

VICKY WALKLATE



BURNING
BRIGHT

THE APEX SERIES: BOOK 3

BURNING BRIGHT

Vicky Walklate

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Content guide](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Author's Note and Exclusive Bonus Epilogue](#)

[Blood Feathers Excerpt](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

Content guide

This ~31k word monster romance novella features high heat scenes between a human and a monster and is intended for readers over the age of consent. Some content in this story may be triggering for some readers. There are scenes of domestic violence between the main character and her abusive ex-husband, along with mention of previous physical and mental abuse.

It also contains: animal attack; a barbed penis; blood; divorce; drowning; guns; harassment and stalking; being hunted by a predator; kidnap; verbal and physical abuse.

For those who deserve better, those who could really do with a monster to snuggle, and those waiting patiently for their own fated mate to come along - especially one with claws and fangs.

Chapter One

Freya's heartbeat thundered in her ears as she peered through her living room blinds. The motion sensor attached to her building had flashed into life moments ago, making her leap up from the couch for the umpteenth time. Night held her hometown of Westhorpe in its sway, the distant noise of traffic in the centre of town nothing more than a low, steady hum. Foxes yipped to each other in the distance, and an owl hooted from somewhere nearby.

Her narrow side street was deathly still, with no sign of life in any of the houses on either side. The streetlights were turned off for the night and there was no moon either, no comforting blanket of stars. Just an endless stretch of darkness, broken by the harsh glare of the security spotlight as it illuminated the stone pavement and the spectral outlines of buildings beyond. No one skulked by the cars parked nose to tail on the street; nobody crept along the paved pathway toward her building's front steps. So, what had set off the light?

Trying to control her breathing, she glanced at the long-stemmed rose lying on the centre of her small coffee table. Its blood-red petals were wilting, but she couldn't bring herself to put it in water. She'd found it on the table when she got home from work, an ominous message in the guise of sweet-scented beauty.

Roses were her ex-husband Ben's go-to apology gesture. When he lost his temper over some imagined slight on her part, there'd be a huge bouquet on her dresser the next day. If he got drunk, and mocked and embarrassed her at one of his fancy work dinners, she got roses, instead of a sorry. Shoved her across the room after screaming at her during an argument? Roses.

That last incident had been the final straw. The next morning, after he'd gone to work, she'd packed a bag and fled. Despite his pleadings, coaxing, and in the end, unfettered rage, she stood her ground and refused to return.

Their divorce was bitter and spiteful on his part. She'd ended her marriage of almost five years with the barest minimum due to her, but she hadn't cared. Ben's deep pockets and extravagant lifestyle hadn't brought her any happiness anyway. A prison made of gold was still a prison.

The security light flicked off, plunging the outside world back into thick, impenetrable blackness. Closing the blinds, Freya collapsed on the sofa, clasping her hands together to quell their shaking.

It was maddening, to feel so fearful in her own home. The modest flat, one of four in a converted Victorian townhouse in the suburbs of Westhorpe, was supposed to be her fresh start. Long and narrow, it ran the length of the left-hand side of the building, with her ground floor neighbour taking the opposite side, and the same layout with the other residents on the floor above. The living room was at the front, overlooking the street. Her bedroom and bathroom were at the back. In the middle was the galley-style kitchen, with a side door leading to the back garden. The front door of the flat led to the shared entrance hall.

She had stripped the walls herself, repainting them dusky pink in her bedroom, and fresh oyster cream everywhere else. With the help of her sister Evelyn, she'd even put up her own shelves. Her pride when they finished was indescribable. The huge house she'd shared with Ben on the other side of town may as well have been a nameless hotel for all the say she'd had in its style. Here, all items from the second-hand sofa to the charity shop picture frames were picked out by her.

Now, apparently, Ben had seen it for himself.

He shouldn't have been able to get into the building; access was supposed to be via a high-tech keypad. However, it had broken so many times, the residents had decided to keep the heavy front door wedged open. Although Freya hadn't been keen on the idea, she couldn't summon up the courage to admit her precarious situation to her new neighbours.

She'd almost contacted the police many times, but always lost her nerve. As a solicitor, Ben could count on friends in high, low, and useful places. Despite him often lingering near the medical centre where she worked; or roaring past her in his Jaguar as she cycled to or from work, his smooth tongue and deep wallet would get him out of any trouble. Even make it her fault, somehow.

How had he gained entry in the first place? There was no sign of a break-in within her flat; both her front and back doors were locked, as were her windows. The building had no CCTV cameras, no alarm system. With the front door being broken, its' only security was the motion sensor light—which had been activated many times that evening.

Too many times.

So, around an hour ago, she called the one person she trusted.

Evelyn took a while to answer but was now on her way over. She'd also sent a cryptic text after she'd hung up:

EVELYN: 'Sending a friend to help – Severin.'

Freya rubbed her temples. Whoever this Severin was, he wouldn't be happy about being dispatched to a strange woman's home in the middle of the night because of a dodgy security light and a mysterious flower. She was overreacting. Maybe she should call Evelyn back, tell her not to worry.

A tiny scratching noise came from her front door. Her heart skipped a beat as she swivelled to look at it. The key in the lock jiggled, like it was being pushed from the other side.

Reality crashed over her. This wasn't her imagination playing tricks on her. Someone was trying to get into her flat by pushing her key out, trying to insert their own.

Adrenalin flooded her veins. Clenching her fists, she rose abruptly.

"I can hear you," she burst out. "Go away."

After a moment's silence, a warm chuckle sounded, one so familiar it made her want to cry.

“Open the door, you silly goose. It’s only me.”

Ben’s sickly-sweet whisper made her nauseous.

“Go away,” she repeated, creeping closer. “It’s past midnight and you’re trespassing.”

“You’re my wife, Freya. There’s no such thing as trespassing where family is concerned.”

He sounded so sure of himself, so rational. He always did though. He could say the cruellest, most cutting things in such a reasonable way, as if stating an unequivocal fact.

Making sure the security chain was in place, she took a deep breath and turned the key, opening the door a crack.

The dim light of the hallway illuminated her ex-husband’s handsome features: light brown hair cut short and neat; grey-blue eyes framed by long lashes; unblemished white skin; a slim and toned frame accentuated by a grey designer suit. When they first met, her friends—she’d actually had some then, before he’d chased them all away—had enthused about his model potential, with his chiselled jawline and million-dollar smile.

Freya used to think it was a good smile, too. Now, she recognised that it didn’t touch his eyes. If only she’d noticed that from the start, when she’d been a naive eighteen-year-old with an absent father and an anxious, people-pleasing soul, bowled over by the charming older man telling her how perfect they were for each other.

Putting something that looked suspiciously like a key in his pocket, he tutted.

“You’ve left the chain on? You’re acting like I’m some kind of axe murderer.”

“We’re not married anymore. I don’t know how you got a key, but please leave or I’ll call the police.” She hated how breathy and weak she sounded. Hated it so much.

He let out a dramatic sigh. “I just want to talk. I miss you terribly, darling. A single flower won’t make up for all

that's happened between us, I know that. But I hope it demonstrates how much you mean to me."

A pang hit her at those words, bringing with it a fluttery sensation in her chest, much to her chagrin. There was a treacherous comfort to be found in familiarity and false declarations of love, and she steeled herself against them. "Leave me alone, Ben. I mean it. I'll scream if I must."

"Don't get hysterical. There's no need to wake your poor neighbours when all I want is a conversation—"

"Sorry I'm late, baby." Another man materialised behind Ben, and Freya screamed for real.

Chapter Two

If Freya hadn't been so shocked, she would have laughed at Ben's reaction to the newcomer. Her ex cursed and stumbled back across the hall, almost tripping over the bottom of the stairs in the process.

The stranger met Freya's wide-eyed gaze through the gap in the door, and it took all her control not to gape. Tall and broad-shouldered, with honey-toned white skin and sculpted cheekbones, this man really did look like he'd just stepped off a catwalk. His mahogany brown hair was short on the sides and longer on top, gelled into fashionable tousles. Dressed in spotless blue jeans and a white t-shirt, his biceps bulged with muscle, but it was his eyes holding her spellbound. They were bright hazel, almost gold, and dotted with flecks of green. Fancy coloured contact lenses, presumably. Maybe he *was* a model.

"Who the hell are you?" The quiver in Ben's voice belied his aggressive words as he regained his balance.

"I could ask you the same question." The stranger's deep drawling voice was edged with humour. It was difficult to pinpoint his age: early thirties, perhaps, the same as Ben?

"Benjamin L. Carmichael," her ex flared. "Partner at Elsgood, Ferris and Carmichael. I'd watch your tone, if I were you."

The other man smirked and turned to Freya, as she peered through the crack.

"Sorry I made you jump, princess. Open the door."

The sensible part of her told her not to do as this stranger bade her. The other part, quaking at his soft and intimate tone, did exactly as she was told.

He stepped over the threshold like he owned it. When he gathered her into a hug, she almost passed out. Giving her hip a warning squeeze, he kissed her cheek and turned her in his arms. He smelled like sandalwood and musky spice. She

inhaled as she faced her ex with the stranger's chest pressed against her back and his hands around her waist.

Ben's eyebrows were in his hairline. "You're seeing someone? We divorced less than a year ago, and you're already shacking up with some fuckboy?"

The stranger made a thoughtful sound, rocking her from side to side, as if they were dancing. "I see why you left him. Is he always this shrill?"

A squawk left Ben's throat. "Who *are* you?"

"This is Severin," Freya replied, praying she was right and hiding her relief when she felt him nod.

"Severin," Ben sneered. "What kind of name is that? What sewer did you crawl out of, *Severin*?"

Ignoring him, Severin flicked Freya's short, blonde bob away from the nape of her neck. The sensation of his fingertips made her shiver. When his lips brushed her skin, she almost closed her eyes in bliss.

"Such a pretty princess," he murmured. "Did you miss me today?"

It was for show, she *knew* it was all for show, but that didn't stop a rush of desire from pulsing through her body as he nibbled her neck. She couldn't look at Ben as she nodded.

"I missed you too," Severin said, squeezing her even tighter, "and I'm bored. He's boring. Shall we say goodnight?"

She nodded again, her heart hammering so hard, she wondered if it would burst out of her chest. As he released her waist to move in front of her, she resisted the strange urge to cling to him, peeking around his shoulder in time to see her ex's eyes widen.

"Leave," Severin said coolly. "Now."

Ben glared. "You think I'm scared of you?"

"If you had any sense, you would be."

"Is that a threat, you little scumbag? I'll have you arrested before you can..."

Severin grabbed Ben's collar, his gaze boring into the other man.

"I dislike repeating myself, boy." His voice was as cold as ice as he forced him to walk backward through the hallway, to the wedged-open front door. "Start running, before I break your legs and make you crawl instead."

Unable to tear her gaze away, Freya followed them into the hallway like a sleepwalker as Severin shoved Ben out of the doorway and down the front stoop. The motion sensor flashed on just as Ben staggered, tripping over a plant pot at the base of the steps. He landed with a thud on the path, flailing on his back like a stuck turtle. Freya's shocked giggle died in her throat as he scrambled to his feet brandishing a large shard of broken pottery, his eyes glazed and wild.

"You piece of filth," he shrieked.

He charged at them. As he re-entered the hallway, Severin swung his fist, a meaty thud echoing against the walls when he connected with Ben's jaw. Her ex flew back, his hands flying in the air just as Severin's momentum made him lurch to the side, leaving her unprotected. Time slowed; Freya could do nothing but watch as the pottery left Ben's grip and flew toward her.

A crack of pain reverberated through her head as the shard made contact. She cried out, slipping to her knees.

Slumping against the wall, she clutched her head. Warm liquid oozed through her fingers and she groaned. Tiny lights flashed in front of her vision, shadows swelling from the edge. The sound of running footsteps drummed against her skull before fading away. For one dreadful moment, she thought both men had abandoned her; then someone touched her forehead and she caught the scent of sandalwood.

The last thing she heard, before she succumbed to oblivion, was Severin's deep mutter.

"Ah, shit."

Chapter Three

Freya awoke with throbbing temples, a mouth as dry as the Sahara, and a hint of nausea rolling in her stomach. The soft strands of a radio station drifted over her, along with the roar of a powerful engine. The pungent smell of leather and diesel made her feel even queasier.

Her head lolled to the side and she jerked herself up. She was sitting in the passenger seat of a large 4x4. Twin beams from the car's bright headlights lit up the road ahead: they were on a tiny country lane, narrow enough that the car almost touched the verges of weeds and wildflowers on either side. Rows of gnarled, twisted trees flanked the verges, their branches curving over the lane to meet in the middle, giving the impression of a dark, ominous tunnel. Her pulse skittered as she straightened, trying to ignore her pounding head.

Severin glanced at her from the driving seat, his eerie amber eyes glinting. "Welcome back."

"What happened?" she croaked.

A phone rang, cutting out the radio, followed by a high-pitched beep as Severin pressed a button on the steering wheel.

"Yeah." He sounded curt, as if he'd expected the call.

"Where are you, Sev? I'm at Freya's flat and neither of you are here. The neighbours heard shouting. If you've hurt her, I'll kill you myself."

It took Freya a dazed moment to recognise her sister Evelyn, and a sliver of fear rose at the uncharacteristic note of panic in her sister's voice. Who *was* this man? Before she could say anything, Severin spoke again.

"Honestly, Evelyn. I thought you trusted me now?"

"I was starting to, until you vanished with my sister! Is she okay?"

“She’s fine. There was a scuffle and she ended up with a head injury.”

Freya touched the side of her head, wincing at the bump she found, which was coated in dried blood. Nasty, but could have been so much worse.

“A head injury?” Evelyn’s voice rose. “What did you do? You’d better be on your way to hospital.”

“No. We’re heading to my safehouse.”

“The penthouse. Fine. Me and Jax will meet you there.”

“Not the penthouse.” Severin’s tone turned dry. “Your lover has made himself too comfortable in my home for my liking. I’m staying elsewhere at the moment.”

“Where, exactly?”

“You don’t need to know. It’s called a safehouse for a reason.” As he continued, triumph tinged the man’s tone. “However, I’m pleased to confirm that I’ve figured out how to repay my debt to you both. I’m borrowing your sister.”

Freya’s gasp was drowned out by Evelyn’s furious screech.

“What the hell are you talking about? You can’t borrow her! She’s a person, not a pencil!”

“It will benefit her, as well as me. I’ll explain more tomorrow. If her neighbours get nosy, just tell them there was an altercation and her boyfriend has taken her to hospital.”

“*Boyfriend?* Dammit, Severin, let me talk to Freya—”

Another beep, and Evelyn was cut off. There was utter silence in the car for a few seconds, then the phone rang again. Sighing, Severin pressed some buttons in the centre console, silencing the ringtone.

He didn’t turn on the radio again, and the silence stretched between them. Freya did her best to control her breathing, staring blindly at the unfamiliar scenery illuminated by the headlights. She had no phone, no bag, no coat, but at

least she was dressed, albeit in her nurse's uniform. The rose on her coffee table had distracted her so much earlier that she'd forgotten to get changed. She hadn't even removed her trainers, which she was now thankful for.

Her hand shook as she felt along the smooth interior of the car door, seeking the handle. She just needed to open the door, leap out, roll upon landing, then get up and run like hell. She'd seen it a million times in movies. How hard could it be?

"I wouldn't recommend that." He spoke without taking his eyes off the road. "It will be messy and painful. It's also unnecessary. I'm simply taking you somewhere safe to recover from your bump on the head."

"There's no need for any fuss," she stammered. "You can just drop me off at a hospital to be checked over."

"They'll ask questions, princess. Lots of them. I imagine there's a reason you haven't been to the authorities about your ex stalking you?"

"Well, yes—"

"I assumed as much, hence why I didn't head to a hospital after you passed out. I wanted to give you a choice on how you handled things, once you woke up. So, my place it is. We're almost there now."

Her heartbeat drummed in her ears. "I'm fine. I feel fine. Please take me home."

"No. As I said to Evelyn, I've found the key to repaying a certain debt I owe. That key is you, which means you're staying with me."

His assertion held utter self-assurance and more than a hint of possessiveness. It was the same way Ben used to talk, when he'd decided on something and had no intention of letting Freya argue, even if she'd dared. Her shoulders sank and her skin felt clammy as she fought the impulse to hunch into a ball, silent and obedient as a shadow. Panic licked at her nerves and a lump grew in her throat. Fighting her tears, she glanced at him, just as he looked over at her. It was only for a second, but his gaze softened ever so slightly.

“You’re not in danger, princess. Take some deep breaths.”

“Let me speak to my sister,” she whispered. “At least to tell her I’m okay. She’ll be worried sick. Please.”

His deep sigh spoke volumes. “Fine.”

He pressed the console buttons with what looked like weary resignation. The ringtone sounded for a mere second before Evelyn’s furious voice came through the speakers again.

“Did you actually turn your phone off, you dickhead?”

Freya’s throat was so dry, it took her a moment to speak. “Evelyn?”

“Oh my gods, Freya. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Yes. My head hurts, but I’m okay. Don’t worry.”

The call cut off again before her sister could answer. Severin raised his brows at Freya. “There. Happy?”

Her glare was involuntary, but if she thought he would get angry in response, she was wrong. Instead, he chuckled and turned back to the road.

She lifted her chin. Fine. She clearly wasn’t in any immediate danger, but she still had to get out of this situation. To do that, she needed to be strong, level-headed, and decisive. She had to bide her time and remain as cool and collected as her captor.

There was no talking. She was tongue-tied, and he seemed content to drive in silence, his long fingers drumming on the steering wheel as if he were lost in thought. Occasionally, he stroked the ridged leather with his fingertips, up and down, then in slow, purposeful circles. With a start, she realised she’d been watching his hands for several minutes, almost hypnotised.

Blinking, she glanced at his face. A tiny smile played on his sensuous lips, like he’d noticed her dazed scrutiny. She averted her gaze in a hurry. What was wrong with her, thirsting

over her kidnapper's dexterous hands? Hadn't Stockholm Syndrome been disproved?

"Hold tight, please," he murmured.

He made a sharp turn to the right, between two stone pillars marking the entrance to a long driveway. Taking her chance, she slumped sideways, pretending she'd lost her balance, resting her hand next to the seat belt clip.

The journey became bumpier, pebbles rattling against the undercarriage. Severin cursed as the car bounced over a deep pothole. The driveway looked more like a farm track, with a thick hedgerow on one side and open fields on the other.

Freya took a deep breath, in and out, readying herself. Her captor's momentum and reflexes in the scuffle with Ben had been impressive, but she was no slouch herself when it came to fitness. Since the divorce, she jogged twice a week and cycled to work most days. She could maintain a serious pace when required.

A shadowy building loomed out of the darkness, lit up by the headlights as they rolled to a halt in a crunch of gravel. As Severin pulled on the handbrake, Freya seized her chance. Undoing her seatbelt with one hand, she yanked the door open with the other and leapt out of the car.

Tiny stones skidded under her feet as she hit the ground. She staggered, flailing her arms to keep her balance. Willing her eyes to adjust to the darkness, she stumbled away from the car. As if assisting her escape, the clouds cleared away, bathing her surroundings in ethereal moonlight. The track stretched out in front of her, impossibly long, the pillars marking the other end not even in sight.

Behind her, a car door slammed shut as her captor gave chase. She darted toward the hedgerow, biting back her fearful whimper. He'd catch her on the driveway and find her easily in the fields. If she could get on the other side of the hedge, she stood a chance.

Suddenly, the ground fell away beneath her and she tumbled into a ditch, sinking into a foul-smelling bog at the bottom and biting back a scream. Weeds, nettles, and goosegrass wrapped around her bare legs greedily. Fighting her way free, she clambered up the opposite bank. Her head was pounding and clothes were soaked, her shoes squelching with mud. Her legs burned from multiple nettle stings, and she bit back a sob as she made it to the hedge, searching for an opening big enough to crawl into. It was a typical wild hedgerow of hawthorn and hazel, with thick vines of ivy twisting through the branches, and the exposed roots wide and unyielding.

