

AN URSA  
SHIFTERS  
NOVELLA

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a red and black plaid shirt and blue jeans, is sitting on the back of a large brown bear. The bear is lying down in a forest with tall, thin trees and yellow autumn leaves falling around them. The woman is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

poke the  
BEAR

SAM HALL

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# POKE THE BEAR

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SAM HALL

## **Poke the 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.

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## Author Note

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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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## Before You Read This Book

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### Before you read this book

You're probably going to think this is a sports romance from the blurb or the start of the book. It's not. You might think you need to know what Aussie Rules Football is. You don't. This is a story about two people finding each other, as a lot of sports romances are, and the sports stuff is very much in the background. The season is finished by the time this story takes place, so no games will be played during the story.

#### So what is Aussie Rules Football?

People argue about its origin, whether it came from an Australian Aboriginal game called Marn Grook, or whether it had its origins in Gaelic football. It's hard to know. But here's some dot points to help US readers out:

- Players do handle the ball. This is not soccer/what the Brits call football.
- It's not super similar to American football (we call that gridiron). Rugby is probably closer to that.
- It features fast play (a lot of running), long kicks and marks (leaping up into the air to grab the ball mid kick, sometimes using the backs of your team mates or opposition to launch you there).

You really want to know more, check out this video made for US audiences.

[Click here for video](#)

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## Chapter 1

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*Freya*

“You look amazing, Freya,” my bestie, Jack, said as she stood before me. Her hands started to flutter and her eyes got a little misty as my eyes narrowed.

I loved her. She was the best person in the world, but I didn't feel amazing.

“I look...”

Different, that was what my family would always say when they saw my artwork. It was the word they used when they didn't know what to say or do and couldn't think of a polite way of saying it. But it was true, I did look different. Somehow Jack had bullied me into accompanying me to the televised Magarey Medal awards night. It marked the end of the South Australian Football League's season and the best and fairest player would be decided, winning the coveted medal.

I theory.

In practice, all of the best South Australian Aussie Rules footballers got super drunk as they waited to find out which one of them won.

“You look beautiful,” Jack said, and she was talking fast, like she did when she was dealing with difficult clients. Don't let them get a word in edgewise, that was her motto. “I always said you'd look fab in this dress, but look at you.”

She spun me around by the shoulders, making me stare back into the mirror at my reflection. She'd worked hard to find a dress that looked good on me, something I seriously appreciated but...

She wanted me to be happy, I knew that. She wanted me to be proud and feel beautiful, so I smiled for her. But I wasn't a WAG (wives and girlfriends of players) and I wasn't even in PR, like Jack. I was a waitress most of the time and sometimes an artist, selling my work at a market stall one weekend out of four, so why was I here?

"Thanks for agreeing to come," she said and that's when my hand covered hers. She frowned now, hard, trying to stop the tears from coming. "When Laila broke up with me..."

Ah, that's why.

I turned around, glad to not be staring at myself now and focused back on her.

Jack and I had been friends since school, and we'd talked about life, boys, our futures, until she finally confessed that she liked girls, not guys. There'd been a string of girlfriends since then and each time it didn't work out, it got messy. I'd held her hair back over the toilet as she heaved her guts out, sat and held her hand as she fucking wept, wondering if she'd ever find Miss Right. I mouthed what I hoped were helpful platitudes, because... She was my best friend and I would've done anything to help her find a partner who would treat Jack the way she deserved, even if I had no idea how to.

"Laila was an idiot," I told Jack, tilting her head up and smoothing away the small smears of mascara. Waterproof, my arse. "If she didn't see what an amazing person you are and marry you off, then she doesn't deserve you."

She smiled then, through the tears and then wrapped her arms around me.

"Thanks... Just thanks. I know you don't want to do this. That hanging out with a bunch of footy players is your idea of hell. That being on television is even worse."

My grip on her tightened.

“I won’t be on TV though, right, Jack? Jack?”

She pulled back and grinned down on me, even through the tears.

“There’ll be too many other people hanging around to worry about that,” she said. “We’ll kick back in the background, make sure the boys don’t get too messy. It’ll be just like when we used to do bar work.”

I groaned then. The two of us had worked behind the bar at a local university pub and it had not been fun. Australian boys and alcohol were not a good combination. Like there was this thing for a while, amongst the engineers, which were weirdly the worst. They called the game pelican. You got as drunk as possible, then tried to spew in your mate’s mouth. Weird times. The pub owner had gotten so pissed off about the whole thing, he said anyone who ‘pelican-ed’ in his pub would get a lifetime ban, which stopped it.

“Just as long as no one’s playing pelican tonight,” I replied. Jack just smiled. “Jack? Jack! Tell me no one is playing pelican. Jack!”

She pulled me out of the hotel suite we were sharing tonight, then down the hall and I thanked fuck that I hadn’t worn the heels she’d given me. I’d swapped them out for a pair of my custom-painted Chuck Taylor’s, the long sweep of the satin dress I was wearing able to hide them. But Jack moved like a fucking steam train, stalking down the hall on perilously high heels, walking us towards the lift when her phone rang.

“Jaclyn Maynard speaking,” she said, sounding completely professional now. She winked at me as we got in the lift. “Yep, we’re heading down now. Got it, sir. Watch the players, make sure none of the contenders get too drunk and rowdy. Definitely no sex in the toilets. We won’t have a Sonny Bill Williams situation tonight. Understood. I’ll see you down there when you arrive.”

“The owner of the team,” she told me when the call ended. “You don’t have to do anything tonight, because you’re my

plus one, though if you bring me gin and tonics when our guys start running amok, I'll love you forever."

"You already love me forever," I shot back with a grin, then lifted my leg, shifting the mass of satin. "And I must love you, wearing a damn dress."

She sniffed at that.

"Women do it all the time. Anyway, you could've worn a suit, you'd have looked sharp in it."

"I'm fine," I insisted.

"Because menswear can look amazing on girls. I could introduce you to some really hot masc girls—"

"Nope," I said, because this was well-worn territory.

"You might hit it off and then you'd get all the benefits of someone with masculine qualities while getting A grade head."

"Still nope," I said.

"Asexual then?"

If you're wondering why my best friend was asking me such personal questions, here's the reason. Everyone did, because I'd never had a boyfriend. Jack assured me I could come out to her as anything, as long as it wasn't a bloody Volvo driver, but... I couldn't answer her questions about my sexuality, not properly because I was twenty-two years old, and I'd never been kissed.

People said that I just needed to put myself forward more, but that was not what I wanted. It was old-fashioned bullshit, but...

I wanted to be swept off my feet. Have some guy see me across a crowded room and know I was his. Then I didn't have to shuffle and be painfully awkward, like I always was when guys talked to me.

Then I'd know he was the one.

I sucked in a breath and then met her eyes, but before we could say anything the doors opened and we looked out onto a

busy lobby. Cameras flashed outside as the photographers for the local media snapped shots of the players entering the hotel.

“OK, let’s head in before the real scrum begins,” she told me, pulling me through the crowd of pretty people, leaving me to apologise to those we bumped into as we went.

“Name?” the door bitch asked as we approached the door of the ballroom.

“Jack Maynard and her plus one,” my bestie said, striking a slight pose. “PR team for the Tigers.” The door bitch looked the two of us over and then nodded.

“Have a lovely night, ladies.”

And that’s when my anxiety started to spike.

The room was largely empty right now, staff rushing around and setting up the last of the tables, bar staff ensuring the fridges were well stocked. Australians liked to drink, but footy players were a whole other level, especially when the alcohol was free. TV cameramen started to adjust their gear, talking to each other over headsets, making sure they’d be able to capture everything for a live simulcast of the awards ceremony.

But it wasn’t hard to imagine.

We had many great artists, musicians, dancers and writers in Australia, but nobody caught the public’s attention like sports people. I sold carefully hand-painted shoes like mine at the markets, but the guy at the stall next to me sold cheap, mass-produced footy-themed items and he made money hand over fist. The rest of Australia might not give a shit about the state football leagues night of nights, but my home city did.

So how did it work?

After every match, the umpires gave points to the three players they thought were the best on field on that day, Jack had explained. The night was one long tally, counting the results until one player came out on top. They’d win the Magarey medal and be crowned the best of the best for this year. People actually sat at home and watched this.

And that had me shrinking back towards the walls.

Jack was chattering away with someone else on the phone, but I was seeing it, the massive ballroom full of players and their partners. *Damn Laila*, I thought, staring at the side of Jack's face. Not just because Jack's ex was a fucking flake, pulling away from my bestie every day until my friend was sobbing in my lounge room, wondering what the fuck had gone wrong. That was enough for me to want to hang, draw and quarter her. But... the traitorous thought came, no matter how I tried to stuff it down. I flushed as I thought it, feeling like a bitch, when Jack turned to me.

"Just hang here for a bit," she said. "I'll be right back. Apparently some of the players pre-gamed before they got here and..."

She shook her head sharply, knowing explanations weren't needed, stalking off with a kind of determination that scared the shit out of me.

Right.

I went to lean back against the wall, jumping when the floor-length curtains they installed against them shifted. Maybe I could pull them aside and hide right under... I sucked in a breath and then pulled out my phone, jumping on my Instagram.

Everyone has places they feel confident and places where they don't. Reality TV shows make good money pushing people into the places they aren't confident and recording the results, but right here was where I could relax. I posted only my artwork on my profile and that was perfect because then people focused on what mattered most to me.

*Gorgeous!* one person wrote beneath a picture of shoes I'd spent hours hand colouring.

*OMG, want!* said another.

I knew they didn't actually want them, because I didn't sell that many via my website, but still. I took a weird kind of satisfaction from the viewer experiencing a feeling of need for my shoes, even if it was just for a minute.

*These are so cute!!!*

I smiled at the sight of all of the emojis that followed that, then flicked over to my messages. The usual spam from people wanting to ‘collab’ but not really, expecting me to send them free stuff, despite not really having developed a following or wanting me to feature their brands in my work, even though our products were completely incompatible. I deleted those messages until I found one worth reading.

*Hey, it said, this is freaking weird, me messaging you like this, but I just wanted to say how amazing your work is. I love it! I wish I could afford...* I smiled, knowing exactly what that was like. I was forced to use all the second hand Chucks I could find in charity shops, then photograph all the imperfections as I listed them, to make sure customers knew what they were getting. *But I just wanted to say you’re freaking amazing,* the message continued. *Don’t give up.*

I looked down from the screen, not seeing the ballroom just then, but this. The freedom to spend my days creating, not serving people overpriced coffee. The thought was like a mirage, tantalising in the distance, luring me forward, always forward.

But I never stumbled into the oasis.

My parents were quietly tearing their hair out, only slightly mollified when I started painting clothes, shoes rather than canvases, because they at least could see that as somewhat useful, not like art.

If they were going to put anything up on the wall, it’d be a footy poster for Dad or a ‘noice’ painting from IKEA for Mum. The idea that people might make weird and wonderful works of art, not for aesthetic reasons, but to represent... Those strange states of human consciousness, from the ugly to the beautiful and everything in between, was beyond them.

But one day... I knew what the chances were of making it big. Our lecturers made that clear at art school. And especially my style of work. Not cutting-edge postmodern stuff, nor classically skilled paintings that would grace the great homes of the rich either. I made quirky, weird little creatures and had



them capering all over my shoes, my bag, my clothes, unable to keep them locked down and inside my head.

It felt like my work didn't fit anywhere.

But here, on Insta, people didn't give a shit about the Western tradition of art or the gallery system. People liked what they liked and every emoji, every response made my heart swell.

Right before the doors opened.

My eyes jerked sideways, and I sank further back now, people strolling in, joking, talking to each other, looking so fucking alive. Of course they were, this was the most important night of the year and a free piss up, so spirits were high. I thought I was doing a very good job of hiding away, as I grabbed my phone, ready to text Jack. I wasn't sure where I was supposed to be or what I was supposed to do until...

They were the loudest, snapping my attention away from my contact list and I knew why. The Tigers had won again this year, and the team were the golden boys of the league.

But none more than him.

There were fan pages made about him on social media, snippets of his best plays and his warm up routines posted. Guys analysed his style, recounted his latest antics when they came into the cafe I worked at, and women? They sighed over his golden good looks. Adam Farrelly was tall, taller than almost every other player, which was saying something, and moved like an actual tiger, with an unconscious grace. His thick blond hair had been allowed to grow long, something that had the older generation tutting even as girls sighed over the thought of running their fingers through it.

He was also the frontrunner to win the Magarey medal.

I watched him like I would a TV clip, my eyes taking in those sharp cheekbones, tracing the line of those broad shoulders, thick thighs as he prowled forward. His suit seemed to cling to his massive frame, barely able to contain it, but none of that prepared me for this.

The guy next to him was nudging and jostling him, obviously putting shit on Adam before the ceremony started and while Adam grinned along with it, his eyes shifted. Scanning the large ballroom, perhaps for his wife or girlfriend? Maybe looking for a drink?

Nope.

Those keen blue eyes skimmed over everything with a remarkable ease, right up until he saw me.

I stepped back hard. Disappearing into the curtains wasn't an idea, it was an absolute need now, as my fingers went to the fabric to pull it around me, hide me from this.

I said I wanted a guy, my guy, to look across a crowded room and only see me, but right now I was rethinking that idea. His eyes seemed to burn brighter and brighter blue as they went wide, flicking everywhere to take me in. Then he took a step towards me.

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## Chapter 2

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*Adam*

“What up, motherfucker!”

I’d no sooner gotten out of the hire car the team had sent around to collect me, than Darryl launched himself at me. He was a teammate and more than that, my best friend. We’d come up the ranks together, when we were still in the under 18s team, but right now? He launched himself at me, as if in a tackle, forcing myself to brace my legs and wrap my arms around him or fall backwards.

Going arse over tit was apparently not what we were supposed to do on the red carpet, Jack had been very firm about that. Darryl just laughed, rubbing his hand through my hair that Jack’s hairdresser had worked very hard to style, then sprang back with a laugh.

“Medal winner for sure here,” he said, punching me in the arm, then turned to the nearest photographer. “Get your shots now, boys, because this fella here is gonna walk out with a shiny bit of gold around his neck.”

I elbowed him in the ribs but forced myself to smile for the cameras. Never let the press catch you looking pissed, Jack had said, except on the field. I could look like I was going to punch the teeth down another bloke’s throat during a game, but not off it.

I also couldn’t look cocky.

“You think you’re in with a chance?” a journalist asked as he came closer, microphone out.

“Like every bloke here,” I replied, “I’d like to think I might be.” I shrugged then. “But we won’t know until the draw’s done.”

The journalist sucked in a breath to ask another question but I just shook my head.

“In with a chance of getting your dick sucked,” Darryl muttered, smiling and waving at the cameras as we walked past. “The girls get a little hungry on medal night.”

Weren’t they always? I had no problems with a woman going out and getting what she wanted. The days of a girl being expected to sit around and wait for the right bloke to come to her were long gone and good riddance to that. But the problem was, some didn’t like to take no for an answer.

