

[NOTE: This is kind of an AU, as well as a deleted scene, because the post-auction conversation and dancing don't quite play out this way in Maria and Peter's book—but I thought you might enjoy the glimpse at my original *All the Feels* draft anyway.]

With Alex's departure, the colors in the ballroom suddenly seemed muted, the sparkle dulled. But she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, and the other people at her table were involved for the moment in a conversation of their own—something about deep-fried butter, oddly enough—so Lauren took her time with the meal.

She was just finishing the last bite of her cherry-swirl cheesecake when the first stranger approached the table.

"Excuse me," she heard, and glanced over her shoulder to find an older couple.

The woman's silver hair had been arranged into a pile of soft curls atop her head, and the sparkling comb tucked into the strands matched her expensive-looking necklace and bracelet. His tux fit immaculately, as did her black, knee-length cocktail gown.

It didn't matter. It really didn't.

But everything they wore...she couldn't help wondering how much it had cost. How many years of her ER salary were encompassed in only two outfits.

The thought wasn't disturbing, exactly. Just...disorienting.

"We saw what happened earlier." The woman smiled at Lauren, her lipstick perfect. "On the red carpet. You were so brave."

Oh, jeez.

Lauren's face heated, and she shifted in her chair. "Thank you. But I'm afraid it wasn't bravery. Just instincts."

The other woman patted her shoulder. "Don't be so modest. You must have been terrified. What exactly happened out there, anyway?"

Being the center of attention rarely meant good things for Lauren. Moreover, she didn't know these people, didn't know their motives, and didn't know what they'd do with any information she gave them.

She refused to offer the press any further ammunition against Alex.

"Ummm..." Her neck was beginning to hurt from being twisted around, but she didn't want to stand and encourage further engagement, and she also couldn't turn back to her cheesecake without being unacceptably rude. "I'm not sure what you saw, but a man came rushing at Mr. Woodroe and hit me instead. Once we were on the ground, security came to take the man away. That's about it."

There. A perfectly true, perfectly un-titillating account of events.

"Oh, no, my dear." The man laughed. "We won't let you wriggle off the hook that easily. You have to tell us all the details."

Then, suddenly, there were four people around her chair. No, six. With others looking her way and headed in her direction. Even though they were still in the VIP section. Which meant, evidently, that these gossip hounds were *other* VIPs.

"I, uh—" Shit. She needed to find Alex, or Desiree, or *someone* who could tell her what she should and shouldn't say in this situation. "I'm not sure—"

At the unexpected feel of a leg against her own, she jumped.

"Oh, such a goddamn shame." Carah Brown's chair was now magically abutting Lauren's, and the actor draped a toned arm proprietarily around her tablemate's shoulders. "My friend here promised me some one-on-one time tonight, and to echo a wise man, I won't let her wriggle off the hook that fucking easily. I'm so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Russo, but she's mine for the next hour or so. Maybe longer."

She eyed the crowd surrounding Lauren. “*Much* longer.”

Her wide smile was steely and unwavering, and she simply stared at the older couple until they reluctantly left. The stragglers, she drove off by coughing dramatically into her elbow and complaining that her test results for “the fucking bubonic plague, can you *imagine?*” hadn’t come back quite yet.

Once everyone was gone, she lowered her arm. “Sorry it took me so long to rescue you. I got too wrapped up in telling Maria and Peter about my latest food-reaction video. Deep-fried butter is delicious as fuck, by the way.”

Upon hearing their names, the two cast members stood and moved to Lauren’s other side, bringing their drink glasses with them.

“I’m Maria Ivarsson,” the blonde said, her accent slight but noticeable, and offered her hand. “I work with Alex.”

Lauren scrambled to her feet for the handshake, but it didn’t help much. Maria was almost as round as Lauren, but tall. *Very* tall. Pretty much how Lauren had pictured a Valkyrie, which was only appropriate. Maria was a Swede, if Lauren remembered correctly, and a novice television actor when filming for *Gods of the Gates* began.

Beside her, Peter Reedton was somehow even taller and built along generous lines too.

Lauren had never felt more like a hobbit in her life.

Smiling at her, he claimed his own handshake. “I’m Peter. Lovely to meet you, Lauren. We’ve heard so much about you from Alex.”

She shouldn’t say it, but—“I’m certain you have. I hope your data plan is very generous.”

All three actors laughed, and Maria and Peter settled themselves in the chairs to Lauren’s immediate right, with Carah on the left.

“There,” Carah said with satisfaction. “Your shield is complete. Alex won’t need to lose his shit. Again.”

“Thank you.” Lauren hoped her genuine gratitude was obvious to Alex’s castmates. “I wasn’t sure what to say, and I didn’t want to cause more problems for him.”

Collectively, they all waved that off.

“You’re not causing Alex problems.” Maria’s words were a confident declaration. “From what I’ve heard and what I saw today, you’re singlehandedly defending the man from everyone who might harm him.”

Peter let out a slow breath. “Including Alex.”

“I don’t…” Lauren lifted her glass and gulped down some water, then tried again. “I don’t think that’s accurate.”

They ignored the protest and continued to beam genially at her.

“I just realized I never introduced myself. What a dipshit.” Carah shook her head, then Lauren’s hand. “Anyway, I’m Carah Brown, and I’m the unofficial chair of our cast welcoming committee. Please expect a fruit basket for what you did on that red carpet. I still can’t believe that fucker tried to fucking *tackle* Alex.”

