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Key to Her Heart

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Wednesday January 17th 2018, 11:54. Desire has not been far from Denise's mind for a long time, but now it threatens to brim to the surface.

"Freya, I have the report ready for you concerning the prostitute murders case." said Denise as she hung up the phone and handed a file over to her boss, Freya Maxwell.

"What do you have?" she inquired. Denise looked at her reflection in the stainless steel picture frame just in front of her. She was a snake whose white scales were sometimes said to glow under bright lights, along with amethyst purple eyes. Unlike many other members of her species, she had a pair of legs and a far shorter tail, and donned a wig with black hair that flowed past her shoulders, leading some to mistake her for a lizard. Freya was a broad and well toned cow, brown fur displaying her form. Two small horns protruded through her brown hair, and coupled with blue eyes that Denise thought resembled a pair of blue topazes, she sometimes found herself wishing she could have met her sooner.

"That was the owner of the lonely hearts club on the line." answered Denise. "She's informed me that one of her clientele may be involved in their orchestration. This thing goes much deeper than it looks on the surface, and Nova was lucky to get out of there unharmed if the killer was there that night." As she spoke these words, images of Nova with the fox who had become instantly smitten with him, Darren, were drifting into her mind. Unfortunately, the boost seeing the two men in love had given to her confidence did not prove to be enough. For a long time, she harboured a strong crush on Freya, but had never been able to form the courage to open her heart to her, while Freya had remained entirely unaware of what was inside her.

"Is that so?" asked Freya. "What makes her say that?"

"She witnessed a meeting taking place between two men." explained Denise. "She didn't get a good look at who they were, but she heard them talking about who she thinks may be a boss of theirs who had ordered that they be killed. They didn't give a name – she said he was known only as The Postman. Whether that's just one of many aliases or the name he goes by, she doesn't know."

"In any case, I advise we get Nova to bring her in for questioning." said Freya stolidly. "We need that statement from her as soon as possible. It will surely be the best lead we've got from here, especially if any other witnesses come forward."

"Yes, I think so too." agreed Denise. "That folder's everything we've got on this so far. It just seemed like a totally normal murder case at first, but it seems like this is much bigger."

"I wouldn't say there is any such thing as what you phrase as a normal murder case, Denise." replied Freya. "No two cases ever present the same results, even if at first they appear identical. Regardless, we will see what the owner can give us and work with the information we have from there." Her explanation seemed to come to her as a haze. Her heart fluttered at the mere sound of her voice as pictures of one of her many fantasies began to displace her focus.

"We should be able to get another lead from there, once we find out who this Postman person is." said Denise.

"Good plan." said Freya. "I do believe your lunch break is just around the corner, unless you have any further news you want to impart." Denise stood up. Freya watched her as she stepped in front of her desk. Her heart racing as fast as a rally car's engine, she reared herself, prepared herself to speak. *What am I going to tell her? she thought, her mouth going dry. This is the woman I'm in love with. So many things I want to say to her...but I have no idea how to express them in the right way...no, I can't do this. I'm her secretary. How can this work...uh oh, she's going to notice me staring at her.* She was too late to break the gaze, for Freya looked up from the form she was filling out, looking quizzical.

"No." said Denise in a small voice. "There...there isn't anything else."

"Are you alright, Denise?" inquired Freya.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm okay." said Denise quickly. "I'll see you shortly." But Freya was not so quick to be quelled.

"Are you...positive you are?" she said tentatively. "I can always tell when there's something on your mind." *She's noticed. Oh, this can't be good.*

"Yeah. I...I just have to go." replied Denise, turning away from her and leaving the office. "I'll be back soon, Freya." After she closed the door behind her, her forked tongue subconsciously lashed at her lips as she found herself cursing herself in her walk. *Well, that was brilliant, wasn't it?* she thought bitterly. *The only chance you'll get for days, and you had to screw it up yet again.* She didn't know how much longer she could keep it contained, but at the same time, she was terrified of what reaction she might get once she did. Trying all she could to put it out of her mind, she grabbed her winter parka and stepped out through the entrance, her head bowed as though trying to avoid the overcast sun. How could she ever overcome this? She didn't know if she could answer that question.

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Denise was shivering despite the parka, for her cold blooded body meant that the cold affected her much more profoundly than it did warm blooded creatures. But this was no concern right now. She headed into the city's centre, her mind clouded with regret. How could she have thrown away yet another opportunity like that? It seemed like such a perfect one, but she didn't see how she would get another one now. She didn't know whether Freya had caught on, but whether or not she had, she had seemed...concerned about her, if that was the right word. It was the only one that came to mind.

She couldn't lift her head, as though trying to shield herself from sunlight much brighter than it was. When she finally did upon reaching the next district, she found herself unable to look away from the other creatures she saw on the streets and inside the buildings around her. All around her, she could see couples of all manner of species, even those who she thought were among the rarest still living. What's more, she saw quite a number of couples who were both the same gender, much like her colleague Nova and his love Darren. It was as though Valentine's Day had come a month early.

Thorns coiled around her heart, with its rose petals nowhere to be found. Thoughts of her hugging and kissing Freya in a coffee shop she passed rushed through her mind. She feared it would be entirely unattainable by now, and no matter where she turned, there came only further reminders of her plight. *I can't imagine my life without her.* she thought. *And yet I can't even talk to her properly. Why can't I say something like Nova can with his Darren? I bet he's having the time of his life.*

She walked into an upmarket sandwich shop named *The Dragon's Feed*. True to its name, the manager was an amethyst coloured dragoness and there was a large amount of livery relating to the species on the walls. But the moment the door closed behind her, she found herself rather surprised when she noticed one of the creatures waiting in the short queue at the counter. A bat without wings who looked rather similar to Nova and donned a grey and blue school uniform and a small rucksack slung over his back with *Persona* and *Bucky O'Hare* comics sticking out of it...this couldn't be anyone other than Nova's younger brother Epsilon. She thought of tapping him on the shoulder, but she didn't even have to try and get his attention, for he immediately turned around upon spotting her in the display's reflection.

