The Ugly Duckling

by Losille

Summary

Sometimes an ugly duckling believes she’ll always be an ugly duckling until someone comes along and shows her otherwise.

Notes

I… don’t know where this came from. But it came from somewhere and it’ll be at least two parts, maybe three. Let’s just say three. Short and sweet. But let’s be honest, I have whole world planned for this, so who knows if there will be more afterward. For the location mentioned in this story, you can watch any one of these videos to get an idea of the peril Astrid faces. The last one is the best, because it has nice, peaceful music.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6wTgnCF_rA
https://youtu.be/iZoacDf5p-U
https://youtu.be/xk6firqVC-U
https://youtu.be/S8GX486ym9Q
Chapter 1

Part I - The Duckling

Of all the harebrained ideas Astrid had ever had, hanging onto a cliff by her fingernails two hundred feet over a Hawaiian beach probably classified as the worst. Not that she planned it this way. In fact, the travel brochure she picked up at the tiny eight-gate Kauai airport said this path down to the secluded beach below it was easy enough for even the mildly physically inclined. She didn’t run marathons or anything, but chasing rambunctious kindergartners qualified her as mildly physically inclined. She certainly didn’t spend her time sitting at a desk job or riding a couch in front of the television. Right?

Wrong.

Now she wished she had a gym membership and some modicum of upper body strength, just to hold herself up by the flimsiest piece of twine masquerading as a hand rail stretched between two shoots of thick bamboo. While her legs kicked wildly on the soft ground, searching for purchase.

Maybe there was a reason why they called this Hideaways Beach, why they said only a few people ventured to it daily. She’d been lured in with the promise of relative privacy and solitude. She’d been blindsided by everything else.

What the brochure neglected to mention was the on-and-off Hawaiian rain. And the fact that, after a rain, as it had done most of the night before, the trail became treacherously slippery. And apparently, in Hawaii, volcanic dirt happened to be five million percent slipperier than normal people dirt like she was used to back home in Las Vegas. This, also, wasn’t considering that most of the pre-laid handrails had either rusted away in the salty sea air or had never been placed to begin with on the steep incline. Like some construction crew realized trying to make the path safe wasn’t even worth their time or effort. They knew the haole would be stupid enough to try it out anyway.

Like her.

Because she was so haole, it hurt. Not to mention stupid.

She realized now, with some startling clarity, that she was probably going to plummet to her death, completely alone. Unloved. Young, basic, and likely easily forgotten. At least the view before she met her fate was gorgeous enough. Anyone would be lucky to die staring out at the crystalline waters of Kauai’s north shore.

But she’d already come too far to give up and, looking back up the steep, uneven stairs leading to the top of the trailhead, she couldn’t summon the energy to try to climb them. Falling, or at least going downhill, seemed like the best option. There was no turning back, even though she still hadn’t figured out how to maneuver her shoe-covered feet into the soft red mud beneath her. Maybe sliding down the muddy incline would be better?

She groaned as she released her sloth-like hold on the nylon rope, setting her butt on the muddy path. The red goo smooshed into the thin bathing suit cover-up she wore, and it honestly felt like she’d had an accident. But her burning arms finally had a rest. And at least like this, she wasn’t liable to take any cartwheels down the cliff. Maybe she’d just sit there and waste away, or maybe turn into Te Fiti from Moana. Her students loved that movie. She’d promised to bring back photos from her adventures to share with them. They’d be so disappointed that they didn’t get to see where Moana and Lilo and Stitch were from.
“Um, excuse me,” said a deep, tentative voice above her.

Astrid startled, but she didn’t jump far, the mud creating a strong suction with her bottom. To add insult to injury, the suction made a disgusting wet fart sound as she settled back into her spot. Now she could die from mortification instead of blunt force trauma. Just great!

A tall man, thin but muscular, peered down at her through dark Ray Bans. He wore a holey threadbare t-shirt in blue with crinkled board shorts underneath, those a plain black. A brightly colored beach towel decorated in hibiscus was slung over a broad shoulder. The dirty boat shoes on his feet seemed to be doing perfectly well holding him upright on the slippery path, enabling him to peer down his straight patrician nose at her. His face pinched and he looked up toward the sun beating down through the trees while he readjusted his baseball cap.

“I’m sorry to bother,” he said again. Goodness, his voice was rich, like honey. His English accent made him purr. Maybe he was doing it on purpose, trying to calm the crazy not-really-farting lady sitting on her ass on a hiking trail. “But are you okay?”

Astrid squinted and looked up at him. He looked like a giant from her position, impossibly tall, like one of the trees surrounding them. “Do I look like I’m okay?” She felt the wetness on her cheek and reached up, wiping away a few anguished tears that seemed to have erupted without her knowledge. She didn’t know if she was crying because she had failed herself, or because she was relieved someone found her.

“May I help you?” he asked, extending a hand. It was a nice hand, big palm, with thin, elegant fingers. His forearm was nice, too. He probably worked out, hence why he was still standing.

She was definitely hitting the gym when she got home. If she got home.

Astrid reached for him, closing her fingers around his forearm, as he did the same to her, for more leverage. With a little hoist, and some more effort, she was finally standing on two shaky legs again. Except now that she had him for support, she didn’t want to let go.

He was more solid than any of the railings around her. She liked it; he peered down at her with amusement on his lips. Maybe she needed to let go of his arm, but she was too terrified to do so.

“Are you going down or coming up?” he asked.

“I have absolutely no idea,” she said with a high-pitched chuckle that came out as exasperation. “I’m technically still going down, but I think maybe I should go back. But then I’m looking back up there, and I don’t think I have it in me right now.”

His bright laugh made her insides bubble. “How about we tumble down the trail together?”

“You sure you want to do that?” she asked. “I’m a bit of a walking disaster.”

He looked down the trail, and back up, then straight at her. At least she imagined he was looking at her. The sunglasses were too dark to see through. “I’m game if you are.”

“You’re probably going to regret it.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

Astrid couldn’t contain the silly giggle that bubbled up her throat. At least there was some gallantry left in the world. Most men wouldn’t even look at her twice, much less stop to help her… and then offer to escort her down the cliff face with the threat of meeting their own demise. She just wasn’t
worth it.

They moved slowly and quietly, and once they were past the initial incline, it became easier to walk without taking small, measured steps to preserve balance. The incline turned shallow, and the terrain changed from dirt to rocks and leaves. These seemed to be mostly dry, covered as they were with such a dense tree canopy above the trail.

Finally, they made it to the beach. True to the travel brochure’s word, it was completely empty. Oh, and it was gorgeous. Aided by the difficult path down, she figured not many people had spent time in this pretty little cove, making the water bluer, the sand cleaner, and the reef more vibrant through the clear aquamarine waters. It was a perfect place to spend a day, even after almost hurtling to a sure death.

She sighed and glanced at the man beside her, who seemed to have frozen in his own awe of the location. Astrid smiled, looking at his profile. High cheekbones, strong jaw covered in a healthy growth of stubble. Short auburn curls poked out from beneath his hat. He looked youngish, yet older than her. She wanted to see his eyes, to gauge his attractiveness further. Not that it mattered. Because it didn’t. He was just being nice, helping her.

“So, uh, thank you,” she finally said, making him turn to look at her.

He grinned. “No problem.”

What did she say? Should she invite him to sit with her? It was weird being the only two people down here, now strangely bonded through a near-death experience. Well, her near-death experience. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, then drew in a breath. “Yeah, have a good day.”

And that’s how she left it, giving him a stupid semi-wave of her hand as she scurried through the grainy yellow sand to her right. Away from him, and away from the awkwardness. She hated awkward, but Awkward was her middle name. Always had been, though her mom had refused to let her use it as her Confirmation name when she was taking catechism classes as a child. She went with Joan, as in ‘of Arc’, instead. Thought it’d give her the push to be courageous for once in her life.

Astrid knew exactly where courageous got her. She’d barely survived the hike down the cliff.

Astrid took the rucksack from her back and pulled out her own beach towel, laying it carefully on an untouched patch of sand, half under a shade tree, but still with a good splash of sun. Then she tossed off her own sunglasses and wide-brimmed hat before heading to the water. She waded into the surf, letting the cool ocean tickle her toes. Preferably, she’d have come later in the year for warmer temperatures, but March’s spring break meant she still might be able to see the whales that came in the spring for their calving.

She carefully inched further into the water, peeling off her cover-up and jumping into a reef-less area of deeper water to wash off the slimy red mud clinging to her body. Fortunately, most of it disappeared in a cloud of rusty water, but her clothing didn’t fare as well. At least she was still alive to tell the tale.

