

URSA
SHIFTERS



BOOK 4

The background of the cover is a misty forest with tall, thin trees and a path covered in fallen yellow leaves. A large, dark-furred bear is the central focus, looking towards the right. A young woman with long, dark hair is sitting in front of the bear, looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. She is wearing a blue denim jacket and dark pants. The overall color palette is muted, with greens, browns, and yellows.

more than I
can BEAR

SAM HALL

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More Than I Can Bear

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The characters and events depicted in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Stalk me!

Stalk me!



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Author Note

This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

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Trigger Warning

Trigger and Content Warning

- Our concepts of what is and what isn't sexual assault is shifting and changing at the moment so some people may consider what happened in the prequel (Adam claiming Freya as his mate during sex) as sexual assault.
- Several characters drinking to excess
- One character getting very depressed and forlorn while drinking
- No other woman drama, but a male friend does try to put a male lead in a compromising position with some other women. There is no misunderstanding drama in the book regarding this

Chapter 1

PLEASE NOTE, *BEFORE* READING THIS BOOK YOU *MUST* READ THE NOVELLA, POKE THE BEAR, FOR THIS STORY TO MAKE SENSE.

[You can find it here.](#)

Freya

Monday morning, after the Magarey Medal count

“What’s with the free-range hotties?” Katie said, bumping hips with me as I worked the coffee machine. “Those two guys at your table...” She nodded toward the customers whose orders I was working on: one black coffee and one cappuccino with only a dusting of chocolate. “They’re the finest pieces of arse to have walked in here for a while.” I glanced in their direction as I tapped cocoa on top of the cappuccino froth. I hadn’t missed the fact that they were damn hot. But there was something a little too intense about the way they were watching our every move. Maybe they were just desperate for caffeine. Or maybe they were serial killers.

“Do *you* want to take their coffees over?” I asked Katie, turning back to her.

“Oh, god, no.” She backed off, hands in the air. “They’re all yours, girl. Those two are looking at you like they’re keen to try a piping hot slice of Freya pie for smoko.” I gritted my teeth, busying myself with cleaning off the milk frother before I picked up the mugs. “They might not be Adam Farrelly, but they *are* hot.”

Adam Farrelly was the golden boy of the SANFL: South Australia's Aussie rules football competition, the state-level version of the national league. Adam Farrelly had also been my date at the Magarey Medal count on Saturday night. But we hadn't even made it through the vote count. Instead, we'd spent one seriously hot night between the sheets. But what had I done when I woke up before he did? To make sure I didn't end up the centre of public attention, I'd scuttled out of there as fast as I could. In fact, I'd been so keen to get out of there that I'd left one of my shoes behind. To say I was wary of hot guys was an understatement.

It turned out that Adam hadn't been content to hit it and quit it, though. And even though it made me sound crazy, I felt like I kinda knew why. Ever since that night I'd had an ache in my chest that throbbed in time with something lower. It felt arrogant to even think it, but I had reason to believe that he was feeling the same way.

That wasn't me engaging in some romantic notion about love at first sight. He'd fronted up to a press conference yesterday to apologise for missing the moment he won the medal. But then he'd placed my shoe on the lectern, and asked the whole of Adelaide to look for me, like I was Cinderella or something.

I'd left like a thief in the night because I'd been afraid of the media spotlight being turned on me, and then he'd gone and set off a whole city manhunt for me. Which made me wonder about these two and their weird fascination with me.

Did they know?

I felt two sets of eyes on me—one, steel blue; the other, pale grey—as I moved from behind the counter to bring their drinks to them. They continued to watch my progress with far more intensity than a morning coffee deserved but I tried to ignore the creeper factor as I sat their drinks in front of them then put on my fake customer service smile.

“There you go,” I said. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

Before either of them could answer, though, a child squealed, piercingly. I winced before I could stop myself. It wasn't just me. As I swung my head to the source of the ear-splitting sound, I saw that almost everyone in the cafe had a similar reaction.

“Do you like that?” the child's mother asked in that manically happy tone that some people use when speaking to children or pets. “Is that good?”

She'd bought her toddler a slice of banana bread—our boss' secret recipe that had people coming back over and over—and the little boy did indeed seem to be enjoying it.

So much so that it was all over the floor.

I didn't blame the kid, or even the mum, but I couldn't help just standing and staring in growing horror at the mess extending across the floor. It was like a bomb full of baked goods had exploded. People were already tracking through the outer perimeter, spreading crumbs in a distinct trail.

“Yes,” said one of the guys. I turned back to him and decided he fitted the nickname Blue Eyes. He looked up at me as his buddy wrapped his hands around his mug and took a sip. “A dustpan and brush.”

“A dustpan...?” I looked at him in confusion, before I connected the dots and looked back at the mother and child. “Oh, don't worry—”

“Please.”

He said the word with the kind of finality that made clear that even if it wasn't a question, he wasn't going to take no for an answer. I sighed and went to fetch the cleaning gear. I'd need to clean up the disaster area before it got any worse.

“I'll see to the mess—” I started to say, but Blue Eyes was already getting to his feet, and he reached across and took the brush and the dustpan from me. He ambled over towards the mother and child at a slow and measured pace, but the length of his stride meant that as I followed along behind him, I was scurrying, two steps to his one.

“It's OK...” I said, but he didn't respond. “Really, I can...”

“Here you go.”

Blue Eyes thrust the cleaning implements at the mother. She turned to face him, wide-eyed.

Shit.

“I’m sorry. Is that for me?” Her brows pulled down slightly, as if the answer to her question couldn’t possibly be yes. She finally seemed to see the mess her child had created all over the floor, but then she just smiled prettily. “Oh no, no, no...” She peered past Blue Eyes to look at me. “Fran darling! How are you? You can take care of this little mess, can’t you?”

Little. Mess.

Her son, whose name was Tarquin, turned around and shot me a brilliant gummy smile, the likes of which only young children high on sugar can pull off. I smiled back at him and shook my head, stepping forward, but Blue Eyes wouldn’t budge when I tried to take the brush and pan from him.

“It’s Freya,” I corrected gently, while trying to pull the brush out of the guy’s hand “and I’ll—”

“Be getting back to work,” Blue Eyes said to me, firmly, looking at me intently before turning back to the woman at the table. “And *you*’ll clean up after *your* child.”

As if in response, Tarquin dumped the rest of his banana bread on the floor. He giggled then, when he realised that it was gone, promptly burst out crying.

“I...” The mother let out a hiss of frustration. “It’s OK, darling. Mummy’ll get you another one.”

“Mummy needs to model how to behave in a cafe. And that if you make a mess, you clean it up yourself,” Blue Eyes insisted as the woman hauled Tarquin onto her lap. And, damn me, she actually pouted.

“Look, you’ve got no idea how hard—”

“What’s going on? Is there a problem?” I turned around to find the cafe’s owner, Amber, standing behind me. She eyed the mess on the floor with a dark look, then turned that look on the mother. “Felicia. We talked about this last time. I don’t pay

my staff to clean up after little baby Tarquin.” Then she turned her attention to the toddler. “And how are you, little man?” Her tone went from brusque to cooing in seconds. Tarquin rewarded her with a brilliant smile. That seemed to mollify his mother, for a second. Amber kept talking to the little boy in her baby-whisperer voice. “You didn’t mean to make all that mess, but it’s time to pack away, pack away...”

Amber sang a song to ease the process, and Tarquin’s smile got wider and wider as he totally forgot about the banana bread debacle. While he was thoroughly entertained by Amber, Felicia ended up sliding him onto the seat, then grabbing the brush from Blue Eyes.

“It takes a village to raise a child, you know,” she said, looking up at him with a touch of resentment.

“And a village helps *all* of its members, so that no one’s life is made harder by those around them,” he replied, dropping the dustpan down on the table.

I stood, watching in disbelief as the whole scene unfolded, with my eyes flicking between them all. People who thoughtlessly made a mess in the cafe—without at least attempting to clean it up—always made me see red. At least Tarquin had the excuse of low impulse control because of his age. Felicia, however... She really had no excuse and I couldn’t help but feel a small degree of glee as she picked up the dustpan then turned to look at the floor as though unsure where to start. But I was robbed of the sight of this quite posh woman cleaning up in my stead when Blue Eyes turned around and walked toward me, steering me back towards the counter.

“Thanks, man,” Amber said, having got Tarquin interested in one of the kids’ books we kept at the cafe for the very purpose of distracting bored toddlers. She interrupted the blue-eyed guy’s progress by sticking out her hand for him to take. He stopped herding me along to shake it. “And you are?”

“Kaine,” he replied, his voice so deep and rich I think both of us felt a little shiver.

“Kaine, thanks for standing up for my staff. I’m usually on top of things like this, but I got caught up with baking muffins. Shit!” Her eyes widened. “The muffins! Freya, get the man a piece of banana bread or a bacon and egg toastie for his trouble. On the house!”

We both watched her rush back into the kitchen, the doors swinging on their hinges in her wake.

“So... banana bread or bacon and egg?” I asked, still feeling a little unnerved by his actions. I watched him draw in a breath, and I guessed he was going to reject the offer, so I shook my head. “You’ll have to choose one, otherwise Amber will chase you down the road with it. Actually she’d probably make me do it.”

“You’d chase after me waving baked goods in the air?” he asked, a small smile forming on his lips. “I’m not sure I’d run away from that.”

“Right,” I said, then smiled hopefully. “So... one of each? You could give what you don’t want to your friend.”

I nodded to the massive man currently bent over a notepad, his pen working furiously.

“Riv?” That... wasn’t a name I knew, but I tried not to look like I had no idea what he’d just said. “Yeah, he’ll go a bit of banana bread. And if you could rustle me up a B&E—with tomato sauce, please—I’d be very appreciative.”

“One banana bread and one B&E, with sauce: coming right up,” I said, hightailing it away from this confusing guy.

And that’s when I realised something. Most days, I lamented the fact that I felt damn near invisible, but today was the first time I craved exactly the anonymity that was my norm. My skin still felt like it was rubbed raw from Saturday night, but in a good way, a sensual way. And at the same time, my nerves were too alive, my steps had too much spring to them. When I charged into the kitchen, I felt as though my eyes must have looked wild as I put the order in with Amber.

“Can I get a B&E—?”

“Already on it,” she said, sliding several rashers of bacon, perfectly cooked, onto the pillowy soft rolls she made in-house before opening every morning. She topped each roll with an egg before wrapping them up gently. The yolks would still crack, but apparently people liked it like that. “And grab the fresh banana bread, not the stuff already wrapped up.”

I rapidly detoured away from the walk-in fridge, picking up a bread knife and slicing into the still-warm loaf.

“Butter!” she shouted as she cracked countless eggs along the grill, then laid down more bacon.

I diligently swiped the butter knife across each slice and then bundled them up into greaseproof paper before bagging everything and heading back out to the cafe.

“She really didn’t need to do this,” Kaine said, with a grin, but when he smelled her cooking, his eyes grew hungry. “Though I think I’ll have half the building site down here for lunch if this tastes as good as it smells.”

“You’re working on the new housing development?” I asked, aware that customers were starting to gather at the counter, but unable to extricate myself without at least a little word of thanks.

“Yeah. My father’s company has the contract,” he said, “so, expect some repeat customers.” His gaze strayed to where Felicia was struggling to get Tarquin back into his stroller. “I can bring a shop vac to help clean up next time.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary.”

I needed to get away from this man and back behind the counter. As if hearing my thoughts, the massive guy who was still seated at the table, put his notebook away and rose to his feet, striding over to stand beside Kaine.

“Snagged us some free breakfast,” Kaine told him, holding up the bag with the banana bread.

Those grey eyes slid down and he grabbed the bag before nodding and heading for the door.

“Umm. Well, thanks again,” I said, giving Kaine a little wave which he returned before walking out the door.

I didn't know why, but the cafe felt a little smaller, a little less bright when they left. I didn't have the chance to interrogate that thought any further, because I needed to get moving, clearing tables. During all the hoopla, more people had come in and there were few clear spots to sit.

Felicia's table was spotless, for a change, which made me smile. I didn't mind helping anyone if they accidentally made a mess, particularly a child, but she was... well, entitled wasn't a word I liked to use, but it was the only one that seemed to fit. The thing she'd said, about the village? We heard that line all the time. I had no idea what it was like to raise a child, didn't know if I wanted to, but I imagined that you would need a bunch of people to support you through it. But surely that had to be a consensual arrangement? As I collected cups and wiped down tables, I realised she'd just assumed we were on board with this arrangement with her son. As I was pondering that, I reached Kaine's table.

I should've made them coffees to go. Kaine had barely drunk any of his and the other guy had only got a few mouthfuls, he'd been so absorbed in his notebook. As I tidied the table, I saw what he had been working on. Big Guy had been scribbling away on the same kind of pad tradies used to write up details for quotes, but there was no list of services required there. Across the neat lines on the sheet of yellowish paper he'd left behind was a drawing. I picked it up, frowning as I stared at it.

Art and work didn't mix. People either rolled their eyes when I said I went to art school or they changed the subject. It was weird and financially irresponsible and anyone I talked to about it always made that point, as if I hadn't already heard it a hundred times. So to say I was unprepared for what I saw was an understatement. Not just that the pen and paper had been used to make something so beautiful. But Mr Big, Tall and Silent had used a series of loose strokes to bring something into being on the paper.

Me.

It was unmistakable, the way he'd caught the side of my face, broom in hand, staring up at Kaine's back with a mixture of irritation and concern, waiting for the standoff to be done so I could sweep in.

“Freya!”

Katie's yelp snapped me back to reality. I folded the drawing up and pushed it carefully into my pocket for later, then rushed over to help.

Chapter 2

River

“We need eyes on that cafe at all times,” Kaine barked, the moment we got back into the work ute. “Keep our mate safe.” He eyed our mate’s workplace like it was his personal enemy as it disappeared in the rear vision mirror.

Our mate.

When Kaine had told me that we’d found her, it’d hit me like a bomb blast. The woman who was destined to be the perfect one for us.

For me.

I hadn’t said a word as he’d detailed Adam’s fuck-up in very specific language, just watched him pace back and forth, back and forth, across our lounge room floor.

Adam had claimed our mate, made her his, without us even meeting her. Without giving her a chance to accept us or not. I blinked now, like I had then, the muscle in my jaw ticcing as I clamped my jaw shut. Kaine stopped his ranting and looked at me.

“Agreed?”

What? I’d tuned him out the moment he’d said ‘mate’, the word sucker-punching me in the jaw and sending my mind into a tailspin I couldn’t seem to pull out of. Kaine was staring at me expectantly.

“Agreed,” I replied, to get him off my back, thinking that would give me some space. To sink down, down, down into the quiet of my mind. To pretend it wasn’t my pen that had traced the shape of her face as she worked, nor my eyes. That it had been me that stood up, walked over, dealt with the entitled cow and put her in her place for daring to presume upon Freya’s kindness.

“Good. I’ll get one of the apprentices to watch the cafe during work hours today, and then I can take over after—Shit!” I watched him thump the steering wheel of the ute. “I’ve got that fucking meeting this evening with the Master Builders Association.” His eyes slid to me. “You didn’t say much in the cafe.”

I didn’t say much, period. Though, admittedly, I talked a lot more in front of those I trusted, which was a very small circle of people. My immediate family was one half, the other was Adam and Kaine.

“Never do,” I replied, then forced myself to smile. “But I’ll go.”

No, a voice said inside my head. *No, no, no, no, no.*

Because here’s the thing. Kaine had been fucking furious that Adam had found Freya first, becoming incandescent when he found out his brother had claimed her, but I wasn’t. And the minute we’d walked into that cafe, all the noise and chatter had dropped away and I’d had this moment where all I could see was her. I’d stood there like a fucking dickhead, just staring at her as she laughed with her colleagues. My eyes had eaten up the sight of her in big gulps, a visual meal which was all I could give the bear to keep him under control.

For now.

But going back there later, when I was tired after a long day of fighting the bear—because in his head, there wasn’t anything that he couldn’t sort out by fighting, feeding or... fucking—it was a recipe for disaster.

Because while I’d painstakingly been drawing Freya, as my hand had moved over the paper, my mind had emptied of

everything but the fantasy of her spread across the table in front of me. The lights would've been turned down, the open sign flipped and in my head, it would've been just her and just me. I'd have done everything Adam had, and more, if I'd been left to my own devices. And then where would we be?

"You sure?" When Kaine looked at me, it was like his eyes sliced through my bullshit, straight into the core of me, and I didn't like that much at all. He was one of only two blokes I considered close friends, but no one—and I mean no one—got that deep. I straightened up and stared right back, letting the bear shift forward.

"I'm sure," I replied, with all the confidence I didn't feel, holding his gaze until he nodded.

"Make sure she gets to her car safely, or the train station..." He frowned. "Nah, fuck that, offer her a lift... Shit." We were Freya's mates and would move heaven and earth to make sure she was safe, but she didn't know that yet. Kaine stared at me again. "Make sure she gets home in one piece. Tail her if you have to."

Hunt my mate, dog her steps while sticking to the shadows, only to slip free if anyone dared mess with her? Suddenly that internal no became a yes.

"Go to your dinner tonight," I replied. "I've got this."

I carried that certainty inside me all the way back to the building site, until I heard a familiar snide voice.

"Have a nice lunch with your boyfriend, Rowdy?"

A lot of foreigners seem to think Aussie blokes are all like Hugh Jackman or someone but, most of them, in my experience, were like this little prick. Macca was one of the plasterers, putting up the sheets of gyprock over the wooden trusses me and my team had put up. But, like a fucking dog, the smaller the pup, the bigger the bark. Maybe in modern terms Macca might've been seen as a short king, but really he was just a little cu—

“Do you order for him?” Macca asked, snickering to his buddies, but their eyes were trained on me, looking for an opening. “Or are you the bitch in the relationship?”

I stepped up to him slowly, knowing from experience how this shit went. Dickheads like this needed to run their mouths constantly to try and shut up the voice inside them that screamed about their inadequacies. Shutting it with my fist would achieve a desirable outcome, in the short term. But this wasn't school anymore. An assault charge was not something I wanted or needed. At the same time, though, I couldn't back off. One little sign of weakness, that's what he was looking for; because if he found mine, he could ignore his own.

“Why you wanna know?” I asked. “You looking to join us?”

“Fuck, no,” he spluttered, his shit-eating grin getting wiped away as his mates cackled. Made me wonder if jackal shifters were a thing. But although his shifty little eyes flicked around to check out the mood in the room, they came back to settle on me. “If it don't have tits, I'm not interested.”

“And if she does, I bet she walks the other way when she sees the likes of you,” I shot back to the continued sound of his buddies' amusement.

I had him beat and we both knew it. It was obvious when he puffed himself up, trying to make himself look bigger, like a cat would. But bear beats cat every time. I smirked down at the little prick, just to rub in that last hit, then turned to go.

Never give your enemy your back, my dads always said, but with a piece of shit like Macca? I figured I was safe. But right as I went to go back to work, he piped up again.

“Least I don't have to put out an APB for a girl after I've fucked her, like your mate, Goldilocks.” He meant Adam and that had me freezing mid-step. “If she sucked my knob and fucked off before I woke up, I'd be down the pub celebrating, not panting after some bitch—”

“What did you fucking say?”

The bear was taking control. I could feel his paw push my hand as it snapped out and around Macca's throat, making his little buddies start to squawk. None of them dared step in though, not even when I lifted the dumb fuck off his feet.

"You... fucking... her... too?" Macca croaked out, the wild smile on his face somewhat marred as he went bright red.

"River."

Kaine was there, along with half the building site. School, work, it was all the same. The little meerkats all came running when shit was going down, grateful for a break from the monotony of work. But my sleuthmate just stood there, arms crossed, waiting for me to make the right decision.

Even though I didn't want to.

I threw the fucking prick backwards because I was pissed off that we'd both lost. Macca had been on a fishing expedition, looking for bait that would make me bite and I'd just given him exactly what he needed to rile me up, even while I handed his arse to him. As he lay sprawled on the ground, Kaine stepped forward.

"I realise my brother has splashed his love life all over the papers and TV, but if you're here to act like a bunch of gossipy teenage girls, you can get the fuck off my building site," he growled at everyone. "You wanna keep up-to-date with what Adam's doing? Read the fucking paper. You want a job? Start showing me you deserve to be here."

And that's why he was the one that called the shots in our sleuth. Keep your head while all others around you are losing theirs, our English teacher used to say all the time, and Kaine was the one who seemed to have taken that to heart. He walked toward me, his gaze softening as he approached me. But he didn't get too close. He couldn't stand side by side with me because of dickheads like Macca. The sort of idiots whose most important relationships were with their buddies, yet when they were together they spent way too much energy pointing the finger and taunting people they assumed were gay.

“You OK?” he asked me as I fought to catch my breath. Black fur prickled over my forearms, forcing me to shove my sleeves down. “How’s your control?”

“Locked down tight,” I replied, shooting him a dark look.

I wasn’t a cub anymore, ready to explode at a moment’s notice. I saw what Macca was, what he was trying to do. His words didn’t hit me hard like they could’ve. They wouldn’t have hit at all if he hadn’t talked about her.

Freya.

Macca didn’t know her name and I’d make damn sure he wouldn’t get to know it, because while the bear could be convinced to put up with a lot of shit, he wouldn’t put up with that.

“What happened?” Kaine asked, much more gently, and that’s why he was my sleuthmate. Other people made assumptions, jumped to conclusions about the guy whose mother wasn’t his fathers’ fated mate, but not him.

“He was talking shit like he always does.” I rolled my shoulders, trying to lessen the tension. “Then he talked shit about Freya.”

Kaine shifted his focus then, turning those laser eyes on the plasterer until the little guy was moving faster than a one-armed paper hanger with the crabs.

“I’ll let his boss know he’s not welcome on site after today,” Kaine said.

And, just like that, problem solved.

Except it wasn’t. The world was full of little men, and not just in stature. Men who had to pull others down if they were to feel good about themselves. Men who preyed on others, thinking that would fill the hole inside them. I nodded, then moved off to get my own work done. But all afternoon I moved through it like I was in a daze, because I couldn’t help but worry about what guys would be buzzing around our mate.

Chapter 3

Freya

There was nothing worse than a customer who wouldn't leave after a long shift.

I'd been on my feet since just before lunchtime and I could feel every hour of my shift in my aching arches. But right when I should've been packing up the chairs and mopping the floors, this guy was sitting there, nursing his tenth cup of coffee.

Art Boy, I was calling this one. It said more about him than Mr Big, Tall and Silent.

Unless there was a slew of random drive-by artists dropping portraits of me down on tables, he was the same massive guy with the grey eyes who'd been in before, at lunch. I'd smiled when he walked back in again in the late afternoon, this time dressed in a pair of jeans and a neatly pressed shirt. I'd shown him the menu, brought him his first coffee, then his meal.

And then he was supposed to have gone home.

People had done that all afternoon and throughout the evening and now I was still standing here at 9PM waiting to finish my shift.

"What's the hold up...? Oh." Amber swept out of the kitchen, then came to a stop beside me. "He's still here?"

"He's still here."

We'd pitched our voices real low, little more than a whisper, but somehow that had him looking up, meeting my eyes for just a second, before staring back down at his coffee like it had personally offended him.

Maybe that was a hint that he should go home like a normal person and make one more to his liking.

"I'll let him know we're closing up," she said, a determined look on her face. As owner of the place, she could do things that I didn't dare.

"It's OK," I said. "If you're happy for me to give him the move along. I can handle it."

"Good girl—" She was about to clap a hand on my shoulder when the late news report came on. Amber always left the TV running all day for customers, on the footy on game days or the cricket in summer. Anything to keep customers happy. But right now she stared at the screen.

"Has Adam Farrelly's Cinderella girl been found?" the news anchor asked with a smug smile. "Not yet. The star footballer and winner of this year's Magarey Medal..."

I shook my head, moving away from the counter and taking several steps towards the lingering customer. I'd seen the afternoon report, the evening report and every one between, with some variation on this story and each time it hit me the same.

I ached inside, but it wasn't a painful thing. It was like the ghost of pleasure I'd left behind, reminding me of everything that had happened. It'd been perfect, that night, that moment, and part of me had been unable to believe a guy like Adam would be willing to skip out of the medal ceremony for me. But there'd been no mistaking his intent. He was hot, demanding—so intense—and I'd lapped it right up.

He was like a fire for me to warm my hands by. And as far as I was concerned, the moment he got too hot, I'd be gone, keeping myself safe from getting burned. But then he'd fronted up to a press conference and told everyone... I scowled at the photo of Adam on screen today just as I had

yesterday, sitting in my parent's lounge room when I'd gone around for Sunday dinner. All that golden perfection seemed... oppressive, somehow.

"He needs to give it a rest," Amber said, hand on her hip. "Poor girl obviously didn't want anything serious. And this guy's using the damn media to get himself another date? These idiots are lapping it up, but now it's verging on stalker behaviour."

I smiled then, feeling validated in my resentment. But hey, today's news was lining the bottom of tomorrow's bird cages. Once Adam came to grips with the fact that I wasn't going to appear to let myself be swept away again, he'd move on to something bigger, better.

Someone better.

I frowned slightly, my finger going to the crease in my brow and smoothing it away. That was my plan, wasn't it? To leave him to find someone who was comfortable standing there in the spotlight. I shook my head, bringing my focus back to the here and now, then walked over to Art Boy.

"So was there anything else I can get you?" I asked in my best dickhead whisperer voice. "We're closing up now."

"You are?"

Jesus, his voice was dark and rich, like a really good coffee. And when he stood, I was forced to look up, up, up to try and take him all in. He raked a hand through his hair and then collected his plate and coffee cup.

"I can get those," I said.

"No, I've got it." He walked his dishes over to the counter and left them there, picking up a damp cloth and, much to Amber's amusement, cleaning off his table and the seats of his booth with a flick, before putting the cloth back where he'd found it. "Thanks for dinner, ladies." But he didn't look at the cook, Amber, as he said it. Instead he focused on me, holding my gaze for far longer than a chicken parmi and chips warranted. "It was amazing."

We should've said thank you, come again, something, but the two of us just stared as he ambled out the front door. Amber shot me an incredulous look and then locked the front doors behind him as the two of us went to work.

I was going to miss the train. I cursed Art Boy over and over in my head as I swept the floor in quick precise strokes, then slicked the mop over it, removing all evidence of the customers who'd been through today.

"Freya, you can go," Amber told me.

"Nope, nearly done," I said, swirling the mop around tables and in between the booth seats.

"You'll miss your train and I can't drive you all the way out north," she said.

I'd started working for Amber while I was still studying art at university and I'd stayed on, even when I was forced way out of the city centre to try and find somewhere that was affordable to live. It was nights like this that made me rethink my life choices, because I knew what I had ahead of me.

The train ride during the day wasn't too bad. There were always some dodgy people in the carriages, but something happened after dark. During the daylight hours, people seemed to be more aware of others, less likely to engage in antisocial behaviour.

But all bets were off when night fell.

Some people seemed to be emboldened by the moon's glow, screaming like animals in the dark, or acting like them. Dad was always muttering about the conditions on my side of the city, about the rise in homelessness, in crime, in every bad thing, but none of that was a help to me now.

If I rang my father, he'd come and get me. He'd told me to ring him if things like this happened, but instead I decided to hope for the best. I unlocked the door while calling to Amber that I was going, then slammed it shut behind me. Grabbing my keys in one hand and my phone in the other I started

speed-walking across the car park towards the road. I hated the way my heart started pounding but I clutched my keys tighter between my fingers and kept one eye out for any trouble, while making sure not to look around me like I was nervous. Oh, the joys of being a woman. I took a deep breath. I was an adult. I should be able to make my own way home. I muttered something to that effect under my breath, letting my frustration fire my legs, forcing my stride to lengthen. Maybe the train would be late. I glanced at my phone, blanching when I saw the time, cursing myself for not having made the change and found work closer to home, grumbling that I wouldn't, couldn't afford an Uber. The cost would be the equivalent of a few good brushes, some new paint, a... My head jerked up as I heard the far-off rattle of the train coming down the tracks.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I stuffed my phone in my bag, holding it tight against me so it wouldn't bounce around as I ran, and prepared to make a mad dash towards the station despite knowing for sure I'd never make it. My muscles tensed as I threw a quick glance in either direction to make sure I didn't get skittled crossing the road. Then, right as I was about to launch into a run, a tall figure loomed up out of the darkness.

Art Boy.

“Jesus!” I yelped, shying backwards from him. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Sorry!” Big hands went up and warned me off, but I was already backtracking. An Uber was fine, more than fine, I suddenly thought. “Shit, sorry, I... I didn't mean to scare you like that.”

“Not scared,” I growled, like my self defence instructor had taught me, shoving my house key further between two fingers, ready to stab at him if he got any closer.

“Yeah? OK, cool, cool...”

Jesus Christ, what was this guy's deal? He was standing there like he was trying to chat me up at the pub, not

approaching a woman on her own, at night, on a dark street.

“Look, I couldn’t help but overhear you talking...” Christ, had I been talking that loudly to myself? I frowned and then stared up at this massive man, trying to convince myself I had a chance if he attacked. “And...” His head whipped around as the blast of air brakes made clear the train had stopped.

The last train of the night.

“Fuck!” I cursed.

“Is that your train?” he said.

“The *last* train!” I didn’t mean to snap at the guy, so when he flinched, I felt a momentary sting of shame. Then I remembered he was the one making me miss it. “Look, I’m sorry, but I need to call an Uber—”

“I can give you a lift.”

Incredulously, I lifted my eyes to his, doing what women always had to do. Use our gut instincts to assess for danger. Search for signs that he would actually help me, or whether this was just a ruse so he could get me in his car and hurt me. He didn’t look like a serial killer; but I guess no one ever did. If they walked around with neon signs over their heads, they wouldn’t be as effective, would they?

“I have literally no idea who you are,” I told him, pulling up the Uber app and resigning myself to waiting around outside the cafe for it to come by. “I can’t get in a car with a strange man.”

“So the Uber driver will be a woman, then?”

My jaw flexed, as I knew that was unlikely.

“No, but they have regulations and... stuff. I could leave a really bad review...” Shit, this was ridiculous. “I can call my dad.” I let out a long sigh as I opened my contacts, knowing he’d be cosy in bed by now.

“Ring him and let me talk to him,” Art Boy said. “I’m River, by the way,” he added, offering his hand. “Freya,” I replied, giving it a quick shake, before pulling my fingers back with a frown.

I'd felt a deep pulsing warmth when our hands had touched. It had awakened a similar sensation deep inside me as when I'd been with Adam, reminding me of my adventures Saturday night. But that didn't make any sense; they were totally different. River was dark where Adam was all gold. They were both big and tall, but Adam seemed to shine light on everyone around him, whereas Art Boy... River... seemed to absorb it, like Anish Kapoor black pigment.

"I'm fine," I assured him, but the tension in my voice wasn't convincing either of us. "I don't usually work the late shift and... I'm fine."

I forced myself to use the smile I did with all customers when they were being difficult, but it didn't seem like it was going to brush River off as it was supposed to.

"Ring your dad and I'll give him my number, rego number, car model and make, address. He can have my tax file number too, if he wants it. I'm not here to hurt you, Freya. Can he track you on his phone?"

He could, if he managed to get his head around how Find My iPhone worked. I wasn't about to share that bit of information, though, so I just nodded.

"Ring him. We'll have a quick chat and then I'll take you home."

I shook my head slowly, almost in disbelief that I was doing as he suggested, then I tapped on FaceTime. No matter how I got home tonight, his suggestion wasn't a bad strategy either way.

"Hello, love." Dad's eyes looked tired as he peered at me over his glasses. "Everything alright[JJ2]?"

"There's a guy here who wants to have a quick chat with you," I told him, not wanting to keep him up. "He's going to give me a lift home and... here." I passed River the phone and he looked down at the screen.

"Give Freya a lift?" I could hear the tension in Dad's voice.

“Sorry for bothering you with this at this hour,” River said, in a very even tone. “I stayed late at the cafe and it made Freya miss her train. I think it was the last one for the night.”

“What’s she doing working late?” Dad growled. “Those people know she has a long train ride home, and at night too. It’s not safe up in the north.”

“That’s where you live?” River asked, flicking his eyes to mine, with a frown. “Northern Adelaide?”

“Salisbury,” I said with a sigh.

The northern suburbs had a bad reputation. Plenty of people declared that they would never set foot in them, but there were some nice areas and some not so nice ones, just like everywhere else. I couldn’t afford to have champagne tastes on a beer budget, so that was that.

“Salisbury?” I watched the muscle in River’s jaw jump. “I can get her home safely, but she doesn’t know me from Adam, so I suggested giving you a call.” He pulled out his wallet. “I can send you a picture of my licence and rego, the car I drive and—”

“I can come and get my daughter,” Dad said huffily. “I’ll be there in about half an hour, love. Go inside—”

“I can’t, Dad.”

Amber was a great boss, that’s why I stuck it out at the cafe, but she was out of there the moment the lights were turned off, ready to get home to her partner.

“That boss of yours should’ve waited until you got safely on the train,” Dad grumped.

“What’s going on?” I heard Mum’s muffled voice say. “Is Freya alright?”

“I’m fine, Mum.”

I was in my twenties, but my parents were fussing like a pair of old chooks, which was why I hadn’t wanted to call them in the first place. They worried. But it was worse than that, because they shouldn’t have had to. I was old enough to be able to manage my own transport and I went back to

deciding I'd Uber it there and then, when Dad said the fatal words.

"If you'd got your bloody licence when I told you to, this wouldn't be an issue."

And there it was. I'd managed to get A's in art, history and English at school. I'd always ended up with a credit or above at university, with quite a few high distinctions. I got my arse to work, the markets, to the shops, everywhere, by myself. And if I worked somewhere closer to where I lived, I could've taken my push bike home, rather than have this embarrassing conversation. I snuck a look at this River guy, sure I would see the same expression as appeared on everyone's face when they found out I couldn't drive.

Shock, incredulity, a hint of mockery or just garden variety awkwardness, I'd seen it all because, in Australia, you got your licence as quickly as possible, relishing the freedom that came from being able to drive yourself around this big, broad, brown land of ours.

Just not me.

Dad had tried. Mum had tried. Even my younger brother had given it a crack when he got off his P plates, but it never worked. I could draw, paint whatever you wanted, but put me behind the wheel and I was a mess. Too many people driving way too fast, too many indicators and gears and pedals. Dad had tried hard to instil a healthy fear of other drivers when I'd first started, but that had only made things worse. The minute I got in the driver's seat my heart pounded, my eyes flicked around wildly and I sucked in breaths so fast I became lightheaded.

"I'll get an Uber," I reiterated.

"No, you won't," Mum said. "I saw something on Today Tonight the other night and—"

"I can get your daughter safely home," River assured them. "You can track her progress using an app. I can keep you on the phone for the whole trip, if that'd help."

And somehow that deep voice seemed to settle the both of them.

“Yes, well, that’d be a big help,” Dad said, “but you’ll need to bring Frey here.”

“Daaad...” I groaned.

“You know your mother and I worry,” Dad said. “We won’t sleep a wink until we know you’re safe in bed. You can go back to that hellhole you call home in the morning. I’ll drop you off on my way to work.”

“Fine,” I ground out.

Dad rattled the home address off, which was probably safer. Delivery or Uber drivers had been known to turn up uninvited to single women’s places, something I’d learned from Mum when she was watching those damn current affairs shows.

“I’m sorry,” River said, softly, when the call ended. “I never meant...” I watched his shoulders sag and all of a sudden, Art Boy didn’t seem anywhere near as scary. “I didn’t mean to make things worse.”

“It’s OK.”

Why the hell was I reassuring him? For the life of me, I couldn’t work that out. He gave a half-smile then nodded to a fancy looking work ute that was sitting in the car park, the dark blue paint gleaming. With his long strides, River reached the ute ahead of me. He unlocked the passenger side door and then opened it for me, the gentlemanly act strangely sweet, but with my building exhaustion I was just glad I wasn’t going to have to make the run from my train stop to the bus that would take me closest to my place. I watched River snap a photo of his licence, sitting it on the bonnet, so he could get his rego plate in the picture. He paused a few moments more to compose a text and then send the message, presumably to Dad.

If he was a serial killer, he wasn’t a very smart one. However, the way I was feeling, I was pretty sure I’d have got in a car with Ted Bundy, if that’s what it took to get me in bed and asleep faster. River got in the car, his size making the cab

feel so much smaller and cosier when he did. Then those grey eyes slid sideways as he reached over to grab something. I thought maybe it was the street directory or something. Some young people still used them, too technologically challenged to work out how the sat-nav worked, but he grabbed the seat belt I'd neglected to put on, clipping it across my body, before buckling up on his side. He slotted the key in and the engine rumbled to life, and then we were off.

Chapter 4

River

I was an idiot, a total fucking idiot. I'd hung around the cafe like a bad smell, waiting for the two women to indicate they were packing up for the day, and instead it had finally become clear that I was holding them up and the two of them were waiting on *me*.

Kaine had sauntered over and sorted out the woman whose kid had been trashing the place earlier today, but I'd... I'd made Freya's job harder, her day longer and, now, her life more complicated. My teeth locked down, and I had to keep my lips pressed tight together to stop myself from flashing my fangs. When I'd walked over and offered her a lift, I'd thought I was doing the right thing, until I caught the harsh chemical blast of her fear. She usually smelled like flowers, pretty ones, but when I'd scared her by appearing out of the blue, she'd stunk like those awful toilet fresheners.

Because of you, the bear rumbled. He didn't know how or why, because he found the rules of human behaviour frankly confusing, but he knew this much. Predators came out at night and we'd made her vulnerable to them. It could've been easily rectified in his head. We'd take Freya home to our place, that wasn't far from here, and move her into our house. We'd protect her, look after her, lo— I shook my head as I drove down the largely empty road, towards my real destination.

Freya's parents' house.

Meeting the in-laws was a whole step in itself and Kaine would kill me when he found out I'd gone rogue and met them by myself. However, I couldn't find it in myself to regret it. I was here with her, in a small space, breathing her scent in, and I'd found out that she had parents who cared about her, given her dad's concerns. I was content that they didn't trust me... yet. She deserved that kind of care. But my fingers still tightened around the steering wheel with stress at my idiocy, making the vinyl creak, as black hair rose and fell across my knuckles.

"So, are you working at the building site up the road?" she asked.

My eyes darted sideways, shocked she'd even talk to me, but those beautiful hazel eyes were staring straight into mine. I smiled slightly, hoping to reassure her, smooth her feathers and shift her scent to something sweeter.

"I'm a carpenter," I explained. "And, yeah, we're working on that new housing development. The guy you met before?"

"The one who wrangled Felicia and Tarquin?" she asked.

"Yeah, him. That's Kaine. He's the one in charge."

"And you're... close?"

"Been friends since we were in school," I replied. "We share a house with his brother."

"So are they really bad cooks or you just needed a chicken parmi tonight?" she asked.

I smiled much more easily then.

"The banana bread was amazing so..." I shrugged. "Had to see what else was good on the menu. And, yeah, the guys can't cook for shit. Kaine is damn good at ordering takeaway and..."

I stopped myself, because I was just about to talk about Adam's toastie making skills, but we weren't doing that. Kaine was on the warpath. Adam had overstepped grossly and was now in damage control mode. We had to try to get to know our

mate, try to persuade her that we weren't dickheads, and then she'd... I sighed.

"And?" Freya prompted.

"My other flatmate has made making a toastie into an art form," I replied finally. "Chicken, cheese, and pineapple. Ham, cheese, and onion. Semi dried tomato, salami, and cream cheese."

"Chicken, cheese and pineapple?" She wrinkled her nose. "That sounds either awful or amazing and I'm not sure which. Maybe I should ask Amber to put it on the menu to test it out with the customers." Freya seemed to be uncoiling in the seat beside me, slowly going limp. "But what about you, River? What do you bring to the table?"

I knew what this was. The thing I was terrible at: small talk. You either had something meaningful to say or you kept your trap shut, that was my motto. But that wasn't going to fly because she was feeling me out, making sure I wasn't a threat, so I kept my lips moving.

"I keep out of everyone's way," I replied, then felt the mood in the car drop. Fuck. "Though obviously not tonight. I really am sorry."

"Don't be." She shrugged. "Mum and Dad will use this as yet another opportunity to talk about my life decisions, and I get to sleep in the same bed I did when I was a kid. They have really good central heating, which is awesome."

When I saw her shiver, I tapped on the centre console to turn the heater on. I tended to keep the heat off because I didn't need it.

"You don't have to..." Her voice trailed away as she felt the warm air rush over her. It was worth being a little overheated if it meant I got to watch her settle back in her seat and sigh. "But it feels so good."

"Crank that shit up to eleven if you need to," I said. "It's the least I can do."

"Eleven?" She peered at me quizzically. "Eleven degrees is cold... Oh god, did you just quote Spinal Tap?"

I smiled despite myself because my dads had sat me down and watched it when I was a teenager, explaining all the jokes. They seemed to have a lot of old records with dudes in skin tight spandex and brightly coloured long hair in their collection.

“My dad...” I nearly slipped and said the plural version. “He made me watch it with him,” I said finally.

“Oh my god, me too! What the hell was that thing with the cucumber...?”

I let her words wash over me, easing the tension in my body as I drove through the dark streets. I added my own observations, the two of us cackling about the tiny Stonehenge prop and the drummers that always died, right up until we reached her destination.

“Shit,” she said, as we pulled along her street, because standing outside on the footpath was a middle-aged couple, both wearing long Oodies, PJs and slippers. “I didn’t think...” She shot me an apologetic look. “You might want to let me out before we get to my place, because you’ll cop a grilling if you stop near them.”

“They just want to make sure you get home safe, right?” I said. I pulled up outside what looked like a nice solid house that had a well-maintained garden behind a low fence. I got out and walked around to Freya’s door to open it as she grabbed her bag off the floor.

“River, right?” I turned to see Alby, Freya’s dad, who looked a little different than he had on FaceTime when he’d had his glasses on and his hair had been sticking up. I made sure Freya got down from the ute without any dramas, then shut the door and walked over to him.

“How’s it going, mate?” I said, holding out my hand for him to shake. He took it and gripped it firmly, then gave me that little chin tilt guys do when they reckon you’ve passed the first test.

“It was nice of you to help our Freya,” her mum said and, when I turned to her, I instantly saw the resemblance. Same rich brown hair with dark blonde highlights, same hazel eyes. “Are you alright, love? Let’s get you inside and into bed.”

“Thanks for bringing her home,” Alby said stiffly, shoving his hands into the kangaroo pocket of his Oodie. He shifted restlessly. “She’s a good girl, but she takes unnecessary risks sometimes.”

“She looked like she had it all under control,” I countered. “She was gonna grab an Uber—”

“Those things.” He dismissed the app with a shake of his head. “How do you know who’s behind the wheel? Don’t have to do the proper training or anything like a taxi driver or something. Look, did you want me to fix you up with some petrol money?”

“No need,” I replied hastily. “It was my fault she left late anyway.”

You dickhead, River, I thought, watching him frown and his eyes harden.

We’d had a little vibe going there. I’d helped his daughter out from the goodness of my heart, from his perspective, and the fact I’d gotten her here in one piece and didn’t want anything in return was earning me some major brownie points. But they all disappeared the moment I said that.

“What?” He seemed to pin me with his gaze, trying to look right into me and I barely fought the urge to step back.

Say something, I thought furiously and then I remembered Kaine’s words. *And don’t fuck this up.*

“I went in for a late dinner and the place was empty, just the two women working there: Freya and her boss,” I told him, which was mostly true. “I got a little concerned and hung around to make sure they were safe. Turns out they were waiting for me to go but didn’t say anything because they didn’t want to kick me out.”

I looked at him with a sheepish grin, because what else could I do? I’d fucked it up and I could now understand

Kaine's irritation. I'd had one job—

"I hate that Amber doesn't put a bloke on with them in the evening," he said with a sharp shake of his head. "Doesn't make any bloody sense to me, with the way the world is nowadays. You're a good bloke, River, for sticking around, even if you need to get your arse out the door earlier. Frey won't listen to me, but that train is dangerous at night, especially heading up north."

"Well, I'd be happy to give her a lift any time she wants. I'm working at the building site just down the road from the cafe."

Shit, where the hell had that come from? I was going too hard, coming on way too strong. Just as I felt a stab of pure fear, Alby grinned.

"You're sweet on her."

"Um, yeah..." I raked a hand through my hair, conscious of the fact my dads said it made me look like a scruffy lout. "I saw her during the lunch rush and..." I shrugged.

"Say no more, mate." The man winked. "I was the same with her mother. I saw Floss across a crowded lunchroom and I was a goner." He gave me a light punch to the arm. "I dunno if you'll get very far, though. Our Freya isn't really one for boys, but you seem like a nice lad." A cunning look crossed his face. "Maybe you'd like to come by one Sunday afternoon? Freya and the other kids come around for their mother's famous roast lamb. She'd be happy to have you."

"Yes." My answer came out too fast, too urgently, but Alby just smiled.

"Thanks again then, mate. I gotta get inside now. I'm fucking freezing my balls off."

I waved goodnight to him once I got back in my car, and then I just sat there looking at the house, blinking. Freya's dad just shook his head at me before he ambled back inside but of course he didn't get it. Had I fucked things up? I didn't know, but despite the way the evening had gone, I felt a strange sense of elation all the way home until I walked in the door.

“You’re up late.”

I was taken aback a little to see Adam bunkered down on the couch watching reruns of Friends. He only ever did that when he was feeling down, and those moments were few and far between. I took in the couple of empty beer cans and the bags of chips strewn across the coffee table, as well as an open box of pizza.

“Having a cheat meal, mate?” I asked him as I walked over to the couch.

“Cheat meal?” He shoved the box with his foot. “Season’s over now...” He let out a heartfelt sigh then looked up at me. “I won the Magarey, River. I won the fucking medal that I’ve been aiming for my whole fucking life. So why does it feel like nothing?” His eyes locked with mine. “Why does it feel like nothing without her?”

Chapter 5

Adam

I'd fucked everything up. If it'd been a play on the field, I'd know how to approach it. I'd let that shit stew for a bit, to feel that gut-wrenching agony that came from giving your all but still failing. When I had the strength, I'd pick myself up, review the footage, talk to my coach, anything, to work out what to do next.

But there was no one to coach me through this.

I couldn't sit still on the couch. Instead, my fingers were tracing the seams of the cushions, worrying at the small hole that had formed some years ago until it became bigger, and I made myself pull my hand away. I reached over and grabbed the stubbie that was pooling condensation on the coffee table and took a drink. I'd rather do anything than feel the ache that was left from holding Freya.

And then losing her.

I took another mouthful of my beer and watched Joey talk about Thanksgiving pants. The familiar dialogue, the canned laugh track, the easy camaraderie between the characters, was all usually enough to settle me. But not now. And then, right when I'd felt like shit, Kaine had been there: not to lift me up, but to grind me down harder.

"You did what?"

His voice still echoed in my head. It was worse than the time we decided to ride BMX bikes from the roof of our

family home into the pool. Me and my mates had thought it was fucking hysterical at the time, right before we busted a bike and my leg. It was worse than when I slept through my Year 12 exam and failed maths, because my mark was already on a knife edge beforehand. It was worse... I took a long swig from the bottle of beer. I usually wasn't a big fan of the stuff, but the bitter taste worked well with my mood, because there was nothing worse than how I was feeling. My phone buzzed and I looked down at it, irrationally hopeful it was Freya, but it was just Darryl.

D-Bag: *Come out, ya cunt. The babes are swarming.*

This was followed by a shot of him in some club, neon lights glaring in the background, a few pretty girls leaning in to take a selfie with him.

I didn't want 'babes'. I didn't like clubs at the best of times, and I hated doof music. I just wanted Freya. I tapped out of his message stream, jumping into the one I shared with Jack, hoping that her message had been updated.

Jackster: *I'm catching up with her on Sunday. I'll ask.*

No promises, no acknowledgement of the hell I was going through. It wasn't reasonable of me to expect anything like that, but... Part of me wondered if Jack knew how this felt. And as soon as I thought that, I felt an overwhelming rush of shame. That hadn't happened when I'd noped out of the medal count, letting my team down. Nor when I'd stood in front of the press and begged Freya to come back to me. But I sure felt it right fucking now.

Because Jack did know how it felt. Her partner had spaced on her, leaving her to come home to a unit empty of all of her girlfriend's possessions, with no other words than 'this isn't working out.' Jack was tough as nails, but I'd seen her crack only a couple of days ago. I'd walked into her office for a word before the medal count and she'd tried to be all business, but the bear had caught the moment her hand had started to shake. It'd fluttered like a wounded bird before she slapped it down on the desk.

She'd tried to carry on, to keep herself together by keeping it professional, telling me how the medal count had to go, but I'd walked around and done the only thing I could think to do and hugged her. She'd gone real stiff then, making me think that this was a terrible mistake, but then she collapsed against me and burst into tears. It'd all come out in great sobbing chunks, the death of Jack's relationship and of her hopes for the future.

"Shut up and listen." That's what my dads always said when Mum burst into tears. They'd waited quietly until she was done and then they'd try to work out how to fix whatever it was that was hurting her.

But I hadn't been able to do that for Jack and I wasn't able to do that for myself in order to work things out with Freya. I rubbed my face with my hands, scrubbing at the skin, anything to try and bring me back to the present, to this room. I had to find her, explain, do whatever it took to make shit up to her and—

"You're up late."

I pulled my hands away from my face to see River standing in the doorway looking over at me. His eyes took in the mess spread across the table and I felt like I was only just seeing it for the first time. This was my third beer, not my first and Dominos pizza...? I didn't even like their food.

"Having a cheat meal, mate?" he asked.

"Cheat meal?" I shoved the box with my foot. "Season's over now..." I stopped and let out a sigh. "I won the Magarey, River. I won the fucking medal that I've been aiming for my whole fucking life. So why does it feel like nothing?" I stared into my sleuthmate's eyes. "Why does it feel like nothing without her?"

"Because it doesn't matter." I thought he was going to sit down beside me, but he picked up the box of pizza and the beers, even my half-drunk one and disposed of them in the kitchen before returning. "Nothing matters but her, and you feel like shit because you fucked up." River didn't talk that much, but when he did, he didn't pull his punches. "But we

can make things better. Freya is our fated mate. We're destined to be with her. We will find her and get to know her and beg for her forgiveness..."

He paused, as if he could see just that and I clung to his certainty. He was giving me something Kaine couldn't or wouldn't: hope.

"Yeah?" My voice cracked on that.

"Yeah, you dickhead." He gave me a shove, something I answered in kind. "Now go and have a fucking shower. Are you trying to preserve her scent or something? Because you haven't washed since that night and you stink."

"Guilty as charged," I said, getting to my feet, but although my head spun a little when I did, I felt it, a sense of purpose. I got shit done—that was my whole identity as a player and a man—so being given something to fucking do helped. I ambled into the bathroom, winced at the sight of the bags under my eyes and my greasy hair, before getting under the shower's spray and scrubbing every inch of me. Shampoo, conditioner, body wash, a razor, deodorant, it felt like the more steps I took towards being an actual human being, the closer I was to her, and that created enough peace in me to get some sleep that night.

I dreamed of her. Of course I did. As soon as sleep took over, she came. The press of her lips and the bittersweet taste of them, part quinine, part juniper, all her. Then the slip of her tongue against mine, darting forward then retreating the moment I tried to tangle mine with hers, inviting me to take over. To cradle her head in my hands, stroke my hands through her hair, kiss her until she moaned, and then kiss her some more. In dreams you don't have to go through any steps to get naked, no need to fight with bra straps and undies. You were just naked when you wanted to be, like we both were.

"Adam?"

She looked somewhat surprised to see me as I rolled her under me on the bed. That strange little detail nearly pulled me

out of the dream, but the feel of her under me was too seductive to let go of.

“Of course, beautiful,” I said, smiling with my whole heart, something I hadn’t managed to do since she’d left my room. But in my dreams she was with me, always. “I can’t fucking stay away.”

She tried to say something but as I felt the vibration begin deep in her throat, it turned into a sigh as I kissed my way down her swan-like neck.

I felt the bite mark there and smiled against it, fitting my teeth back into the scar and sucking against it. In real life it’d feel fucking amazing any time one of her mates did it, just like it did in her dream now. Her words turned to moans, her hands went to my head and she held me there. My fangs pricked her skin, had her writhing under me, trying to get something, anything to ease the ache inside her.

“Shh... shh...” I whispered, licking along the bite mark and then kissing her hard. “I’ve got you, babe. I’ve got you.”

Because in my dreams, I knew exactly what she needed. I kissed my way down her body, spending inordinate amounts of time on her breasts, her ribs and the sensitive swell of her belly, forcing myself to put off what I really wanted to do. But when her thighs parted, I figured she was inviting me in for a taste. This bear needed her honey bad. I spread her thighs wide and then just stared.

“What?” I heard the curiosity in her voice, then the tinge of concern when she asked again.

“Just storing this away for later,” I told her, and I felt my real life sadness seeping in. I smiled to soften the mood, but she just watched me as though she’d picked up on my emotions. “You taste so fucking good, I haven’t been able to get it out of my head since...” I sighed. “I need it, Freya. I need—”

Anything I might have had to say was cut off as her hand went to my head, rumpling my hair for just a second, the tenderness of that gesture making my heart swell in my chest,

even as I knew it wasn't real. But I could dream, right? Here, in my dream, I hadn't fucked up. Here, she was mine and I was hers. Here, she knew what I was, what my brother and River were and she loved each one of us with the kind of single-minded dedication I would give her if I could.

"I know what you need." Her legs spread a little wider. "So take it. Take me."

Would she be as bold if I ever got my shit together enough to be in this position again? I didn't know, but I wanted to find out. I grabbed onto that as my goal, the thing my mind always needed to keep me happy, and held it close. Before it had been the Magarey Medal but now that I'd achieved it, the goalposts had moved. I wanted her, us, this: her hand pushing my face right where she needed me, then the sound of her gasp of pleasure after my first lick.

Chapter 6

Freya

Having a vivid sex dream was embarrassing. Having one in the bed you grew up in as a child was worse than that. The guy from the cafe had driven me home and I should've been grateful, especially when I arrived in one piece, but that gratitude was somewhat diminished by the fact that I'd ended up in this bed because of him. And then, once I'd settled under the covers of my narrow single bed and went to sleep, *he* came.

"I know what you need," I told Adam, raking my fingers through his hair. Had it been this silky the night we were together? I couldn't remember clearly. What I did know was that in my dreams, I was bolder, wilder. I saw his eyes gleam and felt the need to make them shine brighter, so I spread my thighs wider. "So take it. Take me."

This was something I fantasised about (when I let myself). A good old-fashioned ravishing. And this dream Adam? He knew the score, and he lunged forward, ready to show me. It wasn't just his tongue on my clit that drove me insane, making my back arch off the bed in reality as much as in my dream, but the fact he wanted to do it so much. He was into this, growling into my skin before latching onto my clit and sucking. I felt the vibrations all the way through my body and my cunt clenched down immediately in response, onto a distressing nothing. I'd known what it felt like to be filled

before I'd been with Adam. I had a box full of toys that had seemed perfect before that night, but now I needed more.

Him.

“Adam, please...”

“Something you need?” he asked. There was a darkness to his voice that hadn't been there that night: his voice had turned ragged and growly.

“You, Adam, I need... Uh!”

He suddenly was in a different position, with the fluidity that happens in dreams. When I opened my eyes, he was kneeling between my thighs. Every muscle was standing proud, his skin golden, making him look like some kind of pagan idol as he gripped his thick cock. Had it been that big the night we'd been together? My eyes widened as I shifted up onto my elbows to stare at him in all his glory. And then as I looked up at his face, I saw it. The crooked smile—part cocky bastard, part sweetheart—that spread across his face as he watched me watch him.

This was what I needed. The pictures of Adam in the newspaper or footage of him on the TV had never done anything for me. I understood he was attractive, could even acknowledge, academically, how the line of his jaw or the angle of his cheekbones were aesthetically pleasing. But it was the passion in him, here, his eyes on mine, his head being thrown back slightly as his hand worked his swollen length, that had me transfixed. We were locked together in this little bubble and that made my need for him bite deeper until I ached with it. Right now he wasn't a pretty boy on a screen, he was mine.

“Adam, please...”

He was on me in a second, one hand slapped down by my head, the other between our legs. I felt why almost instantly, my eyes slowly closing.

“Eyes up here, beautiful.” He stared into mine, smiling when he had my attention, then delved a little deeper. I felt that terrible stretch again, but this time it was all pleasure,

starting to fill up the part that craved him. “That’s it. Stay with me.”

“What?” I shifted, somewhat confused now.

“I want to see it, the way you respond when I push myself inside you.” He watched me pull in a breath as the fat mushroom head of his cock slowly pushed in, following the movement of my lips as they fell open, drawing in air. “I want to see exactly how I make you feel as you take my cock.”

Fuck, dream boyfriends were always the most perfect. I needed this, the way that some kind of connection snapped into place as we gazed at each other, his smile growing wider as I tried to keep my eyes open. He was so hard, thick and relentless, forcing me to give in and surrender, as I let him in. And once he was there, it was impossible to ignore him, especially when he started to rock his hips.

“Adam...!”

I slapped my hands over his hips, feeling that intense drag inside me, rubbing over some part of me that seemed to come to life at his first thrust. Like he was stroking my clit, but deeper, less direct but, somehow, *more* because of it.

“I know.” God, the way his voice broke and his head dropped down, his lips getting closer to mine, but tantalisingly out of reach. “I know, Freya. It’s gonna be like this always, I promise, baby. Me and you...”

I didn’t know why I was conjuring a dream boyfriend that would say those sorts of things. In my heart of hearts I knew how this would go. I’d tumbled into bed with a stranger, when even the thought of that was the antithesis of who and what I was. And now that it had happened, I knew how things would be. The real Adam had gone on state television to make clear he was looking for me, simply because I was the one that got away. I knew that if I just kept my head down he’d lose interest and find someone else better suited to the life of a WAG. The problem was... when I slept? Part of me reached out to part of him, wanting to reclaim the magic of that night.

“That’s it, beautiful.” His thrusts grew deeper, harder. And each time he buried himself in me, it felt like fireworks going off inside. “You’re gonna come on my cock. You feel so fucking tight, squeezing me with everything you’ve got. Makes me want to fill you up.”

I stared openly at him, an unintentional flex around his length making us both groan.

“You like that idea?” he said, his smile turning lazy. His spare hand grabbed my wrists and stretched them over my head, increasing the feeling of powerlessness. Just what I wanted. Because one of my favourite kinks was exactly this.

Being filled, being bred, forced to take his cum, not so much for the violation or loss of choice, but the connection. His entire focus would be narrowed down on me as he made me take everything he had to give. I shifted restlessly against his grip, a huge wave of pleasure starting to rise.

