shelters and pursued by the other, then pushing forward again, hunting the recoiling intruder into the warm depth and...

They suddenly parted, gasping for air, looking at each other.

“You taste good”, Chris whispered. Her voice was rasping, her throat choked by lust, and Tobin looked at her face which suddenly seemed new and strange, the eyes dark with passion, wide, the lips soft and wet, slightly parted, the tip of the tongue showing, as if impatient to taste more.
She ran a fingertip along Tobin's body, first touching her lips, then tracing the line of her jaw, of her throat, excited, her heart racing, delighted by the smallest detail: the curve of her lashes, the moisture on her lips, the tiny hairs on her skin which seemed to bristle, the drops of sweat between Tobin's breasts, which she picked up with her fingertips, and, unable to resist, she closed her eyes and licked her fingers to taste the salty flavor.

With fingers, lips and tongue, feeling, and teasing, seeing and listening she traveled on, down Tobin's belly, down her legs, learning about the different places, some hard and strong, others soft and delicate, and even the wrinkles of her soles delighted her. Then she returned, first kissing Tobin's ankles, then her knees, then her thighs, and panting, as if exhausted from a long voyage, she laid down between Tobin's legs, and for a moment she closed her eyes, her senses flooded with taste and fragrance, reeling. She listened to wind and rain, hitting the windows, she listened to her own heartbeat, to her blood, pulsing though her veins.

Then she did what she had wanted to do since that morning when she had watched Tobin sleep – she laid her cheek against the plump mound, and when she felt the soft, moist, and hot flesh she trembled.

She cupped Tobin's sex, which was warm, soft, like a little bird, and she held it, gently, as if afraid to crush it, so delicate, pulsing in her hand. With the tip of two fingers she opened the swollen folds, tenderly, gasping with delight as the soft inner lips unfolded, and with the tip of her tongue she touched the soft petals, and the taste of a woman's sex hit her like a drug.

Slowly she began to learn the language of Tobin's body, listening, as Tobin revealed her deepest and best guarded secrets, embedded in the memory of her body, learned of joy and tears, lust and pain, of loneliness and longing. And with kisses and caresses, with lips and tongue, she told her lover that there was nothing to fear.

Tobin arched as something hot and throbbing flooded the spot where her thighs met, then filled her belly and made her gasp for breath and pushed her on that slippery slope which inevitably led to sweet oblivion and nothing to stop it, and it came like a sudden impact, and she screamed, surprised, as if she couldn't believe what happened to her, her scream turning into a groan as she surrendered to what was intense like pain and at the same time made her shake with pleasure.

She surfaced gasping, as if from under a breaking wave, opened her eyes. She saw Chris' face, close to hers, a smile on her lips, and she moaned as she felt Chris lips on hers again, tasting of the place where she had been, felt her hands on her breasts, felt her nipples grow again against Chris' palms...

And she was about to surrender again, to her power, her dominance, her magic.

She began to struggle, grabbed Chris' wrist, stopped her warm, exploring fingers, heard her pant with frustration, then snarl with anger. She had underestimated Chris' trained body. She found herself pinned to the sheets again, Chris on top, mounting her like huge cat which was still hungry, insatiable, unwilling to give up her prey

Tobin got hold of Chris' hair and pulled. Chris' shrieked when she was suddenly rolled on her back, kicking, writhing, her nails hurting Tobin. Her teeth caught Tobin's lower lip and that hurt, too, but Tobin didn't let go, held on to her wrists, and Chris sucked in her breath when Tobin licked her armpits, slowly running her tongue over the soft, warm skin.

She moaned, spread wide, panted when Tobin touched the the most vulnerable part of her body where the nerves lay almost bare, only covered by the thinnest, most delicate skin, where she was hot and wet and soft and swollen, Tobin probing, circling, searching the slippery passage, guided by the flow of juice, and Chris was sinking into a sea of light and happiness, slowly, and there was nothing
she could do, nothing she wanted to do.

Whatever Tobin had feared was gone. She made love to Chris like a dancer following a tune: fast or slow, hard or soft, gentle or cruel – with perfect harmony she picked up the rhythm of Chris' body, of her heartbeat, of her pulsing blood, of her breath, and Tobin no longer had to think what to do and how to do it right, and Chris' heels, her curled toes, dug into Tobin's back while Chris demanded more and more, and Tobin pushed Chris higher and higher, and Chris wrapped her legs around Tobin, telling her that she wanted to feel her deep inside, that she wanted to end in the blinding flash of orgasm, and when wind and rain thrashed against the window it was as if she rode on the storm, whipped by the rain into a new frenzy while the storm's energy pricked her wet skin like a thousand million needles, and she climaxed as if the storm had blown open a window and sweet air filled her lungs, and her heart was suddenly beating with a new rhythm, more powerful than ever before.

Tobin felt Chris' nails dig into her shoulders, then her teeth cut into her flesh, over her left breast, and she knew that it would leave a tiny scar, a mark, which would never go away.

***

Life jackets, boots, safety harnesses covered the floor.

Pat held up a survival suit as if she was trying on a piece of haute couture, haute couture made of a heavy, neoprene lined fabric, designed to give about twenty minutes more to live in the ice-cold water of the Atlantic...

“Nice”, Ali said. “Gimme the address where you shop for these gorgeous things.”

She was on the floor, like Pat in socks and thermal underwear, trying to stuff her laptop into a waterproof bag.

Pat struck a pose, then stuck out her tongue. She dropped the suit, looked at the big watch at her wrist. “Two hours to go”, she said, suddenly loosing her balance when the ship leaned to port. She landed in Ali's arms and both rolled over the floor and were stopped by the wall, laughing.

“Better stay down here”, Ali said. “It's the only place to... Woaah!” She held on to the next solid thing before she slid back to the opposite wall. They began to giggle when they saw one of the Tamil deckhands in the doorframe staring at them: two girls, giggling, Ali holding on to a table leg which was bolted to the floor, Pat holding on to her, about to pull down her the long underpants.

“Krieger?” The man had to clear his throat. “The captain wants to see you.”

Pat couldn't stop giggling. “The scary captain? What've you done?”

“Spilled coffee over her ship.” Ali was on her feet again, steadying herself against the tabletop.

“I don't think she'll forgive you. You better stay with me.”

Ali smiled. “I'll take the risk.” She slipped into her large fleece, waved to the guy at the door. “Wait a sec...” She stepped into her trainers, tied the laces. “Okay...” She winked at Pat who was still on the floor, grinning. “Behave yourself, while I'm away.”

She followed the man in the orange overall down the corridor. The man stopped at the open door of
the captain’s office, and Ali saw Ash behind the desk and her heart was beating faster, and, without thinking, she smoothed down the fleece as if she wore a dress and wanted to look good... She blushed, suddenly aware of what she was doing – like a girl with a crush on a cool chick, she thought, but nothing could turn the X-large fleece into a dress or turn her long underpants into something else than a pair of... well, long underpants.

“Captain - Mrs Krieger...”

Ali looked up from the computer screen. “Okay.” The deckhand turned, wanted to leave but Ash's voice stopped him. “Cleaning of the mess floor - what's the status?”

“Almost finished, Captain. Should be okay for lunch.”

Ash nodded and the man left and Ali stepped into Ash’s office and walked straight to the window which faced forward and gave a magnificent view of the sea and the sky. The clouds were heavy with rain and blocked most of the morning light. Big waves came towards the ship, whipped by the wind, but in a steady pattern, and the ship was no longer tossed and kicked.

“Deeper water?”

Ash got up from behind her desk. She closed the door and joined Ali.

“Yeah. Plus: the cyclone changed its course. Only a bit, but we'll get a couple of hours more before hell breaks loose. Meaning we have a better chance to get you safely onto the rig.” She put her hands on Ali’s shoulders and Ali leaned against her. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair ruffled, and Ash brushed a strand of it away from her face.

“Looks as if you two are having fun”, Ash said.

“We're rolling on the floor - one of my favorites.”

“You're gorgeous”, Ash said into Ali's ear, her voice low. “Even in this kind of underwear.”

“You let me come here to say just this?” Ali laughed. “I'm flattered. But I would've come anyway – to say good bye.”

Ash kissed her hair. “I know.” She turned Ali around, smiling. “But that's not the reason you're here.” She took her hand. “Come...” She led her to the desk. “Sit down.”

The chair was of the executive type and the leather deep and soft, and suddenly Ali realized how tired she was and how much her body ached from fighting against the ship's pitch and yaw, roll and sway.

Ash pointed to the computer screen and Ali looked at some kind of start page, showing a logo which looked like a... space gadget?

“Satellite link”, Ash said. “Iridium network.” She clicked a button and the Iridium page vanished and a window appeared on the screen which was very much like...

“Skype time”, Ash whispered in her ear. “Don't let your kids wait.”

Ali stared. “You mean...”

Ash winked, then walked to the door. “I leave you alone. Let me know when you're finished.”

“Don't... please!” Ali reached out to Ash, almost desperate. “Please... I'd love you to stay.”
Ash frowned, hand on door knob. “You really think that's a good idea?”

***

Saskia was half dressed for Kindergarten, and Ali’s little boy still had a napkin hanging from his neck. The napkin showed a bunny which beamed kind of insanely at Ali and Ash.

Ali’s dad adjusted the camera.

“Surprise, surprise”, he said. “My beautiful girl appears when nobody expects her.” He poked Seanie’s tummy. “Look – there's mommy!”

Saskia kept staring at her dress and pulled at one of the buttons as if she wanted to tear it off.

“Say hi to your mom”, her grandmother said.

Saskia shook her head.

“Hey, big girl. What's wrong?” Ali leaned forward as if this could bring her closer to her little daughter.

Saskia still twisted the button. “You didn't come. You promised. But you didn't come.” There were tears running down her cheek.

Ali’s fingers trembled. “I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I had to work...”

“You promised!!”

Ash had the visitor chair tilted against the wall. She looked into her mug. She felt the little girl's fear: to go alone to a new and strange place where she knew nobody and nobody knew her. She felt the little girl's outrage: she had been let down by her mother. And at the same time she felt Ali’s pain, which was so intense that Ash bit her lips. And still – she envied her because she was part of a family and, much more intense than the pain, there was something else which Ash could feel: never before had she seen Ali so warm and alive, so caring.

This is not for you, she thought. You shouldn't be here, you're intruding. She put the mug down and got out of her chair.

Ali grabbed her wrist and pulled her back and Ash sat down again and Ali didn’t let go of her hand.

“You're a big girl now... And grandma told me that your first day at Kindergarten was just great and... why don't you tell me all about it?”

Saskia suddenly frowned. “Mommy... your mug is moving!”

Ali stopped the mug. She laughed. “I'm on a ship, sweetheart, at sea.”

“Oh My Gawd!” Ali’s Mother sat bolt upright. “You're telling us that... there are waves which make things move??”

“Well - it's a bit rough right now but nothing unusual.”

“A bit rough?? I'm not stupid, girl. What are you doing out there in a... gale and...”
Ali tried to sound calm and reasonable. “It's perfectly safe and very comfortable. Don't upset the kids and...” She tried to switch to cheerful. “Look, I want you to meet somebody...”

Ash shook her head, her lips formed a silent NO! But Ali grabbed her shirt and pulled her in front of the camera. “This is Ashlyn Harris. She's the Captain of the ship. Say hello to her.”

Nobody said a word and three pairs of eyes stared at Ashlyn. Only Seanie looked at his right foot and tried to put it into his mouth. Ash wore a blue T-shirt with 'Captain' printed across her back but that was invisible for the camera. What Ali's family saw was that the T-shirt was worn, the color faded, and that it was of wife beater type, giving a good view of her bare arms and the tattoos: nothing to boost the street credit of a girl which claimed to be a captain and looked like some tough chick of a cheap motel's cleaning crew, and Ali caught herself thinking 'why the fuck doesn't she wear this sexy blue sweater with the smart golden bars' but immediately cursed herself.

Saskia stared at Ash's short hair. Her face mirrored the disapproval of her grandmother. “A captain has a uniform. That's a T-shirt.”

Ash managed a smile. “I'm sorry. I didn't know I'd meet you – I'd put on my uniform if I'd known...”

Saskia simply ignored her. She stared at Ali. “When do you come back?”

Ali cleared her throat. “In a few days, sweetheart. I promise. When my job is done I'll come back and...”

Ali’s mother was not to be put off. “Captain! What's my girl doing on your ship?”

Ash knew trouble when she saw it. “We are bringing her to an offshore platform called Haakon Bravo.”

“Why aren't you going by helicopter?” Ali's mother talked to Ali but it was Ash she meant. “You went by helicopter all the other times...”

Ali was slowly getting desperate. This was moving in a direction where she didn't want to go. “Look, Ma...”

Ash tried to help. “Helicopter flights are canceled. So Ali's going by ship.”

“Canceled?? Why canceled?”

“Ma! that's not really helpful...” Ali didn't need this. She wanted the conversation go back to family matters, like...

Ash didn't budge. She suddenly wanted to protect Ali. “It's all due to the weather”, she said. “We can do things a helicopter cannot do. We move very comfortably even in a number ten gale so there's no need to worry.”

“Don't tell me when I have to worry or not! Don't...”

She stopped when Ali's dad put his hand on her arm. He smiled, looked at the emblem on Ash's T-shirt. “Aurora Borealis. What kind of vessel is it, Captain?”

Ash relaxed a bit. “It's a multi purpose vessel. Offshore platform service. Anchor handling, towing, supply.”

“A tough job, right?”
“Sometimes. But most of the time it's routine work, hauling equipment - like a floating truck.”

Ali's mother took a deep breath. “Why couldn't you just get a job on dry land? Like everybody else? I'm not talking about me, or your dad. But you've got two kids who need a mother - and you're out there risking your life...”

Ali was angry. “Ma! Please... stop scaring the kids! And it's not fair to put the blame on Ashlyn – I mean: Captain Harris...”

Ali's dad tried to smooth things. “I'm sure Captain Harris will carry her safely to...”

“What do you know about what's safe and what's simply irresponsible?” The voice of Ali's mother was barely more than a whisper, and suddenly Ash could feel that Ali's mom was simply scared.

***

Ali played with a pen, staring at the blank screen.

“Didn't go too well, right?” Ash push back the chair and leaned against the wall. She needed a hot coffee but her coffee was cold. She drank it anyway: better than nothing.

Suddenly Ali began to chuckle. “All helicopter flights are canceled due to bad weather. No need to worry...” She began to laugh. “I thought I'd die!!”

Ash blushed. “I'm sorry. I'm not very good when it comes to family things, you know...” What she meant was: she's right, your little girl – I'm just a T-shirt with the word 'Captain' on it. I'm a danger for others, for people who trust me. Even in front of your family I got you in trouble. You better stay away from me. “Your daughter – Saskia... she doesn't like me. And your mother...”

Ali smiled sadly. “Saskia's jealous. She...”

“Why? I mean...”

“She knows”, Ali said. “About us...”

“Are you kidding??” Ash got up, she put her arm around Ali's shoulder.

“She knows. She feels things – she doesn't know what it is, she's just a little girl, but she feels it and...” She sounded weary. “She's alone too much, sometimes she's like a grown up.”

“Your mother hates me. My haircut, my tattoos, what I am...”

Ali shook her head. “Don't be silly! She hates ME!! She hates me being away, having no husband, hates me for ruining my marriage, the life of my kids, the life of my parents...”

“Stop it!” Ash pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and gave it to Ali. “It's just not true. You know what? I think she loves you – so much that she's scared to death because you insist on going to this heap of junk and... I can't blame her... Look - I'm not even sure we can get you and the girl off the ship and on the rig. Come back with me...” She caressed Ali's cheek. “Why don't you just let Little Blonde Bitch handle it – I mean if she's so crazy about riding a gale on Outpost Bravo...”

“Don't start again!” Ali blew her nose. “I have to and you know it. So lay off...”
Ash opened a drawer of her desk and reached into it.

“What's that?” Ali touched what Ash had placed in front of her. “Is this...?” She gently, almost tenderly ran a finger along the back of the soft, green, fluffy crocodile. It was small and worn, but because of that it was more than just a little girl's toy, it was a companion who had shared all the tears, all the joy, all the anger and fear, the good times and the bad in the life of Ash.

“It's still with you??”

“It always protected me”, Ash said. “I want you to have it. I'll take care of you.

Ali had to clear her throat. “And who'll take care of you?”

“Why not... you?” Ash bit her lip. What a piece of stupid nonsense. “Sorry”, she said. “I know your job's almost done and you'll have to...” Ash stopped, unable to go on, unable to say that she knew that Ali would have to leave in less than a week - because until a moment ago she somehow had erased it from her mind, but suddenly the thought of seeing Ali go away made her sick.

“The job Katja offered me...” Ali looked at her pen. “If I say yes I'd be able to stay.”

Ash took a deep breath “You taking it?”

“I know you don't like her. And she's... dangerous. But I have to think about the kids, about my parents - they shouldn't bring them up. It's me who's responsible!” Ali tried to read in Ash's face. “It's a good job, a fair contract. And... we can be together, see each other whenever...”

Ash stared at the floor. And then what? she wanted to say. You'll see her every day, at the office, at her pool parties, at the meetings, the business lunches, working late, you and she... She wanted to say: and I'll have to watch while she slowly takes you away from me? But suddenly she was tired of all this, the jealousy, the anger, which, like a dark cloud, obscured what was important: to be with her. “You're doing the right thing”, she said “And I'd love to know you're around. You – and your kids.”

***

“So... you liked it?” Tobin kissed Chris' ear.

Chris giggled.

Tobin nibbled on her earlobe. “On a scale from one to ten?”

Chris closed her eyes. “Weeell...”

Tobin kissed the spot where the neck joined the jaw and made Chris purr like a cat. “Don't tell me you didn't like it.”

Chris frowned. “Can I split my rating? Points for technique and creativity?”

Tobin bit her neck. “You bitch...”

Chris smiled. “What do you think?”
“It was the best sex you ever had...”

Chris stretched. “Exactly.”

Tobin leaned back and crossed her arms under her head.

Chris grabbed her hair and pulled. “Get that smug look off your face! You're not that good!!” She rolled on top of Tobin and played with her hair. “I just love to be close to you, you smell good, you taste good, I feel warm and safe when you hold me – so the sex is good as well. That's got nothing to do with your... piloting skills.”

Suddenly Tobin jumped up and out of the bed. Naked she walked to kitchen. She came back with a bottle and two glasses. She sat down on the edge of the bed and filled the glasses with champagne, some of it spilling onto the sheets. She gave one glass to Chris. „To us“, Tobin said and raised her glass. She wanted to drink but Chris put her hand on Tobin’s wrist. They listened to the rain and wind thrashing against the window.

„To the sailors“, Chris said. „...who are at sea.“

„To the sailors“, Tobin said.

Chris didn't drink. “And to those who have to travel...”

Tobin’s fingers suddenly trembled. She put the glass on the floor. “You... don't have to go back, to the coast, to the house”, she said.

Chris put her glass down, too. “I've nowhere else to go.”

“I'll call 'Neetha", Tobin said. “She'll set you up for a few days more, here. And you can think it over and... And when the chopper's fixed we can go back together and...”

“And then what? I don't even have clothes, besides... this.” Chris pointed at her dress, crumpled on the floor. “I have to go back.”

“How? You've got no money.”

Chris took her glass and sipped some champagne, which was good and immediately made her head spin because she had forgotten to eat since... she couldn't remember. “Stop a truck?”

“Don't be silly...” Tobin tried to be serious but had to laugh. She drank from her glass, then got up again and rummaged in her day pack. “Here....” She came back and held up her credit card. “We'll Rent a car for you.” Again she sat on the edge of the bed. “Listen - go back, get your things. But don't stay at the house. You don't have to see him.” She traced the line of Chris' breast with her fingertip. Then she put the credit card next to Chris leg. And a key. “You can stay at my place. And when I'm back we'll find a way to...”

Chris touched the key but didn't take it. “Look...” She leaned against Tobin's shoulder. “It wasn't an accident, my marriage. I wanted to be his wife. He was there when I was alone and frightened. He helped me when nobody else did. Just because it didn't work out doesn't mean... I want to end it properly. I owe him that much.” She closed her eyes to feel Tobin even better, and she smiled when Tobin wrapped her arms around her. “I'm not going back to him”, she said, delighted by Tobin's body, warm against her skin. What she wanted to say was: You turned my life upside down. I'm in love with you, with a girl, she wanted to say. And I'm frightened, and I don't know if I landed in an even greater mess than before - or if this is something good, a road to follow, even a future. I'll have to find out, she wanted to say. But I have to find out on my own. There's no other way. She played
with Tobin's hair. “I'm happy now, with you”, she said.

“And what about tomorrow? And the day after tomorrow? And...”

Chris put a finger on Tobin's lips. “What's wrong with... Now? What more do you want than what we have now, here?”

Tobin kissed Chris's fingers. “It's the greatest thing that ever happened to me. I just want it to go on.”

“Look... I just don't want to rush it. I think we should take our time, to come to terms with this. I want us to be really sure that this is what we want, what we need.”

Tobin took Chris' face in her hands and looked into her eyes. “I want it. I need it. Ask me again in two months – I'll tell you the same!”

Chis kissed her. “I'm in a deeper mess than you can imagine”, she said. “And I don't want to pull you into it. That wouldn't be fair. And it would turn our... thing into hell, believe me.”

Tobin frowned “What do you mean: Thing? It's not a thing we have... Come on, what's wrong? Tell me.”

Chis shook her head. “No. I can't tell you. Not now. Just... give me and yourself some time.”

Tobin took a deep breath. “There's a spare key with Edda – girl next door. I'll call her to let you in if you...” She didn't say what she wanted so badly to happen that her voice trembled. “But you can't go in this.” She pointed at Chris' dress. She rolled on her tummy, wriggling a very pretty bare butt while she rummaged her bag which she had pulled from under the bed. “Wait a second...” Tobin threw dirty socks and underwear to left and right, kicking with her feet to keep balance. “Always take this along when I airlift company big-shots. You never know what's gonna pop up in their creative minds next. So... if it means pilot stays overnight I like to do a bit of running...” She blew a strand of hair away from her eyes. “Here...”, she held up a clean T-shirt. “Take this and...” Running pants, socks and a pair of trainers followed. “... and this. It'll get cold.” She rolled on her back, holding up a fleece. “Should fit, it's extra L. Well, better try it on...”