And I always said no.

People talked, at games, in the locker room, online, and I’d been linked to plenty of beautiful girls in the past by the media.

But I’d never touched a single one of them.

Because I wasn’t just a kid that was good with his hands and could move fast down the footy field. We were all regularly tested for performance enhancing drugs, but there was something in me that made me a head above the rest.

The bear.

He hated this shit. The noise, the people, the flashing light and the fucking bullshit. He wanted three things, food, a nice place to sleep and... I swallowed hard, continuing to nod and smile at other players and the media scrum.

And her.

One woman would have my body, my soul, my whole fucking heart, so burying my dick in groupies didn’t make sense. People could have all the consensual sex they wanted, but I’d only have it with her.

My mate.

But I was twenty-two years old. People told me I had a bright future ahead of me, but it didn't seem like it without her, because it was all like this.

Nathan Lyons was one of the other front runners for the medal. He was a fucking prick, played hard and dirty, when the refs weren't looking, and liked to see himself as some kind of alpha dog. He talked a big game on the field. I'd heard what he wanted to do to my sister (didn't have one), my mother (good fucking go. Mum would smash him to pieces) and every other possible female friend or family member to try and rile me up while we were playing.

Trouble was, I didn't have a girl for him to piss me off about.

He tried starting shit with me about Jack, the PR person for our team, but I'd just laughed in his face. I made clear she'd eat me for breakfast and him too, then Jack would turn to her girlfriend and ask about the weather.

Speaking of which, here she came.

“Boys.”

Darryl smirked. There was something of the school mistress about Jack and with good reason. She was too bloody smart for this job. Having to try and whip a whole bunch of blokes with too much testosterone into a publicly acceptable team persona. Kids came to our games, as did mums and dads, so none of the bullshit that went on behind the scenes could get out.

Like the fact that Nathan fucking Lyons had his mistress set up in a place almost as fancy as the family home. That even with two women on the go, he was still feeling around for any groupies who might be keen to go around with him. That apparently he caught some kind of STI from not wrapping it before he had sex.

And he found out because his wife caught it.

But right now he was beaming at the cameras, Mrs Lyons and the Lyons juniors all clustered around him.

“Your family is here,” Jack said in a low voice then steered me towards them.

And that’s when it all got better.

The smiles on my family’s faces, it was the thing that I carried with me every fucking day. Mum was looking beautiful in a dress I’d made my dads buy for her. Yeah, dads. Like all bear shifters, I had multiple. I didn’t give a shit about the cost, I just wanted her to feel amazing. Her eyelashes batted way too fast, warning me she was about to cry, while my dads were all clustered around her. We’d passed my multiple fathers off as uncles to the press. Jack hadn’t freaked that my parents lived a polyamorous lifestyle, but she’d asked me very earnestly if I wanted to expose that to the world.

I didn’t.

I felt like I needed to protect them from everything, the whole three ring circus that went on off the field.

Then there was Kaine.

My big brother glanced over at me from above Mum’s head and unlike everyone else here, he didn’t smile, just nodded to me. I liked to think there was a little sparkle in his eyes when he did that, or was that the flash of the cameras? They were all here, to support me, to watch the tally unfold, all except one.

River, my other sleuth mate.

Bringing River to an event like this was a recipe for destruction. He hated the spotlight, hated the noise and the bullshit. He worked with my brother at my dads’ construction company, but even then he kept a low profile. Some of the other guys muttered about it, reading too much into his silences, but I knew. He was just looking for the same thing as me, the other half of our heart, and we’d never find that here.

“Mum, you look beautiful,” I said, now hamming it up for the cameras. I pulled her close, feeling like a little kid clinging to his mother’s skirts for a second. She smelled of good cooking and Opium, her favourite perfume and I let out a long breath out before letting her go. “Dad.” I nodded to Ed, one of

my dads, then slid my eyes to the other three, so they knew I meant all of them.

“Proud of you, Son.” Ed moved in and gave me that kind of brisk back pat dads use with their grown sons, then tapped me on the bicep. “And wearing smart clothes for once.”

“Haven’t done a bloody thing about that hair.” Willie shook his head and looked at my mop with a frown.

“You know you don’t find a girl by looking like one, s—” Sam said, shooting a sidelong look at the media when he realised he’d nearly slipped. “Mate. You’ll never find a lady looking like an unshorn sheep.”

“This family’s never gonna let this shit get to your head.” Kaine came in close, ruffling my hair and then smiling just slightly for the cameras. He might’ve hated it, but having a famous brother did help bring in business for him. “Just don’t fuck things up tonight.”

Don’t fuck things up, that was Kaine’s default response to everything. What do I do on the first day of school? I’d asked. Don’t fuck up. How do I deal with dickheads on the field? Same advice. So right now, I shoved my elbow into his side and when the air was driven out of him, I sidled away.

“Got all the pictures we need?” I asked Jack, and I let out a sigh when she nodded. “C’mon,” I told my family, holding out an arm for my mum to take. More photos of that, because apparently people wanted to see that, but I didn’t care. Off the field, there was only them.

And my sleuth.

“Sorry, Mrs Farrelly,” Darryl said, emerging as we walked into the ballroom. I saw the massive space and the cameras and all the fancy shit and my heart sank. People loved to watch the medal count, but fuck, they were either watching my slow demise or my victory and there was nothing I could do about it. At least during a game there was the hope of turning shit around for the team. “I need young Adam for a bit.”

“Young Adam,” I said, giving him a shove once he directed me towards the bar. “You’re nearly a year younger

than me.”

“And nowhere near as good-looking, so mate, I need ya as my wingman.” He cast a shifty eye over the ballroom as people started to file in. “The grade A star fuckers are out in force and we need to help those bitches live the dream.” He winked at me. “On the end of our dicks.”

I just stared at him right now, seeing two different blokes. The one who’d seen me through some of the toughest times of my career as we fought it out with all the other kids who thought they could kick a footy around. And then there was this guy.

Some women made it their life’s work to nail a football player, some even trying to get pregnant by one, knowing full well no relationship would come for it. It was far worse for the guys in the AFL, the national football league, but fuck. Some blokes avoided the groupies, some found them beside them in their bed at a hotel, let in by their mates and still others? The women didn’t see the man, just the jersey and these blokes didn’t see them either. Just a willing hole to sink their dick in. If everyone was an adult and consenting, then it was none of my business, but...

“Darryl—” I started to say, but he shook his head, losing the smile.

“Nah, nah, don’t pussy out on me now, mate.” His brows drew down in a slight frown. “This is our chance. You’re riding high this year, and I’m gonna be riding there beside you. Time to put all that fame and good looks to work for the both of us.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, steering me towards the bar again, but something shifted at the corner of my eye. I lived most of my life barely aware of the bear, because he had no place in this country. But when he did come to the fore, there was no ignoring him. He surged to life inside me, stiffening, then roaring, dragging my focus off to the left. I ducked out from under Darryl’s grip and saw her.

My mate.



She didn't look like a groupie, but I wouldn't have given a shit if she was, because she was mine. I felt that throbbing hard and true in my chest. I took a step towards her, then another, a sharp whine in my head growing, like the time some dickhead elbowed me right in the head. But there was no doc to rush on field and check me out, make sure I was still good to play.

Just her.

Because I'd never recover from this, ever.

She was beautiful, with long brown hair with a tawny streak in it, and she'd worn it loose around her shoulders. I wanted to run my fingers through it, then wrap it around my hand and pull her closer. Her lips were bright, bright red, like her dress. The shiny material, satin? It spilled over full curves, ones that I needed to sink my fingers into. She was mine, ours, I corrected, but when I looked over to where my family was seated, I realised Kaine hadn't seen her.

So he hadn't pissed her off with his grumpy prick bullshit yet.

I stopped for a second, because my girl shrank back. I looked around me, searching for whichever dickhead had a beautiful woman like her pulling back, but just saw Darryl at my shoulder. He frowned as he looked at me, then my mate.

"Not her," he said, dismissing my mate outright, before he'd even met her. "You need some chick with juicy big tits you can sink your teeth unto, one that'll let you fuck her wherever you want and then say thank you afterwards."

"No," I said, pushing past him and walking closer.

"What?" Darryl's tone had turned nasty now. I usually only heard it once he had a few drinks into him. Make that more than a few. "You knock back the hotties for this bitch?"

I never lost my fucking cool. Never. I was the Iceman on the field, listening to all of the shitty stuff other players said to rile you up and put you off your game with no reaction. Because nothing touched me. But right now, I understood exactly why blokes lost their shit.

“What did you say?”

Darryl’s eyes widened as my voice transformed, more bear than man and I wondered what he saw when he looked into my eyes, right as my hand went to his throat. I squeezed so fucking hard he could barely breathe, right before I tossed him away.

“Fuck off,” I snapped and then I moved.

To go into damage control. To make sure she hadn’t heard a word of that. To ask her if she wanted a drink, to be my date for the night, and to fall at my feet and worship her. I wanted her, only her and I moved with all the speed I would when trying to intercept the ball.

Right as Jack appeared by her side.

“Hey, Adam,” she said with a bright smile. “Wanna meet my date?”

Date? I stared at my mate, searching her face, something, anything, to let me know this wasn’t true. Everyone knew that Jack was gay, but I thought she was with Laila.

“Freya.” That was my mate’s name? The name of a Nordic goddess, it made perfect sense to me, even as her cheeks flushed red. “This is Adam, one of the players on our team.”

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## Chapter 3

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*Freya*

My dad would've just about shit himself for the chance to shake Adam Farrelly's hand, but I managed to keep myself under control as I reached out and took it. Jack's grin spread wide, then got wider as she watched... What was this? The place was filled with gorgeous women in amazing sparkling dresses. Women that had great tits, great legs and great arses.

So why the hell was he over here, talking to us?

His mate had asked the same question, lurking behind as Adam and I were introduced. The other guy had scowled at me, then turned to try and talk to a few of the perfect girls standing by the door. But I was just standing there, holding Adam's hand as I was thinking all these thoughts, feeling this strange warmth pulsing through me. My breath came in sharp little pants, sweat breaking all over my skin, no doubt staining my dress as Jack's smile faltered. She looked at me, then Adam, then me again, her eyes widening.

"Uh, hi, Adam," I squeaked out.

Oh dear god. I dropped his hand thankfully, and the poor guy rubbed his fingers together, as if to rid himself of the feel of me. But to add to my embarrassment, my other hand rose and I gave him an awkward little wave.

Fuck.

I dropped that as soon as I noticed and then smiled, a fake one full of teeth.

“You must need to talk to Jack. I’ll go get a drink.” I was ready to make a quick exit, but he stopped me.

“Let me.” He flushed, looked down, shoved his hands in his pockets and then dragged them out again, only to rake one through his hair. “I mean, we can get a drink, if you like?”

Then he held out his arm and I just stared at it. What the hell was I supposed to do with that? But Jack had the answers, giving me a little nudge.

“Go and get a drink,” she ordered. “I’ve gotta go and run interference. Darryl obviously thinks he’s gonna score tonight, but I have to make clear that can’t happen until he’s back at his hotel room.” She turned to Adam. “Look after my girl, OK?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer, swallowing hard and then shifting his arm, making clear I was to take it. OK, so I had a star footballer escort. Not the way I thought I was going to get through this night. But he gave me this look, complete with big blue puppy dog eyes, so I wrapped my arm with his and let him take me over to the bar.

“What would you like?” he asked, settling against the edge.

*To go home, I thought furiously. To be in bed with my flannel PJs on and some lo-fi music playing as I draw until I’m too tired to keep my hand moving, but instead I smiled.*

“Um... a vodka, lime and soda, if they have it.”

“They will tonight,” he said, lifting a finger to the bar staff and one came rushing over. I was kinda surprised to see him order an orange juice.

“Not drinking?” I asked, taking the glass with a grateful smile, then stirring the straw through it. “You’re not in training...” I looked around, remembering from Dad’s long conversations that the awards happened at the end of the season. “Shit, of course, you’re not.”

“Nah, just don’t want to make a dick of myself.” As if to illustrate that, there were some loud whoops from the other side of the ballroom, guys sculling beer bottles as fast as they could. Those full lips parted as he drank down a mouthful of

his juice before he set it down, his tongue flicking across the top lip. “So, how long have you and Jack been together?”

“Together?” I swung around, searching for Jack. “Like together, together?” I flicked a finger between me and my bestie as she went and scolded some of her players. “Oh, no, it’s not like that. Jack and I have been best friends since high school.”

“Really?” Adam’s face transformed when he smiled. He was all golden and perfect before, but now he was dazzling. I found myself blinking at the brightness of his grin. “That’s awesome. Shit.” His smile faded. “I mean, if you wanted... If you like...” I just stared at him, sure a full sentence would come out at some point. “So friends, huh.” He nodded slowly. “Cool. Cool.”

“If you want to go back to your friends or your family,” I said, “that’s fine. Jack wanted me here for moral support after she broke up with Laila, but when she’s busy she tends to foist me off onto other people. This is your night and—”

“I wouldn’t want to spend it with anyone else.”

He barely breathed that out and as I stared, those bright blue eyes seemed to gleam.

What?

Fuck, I even said that, because I couldn’t hold back the surprise.

What?

I said that again, prompting him to respond, even though I never meant to say it the first time, let alone the second.

“Look, you’re gonna think I’m a fucking freak...” he said, shaking his head slightly before rolling his eyes back to me. “But...” That strong hand took mine and it felt heavy and hot and I felt the rasp of his calluses on his thumb as he rubbed the back of my hand. “Do you wanna get out of here?”

“What?” *Jesus, find another word, Frey!* I snapped at myself. “God, I want that more than anything else in the world.”

“Yeah?” That cocky smile was back and he seemed to settle right then.

“But we can’t.” I forced myself to smile. “This is your night—”

“I don’t fucking care.” I’d read about guys that growled, but that guy actually did, stepping closer, his body almost pressed into mine. Suddenly the room didn’t seem so big. He sheltered me from the cameras and the players and WAGs and everything, reducing the world down to just this. “They can give the medal to Nathan...”

His speech ended before it’d really began, the haze seeming to fade in his eyes and that’s when I thought it’d happen. He’d pull away, realising this was a mistake, that I was a mistake and— When he shook his head and shot me a rueful smile, I prepared myself for what was going to come next.

I’m just not that into you. Some variation of that was what every guy had said to me since high school. We’d go on a few dates, but it’d fizzle before it even started, or it seemed like there was a real connection, only for them to ghost me. I’d get my hopes up each and every time, enjoying the rush that came at the start of something, the possibilities, the potential all starting to play out in my head, but then... I fixed a polite, sweet smile on my face, readying myself for the rejection.

“I can’t leave,” he admitted. “Fuck!” Adam picked up his drink and took a few long swallows from it. “I can’t...” But whatever else he seemed to be about to say, it all fell away when he stared at me.

There was something so unguarded about Adam, his face an open book, so I saw the moment his head edged closer, his body claiming more of my space. His tongue flicked over his lips, letting me know it wasn’t just my mouth that was bone dry as he stared.