“You like the idea of being filled with my cum?” I nodded quickly, not able to do anything else right now. “You want it all, don’t you, greedy girl?” My heels dug into his butt cheeks, dragging him closer, not letting him pull away as far now. “You want everything I’ve got to give. Well, it’s yours...”

Dream Adam was offering me so much more than mere bodily fluids. It was as if this whole thing was his mind, his body, reaching out to mine and that just had me clinging harder.

“But you’ve gotta take it from me. Come when you can, love, because the minute I feel your tight little cunt gripping me hard, I’ll explode as you wring every single drop from me.”

“Yes...!”

Such was the nature of dreams. Usually it took a whole lot more foreplay than this. But, freed of my body’s constraints, my mind grabbed at the idea. In the dream, in reality, I arched up into him, absorbing every stroke as he pulled me closer and closer to the edge.

He caught the moment my eyes went wide, telling me what a good girl I was as I felt it rush over me. Pure, perfect pleasure. It turned my body to gold, every nerve ending singing. But it was more than that. Right as I was my most vulnerable, he was right there with me, watching me fall apart, and he scooped me up and held me close, nestled against his chest as he did exactly what he'd promised.

I felt every spurt of his cum, aftershocks of pleasure hitting me with each burst. He was emptying more than his seed into me, he was sharing himself as well and it felt so good. Adam chuckled as I went limp against him, utterly spent, then he lowered me down onto the bed and gave me the thing I needed the most right now. His body curled around mine, his leg thrown over top of mine to keep us locked together.

“Just like this...” he promised in a sleepy whisper. “Let’s stay just like this.”

I couldn’t think of anything better. There was a bone deep satisfaction that came from curling into his chest, his arms going around me. Going to sleep never felt so good, a strange kind of warmth allowed every muscle to relax and just let go. But right as I was about to drop off, I heard this.

“Gonna find you,” he promised in a voice hoarse with exhaustion. “Can’t let this go, Freya. You’re mine. You’ll always be mine and somehow I’ve gotta make you see that.”

Chapter 7

Kaine

Did I tell my brother what I knew? I'd been fucking furious when he confessed what he'd done and I'd spent most of Sunday out of the house—away from him, River, our family—because I didn't know what I'd do to him if I looked at his face.

Then River and I had pulled into that cafe.

I knew who she was the minute I stepped foot in the place. I'd assumed that honey sweet scent was coming from the kitchen, right up until I saw her. Freya was so fucking beautiful. Her eyes seemed to shine with life when she turned to the two of us and those lips were slightly swollen when they curved in a smile, making me think of very dirty things to do with them.

It drove out all thought of my brother and his fuck-ups and replaced it with this: she was mine. That burned hot and hard and true in my chest and for just a second, I understood exactly why Adam had done it.

Right before I cursed him because he had.

We needed to take things slowly, at Freya's pace. We needed to find out what that pace was, not rush into things. A protective need had hit me, so deep and vicious it took my breath away, rising and rising so that I barely kept a civil tongue in my head when the mother stood by as her baby trashed the cafe.

I needed to keep her safe, keep River and Adam safe, protect the sleuth to make sure it formed strong enough to last a lifetime. I needed to ensure that what we had was as good as what our parents had. But Adam... But River... I let out a sigh as I stood in my kitchen, setting the coffee mug down when Adam waltzed in.

“You look... better,” I said. The bear noticed everything and everyone and there was that familiar bounce in my brother’s step as he went to the fridge and hung there with the door open, looking for something to eat. “Pick something, then shut the bloody door. You’re wasting electricity.”

He smirked at me as he pulled out eggs, bacon and juice, then shut the fridge door conspicuously before dumping the lot on the counter.

“Yeah, I am.” He whistled, the bloody idiot, as he pulled out fry pans and set them to heat on the stove. “Want some breakfast?”

“Whatcha cooking?” River appeared from nowhere like a shadow. The man needed a bell around his neck.

“Bacon and eggs.” Adam shot me a sidelong look. “Just as easy to cook for three as it is one.”

“If you’ve got the energy to do that, you can start back at work this week.” The dads paid him a wage all year, but he only had to work for it in the off season. Unlike me, his sporting career seemed to take precedence over meetings and approvals and invoicing and—

“Monday,” he promised, cracking eggs into one fry pan and laying down bacon in the other. “This week I’m gonna kick back, chill. Might go for a run down the beach this morning or something.” He shrugged.

Whereas I had a diary full of appointments and missed calls on my phone from contractors already and it wasn’t even seven o’clock.

“You’re better,” River said, a small line forming between his eyebrows.

“Better than better. I’m feeling fucking amazing.” Adam hummed to himself as he got a pair of tongs from the kitchen drawer, clacking them as he turned back to the food. “I think I dream walked last night.”

“What?”

Dream walking was an ability some bear shifters had, but not most. It allowed you to enter the dreams of your fated mate. Not for the first time did I feel the hot, hot burn of jealousy. It felt like everything took on a reddish cast as I stared holes in my brother.

“At least I think that’s what it is. I’m gonna go and see Nanna today and see what she thinks but yeah…” He flushed bright red, but that self-satisfied smirk made clear exactly what kind of dream walk it’d been. “Freya’s amazing, so fucking amazing, and when I find her, you’ll know that too.”

But I already did. It was only sheer will and having notifications buzzing in my pocket that got me out of that cafe the other day. Freya moved with a grace no other woman could match. And the way she shouldered the responsibility of cleaning up after the child without complaint squeezed at my heart, right before I shut that shit down.

And this was why I’d not said anything to Adam about meeting Freya.

My brother was the baby of the family. But more than that, he was the golden child. Not in any unhealthy way. It was just that, wherever he was, people paid attention. Nothing I did seemed to get our family as excited. People were kind to me, attentive and supportive, but then they’d turn to him… Part of me that I didn’t like very much at all, felt like I had to shield this, her, us, away from his golden glow for just a moment, because when we brought Adam back into the mix, it’d be all over for me.

Which shifted my attention to River.

Why hadn’t he said anything? I cocked an eyebrow in question and he just gave me a little shrug.

“I’m sure we will,” I replied neutrally, walking over and clapping my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t make anything for me. I’ve got an early morning meeting so I’ll eat there. I’ll see you on site, River.”

After they said their goodbyes, I strode outside, shoving the key in the lock of my car and not really taking a breath until I got inside. My hands wrapped tight around the steering wheel, squeezing it until the plastic creaked as I sucked a breath in, then another. The twin needs that ruled me raged against each other. The first was to keep the sleuth together.

And the other was to break it into a million pieces, because that was the only way I’d be free.

I shoved the key in the ignition and turned the motor over, forcing myself to be calm, act calm at least, on the drive over.

When I walked in the door of the cafe for my meeting, something that had been aching in my chest all night eased when I finally saw her. Freya’s eyes widened when she caught sight of me, some instinct knowing exactly what I was, but she smiled back when she recovered and nodded.

“Morning,” the sales manager said, getting to his feet and thrusting out his hand for me to shake. “I’ve got some coffees ordered, but figured I’d wait to see what you wanted before I ordered breakfast.”

I settled down in the chair, sprawling slightly as I watched the women behind the counter. No, not both of them: just Freya. It felt like every stray beam of sunlight was directed at her as she bent her head over the coffee machine, the golden light bringing out the highlights in her hair.

“Looking at the hotties behind the counter?” the sales guy said, trying for some blokey charm, too focussed on that to catch the moment my jaws locked tight. “This was a good place to meet. Sweet pieces of ar—”

“The next words outta your mouth better be an apology to womankind as a whole,” I said in a very low, very precise

tone. “Or I’ll be forced to do something drastic to make sure you do.”

“Fuck, OK.” The man threw up his hands in surrender, then chuckled. “Didn’t realise you were the hairy legged, feminazi type.”

“I’m not,” I replied, all good humour gone. “But, one day, if I have a daughter, I’d like to be confident that the blokes around me would make sure she was treated with respect as all women deserve to.”

“Right.” He coughed nervously, seeming to remember why he was there. His job was to look after the sales side of the account we had with our building materials supplier. “OK, so —”

“Here’s your coffees.” The scent of Freya in my nose, along with that of fresh coffee, had my mouth watering. I focussed on those long, slender fingers, a few marker stains around her fingertips, setting the coffees before us and I saw she’d remembered how I took my coffee. That had the bear roaring. She stood before the table, order book in hand. “Can I get you anything else?”

You, I thought immediately, looking up, up and into her eyes, all thoughts of respect gone. On your knees before me. Heels tucked under your bum as you sit down on them, hands in your lap. Ready and waiting for me to touch, to explore, to find out just what makes you tick, right before I—

“Bacon and eggs, thanks love,” the supplier said. “Extra crunchy bacon. And what’re you having, Kaine?”

“Kaine...?”

I’m not sure if the other guy heard her. She barely whispered my name, her focus utterly mine in that second. The moment seemed to stretch on and on, as something in me reached out to something in her, the bear shoving, shoving, against the bonds inside me, wanting out, wanting to claim her. But I wouldn’t, not yet, not until she was utterly mine and begging me to do just that.

“I’ll have the same,” I replied, leaning slowly forward. “But make it a double order. I woke up starving this morning.”

“Of course,” she said, scribbling that down then smiling. “I’ll bring them out when they’re done.”

“You like her.” All feelings of pleasure left me then at the sight of this man’s smug expression. Not only did he sound like some idiot in a primary school yard, but the creepy look on his face had no place when it came to my girl. “She’s a pretty little piece of skirt—”

I’d never reached across a table and grabbed a man by his shirt before. I’d never twisted a man’s collar in my grip, forcing him to only take a breath at my say so, but apparently that was my new normal. I waited until his face flushed bright, bright red before I spoke.

“I dunno what the fuck you think you’re doing, but just in case I hadn’t made myself clear, I don’t like this blokey bullshit much. Objectifying women who are working will not help you make more sales. If anything, it’ll force me to take our business elsewhere. Do I make myself clear?”

I let him go and he sucked in a sharp breath, lungs working hard to drag in the oxygen I’d deprived him of.

“Fuck...” he gasped. “You... fuck.” I watched him shove himself to his feet, hands shaking as they slapped down on the table. “I’ll go to head office and have someone else assigned to your account. But Jesus, Kaine. I was just fucking joking.”

He didn’t see it, caught up in his secure little bubble. The little comments, the tiny steps over clearly delineated boundaries, they all added up to this avalanche of more and more aggressive behaviour because the line kept on being blurred. I didn’t like that for women and I couldn’t let it stand for Freya.

“Do that,” I said, right before he stalked out.

“Here’s your breakfast,” Freya said shortly afterward, depositing my double serve before me, then turning to the

other empty seat. “Is your mate in the loo? I can put this under the heat if you want me to keep it warm for him.”

“He was called away,” I replied smoothly, then grabbed my knife and fork. “This looks delicious though. It’d be a pity to waste it.” My eyes slid to meet hers. Was this stepping over a line, too? I didn’t know. I’d never said a thing like this to a woman before. “I couldn’t persuade you to join me, could I?”

“Join... you?”

I watched Freya take a step towards the empty chair on auto-pilot, then consciously stop herself from doing just that.

“Only if you want to, of course,” I replied, focussing on salting my eggs rather than staring like a creeper.

“I...” She shook her head, as if breaking a spell and part of me crowed that I could have that effect on her. That it wasn’t just me who was affected. I was hard and aching, under the table, utterly transfixed by her. “I’d better not. I have a break coming up soon. Shit, why am I saying that?” She raked a few stray strands back from her face. “The breakfast rush is about to hit, so I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“What about after work?” I asked, trying to keep my tone light, even as the bear and I chanted ‘say yes, say yes’ over and over in my head. “I know a really lovely place that’s just opened up. My friend is the owner and he’s looking for some people to give feedback on the food.”

“Like... on a date?” She seemed utterly confused by the idea and as I leaned back in my chair, I cherished that befuddled expression. Were men that fucking stupid none of them had asked her out before? Were they like my dickhead brother, trying to rush her towards the bedroom as soon as they met her? Then she shook her head again. “No, you—”

“Yes.” I cut off what I was beginning to suspect would be a rush of self-deprecating crap. “A date, if you’re open to that, or just a meal shared between two people if that’s off the table.” I set the cutlery down and crossed my arms. “Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“Oh, right, um...” She looked around her guiltily, seeing the people coming streaming through the door. “Sure. Why not?” She bent down and scribbled her number down on a piece of paper from her order book and then slipped it under the saucer of my coffee. “I’m Freya, by the way.”

“Kaine,” I said, pretending I hadn’t heard her whisper my name. I held out my hand for her to shake and felt my body come alive when she took it.

She was so small. It was like holding a bird in my hand, all long slender bones and soft skin. My thumb twitched with the need to caress the back of her hand, but I just gave it a squeeze, there and gone again.

“Lovely to meet you, Freya. I’ll be in touch about dinner.”

I didn’t want her to go. I didn’t want her to walk away, but I knew she had to. When the noise of the cafe filtered through to me, I was sure it did so for her too, so I just smiled as she scurried back to the counter to help out, then snapped a photo of the phone number before shoving it into my pocket.

I didn’t tell Adam about Freya because I wanted this moment all to myself. I wanted to learn her, see how she responded, see if she could come to like me for who I was, not as Adam Farrelly’s brother. I wanted that so damn much, I was able to push the guilt I felt at Adam’s devastation to one side.

Just for now, I promised myself, him. *Just give me this for now.*

Chapter 8

Freya

“What’s the deal with the return of the hottie?” Katie asked when I got back to the counter. When she nodded at Kaine who was now eating his breakfast, I felt a flush of something hot, something.... possessive? “He looks intense. Just my type.”

“Apparently he’s mine,” I said in a rush, then blinked, both of us looking confused at my outburst. “My type, I mean.” I smiled, feeling flustered. “He asked me out on a date.”

“You?!” Gloria always had an ear for gossip, appearing out of nowhere when it was being discussed, then strangely absent when work was on. “Shit. Sorry, Frey, but...” She smiled. “You said yes, right?”

“God, tell me you did.” Katie set the milk jug aside, pouring the froth into several cups with an expert flourish, but not moving to get the coffees to her tables. “Freya, tell me you said yes.”

“I did.” Admitting that was weird. Saying yes was weird. All of this was weird. Usually I had to do star jumps to get any guy to notice me and now I had two guys—*three*, my mind supplied helpfully, reminding me of Art Boy from last night—two and a half guys, I amended, buzzing around me like bees. I shrugged then as the two women let out a little incredulous laugh. “I did and I don’t know why.”

“I do.” Gloria’s eyes cut through the customers, zeroing in on Kaine as he ate. “That man is fine. He could eat those bacon and eggs right off my—”

But that wasn’t how it worked for me. I could see Kaine was attractive. He had that kind of big, muscular confidence that I’d deduced most women liked. Cheekbones so sharp his face looked like it was carved with a knife, softened only by lips that seemed a little too full, then those eyes, flicking up and cutting through everything else to stare back at us.

But that wasn’t enough.

He was like one of the marble statues I’d studied at art school, glacially white and perfect, pure, but that had nothing to do with sex or desire. That was just what he was. So why did I agree to go on a date with him?

Because of Jack.

She’d turned up at my place the day after the medal count, waving away my babbled apologies and holding up a bottle of gin.

“Babes, I’m just here for the blow by blow details. Actually scratch that. If you could spill the goss without drowning me in descriptions of peen in vag sex, I’ll love you forever.” She marched over to my kitchen, cracked the bottle and then searched in my cupboards for glasses before pausing to look back at me. “Mostly I’m here to see if you’re OK.”

Did everyone’s friend ask the same after a hookup? I didn’t know and couldn’t bring myself to check. I just nodded sharply and she abandoned the drinks and walked over to me.

“Did he look after you?” Her hands went to my arms, rubbing them up and down. “Did he pressure you in any way? Were you drunk? If you were, you know you couldn’t consent, right? You—”

“Had an amazing time.” I smiled then, feeling the second wave of pleasure that came from remembering it. “Really amazing. As peen in vag sex goes, it was kind of incredible.”

“A straight guy that knows how to give good dick? Damn, girl...” She grinned, but that quickly gave way to concern. “So

why did you take off like your arse was on fire? I'm sorry I couldn't make a quick getaway with you because of work shit. The team was losing it when Adam didn't turn up to accept the medal and I was forced to go into damage control mode, but I've sorted that now." She wrinkled her nose. "Sort of."

"I..." It felt stupid saying it out loud, so my throat closed over. "I..." I let out a sigh and Jack squeezed my arm in sympathy. "I think he wanted more than I was prepared to give."

"So it wasn't just a hit it and quit it thing for him?" she said. "I kinda guessed that when he came busting into my room, demanding your number."

"You didn't give it to him?"

I wanted her to say yes and no in equal measure, which was confusing.

"No, I didn't give it to him," she replied. "And I won't, not unless you say so. Ride or die, right?" She held out her pinkie finger and I locked mine around it, just like we used to do at school. "But..."

She let out a sigh, which let me know I wasn't off the hook yet. I pulled away and grabbed a bottle of tonic water from the fridge, pouring out a healthy measure of gin for both of us and handing her the other glass.

"If he was good... He seems really sweet... I wondered—"

"There's no future for us," I said way too sharply. Her eyebrows jerked up but I forged on. "I can't be a WAG. You know I don't like the spotlight."

"And he's shoved you right into it," she said, then nodded. "I get it. Adam's... a lot. He's sweet, so much sweeter than the others. It's like somehow all the blokey bullshit of footy hasn't rubbed off on him. But that makes him a target for the media. Girls throw their panties at him, guys want to be him, and any woman that stands by his side will get a lot of scrutiny. You could probably keep things on the down low for a while but..."

I came back to the cafe with a blink, still hearing Jack's words in my ears.

“But if you’re ready to let a guy in your life, finding someone a bit more low key is probably your best bet. Life as a WAG can be a living hell and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

“You gotta give us all the details afterwards, girl,” Katie said, bumping hips with me as she carried the coffees out.

“*All* of them,” Gloria said with greater emphasis. “That man looks like he’s capable of doing bad, bad things to you and I wanna hear all about it.”

“Stop gossiping like a bunch of old women,” Amber said as she appeared behind us from the kitchen, “and start clearing some tables.”

The regular boring rhythm of work helped settle me somewhat, but as I moved around the room, picking up discarded cups and plates and cleaning the tables, I felt eyes on me the whole time. Something glittered within the depths of Kaine’s gaze when I looked up and I wasn’t completely sure I wanted to know what.

Chapter 9

Adam

“Hello, love,” Mum said when I walked in the door. “You look all flushed.” She rushed over with a frown on her face, hand raised to touch my forehead.

“The smelly prick’s been running,” my dad said, stopping her in his tracks, before turning to me. “How’s the 2023 Magarey Medal winner doing this morning?” I grinned then, feeling some of the joy I should’ve felt the night of the medal count. Dad moved forward, grabbing me in a big bear hug, right before he ruffled my hair. “Though next time have a fucking shower before you come around. Bad enough you and your brother made this place stink like footy socks when you were kids.”

“Kenny...” Mum growled. “Now, Adam, did you want some breakfast? We’ve just finished but—”

“Ah, no thanks, Mum.” I dropped a kiss on her cheek, watching her beam in response. “I wanted to catch up with Nan if I could.”

“Why?” Mum’s bullshit-ometer went through the roof as she went into alert mode. “What’s wrong? Is it about that girl? She’s your mate, isn’t she? You’re searching for your mate?”

“Yes, yes, and yeah, I need to talk to Nan and the other aunties. I think I dream walked last night.”

“Dream walking?” Barry, one of my other dads, was walking out into the living room, and he grinned when he saw

me. “That’s my boy! Chip off the old block, he is.”

“Hasn’t got your hands,” Kenny said with a roll of his eyes. “Wouldn’t have even made it past nipper’s league for footy if he did.”

“Shut up, you.” Barry shoved him out of the way. “So you dreamt of your girl? Did you see where she was?”

“I...” How did I tell them that the only thing I remember seeing was Freya’s sweet tasting pussy? But as my cheeks flushed bright red, my parents laughed.

“One of those dreams, huh?” Mum said, then flicked Barry with a tea towel. “He *is* a chip off the old block.”

“My first time with your mother was via a dream,” he declared.

“More like a nightmare,” Kenny muttered, then winked at me. “So the connection is still there. That’s promising. So, you want to talk to your nan and the aunties then?”

The older women of the bear shifter community were a bottomless reservoir of knowledge. They helped bring new mates into the fold, assisting them to adjust through the whole process and they’d do that if Freya decided to accept the bond. When she accepted it, I corrected myself. See the end goal and then make it happen, that’s what my coaches always said.

“Yeah, if they can spare the time,” I said.

“For a young bear shifter on a mating hunt?” Kenny said, slapping my shoulder. “Try and keep the old biddies away.”

I’d asked for this meeting, so why was I tugging at the hem of my shirt, twisting my ankle as I felt some tiny pebble in my shoe? Probably because I knew how it was going to go.

“Adam!” My nanna rushed over and wrapped her arms around me. She was a tiny, round little thing, but she had my grandfathers wrapped right around her finger. “I hear you’ve found your mate. So, where is she?” She looked around with exaggerated interest. “How come you haven’t swept her off her feet yet?”

“About that. Can we talk?”

“Sounds serious.” Her smile faded and she turned to Mum as she walked up to us both. “Hello, love. What’s our boy got himself into now?”

I didn’t get to answer until I was inside the social club that the bear shifter men had built at the heart of the suburb where the majority of our community lived. Older ladies who’d known me all my life looked up across the room, from those knitting and sewing or having cups of tea, to the others that were on the board of trustees at the new school that had been created, or involved in other boards like the one that ran my dads’ company.

“Young Adam.” Ingrid was the mother of Lars, a polar bear shifter who worked for the restoration company Alaric Burns ran. She was also famously blunt. “You come here, to the she-bears’ den and with a face like that; you’ve done something wrong.”

“More than announcing he was looking for his mate on national television?” Mary was another one of the mums and she looked me over with a faintly reproving look. “You may as well have taken fur in front of the cameras and revealed us to all and sundry.”

“My Adam would never—” Mum started to say.

“Now, now, before everyone gets in a flap, let’s hear the boy speak,” Nanna said, going and taking her spot on the comfy couch and picking up her crossword book. “Tell us what happened and what you need help with.”

“I think I dream walked last night,” I said and there was a lot of twittering in response to that.

“My son...” Mum said, beaming up at me with pride.

“But that’s not all of it,” Ingrid said, her gaze feeling like it skewered into me. “Start at the beginning, boy.”

I didn’t want to. My eyes darted around the room. The longer I was quiet, the more attention the women paid. They seemed to sense that there was blood in the water, as if each one of them was a sweetly perfumed shark, ready to go in for

the kill. But I knew they weren't really: there was concern in all of their eyes. But by the end of what I had to say, I wasn't sure if it'd be for me or Freya. I let a long breath out and then started.

"I met my mate at the medal count," I said.

"And you won. Well done, Adam," Ingrid said.

I flushed at that. I liked it, being told I'd done good. I knew that I had, obviously, but there was something about external validation. It was like the icing on an already delicious cake, the sharing of that pleasure in success somehow doubling it.

"Thanks. I didn't miss the award ceremony because I was sick."

"That much was clear," my nanna said with a small smile.

"I missed it because... She was just standing there, trying to hide in the curtains and I never expected to see her at an event like this. The girls who usually go to these sorts of things, they're not really looking for something long term. Nothing wrong with that but..."

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat and failed utterly.

"I saw her and walked over, then introduced myself." The women all nodded along, caught up in the story. "I asked her to be my date for the night. It all came out in a big rush and I think she thought I meant like a fake date, to keep the other girls away, but it wasn't." My fingers flexed, wanting to find something to do, something to get us out of this situation, but they couldn't. "It was real."

"Of course, it was." My mum's voice was gentle and she gave my shoulder a rub. But would she keep doing that once she knew? Only one way to find out.

"So real I couldn't sit through the award ceremony, not when she was there. She ducked away to go to the loos and I... I was there." I felt like every woman in the room sucked in a breath then. "I asked her if she wanted to go back to my room and she said yes."

“That’s perfectly understandable,” Ingrid announced. “Get straight to the point. I approve.”

“Usually we like our boys to spend a little more time getting to know a girl first, Ingrid,” Nanna said, but then turned back to me. “Though I don’t think that’s the end of the story.”

I swallowed hard.

“No, it’s not.”

My breath was coming in noisy gulps and my heart was beating way too fast. This was like being given a free kick. You stood before the goalposts, the whole stadium’s eyes upon you. Half of them wanted you to make the goal and the other half prayed that you wouldn’t.

“When we were together, we...”

I wasn’t going to tell them all the nitty gritty details. I’d rather cut my left nut off than confess to what Freya and I had done in the bedroom.

“We...”

The sharks started to circle right then, women setting knitting and books and paperwork aside, peering at me over the tops of glasses. I’d faced footy tribunals less stressful than this.

“One thing led to another and I... I claimed her.”

“You did what?” Ingrid snapped.

“Adam!”

Mum’s face fell then, making me feel worse than I already did.

“Well, I assume that’s not what brought you here today?” Nanna said, rising up from her seat. “My boy...” For a minute I thought everything would be OK. She gave my arm a squeeze, just like she did every time I faced a disappointment, but the frown on her face didn’t fade. “There are very, very good reasons why we stress that a sleuth needs to get a woman’s consent to a mating bond first.”

“I know, I know.” My hands raked through my hair and I felt a sudden need to shave it bald, just to get it out of my face. “She needs to be given the opportunity to say no, otherwise it can bring heat on the whole community and her as well. I—”

“No, darling.” My nanna peered up into my eyes, willing me to understand. “Women all across the world are not given choices: around what roles they take on or how they look, what clothes they wear, and who they do and don’t have as sexual partners. Bear shifters are supposed to be better than human men. You make sure you have her enthusiastic consent before claiming her because it’s the right thing to do.”

And just like that, all the joy I’d felt at last night’s dream fled. I stood there, wavering on my feet as it hit me. Because what I’d done? It was a form of sexual assault.

Chapter 10

River

“I need you to go up to the cafe today,” Kaine told me as we all sat down for smoko. He handed me a sheaf of papers. “I want you to feel out the cafe owner, see if she’s open to catering for our team while we work on this project.”

“Why don’t you talk to her?” I asked, pushing the papers back his way. That’s what Kaine did, he made the paperwork happen so we could do our jobs.

“I was in there this morning and...” Fuck, was Kaine smiling? It was a tiny little thing, but it was there. “I asked our mate out on a date and she said yes.”

“She did?” I blinked, trying to imagine how that conversation would’ve gone and failed. “Well, congrats.” I pressed the paperwork into his chest. “So you can handle—”

“I’m not going back in there again today,” he said in a definite tone, the one that made clear there would be no more arguments, no matter what you thought about the matter. “Going back would look weird and stalkery.” We were weird and stalkery, I wanted to say, but I kept my mouth shut. “Talk to the owner, set the deal up and then come back here.”

Which is how I’d come to be standing out the front of the cafe.

“You’re back!” Our mate seemed so bright and bouncy, so alive, that I felt like a fucking creeper as I just soaked her in. “What can I get you this time? Another chicken parmi?”

“Ah, no. Can I have a word with the boss?”

Shit, her face fell then, making me wonder what the fuck I’d done wrong. And then it occurred to me. “It’s nothing you’ve done. Kaine—”

“Kaine?” She said his name quietly, making my mouth move faster.

“He wants you to cater for the building site.”

There, it was out now. Hopefully that cleared up any misunderstandings.

“Me?”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Why the hell did Kaine get me doing this and not Adam...? Wait, I remembered why.

“Sorry, I just cut wood and hammer nails for a living,” I said, raking a hand through my hair. “Words are hard.”

She smiled at me in understanding, and my whole heart felt like it lightened.

“Words *are* hard. Do you mean you want Amber to cater for the building site?” she asked.

“Yes, that. That.” I nodded quickly. “We’ll be there for a bit and the food’s real good here.”

“But not too good,” she said with a wink. “You’ll get home at a reasonable hour tonight, right?”

No. No, I wouldn’t. After seeing how she got home, she had earned herself a very big, very strong shadow. I’d ride the train with her, one carriage down maybe, and dog her steps from the shadows, making sure she got home in one piece.

“Right,” I said, faking a smile like a normal person. “Can I chat to Amber?”

“I’ll let her know you’re here. Take a seat. I’ll bring you out a coffee. Black, right?”

“Right.”

I’d take it any way she’d make it, including one of those floofy things with all the cream and syrups, but when she got my order right first go, I turned away with some relief, sitting down at one of the empty tables and pulling out my notepad.

When I was at school I was always being told off for this kind of shit. Whenever I had a pen in my hand it wasn’t to write down notes or do the set work, but to draw. Sometimes it’d be little vignettes I noticed outside the classroom, like the birds nesting in the tree outside the window, or a coming storm. It didn’t matter what it was, I was always drawing.

“Draw after you’ve finished your work, Riv,” one of my dads had said.

“Or at the very least, don’t get caught.” Mum looked flustered. *“We’re on our own here and if I get one more call from your maths teacher...”*

I’d felt a rush of shame then, swearing I’d stop. It was bad enough the bear shifter community largely ignored us, because my dads hadn’t had the good sense to stay single once their fated mate rejected them. I was the kid that was never supposed to be, and if I was creating trouble at school... But, just like back then, when the pen was in my hand, something else took over.

My eyes found her, watching her pour out my coffee as the women around her talked. Their topic was me, I realised, when they each took a surreptitious look my way, but I didn’t care about that. It was the moment that Freya smiled that caught my eye, my mind freezing the curve of her lips, the dimple popping in her cheek, the sparkle of her eyes as my pen started to move. I barely had to look at the paper, the little sketch taking form almost on its own.

“Here’s your... oh!”

Drawing was less like a hobby and more like a fugue state. I dropped down, down, down into this weird place where time and space didn't exist, just the pen and paper. Freya stood in front of me, looking a little pale. And surprised. She blinked and blinked, staring down at the notebook and that forced me to do the same thing I always did. Put the pen down and snap the notebook shut and shove it into my pocket.

"Thanks, love," I said, a fairly bog standard thing for a bloke like me to say to a waitress, but... That last word, love, came out way softer than I meant to. "I was just... I didn't mean..."

"So, a catering order?" Another woman bustled over, taking the other coffee from Freya and then sitting down across from me. "I'm Amber. Looks like it's going to be a pleasure to do business with you."

She offered me her hand and I shook it, but my eyes traced Freya's hasty retreat. Amber started to talk way too fast and way too loud, making me want to pull away, get the fuck out of there, but I just silently cursed Kaine instead. He was going to take our mate out for a date and he had me doing this shit? I'd meant to tell him about her dad inviting me for Sunday dinner but hadn't had a chance and now I didn't want to. I had no doubt in my mind that Kaine hadn't said anything to Adam about meeting Freya, wanting his brother to stew for a bit, and right now I was on board with that. But if the two of them were going rogue, so was I. I nodded along to Amber, making a show of listening to what she said, as I thought about making 'one Sunday' into a definite 'next Sunday'.

Amber had ideas, a lot of them, about different cuisines and dietary considerations, but I'd stopped her cold.

"Just make good, honest, stick to your ribs food," I told her. "We're simple blokes. Anything fancy is wasted on us."

"Oh, OK." She seemed to deflate momentarily, but nothing seemed to keep the woman down for long. "But we'll make it the tastiest comfort food you've ever had, I promise."

“That’d be awesome,” I said, getting to my feet. “Kaine included all the payment details in the paperwork?”

“Yup, invoicing etc, it’s all there.” She got to her feet and held out her hand for me to shake and I did. “I guess we’ll talk soon about delivery.”

“Can someone bring it down to the site?” I asked, looking over at the counter, and Amber grinned, something in her smile making clear she knew what was going on. I shrugged internally, I could wear that. “We get caught up and—”

“I’ll add a delivery cost to my quote,” she replied, then headed back to the kitchen.

I carried my empty mug back to the counter and the women there all went instantly quiet. One gave Freya a shove, forcing her to stumble closer.

“Was the coffee OK?” she asked.

“Perfect,” I replied, holding her gaze for far longer than I should’ve, but she was just like a drawing. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. Which reminded me...

I reached into my pocket and tore off the drawing, then scribbled a quick note on it before sliding it across the counter along with enough cash to cover at least a couple of coffees, then turned to go. As soon as I was out of human earshot, I heard the giggles from the women and that made me smile.

See you Sunday for dinner, I’d written.

Chapter 11

Adam

Never in my whole life had I felt so shit, and I'd deal with a lot of rubbish as a footy player. I'd had abuse howled at me from the sidelines, been stupid enough to trawl the social media sites that commented on our games where I'd read the vile shit people wrote about me, but that was nothing, nothing, compared to this.

I'd sexually assaulted my mate.

I hadn't meant to. Did intent matter at all? I shook my head, not wanting to take the easy way out. Instead I trudged back to my car, my feet feeling like lead, even though my head was so light and spaced out I could barely feel my face. I'd been so caught up in finding Freya, bringing her back to me, but... That was why she ran, I decided right then, and the thought made something molten hot and acid hit my stomach. I'd driven our mate away. Why else would she take off like that, without even a word? She coulda told me she wasn't interested in anything else, tried to deny the connection I knew we both felt.

Or had we?

An insidious thought slid into my skull like a snake and I could almost hear its scales rasp as it shifted inside me. I saw it then, the moment I locked down inside her, because that heated moment was on replay inside my head every moment I was awake. I saw her, felt her, caught the moment her mouth fell open and she let out a little gasp, a small frown forming.

Somehow, she'd known.

That this was different, that I was different and that she'd never feel anything like this, with anyone else, even if she didn't know about her fated mates, but... What if she didn't want that? River knew what that was like. His fathers' fated mate had rejected them after being with them for a month or two. They weren't what she was looking for. She didn't want to settle down and have kids and so...

What if Freya was the same?

That felt wrong, like the thoughts didn't fit together in my head. But was that real or wish fulfilment? I let out a long, ragged sigh, slapping my hands down on the side of my car and forcing myself to just take one breath, then another. I was getting caught up in my own head, everything that I'd been keeping back rushing out like a dam bursting with a flood that I was about to drown in. Work out what needs to be done and do it! our coaches always snapped. Thinking too much was the best way for a talented player to derail himself. I couldn't think my way through this, that I knew. I had to do exactly as my nanna and the other ladies said, because in this, they were my coaches.

"Make amends," Nanna said with a sad smile. "Many bear shifters have screwed up before you and many will do so again." She nodded slowly. "The dream walking is a promising sign. She's not hurting if she's joining you in a dream; she's not turning her heart against you. But still, make amends. Throw yourself on her mercy, if you can, and beg her to forgive you for doing something that's unforgivable."

Unforgivable. I closed my eyes for just a second, feeling like a weight I'd been carrying since that night was threatening to crush me. Fuck, I... Just fuck. But the part of me that would never give up, never lie down and die, not even when the scoreboard was against us, it rose up and pointed to the job at hand.

I could hole up in my room and eat my heart out, but only *after* I'd found Freya, after I'd made clear how sorry I was. Not because I thought that was a means to get back in her

good books. Coming back from this... I swallowed hard and then shook my head. It probably wasn't possible, but I still needed to make amends. Whatever she wanted, whatever she needed to process this shit, I'd make sure she got it. I jerked my keys out of my pocket and that's when someone suddenly appeared at my shoulder.

"Looking pretty glum there, mate."

When my head whipped up, he was right there, camera in hand: a bloody news photographer taking shots in rapid succession, capturing my surprise then my anger.

Keep your cool, my inner Jack said. *Keep your fucking cool!*

And I tried, I really fucking tried, but I couldn't help but let out a guttural snarl, the bear pissed with... pretty much everything right now and having a target for that suited him just fine.

"Fuck off!" I snapped, putting a hand up to block his shots.

"No need to get pissy," the photographer said, backing off with a sly smile. "And don't worry about trying to ruin my shots. I caught some nice ones from across the streets. Adam Farrelly devastated when local artist rejects him. Adam—"

"What?"

The bloke was trying to rile me up. I was only a player in a state league, not the national one, so paparazzi tended to not pay too much attention to us, but Jack had schooled us on their techniques.

"Be a grey rock," she'd told us.

"What?" Darryl had scoffed.

"You're a small, grey rock, nothing to see here, of no interest to anyone," she elaborated. *"Don't respond, don't give them ammunition. Don't do anything. Just walk past them and ignore anything they say..."*

But I was failing at that too. I searched the man's face, unable to believe what I was seeing, hearing.

“Didn’t ya know?” His grin grew wider. “The newspaper has tracked down the artist that made Cinderella’s shoe. Look up Goblincore Art.”

I didn’t, couldn’t, wait till I got in my car. Instead I grabbed at my phone as he watched, taking shot after shot, something else I would get reamed out for. So he caught the moment I found Freya’s Instagram.

There were no images of her, I knew that almost instantly. I skimmed over post after post of shoes and jackets, t-shirts and stickers, each in the same kind of whimsical pastel style as her shoes. Little creatures poked out of holes she’d painted on the sides of shoes, or capered across the shoulders of t-shirts, but no pictures of her.

“That’s the girl you’re looking for, right?” the guy said, his eyes gleaming and that alone should’ve been enough to stop me, but it wasn’t. “She was wearing some of them shoes.”

“You want a story?” I said, not replying to him, but setting the agenda and as soon as I did so, I felt a bit better. “Either record this on your camera or get your phone out.”

The photographer instantly switched mode on his camera, a small flashing red light letting me know it was recording.

“Freya, if you are seeing this, I...” I didn’t have a lump in my throat, it was a great big stone, hard and harsh, sharp edges cutting into my throat each time I tried to swallow. “I’m sorry. I...” I wanted to say more, but that was a fucking cop out. I couldn’t do this as a one-sided conversation between me and the camera. She might never let me talk to her. I’m not sure I would’ve if our positions were reversed but... If I never got that chance, I needed her to know this. “I did the wrong thing.”

Jack would eviscerate me. I could almost imagine her response. That just made the pain cut deeper, but I couldn’t seem to stop.

“I screwed up and I’m so, so sorry.”

Freya

The lunch rush had just finished and we were in that lull between lunch and dinner where we cleaned the cafe up, ready for the evening crowd. And thank god for that.

“And lastly onto sport. We’ve got some very big news.” The smooth tones of the newsreader had all of us looking up at the screen. “One of Channel 7’s roving reporters captured this video today of a very contrite Adam Farrelly outside a community hall in...”

My hand gripped the broom handle tight, so tight it felt like my fingers would leave imprints in the wood, all sound dropping away until the video was shown.

“Freya, if you’re seeing this...”

“Freya?” Katie said, spinning around.

“Freya? You, Freya?” Gloria’s voice was an echo of my workmates, her incredulity growing louder by the second. “You’re the one Adam Farrelly took off with?”

I took a step backwards, shaking my head, as if that’s what it would take to get me out of this situation. Before now, people used to largely ignore me, and that was OK. I was comfortable there in the background, but this...? Amber came rushing out of the kitchen to see what the fuss was, as did the kitchen hands.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Freya looks as white as a ghost.”

“Freya was the girl that snuck off with Adam Farrelly the night of the Magarey Medal count,” Katie announced with a salacious grin. “Damn, girl, spill the tea!”

Chapter 12

Kaine

I was sitting in my site office trying to work out how the fuck we were already behind schedule when one of my leading hands, Jim, barged in.

“Boss, you’re gonna wanna hear this,” he said, then shoved his phone in my face, and there was my baby brother.

“Freya, if you’re seeing this...” he said, looking absolutely crushed right then, but it wasn’t him that had my sympathy.

“Fuck...”

“The fellas were watching the video at lunch,” Jim said, “and now there’s a bunch of the local media clustered around the building site.”

Hoping to catch sight of my brother. I shook my head sharply. It wasn’t as if this shit hadn’t happened before. When Adam got into a fight. When Adam’s team won the premiership medal. But now? I wasn’t my brother’s keeper. All of that shit before was on him, but this was on us. Freya belonged to all of us and my brother couldn’t seem to get that through his thick head. I focussed back on the video.

“I did the wrong thing,” he said, a perfect picture of contrition.

Yep, I thought viciously, and you’re doing the wrong thing now. You’re making this all about you and—

“I screwed up and I’m so, so sorry.”

But you're screwing it up more, I thought, the bear inside me roaring because he knew. Freya wasn't used to the public scrutiny of having someone semi-famous in her life, not like I was.

"Thanks, Jim," I said, giving the man a squeeze on his shoulder as I marched out of the site office. I leapt off the top step and then strode towards where my ute was parked.

"Son, you've heard?"

Gary, one of my fathers, loomed over me now.

"I have and I'm going to her workplace now."

"Is that wise?" he said. "After what Adam did?"

I searched his face, staring hard at him, wanting, needing to believe that my dad was actually critical of my baby brother for once.

"Who else is gonna protect her?" I asked. "You know what's coming; what kind of scrutiny she's going to face. She might not want to have a bar of us, but I need her to be safe at least."

"Good lad," Dad said finally, with a nod.

I carried that with me as I made a beeline for the ute. All of my fathers were sparing with the compliments, so when I got them, I held them close to my chest.

But that wouldn't help me now.

I arrived out the front of the cafe, pulling on the park brake and then jumping out of the car to get to the front door, to her.

She looked so small, clutching her broom as everyone in the cafe was talking at her all at once. Didn't they see how pale she looked, how hard she was gripping the broom? I moved forward, stepping into the fray.

"Freya?" She looked up then, but there was no relief in her expression, only more fear. "Hey, lemme get you out of here. Can I do that for you?"

She nodded sharply, just the once, and that was all I needed. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and then steered her towards the front door.

“Don’t come back.” We both turned to see the cafe owner flush. “I don’t mean, ot like, forever or anything but...” Her lips pursed. “You’re gonna want to lie low for a while, love. Whatever’s going on—”

“I’ve got this,” I told her firmly but not unkindly. “I’ll make sure she’s OK.” Then I looked down at my mate. “My car’s here. I can take you wherever you like. Let’s just get inside and then we’ll work out where.”

She came with me, so damn malleable, all the spirit of before beaten back. tRight as I got her close to the car, her phone started to buzz.

Her hands shook, and that hurt me to see, as she went to try and undo her apron. I stepped in with a silent request to help in my eyes and she just nodded. I undid the double knot, then tossed the stained piece of fabric over my shoulder as she grabbed her phone out of her pocket. Her fingers had a life of their own, fumbling the phone, forcing me to snatch it out of the air before it went smashing down to the ground and that’s when I saw who was video calling her.

Jack.

I knew and liked the team PR person. Jack had a no-nonsense attitude towards everything football that I appreciated. I wasn’t sure how she had Freya’s number so I looked at my mate. She took the phone from me and then answered the call.

“Frey! What the fuck! I mean... fuck. I’m sorry, girl. I knew Adam... I’m gonna kill him.” The viciousness in her voice had an answer in my own heart and I felt a moment of kinship with her. “I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

“Jack...”

Freya’s reply was croaked out and that had me step closer, as if I could protect her from whatever the hell was hurting her.

“Do you want me to talk to her?” I asked and Freya handed me the phone so that Jack could see me.

“Kaine?” Jack said in surprise. “You’re there?”

“I was on the work site when I heard about the shit Adam pulled and I came down to see if Freya is OK.”

“Thank fuck for that. Did you have any idea this was coming? Because I would’ve really appreciated a head’s up.”

“No idea.” Freya stared at me. I could’ve tried to keep it from her, what Adam was to me. I could’ve lied to try and placate her, but I didn’t. “When I saw my brother in the morning, he was going to go out for a run, then go and see our grandmother.”

“Right, well, I need you to get Freya out of there, stat. She needs to lie low.”

“I can do that,” I said.

“Not near your fucking brother—” Jack snapped.

“I have no intention of letting Adam anywhere near Freya.”

I didn’t mean to growl that, but the bear was close, so fucking close. He hated this big, open area, because it was difficult to control. He needed our mate in a place that was smaller, more contained. He would smash through any and all of the media that would no doubt come after her, and for a second I felt that impulse beat so hard in my chest, it took my breath away.

“Well, good... Frey, Kaine is a good guy. He’s Adam’s brother, but you can trust him. We’ve worked together to sort out some of Adam’s issues before and we’ll have to do so again before I quit this damn job for good. Let him get you out of here before the media put two and two together.”

And work out where she was. They’d want a statement, some sort of reply, hopefully to fan the flames higher of whatever the fuck this was. But they’d do so over my dead body.

“Are you cool to go with him now?” Jack asked her.

When Freya looked up, I felt like I was sinking into those hazel depths. Not one colour but three, maybe four. There was green in there and little flecks of blue, brown and a light amber colour. But as I gazed into them, she stared back for what felt like an aeon, before she nodded sharply. I had the door open and was ushering her inside, putting on her seatbelt, then closing the door before she could change her mind.

“I’m going home,” Freya told me and Jack, and my hands tightened around the steering wheel.

“No, don’t do that. People are gonna get weird,” Jack said. “They will want to know all about the girl that brought Adam Farrelly to his knees and they will go to great lengths to find out. They’re not going to respect your boundaries, Frey...” She swallowed hard. “I thought he was cool. I thought he could be trusted not to make a big fuss. If I knew that he would pull this shit—”

“No.” Freya blinked, seeming to break whatever spell she was under with conscious effort. “No, don’t take that on for me.” She stared down at the screen with a slight frown. “You know how to get out of this kind of thing. What do I do, Jack?”

“Can I make a suggestion?” I was trying so fucking hard to keep my voice calm and even, to suggest rather than demand. We wanted to whisk her away from everything, keep her locked away from the world, but the knowledge that an approach like that would just hurt her further stopped that idea cold. But both women looked at me then, allowing me to make a contribution. “I’ve got a place—”

“Not the one you share with Adam,” Jack said, her brows jerking down.

“No. It’s a place I use when I’m held up at meetings in the city. It’s in one of the high rises on North Terrace. Great security, quiet. No one knows where it is, not even my brother.” I swallowed hard. “I bought it as an investment.” No, that wasn’t right. “Well, actually, I bought it for me.”

“Right.” I could see the cogs whirring in Jack’s mind as she stared into the camera. “You reckon you could keep Freya

safe in there for a bit, just until things calm down? Someone else will do something stupid soon enough to draw the heat away. Maybe I can talk to Nathan Lyons' people and see if they have anything..." She shook her head. "Frey, I'll go to your place and grab some clothes and your drawing stuff and then organise to drop it off in the foyer. You can have a little art holiday, make lots of amazing pieces to sell at the markets when this is over. You never know, this could be a great boost to your artist profile..."

But Freya didn't seem to hear much of what was said, instead staring at me.

"Can you get me out of here? Please." Her plea broke my fucking heart and I hid that with a nod. I turned the car engine over and then pulled out of the car park, making for the city.

This was supposed to have been my night with her. I was supposed to be taking my mate out on a date for the first time. I was going to ease her into things, feel her out, see if she might be open to... I sighed. Nothing ever worked out to plan, but as I took a sidelong look at her, I couldn't seem to regret this change of circumstances.

Chapter 13

Freya

This was not real. That was my overwhelming feeling. Sometimes, when things got too intense and events seemed to pile on top of each other, rather than shout or scream I just went quiet, really, really quiet. Because then I could replay everything that had happened, over and over in my head.

“I hurt you,” Adam declared, looking straight at the camera, the sun turning his hair to gold. *“I hurt you and I’m sorry.”*

My fingers found the bite mark on my neck. It was a bit more than a hickey and kinda a weird thing to do, but it didn’t hurt. Instead I felt a heavy pulse between my legs each time I touched it, which this time me snatching my fingers away. Because I was sitting in his brother’s car.

Was this what it was like for other women? Did they have a crazy night with one brother, only for the other one to turn up and ask them out? Admittedly I hadn’t known about the relationship between the two men at the time, but now I felt a little dirty for saying yes to Kaine. I didn’t owe Adam... well, anything, but I was willing to bet that was not how it would seem when the knowledge came out. And that had me sinking down into my seat.

“You OK?”

That was why I’d said yes to Kaine both times. There was a confidence about him, a surety that right now I clung to even

though I hated how it might make me look weak. But when I dared to look sideways at him, I didn't see condemnation or judgement there, just concern and... something else I couldn't describe. The name for it was right at the tip of my tongue, but elusive. I swallowed hard and then forced myself to smile.

"I..." *Starting strong, Freya*, I thought. *Great job*. "This is all a bit of a shock. Umm, I didn't know that Adam was your brother."

"Not something I advertise," he replied with a slight smile before focussing back on the road. "The kid gets enough attention without me adding to it. So what did he do this time?"

"This time?" My voice was little more than a squeak. "Um... nothing. We were... together."

"Yeah?" I met his gaze, expecting condemnation or revulsion, but instead there was a deep, warm patience there. "And he did something he shouldn't have, obviously. If he hurt you, Freya..."

There was that growl again. Guys pretended to do it on social media videos, but I'd never heard someone seriously growl before.

"He didn't." My hands rubbed at my thighs. "I don't even understand... I left because..."

My breath was coming in shorter and shorter pants, my chest feeling tight, so I forced myself to bring my awareness back to the car and away from that hotel room, back to reality.

"I don't like all the attention being on me," I said finally.

"I'm with you there. Lucky for me, obviously, because no one is noticing anyone else when Adam's in the room," he said with a smile.

"Yeah, I know. He's like the sun and everything and everyone seems to revolve around him and I..." My nails raked at the cheap polyester fabric of my pants. "I felt like if we hung out for much longer, I'd get burned up."

“Like you are right now,” he said, changing lanes and then turned down North Terrace. “But it doesn’t have to leave any lasting damage.”

“Why are you helping me?” I should’ve asked that question back at the cafe, but I’d been too shell shocked to say it. I’d felt like I had the world’s eyes on me, when really it was just the people I worked with. They’d seemed to see me, really see me, for the first time and it wasn’t a comfortable thing. “You asked me out on a date, but... I’ve slept with your brother. I didn’t know that you were brothers when I accepted, obviously.”

“None of that matters.” He seemed so sure about that. Then he winked at me before pulling into the underground car park for his building. “And if you’d come home with Adam, I’m not sure that would’ve stopped me asking you out.”

“You’d have wanted me to cheat on your brother?” I asked, wondering if I was starting to understand the vibe now. “Is this some sort of competition between the two of you?”

“Competition? Nope.” He drove up the ramp, then expertly turned the car right, driving along the narrow space to find a car park. “That makes you a thing for two men to fight over. He probably didn’t really have a chance to tell you much about our family, especially if he was fucking things up, but...”

I leaned forward, hanging on his every word, somehow knowing this would be momentous.

“Adam and I have three dads. We don’t let the media know that, but, yeah. My dads fell in love with my mother the moment they saw her and they’ve spent every moment trying to make her happy.” He pulled into the park and pulled on the break, killing the engine. “That’s what’s normal to us. Finding the right woman and—”

“Sharing her...?”

I’d heard that some people did this, lived like that. While it didn’t really faze me either way, I’d always found it hard to get one guy to notice me, let alone more than one.

“Share the pleasure of making her happy,” he said, staring into my eyes but not making a move into my space. He smiled slightly, then looked down, a fine blush colouring his cheeks which had me staring all the more closely. “But that’s not what this is about. You didn’t feel safe back at the cafe.”

“No.” I felt it again, that rush of fear of being violated. I didn’t even know what Adam had going on about in the interview, though he seemed to. But if he had to have a conversation, he could’ve had it with me... I frowned as I realised. No, he couldn’t, because I’d scuttled on out of his room without leaving anything behind but my shoe. I sighed. He could’ve talked to Jack though, run things past her and instead... My fingers curled into fists. “No, I didn’t.”

“Then that’s what matters right now. Not him, not me, but you. C’mon.”

He was out of the car and around at my door, opening it up, then holding out a hand for me to take because I had to jump down. And when I took his hand, I felt something.

One of the things about me that I liked was that I seemed less fussed by men than other women I spoke to. Some of my friends at school would have been all aflutter at a simple gesture like this. The fact he was good looking and nice equalled saturated panties, apparently. But me? I didn’t seem to see guys or girls, just people. Kaine was being nice, so why did his hand feel so warm in mine? Why did I feel warmer too, the longer I held onto it? He didn’t feel like just some guy, he felt... safe. I shook my head, telling myself instantly that the thought was completely irrational, and reluctantly pulled free of his grip.

“People can’t get in or out of the car park without permission,” he told me, pointing to cameras in the car park. “There’s security down at the gate and people watch the car park as well.” We walked over to the lift. “I’m up on the top floor.”

“The top?” I found myself smiling despite myself. “You must have amazing views.”

“Come and see for yourself,” he said, walking into the lift and using a fob to select the floor. He pulled a second one off his key ring and passed it to me. “Use that to get onto any floor, but we’re on the fifteenth.”

I got to see just how amazing his view was the moment we walked out of the lift. I had the impression that everyone else in the building had part of a floor, but not Kaine. I was confronted by a wall of windows, the sunlight diffused by a reflective coating on the glass.

Kaine watched me take the place in, a small smile on his lips as I walked forward. It was perfect, gleaming and modern: the dove grey carpet not starting to fray like mine was, the kitchen containing slick stainless steel appliances, but also thickly lacquered butcher block counters. But it was the space that impressed me, the oversized furniture seeming dwarfed by the open plan room, making me feel like I could spin around like Maria in *The Sound of Music* and not touch a thing.

“It’s amazing,” I said.

“Thanks.” He shook his head. “My dad’s company built the whole structure, but I bought this floor and designed this part myself.”

“This is some crash pad.” I took in the brass light fittings and the discreetly elegant art on the walls. “I’m fairly sure you could fit a herd of elephants in here.”

“Sometimes I just need space, y’know? I share a house with my brother and a friend of ours.”

“River?” I asked.

“River,” he confirmed with a nod before walking over to the fridge. “I obviously grew up with Adam, and River’s as close as a brother to me, but sometimes the thing a happy family needs is space and this is mine. So, can I get you a drink?”

“Oh no, you needn’t bother,” I replied, my automatic response.

“Freya.”

I froze at the sound of my name because no one had ever really said it like that before. With authority, gently chiding, but with no anger in it, more that he liked having the opportunity to gently correct me.

Great.

Not only had I unwittingly agreed to date two men, who happened to be brothers, but now I was thinking inappropriate thoughts about one after having watched the other deliver a confusing mea culpa on the TV.

“A water would be great,” I said, pulling out a stool by the breakfast bar and sitting down. I rested my head in my hands, watching him come over with two bottles and hand me one. “So, do you know what this is all about? I don’t know if you have any of the details—”

“I don’t,” he replied, twisting the lid off before draining part of the bottle in a few gulps.

“And you probably don’t want to know what went on with your brother.”

“You can tell me whatever you like,” he replied, putting his hands wide either side of him along the bench and leaning down so our eyes were almost level. “And if I can help, I will.”

“Like he’s acting like he raped...” I shifted uncomfortably on the seat, then started again. “We had sex, but it was consensual. So I don’t get why he’s confessing things to strangers.”

“OK.”

I watched Kaine’s fingers follow the grain of the bench top.

“Like he didn’t assault me or anything.” I twisted the cap off my water, but didn’t drink anything. “If he’d just shut up about it... If he’d just left things alone...”

He smiled then and all of a sudden I could see the family resemblance. Adam’s grins came easily, frequently, were bright and beautiful. Whereas Kaine’s smile was like the sun

that peeked out from behind the clouds every now and again, making you that much more grateful each time.

“You have no idea how often I have said those same words.” He reached over to tap his bottle with mine in affirmation and I reciprocated. “Now, drink up. I know I said I’d be in contact and take you out for dinner tonight, but how do you feel about eating in?”

“You don’t have to stay or anything,” I replied hurriedly. “Or you can, of course, seeing as it’s your place. Um... maybe I should head back home. Jack had to be over-reacting, right?”

“Have you ever known her to before?” he asked me and I shook my head. No one had a better head for the risks to your reputation than my bestie. “Then I want you to stay here. If I’m making you feel uncomfortable, I won’t stick around—”

“I can’t kick you out of your own crash pad,” I said, the term seeming ridiculous for a place like this. “This is your place.”

“And it’s yours as long as you need it,” he promised me, before pulling out his phone. “I’d intended to take you out for dinner, but things change.” He pushed his phone towards me. “This is the menu of the place my friend owns. Let me know what you like and I’ll put an order in.”

Chapter 14

Kaine

I was in hell. Not just because I'd been forced to clean up after Adam again, but for a much more practical reason. We'd had dinner delivered an hour or so after we'd arrived and now I was trying really hard not to think inappropriate things as my mate groaned at the quality of the food.

And failing utterly.

My cock was so hard it ached, the throb in time with my heartbeat as I watched Freya slurp up a strand of spaghetti and I found myself envying the fate of pasta.

"Oh my god, this food is amazing!" she said, settling back. "But what about yours?"

I was pushing my food around on my plate, something that would've driven my mother mad, but I couldn't seem to stop. I wasn't hungry for fettuccine Alfredo, not when there was something so much sweeter in the room. I could just see it, shoving all the plates off the table and then replacing them with her as I worked down her zip, her pants, her underwear. I'd tell her to sit still like a good girl, right as I dropped to my

"It's lovely," I said, spiralling a strand around my fork and then holding it out to her. "Try it."

She went to grab the fork from my fingers, but I held tight, something that made her blink. Freya stared into my eyes momentarily, then darted forward and bit the pasta from the

fork, there and gone again like a delicate little hummingbird. Her fingers went up to her mouth as she chewed, then made enthusiastic noises.

“God, that’s incredible too. And you said your friend runs the place? I’ll have to tell Amber...”

We were having a moment, a nice one where we shared space, shared a meal, and the kind of peace I craved so much had settled over the room. I’d hated the massive dining table, all the chairs, but even though we were seated opposite each other, that space seemed to condense, becoming intimate, something I almost felt guilty for.

My phone had been buzzing since the moment we arrived. No, before that. I’d ignored it then and had turned my phone to ‘do not disturb’ when I had the chance, silencing all notifications. *What about the building site?* the responsible part of me thought. *What about Adam and the dads and Mum?* But for once the bear got his way, shoving them to one side and focussing just on her. Muscles that were kept locked down loosened and I felt like I could take fuller, longer, breaths. I was settling, strangely content with just this. Adam had always dreamed of going all the way to the top of the AFL, but me? I just wanted this.

Seeing my mate eat something I provided for her. I wanted to cook for her one day, get her tasting each dish until it met with her approval, right before I tasted her. Watching her move, spike strands of spaghetti with her fork and then eat, seeing her eyes wander around the room as she chewed. I wanted peace, quiet, stillness and while I hadn’t intended bringing her to my sanctum this early on, I couldn’t regret doing that.

“You want to tell Amber what?” I prompted gently. “You’ll be able to go back to work after things settle down.” Would she? I couldn’t tell for sure but I didn’t let any of that doubt colour my voice. “What would you want to tell her about Jorge’s food?”

“That it’s amazing,” she said, flushing slightly. “That we need to try making something of this quality though... Shit,

she might not like hearing that.”

“Maybe not, but those bacon and egg rolls were pretty amazing too.”