Before she could think Chris was lying on top of her, caressing her tussled hair. She kissed Tobin and Tobin wrapped her arms around her. “I just hate to see you going back. I doesn't feel... right.”

“I have to”, Chris whispered in her ear. “You know - there's somebody waiting for me to come back and get him.” She laughed when she saw Tobin frown. “My teddy bear. Sits in my bedroom, on my bed. Got it on my third birthday. Been together ever since. Never a harsh word, no shouting...“

“Your bedroom?? You've got a bedroom of your own?”

Chis shrugged. “We have separate bedrooms. Civilized people don’t share a bed. That's what Angus says,“

Tobin was speechless. That was new to her.

***

“You okay? For a moment I thought you'd go down and into the sea but...” There was static on the
line, and Ash had to press the headphones against her ears.

“Just a few bruises.” Together with Ali’s voice came the noise of machinery. “And when I slipped I lost a bit of skin on my hands and knees but they patched me up and I’m fine now.”

“You mean a paramedic fondled your leg? Some girls have all the luck!” Making it sound funny didn’t help: Ash still felt her heart skip a beat when she thought of what had happened.

Ali laughed but even through the noise and the static Ash heard how tired and worn out she was. “How’s he weather?”

Ash didn’t have to look out of the window: she felt it because she had to hold on to the armrest to stay in her chair. “Shitty. And getting worse. But don’t tell your mom.”

“At least the floor under my feet isn’t moving. But the noise... it’s incredible.”

Ash pushed the chair back against the wall, put a foot against the table top and tried to somehow wedge herself between desk and wall. “How’s Little Blonde Bitch?”

“Banged her head when getting off the ship and looks ruffled and really sweet, and she likes the band-aid on her forehead very much and is proud of herself, and she's having a great time.” Ali stopped and Ash knew that she smiled, the smile she loved so much. “And I bet you're enjoying yourself, too – riding roller coaster in a force ten storm”, Ali said.

Ash grinned. “Take care, will you?”

“Take care, Captain.” Ali’s voice suddenly began to fade.

Ash closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Don't run away again, okay?”

“I won't. I promise.”

Ash cut the connection but listened for a few moments to the static as if it was an echo of Ali’s voice, a trace, like the fragrance of her hair or skin which Ash sometimes found on a shirt – or on a pillow.

She put down the headphones and stared at the sea. It was white, foam covered the surface, driven by the wind, visibility was poor. The waves came from aft, thirty to forty feet high, with overhanging crests. Some lifted the ship up, then pulled it down, others crashed against the vessel, the thunder reverberating on the steel structure, on Ash's body. The storm wasn't force ten. It was force eleven and soon would be twelve and go beyond.

The ship shook, a white wall of water erupted from the bow and crashed against the window when the ship surged down the slope of a wave and into the trough, while another wave, just missing the ship, for a brief moment towered above it, blacking out the daylight.

The electrical engineer stepped into Ash's office, fighting for balance.

„Fuses still blow“, he said. „Two crew checked the Twenty-two line, found nothing.“ He unfolded a diagram of the ship’s power lines, caught the armrest of the Ash’s chair when the ship suddenly swayed to starboard. „Idea is that there’s water in the tunnel, here. We’re going to check the tunnel. Have to dismantle the plating here and here. Two more crew necessary.“

Ash looked at the plan. „Okay“, she said. „And you want us to slow down.“

The Electrical Engineer shrugged.
„Talked to Chiefy?“ Ash said.

The engineer shook his head.

„Tell him what you need. I'm okay with whatever you come up with - as long as we have enough power for steering and to compensate displacement. And whatever you want to do has to happen within the next three hours, because...“ She gave him the weather fax. The electrical engineer looked at it, then whistled through his teeth. „Yeah“, Ash said. „Exactly.“

The electrical engineer held on to the desk as the ship crashed into the next trough. Water broke on the superstructure, half of the sip suddenly submerged, and for a split second it seemed as if the ship would never ever surface again. But then it shook free, tons of water cascading from the scuppers.

The electrician made it to the door, held on to it, then vanished from the office. Ash's lips were a thin line. What should have been a fast run home had turned into a race between her and a Northern Atlantic storm. She had done this before. And lost.

***

The fuses were still blowing, the electrical engineer and his crew had found nothing, and Ash had lost the race about an hour ago. She was on the bridge, in her chair, her first officer sitting next to her. It was almost dark outside, the clouds blocking most of the daylight. There was no longer white foam on the surface because there was no longer a surface, and what she saw had nothing to do with what people called 'waves': the ocean seemed to be ripped apart, not water but something solid, broken into huge pieces which were shifting, moving, tumbling, hammering the ship.

Ash checked the engine workload and speed over ground, she read the latest weather fax. An hour ago the storm had changed course again and was closing in on her.

“You want to go... into it?” Daltry knew that it was a bad move to ask questions when he got an order from the captain but he couldn't help it.

“You have a better idea?” Ash snapped.

Daltry shook his head.

Ash zoomed out on the navigation screen and suddenly the sea seemed crammed with objects. A cluster of transponder codes was hovering close to the shore: ships running for shelter.

„Do you want to get stuck in this with a Beaufort twelve storm blowing up your ass?”

Daltry shook his head again.

She scrolled the map until it showed the northern coast - the sea was covered by a tight pattern of symbols: the offshore platforms.

„I don't know how you feel about this”, she said putting her finger on the rig markers. “But for my taste there are too many hard things.“ She looked at Daltry who didn't dare to look back but felt her eyes on him, and he didn't like it and said nothing, and Ash stared just to make him sweat for asking stupid questions. „Take her out“, Ash said. „Open sea. I want space and deeper water.“
„Aye, Cap.“ Daltry was relieved. He set the autopilot to the new direction, Ash watching the line which projected the ship’s course move with each click. He gave two more clicks pointing the bow directly into the waves.

„Yeah, Ash said. „That’s it. And now let’s get away from here.“

***

It had started a couple of hours ago and had become worse and worse and worse, and Ali could no longer sit at the table with the computer banks. She got up and walked to the window.

It was as good as dark outside, and she only saw her reflection on the glass, distorted, her face pale. Suddenly the clouds were ripped apart, and the in the gray daylight she saw a landscape which no longer resembled the sea but a place where mountains of gray metal marched from horizon to horizon, marched to a tune from hell which the storm played on the platform’s structure, howling, screeching and wailing, making the ears of the crew ring and the platform tremble.

Then it went dark again, the thin beam of a spotlight showing the sheets of rain and spray which were blown against the superstructure.

She leaned her head against the cold glass of the window. Thank God, she thought. Ash must be close to shore by now. She's almost home.

Ali walked back to the table, to the computer banks, as if this was a safe place.

What the sensors where recording was incredible, and they said that there was no safe place.

She saw the rage of the storm translated into columns of numbers, and she didn’t need the final computer model - she knew exactly what she would see once the raw data would be translated into dynamic 3D images: the platforms twisting, waving, like tentacles of a mad octopus, color coded force distribution making them shine like a psychedelic light show, hotspots of extreme tension burning red, running up and down the structures then fading away to yellow to blue only to flare up again.

She saw one sensor die, she watched the data which came in from the three CDIP buoys, translated into three black lines which crawled across the grid, showing maximum wave hight, printing a stairway of many steps on the screen which led higher and higher, now and then going down slightly only to peak even sharper, again and again brushing the red line which marked the platforms‘ maximum clearance - which meant that out there the top of the waves were almost touching the deck of the rig.

She slumped onto the chair, then pressed her hands against her ears, just to have a few moments of quiet but even now she heard, no, felt the forces of wind and sea hammer against the steel plating.

The small green crocodile sat on top of the computer screen and looked at Ali, and it seemed to be determined to keep evil away from her. But it was so small and what was outside was so huge, and Ali thought that today the job as good-luck charm was simply too big for such a little soft thing.

She closed her eyes and suddenly realized how exhausted she was, muscled tied into hard knots, nerves strung, vibrating. Only a moment, she thought. Only a moment...
She woke up and didn’t know where she was, and for a second she wanted to reach out to... Ash. Then she she remembered. She had fallen asleep hugging the keyboard. Her body ached when she slowly straightened herself.

She put on her glasses, checked the sensors‘ data timeline: apparently about an hour ago the storm had ceased.

She stood up, stretched, walked to the window. Still the gray, sharp crested waves rolled from the west towards the continent’s shore which was hidden behind the horizon.

A shadow suddenly swept through the air and she ducked, and suddenly she was afraid. She looked again. A huge seagull rode on the wind, for a moment suspended in the air close to the window and it’s yellow eyes seemed to stare at Ali.

What am I doing here? She thought. So far away from the smell of grass, of earth, of trees and flowers. So far away from the kids, the family. So far away from the one I love.

The bird was gone and Ali shivered. She needed a coffee. She put on her fleece, sat down and slipped into her trainers. While she tied the laces she looked at the screens again.

She had lost a couple of sensors, either washed away or damaged, the remaining still alive, still recording how the storm front moved away into the north sea and towards the land.

A separate screen showed the data of the three CDIP buoys about a mile westward from the platform, translating maximum wave crest height into three lines slowly moving across a timeline grid.

She stopped tying her laces. She stared at the CDIP screen. The three lines were rising and rising steeply and rising while she stared, and she felt her skin crawl as if something cold had touched her.

The chair crashed to the floor, and she was up and pushed the door open and dashed into the corridor running towards the stairs because she had to tell them that in a few moments...

Something shook the platform. Ali reeled, hit the left wall, then the other, then hit the floor. She grabbed the fire extinguisher, pulled herself up. She heard a noise behind her and turned.

A wall of water came into the corridor, through a gaping hole where the exit had been. A heart-stopping cold suddenly seemed to freeze her blood, the smell of the sea almost choking her, the water so cold that air humidity condensed instantly on all surfaces and turned the corridor into a dripping den.

The lights went out. She was lifted up almost gently and carried away. Then she crashed into the back wall, and suddenly there was water instead of air.

For those of you who just want to go on reading: here's a new story by me, starting on Tapas.io
because it's not fanfiction. (It's also a girl/girl thing and telling you that I'm giving away part of the plot. But since you've been with me for so long...). I'd love to have you with me on that new project.

The amazing cover art is by Tine Moellegard. Check out the original, full-size version on Deviantart.
The water was cold, and she was trying to swim back to the yacht, and Ash was standing on the deck watching her, and the yacht was drifting away, and Ali wanted to shout but couldn't, and Ash said "I told you to stay away from the main traffic channel." And then the shark came, and it had the green eyes of Stella Carson, and Ali felt the teeth cut into her body, and the pain was incredible, and Ash sailed away and watched while the green-eyed shark ripped her to shreds.

Ali woke up, gasping, wet, her body aching.

The room was small, the curtains drawn, a dim light shone close to her bed. She tried to remember where she was. She moved her head, and an incredible pain seemed to explode behind her eyes and made her squint.

Somebody was sitting close to the door, tall, a woman, in jeans and sweater and...

Suddenly a warm glow spread in Ali's chest and she felt tears run down her cheeks: Ash!

She pushed herself up on one elbow, wanted to say something but her throat was parched.

"Hey! You're back!!" Katja Olsson took off her reading glasses and put the phone away. "They called me when the helicopter brought you and the others in. You were asleep when I came here and the hospital guys said it's good when you're not alone when you wake up. So..."

Ali slumped onto bed.

"I brought a few things... Sorry – I let myself into your place... company apartment, that's how I got the key..." Katja held up a bag. "Hope I got the right stuff. Casual, no heels..." She smiled. "Gawd - I'm so glad you're back..." Her smile was warm. "Wanted to be the first voice you hear when you wake up from this nightmare."

Ali closed her eyes. Katja wasn't the first voice she had heard. The first voice which had told her that she wasn't dead had been the voice of the rig's fire and rescue team: "Krieger? Krieger?? Talk to me Krieger!!" And they had started to pull her from the debris and she had screamed in pain. "Krieger's back!" The voice had said. "Listen Krieger, you'll be okay but we need to get you out of here."

Katja Olsson came to the bed and sat on the edge.

"They say there's nothing wrong with you. MRI scans show nothing but some old fractures of your ribs, causing the pain."

Ali wanted to say something, but her throat hurt, as if she had swallowed dry desert sand.

"Hang on..." Katja got up and came back with a glass of water. "They say you need to drink a lot." When Ali took the glass her hands started to tremble. "Easy..." Katja steadied the glass and held Ali's head while she drank, spilling most of the water on Katja's sweater.

"Where is she?" Ali croaked.

"The girl? She's here, too, on second floor, intensive care. Broken leg. The problem is hypothermia. They put her to sleep under an electric blanket, to get her temperature up. She'll be alright."

Ali's voice seemed to come from far away. "Girl...?"

Ali shook her head, wanted to say something but her throat hurt like hell. She took the glass and drank again, swallowed too much too fast, coughed, spilling water over the blanket. “The Captain...” She could only whisper. “Ash... Where's she?” She drank again but couldn't swallow.

Katja took the glass away. She held Ali's head while she coughed up the water, then dabbed her mouth with a tissue. “Situation's still kinda... messy”, she said. “Still trying to get things sorted. Lot of damage...” She gave the glass back to Ali. “Easy. You swallowed too much seawater.”

Ali drank, then pushed the glass away. “Where is she?” Her voice failed.

Katja avoided Ali's eyes. “Hang on, I'll get you some more water.”

Ali shook her head, cleared her throat. “She must've come back hours ago. I mean...”

Katja still didn't look at her. “Listen... You shouldn't worry too much. Everything will be alright.”

Ali's head was aching. “Where is she??” She tried to get out of the bed but only came as far as sitting on the edge, trembling, suddenly too weak. Katja sat beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. She was silent for a moment. Then she said: “We don't know where the ship is.”

Ali shook her head if this could erase what she had heard and what she couldn't believe. “What are you talking about? She was on her way back when she called me...”

Katja had told the grosses lies without flinching but now she found it impossible to lie to Ali. “Communication broke down during the night. Then they lost the ship's transponder signal.” She held Ali closer. “That doesn't mean that... They say it happens in a storm like this. Trouble with power lines, antennas destroyed, some electronic defect - you name it.”

Ali didn't say a word. She took the glass, wanted to drink from it, didn't.

“No need to worry”, Katja said. “Look... we've got no SOS, we've got no EPIRB signal. Believe me - it's only a matter of time and they pop up in the harbor, a bit ruffled, ready to party...” Her voice trailed away: 'cheerful' didn't help and since she had started to tell the truth she had no other choice than go all the way. She took a deep breath. “All we know is that she didn't go back. She steered right into the storm.”

The glass fell to floor.

Ali looked at her hand. She didn't feel it: it was numb, paralyzed by a cold which suddenly came from inside Ali, from where her heart seemed to have stopped.

“Into the storm”, Ali repeated, while the cold spread.

“Probably her best option. But to turn the vessel right into... Geeeez! What a cold-blooded bitch. Wouldn't be surprised if she did sink the yacht off Saint-Denise and split a fat wad of insurance cash with her lover.”

***

A wall of glass separated visitors from the intensive care unit. Patty Doyle lay on her back, her eyes...
closed. She was covered with a blanket from which cables ran to a control panel. Two infusion bags fed a clear liquid into her veins. A nurse checked the monitors and made entries on a clipboard.

Ali looked at Pat. The girl's face was pale, her cheeks sharply defined. And although Pat's heartbeat was recorded on a computer screen it seemed to Ali that she was no longer alive. And more than ever she looked so much like... Ash, so much that Ali reached out to touch her, but she touched glass, as if an invisible border kept Ali away from her, like the border which separated the living from the dead, those who lived under the sun from those who had been claimed by the sea.

And suddenly it was as if she saw Ash, pale, still, wrapped in cold, blue light, entangled in a mermaid's net, pulled into the depth, into the mermaid's realm, where silence ruled.

And suddenly Ali understood that the sea hadn't come after her – it had come after Ash. On her it had only called, to look at her, like the shark about which Ash had told her. It was Ash who the sea had claimed.

She wanted to scream but couldn't. She wanted to cry but couldn't.

"She'll be alright", the doctor said. "In a couple of days she'll be out of intensive care and you can talk about your adventure."

Ali turned away from the window. Her blood was like ice, snow seemed filled her lungs with each breath she took: the cold was everywhere and she could only whisper. "I don't want to stay at the hospital." She walked away, hugging herself, her face half hidden in the zip-up neck of her fleece.

Katja looked at the doctor, raised an eyebrow.

The doctor shrugged. "Why not. But she shouldn't be alone."

"I'll stay with her", Katja said. She followed Ali, put an arm around her shoulders. "Let's pack your things."

***

She looked at her reflection in the bedroom mirror. She still wore the fleece, the collar zipped, she still hugged herself. But the cold didn't go away.

I'm a ghost, Ali thought. Walking among the living, fading until I'm no more than an echo of someone who was no longer there. Almost in panic she kicked off her flats, pulled the sweater over her head and dropped it, slipped out of the jeans. She hesitated for a moment, then she took off her T-shirt.

Again she looked at herself in the mirror, to see that she was still there, real. What she saw was a woman who had her face, her body, but wasn't her: the eyes were blank, the body cut and bruised - marked, like somebody swallowed by hell and spat out again, like a woman washed ashore, no longer a woman but a naked, lifeless thing.

Save me, she said to Ash but then she remembered that Ash was gone, that she was alone, and she looked at the pictures of her kids on the bedside table, as if the two little faces, sweet, smiling, could bring her back but they seemed to be far, far away, so far that she could no longer reach them.
Then she heard Katja's voice from the living room. She was on the phone, shouting at somebody. "Get it done, Kelsoe", Katja snarled. "I want the results end of this week". She seemed to listen to whatever Kelsoe had to say but her patience didn't last long. "How much do I pay you, Kelsoe?" Her voice became louder as Katja walked along the corridor and towards the bedroom to check on Ali. "That was a rhetorical question", she said. "I know what I pay you: a fortune. And I don't pay you a fortune for telling me that things can't be done. I don't want...

In the mirror Ali saw the door open behind her, saw Katja enter, saw her stop and stare.

"Katja? Katja??" Kelsoe's voice coming through the phone sounded as if he was a very little guy living in a little box somewhere in Katja's big desk. Katja didn't answer but switched off the phone and put it away. She looked at Ali and their eyes met. And for a second Katja hesitated, about to apologize and walk away, but she said nothing, unable to take her eyes off Ali's body, unable to close the door again and leave Ali alone... She came into the bedroom, long-legged and barefoot, her dark hair shifting and heaving with every step, her eyes wide, sparkling, came to Ali until she was so close that her body touched Ali's naked skin. And she offered to share what she had in abundance: life, power, which she radiated like heat, the heat of an animal, of a large cat which knew nothing about the depth, dark and cold, and simply defied death.

When Katja gently slipped the straps of the bra from Ali's shoulders Ali knew that this was wrong, that she had to protest, resist, should stop Katja's hands. But she felt nothing, said nothing and couldn't move. She could only watch. And she watched while Katja unclasped the bra and took it away, watched as Katja's fingertips touched her breasts.

***

A duffle bag, a carry-on, her small backpack – not much for somebody who had to travel so far, who was about to start a new life. Not much, but it's mine, Chris thought. And it's all I need.

She looked at what she held in her hand: smooth, glossy, heavy and golden. It was a fake Academy Award with her name on it and the caption 'For The Promotion Of Nude Soccer Playing' – a gift from friends after her nude glam shots had gone viral. She smiled. This had to come with her, too. No question. She stuffed it into her backpack.

She was about to leave but stopped. The bear! It sat on the bed and looked a little uneasy.

"No need to worry", Chris said. "You come with me." She took the bear and cradled it in her arms. "Everything's gonna be alright. It's just... we'll have to do a bit more of traveling, nothing to it", she said, as if it was the bear who needed to stay awake and not herself. She had been driving all night, the rented car small and noisy, the weather really bad, and she felt like shit. She sat down in her bedroom and thought that what she really needed was to lie down, and shut her eyes and... she couldn't think of going to sleep without thinking of Tobin, holding her, keeping her warm, keeping the bad things away from her, making her laugh, making her smile, or making love to her. Like when she woke up after they had fallen asleep in each others arms, Tobin's naked body against her back, Tobin whispering in her ear.

"No", Chris had whispered back, had turned her head away, eyes squeezed shut. "No... I can't...

"You do it all the time", Tobin had said. "What's different, now?"
“I can’t with somebody... watching...”

“I’m not somebody. I love you.”

She had touched herself briefly. “I... I can’t”, she had said.

“Show me”, Tobin had whispered, had taken her hand and had guided it between her thighs. “Show me...” And slowly Chis had started to touched herself.

“Most of all I love to see it on your face”, Tobin had whispered, later, when Chris had been so close to coming that she had heard her blood pulse like thunder in her ears. “You’re so gorgeous.”

Chris woke with a start. She had been drifting into sleep, her eyes already closed. But now she was no longer alone.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going??” her husband said. He pointed to the bag, the carry-on. She hadn’t heard him coming into the house, but now he stood in the door frame, and she felt guilty, as if she had been caught doing something... evil and dirty. She jumped up from the bed, and when she looked at her husband she knew that this would turn into something really unpleasant.

McLowry came into the room, and Chris made a step backwards. Like a scared little girl, she thought, suddenly getting mad. She attacked. “Back already? Want to catch me take away things which don't belong to me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not here because of you.” McLowry came closer, and Chris wrapped her arms around the little bear as if to protect a small and living thing. She made another step back. He was very close now, too close, and she lashed out again, harder this time to keep him away, picking her words carefully to hurt. “Missing the bitch at Jåttavagen? The Brit Air slut??”

McLowry ignored what she said. “The oilfields were hit by a killer wave, plus the Storm... we have a lot of damage. And a vessel is missing. The Aurora Borealis.”