“I can’t leave,” he said finally. “Jack would fucking kill me.”

“She’d fucking kill me too,” I said with a grin, a real one this time.

“I don’t want to be here though.” I watched the man, the one my dad assured me was a likely winner of the medal, stare at me, willing me to hear him. “I want to take you out somewhere nice, to dinner or something. I want...”

This was insane, right? When I blinked, glanced past him, I saw other women staring at us, obviously wondering why he’d bother with the likes of me and I couldn’t help but ask the same question. Like if he wanted to create a personal logo, or design a series of t-shirts, I was his girl, but... When I looked across the ballroom, getting more and more crowded by the minute, I saw it immediately.

I didn’t fit in here.

I didn’t fill my dress in the right places and filled it too much in others. I looked nice by my standards, but by theirs... As if in answer to that, the guy Adam had been with before returned with two beautiful women on his arms.

“Mate, I ran into these two pretty ladies,” he said to Adam and only Adam, angling his body specifically to block me out. “And they said they’re dying to meet the next Magarey medal winner, perhaps the next selection for the AFL draft.” The two women smiled at both the guy and Adam. “This is Felicity...” the guy said, virtually handing the woman to Adam, but he didn’t accept the gift. An arm wrapped itself around my waist and then pulled me into his side. The women watched me get super bloody flustered with a slightly quizzical look.

“And this is my date, Freya.”

Wait, what?

Had I said that aloud? I looked around, but no one was responding, so perhaps not, though... Plenty of people ignored every fucking thing that came out of my mouth, which made being a waitress super awkward. But I couldn’t think of work, words, anything, when I was drawn in this close.

My hands went up instinctively and one landed on his shoulder and what a shoulder. It was rigid and heavy with

muscle. But then his arm went around my waist, and the satin of my dress felt all too thin.

I could feel the heat of his hand through it, how big and how strong it was. I was by no means a slight woman, but I felt like it right now. He towered over me, over almost everyone and that massive body felt like some kind of wall between me and everything else.

Which made me wonder if him pulling me close was deliberate.

He seemed to sense I was staring at him, looking down and smiling. Fuck, I had no chance of staging a defence against him.

“Your date?” The guy looked me over much more closely then and I didn’t like that at all. His response was the thing I expected, the narrowing of his eyes, the slight curl of his lip. He judged me and found me severely wanting, which was when I tried to slide unobtrusively out of Adam’s grip.

Only for his arm to tighten around me.

“My date,” Adam said, much more firmly, resulting in his friend’s brows jerking down lower. “Freya, this is Darryl. He plays on the same team as me...”

I blanked out through the introductions. There was some kind of masculine ribbing going on, putting shit on each other in front of the ladies, and then I was introduced to each of the women. Their smiles were a lot less bright now that it seemed there was no chance of them joining Adam. One even pulled away the moment Darryl turned away to join the party. But Adam, he spun me around and pinned me to the bar the minute they were out of earshot.

“I know we’ve only just met, but if you could be my date for tonight, I’ll do anything,” he said in a low, urgent tone. “Anything.”

“You want to fake date?” I asked. “Did Jack put you up to this?”

“No, I want to real date.” He moved closer. “I want to do a whole lot of real things with you, but we met tonight rather



than on the street or at a party, so I can't. But..." His eyes dropped down, seeming to pay way too much attention to my lips, making me worried I had lipstick on my teeth or something. "But if we can get through tonight, I promise to take you on as many real dates as you want. Can you do that for me, Freya?"

I was used to hearing my name shouted or ground out, or ignored altogether, but not like this. It sounded like the whisper of wind in the leaves when he said it. I understood now why he'd been staring at my mouth, because I couldn't help but to do the same now. Taking in the shape of it, seeing the light sprinkle of golden brown stubble and a small scar just above his lip. My heart pounded loud in my ears as I considered what he was asking, all of it, my brain unable to parse it, so I just responded the only way I could, with a nod.

"Thank you." He leaned in close, pressing his lips to my ear, there and gone again before he dragged me out into the ballroom. I could still feel the tingle in the spot he'd touched. But right as we moved towards the tables, Jack intercepted.

"Hey, thanks for looking after Freya for me," she said to Adam. "Now, do me the biggest favour and see if you can get that fucking mate of yourself to behave himself tonight? Remind him he is not the main character in this scenario." Then she turned to me. "You must be just about ready to kill me right now. I didn't think I was going to be putting out this many fires tonight. Do you want to bail?" She rummaged around in her pockets and pulled out the hotel room key. "Or just go upstairs and soak in the tub? I'll totally understand."

I'm not sure if I was supposed to sense this, but I felt Adam's body tense. I was moved slightly closer, that long, slow, throbbing sensation swelling as our bodies slotted together. He didn't ask, try to influence, or put pressure on me, just let his fingers trace lazy circles along my hip.

And that's when I made my decision.

I had literally no idea what this guy was like and I didn't know whether or not I wanted to be his date, but right now? I wanted to be sure either way. I felt light and heavy all at the

same time, my pulse racing as my skin seemed to grow exquisitely sensitive. Right then I thought I understood what Jack had said beforehand.

*“Your drawings, your room, your flat, will all be there after tonight,” she’d said, putting her hands on my shoulders. “You’ll be drawing masterpieces in the privacy of your own room in less than twenty-four hours. Just give me tonight, Frey. Just come and see what happens when you leave your room and decide then whether or not you like it.”*

I’m sure she hadn’t meant this. Just because I’d never had a boyfriend, didn’t mean I didn’t understand sex or desire. I had a very fine selection of sex toys tucked in my bedside drawers, but none of them made me feel like this.

When the shock subsided, something dense and warm washed over me. I raised my hand, brushing the back of it across my forehead, sure it would come away damp, but instead I was so very hot. I swallowed hard, watching the concern grow on Jack’s face, right before I shook my head.

“Adam asked me to be his fake date for the night,” I told my bestie, hoping to god that she didn’t look at me too closely. I was always a shitty liar. “I said yes.” Jack didn’t look at me with suspicion, but surprise, then relief.

“Oh my god, you’d do that?” She surged forward, wrapping her arms around me and then planting a kiss on my cheek. “If you can make sure at least one of my players are behaving, I’ll do anything, anything.” She tapped her bottom lip. “What about those fancy markers you’re always drooling over. A full set—”

“That’s like five hundred dollars’ worth—” I started to protest.

“If it stops me from having a migraine by the end of this, I consider it a sound investment. I wonder if bribes are tax deductible?” Before I could answer, she looked at Adam. “Look after her and treat her right. Frey is my ride or die bitch and if you ride her, you die.”

“I’ll look after her,” he assured her, his grip tightening. “I’ll be on my best behaviour, promise.”

Before any of us could say another thing, a man in a suit with the kind of well-practised smile only professional performers wear came out with a microphone. “If I can have everyone taking their seats, please, we’ll get the night started.”

The energy in the room changed in an instance as people moved to find their place.

And that’s when I saw the big flaw in this plan.

Adam was a potential medal finalist, so he wasn’t hanging at one of the tables at the back. He wove his way through the tables, keeping a hold of my hand, then pulled out a seat for me at one of a few tables close to the front.

I felt the glare of the lights on me as Adam’s teammates got to their feet and greeted him, some patting him on the back, some giving him shit, but I didn’t hear it. I just blinked, blinked, as I saw everyone turn around to look, the cameras focussing their lenses on us, and then sat very abruptly down.

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## Chapter 4

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*Adam*

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

I had to remind myself that this is what I wanted, that I'd been working my whole life to win a Magarey medal. Rise to the top, catch the eye of the national football league scout's attention. Get... All my ambitions fell apart the moment I tried to remember what they were.

Because of her.

I could hear my teammates talking around me, some even calling out shit to me. I saw Darryl out of the corner of my eye and that he was leaning over so far his face was partially buried in some girl's cleavage. I knew Jack would want me to say something, that my dads would want me to make them proud, that Kaine wouldn't want me to fuck this up, but... I could barely feel my face as I stared at her, just her. My phone buzzed in my pocket, again and again, but I ignored my brother, because this moment, it was mine?

"Do you need me to move in closer?" she asked in a low husky voice, doing just that while looking around herself surreptitiously. "Make people think I really am your date for tonight?"

"Yeah..." My voice was all scratchy, the bear shoving forward, threatening to break free. He tolerated sport, the human world, everything, because we hadn't found her. But right now the medal count meant less than nothing to him. He

shoved at our bond, knowing full well that he could push us from skin to fur and the whole ballroom, the whole hotel would clear out from the freaking horror of seeing a damn Eurasian brown bear.

And then there'd just be me and Freya standing there.

*Soon, I promised him. Before the night ends. Just give me this. I need to convince her this is a good idea. I need to try and persuade her to choose us.*

And that stopped him cold. We didn't love Freya, but we would. I knew that from the rapid beat of my heart, the way every muscle was locked down. This was like standing in front of the goals for a penalty kick, your team, the opposition all watching as the crowd surged to their feet. People in the stands would shout muffled advice, urging me to kick the ball hard and true, through the goalposts. I could get this right or I could fuck it all up.

Nope, just like in footy, I couldn't even let myself think it.

I smiled finally, sliding my arm around her back and then leaned closer.

"Yeah, I need you to make it look real." Her scent was rising, becoming sweeter by the second. I sucked it in, saying to the bear, *See? She's responding to us.* I moved even closer, brushing my lips across the shell of her ear and I felt her shiver, her respiration rate picking up. "If you do that for me, I'll be able to get through tonight in one piece. You can do that for me, beautiful, can't you?"

I felt like I'd fucked up then. Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, but we were too close to see each other clearly. Didn't matter, I saw it, saw her brows crease lightly. Her scent soured and she went to pull away, so I tightened my grip on her.

"Please?"

I'd never asked anyone for anything with that kind of neediness before, but I couldn't keep my cool, I just couldn't. She was so close, and she smelled nice, and she had these greenish flecks in her brown eyes that I think made them

hazel, and they felt like the cool depths of the forest as I walked deeper in fur.

“Yes.” She seemed as surprised as I was when she said that, but she put her hand on my thigh then, making my dick lurch like a dog on a chain, trying to get to her. That little hand felt like it was burning a hole right through my pants, but while I shifted restlessly, I didn’t want it anywhere else. She squeezed my thigh, her eyebrows jerking up, as if surprised she’d do that. Freya smiled then and it felt like it was more beautiful than a million fucking sunsets. “Yes,” she said, much more definitely.

Apparently that was all the encouragement I needed.

Kaine was always on my fucking case, because apparently I was too impulsive, but right then, I knew he had a point. I darted closer, apparently about to be real fucking silly, closing the gap between us, and then brushed my lips against hers.

Fuck.

The pitch of the compere’s voice, rising, rising, was like that of a sports commentator’s the day of a match. I heard the sound of music, knew that they were playing the video presentation that they always did at the start of the medal count, summarising what happened during the footy season this year. They were playing tiny little clips of me playing other fellas, but I couldn’t look. If you’d put a gun to my head, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you what team I played for, just this.

Freya smelled like wildflowers when we kissed and she made this cute little noise when our lips collided. Her lips were soft, so fucking soft, I felt like I could dive right into them and never want to come out.

But then she kissed me back.

The moment her lips moved against ours, kissing me, touching me, the bear settled.

For now.

He didn’t have a chance now, my control perfect, because I would not give him an inch while I had this. My lips tingled.

Fuck it, my whole body did when I pulled away. *Freya*, that's what my heart beat. *Freya*. But then a voice cut through it all.

“Adam Farrelly...”

My head jerked up like a kid caught taking a nap during class, and the compere smiled at the gotcha moment.

“He's had a helluva a season this year and looks like his night is gonna end with a bang too.” The slimy fuck winked at my girl, making me growl low in my chest. But then he moved on to talking about the other front runners, like Nathan fucking Lyons.

Tigers supporters hated Port Adelaide ones and vice versa, and he was a prime example of why our team didn't like theirs. The smug prick just listened to the compere list all of his achievements, like he was king shit or something, nodding along, as they omitted all the shitty details.

The sledging, the too high tackles, the elbows in ribs, or footy boots ground into you the moment you were on the ground. The guy was a fucking prick and he deserved a kick in the nuts, not a fucking medal. I directed my attention back to Freya then, noting the ways her lips seemed more swollen now, the red lipstick partly rubbed away, and then smiled.

“Do you know what happens at the medal count?” I whispered.

“Ahh...” My girl didn't like football, I was willing to bet. That deer-caught-in-the-headlights look said a lot. “Dad watches it on the TV each year.” Her eyes flicked around wildly. “I used to listen to it when I was drawing.”

“Drawing?” Freya was artistic? I felt like I was sucking down each detail I learned about her with way too much eagerness. *Keep your fucking cool*, I told myself, even as my arm moved to curl tighter around her. “What do you draw?”

She was going to answer, then stopped herself, smiling before staring back into my eyes and shrugging.

“Pretty sure that's not something a fake date would tell you,” she said.

“And what if this wasn’t fake?” I was coming on too fucking strong, but in this the bear and I were one. We wanted to know the same thing: everything. “I said I wanted to take you out. We can go now.” I turned to look for an exit, but she stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Really?”

Who had hurt Freya to ask a question like that? She was smiling, but it wasn’t a simple, happy thing. There was pain there and hope, I clung to that, a fragile, flickering thing. She wanted to believe I was interested and I needed her to accept it.

“Really,” I said. “Tell me about you.” But just as she sucked in a breath to do just that, the compere broke in, letting us know the tally was about to begin. “I still want to know.” She smiled at my growl. “After this is done.”

“After you win,” she said.

Fuck, she was perfect. I’m not sure if she even gave a shit about football, but right then I felt like she did about me. She squeezed my hand, like wives and girlfriends did all across the ballroom, and gave me something that was more precious than she knew.

It was a privilege to play footy at this level, something our head coach made clear every day during training. Plenty of other fellas had given it their all and found out they didn’t have what it takes, so I was aware of how good I had it. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t lonely. Not as much as it would if I made it into the Australia wide league, but still... When I sat through each medal count, feeling hope spike each time my name was called, then felt it dip when other bloke’s numbers rose higher, I wanted this.

Someone to sit near me, to see me, to give my hand a squeeze and just make me feel I had someone in my corner as I waited to see if all my hard work paid off. I was so fucking into her before this, but now? I stared back, hoping she’d see how bloody grateful I was. I rubbed my fingers across the back of her knuckles over and over.



I looked up then at the screen and saw the round one clips playing, remembering the mark I took, throwing myself up into the air, after leaping off Darryl's shoulders, intercepting the ball and tucking it into my chest. I felt like I was flying that day, but somehow I felt the exact same thing right now. That same elation, that same sheer fucking wonder that I'd manage to achieve that, achieve this. I looked at Freya then, soaking her in. Everything I ever wanted was on the line and I just had to reach out and grab it.

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## Chapter 5

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*Freya*

What the fuck was I thinking?