After bobbing in the slow undulating waves for a few minutes, she trudged back for the shoreline and her blanket, wringing her wet hair as she emerged. Even though it was wet, she could pick out the light golden streaks running through the usually mousy brown, actually making it look something other than drab for a change. If only she could keep it and her nice tan going for the rest of the spring and summer, she’d be happy.

The tiny hairs on her neck rose, and a frisson of electricity sizzled up her back. A sure sign someone...
was watching her, or at least had looked at her. She glanced to her left to make sure no one else was
there—she’d been duped before thinking someone was looking at her, but they were really looking
past her—and then glanced at the only other person on the beach.

He stood still at the surf’s edge, his feet buried in the sand, small frothy waves lapping at his ankles.
But his eyes were on her, not on what he was doing. Still with the glasses and hat, she couldn’t really
make out any intent in his gaze, other than a friendly smile and a nod of his head.

The thought that he might be checking her out made her laugh again. No one checked her out. Well,
maybe not ‘no one,’ but the someones who did were typically only in bars and clubs when she was
the only one left out of a group of girls or the men were too drunk to care who they went home with.

It wasn’t false modesty, either, that had made her laugh… and blush… at the stranger’s attention.
She’d always known she wasn’t pretty. Not like her older sister, the beauty queen. Or her cousins, all
striking in their own way. Her mother had called her the ugly duckling—she of the unremarkable
plumage, plain face, and squat rounded figure. A terrible thing for a mother to say, but that was
Mom. Love her or hate her.

Astrid had waited to turn into a swan for years, like the story she always read to her kindergarten
classes, but it still hadn’t happened. And why would it? This wasn’t a fairy tale and that man wasn’t
looking at her appreciatively. He was probably just being nice, his eyes finding the only other
moving thing on the secluded beach, before moving on.

She settled down onto her towel, deciding to lay first on her stomach and read a bit from the Kindle
she’d brought, since it seemed to have survived her slip earlier. She didn’t get very far before a voice
called out to her.

“Is the book good?” called the Englishman, now closer to her, but still at the surf’s edge. He was
looking back in her direction, then bending down to inspect a shell on the sand.

Astrid frowned. “Excuse me?”

He motioned to the Kindle sitting on the blanket in front of her. “You came to one of the most
beautiful places in the world and you’re reading instead of watching. I sure hope the book is worth
it.”

“You don’t like to read?”

He barked out a laugh and looked back at the sun. “I love to read, but I find there’s so much to
explore in unfamiliar places like this. Unless you live here and this isn’t new to you.”

Ah, so he was playing the information mining game. “If I lived here, do you think I’d be stupid
enough to attempt that hike on my own?”

“No, I suppose not,” he said. “Then where’s home?”

“Las Vegas.”

“I’ve been,” he replied. “Fun city.”

Sure, if you liked always smelling of stale cigarette smoke, losing money, and ignoring the seedy
underbelly of a city built on mobs, human trafficking, and obscene wealth that never trickled past the
Strip. Astrid rolled her eyes and dipped her head to read again.

He didn’t take the clue. “Where are you staying?”
She groaned and shut her Kindle cover. “At the condos right next to the trailhead.”

“I’m at the St. Regis down the way,” he offered. “This the first time you tried to come down here?”

“First time I’ve had the courage to attempt it,” she shot back.

The man nodded, running his fingers thoughtfully across his mouth. “It’s my third time. I slipped the first time, as well.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “You did not.”

“I did! Arse over kettle,” he said.

She scoffed. “You’re a lying liar who lies.”

“Why would it be so difficult to think I fell? That trail should probably be closed due to safety concerns,” he replied, stepping closer to her, dry sand sticking to his bare feet as he walked. Eventually, he stopped in front of her with his hands on his hips, looking down his nose again.

From her vantage, all she could really see was crotch, so she quickly pulled herself up into a sitting position. She rested back on her hands, with her legs outstretched. “I had my hands on you, I know how strong you are.”

“Muscles don’t mean strength,” he said.

Astrid groaned and rolled her eyes again. This man was both incredibly annoying and alluring all at once and she wanted to keep talking with him… until she didn’t. Finally, he seemed to get her reticence and turned on his heels, walking back toward the water, stripping off his glasses, hat and shirt as he went. They landed on the sand in a heap.

He dove into the blue depths, but the moment before he did it was long enough for Astrid to verify that the man was walking muscle. How long did he have to work out every day just to maintain it? Or was he naturally that lean? It was ridiculous and a little unfair, really.

When he popped up out of the water, he was facing her direction, the first time she’d been given an opportunity to really see him. And heavens, was he gorgeous. Not just the sculpted-from-marble body, but his face. Maybe not male model pretty, but that’s what made him so attractive to her. He was a man, interesting and maybe a little on the rugged side, not some baby-faced model perfection. The water dripping around him and off of him, however, made it seem like he’d been ripped straight from the romance novel she’d been attempting to read a few minutes ago.

Maybe he was. Maybe this was all some delusion she’d created as she lay dying on the bottom of the cliff, after actually falling the two hundred feet. She pinched her arm.

No, not a delusion. He was real, and he was headed for her. Again.

“So,” he said, dripping onto her towel as he pulled the hat back down on his head and replaced the sunglasses. For what she had been able to see of his sea-green eyes, she found them to be intense and gorgeous. But she knew she’d have to stare into them for a while to know for sure.

“Yes?” she asked, lifting a brow at him.

“Would you have dinner with me tonight?”

She tried not to sound incredulous. But there was no helping it. No one that looked like him had ever
asked her out to dinner like this. “Excuse me?”

He chuckled at her. “Dinner, at the St. Regis. Say seven?”

Astrid frowned. “I’m sorry, but—”

“It’s the only polite thing to do after I saved you,” he said.

“Shouldn’t I be the one inviting you out, then?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulder. “Nah. My treat. I’d simply like the pleasure of your company.”

“What about the people I came with?”

“The more the merrier,” he said, but he hedged anyway. He wanted her alone, clearly. Which was strange. Everything about this day had been strange. “How many shall I make the reservation for?”

But he knew. She didn’t know how he knew she was all alone, but he did. Even though she couldn’t see his eyes, as they were once again hidden behind his sunglasses, she felt them on her, assessing her, reading her. He had her number. She only wished she had his.

“Just the two of us,” she finally replied. “I don’t even know your name.”

That seemed to change him, to make him do a double take. Almost as though he were surprised by the question. He cleared his throat and said, “Henry Longfellow.”

“That’s a stupid name,” she said. “And fake.”

“How do you know?”

Astrid licked her lips. “Add a Wadsworth in there and you’ve got yourself one of the greatest American poets to ever poet.”

His shoulders slumped and he harrumphed. “I’m impressed you know that. What’s your name, then?”

She sighed. She damn well wasn’t going to give him her real name if he wasn’t going to give his. “How ‘bout Jane Austen?”

“Ha!” He laughed. “No Jane, can’t do Jane. You strike me as more of a Brontë–a little darker and more Gothic around the edges than old Jane.”

“Charlotte, then,” she said.

“Not Emily?”

Astrid shrugged. “I’m more of a Rochester girl than a Heathcliff.”

He stared at her for good long moment, as though memorizing what she looked like. “Alright, dinner at seven, then, Charlotte.”

“Do you do this often?” she called to him as he turned and started for his towel.

“Do what?” he asked.

“Make edicts and expect people to follow them?”
He grinned. “Most people do what I say.”

Astrid couldn’t believe his cockiness. But there was also an infectious friendliness in him that made it difficult to say no to anything. “If I don’t make it tonight, it’s because I’m stuck down here, or dead at the bottom of the cliff from trying to climb back up.”

He laughed. “I have faith in you, Charlotte.”

“Thanks,” she said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

“Seven! Don’t forget! Or I’ll come bang on every one of the doors of the flats you’re staying at,” he yelled, slipping onto the path and out of sight.

Astrid groaned and fell back on her towel, staring up at the impossibly blue sky.

When had her life turned into this, anyway? Damn it, though, if she wasn’t just a little excited. She let out a little squeal and reached for her Kindle, happy to finally have the peace she craved, as well as a weird new happiness bubbling up inside her.
Chapter 2

Part II – The Drake

Tom stood in the cavernous atrium lobby of the St. Regis Princeville fifteen minutes before seven, repeatedly checking his watch and casting glances at the front entrance, waiting for his dinner guest to arrive. To the average onlooker, he likely seemed apprehensive, perhaps worried while he waited for a potentially tense meeting or perhaps for a new romantic interest. While both of those reasons were completely possible for his anxiety (and, in fact, probably contributed to it), it was a third, more stressful reason causing his vigilance.