Sinking to her hands and knees, she pushed her way into a tiny gap at the base. Thorns plucked at her hair and clothes, intensifying the pain in her pounding skull as she ducked her head to protect her eyes. Vines tangled in her hair, ripping it out at the scalp as she forced her way through, bracing herself to be caught at any moment.

“I could do without the histrionics, princess,” Severin called from nearby, sounding half-exasperated, half-amused. “Normally I enjoy this game very much, but it’s hardly the time.”

Gritting her teeth, Freya burst through the other side of the hedge. Staggering to her feet, she started running again, only to crash straight into an unyielding barrier.

Tears pouring down her cheeks, she climbed the fence, praying there was no barbed wire on top.

“I wouldn’t go in there, if I were you...”

Judging by his voice, he was still on the far side of the hedge. Desperate hope surged through her as she swung herself over the top of the fence. Surely, *surely* by the time he found a gap large enough to navigate, she would be too far away for him to catch.

The grass felt soft and spongy beneath her feet as she sprinted into the centre of the field. A strong aroma hung in the air, woody and sweet, intensifying as she ran past a circular metal container filled with hay.

“Come back, you little fool.” Severin sounded concerned for the first time—and still on the other side of the hedge.

Despite her fear, Freya let out a whoop of victory, increasing her pace. On the next step, white-hot agony ripped up her leg as her ankle gave way. She tumbled to the ground, fresh soil filling her shoes. Rolling on to her side, she clutched her left ankle, swallowing as a wave of nausea rolled through her. A molehill. She’d tripped on a bloody molehill.

Gritting her teeth, she wiggled her foot, sighing in relief when she was able to move it. Not broken. Perhaps sprained. It didn’t matter. She had to keep going.

A loud snort came from nearby, and she froze.

Another snort, and a deep, threatening lowing noise. A familiar noise.

Her blood froze in her veins. Less than ten metres away, its nose ring glinting in the dim moonlight, a massive bull emerged from the other side of the feeder. Swinging its head from side to side, it lowed again and stamped at the ground. Its body was thickly muscled, and its horns were short and sharp, bent inward like a pair of curved daggers.

She couldn’t move. Couldn’t scream. Every news report, every social media post, every rumour about cows and bulls ran through her mind: how dangerous they could be, how unpredictable. How deadly, when they wanted to be.

She shuddered, and a surge of pain in her ankle made her bite back a cry. The bull didn’t like that, tossing its powerful head. She skuttled sideways a few paces. The animal snorted and stomped its cloven hoof, making her freeze again. She looked around wildly. Severin was nowhere to be seen. He wasn’t foolish enough to jump in with her, but why wasn’t he at least trying to distract the animal? Had he saved her from Ben only to let her get trampled now?

She had no choice. Small movements weren’t working; they just made the irate animal advance each time, closing the gap between them. She had to make a run for it.

“Nice bull,” she whispered. “Friendly bull. I’m leaving, okay? I’m going.”

She twisted on to her hands and knees again, her fingers clenching on the tufts of grass. Her clothes and shoes were drenched from the plunge into the ditch, putrid mud caking the material and weighing her down. Her fear dulled the pain in her ankle to a steady ache that throbbed in time with her pounding heart.

Leaping to her feet, she broke into a stagger. Agony surged through her and a furious bellow came from behind as the bull charged.

Terror spurred her on, but her ankle gave way and she fell with a sobbing cry. Rolling into a ball, she awaited the trample of hooves and the sensation of sharp horns piercing her body...

A snarl tore apart the night, twisted and unearthly, ringing in Freya’s ears like a bell from the depths of the abyss. A huge shadow sprang over her, and the ground vibrated with faltering thuds, as if the bull was hastily changing direction.

Get up. Go. Now.

She managed a few steps before collapsing again, closing her eyes in despair. When she opened them, her entire body seized as she understood why the bull had fled.

A monster towered over her.

Chapter Four

The creature was over six feet tall, standing on its hind legs like a human. A hide of thick fur covered its powerful body. She couldn't make out its colour in the silver glow of the moon, but she could see its two upper canines. They were long and thick, protruding externally on either side of its jaw and curving downward.

This couldn't be real. She must have been knocked out again. Taking a shaking breath, she shuffled backward.

Dropping to all fours, the animal came to her side in one swift movement. A scream caught in her throat as it stared her down.

It smelled musky and sharp, its green-flecked golden eyes glittering with menace. Leaning in, it scented her hair deeply. She didn't move, her mouth drying up as she felt its cold nose against her cheek. It made another sound, this one almost a purr, and a hot, restless feeling flickered to life inside her. She licked her lips as the creature moved further down her body.

Yes, she must have fainted. There was no other explanation for lying prone in a field while a monster investigated her with its nose. As it brushed over her chest and stomach then went lower, she bit back a soft moan, resisting the sudden urge to arch her hips. The creature made another approving noise as it continued its exploration, down her thighs and past her knees.

A jolt in her injured left ankle made her cry out, and reality flooded back. She cowered away, half-expecting it to attack.

Instead, it met her eyes and blinked. Pulling back, it rose to stand on its hind legs again.

Freya couldn't stop staring at its giant paws, tipped by razor-sharp claws, but she couldn't watch them for long. It sheathed them within its pads with one smooth movement, then bent and hoisted her into its arms.

Its strong scent enveloped her as it held her against its furry chest like she was a child. There was no point in struggling. Its grip was unyielding. She studied its oversized canines, fascinated despite her fear. The creature could decapitate her with one bite, rip her to pieces in a single second; yet it was carrying her carefully, as if she were precious cargo.

They reached the fence, with the hedge looming beyond. Her breath rushed from her lungs as the monster bounded upward to crouch on the top bar. It leapt over the hedge in a single jump, landing clear of the ditch on the other side. Her ankle jarred as they hit the ground and she let out a sob, clenching her fists on the thick fur on its chest.

“Is it broken?” The monster’s voice was a deep, rasping growl.

Holy shit. It talked?

“N...no,” she stammered. “Sprained, maybe.”

It grunted as they traversed the driveway, heading in the direction of the car. Severin must be here somewhere. Did he know about the monster? Could he go for help?

“Please put me down.” She tried for the first time to struggle.

The creature tightened its hold. “Not a chance. You’ve caused me enough trouble tonight, princess.”

Princess?

She’d never been called that in her life before tonight, by a tall, aloof man with a sexy drawl and the most hypnotising eyes she’d ever seen...

“Severin?” she whispered.

The big cat grunted again.

“You, you’re...”

She couldn’t find the words, and he seemed too irritated to care as they headed toward the shadowy building beyond his car.

As they approached, a powerful motion sensor illuminated the house. It was a single-storey chalet made of grey stone, with vines of thick green ivy trailing around the front door. The small, courtyard-style front garden was laid to lawn and bordered by a low stone wall the same colour as the house. A wide cobblestone path cut through its centre, lined with trimmed shrubs in ceramic pots.

Another sensor light flashed into life as Severin reached to unlock the garden gate, holding her effortlessly with one arm. He strode up the path, brushing past the shrubs and causing the sweet scent of lavender and mint to rise in the air, masking the fetid ditch water stench lingering on her clothing. She spotted a wooden bench under one of the windows, with more plant pots either side and a footstool underneath.

“Your home is pretty,” she ventured.

“Not mine. A client lent it to me.”

“Oh.”

He didn't offer any further information, concentrating on unlocking the door, which was secured by a keypad. Unlike the one in her building, this one actually worked. It seemed high-tech and out of place for such a traditional looking home. He had some difficulty putting in the code with his claws, swearing under his breath, but eventually he managed it.

He carried her over the threshold like they were a newly wedded couple, which felt awkward as hell. The entrance led straight into a modern kitchen, but he didn't linger there, heading straight into the neighbouring living room.

Freya glanced around, noting how neat and orderly it seemed. Cream-coloured tiles covered the floor, with a beige rug in the centre of the room and a sofa and two fat armchairs on either side of it, all beige as well. Amber sconces were fixed on to off-white walls, in between framed prints of the flat, arable Norfolk landscape. A cast iron woodburning stove stood in pride of place on the far wall. Embers glowed in the base of the stove behind the small glass window, and the sharp

scent of woodsmoke hung in the air. Even the pile of logs on the raised hearth were stacked in perfect rows. The room looked like a glossy photo in a holiday cottage brochure.

Freya's world tilted as Severin lowered her to the couch. She squirmed, loath to stain the spotless furnishings with her wet and dirty clothes. An annoyed tut passed his lips and she acquiesced.

As she sank into the cushions, his furry chest pressed against her front. His large head was so close to hers that his warm breath huffed on her cheek. She met his gaze as a pleasurable shudder ran through her. She couldn't move even if she wanted to, and by the way his eyes gleamed, he recognised that too. His expression became distant, as it had in the field earlier, like he was listening to something she couldn't hear.

He lowered his head, sniffing at her hair.

She squirmed, then froze when he rumbled low in his throat. A warning.

Breathing fast, she subsided as he dropped his head again. He nudged her neck, scenting her. Something warm and rough swept over the pounding pulse in her throat, and she gasped.

The tiger licked her with lingering thoroughness, as if savouring her taste. At the same time, one of his paws, the claws sheathed, traced its way up her stomach, then brushed across her breasts. She could do nothing to stop him, utterly in his power. Her nipples tingled, and she clenched her thighs together. He made an approving sound and grazed his teeth over her throat, deliberate and possessive.

"Please," she whispered, although what she was asking for, she wasn't sure.

He blinked again, a brief look of shock crossing his face. With a muttered curse, he straightened and backed up several paces, crossing his muscled arms and staring at her.

"You're a monster," she said, more to break the silence than anything else.

“I suppose I am, to you.”

“Did you kill the bull?”

“Just reminded him who’s in charge around here. He belongs to a nearby farm and is pretty docile, but you scared him, bursting into his territory in the middle of the night.”

She bristled. “I wouldn’t have done, if you hadn’t kidnapped me.”

“I *didn’t* kidnap you.”

“You said to Evelyn that you were borrowing me,” she said, shocked she was daring to argue. “What else was I supposed to think?”

His sigh seemed to shake the walls. “You were supposed to spend a few hours recovering from the bump on your head, before I offered my services as your pretend lover.”

Freya’s jaw dropped. “Wait, what? You were going to offer what?”

“You heard me.” He glared at her out of those inhuman eyes. “I thought I’d do something decent for once, as well as repaying a debt. A few weeks of pretending to be in a relationship with you, scaring your ex away, seemed like a good plan. You were *not* supposed to see *this*.”

He gestured at himself then turned away, muttering something about exasperating humans and how he was never doing a good deed again. Mild annoyance rose inside her—if he’d told her all this in the car, maybe she wouldn’t have fled in the first place—but as usual, she didn’t dare vocalise it, swallowing it deep inside instead.

Opening the woodburner with his bare paw, he shoved a couple of logs into it. The subdued embers of earlier transformed into eager, dancing flames, their comforting heat spreading her way. She studied his form as she took off her muddy shoes, being careful of her sore ankle. His fur was pale tawny in colour, like a lion, with mahogany brown stripes running across his muscular back and powerful shoulders. His tail was long and thin, its black tip twitching constantly. He

looked like a bipedal cross between a present-day tiger and a prehistoric sabertooth.

Her gaze drifted lower, drinking in the sight of his narrow hips and thick, muscular thighs...

She shook herself with a start. What was wrong with her? Stalked by her ex, whisked away into the night by a stranger, almost trampled by a bull, and now drooling over the monster who'd rescued her. A monster who, she realised with an embarrassed start, had turned around and was watching her with narrowed eyes.

She flushed, praying he hadn't noticed her checking him out. "A fake relationship. That would have been a good plan."

"Indeed. Bit more complicated now, isn't it?"

"I won't tell anyone about this," she said in a rush. "I promise. I won't say a word about what you are."

After regarding her in cool silence, he shrugged. "Fine."

"You're not going to make me swear on my life, or anything?"

"Who would believe you, even if you blabbed? Not that prick of an ex-husband. And Evelyn already knows."

"She does?" Freya stared. "How *do* you two know each other?"

"Long story. Let me shift back, then we can check your ankle and you can ask all the questions you want."

Closing his eyes, he raised his face to the ceiling and muttered something under his breath. A pleasurable buzzing sensation drifted around Freya and the air in the room grew thick and heavy, before his expression changed to bemusement. He frowned, closing his eyes again. Once more, the atmosphere thickened, but the monster remained in place, slack-jawed and holding out his paws in front of him.

"No," he muttered, unsheathing and sheathing his claws in quick succession. "She's a human. There's no way."

The air buzzed and hummed for a third time. His big cat form remained the same. He clutched at his head, staring at her again.

She bit her lip, unnerved by the fury in his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“Not really.” His voice was clipped. “I can’t seem to shift back into my human form.”

“Oh.” She twisted her fingers. “Is that unusual?”

“For me, yes. It only happens to my people for one reason.”

“Which is?”

A distorted smile, more like a scowl, made his canines glint in the lamplight. “When we meet our fated mate, we remain trapped in our tiger form until the union. I can’t shift back into human form until I fuck you.”

Chapter Five

Fear crashed through Freya like an avalanche, a high-pitched noise whirring in her ears as she leapt off the couch to flee. Pain shot up her ankle as she hit the floor, and she cried out. Then, she was thrown back into the cushions and the tiger was above her again.

No treacherous desire this time, no compulsion to welcome his attention. She whimpered, and he lifted his head, blinking his glowing eyes once, then twice. Easing back, he took a deep breath.

“Please don’t do that.” Although his voice was calm, it was tinged with a growl. “You’re in no danger from me, princess. I wouldn’t take by force something that should be freely given. But when you run, I want to...catch you.”

He didn’t elaborate, retreating a few more paces.

“I don’t understand,” she stammered. “What is a fated mate? How has this happened?”

“It means for some messed up reason, the universe has decided that a shy, innocent human is my soulmate.” A bitter laugh broke out of him. “I assume fate was drinking last night. There’s no way in all the hells that this is right. I’ll need to do some research on how to resolve it. In the meantime, let’s get you fixed up. Wait here.”

He headed toward the kitchen. When he reached the doorway, he glanced back. “*Do. Not. Run.*”

She swallowed, paralysed by conflicting emotions as he vanished. Her instincts screamed for her to flee, but what was the point? He’d catch her if she limped down the driveway, and no doubt he’d taken the keys to his car.

Not that she could drive anyway. Ben hadn’t wanted her to learn, preferring to have her rely on him for lifts. In truth, he hadn’t really wanted her to go anywhere at all, not without him. Training for and then staying in her nursing job, her dream vocation since she was a little girl playing with toy

stethoscopes, had taken immense effort on her part. She'd done her best to compromise—agreeing to be part-time instead of full-time, working at a medical centre rather than going out into the district to visit patients in their homes—but it hadn't been enough for him. He'd wanted her to quit outright, to stay at home, always within his sight.

She pulled a face as she recalled the sound of her ex's rapidly retreating footsteps after she'd been injured earlier that night. That showed how much he 'cared,' fleeing like a coward after trying to break in...Oh *no*. Her flat. The door. The item Ben had returned to his pocket when she'd confronted him.

"He's got a key," she burst out as Severin re-entered the room holding a spoon and an unlabelled brown glass bottle. "Ben. Somehow, he's found a key to my flat."

"I know. I called in a favour after I put you in my car. Your locks will be changed by the morning."

"They will?" Her instant relief was tempered by stark awareness of the sorry state of her finances. "That's great, but...could they invoice me in instalments, maybe?"

He looked at her blankly.

"I'm grateful, of course," she babbled. "It's just, I hadn't budgeted for such an expense this month—"

"Don't worry about it."

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly—"

"Consider it an apology gift for your injuries this evening." He threw her a wry smile. "Those under my protection don't usually get so many bumps and bruises. Not without asking me first, anyway."

She wasn't sure what to make of his ambiguous quip, so decided to ignore it, pointing to the bottle he was holding. "What's that?"

"A painkiller, from my dimension."

His dimension? This night was getting weirder every moment.

“What are its ingredients?” she asked, trying to sound professional.

“I have no idea. It kills pain and expedites healing, that’s all I know. Do you not want it?”

Years of nursing experience, not to mention self-preservation and logic, told her that under no circumstances should she take this unnamed, unknown liquid offered by a strange monster. But her ankle hurt, her nettle stings were itchy and sore, and her head was still throbbing from the earlier scuffle with Ben. She was frightened, in shock, and exhausted both physically and emotionally.

After a moment’s more hesitation, she held out her hand.

“Not too much,” he warned her as he passed it over. “It’s powerful stuff. Half a spoonful should be plenty.”

Pouring the clear, viscous liquid on to the spoon, she caught a whiff of aniseed and fresh mint. Before she could second-guess herself, she gulped it down, the tangy liquid clagging at the back of her throat and making her swallow several times.

“I suppose you’d like a shower?” he asked.

“Oh, my goodness, yes please.” She was cold, wet, reeking of bog, and fairly sure there was hay in her hair—along with other cow-related things.

Moments later, she found herself once again pressed against his furry chest as he carried her through the dark hallway beyond the living room. Being close to him felt weird. Fear was present, but so was something else. Something that made butterflies come to life in her stomach. Something she didn’t want to analyse.

The shower room was immaculately clean, with pale yellow tiles, modern white units, and a floral smell tinged with bleach. There was no bath, but the shower cubicle in the corner looked modern and spacious. She glanced around as Severin put her down. Did he own nothing of his own? Nothing to add a modicum of his own personality? The

questions hovered on the tip of her tongue. She forced them away. It wasn't her business.

Severin slid open the shower door as she leaned against the sink, stretching out her left leg tentatively.

“Can you manage on your own?” He was already edging away, making it clear what he wanted her answer to be.

What would he do if she said no? Hop in the shower with her? His fur would get drenched. Would he go all fluffy and poufy when he dried? She blinked and shook her head. Her mind was wandering. Must be the exhaustion catching up with her.

“I'll be fine,” she replied.

“Good. Leave your clothes outside the door. I'll wash them for you.”

She couldn't help but smile at the image of the huge, powerful monster doing something so domestic. “Do you also offer an ironing service?”

His muzzle twisted in a tiny smile. “You'd be surprised.”

They stared at each other. Then he shook himself and grasped the door handle. “I'll leave you to it.”

Freya undressed with haste, wrapping a thick white towel around herself before tossing her clothes into the hallway. The tiger was nowhere to be seen, and she ignored an odd iota of disappointment as she closed the door.

It took her a while to figure out the shower unit, which was weird as it was a straightforward design with an on/off switch and a rotating dial for the temperature. After studying it vacantly for a while, she came to her senses and pressed the button. Waiting until fingers of steam spread over the glass, she stepped in gingerly, mindful of her ankle, although it was hurting much less than earlier.

As the hot water streamed over her, she sighed in sheer relief. Twigs, leaves, and hay fell from her hair and body, and

she huffed an embarrassed chuckle at how dishevelled she must have appeared in front of the hot monster.

Hot monster? Oh no. Best to lock that thought away with the rest of her repressed feelings. Snorting a laugh, she set to work on her hair.

After washing and conditioning with a sandalwood-scented duo, she picked up the shower gel bottle and gave it a sniff. It smelled deliciously spicy, with a hint of citrus. It took longer than expected to wash herself with it though. She kept getting distracted, drifting off into space before returning to reality with a start.

When she was finally clean, she stared at the bottle, wondering why the letters on the label were dancing in front of her vision like a cartoon come to life.

The bottle slipped out of her hand, dropping with a splash to the cubicle floor and making her jump. She couldn't help her giggle as she stared at it.

"You've been in there for ages. Everything okay?" Severin sounded distorted through the glass, and she spotted his furry head peering around the bathroom door.

"Yup," she called, bending to reach for the bottle. "Everything is normal and not at all weird, stranger who kidnapped me and then *poofed* into a monster. Just need to get this naughty shower gel...whoops..."