All at once Chris' anger was gone and a cold hand seemed to touch her. “Ashlyn Harris’ ship? Oh my gawd...” She had never wished Ash to be dead. But now it seemed as if her hate, her despair, all her tears had been turned into that raging storm, as if she by herself had unleashed this giant vortex she had seen on TV, and had pointed it to the lonely vessel and had screamed: kill her!!

Chris sat down on the bed again, holding on to the little bear.

“I always thought you hate her”, McLowry said. He observed his wife as if she was some sort of insect. “You always wanted to make her pay. Well - seems that she payed. There’s a high probability she’ll never come back. Happy now? Does that turn you back to... normal?”

Chris stared at him. “Are you crazy?? And what about the crew? That also supposed to make me happy?? You give a shit about them, right?”

“That's her responsibility. Not mine. If she can't command a vessel...”

Chris slowly shook her head. “You've become such a coldhearted bastard.”

***
Her blood was still running fast, her heart throbbing, her skin was still glowing from what had happened only a while ago. She had watched, watched as Katja's hands slowly ran down her flanks, her hips, watched as they had cupped the full curve of her butt, watched as her hands had traveled along her back, watched herself as Katja had begun to make to love to her, watched - feeling nothing. Until...

Ali closed her eyes. When had it started? When Katja's lips had brushed against her neck? When she had held Ali's breasts, tenderly, admiring the perfect shape? She couldn't remember. What she remembered was the feeling when life had returned, the first sensation: it had been fear, then panic. And she had begun to struggle...

Ali squeezed her eyes shut, as if this would help to erase what was still haunting her: how Katja had simply picked her up, how suddenly the cold, crisp sheets of the bed had been under her, how she had been pinned down, Katja on top of her, laughing, taking off her earrings, and how, like a predator, she had begun to feed on her prey...

And suddenly fear and panic had been gone and the door to life had opened again, to light and air, to love and desire. And Ali had panted with delight because she had been back from the land of the dead, back among the living, and lust had flooded her body, and she had spread, gasping, convulsing when the orgasm had ripped through her body, making her scream...

Ali opened her eyes again. The room was still the same, nothing had changed and the picture of her kids still sat on the table and the two little faces looked at her.

Ali took a deep breath. Nothing had changed? Everything had changed.

She buried her face in her hands. No SOS? No EPIRB? She gritted her teeth. She couldn't be deceived, or deceive herself, she was too familiar with disasters on the high seas. She knew of ships going down without a signal, without a trace: they broke apart and vanished within minutes. They rolled over and sank, bottom up, the bridge flooded instantly, taking with them the life rafts and EPIRB buoys, crew and captain.

There was a knock on the door and Ali covered her breasts when Katja entered.

She, too, had the touch of lust and desire still on her skin, even more than Ali. She seemed to be a girl again, no longer the chairwoman of Northern Oil and Gas, Europe, residing on the top floor, taking whatever she wanted, but the girl from a Down Under desert town, barefoot, in jeans and T-shirt, her hair tied into a big knot. And her beautiful, heavy breasts, released from the bra, invited a gentle touch, a kiss from a tender lover.

She smiled, the smile of a desert girl who wanted to share her excitement. She held up the phone and her desert-girl smile widened and the sun of her home continent seemed to be in her eyes.

“And now... I want you to take a gooood look at... this!”

Ali stared at the smartphone screen, stared while her vision blurred and suddenly the light was back in her life and happiness rose like a warm tide in her body and she only remembered the last few words which were “... estimated two hours to arrival.”

Katja beamed. “Yeah... They're coming back.”

And then the light faded and darkness returned and Ali inhaled with a sob, as if she had been stabbed into the heart, the pain telling her exactly what she had done wrong: all the time she had been aware of what she was doing and she had done it all the same. All the time she had known that she was in
love with Ash but, known that she was the only one – and still... And Katja had made it so easy to do what was wrong, so easy to forget what was right, so easy to give it all away for one moment of bliss.

Ali's phone buzzed. She picked it up, read the message.

She dropped the phone, closed her eyes. She opened them again, straightened herself and walked from the bedroom and into the kitchen. She was almost naked but didn't care. She scraped the remains of the grapefruits from the plates into the bin, picked up spoons, knives and forks, collected the two cups and put it all into the dishwasher. The orange juice went into the fridge. She stopped for a second, poised, checked the kitchen, the living area. She saw the two glasses on the kitchen island and hurried to get them, pushed one over and the juice spilled over the granite countertop and Ali grabbed a roll of kitchen tissues and wanted to clean the top but Katja's fingers closed around her arm.

For a second Ali stared at her as if she couldn't remember who she was.

"It's her?" Katja held on to her arm and she could feel Ali's heartbeat – it was fast and hard, so hard that it made her whole body tremble.

Ali lowered her eyes.

"She's coming to your place?"

Ali nodded.

"Don't worry." Katja managed a smile. "I'll be off in a minute."

Ali wanted to say something but couldn't. For a second she had been relieved because Katja had spared her the embarrassment to ask her to leave. Now she hated herself for it because all this wasn't Katja's fault.

Katja let her go. "Look, I'm sorry", she said. "I didn't mean it when I said she sank the yacht for cash. It's only... if I wanted to get rid of a dead asset that way, well: she'd be the one I'd ask."

Ali nodded again and Katja touched her cheek and Ali closed her eyes.

"Take good care of yourself", Katja said.

***

They were close to shore and mobile network connection was back and Ash had sent and received several SMS. She watched while the pilot's speedboat came alongside and the pilot boarded the Aurora. She didn't want to sit down, afraid to fall asleep in a chair - and how she managed to keep going she didn't know. Perhaps it was the last message she had received and which she read for the fifth time: that electronics technician Pat Doyle and engineer Alexandra Krieger had been airlifted from Haakon Bravo together with other injured crew members, and that Patty Doyle was in intensive care, and that Ali Krieger had already left hospital after twelve hours of rest and examination.

A deckhand opened the door to the the bridge. “Captain? The pilot...”
Ash put the phone away. The woman in the Pilot Service uniform entered the bridge and Ash saw that her face was pale and dark rings were were under her eyes.

“Been busy?” Ash asked.

The woman smiled. “A lot of traffic. And we had to bring them all in – as long as we could, until we were no longer able to get out and board the ships. Don't know how many. But we did it.”

Ash nodded. “Good job”, she said. “And... the little one?” She pointed to the woman's belly.

“Asleep. And happy.” She and looked around. Two of the bridge windows were gone and had been covered with particleboard, and pieces of toughened glass still crunched under her shoes. The navigation screen was blank and frozen in reboot mode, radar still okay, engines running, but the number three turbocharger was dead and she saw rows of LEDs blinking red on the electricity control panel, telling her why communication had failed.

She looked through the forward bridge windows: The helipad was destroyed, the few remaining deck panels dangling from the steel skeleton.

She looked aft. The crane was damaged, hydraulic pipes and electric cables hanging from the arm. The cargo was gone, the containers unhooked and washed away, the railing of the working deck smashed.

She turned to Ash. “We thought you went down”, she said.

“The fuck I did”, Ash said.

The pilot simply took Ash in her arms and hugged her. “Welcome back”, she said.

***

“How long's this been going on? You and... she??”

“What do you mean. 'This'?” Chris was checking empty drawers and shelves, pretending she didn't feel her husband's hostile stare.

“Don't play stupid.” He held up Chris' mobile, put it on the table. “She's all over your phone: messages, calls, mail... there's even a picture of her.”

“You checking my calls? Who do you think you are??” Chris was pale, as always when she was furious.

“I'm your husband. Seems you've forgotten.”

Chris stopped pretending she was busy. She folded her arms and met her husband's stare. “No, I haven’t. It's the reason why I'm here. Because I don't want to just... walk away from you.”

“Walk away? To her? And then do what? Have sex until you get bored and start a new game? Tell me – what can she do better than me?”

“Nothing. And even her ego is about the same size than yours.”
“So it's just about you... suddenly decided to become a lesbian – for kicks? And what's next? A Thai tranny for the bored wife?”

“It's got nothing to do with sex.”

“So what is it? The beautiful eyes which promise romance and never ending love? So irresistible? As far as I remember she's got a really mean glare.”

“I'm not gonna answer to this... bullshit!” She wanted to walk to the door but her husband blocked the way.

“Come on. Tell me – what's so special about that little dyke? What can she do that makes her so great?”

Chris took a deep breath. “She can listen! And since you're so interested in details: not only with her ears – also with her hands, her lips, her whole body. And not only to what I say – also to what I feel.”

Her husband sneered. “You should hear yourself talk! Don't give me that soul sisters crap.”

Chris made one step towards her husband. “What do you want me to tell you? That she knows how to do a woman? She knows - I bet the neighbors could hear me scream before I fainted!!” She stopped, blushed, embarrassed. How could she make up such... crap. Then she saw it in her husband’s eyes, in his face: now he really hated her, so much that he couldn't get out a word, she had pushed him too far. But what scared her most was that he believed this caricature of what really had happened when Tobin and her had made love. Suddenly she was tired of fighting. “Look”, she said. “I'm sorry. I'm not here to let it end like this.” She picked a few things from her make-up box, just to do something. Gawd, she thought. What a collection of expensive, high quality, useless stuff. “Maybe if there were kids...”

“You? A mother??” His contempt was genuine.

“Yes, a mother!” Chris shouted to hide how much he had hurt her with those words. “What's wrong with it? I'm not fit to raise children... That what you think??”

“Look at yourself. There's nothing which makes you a mother. And now you're running off with a queer chopper pilot and you're telling me....? I'm glad there's no kid involved, really glad!”

Chris could hardly breathe. “Involved in what?? Something so dirty that a child has to be protected from it??”

“Maybe for you it's a new morning. For a child it would be hell - you think they, the others, would spare your little boy, or your little girl? ‘Hey, your mom's lez? Say – who of the two chick's your dad?’”

“It would be my child, not that of... others. And I wouldn't give a hoot what they have in their rotten minds. It would get all the care and love a kid needs.”

“It'd be my child, too! And that's why we don't have any.”

Chris felt her tears coming, fought against them, didn't want her husband to see them. “And I don't think I would want you as a father.” She picked up her bag, ready to leave. But suddenly she turned. “You know what? It's only one tiny thing that makes her special. She's... always with me. Even when she's away I know she cares about me, and the only thing she wants is to come back to me. And I know: I'm not alone!” She took a deep breath. “I was the same with you – in the beginning. I
knew you were there, with me. And I loved you for that and I needed you. But then you left me alone. And since then I've been living in a nightmare.” She slung the bag over her shoulder, grabbed the carry-on and walked to the door.

“What does she know about this?” Her husband held up a computer printout. “Does she know that you're going back to the States?”

Chris stared at the sheet of paper she had forgotten on the printer.

Her husband's voice was menacing. “Booking confirmation for the flight tonight... She going to join you? Live together? Happy ever after?” He shook his head. “No... She doesn't know, right? You dumped her, too. Because that's the way you do things – walk out, run away.”

“You've no idea...”

“Why don't you call her? Come on... take your phone and tell her.” Chris didn’t touch the phone. Her husband took it. “Let me see.” He clicked on a number and hit 'dial'. “For once do it straight – and tell her.” He grabbed Chris' wrist. “Come on, tell her. Let her know what a nice person you are.”

“Don't touch me!” Chris suddenly panicked. She tried to get away, but her husband held on to her wrist and it hurt, and she didn't know why but suddenly she began to fight.

“Hey...” Her husband let go. He pressed his hand against his cheek were Chris' nails had caught his flesh. “You crazy??”

Chris didn't hear him. She just wanted to get away from him and as she backed away she tripped over the carry-on and fell. The daypack burst open.

“You okay?” McLowry wanted to help her up.

“Stay away from me!!” Chris suddenly felt something hard and heavy in her right hand. She had always asked herself why she kept this silly golden guy: 'Promotion Of Nude Soccer Playing’?? She aimed at her husband's head.

***

She had cleaned up the kitchen, the bathroom, had erased even the tiniest trace of what had happened between Katja and her. Now the sheets on Ali's bed were fresh, the cover smoothed, the pillows back in place, white and innocent.

Ali sat in front of the mirror. She was brushing her hair and it shone like silk, as if it had never been touched. She put the brush away, picked up the lipstick but hesitated. She looked at her face. There was skin missing on her cheekbone, the left corner of her mouth was swollen around a thin cut and it hurt, but pain was good, it told her that she was back, walking the earth.

She dropped the lipstick. What did she try to hide, to cover up? Who did she try to cheat? Herself? Ash? Nothing would make what had happened go away.

She got up, went to the closet. She unfolded a new white T-Shirt, pulled it over her head, sucked in her breath when her bruised ribs protested. Then she slipped into her jeans and when she passed the mirror she stopped. Her heart began to beat faster: Like the first time, she thought, looking at herself.
Like the first time we met. Here, at this place, two strangers, far away from home.

She grabbed the pack of painkillers, about to swallow two but didn't.

No, she thought and put them back. She wanted to be wide-awake.

***

Ali opened the door before Ash could press the doorbell button and Ash took Ali into her arms and kicked the door shut and they held on to each other so tightly that it hurt but they didn't care, immersed in the warmth of the other's body, inhaling the fragrance of hair, of skin, their minds spinning, dizzy with happiness.

Suddenly Ali opened her eyes and she held on to Ash even tighter, as if drowning. „It came after me“, she whispered. „It knew where to find me.“ And for a second it was back, the memory of the sea washing over her, so deeply embedded in her flesh that it would never go away, written on her skin with cuts and bruises.

Ash stroked her hair, gently kissed her cheek. „I know“, she said. „That’s how it feels – like something personal.“ She caressed Ali’s neck. Ali was crying and Ash just held her. „It’s over“, she said. „Now it’s nothing more than a bad dream.“ She gently kissed Ali's hair.

Ali wiped away her tears. „Sorry“, she said. She tried to smile. She looked into Ash’s eyes. „You didn't sleep for how long?“

„No sleep for the captain“, Ash said. „No sleep for the crew. But that’s okay. We made it back home.“

„How bad was it?“

Ash shrugged. „Ship's a mess. Coupl'a crew injured...“ She stopped. There were no words for this. Later perhaps, but not now.

They walked to the living room, unable to let go of each other, Ali holding on to Ash's waist, Ash's arm around Ali's shoulders.

Ash sat down at the table and pulled Ali on her lap and Ali buried her face were Ash's neck met the shoulder, delighted by the hard muscles, the tender skin.

She trembled when Ash brushed away her hair and kissed the nape of her neck.

They didn't talk because there was no need to say anything. They just sat and listened to their beating hearts, to the pulsing blood, to their breath.

Then Ali kissed Ash and slipped from her lap.

„You stay here“, she whispered and kissed Ash again. She walked to the kitchen and Ash's eyes followed her and she leaned back and watched Ali while she poured milk into a pot, opened a box with spices and rubbed some of them them in her palms before she let them fall into the milk.

Ash suddenly smiled. „Your famous chocolate?“
Ali laughed. “You remember?” She added something from a glass jar, warming it in her hand before she sprinkled it over the milk.

Ash was grinning. “Black pepper and raspberry powder. Perfect with chocolate. Turned me into a helpless bundle, last time – you're a witch, you know?” She got up from the chair. She had to move, she was afraid that she would simply fall asleep. Not now, she thought, not when I can be with her. “Be back in a second”, she said. As she walked from the living room she held on to the door frame, then steadied herself against the walls of the corridor, as if she was still on her ship. Move, she told herself. Don't fall asleep, not now, when everything you thought you lost is back, like a miracle. She found herself standing in front of a door which wasn't the bathroom door. She pushed it open. It was her room, the room she had lived in for a couple of weeks - the happiest weeks in her life, sharing the place with Ali, the most beautiful girl she had ever met...

She walked into her old room, now empty, as if abandoned. So small, she thought. Like the flat. But for her it had always been like a... palace, with a princess living in it, and the bed hadn't been just a bed, just big enough for her – but what she remembered was something wide and soft, the perfect place for two lovers. She walked to the bed, now stripped and without sheets, and she sat down and she touched it: here, in the silence of the night, they had made love for the first time.

***

“Here you are”, Ali wanted to say but she said nothing. She came through the open door, slowly, almost shyly, holding on to the two mugs.

Ash was lying on the bed – asleep.

Ali set the mugs on table close to the window, careful not to make any noise. Then she tiptoed to the bed. She was about to pull the blanket over Ash and walk away.

Suddenly Ash moaned in her sleep, as if in pain. Her fingers trembled, then dug into the bare mattress, as if holding on to something, something to save her from sinking into the depth again.

Ali knew the sort of nightmare that came after what Ash had lived through. And she knew that this was the real reason Ash hadn't gone to sleep: she had been scared to death about what she knew would come to her once she closed her eyes.

Ali didn't walk away. She laid down beside her and took Ash in her arms and Ash relaxed, no longer dreaming about hell.

Ali listened to her breathing deeply, alive, warm and safe.

I missed you so badly, she thought, as if she was talking to Ash. I thought you were gone and I went insane with fear and grief. And she held on to Ash who was was asleep in her arms, in the bed where she had first made love to her, and it was as if time had been turned back, as if everything was new, fresh, as if nothing had happened, like virgin snow without footprints, without the traces of things that had happened, things which shouldn't have happened but now couldn't be erased, and Ali just wanted this to go on forever but nothing could turn yesterday's snow back into the pure white.

Soon Ash would wake up, soon Ash would know. Ali shivered. She wouldn't be able to stand the pain in Ash's face, watch her love fade away and turn into disgust.
Ali listened to the silence. One more time she ran a fingertip along Ash's cheek, traced the line of her jaw, her neck.

She took a deep breath. She had wanted to feel her blood again, her heart, throbbing and warm, she had wanted it to burn – now she was burned. She had wanted to be saved from the cold, she had wanted to live again, feel again – and now shame ate her heart like acid.

And here it ends, she thought.

Ali got up, spread a blanket over Ash's legs. Then she left, careful not to wake her up.

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Chris sat at the bar of the airport lounge, stirring her coffee. Her flight number was slowly crawling towards the top of the departure list but she didn't look at the display. She watched the woman who walked into the lounge as if it belonged to her, pulling a suitcase, her hair like a red flame, licking her cheeks from under the Borsalino Trilby: Stella Carson - lawyer bitch from New York City. She had hated her as much as she had hated Ash – so much that it had turned her life into hell. But now... She was surprised that she no longer felt the red hot stab.

She didn't know how but she knew: Tobin had made the wound heal - Tobin making her laugh, making her angry, making her scream with desire and cry with tenderness...

She looked up when somebody sat down on the stool next to her.

“I'll take a whiskey”, her husband said to the girl behind the bar. Then he reached into the paper bag he had brought to the airport and placed the teddy bear on top of the bar. “Thought you would want it to keep you company”, he said. “Thanks...” He took the whiskey the girl had put in front of him, sipped from the tumbler. “There weren't only bad things, right?”

Chris toyed with the little pack of sugar that had come with the coffee.

“There were good things, too”, she said. “Many. In the beginning.”

Her husband nodded. He no longer looked like The Chairman but a bit... ruffled. The traces of Chris nails showed on his cheek.

“Listen... In case you worry about...” He took another sip from the glass so he didn't have to say Tobin's name. “I won't give her any trouble. She keeps her job. She can stay or leave – whatever. I'll not take it out on her.” He readjusted the bow tie of teddy bear. “I'm glad you don't want to share your life with... her. She's maybe... exotic. But from what I know... she's just a little cowboy. A... well, a chopper pilot.”

Chris ripped off the cover from the little portion of milk and poured it into her cup, watched the milk dissolve, float, like smoke, like thoughts. She knew all this. But how could her husband ever understand that it didn't matter? How could he ever understand how much she longed for Tobin? That Tobin was the one who's touch made the sun shine on a cloudy day, and the stars twinkle on a dark night, made life a beautiful journey even when it wasn't.

Sure, she thought. Tobin was silly, sometimes stupid, full of dirty talk and other bullshit. Would she want to share her life with this little cowboy? Oh yes. Only she doubted that Tobin wanted to share
her life with her. She wasn't made for a life on the ground, she wanted to fly, ride the air. Would she be able to let another person into her life? No, she thought. She would be like a bird which lost it's wings: grounded.

“Go back. Take your time”, her husband said. “See your friends, the family... And then, perhaps...” He paused. “It's okay. Come back when you're ready. And we'll find a way...

Chris was silent.

“You don't believe me?”


Suddenly her husband smiled. “All the neighbors could hear me scream before I fainted' I like that. You always could make things up to... annoy people.”

For the first time Chris looked at him. “I'm glad I missed you with the fucking Oscar.”

McLowry smiled. “So am I’, he said. He looked at the departure list. “You better check in. Security's tight. You'll have to wait in a long queue.” He emptied the glass and got up from the stool. He put a twenty Euro note on the bar, pointed to his empty glass and to Chris coffee.

“Thank you, Sir.” The girl bagged the fat tip.

McLowry lingered, reached out to touch Chris but didn't. “Have a safe trip”, he said and he didn't mean the just flight to Atlanta. He turned and walked away.

“Anything I can get you?” There was more than customer-care politeness in the girl's voice, she seemed to feel how sad Chris was.

Chris shook her head. She stirred her coffee which was cold by now.

She toyed with the phone, about to call Tobin. But she didn't. There was no way to explain to Tobin why she was at the airport, booked on a flight home, about to leave in less than two hours while she longed for Tobin so much that she could hardly breathe.

She looked up. And she saw Ali. Her face was pale, drawn. In her black T-shirt she looked thin and Chris saw that her beautiful posture was gone. Her body seemed somehow... twisted and Chris spotted a pack of pills among the things in Ali's see-thru bag in which she carried the items security wanted to check, pills she recognized as strong painkillers, probably from the rescue helicopter which had airlifted Ali from the platform, a familiar brand, handed out by paramedics and in hospitals, to injured people. But if they were also good for people who's injury was a broken heart... she doubted it.

Chris was about to get up from the chair, to call Ali's name – she didn't. She just looked at her and then Ali had passed and was gone, swallowed by the crowd.

