

POST CARD



Copenhagen Cozenage
KRISTEN JOY WILKS

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Cozenage

Kristen Joy Wilks

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Dedication

In Memory of Shamu

You were an adorable puffball who ended up
outweighing me.

Although you dragged us into the pond, river, lake,
and creek, you thoroughly won our hearts, despite all
the hair and slobber. May God watch over you and
provide enough squirrels and puddles and shady
patches of ice for it to truly be Heaven.

1

The Dog Guy

I yanked my carry-on toward baggage, trying not to look like the girly-clothes-neophyte that I really was. Twenty-five years of being me had soundly proven one thing. The girl with the giant collection of classic sci-fi T-shirts never ever gets the guy. This was a rare opportunity. I refused to waste it by being myself.

And so, like Cinderella sneaking into the ball, I had donned a disguise and stepped on the plane. A white linen suit began the deception, followed by petal-pink heels. A mother-of-pearl hair clip restrained my long, mostly brown hair into a French twisty thing I'd constructed with the aid of an online tutorial. I also carried an honest-to-goodness purse. The purse was pink. Hey, if I was going over to the dark side, I might as well go all the way.

Perhaps it seems irresponsible to snatch up the first international plane ticket that comes in the mail and rush away for a week of castle ogling and pastry consumption on foreign soil. But I'd done so, nonetheless. Ahem, free plane ticket! And it had come from my long-lost grandmother, not some creepy guy with a pencil moustache. Besides, I know God has plans and He is good and all that, but just the tiniest glimpse into my past would not overly tax Him. How on earth could I guess at what I would become, if I had

no idea where I'd come from?

Right before my plane left, I'd won the bonus prize. An e-mail had come from Freja, my Danish cousin, wanting to meet for brunch. I had family in Denmark, living family. There was no way I would miss the chance to meet Freja.

I clicked to a stop beside the baggage carousel, watching for the suitcase that matched my pumps. A monstrous bark startled me from my luggage musings. I teetered around for a look.

A giant Newfoundland dog pressed its nose against an equally gargantuan crate over by the luggage dollies. The animal had shaggy black fur, floppy ears, and a massive head with sagging jowls. A blond guy knelt in front of the beast, attempting to sooth it with a small baggy of sausage treats. The treats didn't last long. As the barking commenced again the guy looked up and smiled.

It must have been the dress. I have never had such a smile directed my way. He had a dimple, a real live dimple in his cheek, artfully mussed blond hair, and blue eyes that seemed to sparkle. I tripped over my insufferable heels. He turned away and attempted to cover up a laugh with a falsified fit of coughing.

I'd spent two whole minutes in his presence as a gorgeous-heel-wearing-girl, and already my cover was blown.

It was Bret's fault, really. Being raised by a bachelor had its distinct disadvantages. Bret simply did not have the necessary experience to teach me any feminine wiles.

I'd spent much of my childhood in foster care. Then the young youth pastor of our local church went on a short term mission to the Ukraine. Bret came back

with a broken heart, unable to live with himself until he adopted his very own dysfunctional little family. Bret rushed through foster care training at light speed. Within six months, he was the naïve father of a sullen twelve-year-old boy and a rambunctious ten-year-old (me) with the attention span of a Springer Spaniel.

Much life occurred. Bret found himself in serious need of a miracle parenting device to save his sanity. Thus, strategy board gaming came into our rarely-dusted home. Jesse (the sullen twelve-year-old) would actually talk if he had a pair of dice in hand. As long as I sat down for my turn and didn't lose any pieces, Bret didn't mind if I made mad dashes around the table or did a few flips off the couch in between rolls. We all survived long enough to grow up, but my eternal geekdom (and lack of dates) was sealed.

Ok, let me clarify. I have been on dates. If only my favorite science fiction series (Star Jumpers) were real, I would get Snarvich the Reticent to do a mind meld so I could forget them. I do not count dates where the guy cannot talk. I do not count dates where the guy will only talk in made up languages. And I most assuredly do not count dates where the guy starts out the conversation by asking what size breastplate I would wear if he'd scored tickets for the week long reenactment of his favorite dragon movie.