The world swirled, sending her staggering sideways. She slipped down the tiles, landing with a bump on her bottom. A faint jolt of pain echoed through her ankle, but barely enough to register. The shower water cascaded over her face and she blew it out her mouth, coughing.

"For crying out loud." His voice sounded closer than before. She peered through the steamed-up glass at his large form.

"Excuse me, I am naked at the moment," she pointed out.

The door slid open and she shivered, crossing her arms over her chest as the steam escaped. It was tricky to move her

gaze, which for some reason was fixated on his impressive chest. Eventually, she reached his face.

“Hello,” she chirped. “Fancy seeing you here.”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you doing?”

“Just having a rest.” A giggle burst out of her, and she covered her face. “Could you shut the door? You’re letting out all the heat.”

He gave a deep sigh. “Looks like I misjudged the painkiller dose. Come on.”

She wasn’t sure what happened next. She barely blinked once, then she was back in his arms, wrapped in her fluffy white towel and being carried again.

She couldn’t drag her gaze away from him as he strode down the hallway. He seemed less intimidating than earlier, even with the monstrous fangs protruding from his mouth. His thick hide was damp in places, from where he’d picked her up. The sandy-coloured fur on his face looked softer than the rest of his body. His ears were small and rounded, and his almond-shaped eyes gleamed like emerald-flecked gold in the dim light. His nose was flat and almost heart shaped. Cute. Very cute.

He stopped dead with such force, she wobbled in his arms, clutching his fur to steady herself. It took her a moment to realise the massive monster was now staring at her, looking stunned.

“Did you just boop me?”

She blinked. “Um...no?”

“You just touched my nose and whispered ‘boop.’”

“Oh.” She looked blankly at her outstretched index finger. “Then yes, probably.”

Severin opened his mouth to speak—giving her a good view of the rest of his sharp teeth in the process—then shook his head and strode into motion again. She fought back another giggle, which cut off when he shouldered a door open to reveal

a king-size bed on the other side of the room, the pale cream covers turned down invitingly.

The bed sat between two windows with closed wooden blinds. A large canvas print of a windmill was fixed above the headboard. The other furniture consisted of a wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a small dressing table with a stool seat. Painted off-white, a lighter colour than the beige carpet, the bedroom had the same vibe as the living room: simple, modern, and nondescript.

“Your clothes aren’t dry yet.” He placed her on the bed, crouching by her side to help lift her injured leg into place. “There’s a shirt and a pair of boxers here for you, as a temporary measure.”

Shuffling back, Freya studied her ankle. The swelling had reduced, and there was hardly any pain at all. The cut on her head didn’t hurt anymore either and her nettle stings were better too, the angry red rashes of earlier faded to pale pink marks. She touched the raised bumps in wonder. “There must be an antihistamine in that medicine of yours. I’d love to know what else it contains.”

His eyes sparked like a lit match and he averted his gaze, a sudden growl escaping from him.

“Wow, okay.” She grimaced. “Trade secret, I guess.”

His tail twitched against the carpet. “Put the shirt on, Freya. Or at the least, pull your towel up.”

Oh shit. The towel had almost fallen off her upper body, and her chest was on show. She hid her flinch as she covered herself. Okay, he wasn’t happy about this bizarre fated mate situation and who could blame him, but she’d worked hard to raise her confidence since splitting with Ben. She may not be a supermodel, but she didn’t deserve the apparent disgust emanating from Severin.

“Sorry to repulse you,” she muttered. “Hope I didn’t put you off your dinner.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

She sniffed, rubbing her ankle. “You’re the one needing smelling salts just because I accidentally flashed you my tits, which are quite nice to look at, by the way.”

“Nice?” He glared. “They are fucking spectacular. The most beautiful tits I’ve ever seen, and all I want to do is to hold you down and lick every inch of you until you beg me to...dammit.” He emphasised his curse with a vigorous shake of his head. “I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight. I pride myself on my control, believe it or not.”

Hazy, tentative desire rose inside her at his words, as warm swirls of heat rolled through her veins. She *wanted* this monster. She wanted to see him lose control. She wasn’t afraid anymore, and the confusing fated mate situation didn’t seem to matter either, not at that moment.

Say something. Flirt with him. Be cool and sexy.

She licked her dry lips, drawing a complete and utter blank as the silence stretched between them. No doubt tomorrow, she’d think of something coy and witty. By then, of course, it would be far too late. She continued staring at him mutely, cursing herself and her awkwardness.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Dammit, those wide eyes of yours could bring a titan to its knees. Outright torture has nothing on tonight. Get dressed. Your sister is on her way.”

“You called Evelyn?”

He nodded. “After the shitty joke fate played on us, I didn’t have a choice. I need you out of here, before I make things even more complicated than they are already. Not to mention there’s something you’re not aware of and for once I’m trying to be the good guy...”

She reached up and touched his mouth. His eyes widened, but he didn’t pull away as she traced his fangs with her fingertips. The oversized canines were smooth and cool to the touch, like they had been carved out of pure marble.

“Sometimes,” she said, her voice shaking, “men who call themselves good guys are not very good at all. In fact,

they're quite often very, very bad.”

“Indeed?” His eyes glittered. “Then you should know better than to tease one like you're doing now.”

An iota of embarrassment flickered to life inside her. She drove it out of her mind. Whether it was the unknown painkiller emboldening her, the shock of the night's events, or the way this captivating monster watched her like he wanted to gobble her up, she didn't know, but she was so tired of overthinking, worrying, and never speaking her damn mind.

With daring she never imagined in a million years, she leaned until her lips hovered millimetres away from his muzzle. “What if I don't know better?”

His gaze darkened. “Don't tempt me, princess. Now do as you're told and get dressed.”

He rose, and her rush of dismay was so powerful, she fought the urge to clutch at him. A sudden recollection of the way he'd pounced on her earlier made her gasp, and before she could second-guess herself, she stood up and started running.

Chapter Six

Freya barely made it five paces before the tiger was upon her in a rush of primal speed. Spinning her to face him, he pinned her to the bedroom door with enough force to make it rattle. She cried out as he forced her hands above her head. His fur tickled her bare skin, and she realised she'd dropped the towel in her rush across the room and was stark naked, utterly defenceless. She could feel his ragged breathing as their heartbeats thumped in unison.

Straining against his grip did nothing, he was as solid and immovable as a mountain. Fear and desire licked at her nerves as his burning gaze dropped lower, surveying her body hungrily. Transferring his grip on her hands to one paw, he wrapped the other paw around her neck.

“What,” he hissed, “did I just say about tempting me?”

She couldn't answer, words dying in her throat as his sharp claws curled over her skin.

“If things were different, I'd put you over my knee for such wayward behaviour.” His claws curved down to caress her breasts. “I'd spend the entire night fucking the disobedience out of you. Listening to you whimper that you're sorry each time I brought you to the peak. But I can't *do* that, can I? Not with this damn bond hanging over us, and your sister arriving any moment.”

“Please,” she gasped, her body thrumming with need. “Please, Severin.”

His deep growl reverberated all the way to her core. “Say my name again.”

“Severin...”

A noise of possessive pleasure emanated from him as he finally released her hands and lowered his furry head. His rough tongue flicked over her aching nipples, and she gasped.

“A taste,” he muttered against her chest, as if he were talking to himself. “Just a taste, to take the edge off. Nothing

more.”

His fangs grazed her skin as he sucked her nipple into his mouth. She closed her eyes, clutching the thick pelt on his shoulders, encouraging him closer. *This* was what she wanted. What she needed. His tongue swirling over her sensitive skin, the edge of pain as his sharp teeth scraped against her. His paws stroking her ribs down to her hips and curving round her inner thighs, pulling them apart until she widened her stance. When his mouth left her breasts, she huffed a protest, which he ignored. As he crouched to lick his way over her belly and beyond, her eyes opened wide.

Curling his paws around her backside, he nuzzled into the apex of her thighs.

“Just a taste,” he repeated, the greediness in his voice making her quake.

She shied away from his mouth, shock and uncertainty clearing the haziness from her mind.

He looked up, cocking his head to the side questioningly. “No?”

She swallowed. “I don’t...I just...it’s not something I...”

The astonishment on the monster’s face was almost comical. “Don’t tell me you’ve never had your pussy eaten before?”

He was painfully blunt. She shook her head. Ben was the only man she’d ever been with, and he had gone down on her once, before they were married. When she’d failed to come after a few minutes, he’d gotten huffy, declaring it wasn’t something he’d repeat if she didn’t appreciate it. She’d asked him one more time, on their wedding night in fact. His ice-cold anger in response had shocked her to her core, as he accused her of making him feel inadequate. She’d never dared ask again.

Severin’s expression softened, even as an anticipatory smile spread across his face. “Poor neglected princess. Let me show you what you’ve been missing.”

He didn't wait for any further acquiescence. Instead, he bent his head, and set to work.

He was gentle at first, lapping at her slit lazily like he had all the time in the world. Freya closed her eyes, her breath exhaling on a shuddering sigh. The room closed in around her, her focus zeroing in on the monster kneeling in front of her with his mouth between her thighs. He knew exactly what he was doing; how to use his rough, sandpaper-like tongue with absolute skill. Where to touch lightly and gently; where to lick long and slow, teasing and thorough.

Her body came alive, pulsing with intensity as he worked her. The noises emanating from her didn't even sound human, and she didn't care. Nothing had ever felt like this. She never wanted it to end. It didn't matter that her knees were buckling, threatening to give out on her. All that mattered was the teasing rasp of his tongue, curling up and around her clit with languid expertise.

"You're gonna collapse in a minute," he murmured against her skin. "We can't have that, can we?"

He rose, lifting her effortlessly. Startled, she grasped his shoulders, then yelped as he tossed her on to the bed. She collapsed on her back, dizzy and breathless. Her vision blurred as he crawled above her. He was smirking, she could tell that much.

"What a fun little plaything." He jerked her thighs apart. "So wet. So breakable."

A flush of heat warmed her cheeks as he returned to her pussy. She felt a gentle bite on her inner thigh, and she moaned, slick and damp and yearning. He could say what he wanted, do what he wanted. She was at his mercy, her legs wantonly spread, her hands flung over her head, grasping at the sheets. She arched as he sucked on her clit, his fangs rubbing against her tender skin. Her muscles spasmed, her rhythmic movements intensifying as the promise of sweet release drew nearer.

He lifted his head.

“No!” Her keening cry was ignored as he withdrew, his lips and teeth glistening with her juices.

“I’m sorry, princess. You were so close.”

“Please!” Her hips jerked desperately as every fibre of her body screamed in frenzied anguish.

He wasn’t even looking her way anymore, his narrow-eyed gaze fixed on the bedroom door.

“Don’t you dare barge in here,” he shouted.

Dazed shock rippled through her as the tiger rose.

“Housekeeping!” A teasing, unfamiliar voice came from the hallway, followed by the jiggling of the door handle.

Reality crashed back full force as the tiger bounded to the door with a bloodcurdling roar. He barely gave her a moment to cover herself with the bedsheets, before yanking it open and revealing their unexpected visitor.

Her monster had been joined by another. And this one had wings.

Chapter Seven

With shaking hands, Freya tucked the bedclothes around her as she stared at the tall, sinewy stranger in the doorway. He looked like a cross between an eagle and a man, with a hooked beak instead of a mouth. Brown wings were tucked against his back, a large tail fanned out behind him, and creamy-brown feathers ran from his shoulders up to his head. He had wickedly sharp talons in the place of hands and feet, and his muscled thighs were encased in a pair of well-worn, olive-coloured khaki shorts.

“Haven’t you ever heard of knocking?” Severin’s question was delivered with a snarl. “How did you get in here, anyway?”

“And hello to you,” the newcomer replied cheerfully. “Apologies for the interruption. I didn’t realise you’d be so distracted. As to how I got in, you left the front door ajar.”

Severin blinked. “I did?”

“Yup.” The eagle’s golden eyes danced with amusement. “Distracted is the word. Got yourself in a bit of a pickle, have you, Sevvv?”

“I hate that damn nickname, Jax.”

“A nickname is the least of your troubles right now. Have you explained the situation to the girl?”

“She knows.”

“What? And she *doesn’t* want a relationship with a taciturn, cantankerous furball?” The eagle winked at her. “Just one night will do, eh?”

Freya had no idea what to say, but she liked the way Jax was grinning, if twisting his beak in such a way could be called a grin. He seemed nice. Cheerful. Less intense than her tiger, who was glaring at him like he wanted to rip him into pieces. She gave the eagle a shy smile, and he chuckled in response.

Severin stepped in between them, blocking her view. “Where’s Evelyn?”

“Almost here. She told me to fly ahead and stop you from dragging her sister down the metaphorical aisle, or something along those lines. I said she didn’t need to worry, because your control is always impeccable. Was I wrong?”

Severin’s shoulders slumped. “Possibly.”

The eagle whistled. “Interesting. The girl doesn’t seem too worried.”

“I’ve had a painkiller to help my ankle,” Freya said helpfully. “I think it made all this kerfuffle a bit easier to handle.”

“Your ankle? I thought you hurt your head.” Jax turned back to Severin. “You broke her already?”

“He didn’t break me. I tripped on a molehill in the bull paddock.”

The eagle blinked at her over Severin’s shoulder. “If that’s a euphemism, it’s beyond even my understanding.”

A door slammed elsewhere in the house.

“Freya?” Evelyn’s shout echoed around the walls. “Jax? Severin? Someone better answer me, before I start smashing up the place—”

“In here, my feisty love,” the eagle called. “Your sister is safe. Sevvy has taken up close and personal care of her.”

Another growl from Severin, and another chuckle from Jax, then Evelyn emerged from the hallway.

“You absolute prick!” With an enraged bellow worthy of the bull from earlier, Evelyn launched herself at Severin. “I trusted you, and you do *this*?”

Evelyn’s blonde curls whipped around her head and her hazel eyes flashed fire as she shoved the astonished tiger with both hands. “You tricked her into some kind of mystical bond! How could you, Severin? How *could* you?”

Despite her fury, she barely made him move. To his credit, Severin kept his paws at his sides, although his claws were unsheathed and his tail was swishing angrily. Freya couldn't stop staring at it as it swung back and forth, back and forth...

She must have spaced out for a second, because she missed some of the argument. When she came to, Severin was speaking.

"I did not do it on purpose." He sounded like his teeth were clenched. "I left my dimension to avoid this *exact* situation. I don't want a mate any more than your sister does, you infuriating little harpy."

"Name-calling, really?" The eagle's tone became soothing. "Let's all calm down, shall we?"

Curving his talons over Evelyn's shoulder, he murmured in her ear. Freya watched with wide eyes as her brash, cavalier sister relaxed and leaned heavily against Jax.

"Fine," she said grumpily. "One problem at a time. You said she was injured. Freya, are you okay?"

Oh hell. Freya's bottom lip wobbled, and her throat grew tight. She was so used to deflecting those three little words, when she'd been with Ben. A cheerful acknowledgement, and her old mantra: deflect, divert, distract. Never reveal her misery, her loneliness, her regret. She should slam the same walls up tonight, but she couldn't do it. Whether it was the painkiller, the shock, her utter exhaustion, or being denied an incredible release just moments ago—her emotions bubbled up like lava, and she burst into tears.

"Freya..."

Severin's voice, tinged with concern, sounded like it came from far away. She hardly registered her sister, who ushered the two monsters out of the room, cussing like a sailor as she did so before slamming the door behind them and bustling over to her.

Freya felt like she was in a dream as Evelyn helped her don the white shirt and blue cotton boxers. Normally, her sister

was the chatty one. This time it was Freya herself, babbling about the events of the night: the rose Ben had left for her and his brawl with Severin; the bull paddock escapade; Severin getting stuck in monster form and his revelation about their predicament. She admitted that Ben's stalking had been happening for months, how afraid she felt, how helpless.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Evelyn's demand was gentle. "I get why you didn't go to the police, in case Ben somehow turned the tables on you. I wouldn't put it past him, the malicious little creep. But you could have confided in me, at least."

Freya sniffed, wiping her eyes on the shirtsleeves. "I didn't want to worry you. I didn't want to be a burden."

"You're my sister. You could never be a burden. I wish you'd told me."

"Like you told me about Jax?" Freya said pointedly.

Her sister squirmed. "That's different. How was I supposed to work it into conversation? 'Hey, wanna meet my new boyfriend? He's got feathers!'"

Freya bit her lip against a giggle. "Can you imagine what mum would say if you introduced them?"

"I admit, I've considered it." Evelyn gave her a wicked grin. "It would be worth it, just to see her face."

The sisters burst out laughing at the idea of their disapproving mother meeting Jax. Freya's laugh became a huge yawn as fatigue hit her full force, and without realising what she was doing, she clambered under the fresh-scented sheets and snuggled underneath them. She was wearing *his* shirt, *his* boxers. Going to sleep in *his* bed. It felt right. Dangerously so, but she was too tired to probe her thoughts any further.

"Severin told me to take you home," Evelyn said softly, "but screw it, you're exhausted. We'll stay here tonight and I'll drive you home in the morning. We can also devise a plan to get you out of this situation. Okay?"

Freya forced herself to nod.

“Sleep now,” she mumbled. “Deal with sexy monster in the morning.”

She drifted into slumber to the sound of her sister’s warm, knowing words.

“Yeah, I’ve been *there*.”

Chapter Eight

Leaning against the bed's headboard, Freya blew on the steaming cup of tea in her hands. Sitting opposite her with her legs crossed, Evelyn did the same to her own mug. A plate of rustic, thick-sliced bacon sandwiches sat between them, courtesy of Evelyn who had ventured out to buy them from a café in the local village. Every so often, a clawed hand would appear as Jax, who was lounging on the dressing table stool, leaned in for another round. The three of them had been talking for a few minutes, after Freya awoke from a dreamless slumber.

Late morning sunlight streamed through the gaps in the blinds and the scent of honeysuckle drifted in from the open window, along with the sound of birdsong. Finches and sparrows chirruped to each other, as blackbirds trilled their melodies and woodpigeons cooed their familiar refrain. A tractor chugged in the distance, and a cow lowed nearby. Perhaps it was the bull she'd met last night. Hopefully, Severin hadn't scared him too much.

"I can't believe I slept for so long." She sipped her tea, closing her eyes as the warm, soothing brew slipped down her throat. "I'm normally up with the larks, same as you."

"You were dead to the world each time I came to check on you," Evelyn replied. "I figured letting you sleep was the best option, especially for your ankle."

Freya wiggled her leg. "It feels much better. So does my head. I should be okay to go to work tomorrow, although I'm glad it's Sunday today. Wait. Aren't *you* supposed to be at work?"

"It's okay. Cleo gave me the day off."

"She did?" Freya stared. "What did you tell her?"

"The truth."

Evelyn grinned at Freya's shock, as Jax chuckled softly.

“Cleo has a monster of her own,” her sister explained. “If Severin and Jax shocked you, wait until you meet Raukra.”

The thought of the quiet, unassuming Cleo, Evelyn’s best friend and the manager of the wildlife park where they worked, having a monster lover made Freya’s head hurt. “I can’t quite believe all this, you know.”

“I know how you feel,” Evelyn said. “I was the same after I caught Cleo and Raukra in a compromising position and met Jax afterward. This universe is so much bigger than most of us can comprehend. There are thousands of dimensions and just as many types of monsters, some travelling far and wide across the cosmos. Many of them hang out on Earth.”

“It’s your delectable human race, little wren,” Jax remarked. “We can’t get enough of you.”

Evelyn batted her eyelashes at him. “For obvious reasons.”

“Does Severin spend much time in his dimension?” Freya ventured. “He seemed to suggest otherwise last night.”

Evelyn and Jax glanced at each other.

“He lives mostly on Earth,” the eagle replied, his tone careful and even. “With frequent visits to other dimensions for work purposes, but he avoids his own. His people take the bonds of fate stuff seriously, unlike him. Of course, now, he’s *had* to sit up and take notice, and we’ve devised two potential solutions to resolve your current situation.”

“Jax,” Evelyn said in a warning tone.

“Two solutions,” Freya repeated. “What are they?”