I liked to live my life quietly, doing new things only after I'd planned them out, thought them through, but then Adam... My heart was pounding so hard, I was sure people would see it trying to fight its way clear of my chest... I glanced around, and that feeling tripled instantly. Cameras zoomed in a little closer, focussing their glassy eyes on me and Adam. They seemed to take in the way he sat close to me, body tilted my way, not towards the front of the ballroom, the way he seemed to eat into my personal space.

Bringing me back to my original question: what the fuck was I thinking?

Whether I wanted to be or not, I tended to fade into the background and that seemed like a damn fine idea, especially when I saw them.

Some of the partners of the players shot me politely friendly smiles, but still others just stared. Their eyes did the thing that I feared, comparing the two of us and wondering why we were together.

These were the days I wished I was a bird, not a woman.

Flashy, bright, beautiful males, like Adam, made sense in the bird world, and the drab little females just watched them posture before choosing the one they were interested in. But instead I was just a drab little female amongst a whole lot of

beautiful ones. I didn't envy that woman's perfect teeth or the other's amazing makeup. I just knew it was utterly unattainable for me and was willing to high five her for winning the genetic lottery but.... Then Adam looked over at me and my mind went quiet.

Those blue eyes of his sparkled with such warmth and those lips? They curved up into a smile, a fucking dimple popping when he did so. He made me feel like there was no one else in the world, just me and him.

And suddenly that's all I wanted.

I'd never felt like this before, never wanted to be near someone, drawn to them like a moth to a flame, so I leaned over then, breathing in his freaking amazing aftershave and said something I would never have dared.

"Do you need me to move in closer?" I said. "Make people think I really am your date for tonight?"

*No, no, NO!* my mental voice shrieked, but his smile just widened.

"Yeah," he replied, then put his arm around me. "I need you to make it look real."

My dress was made of tissue paper, his body heat radiating through it and I felt that warmth all the way down to my toes. It felt like it thawed stuff I didn't even know was frozen, letting me melt into him. But then Adam leaned over and brushed his mouth across my ear and damn, that tiny little touch set me on fire.

"If you do that for me, I'll be able to get through tonight in one piece. You can do that for me, beautiful, can't you?"

I would have given him my first-born child right then, severed my preferred hand for drawing and given it to him on a platter, if I could just have more of this. He created this hot little bubble around us I was terrified would pop, shutting out the other players, all of the other people, right up until he did this.

But then the compere started talking about the season this year, listing teams I was familiar with, but not the players. He

talked smoothly, enthusiastically about football in a way that I heard every day, people talking about it as they ordered their coffee, and that brought me crashing back down to earth. I was sitting here with this super-hot guy with half the city watching us interact.

Including my dad.

Fuck.

I'd put my phone on silent, but somehow I knew I'd have a million messages, all of them screaming at me, asking what the fuck led me to here, but I couldn't look at it or anything but him. That golden aura seemed to falter for a second, and I couldn't have that, so I said the only thing I could.

“Yes.”

God, that megawatt grin. When I'd been around at my parents' place and Dad had the footy on, I'd seen it then and been struck by it. Adam had that cocky, larrikin energy that so many Aussie blokes seemed to exude, like nothing in the world could touch them right now. But if it'd caught my attention then, it was nothing on this.

Only I could have my first real kiss on live television. His eyes had dropped down the moment I agreed to this insanity, seeming way too focussed on them and not the bloody ceremony. I wondered if he was really going to do this. But then he dipped closer, not even pausing to think about it, then pulling back, like Keith Taylor in school. He went in for the kill, his arm curling tighter around me before kissing me in front of everyone.

Fuck.

Before now I wondered if there was something wrong with me. I felt desire, attraction, and got myself off plenty of times, quietly in my bedroom when I was still living at home, then much less circumspectly at my place. I'd tried a bunch of things different magazine articles suggested, waiting for the fireworks to explode.

Just like they did now.

Holy shit.

Thank god I was wearing a bra, because my nipples were trying to burrow their way out of my dress. I felt like I was licked by flames the moment his mouth touched mine. I hadn't meant to let out a little moan, his breath sucking in at the sound of it, because apparently I had missed the memo.

I agreed to fake this shit, thinking I'd have no problems with that, but that was not the case at all.

“Adam Farrelly...”

The sound of his name being called had both of us jerking apart, but not before I embarrassingly chased his lips forward, the need for more overriding common sense. *Jesus Christ, Freya*, I snapped at myself. *Get a grip.*

My cheeks flushed bright red as I heard the compere list all of Adam's achievements. He'd obviously had a big year, confirming what Dad said. That he'd be a shoo-in for the medal. And that's what tonight was about. As if hearing my thoughts, he whispered, “Do you know what happens at the medal count?”

“Ahh...” Great, I was failing at being a fake date so badly. Jack had told me, but the details fell apart in my mind like cobwebs. “Dad watches it on the TV each year.” Her eyes flicked around wildly. “I used to listen to it when I was drawing?”

“Drawing?” Why did his eyes light up at that? “What do you draw?”

I was about to tell him. I wanted to. Every time anyone asked, it was all there. Everything I had drawn and everything I wanted to, it would all come tumbling out. But as the screen lit up, a video presentation about to be played, I stopped myself.

“Pretty sure that's not something a fake date would tell you.”

I figured he'd just laugh that off and focus back on the matter at hand. He was in the running for the highest award he could get in the state for his sport, but he just frowned slightly. Something burned in his eyes and that wasn't just a metaphor.

His eyes were always bright blue, but now they burned with an unearthly light I'd never seen before. Before I could ask why, he continued.

“And what if this wasn't fake?” Whoa, that came out in a rush, his tone a harsh and urgent whisper. “I said I wanted to take you out. We can go now.”

“Really?” I asked, without thinking.

Oh my god. Like oh my fucking god, who was this man? I knew his name, heard people talking about his stats, but not this. Not the man who stared at me like I was the last woman on earth. No, that wasn't it. The only one. He said the words I wanted to hear, needed to, offering me an out, but... I glanced around, saw all of these people brought together to celebrate something they'd achieved and while I didn't give a shit about footy, I did this.

I knew what it was like to do something with your whole heart and I couldn't take that away from anyone.

Not as others had tried to do to me.

I wanted to leave so badly I could taste it, but instead I just grabbed his arm.

“Really,” he said. “Tell me about you.” I wanted to so much, but the compere was talking again. “I still want to know.” He let out this low growl that was doing very strange things to me. “After this is done.”

Could I hold out for that? I said I could for Jack and I looked back over the sea of heads and saw her waving at me madly. I thought that meant just kicking back with her and having a few gin and tonics, but here we were. But it was the hopeful look in Adam's eyes that convinced me. Somehow this strange man made me feel like I'd break his heart if I didn't agree to stay.

“After you win,” I said, injecting all of my father's confidence into my voice.

He grabbed my hand then, and that drove out all doubts. It was hot and hard and oh so big, dwarfing mine. Adam gave it a squeeze and that made everything else easier.

Maybe this was our first date, my first real date with a guy who actually seemed into me. We wouldn't get much of a chance to chat with the tally count beginning, but I guess it was no different than being at the movies. We sit in the darkened ballroom and watch everything he achieved be displayed up there and for once, I'd be watching the tally numbers rise with bated breath, just like countless people across the city in their lounge rooms. Adam would win, somehow I knew that and when he was flush with success, I could step back and away from him and leave him to it.

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## Chapter 6

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*Adam*

Tonight was giving me whiplash. I'd walked into the medal count cautiously optimistic. Nah, I was psyched as fuck, until Kaine gave me a talking to, calming me down until I saw Freya. Finding my mate hit me like a ton of bricks, but right now I felt it. The same shit that every other bloke on my team and the others did. They all had girlfriends, boyfriends, partners sitting beside them, egging them on and I had...

Her.

I snuck yet another sidelong look at Freya, the need to memorise her face so strong an impulse I was never going to be able to resist, so I watched her watch me on the screen.

I kicked fucking arse this year and the video replays showed it, which resulted in a strange kind of pride. Freya watching that evasion, that kick, that mark. I remembered making each one, but it was so much better now. On match day, I was half riding some kind of manic joy that came every time I got on the field, my body doing just what it was supposed to.

When I had moments like this, the bear could be persuaded to enjoy football. To him it was like hunting, but instead of seals, it was the ball. He wanted to hack, slash and snarl at anyone that got in his way, but I made clear the rules just made the challenge that much harder and more worthwhile. But right now? The bear and the man wanted her to see these clips, see the evidence that was there. That I was strong, fast, a capable



mate. That I'd use every fucking resource I had to get what was mine and that was her. She looked up and then flushed when she noticed I was staring, which should've made me look away, but I didn't. Because then she smiled and I did too.

"Farrelly, 3," the compere said.

Fuck yeah he did. That meant all three umpires that day gave me all of the available points.

"You're in front," Freya whispered, giving me a nudge and that just made me tighten my grip on her. I wanted to nod, say yeah I fucking was. That I'd walk out of this ballroom a winner, with the medal around my neck and my girl in my arms, but I couldn't. Aussies turned pretty fucking fast on anyone that's an arrogant prick, Jack made that clear.

"For now," I replied finally.

*Forever*, I said in my mind.

I'd dominate on the field once I had her. Every game I won would be in her honour. I'd bring her the head of her enemies and lay them at her feet and... I blinked, then forced myself to take a breath. The bear was pretty sure he was a fucking Viking or something, wanting to go raiding and pillaging, but that was just theft and trespassing now. But right as I was riding this wave of awesome, my phone buzzed again.

Fuck, Kaine.

I palmed it surreptitiously. We were not to sit on national television scrolling on social media, Jack made clear, but she couldn't see me right now, so I glanced at it under the table.

*Who's the girl?* he'd written, and I read that in his usual growl.

When me and my mates were all young, having just found our bears, some of us talked about hooking up with a girl, just to get a taste of what was to come. Kaine had pulled me aside and told me in no uncertain terms I wasn't to touch anyone who wasn't my mate. To some of my buddies, that made me a pussy, a soft cock, but he'd made clear that he'd tell every girl at school I had an untreated STI if I didn't listen. I did. But I smiled now, just in time for a round of applause that went up

around the room, then when they started the next round I tapped out a response.

*Ours.*

But mine tonight, which would drive him fucking nuts. Leaving me in charge of building the most important relationship of our lives would have him cursing under his breath, his bear shoving at him to get free.

*What?* That was his first response, then, *Her?* Was there a note of hope there? Kaine was in his thirties and the fact he hadn't found his mate yet was low-key killing him. *She's our mate?* My smile got wider, right as the compere started talking about what had happened in round three of the season. He thought I was smiling at him, then nodded in my direction before describing what I had done.

*Yep,* that was my only reply to my brother.

I felt like time stood still as the video footage played, then I felt the buzz of my phone again.

*Don't fuck this up for us,* the message read. *Adam, don't—*

I did what Jack would've wanted, shoving my phone back in my pocket. I felt it buzz again and again, knowing my brother would be going out of his fucking mind right now. Just made this all the more delicious. I luxuriated in the satisfaction that I had found her first. Freya looked up when I pulled my hand free of hers, stiffening slightly until I placed it on her shoulder blades. I rubbed it up and down her spine, feeling the satin of her dress and knowing she'd feel twice as soft when I finally got her out of it. Probably not tonight, but...

"Farrelly, 2."

Everyone around our table shot me a grin. Everyone except Darryl. He tried to, I could see that, but his face made this weird grimace instead, until the girl he was with leaned in and placed a kiss on his cheek. But I couldn't pay attention to my teammate or even the count, just Freya. She smiled every time my name was called out, it growing wider when my numbers kept climbing, but none of that seemed to matter when she slid her hand on my thigh. My cock was fucking

aching. It had been since the moment I met her, but it jerked in my pants right then. She rubbed her hand in small circles as we watched videos, squeezed it each time my name was called out, but when she went to pull it away, my hand shifted to cover hers. She looked at me then, really looked at me, the smile fading and replaced by this.

Confusion, that was definitely there, and wonder, but the thing that had me drowning in her eyes was hope. I saw it there, shimmering like sunlight on the ocean, something rising, rising, and I felt like I rose with it. Maybe she knew somehow. Some women who found their mates did. They just saw their guys across a crowded room and...

Boom.

That was the only way to describe it. I didn't know who Freya was, her last name, only that she knew Jack and she liked to draw. I was hungry, so fucking hungry to hear more, know more, but right then...

People were clapping and I should be too. It was the decent thing to do, because every bloke here was celebrating everything they'd achieved this year and they deserved that applause. But any thoughts about good sportsmanship were shoved aside for this.

There were only two things I wanted in life, to make it into the national Australian Football League and to find my mate and right now it felt like it was there for the taking. Silently I tried to communicate that to Freya. Jump with me, I wanted to say, even as I knew how fucking insane that would sound. Make the leap and I'll catch you every single time.

But I didn't, I couldn't. Making a fucking idiot of myself in front of the whole state wouldn't help anything, so I just smiled, hoping she'd see it. But I didn't get a chance to find out if she did. The compere spoke then.

"And now we get to round seven," he said, nodding to me.

Shit, I remembered all about that one. We were pitted against fucking Port Adelaide and the game was brutal. My head whipped around before I could even think about it and

Nathan Lyons was there, watching me with a smirk. I was about to punch his teeth down his throat during the game, but somehow I'd pulled the bear back and we'd played an insane game, trouncing the 'Pies, but that was nothing on this. The prick shifted his focus to Freya, and as I growled in response, he cocked an eyebrow.

I knew what that look meant. Right before some bloke was going to say something really shitty about a woman, he looked like that. Like she was nothing but a piece of meat. My grip on Freya's hand tightened, too tightly it seemed. She let out a little noise of pain and that had me focussing on what really mattered.

"Don't get fucking distracted out there!" our coach would always shout at us. "Don't let those other pricks get in your head." He'd tap his temple then. "You play the game in here. In here first. You let them dominate you in here, you're done, no matter how fast or strong you are."

I took it to heart on the field, but right now I needed to heed the same advice.

As Freya got to her feet.

The bear rose to attention. He'd go into hibernation inside me during shit like this because it bored him, but not now. He flexed inside me, had me moving to my feet without thought, but Freya waved me away.

"Just going to the toilet," she whispered and then walked away.

*Go after her*, that's what the bear demanded, but everyone's eyes were on me, not the screen. Even the compere paused in his speech to stare. Jack shifted around to the perimeter of the room, waving her hand vehemently to force me to sit down and the man obeyed.

I saw tawny fur prickle across the backs of my hands, forcing me to shove them down under the table, because everyone was watching. The questions in my teammates' eyes were obvious, but no one said a thing as the ceremony continued. And neither could I. The bear was close, so fucking

close to shoving his way free, in ways I'd never experienced before. *She's coming back*, I told him, over and over, feeling just like a guy would, standing in front of a raging bear. *She has to come back*, I insisted, desperately hoping that was true.