"Hey, it's big sister!" said Epsilon warmly. "What brings you here?" She felt her heart squeezing as she recalled how she'd left the office again, but one polite smile from Epsilon was enough for her to put it to the back of my mind. *I'll be fine. It'll be my turn again soon.* Finally, Denise allowed herself a smile.

"So how's big sister today?" said Epsilon. She almost sighed to herself, a memory of Freya cropping up again. With an effort, she kept her face straight, her forked tongue slipping out in response to the smells of the various foods around her.

"I've been alright. Thanks for asking." said Denise with a smile. "And how have you been, little brother?" Epsilon's face lit up upon hearing this affectionate nickname.

"I'm well." replied Epsilon. Denise went to ask him why he wasn't in school, but he clearly sensed this, as he said, "My school lets me come here for lunch sometimes, so no need to be concerned." *Of course.* she thought. *I remember Nova telling me about it now.*

"That's right. I went past it on the way here." said Denise, only noticing that the line had moved forward when one of the staff members, a slender blue and green chameleon, called them forward. She took a look at the many rolls and baguettes on the hotplates. She drew out her purse, but Epsilon stopped her.

"It's alright, Denise." he said. "It's on me this time."

"No, I'm fine. I can pay." she replied. But Epsilon was already placing his order. "Alright, I'll let you pay this time, but I owe you. Can I have one of them?" She pointed at one of the baguettes on the hotplate.

"Coming up. And what about you, kid?"

"I think that one will be appropriate. How would two cherry cream sodas sound?"

"Cool!" crowed Denise. *He's definitely taking after Nova.* she thought.

"It'll be along in just a minute." said the staff member. "One Emmental salad and one dragon meat feast coming up." Some of the other customers chuckled, although the manager was not impressed.

"I told you not to crack that joke, Francine." she said sternly, her wings spreading out to their full span by a way of a silent deterrent. Epsilon stared.

"Lighten up, Justine. It's just flavoured soybean. I think you two will enjoy it." Epsilon paid and Denise followed him to one of the tables in the corner. He pulled out his drama material from his rucksack once he sat down, but kept glancing up at her as he read. She felt unable to keep eye contact with him any time he tried, and when their food arrived she barely managed to pick at it despite her stomach giving a rumble.

"So what brings you here?" asked Epsilon. Her heart began to race again.

"I just fancied a meal out." said Denise as casually as she could. "And when I found this place...I had to give it a try."

"Good choice." said Epsilon. "I find it's better than the school canteen any day of the week. It's a lot quieter."

"I can imagine, Epsilon." agreed Denise, mustering the willpower to take her first bite while he took a dainty sip from his cream soda. "How are the acting classes going?"

"Nova says I've got a bright future ahead of me." he said.

"I knew his faith in you wasn't misplaced!" beamed Denise.

"I've got the chance to do him proud, and I'm not going to throw it away." he continued. "I'm being cast in the spring half term school play."

"What play is it?" inquired Denise.

"It's advertised over there." said Epsilon with a smile as he pointed behind her. *Phantom of the Opera* was the poster's décor, and it was taking place in the Jensen Gardens theatre in the next district. Denise's face lit up like a candle.

"You're starring in that?"

"Yeah. I'm quite enjoying myself doing this. They gave me the role of the phantom."

"You'll be great! Can I wait for you just in case there's a halfway act?" suggested Denise brightly.

"Maybe you can." he said. "I don't know if anything like that is happening yet, but if it is, you're more than welcome to come along. My teacher said the admission money all goes to the school too."

"Maybe I can get the night off."

"One of these days, I'll get my face in a lot more places. I'm tired of just reading comics."

“Cool!” crowed Denise. “Be sure to send Freya and I lots of photos once you get out onto the big screen, alright? We want to know all about –” She abruptly stopped mid flow, realising what she’d just said. She broke eye contact, afraid to look up at him again until she felt Epsilon’s eyes staring.

“You okay, Denise?” he asked kindly.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” she breathed. “Carry on.” But Epsilon wasn’t to be placated so easily. Despite being only ten years old, he showed far more maturity and level headedness than she had seen from many others her age. She wasn’t sure if she could bring herself to admit what she was really thinking to him, as she didn’t think he would have learned anything about it in school thus far. Despite that, she feared he’d caught on.

“I’m like my big brother in some ways.” said Epsilon. “And one of those ways is being able to tell when there’s something bothering an adult.”

“Epsilon, stop. I’m alright, honestly.” said Denise, distracting herself with another bite of her baguette. *I don’t want to think about it any more.*

“Are you and Freya dating?” asked Epsilon abruptly. Immediately, Denise could feel her cheeks burning as though someone was putting out their cigarettes on them. *Do you have to hit my raw nerves at every turn?* she thought irritably. She sighed heavily to herself, realising that there was no way she could get away without the truth coming out now.

“No.” said Denise simply. “But...”

“But?” pressed Epsilon.

“I’m in love with my boss.” she said, sounding pained. Epsilon’s face brightened up as though she’d just given him a piece of his favourite confectionery.

“I thought so!” he said. “You’re clearly smitten with her. Nova was the same way after his date with Darren last week.”