“There’s just one, babe,” her sister answered. “One that’s feasible.”

“Which is?”

“Severin will leave Earth and stay the hell away from you.”

Freya blinked. “That seems simple enough. Is there nothing else to it?”

“Nope. Technically this fated bond will still be in place, but with the two of you in different dimensions, it won’t matter. You can continue your life as if you’d never met him.”

“And solution two is?”

“Not something you need to know, because it’s not an option.”

Evelyn’s tone brooked no argument as she rose abruptly, signalling the conversation was closed. Ben had used similar tactics to end discussions, and Freya tightened her hands around her mug.

“I know you’re trying to protect me,” she said, “but this isn’t the way. Ben turned me into a meek, frightened mouse who let him make every decision for me. I won’t ever let anyone control me that way again. Not even you. So, tell me the second solution, and I’ll decide which path to take.”

“Look, not even Severin is considering it,” Evelyn flared. “Jax suggested it, and Severin himself said it was out of the question.”

“I’m not sure why.” The eagle shrugged. “Makes perfect sense, to me.”

Evelyn looked daggers at Jax. “How does my sister being with a mercenary monster, one who once threatened to break my neck, in case you’d forgotten, make sense?”

A mercenary? Freya pursed her lips. So, he was paid to hurt people, even kill them. That was so callous, so cold. The exact opposite of the intense, protective tiger who took care of her last night.

“Tell me,” she said firmly. “I’m not leaving this room until you do.”

Jax glanced at Evelyn.

She grimaced and chewed her lip. “Fine. Tell her.”

“The second option,” Jax said, “is for you and Sev to finish what you started last night...”

Freya's cheeks heated. She couldn't look at either of them, keeping her eyes on her tea as the eagle continued.

"...enabling him to regain his human form, without completing the union. I'm not sure what it entails, but there's something that needs to happen after the sex, when he shifts back. He can just leave without doing that part, giving himself more options on where he can go than if he's trapped as a tiger. He could even stay on Earth—away from you—which would be preferable for him."

"But you don't owe him that." The anger in Evelyn's voice made it plain she had already argued this point. "You shouldn't feel obligated to sleep with him. This absurd situation isn't your fault."

Freya shook her head. "No. Although it's not his fault either."

"Are you saying it's an option?" the eagle asked.

"Especially as Severin has already discounted it," Evelyn added.

Ouch. Freya hid her wince at the implication that the tiger had rejected her. He seemed keen on her last night, so what had changed this morning? He swung back and forth like a pendulum, that bloody tiger. Her brain hurt, trying to make sense of it all. What a giant mess.

"I'd like to get dressed," she mumbled, deciding to avoid answering the question. "I should probably go home soon."

Evelyn and Jax left the room while Freya dressed in her nurse's uniform, which Severin, true to his word, had washed and dried overnight. He'd even managed to clean her running shoes; a couple of faint, stubborn grass stains the only proof of her night-time adventure.

He'd rescued her twice last night. For his troubles, he was stuck in monster form and exiling himself from Earth.

It seemed very unfair.

She stared at her reflection in the dressing table mirror, smoothing her hair into a semblance of neatness and wincing at the dark circles under her bloodshot blue eyes. Oh well. He'd seen her covered in cow dung last night, and still found her desirable enough to use his tongue on her.

Her sudden shiver almost sent her to her knees, and she clutched at the table so hard, her knuckles whitened. She'd been so close to orgasm, the remnants of it thrummed in her veins. It wouldn't take much to bring her back...

"Are you ready?" Evelyn peeped around the door.

Freya swallowed and nodded, hoping her arousal wasn't obvious as she followed her sister down the dim hallway. Their hollow steps echoed over the tiles, announcing their presence into the living room.

A hint of woodsmoke hung in the air, but the stove was unlit and the room felt cold and dead, as if an icy weight held it frozen in time. The blinds were drawn, allowing the barest hint of sunlight to filter through. Cover against prying eyes, presumably.

Oblivious to the sombre atmosphere, Jax reclined on the sofa with his clawed feet up on the coffee table and his chestnut-brown wings splayed out against the cushions. He quirked a smile at them, his gaze lingering appreciatively on Evelyn, who seemed too busy glaring at Severin to notice.

The big cat in question stood next to the hearth facing away from them. He was as motionless as a statue, his broad back poker straight, but the black tip of his tail was quivering. Freya couldn't take her eyes off him as she halted in the middle of the room.

"We're leaving now." Evelyn's voice sounded loud in the silence. "Jax, I'll see you later. Sev..." She hesitated.

"Just take her," Severin growled, without turning around.

Smarting from his dismissiveness, Freya resisted her sister's attempt to tug her into motion. "I'd like to talk to Severin alone first."

“Not a chance,” Evelyn snapped.

Freya glared. “What did I say in the bedroom?”

“Tough! I’m *not* leaving you alone with him.”

Freya threw Jax a pleading glance.

The eagle gave a deep sigh and stood up. “Come on, little wren. Let’s go and admire the fancy appliances in the kitchen.”

Evelyn crossed her arms. “No.”

“I wasn’t asking, love.” With that, he threw her over his shoulder.

Despite having a mouthful of feathers, Evelyn’s screech was loud enough to echo around the room. “What are you doing? Put me down, you dick!”

“Sorry, baby. You know he won’t hurt her, and they deserve a moment to talk. So, stop playing the protective big sister and come yell at me in the next room.”

Jax carried Evelyn out of the living room with her fuming on his shoulder. Even after he shut the door behind them, her ranting continued, but the door stayed closed, and Evelyn’s furious voice slowly faded as if Jax was distracting her in other ways.

Freya turned back to Severin, who was now staring at her in cool, silent question.

“Thanks for washing my clothes,” she said awkwardly.

He shrugged. “It was no bother.”

“We can have sex, if you want,” she blurted out.

At his raised brows, she continued, feeling like she was dying inside. “Not right this second, but before you leave. You’ll get your human form back afterward, correct? You won’t be trapped as a sabertooth anymore.”

Severin rolled his eyes. “That damn eagle and his big mouth. I already told him it’s unlikely to be an option.”

“Why not? I’m a decent person. It’s not fair that you’ve ended up in this predicament for rescuing me, so if I can assist you in return—”

“Bullshit. That’s not why you’re doing this. You just want the orgasm you were denied last night.”

Blood rushed to her cheeks with such speed, she felt faint. “I’m trying to help—”

“You want my tongue working your clit again and my cock deep inside you. You want one hot night with a big bad monster before he disappears forever. Admit it.”

Any answer she tried to make died in her throat as he loomed over her, his gaze boring into hers. Slowly, he trailed one unsheathed claw across her lower lip. She fought back a moan as he spoke again.

“But there’s something you don’t know, princess. Let’s see if you feel the same after you find out.”

Curving his huge paw around her wrist, he brought it below his waist, and the truth was revealed.

His cock poked through the thick fur on his groin, fully erect and very large, at least to her inexperienced eyes, but that wasn’t what made her gasp. It was the myriad of protrusions, raised bumps that looked like tiny barbs, sitting flush on his skin from the base of his cock to the halfway point. He held her hand in place on the smooth, warm head as his voice came again.

“This is the reality, human. This is what it means to be fucked by me. I will wreck you, Freya. I’ll plunge inside you and lock in place until your pussy is so full of my cum that it streams down your thighs. You’ll be mine to use however I want, my little plaything until I choose to let you go. It will feel so raw, so intense; it will ruin sex with anyone else for you, forever. Do you understand now?”

His punishing grip loosened, and she yanked her hand away. Stumbling back, she fled from the room and didn’t look back.

Chapter Nine

The good thing about working in a busy medical centre: there was no time to daydream about monsters or their appendages. As was usual on a Monday, every appointment slot was full, and every patient needed Freya's undivided attention. She had a long and intense online training course, too, as part of her studies toward becoming a paediatric specialist. Her ankle, wrapped in a support bandage and checked several times by her concerned colleagues, held up well. Although, by the time she finished that evening, she could hardly feel her feet anyway.

The surgery was situated on the outskirts of Westhorpe, with a housing development on one side and a small business park on the other. It was gone 6.30PM and the day had cooled enough to make her grateful for the thick navy cardigan she wore over her uniform. Blackbirds and robins belted out their lyrical evening melodies as she trudged along the pavement with cars driving past in both directions. A fluffy grey squirrel raced across the road, chittering at her before darting up a nearby beech tree. Soft pink blossoms drifted from a row of sweet-smelling cherry trees further up the road, swirling into the air and carried away by a gentle breeze.

Freya bit back a yawn as she reached the bus stop, thankful that she didn't have to cycle. Evelyn, having stayed the night after driving her home, had given her a lift to work in the morning. She'd offered to collect her, too, but Freya declined, citing that she didn't want to inconvenience her sister any further.

Evelyn had given her a hard stare and reminded her of their new rule: no more secrets, monster-related or otherwise, and no more facing things alone. Touched but insistent, Freya promised she would text Evelyn the moment she got home. She also agreed, that if Ben somehow found the guts to cause issues even after Severin sent him packing, she would go to the police. Both sisters concurred that Ben's reign of terror needed to end.

She owed her mother a call, too. Freya hid her grimace, leaning against the bus stop frame to take the weight off her legs. Phone calls with Ada Mulholland were full of passive aggressiveness about her daughters not visiting often enough, pointed comments about the futility of their love lives, and bitter reminders of how their estranged father no longer spoke to them.

Maybe that call could wait for another time.

The bus was mercifully on time, although as usual it was packed with people and carried an overwhelming aroma of feet and sweat. Freya found herself near the back, wedged next to an old woman who smelled like coffee and cigarettes and kept jabbing her bony elbow into Freya's hip. She bit her lip and said nothing, the idea of breaking the hallowed silence of the daily commute too much for her anxious heart. She popped in her headphones instead, selecting a calming instrumental soundtrack and a high volume that drowned out the noises of the bus.

She stared out the grimy window as the vehicle chugged into town, rocking from side to side. The sun was sinking behind the rows of terraced houses, sending orange and red streaks across the pale blue sky. Westhorpe was a bustling market town with a history dating back to Roman times. Its style was a peculiar combination of old and new, with narrowed cobbled streets and ancient crooked buildings situated amongst modern offices and chain shops. A popular spot for tourists, there were lots of independent gift shops too, and a gratifying number of cafes, restaurants, and pubs.

As the bus trundled over the small arched bridge leading to the centre of town, Freya gave a wistful smile at the sight of the river below. One of the few things she missed from her marriage was going out on Ben's boat, the *Golden Life*. Being out on the shimmering water, watching the wildlife and feeling the wind blowing in her hair had given her some happy memories. Maybe when Ben got bored of torturing her, she could get back on the water on her own. Perhaps even take some sailing or paddle boarding lessons. Talking of lessons, it

would be great to learn to drive, too. No more buses, cycle commutes, or relying on lifts from overprotective sisters.

Yeah, lots to plan. She just needed to deal with a vicious ex and an unwanted monster mate first.

Her monster mate. Closing her eyes, she let out a deep sigh. She'd done so well today, *not* thinking about him or what he'd shown her last night, but there was little else to distract her on the commute.

She couldn't believe what she'd seen. If by some miracle he didn't rip her insides into pieces, surely it would still hurt too much to be enjoyable? How could it be the best sex she would ever have? He'd said it with such arrogance and certainty, too. It would have been annoying if it hadn't been so intriguing.

Uh-oh. Nope. Not intriguing. She couldn't think like that, not that it mattered. She'd spent most of the previous night breathless and awake, wondering if he'd appear at her door. It had been for naught. He must have chosen to leave, trapped in his monster form forever. He might at least have given her a day to mull over his penis-shaped revelation.

Her headphones died just as the bus arrived at her stop in the market square. Shoving them into her pocket, she escaped down the steps, throwing a murmured thank you in the driver's direction. The shops surrounding the square were closed for the night already, their colourful shutters padlocked shut. The skies darkened to indigo as she headed along the street, the glowing sunset vanishing behind thick grey clouds. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The pavements cleared of people as the air thickened and the smell of approaching rain intensified. Freya hastened on, willing the mounting storm to hold off.

The first few spots of rain fell as she scurried into a cobbled alleyway connecting the square to the road behind it. The narrow passage was nestled between a three-storey brick building and the high stone wall of a churchyard. It didn't get much light at the best of times; now, it was a murky stretch of near darkness. The brick wall was adorned with faded graffiti,

mildew stains, and discarded wedges of gum. By contrast, the uneven stones of the old church wall were untouched, apart from patches of musty-smelling green moss amongst the gaps.

The church itself was hidden from sight by several huge yew trees on the other side of the wall, their branches creaking in the strengthening winds. Only the pointed steeple was in view, towering into the heavens, standing as firm in the gathering storm as it had for the last five hundred years.

“Come on, Mother Nature,” she muttered, scrunching her eyes as raindrops spattered on her face. “Give me a break.”

“Where’s the boyfriend? Abandoned you already?”

Oh *no*. She’d stopped using this route a few months ago, when she’d realised Ben was stalking her. It wasn’t the first time he’d waited for her outside the surgery then followed the bus in his car. Today, she’d been so lost in memories of the weekend’s events, she hadn’t thought twice about it. Stupid, so stupid.

Facing her ex, she worked to hide her shock. Ben’s right eye was swollen and ringed with a purple bruise, his cheek puffy and red. His left eye was cold, malicious, and fixed on her.

“He’s at home waiting for me,” she replied, trying to sound calm and collected.

“I’m surprised he hasn’t murdered you in your sleep. He looked dodgy as hell.”

He wasn’t the one breaking into my flat.

The words hovered unspoken on the tip of her tongue. She could never argue with him, not properly. He could shout louder. Argue better. Voice his points, however wrong, in such a confident way that even she ended up believing him. Even now, the impulse to lower her gaze submissively, to do whatever was needed to placate him and make him smile at her again, was strong enough to make her feel dizzy.

“Leave me alone.” She tried to sound assertive but it came out as a pleading whisper.

“Or what? You’ll send your fuck buddy to sort me out?”

Her laugh slipped out before she could stop it. “Looks like he already did.”

The slap came out of nowhere, his open hand connecting with her cheek with such force, the noise echoed around the stone walls. She staggered back, shock numbing the pain of the blow. As she turned to run, he shoved her against the church wall with enough force to make her cry out. The sharp stones dug into her back painfully as he pushed his forearm against her upper chest, holding her in place.

“You cold-hearted bitch,” he spat. “You think you can speak to me like I’m a piece of shit? You think I’ll accept my *wife* screwing another man?”

“Not your wife,” she choked, struggling in vain. “Not anymore.”

“You’ll always be my wife, Freya. We could be together forever if you stopped being so damn selfish...”

A bestial snarl rang around the alleyway, sending a flock of starlings bursting from the yew trees, their wings thrumming as they screamed out a warning. Freya had a bare second to see the utter shock on Ben’s face before he was flung away from her, hitting the opposite wall with a yelp.

As her ex slumped to the ground, Severin loomed over him, his tail whipping from side to side. Picking Ben up by his lapels, he hurled him down the alleyway.

His mouth twisted in horror, Ben scrambled away on his hands and knees. Dropping to all fours, Severin sprang across the expanse of cobbles and yanked him back by his ankles. His claws were unsheathed, and Freya heard a ripping sound as Ben’s trousers tore up to the knee. A high-pitched scream broke out of him as he strived to escape, pummeling Severin on the shoulders.

An evil chuckle came from the tiger as he released him. “Go on, boy. Try to run.”

With a desperate cry, Ben staggered away. He scarcely made it a few steps before Severin pounced, bringing him to the ground with such force, Ben's head whacked against the cobbles. As the tiger laughed again, Ben's pained groan turned into sobs.

"No, please," he wept. "Freya, help me!"

"Don't talk to her," Severin hissed. "Don't look at her. You're not fit to breathe the same air, let alone beg for her aid."

"Please, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, *please!*"

Severin made a disgusted sound. "Pathetic. Hardly worth killing."

Ben's pitiful scream became a choking gurgle as the tiger pressed on his chest, his teeth bared.

Freya took an involuntary step, and Severin swivelled to look at her. He looked utterly monstrous, crouched over a defenceless human with his claws unsheathed, teetering on the cusp of death and bloodshed.

She had to stop this. Whatever Ben had done, she couldn't watch him die. She tried to speak, but the words dried up in her throat as she stared at the tiger.

Severin studied her with narrowed eyes. Turning back to Ben, he leaned in, his wicked fangs scraping against the man's cheek.

"Consider this your final warning. Touch her again, and I'll rip you apart. She's mine, boy. *Mine.*"

With that, he released him. Ben's face was white as a sheet, his one good eye bloodshot and wild. With a hysterical shriek, he clambered to his feet and stumbled away.

Freya's triumph at watching him bolt like a coward changed to consternation as the tiger faced her. Knots twisted in her stomach; her questions about what he was doing there melting away. She couldn't move, couldn't speak. Charged particles between them sizzled, along with the echo of his earlier words.

She's mine.

He'd fought for her, and now, if the look on his face was any indication, he was going to claim his prize.

With a muted roar, he pounced. Gathering her up in his powerful arms, he leapt over the church wall, leaving the alleyway empty and silent behind them.

Chapter Ten

Severin nuzzled into Freya's neck even before her feet touched the ground. They were under an ancient yew tree in the far corner of the churchyard, hidden in the shadows of the boughs stretching out above them. The rain was beating down hard now, the leafy canopy offering little in the way of protection, but she didn't care. Fallen leaves crunched under her feet as he pushed her against the trunk, her bag slipping off her shoulder and thudding to the ground.

She closed her eyes, tipping her head back to offer him her throat. He licked her hungrily, savouring her pounding pulse as it were a delicious delicacy, his heavy breath warming her skin. Running her hands over the coarse fur covering his powerful biceps, she exhaled in a shuddering sigh. No one could hurt her when she was in his arms. No one would dare. She barely knew him, yet somehow, it was as if she was back in the arms of a long-lost lover.

His claws curved over her chest, and a sudden jerk made her open her eyes. Her cardigan hung off her arms, shredded to pieces. The tunic underneath was torn as well, revealing her lacy white bra and half of her stomach in peekaboo rips. A hazy thought about being a butterfly emerging from a cocoon crossed her mind, even as she shivered and crossed her arms.

His disapproving growl made her freeze, then his huge paws pushed her hands out of the way and curved over her breasts. She arched into his touch, her nipples puckering against her bra. An impatient huff escaped him and he grasped the rips in her tunic, ripping it in half in one powerful motion.

She watched numbly as the remains of it slithered down her body to gather at her waist, just as his claws tightened on her bra. With a jerk so powerful it almost lifted her off her feet, he tore it off and tossed it away.

His hot, eager mouth was on her in an instant, his tongue rasping greedily over her nipples. She clasped his head against her, the knots and lumps of the tree bark digging into

her back with pleasurable force. He grazed his teeth over her collarbone and across her throat, sending shivers racing through her body.

“Mine,” he rasped. “All. Fucking. Mine.”

Her stomach clenched as she felt something hard thrusting against her navel. Her mind spinning, she reached between their searing bodies and curled her hand around the head of his cock.

His breath hissed in over her juddering pulse. She tightened her grip, a heady sense of power coming over her as he dropped his head on her shoulder. A rumbling noise confused her until she recognised it.

He was purring. This huge, deadly monster was purring at her touch. What else would he like, this tiger of hers?

She dropped to her knees before she could second-guess herself, the fallen leaves soft enough to cushion her landing. Close up, she could see that the barbs running from the base of his cock to the midway point were small, curved hooks, each one lying flush against his skin. Together, they looked like coarse, ridged bumps, like a cat’s tongue. She imagined them inside her, locking in place so she couldn’t get away, and she shivered again.

Stroking them gently, she watched in fascination as they swelled in place, growing larger and more protuberant, the hooks rising from their flush position to stand to attention. The sheen of liquid caught her eye, as her fingertips started to tingle. Were the barbs secreting something? She’d never seen anything like it.