I yanked my attention away from my almost Prince Charming and focused on the passage of suitcases around the carousel. I teetered closer to the sea of trundling luggage, my inadequacies in the high heel department becoming blatantly obvious. So much for my disguise.

I dropped my purse. With a few clacking steps, I maneuvered back to where it had fallen. Was my skirt

too short to bend over? I wobbled a little but snagged the purse with a finger. My heel stuck in the strap. I yanked. It remained immovable. I yanked again. No luck. With careful precision I attempted to liberate the purse while simultaneously lifting the offending heel off the ground. Standing on one leg while wearing girlish attire for the first time in nearly a decade is harder than it looks.

I pitched forward toward the rolling luggage carousel with windmilling arms and inarticulate squeaks of dismay. My fashionably-clad self plopped down amongst the luggage. Unmindful of my peril, the conveyer continued to trundle along toward a black tunnel where the bags were slurped down into the darkness. A red sign on the left caught my eye.

No Bags with Lose Straps

No Luggage Constructed of Soft, Easily Shredded Materials.

Any Damage is the Fault of the Ticket Holder.

My person was a plethora of soft, strappy, easily shredded material. I struggled to escape. The fate of a flimsy duffel bag awaited me within the dark maw of that luggage tunnel.

I kicked my legs like a frantic ladybug upended by a pack of Kindergarteners. Stuck. I was stuck and this infernal pencil skirt resisted all my efforts to right myself.

My only chance was to wriggle like a worm and flap my arms, thus launching my person off the conveyer. I glanced at the approaching tunnel, and then down at the gleaming tile where I would surely break my nose. Ugh, I had no choice. Perhaps I would

manage some kind of miracle handstand and not actually smash my face. I flopped and scrambled until my head hung over the conveyer edge. My hands scrabbled at the slick tiles below me, but the conveyer failed to slow. My only chance was to jump. One last desperate wiggle and I began to tip. I closed my eyes and threw my arms out, hoping to soften my imminent crash.

I fell and landed in a pair of strong arms.

Someone had snatched me out of the air. My head rested against a large, solid shoulder. I lay there for a moment, dazed. My hairclip hung over my eyes in a nest of tangles. I pushed the mess of brown and gold strands aside and looked up. It was the dog guy. I was in his arms, pressed snugly against him, heart pounding, and mortally embarrassed.

"Hey, you ok?" He peered around my fly-away hair, his blue eyes intent.

"Um, my shoe, and the purse...my luggage is pink!"

"So I would presume." He grinned and tipped me onto my feet, leaving his hands on my shoulders for a moment until I was steady. Then he bent and scooped up my pink shoe.

The dog started barking again, and the dog guy rummaged in his jacket for another treat. "Sit here for a moment and catch your breath. You can watch Leroy for me. I'll go ask about your bag."

Oh, my goodness, he was adorable and gallant. But the power of my new clothes was surely waning. The linen suit sported black smears from the conveyer belt, and my left heel was now bent sideways.

Leroy blasted me with another deafening bark. His brown eyes were expectant, and drool glistened in

moist strings from his jowls. He didn't seem too ferocious, only hungry. "It's just one suitcase and under the name, Morgan Ravn." He nodded and started off. After a couple steps, he turned back.

"And I'm August. August Bruun." I shook his hand and pushed my glasses back up on my nose, as though this happened to me every day. I mean I talked to guys all the time for work. But they never, ever had dimples.

Normally I could be found working in the studio apartment I rented from Bret's Aunt Hildy. It sat over her garage, which was full of collectable dolls and feral cats. On my rental agreement, it actually states that I am responsible to trap at least ten cats a month and force them into good homes.