For the first time in a long time, he’d met someone who genuinely didn’t seem to know who he was. He wanted to protect that ignorance to the last possible minute, revel in the fact that he could build his own character in her eyes rather than contend with preconceptions—often false—based on a public image, and then bathe in the sensation of being just a regular guy after so many years of being recognized wherever he went.

Of course, not everyone stopped him to beg him for a photo or autograph or something else, but they always did the obvious double take. They always seemed to know of him or realized that he looked familiar, though many couldn’t put a name to a face. This woman, though… this woman hadn’t batted an eyelash. Not once.

He had all but assumed he didn’t need an introduction after he’d invited her to dinner tonight, and it took all his willpower to mask the surprise and wonder when she asked him for a name because she clearly didn’t know. She hadn’t seemed to care, or at least didn’t mention his momentary twitch of confusion, and played along with him, about the name. It was a strange experience, but a much needed one. One that put his feet firmly back on the ground, instead of allowing his head to carry him off into the sky of egocentricity full of the current embarrassment of riches in his professional life.

The problem was keeping it like this. Of all the hotel staff he’d spoken to while setting up dinner reservations, he made it clear not to address him by his real name. He was to be Henry Longfellow for the duration, and they were to be seated in the private dining room at the restaurant. There, they’d be free from looky-loos who might recognize him and crane their necks awkwardly trying to catch a glimpse or snap a not-so-secret mobile photo. Or, even worse, protect them from fans who might come to the table to say hello, which would force him to divulge his true identity. He was sure the staff would be accommodating, but there remained the possibility someone might spoil it all between the front entrance and where he sat on a soft leather couch in the middle of the atrium. He hoped no one walked by and stopped to chat.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long with his nerves. The woman in question stepped through the large glass doors at ten to seven, very punctual and suffused in the golden purple glow of a Hawaiian sunset at her back. He stood to greet her.
She first looked up at the huge hanging chandelier overhead, then dropped her gaze, lighting on him with a grin. It was a better reaction than he thought he’d have, honestly, after their meeting earlier in the day. At the beginning, he simply wanted to help the poor stranded woman clinging for dear life to the hiking trail. Then he’d felt her soft hands on his arms, and the pleasing sizzle of something that shot through his body. Frankly, it’d been awhile since he’d felt something like that. And never in the long string of one-and-dones he’d cultivated over the last few years.

She hadn’t seemed too keen to continue conversing with him, but the sizzle deserved more attention than letting her awkwardly slip away so she could do her own thing at the beach. So, he had watched her—he’d watched her strip down to a dark purple bathing suit that showed off her incredible curves. Then he watched her wade into the water like some sea nymph in a Rubens painting. She didn’t seem to realize it, either, when he repositioned himself in the surf so he could look at her, take in the bounty of her breasts as she laid out on her towel and began to read from her Kindle. Maybe it was a little lecherous of him to be ogling her so, but he was a man on holiday who hadn’t had sex in a long time.

Well, a long time for him, anyway.

“Wadsworth,” she mused with a sly grin, her full pink lips curling in a way that made him want to kiss it away. They were natural, her lips, not collagen filled or reshaped or whatever plastic surgeons did to them. And the color was her own, accentuated simply with lip gloss or balm. A proper kiss would tell him one way or another, from the taste, but he figured it’d be too forward, even for him.

“Brontë.” Tom inclined his head and held out a hand to her for a friendly handshake. “I see you survived the climb back up the mountain.”

She cleared her throat. “Just barely.”

“No broken bones? No bruises?”

With a chuckle, she tossed her waist-length light brown hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck, more delectable soft-looking skin, and a red and angry scrape on top of her shoulder, just under the strap of the bright tropical dress she wore.

“Oh, no,” he cooed, stepping closer to her, invading her space, seeing what she’d do. He, perhaps, hadn’t made it clear what his intentions for the evening might be when he’d invited her, but she didn’t seem like an idiot. Young, yes, but the intent is fairly obvious when you’re both single people on holiday and you’re invited out to dinner. Oh, and when you both spent quite a lot of time staring at each other’s bodies on a beach. She probably didn’t think he noticed her own interest in him this morning.

Boy, did he.

“It’s not bad,” she replied.

Tom chuckled. “You know what’ll fix that right up?”

“Some Neosporin and a Band-Aid?”

He feigned ignorance. “I don’t know what those are. But alcohol—now there’s something that’ll fix it right up.”

“It won’t heal anything.”

“No, but it’ll make you forget about the pain,” he said.
She giggled and winked. “Some pain is good, though, right?”

Her words and actions shot straight to his cock. That was unexpected. But also, strangely welcome. More than one woman in his past had called him too intense and too dominant, and it seemed that his ‘Charlotte’ must have sensed it in him from their brief meeting, if her words were truly alluding to the darker aspects of his nature.

She quickly replaced her initial statement with one more benign. “Will it make me forget about this morning?”

Tom turned and slipped a hand around her back, splaying his fingers out and gently nudging her in the direction of the lifts. He liked feeling the slight quiver coursing down her back. “The restaurant is downstairs.”

“I know,” she replied.

“How long have you been on the island?”

She glanced at him, making sure he was completely looking at her before she said anything. “A week. Tonight’s my last night.”

He couldn’t have asked for more perfect circumstances. No awkward farewells if this night turned out how he wanted it to turn out. There was an expiration date. “That’s too bad,” he said anyway. “My holiday is just beginning.”

“I’m sure there’ll be plenty more women on this island for you to harass before you leave.” Her wryness made him laugh.

“Harass?” Tom reached out for the down button on the lift, pressing it before glancing back at her. “I seem to remember our earlier meeting going a bit differently.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like when you wouldn’t let me alone to read?”

“Please. You wanted to be bothered,” he said.

“No… no, I did not. That’s why I was going to a quiet beach with no one around,” she replied. “Solitude.”

“And yet you’re still here about to have dinner with me.”

“You’re annoying.”

The lift doors silently peeled back, emitting a family with two older teenage daughters. Both of whom recognized him immediately, if the way their mouths dropped open were any indication. He dipped his head and offered them a polite smile, ushering his companion into the lift. The girls’ parents seemed to understand he didn’t want to be bothered and pushed their daughters along as well.

It wasn’t until the doors slid closed that he realized the sudden adrenaline of the moment made his heart hammer in his chest. Something told him to just come clean now; if something else happened, then he’d be forced to admit who he was anyway, and it wouldn’t play well in his favor by waiting to tell her.

Maybe it wouldn’t matter, in the long run. It wasn’t like she’d made a huge deal about him not giving her his real name. Maybe she didn’t care. She clearly understood the parameters of this dinner
invitation, even though he got the feeling she didn’t quite understand why he had invited her anyway.

“Do you always garner such attention from women?” Her voice was soft, almost unsure.

He rubbed his bristly chin. It wasn’t worth lying. “Sometimes.”

She simply shook her head and scooted a few steps away from him until he dropped the hand from her back. The lift doors opened on the lower level and she stepped out ahead of him, waiting for him to follow her.

“Are you okay? Is everything okay?” he asked, pressing his hand to her back again, refusing to sever the connection of his hand to her body unless it was absolutely necessary. It was both to satisfy his urge to connect with her in a way that she would not misunderstand his interest, but also to direct her—lead her—in the gentlemanly fashion he preferred.

She sighed. “I’m perfectly fine. I’m anxious for that drink you said would make my scrape better.”

“It’ll certainly take the sting out of it,” he remarked, not satisfied with her redirection. But he let it slide. He didn’t know her well enough yet to harp on about it.

They walked the rest of the way to the restaurant in silence, and were promptly seated in the private dining room without having to exchange anything more than the basic introductory pleasantries with the maître d’.

Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the verdant mountains and sandy shores of Hanalei Bay. Slashes of purple, orange and pink colored the late afternoon sky and reflected off the water in a dazzling array of color. The view was worth every penny he spent on dinner, though he didn’t intend on spending much time looking at it. It was the other view he preferred.

He helped her into a seat at the small square table before he took the chair beside her and motioned to the attentive wait staff to deliver the bottle of champagne he’d pre-ordered for the evening.

When he looked at his guest again, her right brow arched quizzically as though she were searching for something in him. Maybe she was trying to figure him out, making up stories in her head about who he was, why he received service beyond the norm. Still, she didn’t ask. Her eyes flicked to his wrist and the not-inexpensive watch there. He reached for the timepiece and adjusted it, catching the tiny diamonds at the 3, 6, 9, and 12 positions in the low overhead light. It was a fidget, nothing more, but he hoped it didn’t seem too arrogant of him.