She licked the tip of his cock, where a single droplet of moisture glistened. A choking roar was the tiger’s response before the noise cut off, as if he’d forced himself into silence. His paws were clenched by his side, his tail swishing with enough force to ruffle her hair.

She licked again, savouring the salty taste. She’d disliked doing this for Ben, who had expected it on tap,

treating it as something he was entitled to. She'd hated getting on her knees for someone who didn't appreciate it, but she'd been too scared to ever say no. This was different, as she swirled her tongue around the head and traced her tingling fingertips over the barbs. Glancing up through her lashes, she almost grinned at the tiger's dumbfounded expression. He hadn't expected this, not at all. He deserved some attention, her brave monster.

She went back to it, working him with her lips and tongue. She didn't dare take him fully into her mouth in case she impaled herself—and wouldn't *that* be an interesting call to emergency services, caught on a monster's dick like a fish on a hook—but it still felt incredible, holding sway over such a powerful creature, sensing his coiled tension as he tried to control himself. He wanted to fuck her mouth hard, she could feel it. He stroked her head with one heavy, shaking paw, like he was on the verge of pushing her down. Wind gusted around them as she continued her attention until a crash of thunder made her jump and release him.

With another muffled roar, the tiger yanked her upward, pulled her away from the trunk, then twisted and threw her on the ground. She landed with a thump, leaves and twigs digging into her naked back. He crouched over her like he just brought her down in a hunt, his sharp teeth glinting in the darkness.

Trapped and helpless, she stared at him through hooded lashes, desire pulsing through her veins. She was his prize. His plaything. Whatever he wanted from her, he could have, as long as he didn't leave her. His cock pressed against her stomach and she arched her hips with a moan.

An emotion flashed in his eyes as he loosened his hold. Longing? Regret? She wasn't sure. Before she could voice her disappointment, he grabbed her under the arms and flipped on to his back, pulling her with him in one smooth movement. She found herself on top of him, straddling his furry stomach with her mouth hanging open and her tunic bunched around her waist.

“Up,” he commanded.

She came to her senses as he tugged at her. Slowly, she crawled up his body toward his face. His soaked fur clung to her skin as she moved. He grasped her hips, lifting her lower body up until she took her weight on her knees in the soft mud. She couldn't make sense of his actions until she felt him tugging at her underwear and heard a distinctive tearing sound. His eyes gleaming, he ripped off her panties, tossing them away before pulling her down to sit on him again. Sliding her on to his muzzle, he held her in place, his exterior canines grazing her inner thighs. Even in the cold air, she felt her cheeks start to burn, as panic made her stomach twist. She'd never done this with a human, let alone a monster. What was she supposed to do?

Her chest caved and she almost retreated, then his tongue flicked out and her flush of embarrassment faded. The feel of him lapping at her pussy was a wicked, toe-curling delight, just like last night. It didn't matter that she didn't know what she was doing, because he definitely did. He licked with expert precision, teasing and massaging her clit in smooth, greedy strokes.

Oh gods, it was too much. Sensations buffeted her, sending her reeling. She needed something to hold on to. Arching her back, she clutched at her own hair with shaking hands as he lavished her with his tongue. Lightning ripped across the sky, illuminating their eerie surroundings then pitching them back into darkness. The looming shadows twisted into a searing fever dream where reality had no meaning, no prominence. Thunder crashed as she rode his face harder, her sweat mixing with the rain pounding from above.

The storm urged her on, her body wet and hot and desperate as he licked her, sucked her, and swirled his tongue around her clit. His deep, possessive noises blended with her whimpering cries as she ascended to the peak, then tipped over into sheer oblivion. Ecstasy tore through her veins, ripping his name from her throat in a gasping cry. Kaleidoscopic lights flared in front of her vision, sending her rocketing amongst the stars, delirious and abandoned.

When she finally came back to Earth, she had to work to remember how to breathe.

She eased back to sit on his juddering chest, remnants of pleasure quivering along her nerves as raindrops trailed over her skin and pattered on to him. His fur was drenched to the colour of burnished gold, the same as his eyes, which were full of possessive satisfaction.

Despite the rain, the storm, the memory of Ben's attack, she couldn't help but grin.

Chapter Eleven

She felt like a sleepwalker on the journey home. She vaguely remembered grabbing her bag and wrapping her ruined clothes around her before sneaking out of the churchyard. He'd murmured that he'd follow her home, but when she glanced around, there was no sign of him.

The storm left the streets quiet and empty of other pedestrians. The rain lessened to a gentle, soothing drizzle, lit up by streetlights dotted along the pavement. A mangy fox scurried across her path; a discarded takeout box clenched between its jaws. The occasional vehicle drove past her, powering through the puddles illuminated by their headlights. A large van even splashed her from her to toe. She was so wet already; it didn't seem to matter. Her legs were shaky and weak, her body protesting at having to move instead of basking in a post-orgasm glow.

After what felt like hours, she made it to her building, fumbling in her bag for the brand-new key that had been left with her neighbour the night before by Severin's locksmith. The locking system on her flat's door was more complex than the old one and it took her a while to get it open. She bolted it behind her, as Severin had instructed before she'd left the churchyard. Following the rest of his directions, she hurried to her back door in the kitchen and unlocked it before heading to her bedroom to change.

After drying off and throwing on a pair of pyjama bottoms and an oversized red t-shirt, she sat on the edge of her bed, her stomach in knots as she texted Evelyn in a daze to confirm she'd made it home. She didn't go into details. What was the point when she was still trying to comprehend them herself?

Her bedside light created distorted shadows on the pale pink walls. Rain pattered on her window in a soft, rhythmic melody. It accompanied the refrain spinning on repeat in her head: a monster had just given her the best orgasm of her life.

One she would remember forever, even if it never happened again.

A tiny creak from the kitchen door made her jump far more than it should. She waited, her heart in her mouth, as it clicked shut. Scurrying to the bedroom door, she yanked it open, stifling her shriek. He was right there in front of her, shadows curling around him like he belonged to the darkness.

Before she could say anything, he grasped her chin, lifting it so she met his eyes. For a wild moment, she thought he was going to kiss her, then he turned her face sideways and studied her cheek, where Ben had slapped her.

“I should have killed him.”

His tone was flat, matter of fact, as if he were talking about the weather instead of murdering someone. That was, well, monstrous. Depraved. Wicked, despite everything Ben had done. So why was her pulse fluttering and blood rushing to her centre? Why did she feel so safe, and protected?

“Were you following me?” she ventured.

Still scowling at whatever slight mark he could see on her face, he shook his head. “No. I pulled some strings with a contact yesterday and asked for a tracker to be placed on your ex’s car. When I saw he was camped out near your work, I figured he’d follow you home. Evelyn confirmed you’d be catching a bus so I checked for the most obvious area for him to accost you.”

“How did you get all the way from your house, and through the town, without being spotted?”

He shrugged. “Fields, rooftops, alleyways, back gardens. It’s easy enough to hide in this world; plenty of monsters who don’t have separate human forms manage it. Humans rarely see what they don’t believe exists in the first place.”

“Why did you come to help? After I ran out on you at your house, I assumed you’d left.”

“I had every intention of doing so. I was going to pass you details of the tracker, as proof of your ex’s harassment to

take to the police, if you chose. But when I found out he *was* following you, something took me over.” His voice dropped low. “The idea of him stalking you, believing he has a claim on you, I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t stay away.”

“Why?” she whispered. “Yesterday, you were adamant that you didn’t want a mate.”

“I don’t, but I can’t leave yet. Not without knowing you’re safe. This deep-seated desire to protect you...” He shook his head in apparent despair. “I can’t fight it, however much I hate it. So, I’ll stay here temporarily and watch over you until your ex has been neutralised, by human methods or otherwise.” A smile, albeit a small one, touched his lips. “And while I’m doing so, if you ever fancy sucking my dick or sitting on my face again, just say the word.”

With that, he left the bedroom, leaving her open-mouthed behind him.

Chapter Twelve

Freya was dreaming about sharp teeth and gleaming eyes when the drumming noise began. For a moment, she wavered on the eerie line between wake and sleep, the eyes in her dream flashing from yellowy-green to blood-red in time with the noises. Blinking, it took her a few moments to make sense of her surroundings. She was in her own bed, it was still pitch dark outside, and the noise was coming from...

Her front door.

Another loud rapping jerked her upright. Her phone said 1AM. Who would be knocking at that time?

“Anyone in?” a voice called from the hallway, sounding muffled. “Police.”

Leaping out of the bed, she yanked open her bedroom door and bit back a scream. Severin stood in the kitchen, his tail swishing and his stony gaze fixed on the front door.

“Hide,” she hissed.

He glanced at her. “Not a chance.”

“Ben must have called them,” she said through gritted teeth as she grabbed her dressing gown. “Unless you want to spend the rest of your life in a cage being studied by scientists, hide, and let me deal with this.”

She rushed across the flat before he could answer.

“One second,” she called, trying to sound calm as she fumbled with the lock, glancing back to ensure Severin had disappeared.

When she opened the door, she blinked. Two police officers, one tall and grizzled, the other short and baby-faced, stood on her doorstep. Weariness touched their stances, telling of a long shift. Her stomach flipped when she recognised the individual hovering behind them. Ben’s jaw was clenched, his arms tightly crossed. His trousers flapped below the knee

where Severin had ripped them, and his black eye looked even more swollen than before.

“Mrs Carmichael?” the taller officer asked.

She raised her chin. “Miss Mulholland, please. May I help you?”

“Mr Carmichael said you were attacked by some sort of animal earlier this evening,” the officer replied. “He insisted that we check on you. Is everything okay?”

“An animal,” Freya echoed, trying to sound confused. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“They don’t believe me.” Ben’s voice shook. “It *assaulted* me. You saw it. Tell them, Freya.”

She slow-blinked. “Are you all right? You’re not making much sense.”

Ben’s jaw dropped, his cheeks flushing scarlet. “You saw it, you lying bitch!”

“Mr Carmichael,” the younger police officer snapped.

“She was there, in the alley next to St Michael’s Church, with that thing. It was a lion, or a tiger! It *talked!*”

“Mr Carmichael,” the officer repeated, “please keep calm, or we’ll have to ask you to wait outside.”

He turned back to Freya. “Are you saying there was no attack, Miss?”

She took a deep breath. “The only animal who attacked me tonight is standing behind you.”

Both officers glanced at Ben, then the younger one spoke again. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“He’s my ex-husband, as you probably know, and has been harassing me for months. Earlier this evening, he followed me on my commute and when I refused to engage with him, he slapped me. I managed to run away. I’m not sure why he’s so dishevelled. Maybe he’s done it on purpose to give some credence to his little story.”

“She’s lying! It was a monster! It said she was his and called me boy, just like that prick did the other night...” Ben’s eyes widened. “Oh my god. It’s him, isn’t it? It’s that fuckboy of yours. *That’s* why I couldn’t find any info on him. He’s a freak, an alien or something!”

Freya forced herself to look blankly at the three men. “I’m not sure what he’s talking about. I entertained a male visitor the other night, which Mr Carmichael didn’t like when he was snooping around outside my home. However, I’m no longer seeing the gentleman in question. As to this ‘monster’ he’s talking about...” She flicked a sideways glance at Ben. “Perhaps my ex-husband needs a good night’s sleep. And to stay the hell away from me. Especially now I have proof that he’s been stalking me.”

Ben’s breath choked in his throat as the officers gave each other mirrored shrugs.

The older one sighed. “Sorry to have disturbed you, Miss Mulholland. We’ll leave you in peace. And if you’d like to lodge a formal complaint about Mr Carmichael’s behaviour and provide this proof of yours, please let us know.”

She inclined her head. “I’ll come to the police station tomorrow, after work.”

Even after she closed the door, she could hear Ben arguing with the policemen. He sounded so different than usual; his practiced charm replaced with incandescent rage. Eventually, after the older officer threatened to arrest her ex if he wasted any more of their time, the men’s voices faded.

Rubbing her temples, she leaned against the door. She’d done it. She’d stood up to Ben.

A broad grin spreading across her face, she skipped back to her bedroom. Severin was standing next to her bed, looking grumpy. She flung herself into his arms, getting a mouthful of thick fur in the process before leaning back to beam at him. “I did it! I gave him what for!”

His sullen expression melted away, and he gave her an approving smile. “Good girl.”

Oof, that epithet sent a quaking shiver right through her. She did her best to hide it, but if the knowing glint in his eyes was anything to go by, she didn't succeed. She eased back, trying not to notice his paws lingering around her waist.

“Would your contact be able to provide me with some tracker information before tomorrow evening?” she asked, trying to calm her pounding pulse. “I'd like it to form part of my complaint.”

“Of course.”

“It's probably not enough evidence to charge him with anything, but it will scare him into leaving me alone.” She exhaled. “I'm free. Almost free. Thanks to you.”

He huffed a small laugh. “Strange to be the actual good guy for once.”

“You're much more decent than you let on. No one truly heartless would have helped me the way you have.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, enough for Freya to bite her lip and glance at her bed. It suddenly looked incredibly inviting and big enough for two, even with one of them a large monster. From his darkening gaze, he was thinking the same thing. She opened her mouth to speak, not sure what would come out—and ended up yawning in his face.

Another laugh broke out of him. “All right. Back to bed. You can continue telling me how amazing I am another time.”

Tiredness washed over her and she trudged back to bed, fighting another yawn in the process.

“You really are bossy,” she mumbled as she snuggled under the covers.

“I am. Sweet dreams, Freya.”

Sleep didn't come as quickly as she expected, probably because there was a large tiger-shaped outline looming in her bedroom doorway. After a few minutes of studying—well, ogling—him, she cleared her throat.

“Severin?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to stand there on guard all night?”

“That’s the plan.”

“You can pull up a chair, if you want.”

“I’m fine, princess.” There was a hint of humour in his tone.

She resumed studying him in silence. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness enough for her to trace the stripes on his back with her eyes, following their curve to his ribs and up to his powerful shoulders. Her mouth went dry. Did all his kind look like him, or was he just a particularly gorgeous specimen?

“Severin,” she murmured again.

“Yes, Freya?”

“What’s your dimension like?”

Stark silence stretched, and she thought she’d overstepped, then he replied, “It’s like Earth, in a lot of respects, but smaller. There are swathes of unspoilt countryside along with modern cities and quaint villages. It’s a beautiful place. At least, it used to be. I haven’t been back for a long time.”

“Because you were scared of the universe’s fated mate thingy.”

“I wasn’t scared.” He sounded affronted at the thought. “I just wanted to be free. I witnessed so many of my friends and family bind themselves to whomever the universe decreed. Didn’t matter if they were acquaintances, total strangers, or even mortal enemies. The bond overpowered it all. I left because I refused to let fate rule my life.” His tone turned wry. “Not that it listened.”

She grunted. “I guess if you do go home, your family will be super disappointed to find out your mate is a human.”

“Not at all. The bond is what matters to them. Fate has decided you’re my perfect match. Therefore, you *are* my

perfect match.” Charged silence fell before he added, hurriedly, “Is what they’ll think, anyway.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Three sisters. Two older, one younger. The older two are mated. The youngest is still eagerly waiting for fate to command her path.”

“Do you miss them?”

Silence again. Then, “Yes. I’d like to see them at some point, although I’ve heard they’re not too happy with my vocation.”

“The whole mercenary thing. How did you get into that, anyway?”

“It seemed like a natural fit. I was training to join my people’s militia when I decided to leave my dimension, so I had some skills I could put to effective use.”

“You really do kill people for money,” she said quietly.

“Not always. Sometimes I just fight them. Or hunt them down.”

“For money, though. Not for a cause you believe in.”

He sighed. “I do have a code, Freya. I try to only take jobs where my targets deserve what’s coming to them. I don’t always get it right, hence the situation I got into with Jax earlier this year, but I do my best.”

“I don’t think you’re a bad guy, Sev. Maybe you could help people, instead of hunting them? Like a private detective or something.”

“Maybe.” She heard the smile in his voice. “Now, as much as I’m enjoying this impromptu career advice session, you need to sleep. You’re exhausted.”

“Hmm.” She yawned. “A true mercenary wouldn’t care about that, you know.”

“Sleep, princess. Now.”

She drifted in and out of sleep for the rest of the night, fitful thoughts following her into slumber and dragging her back into reality. The one constant was him: the monster protecting her, as silent and watchful as a statue. Despite everything that had happened, she'd never felt safer or more content. And, as the first hint of dawn sent pale sunrays shimmering through her window, she came up with a plan.

Chapter Thirteen

She'd thought that nothing could top the terror of being chased by a stampeding bull or getting shoved against the wall by an abusive ex-partner, but filing a police report came close. Wiping her sweaty palms on her skirt, Freya stepped out into the refreshing coolness of the evening air, relieved to leave the austere square building with its stark white walls and sombre atmosphere. The visitors' car park was empty apart from Evelyn's blue hatchback, parked next to a grassy verge dotted with yellow dandelions and tiny purple primroses. Freya hurried to it, grateful for the spring breeze swishing her hair and tickling the back of her neck.

She'd been on tenterhooks all day at work, spending the time in between appointments to rehearse what she was going to say. She'd even practiced with Evelyn on the morning drive to the surgery, and the short trip to the police station after work. But nothing prepared her introverted soul for the intimidating experience of sitting at a desk opposite the two officers from the night before, and recounting everything Ben had done since her ordeal began.

The officers were polite and professional, taking copious notes and asking considered questions, allowing her time to recover when her anxiousness took over and she jumbled her words. Whilst grateful for their display of empathy, she couldn't stop the voice in her head from screaming that they thought she was lying; she wasn't being clear enough; this was all a huge mistake.

She'd almost fainted with relief when they confirmed they would be investigating further. Their next steps would be to review her statement, including the tracker report which had mysteriously appeared in her email inbox that afternoon. Then they could decide whether they had enough evidence to arrest Ben.

By the time Freya recounted all of this to Evelyn, they'd driven through Westhorpe and out the other side. Her sister negotiated the narrow country lanes with ease, the

scenery whizzing past at a speedy pace. Everything was awash with colour. Bluebells, red poppies and white cow parsley covered the verges, and violet dog roses dotted the sprawling bramble hedges flanking the roads. Fields of sage green wheat swayed in the wind, not yet ripened enough to turn gold. Next to them, sun-yellow rapeseed grew high and strong, its powerful pollen scent making Freya's nose itch. Oaks and sycamores towered over the hedgerows, teeming with life, their emerald leaves quivering as small birds hopped among the boughs. A brown hare bounded across the road at one point, causing Evelyn to brake and swear as it jumped onto the opposite verge and disappeared. Red and amber streaks stretched across the horizon as the sun sank lower in the darkening sky.

"I'm not sure about this," Evelyn said, for the third time. "Do you promise he's not forcing you into it?"

"I promise. He doesn't even know we're on our way. He left just as you arrived at my place this morning. I want to do this for him, Evelyn. He doesn't deserve to be trapped in his tiger form, after all the help he's given me. I'm on birth control, not that I even know if it's necessary, and I trust him not to hurt me. You trust him too; I know you do."

Evelyn grunted. "I guess. I don't know him that well. He's more Jax's friend than mine, a fact which I suspect has surprised them both."

"What happened between them, anyway? Severin said something about a debt."

"Long story. Severin was hired to hunt Jax, but it all went wrong and Sev's honour was, what's the word? Besmirched or something. He stuck around, trying to figure out a way to pay us back. Getting Ben away from you is payment enough, in my book. Hopefully, he'll agree and bugger off after tonight." Evelyn glanced at her. "Assuming that's what you want?"

"Of course," Freya said quickly. "After all, he's made it clear he's not interested in any sort of relationship with me, whatever fate's opinion on our compatibility."

She tried to ignore the odd, desolate pang in her chest. He didn't want a mate. *She* didn't want one either. For goodness' sake, her marriage had been an unmitigated disaster. Why would a mystical bond with a guy she'd known less than a week be any different?

Evelyn steered the car right, on to an even narrower lane with tufts of grass growing between broken fragments of tarmac. "I still can't believe I'm driving my innocent baby sister into the countryside to have no-strings sex with a monster. I feel like I should lock you in a tower or something."