“He was?”

“Of course he was. Before that date, he wasn’t sure he wanted to do it. But now he can’t imagine his life without him.” Another bite of her baguette did nothing to calm her nerves, since she could sense him watching her every move.

“Freya’s so beautiful,” she said, her voice soft, “and...well, look at me. I’m not even her species.”

“That didn’t stop Nova.” Epsilon reminded her.

“Epsilon, I’m too shy to even talk to her about it let alone look her in the eye.” she said. “She must have seen more than either of us can imagine in her life. But I have no idea how she’ll take knowing her secretary loves her. I’ve got even less of an idea how to tell her without completely screwing it up. Every time I try, it’s like the words I want to say get lost on the way to my mouth somehow.” Epsilon studied her as he took all of this in, scratching his chin as he turned it over in his mind. But Denise bowed her head, by now just wanting to get as far away from the city and everything in it as fast as she possibly could.

“Listen to me, going on like some mope.” grouched Denise. “I must sound like the most pathetic snake in the world right now, talking to you about this. I mean, you’re just a cub.”

“Um, yes. I know what I am, thanks.” said Epsilon flatly.

“Sorry.”

“You’re not pathetic, Denise.” said Epsilon firmly. “My big brother was the same when he was trying to get close to Darren. And he finally did it last week. Ask her out the next time you get the chance to do. It’s what adults do when they like each other this way, right?”

“Ask her out?” repeated Denise. “Epsilon...I...I don’t know...” But the young bat was not to be swayed.

“That’s what Nova did.” he said. “And Darren fell at his foot paws.” Denise looked suddenly anxious.

"You really think I have what it takes to win her heart?" said Denise.

"This is getting you down, obviously." said Epsilon. "You're not your usual self."

"What do you mean?"

"You're normally as cheerful as they come and sure about whatever you take on. I don't like seeing you this sad. Denise, you look defeated, like someone's just –"

"Yeah, but today," said Denise. "I just...I cannot get her out of my mind." As Epsilon tucked into his lunch, he suddenly showed a cheeky grin.

"My brain's come up with a sneaky little idea." he said. Denise stared in anticipation. "How about a secret admirer card? You could tell her how you feel that way." Although it seemed like the most innocent thing he could possibly say, it felt as though a load had been taken off Denise's back. How could she not have thought about it before? But would Freya know it was from her? She was willing to bet that she would recognise her handwriting the instant she saw the card.

"I've got it," she mused, "I could write out how I feel about her in one of these cards, include a short poem, and then put it through her letterbox tonight. That way, she'll get it. Epsilon, I love it!"

"I've seen some adults do it before. It always works." added Epsilon. She wondered about asking him who he'd seen do this, but thought it best not to pry into his business. Without a moment to lose, Denise quickly bolted down what remained of her meal and got to her feet.

"Alright," she announced as she drained her cream soda, "I'll do it."

"Don't you want to stick around for the sweets?" asked Epsilon. "I wanted to show you the fancy chocolates."

"Another time, little brother." said Denise. "I've got love to chase after. See ya!" With a spring in her step, she began to make her way back to work. Everything Epsilon said drifted around in her mind like incense smoke, as well as her memories of her failed attempts to admit her love. An image of Freya appeared in her mind again when she spotted several more couples linking tails and hand paws, and for a moment she could barely believe she had allowed her mind to conjure up this image. In her vision, she was standing before her wearing the most beautiful white ball gown glistening in the moonlight, as though she was her very own version of Cinderella. And no matter how she tried, there was no blanking her from her mind no matter what.

Snow began to fall as she passed a card shop. However, she stopped in her tracks when she realised what was in the window display. Bouquets of red roses, bottles of champagne, boxes of chocolates, the most beautiful cards adorned with images of couples hugging and kissing...it was enough to send her mind into even more of a spin than it was in now. *Love, my name is Denise.* she decided. *The kid's right. I can't throw this chance away now.*

With renewed confidence in her stride, she waltzed into the shop, finding herself gazing in wonder at the many Valentine's cards. *Wow,* she thought, *imagine if Freya could see me now. I can't wait to get this off the ground.* She picked out one that bore a picture of a feline woman holding a love letter as she lay on her bed and bore the message *I Love You, You Make My Heart Sing* in sparkling pink letters. *That's perfect!* she thought. *That'll let her know for sure.*

She paid and tucked the card into her blazer pocket, feeling happier than she had in weeks. She checked her watch. Ten minutes left. She had plenty of time left, and it didn't look like anyone had seen her. If she could hone the courage to pull it off, this was going to be an afternoon she would never forget. And as another vision of Freya crept into her mind, this time of her hugging and kissing her upon seeing the card, her walk quickened up, almost to the point of breaking into a run. *Here I come, my love.*

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Denise arrived in her office soon after, her heart racing as quickly as a motorcycle's engine. She knew what she had to do, but if not done with care, it could cost her everything. However, no matter where she looked in the building, Freya was nowhere to be found. What's more, she didn't think any of the colleagues she passed would have any idea where she was. None of them mentioned her, but she didn't want to pester them, thus give her game away. *She's probably just out on her break.* she thought.

She sat back down at her desk and grabbed the phone from the wall next to her. Her mouth going dry, she began to dial Freya's mobile phone number. But she realised...no, she was being stupid. She couldn't risk fouling this up over the phone like she'd wound up doing a few weeks before, when she'd called Freya on her home number, only to clam up and then hang up without saying anything. *I'm lucky she didn't guess it was me who did that.* she reminded herself.