She smiled, then glanced down at the table.

“So, do you do this for every woman your brother outs on state-wide television?” she asked me.

I let out a sigh, abandoning all hope of eating my meal, reaching over instead to top up a glass of wine I’d poured. I held up the bottle in question. Freya had said no the first time, but she pushed her water glass forward now, forcing me to commit the cardinal sin of splashing a glass of Leo Buring Leonay Riesling into a tumbler. But when I had mine in hand, the stem balanced between my fingers, the golden liquid swishing around in the glass, I confessed.

“There’s never been another girl in Adam’s life,” I said, “so, no, I haven’t had to rescue any other fair maidens, but... do I clean up after my brother? You might’ve noticed he’s a little impulsive?” Like the night he decided to spend the night buried between her thighs instead of watching the medal count. Her cheeks went a little pinker at that. “And I’m not. I can’t be. Someone has to be the sensible one and that’s me,” I said finally, feeling like I sealed my fate right then.

Sensible.

Sensible wasn’t sexy. It didn’t inspire thoughts that the man in question might tear her clothes off and fuck her against the mirror at the back of the lift, even though it was something I thought about the whole ride up. It didn’t conjure images of her fingers smearing the polished surface, a golden reflection of me driving into her over and over, until I felt her clench tight. That I’d grit my fucking teeth, hold back, do it right, not like Adam, and ride out her waves of pleasure before kissing her stupid. Sloppy, open mouthed kisses as I’d erupt inside her bare, feeling a kind of satisfaction as I felt my seed run down her legs the moment I pulled out of her.

“Sensible?” Freya smiled, her eyes narrowing slightly. “You’re trying to make out that you’re the boring one, but

you're not."

Had any woman looked at me like she did now, with searching eyes that seemed to see right into my soul? I sucked her regard up like a parched plant might water, holding her gaze long past the point of politeness.

"I know what it's like for people to look past you," she said. "For their eyes to run over you and keep on going until they settle on someone they think is more important. Other people might miss things, but not me."

She leaned forward as she took a sip from her glass, her eyes widening as the taste hit. Dry, with just a hint of minerality, I was wondering if she was getting all the complex notes I was, because not much else got past her. I smiled slowly at her words.

"I see you, Kaine... Farrelly?" I nodded, encouraging her to say more. "So, if you'd taken me out, how would the night end?"

With her pressed up against my truck, her pretty little dress bunching up around her thighs, that was what the bear wanted. But the man? Freya deserved to be wooed.

"When I first saw you, you didn't seem to expect me to notice you back," I said, leaning forward. "That made me want to know why. When I asked you out on a date, that's what I wanted. If you wanted to sit in the car parked by the beach, or maybe perched up on my bonnet as I stared up at you, as you described all your hopes and dreams. That's how I would've liked the night to end."

I felt it then, the future, hanging there and tantalising me at how close it was. It was as if all I had to do was reach out and — She interrupted my thoughts by collecting up our plates with the practised ease of a waitress, something that had me standing to stop her, when she put a hand on my shoulder.

Shit.

Her hand was so small, yet her grip was strong, there and gone again.

“You fed me amazing food,” she said, leaning down until her lips were just above my ear. “So let me do this.”

I watched her bustle around, scraping the plates clean and then stacking the dishwasher before I could respond. But when she put the half-full takeaway containers and back into the plastic bags they’d arrived in, I strode across the room, into the kitchen. Stepping up behind her I took them from her hands, my body almost pressed against hers.

“You don’t need to do anything for me,” I told her in the kind of low urgent tones I hadn’t dared use when she was facing me. “Nothing but be happy. My brother dropped a bomb into your life.”

She turned slowly then, aware of my proximity.

“And it’s not for you to deal with the aftershocks, Kaine,” she said, reaching up slowly to pluck the bags from my fingers. “We can do this together if you like.” Then she held out one handle of the plastic bag, like it was an olive branch. “That way neither one of us is indebted to the other. A burden shared—”

I snatched the bags from her fingers and dropped the containers back on the bench, my hands slapping down either side of her body. I smelled the sudden scent of her fear, but it was coloured so thoroughly by the sweet sharpness of excitement, I couldn’t seem to bring myself to pull away.

“You’ll never be a burden to me,” I told her, aware of how crazy that sounded, but it had to be said. “And I’d like very much if you felt indebted to me.” My fingers flexed and, out of her field of vision, claws pricked the surface of my countertops. “Because maybe that’d make you feel like it’d be a good idea to curl up on the ridiculously huge couch of mine and watch something mind numbing on the TV with me.”

“With popcorn?” she asked.

That fucking smile. It felt like her spirit was bubbling back up again, now that it’d been given a chance to, and the bear roared his victory inside me. She was relaxing, getting

accustomed to me. It was a small step, but it was a step nonetheless.

“Only if you like the triple butter flavour,” I said.

“Oh my god, where have you been all my life?” she asked, ducking under my arms and going ferreting around in my cupboards.

Waiting for you, I thought as I watched her search.

Chapter 15

Adam

“What the fuck did you do to my bestie?”

Jack drove her finger into my breast bone the moment I opened the front door to let her in. A string of flashes went off as she rushed inside. Not that many, thankfully, because I didn't have the kind of profile that warranted national news attention, but still. Having photographers camped out beyond our front fence was freaking weird.

“Adam, I swear to god...” she growled, marching inside and then turning to face me. “Is this why she took off like a bat out of hell? Did you...?” She paced back and forth, her lips working but no sound coming out. “Did you...?” She forced herself to stop, eyes wide but when I stepped closer she warded me off like I was a wild animal charging.

And that wasn't that far from the truth.

“Did you rape Freya?”

“What?” I felt like I'd been king hit, stumbling back. “Fuck, no, never. I could never...” My hands slapped down over my guts, feeling my empty stomach lurch at the thought of it. “I could never abuse Freya like that, ever.”

“That's what rapists say, right up until they face down a jury,” she said, staring at me flatly. “Men deny it all the time. You know that 97% of men who rape women get away with it, right? Right?”

“No, I didn’t know that and that’s seriously fucked, but—”

“So what did you do?” She walked right up to me, and if she was a bloke I’d assume this was the point where she’d take a swing, but instead she stood toe to toe with me. “What the fuck did you do to my best friend?”

“I...” How did I explain this? How did I make her see that I could never hurt her like that. The idea of forcing... My stomach lurched again, bile flooding my mouth. “I did something I didn’t intend to, something she should have consented to first.”

“You stealthed her?” Jack was like a riled-up cat, her fur fluffing up more by the second.

“What the fuck is...? Shit, you mean pulling off a condom during sex. No. No...”

God, I was tired. I felt a bone deep kind of exhaustion that wouldn’t be alleviated by sleep, only by making things right with my mate.

“Look, I’ve gotta show you something and you need to promise to keep it between us.”

We only shared our shifter status with those we trusted. And I trusted Jack. The woman was like a damn vault most of the time, so I had to hope that would still be true at the end of this. She frowned when my hands went to my shirt, ready to pull it up over my head.

“What’re you doing? If you’re about to show me some kind of STI or something, don’t. I’ll get the team doctor to look at you and then sue your arse for unwittingly putting Freya at risk.”

“I don’t have an STI, Jack. I’d need to have had sex with someone *before* Freya for that to be possible.”

“You...” She gestured vaguely, finger travelling through the air on an erratic orbit. “You...?” This turned into a flick up and down, taking all of me in. “*You...?*”

“Come out the back,” I said. “I’ll be able to show you... Let’s just go in the backyard.”

We'd bought this block because it was a huge one by city standards, complete with large trees that provided an impressive canopy. That and the super tall fences gave us the privacy we needed for this. I slid open the back door, the bear stamping his paws in anticipation. He'd let me be in control and, as far as he could see, I'd fucked up everything, so he welcomed the opportunity to take the wheel.

“OK, so we're outside, now what?”

“Just turn around. You're not gonna want to see this part.”

Bear shifters in Australia didn't get much of a chance to take fur. During footy's off season, we went out to a shack we had in the middle of nowhere and let our beasts run free, and it was always a relief to let the other side of our natures free. But not this time. I heard the clack of Jack's heels as she spun around and then I worked quickly, pulling off my clothes and sneakers, then letting out a long breath. Just a moment of cool air on overheated skin and then, this.

The bear whuffed, scenting the air and catching a faint trace of Freya on Jack. But it was stale and old and was quickly drowned out by the scent of fear as Jack turned around at the sound and her eyes went wide.

“Adam!” she yelped, looking around wildly, thinking I was somewhere else. “Adam! What the fuck?” She scuttled back, but she was moving too fast too soon, and her heel caught on the paver. Jack slammed down on her butt and gasped, “Oh my fucking god...” She scooted back on her bum, but we were there. We lowered our head, trying to make our massive frame smaller as we nosed forward. The tension leached from her body as she stared, then dared lift a hand. “Adam?”

Our muzzle pushed into her hand as she touched our fur. She snatched her hand back for a second, then went back for more when we didn't bite or growl. This wasn't the woman I wanted touching me in bear form, but I'd deal with it anyway, to clear the air. The need to make amends was riding me hard, but part of me was sure this was just another fuck up. Everything I'd done since the day I'd met Freya was wrong,

wrong, wrong. The bear was starting to shift restlessly, in tune with my mood, then Jack spoke.

“Fuck, I thought you were in the closet and not wanting anyone to know and...” She let out a nervous laugh. “And you are in a way. Not the kind of bear that has a hairy chest and struts around in little bits of leather, but a real one. Jesus, Adam, does Freya know?”

That question was the thing that allowed me to come back to skin. The bear couldn't answer in this form and somehow he knew it was an important one. The bear receded and I pushed forward, hastily grabbing my clothes to cover my wedding tackle, before shaking my head.

“No. She doesn't know what I am. She doesn't know she's my fated mate and I've been waiting my whole life for her and that's why I've never slept with anyone else. And she doesn't know...” My throat worked, suddenly bone dry and I turned around, jamming my feet through my shorts and hauling them up before turning back around. “She doesn't know I claimed her the night we were together.”

“Claimed. Her.”

And just like that, Jack got over her shock about seeing the other side of my nature.

“I lost control,” I said, walking over to her and sitting on the edge of the deck, hanging my head in shame. “I thought I had shit locked down and I didn't. Or rather, I did. She felt so good and I was so happy she'd come up to my room with me.”

“Dude, the amount of rapey bullshit guys spout that starts just like that is making my head spin right now,” Jack said, coming to sit beside me. “So, what does claiming her mean?”

I forced myself to look at her.

“When we find our mate, things are supposed to follow a set pattern. Get to know her, feel her out, woo her, then let her know what we are and then she decides.”

“To stay or go?” Jack frowned slightly. “Fuck, that's harsh. And if you've been waiting for her your whole life, what does that mean if she says no?”

“No one else,” I replied, the words feeling like ashes in my mouth. “No love, no sex, no nothing.”

“That’s a lot to put on one girl,” Jack said, her tone much softer now. “But it makes sense now.”

“What does?”

She smiled slightly, holding my gaze and nodding at me as she continued.

“You’ve always been a beast on the field. Now I know that’s literally the case.” I snorted in response. “But the thing about you, Adam, is you’ve always been goal-orientated. Coach wants you to kick more goals? Our stats go up the next game. Get more cardio done at training to build stamina? You’re urging the guys on long past the set laps, pushing them to do their best. And this was your ultimate goal. Get Freya, make her yours and live happily ever after, having little baby bears... and how the fuck does that work?”

“Kids aren’t born in fur. It doesn’t happen until you’re a teenager,” I replied.

“Fuck, adolescence is a bitch when you just have to worry about one body, not two. So.” Jack was calming down. Her breath was coming more evenly and I could see that sharp focussed look she got in her eyes every time she had to deal with another fuck up. “Mate, you need me now, more than ever before.” I pulled in a breath to answer, but she stopped me. “Not because I’m gonna help you to get my bestie to accept whatever bond thing you think you have with her, but because you are ballsing every fucking thing up on your own. What made you think talking to the media was a good idea?”

“I sexually assaulted Freya.” I just blurted that out and somehow felt better for admitting it to her. It was like lancing a boil, all the poison oozing out of me. “She didn’t know what was happening, what I was doing and...” I swallowed hard. “Neither did I, not really. The nannas all teach us about the process, that we need to hold back, but I just couldn’t. She was so soft and wet—”

“And she’s my bestie, so shut the fuck up about that part,” Jack said, not unkindly. “OK, you got carried away during consensual sex, right?”

“Right.”

“And this bond thing isn’t going to do anything to her, is it? Like she’s not forever locked out of being with other guys.”

“Other guys won’t be an issue.” I forced the words out, but her eyebrow jerked up at my growl. “It just means there are no other girls for me.”

“But you’re not gonna like that much.” Jack the PR rep and Jack the terrified woman were both being pushed aside as Freya’s best friend was back in the building. “Is this going to be a problem? Are you going to try and stop her from seeing anyone else?”

“Freya’s free of me,” I said, my fingers clenching, then releasing again. “She ran out before I could tell her what had happened and she hasn’t made contact again. I can only assume she doesn’t want to.”

That made my chest ache. Jack watched me scratch at my breastbone as if that would ease it.

“It’s done. She’s made her choice and I’ll respect that, but...” I shook my head sharply. “I had to let her know: that I fucked up, that I was sorry. That’s why I spoke to the media. The guy was there, got photos of me looking like someone had just kicked my puppy, and I was feeling really low so I made a statement.”

“What have I said to you about that shit? Information. Diet.” She poked me in the arm to punctuate each word. “We talked about this. The media doesn’t need to know anything. We control what they do and don’t know. And, mate, I know now your heart was in the right place, but you’ve fucked things up worse than before. You don’t know Freya, don’t know how much she hates being in the spotlight, and you just directed its very bright glare right on her.”

Fuck. Fuck! My mind seemed incapable of any other thought as I let out a long sigh, feeling like everything good in

my life went with it.

“I’m sorry—”

“Sorry’s not gonna cut it, buddy. We’re gonna have to go into damage control,” she said.

Chapter 16

River

“Hello, darling!” Mum pulled the door open and threw her arms around me. I pulled her close, smelling floral perfume and baked goods on her as I held her: the scent of home. “We’re just sitting down to dinner. You’re staying, right?”

“Right,” I replied, having timed my visit for this reason.

Not least of all because Mum was an amazing cook and the whole house smelled of fresh bread and lamb stew, a dish all of my dads loved, but also because I needed help.

“River!” Jacko was one of my fathers and he looked up from where he stood uncorking a bottle of wine. “Haven’t seen you for a bit. Everything OK?”

“Yep,” I replied, conscious all eyes were on me.

“Come sit,” Mum said, steering me towards the dinner table. My other two dads were already seated and Nick got up to bring another plate for me.

“What’s the news, Riv?” he asked as he set a place for me. “I see that sleuthmate of yours won that medal. It’s all the blokes on the work site can talk about.”

A lot of bear shifters worked in construction across Adelaide. Adam and Kaine’s dad were builders, but a lot were like me and my dads, working for other crews.

“He did.”

I looked up as Jacko brought the stew pot over and then set it on a wooden chopping board in the centre of the table to protect the tablecloth.

“Mashed potatoes, love?” Mum asked, another pot tucked under her arm.

“Yes, please.”

“Nothing better than your Mum’s mashed spuds,” Kev, the other one of my fathers, said with a wink. “Fluffier than clouds and full of cream and butter.”

“Good food for hardworking men,” she said, dropping a hefty spoonful on my plate and started working her way around, but Kev dragged her down on his lap.

“You’ve worked the hardest,” he said in a low voice, really just meant for the two of them. He plucked the pot from her hands and deposited mash on his plate and hers, before handing it to Nick. “Get off your feet and have something to eat while our son tells us his news.”

They knew. My family didn’t bombard me the moment I walked in the door because they’d learned that it just made me shut down, but they knew. That we’d found Freya. That we were in the process of trying to win her over. But the rituals we followed meant I had to pretend they didn’t, so I started from the start.

“We’ve found her,” I told them.

“Your fated mate?” You’d think Mum would hate the idea, because she was what the rest of the bear community saw as a second choice. But if anything she was the opposite. Her hand shook like a bird’s wing as it went to her chest. “You’ve found her? Is she lovely? Of course, she is. Have you met her or just Adam? Where did you find her?”

“Love.”

Kev nestled her in closer in his arms, doing his best to soothe her with his large presence, but Mum pushed free.

“Don’t ‘love’ me,” she said, sliding into her own seat. “This is important.”

For more reasons than one. The shifter community had assumed I wouldn't shift when I came of age, not when so many boys born of bear shifters and their fated mates didn't. So when I'd found my bear, it'd caused a bit of a stink and then lots of questions. Would I ever be able to find a mate? People asked that over and over, other guys wary about forming a sleuth with me. But Adam being Adam, he saw that as a challenge he had to tackle head on. We'd been friends since primary school, but when we reached puberty we became a lot closer. He believed in me, in my bear, in my future, so much so he was willing to tie his life to mine. Kaine had noted this with a sigh, making clear we had a hard road ahead of us and that we needed him by our side to navigate it.

"I've met her and she's..."

I let out a sigh as I surveyed the table. What did I say? That she was everything I never knew I wanted and more? I felt torn in two. If I gushed about Freya, was I shoving my mum's face in the fact my dad's would've felt the same about their fated mate? Was I doomed to pick either their happiness or mine?

"River." Mum reached across the table and took my hand and despite how small it was, as always, I felt her strength. "Just tell us about her, love. We want to know about the woman in your life."

"She's beautiful." I stared at the mashed potatoes on the plate, but didn't really see them, the white expanse forming a blank canvas for me to draw her portrait on from memory. "I can't stop fucking looking at her whenever I see her."

"Oh lord..." Mum breathed out.

"And when she smiles..." I swallowed hard, then reached for a glass and some water. "It's like the whole world stops. I find myself drawing her whenever I'm not focussed."

"Always with the drawing," Jacko said with a smile. "That's our boy."

"And she's artistic as well," I added.

“Of course, she is.” Mum clasped her hands to her chest. “She’s perfect for you, isn’t she?” I nodded quickly. “Oh, River...”

“So what’s the plan, son?” Nick asked, putting his elbows on the table, but for once Mum didn’t fuss. “You know you need to win that girl to seal the deal. Not sure what the hell Adam was thinking that night.”

Of his dick, that was my working theory, but I understood why. Watching Freya move around the cafe was murder on my body. I ached and ached, my chest, my cock, all of me in complete agreement. Nothing would satisfy us but her.

“You need to take it slow, let her get to know the man we know you are,” Kev said, grabbing Mum’s hand and giving it a squeeze. “But she’ll come around. We know she will.”

Like your mate did with you lot? I wanted to ask. It was the elephant in the room, but one we all studiously ignored.

“That’s why I’m here,” I said instead, not brave enough to tackle that issue. “I gave her a lift home from work the other day to make sure she got there safe.”

“Good lad,” my dads all said.

“And I met her dad.”

“Shit.” Nick went pale. “How did that go? Your grandfather nearly took our faces off when it became clear we were all interested in courting your mother.”

“Good, I think. He invited me around for Sunday dinner.”

“To a family dinner?” Mum was fairly quivering with excitement. “Oh that’s a good sign, isn’t it?”

“Dad musta taken a shine to you, mate,” Jacko said, punching me in the arm.

“So what do I do?”

I hadn’t dated, hadn’t even really talked to girls when I was growing up. None of the girls in the bear shifter community were keen on me. I was never going to be a serious prospect for them. And other women? Sometimes they saw

how tall I was and how reserved, and they seemed to take that as a challenge, but then... I had nothing to give them, not even small talk, so the gleam would fade from their eyes and they'd wander away, looking for someone more interesting to engage with.

“Dress nicely,” Nick said and then looked me up and down with a critical eye. “Wouldn't be a bad thing to cut that hair of yours, either.” He gave it a ruffle. “Looking like a scruffy prick isn't gonna do you any favours.”

“You need to take something,” Mum said. “It's Sunday, isn't it? I could make one of those apple pies your Nanna gave me the recipe for.” People fought over pieces of Mum's apple pies. She only used the sweetest of Pink Lady apples to make it. “You could come by here first and I'll have it made fresh. It's lunchtime, right?” I nodded. “I'll get up early and make sure everything's done for you.” She got out her phone and started writing down some notes. “And wine!” Everyone jumped slightly at her declaration. “A nice bottle of something. What're they dishing up?”

I shrugged, feeling that tight feeling in my chest start to rise again. It'd been coming and going since the minute Freya's dad invited me around, getting worse whenever I was near her.

“He said a roast.”

“A nice bottle of red, then...” She frowned slightly. “Though if it's chicken, then white. Oh, maybe get both, just in case.”

“Love,” Kev said to her.

“No, Kevin, we need to get this right. This is River's only chance,” she said, her words coming faster and faster. “I'll ask the nice boy down at the bottle shop for some advice on which bottles to buy. Nothing cheap, but not too fancy as to look like you're trying to buy your way into the family. You need to set the right tone with her parents.”

“Love.”

“Maybe a nice pinot gris?” She grabbed the ladle in the stew pot and then started slopping serves onto everyone’s plate, frowning when a little of the gravy splashed on the table cloth. She was up and out of her seat, grabbing a cloth and dashing back again, when Nick hooked her around the waist and put her on his lap.

“It’s *not* River’s only chance,” he said in a low, urgent voice. “Right now he’s feeling a brutal pull towards this girl, but if she decides this isn’t going to work for her...”

No, not that, I thought furiously, but my lips remained stubbornly stuck together.

“But if she rejects him—”

“No...” Mum moaned. “No, she can’t.”

“She might, love. They’ll find their way towards each other, if it’s meant to be, but if it isn’t—”

“Nick, no.”

“Then there are options.” He forced her to turn around and face him. “Options just as magical, just as amazing, as finding your fated mate. The process is slower, more measured, but the end is just the same: finding that one person you love most in the world.”

As I watched him hold her tight I felt a weird mix of fear and relief, because that’s what my parents’ relationship was. To the bear community it was a reminder that failure was possible and people instinctively shied away from that, but to me it was all I’d known and it was built on love.

When my dads clustered closer to my mum, seeing her get all in a flap and trying to soothe her, that’s what I wanted. To be there for Freya, to be her rock when or if she needed it. But maybe she wouldn’t choose me. Maybe there was someone or someones else that she needed, and that would be OK too. The bear roared, snarled and paced back and forth inside me, threatening to take control, but I had to remind him of this. If we really cared for Freya, we needed her to be happy wherever she was: because that was what’d happened with my father’s fated mate.

She lived out in the hills somewhere apparently, with a guy who owned a fruit farm. They worked it together now, had raised two kids and were happy. She'd known him since they were young, always having eyes for each other, but he'd never said anything until my dads started hanging around. Seeing her get all this male attention put a foot up his arse and he declared his feelings and she said she felt the same, so she was forced to reject my dads. And that was that. Then, one day, when my dads were drowning their sorrows at the pub they'd gotten talking to the girl behind the bar: Mum. The connection wasn't instantaneous. She was getting over her own heartbreak. Then what started as trauma bonding slowly became something more, until we ended up here.

"You'll find her, son," Kev said finally. "You're a good lad, if a bit of a dreamer."

"And scruffy," Nick said with a wink. "Don't forget scruffy. You could go and see that barber of ours."

"I'm not sure a short back and sides gets the girls going like it did back in the pre-war times," I said with a wry smile.

"You cheeky little shit..."

And just like that, the tension eased, including what I'd been carrying around inside me. Mum took her seat and we all tucked into dinner. Mum's lamb stew was always too good to waste.

My parent's house was largely a peaceful place and it was always a nice thing, coming back here. Me and the dads sorted the dishes out after dinner, Jacko setting up Mum with an Irish coffee in front of the TV as we cleaned the kitchen. But it was her strangled cry that had us flicking soap suds off our hands and rushing into the lounge room.

"I hurt you," Adam declared, staring at the camera. "I hurt you and I'm sorry."

"What happened?" Mum asked, eyes wide.

“I don’t know,” I replied, answering honestly, grabbing my car keys.

Chapter 17

Freya

“So what’re we watching?” I asked, taking a seat on the couch and trying really hard not to make sex noises in response. It was massive, plush and so, so soft I felt like I was sinking into it.

“Whatever you want to watch,” he said, plonking a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table and then handing me the remote control.

“Oh my god, you must like me to give me control of the remote!” I said, then stopped. He hadn’t said anything about that. My dating history might have been light on, but even I knew you didn’t pre-empt that kind of conversation.

“I do,” he replied, sitting down beside me and putting his arm along the back of the couch. Right behind my head. I blinked because everything I’d read and heard said that guys like this didn’t just say shit like that. Gloria and Katie were always bitching about fuck boys that didn’t want to commit. “So what’re we watching?”

I turned the TV on but the minute I did, I saw the same newsreader delivering the same story, the one about me. It must’ve been a recording, but this time I noticed the small details. The slight smirk on the woman’s face, her shift in tone as she turned to a panel of old men in suits.

“So what do you think has prompted this outpouring of remorse from the Tigers player?” she asked.

“Well, not a proper apology for missing the medal count, that’s for sure,” one man grumped. “In my day we didn’t nick off to mess around with a bit of skirt.”

“Nah, that happened once the winner was announced, didn’t it, Sammy?” another man said, nudging the original guy in the ribs. “But seriously, we’re not being given a whole lot of details here. Kids today seem to do everything via video. Maybe he mistook the cameraman for FaceTime?”

“But serious questions have to be asked,” the last man said with a very dour expression. “If there’s been some kind of misconduct here, something that brings the game into disrepute, we might need to reconsider who won the medal.”

“That’s not because you thought Nathan Lyons was a shoo-in for winner this year, is it, Eddie?” the first man, Sammy, said.

“Not at all. This isn’t the big leagues and our game is one that people feel comfortable bringing their families to watch. If young Farrelly has done something so heinous he felt the need to apologise to a news camera—”

“What did he do?” Kaine removed the remote from my limp fingers and then changed the channel over to Netflix. “He didn’t hurt you, did he, Freya?”

“No.” That came out way too fast. “I mean, not...” I threw up my hands. “Everything was consensual and this is a really weird thing to be talking to his brother about.”

“Freya.” I turned to see him staring down at me. “He’s my brother, but I’m also your friend.” His focus slid down to my lips and stayed there. “More than a friend, later, if that’s what you want. Regardless, you can talk to me about this.”

“So...” My cheeks were burning and I turned around, my fingers tracing the seams of the couch. “We had sex and it was my first time.”

“First...” Kaine’s voice sounded so choked I was forced to look up. “Tell me he took things slowly.”

“Not really, but only because that’s what I wanted.” I let out a sigh, aware that all the easy mood of before was well and

truly gone. “He didn’t break my hymen or anything. I’m fairly sure something battery-operated from Fun Factory did that some time ago.”

Kaine made a strangled sound, red spots forming on his cheekbones, but he nodded.

“Well, that’s something.”

“So everything was good, more than good, and... are you sure you want to hear this?” I asked.

“Whatever you’ve got to say, I’ll listen,” he said.

Part of me wanted to test that, push and see if I could get his facade of fractured calm to shatter altogether.

“OK, so he’s rocking my world and yes, I had orgasms, Dad. Several actually.” He chuckled at that, his hand moving until it landed on the back of my neck, tracing circles there. “And after the first or second, something...” I shifted restlessly, the ghost of remembered pleasure washing through me, because there was a spot deep inside that seemed to reawaken as I spoke. “Something happened.”

I stared into his eyes then, suddenly bold.

“It was like a G-spot toy pressing down hard, but that’s not what dicks do normally, right?”

“Not normally, no,” he agreed in an oh so reasonable tone.

“And then it was like he couldn’t thrust that hard.” My breathing and Kaine’s had become synchronised, so I picked up the moment when his started to come faster. “It was like he was rocking back and forth, but suddenly that was all I wanted. I held onto him tight and told him how good he was making me feel and then...”

Somehow this had turned from a clinical recount to something else, something intimate between the two of us. It was like the huge living space had closed down, forming a warm little bubble around us and we breathed in the same rarefied air as I spoke.

“It was amazing, nothing like what I’d expected. Girls talk about their first time being abysmal, but mine was amazing.

Like, I was coming and then instead of the feeling fading away, I couldn't stop. And that's when..."

My finger went to the bite mark on my neck and my thighs fell open instantly. That same pleasure rose again, this time without any prompting. Kaine was holding his body rigid, the solid lump in his pants making clear his response to what I was saying, but he made no move to do anything.

"Then what, Freya?" he prompted, his voice so much lower and huskier. "What did my brother do?"

"He bit me." I yanked my hand away, feeling dizzy when the sensation of remembered pleasure stopped. "Why would he do that? I have a mark on my neck and..."

"Let me see."

His fingers were cool, clinical, pushing my hair aside and feeling across my bared neck, but I knew exactly when he found the bite mark because my whole body came alive. And that made me feel strange at the same time, because that wasn't how I worked.

I didn't pant after people I'd never met. I'd never projected desire onto famous people. For me, attraction to someone came from knowing them. And while I was starting to feel a connection with Kaine, I hadn't known him long enough to warrant my sudden response to him. I let out a little pant, my skin feeling like it was on fire, as my whole body came to life. My nipples tightened so fast it was almost painful, my back arching in response.

"Kaine..." I gasped out and he pulled his hand free with an almost sad look in his eyes. That was hard to take in as my body slowly gained back its equilibrium. "What the fuck was that?"

"The men in my family..." The words seemed to be pulled from him rather than said willingly, those cool blue eyes watching me the entire time. "They tend to connect with only one woman, and when they do it's kinda intense."

"When you connect together, you mean?" I said, able to see a flash of him, of Adam, both naked together, their

collective focus on me.

“That’s right. And we don’t really connect with anyone else, just that one woman.”

“Like ever?” I looked him up and down then, taking in the massive, strong body, the confident manner, and shook my head. “You’ve never—”

“Never,” he replied, softening that with a little smile. “I’ve been waiting for the right girl. *We*’ve been waiting for the right girl.”

“And you...?” My hand went to that bite mark, and I suddenly felt like a detective with all the clues in front of them. “You can leave a bite on me that would give me multiple orgasms if you touched it for long enough?”

“When you’re ready for that, yes,” he replied, like that was completely normal.

“And what would that mean?”

“That you were mine and I was yours,” he replied simply.

“And can I do the same to you?” I asked, my voice starting to rise.

“If you want. I’d let you do almost anything, Freya.”

“And can you...?” I let out a shuddering sigh, remembering the other night and all of a sudden coming to a conclusion that, at the same time, couldn’t be true. “Can you enter my dreams?”

“That I don’t know,” he said with a slight frown. “You’re connected to Adam now. That’s what he’s apologising for. He shouldn’t have done that, not without your permission. It’s supposed to be a meaningful thing, done between two people who really care about each other, as an expression of that love.”

Was it a meaningful thing? Adam was hot, sweet and had swept me off my feet literally, something I’d always fantasised about, but had it been meaningful? It’d felt like there was a very real connection, despite the fact we didn’t know each other, but that feeling had persisted anyway. I’d felt like I’d

been free to dive head first into whatever was happening because it had a use by date. I would walk away, return to my normal little life, and he'd let me because I was just some random girl.

But Kaine was saying that wasn't true.

"What does that mean?" I asked, my voice way more plaintive than I planned it to be. "What does this mean?" I rubbed at the bite mark, then snatched my hand away. "None of this makes sense." I got to my feet then. "Make it make sense."

"I can." He nodded reassuringly.

I'd felt safe with Kaine for some reason, ever since I'd met him, and I couldn't say why. He was still way taller, way stronger than me. But, as he stood up as well, I paid way more attention to the sense of reassurance that he gave me.

"I can show you, Freya, but that's not what I had planned for tonight. I thought we could just chill out, relax, get to know each other." That sadness was back in his eyes, making me want to know what had caused it.

"Why?" I demanded, not willing to back down now. Between the two of them they'd turned my life topsy turvy, and I wasn't going to stay here for a second longer if I didn't start getting some answers. "Why, Kaine?"

"Because you're our fated mate," he replied, like that made any sense. "There's only one woman in the world for us and that's you."

"Fuck off," I snapped, laughing then sobering up seconds later as he continued to stare. "What, like in Buffy or Twilight or something?"

"Or something," he agreed. "We don't have to argue about this. I can show you why I know it without a shadow of a doubt, if that's what you want."

I nodded then, standing tall, at least until his hand went to his belt.

"What the fuck?"

“Look away if you don’t want to see,” he said, pulling his shirt free once his belt was unbuckled then tossing it on the couch.

My eyes took in everything, the breadth of his chest, the small smattering of hair there, the way his muscles bunched and shifted as his hands moved. He stripped off, standing there for just a second, completely naked, meeting my gaze and not flinching for a second.

And then it happened.

Where there had been a man, now there was a polar bear. And all that came to my mind was that the size of this place made sense. It looked too fucking small to contain a beast like him.

“Fuck...”

I couldn’t take him all in, adrenalin pumping so fast through my blood. As it would when facing an apex predator. He chuffed, his head swinging around to look at me, that massive snout wrinkling as he scented the air, right as my phone began to buzz. I’d made sure to put Jack on a different tone to everyone else so I’d know when she was calling me, so I pulled my phone out and blindly tapped the screen.

“Freya? Freya, you there?”

“Yep.” My reply was short and immediate.

“Look, I’ve got news for you and... fuck, you’re not gonna believe this.”

“Uh huh.”

I slowly, slowly took a step backwards, but the bear noted that, following me. No, tracking me.

“So about Adam—”

“Yeah, I can’t talk about that right now.”

She heard the hysterical note in my voice and came to attention.

“What the fuck is happening there?” she asked. “Where are you, Frey?”

“North Terrace,” I replied, taking another step, then another, the bear making a sound that seemed like it was a warning. “And... And...”

“And what, Frey? What the fuck is going on? What’s that sound... Shit, do you have a bear there with you?”

Where else in Australia you could legitimately ask someone a question like that, I didn’t know. But surely it wasn’t apt for a fucking penthouse apartment in the middle of Adelaide?

“How’d you know about that?” I snapped. “Seems like a pretty bloody weird question to ask.”

“Jesus, girl, that’s what I rang to tell you. They’re werewolf bear things, each one of them.”

“You knew about this?”

I stared down at the phone and then did the only thing I could think of. I ran for the lift to the sound of the bear’s roar. The doors opened almost immediately and I threw myself inside, punching the close doors button as the bear lumbered closer. I found the fob and with shaking hands, activated the lift sending it down to the ground floor.

“Meet me on North Terrace,” I said, glancing around me wildly as I tried to think of a way out of this mess. “I’ll be out on the footpath, down near the university end.”

“On it,” she said.

“Freya!” As I stood at the bottom of the building, near the street, Kaine emerged from the lobby in human form. He strode out onto the footpath in just his pants, looking wild and dishevelled, but stopped when I stepped back. “It’s OK. I’d never hurt you.”

People turned to look as they walked past, wondering what kind of drama they’d stumbled into, but I just stumbled back towards the curb.

“I don’t know what the fuck you are.” The mark on my neck throbbed almost painfully. “Or what you’ve done to me.”

“Frey!”

Jack rolled up beside the curb, window rolled down so she could call out to me, and I jumped into the car.

“Let’s talk about this,” Kaine said.

“Not right now, bear boy,” Jack said, revving the engine. “My girl needs a G&T, stat, and I’m gonna make sure she gets it.”

Chapter 18

Freya

“I...” My hands rose and fell uselessly into my lap. “And he...”

“Lemme guess, becomes a fuck off huge brown bear?” Jack said as she expertly manoeuvred up through traffic.

“A brown bear? No, a polar bear,” I replied with a frown. “And how do you—?”

“Adam showed me a whole other side to himself,” she said with a shake of her head, “and by the look on your face, Kaine showed you something similar.”

“They’re bears...” I searched the side of Jack’s face, waiting for her to turn to me and go ‘surprise! It’s all fake.’ A prank I could cope with, but this? It was as if everything I thought I knew about the world was wrong. And where the hell did that leave me?

“Bear shifters,” she corrected, “and if both of the guys are showing you their furry side, what does that mean? I’m assuming Kaine didn’t show you his bear because he wanted to help his brother out.”

“No, he...” I swallowed hard. “Apparently they were raised to share the same woman.”

“Men who turn into fucking bears and are polyamorous,” she ground out, jerking the car to the left and slotting it into a car park. “Fuck my life, how am I going to keep a lid on that?”

For fuck's sake, tell me they're not also banging their housemate, River, as well." She just gripped the steering wheel for a second, then looked over at me. "Sorry, that was a shitty thing to say and bi-phobic as hell. Frey." She grabbed my hand then and gave it a squeeze. "How're you holding up?"

"Didn't you say something about gin and tonics?" I squeaked out, because each time I blinked I could see it, Kaine's bear, standing there before me. My brain was fighting the evidence of my eyes, unable to reconcile things inside my head, and the subsequent tug of war was exhausting.

"Well, look where we are."

We both glanced up to see the sign outside a bar on Hindley Street. Merv's was about as basic a pub as you could get, but it was wildly popular with university students. Mixed spirits had been served in jugs right up until the government stepped in, citing the effects of binge drinking and the increase of street fighting. But, back in its glory days, the two of us had spent a bit of time hanging around there between lectures.

"Fuck, Merv's."

"I figured some greasy food with a side of salmonella and watered down drinks was the only way to deal with this shit," she said, removing the keys from the ignition and getting out, her heels clicking on the pavement as she came over to my door. I sat in the seat, painfully aware that I was still in my work uniform, but she just grabbed my hand and hauled me out after her. "You'll hold my hair back if I vom and I'll do the same for you. Deal?"

She'd asked me the same thing so many times before it was almost a ritual between us and the familiarity helped settle me. I smiled and nodded, and we walked in.

80s sleaze rock blared way too loudly from the PA system. Blokes who no doubt were in their heyday when these songs were brand new were sprinkled through the place, either sitting at the bar or lurking in booths. Their heads swivelled around, scenting new blood in the water, but when we reached the bar Jack slung her arm around my shoulder, grinning at the nearest bloke.

“Checking out my girlfriend?” she said, watching the hope rise in the guy’s eyes. They always seemed to think Jack being gay was somehow an invitation for them to explore their hottest fantasies. “Sorry, mate, the only dick she wraps her hand around is mine.”

She left the guy to splutter, trying to work out what the fuck that meant, as she put in an order with the tired looking barmaid.

“A gin and tonic and a whiskey sour,” Jack told the woman, then looked aside at me. “And a round of tequila shots.”

“Tequila—?” I started to protest.

“If there was ever a time to kill some brain cells, this is it, babe,” she said, paying for the drinks and then collecting them up on a tray before expertly moving the two of us over to an empty booth. “So...” She pushed a shot over to me.

I stared at the golden liquid for just a second, then snatched it up and downed it quickly, feeling that harsh blast, fighting the urge to cough after swallowing it.

“So.” I met her eyes finally, seeing concern and affection and a bewilderment that I was sure was reflected in mine. “How long have you known about this?”

“Just found out this afternoon, same as you,” she said. “Fuck, Frey, I’d never hold out on you about something like this. I went around to Adam’s to rip him a new asshole.”

Adam. Why did I flush at the sound of his name, feeling a wave of that pleasure I’d felt touching his bite mark? No, his mating mark, I now knew. He’d bitten me, claimed me, like a dog might a bone.

“I still might, by the look on your face. Tell me Older Brother behaved a whole lot better,” she said, searching my face.

“He was lovely.” I took a sip of my gin and then another, needing that lemony taste. “They both were in different ways...”

“But they get furry on occasion,” she said, “and that’s a problem.”

“I...” Words failed me. It was like I couldn’t actually feel my emotions, that everything was kept locked behind an ice wall of shock, but as I took another sip, I felt cracks start to form in it. “I...” But that’s when my thoughts began to swirl.

Kaine and Adam together, prepared to share me. Bears. Being claimed. Without permission. What had happened the night of the medal count, all that sweetness and heat, seemed to take on a different tone, now I had additional information to go on.

“I feel like I’ve been lied to,” I said finally, and Jack’s expression shifted to one of empathy. “Like, I get it, seriously. If he came up to me and said ‘Hey, I’ve just met you, and this is crazy. I turn into a bear at will, fuck me maybe?’ I would’ve told you to contact the nearest mental health professional because your star player was having a psychotic break but...”

“But a girl likes to know what she’s getting into,” Jack finished for me. “He should’ve told you.” Her hand gripped mine. “And if that night was too soon, then he shouldn’t have done anything serious like... claim you until you were ready. You didn’t consent, Freya.”

That was definitely part of it. I felt like something had been taken from me, but that it was more than the chance to make an educated decision. It was as if he’d grabbed my positive memory of what had happened, something I’d been carrying around like a little flame to keep me warm, and had just blown it out.

“I... don’t normally do things like that,” I told Jack and she nodded slowly. “Like I’d... never...”

“Never ever?” she said quietly.

“Never ever. And that’s not the way I always thought it’d go down. I’d meet some guy and we’d click and slowly get to know each other and, one day, I’d just know, right?”

“Right.”

“And then it’d happen, with someone I know, I trust. But with Adam I just jumped in headfirst and that’s not who I am. And... what if...?” I frowned as the thought struck me, then took another sip of my drink. “What if that was part of this whole thing? I mean, if they can turn into bears, can they...?”

I couldn’t say it, but Jack did.

“Magically roofie you? I asked Adam that question because I needed to know if I was going to punch his teeth down his throat. As far as he knows, that’s not how it works. They want to give you their still beating hearts on a platter, but women remain as they are.” She smiled ruefully. “They’re supposed to get to know you, feel you out, then broach the idea of revealing what they are, before any mating marks are given. I’m not going to try and convince you to forgive him at all, but he knows he fucked up.” She shook her head. “It’s the only thing that stopped me from kicking his arse, but...”

She looked me over with a keen eye, the same one that had picked up every shift in my mood when we were in high school.

“I don’t want to talk about him, Kaine, or even River. I want to talk about you, Frey. I’d assumed you bailed on Adam because you just wanted to hit and quit it. But what really happened?”

I grabbed my gin and tonic and downed it in one long gulp, something that made her eyes widen when I put the glass back down and looked at her.

“I left because I couldn’t see a future with him,” I said. “It was a one-night stand obviously, so why string things out?” A waitress came by to take our empty shot glasses and Jack ordered some more. “But mostly...”

In my mind’s eye I saw the awards night, the glamorously dressed people and the way I didn’t feel like I belonged amongst them. I heard the women bitching about Adam and me when I was in the ladies’ toilets, but most of all, it was seeing him up on the screen, moving with a kind of confidence and skill that drew every eye to him. And while I wanted that for him, that kind of attention made my skin itch. Some people

craved public validation, but I didn't want any of it. I preferred to shrink away from the glare of the public eye, back into the shadows.

"I don't want the kind of life a wife or a girlfriend of a player lives," I said. "I don't want people watching what we do, what *I* do just because of who I'm with. I like keeping things low-key, and any guy I get serious with needs to be the same."

"Here you go, ladies," the barmaid said, depositing several rounds of shots on the table for us.

"Well," Jack said, holding up one and handing me the other. "Here's to life lived in the background."

"Cheers to that," I said, clinking my glass with hers.

Chapter 19

Adam

“What’re you doing here?” I snapped, the moment Kaine walked in the door. He had a face like thunder, which meant I should’ve kept my mouth shut and kept on scrubbing the grout of the kitchen tiles, but I didn’t. “You’re supposed to be looking after Freya, keeping her safe.”

“I did what you should’ve,” he shot back, dumping his keys on the freshly cleaned kitchen counter. When I got stressed I had to find something to do otherwise I’d jump out of my own skin, and right now it was stress cleaning. “I told her... showed her what we are.”

“You showed her the fucking bear?” I tossed the scourer into the sink. “Are you serious?”

“What was I supposed to do, Adam?” He stared at me with that familiar combination of frustration and obligation, like I was a weight he had to carry. “She was asking me about the bite you left on her neck and how it made her feel.”

“How did it make her feel?” I couldn’t keep the hope out of my voice.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Kaine’s hands formed into fists. “That’s what you’re focussing on right now? You fucked up, Adam.”

Why did it always cut me off at the knees every time he said that? Not even a dressing down from the dads caused the same reaction. I couldn’t have hurt more if he’d come over and

driven one of those fists into my guts. Actually, I'd have preferred that. If he hit me then we coulda fought shit out, smashed into each other until the other was gasping, bleeding, and then all of that fucking disappointment in his eyes would fade and we could move the fuck on. But Kaine Farrelly did not let his instincts rule him like that, so the two of us were left standing there, fairly vibrating with the effort of keeping ourselves back. And that just left him staring at me like I was less than shit on his shoe, and I couldn't fucking take it.

“And he apologised for it.” We both turned around to see River standing in the doorway. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed, casual as you please. “Though what exactly were you apologising for?” he asked. “That much wasn't clear from the video.”

“I...” My voice broke on that so I coughed and then tried again. “I marked Freya without consent. That's sexual assault.”

“Worked that out, did ya?” River said and then moved forward. He pushed past me and went to the fridge, pulling out bottles of water and then holding them out. “I have no idea what was going on in your head—”

“Nothing, as per usual,” Kaine snarled. “You just reached out and took what you wanted, just like you always do.”

“Fuck, is this about the terrible trauma of growing up with me as a brother?” I snarked. “Poor Kaine, having to look after Adam all the time. You know I never asked for that.”

“And what happens when I don't?” he replied, eyes blazing ice blue. His bear was close to the surface, but I just cocked an eyebrow, daring him to come out. We could settle this shit in fur, no problems. “You do shit like this. And this time, you hurt our mate.”

And there it was again, the pinprick that had all the hot air hissing out of me, bringing me crashing back down to earth.

Fuck.

“I did.” I pushed the bottle of water away, but River put it in my hand with a meaningful look. “I did and I...” One of the

things I'd learned as a kid and on the footy field was that admitting you fucked up took all the heat out of things. It hurt like a bitch at the time, but took far less effort than trying to coerce everyone around you into pretending there wasn't a problem. I nodded slowly. "I did and I don't think there's a way back from that. I can't tell her in person, because she doesn't want to have anything to do with me and I don't blame her."

I cracked the lid of the bottle and drank a long mouthful of water.

"And, honestly, you guys should just do what you can to try and patch things over with her. You didn't... do that to her, so you've both still got a chance."

Kaine's jaw locked tight and he just glared at me. Time felt as slow and sticky as molasses, the seconds taking years to tick by.

"Well, I blew my chance too."

Fuck. Revealing the bear to a prospective mate was about the most nerve-wracking experience a shifter could go through. I'd argued long and hard that we should just come out of the fucking closet and be done with it, but the older members of the community had shut me up real quick.

"And how'd that go?" River asked. And I saw it. Riv always played shit cool, but there was a gleam in his eyes, a hunger to know.

"She ran out." In my mind, my brother was always Kaine the strong, Kaine the capable, so watching him crumple right now had me staring openly, trying to reconcile what I saw with the man I knew. "She saw the bear and bolted, took off out of the building."

"Is she safe?" River's tone was more bear than man. "Is she OK? Kaine—"

"Jack picked her up," he replied finally. "I've tried ringing her but..."

They weren't answering. Made sense, Jack had said she would promise me nothing, after we'd finished our

conversation. She was my friend too, but her relationship with Freya trumped that and I... I loved that she had that, that someone was always in her corner. But it was River's reaction that had me stunned. He let out a shaky laugh, slapping his hands down on the bench and then wrapping them around the edge, as if that was all that was holding him upright. We both stared as he shook his head.

"So... *you* got carried away and bit our mate the first time you got close to her," he said, stabbing a finger in my direction. "And then compounded the issue by going on state-wide television not once, but twice."

"I needed to do something," I said, jerking back like he'd slapped me or something. "I fucked up—"

"And made it worse. Freya's not like you." He dared me to contradict him, the bloke who somehow thought he knew more about her than me. He'd barely said two words to her. "She doesn't feel like everything needs to be done on a grand scale in the public eye."

"And how the fuck do you know that?" I shot back.

"I don't, not really, but... I watched her at the cafe." He flushed then, seeming to realise how creepy that sounded. "And she could've told any one of the people she worked with that she was the girl who owned the shoe you put up at the press conference. If she wanted that kind of attention, she could've notified the media herself."

"But she didn't..."

It was fucking obvious when he laid it out like that. I'd been brought up on tales of all the grand gestures bear shifters had made before us, trying to get their mates to accept them, but I'd never thought for a second that maybe some of the women hadn't wanted all of that. We never really heard much about the failures because the pain of mates being rejected was felt as a community.

But what if those failures had been like this?

The guys thought they were doing the right thing, but really everything they did just pushed her further and further

away. I looked up, seeing my brother and River with fresh eyes then. Every time I opened my mouth, I was sabotaging their chances at happiness. Both of them had had more real conversations with Freya, better ones than I'd had the entire night I'd spent with her. Kaine was honest with her. River was attentive and I... My train of thought was broken by the sound of Kaine's phone ringing. He dragged it out and then blinked when he saw who was calling.

"It's Jack."

All three of us stared at that phone, transfixed, watching as Kaine's thumb slid across the screen to answer the call.

"Jack," he said, "what's happening?"

"Kainey!" I could hear her voice, even though my brother hadn't put the call on speakerphone. "How's my favourite furry? Like, not that kind of furry... Hang on, maybe you are. Do you guys do it in bear form, because urk... Oh shit, I think I threw up in my mouth a little."

"Jack, where the fuck are you?" he growled.

They were drunk, I just knew it, which made sense. What else would you do when you'd just seen a man turn into a bear?

"Give the phone to me."

Both of us looked at River in surprise when he jerked Kaine's phone out of his grip and then put it to his ear.

"Jack, it's River."

"River! Are you a bear too? Do you have those cute widdle fluffy ears."

"Oh my god, the ears!" Freya cackled. "I always wanted to touch bear ears. They look so soft."

"I do," he replied in the even tones people use with drunks. "And I'll let you do whatever you like with them, if you tell me where you are."

"Hindley Street!" Jack replied. "We got kicked out of Merv's, so we're gonna try somewhere else, but then we

thought you could come and transform into bears and then we could ride you and do bear races up the Rundle Mall, see who can get to the mall's balls first."

The mall's balls was a sculpture completed in the 1970s by artist Bert Flugelman. It was a pair of massive stainless steel spheres balanced on top of each other.

"Balls!" Freya burst out laughing.

"So whaddya reckon?" Jack asked River. "Up for a little bear on bear action and why does that sound like gay porn?"

"I'll be there in ten," he said. "Don't fucking move an inch."

As soon as he hung up, we both started to talk at once, but River just ignored us, snatched up his keys and strode out of the kitchen and down the hall.

"Why did they ring you?" I asked my brother. "And what's going on?"

"Dunno, but I'm not standing around here waiting to find out," Kaine snapped.

Chapter 20

Freya

There was a reason why I didn't often get drunk, but I couldn't remember what it was.

“Did you know bears have bones in their dicks?” Jack announced.

Ah yes, that was it.

We'd had way too many shots and were talking too loud. Even Motley Crue screeching about all the girls, girls, girls they'd boned couldn't compete with us. But that was the fun thing about getting drunk, because I no longer cared, cared, cared. When I revisited the memory of Kaine in fur, I giggled at the sight of a polar bear standing in a penthouse and when I saw Adam apologising on the TV, the giggles got louder. Jack kept staring owlshly at her phone, trying to focus, so I went to take a look.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I said, craning my neck to look at her screen.

“Says here that bears have a... baculum.” She put her phone down and then switched to an image search. We both recoiled as pictures of long bones appeared on the screen. “Apparently most male mammals used to have them, even the predecessors of humans.”

“More shots, ladies?”

The barmaid, Janey, who we were now on first name terms with, appeared with a tray and my hand went out, needing another drink if we were going to have this conversation.

“Did you know that bears have dicks in their bones?” I asked Janey.

“I did not.” She placed more shot glasses before us, and I lost count of how many. “I do know they apparently shit in the woods.” She folded her tray against her and looked the two of us over. “And you’re getting cut off after these.”

“What? Why?” we cried.

“Because you have a weird interest in the mating habits of animals and we can hear you talking about them from the bar,” she replied with a tight smile. “So can I close out your tab?”

“Fine,” Jack huffed and then handed over her card. “And put a little extra on there as a tip.”

“Not sure if that’s gonna be enough to pay for the therapy sessions I’m gonna need after hearing you talk about bear dicks,” Janey said, “but thanks.”

“I like her.” Jack hung off her stool, watching Janey walk away. “I wonder if she—”

“Focus!” I snapped my fingers and then grabbed another shot, slamming that down without even a wince, feeling the rush of warmth and oblivion that came with it. “Do you know yet another thing about bear shifters that I don’t? Is that why you’re looking up what a back scratcher is?”

“Baculum,” she repeated. “No, I figure since we’re being drip-fed information, maybe it’s time—”

“Shit.” I froze on the spot.

“What?” Jack peered at me, struggling to focus.

“I just remembered something about that night.”

“What?” She smacked me on the arm. “Stop with the fucking foreplay and shove it in already.”

“Is it normal...?” I paused, looking at Jack and reconsidering my question. “What am I asking you for? You

don't know anything about hetero sex.”

“I'll have you know I had a very disappointing experience with Johnny Goodall the night of the Year 11 formal, which helped consolidate my identity as a gay woman,” she said with a theatrical air. “So spill, bitch.”

“I think...” A thought niggled away in my brain and once that worm started twitching it wouldn't stop. “I think I know what a baculum feels like.”

“Get the fuck out of here!” Jack shouted. She punched me in the arm and I pulled back with a yelp.

“Fuck, ow! What was that for?”

“Where was that topic of discussion when I asked for all the deets, bitch?” she said, cocking an eyebrow.

“You said no P in V conversations would be had.”

“Ordinary peen? Gag.” She poked a perfectly manicured nail down her throat and then actually gagged momentarily. “But weird peen? C'mon, Frey Frey—”

“Don't call me Frey Frey. It makes me sound like a French poodle,” I shot back.

“Did you go onto that website with the freaky fantasy dildos that look like dragons?” she asked me in a patronising tone.

“The one you traumatised me with, spamming me with links for gelatine ovipositor eggs when work was slow, and then we had a deep dive into research, trying to work out if melted jelly in your va-jay-jay would give you thrush? No.” I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry, so I nicked one of her shots, copping a smack to the hand, but not before I swallowed most of it down. “But when Adam bit me...”

“He...” She made a rude gesture, poking several fingers through a ring on her other hand.

“More like...” I replicated that, then curled the tips around until they caught on the rim of the ring. I made a tugging motion and then her eyebrows shot upwards.

“That looks... painful. Tell me that prick did not shred your cervix, because we will have words—”

“He didn’t.” I wriggled in my seat and Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “More like the best G-spot stimulation I’ve ever felt and I’ve got one of those stainless steel things you can brain a guy with.”

“The Njoy Pure Wand?” She grinned widely. “You never said.”

“Well, unlike some people, I don’t need to advertise everything I do with my vagina,” I said.

“I sent you a video of the wet spot a girl left that one time...” she groaned.

“You made me come into your dorm room at university, and calculate the circumference of the wet spot, so you could record it in a chart.”

“For science.” She raised her shot with a goofy grin so I grabbed the last one, doing the same. Jack clinked her glass with mine and then we downed the tequila.

“Hello, ladies...”

The guy, about the same age as my dad, moved to prop his elbow on the top of our booth, leering suggestively when we both turned to him.

“Do you have a bear dick with extra G-spot attachment?”

“What?” The guy blinked wildly and we both started to cackle.

“Didn’t think so,” Jack shot back, “so off you go.”

Margaret Atwood always said that women are afraid that men will kill them and men are afraid women will laugh at them. His reaction made me guess that was true. The bloke turned and walked away, muttering something about us being bitches.

“Ladies, it’s been real...” Janey said, giving the two of us the hairy eyeball.

“But we must be going.” Jack got up, stumbled, grabbed at the table and then burst out laughing as I did the same. Jokes on me, the floor seemed to have moved too. Janey just watched the two of us learn how to walk again, clutching onto each other, then go careening out onto the footpath.

My little art business was called Goblincore for a reason. If you’ve never seen Iliza Shlesinger’s stand up routine about being a party goblin, you’re missing out. Those weird little critters I drew, they were what lurked inside me, hidden down deep under a facade of normality. But when the two of us were drinking, the party goblins came out.

“So how the hell are you going to go back to normal peen after enjoying the delights of the G-spot Stimulator 3000?” Jack asked way too loud, spinning around in a circle, much to the bouncers’ amusement. “Especially when they’re attached to three guys who’re gonna lurve you forever.”

“Shut up, bitch. They don’t love me,” I said, giving her a shove, almost into oncoming traffic.

“They loove you,” she sang, off key. “They want to hold you. Kiss you and only you. Except they can’t love anyone or fuck anyone else, like ever.” She grabbed a street sign pole and spun around. “They’re like the anti-fuck boys.”

“The fuck...?” I stopped still, staring at her. “What are you on about?”

“I was quizzing Adam, doing some undercover research for you, bestie.” She gave me a shove and I went staggering away. “Apparently he and the other guys were keeping themselves pure and untouched for their fated mate.” She stopped spinning, then went an interesting shade of green and stumbled over to a nearby shop front, before the bouncers got cranky and moved us on. “No spew since ’92, Officer,” she said, giving the guys a salute and then marching us up the road. “You’ve got a three bear army of dudes that have never even been kissed before, willing to do anything you want them to. Turn into their bear form and let you snuggle them.”

“Oh my god, all that fur,” I groaned.

“Right now I’d settle for someone to carry me up to the taxi rank,” she said, pulling off her heels and pegging them at the nearest bin. Each one bounced off. “Ohmigod, you could have them turn into bears and we could climb on their backs and ride them home!”

Suddenly I could see it, Jack on the back of one polar bear, me on the back of another. My eyes went wide and my mouth fell open.

“We could have races!”

“Yes, races!” She skipped up the road, guys shouting out some shit as they passed by in their cars. “First one to the Mall’s Balls wins!”

“Yess...!”

She grabbed her phone then, tapping on the screen at least some of the time, though her fingers seemed to slide over the surface like drunken ice skaters.

“Jack, it’s River.” Art Boy’s voice came out through the speakers, much to Jack’s delight.

“River! Are you a bear too?” she asked. “Do you have those cute widdle fluffy ears?”

I don’t even remember the conversation, just that the whole world seemed to be moving in time with my heart, pulsing over and over. My body swayed in time with the dull thud of the bass line we heard from the nearby clubs and a breeze picked up. It seemed to bath my overheated skin, washing it all away, everything that had happened. And then I heard this.

“I’ll be there in ten.” Art Boy’s voice was deep and authoritative, which was somehow comforting. “Don’t fucking move an inch.”

Chapter 21

River

They didn't understand. Neither Kaine nor Adam understood what it was like, growing up in our community as the son of someone who wasn't their fathers' fated mate. They just assumed it'd be all happy families, like it was for them, but as I shifted gears, swiftly swerving through traffic, I was reminded of just how untrue that was.