When I am not capturing cats, I work as a freelance miniature sculptor. It sounds very artsy doesn't it? Mostly I'm hired by aspiring board game designers. They need good quality miniatures to get that childhood fantasy game they've been playing with their cousins for two decades up on a crowd-funding site for publication. My normal day goes like this:

Phone rings and I pick it up.

"Morgan's Marvelous Miniatures, how can I help you?"

"I need to order a dozen trolls, four elves, and an adventurer who looks like..." He names a famous Caucasian movie star, "...only he has to be Asian." The voice is a man whom I later learn is Nate from Idaho.

"No problem, what do you have in mind?" Because it is never that simple. My clients tend to be detail obsessive.

"My trolls are special," says Nate from Idaho. "They have three nostrils and the females have a

golden ring in the left nostril, the males have a golden ring in the right nostril, and if they reach the rank of captain they get a golden hoop through the middle nostril. But only males make captain if they are trolls from the Mountains of Snorgrath, and only females make captain if they are trolls from the snorting planes of Baurghlashenham. The mountain trolls should be whirling a mace above their heads, but the plains trolls only use scimitars. And don't make them weenie scimitars like your classic Aladdin-style weapon. These swords should be huge, at least the size of a Scottish claymore...maybe even longer. Got all that?"

Yep, such is my life. It pays the bills, but doesn't garner much glamour...or very many encounters with normal-type males. But here I was in Denmark, clutching a pink purse and watching a ridiculously handsome man search for my luggage.

I sighed. There was no way this was real. I watched his retreating back, hoping the man was nearsighted. Who was I kidding? Eventually August was bound to put in his contacts or pull out a pair of glasses and realize what I actually looked like. Although the most likely scenario involved me spouting some bit of geeky trivia and revolting him.

Leroy barked in earnest once August left. I attempted to stuff little, stinky dog treats past the bars and into his slobbery jaws. Leroy was not pleased. He plopped his enormous head down at the door of the crate, looked up at me with sad brown eyes, and began to whine. Water! He probably needed water.

Water is not an easy thing to procure for large beasts trapped at the airport. Finally, I was able to order an ice water from the food court using the services of an enterprising teenage boy. The conniving

teen charged me ten dollars to walk fifty feet of tile and order a drink that cost a single American dollar. But since I could not leave Leroy to fend for himself, I forked over the cash.

Disposable cup in hand, I stuffed a few ice cubes into his mouth. But as soon as he snorked down an ice cube, the whining returned. OK, desperate times. I slowly unlatched the kennel and held the cup under Leroy's massive nose. A great deal of slurping commenced. I glanced down at my white suit as I waited for him to finish. A silky, black dog hair had stuck to one lapel. I plucked it off. Then I noticed another, and another, and suddenly about ten thousand more magically appeared! What in the world? How had that happened?

"Here you go, Morgan." August rolled my pretty pink suitcase up beside the crate and took the slobbery cup from my hand.

Leroy launched out of his prison and hit August straight in the chest like a giant bullet of hair and drool.

"Oh, my goodness, I'm sorry. He was so thirsty and loud and this door is really hard to latch. Did you notice that?"

August wrestled Leroy back into the crate and slammed the door, panting.

I peered down at the wet black nose pressed up against the mesh. "I don't think that's shut."

He jiggled it until the locking mechanism finally unstuck. Then he turned and flashed that dimpled smile. "Thank you, I hate to leave him alone, and I was able to find my suitcase, as well."

"So, what do you do when you're not rescuing people from the luggage tunnel?" That sounded

normal right? And maybe if I kept talking, he wouldn't notice all the dog hair.

"My grandfather owns a small theater supply business. We make custom costumes and props for plays all over the Pacific Northwest."

"You work at his shop?"

"Yeah, I specialize in fake mustaches and costume monsters."

"So, what brings you to Copenhagen?"

"Ahhh...would you believe, a mysterious package and the Cinderella Bandit?"

Knowing about my own mysterious package, this was not the least bit of a stretch for me. Denmark seemed to be full of intrigue. But I'd never heard of the Cinderella Bandit.