She cleared her throat and shifted in her seat. Then she swallowed the entire contents of the flute of champagne in front of her. Her face scrunched up and she pressed the back of her hand to her lips. Finally, she coughed. “That champagne—”

“Is it good?” he asked with a laugh.

“Amazing,” she replied. “I’ll drink the rest slower.”

Tom grinned and reached for the bottle in the ice bucket beside him. “Don’t get out much, do you?”

Her face bloomed with heat, though he couldn’t tell if it was embarrassment or from the alcohol working its way through her system. “That easy to tell?”

“Not at all,” he conceded. “I mean, you came all the way to Hawaii by yourself, so you clearly get out.”
“Perhaps.” Her voice took on an awed quality as she looked around the room again and glanced out the window. “Perhaps, I’m not used to the surroundings.”

He inclined his head and sat back in his seat comfortably, taking a moment to consider her further, now that they weren’t in the open and in danger of being identified. She gave him an uneasy smile at his perusal, but it wasn’t enough to make him stop. Her tongue wet her lips and she fiddled with the simple silver chain around her neck, moving the clasp back behind her neck and repositioning the tiny circular pendant on the end. It was nothing fancy or overdone, just modest and refined.

Like her.

He’d been on a lot of these dates with a lot of different women over the years, but he always had a better time with women like her. The ones who didn’t take themselves too seriously; the ones who were themselves without trying too hard. The ones that exuded a light and beauty that no amount of money, plastic surgery, designer clothing or thick makeup could create. He preferred simple and uncomplicated over the opposite any day of the week.

“So,” he said, brushing a finger across his mouth.

The action drew her attention, but she caught herself and looked away. She blushed again and shook her head. “So… what?”

“Did you finish your book?” he asked.

“I did,” she replied with a small laugh.

“Did the boy get the girl?”

Her laugh grew stronger. “What makes you think it was a romance?”

“There’s always romance,” he said. “And I know what sort of books I like to read on holiday. You weren’t reading… I don’t know… Kafka or something out there.”

“And if I was?”

“You wouldn’t have accepted a frivolous request to have dinner with a complete stranger.”

She sighed. “Why?”

He shrugged. “You’d be taking yourself too seriously to allow yourself to have fun.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I should have said I was reading Poe or something,” she replied.

“There’s still romance in that,” he said. “Perhaps I should be calling you Annabel Lee?”

Her eyes brightened. She bit her lower lip and let out another laugh. “‘In a kingdom by the sea’?”

“‘That a maiden there lived whom you may know, by the name of Annabel Lee,’ ” he finished for her.

“You know an awful lot about American poetry for a Brit,” she said. “Are you a professor or poet yourself?”

No, he simply made a career out of putting emotion and character behind the words of more talented people. “Goodness, no. I couldn’t dream of putting words into verse and making it sound half as good as the greats.”
She leaned forward in her seat and rested an elbow on the table, setting her head in her hand to look at him, finally relaxing. “That shouldn’t stop you. Many of those greats had ‘greatness thrust upon them’, whether they deserved it or not. You simply have to be in the right place at the right time.”

“Are you suggesting with that quote that you think Shakespeare doesn’t deserve the notoriety?” he asked, not actually incensed, but feeling slightly attacked as the meme went. It wasn’t like she knew who he was so he couldn’t say she was doing it to anger him. But someone didn’t bring Shakespeare up in such a tone without receiving an argument from him. Maybe it was the English in him. Or the not-so-closeted theater geek.

“I’m just saying that he was a two-bit hack who basically wrote fanfiction,” she said.

“No!”

She nodded. “He’s no better than EL James and Fifty Shades of Grey.”

He scoffed and sat forward, opening his mouth to rebuke her, but couldn’t find the words. Okay, he still found some, but not as many as he wanted, nor as well planned. “How can you possibly say that he’s not great when he wrote some of the most supremely beautiful and most poignant lines and scenes in history? Even if he wrote fanfiction, doesn’t mean he didn’t do it better than his predecessors. His way of creating an image of something with his words, and the catchy aphorisms we still use today… his use of meter and—”

By this time, she was laughing jovially and clenching her stomach, her round face bright red. “Okay, okay, geez, Wadsworth! I didn’t know ol’ Shakes would be your hot button issue.”

There was so much more he needed to say on the subject. So much he hadn’t elegantly expressed to her just then. But it was impossible to spit the words out, like all the arguments were stuck together in his throat, choking him.

“But just so you know, the only reason the aphorisms became so popular is that his campy plays were popular, and then they kept getting taught over and over, and they took on a life of their own. Nowhere does ‘popular’ mean that they are actually ‘great’, she added.

“That is the definition of dramatic and literary greatness, though!” he parried. “Think of all the fabulous one-liners you’ve heard in films and television shows. Usually, they accompany the most lauded and critically acclaimed pieces of work.”

She rolled her eyes. “How many critically acclaimed movies have you seen with memorable one-liners that were crap, though? I mean, honestly?”

He pursed his lips, thinking.

“Think about it. How many movies have you seen that someone somewhere told you were good and you should like it, and if you didn’t like it you were uncultured and uneducated? And then you believed they were good even though they weren’t?”

He slumped into his seat. Maybe it was because he was in the business that he always looked for the redeeming qualities in the films he reviewed, but he tended to agree with the critics. “I dare you to name one film where this applies—where it’s popular and has unjust positive reviews.”

“I can’t really think of any right now,” she said.

“See?”
“Please! It’s only because I haven’t seen a movie in like seven years,” she said.

Well, that certainly explained why she didn’t recognize him. If it was true. “What do you mean?”

She sighed, as though upset she let that fact about herself out. “I mean a regular movie… like higher than a PG rating. I’ve seen plenty of animated movies and singing animals and such.”

“Kids?” he asked.

“I teach kindergarten,” she said.

“No films… at all?”

“Don’t sound so incredulous.” She shrugged and played with the silverware in front of her. “I probably shouldn’t tell you I don’t own a television, either.”

He wanted to shout “What do you do in your free time?”, but he stopped himself. Well, the waiter stopped them when he came by the table to see how they were doing. It was a nice break in the conversation, allowing him much needed time to get himself under control after, rather embarrassingly, flying off the handle about Shakespeare. He couldn’t help his passion for the subject, but his reaction was a little much. Even for him.

Though, it seemed she appreciated his enthusiasm. At least, she seemed to appreciate poking his buttons a bit, which, in hindsight, was the real reason he had to calm himself. There weren’t many women out there with whom he could hold a lengthy conversation about literature… whether he agreed with them or not.

It was fucking sexy.

After they focused on ordering their dinner—he’d completely forgotten about the menus sitting on the table in front of them—she settled back in her seat with another glass of champagne. Her eyes, silver-like liquid mercury in the low light, turned back to him with a new sparkle of interest.

“In all fairness, I should probably admit that I wrote my bachelor thesis on *Taming of the Shrew.*”

The corner of her mouth lifted in a grin. “But that doesn’t mean my opinion on Shakespeare doesn’t stand. I believe you should know your literary enemy so you have a wealth of support for argumentative dates.”

“You secretly love him. Admit it!”

She shook her head. “Never ever.”

His laughter bubbled up from his belly. “Now who’s a lying liar who lies?”

“Ugh!” She rolled her eyes at him. “I just wanted out of school, okay? So I chose the easiest topic I could think of. Shakespeare is literally rammed down your throat as the be-all-end-all of dramatic literature throughout school, so I didn’t have to do much extra work.”

Now more interested, he nodded his head at her. “What was the topic of your thesis?”

“I’m on vacation,” she replied. “I don’t want to talk about college.”

Tom chuckled. “You brought it up. It’s only fair you answer.”

She sighed heavily again, glancing away from him. The color in her cheeks blossomed. With a clear of her throat, she turned back to him. “I focused on the act of submission in the play.”
Even though he knew the play well, and what she meant by her topic, he still felt the tenor of their conversation change. The lights seemed to lower, and the air around them took on an intoxicating static charge that hadn’t really been present till then. Her bashfulness at admitting this to him, though, made it that way. Told him all he needed to know.

He cleared his own throat with a cough and scooted forward in his seat, leaning closer to her until he felt the radiance of her body heat against him, but not close enough to be touching her. “I’m sensing a theme here.”

Her voice was hoarse in reply. “Excuse me?”

“Submission,” he said sotto voce, holding her gaze, refusing to relinquish his sudden, but tenuous, control of the conversation. “First with the Fifty Shades and now… Taming.”

“Both of which involve women with daddy issues and abusive men getting what they want,” she said. Her breathing shallowed and her pupils grew wider. “Not true mutually enjoyable submission.”