"My mum says you can't play with us."

That was my earliest memory of what other boys had said to me during community events. I was the only child, Mum struggling to even have me, it was said, so I'd been hungry for the company of other kids. But boys had turned their back on me, girls had shrunk away, until one of them had finally said that. And I realised, at five years old, that I was being shunned. I'd stumbled back then, as if slapped, unable to work out what the hell was going on. My family was loving, tight-knit and when I hung out with Mum's side of the family, people always treated me well. I'd just stopped and stared, unable to process the words.

"What? You gonna cry?" the boy had said, then smirked.

"Don't." A much smaller Adam had stepped in then, frowning when the other boys snickered, then he'd lunged at them, forcing them to scatter. He'd looked over at me then and held out his hand. *"I'm Adam."*

He'd stuck by me at school and during social events. We'd forged a tight friendship. And because I was Adam's business, I became Kaine's. The two of them unconsciously ruled the playground at school, making clear I was untouchable, but that's what made what I was trying to do so hard.

They were fucking everything up and I felt like I couldn't stop them.

I roared up Hindley Street and some of the blokes trawling the street in their V8 cars revved their engines in response, but I didn't care about that, just them. I saw two women wobbling on the pavement, a couple of big bouncers standing over them and saw fucking red. Somehow the gods of parking saw fit to bestow a boon upon me, and a space appeared just in front of the pub. I jumped out of the car, right as Jack was berating some massive guy all in black, so I swooped in and grabbed her around the waist, slinging her over my shoulder and was carrying her back to my car when I saw Freya.

"River..."

Her eyes were too bright, her cheeks too flushed and those pretty little lips were parted in surprise, making me think of all the very bad things I wanted to do to them. But not now. Both of my sleuthmates had made things worse for my girl, and I couldn't compound that.

Get them somewhere safe and secure, the bear insisted.

And make sure they don't choke on their own vomit, I added.

I picked Freya up with my spare arm and threw her over my other shoulder to the catcalls of a few drunk men wandering through the mall.

"Fuck yeah, mate!" someone shouted down the road, but I ignored them, bringing the women over to the car and setting them down beside it.

"That guy said I'm drunk!" Jack snapped, wobbling on her bare feet and then aiming to go back and argue some more.

"Because you are," I said mildly, jerking open the back door. "Now get in."

“River!” She seemed to see me for the first time, grinning widely and then throwing open her arms. “C’mere and gimme a big bear hug.”

“Bear hug?” Freya snorted, tried to smother it, let out a weird piggy sound, and then clapped her hand across her face before bursting out laughing, Jack following suit. The two of them dissolved into giggles, almost bent double as they clutched at their stomachs.

Damn.

Their behaviour was starting to get more attention, people drifting closer, looking for some sort of drama to enliven their night and I was fairly sure sober Freya wouldn’t want that.

“C’mon, ladies,” I said, coaxing them towards the back seat. “We can’t have bear races up the mall if you don’t get in the car.”

“Oh goody, races!” Jack clapped her hands like a child.

“Waaaitaminute.” Freya stared at me with big, slow blinking eyes. “You’re that guy that made me late for the train.”

“Guilty as charged,” I replied. “And if you get in the car, I’ll get you ladies home and some water and painkillers.” *And a bucket*, I thought to myself.

“My dad likes you.” Freya continued, poking her finger into my chest. “He was saying I should go on a date with you.”

“Right, so—”

“And then I had a sex dream about Adam, which was really weird because I was in my old bed, with all the posters on the wall of the guys I thought were hot when I was a kid.”

“A sex dream!” Jack went to punch Freya in the arm and failed miserably, just spinning around in a circle instead. “You didn’t tell me about that.”

“Sex with one of your players,” Freya replied, cracking up as Jack made an exaggerated show of pretending to throw up in the gutter. “See, that’s why I didn’t tell you.” She spun

around to face me. “So I decided I couldn’t date you because I’m not over Adam. Oops!”

When she slapped a hand over her face, it felt like I got the sting. My face felt red and swollen, like it might crack if I smiled. But I just nodded slowly.

“That’s fair,” I replied, even though it felt like anything but. My heart ached with each pulse, forcing blood into extremities that felt like they’d been deprived of it for way too long. “You don’t owe anyone anything, but I’d like it very much if you’d get in the car. I’ll take you to Jack’s where you can—”

“No bear races?” Her eyes shone then with unshed tears, and I sighed internally, remembering that the kind of paradoxical reactions of a drunk person were always hard to follow.

“Where we can have bear races,” I amended, having no intention of doing that at all. I wasn’t adverse to taking fur. The bear pushed hard each time he heard her mention him, wanting to burst out and be introduced. But she’d had enough to deal with, hence her current state, and I wouldn’t add to it. But of course, I couldn’t just be allowed to run with my plan, because next Kaine’s ute pulled up and he and Adam jumped out.

“Are they OK?” Kaine snapped, then not waiting for an answer, walking straight over to inspect them both for himself.

“What the fuck...?” Adam looked too pale, his eyes too bright, as he came closer. “They’re wasted.”

Because of what you idiots have done, I thought furiously, but didn’t say a thing.

“Hey, Farrelly!”

The blokes calling out wanted to get Adam’s attention, not Kaine’s, but both their heads whipped around, and I willed Adam to do the right thing. People were coming closer; because of course they were. They were focussed on him, because he’d won the medal, because of his latest confession.

He stared at Freya, then me, and I silently begged him not to drag us into his orbit. He nodded.

“How’s it going, fellas?”

He ambled away from us and I let out a long sigh of relief, until I looked down. Freya was watching him go with something in her eyes. Longing, need, confusion, disappointment, pain? I couldn’t decipher what, because it was all so complex, but I knew I wanted to wipe it all away.

“Freya—”

“Let’s go,” she said, turning on her heel and I ushered her into the backseat, Jack stumbling in behind her.

“Take them to the apartment,” Kaine said, appearing at my shoulder. He handed me the key and fob. “That’s the only key to the place. Make sure they know that. No one will be coming in or out without their permission.” He put the key in my palm and closed my fingers around it, then stepped backwards. “Make sure they drink at least a bottle of water before bed and there’s painkillers in the bathroom.”

“You got it,” I said.

“Why are the other bears going?” Jack asked querulously from the back seat as I got in the car. “How are we gonna have races if they aren’t here?”

“They’ll meet us at the mall,” I told her, turning the engine over.

Adam looked up at the sound, glancing at us as he signed t-shirts and arms and whatever else people had on hand, talking as fast as he could to keep their attention until we drove away.

“OK,” Jack said sleepily and then nestled into Freya.

The two of them were toast, all of the hilarity of before exhausted and so were they. I drove to the car park under Kaine’s apartment. Once I’d turned off the engine, I moved around to Freya’s door.

“She’s asleep,” Jack slurred. “Frey. Frey!”

“Whaa...?”

I watched my mate blink slowly, my teeth locking tight as she struggled to do even that. We'd done this to Freya, made her need an escape this badly. I was willing to bet she didn't do this often.

“Kaine said to give you guys the only keys to the apartment on the fifteenth floor,” I told Jack, willing her to listen to me. “I'm going to carry her up, make sure you're OK and then let you guys sleep this shit off.”

“So no bear race?”

She asked me that with a wobbly smile, some of the real Jack coming back online.

“Imagine the PR nightmare that would cause,” I said and she wrinkled her nose.

“OK, yeah, let's not do that.”

I made sure she could get out of the car in one piece, then looked down at a sleeping Freya.

No doubt she would've hated me looking at her like this, but I couldn't stop. My eyes ate her up, whether I had a pen in my hand or not. But then Jack started singing the Tiger's anthem in an off-key voice, and I moved in and picked Freya up.

I shouldn't have been taking this much pleasure from carrying a drunken woman but I felt a deep satisfaction from having her in my arms as I collected her up, then shut the door with my hip.

“Use the fob to select the floor,” I told Jack once we got into the lift.

“The floorteenth?” she asked, then started to cackle.

“Fifteen. One five,” I said, watching her finger circling in the air, then finally tapping the right one. But it felt like more than just my body climbed up, up, up. A feeling of satisfaction rushed through me, followed by something less pleasant.

Guilt.

It felt like we'd crashed into Freya's life like a comet, destroying everything in its path just because she had the misfortune to be the one we were fated to love. I watched her breathe, reassured by the regular rise and fall of her chest, then anticipated the pain she'd feel when she woke up, and I wished I could take it all away.

All of it.

"You really like her."

My eyes jerked up to meet Jack's and I caught that knowing twist of a smile, a little marred when the lift stopped and she stumbled forward.

"That's the way it works," I told her as the door opened and we walked into the living room. I went into the bedroom, using only the neon lights streaming through the uncurtained windows to guide me over to the bed and then laid her down.

I didn't want it to be like this, that the first time I put her down on a bed was because she was too drunk to do it for herself, but someone had to. Freya made a little mumbling sound, then curled up on her side, tucking her hands under her neck before nestling into the pillow. I went into the kitchen and grabbed bottles of water and painkillers, putting some in front of Jack.

"Thanks, Dad," she said, grinning sloppily up at me, then dry swallowed the pills before taking a big mouthful of water. When she did that, I took the other stuff with me, collecting a blanket from the couch. Jack followed me into the bedroom, watching me set the bottle and painkillers beside the bed, then flick the blanket out and over Freya. "You want to look after her."

She said that with a kind of wonder that had me confused. I couldn't even put it down to dudes treating Jack badly, because she liked girls. Jack watched me cover Freya up and tuck her in lightly. Then my mate snorted and her eyes blinked open. She stared at me fuzzily, then smiled.

"River..." She breathed my name, the only way I wanted to hear her say it going forward. "Do you have a bone in your

penis?"

Chapter 22

Kaine

“Did you get them back to the apartment?” I asked River the second I answered his call. “Are they alright?”

“They’re drunk as fucking skunks,” he replied, his expression on the screen speaking more eloquently than he was. “They got absolutely wasted at some dive bar on Hindley Street.”

Where dickheads prowled, looking for an easy mark. Where some men spiked girls’ drinks, in an attempt to make them pliable enough to take them home and...

“Are they OK? Were their drinks spiked? What happened?”

“I can’t exactly ask them, can I?” he shot back, shutting me up. “But it’s not hard to put two and two together. We’ve hit Freya like a ton of bricks and something had to give. Well, she’s the one that did the giving. That shit has to stop.”

It felt like this was the most amount of words I’d had from River, but it wasn’t. They were probably the most serious though.

“We’re supposed to be courting her,” he insisted.

“I tried.” My teeth were locked tight so the words came out in a strangled mess. “I was being honest with her.”

“But was she ready for that?” he asked. “Right after she got hit with the news about Adam, you dumped what we are

on her?”

“I didn’t want any more lies by omission,” I said. “I wanted her to go into things with open eyes.”

“Well, she’s closed them now.” He rubbed a hand over his face and then shook his head. “I’m staying here tonight and I’m calling in sick tomorrow. I’ll need to watch them, make sure they’re still fucking breathing.”

That hit me like a gut punch. When Adam looked across at me, I knew he felt the same. I wanted to blame him, tear strips off him for this fuck up, but River was right. We’d all played a role in this.

And now we needed to work a way through it together.

“I’ll sleep tomorrow,” River finished and I nodded.

“I’ll see you...”

I didn’t get to finish that, River tapping on the screen to end the video call, leaving my brother and I in the car. One long breath in, then out, another deep breath in and out again.

“So what do we do?” Adam asked me and I smiled, a vicious sharp thing.

“Now you want my advice?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do.” He twisted in his car seat to face me as best he could. “I fucked up. I did from the start, and I’ve compounded that each day. I fucked up, Kaine, and I can admit that.”

“Very big of you,” I ground out.

“And while I don’t think there’s a chance for me and Freya getting together...” I froze, staring at the dash with a frown before staring at my brother. “I’m willing to do what it takes to make sure you guys do.”

I didn’t reply, throwing the car into gear and then driving home, forcing myself to stick to the speed limit. I didn’t say anything when we got inside our house. We’d had to walk past a media crew and I’d a fucking microphone shoved in my face, but I’d brushed past people, leaving my brother to deal

with them alone for once. I threw myself down on the couch and turned on the TV, needing something, anything, to distract me from what I was feeling.

She was in my apartment. Freya was lying in the bed I slept in sometimes. I wanted to be the one to watch her sleep, noting the slow rise and fall of her ribcage, catching the way the soft light caressed her face. I wanted to be there in the morning, ready to cook her whatever greasy hangover food she'd need to recover, then bundle her in a blanket and—

“I got rid of them.” Adam was uncharacteristically quiet as he sat down on the edge of the couch. He leaned forward, hands clasped. “I’m due in the morning for a meeting with the team manager and Jack. They want—”

“What?”

“Jack suggested it,” he said. “She wants to develop a plan. Acting not reacting to the mess I’ve made.” He shook his head slowly. “The team manager is tossing up whether or not to keep me on.” Adam winced at that. “I have to have a ‘please explain’ meeting. Make clear there’s been no sexual misconduct or anything else that would bring the game into disrepute. After that, it’s probably time to get back to work on site.”

“I’m coming with you,” I said, my mind starting to race, right as a news bulletin came on the screen.

“I assumed you would,” he replied with a wry smile, “seeing as you’re the site manager and everything.”

“No, the meeting with Jack,” I said, reaching for the volume remote.

“And Adam Farrelly’s mystery woman seems to have been found,” the newsreader said, raising one eyebrow. A familiar looking shoe came up on screen. “Some viewers let us know that a local artist sells these shoes at Gillies on the Ground, a local market for makers and creators alike. These colourful creations belong to a young woman called Freya North.”

The newsreader’s gaze intensified as she stared through the screen.

“After Farrelly’s impassioned, if inscrutable apology earlier today, we’re all wondering: what did the current Magarey Medal winner do to warrant such a public declaration?”

But I wasn’t paying attention to her or the scuttlebutt being discussed, passing as news of the day. It was the pictures in the background of her art, Freya’s art. Goblincore. I saw that much, then dragged out my phone to do an image search and there it was.

My lips quirked at what I saw. Strange little creatures that seemed to emerge from holes, scuttling across the sides of shoes, ones that possessed this strange kind of feeling of being alive, despite being quite cartoonish in style.

“Where’s that credit card of yours, big shot footballer?” I asked my brother, staring at the screen.

“What for...?” He peered at the screen. “Is that her work? Freya’s work?” He sucked in a breath. “Fuck, that’s amazing. What the fuck is she doing working at a cafe if she can do that?”

I stared at him then. “The same thing you’re doing, working on site on the off-season: making money any way you can. Talent doesn’t always equal dollars, you know that.”

“But what if she didn’t have to?” Adam was starting to catch on, jerking out his wallet and chucking his credit card my way. “What if she could just make art all day, every day?”

“At least tomorrow,” I amended, “until we’ve got this shit sorted.” I rang River back then, and when he answered, he looked pissed.

“What? They’re fine—”

“I’m going to send you some pictures,” I said, “and I need you to tell me what kinds of art supplies were used to make them and where I can get them shipped from, express delivery.”

“For Freya?” he asked, suddenly wary.

“For Freya.”

Chapter 23

Freya

I was dying.

The sun had come to the end of its lifetime and it was determined to take me with it, burning through the thin fucking curtains and straight into my eyeballs.

“Freya.” I groaned at the sound of my name. “Frey Frey...”

I wanted to tell whoever that was to fuck right off, but I had a mouthful of pillow and it was stuck to my face with super glue. Actually make that my spit. A groan escaped me as I pulled it free and lifted my head to see Jack standing there. The bitch didn’t have a right to look that put together at this hour, not after the night we’d had.

“What. The. Fuck...?”

“I gotta go,” she said. “I’ve got a meeting with the club bigwigs and... PR disasters wait for no woman. I’m just gonna slip out and grab my car, then leg it home and make myself more presentable, but...” She dropped down onto the bed and it felt like it lurched along with my stomach. “These are the keys.”

“To what?”

I blinked and blinked, trying to make my surroundings come into focus.

“Kaine’s penthouse apartment.”

“Kaine?” I scrambled into a seated position and instantly regretted it. The whole world spun and my guts felt sour, sloshing around inside me, threatening to explode.

“He’s not here, but...” She smiled. “You’ll see when you get up. I’ll be by as soon as I finish work, see how you’re going, but you stay here until I can sort shit out.”

“Stay here,” I agreed, sinking back down onto the bed. But as I did so, the siren smell of bacon and eggs cooking wafted through the doorway. “Did you make me breakfast?”

“Someone is,” she said with an impish smile, “but it’s not me. Look after yourself and stay here for the day. We’ll work this out.”

Which meant I could’ve gone back to bed. I was exhausted, my body having that heavy, leaden feeling, but I felt nauseous and hungry at the same time. I rolled out of bed, clutching a blanket around me, shuffling like an old woman to follow the tantalising aroma of bacon.

Art Boy, no, River, looked up when I appeared, but not for long. He turned back to cooking what looked like the most perfect bacon and eggs in the world cooking in the fry pan.

“Hungry?”

He was like a siren of old, luring me closer with his offer of fried food, but when my mouth opened I left out an acidic burp. I wrinkled my nose, then clapped my hands over my rumbling stomach. “Yes. No. Maybe.”

“Sit down.”

He nodded to the table where Kaine and I had eaten dinner, just one night earlier, and I shuffled over there, not able to stand up for much longer. My muscles already quivered with the effort, as if I’d gotten up early and gone for a virtuous run, rather than slept off a hangover. But when I slumped down in a chair a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice was put before me, along with some painkillers, water and a plate full of food.

“I don’t think—” I groaned.

“Try.”

River sat down at the head of the table with his own plate, and started crunching his toast really fucking loudly, or that's how it seemed. I grabbed the painkillers and threw them back, downing a mouthful of juice along with them. The acidic burst of sweetness was both manna from heaven and too damn harsh, forcing me to swallow hard to get it down. I gasped then clamped my mouth shut as waves of nausea rose, but eventually they fell away, just leaving me feeling shaky.

“Rough morning?”

I shot him a dark look, watching him smirk, the fucking bastard, those grey eyes dancing with amusement.

“How the fuck did I get back here?” I growled. “And what happened to Kaine?”

“Kaine's fucked off. Figured you wouldn't want to see him right now, after... Well, you know.” He grabbed his cutlery and started cutting into his bacon, nodding his head towards a set of keys on the table. “He gave me the keys to give to you.”

I dangled them from my fingers.

“And while I had intended to leave you two to whatever mayhem you could get up to, you passed out in my back seat.” He put his elbows on the table, leaning forward. “So I carried you in.”

Somehow I remembered that, a feeling of warmth, of completeness. All the pain and confusion had just melted away, letting me drop deeper into sleep. But I just stared at him right then, brow crinkling.

“And why would you do that?”

I was getting flashes right now of what we'd done, of the goblin inside me coming out, of laughing ourselves sick over the word 'balls'. We must've been so annoying.

“You know why.” He wouldn't look at me, focussing on his food, chewing one mouthful before prompting me to do the same and I picked my knife and fork up. There was a quietness about River, but as they say, still waters run deep. Those grey eyes finally slid sideways and there was a note of challenge there, asking me if I really wanted him to spell it out.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I didn't. I couldn't in my current state, the answer too hard to get my head around. I was the invisible one, that was my life, but what Jack had said, what Kaine had said... It presented a whole other reality. One where I was the centre of not one guy's world, but all three. So I went to work, forcing the food down, feeling my headache ease and the nausea slowly drop off once I had a full stomach.

But that wasn't all.

When I pushed back from the table, River took the plates away, cleaned them off and stuck them in the dishwasher before going out to the vestibule in front of the lift. He picked a bunch of stuff up and brought it through. I frowned when I saw the dark blue Converse boxes, one, two, three... more than I could count and each one brand new. The images of the shoes on the side showed they were all in pretty pastel colours that would take my inks easily. I stared at River, a question in my eyes. He just raised an eyebrow, stacking more and more shoes to form a wall along one of the massive windows until I couldn't stop myself from moving toward them.

My fingers flexed, all pain forgotten now, along with the exhaustion. He knew exactly what he was doing, flaunting all these perfectly beautiful brand new sneakers in my face.

"What're these for?" I asked, unable to keep the covetous note from my voice. Goblins like to take sparklies, hide treasures, and I itched to grab a few and hide them in the bedroom.

"You know."

"That's all you keep saying," I said, trailing after him as he went back through to the vestibule, then came back again with a different box. "Is this like Westley saying 'As you w...'"

He stopped in the foyer, lips twitching at my reaction to what he was holding: a massive box of the best markers money could buy. I felt saliva fill my mouth; not due to nausea this time. I wiped the corner of my mouth with my sleeve and then tried to be cool.

“So, you’re an artist too? Those are some damn fine markers.”

He snorted, then smiled.

“They’re not for me.” And then he did the sexiest thing a man could ever do. He offered me the box of luxe art supplies.

“I can’t.” I said that reflexively. Some women wanted diamonds, some wanted pearls but I just wanted a set of 72 Copic markers in each of the sets (A, B and C) and he was offering them to me.

“You better,” he said. “I can’t draw with these kinds of things.”

“You could.” I kept my voice deliberately upbeat. “I could show you—”

“Show me what you would make with these,” he said, staring into my eyes. “Please.”

My feet were moving and so were my hands, grabbing the box and cradling it to my chest. It might have been insufferably rude, but he just smiled.

“You could,” I repeated, even as I started to angle my body slightly away from him. “You’re very good.”

“And you’re better.” He nodded to the doorway. “You’re gonna be stuck here for a few days, so I figure you could get at least half of those shoes done.”

“Half...?”

My still partly drunk brain was struggling to put things together, but as I looked down at the markers, then back at the boxes, I felt a growing sense of excitement. “Is this...?” I couldn’t complete that sentence. “Are you...?”

“Apologising?” He straightened up, arms laden with yet more art supplies. I saw paint pens and glitter and brushes and there was still more in boxes lined up in the small space. “Yeah, we are. We fucked everything up.” All the light seemed to go out of him, and strands of that shaggy black hair fell in his face. “None of us expect you to forgive us, but...” He shook his head sharply. “We will provide for you, Freya. We’ll

look after you and make sure you have everything you need up until you want to move on and be with someone else.”

Who? That was my immediate thought. He acted like I had guys lined up around the block, but there was literally no one there.

“Well, markers rather than flowers is definitely a good start,” I said, caressing the box idly before stopping myself. He smiled widely, briefly, and his smile was different again, a lightning flash behind dark clouds, there and gone again so fast you weren’t sure you’d see it. “But really, you didn’t have to.”

“Yes, we did,” he said, “now, can you hold the door open? I’ll get this stuff inside and then go back for the rest.”

“The rest?” I looked around me in a daze. “What else is there?”

“You’ll see.”

I did, fairly quickly, as box after box was opened with a flick of River’s pocket knife and the contents set before me. Flat acrylics to act as a base coat and others with some gloss in them to put on top of that. Beautiful pencils with leads as soft as butter and a sketchbook with paper so fine I could have cried. I sat there in a state of complete overwhelm as every single art supply I’d ever fantasised about was placed on the coffee table or the floor around me, until I felt like an art dragon sitting on my mound of treasure.

“This is too much,” I said, throwing my hands in the air. “It’s so much money and someone had to spend all their time picking each piece out.”

“It’s not.” There was something in River’s tone that had me pausing, meeting his gaze and then being held by it. “It was Kaine’s idea, but he didn’t know what to get, so I advised him. And Adam...” He forced himself to smile. “He put up the cash for it. We’re not trying to buy our way into anything, Freya. We just wanted you to be happy.”

And right then I was, too much so. I was tired and fragile and still feeling pretty seedy, so my eyes filled with tears. And even though they didn't spill, he saw them. He nodded and retrieved a pair of dark blue Chucks, men's size 12, and handed them over.

"Make me a pair that I can wear," he said. "Gimme that and we'll call things even."

Chapter 24

River

“Make me a pair that I can wear,” I said, trying to keep it all tamped down. Freya was surrounded by the stuff that made her happy, stuff we’d given her and I couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride. Kaine had suggested it, Adam had bankrolled it, but I... I’d scoured the art supplies section of Amazon and made the selections. I caught the way her cheeks glowed a pretty shade of pink and fought the urge to roar in satisfaction. “Gimme that and we’ll call things even.”

She blinked, looking down at the box and then her hands seemed to move on auto-pilot. Hands delved into an open box and then she pulled the shoes out reverently.

“I’ve never worked with new pairs before,” she said, then flushed. “Usually I have to wash them first, clean them up and while I wait, I think up a design.” Those beautiful hazel eyes met mine. “These will be for you to wear?”

No, I’d keep them in a glass box and put them in pride of place in my bedroom. But telling a girl you were going to create a shrine in her name was not the best way to get to know her, so I just nodded instead. I watched her look at the shoes, then the mounds of supplies, her fingers reaching out towards a box of markers almost tentatively, then veering off to grab some colour pencils. She picked out a white one and then started to sketch.

I didn’t mean to join her. This was about her, not me, but as soon as those long, elegant fingers wrapped themselves

around the pencil, mine twitched. I didn't know if I wanted that pencil in my own hand or for her to toss it aside and replace it with something else.

Me.

But my hand went to my shirt pocket and I had my notebook out without thought, the click of my pen catching her attention. She looked up and smiled and my brain froze. My only focus was to record the curve of those lips, from the pouty bottom one to the sweet cupid bow of the top one, and my pen moved without thought.

Did she feel this? That was my last conscious thought, wondering if she was sinking down into that no-space of creative flow. Her eyes dropped down and she went to work, drawing all over the shoe. I didn't bother to try and guess what she was creating, focusing on my own work. Capturing the little dimple that formed in her cheek, the small crease at the corners of her mouth, a tiny peek of teeth in the gap, I laid line upon line on the piece of paper, building them up in a lattice work to create the suggestion of three dimensional form, to make shadows and highlights appear, all while she worked. I drew and I drew until she broke the spell, holding out the shoe for me to look at.

“What do you think?” Nothing at first. My brain felt like it needed to come back online so for a few seconds I just stared. As it did, I caught the moment her face fell, interpreting my silence for disapproval. “If you don't like it—” she said hurriedly.

“No.” My hand wrapped around the shoe, my fingers grazing hers. “I just... I space out when I draw.” I paused and then forced myself to smile. “Don't you?”

“God, yes,” she replied, tossing her hair back over her shoulder before looking out the wall of windows. “My teachers used to go mad at me all the time. ‘Freya is a dreamer.’” She mimicked her teacher's intonations. “‘Freya has potential, but can't focus.’”

“But that's not it, is it?” I was talking a lot, more than I expected to, but now we'd got onto this topic, I couldn't seem

to stop. “It’s not *lack* of focus—”

“It’s too much.” Her lips twitched and then that smile was back, twice as bright and I wanted to screw my existing drawing up and start all over again. “I’ve got all the focus in the world on the things that matter.”

She offered me the shoe again and I took the time to look at it, pulling it closer and taking in the drawings. Lots of stylised pine trees ran along the soul, now just white pencil outlines and in amongst them was him. A dark shaggy shape with strange eyes that seemed to glower from the darkness. I took in the long claws, the thick pelt, the small ears.

“It’s me?” I said in wonder.

“Well, yeah. If I do shoes for people, I try to get some of their personality in the characters.”

“So this is how you see me?” I took in the character and his broad, hulking shoulders, the long wisps of fur. “Big and scary?”

“Big?” There was an air of challenge in her eyes. “Yes. Scary? I’m still working that bit out. Powerful, that’s what I was thinking when I was drawing. Powerful and mysterious, that’s what I was going for.”

Powerful and mysterious, I could work with that. Better than weird and stalkery, which was how I felt sometimes around her. I tore my drawing off my pad and slid it across the coffee table towards her.

“That’s how I see you.”

She stared at it for several seconds, making me feel all the anxiety she had no doubt felt when she’d shown me the shoe. Every time anyone created something, they put a part of themselves out into the world, ready to be critiqued. The bear and I held our breaths, waiting for her response. He didn’t understand art, but he did understand her, catching the way her scent sweetened by the second.

“You’ve drawn me before,” she said, finally looking up.

And I will again, I vowed to myself. Over and over until I can draw every detail of you from memory.

“And you’re very good, but...”

“But...?” I went to smile and failed, my mouth forming a grimace instead.

“I don’t really look like that, do I?” Her fingers followed the curve of her cheek and my eyes traced the line of her actual one, flicking back and forth from the drawing to her, looking for the inaccuracies, but not finding them.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Beautiful.”

My breath came out in a huge rush and I dropped down onto my knees, not moving closer, just sitting on the other side of the coffee table.

“This is just a pen,” I said, holding up my biro. “It’s not much of a drawing tool as is, and then there’s limits to my skills.”

“Limits, pfft...” she spluttered. “My drawing teacher would’ve loved to have you in his classes rather than me.”

“Why?” I glanced between our two artworks, the styles so very different, but being absorbed in creating was something we had in common.

“This is very well done. You have amazing technical skills,” she said.

“But I can’t do stuff like this.” I traced the shadowy figure on the shoe, careful not to smudge the lines. “I can only record what is, like a camera or something. I can’t interpret, I can’t communicate...” I let out a huff of frustration and that’s when her hand covered mine. My throat felt thick, swollen, but I forged on. “I can’t represent ideas like you can.”

“Try.”

She pushed the other shoe and the pencil across the coffee table towards me and then took my drawing, picking up a lead pencil to work on it. Suddenly my heart was in my mouth,

something I didn't normally experience when it came to drawing. I looked at her design, unable to think of anything that could be added to it. She'd created this whole scene with tiny creatures lurking in the trees along with me.

Which gave me an idea.

I grabbed the other shoe from the table, drawing her attention for just a second, but her focus was drawn back to the paper, leaving me to work.

I drew two trees on the side of the shoe, having to pull out my phone and use photos as a reference to get them right, but between them I drew her. Partially hidden by the foliage, but not because she was hiding, because she was emerging. With this canvas, this size, I couldn't get all of the details down, which instantly frustrated me and made me admire Freya's efforts all the more. When I was done, I found her watching me closely. She pushed the drawing back to me, but I felt strangely reluctant to hand over the shoe.

But I did.

I wanted to see what she'd done, what she'd made of my artwork. Our artwork now. And part of me... it wanted to know what she thought of my addition.

“Oh!”

I made a similar sound as I looked at the piece of paper, because there we were. Drawn in clear, curving lines, there was the dark and mysterious bear man, but he wasn't alone. Small creatures rested on his shoulder, with another large bear man drawn on the side. The penetrating gaze, the frown, made clear exactly who it was, which made me grin. Kaine. But then there was one more. Drawn with a gold pencil, she created this grinning bear man who seemed the brightest thing on the page. I glanced up at her then, trying to understand what this meant.

“River, this is beautiful.”

People had told me that about my work before and I'd just shrugged it off. Not because I was arrogant, but because it didn't matter. Good, bad or indifferent, the drawings seemed to

need to come out, so they did. But right now I soaked the compliment up, then passed the drawing back.

“And this is amazing. I can tell exactly who everyone is.”

“They’re just silly little characters,” she said with a wave of her hand, but I caught it, not wanting her to brush this away, and as soon as we touched I felt it.

I’d had industrial accidents where I’d been electrocuted and they didn’t hit as hard as touching her. Our fingers locked together, holding on, as if the muscles spasmed in response to a galvanic bolt. But I was holding onto her and she was holding onto me for a whole other reason. I drew her closer, needing to feel her breath on my skin and to breathe in only her scent and she moved closer as I did.

There was this moment where we just stared at each other, that moment when you recognise something inside someone else, just as they do the same for you. My head ducked closer, not meaning to do anything, but unable to stop myself, moving closer and closer to the lips I’d just spent all that time recording, needing to touch them, taste them. Her tongue flicked across them, as if in preparation, but that was when the phone buzzed. We both blinked, some spell broken. Even though Freya tried to ignore it, another buzz, then another, and another stopping her from coming closer. She pulled away to pick up her phone, frowning as she saw notification after notification popping up on her screen.

“Freya?” I fought to keep my voice even.

“It’s my Insta profile,” she said with a frown, flicking through the little pop up notifications, but as soon as she read some, more appeared. “For my art work. I usually get a few hits...”

As her voice trailed away, I caught the moment her scent soured. She opened the app and then the frown grew deeper. Her fingers tightened around the phone, her knuckles white as she read what people had said.

“Freya?” I moved closer, the bear sensing a threat, but we couldn’t fight one that lived inside her phone. “Freya?”

“People have...” She let out a gasp. “So many people...”

And that’s when I realised what had happened. Adam was used to dealing with public adulation and attention, but the rest of us? It was a bit like fuckheads like Macca at our worksite. They all had so much to say. Adam invited the public eye to look more closely at our lives, and Kaine and I had become a lot more private because of it.

But Freya hadn’t had a chance to do that.

“Let me take that,” I said, keeping my voice soft and even.

“No...” She clutched the phone tight, her eyes trained on the screen. “No, I... No.” I watched helplessly as she sucked one breath, then another in, her eyes flicking so fast across the screen. She scrolled and she scrolled until finally she was forced to wrench her eyes away. “I walked away,” she told me, decisively, firmly. “I made the decision to leave. I didn’t want to.”

I knew what she was talking about, the morning after she was with Adam and I felt a surge of hope.

“Sun was streaming in through the window, turning his hair to gold, and I watched him sleep, knowing he’d tug me down beside him if he saw me. His eyelids fluttered and he let out a groan, but I grabbed my shit and bailed.” She tossed her phone down on the table then jerked her hands back. “I never wanted to be a WAG, never wanted that life.” Her eyes met mine and I saw the mute plea there, one I was dying to answer. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

I soon saw why, because there on her screen was a picture of one of her artworks, and below it were many comments. Most were celebratory, people seeing how freaking talented she was, but then there were the others. I growled, the bear and I in complete agreement. Our mate was under threat and we were ready to protect her. I grabbed the phone, scrolling faster and faster, seeing the danger but unable to formulate a response. *Dumb slut*, read one comment, *Think you’re too good for Adam*, read another. More and more people had found her profile, had decided to use the privilege of having access to Freya as a means to attack her.

She had made her decision to reject Adam, not because of his bear nature, but because of this. People say if you can't cope with the heat, get out of the kitchen, and that was what she'd done. But somehow that wasn't enough. I set the phone down and reached out for her, but that was the moment the foul smell of her distress reached me, forcing the bear forward, and my claws snicked out. Her eyes went wide and she jerked away, snatching up her phone and then scuttling backwards.

Chapter 25

Freya

I'd always felt like the internet was my safe space, which objectively was a stupid thing to feel. I knew that cyber bullying was a thing, but it'd never been an issue for me. I didn't get the dick pics and offers to be my sugar daddy that other women seemed to cop, probably because I had a gender neutral name for my artist profile and I never included images of myself. Instead my Insta profile was my own little bubble. I didn't get a lot of views on my photos, but those that I did were largely complimentary. Somehow I'd built a tiny community of people that liked my work.

So that's why the negativity was so hard for me to take.

You needed thick skin to be an artist, our lecturers had told us at art school, but I never did. I couldn't. Mine just seemed to get thinner and thinner with each negative comment. They sliced into me, leaving me gasping and bleeding. My style hadn't gone over well at university, but, as people said, you go to art school for four years and then spend the next ten getting over it. I got over it through this little space on Insta where people responded, people liked my pics and even left comments. I felt... that at least some people seemed to understand what I was trying to make, even if I wasn't entirely conscious of that myself.

But now I felt like that had all been taken away.

My safe space had been shattered and all of these... others had come muscling in.

Why would you like shit like this? one stranger had said in reply to one of my regular commenter's praise.

This is shit, said another. *My kid brother could draw better than this.*

Shit, the comments said, over and over in as many variations as they could come up with. Over and over they described just how awful my work was and then, by extension, me. Dumb slut. Stupid bitch. Who do you think you are? He's too good for you. But why, that's what I wanted to know. Why were all of these people taking time out of their day to hate on me? Then as if in answer to that, a call from my dad came through.

"Freya?" He didn't give me time to answer. "Freya, love, is there something you need to tell us? They've got you on the telly."

No.

That couldn't be true. The phone fell from my fingers, and I could only hear Dad's voice coming thin and tinny through the speakers. This was what I didn't want. I didn't want a fuss, didn't want my name in the mouths of journalists. I was happy as I was, quiet, invisible. For some reason my eyes went to River, as if he'd somehow have the answers. I stared at him, mutely pleading for my father to be wrong, but instead of lying to me, he handed me the remote. I turned on the TV with a strange kind of fatalism, scrolling until I found the news channel.

Brent Hollow was the talking head that droned away every evening on the current affairs show Mum loved to watch. I was used to tuning his voice out, not paying attention to it. He wore a crisp navy suit and a slight frown as he spoke to the camera.

"2023 Magarey Medal winner, Adam Farrelly, had an incredible year in football, but the same couldn't be said off the field," Brent said. "The first slip up was missing the medal count altogether, embarrassing both the SANFL and his team by not being present when it was announced he'd won. Then there was this apology."

I hadn't been able to watch the clip closely when I first saw it. Adam had said my name on state television and that had everyone looking at me. How many Freyas in the city could there be? That's what they all mutely asked, then not so mutely. Katie had said something, then Gloria, their voices drowning Adam out, but now I caught Adam's every word.

"Freya, if you are seeing this, I..." I watched his throat work on the TV screen, saw the real pain there and wondered at it. What did he have to be sorry about? He'd done what he wanted to, bitten me, claimed me. "I'm sorry. I..." He was struggling, I could see that, contrition clear in the way his brows creased and then smoothed again, his jaw muscles. "I did the wrong thing."

He shouldn't have claimed me, he seemed to realise that, or did he regret claiming me at all? Was it something that just happened in the heat of the moment and then he'd recoiled in horror, just like I had when I'd seen Kaine?

"I screwed up," he said so earnestly, staring into the screen, "and I'm so, so sorry."

And that was the trouble with this kind of thing. Adam had decided to talk to the media, he'd decided to apologise publicly, drawing focus on him and me. But it was all so completely one sided. He didn't find me, have a conversation, explain what he'd done and then fall on his sword. No, he'd known what I was to him the moment he met me and he'd decided to sweep me off my feet. When he had me right where he wanted me, he'd swept in, making me feel more pleasure than I dared dream of and then...

"Freya..." River said quietly.

"No." My fingers clutched the remote tight as the video footage of Adam faded away and was replaced by the studio set again. "No."

"Freya—"

"And is this heartfelt apology for the football supporters?" the presenter asked, his lips thinning. "The loyal fans who turn up, rain or shine, to watch the games? No, Farrelly is only

interested in making reparations to this Freya.” His eyes seemed to glitter. “*This* Freya, we believe.”

I was up and on my feet, unable to stop myself from physically recoiling when I saw the photo on the screen. It was one Jack had taken when I had set up my first craft fair, but my embarrassed smirk was meant to be displayed only on her personal Insta feed which was followed by friends and family, not on TV.

“Freya North, is an employee of the Java Hut, though it isn’t her coffee creations that seem to have caught the eye of the footballer, but these. She describes herself as a creator of custom fashion, adorning everyday objects with her own distinctive style of art and selling these repurposed objects at a local craft market. A style viewers might recognise from the post-medal press conference Farrelly gave.”

This was it, the smoking gun that had shot me right in the heart. This was the neon arrow directing all those fans’ ire at me. River was saying something, but I couldn’t hear it, not over the whoosh of my blood in my ears. My eyes flicked all over the screen, as my greatest dream and nightmare happened all at once.

Several of my product shots from my social media were flashed up on the screen, giving me a kind of exposure I could only dream about, but that’s the problem with a higher profile. Jack had explained it to me several times like this. Organic reach was slow but it helped you find the right people online who’d support your work. More artificial reach, like a news article, brought all the boys to the yard. In my case, there were those that supported Adam, no matter what. Others that were just angry I’d touched someone they wanted to. The anger, the bile, made more sense now, but it didn’t make me feel any better.

“Farrelly mentioned that a young woman had helped him through a bout of...” The presenter made a small sound of disbelief. “...gastrointestinal distress, that she’d left a shoe behind, one that appears to have been customised by this same Freya North, though I don’t believe this apology stems from forcing a young woman to assist while vomiting. We’ve seen

media reports of bad behaviour from our sportsmen over and over, where privileged young men act out in ways that make clear they are no role models. Is this Freya yet another victim of a sporting culture that ensures proper behaviour on the field, but cares little for what happens off it? We spoke to a few people who know the young woman to try and get some insight into what happened.”

“No...” I whispered as I saw Katie flash on screen. This was shot in the cafe, after I’d left. I recognised the way she’d had her hair tied up, the colour of her lipstick and the twinkle in her eye as she regarded the camera.

“Freya? She’s always been kinda quiet, low key, y’know. You barely know she’s there.”

I didn’t want this, didn’t want a cross section of people in my life giving their hot takes on who I was for the camera.

“Freya.” River was up and out of his seat, blocking the view of the TV with his broad body and padding closer. “I’ll turn it off. This is bullshit.”

“Freya?” The view on the screen flashed to a guy it took me a few seconds to recognise. Jesus. Mark? We’d been to school together, hung out in the same friendship group until I developed an unfortunate crush on him. He looked different, no longer the clean-cut guy from art class. But that crooked smile, I knew it anywhere, because I’d memorised it, mooning after him while the teacher taught us about modernism and postmodernism, then catching his every response in the school yard. He wrinkled his nose now and then snorted. “I mean she’s a nice girl and everything, but I think you’ve got the wrong person. She’s not exactly the type football players chase after.”

He was saying exactly what I’d been thinking, so why did that sting so much?

I flinched at that, the decisive click of the TV being turned off forcing me to look up. River set the remote down on the kitchen counter, but didn’t come any closer.

“I left...” I said, telling him something I needed to tell Adam, but he was the only one here. “Even though I didn’t want to.”

“You didn’t?”

Why was there hope there in River’s eyes?

“Of course, I didn’t.” I stared into his eyes, took a tentative step forward, pleading for him to understand. “Adam rocked my world, literally. I was hiding at the back of the room and he drew me forward, into the light and for a minute...” I swallowed hard and River edged closer. “For a minute I didn’t care who was looking or staring. I was there, with him.” I experienced then the strange pleasure of having one man reach out and take my hand as I talked about being with another. “And all of a sudden I didn’t want to be anywhere else.”

River drew me close and I nestled in against his broad chest, not feeling like I could take a full breath until I was there. His big hand smoothed down my back, spanning my spine.

“But it wasn’t supposed to be for very long,” I whispered, though when his strokes slowed, I knew he’d heard me. “The only way I could get through it was to promise myself I could go back to my old life. That everything would go back to normal.”

“There is no normal for us,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry for that, Freya. If I had a choice...”

But he didn’t, they didn’t, and therefore I didn’t. When I looked up at him, he caressed my face, his eyes staring into mine and there it was, the strange feeling of connection that persisted, even though what I knew about River could have fitted on a medium sized post-it. A feeling I had no control over.

Like the one that had me moving towards Adam when he held out his hand, or sitting down to dinner with Kaine, despite the drama raging. The one that had me wanting to take a step closer, then another, obliterating the gap between River and me, despite what I thought about that, still feeling every point

on my body he'd touched. This shit was out of control, had been since the moment I'd snuck out of Adam's room. I should've had a conversation with Adam, put on my big girl panties and made clear what I wanted.

Then it struck me that there was no statute of limitations on doing just that.

I fished out my phone and saw several missed calls, but I tapped on just one to return it.

"Jack?" I said, the moment the call went through.

"How are you doing?" she asked me in a tight voice. "This is a shitstorm and I'm gonna kick Adam's arse for this. The media has decided there's a story here and you're it."

"So what do I do?" I tried to keep the plaintive note from my voice and failed. "You deal with this kind of thing all the time. What's your advice?"

"You looking for someone to run damage control for you, babe? I got you. The only way ahead is getting in front of this shit. You ready for that?"

Did I have a choice? I stared at the blank screen of the TV and then nodded sharply.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

Chapter 26

Adam

I'd fucked up. It was becoming my mantra. That feeling of failure was growing by the second, pushing me down hard against my chair in the football club conference room, but when the door opened, something else happened.

I'd literally dreamed of this moment, of seeing Freya again, but when I did I still wasn't prepared. Kaine was seated on one side of me and Phil Vale, the club president, was on the other side, but I was on my feet the moment she walked into the room.

There she was, Freya, with River at her back, my sleuthmate giving nothing away as he escorted her in. All I got from him was a quick cursory look and then he was pulling out a chair for her and she moved to stand in front of it. My fingers flexed, wanting to be the one to do that, but River hadn't been the one that had fucked everything up. Jack had read me the riot act, Phil too, each one taking turns at ripping me to pieces. And with good reason.

"Mate," Phil had said in his customary rough and ready manner, "the way you've handled this, it's as if you raped the girl." His eyes narrowed. "You didn't, did you?"

"No." Jack fielded that question, having prepared me for this meeting. "It's a matter of two people getting caught up in the heat of the moment," she explained.

“Then if it’s a misunderstanding, we need to get everyone around the table and straighten this out,” he said with a frown.

I wanted that like I wanted my next breath, but I’d never expected it to be like this.

Freya looked tired and drawn, her skin so much paler than before and somehow looking thin, like it would take nothing to bruise her. The bear roared inside me, wanting to fight whatever the hell made her look like that, but of course the problem was me. I’d done this, made shit worse, just like Kaine’d said I would, fucking everything up and—

“Freya, this is Phil Vale, the president of the club,” Jack said, making the necessary introductions.

“Lovely to meet you,” the man said, offering her his hand.

Don’t touch her! the bear roared. He saw the bite mark on her neck and made clear his feelings on the matter. *Mate*, that was his next thought, then *Mine!* But she wasn’t mine, that was the problem. I’d fucked up the delivery, wanting to forgo the need to court her by rushing in, but the result was still the same. Every bear shifter faced the threat of being rejected by the one woman they’d love and I was looking down the barrel of that right now.

“You too,” Freya replied, shooting him a shy smile.

I wondered if Phil felt like I did, that she smiled just for him and only him. Something hot and hard and possessive throbbed in my chest, but when Phil shot me a wary look because I was standing by my side of the table like a fucking idiot, I was forced to tamp it down.

This wasn’t about me.

Kaine and Jack had made that clear, that any further attempts to soothe my wounded ego or assuage the sense of guilt that raged inside me were to be smothered ruthlessly. My eye had to be on the prize and that was this.

Fixing shit.

But when Phil sat down, Freya’s focus shifted to me.

Fuck, she was just as beautiful as I remembered. I saw notes of amber and gold, green and sable in her eyes as they widened. Was she remembering what it was like when we were together? She was staring at me, her breath coming in faster, her nostrils flaring. Was she breathing me in like I was doing her? Was she sucking my scent in and—

“Hello, Adam.”

That was more than I expected. Jack had said that Freya might not want to talk to me and I’d accepted that. When she did? Her lips quirked almost into a smile, but it faded away before it became anything real and my heart sank with it.

“Freya.” I breathed out her name. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Her brows creased slightly and she took a step back, the beast inside me wanting to claim the ground she ceded, but I forced myself to stay still.

“So I’ve heard,” she said, her tone turning wry. “I think the whole of Adelaide has heard, but…” Her eyes dropped down, spending way too much time regarding the grain of the conference table. “We need to find a way through this.” Her focus shifted to Jack. “That’s what we’re here for, right?”

She slid into her chair and then pulled out her phone, dropping it onto the table conspicuously before unlocking it and pushing it my way.

“You’ve got quite the fanbase.” Those beautiful eyes hardened then, staring into mine without blinking. “They have no qualms about attacking someone they feel has done you wrong.”

My heart was already breaking, but right now it felt like it was going into flames, filling my chest with hot ash.

“No, Freya, I didn’t—”

But she didn’t let me explain. Her lips thinned and a small frown formed.

“I’ve had hundreds of comments on my artist profile.”

“I didn’t want—”

“DMs warning me to keep the hell away from you,” she continued. “Others telling me to kill myself in increasingly complex ways.”

My hand went to grab hers, but she jerked it out of my reach.

“Some accusing me of making shit up to bring you down. What exactly that is, they don’t seem to know, because I’ve said nothing to the media.” Her eyes narrowed. “Unlike you.”

“Not a smart move, Adam,” Phil said with a shake of his head.

“I seem to be the target of every fantasy and every frustration your fans feel: attention I never wanted.”

“Freya, I’m sorry.”

I was interrupting her diatribe, one I’d more than earned, but I couldn’t seem to help it. I needed her to know just how I felt, but she just shook her head slightly.

“I’m sorry too,” she said finally, pulling away from me and that ache in my chest grew with that distance. “I never wanted this. I never signed up for this.”

And that’s when I saw her hand move, her fingers brushing against the bite mark I’d left.

Fuck.

Part of me had thought there was still hope, but that died now. I’d spent my life listening to stories of bear shifters finding their mates and knew now mine would be a cautionary tale. Don’t do what Adam did, or your mate will end up getting death threats made against her.

“I can make this right,” I said, gripping the table now, so I didn’t grab at her. “I can do another press conference.”

“No, I don’t think that’s going to cut it.”

We both turned to see Jack was wearing a tight smile.

“You’re used to the glare of the public eye being on you,” my brother said. “Shit, maybe you even like it, but that doesn’t

mean everyone else does. It's a situation that needs to be fixed."

"How?" I croaked, reaching for a glass of water and taking a long drink.

"The media wants stories to sell papers or ads on TV," Jack said with a rueful smile. "And they don't care much what it is, just that it gets people's attention. You wanted to try and use the media to fix things?" Her eyes grew hard and glittery, forcing me to swallow hard. "Well, let me show you how that works."

"I'll leave the details to the two of you," Vale said, getting to his feet, then giving my shoulder a squeeze. "Good luck, champ. You're gonna need it."

"So what's going on?" I asked once the president had gone out of the room. I looked over my shoulder to make sure he was gone before confronting the rest of them.

"You're gonna do everything I've ever told you not to," she said with a catlike smile.

"Like... what?" I looked at Jack, confused, but it was my brother who answered.

"It came to me last night when I saw the girls drunk on Hindley Street. You have to convince the world that whatever was going on with Freya is over," Kaine said, the muscles tightening in his mouth. "You need to go out and behave like any other young idiot would when he has the world in the palm of his hand."

"No..." I barely whispered that out.

"If you give a shit about Freya, you'll do this, brother," he said, his eyes blazing bright blue. "You'll go out with those mates of yours to every hot nightclub and pub in town."

"No..."

"You'll get drunk, falling-down drunk."

"No..."

“You’ll be caught vomiting in bushes, making a fucking mess of yourself,” Jack added.

I didn’t bother protesting now, because the two of them were rolling right over me, flattening me out.

“You’ll be seen out on the prowl, decidedly single.”

Fuck.

“People won’t care about Freya when you’re making a spectacle of yourself. You were always their focus, so give the people what they want. Give them drama and a fall from grace, and when you hit rock bottom...”

I shook my head slightly and Jack’s eyes widened as my claws snicked out, embedding themselves into the desk.

“You’ll give the media something to talk about each and every night until the public is sick to death of you,” Jack said finally. “And then you’ll be free. Over-saturated, that’s what we call it. The public is ravenous for more details, right up until they get more than they can handle, then they move onto the next thing.”

“Is this what you want, Freya?”

My voice was ragged, coarse, each word feeling like it tore at my throat, but I needed to hear it from her.

“Jack says—” she started to say.

“No, not what Jack says. What do you say?” I injected all the emotion, all the need that burned inside me into my words, begging her to see it. That no matter how much I’d fucked things up, we could work through them together. “Is this what you want?”

Say no, beautiful, I begged silently. Grab my hand and hold on. We can make it through this if we hold on to each other. Choose me and I’ll make sure you never regret it. Choose me—

“I can’t see any other way.” I felt like I could pinpoint the moment when her heart broke, because mine did at the same time. I swallowed hard but that did nothing to shift the lump in my throat. “I can’t...” Her hands reached for her phone, but

she snatched it back, as if remembering the hate being transmitted through it. Hate I'd brought to her door. "I can't live like this." She shot me a sidelong look, but when she looked away, all I seemed to see was the fall of her long lashes against her cheeks. "I never wanted to be in the public eye. It's why I bailed the next morning. I could handle it for a night but no more."

I took her hand then and she didn't fight me. I cherished the way it felt so warm and small in my grip as I cradled it against my chest. I held part of her, if only for a moment, and that was all that mattered.

"If this is what you need, I'll do it."

She dared to look at me then and for the first time today, I saw the girl from that night.

My mate.

Something as tenuous as it was beautiful had existed then between us and that's what allowed me to do this.

"I'll do whatever you need me to do, you know that," I said and for just a second I could believe she did.

The hardest thing I'd ever done was let go of her hand right then. Tears welled in my eyes, but I didn't let them fall as I forced myself to smile. She caught every second of that, something shifting inside her, forcing her to lean closer, peer into my face. Her fingers clung to mine, but I set them aside, just like she asked, and pushed my chair backwards.

"If this is the way it has to be, then that's it," I told the others with a nod.

"I think it is, Adam," Jack said, nodding.

At that I grabbed my phone out. It was always easier to bear anything if there was some kind of action involved. I punched in Darren's number and he picked up on the second ring.

"What up, dickhead?" he said. "Saw you having a sook on statewide TV. It was a look alright."

“Yeah, well, I’m over that now.” I scanned the room, making clear the lie of my words. “I need to shake that shit off, move on.”

“You wanna cut loose?” He could barely contain the excitement in his voice. “Fucking finally, mate. I know just the place.”

Chapter 27

Kaine

This was the right way to go, so why did it feel so fucking wrong? I watched my brother walk silently out of the conference room and knew I'd never seen him look so defeated. Not when he'd missed a goal that'd cost the team the game, not when he'd endured injuries that'd kept him off the field for weeks or months. Adam was thoroughly beaten.

Which was the point, right?

That was the fucking hard thing about being his brother. He was either relentlessly optimistic, always seeing the sun behind the clouds, or this, broken completely. But he didn't get it. I'd had to break him, hadn't I? To get him to see... I frowned and then leaned forward, determined not to spend another minute worrying about Adam. He was big enough and ugly enough to look after himself, but Freya... The last time she'd seen me she'd run away screaming, but that didn't stop me from leaning forward toward her.

"How are you feeling?" I scanned her face, her body, for tension. She watched me warily, but made herself smile, shaking her head.

"It's been..." Freya couldn't seem to find the words, throwing her hands up in the air. "It's been a lot." She looked around the room at each one of us. "I went to the medal count to help Jack out—"

“And ended up with three potential boyfriends out of it.” Jack grinned. “Maybe I should start a paranormal dating service? Any more bear shifters out there looking for their mates?”

“Plenty,” I replied before turning back to Freya. “I know this has all been a big shock...” I remembered the look on her face when she saw the bear, heard the stifled scream, but I pushed on. I had to. “But no matter what you decide, we’re here to support you. If you can’t stand to be around me—”

I wasn’t trying to make this about our relationship because that wasn’t how it worked for us. Freya was our mate. That would never change and therefore we were honour bound to help her, support her until such a time as she didn’t want that anymore. I needed Freya to be safe, secure, for that fine line between her brows to disappear. Like it did when she smiled at me in response.

“That’s not it,” she said hurriedly, then her cheeks flushed pink. “I don’t usually run away from men who’ve been nothing but kind to me, but...” Her brows wrinkled slightly then, destroying the fragile peace I was feeling. “You took me by surprise.” She looked at me, then River. “I wasn’t expecting to see a fucking polar bear in the living room of your apartment. Is that what you are too?” she asked River.

“Black bear,” he corrected, arms crossing his chest.

I knew exactly what that meant: it was a sign of River shutting down, putting up barriers. We were all terrified of Freya’s rejection, but none more than him.

“Oh, well, that makes all the difference.” She laughed but only for a second. “I’m trying to get my head around...”

But whatever Freya had to say, it was derailed by another buzz from her phone, then another, several more coming in rapid succession. That frown was back, getting deeper as she reached for it.

But I got there first.

She felt compelled to unlock her phone, see what strangers on the internet had to say about her, but once she unlocked the

device, my hand went around hers. The feel of her, warm and vital, was enough to derail me, but I didn't let it. I pulled the phone from her hand, watching her frown as I did so, but she didn't stop me.

I'd done some research long before I knew Freya existed, looking at the impact my brother's career might have on our potential mate. Online hate directed at the partners of people in the public eye—footy players, or actors or musicians—seemed to be commonplace. It was as if the person who became famous belonged to the fans, and anyone who dared to step in and change the perceived parasocial relationship was a threat that needed to be obliterated. So I thought I had a pretty good idea of what I'd see, that I was prepared for this, but as I saw what was written, I realised how wrong I'd been.

These commenters on her post didn't know Freya. They couldn't, because they'd never have written such vile things about her if they did. But as I scrolled, I realised she didn't matter to them. People were making up whole stories in their head about what she was and what had happened between her and Adam, then they'd manufactured outrage about it. My brother was often the target of other people's fantasies. I'd been made aware of the lengths some women would go to, just to get his attention, but this? This was on another level.

“You need to set your profile to private.”

I wasn't asking. I was telling her, which wasn't the right way to go about this, but I couldn't stop my need to protect her, not while this crap was coming in. The bear wanted to lay waste to the whole fucking city, was willing to slay innocents, if that's what it took to eradicate this threat.

“No—”

“Just until shit blows over,” I insisted. “Please, Freya.”

It was the ‘please’ that seemed to get to her and some of the tension left her body.

“But all exposure is good exposure, right?” she said, forcing herself to smile. I didn't want her to do that, not any more. Instead, I wanted her only to have real smiles only from

actual pleasure or delight. I'd spend my life trying to make that happen if she just let... I sighed.

"Then you need a social media manager to moderate the comments." I looked at Jack. "Do you know someone? I'm happy to pay for it."

"You don't need—" Freya protested.

"Yes, you do." River leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. "Your scent turns every time you get a shitty comment come through."

"My what?" Freya said.

"Your scent." I leaned forward as well, letting myself take a deep breath in. "We can smell you—"

"So I stink to you?" Freya surreptitiously sniffed at her armpits.

"Not stink," River corrected. "Sweet, like flowers." He frowned. "Then burnt flowers when you're upset or angry. We don't like it when you're upset or angry. The bear gets close to the surface."

"So there's some kind of reverse Hulk thing going on?" Freya was grasping at levity and I think that was her natural state, not wanting to get bogged down in this shit. She turned her hands into claws and enacted a grumpy expression. "You won't like me if she gets angry."

"Is that what I look like to you?" I asked, my lips twisting into the tiniest smile.

"No, you look..." She was about to reply earnestly, tell me exactly how I appeared, but then she realised Jack was still in the room.

"I'll find that list of virtual assistants I have in my office," Jack said, shooting us a wry smile. "And Kaine's right. You just have to weather this storm. But it'll be over soon enough. Someone else will do something scandalous, and then that's all they'll care about. You just need to be patient." She nodded to me. "Kaine's offering you a place to stay and enough art

supplies to keep you amused for days. Keep your head down and work on that gallery show you always talk about.”