"That would be the pot calling the kettle black, don't you think?"

"Whatever, Rapunzel. Just please be careful. Severin isn't like Jax. He's a mercenary, for crying out loud."

"A mercenary who's jumped in to save me several times, provided me with proof that will get Ben to leave me in peace, and acted more with more chivalry and compassion than that dickhead ever did." She caught Evelyn side-eyeing her. "What?"

"You sound like the old you. The person you were before you met Ben. It's good to have you back."

Freya gave her a smile. "It's good to be back. Ah now, this looks good. Stop here, please."

"Here?" Evelyn pulled up in a narrow passing place caked with mud and puddles. "His house is about a mile away. Are you sure?"

A five-bar gate stood to the left of the passing place, closed and secured with a rusty chain and padlock. A small grassy meadow lay beyond it, covered in yellow ragwort and bright red poppies. Butterflies and bees flew amongst the dancing flowers, and several young rabbits darted through the grass. An overgrown ditch bordered the field on one side, leading to a dark woodland that stretched far into the distance. A buzzard glided over the leafy canopy, harassed by a pair of cawing jackdaws. The wood looked like something out of a fairytale in the dappled evening light. Freya wouldn't have

been surprised to see Little Red Riding Hood disappearing amongst the trees, or a witch beckoning her toward a gingerbread cottage.

“This is perfect,” she said, trying to sound confident.

Her sister gave a deep sigh. “Can I voice my misgivings just once more?”

“Nope. I’m doing this with or without your approval.” Undoing her seat belt, Freya leaned over to give her scowling sister a hug. “But I love you and appreciate you. Now go take my bag to Severin and tell him where you dropped me.”

Her sister’s frown became a grin. “It’s so very *you* to head off for an impromptu night of unbridled sex with a monster, yet methodically pack a full overnight bag as well.”

“It’s not a full overnight bag, I just shoved in a change of clothes. If last night was anything to go by, these ones might not be wearable afterward.”

Evelyn gave a dirty chuckle. “As your big sister, I’m disturbed by what I’m hearing, but as a fellow monsterfucker, I salute you.”

Freya grinned as she opened the passenger door. “Salute acknowledged and returned. Now get going.”

As the sounds of the car faded, Freya’s first challenge was negotiating the gate. She’d changed into a knee-length skirt and a smart blouse after her shift at work, wanting to appear as professional as possible at the police station. Such attire wasn’t built for gate-climbing, which she quickly realised when she tried to swing her legs over the top. At least she had on her running shoes, which she’d left in Evelyn’s car that morning.

When she finally clambered over and hopped down, she slipped in a patch of mud. Her ankle twinged, and she bit her lip against a curse. Her sprain had healed so much quicker than she’d expected, presumably thanks to Severin’s painkiller, but she’d put on a compression bandage, just in case. The last thing she needed was to aggravate her injury.

Taking a few wary paces, she sighed in relief when it held up with no pain. She was good to go.

Following the ditch's path to the woodland, she took several deep breaths. It smelled warm and earthy with hints of moss. The view wasn't quite as inviting as the smell, as she crept amid the gnarled trees. The sunset struggled to penetrate the thick canopy above her head, creating an eerie half-light that made her think of mythical beings and ancient magic. The temperature dropped and she shivered, wishing her legs weren't bare underneath her skirt. Branches creaked above her head and the leaves whispered and rustled. The birdsong was muted, like the wildlife was hushed and watching, wondering what she was doing.

She couldn't see more than a few meters in front of her, the knotted trunks and twisted branches merging into distorted shadows. Leaf litter crunched underneath her shoes, and huge mounds of sprawling brambles kept appearing out of nowhere, forcing her to change direction as she walked farther into the woods. Wary of her ankle, she kept a close watch for exposed tree roots and other hazards. In doing so, she lost track of which direction she came from.

Eventually, she stopped in a small clearing dotted with bluebells and daffodils. A fallen tree lay in the centre, covered in fluffy fingers of moss and lumpy, misshapen fungus. Leaning against it tiredly, she squinted at the sky. Beyond the outlines of the branches, faint veins of amber shimmered on the dark sapphire canvas. It would be pitch dark soon.

She hugged herself, trying to ignore the churning sensation in the pit of her stomach. What if Severin had changed his mind about sticking around, and left? Freya hadn't thought to bring her phone with her, and she was deep enough in the woods now that even if Evelyn came back for her, she wouldn't find her easily.

A twig snapped nearby. Freya locked gazes with a chestnut brown roe deer who looked as surprised as her as it emerged from the undergrowth. After a few tense moments spent staring at each other with wide eyes, the deer scurried away, its white tail flashing in the darkness. She had to stop

herself from rushing after it, suddenly feeling desperately alone.

What had she been thinking? He wasn't coming. She was alone in the near dark, wearing a ridiculous skirt and a thin blouse, which was no protection at all against the elements. What if there was another storm? What if...

Another twig snapped, louder this time, and she froze.

"Well, well, well." The deep, growling voice came from all around her. "What do we have here? A pretty little princess, lost in the woods."

Freya trembled, relief and apprehension battling for dominance inside her.

"Are you scared, little princess?"

Looking around wildly, Freya searched the murky shadows. "N...no."

His hungry laugh ricocheted off the trees. "Liar."

Severin stepped into view. The gathering darkness skewed her perception; he looked even taller and more powerful than she remembered. His long, curved fangs looked sharper too. Deadly. Dangerous. Not of this world.

Her breath came in short, sharp pants as her plan to be coy and flirtatious evaporated. This game had seemed like such a clever idea when it came to her last night, a perfect way to thank him for everything he'd done. Now, she felt like a helpless fawn stumbling straight into the tiger's den.

"Is this what you want?" The question was calm and gentle, the opposite of the anticipatory gleam in his eyes.

She gave a jerky nod, desperate to start before she lost her nerve. "Just sex, nothing more. To help you out."

His muzzle quirked. "So selfless."

She tensed involuntarily, half-expecting him to leap at her. He didn't move, examining her with such intensity, her entire body quaked.

“Come to me.” His command was a honeyed purr, the softest silk covering a steel trap.

She took a half-step back, using the fallen tree as a barrier.

He tutted. “Bad girl. I’ll punish you for that.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” she retorted breathily.

“So confident. You can run all you want, princess. We both know that when I catch you, you’ll beg me to fuck you.”

The tip of his tail quivered as he dropped to all fours, readying to pounce.

Her nerve broke.

She fled, stumbling through the undergrowth, the sound of his mocking laughter echoing behind her.

Chapter Fourteen

She couldn't lose him. It didn't matter how fast she ran, he was always there, just behind her, smirking in the darkness. She tried everything: running at full speed, dodging from side to side, backtracking, trying to hide in the undergrowth. Nothing worked.

Her muscles ached, her breath came in agonised pants, her throat was as parched as a desert, and still he continued to play with her, letting her get far enough away to feel hopeful before tearing her hope away. It was infuriating, intimidating, and not at all fun. Why had she ever thought this was a good idea?

Her lungs burned as she ran around a corner, ducking under a low-hanging branch and trying to figure out her location. If she could get back to the gate where Evelyn dropped her off, surely the game would be over. He wouldn't dare hunt her on a road, where anyone could drive past.

Or maybe he would, if the predatory gleam she'd seen in his eyes was any indication.

A despairing sob escaped her as she clambered over a rotten tree stump and broke into a run again. She'd seen that stump before, she was sure of it. Was she running in circles?

Suddenly, he loomed out of the shadows in front of her. She skidded to a halt, biting back her scream and keeping her balance by sheer luck. He wasn't even out of breath, standing on his hind legs and towering over her.

"Poor baby," he purred. "Poor, exhausted princess. Are you tired of running yet?"

Her mind screamed at her to change direction and keep going, but her shaking body refused to obey. Panting, she fought the urge to bend double, determined not to give him confirmation of her exhaustion. She dropped her gaze instead, the fallen leaves and vegetation blurring in front of her vision as she tried to catch her breath.

“Look at me.”

His words coiled around her like a snake. Freya shook her head.

“*Look at me.*”

Flinching, she met his eyes and bit back a gasp. His yellow-green orbs shone like beacons in the darkness, dragging her into their depths, mesmerising in their intensity. She couldn't move, couldn't speak, caught in his gaze as if he'd bound her with rope.

“You're so tired,” he crooned. “You don't want to run anymore.”

A dreamy sense of inevitability washed over her in soothing waves. She *was* tired. She *didn't* want to run anymore.

“You can stop now, my little toy.” His magnetic voice thrummed in her head. “Stop, rest. I'll take such good care of you.”

Rest, yes. That was what she needed. He would take care of her. He could do whatever he wanted to his toy.

She swayed in place as he approached her, lost in his hypnotic gaze.

Almost lazily, he grasped her upper arm and pulled her into his arms. She didn't fight him, rotating at his tug, so her back was against his front. Her body reacted to his nearness, molten heat swelling inside her like a volcano ready to explode. He scented her neck, his breath warming her sweat-tinged skin.

“Back with me?” he murmured against her skin.

Her eyelids fluttered as she came to her senses, and she nodded faintly, shocked at how quickly she'd fallen under his spell. His tongue flicked over the pounding pulse in her throat and she couldn't prevent her soft moan.

“Such a good little plaything,” he murmured against her skin. “Are you ready to beg?”

He teased her hard nipples and Freya arched her back, offering herself to him.

“So responsive,” he whispered. “So eager. You want it badly, don’t you? You want to be rutted and used. Just say please.”

She managed to shake her head. He tutted in response, his paws trailing across her body: breasts, stomach, lower, until he dipped under the hem of her skirt. She made a keening noise, her hips flexing as he cupped her pussy with one huge paw. The sensation was muffled by her underwear, but the intent behind his movements spoke volumes, even before his next words.

“This is mine, Freya. I’m going to wreck this pretty pussy tonight.”

She was so lost in his rhythmic voice; it took her a moment to notice what his *other* paw was doing. He was bending his torso to stroke his way down her left leg, past her knee, over her shin to her ankle. As his paw curved around her compression bandage and squeezed gently, realisation made her jaw drop.

He was checking her injury.

Even now, even in this bizarre situation where she’d given him free rein to be as monstrous as he wanted, he was *still* taking care of her.

Warmth tightened her chest, and she gave a tearful laugh. This made him pause, like she’d surprised him.

“Beg, Freya,” he ordered. “Beg me to fuck you.”

“No,” she flared. “We’re not done yet.”

She elbowed him in the stomach with all her strength. Hearing the breath rush out of his lungs in a surprised grunt was extremely gratifying. As his grip loosened, she tore out of his arms and took flight again.

His bloodcurdling roar made her stumble. Somehow, she kept going. If he wanted her to be his prey, she’d be the best damn prey he’d ever hunted. He deserved nothing less.

Panic licked at her nerves again but this time, she didn't let it overwhelm her. She could hear him close behind, the ground vibrating as he resumed the chase. Increasing her speed, she pounded over the terrain, renewed strength flooding her muscles. He'd messed up, making her stop. The respite, however brief, had allowed her to catch her breath and regain her senses. She couldn't outrun him, but she was pretty sure she could outthink him.

She ducked into a cluster of mature trees growing so close together they almost merged into one. She had to sidestep to get through them; he stood no chance of doing so. Squeezing out the other side, she ran on, listening to him swearing as he sought a route around them. Biting back her triumphant laugh, she kept running, straining her eyes in the gloom for other densely packed areas she could use to her advantage.

After a few moments, she fainted left, then veered right, sliding underneath a fallen sapling leaning on another one still standing. It was low enough to the ground that he wouldn't be able to follow. As she raced on, the sound of his pursuit faded for the first time. Ducking behind a clump of brambles, she stopped to catch her breath, closing her eyes against a surge of dizziness. For the first time, her ankle began to ache. She wouldn't be able to go on much longer.

Keeping low, she crawled to a large, crooked oak and tucked herself against its exposed roots. The ground smelled fresh and earthy, covered with a carpet of moss and fallen leaves. Her heart was pounding so hard that her chest stung, and her vision blurred again. Trying to steady her breathing, she stayed as quiet as she could, and strained her ears.

Nothing.

Just the wind rustling the leaves above her head. An owl hooted nearby, with another one replying a few seconds later. A muntjac deer barked a warning in the distance before falling silent. Had she done it? Had she lost him? That was... oddly disappointing.

A twig snapping was her only warning before she was seized from behind. The tiger hefted her over the root smoothly, and her breath rushed from her lungs, silencing her shriek.

“Game over,” he said, sounding rather out of breath.

Even as she fought in his arms, she couldn't prevent her smug smile. “Oh dear. Is the big scary predator a bit winded?”

His chuckle resonated through her bones. “You're faster than I expected. I should have remembered that from the other night.” He gripped the nape of her neck. “But not fast enough.”

A whimper escaped her and she tried to struggle.

He tightened his hold. “Hush, little one. No more of that. I caught you fair and square, and now I want you on your knees, where you belong.”

He forced her into the undergrowth, following her down so that he crouched behind her, his chest to her back. He continued pushing her until she was leaning on her forearms, her ass sticking up in the air. With his other paw, he yanked up her skirt until it bunched around her waist. Chilly air touched her backside and she almost protested, then a warm, rough tongue licked one of her cheeks, and Freya forgot how to think.

“Such a pretty ass you have.” His words were peppered with more licks and kisses, as he worked his way over both cheeks, toward her centre. “You don't need these, though.”

A ripping sound made her eyes widen, as a scrap of white material flew past her head to land on the branch of a nearby sapling. He'd ripped her panties off, with his teeth or claws, she wasn't sure, but they were gone, the second pair to be destroyed in less than twenty-four hours.

His tongue returned, this time in a deep, purposeful lick of her pussy. Sinking further onto her elbows, she moaned, welcoming his hot, clever mouth and arching her rear to give him all the access he needed.

His fangs rubbed against the sensitive skin of her inner thighs as he tongued her folds, then teased her throbbing clit. Sparks of pleasure raced through her veins and she cried out, pushing against his mouth and clenching handfuls of moss and acorns in her fists.

“You are delicious.” He lapped at her slit, his deep voice vibrating through her body. “The sweetest, most delectable pussy I’ve ever tasted. I could spend all night doing this, if you weren’t silently begging for more than just my tongue.”

He grasped her hips, something hard and rigid pressing against her pussy. Her groan of aching desire didn’t even sound human as he rubbed the head of his cock over her entrance, teasing and slow.

“Please do it.” The words burst out of her in a desperate rush of need. “Please, Severin, please, now.”

She could have cried with relief when he entered her. He took it gradually, edging in then pulling back, controlling the pace with careful movements. It felt incredible, but the barbed section was coming and despite the pleasure thrumming through her veins, her stomach twisted.

“I can taste your fear.” His voice was deep and hungry. “You think it’s going to hurt, don’t you? It will, but only for a moment.”

A stinging sensation hit her and she yelped, trying to scabble away.

“No, princess. No more running. You’re gonna take all of my cock now, like I know you can.”

She sobbed as he pushed in again relentlessly, pain shooting like white-hot lasers through her core.

“That’s it, baby. Take it. You’re doing so well.” He gripped her hips even tighter. “I promise, you’ll feel so fucking good in a second.”

Hot tears trailed down her cheek as she bit her lip against the urge to scream at him for lying, for bragging about

how good this would be when it hurt so much...oh. Wait just one second. Wait.

Her eyelashes fluttered as the pain faded, replaced by...holy shit. The barbs were inside her now and everywhere they touched *tingled*. They were swelling, growing, but the hooks hadn't caught hold yet. He was still moving, thrusting back and forth, whispering wicked things in her ear. Her senses spilled over, warmth and pleasure rippling outward from her centre as a quivering moan escaped her throat.

“Told you,” he murmured. “Told you it would feel good.”

She sank on her elbows. “Fuck, Sev, fuck, oh my gods, fuck...”

He chuckled above her. “What a dirty mouth you have, all of a sudden. Do you want more?”

“Yes, more, please, yes.”

He increased his pace, holding tight to her hips to stop her from sliding along the forest floor. The swollen barbs massaged her insides ruthlessly, and the harder they rubbed, the more decadent pleasure they created. A dazed half-thought filtered through her mind, something about what kind of chemical could possibly cause such a reaction, but it quickly vanished, leaving behind only fierce, carnal need. She was dripping, gushing, soaking his fur where their bodies met. Someone was whimpering and she realised it was her as she raced toward climax, the pleasure intensifying to a crescendo

“Fucking hell. Those sweet little noises make me wanna eat you up, princess.”

Gripping her by the hair, he pulled her up and wrapped his muscled arms around her chest. The sharper angle made the barbs swell even more, and her gasp became a delirious scream as they finally locked in place. He was buried to the hilt inside her, claiming her in the most primal of ways, his claws digging into her tender skin.

“Yeah, I'm gonna eat you,” he rasped in her ear. “Fuck you until you're raw. Rut you until the only word on your lips

is my name, and you scream it over and over...”

She came in time with his words, writhing in place as ecstasy crashed through her body. He was climaxing too; she could feel his hips jerking as much as they could with his cock hooking her. He groaned in her ear, low and breathy. Warmth spurted inside her, filling her up, just as he said he would, and it felt incredible.

Their movements slowed, and she sagged in his arms like a ragdoll. He forced her back into position.

“Again,” he snarled in her ear.

Her jaw slack, she shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Did I say you had a choice?”

Reaching down, he rubbed her clit, nudging his hips at the same time, and another tingling rush of warmth and pleasure came from the barbs. She came again, screaming out his name as he finished inside her for a second time. Hot cum snaked down her inner thighs and he cupped it in one paw, rubbing it possessively over her back.

Oh yes, he *should* do that. He *should* cover her in it, make her his in every conceivable way. She moaned in satisfaction, just as his dark, ravenous voice returned.

“*Again.*”

“Oh gods, please,” she sobbed.

“Baby, you’re fucking a monster tonight. The only thing praying will do is deliver me your soul along with your sweet little pussy.”

His wicked voice smashed through her like hot lava as she juddered to completion for a third time, every atom in her body exploding with bliss. He massaged more cum over her back and ass, even as his hips continued to jerk, filling her up, and more of it trickled down her thighs.

“Take it, Freya. I want you covered in it.”

He squeezed her tits, slathering them in a sheen of cum, before his claws curled up to her mouth. He stroked her

lower lip in silent demand. Opening her mouth like an eager baby bird, she licked the salty remains off the hard pads on the undersides of his paws.

“Good little plaything,” he crooned. “Take it all, princess. Swallow it down like a good girl.”

Yes, good girls swallowed. Good girls took what they were given. Dazed and eager, she barely comprehended what she was doing, only that it felt so right to please him, so right to do anything he demanded. Her mercenary monster. Her mate.

Finally, they slowed. As he released his grip on her body, she slumped into the soft mossy carpet with a shuddering sigh. Words were impossible. Her muscles quivered and remnants of pleasure hummed through her veins. He was still deep inside her, hooked in place, but there was no pain, just a delightful sense of fullness. Her matter-of-fact nurse’s side deduced that whatever chemical the hooks manufactured must include a powerful anaesthetic. Whatever it was, she just wanted to enjoy it. With an appreciative murmur, she rested her head on her forearms to protect her face from the dirt and closed her eyes.

His laugh was dirty and knowing. Jerking her back up, he wrapped his arms around her body again. His fangs brushed against her neck as he bent to whisper in her ear.

“It’s cute that you think we’re finished.”

Chapter Fifteen

Five orgasms. Five mind-blowing, world-shattering orgasms. Possibly six or maybe seven; she'd lost track by the end. Severin had been ruthless, merciless, claiming her body, mind, and soul just as he'd said he would. She came at his command repeatedly, spiralling into the heavens with his carnal voice the only thing tethering her to the earth. By the end of it, when the barbs released their grip on her, she resembled a puddle of goo on the woodland floor.

She barely registered the journey to his house, snuggled in his furry arms, her body aching in the best of ways and only the tiniest hint of discomfort between her thighs.