Something good has ended for her, Chris thought. And now she's alone again. Going on with her life like walking an endless road.

Chris checked the departure list. Her flight was one step closer towards boarding.

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Ash was paralyzed. She had walked through the empty flat as if in a nightmare, calling Ali's name, opening doors to empty rooms, getting more and more desperate, until she had realized that Ali was gone and she was alone.

Now she sat on Ali's bed, in Ali's bedroom. There was a letter on the pillow, and next to it sat the little green crocodile which Ash had wanted Ali to keep, as a lucky charm, so she would be safe whenever Ash couldn't be with her.

Ash hadn't dared to touch the piece of paper but now she picked it up and unfolded it. Ali's handwriting didn't show any sign of weakness, of doubt. It was powerful, determined.

*My job is done,* Ash read. *Most of the sensors survived and they say they will be able to recover enough data from the computer disks to complete the study. I go back, to my family, to my girl and my little boy. They need a mother, not a woman on a screen.*

*To be with you was like a beautiful dream. You always looked at me as if I were special and it made me happy. But I'm not what you think I am and I'm not what you deserve and you'll be better off without me.*

*I leave the crocodile with you – it took good care of me. But I think you need it more than I do.*

Ash knew she had to do something but she was unable to move, she just sat on the bed and stared at the wall, as if her blood was running from a deadly wound, and with it all her strength.

Ash's phone buzzed and suddenly she was aware that she had dropped the piece of paper and was crying. She looked at the number while tears ran down her cheeks. Shit, she thought. First officer's calling, captain's sobbing. She cleared her throat and hoped she didn't sound too much like a girl crying her eyes out.

“Yeah?” she said. She listened. “Okay. Will be there.” She put the phone away. And why not, she thought, feeling the tears run. There's nothing left to do for me anyway - except go to the crew's party and booze myself into oblivion.

She bent down to pick up Ali's message, and while she was groping under the bed she felt something round and hard lying on the floor. It was smooth, almost slipped from her fingers. She put it on her palm, looked at it: an earring, a pearl framed in silver, a perfect globe, white but at the same time radiating a rich luster, designed to set off the beauty of an already beautiful woman.

Ash stared at it, then her heart began to race – because she knew who had lost it on the floor of Ali's bedroom.

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The plane traveled smoothly across what seemed to be an endless landscape of white mountains, the peaks and ridges fringed in bright orange, a farewell kiss by the she setting sun while the night began

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to rise from the valleys between the clouds. Soon the first stars would come out.

Ali looked at her glass of tonic and lemon. Ripples spread on the surface and now she could feel the turbulence with her body, could feel her palms get wet and her muscles tighten.

It seemed so long ago that she had seen the same in her coffee mug, on board Ash's vessel, before it got worse and worse, so long ago it seemed like a lifetime, but her body still remembered. She looked at the clouds to get rid of the tension, at the moon - a thin silvery slice. Unbelievable that underneath the peaceful scene was the sea that had almost killed her – and Ash.

Suddenly somebody took the empty seat next to her and Ali turned to the window, annoyed, because she wanted to be alone. Then she thought how childish it was and leaned back in her seat. Then she looked at the woman in the aisle seat and the woman looked at her and Ali felt the blood rush into her face.

Stella Carson pushed back her red hair. She took a deep breath.

“‘I lost her a long time ago”, she said. “I just wanted you to know...” Ali turned away, her lips a thin line and Stella felt something like a wall of silence and she was about to get up and back to her seat.

“How much money did you get?” Ali suddenly asked without looking at Stella. “And how much did you give her?”

Stella stared at her trying to find out if Ali expected an answer. Then she thought that the best answer would be to get up and walk away. But suddenly she understood what Ali really wanted to know: was it the money, or was it... love which had made Ash sink the ship off the African coast.

“I didn't get any money. And neither did she”, Stella said.

Ali turned towards her. She looked into Stella Carson's eyes as if they would give away a lie.

Stella cleared her throat. “Listen – the insurance payed, but they payed my ex. It was his boat, not mine.”

Ali didn't say a word but she held Stella's eyes and Stella felt how much Ali needed the truth, how much she was in love with Ash.

“I had a share in the yacht”, she said. “But nothing in writing to prove it. I had the money and I gave it to him – a typical girl-in-love thing, I guess.” She stopped because Ali hang on her every word and that it wasn't just because of the accident but there was something else. She didn't know what, but she was a woman who could tell if another woman was close to falling apart. She went on: “I was divorcing my husband, and it was all about how to split the assets, and – you know, my ex is a tricky piece-of-shit asshole and I just wanted to get my hands on the yacht before...” She stopped again, this time because she suddenly realized what this gave away about herself, to get involved with such a man, to pull even dirtier stunts than her ex. But somehow it suddenly felt good to tell the truth. “I was afraid he'd hire a few guys to steal it, then sell it somewhere on the islands or the East African coast and split the money with him. It happens, down there... So I decided to fuck up his scheme...” She brushed away an invisible speck on her tailored jacket, as if something dirty still remained from the whole affair. “Look – the only reason I asked Ash to make the trip was... I wanted my money back, little as it was.”

Ali spoke for the first time. “But the insurance would've payed anyway?”

“Ash doesn't know the full story. Never told her. She wouldn't have done it if she had known. All the time she thought it was my ship. Thought she was simply transferring the yacht to a buyer at Saint-Denis. Thought she was doing me a favor. And she liked to sail something fast and powerful, like this floating razor blade. So... we were both happy.”

Ali narrowed her eyes. “You made her steal the yacht??”

“Listen, from a legal point of view, me being his wife...” Stella Carson stopped. It sounded so... fucking bitchy to turn on the lawyer talk. It sounded as if she was trying to defend herself. And she was. “Look – I was afraid he'd try to rob me. And sweet Jesus did he try! With all the other assets he tried and I had to fight him every inch of the way...” She stopped again because there was nothing that could make her part in this smaller. She looked at Ali. And suddenly she was sure that something had happened – between her and Ash.

“You going back home?” She asked.

Ali took a deep breath. “To my family. Aberdeen. Catch the shuttle flight at Heathrow. And you?”

“Business in London. Then home - to NYC.”

They were both silent, listening to the sound of the plane's engines, the noise of the air condition, to the faint clink of the ice cubes in Ali's tonic when another turbulence made the plane tremble. And suddenly Stella knew what it was: despair. Ali radiated it like heat.

“You're running away from her, right?” Stella suddenly said.

There was no answer but she could feel Ali wince, as if cut with a sharp knife.

“Don't be angry, please.” Stella didn't know why but she touched Ali's hand. “I don't wanna smart-ass you. But whatever happened between you and her... I'm not sure if you're doing the right thing, running away, I mean. Chance is you'll never see her again. At least I didn't.”

Like to go on reading? I added a new episode to my story on Tapas.io., here.
Katja Olsson kicked off her shoes and put her feet on the desk. She leaned back in the chair and looked out of the window. The Storm was still strong, clouds racing across the sky, big raindrops had turned into hail, and now tiny pieces of ice were pelting the glass front.

She opened her hand and looked at the large pearl, framed in silver, which sat on her palm. There should have been two of these but there weren't, and she knew were she had lost the other earring.

She reached for the phone, hesitated, put it back. She closed her eyes for a moment. Then she took the phone again and dialed the number which was on the slip of paper in front of her.

Hail and rain stopped and the sun came through the clouds and it seemed to her as if the sun was shining in her heart when she heard the voice and she smiled.

“Thanks for giving me your home number”, she said. “Hey! You okay?” She listened. “Good. I just want to make sure you're alright. If you don't want to talk – just say so and I'm off.”

“No”, Ali said. “It's good talking to you.” She cleared her throat which was still hoarse, and Katja could hear that it was painful for Ali to breathe. “You must be awfully busy right now...”

Katja was glad to hear Ali's voice, glad to talk to her, glad that Ali didn't just hang up on her. “Well, yeah - there's a hellish schedule waiting for me.” Fuck the schedule, she thought. She wanted to talk about what had happened, wanted to say how sorry she was - instead she gave her some inside chat because she didn't know how to start. “Haakon rigs are shut down, we've no idea when they'll be operational again. There's an oil leak in the Gyda field we need to do something about. In an hour I have a conference with my engineers and the CFO to put a number to the damage. After that I'll meet with my lawyers because right now the insurance guys do the same to find ways not to pay us so we'll have to find ways how to make them. And tonight I'll fly to Oslo to get my ass kicked by Statoil and the government guys, and afterwards they'll try to blackmail me into giving them a bigger share of the profits.” She stopped. What the hell are you doing, she thought. You're spilling out small talk like a charity hostess. She leaned back, watched the daylight reflect on the pearl of the earring. “Did you... see her? Is she... alright?”

There was a moment of silence and Ali's voice had changed. “Ash was asleep when I left.” She paused again. “Did you... talk to her?”

Katja let the earring dangle in the sunlight. “Don't worry. She'll never know. Not from me...” She decided not to ask about the missing one.

“I know. It's just...”

“I haven't seen her, haven't heard from her. Nobody else has. Only thing I know is that the ship'll go to repair dock in three days, so...” The silence seemed to have a weight. They both didn't know what to say, knew that something had to be said, but they didn't know how. The silence went on, and they knew they had to end the call but couldn't.

“Look, I'm so sorry.” Katja changed the phone to the other hand because her palm was wet. “It's all my fault. I shouldn't have done...”

“Don't... It's not your fault. I'm a grown up woman and...” Ali started to cough.

“You didn't want it and I didn't ask...” Katja said. Her other palm was wet, too.
Ali cleared her throat. “You make it sound as if it was something filthy. It was... good.”

Katja closed her eyes. “For a moment. But then... You must hate me.”

“I don't hate you”, Ali said. “You took what you wanted so much because I let you.”

Again Katja listened to the silence “What can I do to make you happy again?”

Ali didn't answer and Katja suddenly was afraid she was about to hang up. “Come on. Anything you want. Just tell me.”

Ali took a deep breath. “Go find her.”

“Her?? Find her? And then... do what? Dry her tears??”

Ali was silent again.

“I'm sorry.” Katja really was. “I didn't mean to...”

“She needs somebody who cares, somebody who shows her that she's not alone.”

“Shouldn't you do that?”

“I can't”, Ali said. “No longer. Not after what happened.”

“Now YOU make it sound as if... we did something wrong.”

“We did”, Ali said.

Katja changed the phone back to the other hand. “She can't possibly know! Unless... You didn't tell her, did you?”

“No. But she knows. I would, in her place.”

Katja instantly felt the hot stab which she knew was plain jealousy. “You two are that close?”

The silence again.

“You love her”, Katja said.

Ali's voice seemed to come from far away. “Sometimes she's... stupid, stubborn. I don't want her to quit the job and go back to the States. Or do something silly with her bike. Find her. And... dry her tears. Will you do that for me?”

Katja swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“You're not the stonehearted bitch people think you are,”

Katja wanted to hold Ali in her arms and kiss her for that. “Don't think just because I'm nice to you I'm a nice person...” She listened to the silence and she knew that the call was over. “Will you come back?”

“I have to hurry”, Ali said. “The kids want breakfast.”

“May I call again?”

“It was good talking to you”, Ali said. Then she was gone.
Tobin looked at her hands. They were still trembling and trembled even more when she thought about what had happened: how she had insisted on going back by chopper, sunrise an hour away, the weather really bad, visibility zero, flying by instruments – only because she hadn't been able to wait one more day, wait and let the storm pass, or at least wait until daylight; unable to be alone one more hour, alone, without Chris.

ATC had forced her to detour, the detour had cost more fuel than expected, a change in wind direction had put a bigger workload on the tail rotor and had slowed her down, had burned away even more fuel.

And she still heard the voice of the flight monitoring computer, which, courtesy to Airbus Industries, was the voice of a cheerful girl which Tobin called Mary Poppins. Mary Poppins talked to the pilot in a no-need-to-worry voice, saying things like 'engine – fire', 'engine – fire' or 'too low – terrain', 'too low – terrain' which meant that you were about to crash and burn.

And what unnerved Tobin most was that Mary Poppins banged a little gong between handing out those bits of information, so what Tobin had heard going on and on and on had been 'fuel – low' BING 'fuel – low' BING...

And she still heard it and she pressed her hands against her ears and her cheeks still burned with embarrassment because when she had informed ATC about her fuel situation, the traffic controller, probably one of those guys who thought that girls should stay away from high tech gadgets, had asked her: 'You want to declare an emergency? You want to declare an emergency??' and she coming back 'Negative! Negative!!' as if she had been caught smoking on the school toilet, afraid to get her wrist slapped.

You stupid cunt! She screamed at herself. What had been your your plan?? Crash on a snow covered slope? Or, flying low in Tyri Fjord, picking the way through darkness and storm, collide with a cruise liner and vanish in a fireball, together with a couple of hundred passengers??

Chief pilot had already been waiting for her, his beauty sleep ended by an ATC wake-up call and had kicked her ass for about fifteen minutes, but she had given a shit because things at Northern were going down the drain anyway so fuck the Chief Pilot. And she had climbed into her Mustang and had pushed the car through the early morning traffic as if to complete the suicide trip under a container rig, then running up the stairs, fumbling for the key - only to find this: a dark, silent apartment and a note by Edda-next-door, saying 'Cleared the yuck stuff from the fridge and bought something fresh. You owe me Fifty-Five and three P.S. No Christen.'

She sat in the kitchen and had just opened the third can of beer. She drank from it and it was so cold that it seemed to burn her throat, but that was what she needed right now.

She heard somebody turn the key and open the front door.

Gawd... She closed her eyes and drank from the can. Edda! About to lecture her on green stuff and having regular meals and... shit! She had no cash to pay Edda.

She heard footsteps in the corridor, heard the door to living room open behind her.

Tobin put down the can. “Look... I'm sorry. But I'm really tired. Can we do that tomorrow? I
mean...” She pushed herself up and turned around. “And I'm short on cash, so...” She gaped.

Lia barged into the room, her raincoat wet. She put two coffee to go in front of Tobin and added a sandwich. She kissed Tobin's cheek, fetched the can of beer and looked at the label.

“You shouldn't drink this non-alcohol garbage. Why don't you buy decent stuff, German or Danish? Tuborg, for instance.”

Tobin found her voice again.

“Just because you're Danish...”

“Inuit”, Lia said and pushed back the hood of her coat. “I'm Inuit. I've got a Danish passport because Denmark decided in 1814 that it owns Greenland.” She shook her jet black mane.

“Stop dripping all over my place!” Tobin took the can away from Lia. “Can't you knock, or use the door buzzer?”

“Met Edda-next-door way up.” Lia unwrapped her own sandwich. “Gave me the key. Said you're probably into your third beer, and if I could just see that you eat properly. Surprise inspection, so to say...”

Tobin narrowed her eyes. “What do you want?”

“Why didn't you stay in Oslo?” Lia was already two-thirds through her sandwich. “Somewhere nice and warm, where you can drink something good, for a change, at a nice bar or restaurant. Just sit and wait. But no – you had to take the chopper while the shit out there is still...” She ate the rest of her sandwich. “Are you just stupid or are you trying to kill yourself?” She reached for the can of beer.

Tobin took the can away and pushed the coffee towards Lia. “Why are you here? I mean...”

“Delivery service”, Lia said. She swallowed a big gulp of coffee, then another one. “Free of charge. But if you give me a tip I wouldn't complain.” She grinned and took a large piece of Tobin's sandwich. Then she drank from Tobin's coffee. “And now say hello to who I brought to you.”

Tobin turned to the door. Her heart missed a beat.

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There was a vague recollection of a pole dancer.

Had she really given the girl... what? A lot! Just to make her take the g-string off and let her look at the angel-wing piercing through her... Ash felt her stomach turn.

And the three Hells Angels who had, at some point in time, gatecrashed the party and had tried to chat her up while filling her with booze...

Ash groaned in disgust. She opened her eyes which were swollen.

The room was half dark, the curtains drawn, but there was enough light to make her head explode with pain.
The double bed, the tiny freezer, a chair, the door with the fire drill instructions... She rolled on her back. Now she remembered where she was: a motel on the road to Sweden.

She should've stayed with the Tamil guys of her crew. Don't drink, don't smoke - decent guys, nice, polite, she thought. But no... she had to join the rest, First Mate, Chiefy, Electrician and their gang, the Norwegians, the Germans and the Russians.

Something flashed through her mind and she tried to sit up and look around, but it was a bad idea because she felt so sick that she simply fell back onto the bed, relieved at the same time: she was alone. In her condition everything would have been possible, from pole dancer to three Hells Angles.

„You back to earth?“ somebody said.

Ash's heart stopped. She was NOT alone! She slowly turned her head. Katja Olsson was sitting on the edge of the bed. „How ...?“ Ash's tongue was like an old sock. „How did you get into the room?“ she croaked.

„Told them I’m your big sister. And how hard it is to lead a family life with you hooked on booze and sex... and how all the responsibility rests on my shoulders.“

Ash moaned. She pulled the pillow over her face. „Go away”, she said, each syllable made sparks explode in her head, even her teeth hurt.

Katja Olsson stayed where she was. „Who do you think you are? You think I've got nothing else to do but hang out in cheap motels?“

Ash's voice from under the pillow sounded as if it came from the grave. „I'd kick in your teeth if you don't get out of here. And I give a shit if you're my boss."

Katja Olsson wasn't impressed. „You know what? You're one hell of a skipper, but you've got a piece of shit personality. We better do something about it.“ She got up from the bed. „You ready to greet the new day?“

Ash threw the pillow in the direction of Katja Olsson's voice. „I'll drag your ass across the parking lot and fold you into the back of your fancy Volvo...“

Katja Olsson grabbed Ash’s ankle and pulled her from the bed. Ash hit the floor, gasping in pain, wanted to do something, but Katja dragged her across the floor towards the bathroom door. Ash's head hit the doorframe and she thought she was going to faint. She tried to kick Katja but missed, shrieked when Katja grabbed her hair and pulled her up and sat her against the tiled wall. Ash opened her eyes, panting, only to shut them immediately because the room seemed to spin. „I’m gonna kill you“, she rasped. „You hear me? I’m ...“

Katja smiled. Then she turned on the cold water.

Ash wanted to scream but couldn’t. There was no air. She sat under the shower, gasping, helplessly staring at her boss.

„Hey!!“ Katja said, looking at the wet T-shirt which clung to Ash’s body. „Your nipples are gorgeous!“ She stopped the cold water. „Let me make you a bit more comfortable. “ She pulled the T-shirt over Ash’s head, simply ignoring her weak resistance. „Whoah...!“ Katja said. „And what a pair of knockers! Mind if I take a look at the rest?“ She pulled away Ash’s slip, easily fighting off her kicking legs. She dangled the slip from one finger. „Too late to cross your lovely thighs, Lady. I saw it all. And I can say: you’re sitting on a real treasure!“ She threw the wet clothes into the washbasin. „You smell like a booze factory. “
Ash tried to get up but Katja pushed her back into the shower.

„You fucking ...“, Ash gasped.

„You mean you enjoyed it?“ Katja Olsson grinned. „What?? I can’t hear you... was that a 'yes'?“ She ran the cold water again and Ash sat under what seemed to be a cascade of ice, stunned, unable to move, her skin raw, turning numb.

Slowly Katja turned the mixer towards 'Hot'. Warm water began to envelope Ash’s body while Katja Olsson made herself comfortable on the toilet seat, crossing her legs.

Ash tried to get up but was still too weak. Her head was spinning. „Help me up“, she moaned.

„Why should I?“ Katja Olsson frowned.

„I’m gonna be sick“, Ash croaked.

„So?“ Katja folded her arms.

„You’re sitting on ...“

„You’re disgusting“, Katja said without moving.

„I’m gonna wring your neck!“ Ash began to crawl towards her.

„Yeah. In the next life.“

Ash reached out to grab Katja Olsson’s leg, but she jumped up and slipped out of the bathroom door. „Enjoy yourself!“ she shouted.

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Chris was leaning against the doorframe, wet from the rain, the hair clinging to her head.

Tobin stared, her eyes blank.

“Wееееll – time to face the bitter truth”, Lia said and her dark, slanted eyes gleamed with mischief. She sighed, struck a Greta Garbo forgive-me-I-couldn't-help-it pose, one of her specialties. “We spent the night together”, she whispered, fluttering her heavy lashes. “I know it hurts, but...” Lia waited for a reaction but there was none: Tobin didn't know what to say and what to do. “The pilot here has lost it, finally”, she said to Chris. She waved her hand in front of Tobin's eyes. “How many fingers do you see?” She shrugged, broke another piece from Tobin's sandwich. “I’m off to work. Already late. Don't know why you insist on loving this dim witted flying chick.” She ruffled Tobin's hair. “Hulloo?? I said I'm off???” Tobin was frozen. “Hopeless”, Lia said, munching. She broke another piece from Tobin's sandwich, kissed Chris on the cheek, then winked and was gone.

Tobin and Chris looked at each other, heard the front door slam.

Chris dropped the daypack, walked to the cupboard and fetched a glass. She put it on the table in front of Tobin, took the can and filled the beer into the glass.

“Why didn’t you come to my place?” Tobin's voice was hoarse.
Chris took off her raincoat. “I called. You didn't answer.”

“I told you – Edda would've let you in!”

“It was in the middle of the night! She's got kids!” Chris sat down. “I can't call on a woman with a family in the middle of the night just to get into the flat of my... lover.”

Tobin took a deep breath. “You called Lia...”

“I know her. I've got her number.”

Tobin stared at Chris.

“She gave it to me when we first met, at the club, the 'Ozone'...”

Tobin leaned back. “I know exactly where you first met her. She gave you her number? Was it before or after you two hit the dance floor? Before or after she stuck her tongue down your throat?”

Chris narrowed her eyes. “Don't be silly! I slept on her sofa last night!”

“She's a big, dirty minded Eskimo girl. Why do you think she gave you her number?”

“You intend to go on and on about the fucking phone number?”

“She gave you her business card or what?”

Chris hesitated. “She wrote it on my arm.”