But just as she'd replaced the handset, she realised that she was missing a crucial piece of information. *All that time spent buying that card, and I don't even know what Freya's address is.* she thought. *But where do I look? Where would she keep something that has her address on it?* She turned it over in her mind, feeling the card inside her blazer pocket. Freya would be back soon, so she didn't have long to find it without her knowing.

Despondent, she returned to her office, her shoulders slumping. But just as she was about to sit down at her desk, the idea of a lifetime came to her. *Her address book!* she thought. *She might have put it in there.* She headed to Freya's office, walking so quickly she threatened to break into a run. Ignoring the glances from her passing colleagues, she arrived at the room to find the door unlocked. Looking around to make sure nobody had seen her, she pushed it open and then locked herself in.

The room was just as immaculate as Freya had left it, and Denise was well aware of her neatness. The diplomas and certificates, of which there were several, formed their own pattern on the wall behind the desk. But there was something on the opposite wall she had always walked past, but never thought to take a closer look at until now. There was one framed photo of the Scottish Highlands with the Northern Lights lighting up the night sky hanging over it. Adjacent to it was a photo of who she guessed were members of her family. *Family is as important to her as mine is to me with her.* she thought. *Wonder where her family is now.*

But then, her heart began to race upon hearing footsteps. She hadn't even started to search yet and yet she was going to be caught...but much to her relief, the passing creature left. She pulled open each of the desk's drawers one by one, but all that was in this desk were files pertaining to suspects the police had referred to their agency. She slammed the drawers shut, but before closing the last one, she grabbed a small key for the filing cabinet behind her. She went through its drawers, finding supplies, spare clothing, office stationery, printer cartridges, various computer parts, until finally, she saw a small book in the bottom drawer. It was Freya's address book.

"Yes, this must be it!" she cried. She grabbed it and flicked through it, and her face lit up like the morning sun when she found a page listing her emergency contact details. Listed underneath her phone numbers was her address. *58 Brentwood Forest Gardens,* she read to herself. *I know where that is! That's on the outskirts of town.* With that, she hurriedly copied the address onto the envelope and replaced the diary as quickly as she could, before she raced for the door.

She scrambled to unlock the door as another image of Freya began to fill her mind. Thankful that nobody else had seen her, she headed back to her office in a haze, her heart feeling as though it was being stroked by the petals of lily flowers. Conjured up in the wide confines of her mind was an image of Freya on a bed of red and white roses, awakening to greet her the moment she entered. She imagined holding her as tightly as she could, wanting nothing more than to spend the remainder of all eternity in her arms. Were there a beach nearby, she was certain she would have imagined Freya in a revealing bikini, although by the time she reached her office again, she almost tripped over when she realised that she was right in front of her.

"Welcome back." said Freya kindly.

"Hello...Freya." said Denise nervously. She couldn't look up at her, her mouth had gone very dry, and her heart was fluttering like a butterfly in a new spring. Worse, she felt Freya's eyes on her, studying her as though she was a specimen in some kind of research facility.

"Is all well?" said Freya inquiringly. "You seem rather...flustered, if that is an appropriate word. And you haven't been your usual self today. I pick up on things like that." She felt her heart tighten, like she had somehow reached in and started squeezing it as hard as she could. Thankfully, it didn't appear as though she'd noticed what was in her pocket.

"Don't worry about me." said Denise, drawing in a deep breath. "I'll be fine." Freya wasn't to be so easily satisfied, though.

"As long as you're sure." suggested Freya. "I'm not completely heartless, Denise."

"I didn't say you were." said Denise politely.

"You know you can always come to me any time you need to offload something," said Freya softly, placing a hand on her shoulder. However, before she could continue, her mobile phone started to ring. "Sorry, I've got to take this. I'll come back in a moment." With that, she turned and left the room, leaving Denise to collect her thoughts. "Hello? Yes, that's right. Yes, she should be nearby..."

She sat back down at her desk. As she watched Freya leave, she couldn't take her eyes off her until she finally turned the corner. It was as though she was drifting into a beautiful paradise without even leaving her chair, for her environment lay forgotten as her mind filled with another vision of the future she wanted. Starting out with a sunny beach, she imagined finding her sunbathing in the cloudless blue sky above, clad only in a light green bikini and a pair of sunglasses. She lowered her sunglasses as she approached, before the two shared a tender embrace and a peck on the cheeks. And yet Freya desired even more, puckering up her lips and drifting closer and closer towards her, her heart racing as the air between them heated up...

...but suddenly, it all disappeared and her office came back into view. She was still alone, but she could hear the phone ringing. *I've got to stop spacing out like this.* she thought. *I'm lucky Freya wasn't around to see that.* Her senses reawakening, she picked up the receiver.

"Denise Watson speaking...that's right...yes, I'll give her the message right away. Thank you."

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The rest of the shift seemed to pass in a haze, as though she was the protagonist of a dream sequence or a film. And by the time it wrapped up and the night staff took over, the snow had stopped but the night sky was as clear as the glasses perched on her nose. Nova had not returned to the upper floor flat, and though she'd seen Epsilon come in, he'd not had time to stop due to homework. She'd been able to prevent herself from daydreaming again, but the moment she left the car park, she began to imagine Freya's reaction upon seeing the card. Would she be delighted? Or would this end in despair? Love letters were one thing, but a secret admirer card was quite another.

When she reached the beautiful estate, she stopped at the foot of the road and pulled the card out. Feverishly, she wrote the message in emerald green ink that sparkled in the dashboard light:

For you, Freya. I love you more than life itself. There's nothing I yearn for more than spending the rest of my life with you. Yours truly, your secret admirer.