He'd taken her straight to his bathroom and deposited her in the shower, allowing her to sit on the cubicle floor when it became apparent that she couldn't stand on her own. Now, he was kneeling beside her, holding the shower head and washing her from head to toe, seeming not to care that his fur, not to mention the bathroom floor, was getting drenched in the process.

"Ow." She pouted as he brushed an open scratch on her arm where she had gotten caught on a bramble.

"Sorry." He rinsed the bubbles. "I'll give you some medicine in a minute, to expediate your healing."

She murmured in acquiescence, closing her eyes. "That's good stuff, your medicine. Wish I knew what was in it. And those barbs of yours, too. I should be in much more pain than I am; they must contain tons of anaesthetic. Maybe some antiseptic, too. A super clever design. Monster biology is amazing, isn't it? They should run courses on it. I'd sign up, for sure. Am I babbling?"

She felt, rather than saw, his smile. "A bit."

"Oops." She managed to open her eyes. "Uh-oh. Look at all the water on the floor. We must be almost finished...oh hang on, you missed a bit."

She rubbed at some lines of dirt on her chest, but they didn't come off. Frowning, she rubbed harder. Did they just shimmer?

A sudden tremble hit her, and she realised he wasn't washing her anymore, and cold air was drifting across her skin. He was too busy staring at her chest, the showerhead forgotten in his paw.

“What is it?” She clambered to her feet, switching the unit off as he dropped the showerhead and backed away. “What's wrong? What are these things?”

Securing a fluffy white towel under her arms, she lowered it enough to study her chest. The intricate, slate-grey markings started just above her breasts, curving in between them to stop over her heart. They shimmered again, flashing translucent before returning to grey, like a faint, mystical tattoo. She touched them again in wonder.

“What are they?” she repeated.

Backed against the bathroom door, Severin let out a shuddering sigh. “This is the second part of the union, which will finalise our bond. That's my family sigil on your chest. If you were of my people, I would have your family mark on mine.”

“Well, you've got *something* on you.” She pointed at a glint of silver through his fur.

He touched his chest, his jaw dropping open. The air in the bathroom grew thick, the steam from the shower swirling into Freya's lungs. The outline of the tiger disappeared, replaced by a familiar human dressed in the same clothes he'd worn the night they'd first met, blue jeans and a white t-shirt. He pulled the latter over his head in one smooth motion.

Freya's mouth dried up at the sight of his tanned, muscled torso. He didn't notice, too busy touching the ornate marks swirling over his pecs in a familiar shape.

Her eyes widened as she recognised the letter F and a deep, comforting heat rolled through her. It was the weirdest feeling. She knew she should be angry with him for not telling

her in advance about the marks. Instead, she felt warm, safe, and content, as if they were curled in bed, limbs entwined, cocooned in a mass of blankets.

He cursed loudly, clenching his fists. Her cozy feeling fizzled out like a snuffed candle, and she stepped back.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice. “This is all my fault.”

“I’m not angry with you, princess.” His tone was flat. “I knew the marks would appear. I expected them, at least on you. I just didn’t imagine...I thought it was a lie. Propaganda, to make our people obey fate’s ridiculous hold on us.”

“You thought *what* was a lie?”

“How the marks make you feel. They say when your sigil appears on your soulmate after the mating, that’s when you know it’s right. You know you’re exactly where you’re meant to be.” He was staring at her chest, and the hot possessiveness in his eyes made her quake. “I never believed it. Never wanted to believe it, but I *love* that I’ve marked you, Freya. Every fibre of my soul is screaming at me to finish the union.”

She swallowed. “How would we do that?”

“I accept your mark while tracing its lines, you do the same to mine. They merge to create a new symbol, signifying the creation of a new fated bond. I have no intention of going ahead with it, but fucking hell, I want to. I want to make you mine. I want to always be able to feel you, to know where you are.”

Fear, stark and cold, crawled into her veins as she realised that she felt the same. The treacherous sense of home when she looked at the F on his chest, the whispering inner voice telling her to accept his mark, made her pulse skitter with fear. She’d just escaped marriage to one monster, albeit one with a human face. Did she really want to tie herself to another, any more than she had already?

The knot in her stomach doubled in size. “I can’t do this, Severin.”

He closed his eyes. “I know. Whatever fate believes, this isn’t right. Not for either of us.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “I’d better go home.”

“That would be best. Get dressed. I’ll drive you.”

The car journey was excruciating. Neither of them said a word, and he didn’t put any music on, so they just sat there in silence. Huddled in her orange leggings and a black sweatshirt, she kept her gaze fixed out the window, watching as the spectral shadows of the countryside were replaced by streetlights and town scenery. It was just past midnight and the streetlights on her road were already switched off when they arrived, the car headlamps the only things holding back the darkness.

Rummaging through her bag with a shaking hand, she found her keys just as he pulled up outside her building.

“I’ll call Evelyn on my way back.” He spoke dispassionately, staring straight ahead. “She can send Jax over to keep watch tonight. Just in case your ex comes sniffing around.”

She nodded, the lump in her throat making a response impossible.

“The marks will go.” His voice remained flat. “In time, after I leave. They won’t ever disappear completely, but they’ll fade.”

“Great,” she managed to croak as she opened the car door. “That’s great. Well. Goodbye. Thanks again for all your help. Sorry about all this.”

He didn’t reply, a muscle twitching in his jaw as he kept his hands clenched on the steering wheel. Her stomach lurched as she clambered out. Scurrying along the path, she flinched as the security light flashed into life, blinding her. As usual, the front door of the building was wedged open and she hurried inside, heading to her flat. She could hear his engine idling as she unlocked the door. It wasn’t until she crossed her

threshold that the car roared away, its tyres screeching on the tarmac.

Leaning against the door, she closed her eyes. Tears trailed down her cheeks and she rubbed them away. There was no need to cry. This had been the plan from the start. An amazing night of sex, then off on their separate ways. Two ships passing in the night, nothing more.

Trudging through the living room, intending to toss her bag into her bedroom then make herself a much-needed cup of tea, she switched on the kitchen light.

The air rushed from her lungs in a silent scream as Ben stepped out of her bedroom, pointing a pistol at her.

“Welcome home, darling.”

Chapter Sixteen

Freya stared at the gun, her palms damp with sweat. A cool breeze wafted around her and she darted a glance at the kitchen window above the sink, which was covered in glinting shards of glass, revealing Ben's method of entry. He was in his customary smart suit, a picture of refined elegance except for the black eye and the weapon in his hand.

"Where is he? Where's that freak of yours? Let's see how confident he is now I've evened the odds."

"He's not here," she whispered, forcing the words out. "Ben, where did you get a gun?"

He smirked, his swollen right eye creasing. "Defend enough criminals and you can get your hands on anything you want. I never thought I'd need it, but that was before my wife started screwing a freak of nature and told the police a bunch of lies about me. Tracking my car, Freya? Really?"

He knew the details. Someone at the police station had passed them on to him, of course. Friends in high and low places. She'd been so distracted by Severin, she'd forgotten.

Severin. The lump in her throat grew larger at the memory of him driving away.

Come back, she begged silently. Please come back and save me, just once more.

"It's okay, my love." Ben's voice softened. "Don't cry. I've pulled some strings and quashed your complaint. It's been deleted, like you never even made it. I know none of this is your doing. He's brainwashed you, turned you against me..."

What was he talking about? Their marriage was over long before Severin arrived on the scene. She didn't dare say a word as he continued,

"...I'm here now, to save us both. We're going somewhere we can be together, somewhere that monster will never find us. Come on."

She recognised what he held in his other hand. Her passport. He'd been through her things and found her passport.

She shook her head, taking a step back.

His gentle expression melted away, replaced by an icy stare. "I will save you, darling, one way or the other. I won't leave you alive to be corrupted by him, any more than you have already." He took aim. "Make your choice."

"I need to pack." Her desperate babble rang in her ears. "Please, Ben, where are we going? I can't go abroad with nothing. Please let me pack a few things."

The silence stretched, deafening in its intensity, then he lowered his arm. "Be quick."

He followed her as she stumbled into her bedroom, her brain working on overdrive. If Severin had made the call to Evelyn, Jax may already be on his way. How fast could an eagle monster fly over a town? She needed to stall for as long as possible.

As she threw her bag on the bed and rummaged through her wardrobe with trembling hands, Ben made a disgusted noise.

"This place is a shithole, Freya. Pink paint and cheap furniture, for god's sake. You never did have any taste."

Her shoulders hunched involuntarily. Answering back didn't even cross her mind, not with a gun pointed at her. She was also relieved he hadn't spotted the ruined skirt and blouse scrunched in the corner of her bag. She began to sort through her hangers, folding the clothes before packing them. Stall, stall, stall. That was all she could do.

It took a few minutes before his irritated sighs became curse words, and in the next moment he shoved her out the way, throwing the clothes into the bag himself.

"Done," he spat, jerking the gun for her to close the bag. "Let's go."

He shoved her out of the bedroom, making her stumble. Her ankle jarred for the first time in hours, and she

bit her lip against a pained cry. Limping to the kitchen door, she unlocked it and stepped into the dark garden.

No lights or noises came from the windows of the other flats in the building as they crept along the path. The gun wedged into her back forced her into silence as they reached the back garden gate.

“Hurry up,” he hissed as she struggled to undo the bolt.

His nervous gaze swept from side to side as he spoke. She inwardly bared her teeth. He *should* be scared. Severin would kill him for this.

Assuming he made it in time.

Ben directed her down the narrow alleyway that ran behind the back gardens of her row of houses. The cool wind chilled her skin, making her shiver as she walked as slowly as she could. She searched the skies. Nothing, just emptiness, thick clouds hiding the moon and stars. The alleyway led out into a small car park for residents, edged by a brick wall covered in graffiti and ivy. She couldn't see Ben's fancy red Jag; instead, he led her to a plain black hatchback sitting in the corner of the car park, half hidden by trailing ivy.

“Get in,” he hissed.

She hesitated, then the barrel of the gun pressed into her ribs.

“I said, get in.”

She obeyed him, blinking back her tears. The car was spotlessly clean and smelled of lemons, with a hint of leather. A citrus air freshener featuring the logo of a hire car company swung on the rear-view mirror.

This nightmare was real. She was being kidnapped; stolen from the new life she'd barely begun. He had enough money to take her wherever he wanted, where she would never be found.

She stilled.

‘I want to always be able to feel you, to know where you are...’

Severin's words from earlier crashed into her mind, drawing a gasp from her lips as she touched her chest over her clothes. Hope, desperate and frail, rose inside her. As Ben opened the car boot to place her bag inside, she fumbled with her clothes, yanking down the necks of her sweatshirt and t-shirt underneath until the ornate pattern on her chest came into view. What was she supposed to say? He'd said something about accepting the marks. How?

"I accept." Her voice trembled as she followed the lines with her fingertips. "I accept you. I accept us. I don't know what I'm doing, or if this is enough, but I want you as my mate."

Nothing happened. No flash of magical light, no fireworks. No sabertooth tiger appearing in front of her in a puff of smoke. The marks looked no different than before: just grey, alien patterns on her skin.

The driver's door opened and she pulled her top back into place hurriedly.

"Let's see your freak track *this*," Ben crowed as he climbed in. "Now don't do anything stupid, darling. This is a fresh start for both of us."

He kept his gun on his lap throughout the journey. The town was quiet and dark, with only the occasional pedestrian on the streets and vehicles going in the other direction. She tried to keep track of their location, but he drove so meanderingly, she lost her bearings. It wasn't until they left the built-up area and turned on to a narrow track that realisation hit her.

"The old marina?" Squinting, she spotted a battered white sign covered in bird droppings and half-hidden under the boughs of a drooping willow tree. The harsh black letters read 'Westhorpe Marina – Permanently Closed – Strictly No Entry.'

As they rounded a corner and the glint of water came into view, she turned to Ben in confusion. "Why are we here?"

The riverboat mooring and maintenance area closed over three years ago, replaced by a bigger and more modern

one farther along the river. This one was earmarked for a housing development, but that hadn't happened and it had fallen into disrepair. The car headlights revealed abandoned boathouses and other decrepit buildings standing empty beside the rows of man-made channels and laybys leading from the main river around thirty feet away. Weeds and vegetation ran wild on the pathways running between the channels. There were two boats present: a small, colourful houseboat which was moored at the top end of the marina, and a much larger vessel situated close to where Ben parked.

Freya's heart sank at the familiar sight of the *Golden Life*, an elegant sailboat shining white in the car headlights as it bobbed in place on the water.

"I sailed her from the new marina this afternoon." Ben's voice was full of triumph. "From here, we can head straight to the coast. She's not powerful enough to cross the North Sea, of course, but we can follow the coastline to Harwich, then catch a ferry across to Holland. From there, onward to wherever we want in Europe. He'll never find us. Come on."

A gust of wind ruffled Freya's hair as she exited the car. There was no sign of Jax or Severin. Her desperate plan hadn't worked; the union was incomplete. She would have to get out of this herself.

"Well, hello again!"

An unfamiliar voice accompanied a bright spotlight on the corner of the nearest boathouse sputtering into light. A young woman hurried their way, a small wire-haired dog trotting at her heels.

Ben backed around to Freya's side of the car, hiding the gun in the folds of his suit jacket. He grasped her arm tight enough to make her wince.

"Not a word," he hissed in her ear. "Let me deal with this. Good evening, my dear Teresa. I told you I'd be back!"

His ugly voice changed to the honeyed tone that Freya remembered all too well. As he leaned close to kiss her neck in

an exaggerated display of affection, a fluttery pang in her chest brought a surge of despair that made her fight back tears. How could her body still react to him, after everything he'd done?

Clenching her fists, she studied the newcomer, who was beaming like they were dear friends. She looked to be in her early twenties, with pale skin, bright blue eyes, a short, curvy physique and long brown hair dyed with purple streaks. Her jeans were raspberry pink, her trainers neon yellow, and her baggy shirt was tie-dyed in multi-coloured spirals. Even her rows of hooped earrings were assorted colours, and the pretty little stud in her nose was the same shade of purple as her hair. If a rainbow could take human form, this woman would be it.

“I never doubted you for a second,” the newcomer said cheerfully, hoisting her dog into her arms. “Hi, Mrs Smith! Your husband has told me all about you. Happy anniversary!”

Freya blinked. “Thank you, Miss...?”

“Call me Tess.” The young woman grinned. “No point standing on ceremony when there's no one else around. Being the unofficial security officer for an empty marina means I make up the rules myself, and I'm not one for formality. Oh, and this is Mocha. She's my guard dog, except she wouldn't hurt a fly, so she's about as good at her job as I am.”

Freya smiled faintly at the mottled brown terrier, who was wagging her stumpy tail under Tess's arm. “It's nice to meet you both.”

“You too. I wasn't sure what your husband was doing when he appeared earlier today, but he told me he wanted to surprise you with an anniversary boat trip...”

As the young woman's enthusiastic monologue continued, another pang in Freya's chest made her wince. Then her heart fluttered again and a humming noise filling her ears, drowning out Tess's voice.

Realisation made her knees go weak. These sudden sensations weren't anything to do with Ben's fake demonstration of tenderness. She could sense...*him*. She could

feel Severin's presence like he was standing beside her. He had accepted her mark, the same way she'd accepted his, and he was close. Very close.

"Tess lives on that adorable boat over there," Ben said, his voice as sweet as poisoned honey as he hugged Freya's waist. "She let me moor here while I waited for you to finish work. The marina is closed to visitors, but I promised her I wouldn't cause any trouble."

His conspiratorial wink made Freya want to vomit. Somehow, she kept her weak smile in place. Severin was coming. She had to stall again. "That's nice of you, Tess. Have you worked here long?"

"About a year," Tess replied. "My stepmother owns the site. She needed someone to watch over it while she works through all the red tape around the development."

"How interesting," Freya replied innocently. "I'd love to hear the plans for the area."

"Not right now," Ben snapped, then softened his tone at Tess's faint look of surprise. "I mean, we have our celebrations to start, don't we? Five wonderful years."

Tess sighed dreamily. "So romantic. Have a great night! You said you'd finish the night at the new marina, Mr Smith?"

"Correct," Ben replied. "And someone from the rental company will collect the car in the morning. Come along, darling."

He tugged at Freya's elbow as Tess bounced off, almost tripping over Mocha when she put her down.

"Get on the boat," Ben said in a low voice.

Gritting her teeth, Freya dug her heels in the ground and refused to move.

He squeezed her elbow. "Move, you traitorous bitch."

Oh, *there* was the husband she remembered. *There* was the contempt, the spite, the bitterness oozing out of his pores. *There* was the reason she'd lost all sense of self, cowed to

practically nothing, a candle starved of oxygen, a flame almost extinguished.

Never again.

“No.” She yanked her arm out of his grip.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tess pause. Mocha did the same, running a few paces in their direction before stopping to look at the sky. Her sudden growl was loud and impressive for such a small dog, as was the sudden rush of fierce barks, but they didn't seem to be aimed at any of them.

Ben's lips thinned. “You're really going to be a pain about this? After the way you've treated me since the divorce?”

Freya gaped. “Are you for real? You've treated me like dirt for years!”

“Don't you dare talk to me like that. After everything I've done for you, everything I've given you...”

Red mist descended, her voice ringing in her ears as she exploded. “You've given me *nothing* but anxiety, low self-esteem, and a shit ton of emotional baggage, you deluded, gaslighting scumbag. From the moment you put a ring on my finger, you did your best to destroy the very essence of who I was, and we both know why: because I am *miles* out of your league and I always have been.”

Tess walked back to them with a wary gaze. “All okay, you two?”

Ben's charming smile was frayed at the edges. “Fine, dear. Just a lover's tiff—”

“Fuck you!” Freya charged, shoving him with all her might and making him stagger sideways. “Run, Tess, get out of here! He has a gun!”

As the young woman's eyes widened, Ben regained his balance and revealed his pistol, pointing it straight at Tess. With a shriek, she turned to flee, just as a dark shadow smashed into Ben from above, sending him stumbling.

The gun skidded out of his grip. Freya lunged for it, but he grabbed her ankle. Hot pain ripped up her leg and she screamed, falling to her knees as Ben seized the weapon again.

“Careful, humans.” A familiar voice came from above their heads. “Getting shot stings a bit. Trust me, I know.”

As if he’d planned his entrance to be as theatrical as possible, the clouds cleared to reveal Jax in all his feathered glory as he landed on the roof of the nearest boatshed, the corrugated iron sheets clattering under his claws. His huge, splayed wings folded in until they were tucked behind his back, and his eyes glowed golden in the moonlight.

Freya heard Tess gasp, as the young woman stared at the eagle in fearful awe. Even Mocha looked shocked, cowering against her mistress’s legs.

Ben made a strangled noise, his eyes bulging out of his head. “Another one? How many of you freaks are there?”

“Freaks?” Jax clutched his chest dramatically. “How dare you. I should thrash you soundly, but someone else called dibs on that, for stealing what belongs to him.” He raised his voice. “Right, Sevvv?”

A familiar monster emerged from the shadows of another building. Freya’s rush of relief made her feel faint.

Severin’s face was twisted with fury, his tail swishing with such force it slapped against the grass underneath him. His fangs looked even more monstrous in the cold floodlight as he approached them, paying no attention to the gun Ben was now pointing his way.

“You were warned, human,” the tiger hissed. “You were warned what would happen if you touched her again.”

Ben’s whimper turned into a desperate scream. He darted to Tess and grabbed hold of her. Yanking her in front of him, he put the barrel of the gun against her temple.

Mocha whined, running in circles around them. Freya stared in horror as Ben began to drag Tess toward the *Golden Life*.

“I’ll do it,” he spat. “I’ll blow her brains out, you mutant freak.”

Severin gave a low, vicious chuckle, coming to Freya’s side. “I knew I’d enjoy killing you. From the first moment I saw you, I knew.”

Jax glided down, his gaze ice-cold as he landed next to the tiger. “Make good choices, human. Let the girl go, before you lose your arms.”