“Yes...” Tobin sneered. “That's one of her dirty little tricks. Works with five out of ten girls she hits on. The felt tip on their skin... gives them goose bumps.”

“You aren't serious! Are you?”

“Sometimes she writes on the inside of a chick's thigh.”

Chris couldn't help it: she began to laugh.

“That's not funny!” Tobin threw a crumb of sandwich at Chris. “You sure it wasn't your thigh? The dress you wore at the 'Ozone' was very short. Very!”

Chris knocked on Tobin's forehead, not very hard – it was more like a caress. “Why didn't you wait until the storm would be over?”

“I wanted to watch you sleep”, Tobin said. “I love it when you're dreaming”. Rain hit the windows again. And suddenly she began to cry. “I missed you so much.” She used her sleeve to wipe her eyes. “Sorry. I just...”

Chris gave a paper handkerchief. “Here, blow your nose.”

“I thought I'd never see you again and...” Tobin had to blow her nose again.

Chris took Tobin in her arms. “Come”, she said. I know what you need.”

***
Ash carefully picked her way out of the bathroom, holding on to whatever prop she found. She was naked and still wet.

Katja Olsson sat on the bed and checked her inbox. She was so gorgeous that Ash felt sick immediately. “How did you find me?”

“Wasn't too difficult”, Katja said. “Called your First Mate. Then followed the stink of cheap booze.”

Ash threw the wet T-shirt at her and missed because Katja Olsson ducked.

She looked for her clothes and found them piled in heap on the floor. She picked up her jeans but had to close her eyes and hold on to the chair’s backrest. Then she searched the left pocket. „That yours?” She held up the pearl and let the daylight dance on it, then flipped it to Katja.

Rain hit the motel roof while Ash and Katja stared at each other.

“Guess where I found it”, Ash said.

Katja held the pearl between two fingers, gently, as if it was a living thing she didn't want to hurt. “She wanted to leave the hospital and go home, so I took her. And I stayed with her 'cause the doctor said so.”

Ash turned her back to Katja Olsson and stared out of the window, steadying herself against the wall. The rain had turned into hail. “What about last time? Doctor ordered that, too?”

Katja Olsson frowned. “What last time? Are you crazy?”

“Don't tell me this was the first time. You think I'm stupid? You picked her up and took her to your place...”

“What the fuck...” Katja Olsson closed her fist around the pearl. She stared at Ash's back and then she knew. “Who told you that we... met? She certainly didn't. Heath? No...” She got up from the bed. “Listen... there is no 'last time'. We met when she went to see Heath. And that's it.”

Ash still looked out of the window. “You're lying”, she said.

In the silence the traffic noise seemed to flood the room like the surf of a big ocean.

“You know nothing”, Katja said. “But your mind is twisted and full of garbage.”

Ash turned around and Katja realized how hate and jealousy made her look like an animal about to go for her throat. “You think I'm afraid of you?” Katja Olsson came closer. “Cause you’re a tall, strong girl with a lot of ink? I could get rid of you like that...” She snapped her fingers. “But I want you as my captain. You're one hell of a skipper. You saved lives. You saved the ship. And I'd hate to lose you.”

“You never stop, right?” Ash's voice was choked by the strain not to simply hit Katja Olsson. “You take what you want, regardless. Did you ever ask?” She was too furious to see the expression change in Katja’s eyes: they were still dark, like polished jet, but they not longer just reflected what they saw, a hard surface, like a mirror, revealing nothing – now they seemed to have suddenly opened and in the depth there was sadness.

“Okay. I see.” Katja nodded. “So you decided what's true and what not: your princess is not a
princess but a slut, and she went down on her knees and ate my pussy to get a job, and she'll do it again 'cause it'll guarantee her a fat paycheck and a promotion, and because it's fun to do it with dirty Katja from Down Under...”

She reeled when Ash hit her. Without thinking she hit back and Ash hit again, harder this time.

„Shit!!“ Katja turned away, trying to catch the blood that ran from her nose in her hands, but the blood ran like water. It began to drip onto her T-shirt.

„Don’t swallow it! Come on...“ Ash lead Katja to the bathroom and made her bend over the washbasin. „Let it run“ , she said. „That’s it...“ With a few quick steps she was at the freezer and grabbed a couple of bottles. She wrapped them in a towel.

Katja sucked in her breath when she felt the cold on her neck.

„Don’t squirm!“ Ash pushed Katja’s head back over the basin. „Just hang in, you’ll be okay in a moment!“ The bleeding turned into a trickle, then stopped.

Katja looked in the mirror and took a deep breath. She ripped a handful of tissues from the box. “What a joke”, she said, dabbing at her blood smeared nose. She turned and looked Ash in the eye. “You're no better than me. Maybe you think so but you aren't.” Her eyes were the two dark mirrors, cold and hard, giving away nothing. “Your hurt pride tells you that I'm a low life form and that you are a noble creature defiled by two sluts. Believe me - there's nothing noble about you. Right now you're just a miserable piece of shit capable of the meanest and dirtiest moves just to make others suffer.”

***

“Take that off”, Chris said. She plucked at Tobin's T-shirt.

Tobin touched Chris' wet hair. “Look - I'm dying to make love to you, but right now...” She felt silly, alone with a beautiful girl in her bedroom, the girl she loved, talking to her like this instead of just doing it. “But... I wouldn't be able... Look, I'm too worn out to be of any use.”

“Shut up.” Chris pulled the T-Shirt over Tobin's head and Tobin was suddenly naked. “I'll give you something better than sex. Lie down, on your belly.”

Tobin sat down on the bed, watched as Chris slipped out of her jeans, got rid of her sweater and shirt. Then she unhooked her bra and dropped it.

“Come on”, Chris said. “Lie down, turn around. Show me your butt.”

Tobin crawled onto the bed, turned around. The sheets where cold and crisp and her nipples hardened and hardened even more when she was suddenly straddled by Chris.

“Hey!” Tobin pretended to protest while she enjoyed the warm, soft folds of Chris' sex on her back, leaving a warm spot, slightly wet. “I'm not Silver and you're not the Lone Ranger and...” She groaned with pain when Chris' suddenly dug her fingers into Tobin's muscles. “You're crazy... You gonna kill me if...” She panted when Chris found a certain spot in her neck and pain exploded in her head – only to turn into a warm wave which suddenly seemed to flow through her body. “Oh my gawd!” Tobin moaned while Chris' fingers worked their way through the long muscles of her back,
close to the spine. This WAS better than sex! She hissed in pain when Chris' fingers dug into her butt muscles.

Chris stopped. “You know”, she said. “This was what turned me on first, your lovely behind. And those beautiful legs.” She ran her palms along Tobin's thighs, then began to work on them. “Like a cute boy – but much more tempting.”

Tobin's head was spinning. “You mean you stared at my booty and my legs each time you took the chopper? You dirty little... Oh my gawd!” She sucked in her breath when Chris dug her fingers into the soles of her feet. “Oh MY GAWD!!” Tobin panted. She suddenly felt the familiar throbbing pulse between her legs, the spreading warmth, as if a little sun was shining in her belly, expanding, felt that she was getting wet. This was sex and, at the same time, something beyond. Her whole body was warm, electrified, vibrating.

“Where...” She had to whisper because her throat was tight. “Where did you learn this? At a Bangkok massage parlor??”

Chris gently kneaded her toes. “Sure”, Chris said. “Worked part time as a massage girl, between soccer games, at one of those joints where they shoot ping-pong balls from their snatch. Learned that, too.”

She let go of Tobin's feet, turned around and laid down on Tobin's back, stretching out like a warm blanket. Tobin felt the tips of Chris' breasts hard against her skin.

Chris' hair fell over Tobin's face, her cheek rested against Tobin's.

Tobin took Chris' hand, played with her fingers. She closed her eyes and listened to Chris' heartbeat. She took a deep breath. “You... talked to him?”

Chris moved slightly away from Tobin. “You keep your job.”

Tobin held on to her hand. “That's not what I mean.” She kissed her fingertips.

“It wasn't nice”, Chris said. She relaxed, again resting her cheek against Tobin's.

“He didn't.... hurt you?”

Chris shook her head. “He thinks I'm gonna dump you, go to the States for a while and then come back to him, eventually.”

Tobin closed her eyes again. “You do, right?

“Do what?”

“Want to go away...” Tobin said.

Chris let go of Tobin's hand. “You should stop drinking beer. You smell like a pub.” She sat up, pushing back her hair.

Tobin turned around, looked at her face. “Will you?”

Chris avoided Tobin's eyes. “Will I what?”

“Go back to the States.”

Chris didn't answer.
“What if I look into your cute little daypack?” Tobin touched her back but Chris drew away from her. “Tell me.”

Chris got up from the bed. She walked from the bedroom, came back a few moments later and dropped the daypack in Tobin’s lap.

She stared into Tobin’s eyes, hands on hips.

Tobin hesitated, then she pulled the zipper and slipped her hand into the daypack, pulled it out again and held up the airline ticket. She didn’t look at it but put it back. “One way... I bet.” She pulled out the booking confirmation, read it. “You wanted to go yesterday? Just like that?”

“I’m here”, Chris said.

“With barely enough time to say good-bye...” She dropped the sheet of paper. “...if you want to catch your new flight.”

Chris still stared at Tobin. “I’ll not go back to him. Never.”

“But you’ll not stay with me either.” Tobin pushed the daypack away.

“And if - then what? I’ve got no job, no place to live...”

“What’s wrong with being together with me? Tell me!”

Chris sat down on the edge of the bed. “Look - I’m here because I couldn’t go away without seeing you. I thought I could. But I couldn’t. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have to.”

“Why do you have to go back to the States?”

“If he finds out that I’m still here...”

“I’m not afraid of him...”

“Don’t be silly. You’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” Chris closed her eyes. “I’m here because there’s something you should know...”

Tobin unfolded the blanket. “Come”, she said. “You’re getting cold.”

Chris bit her lip. Then she laid down beside Tobin and Tobin pulled the blanket over Chris and herself and took Chris in her arms. She ran her fingers through Chris’ hair. “You ever been to France?”

“Paris... why?”

“What about Nice?”

Chris raised her head to look into Tobin’s face. “What are you talking about?”

Tobin smiled. “Blue sea, sunshine, palm trees?”

Chris frowned.

“Made a couple of phone calls while sitting on my thumbs in Oslo”, Tobin said. “Geeze... she’s a tough bitch.”
Chris narrowed her eyes. “She!!??”

“She runs the business. Backed by her father's money.” Tobin stretched, pulled Chris closer to her. “Aisha Al Said, that's her name.”

Chris pushed herself up, searched Tobin's face, prepared to see the usual I'm-bullshitting-you expression. “Business? What business? Sounds more like Arabian Nights to me...”

“Oman”, Tobin said. “She's putting together a VIP heli service at Nice. Made me an offer. A good one.”

“Hang on a second. Just let me get this straight. You wanna quit and join this... Arab outfit and airlift billionaires from ship to shore in France?”

“You think I want to spend the rest of my working life in Alaska?”

Chris shook her head. “You won't have to. He said he won't transfer you.”

Tobin laughed. “Come on! What would you do in his place? You think he looks forward to seeing me each time he takes the chopper to Oslo? 'Oh, Mrs Heath! How nice to see you! And how’s my wife? Still eating your pussy?’”

Chris pushed Tobin, hard. “You're sick!”

Tobin pretended her ribs were broken. Then she grinned. “Palm trees! Think of that! And long delicious lunches!” She touched Chris' cheek.

Chris pushed away her hand. “And what shall I do? You thought of that, too?”

“We'll work something out.” Tobin ran a finger over the skin between Chris' breasts. “Meanwhile...”

Chris pushed her hand away again. “Meanwhile what?”

“... get a suntan.”

“And that's all?”

“You mean do something with our lives?” Tobin shrugged. “Sure.” She sat up. “Let's challenge the glider altitude record!”

Chris fell back on the bed. She covered her face. “I knew it! I knew when I saw you gape at the fucking sailplane! It turned your brain into jelly!”

Tobin was excited. “Hey! We ship the plane to the Chilean Andes, and then we surf the mountain waves that build up when the Pacific winds hit the Andean ridge. They'll take us to sixty thousand feet and higher. You'll love it! You can see the curve of the planet, and the sky is no longer blue but turns black, and the stars and the sun are out at the same time...”

“You're nuts! How did you manage all the years to avoid growing up??”

Tobin was on all fours. “You'll look gorgeous in a pressure suit. We'll make headlines... What's wrong with it?”

Chris looked at Tobin. Suddenly the daylight faded and hail crashed against the windows.

“What?” Tobin's smile vanished because there was something in Chris face she had never seen
before.

Chris still looked at Tobin. “I’m pregnant”, she said.

***

Katja Olsson rummaged in her briefcase. It was one of her designer pieces, meant to boost status in certain arenas, like conference rooms, airport lounges, expensive restaurants. Here, in a cheap motel close to a busy road, where right now a passing container rig made the complementary flower arrangement quiver and the vase rattle on the table, it was just pathetic, even more so in the hands of a woman with a bloody nose, wearing a a bloodstained T-shirt.

Katja pushed a piece of paper across the table. „Sign“, she said. She handed Ash a pen which fell into the same category as the briefcase and now looked strange in the hand of a naked woman with Katja’s bloody fingerprints on her arms.

Ash read. It was the addendum to her contract, canceling the termination clause. She saw Olsson's signature. And next to it McLowry's.

„Repair of your ship includes a brand new loading crane built according to Alexandra's specifications“, Olsson said. „And McLowry personally signed the papers, overriding CFO's veto. Apparently he's become one of your fans.“

Ash dropped the pen. “You're trying to buy me?”

Katja laughed. “That what they say I usually do?” She laughed again. “Well, I can do better than giving you a new crane. Northern and British P agreed on a joint venture: a sea-air service which will bring together all activities of support and rescue. Northern and British P offered me CEO and I accepted last week. One of my first tasks will be to build a new ship, the biggest and most modern AHST in the business. Wherever it's needed it'll go: from arctic circle to Gulf of Oman, from South America to Africa, from Texas Gulf to Antarctica.” Katja Olsson smiled. “They expect me to make a strong statement, they said. Well, I can see a woman captain on the new vessel, a Captain Ashlyn Harris. That would be a strong statement, right?” Katja tried to read Ash's face, but it gave away nothing. „So what are you gonna do, Captain? Run away? Back to the States? Or stop acting like a complete asshole and sign the the contract?“

Ash shook her head. She stepped away from the pen as if it could bite her. “Why the fuck are you here?”

„'Cause she asked me“, Katja Olsson said.

Ash leaned against the wall. Her heart was throbbing, telling her that things were much more complicated than she had thought. „Asked you? To do what? Gimme a career boost?“

Katja Olsson took a deep breath. “To dry your tears.”

Ash stared into Olsson's eyes, trying to find something that told her that this was just a bad joke, something to give her a reason... to do what? Hit her again?

She stared. And suddenly she knew that Katja Olsson was telling the truth. And this was worse than anything else because she suddenly longed for Ali so strongly that she had to sit down on the rickety
chair which was supposed to turn the room into something slightly better than just a place to sleep.
And she suddenly knew that there would be tears, later, so many tears that there would be no way to
dry them – she couldn't think of any. Ash got up from the chair and tried to get a leg into her jeans,
but it was the wrong one.

“I want you to bring her back”, Katja Olsson said.

“Are you crazy? Do it yourself if it's so important to you! I don't even know where she lives.” Ash
pulled up her trousers, then slipped into her T-shirt only to find that it was inside out and cold and
wet.

Katja produced a piece of paper from the back pocket of her jeans. „This is for you.”

Ash snatched it from Katja's fingers just to make her stop shoving it into her face. She wanted to
crumple it but didn't. She looked at it. „Where did you get this?“

„Thought you'd want to know where to find her.“

„You're nuts!” Ash dropped it on the table. She put on her biker jacket, fetched her bag and walked
to the door, fumbling for her credit card.

„And I already checked you out and payed the room”, Katja said. „So... why don't you go back to
your place, get in shape and then do what's right: take a plane to Britain.”

Ash didn't stop.

Katja blocked her way.

„What else?” Ash hissed.

Katja Olsson's voice was barely more than a whisper. She held up the pearl and let it dangle in front
of Ash's face. „And if... she did what you think – is she now a second hand item? Like a used
subway ticket? A bottle of milk beyond expiration date? Something you want to get rid of?”

Ash was pale. She tried to push Katja Olsson aside, but Katja didn't move.

“I've been several times where you are now”, Katja said. „And I know that you want one thing, even
if it hurts, want it so desperately that you'll even swallow the pain: you want to know the truth.” Ash
didn't say a word but Katja knew she was right, she saw it in Ash's face. „You think you know what
happened. But you can't be sure, right? And you're dying to know.”

Ash gritted her teeth, clenched her fists.

“I'll give you the truth”, Katja said. „But there's a condition. I want you to never talk to her about
this... thing... Never ask her. You hear me? Never ever. It would only make her suffer, and I don't
want that to happen. She means too much to me.”

Still Ash was silent. She was pale, her lips a thin line.

Katja came towards her until she almost touched her. „Say it!”

Ash swallowed hard. She nodded.

Katja leaned forward, her lips close to Ash's ear. „Yes”, she whispered. „We made love.” Ash closed
her eyes. „And yes, we shared a moment of happiness. A very brief moment. And then, when it was
over, I'd have given anything to undo what I had done, give back what I had taken.” Katja was so
close that she could feel Ash tremble, her muscles harden. “All I wanted to do was ask her: will you love me, one day? But I did it the wrong way. And when she answered I didn't listen because I didn't want to hear what she said because it was 'No, no, no!'” Slowly Katja embraced Ash and held her. “You are no better than me”, Katja whispered. “There's only one difference: she choose you, not me. Don't throw it all away just because she hurt your fucking pride. Yeah, believe me: It's you pride that hurts, not your heart! And pride is nothing compared to love.” Katja held up the piece of paper again, stuffed it into the breast pocket of Ash's jacket. „Bring her back."

Ash's heart was racing, a spot of throbbing pain inside her breast, her throat tight. “Why should I?”

“Cause you love her”, Katja said.

“What makes you think so?” Ash's throat was so tight she could barely breathe.

“This”, Katja said and touched her bloody nose. „Bring her back."

Ash wanted to walked through the door and get out of here, away from Olsson, away from this sad place, as if this would make her get away from what she had heard right now. Instead she took a deep breath and looked Katja Olsson straight in the eye. “Why don't you, Northern, British P and all the rest go fuck yourself?”

***

Tobin had never been in plane crash, but now she knew how it must feel: one moment riding the air, on top of everything – the next instance the bottom drops out, just like that, and everything suddenly turns into screaming terror, the fall freezing the soul, the blood.

“Talk to me!” Chris said, while Tobin fell from the sky and towards a sudden death.

Tobin's throat was tight. “Who...”


“Did he...” Tobin's voice failed.

“Did he – what? Rape me?” Chris tried to steady her voice. “It wasn't what I wanted, and I didn't ask for it. But... No, he didn't. Look, I'm his wife...”

Tobin turned her face away. “Did you already know when we...”

“Yes”, Chris said. “Made the test last week. And – no, I'm not going back to him.”

Tobin gritted her teeth. “Does he know?”

“No.” Chris moved closer to Tobin so she would have to look at her, but Tobin closed her eyes.

“Why didn't you tell him?”

“If you don't know I shouldn't be here – should've taken the flight yesterday.”

Tobin got up from the bed. “Yeah. Would've spared us... this.” She put on her T-shirt, her jeans, pulled the sweater over her head, slipped into her shoes.
“What the hell are you doing?” Chris jumped up, naked. “Go to work? To your fucking helicopters?” She followed Tobin into corridor. “You're not gonna walk out on me just like that!!”

Tobin grabbed the raincoat, the car keys and walked to the front door.

“Don't leave me standing like this!! Give me a chance...” Tears were running down Chris’ cheeks.

Tobin opened the front door.

“Please don't!”

Tobin slammed the door.

***

Ash stuffed a additional pair of socks into the carry-on, on top of the spare T-shirt and the spare jeans. She thought again and added a silk scarf and a fleece.

Her phone buzzed. “Harris...”

“Hey... Captain. How are you?” As always Stella Carson's voice made her spine tingle – which made Ash, as always, very angry with herself.

“What's up?” As always Ash tried to hide her feelings behind very short sentences.

“Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to reach you for days!”

“Listen...” Ash sat down on the floor. “I'm quite busy right now...”

“You are really crazy to hear my voice, right?” Stella’s sarcasm hurt. “Listen – I know you no longer care to talk to me but, well... couldn't you just pretend you do?”

“Look...” Ash didn't like that sort of talk. It added feeling guilty to being angry. “Why don't you tell me what you want?”

“It's about the accident thing...”

“Shit!” Ash took a deep breath. “What is it now? They want to put me in jail or what?”

Stella was silent for a moment. “It was my piece-of-shit ex.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Came out short from a couple of deals”, Stella said. “Asked me for money.”

“And you gave it to him...” Ash suddenly hated to hear her voice echo off the bare walls of her flat. It sounded as if she was living in a bucket.

“Weeeell...” Stella apparently thought about how to wrap up an ugly thing nicely. “He wanted more. And I said no.”

“And he didn't like that...” Ash started to tear tiny pieces from the lid of a moving box.
“Exhumed the accident thing, made the picture public. Just to piss me off.”

Ash switched the phone to the other hand to stop herself from shredding the box. “And all that occurred to you just now...”

Stella sounded embarrassed. “Look – I thought it might be him behind all the shit. But now I know. Don’t ask me how I found out.”

“Rode on his dick?” Ash immediately regretted that.

For the first time 'lawyer' and 'bitch' were gone from Stella’s voice. “Will you ever forgive me?”

Ash closed her eyes. “Will the shit ever stop?”

'Lawyer' and 'bitch' were back. “Don’t worry. I'll take care of him. I know a few things about his deals which the IRS and SEC won't like.”

Ash had to laugh. “You’re dangerous, you know that?”

Stella cleared her throat. “What about this girl, Alexandra?”

“What about her?” Ash narrowed her eyes.