Smiling to herself, she sealed the card and looked at each house. Number 58 couldn't be that far. She finally found it sandwiched between two beautiful rose bush gardens, and her jaw dropped open upon seeing the house. *Stone me...Freya lives here? This place is a palace!* The home she saw with the brass numbers, while not the largest home she had ever seen, was a two storey Victorian style cottage, adorned with a porch and balconies outside each of the two upstairs windows. Light brown paint coated the walls and green tiles lined the roof and the space between the downstairs and upstairs windows.

Denise looked at the clock on the car's control panel. Freya wouldn't be home for at least another hour and a half yet. With a spring in her step, she walked up the driveway. Her heart beginning to race again, she slipped the letter through the letter box, her face glowing as she left. Would this act grant her the key to the bovine's heart? Or would it result in the lock bearing a huge padlock thereafter? That night would decide, and as she drove home, she repeatedly checked her mobile phone, hoping that Freya would guess who had sent the card. Whatever the outcome, the gap she had in her knowledge would no doubt be plugged.

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Surprisingly, Denise's sleep had been a dreamless one. But the moment she had awakened, Freya was back to dominating her mind whether she tried to escape her visions or not. Indeed, on her way to work she could barely stay focused, at one point almost crashing into the car in front of her. Her heart was fluttering – just the sight of her boss, no matter where she was or what attire she had chosen today, would be enough to complete her day before it had even begun.

However, when she arrived, her face fell when she looked around the building. Freya was nowhere to be found, but yet the other staff members had arrived already. Had she arrived too early? Was there a road accident or traffic jam she hadn't been aware of? She tried to put it out of her mind as she followed up with the lead she had been made aware of the evening before. However, she found it impossible to stay focused, and Freya kept creeping into her mind.

She looked up at the clock. It was now 9:30AM, and yet Freya still hadn't arrived. What's more, she hadn't phoned in. This wasn't like her, for any time she expected to be late, she would inform her immediately. She drew her mobile phone out of her pocket and dialled her number.

"Come on, pick up!" she grunted as the dial tone rang ten times, finishing with a beep.

"This Let's Talk mobile phone is switched off. Please leave a message after the tone." said the automated voice.

"Freya, it's Denise." she said, her voice wavering. "Was just wondering where you were. Give me a call back when you get this." She hung up, but then her heart turned to ice. Had something terrible happened to her?

"Shit!" snapped Denise, tossing the mobile phone into her handbag. What's more, she felt a pair of eyes on her. She turned around to find Nova on his way in.

"Denise, what's going on?" he asked.

"It's Freya." she said. "She's not here. And she's not answering her phone." Nova was aghast.

"What?" he cried.

"She's never been this late before." said Denise. "And she normally calls in. I think something might be wrong." Nova suddenly smirked, however.

"It's half past nine." he said. "She could just be stuck in traffic. But you raise a good argument. She always calls in. Unless I simply have been absent when she has not." She went to reply, but then she thought back to when she'd posted her card. *Oh, no. If this is because she's seen that card...I have to find her right now. This can't be good.* She felt like she was about to vomit, despite not having eaten yet that day. But she couldn't simply sit there. *This is on me. I might be responsible for this.* she thought. She almost said this, but couldn't bring herself to.

"I'm going to go and look for her."

"Are you positive that's the best idea there is?"

"I hope I'm just worrying over nothing. If she arrives while I'm gone, get her to call me, okay?"

"You probably are. I'm sure she's fine." said Nova, the warmth in his eyes doing nothing to calm her nerves. "I would come too, but I have to go. We've got another lead – there's a night club staff member who says he knows something about the prostitute murders and he wants to meet me in half an hour."

"That's great. Give her the news if you see her before I do, comprende? I've got to find her. If Benny hasn't gone home yet, get him to take over until we're back."

"He should be in the other room."

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Denise tore across the city, trying to find Freya in any place she could. She checked her favourite hangouts first, from the coffee shop across the street from the agency to the Yellow Canary pub a little further away. No sign of her had been seen at any of them. So where could she possibly be if she wasn't in the city centre? But then it came to her. *She couldn't still be at home, could she?* she thought in alarm.

There was nothing else for it. She turned around and headed for Brentwood Forest Gardens, weaving in and out of the traffic with no time to lose. When she arrived, there were scratches on the front bumper from where she had accidentally hit another vehicle. She raced up to the entrance of the house and went to knock on the front door. However, what she saw through the left hand window made her neck bend round. She backed up and peered through the window, and was shocked by what she saw.

"Oh my." she said softly. While through the right window was an immaculately kept kitchen with everything as neat as a pin, through the left window revealed the living room, the state of which made her gasp in horror. There was broken glass and china strewn across the living room carpet and marks on the wallpaper where items had been thrown against the walls. The table had been turned over and its contents flung to the other side of the room. There were pieces of a wine bottle everywhere with burn marks surrounding the

fireplace, a moist pool of liquid in the centre of the carpeting. Several picture frames had been smashed and most of the shelves in the unit and its contents had been destroyed. Then she spotted Freya on the sofa, the only undamaged piece of furniture in the room. She was turned away from the window with her head hung low. A wooden baseball bat lay next to her, and it had been used with such force that it had snapped in half. *What happened here?* she thought in panic. *I've got to get in there right now!*

She rung the doorbell, but there came no answer. Freya had not moved from where she sat. She put her hand through the letterbox, and what she heard next felt like a knife to her throat. She heard Freya's voice. She was sobbing her heart out. *Did I cause this?* thought Denise in panic, her heart plunging. *I must be the worst secret admirer who ever lived.*

"Freya?" called Denise.