“Stay back! Stay away from me. You can have my whore wife. The pair of you can rip her to shreds for all I care, but I’m leaving, right now. Try to stop me and I’ll finish this little slut right now, I swear it.”

Mocha’s wild barking continued as Tess cried out in fear.

“Shut up, you stupid bitch!” Wrapping his free hand around her throat, he squeezed hard.

Tess’s scream cut off as she slumped in his arms.

Severin crouched low, the muscles in his shoulders rolling as he readied to pounce. Then he stopped dead, even the tip of his tail frozen.

For a moment, Freya assumed it was because of the gun. When she spotted what the tiger must have seen, every muscle in her body locked.

Something was emerging from the dark water.

A tentacle.

Ben muttered and cursed as he pulled Tess toward his boat, oblivious to what the others were gaping at. Mocha circled them, yapping and darting in at him aggressively, missing his vicious kicks by millimetres.

Frozen on the ground, Freya stared at what was rising from the narrow channel. The appendage was long and thick, its slate grey skin glistening with moisture. Its underside was covered in a multitude of pale cream suckers that undulated as water streamed from them. It moved with grim purpose, like something out of a horror movie. Even Severin and Jax

seemed wary, both planting themselves in front of her, so she had to peer around their legs to keep watching.

When he was almost at the boat, Ben finally seemed to realise that they were no longer looking at him. He blinked in confusion, then craned his neck to behold the tentacle, which was rising slowly as if pulled by invisible strings.

His face contorted in horror and he stumbled away, letting go of Tess in the process. Mocha darted into his path, and he tripped over her with a terrified cry.

The alien limb lashed out, coiling around him like a python.

“Help!” Ben’s shriek was high-pitched and desperate as the creature began to drag him toward the water. He scrabbled frantically, clutching at gravel and grass until he grabbed one of Mocha’s back legs as she dashed past him. The dog yelped, struggling as she and Ben were towed to the very edge of the water.

With a splash, they were gone.

“No!” Tess’s agonised scream rang around the marina.

Racing to the edge, she leapt in after them and vanished.

“Tess!” Freya tried to stand, but a heavy paw restrained her.

“Don’t even think about it,” Severin snapped, before striding toward the channel, with Jax jumping into the air behind him.

Suddenly, two tentacles burst from the water. As Severin jumped back to crouch in front of Freya, and Jax banked away in a hurry, one of the appendages landed on the path.

With something close to reverence, it unfurled to reveal the wet and soggy forms of the young woman and her dog. Tess was retching, clutching her sodden, trembling terrier in her arms, but they both seemed unharmed.

The same couldn't be said for the person trapped in the other coiled limb. Ben's eyes were wide with primal terror, his mouth opening and closing like a dying fish, as he pounded weakly at the creature holding him in its grip. As Freya looked on in silence, the tentacle began to submerge again. Ben's pleading gaze met hers, but there was nothing she could do. Whatever this monster was, it was vengeful and determined as it pulled him under.

This time, he didn't resurface.

Chapter Seventeen

One week later

Solicitor dead in tragic boat fire.

Tributes have been paid to a well-respected solicitor who perished in a fire on his boat. The sailboat belonging to Benjamin L Carmichael, 31, was found burnt out in the old Westhorpe Marina in the early hours of...

Lying in her bed and propped up by soft pillows, Freya scrolled the news item on her phone. She skimmed over the fawning accolades to a talented professional gone far too soon, focussing on the facts. The ‘accidental’ fire destroyed the Golden Life to its bare bones. Ben’s charred remains were found, along with a fragment of his suitcase and the burnt-out hire car, which he’d rented under a false name. The young woman acting as a security guard at the site had given a statement to police, providing evidence that she had not been present all day or night. The police declared it a peculiar, tragic accident.

Freya hadn’t seen Tess since that night, when the young woman had been shellshocked and teary, hugging Mocha and whispering about being saved by “him.” Freya wanted to stay and keep an eye on her, but Severin refused to allow it. He had leapt into action after Ben disappeared under the water; shifting back to human and ordering Jax to fly Freya to safety as he made calls to various contacts to help him wipe the scene, as he’d put it. Freya had been desperately worried about Tess, but Jax reassured her she was in no danger from Severin, or anyone else.

“From what I saw,” the eagle monster said as he’d soared across the night sky with Freya clinging to him like a frightened limpet, “that little lady is the safest human in this

town. Not many people can say they have their very own tentacle monster as a protector.”

Freya had no idea how Severin obtained Ben’s body from the deadly creature in the water, but staging the fire had ‘wiped the scene’ perfectly. So did the strings he pulled with the authorities. Although rumours swirled around town about why Ben was at the abandoned marina in the first place, the police took no further action, not even coming to talk to Freya. It was over. Truly over.

She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to feel about the death of her ex-husband. She certainly hadn’t been sad about it. Shocked, without doubt. Even a little nostalgic, as she found herself occasionally reminiscing about the wasted years she’d spent married to him. But definitely not sad.

She put her phone down, shuffling against the pillows. Her room was in darkness, except for a faint amber glow from her bedside lamp. Her curtains were wide open, revealing the star-filled sky and waning moon. The window was ajar enough to let in the sounds of the night: an owl hooting in the distance, a dog barking a few houses away. A gentle breeze rustled the shrubs in the garden, making her curtains flutter. If she didn’t know better, she’d assume she was completely alone.

She glanced at her chest underneath her thin-strapped pyjama top. The elegant swirls of Severin’s family mark combined with an ornate letter F in an intricate pattern. The lines were black now instead of grey, looking for all the world like a regular, if unusual, chest tattoo.

Stroking the pattern, she sighed. Climbing out of bed, she crept to the window and opened it wider until the breeze wafted over her face. She caught a scent of musky spice and her pulse sped up.

“You do realise,” she called in a low voice, “that stalking doesn’t work when the other person knows where you are at all times?” Despite the utter silence from outside, she could sense a certain amount of exasperation, and her lips twitched. “Kitchen door is unlocked if you decide to give up for the night.”

Although there was still no noise, she knew he was there. She'd sensed his presence as soon as he arrived. She'd felt it yesterday, too, and the night before. She'd even stepped outside, eager to see him. He'd stayed hidden and silent, refusing to reveal himself, just as he was doing tonight.

She'd had enough.

"Oh well," she said with an exaggerated shrug. "I'll just have to enjoy my own company."

She went back to bed, resuming her previous position. Breathing deeply, she drifted her fingertips across the marks again before moving to her nipples, rubbing them into peaks through her top. With a soft murmur of pleasure, she rolled them between her fingers before caressing her way down her stomach to her pyjama shorts.

The back door in the kitchen clicked as she stroked between her legs. She couldn't prevent her smug smile.

"I'm not stalking you."

She flashed a glance at the tall, handsome man standing in her bedroom doorway looking grumpy. "What are you doing, then?"

He hesitated. "I just wanted to make sure you were safe."

"I am safe. Thanks to you." Her last word ended in a gentle moan as she worked her way under her shorts to her damp centre, watching him through her lashes.

His chiselled jaw was tight. "Freya."

"Hmm?"

"I also wanted to apologise."

She paused. "For what?"

"For what you had to do." He gestured at her chest, then at his own, where his matching sigil was hidden under a black shirt. "I never should have let you walk in here alone that night. You were taken because of me, because of my anger after our marks appeared. I was so scared"—he choked on the

word—“of the strength of my feelings, of how much I wanted you, that I neglected your safety. Completing the union was a last resort, one you wouldn’t have resorted to if I’d taken proper care of you.”

She resumed her attention, circling her clit with a shiver. “None of this was your fault. You didn’t tell Ben to stalk me or kidnap me. You didn’t even have anything to do with his death, in the end.”

“Yes, but...” He raised his palms to the sky, his eyes on her body. “I have to admit, I’m finding your current actions rather distracting from this conversation.”

She gave him flirty eyes. “Good.”

For the first time, his lips tugged into a smile. “You’re a tease, princess. Shy and innocent, my ass.”

“I’m clearly not a very good tease, because you’re all the way over there.”

He raised his dark brows, then walked over to the bed.

She smiled up at him, her eyelashes fluttering as she stroked her clit. “I don’t blame you for any of it, Sev. In fact, I’m planning to ask you out in a minute.”

His brows raised even more. “Ask me out?”

“Yup.” Her hips arched, and his bronze eyes flared in response. “On an actual, real-life date. You’re cute and funny when you’re not being a cranky prick, and I want to get to know you. Will you go out with me?”

His smile stretched into a lopsided grin. “Only if you tell me what you’re thinking about right now.”

She licked her lower lip. “Claws.”

He blinked. “Claws?”

“Mmm.” She closed her eyes again. “Claws and teeth on my body. Thick fur against my skin. You locked deep inside me, whispering wicked things with your dirty mouth.”

The atmosphere thickened. A buzzing in her ears made her open her eyes, and her smile widened. The tiger climbed

on to the bed, his eyes glowing and his long fangs glinting in the amber light. She reached for him with her free hand, encouraging him to lean in.

“I can’t kiss you properly in this form, princess.”

“Sure you can.” She pressed her lips against his soft muzzle.

He exhaled in a growling sigh as she peppered him with kisses, his fur tickling her skin. His paws curved over her breasts, pulling her top down to caress their shared mark.

“I should warn you, before our date,” she whispered against him. “I have a weird situation going on in my personal life. A fated mate situation, to be precise.”

“Is that so?” A claw trailed over her lower lip. “What’s he like, this mate of yours?”

“I don’t know him well yet, but he’s protective. Very protective. A bit mean and aloof, or at least he pretends to be.”

“Oh, he’s definitely pretending. When it comes to you, anyway. He probably thinks you’re incredible. In fact...” He hesitated, then spoke in a rush. “He’s probably falling for you.”

She couldn’t prevent her smile. “Really?”

“Really, Freya.”

Her chest filled with warmth. “Then I guess it’s a good thing he’s my mate. Oh, and he’s *super* hot. Okay in the bedroom department, too.”

He threw her an indignant look. “Just okay?”

“Hmm. Maybe better than okay.”

“Well, he sounds great.” He nipped her throat, sending fluttering sensations through her body. “You’re a lucky little human.”

“Yeah.” She couldn’t prevent her soft smile. “I’m starting to think so, too.”

THE END

Author's Note and Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Burning Bright. If you'd like to see more of Freya and Severin, and maybe learn a little more about the characters of Book 4 (tentacles, anyone?) [sign up to my mailing list](#) to receive a free and steamy bonus epilogue! Newsletter subscribers will be the first to learn about upcoming releases and I don't do spam, I promise.

Read on for a sneak peek at Blood Feathers, Book 2 in this series, where Freya's feisty sister Evelyn meets her match in the form of a certain cocky eagle monster...

Blood Feathers Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

This was, even for her, a ridiculous plan.

Hefting her coat around her shoulders, Evelyn shifted to ease her aching knees. She'd been crouching in shrubbery for almost an hour. The wind whistled through the trees beyond the small garden, making the bare branches sway and creak. Every so often, the clouds covering the sky cleared to reveal a carpet of stars and a golden, crescent moon. Owls hooted to each other across the flat Norfolk fields, and a fox yapped nearby. Leaves crackled beneath her feet as she fidgeted, studying the building in front of her. Thankfully, she'd remembered her bobble hat. At least her ears were warm.

It must be past 1am by now. She'd gone to bed at a reasonable hour, but her worries had kept her awake until finally she'd gotten up and driven to Cleo's house. The tiny gatehouse cottage was perched next to Frinkley Manor Wildlife Park, where both women worked. They had been friends for six years, since Evelyn joined the staff. She was now a senior keeper. Cleo was head keeper and manager.

She was also hiding something, and Evelyn was sick of being kept in the dark.

Her best friend's dreamy smiles, distant stares, and vague excuses when invited to social events hinted that she was seeing someone. But for some reason, she was keeping the identity of her new partner a secret.

Pleased to see her often-anxious friend happy, Evelyn had been patient at first. However, as time went on, her frustration grew. For two months, Cleo had avoided answering any questions about her new relationship, or even whether she was in one at all. Nevertheless, Evelyn recognised the look of longing in her friend's eyes. She *wanted* to talk about it.

Something was holding her back. So, Evelyn decided to give her the chance to spill the beans.

However, when she arrived at the cottage with two bottles of wine— necessary when confronting a friend about their mysterious lover—she'd been hit with second thoughts. After all, it was Cleo's choice to keep her relationship a secret. Evelyn had no right to demand the details. Was this, as Evelyn's mother often told her, an example of when she should take a breath, sit down, and contemplate her absurd actions?

So there she was, sat in the shrubbery bordering the little rectangular garden, chugging the wine to keep warm and trying to decide what to do. Unfortunately, it was a nice vintage, and before she knew it, an hour had passed and she'd started the second bottle. A warm, fuzzy feeling spread through her limbs, along with dizziness and a faint sense of regret. Yep, this had indeed been a daft idea. She should have stayed in bed.

As her hazy brain tried to convince her muscles that getting out of the bushes was a good idea, twigs crunched loudly on the other side of the garden. She tensed. Maybe it was a deer or a fox passing through, or a branch falling in the wind.

A shadow moved on the flagstone pathway, close to the house. She couldn't quite make it out as she rubbed her eyes. It looked almost distorted in the darkness, large and twisted as it opened Cleo's front door and disappeared inside.

“Shit.” Evelyn struggled to her feet, swaying. Why, oh why had she come out without her phone?

For a moment, she stood frozen in the flowerbed, racked with indecision. Should she run for help? This was the Norfolk countryside in the middle of the night. There was no one around. The nearest houses were the zookeeper cottages a mile away, including Evelyn's own. She could run to the zoo itself and use one of the office phones, but by the time she got there, anything could have happened.

She'd have to handle this herself.

Taking a deep breath, she tiptoed toward the building. No sound came from the house. Was Cleo being robbed while she slept?

A soft gust of wind ruffled her hat and teased her cheeks, as if something had flown over her head. She looked up sharply. An owl, perhaps?

Darkness loomed around her, danger lurking in every swaying shadow and foreboding recess. A prickling sensation touched her shoulder blades, as if someone were watching her. She shivered, forcing her feet to keep moving until she reached the house.

The ancient front door squeaked as she opened it. No one confronted her, and a strange smell hit her as she crept inside. Magnetic and musky, it blended with the citrus scent of Cleo's polish, making Evelyn's body tingle as she inhaled. There was no sign of the intruder. No upturned furniture or open doors. She hesitated, biting her lip. Had she imagined the whole thing? Pulling off her hat, she strained her ears, trying to control her rapid breathing.

The murmur of voices came from Cleo's bedroom at the other end of the hallway. A deep, rumbling voice came first, followed by Cleo's lighter tones. Then, the unmistakable sound of flesh slapping flesh.

Grabbing Cleo's ancient cricket bat from the umbrella stand, Evelyn crept toward the bedroom. Her heartbeat thrummed in her ears and her breath came in short, sharp pants, but there was no way she was leaving now. Her friend needed her. Gripping the bat in both hands, she nudged the bedroom door open with her foot.

The room was lit only by intermittent moonlight from the window. As her vision finally adjusted, she sucked in a gasp. Two figures writhed on the bed; the large, misshapen shadow pressed against Cleo's pale skin. Her friend was facing away, toward the headboard, with the intruder on his knees behind her.

Evelyn stared in horror. It almost looked like he had ridges running along its back, and was that... a tail?

The rutting grunts and Cleo's soft moans brought Evelyn to her senses. Fear and fury propelled her forward, and she swung the bat hard against the attacker's bulk. "Get the fuck off my friend, you freak!"

A bloodcurdling snarl echoed around the room.

Evelyn staggered back, a scream bubbling in her throat as a monster turned to face her, sharp teeth shining in its elongated snout. It stood on its hind feet like a human, but its features were distinctly crocodilian, with blunt claws instead of hands, and dark green scales covering its naked, muscled body.

"Evelyn?" Cleo rolled on to her front, covering herself with the sheets. Her eyes were wide and dazed, her cheeks flushed and her long red hair tousled.

Evelyn's muscles seized.

Holy shit. This wasn't a break in, or an attack. This was a tryst. A rendezvous. A, well... a good hard fucking, from the looks of it.

She knew her mouth was hanging open. What the hell...

Suddenly Cleo gasped, and the crocodile snarled again. As it strode forward, Evelyn tensed, her grip tightening on the bat as she prepared to defend herself. The creature didn't seem to notice, and she belatedly realised that it was looking at something behind her.

It charged past her, nudging her backward as if trying to get her to safety. Jerking away in fear, she stumbled and landed with a grunt on the hardwood floor, all the wind knocked out of her. When she finally managed to turn, it was her turn to gasp.

Beyond the crocodile, who stood in a defensive crouch as if protecting them, a second monster loomed out of the shadows.

Chapter Two

Slumped beside the bed, Evelyn's brief view of the second monster was obscured by the crocodile. Her brain tried desperately to process what she'd seen: feathers, talons, glowing eyes. Had she passed out? Was she unconscious?

"Evening, Raukra." The voice was smooth and deep, with a teasing edge. "I hear you've been looking for me."

Her head swimming, Evelyn watched the crocodile relax from its defensive crouch.

"Ajax?" it rasped. "What are you doing here? I've spent the last week trying to track you down."

"I know. I was told this morning but by then, you'd departed London to return here. I can see the reason for your haste. Are they both yours?"

It took Evelyn a moment to comprehend what the newcomer meant, and when she did, she gaped. "Wait a bloody minute..."

"Cleo is mine," Raukra growled, as if Evelyn were invisible. "Claws off."

"Fair enough," Ajax replied, with apparent cheerfulness. "What about the other one?"

Shock was the only thing that stopped Evelyn exploding with indignation, both from the question itself and its casual phrasing, as if the stranger were asking about the weather. She clenched her fists as Raukra replied, "She is a friend of Cleo's, and under my protection. Step wisely, Jax."

He moved sideways as he spoke, finally giving Evelyn a gawking viewpoint. The creature leaning against the doorframe resembled a bird of prey. His legs were human shaped, but his feet were in the shape of long claws, with four sharp talons on each one. His sinewy arms ended in claws too, slightly blunter than the ones on his feet yet no less deadly looking. Unlike the extremely naked crocodile, the eagle wore cut-off khaki shorts that hugged his lean hips and muscular thighs. Downy white feathers covered his bare chest and upper arms, with more scattered across his toned abs. A large tail

fanned out behind him, and a pair of wings were tucked against his back. More feathers, these ones in shades of cream and brown, covered his neck and head. His face was elongated like the crocodile, except where the former had a snout and sharp teeth, Ajax had a narrow, bright yellow beak with a hooked black tip, like an eagle.

His vibrant yellow gaze held her spellbound, as his beak twisted into a wicked grin. “Like what you see, little wren?”

Her cheeks heated and she looked away, kicking herself. Since when didn’t she have a snappy comeback ready? Maybe this really *was* a dream. Her head swam again. The urge to stagger to her feet and flee was overwhelming. Only Cleo’s presence kept her in place.

“I heard you were in trouble,” Raukra growled. “According to gossip, you and Deacon are on the run. I came to help.”

The eagle huffed a laugh. “I’m honoured.”

“So, what’s happening? I’ve only heard rumours—”

Cleo cleared her throat. “Raukra, would you and your... friend... take this conversation to the living room? I need to talk to Evelyn, and I’d *really* like to not be naked anymore.”

The crocodile’s hard stare relaxed. “Of course, pet. Come on, Jax.”

Pet?

Although Raukra didn’t see Evelyn’s wide-eyed stare, Jax did. He gave her a bold wink before leaving the room. She glared, even as she admired his beautiful wings and tail, glossy chestnut-brown and flecked with gold. If this *was* a dream, it was stunningly vivid.

Like the sound of this? [Grab your copy now!](#)

Acknowledgement

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Vicky is a romance, fantasy and historical fiction writer from Norfolk, UK. Along with her self-published monster romance novellas, she has three full-length novels published with Champagne Book Group. When she's not writing she becomes a giant bookworm, devouring stories of all kinds, especially romance.

Find her in various places online at linktr.ee/vickywalklatebooks

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