“Gallery show?” I asked when Jack had left the room.

“It’s nothing.” No, it wasn’t. Freya’s cheeks had turned a very pretty shade of pink. “A pie in the sky dream.”

“Tell me that dream.” I was being too forward, too intense, but I couldn’t seem to stop. “Please, Freya.” My hand slid across the table and she watched it get closer, but didn’t move hers out of the way. I experienced that same tingle when our fingers touched, right before I took her hand in mine. “Tell me what you want and I promise I’ll move heaven and earth to make it happen.”

“Just like that, huh?”

Freya’s focus shifted from River to me and when her eyes locked with mine, I held her gaze, because she didn’t know what I could do. I had connections in the art world, dealers I leased artworks from or bought to fill the high end homes we sold. I knew people who could open doors for her, if she just said yes. She looked away for a moment, but as my heart clenched, her fingers tightened their grip on mine.

“I had a lecturer say that art without some kind of exhibition is like masturbation.” She snorted. “Not sure why masturbation is such a terrible thing but...” I stifled a groan and noted River shifting restlessly in his seat. I was sure we were both imagining the same thing for a split second: Freya, naked, her hand sliding lower... “But I want to have an exhibition one day,” she continued. “I’ve put in some applications before, but it hasn’t gone anywhere.”

“And if it did?” I asked. “If you had a gallery to display your work? What would you do?”

Freya smiled and it was so fucking beautiful I felt a tension I hadn’t realised I was holding lift.

“Well, I have an apartment full of art supplies.” She shrugged. “I guess I’d sit down and make as many pieces as I could for it.”

Yes, that, the bear and I decided, but I reined him back with the knowledge that any attempt to railroad Freya would just result in more pain on her end.

“I know some people in a few of the major art galleries in town,” I said. “I can organise some meetings, touch base with my contacts and see what comes from it, if you can lay low for a while.” I looked past her to River. “You can keep Freya safe in the apartment, make sure she has everything she needs.”

“You onboard with that?” he asked her.

“You don’t need—” she started to say.

“Spending the day watching you draw? That’s no hardship for me.” River shrugged. “I’m good with a brush. If you need me to prime some shoes or something, you can put me to work.”

Say yes, I begged mentally. Say yes.

“OK, then. Yeah, I’ll find something for you to do,” she said with a smile.

The way that made me feel, warming me from the depths of my soul, was a feeling I carried with me as I strode out to my car.

“Call Margot,” I told my phone as I turned the key in the ignition, easing the car out onto the road.

“Kaine!” the woman purred. “Got a new project in the works? What kind of artworks are you after now?”

“A new project? Yes. But looking for new artworks? No.” I smiled as I put my foot down on the accelerator. “Rather than selling me some artworks, I’ve got some you might want to buy.”

Chapter 28

Adam

I hated this plan. I fucking hated it with every breath in my body, but as I stood in front of a mirror, adjusting my dress shirt and pants, I knew I just had to get through it.

“Here you go. Get this into you.” Darren handed me a can of beer, cracking his own with a flourish. I didn’t feel the excitement he obviously felt, but I had to pretend. I opened the beer and tapped my can against his, then drank deep. Jack wanted me drunk and disorderly. I could get on board with that. I needed something to get me through this and it looked like Dutch courage would be it.

Dickhead.

Failure.

Fuckup.

My brain was entirely focussed on all the ways I’d screwed up, playing everything Jack and Kaine had told me over and over in a loop. And if that didn’t convince me that I’d made a mistake, Freya’s expression had. The shadows under her eyes, how pale her skin was... I stifled a growl and drank the rest of the can down in a few gulps before crushing it in my grip.

“Fuck, yeah!” Darren said with a grin, polishing off his own. “Bout time you started to let loose a bit. Tonight’s gonna be fucking epic.”

It wasn't.

We had a few more beers as we waited for our other team mates to arrive. Darren had taken the bit between his teeth and run with it, ringing around to see if anyone was free. They all were. They filed into Darren's flat, filling the small space with rowdy greetings and testosterone, right when I craved quiet... and her. As if sensing blood in the water, that's when the ribbing started.

"Where's your girl, Ades?" one guy asked, ruffling my hair. "Decided she didn't want to go another round with your ugly mug."

I shoved him off, but someone else was stepping in to take his place.

"Must be good pussy if you're prepared to miss the fucking medal ceremony."

The can in my hand crackled as my fingers dimpled the surface.

"Dunno what I'd find more satisfying," another fella said. "Getting my dick sucked or watching Nathan Lyon's mouth turn into a cat's bum when he realised he lost." He made a face, tightening his mouth to illustrate his point.

"Getting your dick sucked while watching Nathan Lyon realise he wasn't gonna win, obviously," Darren said. "Shoulda pushed that girl under the table. Could've had you unzipped—"

"Darren—" I growled.

"Polishing your nob like a pro—"

"Shut the fuck up," I muttered to all of them, taking another drink.

"Probably the best place for her, because that chick had butterface," Darren chortled.

A woman who had an attractive body but her face wasn't. That's what the term meant and that's when I ruined everything. I was supposed to be convincing the world I was

moving on, so why was my hand wrapped around Darren's neck and squeezing?

"Adam!" someone shouted, but it was as if I could hear them from far, far away; easy to ignore. "Adam!"

I pulled my hand away, blinking away the haze of red, to find everyone staring at me wide eyed, as if they'd never seen me before. All but Darren. His face was bright red and I caught the moment when his jaw muscle locked down, as he glared at me, but not for long. Whatever he was feeling, he seemed to shake it off quickly, grinning wide.

"You gotta build a fucking bridge and get over this, mate, and I know just the bitches for it."

He didn't need a response from me, grabbing his phone out and making some calls, much to the excitement of the other guys. And when we got out of the Ubers we'd caught to the pub, there they were, a line of girls dressed up to the nines, waiting for us by the pub entrance.

"Having a good night, Adam?" one of them asked, sidling up to me with one of her friends in tow.

"Yeah, great," I said between gritted teeth. "Lemme buy you two ladies a drink."

I ordered them a couple of vodka cranberries, but didn't stop to talk to them while they were drinking them, instead I organised a tray of shots to be deposited on our table.

"Fuck, yes, someone's going big on his daddy's credit card tonight!" Darren crowed, taking the shot glass I handed to him.

"Just bring us the bottle, thanks, love," I told the barmaid, who gave me a lingering look, right before nodding.

Jack told me to get drunk? It took a lot of booze to fuck up a bear shifter, but I was prepared for the task, downing one, two, three shots to the sounds of everyone's cries. They weren't cheering me on because I'd worked hard and achieved something, or because I'd shown myself worthy of it. Instead

it was some kind of salute to my temporary insanity, egging me onto greater and greater heights. Where they were happy to join me.

So why did I feel so alone?

“C’mon, fuck ya!” Darren slurred, several hours later, slinging an arm around my shoulders and steering me towards the stage. The pub band had just started and the crowds were all massing, ready for a good time. “Tonight’s gonna go off. Tina and Sheena are looking like they want to put you right in the middle of a twin sandwich.”

Who? I didn’t ask my friend for the details because I didn’t care, taking the shots he offered me and drinking them down, then he ushered them over.

“Take very good care of my boy tonight, ladies,” he said, pulling free, the space beside me quickly occupied by one woman, then another.

“You wanna party tonight?” Tina asked, or was that Sheena? She placed a shot very carefully into the low cut bodice of her top. “How about a body shot?”

“No thanks,” I said, plucking the shot free without even touching her and drinking it down. She was about to say something to me about that, both women frowning slightly, but that was the moment the guitarist played the first chord. He drowned out all other conversations, smiling at the roaring crowd, before breaking into the first song.

I couldn’t have told you what songs were played, not even if you put a gun to my head. The drinks came and kept on coming, rung up on one of the company credit cards Kaine had handed over for this purpose. I’d been given a job, to get fucked up, in public, surrounded by other people, other women, and I achieved it.

At some point I ended up with my arms around some of my teammates’ shoulders, singing along or trying to, stumbling over the lyrics. The guys seemed to jump around rather than actually dance, which worked for me, as I had no fucking idea what to do. I knew how to move on the footy

field and on a building site and that was about it. I had no idea about anything else. That hit me so fucking hard as we hoarsely shouted out lines about love and loss and moving on, a warbling counterpoint to the lead singer, right up until Tina or Sheena shimmied up to me.

“Come dance!” she said, smiling coquettishly. She spun around, showing me clearly that she did know how to move, but I didn’t care.

“No.”

“C’mon, loosen up a bit.”

And that’s when she made a mistake. Her hands smoothed over my shoulders and that forced me to knock them away. The bear was sulking deep inside me, pissed at the direction things had taken, but willing to let me maintain control because everyone in the sleuth had been around that table, working out what to do next.

Including Freya.

“No,” I said more firmly and then when she looked like she was about to give me a mouthful, I pushed my way free of the crowd in front of the stage, stumbling into the relative cool of the rest of the pub.

My eyes felt like they were rolling around in my head. I couldn’t see straight and I swung my head back and forth, scanning the pub but not really seeing it, until I finally registered the sign to the men’s toilets. I stumbled over, the whole world feeling like it was pitching and rolling under my feet. And didn’t that make sense? I’d lost my internal compass when I met Freya, the little arrow spinning around and around in confusion the minute I laid eyes on her.

“Freya...”

I whispered her name like a prayer, and in some ways it was one. An admission of guilt, a plea for forgiveness, a submission to her will. I clung to that idea as I lurched over to the toilets. I kept on saying her name in my head as I unzipped, a reminder of what this was all for. My cock thickened slightly, an optimistic response to her name.

Because when I thought about her, I could smell her scent in my nose, feel her lips against mine, hear that little gasp she made as I fed her my cock. It was like she was right there with me.

“Freya...” I slapped my hand on the wall above the piss trough and eased my hips forward, trying to ease the pressure in my bladder but only feeling her.

“You having a piss or ya playing with it, mate?” I opened my eyes to see Darren standing there with a smirk on his face. “No need to do that when plenty of ladies are willing to take that job on. Girls?”

Was it Tina and Sheena or was I just seeing double? I couldn't decide, the whole world still spinning slightly, but they showed no sign of recognising that. They just moved forward, hips swivelling, as their eyes slid down my body.

“Got something for us, Adam?”

Chapter 29

Freya

“Stop that,” River said. We’d been back at the apartment for a while now, and there were shoes, paint and pencils scattered everywhere. The sun was dropping low in the sky, turning the whole city red gold, but he ignored it. His focus was on my phone, just like mine was. Kaine had said I should turn my accounts private, that he’d have a social media manager take them over, but he hadn’t managed to organise that yet. So every time a notification came, I looked down at the phone. “Give it here.”

He held out a hand for the phone, the other one still holding a pen.

“You guys are so fucking bossy,” I said, but I slapped the device in his palm.

“Bossy when it comes to looking out for you,” he said and for a second I saw something intense in his gaze. Those grey depths seemed deep, endless as a river, taking all of me in, even stuff I hadn’t meant to put on show. It was somehow seductive, when I’d felt like I had to fight to get someone to see me sometimes, and now I had all the attention I needed. “You don’t have to read more shit from people that don’t even know you.”

He set the pen down, drawing my attention to the drawing he’d been working on. Me again, which seemed to be a theme, so I focussed on that rather than my phone.

“Why do you always draw me?” I asked and he let out a sigh. Not ominous at all.

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve always been drawing you, my whole life,” he said in reply. “She was a vague figure before, my mate, so I’d be forced to fill in the details, guess at the shape of her eyes, her nose, the curve of her lips. And now...?” His full lips twitched just slightly, almost forming a smile. “Now I know exactly what you look like. And drawing helps me focus.”

“Because it pushes everything else into the background,” I said, searching his face, looking for clues that he felt the exact same way I did and that’s when I got my smile. A slow, shy one that forced him to look away for a second, though not for long.

“When I draw I don’t have to think,” he said, “I just see, all the extraneous shit falls away. There’s only you.” Those grey eyes locked with mine, the fall of black hair pushed back now, not hiding the harsh planes of his face. “That’s what I focus on, what you’re doing, whether or not you like what you’re drawing, then the moment you sink down into that other space.”

“Flow state.” I barely whispered that, feeling something I’d longed for. I could talk to Jack and friends from art school about my work, but everyone else? They didn’t seem to see things the way I did. But River just nodded.

“That’s the place where my brain shuts up and I just am, where I’m not wondering...” His lips pursed, then he dared to look at me again. “I’m not wondering what the fuck is going to happen between you and me. Whether Adam fucked shit up irrevocably. Whether you’d be interested in me even if he hadn’t.”

This was a truth baldly stated, something I’d never really experienced from a guy before. There was usually lots of posturing and bullshit, not this. Not real vulnerability, something in him reaching out to me, demanding a response. But when my lips parted to respond, his phone rang. He

blinked, frowned and then pulled it out, looking at who was calling then tapping the screen to answer it.

“River?” A feminine voice came through the phone speakers. “Darling, is that you?”

“Of course it is, Mum,” he replied with a wry smile. “Who’d you think you called?”

“You didn’t say hello or who was speaking, like I taught you more times than I can count when you were a boy.” River shot me a look, eyes twinkling, both of us silently acknowledging that she hadn’t given him a chance. “But let’s not get caught up in that. Your mate.”

I stiffened then, the call suddenly taking on an incredibly personal tone that I felt uncomfortable encroaching upon. I dropped my brush in some water and went to get up, but River grabbed my hand.

“How are things? Have you spoken to her? Of course, you’ve spoken to her.”

The woman was having a conversation all with herself, something I understood well. When you were anxious, you couldn’t wait for the other person to reply, your brain producing the expected response before anyone got a chance to actually answer.

“Mum—” River said.

“Are things so terribly bad? I’ve heard some bad news about Adam.”

River used his grip on my hand to draw me down beside him on the couch, the size difference between us suddenly stark.

“Things aren’t... great,” he said, which just got her twittering again.

“Oh, River... That silly boy. Too impulsive by half. I told you—”

“Mum—”

“If you’d chosen to form a sleuth with someone more reliable: like Hailey’s boy.”

“Mum—”

“But maybe there’s hope. Maybe Freya can see past Adam’s rashness. He is a good boy at heart.”

“Mum, shut up and listen for a second,” he said with a sigh.

“River! I... Fine, what did you have to say?”

“I haven’t given up hope.” His thumb rubbed across my knuckles in a slow, sure stroke that produced little thrills of sensation through me. “I can’t. She’s beautiful, Mum.”

But he wasn’t talking to her, he was talking to me. His eyes held mine as he spoke, never wavering for a second.

“She’s talented, more talented than any person has a right to be and she doesn’t seem to realise that.” I shifted restlessly on the couch. “I could spend hours just watching her work.”

“Oh, River...” There was a world of need in the woman’s voice, one I didn’t quite understand, but I couldn’t interrogate that right now. His gaze felt like it pulled me in, drawing me closer. “Well, I’m ringing about the pie for you to take to Sunday lunch with Freya’s parents. Will one really be enough? I could make a quince and apple one as well, or apple and custard? What about apple and rhubarb? What sorts of things does her family like?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” he said.

My eyebrows shot up and I glared intensely at him, right as his mother seemed to lose her shit.

“What do you mean...? Do you have me on speakerphone? River...!” I heard her take a shuddering breath. “Is Freya there?”

“Hi,” I said, keeping my voice light as I scowled at him. “I’m Freya and pretty much anything with apple in it will make my dad happy, though maybe not the rhubarb.” I wrinkled my nose then, not really understanding people’s fascination with it. “But you don’t have to make anything—”

“Oh, I am so sorry, love. If I had any idea you were listening in. River, we’ll talk about this later.” I grinned at his mother’s suddenly terse tone, pointing a finger at him and making a silly face, but he was utterly unrepentant. “I’m Valerie, sweetheart, River’s mother and I swear I didn’t raise him to be like this.”

“Sweet?” I said. “Quiet, but like there’s a lot going on under the surface and very talented. He’s drawn me a couple of portraits that would have had my drawing lecturer losing their mind if they saw them.” I looked down at the hand that was covering mine. “Big and strong.”

“Yes, well, he is all of those things.” She seemed somewhat mollified by this. “He came around the other day because apparently your parents invited him around for Sunday dinner?” I didn’t know that, but it sounded like Dad. He was always complaining that I didn’t have a bloke around to keep me safe. “I said I’d make one of my famous apple pies, but I wanted to be sure that wasn’t overstepping. Your mother might have her own ideas about what she wants served for dessert.”

“As long as she doesn’t have to do the cooking, she’d be happy,” I replied. “Dad does the roast, because if it was up to Mum, we’d live off cheese and Vegemite sandwiches. She was never really a fan of cooking.”

“Oh, well, perhaps I can share some of my recipes.”

“Mum, not everyone is a culinary master in the kitchen,” River said. “Speaking of which, I need to try and cook something for my mate.” My stomach growled in agreement, forcing me to slap my hands down over it. “She hasn’t really eaten much today and that needs to be rectified.”

“What were you going to cook? Not that terrible concoction you try to pass off as Bolognese? Freya, he likes to think some beef mince fried until it’s burnt, then some tomato sauce and pasta is an actual meal. Do not hold his lack of cooking skills against him. I tried to teach him and his fathers —”

“I was thinking a nice stir fry,” he said, winking at me. “I’m pretty sure even I couldn’t fuck that up.”

“River!”

His mother started to spit out a rapid array of instructions and he just nodded along as he drew me into the kitchen. ‘*What do you want?*’ he mouthed, even as he made reassuring noises for his mother. I just grinned then, watching the big man engage in what seemed like a familiar ritual, one where he humoured his mother’s flighty nature, all while doing what he wanted.

“That sounds amazing, Valerie,” I said, stopping her mid-flow. “I think we’ve got most of those ingredients here. We’ll give it a go and see how the meal turns out.”

“Well, if you’re sure—” she said.

“We’re sure,” he said. “Love you, Mum.”

And before she could get another word in, he disconnected the call.

“So, you went to see your parents about coming around to see mine?” I asked as he settled me against the kitchen bench.

“Course I did,” came his reply as he edged closer. “I’ve never bloody done it before and, after Adam...” We winced but he was determined to recover. “I don’t want to fuck this up.”

One big hand, then another, landed on either side of me on the bench.

“The stir-fry?” I was trying to be funny, but that didn’t work when my voice was all high and breathy. He was looming over me, smelling like pine needles and wood shavings and something spicy.

“This.”

He moved slowly, too slowly for my liking, because the anticipation seemed to build with every second he hung above me. I caught the moment his eyes went heavily hooded, his lips parting slightly. But when he swooped closer, it wasn’t to kiss me into oblivion. Rather his mouth hovered over mine, so

I could feel his breath on my skin, almost taste him on my tongue.

“I really want to kiss you now, Freya.”

“You don’t have to ask—”

“Yeah, I do.”

He wouldn’t move an inch forward, not without my say so and that emboldened me. I reached out, stroking my hands across that broad chest, feeling the textured surface of his thermal Henley, the heat of his body radiating through. I felt him shiver at the first touch and the last. Then I gave him my answer.

“Yes.”

That seemed to break something in him, his hands going to my hips and tugging me tight against him, then one cupping my jaw, tilting it to just the right angle for him to take. But while his mouth drew closer, he didn’t kiss me, not yet, waiting for me to let out a small sound of protest, then smiling before putting the two of us out of our misery.

And it was everything.

I was clear headed, not wracked by insecurity or dazed by the lights of the cameras. Here there was only River and only me. The whistle of his breath as he sucked it in, right before he plundered my mouth. All gentleness, all reticence seemed to have been tossed aside.

His lips were forcing mine wide before I could even think, and he groaned at what he found. At the soft swipe of my tongue against his, at the softness of my mouth. The hand on my hip held me tight against him, so I could feel exactly what I was doing to him and respond in turn. My hips shifted experimentally against his, that rocking sensation helping to provoke something but not settle me.

“River...” I gasped as he picked me up like a doll and set me on the counter, stepping between my legs.

His hair felt like silk between my fingers and I found myself stroking it over and over, unable to get enough. River

seemed to know exactly how it felt to want more, clutching at my arse, encircling my waist, then rubbing up and down my spine. We kissed and kissed until our lips were swollen, going back for more until we both heard someone clear their throat. We jerked apart to see Kaine standing at the other end of the kitchen.

“So that’s how you’ve been keeping our mate distracted?” One of his brows rose up slowly. “Can’t say I don’t approve, but maybe you should tell me exactly what’s got Freya’s lips looking so bruised, or...?” The challenge was plain in his eyes. “Maybe you should show me.”

Chapter 30

Kaine

Get Freya an exhibition at a gallery.

Having a goal made all the difference to me and I was willing to bet it would do the same for her if I could pull this off. Having a project would keep her from thinking about the bullshit going on, distract her from my brother's prescribed antics. But more than that. If this is what she wanted for herself, then I wanted it too, so when Margot came on the line, I cut to the chase.

"Something I might want to buy?" Margot was the owner of a prominent local gallery and she had done well out of providing pieces for our completed projects. "Colour me intrigued."

"Can you fit me in for an impromptu meeting in the next half hour?" I asked.

"For one of my best patrons? Of course, but are you going to tell me what this is about?"

"I've met a new artist who's looking for somewhere to show and I thought of you."

"Kaine, darling." Margot rose from behind her desk and clasped my shoulders to bestow air kisses on each of my cheeks. "So a new artist? How did you come across one in

your line of work? Not that delicious River, is it? I've seen some of his sketches. He's very capable."

"I'm fairly sure River would rather set every drawing he's ever made alight before holding an exhibition." I sat down when she gestured to a seat. "No, this is Freya North."

Margot shook her head. "Never heard of her, but you obviously think I should've. What's her medium?"

I unlocked my phone and navigated over to Instagram, bringing up the profile I'd been watching like a hawk once I'd realised what was happening. Jack was onboarding a social media manager, but until then I was reporting abusive comments left and right. I set my phone down on the desk and waited for Margot's reaction.

And was sorely disappointed by it.

"Goblincore?" I was glad I hadn't thought to bring Freya with me, because the scorn was obvious in Margot's voice. A scarlet talon tapped on my screen, flicking from one image to another. "I mean there's a kind of animal vitality about these, but..." She looked up at me. "This is the work of someone close to you."

"Someone I want to get close to," I muttered, mostly to myself.

"Ahh... so there is someone special in your life." She sat back then, fingers laced together. "Well, I can appreciate that you might want to pull some strings for the little woman, but I don't think Miss..." She peered at the screen again. "Goblincore would be a good fit for the Sutter Gallery. You know what kind of business we do here. Sutter sells exclusive pieces, the kind of high end stuff clients who buy your homes won't be embarrassed by."

"They'd be embarrassed by Freya's artwork?"

I didn't know shit about art, just that interior designers insisted we have some pieces to place in showrooms and display homes. Usually I just gave dimensions and colour schemes to Margot and she found the right piece to fit the space.

“It just doesn’t really fit the clientele we cater to, surely you understand. It’s like in the building trade. There are quickly-made, basic kinds of places for people on a budget.” Her eyes slid back to the phone. “And then there are the kinds of places *you* build. Constructed in desirable locations, from high end materials. People buy something solid, enduring, functional, but beyond that. Your architects make damn sure that the spaces inside have the kind of elegant design that will stand the owner in good stead for years to come.”

She gestured to the wall where a painting hung, a canvas where the artist had seemingly slapped a series of unpredictable strokes in shades of beige, red and black across the surface. It didn’t look like anything to me other than something I’d take one of our house painters to task for if they did that to one of the walls.

“We do the same thing. These artworks are investments.” She blinked as she looked at Freya’s work again. “I can’t see anyone investing in that kind of art.”

“But people do, right?” I’d looked through all of her Instagram posts, found her online store. “She sells them at markets—”

“There is a market for this kind of artwork.” Her mouth tightened. “It’s not an especially lucrative one.” She waved her hand around dismissively. “Tattoo parlours and streetwear brands will often buy this kind of artwork, mostly because it’s what they can afford. Something cheap to slap on their walls.”

She was dismissing Freya outright after barely even looking at her work and that had me standing up, ready to end the meeting. Margot seemed to sense my shift in mood belatedly affixing a polite smile.

“But if she’s someone important to you, perhaps we could add one of her pieces to a group show. We’ve got one coming up. Who knows?” Could she have sounded more patronising? I didn’t think so. “Maybe it’ll sell.”

“No, thanks.” I could wear Margot’s dismissive bullshit, just, but I’d be damned if I would subject my mate to this shit. Maybe this was exactly the kind of crap that had her so

tentative about the idea of having a show. But, I resolved, she hadn't had me in her corner before now. "Tattoo shops and streetwear brands, you say?"

"You know, the kinds of low class places your clients wouldn't be seen dead in," she said, smiling in a way that tried to create a sense of camaraderie but didn't. I handled a lot of money, and was forced to rub shoulders with the rich and powerful at times. But day to day? I worked with blokes who swung tools, slogging their guts out to build people somewhere to live. Putting on the kind of pretensions Margot seemed to think was the norm would've just got my teeth punched down my throat. "But don't be concerned. I'm sure this young woman could sell her designs to a streetwear company. If she could get in with the right person, become a big hit with kids, she could do very well out of her designs."

I didn't really process the second part of her advice as I headed out to the car, because I was already focussing on the first part. Once I was in the car, I punched in another number before putting the car into gear.

"Ursa Ink," a gravelly voice said when the phone was picked up.

"Bjorn, it's Kaine," I said as I eased the car into the closest lane.

"Kaine! How the fuck's it going, catering to the straights?"

"Some days are better than others," I replied. "Look, I won't fuck you around. You still got that gallery attached to the shop?"

Bjorn and his sleuth lived life a little differently than the average bear shifters. A lot of the major biker gangs formed after World War II, when pissed off young servicemen returned to civilian life. Gangs formed in Australia as well as America, and Bjorn was the president of one that allowed only bear shifters as members. They weren't exactly one percenters, but they certainly didn't focus on keeping a low profile either.

“Yeah, I still got the gallery,” Bjorn replied and I could hear the smile in his voice. “You sick of putting arty farty bullshit on all the walls of those swanky houses you build.”

“Yeah, maybe I am.” I flicked the indicator, changing lanes to turn down the main road that would bring me closer to his shop. “And maybe I’ve got an artist you should be looking at.”

“River finally gonna have that show?” Bjorn asked.

“Not River; it’s my mate,” I corrected.

“Well, fuck, you found her, and she’s talented too? You on your way?”

“I’ll be with you in twenty,” I told him.

The big man came to stand in the doorway to the shop, hands going to the top of the door frame when I pulled up. We were all big blokes, but none of us had anything on Bjorn. Not an ounce of fat on him, he had a powerful presence that made clear punks weren’t to fuck with him, yet could settle the nerviest of tattoo clients before he started to ink their skin.

“How’s it going?” I said, looking around at the shopfront. The signage had been replaced, and the whole shop looked crisp and clean. Bjorn’s dads had run the place before him, and had been pretty cavalier about looking after the place.

“Better for seeing you,” Bjorn said with a chin tilt. I held out my hand for him to shake, but he just used it to haul me closer, grabbing me in a bear hug. A warm, hard presence, he was there and then gone again seconds later. “How long’s it been?”

“Christmas. Your mob came down for the toy run.” I gestured to the motorbikes set up outside the front of the shop.

“No word of a mate then,” he said, those blue eyes narrowing. He scratched at his full beard and then looked me over. “So what’s the story? Anything to do with your dickhead brother?”

“Everything’s always to do with my dickhead brother,” I told him as he ushered me inside.

Back in the day, this had been one of the rougher ends of town, but with Adelaide property prices rising as they had, it had been through a gentrification process. Some developers had sniffed around Bjorn's shop, offering him big money to sell, but I'd talked him through the deals. If they were going to raise the property values of the area, the best thing to do was stay.

Bjorn owned the shop outright so he had few overheads. And tattooing? It'd had its own gentrification process. A corporate shark was just as likely to be wearing ink as a biker now. So I'd helped him get a business loan to do the place up and now it was run as both a tattoo parlour and a gallery, the ever sharp Cressida looking after that side of the business. She nodded to me as we came inside, her blunt cut Bettie Page haircut and many piercings seeming to draw the crowds in rather than keep them away.

"Beer?" Bjorn asked, walking over to a pastel blue, 1950s style fridge where he kept alcohol and tattoo ink. I didn't normally drink beer during the day, but after today... "You look like you need one."

"Please," I said, and when he set the can in front of me, I cracked it open and then told him my story.

"So the snooty bitch didn't like your mate's work?" Bjorn said, peering at my phone. "Her loss is my gain. I could sell the shit out of these shoes. Cress!" Cressida always seemed to wear this weird combination of gothic and receptionist clothing, clicking her way over on perilously high patent leather heels. "Whaddya think?"

"This is that chick that was on the news," Cress said, leaning over to look at the photos. "I told you we should get her work in here. Shitty way to get that exposure, but this girl's about to blow up. Look at the views on her posts."

I didn't know shit about social media, so although the numbers of people who had seen Freya's work seemed impressive, Cressida's validation of that helped make me feel a little better. If something good could come from this...

“Maybe we could look at an exclusive arrangement?” she asked me.

“No exclusivity, not without consultation with a lawyer,” I said definitely. “She’s already got her own e-commerce business—”

“One we could boost the reach of, exponentially,” Cressida countered. “We’re heading to that big tattoo show in Sydney within a week. People coming from all over the world to see that. We could feature Freya’s work—”

“And take a cut of sales, the details hammered out before the pieces go anywhere,” I said. “But no exclusivity. She’s building something for herself—”

“And you want to see that grow.” Cress smiled slowly. She was born into a shifter family, so she knew the drill. “Yeah, alright, but we need to pull something together fast. Your girl is gonna want to make new pieces for what we’d have in mind, but that’s something she can work on down the track. The moment is now. People are curious about Freya.”

“And I don’t want to add to that,” I replied firmly.

“So we make it about the work, not the woman,” Bjorn replied. “That’s what you want, right?”

“I want what she wants.” My gaze dropped then, watching the slow slide of condensation down one side of my can. “And she wants to do more with her artwork.” I dared a glance up then. “And if that’s what my mate wants—”

“You’ll do whatever the fuck it takes to make that happen,” Bjorn said with a nod, as the studio phone rang. Cressida clicked away to answer it, her voice a low hum in the background. “We can help you out. You know we would anyway, but Freya is good. Her designs, they’ve got life, y’know? Our clients are into that; something real, something genuine.”

But before we could talk further, Cressida returned with a frown on her face.

“B, that was your brother’s girl.”

Jesse wasn't Bjorn's actual blood brother, but his parents had adopted the kid when they were young. He knew about bear shifters, about fated mates, because his birth parents were part of the community, if not especially good caregivers. Jesse was also a bit of a dick. But Maddie, Jesse's girl? She was a whole other ball of wax. Gorgeous, curvy as fuck and, more importantly, Bjorn's fated mate.

The big man seemed to transform, all of the laidback cool fading away to reveal the bear pushing hard under the surface.

"What the fuck is going on with Maddie?"

"She said she's got car trouble and when she called your dick brother, he left her stranded by the side of the road. Said to call you," she replied.

"Where?"

Bjorn's voice was more bear than man, his eyes blazing bright blue. Claws dug into his rough hewn wooden table, digging deeper as she gave him the address. When he got to his feet, I was there with him.

"Need some help?"

Other shifters' mates were precious to the whole community and he knew I'd ride to the rescue, if that's what he needed, even if Maddie was somehow oblivious to the connection she had with Bjorn and his sleuthmates. A girl didn't have to accept a bear sleuth to have value to our people.

"We've got this," he told me, grabbing out his phone. "Bring your girl around early next week when shit's slow, but... I gotta go."

He grabbed his leather jacket from the back of his chair, barking out instructions down the phone line as he left.

But that desperation, that need? I understood it all too well when I stepped into my apartment.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting to see as I walked in, didn't even know if I'd get a warm welcome, but the sight of River kissing our mate out of her mind on my kitchen bench wasn't

one of them. My dick punched hard against my zipper, making clear what my body thought about this.

“So that’s how you kept our mate distracted?” I said, stalking closer, Freya’s sweet scent heady in the air. I licked my own lips as I stared at hers. I hadn’t had to rescue her from the side of the road, but I had something to offer her now, something she wanted, which was good, because she had something I fucking needed too.

Chapter 31

River

Kaine and I had talked about how this might go, when we first started the sleuth. At that stage we were just out of school, sure we'd find our mate in the next year or so. We'd talked long into the night about what she'd be like, how she'd be perfect for each one of us, and sometimes, when it was dark, about this. We'd confessed our... predilections, what we wanted to happen, what we wanted to do to our mate to drive her out of her mind with pleasure. And as my mouth hovered over Freya's, I was reminded of one thing Kaine had mentioned.

He liked to watch.

Or so he thought. None of us had ever messed around with another woman, so it was hard to know, but I felt my heart start to race even faster at the thought of it. Kaine said it was because he wanted to see our mate, catch all of her reactions, feel the ache to be the one making her gasp, until he couldn't stop himself from taking over.

I looked down at Freya, and smiled slowly.

"These lips?" Hers parted the moment I ran my thumb across that full bottom lip. The pad slid across all that softness, feeling the slick surface and making me want to delve it deeper into the hot, velvety wetness of her mouth. "They're not that swollen yet. Not as much as they could be."

I kissed her again, to show my sleuthmate what it was like, to let him hear the sound of her little gasp that transmuted into a muffled moan, but mostly because of her. Freya smelled so fucking sweet that kissing her was like licking honey straight from the pot and that shivery feeling of pleasure that came each time I did had me going back for more. At first I was just showing off, taking it slow, drawing out each kiss until it became something else again. A drowning in my senses, in her.

“Slow it down.”

I pulled away, automatically. Kaine was a bossy prick and Adam and I humoured him most of the time. When he had control he could settle down, take a full breath in. But his needs weren't my focus right now.

“If you think Kaine was pushy before,” I told Freya who was staring at me, eyes glazed. “You haven't seen anything yet. You want this?”

“What...?” she asked, blinking, looking like a swimmer coming up from under the water.

“You want him to dictate what we do?”

She blushed instantly, something she did a helluva lot, obviously having no idea how fucking cute she looked with pretty pink cheeks. But then those eyes; they glittered like diamonds, even as they grew heavily lidded as she slid them towards Kaine.

He was holding himself back by a thread, no doubt wanting to shove me out of the way. Not from jealousy, but because he wasn't content until he knew a job was done right. He didn't micromanage on a work site because he knew that actually would make the end result suffer, but still. Kaine had to know that we had achieved the desired result and that went double where Freya was concerned.

“You want—?” she started to ask Kaine, and that's all it took for him to take over.

“I want to see him please you.” His eyes bore into hers. “I want to know that he's making you feel better than you've

ever felt before. I want you to experience your every sensual dream.”

“And you think you can make that happen?” I watched her eyebrow rise in challenge, and I chuckled. Kaine’s lips twitched, a smile wanting to form, but he was too obsessively focussed right now. Offering my sleuthmate any kind of provocation was likely to get a response. But this? He settled against the bench beside her, on the surface looking cool and calm. Freya turned back to me and the devilish light I saw dancing in her eyes made clear what she was thinking, so when she reached for me, I came willingly. “Maybe I just want this.”

She kissed me then, hard and hungry, and I forgot all about the game as soon as I felt it. My hands went to her hips, pulling her hard against me, giving her something to grind against, which she immediately started doing. Her mouth opened, her tongue sought mine and I gave and gave everything I had. Quick kisses, deep ones that felt like I was trying to crawl inside her, right as she did me. I was caught up in a cyclone of sensation, one I couldn’t bear to pull free of until Kaine spoke again.

“Slow it down.”

I let out a huff of frustration, then shot him a dark look.

“Maybe you should find some quotes to send out, some reports to prepare,” I growled. “While I see to our mate.”

“Slow it down,” he repeated with a nod. “Feel the need that burns inside you and only give in to part of it.”

Freya’s hands went to my face and she directed my gaze back to her and I felt it, that need to reconnect. I’d been drawn to her the moment I’d seen her, Adam’s impetuosity making sense the moment I touched her, because when I was close, I wanted to watch her, and when we touched, I wanted to kiss her and when we kissed...? I kept getting flashes of what it’d be like, her stretched naked across Kaine’s fancy bed as I kissed my way across... But I swallowed hard and then did exactly as Kaine suggested.

The kiss was a soft one, a ghost that was there and gone again. It wasn't so much the feel of her lips brushing against mine that had me throbbing in my jeans, but the promise of more. If I just delved deeper, opened her mouth wider, took more I'd... I kissed her again, just a fraction deeper and then smiled. She seemed to catch on, her hands moving restlessly, communicating a passion that rose between us, but we hadn't surrendered to it, not yet. Small kisses, delicate kisses, that made your mouth tingle, needing more, they were layered on top of each other like veils of paint, creating something beautiful between us. Maybe Kaine had meant this as a kind of punishment, because it made me ache. Tut just like art, it might hurt to make, but the end product was always so fucking beautiful tears formed in my eyes. My sleuthmate was right. By slowing shit down, it allowed the feelings to rise and they were just as intense as that need.

There was the feeling like I'd come home after years of being away. The feeling of needing something for so long the ache had become like an old friend, one you almost mourned the loss of when it was finally satisfied. But mostly this incredible, terrible feeling of rightness. I didn't want to be anywhere or with anyone else ever, not when I had Freya. The weight of her in my arms, the way she felt pressed against me, the ragged little pulses of her hips, rocking her jeans-clad cunt over my aching dick—you could've put a gun to my head, telling me I'd die if I didn't let her go and you'd still have to prise her from my grip.

“Freya...” I gasped.

“Tell her.” Kaine's voice wasn't a whip anymore, but a firm hand, guiding me where I needed to go. “Tell her how it feels to kiss her.”

“Good.” I let out a frustrated hiss, the response so inadequate in response to her. “Soft. Beautiful. Can't get enough. Need more.”

“Take more,” she urged, pulling my head down, so I did. But finally I pulled away.

Maybe this was too soon. Maybe I was rushing things. I was all in with her, but she wasn't there yet with me. But I had to let her know, that's what Kaine allowed me to do. I had to put my cards on the table so she knew exactly what she was getting herself into.

"Like this is the place I'm meant to be." I stared into her eyes, willing her to understand, knowing then the terror of being a bear shifter. I could give her my heart and she might reject it, but that knowledge didn't seem to stop me. My eyes studied her, catching the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the shine of her eyes. "Like I'm home."

For a moment I was standing on a precipice, not sure if I was going to jump, but her eyes became suspiciously shiny as she reached out and touched my cheek. Her fingers played with the stubble there and I cursed myself for not having shaved before, looking now for signs that I'd scored her face with beard rash, right before she spoke.

"River..."

It was just my name, but there was so much in it. Need and desire, understanding and concern, but mostly a sweetness, one so intense it set my teeth on edge, right before she kissed me again.

Kaine's directive was pushed to one side now, the emotion, the need that had been dammed up breaking free. I ground my girl into the kitchen bench with my ferocity. I needed her, now, all of her that I could have, gulping her down greedily, because only the gods knew how long I'd have her for. She moaned my name between kisses, her nails clawing at my back, rocking her hips harder and faster against me until...

The scent of sweet, sweet honey filled the air as she pulled back, panting rapidly and I experienced the very animal satisfaction of watching my mate come apart. Just a little orgasm, but it seemed to shake her, her whole body quivering until finally she fell still. I stroked her back through every wave, but then she met my eyes.

"You're supposed to be perfect for me?" she asked.

“If I’m not now, I will be, I promise,” I replied.

“Then take me to bed and show me,” she said, the bear roaring his glee inside my skull. Then her eyes slid from mine to Kaine’s. “Both of you.”

Chapter 32

Freya

Holy crap. I blinked as I felt the last vestige of pleasure wash through me, one that I'd earned simply through grinding on River in Kaine's kitchen. It was something I'd had no idea was possible before now.

Making me wonder what else my body was capable of.

A small, sensible part of me screeched inside my head, wondering if I was rushing into something else too fast, but it was easy to brush aside. I knew now why bear shifters get shit on the down low because, damn, these guys were addictive. My legs wobbled when River set me on my feet.

"River, catch her," Kaine directed, his voice so fucking imperious.

But River's arms had already gone around me. I knew my brain was being flooded by endorphins and feel-good hormones, but right now I was sure. River would never allow me to fall. As I stared up at the man who thought he was fated to be with me, Kaine stepped forward.

"You sure you want both of us?" he asked.

There was something so confident, so competent about Kaine, and perhaps he would've hated that estimation of his personality, but I found it illuminating to see that hard shell crack just a little.

He wasn't sure I'd say yes.

I caught the way his muscles locked down, holding himself back, those eyes searching my face, trying to anticipate my response.

And maybe he wouldn't like mine.

"I don't know what this is yet," I said, smoothing a hand up River's arms, both men watching me move. "But I'd like to find out. If you're open to that—"

I didn't get a chance to finish the sentence. Kaine swept forward and plucked me from River's grip, carrying me in a bridal hold over to the nearby bedroom.

And that made sense in a way. When we entered the room, when River joined us, there was something in the air. Solemn, ritualistic, but fragile. I had always been sure I'd never be able to just hit it and quit it and I wasn't going to get a chance now. Kaine laid me down on the bed reverently, stroking my hair, my face, my neck and I stretched to press into his caress, while River joined us on the bed. His hands went to the collar of his shirt, a question in his eyes, but I scrambled to answer it.

I got to my knees, smoothing my hands over the soft flannel shirt. It had a pettable plush feel, but I was willing to bet the man himself felt even better. As I eased one button open, then another, Kaine moved behind me. My hair was balled up in his fist and he placed a single burning kiss against the nape of my neck. My hips jerked backwards, the sensation feeling like it tugged at something deep inside me and his other hand clapped down on my side, tucking me in against his hard length.

"Unbutton River's shirt, Freya," he told me in a low husky voice. "He's yours, all yours, so explore him."

Part of me bridled at his directive, but mostly I loved it. It was as if Kaine was giving me permission to do exactly as I wanted. No, more than that. The fact he knew what I needed was what helped me feel more certain about my choices. So I stared up into River's eyes, glorying in the fact he watched everything I did with rapt fascination. The flicking of one button, then another open, his breath coming faster when I slipped a hand into the gap I'd created. His chest was hot,

hard, and moving faster and faster as I began to explore, until finally he had enough. He pulled his shirt open, buttons going pinging around the room, leaving what remained of the garment to hang from his shoulders.

“All yours,” Kaine reminded me.

It seemed somehow decadent, to run my hands over such perfect male flesh. River was so big, I couldn't help but feel tiny by comparison. That didn't happen often and I had to admit to myself that I liked the sensation, just as much as I liked what I was touching. River's skin was like satin stretched over steel, with no give in him whatsoever. And all that power? It remained reined in, patiently allowing me to take the lead.

Right up until I found his weakness.

I traced the lines of those impressive muscles, discovered small scars that spoke of a history I was ignorant of, followed the sweep of the veins in his forearms up, up, until I found the small medallions of his nipples.

“Freya...” he gasped when I circled one, watching the skin start to crinkle in response. “Freya...” I traced the small bead, watching it grow tighter by the second. “Freya... fuck!” I tugged at the point, noting that his hips jerked in time, until he covered my hand with his and then shoved both down, with purpose. “I feel that right in my cock.” Our hands disappeared under his waistband, then closed around something very hot and very hard, throbbing in my grip. “And I'm so fucking close right now.”

My thumb moved experimentally, rubbing across the head of his cock and finding it slippery with pre-cum.

“Fuck, I'm gonna explode,” he groaned.

“Hold it together.” Kaine's tone wasn't demanding, more like a coach encouraging his star player, like his belief in River's control would help him achieve it. “You can do it.”

“But she feels so fucking good.” River forced his head down, staring into my eyes, cupping my chin with his hand before rubbing his thumb on my jaw. “Your hands are so small

and soft and... fuck!" I tightened my hold, feeling the rapid pulse of his heart through the thick vein that ran up his shaft. "Beautiful, you make me want to come apart."

"So this would be a really bad thing to do."

I'd touched precisely one dick before this moment, so I wasn't entirely sure what I was doing, but his hips followed the swivel of my hand, a low rumble in his chest indicating how pleased he was.

"Answer our mate, River," Kaine said, right as his hands swept up my ribcage. I was beginning to see how River felt, because the tingle of sensation was oh so distracting.

"Bad...?" River sounded all choked up. He pawed at my hair, stroking me over and over. "No, so fucking good, but this is going to be over way too soon if you keep doing that."

"You want to come?" I asked, having no idea where this boldness came from.

"So fucking much." He darted in, kissing me lightly. "I fucking ache every time I'm around you and now that you're touching me... No one's ever... I need..."

"No one's ever done this before?" I stopped then, needing a moment. The idea of virginity was a weird one, coded with a whole lot of other cultural stuff that had little to do with actual sex, but I felt like this required pausing.

"No one," he said.

"No one but you." Kaine confirmed what I had been suspecting, but had found difficult to accept. "There's no point touching other women, because there's only you."

Then he found my nipples with unerring accuracy, rubbing them through my shirt until they were almost painfully sensitive, and a low, heavy throb starting up between my legs. Kaine shoved my shirt up and my bra cups down, seeking skin to skin contact. And then I knew exactly what River was going through, as every caress resulted in something so very sweet pulling between my legs, making me swell and slicken, grow ready. But for what?

I knew.

I'd felt it every night since Adam. And every day the ache he left inside me started up again. I'd bend over to wipe a table, or pick up a bin and feel it, the emptiness he'd left inside me. But River could fill it, or Kaine, or fuck, both of them. My thighs rubbed together furtively, resulting in Kaine pushing one of his hands down the front of my jeans, only to spear through my folds.

"Make River come," he commanded, "and I'll do the same for you. If you want more, he'll rise again. Both of us will, for as long as you need us."

But I couldn't answer him, couldn't think, not while that blunt finger slid through my too wet pussy, the friction as he stroked my clit too much and not enough, all at the same time. I had plenty of G-spot toys at home, so I knew how to stimulate it myself, but it'd never ached with this kind of ferocity during self play. I made a small sound of protest, one that had Kaine chuckling.

"Something you need, mate?"

How did I say it? That as I jacked River's cock harder and faster, I could feel the hard line of something I craved. His baculum, that's what I'd discovered. If I was just to lie back, let him drive himself inside me, I'd be full, so full. And then, he'd tug against that aching spot, turning pain into pleasure that would melt my bones and... I pulled away, leaving River wide eyed and Kaine watchful, right before I yanked my shirt up over my head.

Only for Kaine to stop me.

My hands were trapped by my shirt and he wrapped his own hands around my wrists, holding them above my head.

"No need to rush," he said. Those blue eyes of his seemed to take me all in, roving, roving, as if snatching a glimpse of something about to be taken away. He moved closer, pulling my shirt free, tracing the line of my bra with his fingertips before asking the important question. "But we need to know how far you want to go."

As far as I could, that beat hot in my blood. For the first time in my life I felt greedy for experiences, wanting everything. I said something to that effect, the look of pure satisfaction on both of their faces reaffirming that need.

“So I can touch your beautiful fucking tits?” Kaine asked, reaching behind to flick open my bra clasp. “I can flick your little clit and push my fingers inside you, rubbing against the spot that aches.”

“Yes, that! Kaine—”

“I know what you need.” He pulled away to stroke my face so gently, all the care in the world in that hard blue stare. “I’ll always know. You need pleasure, yours and his.”

“Yes,” I said, then tacked this on afterwards, “please, Kaine.”

“Well, because you ask so sweetly,” he said and then moved behind me. My top button was undone, my zip slid down and I moved with him to remove my jeans then my underwear and that’s when I experienced the singular pleasure of being naked between two still clothed men.

“Fuck, look at you,” River groaned, reaching out to touch me, his hands hanging worshipfully in the air before he tugged me closer, his mouth dropping to my nipple.

Mouths were softer and harder all at the same time. My hands went to his hair as he sucked, the softness of his mouth contrasting with the sharp pull of suction. Pleasure felt like it rippled outwards with every pulse.

“River...” I moaned. “River...”

Right as the pleasure started to crest, I tugged his head upwards, our lips crashing together as our bodies worked as one.

Kaine cradled me close, hand sliding between my legs, two fingers pushing up inside me, the small pinch making me hiss, then hum with pleasure. His thumb rubbed at my clit with rhythmic strokes that forced his fingers in and out of me. He’d promised me it’d satisfy the ache inside me, but it just seemed to get worse. His fingers could only move so far and River... I

gripped his hard length, feeling him buck against me, then work his cock between my fingers, keeping time with Kaine's pulses.

"We're gonna come together," River promised in a hoarse voice. "You and me, beautiful. It's gonna feel so fucking good. You make me so damn hard, I..."

He couldn't keep narrating this and I knew why. There came a point where words failed and there was only feeling. Him in my hand, me in Kaine's, everyone moving faster and faster, until our strokes started to stutter.

"Holy fucking shit, Freya."

River stared into my eyes, a connection locking into place the moment when that frozen feeling came, right when the whole world seemed to be coloured by a bliss that was hard to comprehend. In that second, it felt like it'd last forever, that we'd last forever, but then I clamped down on Kaine's fingers.

"Good girl," he purred, feeling me come apart and his pace only quickened, not letting up for a second. "Such a good girl, coming on my fingers."

I didn't get a chance to discover if I had a praise kink or not, as River erupted all over my hand.

His cum felt hot, branding my skin, marking me as his, right as his grip on me tightened almost to the point of almost pain.

"Fuck... Fuck... Freya..."

Then he yanked me free of Kaine, wrapping his body around me, holding me through the afterglow, tethering me to the bed right as I felt like I was going to float away, before lowering us down onto the mattress.

I was spent, my body long and loose right now as a sloppy smile spread across my face, one that River echoed. He looked boyish, all of the mystery gone right now as he tucked me in close and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"That was fucking amazing," he told me. "You were fucking amazing."

“You got room for one more on the bed?”

We both looked up to see Kaine kneeling before us, the front of his pants stiffly tented, which had my tongue flicking across my lips.

“I don’t think you’re ready to relax,” I said, glancing pointedly at his dick.

“Considering I’ve been hard most of the time since we met, I’ll be fine,” he said dismissively, but I pointed my toes and moved my foot across to him, moving slowly to trace the shape of him in his pants.

“Why be fine when you can be so much better?” I asked.

“You’re tired—”

“And you’re hard.”

He tilted his head to one side, regarding me steadily, before gripping my ankle and setting my leg down again, splitting me open. Kaine’s eyes seemed to trace all of my most tender flesh before forcing his focus back to me.

“I can sort that out if it concerns you.”

“Yeah?” I grinned then. “What’re you thinking?”

Chapter 33

Kaine

“Yeah, so what were you thinking?” Freya asked, naked on the bed.

She did not want me answering that, because a whole host of scenarios were playing out in my mind, something River noted with a sly grin. Instead I unzipped my pants, pulling out my cock. And that’s when her eyes widened.

Did she know she looked like a kid in a candy shop? A curious combination of fascination and glee transformed her face, forcing me to perform. I worked my hand up and down my aching length, feeling the need to burst, but not yet. Not while she was watching me like I was her whole world.

I wanted just that, after never thinking for a second I’d be here with her like this. After Adam’s fuck up and mine... But Freya seemed so damn resilient. Nothing seemed to keep her down for long and I loved that about her. So while she was keen to watch, I strung this out, teasing myself until I was so fucking close to blowing, but never letting myself lose control.

“So what’re you going to do?” she asked in a husky voice. “Come all over me.”

“Need to,” I ground out and that was more the bear than me. “Need to mark you.” My focus slid to the bite mark on her neck and her fingers moved in the same direction. “Not permanently, not yet, but I need me on your skin.”

“So come here then.”

Fuck, did she realise how much I needed that or was this just the magic of being with your mate? I dropped down onto the bed until I was hanging over her, propped up on one arm. River didn't back up for a second, pressed into her side, his lips on her neck. Because after this we'd never be able to stop touching her, not always for sex, but because she was like air. I could breathe more fully, be more in the moment when I was close to her.

“You gonna let me rut against you?” I asked, lowering my hips down. “Let me cum all over this pretty pink pussy.”

Her only answer was a sigh when our bodies made contact, then her arms going around my shoulders. She held me close, turning something that could have been pornographic into something else. I was caught up in her spell, listening to her sighs, feeling her breath on my skin, then the scalding hot slick of her cunt as my dick glided across it. And that's when I understood my brother.

The need to push down, notch the head of my cock against her opening and then thrust in was overwhelming. I didn't just want to fuck her, I *needed* to. And if I did, we'd be locked tight together, literally, when my baculum jutted out. It ached now with that need, whispering sweet nothings in my ear about what would happen if I just gave in.

If she was feeling good now, she'd feel so much better when I locked inside her. The orgasms would come and keep on coming with each tug. And I'd feel every ripple of pleasure down my entire length, feeling her pleasure secondhand, adding to my own. We'd be connected in the way I'd felt we were since I'd met her. She'd be mine. And for a second, my cock slid downwards, ready to do just that. But as Freya started to squirm, untapped instincts starting to rise, I knew I had to pull back. I couldn't compound the problem by taking this from her. I wanted to lock down in her when she loved me, when the words were falling in a messy tangle from her lips. And I'd tell her how much I loved her too...

Which brought me rudely back to the present.

“Kaine...” she whispered, my cock now rubbing on her clit. She didn’t think she could come again, or so she said, with a frown. But I knew. I kept the pressure light, teasing the hood of her clit back and forth, seducing her into thinking that coming might not be such an impossible thing after all. Because I wouldn’t until she did.

“You can come again, can’t you, beautiful?” I coaxed. “I’ll make you feel so fucking good and when you come apart, I’ll shoot my load all over you, drench that sweet little pussy in my seed.”

I wanted to see that, my cum dripping out of her after I’d erupted deep inside her, ready for me to push back in. Maybe I’d get her to tilt her hips back to hold it there, then stroke her clit with featherlight strokes, telling her how beautiful she was, right before her whole body went rigid.

Like both of ours were doing now.

“Kaine...”

Her mouth was on mine, her lips searing, staking a claim I willingly surrendered to. Because I was just as hungry, sucking at her bottom lip, scoring it with my fangs, the need to mark her growing more and more intense. She was mine, all fucking mine, that terribly selfish thought ambushing me right when my defences were low, and I needed some kind of physical proof of that.

“Come for me one more time,” I begged. “Give me that.” But I didn’t hear her answer, so caught up was I in the rapid slide of her flesh against mine. She was so wet she was dripping and it felt like I was dipping my cock into molten wax with each pass. *More*, my heart beat, *more*. Her legs wrapped around my hips and hers rose up to meet mine, stroke for stroke. “Give me your pleasure.”

She was so fucking beautiful, her face like a sunset, flushing each time she reached her peak, her sobbing cries twining with mine, right as I let go. That feeling of surrender, it was like nothing I’d ever felt; something I’d kept locked down tight inside me erupting, right as I came. Because this wasn’t the furtive, perfunctory pleasure I was used to giving

myself. This was bliss, pure and simple. My heart lightened to the point of pain, right as every muscle fought to eject my load.

“Mm...” She said when I pulled back, her hands slipping between her thighs. “Messy.”

I watched her play with my cum like it was the most beautiful sight in the world, one I wanted to see every fucking morning when I woke and again when we went to bed, but right now I collapsed down beside her, snuggling into her side.

River caught my eye sometime later, his face half buried in Freya’s hair. Our breathing had evened out and hers was starting to slow as she sank down into sleep. We’d formed a sleuth together years ago from a sense of brotherhood that went beyond blood, but now? There was something far more immediate tying us together. I hated what we’d had to do to Adam to make him see, to get him to make amends for his fuck-up, but this was too important not to get right. What River and I experienced right now? It could be our future, if we were just able to make Freya see how good it would be.

“Tired...” she mumbled as I pressed a kiss to her shoulder, mostly just to breathe her in.

“Sleep then, beautiful,” I told her, snuggling in closer once I pulled the cover over the three of us. “Sleep and we’ll be right here in the morning.”

Chapter 34

Adam

“Got something for us, Adam?” the two girls said with a sultry smile.

“No.” My response was immediate, because while the alcohol was pumping in my system, I couldn’t pretend. “No, I don’t.”

“C’mon, you fucking soft cock,” Darren said, urging the girls forward, then pulling out his phone.

What the hell was I doing in here? My brain fought to remember, then Jack’s words came back to me. Drunk. I needed to get fucked up drunk.

“I need a drink. Let’s go and get another drink,” I slurred.

“That’s not what you need,” Darren, my team mate, a bloke I’d considered my friend, said, urging the girls closer. I flinched when one hand touched me, but when I knocked it away another replaced it. I let out a low growl and that just had the girls cooing.

“Oh my god, Adam, you’re so strong.”

The bear fucking hated this, hated everything to do with this plan.

Hands touched my biceps, testing the muscles.

He paced back and forth inside me, testing the boundaries.

“You’ve got amazing abs.”

He snarled at her for daring to notice. My abs, my body were none of her business.

A hand slid over them, going lower, but I pushed that hand away before it could get too far. But while I was doing that, another went to the back of my neck, and that's when the bear went rigid.

“Just a little kiss,” she insisted.

In no uncertain terms, he made clear what would happen if the girl's lips touched mine. He'd erupt from my skin and rampage through this pub to get free. Jack had wanted me to create some kind of PR diversion? We could do that. People would photograph a fucking Eurasian brown bear running through the streets of suburban Adelaide, the media forgetting all about Freya.

“I don't want that,” I said, trying to pull free without hurting either girl. “I don't want this.”

“Of course you do,” the other girl said, sliding her hand up my leg and that's when I lost it.

The bear fucking hated this place, the noise, the alcohol clouding my senses. He hated the artificial scent of these women who weren't his mate and most of all, he hated this guy, the one my human side thought was a friend, for arranging all of this shit. Darren was taking photos one by one, a sly grin on his face, as my mouth hung open. I was slow, too fucking slow, right up until I wasn't.

“ENOUGH!”

I shoved the girls backwards, feeling bad when they went flying, but they weren't my focus, he was. Or at least that small, shiny device. Cameras = bad in the bear's mind. It was my last encounter with a camera, a real one, that had got me in this shit in the first place. Before that, Freya had visited my dreams. She was sweet and warm and mine, all fucking mine.

And this fucker wanted to take that away from me.

“Jesus, Adam—!” he started to say as I stormed over, the bear and the man moving as one. He tried to fluff up with outrage, but that stopped the moment I grabbed his phone. He

watched with complete incredulity as I crushed his phone with my hand.

As glass pricked my palm, as metal bit into my skin then fell to the floor like strange confetti, that's when Darren finally saw what I was. His eyes went wide, the bathroom filled with the stink of his fear as he tried to take all of me in. The bear was so fucking close, swelling my body, armouring me ready for battle. Back in the day I would've been a berserker, a Viking warrior lost to battle fever, attacking mindlessly until there was nothing left standing but me.