"Get the fuck out of here!" growled Freya. Denise was completely taken aback. She'd never seen anything like this from Freya before, even when her mood was at its worst. *Something big has clearly happened here.* she thought.

"It's Denise," she persisted. "I...I came to check on you. I wanted to...see if you were alright." It sounded like Freya was about to bite back, but then she fell silent. Instead, she got up and slowly made her way to the door. Denise was ready to run for it, fear starting to take hold of her. She was afraid that anything she did now would only worsen her mood.

The front door opened and Denise took a step back, her eyes widening in shock. Freya looked completely broken. Her clothing was dishevelled and the fur on her face was matted with her tears, and yet she looked so furious, Denise was scared she would attack her.

"I thought I said," she snapped, but stopped mid flow, like words had failed her. Her expression began to soften when she met eyes with Denise, who looked utterly terrified.

"Denise?" she said. She remained silent, not daring to answer her. "You mean you...?"

"I thought something might have happened to you," said Denise in a small voice. Freya sniffed and looked away, seemingly no longer able to bear to look at her.

"I'm so sorry, Denise," she said weakly, almost whispering. "I didn't...I thought you were..." Denise responded by wrapping her arms around her and cuddling her.

"It's okay," said Denise soothingly. "Benny's on overtime until we get back. Come on, let me get you some tea or coffee." Freya bowed her head, before finally nodding.

"Alright." With that, Denise followed her in and shut the door behind her. Freya returned to the sofa, Denise saying nothing until she'd finished brewing two cups of milky sugared coffee.

"I was getting very worried about you," said Denise as she brought the cups in, treading around the broken glass. Denise looked around the wrecked room as she swept the broken baseball bat off the sofa, before turning the table back upright. There was a floor lamp that also hadn't been damaged, but with its lampshade untidily askew. "What the hell happened here?" Freya hesitated.

"You might be one of the only creatures I've met here...who actually cares enough to come and check on me," she said, her voice wavering. Denise sensed she was going to break down again at any moment, but was confused by what she meant. *I'll have to choose my next words very carefully.*

"What do you mean?" she inquired. She went to answer, but the words seemed to get lost on the way to her mouth. Instead, she broke down in tears again, although Denise didn't back away this time.

"I'm not from around here," she sniffed between tears. "And someone I tried to escape from...he's found out where I live. And now he's come after me. I'm not safe here any more." Denise could scarcely believe what she was hearing.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm actually from America," she explained. "And I'm in exile."

"Exile? Why?"

"I was going to inherit my dad's business and he groomed me to take over after he died. My ex boyfriend was a football player, and he treated me well at first. I lost touch with him, and then I found out he'd just used me to further his career. He never even loved me. I was just a status symbol to him."

"Seriously?" exclaimed Denise. "He just...how could he do that to you?"

"I'm not even at the worst part yet." said Freya darkly. "I found out he'd cheated on me too, and that's when I completely lost it. I beat eight tons of crap out of him right in front of his new slut for what he did to me. Trouble was...his team was playing a high profile game the very next day. It reached the media, and they made *me* out as a deranged fucking psycho!" Her voice rising, she pointed at herself, bluntly emphasising the last word. "My friends and my neighbours...since he's famous, he was the hero as far as they were concerned, so they believed his side of the story. They turned against me, every last one of them. They didn't want to hear anything I had to say. Seems like unless you're famous, you're completely worthless in this world."

"Freya," said Denise anxiously, "I never expected this. I had no idea...you never told me how much you'd been through. Why keep it bottled up?"

"I was ashamed." cried Freya. "Johnny ruined my life for no reason at all. I lost everything, my friends, most of my family, my home, all of my possessions...because of him. I can *never* go back to my country. And now he's trying to get to me again. There's no rest for me. There's no peace. Just more punches and kicks while I'm down."

"But look what you've done now." countered Denise. "The agency's been going for years and we're in partnership with the police. If he tries to reach you, they'll take care of him. And I have you to thank for a lot."

"Denise...I remember your case like it was only yesterday." said Freya. "When you dealt with those criminals, I knew you weren't the mastermind they made you out to be. I know what it's like to be thrown under the bus. For you, the danger has passed. The police in this country...they don't know who he is, so they wouldn't know to look for him. And they have bigger priorities than him. Anyway...just go back to work, Denise. I don't know why you're wasting your time with me."

"Wasting my time?" exclaimed Denise. "Now just wait a minute –"

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this. But that card couldn't be anyone else other than him." Denise froze.

"Card?"

"Yes, a card!" She pointed towards the corner of the room where a small pile of paper remnants lay. "Johnny, or some sicko friend of his, sent me that Secret Admirer card last night as part of some sick joke." She could just make out that it was the very card she had posted, and it had been torn to pieces. The realisation dawned from her, and suddenly she felt sick to her stomach. *This has to be some kind of nightmare.* she thought, feeling more and more guilty by the second. *So I caused all of this? How did I screw this up this badly?* Suddenly, her cup of coffee looked like the most revolting liquid imaginable.

"Tell me – who would want to date me?" sniffed Freya. "I have nothing here and not much to offer in terms of love these days." Her heart racing again, she realised that she was cornered. She couldn't just leave her now. *I just can't...how could I do that to her?*

"Who would want to date you?" repeated Denise in a soft voice, her head bowing and a single tear falling into her lap. Her heart felt like it had just been impaled with the tip of a sword. "There is someone who does." Freya remained silent.

"What do you mean?" asked Freya. The look on her face told Denise that the least she wanted from her was an admission. She couldn't keep it together any longer. Her guilt soon overwhelmed her and she broke down into tears.