A strand of her honey-colored hair fell across her face and he lifted a finger to brush it back behind her ear. “And you would know about that?”

“About what?”

“Mutually enjoyable submission?”

She lifted a shoulder in a semi-shrug. “I would say I accepted your request to dinner on the promise that you were a little domineering. I prefer men who are men. But other than that, no, I’m no expert.”

He grinned, ready to end dinner now and take her somewhere more private, but he was a gentleman above all. The least he could do was wine her and dine her like she deserved.

The waiter reappeared with their first course, again breaking up the conversation and allowing them to converse about something a little lighter for a while. Even so, he couldn’t take his eyes off her for any real length of time, finding himself, more and more, enraptured by his date.

He couldn’t remember a time before where it had gone like this. Usually, he spent his dates battling preconceived notions about him instead of really enjoying it. When it came to the latter part of the evening, with the sex, he always felt crippled with the need to perform, to be up to his dates’ presumptions about his prowess. But not tonight. Tonight, in some crazy twist, none of that mattered. He silently thanked whatever deity was responsible for giving him the ability to disappear like a chameleon for just one night of truly anonymous fun.

The taste of this new freedom was like nothing else.

Except, perhaps, what she’d taste like… later.
Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Sex, D/s, very very light BDSM. Just a rougher form of sex, not really that rough.
AUTHORS NOTES: This story will continue with an epilogue and a full-length multi-chapter entitled The Swan. Thank you all for reading!

Part III – The Swan

A little pain is good?

Mutually enjoyable submission?

Where the heck did she come up with this stuff, anyway? Astrid wanted to kick herself for saying such stupid things to a man she didn’t know, no matter how difficult it was to resist the intensity in his gaze—the way his eyes lingered just a second too long before his tongue licked his lips or he pressed them together in a heart-stopping smirk.

Or how he kept shifting in his seat throughout dinner as though he were uncomfortable to be sitting.

Astrid had an idea about what might be bothering him. She’d certainly been on enough dates and with enough men to know, but it was still difficult to believe that he was that into her and the dinner invitation was anything more than a mercy mission. Or, worse, some twisted game he was playing to build her up into thinking she might deserve the attention of a guy like him.

Okay, maybe she did deserve a guy like him, most women did—a thoughtful, gentlemanly man who holds doors and guides women with a firm hand on the back. A man who can not only tickle a woman’s baser fantasies, but also her intellect as well. But she wasn’t delusional. Men like him—gorgeous, dominant men like him—didn’t just fall out of the sky and land on a remote hiking trail in Hawaii to save the frumpy girl from death.

Or from herself.

Or invite her out to dinner and make absolutely no attempt to hide why he’d invited her.

This sort of thing only happened in romance novels, and even then, most of the women she read about weren’t remotely like her. Those novel heroines were usually striking in some aspect—bouncy, barely tamed curls cascading down their backs in a rich color or maybe they had mesmerizing jewel-hued eyes, all slapped on the perfect, but somehow completely natural, hourglass body of a 1950s starlet… starlets who really weren’t that curvy, in the long run.

And yet… and yet… he never seemed to focus on any of that. Indeed, when he looked at her for those one or two beats longer than normal, it wasn’t in some judging manner. It felt like he was looking inside her, searching for some truth in their little game of anonymity. When he found whatever he’d been looking for, he turned the temperature up higher. Seeming, even, to more thoroughly appreciate what she had to offer physically. Which, while not unheard of for someone like her, was particularly strange for a wealthy and attractive man in his prime. Strange, but very,
very welcome.

As trite as it was, and as much as she disliked Shakespeare, her Wadsworth really took the “love looks not with the eyes but with the mind” adage to heart.

It was maddeningly sexy, even if it was too good to be true.

Just as sexy as it was to have him suggest walking her back to her condo, rather than insist on, right after concluding dinner, shoving her in an elevator and taking her up to his room. Sexy and classy, that.

Maybe it only served a purpose for him—he’d be able to decide when he left, when this idyll had finished, therefore maintaining his power in the rendezvous—or maybe he was simply a gentleman giving her an illusion that he wanted to do anything but fuck her brains out after he’d taken such care to prime her with some expensive wine and a good dinner. No matter the reason, she was still thankful for the fresh tropical air and the time to collect herself before he made good on the innuendos he had leveled at her once he’d found out about her more lurid fantasies.

“You’ve gone quiet,” he murmured into the silent night, pulling her out of her doubtful thoughts.

She glanced at him and paused momentarily on the road. He stilled beside her, the fingers that were resting on her wide hip clenching slightly, as though he were worried she’d run away from him.

The wind picked up and whipped her hair across her face. Before she had time to move it herself, his free hand was there to brush it all away and gather the loose strands together in a makeshift pony at the nape of her neck. His movements brought him closer to her until his strong arms locked her in place, one hand completely entangled in her hair, the other hot and heavy as it slid into place on her lower back. He tugged lightly on the hair in his fist as his chest—warm and hard and masculine—pressed against hers. A searing streak of recognition passed through her body, numbing her scalp with pleasure and forcing a quiver from the rest of her. The tingles stopped low in her belly, dipping deep between her legs. She bit back a moan.

He was too good at this. Way more experienced than she, probably, in the ways of meaningless trysts between strangers. A true smooth operator. But fuck if she wasn’t going to enjoy it.

“You’re thinking too much,” he said, now watching her face intently, barely blinking. His ability to hold a gaze, to maintain the intensity of his eye contact was ridiculous.

She felt the warmth of his breath on her lips, teasing the sensitive flesh, but he made no move to kiss her. “I’m not thinking,” she defended.

“You are.”

Her curiosity got the better of her before she could stop the next question from pouring out of her. “Do you do this often?”

He smirked. “Often enough.”

“With girls like me?”

The smirk dropped from his face, all the way into a frown. “I’m not quite sure what you’re referring to… my preference for dominance, or if I always do this on holiday, or…”

“All of it?” she asked. “I’m trying to figure out why me?”
“Why not you?”

Astrid shrugged, raising her chin, refusing to let her self-consciousness win out. But she had to say something or she wouldn’t fully appreciate the rest of the night. She’d be too caught up in her head to really let go, to really experience this. To experience him. And, truthfully, it wasn’t worth it to continue with him if she couldn’t forget; she could always go home tomorrow morning and find someone else. Someone in her own social and physical strata. Someone simple and uncomplicated, to get the release she now needed.

She breathed in again, taking quite a lot of air into her lungs before speaking. “There are a million other girls you could have tonight. More attractive, more worldly, more—”

Her words were silenced when his demanding, thought-stealing lips crushed hers. He tugged her ever closer until every part of her body touched his. Until she could feel the pants-straining erection pressed against her belly. Until she heard the little growl-moan that came from his throat.

She’d never felt more wanted by a man in her entire life.

She relaxed into him, flattening her palms against his shoulders and massaging northwards to cup his scratchy jaw. That stubble was going to rub her raw, she just knew it, but she couldn’t wait. Not now that she’d had a taste of him.

The kiss, their first kiss, didn’t last forever, but only because he had something to say. She panted as he abruptly pulled away from her, wanting more than he gave her. Wanting everything. She didn’t care about anything anymore. That kiss alone had made her toes curl in a way she’d never known. Had cured her of any misgivings she might have had about him.

What else could he do to her?

His voice was husky with barely restrained hunger, but his expressive eyebrows furrowed. “Why would you say those things? Have I given you any indication that I’m not attracted to you?”

“Well, n-no,” she said breathlessly, glancing at his throat and the collar of his shirt as though she would find her strength there. She didn’t. “It’s just that you’re gorgeous and I’m—”

He tugged sharply on her hair, a punishing censure that did nothing to quell the rising tide of desire within her, nor the growing wetness between her thighs. “Don’t you dare finish that statement.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek in hesitation.

“If other men haven’t seen how beautiful you are, they’re imbeciles.” He paused, then dropped the hand on her back further down until it cupped her ass. “And I absolutely refuse to pay for the sins of other men.”

Astrid’s face warmed. Her heart jumped around in her chest. Her stomach felt like it had a million tiny butterflies swarming around. No man had ever actually called her beautiful, not even the two long-term boyfriends she’d had… but perhaps that was due to immaturity on their part more than it was anything else.

She giggled lightly. “I’m just saying you could do better than me.”

“I would resoundingly disagree with you.” He nipped lightly at her bottom lip. “As to the other questions: I do not sleep with girls, I sleep with women. I have always been a more dominant person and will continue to be. My real life tends to be run for me, you see, so I like to regain a little control in whatever areas I can. And lastly, I have had women across the world for nights like this, but not as
“Oh,” she mumbled.