“Adam...?” That fucking smirk was wiped away, replaced by an open mouthed stare. “Adam, mate...” He tried for a smile, wanting to humour me out of whatever the fuck this was, but he couldn't maintain it, not when I was hauling him up by the front of his shirt until we stood nose to nose.

“I don't want them.” I stabbed my finger in the general direction of the girls. “I don't want other women, any of them.”

“Right, right, got it. No girls—”

“I don't want...”

My voice broke on the words and I shattered with it. The combination of everything: alcohol, the last few days, the agony and ecstasy of finding my mate and losing her, all in such a short period of time, hit me harder than an illegal tackle on the footy field. It felt like air was driven out of my lungs and, right as I was gasping, another hit came.

I'd asked the girls not to touch me. I'd asked Darren not to try and hook me up with any girls, and all of them had ignored me. I could never countenance any kind of plan that meant disrespecting Freya, and that's what they were doing. They were touching what belonged to her and her alone. But when I'd made clear my wishes, the two women had pushed past them, overrode them, confident I didn't really mean what I was saying. That what they wanted was what I really wanted. And that's what the blow was: it was a realisation.

I'd done the same with Freya.

Not deliberately, but if I'd tried harder, didn't let myself get so fucking caught up in my own pleasure, I'd have kept my focus on what she needed. To take things slow, get to know me and the rest of the sleuth, meet the bear and then... I let out a ragged sob, feeling so very fucking tired, so much so I dropped Darren to the floor. He scrabbled away, eyeing me warily, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything, not when I didn't have her.

Freya.

I whispered her name over and over, lurching out of the toilets and back into the pub. The bear roared at the noise in here, at the people, too many people. Some shouted out my name, but I stumbled over to the front door of the pub, slamming it open. Jack said she'd have some people strategically placed around the entrance to take some photos of me misbehaving and then post them on social media, tagging news channel accounts, and I was dimly aware of the flashes going off as I staggered forward, but I couldn't pay attention to that. My feet moved slowly, then got faster, the alcohol starting to burn off now the bear was so close to the surface, ending with me running towards her.

Freya, Freya, Freya, I heard her name in my head each time my shoes slammed onto the concrete footpath, as I ran and ran out in the darkness, but of course I couldn't run to her. And that's what finally had me stopping.

We searched the streets for her, sure she was close. She had to be, right? She was the other half of my heart and it ached so fucking furiously right in that moment. Get pissed, they'd said, make a disgrace of yourself, but they didn't know what that meant. The alcohol took what control I had left away, stripping my every defence away until there was only this: pain, so much fucking pain. Pain from the punishment of being away from my mate, but worse.

From deserving it.

Every iota of agony I felt right now was my reward for my behaviour, I realised, as the depressive effects of the alcohol smashed into me. *I'd* done this and that knowledge was what

had me pacing back and forth, my hand in my hair as I tried to work out a way forward. I couldn't fight it, train for it, develop a plan and work it to gain redemption. When I saw Freya there was nothing but pain on her face and that had my chest seizing. Every breath hurt, clawing its way in and out of my lungs until I was shaking. I pulled out my phone with weak fingers, unlocking it after two tries, then navigating over to my contacts. I didn't have Freya's number and that was good, because I was on the brink of leaving one of those long, rambling, drunk phone calls blokes left for their exes, all over the world.

Instead I called him.

It's what I did each time I ended up in a situation like this and while I knew my big brother couldn't fix shit this time, I had to talk to someone.

"Adam?"

His voice was hoarse and scratchy with sleep and I felt another pang of guilt at having woken him up, but I needed him. I fucking needed him.

"I did it," I said, unshed tears clogging my throat. "I went out with the boys. I got drunk and was photographed leaving the club in a rush."

"Yeah?" He sounded tired, so tired, and I knew exactly how that felt. I sank down into the gutter, the only place I felt I was fit to sit, and got comfortable.

"Darren tried to set me up with some girls. He took some photos."

"That little fuck... I never liked him. I told you that."

"I know." My head hung lower. "I know you did." I swallowed hard. "He took some photos, but I crushed his phone."

"Did ya?" He snorted at that, laughing despite himself.

"The bear saw the camera and... He doesn't like cameras anymore."

“So this is what it takes to get Adam fucking Farrelly to step out of the spotlight,” Kaine said. “They say our mate is perfect for us but I didn’t see this coming.”

“Is she perfect?”

I wasn’t supposed to ask. River, Kaine and I, we’d come to an agreement. They were to see if they could work things out with Freya. I couldn’t stand it if their chances of being with her were fucked over by me. But right now my defences were down and I felt so fucking low.

“You know she is,” he told me in that gently chiding tone he used when I hadn’t fucked things up too much. “That’s why you did it. I understand shit a lot better now. She’s so fucking sweet the bear has you wanting to gorge yourself on her, sucking down all that sweetness, just in case she decides...”

To reject you, that went unsaid. I didn’t know how Freya felt about this, but she had the three of us fucking hard and desperate for her. If she just crooked a finger each one of us would come running to do whatever the fuck she wanted. She just had to point and we’d do it.

“So she’s forgiven you for taking fur?” I asked, wrestling my mind back on track.

“Forgiven? I dunno if she was hurt, so much as surprised. It’s a lot to take in,” he said and I heard his sigh then. “But she’s doing it. She’s so fucking amazing, Adam. Shit, you probably don’t want to hear that right now.”

“No,” I said, closing my eyes, just hearing the hush of the night air and feeling the cool of my phone screen pressed against my face. “Tell me. Tell me everything, Kaine.”

“Well,” he said, and I could hear the sounds of him settling down into a chair. “I came home to find River kissing her.”

I let out a low groan, my tongue flicking over my lips, as if I could still taste her there.

“And you didn’t leave them to it, did you?” I knew my brother well. “What did you do?” That low chuckle, it was a knife stabbing into my heart, but I was the one plunging in.

My cock ached but not more than my heart. “Tell me, brother.
Tell me what you did.”

Chapter 35

Kaine

Cleaning up after my brother, that was what I did, so it was no surprise to hear him on the other end of the line. I hated him for just a second, dragging me away from the warm haze of pleasure I felt sleeping next to Freya and River. I was in heaven, the scent of her in my nose, the feel of her in my arms, but I was always my brother's keeper, so when I felt the phone buzz, I woke up.

"I did it," he told me and I could hear just how miserable he was. I used to wash gravel out of his grazes when he was a little bloke, picking him up and dusting him off before sending him on his way again. "I went out with the boys."

And that was the problem with this plan. Adam didn't do that often. Sportsmen achieved god-like status in Australia and that was a sweet position to be in for a young guy. All that attention showered on you, it could change you, but it hadn't changed Adam. He'd steered clear of the drunken orgies, adhering rigorously to his training schedule, showing a kind of discipline that, to be frank, I admired. But that always fell apart when directions ran counter to his values. When advertisers tried to mould his image into one that would sell more shoes or t-shirts or whatever, when he was required to play a role at fundraising events, schmoozing with the powerful sponsors, it all fell apart. That wasn't my brother, he couldn't do what I had to, put on the mask and be what was needed in that moment.

“Tell me, brother. Tell me what you did,” he pleaded, the misery plain in his voice.

“Let me know where you are first, and I’ll tell you whatever you like,” I replied. “I’m coming to pick you up.”

“In the gutter.” That sigh seemed to come from the depths of his soul. “Where I belong.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” I said, trying to hold back the bite in my voice and only partially managing it. “Adam, where are you? What pub?”

“The one with all the noise,” he said, forcing me to sigh.

I pulled away from my phone and then navigated over to the Find My iPhone app and then found my brother’s location.

“Adam, can you stay where you are, mate?” I asked him. “Don’t move, just stay right there and I’ll come get you. Stay right where you are.”

“Stay here.” He sounded drowsy and drunk. “Got it.”

I kept my brother on speaker phone as I drove to one of the suburban pubs. Jack and I hadn’t wanted to chance him running wild in the city, so we’d approved a more low-key establishment. But that meant I had to drive as fast as I dared to find him. I tried to keep him on the line talking, bringing up stupid shit from the past, just to hear his voice, but when I pulled up to the curb, I could see it hadn’t really worked. He was slumped over, head hanging between his knees, his phone on the road between his feet.

“Adam?”

“Still here...” he mumbled at the phone.

“No, Adam. Look up.” My brother was broken, I saw that in the dead stare of his eyes, even beyond the haze of inebriation. “Let’s get you home, mate,” I said.

“Home?”

The little boy who’d followed me fucking everywhere, daring to try all the shit the big kids were doing despite his age

and small stature, he was here now, not the big, boofy football player.

“Home, mate,” I said, holding out a hand and not letting it fall until I had him in my grip, standing beside me. I had to grab him, the dickhead was swaying on his feet, but I had him. I always had him.

But I didn’t take him back to the place River and I shared with him, but to the home where that little boy had lived.

“This is a bad business,” one of my dads said, meeting me in the garage of the family home. “Look at your brother, Kaine.”

“I know, Dad,” I replied. “I picked him up out of the gutter.”

“Out of the gutter?” We both hissed as Mum came rushing out, taking the two of us in before going to Adam’s side. “What the hell has been going on? I know he did the wrong thing, but, seriously, Kaine!”

Of course, whatever happened to Adam was somehow my fault, just like when we were kids. I weathered Mum’s scowl, folding my arms across my chest.

“Adam is making amends,” I told her. “Jack and I—”

“Not like this.” She looked Adam up and down with concern, then was pulling his hair back when he made a gagging sound. “I know he messed up, but it’d be better for this girl to reject him outright—”

“Now, Toni...” Dad said.

“At least he’d know,” Mum said. “Not like this.” She turned to me. “There’s no guarantee this will even work to make a difference with Freya; that it’ll make up for what he’s done.”

“There never is a guarantee,” I replied, keeping my tone even. “You know that. Everything my dads did to get you to accept them, they had no idea if you’d choose them or not.”

“He’s right, love.” Dad reached over to push a lock of Mum’s hair behind her ear, but she shook him off.

“But this is different—” she spluttered.

“Because it’s your boy’s heart on the line,” Dad observed, then shot me a shrewd look. “Your boys’ hearts. So, what do you think, Kaine?”

My dads had been doing this, asking my opinion like I was an adult, before I’d even left school. I’d always felt both proud and oppressed by that honour. But now? It felt like I had three, no make that eight very different people to keep happy—my dads, my mum, Adam, River and Freya—and I had no clue how I was supposed to achieve all of that.

“Jack and I came up with this plan for a reason,” I told them. “And I think it’s still worth pursuing...” But whatever case I was trying to make, it was abruptly cut off as Adam staggered out of the garage to vomit in Mum’s rose bushes. “Just not exactly like this. We need to come to a decision. See if Freya’s open to even talking to Adam or whether she’s not...”

They both sucked in a breath, knowing what I meant. If she was to reject him outright. It’d put him out of his immediate misery. But long term? I frowned then, my mind starting to race at the possibilities, even as my mother stepped in to voice the fears that lurked in my heart.

“So you’ll what? Break up the sleuth, and you and River will pursue this girl?” Mum asked, her voice getting higher and higher, her hands going to her hips. “I know what Adam did was wrong but—”

“Toni,” Dad growled.

“He’s your brother, Kaine. This will break his heart and you know it.” She was dressing me down, just like she always did when Adam was struggling. “You’ll abandon him for some girl—”

“My mate, Mother.” My voice was more bear than man and she let out a little gasp then, taking an instinctive step backwards. “And what about my happiness, Mum? I was with

Freya when Adam called. She was snuggled up tight against my body and I was so fucking happy, just listening to her breathe, feeling her in my arms. I was in heaven.” Mum’s shaking hand went to her lips. “I didn’t want to be anywhere else in the whole fucking world and then I got the call. Adam called me.” I swallowed hard. “Just like he always does when he gets in the shit and, like every other time, I put aside what I wanted and rushed to help him.”

Dad was watching me with molten gold eyes, half of him providing a barrier between me and Mum, the other half nodding in recognition.

“Look after your brother’, you’ve always said that to me and I’ve stepped up every fucking time.”

“Don’t swear at your mother, mate,” my dad said.

“Every time.” I stabbed my finger into the air. “But this is my time too. She’s the only woman for me, and you know that.”

“You might find someone else,” Mum said and I could hear the hope in her voice. “Someone you can all love. Look at River’s mother.”

“Yeah, look at River’s mother,” I snapped. “What’s her name?”

“Oh, well, I...” Mum stammered.

“What’s her name, Mum?”

Her mouth set in a mulish line and Dad pulled her into his side.

“Kaine needs to go to Freya.” Adam looked too pale and sweaty, his hair matted to his brow and he was wiping bile from his mouth with the back of his hand, which kinda ruined his delivery. “If he’s what she wants, I won’t stand in his way. I want you to be happy, brother.”

And right there was the reason why I loved the little bastard. He was the golden boy for a reason, because at his heart there was something good and honest and that was what came through right now.

“I’ll talk to Freya about the situation as soon as she’s comfortable with that,” I told him. “Try and feel her out about what she wants to do. That’s what this is about.” I glanced at each one of them, trying to make them see that. “It doesn’t matter what family shit we’ve got going on.”

“Kaine...” Mum hissed.

“It’s always what the woman wants, that’s how the stories go, right?”

“Right,” Dad said with a firm nod, then bumped his shoulder against Mum. “It was the way it worked with you.”

“But—”

“If you only wanted me and weren’t into Kev, we would’ve understood,” Dad insisted.

“More like she would’ve rejected you.” My other two dads walked out with sleepy smiles, before Kev took Adam in. “Our boy is looking a bit worse for wear. Thanks for bringing him home, son, but we’ve got things from here.”

I watched my dads swoop in and wrap their arms around Adam, steering my drunken brother inside the house.

“Go back to your mate and hold her tight,” Dad said, guiding Mum in the same direction. “You can never take for granted how long you’ve got her for, not even after the mating marks are made.”

I thought about that the whole drive home, on the ride up to the apartment via the lift and when I stalked towards the bedroom.

“Mm...” Freya said, rolling over in her sleep, before snuggling into me again. I stroked her hair for some time, sleep taking a while longer to come this time, and thought about just what we were going to do to get out of this mess.

Chapter 36

Freya

So if this was life with a bear sleuth, I definitely didn't hate it. I woke up after a glorious sleep to feel my two lovers wrapped around me.

Lovers.

The word felt curiously old fashioned and awesome all at the same time.

Then there was being kissed awake. River started first, looking at me almost shyly when my eyes opened, going back for more when I didn't protest. Kisses on my lips, then down my neck, making me squirm, which woke up Kaine and he joined in the fun real quick. They kissed me until I was gasping and writhing on the bed. Then, just when I thought things were about to get interesting again, Kaine rolled out of bed.

"How about breakfast? I've got some thick cut bacon in the fridge and some free range eggs? That on some toasted sourdough?"

"I could make that," I said. "Or the coffee."

By this time of the morning I would've done that any number of times at work, so making three cups was no great chore. He just shook his head slowly with a smile.

"Have a nice long shower," he told me. "We'll make breakfast."

“Maybe I’ll join you.” River looked at me with a slow smile.

I tried to imagine it: the simple pleasures of a shared life, of being able to have a shower together, a car ride, maybe a movie on the couch. Of being connected to someone. But Kaine obviously wasn’t picking up on that, and he threw a pillow at the other man.

“Your breakfast will be waiting for you when you get out,” Kaine promised me as River reluctantly pulled himself out of bed.

In the shower I was forced to confront what had happened last night. I had meant to... It wasn’t what I had planned but, as I smiled at my reflection, noting how swollen my lips were, the skin on my chin reddened with beard rash, I couldn’t bring myself to regret it. If multiple orgasms and having breakfast made for me was the beginning of my fated mate era, I was here for it.

A tiny part of me felt guilty, knowing that Amber wouldn’t have been able to find someone to replace me at such short notice and that everyone else would’ve had to pick up the pace to cover my absence but... Like a lot of creative people, my day job was a means to an end, not the career I’d engaged in willingly. I’d dreamed of being able to spend the whole day drawing when I was still at school and now...After I dressed, I walked out into the massive living room and saw all the art supplies where we’d left them, along with all of the shoes, just blank canvases ready for me to work on. Kaine looked up the moment I entered the room and pushed a steaming hot coffee towards me.

“So I’ve got news.”

I pulled the cup closer, cradling it in my hands and soaking up the warmth as River turned away from the cooktop.

“What news?” he asked with a frown.

“I spoke to Margot at the gallery and that didn’t go so well,” he said. Then his lips quirked up in a smile. “But then I went and had a chat with Bjorn.”

“Over at the tattoo shop?” River said, turning down the heat and setting the spatula down on the counter top. “He’s got that gallery...” They both turned to me.

“Bjorn’s a family friend,” Kaine told me. “He’s one of us.”

“A bear shifter tattooist?” I asked, still trying to get my head around that.

“A bear shifter biker tattooist,” River corrected.

“Who owns the shop he works in.” Kaine grabbed a plate and loaded it up with food, pushing it my way. “One part is the tattoo studio and the other part is a gallery. He and Cressida looked at your work and...” He looked like the cat that got the cream right then, so much pleasure in his expression. “He wants to offer you a solo show.”

“A solo...?” Words failed me. Gallery owners were spoiled for choice, often only letting a select few artists exhibit with them, and mostly those with a proven track record of sales. I flushed, thinking of my own anaemic sales records. “But I barely sell enough to keep myself in supplies,” I told him.

“Sales aren’t just about having a good product,” Kaine said and River sighed. The other man winked over his sleuthmate’s shoulder, as if Kaine did this a lot. “We build bloody good houses, but few people would build with us if they didn’t know that. We have a marketing and advertising budget that rivals our materials spend, but that makes sure that the sales keep coming.” He nodded slowly. “Bjorn knows his shit and wouldn’t offer you a spot if he didn’t think he could sell your work.”

“So what’s the shop’s name?” I asked, feeling a thrill and tamping it down hard. *Don’t get excited*, I thought to myself, *not yet. The place might be a dump or—*

“Bear Claw Studios,” Kaine replied.

Oh. Shit.

Something had happened in the last five years. When I was still at university there were only a couple of places to show your work. There were the big expensive galleries with fancy

wooden floorboards and perfectly white walls, all with hideously expensive abstract artworks on their walls. And then there were the slightly grungier indie galleries that were off the beaten track, with less hideously expensive, often very cerebral artworks displayed in them. I didn't feel like I fitted in either place. Then tattoo studios, hip boutiques and cool cafes seemed to get in on the whole gallery idea, displaying artwork that didn't really fit in the fine art canon, art like mine, instead focussing on shit the owners vibed with.

And Bear Claw was one of the coolest.

I'd met Cressida, the gallery manager, at an opening once and gushed all over her after one too many red wines. She'd handed me her card, told me to call her but... I didn't. When I was hungover the idea felt ridiculous. The woman was a goddess and I was...

"They want..." My throat closed up so I took a sip of my coffee. "You showed them my work?"

"Your Instagram feed," Kaine said, proud as punch, but that sent a wave of terror through me. I just posted my latest WIP pics there. It wasn't a professional portfolio. I unlocked my phone, tapping on the Insta icon, trying to remember what I'd last posted on there, fearing what that might mean for me career wise until...

I was never able to ignore my notifications. If those little red numbers popped up, it didn't matter what I was doing beforehand, I had to read through them, so any thought of looking up Bear Claw Studios went out the window when I saw the 99+ number in my notifications. I frowned as I scrolled through, seeing old comments on my feed before it had been set to private.

And this.

My heartbeat began to pound in my ears as I saw I'd been tagged in a heap of people's photos. People I didn't know. I blinked as my thumb hovered in the air, sure that I wasn't going to like what I was about to see.

But I tapped on the screen anyway.

And that's when I saw them. One photo, then another, of a glazed eyed Adam, just as we'd planned in the meeting at the footy clubhouse. He didn't look like himself, the light inside him somehow dimmed. His eyes looked hollow, his gaze empty, no, distraught, as he gazed at the camera. But they didn't. A little growl escaped my lips as I saw two beautiful women (were they twins?) raking their hands across his body like they had a right to.

I didn't want any other women touching Adam. I wanted to break one woman's fingers and bitch slap the other. And where the hell had that crap come from? I'd walked away. These ladies were within their rights to give things a go with him if all parties were open to it. But that' was not how it felt. *He's mine*, a selfish little voice said inside my head, *Mine*.

"Freya?" Kaine's voice sounded like it came from far away and that reminded me of my situation. I'd spent the night with two smoking hot men, enjoying a very nice evening wedged between my lovers, just like Adam probably still was right now, but... "Freya?"

Coffee cups and plates of food were left abandoned with a clatter and the two rushed to my side. Kaine took one look at me and plucked my phone from my grip, looking at the screen.

"That little fuck..." he cursed.

"No," I said, shaking my head, as if that would dislodge this feeling of... what? Betrayal? I'd looked at him from across the conference table and told Adam to do just this, so what did I expect? I had no hold over him and... "No, it's fine."

"Scent, remember?" River tapped the side of his nose. "No, it's not." He stared at Kaine. "Who the fuck took those photos? And who are those bloody girls? That's not what Adam had planned."

"Darren."

Kaine snarled the man's name and at that I remembered him. The guy who'd been at Adam's side, intent on pushing a hot babe his way, then shooting me a disgruntled look when

that didn't work. I'd seen it before, straight guys who were way too interested in their mates' love lives, as though the women they got with were more a means to consolidate that bond of mateship, rather than have an actual relationship with.

"He planned this?" River asked with a deep frown.

"It's probably why Adam was such a mess last night." Kaine shook his head. "He rang me from the gutter he was sitting in, drunk as a fucking skunk and..." He shot me a sidelong look. "Miserable." Kaine looked incredibly uncomfortable, but he wouldn't shy away from a difficult conversation, that was something I was learning about him. "This isn't what Adam wants, Freya. He wants you."

Why did that admission claw at my chest, destroying what peace I'd enjoyed since last night? He was just a one night stand, nothing to me. But I could see it somehow, an extension of the man in the photos. Someone broken down by a combination of bad luck and booze, someone...

Someone who missed me.

It'd felt like his eyes would sear holes into me when I walked into the conference room. And part of me needed that kind of need more than my next breath. It confirmed that what I'd felt that night was real for both of us. But then we'd talked coolly and clinically about solving the situation we'd found ourselves in. I'd just nodded along. That's what I wanted, right? To get the heat of the public eye off me, to stop people focusing on the wrong person and...

Direct it back where it deserved to be, on Adam.

I grabbed my phone back then, going to my contacts to put a call into Jack.

"You saw the photos?" I asked her when she picked up.

"Did I ever?" She let out a sigh. "Phil's having a conniption, but he'll get over it. He's just pissed at the journos talking about Adam not being a role model for the kiddies. But what did he think was going to happen?"

"Kaine said he's miserable," I said, every muscle tensing. "You didn't tell me that."

“Because the feelings of a man you had a one night stand with don’t matter,” she replied crisply. “Not until you say they do.” Jack paused for a second. “Do they, Freya?”

Why did I feel put on the spot by her question? Why did I care what Adam was going through? I didn’t know him... My mind stuttered on that, because somehow I felt like I did.

That didn’t stand up to any sort of scrutiny. I didn’t know how he liked his coffee made. Shit, I didn’t know if he liked coffee at all. I didn’t know if he thought Avatar: The Last Airbender was a masterpiece of modern animation or whether he listened to the top 40 stations or indie music. But for some reason I wanted to know. Because every time I remembered that night, I felt flushed with a strange kind of warmth that washed all the way through me, something that I’d only felt with two other men, and they stood in this kitchen.

“They do,” I said finally, then let out a sigh, a whole lot of tension leaching out of me. It felt like I’d just set down a burden I didn’t know I was carrying. “He does.”

“Well, as the team’s PR person, I could school you on how to stay under the radar until you’re ready to announce something real, give you some tricks for avoiding the media but—” she said.

“And as my friend?” My grip tightened around the phone.

“As your friend, I say talk to the boy. He’s a bloody idiot, like most men, but he’s not such a bad one. If you are determined to go dick, there’s certainly worse guys you could end up with. Talk to him, Freya. I think a lot of things could’ve been sorted out a whole lot better if the two of you had done that from the start.”

I ended the call and then found the two of them watching me closely without giving away anything in return.

“Jack says to talk to Adam,” I said lamely.

“And what do you think?” River asked carefully.

I thought about the morning when I’d sneaked away. I’d wanted to talk to him, just to have a few more minutes together, but then I’d pussied out at the last minute. I’d

thought I was avoiding the drama that might ensue, but look how that turned out?

“I’m ready,” I said, looking each one square in the eye. “If he wants to talk to me, I will.”

“I’ll get him on the phone,” Kaine said, with a smile and a nod. “I think you’ll find you made my brother’s day.”

Chapter 37

Adam

I woke up feeling like fucking shit. At first there was just the physical pain, the ache in my stomach, still sour and rumbling ominously, the muscles having been strained yacking up in Mum's garden. Then there was my head. It felt like I'd taken a fist to the face, the pain throbbing in time with my heart. But once the physical pain was noted, other shit came flooding in.

The girls touching me... Darren and his fucking camera... Alcohol, so much alcohol... Running out of the pub and ringing my brother. Fuck. That longing that seemed to plague my every step rising, rising, until I was crying down the line. Kaine having to walk away from Freya to pick me up— I aborted that thought process, jerking the covers of my childhood bed to one side and then slapping my feet down on the floor. Nothing good came from dwelling on shit, that's what my coaches always said, so I forced myself upright and staggered out of the bedroom.

“There he is!” One of my dads looked up from the kitchen, waving a spatula at me. The smell of bacon and eggs was usually manna from heaven, but my gut lurched, letting me know what would happen if I tried eating that. Dad snickered when he saw how green I looked. “No wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey for you?” he said.

“Fuck no...” I lurched away.

“What about hair of the dog?” One of my other dads, Kev, went to the fridge and pulled out a beer. The bile started to pool in my mouth, reminding me that I had chucked up everywhere yesterday and I hadn’t brushed my teeth yet.

“How about a toothbrush?” I croaked.

“In the bathroom drawer.” Mum appeared behind me, then reached up and placed the back of her hand against my forehead. “You’re looking a bit better. Nothing a good night’s sleep and a few square meals couldn’t fix.”

“Less of the talk about meals right now, thanks, Mum,” I groaned, feeling my guts rebel. “I’m gonna head into work a day early.”

“Yeah?” All three of my dads came to attention right then. “There’s work to be done,” Barry said, but then his eyes narrowed. “But only if you’re sober enough to do it safely.”

I raised a hand. “As a judge. Pretty sure I vomited up most of the alcohol I drank.”

“Well, if you’re feeling better, that’s the first job off the rank,” Mum said. “You can hose out around my roses. Stinks like a bloody brewery out there.”

I had a shower, brushed my teeth, cleaned up all of my messes and then pulled on some work gear one of my dads lent me, already feeling better when I did so. There was nothing that couldn’t be improved with hard work, that was the family motto. I caught a ride over to the building site with Kenny, jumping out and grabbing the toolbox in the back of the ute, carrying it over to the job at hand. I was gonna be fitting some doorknobs onto a finished house, a nice simple job that ‘even I couldn’t fuck up’, according to my dad. I checked in with the leading hand, found the door furniture they were using and which house to start on first and then got started.

I always hated school. PE was my favourite subject, tech studies coming a close second. There was something that came from working with your hands that just made sense to me, where scribbling all day in the classroom didn’t. I didn’t

exactly feel at peace though. Flashes of the mess I'd made, of the girls... of Darren... of Kaine being dragged away from Freya, all kept popping up too often for me to feel any kind of serenity, but... I felt useful. So when morning smoko came around and the leading hand said I'd done a good job getting through the simple task, I flushed, feeling better by being able to do something productive, at least. But right as I sank my arse down on my toolbox, ready to drink coffee from a thermos and munch on the ANZAC biscuits my mum had made, I got a message.

"Boss man wants to see you in the site office," one of my workmates said with a jerk of his head.

"In the shit with your brother already?" one of the guys asked with a knowing smile. "That didn't take long."

"Fuck off," I said, but with no real anger.

Putting shit on everyone you worked with was as Australian as kangaroos fucking, I reckoned. I shoved the biscuits back in the Ziplock bag, despite the other blokes offering to eat them for me. Mum's cooking was well known around the work site. But as I wandered off to the site office, I was pretty sure how this'd go.

You fucked up, Adam, Kaine would say. You were supposed to get pissed, but not that pissed. You rang me up, whinging like a little bitch and then you... My imagined conversation with my brother evaporated after I knocked on the door and then walked in, because there, leaning against my brother's desk, was Freya.

My mind stuttered, my lungs seized and my heart came to a standstill. Body and mind, I was derailed by the sight of her. I was exhausted, rawer than the last time I'd seen her, so my control was shot and I couldn't hold any of it back, taking a step closer then forcing myself to stop. I wanted her so fucking much that my fingers were flexing, then forming fists, over and over, trying to keep myself from reaching out and throwing her over my shoulder. I'd carried her away from the medal ceremony and I'd do the same again, if that's what it took... But I forced myself to take a breath, then another,

hastily wiping away the sweat that prickled across my brow, before rubbing my hands on my shirt.

“Freya—”

“Adam.” She took a step forward. *She* did. Freya came closer to me and no one was pushing her there. *Take another one, baby*, I pleaded inside my head. *Just one more*. But she stopped, her fingers raking up and down her jeans-clad thighs. “I thought...” That fucking smile, it lit something inside me, a fire I didn’t know had burned out and left me cold and bereft, but now it was back. “I thought we should talk, finally.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Kaine smirked then, the fucker always looking the same way when he brought home the bacon. He might take me and River to task for not getting shit done, but big daddy Kaine loved to play the role of the provider. I’d begged him last night, that bit was clear to me, even if I couldn’t remember exactly what for, and now he was delivering.

And I loved my big brother all the more for it.

He indicated a chair beside his desk and I sank down into it, hands on my knees, clawing at the stiff fabric of the work pants, before she did the same. She was so fucking elegant, tucking her legs off to the side a little and the sunlight coming in through the high windows seemed to light her hair on fire, turning it from brown to shades of dark gold and amber.

But that wasn’t what mattered.

She looked rested. No, better than that. She looked satisfied. I shot Kaine a sidelong look, sure he was to be congratulated on that. Part of me ached with a kind of jealousy I barely wanted to acknowledge, but mostly I was happy. That she was in the same room as me. That she looked well. That she was getting what she needed. And when I took a big breath in, it was because I wanted to tell her that.

“I guess you’re wondering why I nicked off that morning without a word.” She smiled as she spoke, but it was a bittersweet thing. It made me wonder if she felt the same pain about that day as I did.

“I wondered...” I replied.

I swallowed hard, my throat feeling bone dry and Kaine shoved a water bottle my way. I cracked the lid gratefully and drank way too much in greedy gulps, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. Because when I set it down again, she was watching me closely. I met her eyes then, even though that felt way too fucking intimate, because right now I didn't have a single defence I could muster. I was broken open and bleeding and so this came out.

“I figured I fucked up,” I said baldly, because sometimes you've just got to get that shit off your chest to get past it. “Either that night or beyond. I moved too fast—”

“I was moving just as fast with you,” she said, her hand sliding closer.

“Then it wasn't any good.” I searched her face, having asked myself the same thing over and over since that night. “I hurt you or didn't check in to see if you were happy. I didn't...” I shot my brother a sidelong look, but he just watched this shit show without comment. “I didn't please you.”

“No.” She reached over and fucking touched me and then I was gone, completely gone. My head stopped aching and so did my heart, my fingers tightening around hers, wanting to pull her closer. “Seriously, it wasn't because you didn't rock my world, but...” She let out a hopeless little laugh then. “It was because you did.”

Was it wrong for me to feel a hot flash of pride right then? Probably, but I did it anyway. I stared openly at her then, begging her to continue. Her cheeks were bright pink now and her eyes kept straying to where our hands were joined. She gripped my hand tighter and then it all came out.

“I didn't leave because of the sex, or how fast things went. It wasn't even the bite.”

Her spare hand strayed to her neck and I felt a deep pulse of satisfaction, seeing my teeth marks in her neck. I shouldn't. I stole that pleasure from all of us, but still. She was mine, the

bear was roaring that inside me, fur prickling across my skin as he fought to get out, to get closer to her.

“It’s kind of stupid really.”

“I’m fairly sure nothing you could say is stupid,” I told her, rubbing her knuckles with my thumb.

“No?” Her brow quirked up and there was my baby, full of spirit and challenge. “Well, how about this? I left the best thing I’d ever experienced in my life up to that point.” Her focus shifted to Kaine for just a second and that’s when the competitive streak in me started to rise. Kaine looked after our girl well? I needed to know how well, so I could top it. “Because I was scared.”

Fuck it, my other hand took hers and I drew her closer, so we were almost knee to knee.

“Tell me what was scaring you,” I said then. “Gimme that and I’ll tell you what I would’ve said then.”

She shifted on her chair, her scent souring, but I kept on sucking it in, because it belonged to her. *Be brave, baby*, I thought furiously. *Tell me what’s going on in that head of yours, because then I can start fixing shit.*

“I…” She let out a huff of breath, then seemed to collapse into herself. “I didn’t want to be in the spotlight. I loved being with you, being your fake date, then your real one. I felt a connection straight away and that was amazing, but the only way I could get through the medal ceremony was to promise myself that this would be the only time.” She squeezed my hands and then pulled free, even as my fingers clung to hers. “I had no idea if you wanted to pursue things further—”

“Only with every breath in my body,” I muttered, even as I felt the same ache in my heart again. I might not have much personal experience, but I knew a brushoff when I heard it.

“But I didn’t want to be a WAG. There’s nothing wrong with being the wife or a girlfriend of a player, but it comes with some challenges, I think you have to admit, they were ones I didn’t want to have to face. Everything that’s happened since makes that clearer. I don’t want to be the centre of

attention, have randos looking at my social media and giving me their unsolicited attention.” She rubbed at her face. “Like they are now.”

“We can get past that,” I said, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. Other people, that was the big thing standing between us? It couldn’t be, it just couldn’t.

“Adam—” she started to say.

“If footy’s the problem, I’ll walk away right fucking now.” But as soon as I said the words, the whole office went perfectly silent. Kaine watched me closely, but Freya’s brows creased in empathy.

“I don’t want that for you,” she said, her hand going to my arm. “You love football like I love art.”

“But I love you more.”

Fuck.

Fuck, I—

Fuck.

I tried to rally, pull shit back from the cliff I’d just stepped over, but it didn’t work. I’d tripped over my own tongue, bugged things up again, and I had to own that.

“Not love, love, because feeling like that after one fucking night would make me a raging psycho, and I don’t want you thinking that when...” I grabbed her hand again, needing the feel of her right now. “When all I can think about is you, Freya. Your smile, your scent, the way your skin feels against mine. That weird feeling of warmth every time we touch.”

“God, I thought that was just me,” she gasped.

“No, I’m right there with you.” I stared into her eyes, willing her to see it. “I knew one day a woman would come from nowhere and knock me for six and I was still not prepared for the way you make me feel.” I held her hands like an injured bird, cradled them inside mine. “I’ve wanted to find my mate from way before I started playing footy. I’ve heard the stories from the old fellas and knew my time would come.”

“Adam—” she said, a pained look on her face.

“You didn’t grow up in the community, so you don’t know. Bear shifters grow up knowing they need to make the necessary sacrifices to make their mate happy. Before I thought you didn’t want me, so I was willing to step back and let things progress with Kaine and River, but...” I searched her face, looking for signs of what I knew to be true. “I know I fucked up. I should’ve held back, paced myself, thought more about the consequences but...” My eyes bore into hers. “I think I knew. I felt you slipping through my fingers the moment I met you and part of me...” I shook my head. “Part of me just wanted to hold on regardless.”

I forced my hands down, my back straight and against the chair.

“And if that means you don’t want to be around me, I’ll accept that. I won’t be a creepy stalker. That’s wolf shifters.”

“There’s wolf shifters as well?” she asked with a snort.

“A whole bunch of weird fucking people who have more than one soul and just one soul mate,” I replied, soaking her in, like this was the last time I’d see her. “And all they want to do is spend their lives looking after them.” I let my eyes slide down her whole body. “That’s all I wanna do, is look after you.”

“But football—” she said.

“If you’re willing to let me make it up to you, then I’ll quit, Freya.” I threw up my hands. “Don’t let that shit hold you back. Just tell me...” I wanted to get close to her, let her scent wash over me, but I didn’t. I couldn’t do anything other than lay shit on the line. “Just tell me I’m not alone out here, aching for you, that I’m not the only one that feels like this is for forever, if we just take that first step.”

When her eyes filled with tears, I moved then, falling down on my knees before her, ready to hold her close, soothe her through this, but her hands went to my hair, stroking it over and over. I remembered her doing that on the night we met. The bear and I, we’d loved every fucking minute of it.

But it didn't hurt then as much as it did right now, the ache building, building, in my chest, feeling like my sternum would crack open at any point from the weight of this.

"You're not," she croaked out, a single tear sliding down her cheek and my hand was there to brush it away before it fell free. "I wish you were, but you're not. You..." She shot Kaine a sidelong look. "All of you, you get under my skin so damn easy."

"That's what mates do, baby, and we haven't even been on our A game. So, you're in?"

I sucked in a breath and held it, staying perfectly still, right up until the moment she nodded, then I surged forward.

I wanted to kiss her stupid, make those bee-stung lips even more swollen. I wanted to pick her up and set her on the edge of the desk, stepping between her legs. I wanted to grind all of my hardness into her softness, but instead I just brushed my lips across her ear.

"You've seen all the shit stuff about being with me," I whispered. "Lemme show you the good. I'll take you out on a date tonight."

"*We* 'll take you out on a date," Kaine corrected.

She flushed bright red then, looking at the two of us before nodding.

"OK, let's see where this goes then," she said and those were the sweetest words I'd ever heard.

Chapter 38

River

“So, we’re doing this?” I frowned as I stood in Kaine’s office at the end of the day, Kaine looking smug and Adam like he’d been hit by a truck. “You’re sure Freya said she was on board with exploring things?”

“Heard it myself,” Kaine said, spinning a pen between his fingers. “Problem is, we need to organise something for tonight. A date that shows her that we’re serious about her becoming our mate.”

“Somewhere we can spend some time getting to know her,” Adam added.

Don’t need that, I thought to myself. I know her.

It didn’t make sense, feeling that way, but that sense of her persisted. It was like I could feel her presence beside me, anticipate how she’d respond if she was here right now. With a snort and then a giggle, I’m sure, at the fact that we were making such a fuss over her, worried about what she would think, then an easy smile when she realised that we had gone all out.

“Bridgewater,” I said, able to see it now.

The Bridgewater Mill was a gorgeous restaurant nestled in the Adelaide Hills. Built in the 1850s, it was once a working flour mill, powered by a massive water wheel. The owners had built a restaurant/wedding venue into the building. It was

beautiful, tucked away from the hustle of the city, and the food and wine menu was incredible.

“The Bridgewater Mill?” Adam said, a thoughtful look in his eyes. “It’s freaking gorgeous and the media’s hardly likely to be hanging out around there.”

“It’s also booked out months, if not years in advance,” Kaine said with a frown, but he pulled out his phone. “Luckily I know the owner well.”

Of course he did. Kaine was always having to go to bullshit meetings with other builders, business owners or politicians, but sometimes that worked in our favour.

“Reg?” he said when the other person on the line picked up. “Kaine Farrelly, mate. Yeah, good to talk to you too...”

His well practised patter washed over me and that’s when I smiled.

I knew my sleuthmates well. We’d grown up together, so I had to, right? But there was something that came from lurking in the background. I saw shit no one else did and this was what I saw. I knew that Kaine felt like he was living in Adam’s shadow some of the time and that, frankly, it pissed him off. He had too much big dick energy (even though we were all packing everything our mate might need) to be able to play second fiddle to anyone. But on the flip side, he was the only bloke that could pick up the phone and get straight through to the owner of an exclusive restaurant, get them chatting and, then, organise something special.

Some hours later we were freshly showered with our hair brushed back from our faces. Even mine. Adam had even tied his long blond hair back into a man bun. Mostly at Kaine’s insistence, but still. Each one of us was clean, smelling of expensive aftershave Kaine had selected and wearing clothes we’d ironed to his exacting standards. My clothes felt stiff, uncomfortable, the sort I only wore at formal events like weddings and funerals, but... I glanced at the other two and

saw their cheeky grins, one part nerves, one part elation that Freya would even agree to this and I didn't care a bit.

"This feels like the change room before the grand final," Adam said and, all of a sudden, the mood shifted.

I didn't believe him when he said he was giving up football. As long as I'd known him, Adam was always bouncing a ball, ready to jump into a round of kick to kick in the school yard, dominating on the field during lunchtime games and then at training. I'd never seen the fascination. I'd played when I was at school, mainly because Adam did, but my performance was always lacklustre.

My coaches always said I was fit enough, strong enough, had good enough reflexes to succeed at the game, but... I didn't have the requisite hunger, not like Adam did. I think Kaine's mind was going down the same route and Adam caught our serious expressions and then smiled.

"Just because it's the same anticipation," he explained. "Like if we go in tonight and do our best—"

"Freya is not a game," Kaine corrected. "She's a grown arse woman and you need to treat her like that, not as an objective."

I watched Adam's face fall, and not for the first time. Kaine could always cut him off at the knees better than anyone else.

"That's all I want." There was something naked and vulnerable in Adam's face and that had me moving closer. "I just want a chance to get to know her properly, make amends."

Kaine was going to say something more, but I stepped closer, grabbing Adam by the shoulder.

"You'll be fine," I told him. "She puts up with the two of us so..."

"Well, I'll be a fucking shoo-in then, won't I?"

Adam shot me a relieved smile and of course, like all Aussie guys, the bullshit started.

“Shoo-in?” Kaine said with a smirk. “Is that what we’re calling putting your foot in your mouth now?”

“Bullshit!” Adam shot back, punching his brother in the arm. “My foot? No. Freya’s? If she asks nicely.”

“Is this the point where I find out you have a foot fetish?” Kaine asked, jerking backwards. “Fuck, brother—”

“Not a foot fetish,” Adam shot back before his eyes went wide and dreamy. “A Freya fetish.”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod, “that’s about right.”

We’d left Freya at the apartment to get ready. Jack had volunteered to come around and assist, once we told her the plan. She’d looked a little pained at Adam’s announcement, no doubt anticipating what her boss would have to say about it, but she’d rallied quickly, discussing potential options for Freya to wear.

“Take this,” Kaine said, handing her his credit card.

“Ooh... Daddy’s giving us his platinum card to play with,” Jack said to Freya. “Does this mean I get to live out all of my Pretty Woman fantasies? Except the one where I go down on 1980s vintage Julia Roberts, of course.”

So to say we were all waiting to see what our girl had decided to wear was an understatement.

“You’re gonna bust a load in those perfectly tailored pants,” Jack said as she emerged into the apartment living room.

“Jack...!” came Freya’s muffled retort.

“Spontaneous ejaculation all around, promise,” Jack said. “But if you can be real discreet about it, that’d be awesome. Don’t want to have my bestie’s guys’ O faces etched into my brain. Save that shit for her.”

But anything anyone might have to say about that was silenced as soon as Freya walked into the room.

She didn't like wearing dresses, that was clear. She kept twitching at the folds of the full skirt, made from some kind of light as air, twinkly fabric overlaid on a heavier satin. That was OK, because I was pretty sure I didn't want anyone seeing her like this. The dress had a strapless bodice that seemed to expose way too much creamy white skin making my fangs ache and my fingers itch to explore, the dress nipping in to make her waist look tiny, then flaring out over her hips.

"You look—" I started to say.

"Fucking amazing."

Adam had a posy of flowers he'd picked from the gardens of the old ladies up our road. Each one of the women knew what we were and what we were up to, being members of the bear shifter community, so they'd banded together to help him make the prettiest flower arrangement possible, fussing over which flowers to add and which to discard. Their hard work seemed to have worked. Freya flushed bright red as she accepted the bouquet.

"They're beautiful," she said, then looked at each one of us. "Thank you."

"And I got you this."

Kaine produced a shawl from fucking nowhere, like some kind of magician, flicking the soft folds out and then wrapping it around her shoulders. Her eyes went wide, then heavily lidded as she felt the fabric. Her hands petted it like it was a cat and suddenly I was jealous of a piece of fabric.

And realising I was standing there empty handed.

Mum's worries about finding my mate, her twittered instructions, felt like they doubled, tripled inside my head, but I stepped closer anyway.

"I didn't bring you anything—" I said.

"Yes, you did." Her arm went around my waist and while I could barely feel the weight of it through my suit jacket, I treasured it just the same, tucking her into my side. She stared up at me and I met her eyes. "You brought me you."

I dropped my head down, arrowing in for her lips. I'd stopped myself from kissing her, picking her up and throwing her down on the nearest bed the moment I saw her, so I figured I was doing alright. I brushed a kiss across her lips, loving the way they instantly parted for me.

“Gag,” Jack said, then winked at me. “People in love. Bah, humbug.”

“Shit, Jack,” Freya said, pulling away from me to go to her, but her friend shook her head sharply. “You’re still getting over—”

“Nothing. I’m getting over nothing.” Jack said the words so decisively you had to wonder what pain was lurking beneath them, but she charged on. “Because I know this: nothing and no one should stop you jumping in, if you know it’s right. It doesn’t matter if it’s right now, or forever.” She shrugged. “There’s no way of knowing other than giving it a go.” She looked all of us over. “And I hope you four can get it together long enough to see if this is going to work.” Her eyes narrowed as she zeroed in on Adam. “And you. Keep your bloody fangs to yourself.” She wagged a finger in his face.

“Can’t claim your mate more than once,” he said with a grin, then glanced at us. “You need to be lecturing these two.”

“My bestie comes back here un-gnawed, you hear me?” Jack told us and I held up a hand.

“I swear I won’t claim Freya unless she asks me very nicely,” I replied.

“Good, now you...” She sighed when she looked at Kaine. “No point in telling you anything, is there, Ice Man?”

“Ice Man,” Adam chuckled. “I think I’m gonna use that.”

“And if you do, I’ll kick your arse, ya great fluffy poodle.” Kaine yanked on his brother’s bun, hard. “But let’s get out of here before this all devolves.” He held out his arm for Freya to take and she glanced up at me before moving the two of us closer so we could both escort her to the lift.

“I get to walk Freya into the restaurant,” Adam said, following behind.

“You did not just call dibs on our mate,” Kaine replied.

“Not dibs, just saying.” He ducked out in front of us, walking backwards so he could still talk to Freya. “The place is amazing, just you wait.”

And it was.

We all piled into the town car Kaine had hired, winding our way through the hills, before we reached the mill.

You could see why people used it for weddings. The beautiful old building had been revitalised and remade into a fairy tale-like venue. There was a large open deck area and across the top they’d built a trellis. Vines wound their way between the network of wood and steel, softening the hard lines and creating an open air roof of pretty purple flowers that smelled almost as sweet as our mate. Adam had stayed true to his word, escorting her up the steps, but I cut ahead. The waiter indicated which table was ours and I pulled out the chair at the head of it.

“Thank you,” she said, flushing as I moved in closer, breathing her in as I tucked her chair under her, then sat down at her left. Both Farrelly brothers went to sit down at her right before I shot them a steady look. Kaine nodded. He knew what the two of them were like when they were together, so he came and sat next to me.

“Is there anything—?” the waiter went to say, but Adam leaned in closer to Freya, ignoring him completely.

“What do you want to drink? They have a house wine that’s supposed to be amazing, but do you even like wine?” He frowned slightly. “When we met you were drinking a gin and tonic.” He turned to the waiter. “Can we get a fancy gin and tonic? One of those ones that tastes like green ants or something.” His focus shifted back to Freya. “Would you like something like that?”

“Adam,” she said, reaching across and grabbing his hand. “Take a breath.”

“Right.” He did just that. “Right.”

“I’ll have a gin and tonic,” she told the waiter. “No green ant gin but if you have any citrus flavoured ones?”

“We have a 23rd St red citrus flavoured gin,” the waiter said. “Paired with an elderflower tonic water, it’s really amazing.”

“Then I’ll have that, thanks.” She looked Kaine over speculatively. “I’m thinking wine, South Australian, dry... a Riesling?”

“Or a pinot gris,” he said, slowly inclining his head.

But when she turned to me, I froze. Right now, this little tableau, it scared the fucking shit out of me. That might have seemed odd, but I knew why. This was a glimpse of the future: our future. Freya chilling Adam out, catering to Kaine and me? I just needed to be noticed every now and then and I’d be happy, so when I felt her eyes on me, I soaked that attention in.

“And River—”

Before she could say anything, I had an answer. “Just a beer, thanks, mate,” I told the waiter. “Whatever you’ve got on tap.”

Her other hand took mine, but she didn’t hold it so much as explore it, tracing the lengths of my fingers until my skin was alive and tingling at her touch. I gripped the glass of beer when it arrived, gratefully taking a drink, glad for something to do, because it took my mind off the intensity of the moment.

I had a pen in my pocket and I wanted to grab it to record what this was. I wanted to scratch in Kaine as he leaned back, his fingers playing with the stem of his wine glass as he talked about his day, the hunch of Adam’s shoulders as he sought to find the gaps in the conversation where he could insert himself. And then there was Freya, seeming somehow surprised by all of this attention, but how the fuck could that

be the case? She was beautiful, so fucking beautiful, so of course we stared at her. But it was more than just a physical thing. She was like a fire and we were clustered around her warmth, putting our hands out to absorb that heat. Because being with her? It washed the cold chill of loneliness from our bones.

“And what about you, River?” she asked me. “How was your day?”

I needed to answer her and not just due to the social expectation that I would. I was an open book when it came to her, I felt, so her asking me questions felt weird. Didn't she already know? But of course, she didn't. How could she? So I answered her as honestly as I could.

“I can't really remember,” I said with a sheepish smile. “Not trying to hold out on you or anything. I know I went to work, built something.” Kaine snorted at that. “But as soon as Adam said you were interested in trying something...” I stared into her eyes, tightening my grip on her hand. “Then everything else got driven out of my head. That's all that I remember, Freya, that you decided you were open to this.”

I felt like I'd exposed too much, made myself look weak, but she moved in slowly, looking me over with a possessive air, before taking my mouth. I let out a helpless little sound, then kissed her right back. She was my girl, they were my sleuth and while we might not be able to make this shit work out in the end, right now all I saw were possibilities. I tried to communicate that in my kiss, my gaze, everything, until...

“Are you ready to order?” the waiter said.

Finally, we pulled away breathlessly to blink at the rest of the table. And the rest of my sleuth? They wore small smiles of contentment.

“I think we know what we want,” Kaine said, leaning forward.

Chapter 39

Freya

Oh my god. I... Oh my god.

My brain couldn't seem to move on from that exclamation, because to do so would mean processing everything. The dress Jack and I had found. The posy of creamy white ranunculus and blush dahlias, coupled with fine sprays of baby's breath. The flowers were beautiful. But this place? I felt like I was having dinner in a fairy kingdom. The furniture was made from well sanded pieces of blond wood, the natural shapes of the boughs helping form the form of each piece. And the table? It was covered with a long runner of white crochet and there were little jam jars made of a pinkish glass, tea lights flickering inside them. There were too many knives and forks at each place setting it seemed, but despite all of these visual delights, all I could do was look at them.

These men, they were mine, they'd made that clear, but it felt like I was finally being given space to come to grips with that.

Adam was frantically attentive, his bright blue eyes wide as he watched me the entire time and I watched him back. I couldn't stop looking at the harsh planes of his face, revealed clearly now that his long blond hair had been pulled back. And in a suit? This boy was pure porn, the dark blue fabric hugging his broad shoulders, then narrowing down to a narrow waist, but it was more than his good looks. All of the fan pages

recorded the way he looked on screen and off, but they didn't know the little things about him.

That his hands couldn't stay still when he was nervous, plucking at his suit jacket, tracing the shapes in the crochet work on the table, until my hand reached out and took his. He exhaled then, letting out one massive breath and just went still. Adam stared at me like I hung the damn moon, that everything I had to say was fascinating, right before he worked himself into a lather about what I might want to drink. And that attentiveness was what I wanted.

I needed to know I mattered to whoever I was with, because that had been missing in the guys I'd met before. None of them watched for my every micro-expression, reading me constantly, desperate to keep me happy. I'd never had anyone's entire focus before and now I had his. Adam just stared at me, hope and fear warring inside him until I smiled and he smiled too, seemingly relieved. That right now we could have this moment together, away from everyone and everything else and just be.

Kaine watched everything keenly, maintaining the facade of idle confidence, but I knew what a lie that was. He lowkey hovered, ready to step in and rein Adam back. When it became clear that I wasn't offended by his brother's attentiveness, he leaned forward.

"So what about your day?" he asked. "You asked us about ours..."

"Jack was in her fucking element, being able to buy me another dress and within weeks of getting the last one." I went to retrieve the credit card he'd given me so I could return it to him, but he closed his hand over it, leaving it with me.

"I'll get your own issued to you," he replied smoothly. "I'm not sure if you're comfortable with that—"

"Not really," I replied honestly, but I smiled.

"I don't want you going without, Freya," he said, a tiny smidge of that grumpiness bleeding back into his voice. "I know you're perfectly capable of earning your own money,

but...” He squeezed my hand, then let it go, leaving the card in my palm. “I want you to have everything you need.”

But I did already, didn't he understand? I was floating in this sea of unreality at how my fortunes had changed. He'd made an appointment for me to meet up with Cressida about the potential solo show, and then Jack had gotten involved, not wanting me to sign anything until she'd looked at it, so we'd made a time that suited us all. I'd thought I could sink into a morning of creating, but she'd insisted on taking me dress shopping and... I looked around me again, my breath coming in tremulous little gasps right now, because it felt like if I exhaled a long breath out, I'd blow all of this away and I'd be back stuck being reliable, nice, but ultimately forgettable Freya.

And then there was River.

Out of the three of them, he was the one that was the most similar to me. I'm not sure if he took in the aesthetics of this place in, but his eyes seemed to be everywhere at once, looking, looking, until they settled on me. And that's where they stayed. There was a quietness, a stillness, that I needed, like he was seeing everything I was seeing and was right there with me through it. Scraping his hair back from his face revealed all of his reactions, but he wasn't saying anything. Adam was filling all the spaces that Kaine left, and that's why I asked him how River's day was.

“I can't really remember.” I treasured that slow smile of his. “Not trying to hold out on you or anything. I know I went to work, built something. But as soon as Adam said you were interested in trying something... Then everything else got driven out of my head. That's all that I remember, Freya, that you decided you were open to this.”

Jesus, was this possible? Is that what this was? Were we building something? My mind wanted it all planned out, to know everything that was to come, even as my heart knew that wasn't possible. So that's why I posed a question.

“So what would it look like?” I tried to make the question casual, not a demand for a five year plan. But if he

spontaneously provided one? Well, I wouldn't have been sad about it. I dared to look at each one of them, searching their faces. Because this was all very nice, the beautiful venue, the amazing gin that I admit I took a big sip from when it arrived. Part of me wanted to believe that this might be the way it would be, me making art and preparing for an exhibition, and then when they came back from work, we'd go out for dinner at places like this, but... "It can't always be like this every night."

"Can't it?" Kaine straightened up, those cool blue eyes seeming to heat up. "If this is what you need, we'll make sure you get it." He pulled out his phone and started flicking through his contacts. "I have a dozen good restaurants on speed dial. I can have a standing reservation—"

"Kaine."

I was forced to lean past River to get to him, but when my hand reached out, he took it, rubbing his thumb across my knuckles. That's when he looked up, searching my face.

"What do you dream about?" he asked me, all the hard edges gone from his voice. "What did you want for your future when you were a little girl?" I let out a little huff of a laugh, holding that smile as I stared into his eyes. I was like every other adult, forced to make compromises and do without things I'd assumed were so very important, so thinking otherwise felt ridiculous, indulgent. "Freya..." Kaine was gently, gently prompting me now, his grip on my hand softening. "What do you hope will happen if we make this work?"

OK, I'd come out tonight, prepared to be wowed and dated by three hot bear shifter men, but I wasn't prepared for this. Because right now, Adam, Kaine, River, they watched me closely as if just waiting for a word from me to make all my dreams come true.

"I..." I let out a sigh then, disengaging my gaze from Kaine's and looking down the long table, my eyes going unfocussed as I stared at the purple flowers hanging down low from overhead. "I think..." I sucked in a breath, my eyes

falling closed for just a second before I dared to open them again. “The night of the awards ceremony. When the attention wasn’t on us, but on the screen, and Adam was just sitting next to me, holding my hands and saying... everything I wanted to hear. Then afterwards...”

I flushed as I remembered exactly what came next and Adam let out a low growl in response.

“And Kaine, when you ordered me dinner and we sat there, talking. And despite the fact I’m sure you could fit a whole footy field in your living room, it felt small and intimate.” I glanced his way. “Like the whole world was reduced down to just you and me.”

Two small red spots formed in Kaine’s cheeks, but I saw the determination there in his eyes, right before he nodded.

“And River...” Something in his eyes stopped me. He wasn’t smiling or looking smugly confident, instead River’s eyes were wide and staring. I frowned slightly, and it took a second to realise what he was feeling.

Fear.

“The day we sat together making art? I’m not sure if you realised this, but that was always one of my favourite dreams when I was a teenager. That I’d find some hot guy...” I reached over and pushed a strand of his hair back and he moved closer, just a little, to lean into the caress. “One who shared my love of art, who’d be like my twin, the two of us creating for hours on end, only to emerge later and make something beautiful together.”

He shut his eyes and then pressed a kiss into the palm of my hand.

“That’s what I wanted too.” River’s eyes closed and the words seemed to come easier because of it. “People were always telling me off for drawing when I wasn’t supposed to. They didn’t get why it was so important, and that killed something inside me. When I dreamed of finding my mate, I dreamed of finding someone who got it.” His eyes flicked open. “Who understood.”

And I did, I really did. The creative impulse is a strange one. Most people go through their life not wanting to make a single thing, or if they do, it's just an idea or two they keep close to their chest, never actually wanting to make it real. Because once it's there on the page or on the wall or whatever, it's up there to be picked apart, critiqued. The dream dies so something real can be made.

"I get that." My smile twisted right as I felt a pang of pain. "Man, do I get that. My parents have always been frustrated about me making art all the time. 'You won't get a job making art, Freya...'" I said, imitating Dad's gently disapproving tones.

"River, why do you have to draw all the time?" River said, obviously doing the same. "You could spend your time doing anything, and this is what you waste it doing?" He shook his head. "But it's not a waste."

"Never," I agreed. "So you and I get to set up an artist's commune for two, but..." I glanced at Adam and Kaine. "What do you guys want from this?"