“I still can’t believe you managed to land on top of the asshole.” Maria tilted her head, regarding Lauren thoughtfully. “It was impressive. Do you have a background in wrestling?”

Lauren shook her head.

“No? Well, those were some damn good instincts, then.” Maria turned to Peter. “I told you I joined a Stockholm wrestling club for a while, right?”

He playfully flicked her arm. “You didn’t have to tell me. I experienced your wrestling prowess on set, multiple times. You almost broke my arm in the second season, you vicious

bitch. Remember? We were fighting over a fish?”

“Don’t worry, Lauren,” Carah said. “Everyone on our cast is a bitch of some sort. By near-unanimous acclamation, Maria has been deemed a vicious bitch, Ian a little bitch, and Alex a gossipy bitch.”

Lauren didn’t know about Maria, but the other two seemed accurate enough.

“I’d apologize for almost breaking your arm, Peter.” Mouth curved with amusement, Maria took a calm sip of her wine. “But if I remember correctly, you deserved it.”

He extended his arm and regarded it mournfully. “There you have it, Lauren. My poor arm was just another victim of unprovoked, unapologetic Swedish aggression. I’m sure the Norwegians can sympathize.”

Maria ignored that. “Anyway, back on topic. Thank you for protecting Alex, Lauren. He may be the cast’s official gossipy bitch, but we love him. He’s our friend, and he’s a good person, and we’re grateful he has you in his corner.”

Carah and Peter murmured in agreement, their sincerity evident, and Lauren almost ached with a pride she had no right to feel. Pride in Alex and the community he’d formed around himself on his show. The respect he’d evidently earned. The fondness his colleagues had for him.

They saw him clearly and loved him anyway, even after seven years of working together. That said a lot about Alex, all of it good.

Across the room, the man in question was holding court, the center of a circle of admirers. He laughed and gestured and held everyone’s attention with such ease, she had to wonder whether he’d been born with that charm or cultivated it over the years.

His head turned abruptly, and his sharp gaze met hers.

In the next moment, the opening notes of a sweet, slow song filtered through the crowded

room. A woman in a beautiful tulle-skirted dress laid a hand on his arm, but he didn't turn toward her. Didn't look away from Lauren.

Someone tapped Lauren's shoulder, and she started.

Peter. Peter was standing beside her chair now, his elbow extended in invitation. "Care to dance, Ms. Clegg?"

His voice was warm and kind, and when Lauren instinctively glanced toward Maria for confirmation—that it wasn't a joke, that it was okay to accept his invitation—the other woman nodded. Her encouraging smile plumped her smooth cheeks and crinkled her warm brown eyes.

"Peter's a good dancer," she told Lauren. "You should say yes before all the other women in the room claim their turn. If you don't snag him now, you might not see him for the rest of the night."

His lips quirked as he regarded Maria. "I'll always save the last dance for you. You know that."

"I know," she said softly.

Then Peter claimed Lauren's arm, escorted her across the room, and swept her capably onto the dance floor there. Where, as she discovered, Alex was also dancing.

The woman in the tulle skirt was almost as tall as he was. Graceful. Lovely, her laughter low and musical. To speak into her ear, he only had to bend his neck slightly.

Whatever he said, her face lit to a brightness almost painful to witness. And Lauren was going to stop looking and pay attention to her own dance partner, she really was, but—

Alex glanced away from the woman, appearing to scan the room. Then his penetrating stare lit on Lauren and Peter, only five feet away from him. He gave them a once-over, apparently noting her right hand clasped in Peter's, her left on his lower shoulder.

His sudden scowl was ferocious enough to blister her flesh.

She couldn't help a small gasp, because—

Well, because *what in the world* was his problem? Was she supposed to sit in a corner the entire time he danced? Was that what he expected from her? Was that what he *wanted*?

If so, screw him. While she had the opportunity, she was dancing. And it didn't detract from her professionalism at all. In fact, she had a better view of her charge here than she would have had at their table, so *ha*.

“What's the matter?” Peter was evidently speaking to her, and she tore her gaze from Alex and glanced up at her dance partner. *Way* up, to the point where her neck twinged. “Are you in pain, or—oh. I see.”

He let go of her hand and waved enthusiastically at Alex, his grin wide and edged with a wickedness she didn't entirely understand.

“Hey, Woodroe!” he called out, loud enough to be heard over the music. “Great speech, man. And thanks for lending me your date!”

She got up on tiptoe, and tugged Peter's head lower.

“I'm not his date,” she whispered in his ear. “I'm also not a possession to be lent.”

He gave a little hum, his cheek brushing against hers. “You're entirely right. I apologize.”

Funny. He didn't *sound* sorry.

When he lifted his head, she couldn't resist. She looked Alex's way again, and—

Holy crap. His glare could incinerate several city blocks in a single sweep.

Whatever. If he thought she wasn't doing her job properly, he could complain to Ron and get her fired, and she could return to her previously planned vacation, and that would be fine by her. Just fine.

Deliberately meeting his narrow-eyed glower, she tipped up her chin in defiance, smiled, and let Peter sweep her into turn after turn, until she was dizzy and laughing and entirely unconcerned that Alex was angry at her for some mysterious reason.

She didn't care. She *didn't*.

Much.