A soft laugh made his chest vibrate. “However, much more importantly, you think I’m gorgeous?”

Astrid rolled her eyes and pushed at his chest, hard enough that he let go of her. “Can we just forget I said that? Any of that? Just forget about it all?”

He followed as she started walking, asserting himself with his hand on her hip again. “Why would I want to forget about that? I enjoy hearing I’m attractive just as much as the next person.”

“Haven’t you looked in the mirror recently?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Have you?”

Astrid froze and looked across at him. “Touché.”

He leaned in and kissed her, short and sweet and for not nearly long enough, but he still tasted like the wine and tangy passion fruit from dessert… and definite, unbridled sexual need. She reached for the lapels on his sedately-printed Hawaiian shirt, but stopped when his hands covered hers and pulled them away. As elegant as his hands were, they were solid and demanding, masculine and large. Big enough to hold her abundant curves, absolutely strong enough to choose where he wanted them to be.

With a slight yank toward him, she stumbled forward on her feet, nearly collapsing against his chest. It seemed to be exactly what he planned, though, when his arms enveloped her and he moved to kiss her again.

However, his carefully orchestrated move was all for naught when a big fat raindrop splashed on her nose, startling her so thoroughly that she ducked her head and jumped a few inches away from him. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have left his secure embrace for anything.

They both looked skyward at the same time, into the dark starless night. With no other warning, the sky opened and dropped a sheet of water on their heads. Then another. And another.

As with most Hawaiian rain, she’d learned over the past week, there was no point in running for cover. If it was raining, they were going to get wet, so it was better to just enjoy it. Fortunately, it was a tepid rain—not too cold, but not warm either—so it was more than bearable. Even at night.

Especially when pressed up against a hot body.

She blinked against the deluge and moved her attention to him, finding a serene smile on his features. Rainwater poured over the slopes and sharp angles of his face, dripping off the end of his nose and eyelashes. He laughed with her and leaned in, sliding his lips across her wet forehead. Astrid slithered from his arms and pulled him along the road toward the line of condos that had come into sight a few minutes before he’d interrupted her troublesome thoughts.

When they finally reached cover, they were both laughing hysterically from slipping and sliding along the vast grassy knoll they’d crossed to reach the overhang of the nearest condo building. For once, she didn’t feel so awkward, because even as steady on his feet as he seemed to be, he had managed to turn into some sort of newborn giraffe all while trying to keep her upright. Somehow, it lowered the tension in her shoulders and unwound her stomach. This man, as intense as he was and serious about what he wanted, still had a lightness about him. True good humor that, despite all her misgivings about his interest in her, made him all the sexier.
She showed him to the third building and down a flight of stairs to the lower ground level where her condo shared an open-aired hallway with one other door. Fortunately, it didn’t appear that her neighbors were in, or the place wasn’t rented for the night; they certainly wouldn’t be interrupted by whatever happened inside her own condo, even though the master bedroom shared no common walls with the opposite unit.

Astrid kicked her sandals off outside the front door, as was customary on the island, and he followed suit by toeing off his boat shoes. She finally looked at him—at all of him—noting how his wet clothes stuck to his muscular frame. Before she could stop herself, her tongue traced the lines of her mouth, wetting her lips, though they were already drenched with rainwater.

He stared back at her expectantly, the thrilling bubble around them ever changing, growing heavier and poignant and pregnant with lust. Yet, he kept his hands to himself and nodded at the door before glancing back to capture her interested gaze.

“Are you planning to open the door sometime tonight?” he asked.

She swallowed and felt heat on her face again. As soon as she turned around, he pressed the length of his body along her back, hands clutching the wealth of her hips and the sodden clothes covering them. A moan, low and needy, tickled her ear along with light puffs of air. Stubble scratched the side of her face as he nudged his nose against her cheek, silently communicating that he wanted her to turn her head just so. She exposed her neck, resting back against him, allowing him to support her as his arms snaked further around her body, holding fast.

His questing hands stopped, flat on her abdomen, drifting lower, the heel of his palm massaging and digging down into her skin until he cupped her sex through her dress. She opened her mouth on a gasp, sagging into him, wishing he’d continue his movements, that he’d press harder, make the ache there go away.

Instead, his insistent lips fused with the flesh high on her jaw, just under her ear, nibbling a tiny path down her neck to the slope of her shoulder, taking care to skip over the painful injury left behind by her meeting with the hiking trail earlier.

His voice rumbled in his chest, transferring to her body, eliciting a shiver deep in her core. He squeezed her mound again, palm moving in a tempting circle. “Open the door, Brontë.”

“How?” she asked, her eyes snapping open, not realizing she’d closed them while relishing in his tease.

“The door,” he growled. “Unless you want me to take you right here.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Astrid giggled and moved forward to reach the automated lock, expecting him to let her go.

He didn’t.

Instead, he moved with her, refusing to relinquish the physical connection between them. Her wet fingers slipped a few times on the number pad, but eventually, the automated lock clicked open and she burst through the door with him hot on her trail.

He attempted to push her back against the closed door. She had enough distance, though, to shimmy out of his grasp and turn to face him. He frowned. “I thought you wanted to submit?”

“I do,” she said softly, nodding down to his feet where the water continued to drip off him into a tiny puddle. “But not at the expense of the damage deposit I won’t get back because of a water-damaged...
hardwood floor. I am, after all, a humble teacher and will need the deposit returned.”

“Of course,” he added, almost sheepishly, if she weren’t mistaken. It was a change in his demeanor, however slight, since she’d met him. While she didn’t think he was covering up anything or that all this machismo was an act, it was, for some reason, nice to catch another glimmer of something more underneath the all-consuming tsunami of his intensity.

The master bedroom lay off the entrance atrium and through it was the bathroom and laundry closet. He followed her through the room, stopping to consider the neatly-made bed of white linens. When she entered the bathroom and looked back at him, his hands were halfway down the buttons on his shirt, peeling the wet fabric off his muscles with a light sucking sound in the quiet room.

“You don’t mind if we wreck the bed, do you?” he asked.

Her face warmed. “Within reason, please.”

His laughter did funny things to her body.

“I do have to get up in the morning and clean up whatever we do tonight,” she added.

“We’re doing everything tonight.”

She giggled. “I think that’s physically impossible.”

“Improbable, but not impossible,” he said, stepping over to her, stopping in the bathroom doorway. Glancing around the large space, the huge bathtub, large open rainfall shower and substantial vanity, he seemed pleased with his findings. “Or we could spend all night in here. Have a bath. Or a shower. Both? Together, of course.”

“Why don’t you stop talking?”

That moved his attention back to her. “I’ll not have any more of that cheek tonight. I’m in charge now.”

Astrid’s skin prickled at his words, at his tone. At the authority in them. Yes. This was exactly what she wanted.

He balled the shirt in his hands and tossed it on the tiled bathroom floor while staring back at her, his eyes penetrating her deep down, with the same intoxicating power that had enticed her all night. His expression wasn’t threatening or questioning, simply a wordless statement of what he thought about her, looking at her, along with the added promise of what they were about to do. Even though he’d said it before in so many ways, she had absolutely no doubt in her mind about his attraction to her.

There was a strange meaningfulness in them, those handsome sea-green eyes which were now hooded with lust and the liberal application of alcohol from dinner, that took her breath away. She might have been nothing more than a one-night stand, but he made her feel like more. Somehow.

Like she was the only thing in the world that mattered. Like she was special, and all those other times he’d alluded to doing this were nothing.

She shivered again from the rain and the wolfish, predatory smirk spreading his lips. Every cell in her body wanted to feel his touch, to forget about talking and move onto what she really wanted, and yet she still found the inexplicable need to ramble at him, her awkwardness again making itself known. Completely negating her previous attempt to get him to stop talking about his ideas for the night—
and actually do them.

“It’s, uh, a good thing I have a dryer,” she said, pointing to his discarded shirt. “Or you’d be going back in the morning with damp clothes. Nothing dries in this humidity.”

He laughed, coming toward her, saving her from herself. He pressed against her until she had no option but to take a step back or fall. She stepped, then stepped again as he pushed forward, mischievously nibbling at her lips each time he filled the space in front of her, leading the dance to somewhere in the marble bathroom.

A high squeak jumped from her throat and reverberated off all the reflective surfaces in the bathroom when her rear hit the sink vanity. The sound was loud enough on its own, but with all the stone and tile, she was sure anyone passing by had to have heard it travel through the open windows in the bedroom.