"It wasn't that Johnny guy who sent that card. It...it was me." Denise showed her the receipt and her sniffing turned into sobbing. She couldn't bear even to look at her. *How could I deserve her now? Who does this to the objects of their affection?* Freya looked utterly stunned.

"I don't understand." she said. "So...it really wasn't him this whole time? It was you?"

"Yes." said Denise.

"But...why?" asked Freya hoarsely. Denise wiped her eyes dry, her clothing starting to show moist spots where her tears had fallen. Despair saturated her being and she didn't see any escape from it now.

"I never had the courage to say this to you." began Denise. Freya watched intently. "All this time, while I was working with you...I've been falling under your spell. I mean...you didn't even try to attract me, and yet here I am, utterly in love with you." She shuddered as she tried all she could to hold back more tears. Freya motioned at her to carry on. "You've...you've been on my mind always. And whenever I'm away from you, it's like...it's like half of me is missing."

"You...you're in love with me?" asked Freya incredulously. She sounded like even she didn't believe her own words as she spoke them. But Denise wasn't going to stop now.

"Yes, Freya. I am really, really sorry for the...pain I caused you. I'll never forgive myself for this. I didn't know that any of this had gone on." At this point, she could no longer continue. Utterly ashamed of herself, she bowed her head and began sobbing her heart out. Freya's eyes were on her, and one glance revealed that she was in thought one moment and flummoxed the next. She was clearly unsure of what to say. Despite the tenderness on her face, her eyes felt like a pair of daggers penetrating into her.

"I deserve to be fired, left to die on the streets, for doing that to you. Now...I've thrown away my chance to win your heart. I didn't even know...if you swung my way." It was only when Denise let out another howling sob that Freya finally spoke again and held her in her arms. Her body stiffened. Inside she was torn between feeling like she wanted to be in no other place on Earth and wanting to run as far away from her as she possibly could. What's more, it amazed her that Freya hadn't decided to throw her out there and then.

"I'm not about to fire you, Denise." she said.

"You're...you're not?"

"No. You've done one hell of a lot for my business." Freya reached into her pocket for a packet of tissues and dried Denise's eyes with them. "And that counts for a lot as far as I'm concerned. Secretaries are never *not* useful, you know. And I think hiring you proved to be a great decision." Denise looked up with uncertainty, but Freya returned a warm glance. "That's not sarcastic, Denise."

"Doesn't matter. There isn't any way I can make it up to you now." sniffed Denise. "I don't deserve to be in the same building as you."

"This isn't on you." said Freya softly, before she sighed to herself. "You didn't know. You didn't mean for any of this to happen." She cast a hand around the room. "I never talked about it...not only because I was ashamed, but because I didn't want to risk anyone tracing me back to my former home. I should have recognised your handwriting. But the idea that Johnny was trying to find me after everything he'd done to me...I just couldn't handle it."

"I should have just asked you for a private chat." said Denise. "But I...I never had the courage. Without even asking you, I went and got the card and went through your address book." Freya looked only mildly surprised.

"So *that's* how you found out where I lived."

"I'm so sorry." Freya sighed again.

"I don't want you beating yourself up over this, Denise." said Freya warmly. "I understand why you did it. The trouble is...I've had a few men try it on, and I rejected all of them. I was still hurting and I just wasn't ready for another relationship. But I've never felt interested in other women before." Denise's face fell.

"So...what happens now?" asked Denise, shedding another tear.

"I'm still...shocked about this whole thing." admitted Freya. "I don't know...I mean, I've never swung that way." Denise wasn't about to throw in the towel, however.

"I'd never, ever hurt you like Johnny did. You believe me, right?" said Denise, her voice heavy with her desperation. She wiped another tear from her eye. "You mean everything to me, Freya. I know you aren't sure

you feel it...but I think there's something there between us." Freya looked disconcerted, but in the next moment, a small trace of a smile crept in.

"So what you're saying is," she said, "you want me...to give it a go? To see how it pans out?" Denise nodded, drawing in a deep breath.

"That's right, Freya," she said. *I love you with all my heart. And I still can't bring myself to say that much even now.* she thought. *But somehow, I've got to.* "My heart is saying to me, this cow before me is the woman of my dreams. I mean, we can take things slowly. It doesn't have to be a whirlwind romance."

"That's a massive thing you're asking me to do," said Freya.

"I thought it might be," said Denise softly. She reached out and stroked Freya's shoulder, and much to her surprise, her body's tenseness eased slightly. "I'll completely get it if you don't want to. But it doesn't change the fact that I love you with all my heart. And there are so many ways I can prove it." Freya studied her, and it was a short moment before she spoke again.

"I'm not sure about it...but at the same time, I just don't feel right denying you what you want. I know what it is to feel the way you do."

"So...what do you want to do?" asked Denise cautiously. To her surprise, Freya gave a warm smile.

"I'm not going to lie," she said, "I'm wondering what this will turn into. Giving it a try couldn't hurt. But please don't be too heartbroken if this doesn't work out." Although it didn't sound especially promising, this still made Denise happy enough to reach out and tightly hug her.

"That's good enough for me, my love," smiled Denise, smiling as Freya stroked her shoulders.

"I don't know if I'm the right woman for you," she said, "but I will still try. For you."

"I can help you get this room cleaned up," suggested Denise.

"Yeah, that sounds good," said Freya. "Your coffee's gone cold."

*

Cleaning up the living room took an hour, removing the wrecked unit taking up the bulk of it. Throughout, Denise's mind was still in a haze and she sensed she wasn't the only one. She kept thinking back to the night before and retracing her steps. She found herself wishing that she'd put her name into the card rather than leaving it a secret. But would the events of that day have been avoided, or would it have made them one hundred times worse? She didn't want to think about it.