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## Chapter 7

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*Freya*

I could not do this, I just couldn't. I'd felt on edge before when Jack asked me to come, but this went beyond bestie duty. I rubbed at my arms as I wove my way through the tables, keeping my head down, not meeting anyone's eyes. The only relief I got was once I was beyond the seated players, stumbling out into the outskirts of the ballroom.

"You OK, Frey?"

Jack appeared at my side in seconds. Those keen eyes seemed to take everything in all at once.

"I'm fine," I said, faking a smile. "I just need to go to the loos."

"Frey." She grabbed my arms and turned me towards her. "Freya—"

"I'm fine." I palmed the room key she'd given me. "I'll just duck upstairs and then I'll be back."

"C'mon," she said, moving closer. "It's me. If that little shit Adam has been messing with you—"

"No!" I blinked, then looked around me. "No, he's been lovely."

"Lovely?" Nothing could distract Jack from her job, nothing but this. A smile spread across her face. "How lovely?" She looked back over the crowded room, catching

Adam staring back at us. “I mean usually I’d warn you the fuck away from one of the players, but Adam...”

“But Adam?” I prompted.

God, I sounded needy. Probably because that’s how I felt, because while I now had a good working knowledge of Adam’s 2023 season achievements, I knew nothing else about him but this.

He was like the sun. I felt warmer when I was around him, something that spiked into a bittersweet heat every time he looked at me.

And he did, over and over.

The experience was a weird one. I mainly served female customers at the cafe I worked at because guys just didn’t... see me. Their eyes skated over me and flicked to one of the other girls working behind the counter, putting their coffee order in, and I rarely challenged that, because things got exponentially worse when I did. Their eyes would narrow, their nostrils would flare. Even blokes old enough to be my granddad would do the same. It was as if by alerting them to my presence I somehow annoyed them for existing.

But not Adam.

Those blue eyes lit from within with a fire that threatened to consume me, and just like a clueless little kid, I wanted to reach out and touch the flames. But they’d burn me, mark me forever and that wouldn’t work for me.

I didn’t experience desire the way other people did. Looking at pictures of hot guys or thirst traps on social media didn’t do it for me. They were just a series of images of people’s bodies and while I could appreciate their beauty, they just left me... empty. But if I saw that actor or model on the screen? If I got to know their character, saw more clearly who they were, the floodgates would open and out it would all come.

I’d want them and it would hurt in a way, the intensity of it. It’d rush in and overwhelm me, take me over, sweep away all of my rational thoughts and feelings. That longing would

just throb and throb inside my chest until I'd stop the movie, or pull away from the person I was speaking to, just to get a break.

And that's how I felt right now.

What was happening with Adam didn't make sense. We'd hardly had an in-depth discussion and yet here I was. My chest was heaving, the corset and dress Jack had made me wear constricting on every out breath, making it harder and harder to suck air in until Jack laid a hand on my arm.

"You like him."

She looked at me in wonder and I knew why. I'd so very rarely talked about being attracted to anyone. Probably because of this.

I could count on one hand how many people I'd been truly drawn to and right up the top was Mark. He was a guy who hung out in our social group at school, that the other girls thought was hot. But to me he was funny, sweet, shared my love for drawing and brought me some of his stash of cool indie comics to read.

And that's when I fell for him.

It hit me like a ton of bricks, feeling like my legs were cut out from under me. I fell down, down, down into an intense swirl of emotion I'd never really felt before. I got on well with my parents and siblings and there was no major trauma there. I felt like I was always hovering on the periphery of the family, not quite belonging, but not due to neglect. I was quiet, well behaved, as a child, so that gave my family the opportunity to focus on my siblings, so nothing prepared me for this.

All of a sudden I was painfully aware of the way Mark smelled of Lynx body spray and a sweet masculine scent of clean sweat. I noticed the way his long sensitive fingers held a pencil, watched him draw superheroes in his art journal with rapt fascination. I struggled to put words together when he asked about the most recent comic he'd given me, my throat closing up, needing to so I could keep the other words I wanted to say down.



That I noticed at least five different shades of brown in his hair, from almost black to a rich chestnut. That he had tiny little flecks of green in his brown eyes. That the skin around his mouth was always tight, so he had lines around it from smiling all the time. That there were exactly thirty-four freckles across his nose. That his voice changed when he talked about art, comics and what he wanted to do when we left school, illustrating indie comics in an attempt to catch the eye of Marvel or DC and then join the ranks of the artists he loved. I didn't even give a shit about superhero comics, but I could listen to him talk about them for hours.

Right up until he started going out with Abigail Hartley.

If this was what everyone else felt, this crushing feeling inside my chest so damn intense it made me Google heart attack symptoms, then they could have it. *Love Hurts* was a song on the golden oldies station Dad always listened to, but it was only now that I understood what that meant.

I didn't know Adam, the man, not the player, so this response didn't make any fucking sense, but right now? I felt like I did. That throbbing sense of connection, pulsing inside me, making me feel alive, but that wasn't the poetic thing people said it was. It forced me to feel the rush of my blood in my veins, the throb of my heart, the whistle of wind sucked into my lungs and the race of my brain.

When I blinked, I saw it, the tumble of Adam's long blond hair, that softness at odds with the sharp black cut of his suit, and then there was his hand. Big, solid, like he could hold the whole world in it, and somehow I knew he would. Nothing I saw on the replays of his games made me think any different. If anything, it made it worse. He moved like a big cat, full of strength and grace, which had me wondering what else he could do with such skill. But where the fuck had that thought come from? Desire hit me hard, low in the gut and that had my head spinning.

"Shit, you do." Jack's focus shifted to the ballroom, not looking at the players as her clients now, but as my best friend. Her eyes narrowed when she stared at Adam, before her attention returned to me. "Normally I wouldn't let a player

within ten feet of you. Some are nice guys, some aren't, but the life of a WAG? It can be real ugly. Even if he's good to you, the fans they can get... intense. But Adam... I've never seen him take an interest in anyone."

She shrugged.

"I figured he was some cute closet case who probably had a string of hot boyfriends on the side. Coming out as gay in footy? No one's ever done it while still playing. But..." Jack looked me over closely. "But he likes you too, doesn't he? He rushed over like his pants were on fire, and for a second I wondered if they were, wondering where the hell I'd have to find a spare pair, but—"

"It's OK," I told her. "This doesn't matter. I'm not WAG material. It just kinda hit me when I wasn't expecting it. I thought he just wanted someone by his side to keep groupies away, but..." When I looked back, Adam was still watching us, right up until someone gave him a nudge. He didn't want to focus back on the screen and I wanted to scream that he shouldn't, that he needed to look at me and only me. "But I guess I suck at fake dating."

"Honey." She stepped in and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "You're in control here, remember that. Nothing happens that you don't want to, otherwise Aunty Jack is gonna bust in with her romper stomper boots in and kick arse. Fuck the team." Her elbow poked into my side. "You're my ride or die, so..." She nodded at the screen. "You want that boy?"

*Yes!* A voice I'd never heard inside me screamed. Suddenly Adam was all the chocolate baked cheesecake and pizza with extra cheese in an endless buffet. I wanted it, him, the feeling currently a low simmer down in my gut, one the heat would turn up the minute I got closer to him, but Jack was right. It was my choice how the night went and that was kinda dizzying.

I'd never had sex with anyone, never had long, slow, open-mouthed kisses. Never been touched, never been sucked, never had a burning trail of lips down my body, driving me—

“Yeah,” I finally croaked out and her eyebrow shot up right then. “Yeah, I think I do.” I let out a sigh, feeling some relief on admitting that. “But first I’ve really gotta pee.”

“The shit of being a woman,” she said. “C’mon, I’ll show you the way and help you with that dress. Floor-length satin is gorgeous, until it’s trailing along the floor of a public toilet.”

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## Chapter 8

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*Freya*

“Who the hell is that girl with Adam Farrelly?” someone said.

Jack was called away on another PR emergency. Apparently some of the guys were threatening to moon the cameras, which wasn't likely to happen, and was probably just them baiting my bestie, but she had to go and check it out, which left me to do my business in peace.

“I've never seen her before,” another girl said.

“And won't again after tonight? Did you see that dress? It was like a ballgown or something.”

My cheeks flushed hot. I had a love-hate relationship with fashion, loving it for other people and hating it for myself for exactly this reason. It drew attention to stuff I didn't want me to look at.

“I don't know what she thinks is gonna happen though. Adam's totally gay.”

“And she doesn't even realise she's his fag hag.”

The two of them cackled as I flushed the toilet and then emerged from the cubicle. I didn't want to stand tall or stare the two of them in the eye, but I did, catching the moment their faces fell.

“The dress was Jack's idea,” I said as I bent over to wash my hands. “It's ridiculously dramatic but...” I pushed my shoe

out from under the hem. “I can’t wear heels, so this was the alternative. You ladies look amazing though.”

I smiled, refusing to stoop to their level as I swept past, not even bothering to dry my hands. But when I emerged, I saw that I had someone waiting for me, and so did the women, because there he was.

“You were gone for a while,” Adam said, his voice low and throaty. He smiled, then shook his head. “I came to see if you fell in.”

I couldn’t help but smile in response. The women had something to say, but I didn’t hear it, couldn’t, when he drew closer. His hands went to my waist, then he tugged me towards him, his strength obvious.

“You’re my fake date.” His head dropped lower and lower. “I need you beside me.”

We’d shared a tiny little butterfly kiss before, but as he drew closer, I didn’t think that was how this would go. The room, the award ceremony, everything dropped away for this.

His breath was coming in fast and ragged, as if he was back out on the footy field, and I knew the feeling. Mine matched his in pace. We were rushing towards something, but it was each other, not the ball. I followed his trajectory, leaning into it, matching him in speed. “Freya...” he hissed, saying my name in an entirely different way, like it was a prayer, not because he was irritated by me. “Freya, I need—”

That’s what I had to hear. I couldn’t do this for myself, take him, claim his mouth, but when he made it clear how much he needed this, my hands went up and around his neck, drawing his head down to mine.

Fuck.

His lips were so soft, but he took over quickly, slamming me tight against his body, then holding me in an iron grip, rocking me against his body and that’s when it became clear just how much he was into this. I hadn’t had sex with someone else, but I knew how this worked, that the solid lump in his pants was all for me, but if I needed more of a confirmation, I

got it. He pressed me against the wall, kissing me harder, longer, deeper, my eyelids fluttering when he slid his tongue along the seam of my lips.

I opened them. Somehow that felt right, fated. Like he was always going to be the one, because with anyone else, it wouldn't feel this way. His groan and mine, the way our hands clawed at each other, as if to stop the other person from getting away when all we wanted to do was get closer. My tongue tangled with his, tasting him, feeling him, my lungs burning with the need to take a breath until I could ignore it no more, and was forced to pull away.

“Fuck...” The reverence in Adam's voice was everything. His hand went to the wall above my head. “That was... fuck.” He grabbed my hand then, smiling as we both fought to catch our breath. “Freya, we've only just met, but I need you to—”

“Yes.”

Where the fuck did that come from? The word sprang unbidden from my lips, but I meant it. Whatever he wanted, whatever he needed, I needed it to. He nodded slowly in acknowledgement, then kissed me much more slowly.

“I want to take you out on a date,” he said between kisses. “I wanted to take my time.”

“We can do that.” My voice was ridiculously high and breathy right now.

“But can we do it afterwards?” He frowned slightly as if realising what he was saying. “Like I'm in, one hundred percent in. I'll take you anywhere, Freya.”

I was being a fucking idiot. Dickheads smooth talked their way into women's undies every damn day and there was every chance Adam was doing the same. No matter what Jack had to say, that was the only likely scenario here, but... Something inside me made me think that this was more. That desperate look in his eyes, the way he gazed down at me, even as the compere talked about what Adam had achieved in the next round, it was everything. Right now it felt like it was a twin to

the same intensity that lived inside my heart and for one night, it'd be nice to pretend that was true.

“So what did you—?” I started to say.

“Be with me, tonight.” His hands moved restively, tracing the shape of my body. “I’ve got a hotel room.”

“So do I. Shit! I’m sharing it with Jack, but—”

“Come to my room,” he said, much more seriously, watching for my response. “I’ve never... I’ve never done anything like this before, ever. I know I’m moving too fast.”

“Like never?” I asked, my eyes dropping down to the sizable tent in his pants. “Never ever?”

He flushed then and I worried that I’d fucked right up, but he shot me a sheepish smile.

“Never ever,” he confirmed.

“Me either.” I shrugged, figuring we were getting all of our embarrassing confessions out in one hit. “So this could be like the blind leading the blind.”

He smiled then, something carnal in with all of that sweetness.

“Yeah?” He bent his head down. “You been saving yourself for me?”

Had I? My mind rejected that idea absolutely, but my heart? It went pitter patter at that thought.

“Maybe.” My reply was my compromise between the two parts of myself. “What about you?”

“Fuck, Freya...” His voice was so deep and growly, it felt like it vibrated through my whole body. “You have no fucking idea how long I’ve waited for you and just you.” He took my hand in his, tugging me away from the wall. “This is gonna sound mad, but there was never gonna be anyone else, ever.”

He started leading me down the hall and my feet felt light as a feather as we walked away from the ballroom, out into the hotel, but right as we went to head to the lifts, Jack came running out.

“Adam!” He paused then and she shot me an apologetic look. “Sorry, Frey, but he’s gotta stay.” She turned back to Adam. “You’re in front. You’re gonna win.”

“I’ve already won,” he said and then I yelped as he picked me up and swept me into his arms. “So I’ve gotta go. Say I got food poisoning.” He walked away from Jack as she made small noises of protest. “Explosive diarrhoea. Stuck on the toilet all night.”

“Fuck... Fuck...” Jack looked on in distress, but any protests she might have were silenced by her phone.

“Jaclyn— Yes, sir. Yep, I know.” She turned towards us and then winced. “Adam’s ill. Had some bad prawns or something. I’ve got a friend of mine looking after him— Yep, he’ll be fine. Just needs to spend some time throwing up for a bit. I’ll try to get him back down for the medal count.”

“Adam,” I said as he swept me over to the lift and punched the button. “We can wait. We’ve got all night.”

“Yeah?” There was that boyish grin that had half of Adelaide swooning. “Well, then, I don’t want to waste a minute of it.”

He wouldn’t put me down for the whole elevator ride, nor when we got to the room, somehow managing to unlock it, before carrying me forward and then laying me down on the bed.

“Gonna make this so good,” he said, looming above me. “So good you’ll never want to leave.”

I chuckled then, at the insanity of this, that I could actually believe that this might be possible, but rational Freya was shoved to one side. For one night and one night only, she wasn’t in the driver’s seat, I was.

“Yeah?” I said. “Show me.”



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## Chapter 9

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*Adam*

Fuck... Just fuck... I didn't have any other coherent thoughts because there was only room for her. Freya's perfume was growing sweeter, filling my nose with the smell of honey.

And that's when I felt the rhythmic buzz of my phone in my pocket.

Kaine, no doubt about it. He wasn't texting now, obviously having seen that I had deserted the ballroom and who with. I pulled away for just a second, which felt like a damn travesty, and Freya just grinned.