"Who's the Cinderella Bandit?"

"Everyone within ten feet of my grandpa has been living and breathing the Cinderella Bandit ever since the package arrived. It's hard to remember that most people have never heard of her." He gave Leroy another sausage. "It sounds made up, doesn't it?"

The story did sound made up. But I decided to give August the benefit of the doubt, shook my head "no," and leaned closer.

"The Bandit captured Grandpa's heart and sent me to Denmark."

"Maybe the story will sound more believable if you explain it."

August flashed me his amazing grin and leaned over Leroy. He wiped the drool off Leroy's snout with a napkin from the food court and gave him a scratch behind one floppy ear through the crate's mesh. If I didn't watch myself, I would start drooling worse than the dog. It should be illegal for guys who were both

gorgeous and conversationally adroit to talk with us mere mortals. With difficulty, I pulled my dwindling mental faculties back into focus.

"Because he grew up here, my grandpa was actually on a tour of Rosenborg castle when her famous theft occurred. An impressionable ten-year-old boy sees a beautiful young woman make off with one of the nation's treasures. She was his first crush, the mystery he could never solve. That day the Cinderella Bandit hooked him for life. He's been poring over old Danish books and buying boxes of moldy records from estate sales in Denmark ever since I can remember."

"So what exactly happened?"

"According to the legend, she stole a piece out of Denmark's crown jewel collection in 1958. The chain of the Order of the Elephant. It belongs to the highest order of knighthood in Denmark. Well, she got half way out the door and the strap of her fancy shoe snapped."

That I could believe. I glanced down at my own mangled footwear.

"The Cinderella Bandit fled the scene, leaving a single shoe and the necklace behind. Grandpa's theory is that she dropped a fake piece and the government has been covering up the loss of the real necklace all these years."

"He sounds like a good, old-fashioned romantic." I attempted to pat my tangled hair back into place.

"Most definitely. And it gives him something fun to research when his arthritis acts up. Last month was his first real breakthrough. A package from Denmark arrived out of the blue. Some Danish lady died and left it to him in her will." August pulled out an old-fashioned pocket watch. It was gold with some kind of

animal engraved on the front and a delicate scrolled key in the side to wind it. "All it contained was this watch, a picture of the Chain of the Order of the Elephant, and instructions to eat at a certain table at a local restaurant for brunch. Grandpa couldn't resist. So here I am."

Hmmm...apparently strange packages were more common than I had thought. It made me feel a little bit better, knowing that I was not the only one chasing a mystery halfway around the world.

Upon the death of Silje Østergaard, who appeared to be my grandmother, I'd received a mysterious package from her lawyer. Apparently I was the only child of her youngest daughter. My mother had run away to the States thirty years ago and disappeared. All she left behind was a baby girl in foster care. Somehow the lawyer had found me. That single, oversized envelope from Denmark contained everything I knew about my past.

There was a round-trip plane ticket to Copenhagen, an antique watch with a key to wind it, a brochure about the crown jewels of Denmark, and a receipt for a room and the Sunday luxury brunch at the Nimb Hotel in Tivoli Gardens. The package even held instructions regarding where I should sit during brunch. My grandmother's favorite table was near the fireplace, next to an antique elephant's head displayed on a short marble pillar.

The similarities between mine and August's packages wasn't lost on me. Apparently, the Danes had different customs than Americans upon the death of a loved one. Giving out family heirlooms, sending brochures about national treasures, and having one eat at a favorite restaurant of the deceased was obviously

some kind of tradition.

Right before my plane left, I'd won the bonus prize. An e-mail from Freja, my Danish cousin, wanting to meet for the brunch. I had family in Denmark, living family. Nothing short of three hurricanes and a broken arm would make me miss meeting my birth family.

My attention snapped back to the conversation at hand when Leroy gave me a generous slurp across the arm. "So, why did you bring Leroy?" I scooted back a step and wiped the slobber on the side of my suitcase.