That was something else particular to Hawaii—the lack of air conditioning and the use of louvered windows and screened porch doors left open to the cool sea breezes twenty-four seven. She wondered if she should close them off to maintain some privacy, but quickly forgot about it when her lover’s hands smoothed down her arms, to her thighs, gathering the dress in his fists.

The wet cotton clung to her, slurping up her legs until he had the entire skirt in his hands and drew it up over her head with one long tug. It quickly joined his shirt, exposing her damp skin to the cool air, her nipples puckering almost painfully against her unyielding satin bra. As it was, the thing had been more than uncomfortable all night without the straps holding it in place, but she’d never felt more constricted than at that moment, struggling to breathe. She wanted it off, to fill her lungs with air and relieve her tight, sensitive breasts from such torture.

He licked his lips and leaned forward, overwhelming her mouth with his. She moaned against him, parting her lips just enough that he slipped inside, their tongues frantically colliding with each other. He tasted good, almost too good, and she decided right then and there she never, ever wanted to come up for air again when he kissed her.

An invisible frown briefly dampened the sparking tingles in her body. Well, at least not come up for air for the night. That’s all they had. Tonight.

Right?

Somehow, she’d have to find a way to forget this and be content in the mediocre when she returned to real life. She already knew that was going to be impossible.

His deft fingers—finally, blessedly—unclasped her bra, his teeth gently biting her lower lip as he shifted his attention. Resting his forehead against hers so that they were nose-to-nose, he looked at her before flicking his gaze south. She watched him, content to observe the way his dark eyelashes fanned out on his cheeks each time he blinked, utterly arrested in the intimacy of the moment.

There had been men in her past. Not many, but enough. Some of them had been good in bed. At least, she thought they’d been good. Most of the time, they gave her an orgasm. She knew now how wrong she was about her past experiences. So horribly wrong. Not once could she remember ever feeling like this. Like her skin could barely hold her together, like she was about to be completely consumed by the fire raging inside her belly… and yet, oddly, cherished.

He unwrapped her breasts and tossed the offending garment aside, wasting no time palming their considerable weight in each of his masculine hands.
“These are especially lovely,” he murmured against her lips, then scraped the side of her neck with his teeth, laying his tongue in a trail further down her chest that ended with his teeth tugging at her left nipple.

She keened into the hollow room. Yes, people were going to hear her tonight. She didn’t much care, especially when he moved and drew the other nipple into his mouth. Then sucked. Hard.

*Fuuuuuuuck.* She could get used to this. To him.

Her fingers curled around the slight overhang of the cold marble vanity he had her pressed against, but it wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t him. She *had* to touch him. Now. Had to feel the hardness of his body, of his chest, of his erection. God, she didn’t want to wake up in the morning without having had the opportunity to touch every part of him. So that weeks from now, her hands would remember him. Remember this night. Remember how he felt while she made herself come with her own hands.

He stepped back when she laid her hand against the planes of his chest, and then looked down at her with a quirked brow. Without a word, his hand entwined with hers, pushing it down until they settled over the steel length of his cock. He twitched beneath her fingers. She felt his rumbly groan-sigh deep in her own sex.

Was it possible to come from auditory stimulation? She certainly never had experienced it, but she was sure he could do it with the smooth timbre of his lilting voice and the other delicious sounds coming from his mouth.

Astrid lifted her eyes from where they’d focused on his groin and the leisurely stroking and exploring she’d begun. The opposite sea-green gaze met hers, alight with new hunger. He looked ravenous.

She bit her swollen lip, misjudging how sensitive it had become from his drugging kisses. His smirk was instantaneous when an anguished whine tumbled from her mouth. He set a large palm against her cheek, drawing a thumb across her puffy lip, soothing the fiery throb she’d caused herself.

“I can’t wait to watch you come around me,” he said, dipping again to kiss her.

She ignored the slight pain, instead focusing on the pleasing icy hot tingles translating themselves through her body into a language her clit understood. The hand on her cheek dropped to her throat, squeezing, then slipped down her stomach and dove straight into her cotton underwear.

Her legs spread open, nearly of their own volition, like some wanton hussy. She felt like one, certainly. She didn’t care. *Damn.* Not if he kept doing that thing with his thumb and the rough circles around her sensitized clit.

She was lost. Sent sailing on a tidal wave of sensation she had not known possible. Was it legal for a man to be this good with only a few fingers and such a sinful mouth? Because it didn’t feel like this was normal or right. Or maybe other guys were wrong. Woefully unskilled. Maybe they should be punished for not knowing what to do to a woman’s body. To her body.

How did he know what she wanted after only a few hours? How could he read her signals so well?

“Take the wallet from my pocket,” he panted against her mouth. His long fingers unfurled against her sex, skimming along her slit, teasing her opening. She could barely think, much less move to do his bidding. The little spring inside her continued to tighten, further and further, while her hips rocked in tandem with him, searching for her release.

Desperate for it.
She was close, so close. Just… a little bit… more…

Then it all stopped, like a roller coaster stopping right before the big drop.

That sublimely dexterous hand froze, the tips of two long fingers stilling just as they pressed into her.
“Did you hear me?”

Her eyes snapped open. “Huh?”

“My wallet, in my pocket,” he said. “Take it out. Now.”

Astrid quivered at the command. He did authoritative so well. Almost too well. She reached around him, teasing her fingers along the inside waist of his trousers. The thin wallet in the back pocket came out easily, though the expensive leather was also damp from the rain.

She held it between them. He grinned. “Take a condom out.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.” She laughed at the high tone of her voice. She sounded giddy. Love drunk.

His response to her outburst was only to pinch her clit. Hard. A rocket of bright white bliss masquerading as sweet agony exploded in her body. She nearly convulsed right off the vanity, but he held her in place, doing it again. Only this time, she was prepared. Somewhat.

“Did I say you could speak?”

“N-no,” she wheezed. Then she clamped her lips shut, realizing she’d spoken. Did he want her to answer him? Or no? While she knew it was all play, she still wanted to do it right, even though they’d both agreed to the informality of this over dessert.

Flipping open the wallet, she found three foil-wrapped condoms and withdrew one. Carefully, she set the wallet aside and looked back at him for further direction.

“I don’t have to tell you where it goes, do I?” he mused, this time allowing his lips to curl up in a naughty smirk.

“No, sir.”

He hummed, pleased.

“Do you like that?” she asked. His answer was as plain as day on his face—and in the way he ground against her. “Being called ‘sir’?”

“What do you think?”

Astrid giggled and pawed at the fly of his trousers, finding the zipper and lowering it easily. “I like ‘sir’ better than Wadsworth.”

He hissed through clenched teeth when she stuck one hand down his boxers to cup the velvet-cloaked steel length straining within them. “What about my own name?”

She used her other hand to pull both trousers and underwear down far enough to free him. Glancing down at what stood between them—quite proudly and at full attention—she couldn’t stop her tongue from wetting her lips. Even his cock was perfect. It almost wasn’t fair.

“I think I’d still prefer to address you as ‘sir’,,” she admitted, glancing at his face. She didn’t want to
get into real names. Not now. The not knowing made this more illicit. Made this whole thing hotter.

He seemed more than content with her answer, but otherwise had reached the end of his patience with her playful hands. He hauled her away from the vanity, fingers clenching her hips, manipulating her until she turned around to face the mirror. She immediately noted the faint red marks from his teeth covering her skin.

“Remove your knickers for me,” he said, plucking the condom from her fingers. He tore it open with his teeth; she watched in rapt attention as he easily rolled the latex down his considerable length. Then, when he finally met her gaze in the mirror, he pumped his fist up and down his cock. Twice. Goodness. What was it about a man pleasuring himself that was such a turn on? “Did I stutter?”

“Oh, n-no!” She hooked her fingers on the sides of her underwear and quickly pushed them down her legs until they fell the rest of the way to the floor.


She followed his directions to a T, the position offering her the opportunity to get a good, close look at her face. Looking at herself, though—really looking—gave her a considerable moment of pause. She seemed… different. Pupils blown wide. Cheeks rosy. Eyelids half closed with lust. Eyes shimmering silver instead of lifeless gray. Lips puffy and well kissed. Messy, wet hair falling over a shoulder. Everything about her was wanton and wild and… and… beautiful.

A funny niggling took root in her heart, exploding to the rest of her body, until she felt like one big blush. She’d never felt like this. Felt beautiful. But it wasn’t all in the way she looked; she knew, academically, it probably had to do with him, too. His wanting her, knowing that she had made him hard, knowing that he could barely control himself… it all reinforced the new sensations bubbling up inside of her.

How was it even possible?

