

Best Laid Plans by Lindsay Larson (for Carina Press)

Short introduction: Softened by the heartache in the million-dollar-an-episode green eyes of her brother's best friend, TV star Keir Mackinnon, Natalie Fraser is attending the wrap party for Keir's hit urban fantasy series as his date. She resisted clawing at his ex-wife's face when she bumped into the witch in the drink line. She doesn't know if she can resist Keir.

Maybe I'll survive the night intact.

A familiar hand landed on Natalie's lower back.

Or not.

"You disappeared on me." Keir breathed his decadent Scottish lilt into her ear. One of his rock-solid pecs pressed against her shoulder. His warrior-werewolf role on *Four Houses* required him to spend half his screen time naked but for some strategically placed fur. A good deal of time without the fur, too.

Natalie had spent too much time contemplating that lack of fur.

She let herself lean into him, just enough to humor the tingle in her stomach. His week's worth of facial hair rubbed against her temple, begging her fingers to creep up and toy with it. Pressing down the urge, she inhaled. Hints of coriander and expensive scotch swirled into her nostrils. She studied him out of the corner of her eye. His glass held an inch of amber liquid, but his eyes were sober. She exhaled. "You knew where I was."

"Yes. Not with me. A problem needing rectification."

His flirting threatened to nudge her into outright infatuation, despite his cheese-ball delivery. “No need to put on the charm for me, Keir.”

“Or maybe there’s every need.” He ran a knuckle down the midline of her back, stealing her breath in increments.

“I came to give you a line of defense against Greta. That’s it. You know this kind of event isn’t my thing. Put me in a room with wine-soused people and I wind up reliving the memory of Gage passed out on his kitchen floor.”

His forehead furrowed. He slid his arm around her. “Did I overstep, inviting you?”

The spread of his strong hand on her waist felt like a step beyond comfort. Was he doing it on the off chance Greta would see, or because he wanted to? She wouldn’t ask. Couldn’t risk him wondering why she cared. *Oh, for fuck’s sake.* She sounded more like one of her teenage English students than a thirty-three-year-old woman who managed a secret writing career, a job as a substitute teacher, and good chunks of her family’s lives, to boot. “I’m pleased to provide you cover, but enjoying myself is a stretch. I could happily go my whole life not seeing another drunk.”

“Of course, love. Makes me all the more grateful you’re here.” He rubbed a circle on her shoulder blade. After a pause, a playful twitch broke the solemn line of his mouth. “That, and your dress. Great dress.”

“Flatterer,” she muttered, nudging his ribs with her elbow. But she’d take the compliment, especially delivered in his bewitching accent. Tonight marked the first time she’d

heard it in six months. He wasn't a full-on method actor, but did stay in his character's voice for the duration of filming. American werewolf was sexy and all, but his natural Highland burr forced Natalie to lock her knees. "You're a Scot again. Sounds good on you."

"Filming wrapped. No need to keep up the pretense."

"I missed hearing the real Keir Mackinnon." Her hands shook and her sternum pinched.

Ridiculous. She'd shucked off her Keir-nerves years ago.

Editor's Critique:

This scene is very nicely written! The author makes great use of details to put the reader in Natalie's shoes while keeping the scene moving. I especially loved "hints of coriander and expensive Scotch." I was definitely swooning for Keir, and I liked the glimpses of the characters' backgrounds. There were nice touches of humour, too. I laughed out loud at this line: "His warrior-werewolf role on *Four Houses* required him to spend half his screen time naked but for some strategically placed fur. A good deal of time without the fur, too." The snappy, witty voice, drool-worthy hero and engaging scenario made me want to read more.

Natalie's attraction to Keir is evident in her internalization, and he's insistent in his flirtation, but sometimes the dialogue felt a bit stilted. For example, "A problem needing rectification" doesn't strike me as the most natural thing for a 30-something TV star to say. Making the dialogue a bit more organic could help with the characters' chemistry.

The push-and-pull between Natalie and Keir was compelling, but I would have liked to see more hints about why she feels she *needs* to resist him. It's clear why she's not totally comfortable at the party, but why can't she give in a little to Keir's charm, even if she thinks her giddiness is a bit ridiculous? Giving the reader a sense of the romantic conflict to come would help build that tension. If she has a strong motivation for resisting him, the temptation will seem even stronger, especially since Keir doesn't seem to have any qualms about pursuing Natalie.