“You love her, right?”

“That's none of your business!” Ash said instead of the 'fuck off' that came to her mind.

“Listen...” Stella paused. “Don't let her go.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ash sat bolt upright. The anger was back. “You lecturing me about... love?? You??”

“Am I that bad?” Stella seemed to be hurt. “Listen - I'd love to... see you again, some time...”

Ash had been afraid of Stella saying this because she found it harder and harder to find an excuse. “Look... of course it's good talking to you. And I'd love to see you, too. Let me call you again later. And then we'll arrange something, okay?”

“I'm a lawyer, remember? I know when somebody feeds me crap just to get rid of me.”

“No. I'm serious. You are a bad girl, Stel. But for some reason I still like you.” Ash meant it, instantly cursing herself for showing weakness, prepared to feel Stella's teeth, because she liked to bite into a soft spot - but nothing happened.

“That's nice of you to say.” Stella took a deep breath. “Let's end the call before I start to cry.”

Ash had to smile. “Yeah. Good idea. Talk to you later, Stel.”

“Talk to you later, Captain.” Stella was gone and Ash found herself listening to the dead line.

She put the phone away and simply let herself fall on her back. She stared at the ceiling.

It was a dark and rainy day, and noon looked like early evening. Perfect to leave all this behind and move on.

Why not? She thought. Go back to the States and call Stella and see what happens. The few things in
her new flat – nothing she really needed, nothing she couldn't easily replace. The place itself still more or less empty. And anyway: a place, not a home. She could get rid of it with a phone call.

And Olsson? She wouldn't make any trouble. The contract had a termination clause. And the addendum... without her signature it meant nothing. Again a phone call, and she would be free.

And she could just pick up her daypack and the carry-on and hop on the next plane and go back. Why not? She thought. She picked up her phone.

“SAS reservation center - How can I help you?”

“Ashlyn Harris. I'd like to book a flight...”

***

Tobin stared at the sea, gray as slate, large waves rolling in from the west, their crests sharp, white. She was so close to the cliff’s edge that she seemed to be in the air, high above the sea, and not in her car. And the wind, still strong, made the Mustang tremble like a plane.

The car park was empty, she was alone.

She was exhausted, as if at the end of a fast journey. She had always thought to be in control, her life straight and simple: sleeping, eating, having fun, doing her job; moving smoothly, flying, riding the air. Now everything no longer added up. Her friends, her job, her love affairs: gravity had claimed her, she was on the ground, learning to walk - like everybody else.

Would have been better if it had stopped here, she thought. Chris had wanted it, when they had met, right here in this car park. She had wanted it to end – instead it had started, started for real. And now it was so real that it hurt.

Not what she wanted... Tobin gritted her teeth. What's that supposed to mean? Not what she wanted? So why did she do it?

Suddenly another thought surfaced. How many times had girls let her do them without really wanting it? Hadn't she, just to be nice, done it, now and then? And afterwards it hadn't been, well, not what she had wanted? Bullshit! She thought. It's different between girls.

She turned on the radio, not really listening.

Why hadn't she told her husband? It's his kid anyway. Why did she come to me? Because I'm just an accommodation? she thought. A place to run to when things get rough and she needs some...

“You're listening to xyz Radio...” The guy spoke Norwegian, but he had the standard voice of all anchor guys around the globe, sounding exactly as they sounded in Britain, Australia, on the continent or in the States, so Tobin had no trouble understanding what he said. Even the traffic news which followed sounded as shitty as traffic jam information sounded on all the other stations on the planet.

Tobin turned the volume down. To have a baby - she had never thought about it. It happened to other people, nothing she had anything to do with. But now... Chris was no longer just a chick, a hot piece, a girl she was in love with. She was a mother.
She'd have to sleep on the plane, Tobin thought. If she could. She'll need a blanket, it gets cold, high in the air. The sweater she had on wouldn't keep her warm. And water. She should ask the flight attendants for a whole bottle, not just one of the tiny glasses they usually hand out. A bottle, not just a glass. To balance the dry air from the air condition, it was important. One could catch the flu on a plane. And flu wasn't good for a mother. She should be careful, from now on.

Tobin stared into the distance where the beams of far away lighthouses punctuated the rain and mist.

Was it a good idea to fly high altitude with a baby? Tobin was suddenly worried. A lot of radiation from space hit the planet and planes flying intercontinental absorbed a good portion of it – and the passengers as well. Had she thought about that? She had to be much more careful! She should've asked a doctor! Or had she?

Tobin woke up with a start when a blinding light hit the car. A second later a Coast Guard helicopter came in low and thundered across the parking space towards Sola heliport.

Gawd – how long had she been sitting here? Tobin looked at her watch. The same moment the mobile buzzed, the screen lit up and showed that Bugs Bunny wanted to talk to her.

“Where are you??” Mikkelsen was shouting into the phone and Tobin held it away from her ear. “Workshop starts in fifteen minutes!”

The workshop! Tobin had forgotten about it: Sikorsky engineers from Sweden giving a rundown on the new night vision electronics on the S 92.

“Tell them I'll be late, Mikki. Tell them I'll be very late.” She listened. “I know, Mikki. I know it's important.” She listened, again holding the phone away from her ear. “Yes, Mikki. I know I'll be in trouble. No, I haven't got any idea what you should tell them. Come on, Mikki, use your brain! Tell them my car broke down. Tell them I was kidnapped by aliens. I don't care. Thanks, Mikki.” She started the engine and backed away from the edge of the cliff, carefully, because she had been too close to it.

Then Tobin stepped on it. She couldn't just let Chris go without talking about these things – the flu, and the radiation. And to be much more careful from now on because from now on she had to take care not only of herself but also of the tiny spark of life growing in her.

***

Tobin ran up the stairs, taking two at a time. She almost dropped the key when she opened the front door. She barged into the living room. “Did you see a doctor?”

The answer was silence. The place was empty. A wet spot was where Chris had put her daypack.

Tobin touched it. Then she sat down. There was still beer in the glass. She stared at it, then grabbed it and swallowed the booze. It started to rain.

She got out her phone, found Chris' number. What was she going to say to her? She hadn't thought of it. Panic turned her stomach into a tight knot.

“It's me... look I'm so sorry...” She stopped when she realized that she was talking to a mailbox.
She put the phone down. She tapped on the table.

She picked up the phone and tried again, again listened to the mailbox.

There was a wet ring from the glass and she began to doodle and when she stopped it was a heart. She wiped it away. The rain had turned into a torrent.

Airport! She jumped up, grabbed the car keys. She could make it in half an hour, could find her, could talk to her, tell her that...

She stopped at the front door, turned and almost ran to the bedroom, was on her knees, looked under the bed. There it was, the booking confirmation. She checked the time of departure.

She sat down on the carpet, crumpled the sheet of paper into a ball. Chris was long past security, probably boarding right now.

She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of raindrops hitting the window.

She could almost feel Chris slip away, as if the invisible bond that had seemed so strong, made for eternity, was already giving, and giving more and more with every beat of Tobin's heart, already nothing more but the fragile, unreal link of long distance communication which reduced Chris, her smooth skin, her tender touch, the warmth of her body, the fragrance of her hair, to a telephone number and a voice coming over a shaky mobile connection.

Tobin took a deep breath and opened her eyes again. She took the phone. I'm sorry, she wrote, added: I love you. She sent it.

She picked the phone up again. Take care, she wrote and sent it.

Call you later, she added. She wanted to send it – but didn't.

Her heart was beating faster. She looked up Chris phone number in the phone book and her fingers began to tremble. It was a Telenor number - the largest Norwegian provider. She checked the e-mail. There was no e-mail. She scanned the phone book but there was only one entry for Chris, the Telenor account. She scanned the incoming calls, found only Telenor. She scanned her e-mails, she scanned the phone book again...

She dropped the phone, pushed it away, closed her eyes and as she did so she could almost feel the bond between her and Chris rip apart.

She could send mails, she could send SMS, she could talk to the mailbox – she could as well talk to her espresso machine, or shout into the garbage bin: Chris was gone, beyond reach. She had never thought that the difference between hope and despair, heaven and misery, making a simple mistake and ruining the best thing ever happened to her would be a fucking mobile phone number she didn't have.

Yes – Chris had come to her, not to her husband. Because she had wanted her to know, not her husband. Because she had decided that Tobin was the most important person in her life, not he. Because she had trusted her, trusted her to be there, to be on her side, to help her. But she hadn't.

Tobin inhaled with a sob. She opened her eyes again, got up from the floor and walked to the kitchen. She opened the freezer. No beer left.

She paced the kitchen, stopped in front of the door and banged her head against it.
What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she never simply do what was right, say what had to be said. Like in a nightmare she had taken every wrong turn possible – when it had mattered most.

She buried her face in her hands. She couldn't bear thinking of Chris, flying across the ocean, alone on a long journey: from here to London, from there to... where? What had she read on the departure list? LAX? She couldn't remember.

Tobin walked to the living room and stared out of the window. Then she went back to the kitchen.

She couldn't bear sitting in the flat thinking about Chris who every minute, every hour went farther away from her. She couldn't bear sitting in the flat thinking about what she had said and what she should've said instead.

She slipped into the raincoat, took her keys. Night vision electronics - she hoped that it would keep her from getting insane by boring her into unconsciousness.

But after that?

She walked to the front door, took her phone and dialed Lia's number.


“I have to work.”

“It's Friday”, Tobin said.

“I'm on a tight deadline.”

“Perfect”, Tobin said. “A very good reason to leave early and get into your sexiest outfit.”

Lia sighed. “My place”, she said. “Pick me up around eight so we can eat something and have a couple of drinks, just to get in the mood.”

“'kay.” Tobin ended the call.

Lia... She thought. Always spending too much money on beautiful things, always hungry, never getting enough: enough food, enough girls. Bad influence, Tobin thought. And that was exactly what she'd need tonight: bad influence, lot's of it.

She dialed again. “Alina? You're in town? Listen – care to hit the clubs tonight and meet a friend of mine?”

Like to go on reading? There's a new episode of my story on Tapas.io.
Chapter 19

Tobin took the last stairs, careful not to wake up the neighbors. She had payed the taxi, had collected Lia's phone and Alina's scarf from the backseat, and now carried the three bottles of hard stuff upstairs which she had bought from a bartender she knew and which had cost a fortune. The door to Lia's flat was open and Tobin walked straight into the kitchen. She searched for glasses, then opened the fridge to fetch some ice: just because the city's clubs had closed the party didn't have to end.

She heard Lia and Alina talk in the living room, heard Lia laugh and Tobin could tell instantly what was going on and what was going to happen because Lia's laughter seemed to come from deep down her throat and it had a certain lack-of-oxygen quality caused by the excitement of a long night on the dance floor – and being close to Alina.

She could feel the heat even here. What was it this Russian trucker had, and others didn't? She shook her head. Now where's your cute felt pen, Lia? She thought. No need to scribble your number on her arm. Or thigh. She's probably giving you her number right now – in a place where you won't forget it.

And what about herself? Where would she be when those two collided? Right in the middle? Like a leaf of lettuce on a sandwich?

Lia, big and breathless, barged into the kitchen. “Where the hell did you get HER from?? I mean... Woah!” She fetched a can of coke from the fridge and held it against her cheek, then against her cleavage. “You... did it with her?”

Tobin dropped the ice cubes into the glasses. “Just friends.”

“Just friends? With her? Come on!”

Tobin put the bag of cubes back in the fridge, closed the door and leaned against it. “Say... did you ever do a girl and had the feeling that... you know... she didn't really want it but just to be nice she... well...”

Lia wasn't really listening. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Forget it.” Tobin ran her fingers through the hair, as if this could chase away all the thoughts that were flicking back and forth in her mind – a kind of channel hopping she hadn't been unable to stop.

“What's the matter?” Lia's mind was, right now, tuned to one channel only, the one providing adult entertainment. She watched Tobin prepare the drinks. “Less ice for me. More booze.” She grabbed her glass. “Come on. Let's have fun.”

“Gimme a few minutes. Was a busy night.”

“Don't stay away too long. Everything is possible when I'm with her, alone.” Lia winked, then left the kitchen.

Tobin walked to the window. The darkness was already fading into a gray morning, soon the city would wake up to another day. Her ears were still ringing from the music, her body still vibrated from the electronic beats, her feet still wanted to move to the rhythm. And the parade of neon colored drinks she had put into her body via straw or straight from the glass still poisoned her blood.

And nothing had helped. Chris had been on her mind in the light shows of the clubs, on the dance
floor, in the dim glow of the bars, had been on her mind all the time.

Now she's home, Tobin thought. Hopefully too tired to worry and in her bed, asleep.

She heard Lia laugh, then squeal, as if somebody had touched her in a spot where she thought she had to protest, but her voice definitely said that she liked it and wanted more.

Tobin smiled. Lia and Alina - like putting a match to a stack of explosives, Tobin thought. Whammm!!

She picked up the two glasses, cold and fogged. In the corridor she stopped. She heard Lia: “My name's Elizabeth Nuliajuk Alaku. But nobody can remember that. So at work they call me Liz. My friends call me Lia.”

Then Alina's low, husky voice: “Nuliajuk...” And Tobin could tell from that voice that Alina was touching the tiny dots tattooed on Lia's cheeks.

Tobin moved closer to the living room door which was ajar and peeped through the gap. Lia and Alina were kissing – really kissing, like two girls in love.

Tobin tiptoed back to the kitchen door, then started again to the living room, making sure they heard the ice cubes clink. She cleared her throat, deliberately noisy. “Say girls – any chance of some decent music?” She pushed the door open with her shoulder and entered.

Both were apart, cheeks flushed, Alina pretending to check out Lia's CD collection, Lia straightening her tight dress, breathing fast. She was powering up the Bang Olufsen system.

Alina was now into Lia's vinyl collection. “Shostakovitch!” She lifted the acrylic cover of the huge vintage Thorens record player and a few seconds later the first chords of the number one piano concert hang in the air like glittering shards of glass. Alina closed her eyes. “How I love this music!” She took a deep breath. “Excuse me, girls. I have to wash my hands.”

Lia tried to rearrange her hair. “Where's Chris? I thought she'd be coming too. We need at least one sane person around here!”

Tobin shrugged. She turned down the volume: Shostakovitch's haunting string passage was too closely mirroring her own condition.

Lia's instinct for trouble worked with perfection even under more-booze-than-healthy conditions. “Where's she?”

“Left her husband.” Tobin hoped that minimum information would spare her Lia's unnerving way to find exactly the weak spot.

Lia wasn't to be deterred. “Where is she?”

“Gone.”

“You mean you fucked up?” Lia had also a very direct way to find the bottom line.

“Now wait a minute...” Tobin protested.

Lia wasn't impressed. “You fucked up! Gawd! I knew it!”

“She walked out on me!!!”
“What the hell did you do to her??”

“You kidding? I didn't do anything!!”

Lia shook her head. “Don't lie to me. What did you do?”

Tobin stared into her glass. Most of the ice was gone, the water spoiling the drink. “She's pregnant”, Tobin said and put the glass on the table.

Lia came closer. “She's what?”

Tobin's pride called for showing at least some sort of resistance. “Not by me...”

“She told you she's having a baby and you...” Lia was now so close Tobin could no longer avoid her eyes. “A guy knocks her up – you ditch her?”

“What do you mean by 'ditch'? Listen...”

Lia stabbed a finger against Tobin's chest. “That's the most disgusting thing I ever heard!”

“Hey! You talk to me as if I'm the father...”

Lia stabbed again. “Don't give me that sort of crap. That's not funny. You said all the time you love her. And the moment she needs you most you dump the girl! What a miserable little fucker you are! Like a piece-of-shit guy!”

Tobin wanted to say something but Alina came back from the bathroom. “Lia's right”, Alina said. She turned up the volume again and Shostakovitch's slow movement filled the room like a funeral march.

“And then you organized this little party to get rid of your bad conscience?” Lia was no longer stabbing and her voice sounded as if she didn't want to touch Tobin any longer.

“Hang on a second! She didn't give me a chance to...”

“That's pretty low what you did”, Alina said.

Tobin drank from her glass, suddenly aware that it consisted mostly of stale water. She pulled a face. “She didn't give me a chance to set things right. When I came back to tell her I'm sorry she was gone. Wanted to dump me anyway. Had a one-way ticket to the States!!”

“Shut up”, Alina said. “Get into your raincoat and get out of here.”

“What?? You two push over girls at a rate of ten per day and want to lecture me on the small print of girl-girl etiquette??” She pointed a shaky finger at Alina. “Besides – it was you who always told me to get rid of her!!”

“Do what she tells you!” Lia slapped Tobin, not too hard, almost gently, but it stung.

Alina put her arm around Tobin's shoulder. “You in love with her? Still?”

Tobin nodded.

“And she?”

Tobin shrugged.
Lia narrowed her eyes. “Does her husband know that she’s pregnant?”

Tobin shook her head.

“But she came to you...” Alina said. “And you tell me you don't know?” Her lips were close to Tobin's ear. “Love is a gift”, she said. “Don't throw it away. Or you'll regret it for the rest of your life.” She gently kissed Tobin's cheek.

Lia touched the tip of Tobin's nose. “You want her back?”

Tobin nodded, close to tears.

“Then do something”, Lia said. “Now. Before it's too late.”

***

Tobin walked along the street. It was still dark, too early for traffic. The decent folks would soon get up and ready for leading a decent life, the bad folks would go to bed, their ears still ringing from loud music, their mouths dry from too much booze. She took a deep breath in the chilly air. She shivered, walked faster.

Do something? She thought. But what? Call Chris' husband? Sorry to bother you, Sir. But could you give me your wife's number? Just want to ask her how she feels about shacking up with me... now that she's having a baby and nowhere to go?

She needed to think and she needed a coffee, but she had no idea where to get one in Lia's neighborhood. She began to walk, going nowhere in particular, just to get rid off her tiredness. She searched the pocket of her raincoat, found a gum. She unwrapped it and dropped the paper. She stopped, walked back and picked it up - they didn't like littering in this country. She rolled it into a ball and when she passed a deserted bus stop she aimed at the garbage can.

She stopped, closed the fist around the piece of paper. But of course!!

A taxi passed but she was too slow and it was gone when she raised her hand. She walked faster. Another taxi came from behind and this time she was fast enough but it didn't stop. Tobin began to jog, towards the intersection ahead where she saw more traffic.

A taxi stopped at the red light and Tobin started to run. She saw the lights change, saw the taxi move on. She simply stepped into the lane. And even when the taxi honked the horn she stayed where she was, squinting into the headlights, stayed, her hands raised, until the taxi stopped right in front of her.

***

Ash put on the biker jacket, collected her daypack, and walked past the flight attendants off the plane and followed the crowd through the connector bridge and through the the arrival gate towards customs and immigration.

The officer barely looked at her passport, checked it against security data, stamped it and handed it
back, and Ash switched on her phone and walked past customs and into the waiting area.

She followed the signs ‘Car Rental’ which lead her outside the main terminal. The weather was fine and she longed for fresh air and just loved to move after the flight. She skipped the service shuttle bus stop and walked the short distance to the rental car building. The sun came out and she blinked into the bright light and thought that this was a promising start into... Well, she thought. Into what? A new life? She stepped through the sliding doors and walked towards the Hertz counter where her company ID gave her a fat discount on cars.

Her phone buzzed. “Harris...”

“Hey... Captain. How are you?” Torben Molvik's voice was cheerful and loud, the voice of a large man used to make himself heard at a busy shipyard.

“Hey...”. Ash switched the daypack to the other shoulder. “What's up?” She held the phone closer to her ear when a computer voice, disguised as a woman who cared for the passengers' safety, began to tell everyone who had the time to listen that they should never leave the luggage unattended, never talk to strangers, and that every item alone would be arrested – or so it sounded after the announcement had bounced off the walls, floors and glass fronts of the building, and had mixed with the voices of people shouting at each other or into their phones.

“You're at an airport!” Molvik had identified the background noise. “Where the hell are you? Don't tell me you went back in the States!”

“Listen...” Ash had reached the car rental desk. “I'm quite busy right now...” She put company ID, passport and driver's license on the counter. She covered the phone. “I made a reservation – Harris.”

“Rich guy called me yesterday...” She heard Molvik sort through paper: he was at his desk at the shipyard – they started early in his business. “He's eager to get you as the skipper for his toy. Now... what do you want me to tell him?”

The Hertz girl typed away on the keyboard, looked at the screen. “Mrs Harris – yes. Standard company package, unlimited mileage, excess damage waiver. How long do you want it?” Ash raised two fingers. “Look...” she said to Molvik. “This has to be planned, carefully. I'd need a crew to make the voyage, at least one more guy, better two or three.”

“One is enough”, Molvik said. “The thing practically sails itself. You only need to...”

Ash shook her head. “Come on, Molvik. You know better than that. We are talking about the Atlantic. If it's only one it'll have to be somebody who knows ships.”

“What about this engineer, what was her name, Alexandra...”

Ash took a deep breath. “Don't you know? She was on the platform when it was hit by the wave.”

“No shit!” Molvik's voice changed. “It was in the news, but I didn't know that it was her. She alright?”

“Two days...” The Hertz girl typed on the keyboard and a printer started.

Ash turned away from the counter. She suddenly realized that she had never asked Ali, never had talked to her about it. “I...” she hesitated. “I don't know.”

“Geeez...” Molvik tapped with a pencil on his desk, probably not knowing that he was doing it. “She must be in pretty bad shape. Pretty bad.” He cleared his throat, fighting against his own nightmare
which seemed to surface again. “I was, back then, when...” His voice trailed off: after all those years he was still unable to tell somebody what the sea had done to him.

Ash felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She hadn't even thought about it, about what the sea had done to Ali - too busy pitying herself, being jealous and mad, too much in love with her own injured pride.

The Hertz girl pulled several forms from the printer and placed them in front of Ash. She gave Ash a pen. “Please check name and address. And I need your signature here, here and here. And please sign off here for the insurance cover.”

Ash switched the phone to the other hand. “How long until the Flying Saucer is ready to go to sea?”