"Leroy's here to work. A local artist needed the loan of an enormous dog. I was here anyway, so bringing Leroy wasn't too much hassle since the other guy is paying."

I stood and tried to dust some of Leroy's hairs off my new skirt. They just smeared around. "Um, well...thank you for rescuing me, and good luck with the jewel thief and Leroy's job."

"No, thank you for watching Leroy." Our conversation dwindled down to a thick awkward silence that sat between us like that lava monster Snarvich The Reticent was forced to calm with his telepathic abilities in Season One of the original series.

August fumbled a paper out of his back pocket, braced it against Leroy's crate, and scribbled something down. His blue eyes were strangely serious as he broke our silence. "Here, take my number. I'll be visiting the crown jewels and snooping around some fancy hotel, but other than that I'm free if you need a tour guide."

I smiled and took the scrap of paper he slipped into my hand. Wow, what were the odds I'd meet a man undeterred by the sorry state of my appearance.

I attempted to keep a blush at bay, gathered up all my pink items, and clicked off toward the bathrooms. A few steps into my grand exit I couldn't help myself and looked back.

August had opened the cage to give Leroy a drink, and was now attempting to stuff the dog back into the crate. The latch on the crate appeared to be giving him trouble again.

Leroy burst free. The dog's wagging tail swept across a stand featuring Copenhagen's most popular attractions. The flyers fluttered out of their carefully labeled pockets and scattered across the floor.

Man, he was cute, and I was not talking about the dog.

2

The Taxi

I may not be considered much of an artist. Sadly, the complexities of creating a fierce unicorn that remains majestic without appearing too proud is lost to most of the artistic community. Still, I love art. And God added a bonus blessing to this trip I would never have thought up on my own. My favorite artist in all the world would be at the Nimb Hotel today—the very day my Grandmother arranged for my brunch.

Axel Rasmussen was famous for his candid sketches of everyday people on a bad day. How he thought up his subjects' misadventures and coaxed his models to accurately portray every indignant pose was a mystery. They were unequivocally hilarious, especially the one of a businessman whose briefcase got hooked by a passing trolley. By the time he retrieved the tooled leather case, it had been run over by five cars, a garbage truck, and a mounted policeman.

I owned ten of his coffee table books. I'd heard rumors, in a few online chat rooms, that Axel Rasmussen would finally reveal his process. And I, Morgan Nicole Ravn, would witness his genius first hand.

I dragged my luggage to the ladies' room where I changed out of my damaged attire. I donned a slim

navy dress with a wiggle skirt, cap sleeves, and matching heels. I hid the pink purse at the very bottom of my suitcase underneath my ragged jeans and orange “Live Long and Thrive” T-shirt featuring Snarvich The Reticent and his intergalactic space craft. It was the only classic Morgan outfit I had condescended to bring—just for emergencies. I pulled out a small leather backpack that Bret had given me and stuffed my wallet inside.

The navy heels were even higher than the pink ones, but they made such satisfying clicks on the shiny airport floors that it almost made up for how I lived in fear for my ankles. What if I hit a puddle and my ankle bent and my leg snapped right off? No, I had to focus. This was what normal women dealt with every day.

I could sculpt six different styles of the same movie hero in two weeks (one Somalian, one Japanese, one Swedish, one Peloponnesian, one French, and my favorite, the Chilean hero). I was going to this fancy schmancy brunch as a woman. Heels and a slick floor would not thwart my plans.

I flagged down a taxi, tossed my carry-on into the seat, and stashed my larger bag in the trunk.

Someone behind me gasped.

I turned.

Several travelers ran toward me waving their arms and shouting in Danish.

Oh, no, this was my taxi. The frantic travelers would just have to wait their turn. I leapt inside and slammed the door, shouting out the address for Tivoli Gardens where the Nimb Hotel and Restaurant was located. Sensing my urgency, the driver zipped out into traffic. I sighed and looked across the seat to make sure that my carry-on and purse had made it.