"A family." Adam blurted that out without thinking, then looked guiltily around the table. "Not necessarily with kids. Well, unless you want them?" He looked at me for an indication of what I thought, but charged on before I could answer. "It doesn't have to be 2.5 kids and a house in the suburbs, but..." Those big hands started to worry the crochet of the table runner again. "Knowing that every day when I come home, someone will be there. Being surrounded by people I love, doing all the little things together like making a slap-up meal."

"There'll be plenty of them if you decide to accept the bond," Kaine said. "Either a whole lot of scrambled eggs on toast or I order in."

"I can cook," I said, then instantly regretted it as each man groaned.

"Of course you can," Kaine muttered. "You're perfect for us."

“But I don’t want you stuck in the kitchen or anything,” Adam continued, grabbing my hand. “And if you are, I’ll be right there with you.”

“You know he can’t even heat water without leaving it to boil dry,” Kaine supplied helpfully.

“Peeling spuds or chopping up carrots.” Adam leaned in closer. “Whatever you need. That’s what I dream of. I got into footy...” I think we all drew in a breath then, but he forged on, “for that feeling of connection, of being a part of something bigger than myself. That’s what I want.” There was something of a challenge in his gaze as he regarded the other men. “To be connected, to be a real sleuth.”

“And Kaine?” I asked. “Is that what you want? To make art and be a part of a family?”

“No.” His reply was blunt and that made me blink, but before I could respond, he explained. “I’m terrible at art. I’m fairly sure my old art teacher found a way for me to switch electives in middle school so as to get me out of her class. I don’t understand it, the need to make it or the process that goes into it. In the end I just see something beautiful...” He stared at me. “Or not. I’m that guy in a gallery, wondering if the painting someone put their heart and soul into will work with the existing colour scheme we have in the display home we’re building. Art for me is an investment not a spiritual thing, but...”

He leaned in and the cool businessman facade seemed to fracture.

“In some ways I’m very similar to my brother. Our mum and dads, they love each other dearly and while watching your parents fall in love more each day was gag-worthy when we were kids, it’s engendered something in the both of us.”

Kaine stared into my eyes.

“I watch my dads and to the world they seem like big burly blokes who run a very successful company. They can mix it with politicians and CEOs and shout down unruly subcontractors who think they can come onto our building

sites and throw their weight around. But despite all of that, those men are mush when it comes to my mother.”

He sucked in a breath and I felt like I saw the real Kaine.

“Back when we were kids, Mum was on a DIY kick, painting walls weird colours and calling them feature walls.”

“God, remember that suede effect paint she used?” Adam groaned. “That was a bitch to sand off afterwards.”

“She put up these little friezes of wallpaper, then hated that. Textured tiles, then hated that.” I smiled as Kaine recited a litany of his mother’s questionable decor choices. “But whatever she wanted, my dads were right there, enabling her the whole way. They knew she’d dislike the results years, maybe only months, down the track, but they never said a word. That.” One finger stabbed into the table. “That’s what I want. My dads don’t understand a fucking thing about interior decoration. They employ arty types to sort that out once the house is designed and signed off, but despite that fact, they work with her through every change, because when she’s finished she’s pleased as punch, if only for a little while and that’s all they need.”

His brows creased slightly.

“It’s what I need. To make my family happy. To look after them and keep them secure. To protect them from the shit of the world—”

“But not all of it.” Adam stared his brother down. “You literally can’t, you know that, right?”

“I can try,” Kaine growled.

“And you’ll fail every time, because that’s the thing.” Something real was playing out between the two of them, and River and I were on the side lines, watching. “Our dads? They work together. Kenny gets her to visualise what she wants on like Pinterest or whatever, especially after that fairy light debacle.”

“Fairy light debacle...?” I whispered but River shook his head.

“One of the others gets her to come and grab paint swatches and wall paper samples, creating a vision board, helping her to make a clear plan for what she’s proposing and ___”

“Then Barry makes sure it all gets done, even when she loses interest.” Kaine blinked as he regarded his brother. “They all make sure that what she wants happens.”

“They succeed as a sleuth,” Adam corrected, “not despite it.”

Kaine’s eyes narrowed.

“You’d need to start running some of those dumb arse decisions past me before you make them, brother.”

“Right back atcha.” Adam’s reply was sharp, but his gesture wasn’t, as he reached across the table and offered his hand to Kaine. “Making decisions as a team? I’m the one with the most experience in that regard.”

Kaine snorted, eyeing his brother’s hand.

“You do what your coach tells you to.”

“There’s always gotta be someone who listens to everyone’s input, then makes the best decision for the team. Everything can’t be done as a committee. There needs to be someone experienced enough, with enough objectivity...”

Adam’s voice trailed away as Kaine leaned over the table and then shook his brother’s hand.

“Together,” Kaine agreed finally. “Whatever we do going forward, we do it together.”

Chapter 40

Kaine

Fuck, maybe this might just work.

I let out a long breath as my brother and I came to an agreement. It felt like a weight had been lifted for just a second, before my brain strove to make clear what a bad idea that was. *What about when Adam...? And then when he...?* But I was forced to shove that shit to one side. That's what this whole thing was about, right? About trying to find another, better way forward. My brother wasn't an idiot and no one had ever said that about River, but maybe...? Maybe we could start pulling together in the same direction instead of whatever parallel play shit this we'd been doing. The fact that everyone in my sleuth seemed to want to wander off on their own and do their thing quietly drove me insane. The bear, he growled, knowing how this shit worked. We were stronger together and we always would be, and he was just pissed it'd taken me so long to work that out.

"Well, in the spirit of cooperation, let me order for the lot of you," I said.

The waiter was doing his best to be patient and I empathised with how he felt. I waited on tenterhooks for their answers.

"You need this." Freya stated that softly, with a kindness that I probably didn't deserve, before smiling and then nodding, letting me play the game that I loved the most.

I was fairly sure Adam thought I was an overbearing dick, but he didn't have to live with himself. Every time I thought I had him pegged, had his favourite sports drinks stocked and a fridge full of the kinds of meals his nutritionist recommended, he'd decide that he needed to eat his body weight in pizza instead.

And he didn't know what that did to me.

I needed this, the challenge of skimming my eyes down the Mill menu, instantly rejecting some meals and holding others in my mind as I curated our order in my mind. I accepted and rejected ideas as rapidly as I could, until I was pretty sure I had it. I rattled off the dishes, watching the waiter's pencil work on his notepad, struggling to write down everything I listed.

"So what're we eating tonight?" Adam asked, once the waiter was gone. "Filet mignon for you and stale bread and gruel for me?"

"A selection of lean protein, vegetables and some slow carbs for you," I replied. "It's the kind of diet you've been on since playing footy, so while you might need to reduce your calorie intake due to less training, the macros still agree with you." I shifted my focus to Freya. "Something rich and indulgent for you." I loved the way her cheeks flushed at that. "And some lighter sides to contrast with that. While I think eating something decadent agrees with you, you're not used to a lot of it and it'll just end up making you ill."

"And me?"

People always underestimated River, but they never saw the challenge in his eyes that rose periodically.

"You treat food like fuel, something you need to put in your body to keep it going," I replied. "So I got something substantial, but with some sides that are quite special. They might remind you that sensual pleasures are something to be enjoyed, not endured."

Both our eyes slid to Freya, something that had her wriggling in her seat, but not for long. The waiter returned all too quickly with our entrees, presenting them with a flourish.

“Oh my god...” she gasped and that was everything I needed from tonight. “This looks amazing!” I couldn’t have been prouder if I’d made the food myself.

“Damn...” Adam’s cutlery hovered in the air as he chewed on his first mouthful. “This shit is good.”

“Very good.” River nodded to my own untouched plate and it was only once I had seen their approval that I could turn to my own food. A confection made from burrata, tomatoes that they grew on site and fresh pesto, the mixture of acid, creamy cheese and tangy pesto exploded in my mouth, all the better for the company I was with. Because when they were all together, around the table, enjoying what I provided for them? That’s when I could truly taste every flavour of my own food.

“So full...” Freya groaned as we pushed the last course of the night away from us, scraps of the delicious desserts going uneaten: not because we didn’t want to, but because we couldn’t fit another morsel in. “You’re gonna need to roll me into the car park and shove me into the back of the car because I am done.”

“Perhaps a little walk before we head back might be in order?” I gestured to the waiter who swept forward with the bill, then took care of it before offering her my arm. Freya stood with a smile, fussing with her pashmina before I stepped in and tucked it tightly around her shoulders. I kept it in place with my arm as I walked her down a small slope to the destination I had in mind.

The mill was built in a small depression which had a thin trickle of a creek running through it. And while there was a park adjoining the restaurant, that was not where I steered her. The whole area was thick with trees, creating a massive canopy the stars were forced to peek through, the only gaps those where walking tracks had been created. Locals no doubt used them for exercise each day. But at this time of night,

there was no one else here. I moved her off the road, grabbing her around the waist, smiling when I heard her gasp, her hands around my shoulders as I carried her from one bank of the creek to the next, before putting her down on the track.

“So is this what you’re promising me?” she asked with a smile, taking my hand. “I’ll never have to cross a creek alone again?”

“Point me at any obstacles you face,” I replied, “and I’ll make sure you get over them. Whatever stands in your way? I’ll get rid of it.”

“You’re a fixer,” she said, staring up at me. “That’s what makes you happy.”

“Sort of,” I replied.

“Kaine wants to know where the problems are before they arrive,” Adam said, popping his elbow up on my shoulder. I barely suppressed the urge to drive my elbow into his ribs, which should have earned me major brownie points. “Pretty sure he believes with just the right amount of anal retentiveness, he’ll be able to nip every problem in the bud.”

When he reached over and mussed my hair, that was a step too far. I shoved him out of the way, which just had him cackling, because he’d gotten what he wanted, a reaction.

“Are you right?” I asked, part joking, part serious. “I’m trying to have a moment here.” My focus shifted back to Freya, but I caught the moment when Adam’s smile faded. I paid him no mind though, offering Freya my hand. “I can’t stand to see someone I care about hurting. If you need something, I’m gonna want to give it to you, like...”

I sucked in a breath, knowing this was probably happening too fast, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself.

“Like your job.”

“What about my job?” she asked.

“It’s not what you want to do with your life.”

“Yeah, but I have to earn money—”

“No, you don’t.” I stepped closer then. “That’s the thing, Freya. I earn bloody good money. More than enough to allow all of us to live in luxury, if that’s what we want, which...” I scanned the lot of them. “I don’t think any of us want. People say money doesn’t buy you happiness, but, shit, does it buy you freedom. Freedom from having to make people coffee or clean up their kids’ messes. Freedom from having to do anything other than the thing you really want to do.”

“You come alive when you work on your art,” River said, stepping closer. “You don’t when you’re at the cafe. You might like the people or your boss, but, if they all went?” Her face seemed to fall then, as if visualising just that. “I don’t think you’d enjoy it at all. Creating is what makes you happy. It’s what you’re made to do.”

“And what about you?” she shot back and we all heard the defensive note in her voice. “You’re an artist. Why don’t you stay home and make all those beautiful drawings? Let Kaine support you while you put a portfolio together.”

“Because that’s not how art works for me,” he said. “For me it’s a way to escape the world and understand it all at the same time. When I draw, I process and shut out all the damn noise, but when I’m done? I toss the drawings usually.”

She winced at that and Adam stepped forward.

“I’ve saved a bunch of them,” he told her. “Pulled them out of the bin or the recycling. They’re too good to be thrown out, but...” He smiled then. “You shouldn’t let whatever’s going on in your head put you off. Footy players at my level, we get a wage, but it’s not exorbitant. The wage cap makes sure of that. I couldn’t afford to take the time off to train full time without my family’s support. It can be a hard thing to do, to accept someone else’s support—”

“But the great artists used to have patrons.” I might have failed art, but I was good at history. I remembered when we covered the Renaissance and the patronage system thriving at the time. “Rich men used to fight over the opportunity of commissioning artists.”

“Well known artists,” she shot back. “Ones that they knew they were either going to get a good return on their investment on or as a show of piety. Pretty sure weird little drawings on sneakers don’t fit that bill.”

“So don’t draw on sneakers.” I didn’t care what she did, just that she was happy but right now I caught a small wince at that, which I didn’t understand, not yet. “Or do. An artist needs to express themselves in the way that makes sense to them.” I nodded to River’s notebook, poking out the pocket of his jacket. “Whichever way makes sense to you, we’ll help.”

“So that’s the way it’s gonna be?” she scoffed. “Art supplies and multiple orgasms until I die.”

We all stepped closer then, because that was the thing about fated mates. They bring a sleuth together in ways that don’t quite make sense until they do. All our differences, all our quibbles were shoved aside right now as we focussed on this.

“If that’s what you want,” I replied, slowly, carefully, letting my eyes run down that damn dress and the beautiful body underneath it. “You just need to decide. So which is it tonight, beautiful? You’ve got an apartment full of art materials to return to...”

Or, that was left unsaid. Or she could let us take her back to the city, not to kiss her cheek at the lift, then leave her in peace for the night. Or she could take our hands and let us in.

Chapter 41

Adam

“You’ve got an apartment full of art materials to return to...” my brother said and I wanted that for Freya. I could just imagine her nestled down in amongst all the shit we bought her, going to her happy place and creating, but... We all heard the implied alternative offer in his voice, because Freya’s eyes jerked up to meet his, then ours.

“And if I don’t want that?” she asked, and that’s when I saw some of the fire that had burned in her the night we first met.

She didn’t see it, but I did. Our girl was brave enough, bold enough to do a whole lot of things, including sneak upstairs into my room at the hotel the night of the medal count. No matter what her sexual experience was, she knew what she wanted that night, and right now, I was seeing that same certainty. Freya wasn’t looking at me or the others with wariness or pain. Instead, there was something... possessive about it. It was in the twitch of her fingers, the way her hand lifted slightly, then was pushed back down again, only to be raised again. Her scent bloomed, sweeter than any flower, filling the air until my head started to spin and my heart pounded.

She wanted us, wanted me.

I could’ve damn near cried for the relief of it, never daring to think it could’ve happened again and that’s what shifted me closer.

“What do you want, Freya?” Those could’ve been harsh words but I barely whispered them, treating her like a skittish horse I needed to gentle, although I was the one that was terrified. “You tell me and I’ll make sure you get it.”

And I meant it too. If she just wanted River, I’d haul Kaine away by the collar and if it was my bossy prick brother, then I’d turn River around, go back to the mill and order us a couple of beers as the Ice Man escorted her home. And if it was me...? That idea was so damn tantalising my mouth watered and every muscle locked down, not wanting to do it, to force myself into her space, not after all the shit I’d pulled. Some things need a whole lot of muscle to achieve and some things need razor sharp control and I had both, when I had my eye on the prize. I’d do anything, if it meant winning her back to my side.

“Tell me, Freya—”

“You.” She said that softly, bluntly, with a shy little look and then one not so shy. Those beautiful hazel depths felt deep enough to dive into and I wanted to drown in her. “That was never the problem. I wanted you the morning after. I wanted you the day after that.”

“And the day after that?” I asked, risking a small smile. She smiled too and for a second the bear settled inside me. I was on the right track. She was smelling so sweet. We had our mate and—

“Maybe not then.” Her brow creased for a second but she chased it away with a grin. “Then I was angry with you going to the damn media, but all the while...” She grabbed my hand and my fingers flexed around it on reflex, gripping it tight, right before she forced it to settle low on her pelvis. “I ached, right here.”

“I hurt you?” I asked, already starting to back away. I thought I’d *been* careful. I didn’t lose control right up until the very end, but—

“Not in a bad way.” She willed me to understand as she stared into my eyes. “It was like I felt the ghost of you deep inside me, a reminder of where you’d been.”

Oh.

Some deep primal part of me fucking loved that idea, that she felt the echo of me inside her long after I was gone. I wanted to revel in that, but I pushed past it and focussed on her.

“The only place I’ll ever get peace,” I replied, smoothing my hand over the gentle swell of her stomach. “Being inside you...” I raised my other hand and used the fingers to trace the shape of that perfect mouth. “I’ve won grand finals, pulled shit out of my arse to turn a game around and had half of Adelaide cheering me on. But medals, honours, they’re nothing compared to you, Freya. It’s why I walked away from the medal count. That was just a foreshadowing of what’s to come, because I can’t think of a fucking thing, not footy, not work, nothing but you.”

I was standing there between the darkened trunks of massive trees, scrub and bush around our ankles and the cool air playing over our skin, but all I could see, feel, was her. It was all I’d ever be able to focus on.

“You want to see where things go? Let us take you home, show you what it would’ve been like if I hadn’t fucked everything up. Give us that tonight, Freya, and—”

She smiled as she pressed her hand to my lips.

“Yes. You told me to tell you what I want? I want that, Adam, give me that.”

She let out a yelp as I scooped her up and carried her out of the trees and onto the road.

“Get that fancy arse car here stat, Kaine,” I ordered my brother and didn’t that feel good. “My baby wants to go home now and I’m gonna make sure that happens.”

“Yeah, sure, you’ll do that,” Kaine snarked, but he got out his phone and put through the call, the town car appearing not long afterwards.

Freya's lips got so damn swollen when she was kissed. I hadn't noticed that last time but I did now. They were already plush and pink and oh so tempting, but as we all sank into the double backseat of the car and the driver started off, we each kissed them until they were ready to burst.

I started first, unable to stop myself from leaning down and brushing my mouth against hers, because the moment we reconnected? It was like taking long breaths in after running until my legs gave out; a cold bottle of water after a long run. I needed this, needed her, and I wanted to tell her that, over and over.

"Freya..." I had more to say, but my mouth found hers instead. "Freya..."

I was trying to get it out, the feeling that was surging in my chest, clawing its way out, ready to be free. But she grabbed my hair and tangled her fingers in it, pulling the hair tie out and then raking her hands through my hair before dragging me closer. She needed me, that sang in my heart, just like I needed her. Somehow her seatbelt was undone and I hauled her up onto my lap, dragging her mouth back down to kiss, when my brother cleared his throat.

The car had a double back seat, one side facing the other and my brother sprawled across his side, watching the two of us with cool eyes.

Actually make that three.

He nodded to me, then looked over at River.

My boy was holding himself back by a thread. If I could see it, so could she. An impish smile quirked her lips, right before Freya stared at the privacy screen for the third time. Then she gestured for River to come forward and that's all it took.

I didn't know what it'd be like to share my mate, but I'd thought about it a lot. Jerked my dick raw fantasising about it as a teenager, then pondered on the logistics when I was older. But what I hadn't anticipated was the intimacy of it all. When River kissed her, I heard as they both drew breath, like divers

about to throw themselves overboard and into each other. I felt her hair shift against my skin as he grabbed great handfuls of it, then balled it up against the base of her head. I heard her little moans and felt her body shift, against his and mine. My hands slid around her, wedging her tighter between us, hearing the hum of pleasure from her, then my eyes dropped down, taking in the creamy expanse of her neck.

The scar I'd left on her perfect skin was both a trophy and a mark of shame. I loved that she wore it, that it was in a place she'd never be able to hide, not even with the highest of turtlenecks. It made clear to other shifters, to the world, that she was mine and I was hers. But right now it taunted me. I'd made the mark in haste but now I had to prove myself worthy of calling her my mate. I pressed my mouth to that mark, promising with my kiss to do just that, and her whole body jolted.

I knew what I was doing, what it would make her feel. A mating mark was a whole other erogenous zone, able to set a shifter's mate alight. When I flicked my tongue across the serrated mark, she let out a little groan of surprise, then her body rocked against mine. My hand slid down her flank, wedging her tighter against me. She let out a gasp when she felt how hard and ready I was to service her, her movements much more purposeful now, as I sucked on the mark in long slow pulses.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Kaine asked, his voice a sharp knife cutting through the thick air in the back of the car. River pulled back from kissing her to force Freya to answer.

"Yes..."

"You don't want Adam to stop, do you?"

Her hips jerked, and I could feel the tension inside her wind tighter, as my hands ruffled through all those layers of floaty fabric, pushing them aside to get to her. Hot, slick, she was drenching her knickers and painting her thighs with her arousal and I couldn't have been fucking happier. Fuck medals, I won everything right now.

"No." That came out much more definite.

“So imagine how all three of us can make you feel.” Kaine met my eyes over Freya’s shoulder, a smirk forming. “Time to share, little brother.”

He knew I’d always struggled with that, getting so caught up in playing with toys when I was a kid, that it was a fight to get me to let go of them. That selfish impulse, it’d been riding me the night of the medal count, part of me loving having Freya all to myself. But the same shit played out on the footy field. Some dickhead would get full of himself, focussing on his own performance not the game, and that’s where it all fell apart. We had to work as a team on the field and it was now I realised I needed to do the same here. I picked Freya up and turned her around, putting that sweet arse right back on my lap before kissing my way down her spine.

“You want Kaine?” I asked her in a husky voice. “You want him to kiss you?” My hands slid around her sides and her spine arched, rubbing her butt against the hardest part of me. “Maybe more?”

I felt the pleats in the fabric of her bodice, the heat of her body only just radiating past it, then the swollen swell of her breasts. I traced the sweetheart neckline of her dress, the suggestion clear.

“You looked so fucking beautiful tonight, Freya, and this dress is amazing, but Jack is a fucking bitch, because it puts your tits up on display, like fruit on a platter. I tried really hard not to stare—”

“Not very hard.” River cocked an eyebrow at me.

“You didn’t try all that hard either,” I shot back with a grin, but then we both focussed on her. “None of us can.” I shifted my hips on instinct, rubbing the cock trapped in my pants back and forth against her seam. “When you’re near us, all we can do is look at you, watch you. Jack bought you a beautiful dress, but all I’ve been thinking about is taking it off you since the moment I saw it.

“Right there with you,” Kaine growled.

“You look like some kind of fairy princess, but...” I slid my finger down the zip of her dress, not undoing it yet, but making clear I wanted to. “I don’t need a princess and I don’t think the others do either.”

“Just you.” Kaine tipped her chin up so Freya was forced to meet his eyes and I saw the look of rapt fascination and the pain it caused him there. Did she catch it? The slight purse of his lips, the tiny frown forming. “We need you, Freya. Not before you’re ready and if you’re not—”

“God, Kaine, kiss me already,” my girl rasped out.

I smiled then, right before her hands grabbed mine and placed them on her breasts, and I took just a moment to treasure that, before I mapped the swell of each one with my hands. Her nipples felt like they were burrowing their way through the soft fabric and I couldn’t let their struggle go unaided. I pulled one hand away as the fingers of the other clamped down and that’s when she started to writhe. I tugged a nipple with one hand and her zip down with the other and that’s when everyone groaned.

“Fuck...”

Kaine pulled back and River crowded in, their eyes not seeming to know where to settle as they struggled to take all of her in. That was my girl, stopping three bear shifters in their tracks, like she would every damn time. But feeling her bare, hot flesh, it had me moving, circling one nipple and feeling the skin begin to respond, the point forming a hard bead I couldn’t help but pinch. Because each time I did, she moved, as if there was a line between her breasts and her clit and I was pulling on both of them.

“Stop fucking staring and get to pleasing our mate,” I barked. “She’ll think we’re a bunch of dickheads who have no idea how to show a woman a good time.”

And in some ways that was true. We’d all thought about, wondered, prepared and even talked about this, but now was the first time we’d ever been together the way we were supposed to be and nothing felt more right.

“Kaine, I need—”

She didn't get to finish that sentence and she wouldn't again. We'd be there, every step of the way, anticipating what she wanted and making sure she'd get it, I'd bet my life on it. Because suddenly the whole world narrowed down to just this car, the sway of it around corners, as the forward momentum feeling like it powered ours.

My brothers kissed her and River's head dropped lower, brushing kisses along her shoulders and then going down. Freya wrapped a hand around his head, tangling her fingers in his hair, right before he sucked her nipple in. I raked up her skirts, my fingers finding her core dripping with honey for me, for us. Her hips lifted, just enough to let me pull her underwear to one side and then plunge my fingers in.

There, that's where heaven on earth was. I felt her clamp down on my fingers, as if to stop me from pulling away, but that was never going to be the problem. I rushed towards her, towards this, like I had before, but now I needed to do that the right way.

Together.

No matter what happened, no matter what challenges we'd face, we'd do so as a sleuth.

A lovely sentiment, obviously, but as my nanas always said. If you make promises to the bear gods, they'll make sure you live up to them every time. Right now all I could think about was how perfect this night was.

But at what cost?

I couldn't calculate that, not as I felt Freya's pussy twitch around my fingers, forcing them to curl up and rake against the spot I'd awakened the night we first met. I did it over and over, listening to her muffled cries grow louder, come faster, right up until...

“I'm coming!” she gasped out.

Fuck, yeah, she was. I thrust my fingers in and out, pushing past the waves that wracked her body, spurring on more, until she forced my fingers away with a shudder. I

licked them clean, loving that tangy sweet taste, right before Kaine moved forward.

“Tonight has been far more amazing than anything I expected,” he told her. “And we can end things here.”

It was only now we realised that the car was idling, and as I looked out the dark tinted windows, I saw the car park that belonged to Kaine’s apartment.

“Oh my god...” Freya hissed and as she jerked her dress up, I zipped her back up again, making her decent. “Did the driver—?”

“None of that matters right now,” Kaine told her. “Just you.” And then my brother asked the thing I should’ve the night I first met Freya. “What do you want?”

I moved so I could see at least the side of her face and when I did, I caught the flush across her cheeks.

“More.” Her voice was one part shy, one part vixen. “I want more.”

Chapter 42

Freya

“More,” I said, and where the hell had that come from? I’d had a lovely dinner, and then had three guys work together to give me an orgasm on the drive home. “I want more.”

And I did. Good girls waited until the third date/sixth/until he’d spent two thousand dollars/six months, but I couldn’t seem to wait for another minute. My hands couldn’t stay still, reaching to stroke one impeccably tailored lapel or to grip another big strong hand, with a need that was riding me high right now. I still felt the aftershocks of the pleasure they’d all made happen thrumming through my body and I couldn’t help but want to do that again.

“Get the door,” River said and the others moved, getting out of the car and then holding the door as he swooped in. Those massive arms went around me and he held me tight against his chest.

“Why are you guys carrying me everywhere?” I joked as we emerged out into the car park. I studiously avoided looking at the driver as Kaine ensured he was paid. “I’m perfectly capable of walking myself.”

Was I? My legs felt like jelly due to how tight they’d been clenched as I’d ridden each wave of pleasure.

“You are capable,” Adam said, swimming into view. “So very capable, but we’re gonna want to do things for you that

you can already do yourself. We like..." He shook his head. "We need to look after you."

I glanced up at River, feeling a low rumble in his chest. He wasn't saying much with his lips, but a whole lot with his eyes that stared into mine as he nodded slowly.

"And if we're going to do that, we need to take things upstairs." Kaine had returned, sounding crisp and authoritative, but those cool blue eyes heated up when he saw me.

I saw the same expression in each man's face as they carried me into the lift. I saw the floors tick by and felt a growing sense of anticipation with each number that appeared. What would happen when they opened? I knew, and that had me squirming right up until the lift stopped. When we stepped out, Kaine retrieved the keys to the apartment from my bag, as River set me down on my feet.

How had anyone mistaken them for anything other than bears? That slow amble towards me, the gleam of their eyes... I took an involuntary step backwards, then another, a prey response. And they noted that, eyes narrowing slightly, right before Kaine spoke.

"You need to be clear on what you want tonight, Freya."

"And what's on offer?" I was mouthing off like I didn't have a care in the world, even though every muscle in my body was quivering with the effort it took to stay in one place.

"Everything," River growled. "You know that."

And I knew what that meant now. He watched my hand move to trace across the bite on my neck, the skin so damn sensitive right now. Those eyes caught the little moan of pleasure that escaped me. So what would more look like? That was what the greedy part of me asked. What would it be like to have everything I'd ever wanted? Stuffed full, every erogenous zone worked, that was often a fantasy of mine, because when no one seemed to notice you, the idea of having three men focus entirely on your pleasure was pretty damn seductive.

But what he was offering was more than just tonight.

I had only seen Kaine's bear, my fingertips rubbing together as I felt the phantom sensation of his fur, and when they drew closer to me, I tried to see it. Were they all polar bears under the skin or something else?

"So, am I going to meet your bears?" I asked.

"If that's what you want." Kaine stopped tracking me, standing with a square stance, his arms crossed. "We've never hidden that from you. But that's not what you want to ask."

"What're you going to do to me?" came a much more honest question.

He smiled as he came to a stop and so did the other two, and it felt like the entire sleuth was eating me up with their eyes.

"We're going to strip that gorgeous dress off your body. We're going to stare at you, because, damn, that's the only reasonable response when in the presence of someone so fucking beautiful. And when we're done?" Kaine glanced at Adam and then back at me. "Then we're going to learn you, find out what makes you gasp and cry out and even scream, right before we make you come more times than you think possible."

I let out a little laugh, even as something throbbed deep inside me. "You're building this up to be more than it is. No sex can be that good."

"You doubt me?" Kaine slunk closer. No, all of them did, surrounding me now.

"Don't doubt *us*," Adam corrected. "We want that, Freya, more than you could know. It's been burning inside each one of us since—"

"So show me," I said.

I couldn't take another declaration. I needed to know first hand if they were everything they said they were. I stepped up to all three of them, daring them to put their money where their mouth was and that was where I made my mistake.

Goldilocks didn't tell the three bears to bring it, because those hulking creatures knew exactly what they were capable of.

My hand was grabbed and I was tugged further into the darkened apartment. Bars of artificial light streaming in through the massive windows flickered over my skin as I stumbled after them, but somehow it felt entirely apt that they didn't turn the lights on yet. Instead I saw them as dark shapes and burning eyes, indistinct demonic creatures until one of them yanked me forward.

“Need a hands on demonstration of what it'll be like to become our mate?” That was more growl than man right now, so I couldn't tell who, his grip like iron as he kept me pinned against his hard body. “We'll give it to you.” His other hand slid up my throat, thumbing my pulse before forcing my chin to rise and my mouth with it. “We'll give you everything, Freya.”

I had a smart arse reply right there on the tip of my tongue, but he kissed me before I could say anything.

And then words didn't matter.

Not when I felt a hard body pressed against mine, not when he was forced to suck in a sharp breath, right before he kissed me, like he was diving in and wouldn't be coming up for air for some time. Not when my mouth and his seemed to wrestle for dominance, right up until the point he made clear there was no competition. He chuckled when he pulled away, sensing my lips moving closer, unwilling to break the kiss. But I got it on his terms and his terms only, and when his mouth slammed down on mine, he declared himself victor.

Tongue, teeth, no make that fangs that raked across my swollen bottom lip, right before he sucked it in. But when he let it go, he was right there before I could rally, thrusting his tongue between my lips in a slow sensual sweep that made clear what else he'd like to do with it. I wriggled against his grip, my arms held behind my back with a hand made of iron, forcing me to stop still and take this.

Which was exactly what I needed.

Him holding me, keeping me still, seemed to stop more than just my body but my mind too. Something unleashed inside me, something hungry that had been beaten back too many times. I made a hopeless, desperate little sound, right before he pulled away.

“Shh...” The lamp flicked on and I saw Kaine lying on the bed, River watching us wide eyed as Adam stood over me.

I was sure it was Kaine I was kissing. The masterful way he controlled my body, it seemed...

“Adam...?”

“Give it to me,” he demanded, not bothering to explain what that meant. “Give it to me, Freya.”

“What, I—?”

“You’re needy,” he announced and I flushed instantly. “Give me that.” He let go of my hands and threw his arms wide, making himself the target, but for what? “Give me that hunger.”

But he didn’t understand what he was asking for. I’d been ignored, rebuffed, never even got beyond friendship with other men I’d become interested in, left to moon after them in private and put on a brave face when I was out with others. People didn’t want desire from me.

“Give it to me,” Adam said again, like he knew exactly what I was thinking and he wasn’t backing away for a second.

They were always growling, so I guess they weren’t surprised when I made a strange little strangled sound, right as I launched myself at him.

I tried to undo buttons with shaking hands and when that didn’t work my hands turned to claws, trying to force the shirt open. Not literal claws, because that would’ve been actually useful, just useless blunt nailed things that raked across his shirt front. Adam didn’t move to help me, just nodding when I got one button free, then another, then enough to tear his shirt up from out of his pants and rip the rest of the buttons off so they went pinging off around the room.

And then there he was.

In the golden light of the lamp, he was beautiful, making me wish my drawing skills were more like River's, so I could record such masculine perfection. There was no softness in him, something I compared as I touched him with the fingertips of one hand, before jerking it back.

“You can touch me.” His voice was low and encouraging. “I’m yours, beautiful.” When I didn’t move fast enough, he put his hand over mine and pushed it towards his chest. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you the whole time.” His voice broke then. “I’m yours, Freya, and that’s all I’ll ever be. Since that night, nothing else has made sense, nothing else has felt right, but you.”

He drew me closer much more gently now, stroking his hand down my jaw.

“And if it’s alright with you, tonight, just for tonight, I want to make you mine.”

I kissed him then much more sweetly, because dammit, I felt the same. When I kissed him, it was like coming home and when his arms went around me, I knew I’d been missing them since that night. Screw football, screw the media, screw everything but this and I think I mumbled something to that effect.

“Screw all of that, huh?” he said, grinning down at me. “I dunno, I’ve got other ideas that are likely to feel a whole lot better. Whaddya think, baby, wanna do this right this time?”

Chapter 43

Kaine

I'd spent my life being envious of my brother, but never more than now. He was staring down at Freya with all the love each one of us felt for our mate, but he held nothing back. That was always his gift. Adam was always completely and utterly open with everyone about everything, and that opened doors for him that I couldn't walk through.

It also closed a whole bunch of others, hence the drama with the media.

But as I watched him with our mate, I learned a lesson, knowing now that we could do the exact same thing. I glanced at River and he nodded in recognition, right as we stepped closer.

Skimming the backs of my fingers along her arms and watching her shiver? I'd never get used to that. Then that shy little look over her shoulder, followed by a completely brazen smile? I looked forward to all the incidents where we could inspire that over and over. And then there was the way her gaze dropped down to focus on my lips, the smile fading as something else came over her.

A need we shared.

I darted in, wrapping a hand around her waist but not pulling her away from my brother. We wouldn't play those games anymore. I kissed her slowly, savouring her, tasting the honey from the dessert she'd ordered as my tongue swept in.

And then I let her go.

Her brow creased slightly, as if she wondered at that, but that's when River stepped in. He didn't even need to say anything, so attuned to each other's presence they were. He had something that both of us didn't, some other connection beyond that of a bear shifter and his mate. They moved like dancers, realigning their bodies, Freya shifting in Adam's grip to face him. Then I watched them come together, her hands going around his neck, their mouths hovering over each other's, just breathing each other in before they moved closer. His lips grazed against hers, stringing this out until even my muscles were tensing up in anticipation and Freya was forced to drag him down to kiss her.

And that's when he took over.

His hands went to her hair and he cradled her against him while Adam stepped in to run kisses down her spine. I watched them try to map her form with their mouths, and knew they couldn't, not without help. So I moved in to trace the shape of the back of her dress with my finger before easing the zipper down. She let out a little sigh, as if she'd been waiting for this the entire time. The dress parted, then fell to the ground in a soft cloud and I drew her away from it, holding her hand as if we were about to dance. Though what I had in mind was not as elegant as that.

"You're beautiful, Freya." Her cheeks pinked at that and I couldn't work out why. "But more than that, you're perfect for us, and we're a complete mess as a result." She smiled, which was much easier for me to watch. "Remember that. You're always the one in control. We are helpless to do anything other than what you want." I shot Adam a look. "Well, we are now. So whatever happens tonight—"

"Is what I want." She smoothed her hand across my chest and I loved the possessive air of that. "I know that." Freya moved much more slowly now, undoing my buttons, but I didn't care how long it took, not when she pushed her hand inside and touched my bare skin. All the shit in my head stopped right then and just went quiet. This, this is what I needed. "You're what I want. Do you know that?"

“I do now.”

I tugged her closer, smelling her scent sweetening and becoming more complex by the second. My eyes found hers, holding her gaze as I reached behind and undid the clasp of her strapless bra and let that fall as well. River might be the artistic one, but I felt like a sculptor, discovering her form within a lump of marble, using my hands rather than tools to shape her.

But I watched her the whole time.

Cataloguing her every response, watching her pupils expand, her breathing come in faster and faster as I stroked her shoulders, then followed the slope down until it met the tops of her breasts, her tiny nod giving me the go ahead to shape them as well. That softness, that heaviness, filling my hands, feeling oh so soft, I got lost in it until Adam stepped forward.

“I think big bro is a little transfixed, beautiful.” He took her arms and brought them up behind her head to wrap around his neck and that thrust her breasts up and out, like she was offering them to me. Not just me though. River stepped in when I did, tilting her lips his way and kissing her as he claimed one breast and I did the other.

My focus felt like it narrowed down now, tracking the way goosebumps prickled across her skin, her chest heaving with sighs as I treasured the sight of my beautiful mate. Her breasts were fucking amazing. How every bloke who walked into that cafe didn't fall to his knees and give thanks to the gods, I didn't know, but that was what I did now. I whispered frantic little prayers, just under my breath as I teased the nipple to tightness, then pulled on it, hearing her answering moans and wanting to provoke more, before Freya pulled away and dragged my head down.

Gods, she was so fucking soft.

My tongue flicked across that swollen nub, circling it before giving it an experimental suck. Her fingers raked across my scalp, egging me on. I sucked harder, rolling that sensitive point around in my mouth, wringing every drop of sensation I could get from the caress.

“You like my brother’s mouth on you?” Adam asked her. “I think I know something you’d like more.” And that’s when he plucked her from our grasp and laid her onto the bed. He kissed her, of course he did. We couldn’t seem to stop doing that right now. “All of our mouths on you, beautiful.” She let out a little moan at the idea, right before he looked back at the two of us. “So what’re you waiting for?”

Chapter 44

River

I knew what she needed. I could taste it on my tongue. That floral sweetness was growing tart and I was moving forward without thought. Adam lay down on the bed and then put Freya between his thighs, offering her up to us. His hand moved slowly, drawing attention to our mate's curves before we moved forward. Clothes were torn off. They were an impediment to giving her what she needed. My cock was hard, weeping in anticipation of being close to her, but I caught Kaine out of the corner of my eye and saw he was exactly the same. He held my gaze for just a second, then nodded, before we closed in.

“The big bad bears look like they want to eat you all up,” Adam said, moving his feet so they were in between hers and then used them to separate her thighs. He was opening her up like she was a present for us.

When she was something so much more important.

Freya was everything and that had the two of us dropping our heads down, our mouths moving up the rounded forms of her legs. Because with each kiss, I heard a little intake of breath, getting faster and faster until they just blurred together into one long sigh. Then, as I got higher, I felt it, a hand on the back of my neck, soft at first, then tangling her fingers in my hair to grip tight as we got closer.

Her scent was heady. When she'd been aroused by something in the past, it had filled my nostrils, but that was

nothing like now. The perfume made my mouth water, my lips move faster, instinctively knowing that my goal was in sight.

But so was Kaine's.

He drew back then and looked across at me in the darkness, eyes twinkling, before he turned to stare at Freya.

“River didn't have dessert at the restaurant.”

There was no point. Everything tasted like sawdust to me when I was around our mate. I could've been eating plain boiled rice or haute cuisine and I wouldn't have known the difference.

“I'm thinking he deserves some now.”

She did too, her grip growing tighter, dragging me right where I wanted to be.

Drowning in her.

My hands went under her hips and my thumbs spread her wide, tilting her up and towards my face like a cup I'd drink from, then I darted forward.

That first taste. She burst on my tongue like the sweetest of fruit and I couldn't help but go back for another lick, then another. I wanted to trace every fold, draw a map of her with my tongue until I knew every inch of her intimately. But like a kid being given his first ice cream cone, I couldn't take my time. Her fingers digging into my skull, the sounds of her moans, the way she opened up for me, letting me in deeper, made clear what she needed.

And I'd always give it to her.

I'd paint the backgrounds for her art, take her home when she was working late, sit there and listen to whatever she needed to talk through, but also this. When the fires of lust raged in her body, I'd feed them right up until she burst, and then hold her tight as she came down. She was mine, all mine and I'd do my damndest to make that clear each and every day. It's why I scooped her up and off the bed, pulling her away from the others and then placed her on top of my face. She was a queen and I was the throne.

“Riv got you riding his face, baby?” I felt Adam shift behind me, then heard her frantic little sound of pleasure, right before he muffled it with a kiss. “Got you feeling so good?” She couldn’t reply, and that made me savagely proud, my mouth, my tongue moving faster, pushing her harder. “Now here comes Kaine.”

I felt my sleuthmate settle behind her, then fingers slide through her folds. I focussed on her clit, swirling my tongue around and around it, before daring a direct flick across the nub.

“He must be making you ache,” Kaine said in a low growl. “Somewhere right about here.”

I felt her jolt as he pushed his fingers inside her, then her thighs widened as he found that spot. Any guy could give a girl a G-spot orgasm if he knew what he was doing, but bear shifters? We had an innate sense humans didn’t. We knew where we’d lock down inside her, tugging, tugging, our baculum forcing her to come and keep on coming and, while fingers were a poor substitute, she didn’t seem to mind. Her hips jerked down, rubbing frantically against me, cutting off all my oxygen, but I didn’t care. I didn’t need to breathe when I was with her. My hands clamped down on her hips, my tongue moving like lightning to get her where she needed to go.

The first jerk, that little yelp, I fucking loved the sound of it, my mate helpless with a pleasure we made her feel. But Kaine wasn’t satisfied.

“Mm... feeling good right now? I’m sure we could top that.” His hands moved much more slowly now, like he was massaging something deep inside her. Her answering cry was not so certain. She sounded tired, delirious, drunk on pleasure, but our girl had asked for more, and we were going to give it to her.

“Kaine...” There was something helpless in her voice, something desperate.

“You need something, don’t you?” His voice was one part command, one part plea. I traced the very outskirts of Freya’s

clit with my tongue. She was too sensitive to get too close to, but I could nudge her slowly towards another orgasm, I was sure of it. “Something our tongues and fingers can’t give you.”

“Yes...” she panted. “Yes...”

It was then that he pulled her away from me, my fingers leaving red marks in their wake, as I instinctively tried to snatch her back. She needed me, the bear roared inside me. She was mine and... Kaine smirked over her shoulder as he held her close, then settled her hips over mine.

Fuck, the feel of her wet cunt against my cock, it had it jumping in response. Precum drooled out of the tip in preparation. But he slowly slid his hands up and down her body, cupping her tits, tilting her head back, right as he kissed her lips.

“You need something inside you.”

“Yes...” she whispered.

“You need us.”

That had her eyes open, the haze dissipating for just a second and she seemed to see me for the first time. I mentally begged, pleaded for her to see it. That I was hers the moment I walked into that coffee shop. That I’d spend my whole damn life drawing her, to try and capture her beauty, her soul, because then she’d be really mine.

“You want that?” she asked me with a slow smile.

“I want you, Freya, in any way you... Oh fuck!”

Nothing I’d thought about, seen or heard prepared me for this. Every muscle locked tight, rigid as she gripped my cock and then worked herself down. Her cunt felt like it swallowed me whole. Soft, slick, but oh so fucking tight, I prayed to all the gods that this shit would work out between us, because I could never come back from this, ever.

“Freya...” I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, how good she was making me feel, but I couldn’t form words, nor sentences, just calling out her name over and over. “Freya... Freya, I—”

She leaned forward then, planting her hands on my chest like she owned it: and she did. I was hers, wholly and solely, now and forever. I reached up then, cradling her close, just holding her against me for a second as we both just felt. That moment of connection, throbbing real and true. I knew then exactly the challenge bear shifters faced. I'd never feel like this for another woman, I was sure, forcing myself to hold her lightly, right as I wanted to grip her tight. Instead I breathed in her scent, closed my eyes and buried my face in her hair, right as my hips jerked up and into her.

Fuck.

When I moved, she moved with me, the two of us working in perfect tandem. Somehow I knew I needed to shift my angle slightly, and I was rewarded by a deep throaty moan.

“River...” She barely whispered my name, but I heard it anyway. “River, I—”

“I know,” I rasped back. “I know.”

She must have been filled with a need to string this out, make it last forever, because the same need burned in me, but neither of us could manage it. She was too hot, too sweet, felt too damn good, so when her cunt flexed around me, I was gone. My hands slapped down on her hips, not letting her pull back as far, and I jerked up harder, slamming into her. Fireworks of pleasure burst behind my eyes, right as she felt the same.

“You’re gonna come all over his cock, aren’t you?” Adam appeared by our side. “Because that’s the way it would’ve been, if I’d waited. All four of us coming together, joining together.” She sought him almost blindly, caught up in the sensations we stirred up together, but his voice still drew her forward. “Like this, baby.”

His hand slid between us, finding her clit and working it, my stomach pressing his fingers down harder with every thrust. I didn’t get our girl off and neither did Adam. We did. I could see it now, how it might be, all the way we could work together to make her life better. To make her happy. That’s

what ached in my chest, taking the physical pleasure of being inside her and transmuting it into something so much more.

Love.

I fucking loved Freya and I didn't want to just blurt that out, not right now when we were all so totally vulnerable, so I found her eyes instead, telling her mutely over and over what I felt. And when her eyes locked with mine, I think she knew.

Her cunt clenched down tighter, her fingernails pricking the skin of my chest as she lowered her lips to mine.

“River...” She whispered my name against my lips, right as everything came rushing to a head. “River, I need...”

“That’s it,” Adam said with a smile, right as Kaine scrambled to move.

“Hang on,” he growled. “We need to talk this through first.”

“River, I need you to...”

But I knew. I rolled us over, so I loomed above her, pistoning in and out of her body, feeling her cunt grip me tighter with every pulse. I'd always been told that a man unleashed his baculum at will, but that was not what happened here. She gripped me tight, forcing it out of me, my breath sucking in as the bone jutted out. The blunt spur dug in and that's when she screamed my name.

“I'm here, beautiful,” I told her, my voice a shaky fucking mess. “I'll always be here. For now and forever, as long as you want me.”

People were talking, so much talking, but I shut out each and every one of them to focus on her. The way her hips squirmed, as she tested the bond between us and let out breathy little sighs as a result. The way her head rolled sideways, baring her neck to me. Her fingers raked across my back, right up until she said the words.

“Now, River.”

That's it, that's what I'd been waiting for my whole fucking life, let alone this night. My lips peeled back and my

fangs were bared. But she didn't care, stroking me much more gently, then digging her fingers into my hair as my mouth closed around the skin on her neck. When my fangs bit deep, I erupted and she was there with me, tugging me along with the rolling waves of her pleasure that seemed to go on and on for a million blissful moments, until finally they petered away. It was then I pulled back to stare at her.

Did she regret this? Had I hurt her? I searched her face for answers and her neck for blood? What if she was just caught up in the moment and this was not what she had planned at all? What if—?

River. Her voice inside my head, that's what stopped me cold, blinking as I stared down at her. *You're just what I was waiting for.* She stroked my cheek then and I leant into the caress, catching the moment tears pricked her eyes. *I feel like I've been waiting for so long—*

I scooped her up then, sitting back and holding her to my chest, my arms wrapped tight.

No more waiting, I promised her, the bear promised her. *Never ever. You need something—*

Just this.

She settled against my shoulder, collapsing against me and that's when I saw Adam nod and smile. It seemed farfetched to think he'd known this was going to happen, but that's what it looked like. But I didn't care. I'd spent my whole life waiting to find the one woman that was the other half of my heart and now I felt that connection throbbing between us, I didn't care how I got here.

Mine, that pulsed with my heartbeat, over and over.

Mine, she agreed, nestling in closer with a sigh.

Chapter 45

Freya

It was now I realised what the guys had been making such a fuss about. With Adam the connection was instantaneous, but it was a superficial one. It could've been built on, become deeper with time, but he hadn't allowed that. River however... He lived up to his name, feeling like someone I could dive down deep into, never finding the bottom of his depths. I sighed as I snuggled into him closer.

“Freya...”

My brow creased and I made a plaintive little sound. I was sinking down, down, down and I didn't want to come up.

“Freya...”

“C'mon, sweetheart.” That was another voice, not quite so insistent. “Big brother has to check in and make sure you're OK.”

“Something that you should've been doing.”

“Don't need to.” I blinked and then saw Adam and Kaine sitting looking down at me. “I can feel it and you'd feel it too if you shut up for long enough.” Adam rubbed his hand up and down my arm. “You're feeling good right now, aren't you?”

I nodded slowly, ready to turn back to River and feel more of that.

“How about a shower?”

Kaine was trying so hard to keep his tone light, to phrase it as a request, not an order, so when he held out a hand, I took it. He collected me up and I didn't care if he carried me this time. My legs were not working and I wouldn't have made it without him. He set me down in a very swanky looking walk-in shower and I made a sound of distress at the feel of the cold tiles on my feet. Kaine moved instantly to switch on the water, get it to temperature and then pull me under it.

“And how are you feeling?” Kaine asked.

I smiled slightly at the solicitous question. As he worked the soap between his hands and got a lather going, this felt something like a doctor's visit, but there was no clinical calm in the way he smoothed the soap over my skin. He worked to get me clean in a series of long, sensual strokes, right up until he reached the fresh bite River had left on my neck.

“Good...” I ground out. I'd just had three orgasms, but as soon as he touched me, I felt ready for more. Not hypersensitive, not rubbed raw, but alive in a way I'm not sure I'd ever felt before.

“Good?” Kaine seemed somewhat distressed by my response. “You're not sore or anything—?”

I choked off any other questions by grabbing him by the back of the neck and pulling him closer.

“Good, as in this,” I replied.

I kissed him because the pleasure I felt was too big for me. It needed to be shared. Because when I did, he took over, dropping the soap to the floor, those slick hands struggling to hold me tight enough against him. His cock had been soft when we walked into the shower, but it rose now, pressing insistently against us, right before Adam stepped in.

“That looks pretty damn good,” Adam said. “Got any of that for me?”

I'd gone from a virgin to a woman that was held in the arms of one brother while reaching out to kiss another and I didn't care. Adam welcomed me just as warmly, if not more so, because there was no reticence in him. There never was.

He jumped into everything feet first and anyone he was in a relationship with would be forced to jump right alongside him.

Which had me pausing for a second.

Adam watched me closely, a small frown threatening to form, but not yet there. He was waiting for something, anything, a sign to indicate he was good to go, so I just smiled for him. At that I was plucked from Kaine's arms and carried over to the shower wall and pressed into the tiles as he held me there.

"Adam—" Kaine growled.

"Not now," Adam said between kisses.

"Adam, you're rushing things again."

He pulled away despite my sound of protest, then pressed his forehead to mine.

"No, I'm not." His eyes flicked open, staring into mine. "I'm not, am I, Freya? I know we only met a week ago and I've spent the whole week fucking things up, but we're not, are we? I feel the same way as I did then, that you were right there with me, ready to jump off. It's why..." He sighed and then grew serious. "It's why I claimed you when I did. It felt right. You felt right and while you didn't know what you were getting yourself into, you do now." He grabbed my hand and placed it on his chest. "It's me, Freya."

There was so much in that small statement, an objective insistence that I didn't know him at all, coupled with a feeling that far outstripped it. When I reached up to touch his face, I knew he'd push his hand into it, more insistent cat than bear. And when I was quiet, he became uncharacteristically pensive. He was bracing himself for another smackdown, I quickly realised, waiting for me to reject him all over again.

"You're not wrong," I told him and there it was, that brighter than the sun smile. A small look of self congratulation, then a smirk shot Kaine's way. "And you are, all at the same time."

"What?"

“I feel a connection to you.” I pulled free so he was no longer supporting me against the wall, standing on my own two feet. “But it’s not the same as it is with River.” All the joy seemed to leave him then and I felt like such a bitch for doing this. “That doesn’t mean it won’t. This is why Kaine’s right, too.” I grabbed Adam’s hand and he held it tight, as if worried I’d slip from his grip moments later. His brother sidled closer, moving into the space beside the both of us and I took his hand with my free one. “We need to build that between us, together.”

“Together?”

I saw then why coaches must love Adam. He took that one little crumb of hope and grabbed onto it with two hands.

“That’s what we’ve been talking about, isn’t it?” I said.

Kaine moved in then, pressing his body against my back as he held me close.

“There’s something special between you and Riv. Makes sense. You’ve got so much in common...”

But that was only the superficial stuff. I would’ve felt the same about River if he liked Dungeons and Dragons or monster trucks. Hmm... maybe not the monster trucks. As if summoned, I felt him touch my mind just then.

Where’d you get to?

I heard the sleepy tone as if he was standing right next to me.

Kaine wanted to check in. Adam wants to jump right into everything head first.

So the usual bullshit. He sighed. Want me to come and intervene?

Not yet. I have to learn how to handle them if this is going to work.

You’ve got this.

And then he sent me a very frank mental image, of the two men blathering on and me shutting them up as my hands

wrapped around their cocks.

Maybe that wasn't such bad advice.

I reached up and slid my hand down Kaine's chest, then Adam's and both men stopped talking so fast it was almost comical. It was then I realised the power I had as they both focussed on me.

Just as I stared at them. Adam was all golden lean muscles, but Kaine's were much heavier, solid, as if they came from long hours during tasks that required heavy endurance, not speed. Adam was completely smooth, where my fingers toyed with the small smattering of hair on Kaine's chest. But as I explored, they both watched, completely fascinated, letting out twin sighs when my fingernails scraped across their nipples. And their bodies? They both quivered with an unspecified tension, ready to take over the second I wanted them to.

"We started this night putting me in control, so why don't we end it that way?" I said, sliding fingers down their stomachs, feeling the muscles flex, right before I took each one of them in hand.

"Oh fuck..."

That helpless little exhalation from Kaine was everything I needed. It was great that he was the one trying to make sure everyone was OK, but sometimes I wanted this too. A Kaine whose head rolled back, his eyes closing, his mouth falling open. A man whose hyper-alert brain went offline the minute my fingers wrapped around him. His hips jerked back and forth in time with my strokes, working his cock in and out of my grip, even as I jacked him off.

"So that's what it takes to shut him up?" Adam ground out, slapping his hand above my head onto the tiles. He let out a little hiss, his eyes rolling backwards before he forced himself to look at me. "Well, you've got us right in the palms of your hands, so what're you going to do with us?"

Spending such a long time without having sex had given me plenty of opportunities to fantasise, so maybe that's why I

did this. I bent over, replacing my hand with my tongue. Adam let out a strange little sound as I licked a stripe up his cock, then a low hum of pleasure as I sucked him in.

“And that’s what it takes to shut Adam up.” Kaine, the cool, calm and collected, was back online. “I think I’m going to need you to suck his cock a whole lot if this is going to work. And if you do...” His hand slid up my inner thigh and I parted my legs willingly, because bobbing my head over Adam’s hard length made me ache for something similar inside me. “I promise to make it worth your while.”

My mouth was otherwise occupied, so I couldn’t reply, couldn’t do anything, not when he moved his hand. Kaine slid his fingers carefully, cautiously through my sensitive folds, but when I didn’t jerk back, he surged forward, piercing me with his thumb as two of his fingers slid either side of my clit.

I never expected it to be like this, as the pleasure Kaine forced upon me encouraged me to try and drag Adam on to higher and higher heights.

“Oh fuck, baby... That feels so fucking good. Shit, shit, yeah, just like that. Mm... You make me want to fucking shoot my load right down your throat. You’d like that, right?”

I pulled away then, staring up at Adam with bleary eyes, right as Kaine moved behind me, replacing his fingers with something else. Swollen, blunt, hard, he felt like he was splitting me in two and I pushed back hard to aid the process.

“Yes,” I said to Adam. “Yes....” I said as Kaine’s hands gripped my hips and he forced himself deeper. “Yes,” I murmured as I clawed Adam closer.

“Fuck yes...” he hissed, as his cock nudged at the back of my throat.

I’d always been turned on by the idea of multiple guys with one girl, though I hated the way it was usually portrayed in porn. Like the girl was just a series of holes to masturbate in. But this? It was something so far from those images that I didn’t know how you’d classify them as the same. Both men

thrust into me but I took everything I needed from them, their pleasure and mine, right up until this.

Whatever their dick bones did, it awakened an itch inside me I'd never experienced before. I pushed back against Kaine's thrusts, forcing him harder, deeper, but that wasn't what I needed.

"Kaine..."

I'd pulled away from Adam to whine my discontent and Kaine would give me anything I needed, I knew that. From stepping in with Tarquin's mother at the cafe, to picking me up when the news story broke, his first thought wasn't his family or their reputation, but me. I'd been looking after myself for so damn long, it was hard to see this for what it was, but... He didn't want me to have to do it on my own anymore. The offer of a credit card wasn't some financial transaction, but simply an offer of help. So that I'd have what I needed at any moment, whether he was around or not.

But that wasn't what I needed right now.

I let out a small groan of frustration. I felt like I was hovering on the edge of orgasm and it'd be fucking amazing if I could just fall off that cliff.

But he had to come with me.

"Kaine...!"

"Our mate needs you." Adam said the words through gritted teeth. "Time to put up or shut up, Brother. You would never deny her a thing, but what she needs is something else. You."

"Kaine...!"

He moved in then, pulling me away from Adam, his dick dragging free, right as he spun me around and plastered me against the tile wall. Water streamed all over me, him.

"You need me?" Kaine asked, but there was an intensity to his voice, his gaze, that I'd never seen before. "You need me, Freya? Tell me that and I'll give you everything. Just that."

I smiled as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, then I opened my mouth to reply.

Chapter 46

Kaine

I never wanted Freya to be dependent, to put her in a position where I was strong and she was weak, but as I spilled my guts to her, I hoped she'd understand. The only way I knew how to care about those I loved was to look after them. Make sure River actually ate some breakfast before work, that Adam wasn't pushing himself too hard. They didn't always appreciate the fuss, but it happened anyway. It was something that just fucking came out of me, just like this did now.

"Need you?" Freya asked. I felt guilty then. She was wet, tired, crumpled looking and I'd dragged her away from River because some niggling feeling behind my breastbone wouldn't let me leave them alone and— "Of course I need you." She ran her hands across my shoulders, then wrapped her arms around me. "You make me feel safe."

Some blokes would've thought that was a total passion killer, but not me. It was all I needed. If she was safe, she was OK, had space to be happy even. If she was safe, she had what she needed—

"And achy."

Those two words shoved all good sense to one side, my dick jerking hard in response.

"Achy?" I pulled back to study her face. "You hurting?"

"Not in any bad way," she said in a hurry. "Not in a way you couldn't... Ohhh..."

I reached down and pushed my dick back inside her, hissing at that warm clasp of her body around mine.

“What’re you aching for?” I asked her in a low voice. “Freya? What do you need?”

“You...”

Her face seemed to scrunch up in pain right then, but that wasn’t what it was. It was pleasure so acute you instinctively flinched away from it. Too much and not enough, all at the same time, I knew exactly how she felt. Because fucking her wasn’t enough, nor was crowding in close, watching her expression shift and change. Even making love wouldn’t have been enough. Freya demanded everything I had to give and I was helpless to do anything other than deliver.