"Is that Jack?" she asked.

"No, someone a lot nosier." I pulled my phone out and looked at the screen, the caller ID confirming my suspicions.

"Who?" Her hand rose and my eyes followed it, the bear roaring his fucking head off as she slid her hand inside our shirt, stroking our chest.

Fuck.

"No one," I replied, turning the phone off and tossing it on a nearby chair. That wasn't exactly true. If Freya was to accept the bond, she'd need to come to grips being with River and Kaine as well, but right now? I wanted to be fucking selfish for once, to put myself first. No, us. I'd share her with my sleuth, make damn sure every single one of us spent our lives making her happy.

But not right now.

I wanted to be the first, to show her how good it would be. All of my knowledge was of course, theoretical, but the mums and grandmas of the bear shifter community sat us all down when we were teenagers and explained how to please our women. Having my nana explain what dominance and submission was, and the power exchange that took place, still gave me nightmares, but it meant this.

I could ignore the steady throb in my dick, one that had become extra achy now I had her in my bed. My baculum, the bone in my dick, was readying itself to jet out the minute I got inside her. But not yet. Her pleasure first, that was made clear, so I dropped back down onto the bed, hanging over my girl and just stared at her.

“What?”

I didn't know Freya yet, but I was learning her. She flushed then, like she had a few times. I liked the pretty way it made her cheeks go pink, but... Something or someone had made her think she wasn't worth a second look and I vowed to change that.

“Just looking,” I said, keeping my tone light. “I was sneaking looks all night and now there's no one to bust me at it.” I dropped down on my elbows, watching her pupils blow wide. “Now I can look all I like.”

“You didn't want to, because everyone was looking at you.” Her tone flattened then, the light dimming in her eyes.

“I didn't want to because this feels special, private, just for us.” I reached across and stroked her hair back from her forehead, feeling the silky slip of it between my fingers. “I didn't want the moment when I stared at my girl like a gormless twit being memorialised on a state wide simulcast. But I will. If that's what you need, I'll go downstairs and walk straight up to the camera.”

“Oh god, no...” she said, starting to squirm.

“I'll run around the lobby, shouting to everyone who'll listen that I'm gonna come right back to this room and spend

the night with you. I'll—"

She placed her fingers against my lips and I smiled, then pressed a kiss into them.

"No, no, this is fine." She looked around herself, as if seeing the room for the first time, but when her focus shifted back to me, I felt it like a punch to the gut. "This is good."

Her hands pushed my jacket open and I reared back then, tearing the apparently quite expensive rental off and tossing it on the floor. She followed me up, taking over unbuttoning my shirt and that's when I heard the hiss of her breath.

I was damn proud of my body on most days, but right now? I was glad for every fucking punishing training session, because it made my body hard and strong for her. She paused midway down the shirt, forcing me to look down, but then I saw that look. Wide-eyed, her lips parted and a cute little crease formed before she quickly undid every other button. Then as her fingers slid over my abs muscles I may have flexed just a little for her, I pulled my shirt off.

The bear growled his approval. Our mate liked our body, we could smell that in her sweet scent. It was thick and syrupy, just like she would be when we were done with her. I stayed right where I was, letting her touch, explore, almost afraid of scaring her off, when her fingernails scratched over one nipple. My hips jerked, the feeling making my dick lurch, a helpless little jet of pre-cum spurting out, which forced me to cover her hand and bring her knuckles to my lips.

"This isn't about me," I told her. "It's all about you."

And I moved forward, ready to slide one scarlet strap down, then the other, undoing her zip and—

"And what if I want to touch you?" The little minx, she jerked her eyebrow up and smirked. "I mean if it is my first time..."

"Unless you want this over before it's even started, we need to do things my way." I grabbed her wrists and used them to pin her against the bed. "Let me make you feel good." I proved my point, kissing along her jaw and then down her

neck. She let out a little noise of pleasure, tilting her head to one side to give me greater access. “Let me do all the things I’ve been dreaming about.”

Wrong words, dickhead.

I was too fucking caught up in her now, the bear and me moving like one. We needed to please her, sate our mate over and over. We needed to prove how good we would be for her and it seemed to be working. As my lips worked their way down to her collarbone, I felt her breasts press against me, full and soft, but then she froze.

“Dreaming about...?”

Her voice was weak and thin, her scent souring just a little.

The bear roared his displeasure at me. He let me be in control, as long as I didn’t fuck shit up and this was fucking it up. He lunged at the barrier between us, intent on getting out in a space that would barely be able to contain him, but I held firm. I pulled back and met Freya’s eyes.

“You,” I replied, as honestly as I dared. “I dreamed of you.” I was losing her, I could see it in the tension in her body, the curious look. “I didn’t see you clearly. You were just a feeling, a glimpse, but somehow I knew.”

“Knew what?” Hope and wariness were fighting a war inside her, and I needed hope to win.

“Knew that you’d be the one for me. This feels right.” I wrapped my fingers with hers. “I think you feel that too.”

“But how...?” she said and I just shrugged.

“How does anything ever happen? The gods, luck, or just coincidence, I dunno. It’s just like sport.” She smiled then, somewhat indulgently. “Every single team is filled with talented guys, ones that work hard, train hard to get on that field, but sometimes... The same player could become part of something bigger than themselves in the right team, or turn to shit in another. Sometimes the right people just come together.”

I grinned then and she did the same, despite herself.

“Are you going to come together with me, Freya?”

“Oh my god, of all the corny lines...”

*Get 'em laughing, one of my dads always said. Sometimes you get 'em laughing, right up until their knickers came off.*

Words to live by.

She seemed to relax then, her eyes becoming heavily lidded, a sultry light filling them.

“You think you can?”

“Ohh fuck...” I hissed. “You did the wrong thing right there. Issuing me a challenge? A Farrelly never backs down. What’s the record number of orgasms you’ve had by yourself?”

“Adam.”

“Two? Three? Four?”

“Four?” she yelped. “Is that even possible?”

“It is tonight.” I stopped fucking around, leaning in close and then kissing her again, not so sweetly. Her lips parted and she let me in, allowing me to claim her mouth, then her neck. I left a sucking trail of kisses there, my fangs grazing the skin, dying to snap down and mark her as mine, but the bear had to be content with sucking on her skin, leaving only temporary red marks. “Whatever you want. Whatever you’ve been fantasising about in secret. Tell me and I’ll do it, I promise. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to please you.”

She didn’t answer me, her back arching upwards, her breasts thrust up into the air. Sometimes body language is a whole lot more eloquent than words. I smiled to myself, scooping her up into my arms, right before I slid her zipper down.

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## Chapter 10

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*Freya*

Just for tonight, I told myself over and over like a mantra. The relief I'd felt when we left the ballroom was dizzying, but then again, so was he.

Adam was not the guy I saw on the TV, playing in the background at my parents' house. He was not the guy in the photos in the newspaper or on social media. There was something seriously... intense about him, and not just in those electric blue eyes. It was like this wasn't a one-night stand for him or something. He'd said something about dating, about seeing where this took us, but surely if that was the case, we wouldn't be here.

Yet somehow I couldn't imagine sitting through dinner and a movie, not when this was on offer. He was golden brown and blond, palomino colouring, and so fucking beautiful.

It wasn't his body, the very impressive muscles that he was low-key flexing, but the way he responded. He watched everywhere I touched him and made small involuntary sounds in response. I knew when he wanted my hand to slide lower by the flex of his hips, and then his hand had slapped over when I touched what were apparently sensitive nipples, stopping me from doing that. But most of all it was how much all of this was. I felt like I was drowning in him, in his kisses, in his responses and mine and I couldn't let that happen.

The women in the bathroom, I hadn't liked what they had to say, but I couldn't help but agree with it. Not the gay part,

that was clearly not true, but me. I wasn't WAG material, not that I was looking down on someone who wanted that. Some people were great in the spotlight, but not me. I was much more comfortable kicking it in the background and that's where I wanted to stay. I said Adam was like the sun and right now I was Icarus, flying too close to him. The wax on my wings was starting to melt, but I was sure I'd be able to pull back in time. So when he slid down my zipper, I wriggled free of the dress gladly, needing to get my fill of his golden glow, then slip free before I got burnt.

"What's this?" he said, his eyes gleaming as he saw the bustier Jack had made me wear.

"Great for your tits, babe," she'd assured me, "and ones like yours can't just free ball it." She grabbed her own breasts for emphasis. "And anyway, any guy that sees you in that..."

Will want to swallow his tongue, that's what she'd said, and she was right. Adam looked at me in the way most people did things like the Mona Lisa or Michelangelo's David.

"Freya, that's... fuck." He reached out to touch and then stopped himself and I wished he hadn't. "That's... fuck."

I took pity on him, grabbing those massive hands and placing them on the lace-covered mounds, but he got the message real quick and took over. Somehow he managed to scan every inch of my breasts with those blazing blue eyes and then do this.

I was aware nipples worked to arouse people, but twiddling my own just didn't do much. I felt like I was trying to tune an old-school radio, find that elusive signal, but the moment his thumbs pressed the points into his forefingers, the shot of pleasure had my whole body stiffening.

"Like that, huh?" He sounded confident, cocky and grinned down at me as he went to work. "So what about this?"

He pinched them tighter, just to the point of pain, but I couldn't complain, because that intensity just made the pleasure flare brighter. My thighs spread and he shoved his massive body between them. I felt tiny, dwarfed by him, but

that didn't matter, because each slow rub of his thumbs over my nipples had me panting like an insane person.

“Freya?”

“Uh?” I wasn't capable of conscious thought, the feel of him and the lace abrading my nipples driving me fucking insane.

“Freya?”

“Yes.”

I'd have agreed to sell him my first-born child, if that's what it took to keep this going, to get me where I needed to go. My hips thrust up and against him, searching for the hardness I suddenly needed.

“Freya, this... whatever it is.” He pulled away to stroke his hand over my bustier and I let out a small growl of frustration. “It's really pretty, but I need—”

I cut him off, my hands going to the clasps that ran down the front, unhooking them with undue haste, until he stopped me. And that's when we both went quiet. He held my eyes as he took over the job, doing it with far too much skill if what he said was true.

That when his hand smoothed over the bare slope of my breast now, that this was the first time he'd ever done so. That when he seemed to weigh the heavy swell, then sink his fingers into the softness, that he didn't have anything to compare with it. And somehow I believed it. He stared at me, at my body, with a kind of rapt fascination, but as his fingers found my nipples again, I broke it. Or rather sharpened it. He watched my responses, catalogued them, until I flopped back onto the bed and let him have his way.

This felt oh so selfish. My hand slid over his shoulders, glorying in the broad span of them, but from everything I'd read, to be a good lover, I needed to please him too. But then his mouth darted forward, capturing a painfully tight nipple and sucking. Our groans came out at the same time, as all thoughts were driven out of my head.



Fingers were tight, tight, tight kinds of pleasure, but this was both softer and spikier. My breast felt like it swelled in time with each suck, sending long, slow, sensual waves of pleasure washing over me.

“Adam...” I barely whispered his name. “Adam...” He pulled his mouth off, checking in with me, then chuckled as I put his mouth right back to work. “Oh god, yes, just like that.”

I was a tide, being pulled out, out, out, but he was the moon, forcing me to swell. My hips moved instinctively towards him, needing something inside me, something much bigger than the toys I used at home. And right as I was making some incoherent plea for just that, he reached down and jerked my underwear right off, before spearing his fingers in.

Fuck, yes.

I told him just that as I rode his hand, any idea of keeping my cool well and truly gone. If this was sex, I got it now. It was the same shit I did myself and yet so completely different. He was working to get me off, seeing what pleased me and then going back for more. The rasp of his stubble against my breast, the small sounds he made, the way his hips ground against me, that hard cock rubbing in time with his strokes. We were both racing closer to the finish line, when I reached down.

I was ready to throw caution to the wind, trying to undo his pants, even as he was destroying me. But he forced me back, pulling his mouth free to say this.

“Just like this.” His fingers curled up and then I saw stars as those blunt tips rubbed hard against something inside me. “Come like this for me, Freya, and I’ll give you fucking everything. Come for me.”

His voice went from entreaty to growly demand, then he lunged back, sucking hard on my nipple. He pressed another finger in, then another, until there was a sweet burn to my pleasure, along with this incomplete feeling of fullness.

I knew how it’d feel when he finally fucked me, and it wasn’t because I had quite the stash of toys. Somehow I just

knew he'd satisfy that ache deep inside me in ways I couldn't replicate. Right as I reached my peak, there was a moment of sadness, that I could feel this good, but only now, yet somehow that just made it all the sweeter. He told me to come for him and I did, my whole body going into riot.

Everything jerked, twitched, riding those waves of ecstasy as I screamed out my response. Part of me was quietly horrified, but that was easy to shove to one side. His fingers get moving, his thumb brushing oh so lightly across my clit, stringing the pleasure along until it finally faded away.

I blinked owlshly, the room suddenly coming back into focus as he reared up, taking his sticky fingers and then shoving them into his mouth. He licked each finger clean of me.

“Fuck, you taste sweet.”

I felt faintly embarrassed by that, but he slid off the side of the bed, dragging me with him. My legs were placed on either side of his head, right before I was about to protest.

“Adam, I can't—”

“Sweet as honey, beautiful, and I need a taste. You can let me do that, right? Just a little bit. Please?”

I let out a full-body groan, putting my hand in his hair.

“Fuck, when you ask like that.”

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## Chapter 11

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*Adam*

Holy fuck, I was in heaven.

The way she felt when her cunt snapped tight around my fingers, the swells of those fantastic tits. I thanked the bear gods for the amazing mate they'd given me, but never more than now. I bowed before the altar of her cunt, spreading all that sweet pink flesh wide and watched the slick begin to form. Her channel flexed, as if remembering the pleasure I'd already given her, or because she wanted more, right before I lunged forward.

Humans would get weirded out by it, but when we were old enough to listen to their advice sensibly, the mums and the nanas all got together and told us how to treat our mates right when we got them in bed.

Don't go too hard, one of the nanas had said during sex ed, but don't go too soft either. Make sure you pay attention to her clit, said another. But be careful, one of the mums said, it could be very sensitive. But somehow I knew just what my girl needed, more than she did. She thought she couldn't come for me again, but I'd prove her wrong. First a long lick along her whole seam, that was for me. I collected her taste, slurping her slick down. But then I started to do what she needed.

Soft little licks around her clit as the hypersensitivity faded, I was persuading the little nub that another round would be a good idea. But when she stopped jerking away, anticipating I'd be too rough, she seemed to come around. I

was sure she could barely even feel the tip of my tongue, drawing tiny little circles around her clit, then nudging it slightly to test her readiness.

That long, soft moan told me everything.

My baby needed me. The mums and the nanas advice all jumbled around in my head and was replaced by this.