His hands were in her hair again, gathering it all together to push over one shoulder. He stood back, caressing her with his eyes, then with his fingers. They raked over her shoulders into the slope of her back, and back up around her ass. An electric tremor started high in her shoulders and quaked down her body, chasing his movements, bottoming out around her clit. She wiggled her rear, brushing his cock, but he stepped away, just out of reach.

“How do you see what I see, darling?” he asked lovingly, his voice low and dangerous. He moved behind her, fingers plunging deep into her slit, pumping slowly.

Her legs almost gave out when he found her clit again. She cried out, shutting her eyes to the renewed onslaught. When she opened them again, she realized he was still waiting for an answer, watching her intently in the mirror. But she didn’t want to put words into his mouth. “What do you see, sir?”

He haughtily flicked his eyes down her body again, then looked at her with a pleased, toothy grin. “A fucking goddess.”

She bit back the sudden sob that threatened to tear from her throat. Why his words affected her so, she didn’t know. She didn’t understand. She wasn’t sad, but it nearly felt like a release of some kind. An orgasm of another sort, perhaps? Only this time, she threw off all the negative things she’d thought about herself tonight, leaving her utterly exposed to him. She was all here, all in. And she needed him to fuck her, now. To fill her up with something else. Or, at the very least, take away the
gapning ache left from the rawness of the moment.

“Please,” she whimpered. “I need to feel you.”

He smoothed a hand over the globe of her ass, then lightly swatted the taut skin. Not enough to hurt, but enough to sting. “Don’t you feel me here?”

She mewled and shifted on her feet, wishing they were closer so she could squeeze her thighs together and take away some of the crazy unfulfilled itch away. “I need to feel your cock.”

Teasing, he ground his hips forward, nestling his erection between her slit and cheeks. He had remarkable control, she’d give him that. Most men wouldn’t have held out this long. Most men would have come already.

“There?”

“Inside me,” she corrected, now frustrated. Why wouldn’t he just—

“There you go,” he said.

She felt him, finally, his tip pressing against her lips. A foot kicked between her legs, spreading them wider, allowing him to push forward, sheathing himself in one tortuously long thrust. A low growl erupted from him as he steadied himself with his hands on her hips.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he murmured.

“I-isn’t that what they all say, sir?”

The twitch of his cock inside her forced an uncomfortable giggle-moan from her mouth. He needed to move. She needed him to put her out of her misery. Fortunately, he seemed to understand and slowly withdrew.

“This time it’s true.”

The long hiss of air coming from his pursed lips as he reseated himself was the last thing she remembered hearing, replaced as it was with the sound of the thumping pulse in her ears and then concentrating on the feel of him each time he drove into her. He gradually increased in speed and depth, clawing at her back, at her hips, pumping with abandon—and she was content to let him do it. Fuck, was she. She loved participating, too, but this… letting him do what he would. She’d never experienced anything like it. Well, experienced anything close to it. A few had certainly tried on her, to mixed reviews.

But this man… this man.

How was she ever going to move on after this? Fuck, never mind that. How was she going to move after he was through with her? The muscles in her body were already screaming from overuse.

Astrid cried out, biting her forearm at a particularly harsh thrust that hit her cervix and stayed there. He bent over her, his front to her back, encircling her in his arms, a hand on her throat as he dragged her into a semi-standing position. It changed the angle of his thrust, hitting her exactly where she needed it. The glorious fingers on the other hand dropped to her clit, and pressed, circling the bundle of nerves with measured strokes.

The scream that came from her a short time later wasn’t a word, just a guttural sound ripping from
her throat as she shattered around him. He was strong—so, so strong—holding her there, steady against him as she burst over and over like a million tiny fireworks in an epic Fourth of July finale. Except they didn’t stop burning, they continued to smolder, burning hotter and hotter. Her lungs couldn’t find enough air, her heart stuttered in her chest, but then continued its constant hammering. Every inch of her body felt like a live wire.

“Open your eyes, beautiful,” he commanded, close to her ear. “I want you to watch me come. So you can see what you did to me.”

She snapped her eyelids open, meeting his steely, mercurial gaze. Long gone were the bright sea-green ones she’d fallen for all night. His brow knitted in concentration as he hurtled toward his own release. A second later he stilled—just a fraction of a second—then jerked inside her, his mouth opening on a throaty, rasping roar.

They collapsed against the vanity, struggling for breath with her breasts smashed against the cold marble and her back covered in hot, hard man. It was an amazing juxtaposition. She never wanted to leave the position, this feeling of contentment, the feeling of absolute safety. Of protection.

But she knew it wouldn’t last. Couldn’t last. They belonged to opposite sides of the world, to radically different lives. Everything would look very different in the morning light, on her trip back home to the mainland.

His lips brushing lightly, lovingly, behind her ear made her sigh. She felt his grin against her skin. “How about that shower now?”

“Don’t you need to recover a little?”

He laughed, standing up and slipping from her to dispose of the condom. “Doesn’t mean I can’t use the opportunity to show your pussy a little more appreciation with my mouth.”

“What if I need more time to recover?” she asked, righting herself and looking at him. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this unselfconscious. “I haven’t had the training for a marathon.”

His eyes were twinkling. “I guarantee you I’ll do all the work, darling.”

Astrid giggled. My god, he was horrible and amazing all at once. “Will you at least let me put the clothes in to dry, first?”

“I’ll do it,” he said. “You get in the shower.”

And that’s what she did. It felt strangely good to obey him. To let him make the decisions. Doing so quieted her mind, but only for a few minutes.

As the hot shower spray began beating down on her body, she closed her eyes and thought more about what had happened. How she didn’t want to say goodbye to him in the morning. But, she figured, maybe that was the best thing to do. There was no way in the world two people could keep up to this level without it either blowing up in their face or it dying a quick death.

Could they?

No.

So, she decided right then, that she would forget about anything else and just enjoy the night like the twenty-something she was. Because she was sure it was all downhill from here.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Please make sure you read Part III before this—they were posted within minutes of each other!

Thank you all!

Don't forget that this story will continue in The Swan!

Epilogue

Tom scooted out from under the bedcovers as carefully as possible so as not to wake up the sleeping form beside him. The wooden floor beneath him let out a soft groan as he applied his weight to it, stilling him in the quiet periwinkle-tinted morning. She mumbled something unintelligible in her sleep and rolled over onto her back before falling right back into a deep sleep, her chest rising and falling steadily.

He smiled to himself, taking a moment longer to look over her supine form, her gorgeous breasts bared to him, the soft skin now peppered with a few love bites, the luxurious waves of her hair spread across the pillow. Every cell of his body told him to climb right back into the bed and snuggle up beside her, to enjoy her until the last possible moment she had to slip from his arms to return to her real life.

After last night, he couldn’t just let her go like he had all the others. He didn’t know why, exactly. Was it her personality, or her ability to talk to him about anything, or the earth shattering fucking? He just knew she wasn’t anything like the others. He’d never felt like he had last night. Powerful, in control, allowed to explore the myriad ways he typically held back from one-night stands because he didn’t want to become one of “those” celebrities with sordid stories.

And she wasn’t like the other women at all, not with the way she’d surrendered to him so sweetly or the way she made his body—all of him—weak. She was the whole bloody package. She was the woman he’d always wanted. The woman he’d waited his whole life for.

Even so, he knew this was impossible. Not only because she was leaving in a few hours, but also because long distance relationships never worked. Least of all long distance relationships in different countries, where one of them was constantly on the move with a random schedule. Or living a life in the public eye. How could he forget about that?

He tore his gaze away from her and dressed quietly, inching carefully out of the bedroom. He had to leave, now, if he was going to do it with any bit of dignity. Still, he noticed a pad of paper and a pen beside the landline telephone. As if on autopilot, he picked up the pen and scribbled a quick note. Before he knew it, his name—his real name—and mobile number were on it as well.

Then he ripped off the piece of paper and placed it in the middle of the glass dining room table, in clear view. Unmissable for anyone leaving the master bedroom. With a heavy sigh, he slowly buttoned up his shirt and reread the letter, debating.
Brontë—

*Thank you for sharing a marvelous night with me. While we were clear about the parameters, I am leaving a way to contact me should you reconsider.*

—Wadsworth (aka Tom) +44 720 555 4567

Leave it? Not to leave it? That was the question. He didn’t even know her real name. He might never. Did he really want to take the chance that she might not reciprocate how he felt after last night or change her mind to contact him?

He huffed. This was ridiculous. He never felt indecision about anything like this. And yet, here he was. With a nod of his head, he placed the paper back on the table and quickly moved to the front door before he could change his mind again. He shut the door behind him softly, making his way for the road back to the hotel.

She’d call him. She had to. He hadn’t imagined what they’d shared. That thought, though, was only a weak balm to the situation.

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