“Don’t worry, baby.” Adam landed on the tiles beside her, turning her lips his way. “He can’t hold out on you. None of us can. If you need—”

“Yes, that, I need—” she said urgently.

“Then Kaine will deliver.” He shot me a sidelong look. “People can say a lot about my brother, but he never lets anyone down, especially not you.”

He turned back to her then, stroking her and kissing her, soothing her through this, but it was now that I realised only I could give her what she really needed.

I had thought, planned, then revised those plans and then run a ton of scenarios through my head about how claiming my mate would go. This hadn’t been in it. Part of me had hoped, deep down in my heart, that she’d want this tonight, but I’d assured myself I would wait, be patient, ensure the relationship was rock solid. But as she tightened around me, my body had a whole lot of other ideas. The baculum shifted back and forth inside me, the temptation to let it jut out driving me insane, right as the sense that I had to let it go grew stronger.

“Freya...”

I’d tried to wake her as gently as possible and I did the same now, seeking to break the spell we’d wrought and bring

her back down to earth. I'd been furious at my brother, because I couldn't countenance this. The thought of her regretting what happened, of waking up and sneaking out the door of the apartment again, ghosting us because we'd rushed things. Not when my fingers cramped with the need to grab her, drag her off to my bedroom and lock her up inside, holding her close until the need, the worry, finally faded. But she blinked, look at me now, seeing me clearly and then smiling, something so fucking beautiful my heart felt like it stopped.

"You want to give me what I need?" she asked. I nodded sharply. "Then gimme this. Give me you."

The bear was done, shoving against my boundaries, forcing my body to move. My cock bucking up deep inside her, dragging a scream from her, right as my baculum shot out. My teeth buried themselves into the curve of her neck, the small burst of blood like nectar on my tongue and then I came, she came, over and over in long, galloping ripples that never seemed to stop.

Until they did.

Kaine...

Oh fuck.

My head jerked up, my eyes scanning Freya, seeing how soft and flushed and wet she was right now, but she seemed to sense my concern and then smiled slowly.

"Everything's alright," she said, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Everything's gonna be fine now."

People had been telling me that for some time, but right now it felt like it was the first time I could believe it. I held her close, shoved my face into her neck so she wouldn't see the moment I broke, even if I knew she could feel it down the bond. My breaths came out in ragged sobs, not due to exertion, but this:

Freya was mine.

She was mine, she was mine, she was mine, that kept playing out in my head, but it didn't make it feel any more

real, and that's when I felt her hands rubbing my shoulders.

All yours, she told me, in the secret place we shared. *Just like you're all mine.*

I held her against the wall, time seeming to stand still, until my legs started to quiver. When I put her down, I checked her over, then Adam and I washed her clean before towelling her off and putting her back to bed. She rolled towards River as soon as she was close to him and we watched her.

"Everything's going to turn out for the best," Adam said, giving my shoulder a squeeze, the little bastard knowing I hated platitudes like that. But maybe, just maybe for once he was right. A stopped clock is correct twice a day, right? He just shook his head, as if he'd heard my thoughts and then jumped on the bed beside them.

The way he snuggled into her back, pressing his face into her hair? It was tantalising. He was doing it right now, but... We had a whole life of that ahead of us now, that's what I realised and that was enough to have me stepping forward. I lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling, unable to believe what'd just happen, sure I'd never be able to sleep after such a thing, but it came for me anyway. I dropped down into a velvety warmth, the darkness behind my eyes never feeling so welcoming.

An insistent buzz, then an outright ring, over and over, not letting me fall back into sleep. I groaned and so did someone else.

"Hello?"

Whoever it was, whatever it was, they were sorted now, and while I wanted the details, I wanted sleep more. I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow, then dropped back down into darkness.

Chapter 47

Adam

“Hello?”

I was barely conscious of answering the phone. I’d gone to bed with an achingly hard dick and a mate who’d passed out from orgasmic bliss, so I was forced to listen to River and Kaine’s snores for a bit before sleeping.

Still worth it.

But right now while I blinked as I stared out the windows, watching the sun rise over the Adelaide CBD, what I didn’t expect to hear was a familiar masculine voice coming down the line.

“Adam Farrelly! Long time, no speak.”

When I’d started in the SANFL, Kaine had insisted I get an agent, just in case I made it into the national draft. Billy Franklin was the guy we’d settled on and he’d shopped me around to a bunch of clubs apparently, but it came to nothing. We rarely spoke now. I wasn’t earning enough money to warrant his notice, so I felt he kept me on the books just in case.

Which made me wonder why he was calling now.

“How’s it going, Billy?” I got up when River snorted, then shifted on the bed. I padded out of the bedroom and closed the door behind me.

“Good, mate! Look, I know I’m ringing you at the arse crack of dawn, but I’ve got big news. Big news!”

“Right, so yeah, I was meaning to ring you,” I said. “I’ve already told the club I’m—”

“They want you in the draft.”

“What?” I froze still, adrenaline rushing through me. My face felt numb, my hands too as they shook, trying to keep a hold of the phone.

“I got the call just this morning. All that media attention, some would say it was a bad thing, but apparently not in your case. You got the attention of several scouts and they want you in...”

He was talking too fast, words seeming to fall all over themselves and into my brain. But I couldn’t take them in. Because up until a week ago, what he was saying was the one thing I wanted most. I worked hard, dominated on the field, but you always had to look for new challenges. And the national league? I’d be playing with the best and brightest in Australia and—

“No.”

“What?” Billy shut the fuck up for once, stunned at my reply. I understood why, I was surprised myself, but when I went back and reconsidered my response I knew.

“I mean thanks.” I looked back at that closed door, at what lay behind it and knew what I had to do. My heart ached for it, to turn down this opportunity, but I couldn’t put my hat in the ring for the draft, I just couldn’t. I might not get a look in, that was the most probable outcome, but if I did... The shit people said to Freya, on her Insta profile, in her DMs. Kaine had shown me the report the social media manager made on her first day, outlining all the crap she’d intercepted. Freya told me she never wanted to be subjected to any of this, and I... I wanted to protect her from that more than I wanted to play footy, so I knew what I had to say. “Thanks for the opportunity, Billy, but I’m retiring from the SANFL and don’t

need you to put me forward for the AFL draft. I've got stuff going on here—”

“Look, mate—”

“My mind's made up.” I was firm, decisive and then I nodded, feeling something lighten inside me. “I have a family and... I choose them, every time. I always will, so thanks, but no thanks.”

He spluttered something about me regretting my decision, even though I knew I wouldn't, of being able to change my mind before a certain date, and I humoured him through it. Once the draft was done, I'd sever the relationship between us. I didn't need an agent anymore, not when I had her. My refusal finally seemed to sink in and Billy got off the phone, just leaving me standing there.

I stared at the door, able to visualise what lay behind it. River and Freya curled around each other, that crease between Kaine's brows finally smoothing out. There was my future, that. I always felt better when I was moving, doing, had an objective in mind and I grabbed at one now.

I found some clothes in the spare room, Kaine's not mine, and got dressed before collecting the keys. When I went downstairs and out onto the street, my casual apparel stuck out like dog's balls amongst all of the business wear of the city commuters. I strolled up to the local cafe, scanned the glass case full of goodies and mentally worked out what each of them would want. Coffee, croissants, toasties, the works, I charged it all to the card Kaine had given me and then carried it back to the apartment.

“Where'd you get to?” my brother asked as soon as I arrived, but the tight expression on his face was at odds with what he was wearing. Just a towel slung around his waist, his hair a ruffled mess, I wondered what the boys at the work site would've thought about him right now.

“I got breakfast,” I said, setting the bags down onto the kitchen bench. “Coffee, just how you like it.”

When I handed him a cup, he took a sip and then nodded in appreciation.

“Was it your phone ringing this morning?”

“Yeah,” I replied, plating up the food and then setting it out on the table, focussing on that not him. Kaine could smell a lie from a mile away. “Bloody telemarketer. I told them I wasn’t interested.”

“Wasn’t interested in what?” River and Freya emerged from the bedroom, my girl wearing one of our shirts and nothing else. With rumpled hair and a glow about her, she never looked sexier.

“What I am interested in is whether or not you’ve got any underwear on under this,” I replied, giving her a kiss that turned into another, then another, each one confirming my decision. My hands slid down and under the shirt, sliding upwards before she batted them away. Everyone settled around the dining table and helped themselves to food, but I hung back. I felt like I was eating the lot of them up with my eyes, unable to look away for a second, as if I’d miss something.

“Oh my god, are those croissants?”

“Breakfast for my baby,” I said, smirking at Kaine that I was the provider this time. I pulled a toastie my way and unwrapped it. “Not sure what you guys have on, but I thought we might head to the shack.” I stared at Freya, then brushed a crumb off her chin. “Be a good time to introduce you to the other parts of ourselves, I think. We’re a sleuth now, so you need to see what you’ve got yourself into.”

Freya was about to reply, but as she sucked in a breath, her eyes darted to River. Her cheeks flushed and then she giggled, making me think she was having a whole other conversation with him behind our backs. Part of me envied the bond the two of them had with a viciousness that took my breath away, but the other part? I was determined to make myself worthy of her, of deepening what we had until that psychic link clicked into place.

“And what was that about?” I asked gently.

“Nothing.”

That devilish grin of hers popped out, and brightened the room: the way everyone sat ringed around her, it was like she was the sun and we were caught in her orbit. Coffee was being passed around as well as food, accompanied by light banter and Kaine telling her all about the shack and the journey it took to get there. All of it washed over me, filling in all the gaps and making me feel whole.

I was making the right decision.

I just sat with that certainty before the ribbing was directed at me. Kaine teased me for my moony expression and River smiled along, adding a few points of his own. They’d never know about that phone call, I’d make sure of it. Each one of them would walk around, knowing I loved them, but never just how much. I smiled then, feeling tears prick at my eyes, just beaming at every single one of them, before Kaine got to his feet.

“You alright?”

He asked me this as a quiet aside, as the other two headed off to get ready.

“I’m good,” I told him honestly. “More than good. Just happy, y’know?”

“Yeah, I know.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Now get yourself cleaned up, you scruffy piece of shit. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.”

After a shower, a shave and a change of clothes, because Kaine the anal had standards apparently, I joined the rest of them in the lounge room. River had an esky ready and some towels and Kaine was talking very fast to someone down the phone line, which was when my own phone buzzed. I hauled my device out and saw I had a text from Jack.

“Everyone ready?” Kaine, as usual, was bossy as fuck, even though we were all waiting on him seconds before to

finish his call, but once he was done, we were supposed to be ready to go, pronto.

“Just a sec,” I said, as I read the message. “I left something in the bedroom.”

“Jesus, Adam...”

Heard the news, she’d written. Congrats?

No congrats needed, I replied. I needed to make a choice and I chose them. I told Billy not to bother putting me forward in the draft.

You sure? Phil’s wetting his pants. His star player quitting, then being called up to the big leagues.

I smiled then, all of the misery of the last week feeling like it was washing away.

Never been more sure of anything in my life.

And with that, I turned my phone off and went and joined the others.

Chapter 48

Freya

As we drove, I watched the landscape pass by with my face almost pressed against the glass. Kaine shot me a sidelong look from behind the wheel.

“Don’t get out this way often?”

“Mum and Dad used to take us for drives when we were little,” I replied. “But not having a licence means I don’t really get out this way much.”

“Well, you’re with us now.” He took his hand off the steering wheel and squeezed my knee. “You can ask us to take you wherever you want, or help you get your licence if you want.”

“I’m not sure you want to see me behind the wheel,” I said sheepishly, remembering all of my aborted attempts in the past.

“Whatever you want,” he told me, those cool blue eyes holding mine for way too long before flicking back to the road, the way they had been since we’d gotten into the car. “No one’s going to pressure you either way.”

“And you’re fulfilling all of Kaine’s Driving Miss Daisy fantasies at the same time,” Adam said with a cackle, right before his brother deliberately swerved the car, knocking Adam’s head against the glass. The teasing continued right up until we turned off the main road.

I wasn't sure what I expected when I heard about 'the shack'. A military grade fence that was ten feet high and topped with razor wire certainly wasn't it. And Kaine grabbing a device from the glove box and then using it to open the automatic gate was a surprise as well. My eyes felt like they were popping out of my head, but once we drove in, it seemed like any other bush block. A dirt road, plenty of virgin bush and the shack itself.

The shack had been created with some care a while ago, from simple materials corrugated iron, roughhewn wood, I stroked the smooth sanded guard rail once we were out of the car, feeling the natural shape of the bough that had been cut down for this purpose.

"Our great grandfathers built this," Adam explained. "At first, as a place to let the bears out and do some fishing, then —"

"It's become a sanctuary," Kaine added. "A lot of different shifter families come and use the place on their off days. Everyone needs a place where they can take fur."

"Like me."

Adam grinned, shucking his clothes in a few quick movements and one minute there was a very naked man there and the next there was a massive bear.

Whoa.

It's OK. You're OK.

River's voice was a gentle presence inside my head as I was confronted by the sight of Adam's other form. He was just so very big that my mind struggled to take him in. I noticed the thick, tawny brown fur and the way it was lighter around his head, darker on his body, the massive paws, planted firmly into the earth, caught the sight of those gorgeous brown ears flicking, then the snuffle of his nose. The bear was curiously gentle, skittish almost as he extended his muzzle forward.

It's Adam, Kaine told me. Just Adam. The bear is exactly the same as the man. All he wants to do is be next to you and...

That steady stream of encouragement faded as I rushed forward. The bear huffed, right as I flung myself at him. Soft, soft fur and strength, that's what I felt as I buried myself under his neck. The bear reared up and then gently placed his paws around me.

Getting a bear hug from an actual bear? Can 10/10 recommend. I felt like I could take on the world, my massive bear buddy by my side. I squeezed tighter, barely able to span his chest, let alone the rest of him, right before Adam took skin again.

“So that's how I get all the hugs now?” he said as he grinned down at me. “Good to know.”

“Polar bears are the largest of all the bear species,” Kaine shot back, but I couldn't tell if that was to warn me or to gloat. I didn't bother to clarify, transfixed by the sight of him pulling his shirt off. But all those muscles transformed in a blink of an eye, turning into a now familiar form.

I hadn't had a chance to inspect Kaine's bear closely the other night. My brain had been broken by the sight of it and I'd bailed as quickly as my legs could carry me. But now... The polar bear's head shifted from side to side, his huge paws stamping the ground almost nervously, right before I took a step towards him.

My hands went out, like I was gentling a horse, not the biggest apex predator on the planet. And the bear? His nose worked as his head swung closer. We slowly, slowly worked our way closer to each other, him jerking back when I did, growing bolder when I did the same. But the first time I touched him, I let out a sigh and he shifted closer, that massive head coming and resting against my chest, then giving me a nudge that had me stumbling.

“He wants a pat,” River explained.

I let out an incredulous laugh, then wrapped my arms around Kaine's head, reaching down to scratch around the bear's neck. We all chuckled when a massive paw started tapping the ground in time with my scratches. But when I stopped, the bear grew insistent, letting out a little growl to

make clear he wanted more, right before Kaine came back to skin.

“He’s pushy—” he tried to explain.

“Just like you are,” Adam added.

“Whenever he likes something, he just wants more.”

“Just like you do.” River interrupted Adam before he could make another smart arse remark, shooting his sleuthmate a meaningful look.

“Well, right now I want a swim. How about it, Freya?” Adam asked, propping his arm out for me to take, which was kinda incongruous because he was completely naked.

“What about River’s bear?” I asked, right before the man himself strode forward and picked me up, throwing me in the air, as if to land on his shoulders, but by the time I did, it was on the broad back of a black bear instead of the man.

Jack and I had drunkenly joked about riding the bears down Rundle Mall, but now that I was experiencing it for real, I knew that this was better. River’s bear roared and then barrelled towards the deck that led out to the river beyond, my fingers digging into his fur.

“River...! River...!” I yelped, just before he launched himself into the water.

I was submerged, clothes and all, forced to swim up and splutter before turning on the black bear with a roar.

“Well, he did put you in the river, as you asked,” Adam said with a cackle, before leaping off the bank and into the water. When he landed, it wasn’t as a man, but as a bear, and waves and waves of water threatening to overwhelm me.

“Are you alright?” Kaine scooped me up and dragged me back to the shallows. “If we get these clothes off now and hang them in the sun, they should be dry before we leave.”

“Is that an attempt to help me or to get me naked?” I asked, clambering up onto the bank.

“Well, they say the secret to success is multitasking,” he said with a studiously smooth expression. “So...”

I punched his arm then and it was totally worth seeing his look of surprise, then hearing his low chuckle, but as I pulled my sodden clothes off, I saw there had been more than one casualty to River’s prank.

“My phone!” I pulled it out of a sodden pocket and then shook my head.

“We’ll get you a new one,” Kaine assured me as I stripped down, “and I’ll take the cost from their wages. You don’t need it now, but you do need this.”

As he scooped me up and ran towards the riverbank, I was beginning to think the whole sleuth shared a psychic bond. River and Adam were now back in skin and watching us with the eyes of predators as we approached. They launched themselves at me the moment I was back in the water. Hands grabbed me, arms tugged me closer in a wild fray of splashes and kisses, right before I emerged breathless.

“It’s not so bad, being the mate of three bears, right?” Adam asked.

“It’s considerably wetter than I thought it’d be,” I grumped, even as the cool water washed over my skin, the dappled sunlight that filtered through the trees overhead bathing my face.

“I’ll get you wetter...”

Adam pulled me into his arms like we’d been together for years, not minutes, and that was the magic of him. By assuming everything was alright from the get go, apparently it was. He smiled as my head dropped down, our mouths seeking each other, but slowly, creating anticipation that just made the kiss sweeter when it came. I forgot about bears, the river, everything, as he kissed me senseless, water dripping off me as he pulled me from the water.

“Adam...”

“Yeah?”

His voice was all low and husky.

“You didn’t get off last night.”

“I did, watching the two of you,” he said, shooting me a smile. “I admit I would’ve preferred to be front and centre for the action—”

“As always.” Kaine appeared beside us. “He’s an attention whore, just so you know.”

“But Adam...” I reached down and found him hot and hard for me. “You must want—”

“Yes.”

“And I need—”

I did. Being around them seemed to make me overheated, always ready, always hot for them.

“Not yet,” Kaine growled at his brother. “Take your time. Get Freya ready for you first.”

But all of his instructions went unheeded as I rubbed that swollen cock across my entrance.

“Oh fuck, baby...” he said, jerking forward once I slotted him against me, his cock surging forward.

I felt the prick of his teeth on my shoulder and that had me wriggling in earnest. Kaine was right of course, we were rushing things, not doing the required foreplay to make it easy for Adam to push himself inside me. The river stripped me of my natural lubrication, making his cock stick to my skin, but as he gently rocked back and forth, more replaced it quickly. I fought to take him and it was a war I was willing to wage, that intense feeling of being stretched open, forced to receive that swollen length, was somehow just as hot as hours of sweet foreplay.

“Jesus, Adam—” Kaine growled when I let out a little yelp, but River put a hand on his shoulder.

“Feel her.”

“What? You can’t do that after—”

“Feel her.”

And it was then I felt that connection come to life, my sense of myself multiplying to include the two of them.

Are you OK? Kaine asked. *I’ll pull him off, force him to stop if this hurts.*

Doesn’t hurt... My thoughts felt like they frayed as soon as they were formed. I wrapped my arms tight around Adam the minute his cock started to rub against that swollen place inside me, and it felt like direct attention on my clit, but more. Over and over, he moved slowly but surely, stoking a fire inside me, one only he could put out. Good, I reassured Kaine. So good.

“Fuck, baby...” Adam growled. “You make me want to come. I thought I’d built this up to be too much inside my head, but it wasn’t. It’s just you.”

He stared into my eyes, his control fracturing, as was mine, small helpless pants mingling as his strokes grew faster. I rolled forward onto my knees, bouncing now, working that entire long length back and forth inside me until I couldn’t anymore. His baculum jutted forward, harpooning into me and then locking me down tight, keeping me right where I needed to be. Each small tug now created starbursts of pleasure that went off in a rapid succession.

The pleasure crested slowly, in such small increments I was able to feel every single one of them and together we took those tiny little steps. His eyes locked with mine, he watched my every expression, seeming to know when to move faster, deeper.

“You gonna come with me, Freya?” I was, I had and I would again, I thought, clinging to him tightly. “Gimme that, just that for today. Give your pleasure to me.”

It rocketed up my spine, bringing every nerve ending to life, the sounds of my gasps twining with the chirp of birds, the whisper of the trees. It made me feel like I was somehow a part of the bush, of us, of him, right as everything burst. Adam held me tight in arms that could carry any weight with ease,

stroking me and telling me how good I was, right until the savage tides inside us settled.

There was nothing better than lying under a gum tree, on a blanket, with my head propped up on one bear, another nestled in by my side. Kaine had to stay in skin most of the time. The polar bear was not great for dealing with the much hotter Australian weather, but that was fine too. He had my feet in his lap, massaging them with thumbs of iron. He smiled when I let out a long sigh.

“Happy?”

I looked at him, then the bears, River’s moving closer so I could scratch his muzzle.

“Happier than I would ever thought I could be,” I replied and that seemed to make Kaine happiest of all.

Chapter 49

River

Sunday afternoon

“River, darling?” I emerged from the bathroom with a towel around my waist to find my sleuthmates chatting to my mum in the kitchen. That and a whole lot of pies. “Sweetheart, I brought the pies for dinner tonight with your mate’s parents?”

“Pies?”

Freya came from behind me, tucking the towel around her tighter.

“Oh hello...” Mum’s face lit up and I shot a desperate look to my dads, who were bringing yet more desserts behind them. Small bakeries wouldn’t have been able to offer the selection we had right now. They just smirked and plonked the plates down on the bench as Mum moved closer. “I’m River’s mother, Janice.”

“Freya.” But when I watched my mate awkwardly try to shake Mum’s hand and keep her towel on, I stepped in.

“And she needs a minute to put some clothes on,” I told Mum, stepping between them. “We didn’t know you were coming.”

“You asked me to make pies.” Mum’s voice started to rise in tone, getting that shaky edge to it. “And I texted you to confirm which ones and then you didn’t get back to me...”

Run, I told Freya inside my head. My mum is a bit... intense. You can hide out in the room, put it down to not being able to find the right outfit. I'll cover for you.

But she's your mother. Her voice was like a cool hand on the back of my neck. She's important to you. I heard her chuckle. And I need to put something on now. Flashing the in-laws might not get the relationship off on the right foot.

"I'll be back in a tick," Freya said, beating a hasty retreat.

"Oh my godddd..." Adam moaned, dropping his head down to suck in the scent of the closest pie. "Damn, Janice, you know how to make good pie. You sure we can't eat one now? There's like twenty of them."

There were eight, but still.

"Don't you dare." Adam had been coming around our house since he was a little bloke, so Mum was as firm with him as she was me. "I was up all of yesterday stewing the fruit up and then spent the morning making the pastry."

"All day..." Freya emerged out of the room in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. "Oh wow, Janice, you didn't need to do that."

"Well, River wanted to bring something special..."

I thought I had to win you over, I told her. Figured maybe the way to a girl's heart was through her dad's stomach.

You asked your mum to make eight pies?! she shot back.

I asked her to make one and then she went freaking overboard, as per usual. I looked down at Freya. Mum's freaking out. She's not my fathers' fated mate and that means they don't get accepted as readily by the shifter community.

What!? Why the hell not?

I sighed. *Because it's supposed to be like this.* I reached out and grabbed her hand and when I did, Mum stopped talking to the others. They all did. She put two and two together, eyes widening as she watched my thumb rub across the back of Freya's hand.

“River...” I hated the hope and the fear and the desperation in her voice and I knew exactly what had put it there. I loved being a part of a community of other shifters and I hated it in turn. I rarely went to the big events, sticking mostly to Adam and Kaine and the Farrellys, avoiding the rest but... “River, is this...? Did you...?”

“Freya accepted the mating bond, Mum,” I said, and that’s when I was forced to pull away from my mate.

Mum’s hand fluttered like a wounded bird through the air and her eyes blinked, blinked, then a tear fell free.

“Jan...” One of my dads swooped in, the rest clustering around her before tucking her into his chest. “Riv, you might’ve let us know. Your mother, you know what she’s like. She was worried sick.”

“Don’t put that on him!” Mum fought her way free, a determined look on her face as she moved to take my hand, then Freya’s. She beamed down at my mate with tears still in her eyes, but she smiled, gods, how she smiled. “I’m just so, so happy. My son is a good boy. He lets himself get a bit of a mess.” She shot a dark look at my hair. “And he spends too much time drawing—”

“I do too,” Freya said with a smile.

“Of course, you do.”

Mum just gazed at the two of us and then Kaine decided it was time to put the kettle on, which Adam thought was an excellent time to taste test the pies, which is how we were late to the first time meeting Freya’s parents as a sleuth.

“Fuck...” Adam hissed as we pulled up the front of Freya’s parents’ place. “Do I look alright? I didn’t want to dress too fancy, but I don’t want your dad thinking I look like a lout.” He tugged at his shirt collar.

“Leave that alone,” Kaine snapped. “You look fine. I picked those clothes out myself.”

“Just like Mum does. Aw...” Adam fluttered his eyelashes at his brother before the other man gave him a shove.

“So we’ve got everything?” Kaine looked over into the backseat where Freya and I were holding two of the pies. The rest went into the freezer for later, but we weren’t going to tell Mum that. “Those bottles of wine I selected?”

“You know you guys are gonna intimidate the shit out of Dad,” Freya said and we all went perfectly still. “Like every single one of you is built like a brick shithouse and no one dresses this fancy for Sunday dinner normally. I’m usually in trackies and an old jumper. The wine, the pies... You’re going to make an impression, don’t you worry.”

“It’s too much?” Kaine’s brow wrinkled. “It is, isn’t it? I stayed within budget for the wine but I wanted to make sure we had something nice.”

“Mum usually drinks wine from a box, Kaine,” Freya told him.

“Shit...” You didn’t see Kaine lose his crap often, so it was amusing when it did. “Shit! If we walk in there with this shit, they’re going to think we’re putting on airs. Leave the wine ___”

“Kaine.” Freya placed a hand on his arm and I watched the tension release. “It’s going to be OK. And even if it isn’t?” She pulled her shirt away so we could see the three marks we’d left upon her. “You won the girl already.”

“Right.” Kaine nodded sharply. “Right. Well, let’s do this.”

I’m not sure I felt any of that certainty, but where Freya led, I followed. We got out of the car and filed down the front path, Kaine going to knock on the door before it was jerked open.

“Hello, l...” Alby North stood there, wide eyed, surveying everyone standing on his front porch. He took in the pies, the wine, Freya and then us. His brows smoothed slightly when he saw me, a semi-familiar face, but then creased again when he noticed Adam. “Frey...?”

“Dad, this is Kaine Farrelly and his brother, Adam,” she said smoothly.

“I know who Adam Farrelly is,” the man blustered. “What I don’t know is why he’s standing on my doorstep. Congratulations on the medal win, mate.”

“Thanks,” Adam replied with a smile. “I appreciate it.”

“I asked young River to come by, as a thank you for dropping you home,” Alby said, and I nodded in response. “And then I see young Adam here talking about you on the news.”

“It’s a bit of a story,” Kaine said, in his best customer whisperer voice. “Perhaps we could come in?”

“What’re you hanging around by the door for?” came a woman’s voice, then she appeared. This was Freya in twenty or so years I thought, as she peered over Alby’s shoulder. “Oh, you’re the nice boy who brought Freya home that night and you’re... Alby.” She nudged her husband with her elbow. “Isn’t he that boy on the news?”

“Adam Farrelly,” he said, holding out a hand and smiling, “and this is my brother, Kaine. We’re here for Freya.”

“Well, you better come in then.”

Chapter 50

Freya

This was going to suck.

I'd listened to my friends talk about the horrors of introducing their partners to their parents, but I'd never had to deal with it before, so to say I was unprepared to alert my family to the fact I didn't have one boyfriend, but three, was an understatement.

"So I saw you on the news, Adam... What was all that business about with Freya?"

Mum was trying so hard to be polite about it, but she was only just holding herself back from pinning him to the kitchen counter and demanding answers.

"That was a misunderstanding, Mum," I told her.

"About what?" Justin was my not so little brother and he popped up and then took a step backwards. "Holy fuck, is that Adam Farrelly!"

"Justin!" Mum shot the guests a sidelong look. "No swearing in front of company. So, you were saying...?"

"That was a lot of fuss for a misunderstanding," Dad grumped. "Those reporters ruined your mother's geraniums, trampling all over them and for what? A picture of me in my underwear?"

"I told you to put some bloody clothes on," Mum said, whacking him with a spatula.

“That’s why we’re here.” We hadn’t worked this bit out. Every time Kaine brought it up, we found something else much more compelling to focus on, so it was no surprise when he stepped forward. “We wanted to come around and clear the air. River’s mother made some homemade pies for us to give to you.”

“Oh, well, they do look nice,” Mum said, eyeing them off as River and I set them down.

“And a couple of bottles of wine might help the process.”

“Alby,” Mum said, picking up one bottle, “this is that wine they were talking about in the newspaper. It won awards and everything.” She put it down and faced us. “That is all very nice, but you needn’t have. We just get together on a Sunday as a family, have a slap up meal—”

My parents worked hard on their roasts, ensuring they were cooked to perfection every time. The rest of the week it might be all beans on toast or a Lean Cuisine frozen meal, but not on Sundays.

“And anyone the kids choose to bring around is welcome. Come and have a seat.”

“Did you want a beer?” Dad asked, eyeing the three of them with considerable suspicion.

Say yes, I broadcast down the link between me and River and Kaine, hoping to get through to Adam as well. *Say yes!*

“Never trust a man who doesn’t drink beer,” Dad had said more than once and it was one of the many reasons why Jack was his favourite. She could drink him under the table no problem.

“Love one,” Kaine replied smoothly.

“So you nicked off with Freya the night of the Magarey medal?” Justin asked, then wrinkled his nose when he looked at me. “Why?”

“That’s enough of that,” Mum said, jabbing her elbow in his ribs.

“I knew she was the one for me the moment I saw her and while I know now I should’ve taken things slower, I wasn’t thinking with the right head at the time,” Adam replied with a rueful smile.

“Yes, well, we’ve all been there,” Dad said with a sheepish look. “Freya may have been why we got married in the first place.”

“Alby!” Mum exclaimed.

“Sorry, Floss, but you know it’s true. You were always the one for me, love, but we probably would’ve travelled a bit, kicked up our heels before settling down.” Dad’s eyes narrowed as he took me in. “Don’t go relying on condoms for birth control. They’re not foolproof, y’know.”

“Oh my god, Dad, we had that conversation,” I groaned. “Several times when I was a teenager.”

“It bears repeating...”

It really didn’t.

“So Adam and Freya then...” Mum sat back with a look of satisfaction. “That’s what it was all about, the fuss on the news. The path to true love is never smooth.”

“That’s definitely the case here,” Kaine said, grabbing the open bottle of wine. “Can I top you up, Floss?”

“Oh, thank you.” Mum flushed. “So, you’ve got a new boyfriend.” Something much more permanent than that. “It’s about time really.”

“Couldn’t find anyone who’d put up with her,” Justin muttered, so I shot him a dark look.

“So, Kaine, you’re Adam’s brother?” Mum asked.

“And River shares a house with both of them,” I said, my heart rate beating hard and fast in my ears. We knew we had to have this conversation and everything in me wanted it to be later, so much later, but we’d decided as a sleuth not to continue the bullshit, to start as we meant to go on. We were going to have to live our truth and this was the first step. “And me.”

“What?”

This was like the time when I told them I was going to art school, not doing journalism, as my parents had urged. They just stared at me with a curious mix of terror, disbelief and pain. I watched their eyes flick from Adam to Kaine and to River and then back to me, mentally begging me to correct myself.

Do your parents' faces go that colour often, Kaine asked me in alarm. They don't have heart conditions, do they?

Freya, are you OK? River asked. *Freya?*

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, Kaine said, his body tensing. Maybe we should just—

“Now hang on just one second.” Dad jerked himself to his feet and the man who stood toe to toe with Port supporters on game day emerged. His face was very red, his eyes flashing. “Are you trying to tell me that—”

“Sit down.” And there it was. Mum was always the power in the house, even if the world had no clue. She gave a quietly confident order and that stopped Dad's tirade cold. He jerked his attention her way and she looked pointedly at the chair beside her and Dad sank down into it. “So what you're saying is the three of you are in a relationship with our daughter?”

There was something ever so slightly tremulous about her voice, but Mum forged on, staring across the table at me.

“We all—”

“She—”

“This is—”

“Yes,” I said, cutting through everyone and everything, facing down the family I loved with the family I'd made sitting around me. I wanted them to get along, to join the two parts of my life together, but I wouldn't compromise. I couldn't. Just like the time I told them I wanted to be an artist. It'd been a painful process, followed by a whole lot of shouting, but we'd gotten through it together. I willed them to

understand it, to accept us, to see what I saw, when Mum turned to Dad.

“I saw an article about this on the news. Polymorphy they call it?”

“Polyamory,” I corrected with a smile.

“When multiple people love each other and want to spend their lives together, making each other happy,” Kaine explained, then reached over and took my hand. “That’s what we want to do for your daughter. She means the world to us and we are hoping that the people she loves the most in the world can support that relationship.”

Dad crossed his arms and regarded the table with a long look.

“I know Adams is a Glenelg man, but what about the rest of you? You’re not Port supporters, because I can’t abide my daughter getting into a relationship with a Magpie fan.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” River said, leaning forward to take my other hand. “Tigers all the way.”

Chapter 51

Freya

“So who is this Cressida?” Jack asked, her heels making a rapid click, click, click sound as we walked across the car park towards the Bear Claw Gallery. She stopped and eyed the tattoo shop, as if seeing it for the first time. “And this is the hot new gallery you were talking about?”

“Yes, it is and it’s amazing, so I don’t need super protective Jack right now, I need open minded Jack. I invited you along to make sure the contract was on the up and up—”

“OK, fine,” she said with a huff, then strode over to the front door and jerked it open. It didn’t stop her from scanning the flyers on the door, then the view inside. Yeah, the protective part was still in full swing, she was just masking it real well. But she couldn’t mask this reaction when we walked inside.

Cressida was standing at her desk, a black lacquered thing of majesty, looking like an eighteenth-century antique that had been given a goth makeover. She was wearing perilously high patent black heels, fishnet stockings, a pencil skirt that nipped in severely at the waist and knees and a black bustier that displayed a wealth of black and white tattoos across her shoulders.

“Ah...”

Jack took an abortive step forward, frowned, her mouth falling open as she took the other woman in. I didn’t think it

was in response to Cress' more edgy fashion sense, but something else altogether. I hadn't heard much about Laila, Jack's ex-girlfriend, for a little bit, which made sense. My bestie was crushed every time shit went wrong, but she bounced back quickly.

And, from the look of things, potentially right into Cress' arms.

I smiled wickedly, all of my nerves about this meeting suddenly dissipating.

"Hi, I'm Cress," the woman said, clicking over and offering me her perfectly manicured hand. I shook it and then turned to Jack.

"I'm Freya and this is my best friend and PR manager, Jack Maynard."

I watched Cress' gaze lift to take in Jack, scanning my friend's face. Did Cress' eyes widen slightly? Did her lips part? Did Jack's drop down to take in those perfectly painted black curves and stay there for far too long? Damn, everything was looking up right now, but this was one step better.

"Jack?" I prompted.

"Shit, sorry, yes, Jack Maynard." Jack took Cress' hand but rather than shake it, she just held it. "And Freya already said that."

"She did." Cress' lips quirked in a small smile. "It's lovely to meet you, Jack."

"Likewise." Jack extricated her hand with a rueful look. "So, Freya said you were interested in offering her a show at your gallery?"

It was easy to see why Bear Claw had earned such a great reputation. Apparently the building was a blacksmith's forge back in the day, but it'd since been renovated. The walls were covered with a thick whitewash that still allowed the texture of the old stones to come through, and the knotty pine floorboards had been stripped and sanded to a soft glow. But it was the artwork that drew me forward, just like the last time I was there.

It was as if all the ‘rules’ about subtle colours and good taste that were shoved down our throats at university were pushed to one side. What was on the walls was raucous, savage, alive. Grotesque creatures and cute ones sat side by side on canvases or in small sculptures, as well as riotous patterns and free splatters of paint.

I felt the same as I had the first time I stepped in here, like I’d found my people.

“We have a spot for a solo show, if you’re interested,” Cress said, like she wasn’t just offering me all of my hopes and dreams at once. “But there’s a catch.”

“A catch?” Intrigued Jack was replaced by the hard eyed PR manager as she stepped forward. “What catch?”

“We’re usually booked out for a year in advance,” Cress explained, “but we’ve had a last minute cancellation. An American artist was supposed to be showing his work then but his work got lost as it was shipped over, leaving him here, but no work to show.” She smiled at me. “We thought you might like to take his spot. Your work is hot right now.”

I flushed at that, even if I knew it was true. Kaine had forced me to overhaul my e-commerce platform and the sales were coming in thick and fast. River was off the building site and working with me full time, prepping shoes for me.

“It is. We have a team working with Freya now to raise that further,” Jack replied smoothly before crossing her arms. “And what does your organisation bring to the table?”

Cress caught that moment, seeming to stare far too long at the lean muscles in Jack’s forearms before forcing her eyes up.

“Bear Claw has a reputation that speaks for itself. Kaine Farrelly could probably get you in the door of any number of galleries, but not ones with a client database of buyers completely geared towards the kind of art Freya makes. We look after the misfits, the outcasts, the Salon des Refusés, if you like.” Jack’s eyebrow jerked up at that art history reference. “Because we love that kind of artwork and we’ve found a lot of other people do too. Kaine has made clear he’s

not interested in his m—, partner being locked down by an exclusive contract. That's fine. But we do have an amazing network of galleries that we also work with. If Freya shows with us, we can put her forward to others like us all around the world."

"So the answer is yes," I said, without thinking and Jack made a small sound of disapproval. "But the problem is when is the show supposed to happen."

"Three weeks," Cress replied with a rueful smile. "If that doesn't work for you, we could turn it into a group show, get some of our regulars to jump in and submit the works they have going right now to pad out the space."

"No."

"Jesus, Frey," Jack hissed at me. "Game face, remember?"

"No." I reiterated that a little more definitely now. "I can do this." I turned to face Jack. "This is the kind of opportunity I've been waiting for. I'll stop doing the markets for a bit, hold back the stock and..." I turned around and faced the gallery, seeing the empty walls now, then an overlay of them covered with my work. "I'll make it happen. I have the materials, the shoes..."

Jack let out a long sigh and then turned to Cress.

"So I assume you've got a contract?"

"Of course." Cress walked over to her desk and retrieved a sheaf of papers. "Take it and have your lawyers look at it, or..." She gave Jack a speculative look. "We could discuss the details over coffee if you like? Just to be clear about our intentions."

I smiled slowly, watching my super poised friend flush, search for a response, fail, clear her throat and then try again.

"That could be worthwhile, just so I know exactly what you've outlined here..." Jack said.

"So how did it go?"

All three of my guys were up and on their feet the minute I walked into the house we all shared. We'd moved all my things into their place one weekend, once I realised I'd have a fridge full of rotten food now, having avoided my flat for some time.

"Did they give you competitive terms?" Kaine asked. "They didn't try to slide that exclusivity condition in again, did they?"

"Did they give you the show?" Adam asked.

"Of course, they gave her the show," Kaine scoffed.

What was it like? River smirked when I looked his way, the smile growing broader as I showed him, mentally, the gallery, Cress, Jack and then my dream for the show. Unfortunately there was the matter of the timeline.

"It's in three weeks," I said.

"Three weeks?" Kaine jerked back as if slapped.

"Fuck yeah!" Adam said, then pulled out his phone. "So we need shit, lots of art shit. Start putting in an Amazon wish list, baby, and I'll get it sent via expedited shipping."

"She can't put a whole show worth of work together in three weeks!" Kaine snapped.

"No?" As I said that, River came to stand beside me, his arm wrapping around my waist. "Just watch me."

Chapter 52

Freya

Three weeks later

“So where did you want these?” Adam asked, rushing in with a massive armful of shoe boxes.

“I’m not—” I started to reply.

“How about these, Freya?” Kaine was dragging in a massive flatbed trolley he’d brought in from work and there was all my art stacked up on top of it. “I was thinking we’d sort these all out first, in shoe size or perhaps in terms of value. Did you have a price list anywhere?”

“So I—”

“People are coming, Frey!” Jack marched in with her phone on her ear, listening to a message, then tapping a button to end the replay. “Some people from the Advertiser, that cool streetwear company a friend is representing—”

“Cool, so—”

“Stop.” River was always so quiet, when he did speak, people listened, even if they were surprised by it. Right now he had all eyes on him. “Stack all the pieces over on the far wall.” He pointed to a space near the storeroom. “We’ll sort through them and anything we don’t end up using can go in the storeroom afterwards. If pieces are sold and taken tonight, it’ll be easy to replace them.”

“But what about all the boxes?” Kaine asked.

“We’ll put them on the plinths. Freya and I went and looked at some of the sneaker shops and they use the original boxes to help display the product.” He nodded at me. “We’ll do the same. Artworks can be lined up against the wall and when Freya’s ready, she can work out where they need to go.”

“And we can put in any extra hooks if needed.” Adam brandished his drill and pressed the button to make it whirr.

“In my walls?” Cress appeared, clicking over at a rapid rate. “Over my dead body.”

“Dead?” Jack hooked her arm around the other woman’s waist. “Now that would be a waste. How’s your day going?”

“Better now that you’re here.”

When they leaned in to kiss, I jerked my eyes down, not wanting to intrude. Things between the two of them seemed to be moving at a breakneck speed, but then she reminded me of my own relationship arc, so I shut my damn mouth. I worried for her though, having seen the devastation of her breakups first hand.

“You can’t love someone as if they’re about to walk out the door,” she told me over a wine one night. “That’s not how it works. In some ways blondey bear here...”

“Hey!” Adam said as he cut up the pizzas he’d just prepared.

“...has it right. At some point or another, you’ve gotta make that jump and the only time you’ve got the courage to do that is when it feels right.”

I’d stared at Adam then and he’d stared back, his grin fading down into a much smaller, almost sad smile. As I blinked, back in the here and now, my image of him was replaced by Jack and Cress pulling apart.

“Sounds like we have a plan,” Jack said, clapping her hands. “So let’s get this party started.”

And what a party it was.

There is a special kind of anxiety that comes from trying to organise an event. Even if you did everything right, what if no

one comes? Or just a few people, there to witness the shame of your failure. My heart was in my throat, my heart pounding, the need to wee becoming insistent when the first people arrived.

“Holy shit...!” a young guy led the way, his friends in tow, as he rushed towards the sneakers. He picked a pair up, inspecting the designs for about 2.5 seconds before looking up and locking eyes with me. “Do you have these in size 10?”

I sucked in a breath, ready to say something, but Kaine beat me to it.

“I’ll look after that for ya, mate.” He stepped in smoothly. “We’ve got a whole range of designs and sizes in the backroom. Size 10 is what you’re after? In any particular colour?”

And so it went.

“The gallery’s filling up fast.” Bjorn, the massive bear shifter who owned the place appeared at my side with a wild grin. “This is amazing, Freya.”

“Yeah,” I said, grinning so hard my cheeks hurt. “It is.”

“Some of my boys are gonna have to stand on the door.” He nodded to the rest of his sleuth who were already making a beeline towards the doorway. Each one of them was so tall, so big, the crowds would’ve parted for them automatically. But when faced with giants wearing denim and black leather biker jackets? People just moved faster. “We can only have so many people in here without it being a fire hazard. They’ll keep the numbers constant, let people in when others leave.” He winked at me. “Also makes an event seem exclusive.”

“Because everyone loves your work.” I turned around to find Jack standing beside me, swirling a glass of wine in her hand. She smirked then, the elegant PR maven shoved aside to let my friend through. “Of course they fucking do, which I told you—”

“Dude, you are not gonna ‘I told you so’ me on the night of my first gallery opening,” I replied with a grin.

“Yeah, I am. Look at them, Freya.”

We turned around together and surveyed the gallery. People were staring at paintings, picking up shoes and holding them against themselves to see how they'd look. I saw the gleam in people's eyes, of the kind of excitement that comes from finding artwork that speaks to you. Honestly I'd felt like I was never going to experience that.

My work was too weird, I'd decided, only able to be appreciated by other strange little weirdos. So, now, to find out there were a whole lot more weirdos out there than I expected...? I let out a long sigh, my heart aching in my chest, not from pain but from pleasure. It seemed to happen all too often lately. I felt a kind of gratitude so intensely sweet it took my breath away and that's what had my eyes pricking. I raised a shaking hand and tried to low-key brush at my eyes, but Jack caught me at it.

"Freya..."

Her voice was low and full of concern and she instantly spun around, blocking the sight of me from the rest of the room. She bent down and inspected my face. "Are you OK? Do you want me to grab the guys? Did they do something?"

"No, they..." My throat closed over and the rush of emotion just hit me harder. I didn't cry, ever. I'd once had a particularly bitchy male painting lecturer take me out into the hallway and call into question my presence in the program, let alone my future as an artist. If I could survive that, I could certainly get through this. But her suggestion that the guys were at fault just made things worse.

Because Kaine was there as soon as someone seemed keen on buying something, so that Cress was often cut off before she could get to a customer, because he was on it. He directed them to the stock of shoes we had in the backroom or talked about the various merits of the paintings, seeming to know that once he got them talking, he could make a sale.

Adam was greeting people like they were long lost friends and, like always, that's the way they treated him. He was my hype guy, gesticulating wildly as he told them what he loved about each work as they smiled and gave their own input.

And River? He found the quieter lurker types, sidling up and sharing the same space as them before asking a few discreet questions, making sure they knew where to get assistance before disappearing. Every single one of them had worked like a dog to help me get this exhibition off the ground and they weren't content to drink wine and nibble on cheese and crackers now. They wouldn't rest until it was a success.

"They're perfect..." I finally ground out. "It's all perfect, every single thing."

"And you deserve that." She forced my eyes to meet hers. "I don't know where you get the idea you don't. Alby and Floss, they're nice people. Justin needs a kick in the mangina most days, but no one brought you up to think you aren't worthy of this. Somehow, you do it to yourself."

She glanced behind her.

"Life's hard in the spotlight." She nodded slightly. "But it can be worth it, because sometimes it takes the glare of the public eye to get people noticing how worthwhile you are." I caught the moment her lips twisted into a lopsided smile. "And that's why I need to tell you something?"

"What?"

I blinked as I stared into her eyes.

"Adam..." I watched her suck in a breath and then look around the room. "He was given an incredible opportunity, to be added to the 2023 AFL draft."

"The national league?" I asked, my mouth falling open. "But he never said anything about it."

"No, he hasn't." She shot me a rueful look. "He feels like he can't, that it's a choice between you and the rest of the sleuth or football and that if he can't have both..."

He chose us. Every day since that dinner at the Bridgewater Mill, he'd chosen us. He must've got the call sometime between then and now and rather than bring it up with the entire sleuth he'd... I swallowed hard then, more tears forming in my eyes, that I had to brush aside as I stared at him. Beautiful, golden, the centre of attention, that would always be

the case, whether he played football or not. I'd known that when I met him and I knew it now.

"I've got this," I told Jack, giving her arm a squeeze before working my way through the gallery.

People called out as I passed, or stopped and stared, like I was the celebrity this time, not Adam, but I didn't care. I was proud of what I'd been able to pull off in the last few weeks, but that wasn't more important than this. The way Adam's face lit up as I drew closer, then his arm hooked out to grab me around the waist.

"And here's the artist herself. My girl." He said that with such pride, beaming at the crowd of people clustered around him. "She's so freaking talented. You wanna snap up some artworks now, while they're ridiculously cheap, because she's gonna hit the big time." He nodded to the paintings on the wall. "Everyone's gonna want a Freya North original in their lounge room."

"Adam." His eyes dipped down to meet mine and his were sparkling. People, it was always people that brought him alive, especially a crowd. But it didn't seem to matter to him if it was a bunch of art lovers or footy fans, he just wanted a chance to be a part of that collective appreciation. I hugged him close and then turned to the gallery attendees. "You'll have to excuse us, I just need to have a quick word with him for a sec."

"Is everything OK?" he asked, once we got outside. People standing in line to enter the gallery turned to watch us go with interest. "Has someone said something shit? Tell me who, Frey, and I'll sort them out."

"Adam—"

"Whatever it is, we'll sort it out." He took my hands in his and gave them a squeeze. I let out a sigh then and nodded.

"We will."

I hadn't connected fully to Adam yet. We all studiously ignored that fact, too caught up in the honeymoon phase to say

anything about it, but I was about to now. I let out a long sigh and then reached out.

Adam?

He jerked back as if stung, his grip growing painfully tight as he stared down at me.

Freya? How are...? What...?

Adam, have you been holding anything back from us?

I watched his smile fade, the light dim inside him and I hated that he'd done that for us.

What're you talking about? He moved to take me in his arms, but I slid my hands across his chest, holding him at arm's length. *Freya, you—?*

You were offered a place in the draft this year.

He frowned but didn't look shocked by that news, shaking his head, but before he could answer, Kaine and River came outside.

“What's going on?” Kaine asked. “Freya, they're about to officially open the exhibition. We need to head back inside.”

I just shook my head slowly. River caught on first, tracking the way I stared into Adam's eyes, waiting for him to confess. It wasn't even that, share his news with us.

We're your sleuth, I told him. We... My mind stuttered on the word, but then I remembered what Jack had said. *We love you.*

Do you? Adam searched my face and it took me a moment to decipher his expression, because I'd never seen anything like it. Doubt, that was it. Enough to be together, but... He shook his head, jerking backwards before glancing at the others. “Billy gave me a call the night after the Bridgewater,” he told the guys. “He had an offer.”

“What kind of offer?” Kaine snapped, but River just seemed resigned. He moved closer to me, putting his arm around my shoulders. “What kind of offer, Adam?”

“The kind no football player can refuse,” Adam shot back, “but I did. For Freya.” He scanned the group. “For us. I’ve got fuck-all chance of making it into the big leagues because I’m in my twenties, and it wasn’t worth the risk. Freya said she didn’t want to be a WAG, didn’t want to spend her life in the spotlight and I respected that. I made the only call I could. I told him I wasn’t interested and to lose my number.”

“Adam...” River’s voice was a low rumble and he gripped his sleuthmate’s shoulder, but I couldn’t tell whether that was in commiseration or to prompt him to say the right thing.

“Adam, you should’ve—” Kaine started to say, but I broke in.

“Ask me again.”

“What?” Adam’s brow knotted as he stared down at me.

“Ask me again. Whatever you would’ve said the morning after the medal count. Ask me again.” His teeth sunk into his bottom lip and then he let out a sigh, taking my hand again and stroking the back with his thumb. “Ask me again, Adam Farrelly.”

“Freya...” Time felt like it stopped still as his eyes stared into mine. “I know this is all happening way too fast.” I let out a little huff of incredulity at that. “But I feel like there’s something here, something real.” When he squeezed my hand, I squeezed back. “I’m never going to love anyone else. I’ll spend my life trying to make your life the best it can be, but... I know I’m asking you to jump off a cliff when you’ve got no idea what’s at the bottom, and I’m pretty sure you hate that and I know my brother does.”

“Bloody dickhead...” Kaine muttered.

“I wish I could have it all planned out, tell you what’s going to happen, but I can’t.” He stepped closer, so I could feel the heat radiating off his body, smell the expensive woody aftershave Kaine had selected, mixed with his own scent. “But I can say this. Whatever it takes to make this relationship work, I’ll do it, Frey, you know that.” He picked up my hand and placed it on his chest. *You know me.* That was said inside

my head, as if the information was too intimate to be shared freely and I understood why.

Yes, I replied mentally, because my throat was bone dry. “Yes,” I said out loud. “Yes to us. Yes to our future.” I looked inside the gallery window, catching all the people massed around my work. “Yes to whatever the hell that looks like.”

“Yes to Adam being put forward for the draft?” River asked, watching me closely. “That could mean moving to Sydney or Melbourne, maybe Brisbane.”

“The dads have been wanting to break into the property market in Melbourne for some time,” Kaine said with a sheepish look. “They hit me up about it.”

“Just yes,” I replied, that aching feeling growing and growing inside my chest until it finally seemed to crack and just leave this: tears and joy, so much joy. Because you know what? I’d thought the glare of the spotlight was too much to bear, but sometimes it’s soft, just like the sun on a winter’s day. “Just yes.”

Epilogue

Four Years Later

There's nothing like an AFL grand final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. I didn't even fully understand how AFL worked, but even I could feel the energy. Everyone here was cheering, screaming, sometimes spewing abuse at the umpires, and I sat there trying to make sense of it all.

"So is he—?" I asked.

"If Adam gets this penalty kick, it'll mean Carlton wins the fucking grand final!" Dad shouted.

After a few frantic phone calls and some big apologies to his agent, Adam was put forward for the AFL draft four years ago, and despite slim chances of being picked, he was signed by an AFL club. He'd spent a year at St Kilda, one of the smaller clubs, but his performance and some canny negotiations by his agent, had him being picked up by the Carlton Football Club. By the look on his face and Dad's, this was a very good thing. He'd spent the last few years proving himself, dealing with injuries, exhausting training regimes and media attention, so much media attention, but that all led us to here.

"It's all on his shoulders?" I asked, feeling a pang of fear.

Don't be scared, River said, grabbing my hand. *Adam's got this.*

"That's right!" Dad crowed. "Kick the fucking shit out of it, mate! You can do it, Adam!"

And that's when my focus narrowed down.

The sound of the crowd dropped away first, then the madly waving presence of all the fans. One side of the stadium was urging Adam on, and the other half was cursing his name. They didn't matter. I sucked in a breath and then reached out, across the top of so many heads, over the field, down, down, down to where Adam was a tiny presence on the field. He tossed the ball in the air reflexively, then dropped his head down and trotted forward. I went with him.

You can do this, I whispered inside his mind.

I didn't throw him off his game. Nothing could, because when he was like this, I felt it. An iron control, a total focus, which was usually directed at me, but now it was entirely down on the footy field. Here we needed to be the ones to carry him forward. Kaine set his beer down and leaned forward as well, River shifting closer. The three of us must've looked like a strange sight, but we knew what our job was today. Carlton had a secret weapon and we were it.

It felt like our feet picked up speed as Adam got closer to the line, our bodies thrummed with barely contained power and as we got closer, our eyes didn't drop for a second from those goals. We saw it, over and over inside our minds, the ball going sailing through the air and between the goalposts, the umpire darting forward to raise both hands and indicate we'd kicked a goal. We saw it so fucking clearly, that when the ball hit Adam's boot, it was almost an afterthought.

Except it wasn't.

He put every single iota of power he and the bear possessed into that kick, and we could see that as it went arcing up high, so fucking high. Kaine muttered something over and over as Dad started to shout, leaping to his feet and we were there with him. We had to be in order to follow the ball, because the entire stadium was on its feet, focussed on the progress of that distinctive brick-red Sherrin. Over and over it spun, looking like it was just going to keep climbing higher, right before it came crashing down.

“He’s gonna make it...” Dad growled. “He’s gonna make it. C’mon son, I’ll letcha walk my daughter down the aisle if you can just get this bastard past the posts. C’mon, mate, c’mon... You little bewdy!”

Everyone else in the stadium went wild when the ball landed squarely between the posts, but I knew how Adam felt. Faint, lightheaded, unreal, so much so that when his teammates slammed into him he barely felt it. Nothing but this. Our bond, locked tight, had him wavering on his feet as I was on mine, but not for long. I moved, forcing my way past people on our row of seats, then down the centre aisle. I heard my name called over and over as I wove my way past cheering fans, one goal in mind. People were already throwing themselves over the barrier of the pitch, but I was forced to do the same, because I heard this.

Freya... There was something keen, desperate and completely bewildered about Adam’s voice inside my head. Freya...

I’m coming, I promised and that’s when his head whipped around. His eyes locked with mine and I started to run, stumbling over the flat ground, as per usual, but still, I was moving as fast as I could, right as a pair of arms jerked me off my feet.

You said you wanted to ride the bear up Rundle Mall, River said, throwing me on his back and then running forward. *Want me to take fur right now?*

Don’t you bloody dare, Kaine replied with a scowl, but he kept pace with us.

“Fuck, Freya...” Adam slammed into me like a freight train, tearing me away from River and fisting my jersey in his hands as he sank his head into my hair. “Freya, love, we did it. We fucking did it.”

His voice cracked on the words, the pain and the need and the complete shock of everything that had happened hitting the four of us, along with this.

Bliss.

Journalists moved in, photographers taking shots at a rapid rate, something Jack would take us to task about later. The media did it all the time, coming up with wild theories about the nature of our relationship, but because we didn't talk to them, that's how they stayed. After everything, I'd learned something important.

The opinion of people you don't know or value doesn't matter, and can't be what shapes your decisions about your life. It can't stop you from doing the things you know you have to, so I threw my arms around Adam's neck, felt the slick of his sweat, the rapid beat of his heart and focussed on what mattered the most: us.

Kaine stepped in then, pressing his head to Adam's.

"You did good, kid." He ruffled his brother's hair and then let out a wild laugh. "Fuck, Adam, you did good."

"I did?" Adam still seemed to be in a daze, unsure of what he'd just achieved, but then he nodded. "I did, didn't I? I did it."

"So how long do we have to stick around here for?" River asked, eyeing the crowds with a baleful eye.

"There's the interviews and the media scrum and the premiership cup..." Adam looked at the three of us and then grinned. "Or we could just skive off."

"Adam..." I said, holding out my hands, as if that would stop him when his mood was up. "Adam, no! The president of the club said... We have to..."

I tried to stop him, I really did, knowing what the consequences would be, but sometimes you've got to choose your family first, no matter what the cost. Adam had walked out of a football ceremony for me before and he'd do so again, because he'd always put us first.

But sometimes we needed to put him first too.

"We'll leave right after the cup ceremony," I assured them. "You won the bloody grand final! You can't walk away from this." The sight of him grew blurry as I grinned like an idiot. "We can't walk away from this."

He nodded slowly, letting out a huff of breath and seeming to see the cheering crowds and bright lights of the stadium for the first time.

“If I’ve got you three by my side, I can get through it,” he said with a nod. “I can get through bloody anything.”

“Together,” River agreed, slinging his arm around Adam’s neck and pulling him in for a rough hug before ruffling his hair.

“Together,” Kaine agreed, coming to stand beside me. “Whatever we do, we do together.” He looked down at me. “Forever.”

“Forever,” I agreed with a soggy smile. “Now, lets go celebrate!”

What comes next?

I have a book planned for Bjorn and his sleuth of biker bear shifters. It should be coming out early in 2024.