“About two months”, Molvik said, glad to talk business. “Enough time to work something out. It's just that the rich guy would feel much better if you say 'yes'. He says if it's about money simply say your price and...”

Ash was suddenly furious. This sounded too much like Katja Olsson trying to buy her after she had taken what she loved most. What was wrong with these guys? Did it come as an add on to being rich and successful? “You can tell him to stick his money where the sun never shines.”

The Hertz girl didn't even blink. Only her smile seemed to have frozen while she watched Ash putting her name on dotted lines, angrily slashing away at the paper.

“Don't get mad at me. It's what he says,” Molvik seemed to cover the phone, talked somebody who had entered his office. Then he was back on line. “Listen - this girl, Alexandra...”

Ash signed the last piece of paper. “What about her?”

“Ask her if she wants to sail with you”, Molvik said. “She knows about ships. You two can easily handle the Fyling Saucer. Besides, I think it would help her to... you know... mend. To sail a yacht across the Atlantic is something... well, it clears the mind. It's good for the body. And the soul. If you get what I mean.”

Ash got exactly what he meant. “You sound like a preacher, Molvik. Stick to your ships.”

“Yeah. Good idea. But think about it, Captain. And let me know when you made up your mind.”

“I will. Talk to you later, Molvik.”

“Talk to you later, Captain.”

Ash put the phone away and gave the pen back to the Hertz girl.

“Thank you.” The Hertz girl ripped the forms apart. “That's your copy. And you'll need this one to collect the car. And here's an information leaflet with the phone numbers you need in case anything happens. Now...” She leaned over the counter and pointed towards the exit. “To collect your car follow the signs 'Rental Cars'. They'll lead you to the parking area where you'll find our desk.”

“Thanks.” Ash grabbed the paperwork, ID and passport and driver's license.

“Oh... one more thing, Mrs Harris.” The girl smiled. “Don't forget: we drive on the left side in Britain. Welcome to Aberdeen.”
Tobin was on all fours, on the floor of her bedroom. It was dark under the bed but she saw that there was nothing. She looked at what she had found, groping at the far end: the spare key for her bicycle, a one Krone coin and a small row of beads which she had, at one point during an evening a long while ago, gently removed from the right ankle of a beautiful girl with freckles.

But no booking confirmation. Which she had crushed into a ball and thrown under the bed. And on which, she was sure, she had seen a phone number, a US mobile number, the number she needed so badly.

She sat down on the carpet and leaned against the bed. She closed her eyes. Where the fuck was the booking confirmation? A small, hard ball of paper. Which couldn't have grown a pair of legs and walked out of the the flat to meet the neighbors...

Tobin jumped up. Edda! What day was today? Saturday! And Friday afternoon was Edda's slot to clear up Tobin's place – check the fridge, run the dishwasher, get rid of garbage. Tobin grabbed her key and walked to the front door. She stopped. Gawd! She owed Edda money, money Edda needed. Tobin went back to the living room, took the wallet from her coat.

***

Solveig, Edda's oldest daughter, opened the door. She glared at Tobin, a real death ray stare, but Tobin wasn't to be out-glared by a fifteen year old miniature bitch.

“Is Edda in?”

Solveig kept on staring. She had her ears plugged with a pair of expensive headphones, connected to her even more expensive mobile, for which, among other things, Edda had slaved on the early shift in the supermarket. Solveig evaporated the sort of disgust for grown-ups which only a wagonload of female hormones dumped on a young girl could produce.

“Edda... is she in??” Tobin shouted.

Solveig glared, her whole attitude telling Tobin to get lost.

“Take them off!” Tobin pointed to the headphones but as far as Solveig was concerned Tobin didn't exist.

Suddenly her smartphone buzzed. Life returned to Solveig's face as she looked at the screen, excited because she didn't know the number. She turned away from Tobin and took the call. “Yes?”

Tobin spoke deliberately slow: “Is – Edda- IN??”

Solveig turned as if a shot had hit her. Tobin raised her phone and waved to Solveig. Now the girl was really mad. “Who gave you my number??”

Tobin made her smile as vicious as possible, showing her teeth. It said: resistance is futile – wherever you run, I'm already there. She was still on the phone. “If you don't talk to me I'll tell Edda that you let yourself get fondled by the dirty little punk from second floor, the guy with the spiked hair.”
Solveig ripped away the earphones. “That's not true!”

“You had Spikey's tongue down your throat when I saw you.”

Solveig was pale. “And you do it with girls. That's so... grotty!”

Tobin shrugged. “And you shoplift perfume at the Kvadrat mall.” It was a shot in the dark but many of the little bitches did it, so...

Solveig's cheeks were burning. “That's a lie!”

Tobin narrowed her eyes. “If I tell Edda she's gonna raid your room. And then...” Tobin drew a finger across her throat. “Judge, jury and executioner in one person – you're dead.”

“Edda isn't in. She's at work”, Solveig snapped. She tried to shut the door but Tobin's foot put and end to that. “What do you want??”

“Let me in.”

Solveig just walked away and her little butt bobbed with disgust.

Tobin followed her. She went straight to the kitchen. There was plastic sack full of garbage in the corner.

Tobin took a deep breath, opened the sack and emptied it on the floor.

Solveig stood in the doorway, her arms crossed. “If Mom sees this she'll kill you.”

Tobin was on her knees and sorted through the garbage. “Haven't you got something important to do? Homework?”

“You want your garbage back?” Solveig leaned against the doorframe.

“I love my garbage”, Tobin said. She picked up pieces with two fingers and held them into the light - none of the things she had ever seen before.

Solveig watched Tobin.

“It's not here”, she said after a while.

Tobin stopped. She slowly turned and stared at Solveig. “What are you talking about?”

Solveig stared back. “Mom took it downstairs when she went to work.”

Tobin counted slowly to ten. “Why didn't you tell me?”

Solveig tried to out-cool Tobin's stare. She said nothing but her posture was of the why-should-I type.

Tobin clenched her fists. “This what you learn from Spikey? To piss people off?”

Solveig looked at Tobin as if she was something that had crawled from the garbage sack. “It's in the recycling containers, outside. Why don't you separate your shit? Paper, plastic... Everybody does it. Why can't you?”

“Maybe because I do it with girls?”
Solveig was angry. “You leave it to Mom to do it. And you owe her money.”

Tobin suddenly felt how tired she was. “I know.” She stood up.

“Have you got it? Or do you just want to mess up our kitchen?” Solveig held out her hand.

“I have it.” Tobin walked out of the kitchen. “But I won't give it to you.”

Solveig followed her. “Why not?”

“I don't trust you. You're a little perfume shop thief.”

“And you're a messy lesbian!” Solveig shouted at Tobin's back.

Tobin walked down the corridor towards the front door. “Right. So I better leave it to you to put the stuff back in the bag.”

Solveig gave her the finger.

“I saw that!” Tobin said without turning.

***

Ash looked at the clock on the dashboard. Gawd... What's wrong with you, she thought. How long do you want to sit here, in the car, in front of her house, on the other side of the road? Either drive back to the airport or do it: get out and knock on her door. The truth was: she was scared. So scared that she could hardly breathe. But why?

She clenched the steering wheel. She knew why. Because the girl that would open the door would no longer be the Ali she had known, no longer the sweet lonely girl who loved to be in Ash's arms. This girl was gone, would never come back. It had died out there, in the storm, when the sea had come to Ali, had looked her in the eye, cold and green, freezing her blood and her soul, leaving it's mark forever. And sometimes the sea changed people so even their friends, even their lovers didn't recognize them anymore.

Should've taken the next plane back to States, Ash thought. Should've gone home instead of here, trying to put the pieces back together.

She still stared at the house, like she had done for about half an hour. It was a quiet part of the city, houses and gardens, with a strange name for such a nice spot: Cults, pronounced even stranger in Gaelic, as if there was something dark attached to this beautiful place, a spell, which could make nice things turn into something bad.

She held her breath as the front door of Ali's house opened. And there she was and Ash's heart began to race. Now, she thought and reached for the door handle and wanted to run to her and take her in her arms and when she she would ask 'Why are you here?' she would say 'because I love you' and...

She didn't. She sat and stared as a man came out of the door, holding Ali's little boy in his arm while Ali's girl pulled at his hand, impatient, because the man stopped and bent towards Ali and kissed her on the cheek and Ali smiled and kissed him back.
Ash inhaled with a sob when she remembered to breathe again. She stared the car, pulled away from the curb, fighting the urge to step on it and get away as fast as possible and slowly drove back to the highway, careful to keep to the left lane.

***

Tobin was digging with both arms, trying to keep her balance at the same time, legs kicking, only her lower half was sticking out of the recycling container, a yellow monster with gaping jaws. She was desperate. How could she find a small ball of paper in a container full of that stuff?

“Hey…” It was the voice of a guy. “Can I help you?” The guy was talking to Tobin's wriggling butt. “You better be careful…” He stopped because Tobin was gone.

“Shit!!” Tobin scrambled to stop the container's cover to close but it was too late.

She rolled on her back and opened her eyes. It was dark and smelly. Great, she thought. So that's how it feels to be garbage.

She heard the guy knock against the container: “Hullo? You alright??”

No, I'm not, Tobin thought. And maybe I should stay in here, roll into a small ball, like the one I'm looking for, and let myself get recycled. Maybe I come back as a letter, with all those words in it, written in lavender ink, the words I should've said and didn't. And she'll find me in her mail box, and she'll know what I really feel and everything will be alright and...

“Hullo??” The guy knocked again.

Tobin spat out something which tasted faintly of pizza box. She got to her feet, pushed back the lid and looked out of the container.

The guy wore a helmet and leaned on a racing bike. She knew him. He lived in the other block of flats, on the forth floor. And he had a crush on her.

“You looking for something?” He smiled. “Better get out of there...” He leaned the bike against the container and reached out. “Come on, I better lend you a hand.”

“Stay were you are!” Tobin pointed a finger at him like a gun and he stopped short. 'Guy with crush’ – that was exactly what she needed now, sweaty, and scruffy as she was. She climbed out of the container.

“Found what you lost?” The guy wasn't to be discouraged by Tobin's dirty face. He picked a piece of paper from her hair. “Perhaps if we both get into this thing and have closer look...”

That was what Tobin hated second most, right after guys commenting on her legs: to be treated like a child, too stupid to look after herself, so they had to pick real or imagined pieces of dirt from her T-shirt, her blouse, her pilot's uniform, her flight overall... One day she would just snap off one of those busy fingers.

“No thank you”, Tobin said and wanted to get away as fast as possible.

The guy blocked the way.
“Listen”, he said. “Somebody told me that you like to dance. What if we both go the Old Quayside tonight...”

Tobin stared at him – which usually was enough to get rid of most of the guys. “You mean you waited all night and morning down here at the garbage containers so if I come down and fall into one of them you could ask me?”

Tobin's sarcasm was lost on Racing Bike. He pulled his phone from the messenger bag and hit a few buttons. “Look”, he said, showing what he found on the web, beaming with enthusiasm. “It's Tango Night tonight. Weather's too bad to make it open air. They moved it to Folken and...”

Tobin considered briefly to snatch the mobile and throw it into one of the containers - just to keep him busy while she made her escape. She took a deep breath. “Now you listen”, she said. “And carefully. I'm close to killing somebody 'cause I haven't slept since yesterday morning. I'm pissed and dirty from sorting through garbage and I need a shower. And I'm sad and desperate because the only person I ever loved has left me.” She made a step towards him and lowered her voice to really get his attention. “And I'm a lesbian. Still interested?”

She grabbed the phone and the guy was too surprised to do anything about it. The smelly container, she though. Yeah – right into the organic stuff.

She hesitated. She looked at the smartphone-screen which showed the Folken concert hall, one of the city's event arenas, while an idea took shape in a place of her mind which was the equivalent to the dark side under her bed where sometimes interesting things turned up.

Perhaps... She tapped on 'search', entered Chris' name, watched a long list of entries roll on the screen, a list that became longer and longer. Perhaps... She thought.

“Thanks!” She pushed past him.

“Hey! My phone!”

Tobin stopped and turned. “You know what?” She came back. “Why don't you ask Edda Stelling? Right – that's the girl living next door to me.” She came closer and the guy made one, two steps backwards. ”And now you think: why should I waste my time on a single mother with three kids who always wears faded jeans and baggy sweaters and cheap trainers and has to work on two jobs to support the family.” She was really close now and the guy was with his back to the waste glass container. “I tell you why. Edda loves to dance, she's really good at it. You'll make her smile, and when Edda smiles she's a real beauty – only she hasn't many opportunities to smile.” She dropped the phone into Racing Bike's messenger bag. “Make her smile”, Tobin said. “And when you two hit the dance floor the other guys will think: Man! Where did he find this gorgeous chick.” She turned and walked away again, stopped after a few steps. “And tell her I'll take care of the kids if she needs a babysitter.”

***

Question: What VIP, celebrity or any other person with a fan base not totally off the rocker would publish a private phone number?

Tobin stared at the laptop screen. For more than an hour she had been on the web and now she knew the answer: none. There was an impressive heap of stuff about Chris, articles, fan blogs, pictures –
but no phone number.

Tobin drank from the coffee. It was cold but she didn't really notice. She scrolled through a collection of shots which covered most of Chris' public appearances.

There were two girls hugging on a soccer field, the picture she used on her smartphone, Chris very young, almost a girl, her face soft, her eyes full of joy. The same two girls at a restaurant, a fan shot. Who was the other girl? Tobin tried to find some reference but found none. Was she the one who had died, in the accident, when the yacht went down? I should have asked her, Tobin thought.

There was Chris in front of a court building, the media pushing each other to get close to her. Tobin read the caption. This was taken after the investigation of the accident. She looked at Chris face. It had changed. There were lines, traces of fury and despair, and her eyes seemed to be tired. From crying? It was no longer the face of a girl and the joy was gone. She looked fragile. Lack of sleep? Not eating properly?

Tobin moved on. There were more shots, taken after the hearing, and on one she saw Aslyn Harris, slightly blurred, as if making a fast exit, her thick ponytail swinging, the go-fuck-yourself expression of her face unmistakable.

The nude shots came next. Chris' body in glossy glam perfection.

Tobin took a deep breath. What a pathetic job. It wasn't even close to what she remembered, what she had seen, had felt while holding Chris, while making love to her. Perfect? Her body wasn't 'perfect'. It was breathtaking!

Why had she done this silly photo shoot? I should've asked her, Tobin thought. She scrolled down, found Chris at a charity event. The gorgeous dress, make up and hair done by professionals, heels expensive, Italian: the Chris she knew, the VIP chick, the girl she had fallen in love with. But now she saw that her lips were a thin line, her eyes hard, her face a front. More pictures like this, alone or together with her husband. Tobin suddenly saw details she had never seen before: Chris' posture had changed. She was no longer the athlete, relaxed, at home in her body. Now it seemed as if she was straining against an invisible force, fighting against something painful and suddenly Tobin realized that everything she saw was a front, and the apparently hollow shell was the hiding place of a girl, desperate, terrified and alone, staring at the world through those eyes framed with mascara and false lashes.

Tobin scrolled back. And the more she looked at the young soccer player the more she was determined to bring back the smooth lines, the soft curve of her mouth, the joy in her eyes. That was her task.

She shut down the computer, stared at the blank screen. And suddenly the spot over her left breast began to hurt, the spot where Chris' teeth, in a moment of bliss, had left their mark, a mark which would never go away.

She hadn't slept for how long? She was so tired that she was afraid to close her eyes but did it because they hurt. Only for a minute, she thought.

The door opened and Katja Olsson entered. “I told you to stay away from her”, she said. She took Tobin's cup from the table. “And now she's pregnant.” She sipped from the coffee. “I also told you to buy decent coffee. Why can't you do anything right? You're sacked”. She walked away, leaving the door open, and Tobin shivered and wanted to get up and close the door but she couldn't because she was dead tired and her body heavy and aching.
Chris came into the kitchen and Tobin was so glad she was back that she cried, and Chris brought the cold from where the intercontinental planes traveled, and Tobin shivered even more, and she wanted to say that Chris should wear a sweater, so high up in the air, but Chris only wore a T-Shirt. She held a tiny kitten and she smiled and sat it on Tobin's lap and smiling she walked away.

***

Ash had stopped at the fast food joint because she couldn't go on. It was as if she had spent all her energy, as if all that had happened over the last weeks and which had carried her through bliss and pain, love and hate, joy and despair had been a journey, and now it had ended, and she had nowhere to go.

She had picked a table in a corner where she could be alone. She stirred her coffee, too exhausted to wipe away her tears which she felt slowly running down her cheeks. And she was too exhausted to get angry when suddenly somebody came to her table.

She used her sleeve to wipe her face. She looked up – and felt the blood surge hot into her cheeks.

A little girl climbed on the opposite chair, Ali's daughter, Saskia. The guy Ash had seen coming out of Ali's front door sat down next to girl, placing Ali's little boy, Seanie, on his lap.

Ash stared, unable to move or think, clutching the latte glass to stop her fingers from trembling.

The guy leaned back. “The lady's a real captain”, he said to the kids. “She's got a big ship.”

“I know”, the girl said. “Did you bring your ship?” Her eyes seemed to probe deeply, right into Ash's soul.

Ash couldn't get out a word.

The guy pointed to her coffee. “What's that you got? Tall latte?”

“I want a tall latte, too”, the little girl said.

“Forget it, you troublemaker”, the guy said. “And shut your mouth when grown ups have a conversation.”

Saskia still studied Ash's face. “She doesn't talk. That's not a conversation.”

The guy smiled. “Nice haircut”, he said to Ash. “I like it.” He stretched his legs, making himself comfortable. “Saw you sitting in the car, across the road. Saw you drive away. So I went after you, checked a couple sticky stuff joints, then thought you might be here, the only Burger outlet on the way to the airport.”

Ash's voice was barely more than a hoarse whisper. “You often get that sort of intuition?”

The guy beamed. “My sister told me you like the stuff they sell here.”

Ash had trouble to find her voice. “Your... sister?”

“She showed me a picture of you, some time ago. She said you look more dangerous than you are. I don't think you look dangerous. Just like somebody who takes no shit. And that's good, isn't it?”
Ash’s mind was blank and she felt the tears start again and desperately fought them back.

“I don’t know what happened, but...” Ali’s brother produced a big pack of paper hankies from his pocket and slipped it across the table. “You shouldn’t go back without seeing her.”

Ash opened the pack, took one out and blew her nose, each move almost impossible to make.

Ali’s brother leaned forward “I mean...” He lowered his voice. “What’s the risk? That she slams the door in your face? She does it all the time on me. There are worse things.”

Ash wasn’t so sure. She needed a second handkerchief.

Saskia watched her as if grown ups blowing their noses were the most interesting thing in the world. “Will you stay with us?”

Ali’s brother pulled her ear. “Hey! Stop snooping. Why don’t you wait and see?” He got up from the chair. “So... while we’re here we can as well go all the way and get us some of the stuff they sell here.” He turned to Saskia “You stay here. See that she doesn’t run away.”

Saskia looked at Ash. “She doesn’t talk.”

“Why don’t you make her a picture. Look, over there's all you need – pencils, paper... Okay?” He walked to the counter and Ash heard him say: “What's the most stickiest stuff you've got?”

“Pardon??” The girl behind the counter was not amused.

***

Seanie began to crawl onto the table, trying to get to the tall latte. Ash touched his tiny nose. “Hey, big boy. That's nothing for you.”

She picked Seanie up and sat him on her lap. For a second Seanie was undecided whether to cry or enjoy. Then he began to trace the pattern on Ash's black ribbed T-Shirt with his little fingers.

Saskia came back and spread paper and pencils across the table. She began to draw while she watched from the corner of eyes as Ash and Seanie began to play count-the-fingers-and-see-if-they-are-all-there.

Ash cleared her throat. “Can I see the picture?”

Saskia took the paper and walked over to Ash.

Ash had a moment of confusion. She was used to her Chief's diagrams which were easier to read but less colorful. But then she got it. “Woah! That's a big one. Oceangoing. What's that? The bridge?”

Saskia shook her head. “‘s where the children can play...”

“There are kids on board?”

“Two...” Sakia said.

“A boy and a girl?”
Saskia nodded. “And here's the kitchen for mommy. A big one. So she can be with us all the day.”

“She probably doesn't want to spend all the day in the kitchen...”

Saskia enhanced the picture with a set of waves. “Mommy likes to cook.”

Ash had to clear her throat again. “I know.”

“Here's the garage.” Saskia pointed to a part of the picture which to Ash looked like the gate to a higher dimension.

“The garage?”

“For the car. And here are the tools. So mommy can fix it.”

“Your mom fixes the car?” Ash had spotted the car: it was upside down and... inside out?

Saskia produced a new set of waves. “She did it before she was always away to work. She's an engineer.”

Ash suddenly realized that her own mind map of ships wasn't so much different and as far away from her Chief’s diagrams as Sakia’s: in a way she was was still a little girl who thought that the sea was a place of magic and adventure and the ship a place of comfort and safety. “Well... I think it's a good idea to have a car on board. And someone to fix it.”

Saskia gave the picture to Ash. “It's for you.”

“Thanks. That's...” Ash searched for words.

“Can you draw a ship?”

“For you?”

Saskia nodded.

Ash took a piece of paper. “Let's see.” She began to draw.

Seanie had found a cozy place on Ash's lap and was sucking his thumb, watching closely what Ash did. Saskia watched, too, her head on Ash's shoulder.

The picture was getting more and more colorful, a fantasy boat, with a lot of kids, a mom and a captain. She added a fish, an octopus. She added a shark - this one was smiling.

Seanie managed to get a pencil and began to scrawl on Saskia's picture, something which resembled a tangle of wire.

“No! Stop it!” Saskia pushed him away, took his pencil and Seanie began to cry.

Ash gently rocked him. “Don't be so rude. He's a little boy!” She gave him another pencil. Seanie stopped crying and went on producing knotted wire.

“I don't want him to scrawl on my picture!” Saskia shouted.

Ash was thinking fast. “Well.. looks as if he added... looks like...”