Sucking her clit in soft, long swallows, each one tugging her sensitive spot slowly. Her skin here was so velvety soft, my cock was already imagining how it would feel when I finally speared into her. But right now I was patient, a bear on the hunt, but not for fish or seals but this. The moment her thighs widened, welcoming in, her little intake of breath as I traced my fingers around her opening. I was worried about how much I was stretching her before, but she seemed to fucking love it. Well, she'd need at least three fingers if she was going to take me, so I pushed one inside.

She was volcanic hot and so damn slick. My finger glided in with little resistance, then hooked upwards. There, that rough patch of skin. The nanas had told us that's where our baculum would lock down, right where our mate needed it the most. I tried to approximate that now, raking my fingertip along that spot and the results were instantaneous.

“Oh...!”

That little gasp of surprise was everything I needed to hear, followed by the flex of her hips in time with my strokes.

“Oh...! Oh...!”

I felt her shift on the bed, roll up to take a look at what I was doing, but I put a warning hand on her stomach. She wanted to watch me? I'd always let her, in bed, on the field, wherever the fuck she wanted, but right now I rolled my eyes up, meeting her gaze.

And I held it as I licked a big stripe along her cunt, her mouth falling open when I did. I stared at her as I sucked her clit in. I heard her call my name, felt her stroke my hair, then grab it tight against the skull and I leaned into the pain. On the field it meant I was going as hard as I could and right now, that

also held true. I'd work my damn arse off servicing her, making her feel good, making her come.

“Adam...!”

Her voice was getting all high and breathy again and I fucking loved it. It told me I was doing this right, doing her right. That's all I'd ever wanted, to please her, serve her, give her everything she ever fucking needed and then more. I wanted her drowning in pleasure and that's why I pushed the second, then the third finger in.

She was tight and that sent a shiver down my spine. My cock jerked in my pants, imagining what it would be like to have all that sweet, slick heat clasp me, but not now. I needed her to come again, to be all blissed out on the bed before I did what came next.

“Oh fuck...” she breathed. “Oh fuck...!”

My tongue moved faster, flickering over her clit and my fingers pushed in and hooked up into her G-spot.

“Fuck... Adam!”

*That's it, beautiful*, I thought to myself, moving faster. Just like I did when I stood before a goal, I could see it, how good this would be. The ball sailing through the goalposts and this.

Her hands buried themselves in my hair and right now I was fucking glad I ignored my family's advice and grew it long. It meant I could feel the prickle of each strand as she pulled it tight. She made clear just how fucking much she loved this, needed this and inside me the bear roared.

Fuck.

She let out this high little wail, but I didn't stop. Her hips jerked, her cunt twitched, clamping down on my fingers to stop them from pulling back, but she needn't have bothered. I wasn't going anywhere. I wanted this, the long sobbing breaths as she came and kept on coming, my fingers working that spot inside her, until finally she fell limp on the bed.

WHEN I ROSE ABOVE HER, I licked my lips, not wanting to waste a drop of her. I licked my fingers clean before my hands went to my bed.

“Tell me you want more,” I said, wanting that to be all light and sexy, but it came out growly and desperate. “Tell me you want me.”

She smiled then, something soft and lazy and that gave me hope, but none more than this.

“Of course I want you.” She held out her hands and then gestured for me to come forward and that was her first mistake. I was out of my clothes and on her in seconds.

“Good.”

My voice broke on that and her focus sharpened. Where the fuck had this come from? I thought, but I knew why.

One of the reasons why Kaine was always on my arse was because I craved all of the attention he couldn't handle. As a kid I'd do almost anything to get it. Clowning in front of our family when I was little, then dominating at sport when I saw people's reactions. The cheer of a crowd? No greater drug exists, except maybe this.

I didn't know the people in the crowd, but I did her. In some ways they were easier to please because I knew exactly what they wanted, for our team to win. But Freya...? Her desire was thick on my tongue, a heady perfume in my nose, but did she want...? One night, a week, another date, forever? I could only settle for one and that was everything, but I had to start here.

“How're you feeling?” I asked, smiling down at her.

“Good.” She gave this cute little cat-like wiggle. “So good.” But then she reached up and stroked the side of my face. “Though I could be better.”

“Something you need?” I said, the bear saying it right along with me. “You just say the word.”

But she showed me instead, her hand feeling so little and soft around my cock, making my eyes roll back and my hips

burn with the need to thrust forward. Into her in whatever form she'd allow. Instead I counted backwards by tens, trying not to spill my cum all over her pretty tits.

Though I'd totally be open to that later, if she was into it.

"Fuck..." I hissed, because her hand moved too slowly to get me off, but if she wanted to take her time getting to know the dick that would service her to the end of her days, I was cool. Her slow, careful, swivelling inspection of every inch had my teeth locking down.

"You're big," she said with an attitude of wonder.

"For you," I ground out. "But you can take me." I forced my eyes open. "If that's what you want. I'll go slow. I don't want to hurt you."

"And take my virginity?" She shot me a lopsided smile. "If you were caught up in that idea, I'm sorry to tell you that I lost that to a very nice dildo from Fun Factory some time ago."

"Yeah?" I grinned down at her. "Gotta say, the idea of possibly hurting you was killing me, so no regrets here, though I wanna see you with those toys."

Spread out before me, toying with her cunt and her clit, driving me out of my mind with not being able to touch her, right until my control broke and I pushed them aside and filled her with me. Fuck yeah, that was hot.

"And I want to try the real thing," she told me. There was a glitter of mischief in her eyes, as if Freya was daring to let herself be naughty for once and I was down for that. "Whaddya s—?"

"Yes." I cut her off, lunged forward, slotted my hips between her thighs and used my hand to rub the head of my cock against her seam. Fuuuuck. She was scalding hot and so fucking wet. "Yes, please. Yes, please and right now."

She answered me by wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling me closer. The tip eased in and it was fucking everything. I'd dreamed of this moment, but it felt like it was all going to be over so damn quick. I took a few rapid breaths, clawing at control, trying to keep a lid on this, but the need to

bust my hot load into her was so fucking intense. I wanted her full of me, just a little of my seed oozing out of her pussy for me to push back in. I'd tilt her hips up, make sure she kept every drop so that her belly would swell...

Fuck.

I said just that as I pulled back.

"Condom. Fuck, I don't have condoms." I looked around me wildly, but knew I wouldn't find any. "Fuck, I was not expecting to have sex. I didn't know I'd meet you tonight. I \_\_\_"

She tilted my head her way and smiled.

"I'm on the pill." I let out a long sigh of relief, but that wasn't all. "And I'm clean. You're clean too, right?"

This was not how it was supposed to go. The team doc made clear that someone telling you they didn't have an STI was a dumb thing to rely on, but...

"Clean as a whistle," I said, then smiled. "Clean for you. I was waiting, waiting, for you to come along and ..." I shook my head, feeling the prick of tears in my eyes before I blinked them back. "I didn't want any shitty ex-girlfriends or situationships there to complicate shit. I didn't want anything but you."

She struggled to accept this, I could see it in her eyes, but wariness and hope had been fighting it out since we came in here and this was the moment that hope won.

"Really?"

I nodded.

"Just you, beautiful, so I can wait, if that's what you need." The bear, my dick, were all doing their level best to take control, to seal the deal, but I wouldn't, not if she wasn't keen. I'd woo her, take her out to every pretty place I knew and shower her with—

"I don't want to wait."

It was game time and I felt the same focus right then.



“Yeah?” I shifted my hips a little closer, easing myself in.  
“Something you need?”

She couldn't answer me at first, a small strangled sound escaping her lips, but when I went to pull back, her legs locked around my waist.

“So big...”

“Gonna fill you right the way up, beautiful,” I promised her. “You're gonna have everything you need.”

And what I needed too. I thrust forward, into her velvety depths and the groan I let out came from the depths of my soul. I was in her, in my girl, in the only woman I'd ever want and love, and it was everything I'd been waiting for.

Kaine told me not to fuck this up and for good reason. If we didn't handle this right, we could lose her, lose our mate and live a shitty life, alone forever.

So it shouldn't have gone down like this.

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## Chapter 12

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*Freya*

Oh my fucking god.

I wasn't able to think anything more coherently, because fuck. Just because I was a virgin, it didn't mean I needed to be 'broken in', but this. The difference between a silicon toy and a man was so great, they almost couldn't be the same thing. He was thrusting into me, filling me right up, just as he said, almost to the point of pain. But that fucking stretch. I didn't think I was a size queen, but maybe I was reconsidering that idea. Because every time he pulled back, I clawed at his shoulders, tightened my legs around his waist. I didn't need him drawing away, I needed him deeper.

So I told him that.

Babbling words fell from my lips, trying to communicate what I felt. There was this... spot inside me, that had woken up when his fingers raked against it and suddenly I needed more, more. I knew I couldn't. A cock is not a G-spot attachment, but... He was driving me out of my fucking mind, the pleasure so much more intense this way.

I couldn't ignore that heavy drag of him inside me. It made every nerve come alive in a way that was kind of overwhelming, right up until the point I surrendered to it. "Fuck... fuck..." I whispered that over and over, as my hips shifted, as I worked my body in time with his.

"God, you feel so fucking good," he growled.

My eyes flicked open and I saw a twin of my own expression I was willing to bet. He needed me as much as I needed him.

“So good,” I ground out with a sharp nod.

“You gonna come for me again, beautiful? I need to feel it. Your cunt tightening around my cock, fucking strangling it as I fill you with my seed. I want that so much. I want you full of me, belly swelling, cum oozing out at every step, forcing me to fill you with more. You want that, right?”

Breeding kinks had filtered into the mainstream consciousness and the idea had squicked me out, until now. When I read about it, it was two or more strangers experiencing it and that did nothing for me, but now?

“Fill me up?” I ran a spare hand down my belly, thankful at this angle it was relatively flat. “You want to give me all you’ve got, filling me with cum until something takes—”

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, a look of helpless pleasure transforming his face.

“You want to breed me.”

I thought I knew who I was in bed with, but right at the moment, something changed. The barely-in-control guy faded away and something else rose. Whoever was in control, his eyes blazed so pale a blue they were almost white and they stared at me unblinking.

“No,” he said, whoever that was, and for a second I felt a jolt of rejection, but that was quickly swept away. “I don’t want it. I need it. To fuck you over and over, until you can’t walk, my cum running down your legs. You so overheated, you claw me back for more. I need to feel your tight little cunt snapping tight, wringing every drop of cum out of me as it floods your womb. Because this isn’t one and done, beautiful, not by a long shot. I need to make you mine forever.”

Just because you’re a virgin, doesn’t mean you’re inexperienced. Just because you don’t feel sexual desire like other people, doesn’t mean you don’t understand your own. I knew people liked to have fantasies, playing mental games in

the moment to get them off, the whole vibe fading away the moment you came. But right now I was both turned on as fuck and terrified.

Because I wanted just that.

I read a lot of books, online stories, erotica about just this thing, about groups of men surrounding a sole woman, forcing her to feel so much pleasure, right before they did this. Come inside every hole, marking her as theirs, over and over until she received their final claim, getting pregnant. The idea of having a child in real life just exhausted me, but this...

“Adam!”

I dragged his head down and kissed him furiously, forcing him to suck down my muffled cries of pleasure as it hit me hard.

I came and came, the waves of pleasure hitting me so hard, they spurred on others. I was a crying, sweating, screaming mess, my whole body going into riot as he drove through every one, going deeper and deeper, scratching that itch, but not, until this happened.

Was this normal?

“Shit, shit, Freya, I can’t hold it back!”

I felt something hard shift inside me, slowing his pace, because something dug in. Oh fuck yes... I flopped down on the bed, not even trying to participate now, because all I could do was feel.

Adam was perfect, so fucking perfect.

Other people seemed to get off to their fantasies about the hot guy they saw on the train, or even those hot people fucking in new and unusual ways in a porn movie, but not me. I needed this. The sense of connection that seemed to throb with life between us, allowing me to feel it. It was almost as if my lack of sexual response in the outside world made solo time all the more intense. In my dreams I could conjure the perfect lover.

Or lovers.

And the idea of them insane with need for me, perfect for me, wanting everything I wanted, wanting me so much they'd never let me go, that was exactly what I needed. I felt like I floated free inside that fantasy right now, as Adam's eyes bore into mine.

Whatever that hard thing, it tugged on me gently, forcing another burst of pleasure and another, until I was half out of my mind with it, completely overwhelmed, so when he reared back, fangs flashing, I couldn't pay it much mind. I just stared at him, eyes wide, unable to do anything but feel as he struck, biting down into my shoulder.

Because somehow that was all a part of this.

I held him close, cradling his head against my shoulder, feeling the sharp sting of his teeth and then only pure, unadulterated bliss. I thought I could just have a night of fun with Adam, experience what everyone else in the world seemed to, but it was now that I realised my mistake. Adam had marked me far more indelibly than any bite could. I held him close, stroking his back as his cum unloaded inside me, as I flexed and twitched around him.

And that's when I felt it.

A perfect moment of connection, something that stripped away everything else. It wasn't just that he was locked down inside me, but the fact there was no me, or him, just we. I sucked that feeling in, one that was just as potent as sexual pleasure, maybe more so for me, and I let out one shaky breath, then another as I stole this moment.

Adam had made clear that he would like to see where things went. Maybe that was a line, maybe he'd call me, but it didn't matter. I couldn't allow that to happen. I'd gotten through tonight at first, because Jack needed me, then because Adam seemed to, but I'd been able to endure the moment with the women in the toilets because this wasn't my world.

They weren't women I'd need to hang around, get to know, pretend to befriend, even as we bared our teeth at each other. I wouldn't have to make sure I looked amazing each year the medal ceremony was held. I wouldn't have to endure the

state's focus on me as his girlfriend, or the country's, if he made it into the AFL. I wouldn't have to do anything, because this was not my world. I'd put it on like Jack's dress and I'd take it back off again and go back to my room and my PJs and my job at the cafe and everything would go back to normal. So I held him extra tight, listening to the noisy rasp of his breath settle, his heart rate slowing to match mine.

"I LIKE THIS LOOK ON YOU," Adam said.

He looked wide-eyed and shaky after he pulled free, then rushed to the bathroom to find something to clean me up. But rather than wipe his cum away, he seemed to be playing with it, sliding his fingers through my too sensitive folds, then pushing the cum that he collected back in.

"We could do this again," he said, daring to look at me, a strange hunger there. "I like seeing my cum leak out of you, but I like giving it to you more."

"You wanna make me messy, golden boy?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Fuck..." His voice was a low hiss. "More than you can possibly know."

"Well, c'mon then," I said, reaching up to pull him down beside me, then moving to straddle his hips. He was hard already and I was unsteady, not sure what the fuck I was doing, until his hands went to my waist to help me. We both worked it out together, the sting on my neck a counterpoint to the hurricane of pleasure we created together.

But later, much later, in the early hours of the morning, I was up and out of bed, searching for my clothes and shoes. I put the bustier on over breasts that ached with all of the stimulation they'd received, the hollow between them sticky with Adam's cum. I even wriggled back into the dress, managing to get the zipper up as far as I could for decency's sake, but I was missing one thing.