Saskia was close to tears. “I don't want him to...”
“Looks like a...” Ash was thinking even faster – she needed a story. “…a deep sea animal, a worm. From the bottom of the ocean. It came up from where it's cold and dark.”

Saskia stared at what Seanie had just completed. “Why?”

Ash cleared her throat. “They all do. Every day, when it gets dark, the deep sea animals travel towards the surface.”

“Why?”

“Don't know. Maybe to check out what's going on up here. Maybe to look at the moon and the stars.”

Saskia watched Seanie who had turned into a deep-sea-worm factory. “All the animals?”

“Yes. From giant squid, which is as large as a truck, to the tiniest of them, so small that we can't see them.”

Saskia was more impressed by small and invisible than by truck-size. “How do I know they are there if they are so small?”

“They glow in the dark”, Ash said. “And because there are billions of them they add up to something we can see: a beautiful green light. I saw it once, on my first voyage on a container vessel, in the South Sea.”

“Why were you in the... South Sea?”

“That's were the ship had to go.”

Saskia got closer to Ash. “I have to be in bed when it's dark. And Seanie too.”

“Ship's don't stop when it's getting dark. So somebody has to be on the bridge, to make sure everything is alright and it's not running into other ships.”

“I woke up once and I was scared and I think I cried”, Saskia said and Ash could feel her fear as Saskia's little fingers held on to her jacket.

“It's different when you're a grown-up. Hey.. when you're a grown-up you'll never be afraid.” Ash knew that this wasn't true but since she had got away with the deep sea worms... “Not even of deep sea worms.”

“There are worms in our garden. You can ask mom to show them to you.”

“Why don't you show them to me?”

“Mommy knows where they are”, Saskia said and Ash suddenly realized that she was afraid of worms. Worms? Come on! What the hell was going on in kids minds, she wondered. She had never thought about that before.

Ali’s brother came back from ordering. “So why don't you go and look at the worms while we do what we're not supposed to do and if Ali ever finds out we'll be finished.”

Ash swallowed hard. “You're not coming along?”

Ali’s brother laughed. “No chance. You'll have to do this alone, Captain.”
Ash rang the doorbell. She heard steps, then Ali's voice. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” The door opened. “What now?” Ali said. “I told you not to come back sooner than...” Ali stopped talking. She stared. She was in the middle of doing housework, her hair tousled, in leggings and a faded T-shirt and flip-flops. Her glasses were fogged up and she held on to a pair of yellow rubber gloves.

They looked at each other, Ash trying to find something in her eyes that told her that this wasn't a bad idea... And for a second there was no sound other than the blood throbbing in her veins, as if the world had stopped. Then the world began to turn again and Ash heard the wind in the trees and the voices of birds.

“I won't go away”, Ash said. “Only if you say so.”

Ali didn't say anything. She stepped back, turned and walked away and Ash watched her walk down the corridor, walk faster, then run up the stairs.

Ash bit her lip. All she had seen in Ali's eyes had been tears. She took a deep breath and walked through the door and into Ali's house and closed the door behind her.

This wasn't one of the many places Ash had been: hotels, flats, ships' cabins. This was a home which a mother had made for her kids.

A stroller was parked in the corridor, next to the little raincoats and gum boots, there was a heap of laundry in front of the washing machine when she passed the half open door to the kitchen. She entered the living room. There were toys on the floor, a few big, fluffy animals, a duck on wheels, made of wood: Seanie's stuff. She saw a small desk, books, pencils, two dolls wearing hard hats and dressed in orange overalls with 'Krieger' written on the back - the things of a little girl pretending to be her mother: Saskia.

Ash moved slowly, carefully. She had never been that close to Ali before, not even when she had been in her arms. This was the real Ali and Ash took in every detail.

She touched the surface of a table, of a chair, touched the wall, ran a finger along the edge of a half open drawer. She listened to the sound of a car passing by, to the ticking of a clock, the hum of the fridge - all of which added up to a certain sort of silence.

She looked at the pictures on the wall, the kids, Ali's parents, her brother. And one Ash couldn't get her eyes off: Ali in survival suit and life vest, on the heli pad of an oil rig, in front of a Sikorsky S 97, surrounded by the helicopter crew and the platform guys, hard men, and among them Ali seemed small, almost fragile. But all of them were smiling, as if they couldn't believe their luck that this beautiful girl had appeared in such a solitary place, and, like a miracle, had brought light and happiness...

In front of the french doors which led to the terrace and the garden she stopped.
Ali sat in front of the bedroom mirror, biting a nail. Her heart was racing, she could barely breathe. Why is she here? she thought.

She pulled away the rubber band which kept her hair from falling into her eyes while sweeping the floor. Her hair was a mess and to her it looked ugly and dirty. She began to brush it, furious because it didn't turn into what she wanted, what she needed to face Ash. She dropped the brush and put on her glasses. She searched for a lipstick, fingers trembling, began to paint her lips, too clumsy to do it right.

She should've stayed away, she thought. What does she want? Here's nothing but plain, boring suburbia. A place where you trip over toys and worry about dirty laundry.

She yanked away her leggings, jumped up, slipped out of her T-shirt. She walked to the closet, wanted to open the doors, stopped. She stared at herself in the large mirror. Ugly, she thought. Dirty, dirty and desperate, a real slut: too much make-up, too much attempt on the hair. Ali opened the door, picked a simple blue dress and put it on the bed. She choose a pair of gray heels.

She sat down again, wiped away the make-up, again pulled her hair up into a ponytail. She rose from the chair and took her blue dress from the bed. She stepped into it.

The garden was large, there was trampoline, a playhouse, more toys on the lawn and among the flowers.

There was a tree with a swing hanging from the lowest branch. The swing was red. And as if pulled by some sort of magnetism Ash opened the french doors and stepped outside and walked across the lawn straight towards the tree. With a sigh she sat down on the swing, as if now, finally, she had arrived where she had always wanted to be. She looked up and at the leaves of the tree, then beyond, into the sky.

She saw the white trail of a plane going... where? Toward the west, the US, probably. She took a deep breath. Could have be her plane.

Then she heard Ali scream.

“Ali?” Ash stood at the foot of the stairs. “Ali?? You okay?” She heard Ali sob, began to climb the stairs, stopped again. “Ali? What's wrong?” She hesitated to move on. “Ali?” She listened. Ali was crying. Ash took the last stairs, walked along the corridor. The door to the bedroom was half open.

Ali was chocked up and could hardly speak. But what Ash heard was not despair – it was rage and frustration: “If you've come that far – why the fuck don't you just come in??”

Ash took a deep breath, opened the door and looked into the bedroom.

Ali sat on the edge of the bed. She wore a beautiful blue dress, still unzipped, a pair of gorgeous gray heels on the carpet.

Ali wiped away the tears with the back of her hand. “Can't reach the fucking zipper of the fucking dress. Hurts too much...” She turned her face away from Ash. “What are you waiting for? Come in and help me!” She had trouble to get up from the chair and moved painfully slow, and when she turned the dress opened, and Ash saw the bruises and the cuts on her ribs and on her back.

Ali steadied herself against the chairs backrest and closed her eyes, and Ash went to her and pulled up the zipper, careful not to hurt her and she was so close that she felt the warmth of Ali’s skin and her fingers trembled because Ali was so beautiful.

Ali made a few steps away from Ash, turned and looked straight into Ash's eyes.

Ash knew she had to do something, say something, make the first step. “I didn't sink the yacht”, she said.

Ali crossed her arms. “Why are you here? Just to tell me that?”

Ash cleared her throat. “You asked me to tell you the truth: I didn't sink it. It was an accident.”

Ali didn't move. “How did you find me?”

Ash heard the anger in Ali's voice: don't you see? It said. You bring it back, all that hurts. It said: you're like a mirror - when I see you I see myself, see what I did wrong, that I'm worthless, dirty, ugly.

“She... gave me your home address”, Ash muttered.


“Asked me to bring you back”, Ash said.

Ali's voice was cold. “So you talked...” She turned away from Ash, holding her ribs as if a blow had hit her.

Yes! We talked! Ash wanted to shout. And I know! But I don’t care! It doesn't matter!!

Ash couldn't get out a word.

“And you are here because she she told you so?” Each word seemed to hurt Ali.

Ash couldn't answer, afraid that whatever she would say would make things worse. She listened to the silence, to her heartbeat, wanted to say: I would've found this place with or without her, even blindfolded - like a deep sea animal, traveling from the depth to the light. Don't you see how I glow, so close to you?

“Help me to get into my heels”, Ali snapped. “It hurts to bend down.”
Ash went down on her knees and Ali steadied herself on Ash's shoulder and Ash took her left foot and guided it into the shoe, then the other one. Still on the carpet Ash watched Ali make a few steps, then, in front of the mirror, smooth the dress over her hips. And since she was on her knees anyway she decided to stay there. She dug into the inside pocket of her biker jacket.

“This is for you”, she said and on her palm sat the green, fluffy crocodile. “It protected you. It's yours now.”

“It tried”, Ali said. “It's brave and fierce. But it's... so tiny. And there are things which fluffy green crocodiles can't prevent or put right.” She looked into Ash's eyes. “Why are you here?”

***

Tobin woke with a start. She was still sitting on the chair, but with her upper half lying on the kitchen table, face down and unable to move. She had been asleep for how long? She didn't know. Get up, she told herself, get going. She started with the eyelids, opened them. Then she sat up, slowly, leaned back. Her head began to ache and she pressed her fingers against the temples. And now what? She had no idea. She stared at the fridge which was covered with stickers and notes. There were also a couple of get-well cards and the note by Alina: 'Take better care of yourself' – and the heart, drawn by Agnetha, her fingers still trembling from making love to Alina on Tobin's sofa.

All that seemed to be ages ago. Tobin shook her head. Her mouth was dry and she reached out for the espresso cup but didn't touch it.

She stared at the heart.

The chair fell to the floor when Tobin jumped up. Her muscles screamed in pain and her left leg was numb. She limped from the kitchen.

***

Tobin pushed the door buzzer button, pushed again and again, then leaned against it until the door opened.

Agnetha's cheeks were flushed, her hair disheveled, she wore a baggy T-shirt and nothing else. “What do you want? I'm not alone!”


“Just a girl from work... Be back in a second.” Agnetha was angry. “What do you want?”

“I want you to do me a favor.”

“What?” Agnetha's face turned into bitch-about-to-bite. “You mean you are here because... Can't that wait???”

Tobin shook her head. “Better let me in.”
Reluctantly Agnetha opened the door and Tobin slipped into her apartment. It was a nice place and there was a picture taped to the large mirror on the corridor wall where Agnetha checked her perfect looks each time she left the apartment to descend among the mortals. It was the picture of a handsome guy.

“That him? He in there?” Tobin made a few steps towards what seemed to be the bedroom door.

Agnetha grabbed Tobin's sleeve. “You're not gonna go any further! What do you want?”

Tobin produced her most dangerous smile. “Does he know? No... He doesn't, does he?”

Agnetha held on to Tobin's sleeve even tighter. “Does he know what??” she hissed.

Tobin pushed Agnetha's hand away and crossed her arms, copying Solveig's unnerving poses. “Does he know what? That you went to bed with a Russian truck driver who happens to be a girl.” Tobin stared into her eyes and Agnetha stared back, a real stand-off, but Tobin knew she would win because Agnetha, almost naked, was getting cold and colder.

“You're not gonna tell him!” Agnetha rasped, goose bumps all over her skin. “Or anybody else!”

Tobin was unmoved. “You afraid he won't like it? Because of the truck driver part? Or because of the girl part?”

“Please...” Agnetha wasn't just getting cold, she was getting desperate. She tried again to pull Tobin back to the front door. “What do you want??”

“The chairman's wife - I need her private mobile number.”

Agnetha stared in disbelief. “Are you crazy?? It's illegal to give away that sort of information...”

“I know”, Tobin said.

Agnetha lowered her voice. “You can get sacked. And prosecuted for stealing company property and for...”

Tobin shook her head. “No. But YOU can get sacked and prosecuted if you get it for me. So better be careful.”

Agnetha made a step backwards. “No way! Besides – how should I get access to confidential data on the HR databases? I mean...”

Now we are talking, Tobin thought. “I know you have special relations to HR. If I remember correctly the two guys you simultaneously shagged...”

“Keep your voice down for heavens sake!!” Agnetha looked at the door down the corridor.

“...they worked in HR.”

Agnetha's bitch face was back. “Who told you about the two...”

“Everybody knows.”

Agnetha rolled her eyes. “It's this Eskimo bitch from Headquarters, Jean Akalu, right? The cousin of that big girl you hang out with, this... Lia, or whatever her name is. Sticks her nose into other peoples affairs. Can't keep her mouth shut. Bitch!”
“Innuit”, Tobin said. “They're Innuit.”

Agnetha's voice said 'now let's be sensible': “It's weekend! How do you think anybody can get into the HR databases on a weekend?”

Tobin narrowed her eyes. “If I remember correctly one of the two is a managing director. Now if you are one of Katja Olsson's managers you work twenty-four by seven. So don't tell me he can't access the company network whenever he has to.”

'Bitch', 'desperate' and 'sensible' hadn't worked. Now Agnetha was simply Agnetha, her feet cold, her neck in Tobin's choke hold. “How the fuck should I... I mean I can't just call him and...”

Tobin knew she was getting where she wanted to go. “Course you can. Old lovers and all that. Just call him, see what happens. Let's feed him a nice story so he can tell himself he's doing nothing wrong. Like: the chairman's wife left something on the VIP chopper which you want to return to her...”

“Don't be silly. Why should he...”

“He's married, right? Does his wife know about you and him?”

“You mean I should blackmail him like you blackmail me, right now??”

Now you got it, Tobin thought. And you better get moving or else... Suddenly she saw her reflection in the body-length mirror. She was pale, with dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks hollow from lack of sleep and lack of food, her lips a thin line, her eyes cold. She leaned against the wall because suddenly she didn't trust her legs anymore. She looked at her fingers. They were trembling. That's far enough, she thought.

“Don't worry”, Tobin said. “I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here because I need your help. And because I'm gonna give you something in return, something for you and the good looking guy over there.” She pointed to the picture taped to the mirror. “Something you always wanted.”

Agnetha's eyes widened. “You mean...”

“Exactly”, Tobin said.

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Ash took a deep breath. “I'm here because your little daughter said so.”

“You... talked to the kids?”

“Met the kids and your brother at the burgher joint, down the road, you know, at the roundabout...”

“I can't believe it!” Ali leaned against the table and raised her eyes to heaven, which meant to the ceiling. “And I told him NOT to take them to the sticky stuff outlet!! He never listens...”

Ash slowly got up from the carpet. “Don't be angry. Sometimes people need to do something forbidden. What they know is wrong...” She stopped, suddenly aware what she was talking about, but it was too late. You stupid bitch! She screamed at herself. Wrong? Forbidden? The only words you shouldn't have said to her!
Ali stared into Ash's eyes. “You think so?”

“Sure. Like...”

“Like what?”

“Like... driving on the left side.” Ash congratulated herself on that smart move.

“That's nothing wrong, here”, Ali said, not letting Ash get away with it.

Ash carefully picked her words. “But elsewhere. And it feels like something forbidden and still, you have to do it, and it's even fun...”

Ali narrowed her eyes. “You mean it's okay to break the rules – for kicks?”

“No...” Ash was sweating. “What I mean is that sometimes it happens and then you find out that it's far less worse than you thought and...” Go on! She thought. As long as we pretend to talk about left hand traffic it's okay. “... and that it's not really important because there are other things which matter more...” She didn't dare to look at Ali, just stared at the carpet. The silence suddenly seemed to be too large for room.

“What did she tell you?” Ali asked.

Ash's heart began to race. “Nothing”, she lied. She wiped her palms on her jeans. “She said I should bring you back and...”

Ali cut her short. “I'm not talking about Katja. I'm talking about Saskia.”

“She said I should ask you to show me the worms in the garden.”

“The worms??” Ali came a step closer and for the first time Ash dared to really look at her. Yes, she thought. Something had changed. This was no longer the beautiful girl who had appeared like a dream, not the lover, warm skin and soft lips, not the princess as Katja had called her – but a real person of flesh and blood, who could hurt and could be hurt, who could make her laugh and make her cry, who would wear breathtaking dresses, rubber gloves - or nothing.

“I think she's a bit scared of worms”, Ash said.

Ali frowned. “You're kidding. Why should she...”

“Maybe it's because I told her about the... deep sea worms and...”

“Deep sea worms? Come on! There are no...” Ali seemed to think that Ash and her weird fantasy should be kept away from children.

“She made a picture for me.”

“A picture? For YOU?”

“Hey! Why not? I'm just a little girl in a foreign land, you know. Like her.”

Ali just frowned.

“You don't believe me?” Ash pulled the picture from her jacket's inside pocket. “Here it is.”

Ali looked at it. She pointed to the multidimensional room right at the center of the ship. “What's
“The garage – where her mommy, who's an engineer, fixes the car.”

Ali was silent. She traced the details with a fingertip.

Ash cleared her throat. “You can't fix bikes as well, can you? I mean...”

Ali didn't listen. “She usually doesn't give her pictures away.”

Ash shrugged. “We traded. She got one by me.”

Ali looked at her. “You made a picture?”

“Sure. You want one?”

Ali didn't answer. She looked at Ash as if she saw her for the first time.

“Hang on.” Ash sat down at the small table and took the ball pen from the pocket on her left sleeve. She grabbed a piece of paper.

“Hey! That's the the electricity bill...” Ali protested but Ash had already turned it around and was drawing on the reverse side.

Ali sighed. “Do me a favor and don't give me one of your supplier tugs! I want something more elegant.”

“Piece of cake.” Ash was working on the picture with bold strokes. “Come here, tell me if it's okay.”

Ali hesitated, then came to Ash. “Where are my glasses?” She put them on. “That's a sailboat, a yacht!” She leaned against Ash, and Ash inhaled the fragrance of her skin and for a second was too dizzy to draw a straight line because something warm began to spread in her chest like a small sun rising inside her. True - her heart had been chipped, but it wasn't broken. And the girl who had almost broken her heart, had almost smashed it, like a mug on the floor, was the only cure to make it whole again. She desperately wanted to touch Ali but didn't dare. She concentrated on the picture.

Ali was fascinated. “That the skipper? Yeah, that's you. Looks like an ant with stupid grin.” She gasped as Ash poked her with the ball pen. “Careful... my ribs. And that? That supposed to be me? Girl like a stick with a lot of messy hair? That how you see me? Thanks a lot!” She came closer and her hair brushed against Ash's cheek. “What's that? Looks like one of Seanie's.” She squinted. “It's a... whale! With a little one. Like the ship's crossing the Atlantic and...” She stopped, took off her glasses, then she leaned her head against Ash's. “You know that it's impossible for me to come with you, with the kids and all...” She closed her eyes, put an arm around Ash's shoulder. “Dreams are not what I need.”

Ash put the ball pen away. “Oh yes, you do.”

“Why me?” Ali whispered.

“Because that's how it is”, Ash said.

“It'll not be one long dream voyage”, Ali said and Ash knew that she wasn't talking about the Atlantic.

“I know”, Ash said. Exactly this was what she wanted, the real thing, not an illusion but something that lasted, something which didn't fade like a dream or a fairy tale but grew stronger instead - a big
chunk of life.

“You're crazy”, Ali whispered.

Ash kissed her.

***

There had been no further visit from Katja Olsson. And also Chris hadn't come, bringing her sad smile and the cold from thirty-two thousand feet. And no kitten had been left in her lap this time – or at least Tobin didn't remember.

Tobin had slept through the late afternoon and the early evening until Edda had come to her, cheeks red, eyes sparkling, telling her that the guy from fourth floor had asked her out - and if Tobin was serious about looking after her kids?

Now it was in the middle of the night and Tobin was wide awake. She looked into her bedroom. Edda's little ones were asleep in the bed, the boy with a toy helicopter and his sister with a doll Tobin had rescued from her little-girl days and Tobin hoped that this didn't mean that again a boy would go for the highly payed tech jobs and one more girl would manage the household for nothing. Would it help to secretly switch the toys? Would the girl dream of riding the air and the boy of holding a little, warm being which he had to take care of so it could grow and live?

Tobin left the door open and tiptoed to the living room.

Solveig, the little bitch, was supposed to stay with a girlfriend, but Tobin wasn't so sure about that. Her bet was that Solveig's girlfriend was a guy with spiked hair.

She sat down on the sofa and listened to the silence of the small hours.

She had no idea how to arrange the trip on Northern's VIP chopper for Agnetha and her new guy to Preikestolen plateau, outside the tourist mainstream so the two could watch the sunrise, alone, sipping Champagne. But that didn't bother her, right now.

She toyed with the piece of paper which had been ripped from a Stavanger newspaper, the Aftenbladet, and which told her to buy a Mercedes Benz because... The 'because' was missing but Tobin wasn't interested in buying a premium German car. Not now.

The only thing that had her full attention was the phone number scribbled on the paper by Agnetha.

She didn't dare look at it too closely. She knew how much bullshit resided on the HR databases where she had led a virtual existence as Robin Preach for more than a month while wondering what the hell had happened to her paycheck.

She closed her eyes. She prayed that this was the real thing, not just a cluster of digits entered by a bored trainee, Chris' phone number, and not, thanks to an error, the number of a Bensonhurst dry cleaner.

She opened her eyes, smoothed the piece of paper, took her phone and entered the digits, one by one, carefully.
Please, she said and meant that she needed a miracle. She pressed 'dial'.

And maybe because it was the small hours of a Sunday morning, or maybe too many lonely girls, like Tobin, right now hoped for the same: the miracle happened and took the shape of an ugly piece of hardware floating in space and the AT&T communication satellite, its wings opened towards the sun, went to work on Tobin's signal from the planet below, a lonely girl's hope wrapped up in binary code, and thousands of miles away from Tobin, on earth's other side, a smartphone screen lit up, showing the picture of two girls hugging on a soccer field, and a pulsing icon appeared, saying 'incoming call', but it seemed as if it was Tobin's throbbing heart itself that had been hurled around the globe...

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