He'd noticed my shoes when we finally pulled them off, asking me questions about my art, everything, with this weird

kind of intensity, like he cared or something. But it was the spectre of that which had me running. If I stayed, I'd never be able to leave his side, and somehow I figured that'd be bad for both of us.

DAD WAS sure that Adam had what it took to make it to the national league, which would probably mean a move to Melbourne. He would be travelling all over the country to play games and anyone he was dating would need to go with him, and that was not me. My chest ached and I rubbed at my chest as I searched for my shoes, finding one and pulling it on, right as he snorted. I froze as he lifted his head off the pillow, looking around blindly, but not seeing me, before flopping back down into sleep.

And I wanted to climb back into bed and join him.

That tug in my chest, that need to push his hair away from his face, it fucking terrified me. It wasn't even that I was worried that this was all bullshit to get into my pants. In some ways this would be easier if it was. I craved connection, but I craved quiet, stillness, peace more and that's why I left.

“Freya...?”

He groaned my name, reaching for me and when he didn't find me beside him, he began to wake up. I could've stayed, explained, made clear why this wouldn't have worked, thanked him for one of the most amazing moments of my life, but I didn't. I looked frantically around for my other shoe, finally seeing it tucked under the bed, but when I moved closer, he called my name again.

And I was too much of a fucking coward to face him.

I turned tail then, slipping out the door and then striding down the hall, away from him, away from that feeling of connection that would hopefully come again. With someone less high profile, more low-key.

More like me.

I pressed my finger on the lift button over and over, willing it to arrive, and the sound of the ding was a lifesaver. I heard a door open down the hall, but didn't see if it was Adam, ducking into the lift and then punching the ground floor button. I'd message Jack about my stuff later, fill her in on what went on, but right now I flagged down a cab that passed by and got it.

“Where to, love?” the driver asked.

Home, that's what I wanted to say, where it was safe, but I gave him my address instead.



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## Chapter 13

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*Adam*

“Where is she?”

Sometime the next morning, I busted into Jack’s room the minute she opened the door. She looked like fucking shit, but I was in no place to point fingers. I no doubt looked like a madman as I paced around the room, sticking my head in the rooms.

“Where’s who? Where’s the fucking fire, golden boy?” she asked.

“Where’s Freya?” I held up the shoe I’d found in my room as evidence, the only thing I had that proved she was actually there in my room and not some kind of fever dream. “Where’s my girl?”

“Your girl?” Jack’s voice cooled noticeably and when I turned to face her, she crossed her arms. “Freya’s not anyone’s girl, not until she says so.”

“Yes, she is. Jack, I...” I needed to calm the fuck down, but the bear and I were in the same mind. We claimed our mate last night, before we should’ve, and then she’d taken off without a word.

I thought we were cool. The moment I lost control was so fucking sweet and absolutely fucking terrible, all at the same time. Feeling my baculum jut out and lock down inside her, the blunt bone anchoring me to her, forcing me to rock her through this orgasm and the next, it’d driven all good sense

out of me, so my fangs found her neck. I did the one thing bear shifters were never supposed to do.

Claimed my mate before she accepted our bond.

I forced her, bit her without permission, and she didn't even know why. I'd rushed shit.

I'd fucked shit up.

I groaned, raking my hands through my hair, able to hear what Kaine would have to say in my head.

And knowing River would say nothing, his face closing down.

I'd tried to do this shit on my own, steal something for myself, and here we fucking were. Sleuths worked together for just this reason, to keep these impulses under control. Of course I wanted to mark her, lock down inside her, fill her full of babies, because that was the terrible biological imperative that lurked inside us.

But people weren't animals and didn't like being treated like that.

I had to make this right, that need burned in my chest, even though I feared I couldn't.

"I fucked up," I told Jack, because facing shit head-on is always the best tact.

"What did you do?" I'd seen Jack do her nut before, but not this. She seemed to swell to twice her size, fury blazing in her eyes. She tucked her dressing gown in tighter around her and snapped. "What the fuck did you do?"

"I like her, Jack," I said. "I want—" To spend the rest of my life with her, I thought, but didn't say. "I don't chase girls, you know that." She nodded grudgingly. "But Freya..." Internally I begged, pleaded for her to understand. "She's the one."

"God, help me," she said with a shake of her head. "I thought you were the easy one. What did you have? A hot one-night stand and now you want more? Newsflash, buddy." She

tapped on my skull. “It’s because she left. This is just some primal need to chase bullshit going on.”

She had no idea how true that was.

“Some dickheads want to chase the one that got away,” I agreed. “But not me. I know Freya’s the one for me.”

“So why didn’t she give you her number?” Jack’s eyes bore into mine. “Why didn’t she stay? Why aren’t the two of you doing whatever shit heteros do in bed right now? Freya’s my best friend and if she left, she did it for a good reason.”

“Let me talk to her, please, Jack.” Fuck, I was so close to begging, I may as well commit. “I will do literally anything you want. That charity thing—”

“No.” I’d seen this expression before. A woman working in a male-dominated field had to have a steely spine and that was when hers came out. Jack was not going to be moved. “You can’t bargain your way into my bestie’s life. She either lets you in or she doesn’t, and lemme say, she doesn’t let many people in. I’m sorry, Adam.”

I flinched when she put her hand on my arm. It was well-meaning, but any woman’s touch other than my mate’s felt wrong.

“You’re just going to have to let her go.”

But I couldn’t, wouldn’t, turning on my heel then and striding out into the hall.

And that’s when my brother rang.

“Where the fuck did you get to last night?” he snapped, as soon as I accepted the call. “What the hell were you doing? You won the fucking Magarey medal, you dickhead, but you weren’t there to accept it. I had to fucking do the honours.” But before I could get a word in edgewise, he charged on. “You were with her, weren’t you?”

His voice changed then, the longing becoming clear, right before he smothered it.

“You were. You took her up to your room and —”

“Fucked everything up.” I said it before he did, then waited for his response.

“What?” Rage, hopelessness, fear, but mostly white-hot anger, that’s what I got down the line. “What did you do?”

“I marked her, claimed her.” The bear roared inside me right then, both glorying in that fact, and insisting we go and find Freya now. “Before I could explain anything.”

“Fuck...”

Kaine shouted at me, no doubt waking up Mum and the dads, because I could hear muffled voices in the background. It didn’t stop him though. Every shitty thing he could think of, he brought up, listing all my failings. From the moment I fucked my brand new bike, playing the fool with my mates, before colliding with a car. I broke my bloody arm and my mother’s heart that day. Then there were the assignments I spaced on, that time I got pass-out drunk and the bear nearly came to the fore and...

“I know,” I said quietly, a weird kind of stillness settling over me. I looked down at the shoe I held cradled in the crook of my arm. I held it like a baby, staring at the cute little graphics that had been painstakingly painted on the canvas part of the Converse shoe.

“So what the fuck do we do about this then?” Kaine asked me, like he’d let me have a say over the situation, but... This time he’d have to. I turned around and walked back into Jack’s, ignoring her muttering as I told her what needed to happen.

“We need to set up a press conference,” I told her.

“Already on that shit,” she said, sitting down in front of her laptop and looking so tired. “I was organising that last night when you didn’t make it back for the announcement that you’d won that damn medal.” Her eyes narrowed. “The two of you couldn’t have just had a quickie, take the edge off and then come back down a little flushed and sit through the rest of that interminably boring ceremony? Fuck, Adam...”

“No.” I shook my head, then let out a sigh. “She was it for me. I wanted that medal so fucking much I could taste it, but not then. It was Freya, all Freya.”

“Then sit down, shithead,” she said, gesturing to the other seat at her table, “because we’re gonna have to find a way to spin this shit so the city doesn’t hate on you.”

WHICH WAS HOW, some hours later, I came to be standing before a small gathering of the local press.

I was neat, tidy, having gone home to shower and get dressed in clothes Jack approved of, before stepping up to the mic.

“Hey,” I said, hearing my voice echoing around the room via the microphone and wincing, before forging on. “I’m Adam Farrelly, proud winner of this year’s Magarey medal” When I held it up, flashes burst in a flurry, all of the photographers getting their shot. “I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to say this last night, but I’m bloody proud to have been this year’s winner. I feel like I’ve been working towards this moment my whole life...” My voice trailed away, because right now, winning seemed so fucking hollow without her. “And honestly, I can’t believe I’m standing here before you wearing it.”

I swallowed hard then, knowing I was about to go off script and Jack was gonna kill me for it. Maybe even the team manager too. But I had to use the platform I had to try and fix this shit.

“I couldn’t attend the final part of the ceremony because I ended up on my knees, praying to Huey.” There was an involuntary chuckle from the press gallery. “I had bacon and eggs for breakfast yesterday morning and didn’t bother to check the use-by date. They went down easy and came up just as quick. I’m sorry I let the fans down, my family and my club. I wanted to be there to claim the medal, but luckily for me, I had someone by my side to help me through my... gastrointestinal distress.”

Jack's eyes widened and she shook her head sharply as I pulled the Converse out of the kit bag I was carrying and put it on the podium. What had come before was a stock standard *mea culpa*, as Jack called it, and I didn't really have the press' full attention until I did this.

"The lady in question left a shoe behind. Probably because I threw up over it. She gave it a good clean, but must've left it behind when she left me to sleep the horror off. I just want to get it back to her, so Freya." I stared straight into the camera then, as if my gaze would somehow connect with hers. "I just want to get what's yours back to you. Reach out and I'll return it, all of it."

The press was like an animal on a hunt, knowing there was a story there, but before I could answer a question, Jack stepped in.

"Adam's still not feeling quite right," she said, shooting me daggers. "So we're going to have to leave that there for now. Thanks everyone for coming." But afterwards she marched me back inside the club building, hand tucked into the crook of my arm, almost hauling me forward. "You really aren't right, are you?"

She stabbed her finger into the air between us.

"We talked about this. We agreed on what was going to be said. You can't use your platform to coerce Freya into a relationship with you."

"Everything I said was true," I said, holding up the shoe, then jerking it out of her reach as she lunged for it. "I just want to return what belongs to her."

Including me. Heart, body and soul, that's what carried me forward as I walked out of the club building and into a waiting car.

"You better not have fucked this up for us," Kaine said, the minute I got in the passenger side seat. "This better work or \_\_\_"

"She's the one?"

River was a massive guy, something that helped him on the building site, because he didn't say much. His shaggy black hair was falling in his face, but I saw the gleam in those grey eyes, right before he worked hard to hide it. I turned around and met his gaze.

“She’s the one. I had her once, so we can have her again. We’ll fix this, find her.” I glanced at my brother, sighing at the stiff set of his shoulders. “She’ll be ours.”

Because like it or not, Freya was already mine.

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## Chapter 14

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*Freya*

“Oh my god, did you hear about Adam Farrelly’s Cinderella girl?” Katie, one of my workmates, asked one of the kitchen hands. “He has this shoe and he’s trying to find the girl it fits.” She turned to me. “Oh, hey, Freya.”

“Hey.” I wrapped an apron around my waist. “What Cinderella girl?”

I didn’t want to know the answer, but knew I had to.

“Apparently Adam met some girl who ‘helped him while he was sick’.” She made quotation marks in the air with a smirk. “And she left a shoe behind, because that’d happen if you were holding back all that pretty blond hair of his. He held it up in front of the whole press gallery, saying he wants to find the girl it belongs to.”

My eyes involuntarily slid down, thankful I could only wear black Doc Martens to work, not my Converse.

“That is so fucking hot,” Gloria said, coming over. “A guy like that, searching for his girl with just a shoe for reference.” She looked at me then. “It was a hand-painted Converse All Star sneaker. You make them, don’t you?”

“Ah, yeah, but—” I started to say.

“Maybe it’s one of your customers!” Katie said. “Do you think you’d recognise who you sold it to?” She pulled out her phone and showed me a photo, but she didn’t need to. I knew



exactly who it belonged to. “That’d be so cool if you got them together.”

“I sell most of my stuff at the markets,” I said, brushing her off. “So no client records. It’d also be a breach of privacy to share that information.”

She wanted to say more, all three of them did, but a customer appeared before the counter, so I turned to serve him.

Make that them.

He was talking on his phone, conducting some kind of business meeting while waiting, but that stopped when he saw me. His voice trailed away and he ended the call abruptly which was weird. What was even more weird was the way he stared with blue eyes almost as bright as Adam’s. Usually I had to fight to get customers to acknowledge me, but not him.

He was good-looking, I could acknowledge that. Thick dark hair made the contrast with his blue eyes stark. He had cheekbones so sharp they cut you, and a spread of dark stubble across a square chin. But right when I wondered if I had toothpaste on my lip or something, a dimple popped in his cheek.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

The guy the customer was with shifted restlessly by his side, alerting me to his presence. He was so freaking tall and solid I had to shift my head to see all of him. He was wearing the same high vis gear the other man was, making me think they worked together, though the body language... They stood quite close, not quite an intimate space of lovers, but something more than workmates. But his focus wasn’t on the other man, but me.

Grey eyes searched mine, staring, staring as if he could see far more than the professional facade I put on at work, beyond it to... Me, that’s what it was. And that inspection wasn’t just one-sided. To delve into me, it felt like he had to open himself up as well.

I saw it then, for just a second, pain, fear, need and so many other emotions, that didn’t fit here. I felt the need to take

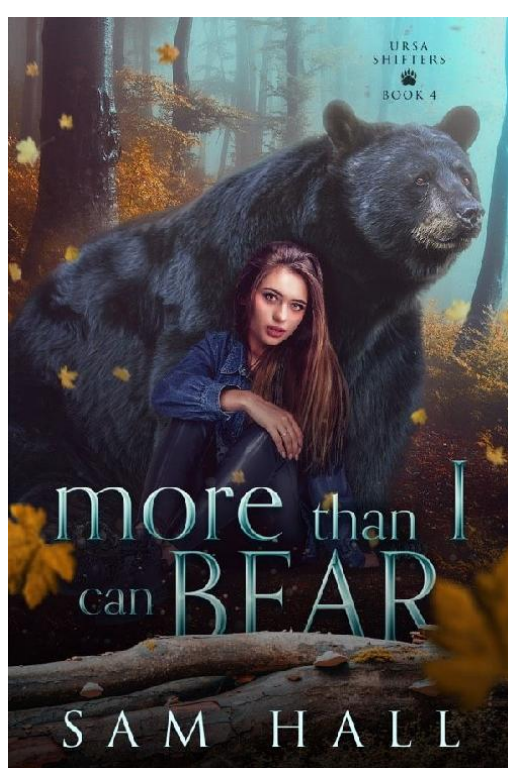
his hand and squeeze it and also run the fuck away. He made a strange little grumbling noise, something that caught Blue Eyes' attention, right before he flicked his head. All that beautiful black hair shifted then, falling into his face like a curtain at the end of a play.

“Yes.” Blue Eyes' voice was rich, deep and completely authoritative when he finally answered... “Yes, I think you can.”

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Freya, Adam, River and Kaine's story will continue in More Than I Can Bear, hopefully out in November.

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