After they shared another cup of coffee, Denise was ready to admit defeat. All of this had left her quite drained, and indeed, Freya wasn't looking on the top form she usually kept. Physical exhaustion was setting in and Denise's right hand was bandaged from where she'd cut herself on the shards of glass. Suddenly the caffeine boost didn't feel like it was enough.

"This has been quite a day," said Freya.

"You don't have to tell me," said Denise.

"How long did Benny say he could stay for?" asked Freya. "He's got to be exhausted by now."

"He agreed to stay for as long as he's needed," answered Denise. "If he gets too tired, the night deputy has offered to take his place."

"See?" said Freya with a grin. "Was hiring you such a bad idea?" *Okay, I know what she wants me to say here.* she thought.

"Guess not," said Denise simply.

"Just like you to take care of the little things," said Freya. "But trust me, after a day like this, I can't say I'm not familiar with how Benny feels. I might just go and get some sleep." This cemented an idea in Denise's mind, and she just could not resist proposing it.

“Room for one more?” she asked silkily. “I’m tired too.”

“There’s only the one bed.” said Freya with a shrug, but not without another smirk. “And I don’t think we got all of the pieces of glass out of the sofa yet.” Denise’s heart began to race again at the very thought.

“I’ve got no problem with that.” she smirked. “Don’t wait up.” Denise went and changed the bandages on her hand, but true to her word, Freya had already gone upstairs by the time she was finished. She cautiously climbed the staircase, and in the first room to the left was the bedroom with the door still open. With her uniform lain at the dressing table, Freya had already sunk into a deep sleep. *I don’t think she’d mind now, even if she never sees me.* thought Denise, letting out a yawn.

With that, she stripped down until only her bra and panties remained. She climbed into the bed, trying to avoid taking too much of the duvet away from Freya. The thought of her subconsciously taking as much of it for herself as she possibly could served to make her giggle, although it wasn’t enough to disturb Freya, nor was it enough to prevent her from soon falling into a dead state of sleep.

Bright sunlight blinded her when she woke up after what felt like an eternity. She yawned and stretched and turned to her right. She was aghast when she saw the time on the LED clock. 1:15PM. Three hours had passed. And what’s more, the space where Freya had been was empty. But just as dismay threatened to rear its head, she felt her forked tongue slip out in response to a sudden amazing smell.

There came no time to try and guess what it was, however. The door creaked open a mere moment later, and Denise could scarcely believe what came through.

“Freya, is that you?” she said hoarsely.

“Rise and shine, snakey!” said Freya with a glowing smirk. Denise couldn’t take her eyes off her. The food on the tray didn’t seem to matter at all. She had let her hair down and stood before her wearing only a bra and a pair of panties, revealing that underneath her uniform was a bovine who, Denise thought, was very shapely. She found herself imagining how she’d be able to take advantage of her own flexible skeleton to get even closer to her. In the bright sunlight that filled the room, it was as though she was made out of the most precious of jewels, for she shone with a renewed confidence, as though her emotional hurt was now a distant memory.

“I thought I was dreaming.” breathed Denise. “I thought I’d wrecked everything today.”

“You are dreaming.” smirked Freya. “I am just a mere fragment of your imagination!” She chuckled, although Denise looked like she was about to break down again. “Okay, that was a bad joke. Sorry.”

“That’s alright.” said Denise. “Is that...?”

“It takes two to tango.” said Freya fondly. “Lunch in bed never fails.” It was only then when she got a look at the tray. Orange juice, French toast, a hunk of pork flavoured tofu coated with barbecue sauce, grape and blackcurrant trifle...this was the most exquisite food she had seen in years.

“You got French toast?” asked Denise in surprise. “That’s really expensive!”

“Yeah, they’re a sometime treat.” said Freya sheepishly. “There’s not many hens who want to give their eggs nowadays and lots of creatures who want them. Because of that, they’re very hard to find unless you get lucky at the markets. And I did.”

“How much did they cost you?”

“They cost a tenner each.” answered Freya. *That sounds about right.* thought Denise. “Dig in, Denise. Don’t worry about my purse.” Though hunger wasn’t in her mind’s forefront, it still looked like a good feed.

“Thank you so much, Freya.” simpered Denise, hugging Freya the second she laid the tray down.

“Anything for you, Denise.” replied Freya as she held her in her arms. “Still feels a bit...weird dating another woman, if that’s the right word.”

“Give it time.” smiled Denise. “It’ll come.”

Denise was comforted by the thought that this may only have been the very beginning. As the day went on, she found herself wondering if the entire sequence of events was some wondrous dream. But if that was the case, she was hoping that someone would explain to her why it felt so real, why cutting her finger upon picking more glass out of the sofa didn't wake her, and why her meal had been so good. For a moment she thought that nothing could disturb such a realistic fantasy as they shared each other's company and two romance films. Denise almost commented that she was glad that the television was kept in the bedroom rather than the living room, but thought it best not to remind her of what had set her off.

Throughout the films they held each other in the bed, affectionately stroking and cuddling into each other in the more dramatic twists and turns. Freya tensed and relaxed at different intervals, and Denise could sense she still wasn't entirely sure about it. However, over time she seemed to slowly relax more and more...or was this them both drifting in and out of sleep? She could no longer tell, although she was reciprocating more and more of her subtle and sly advances. Could it have meant that a spark was not quite as deeply hidden within Freya as she may have thought?

The remainder of the day seemed to pass by in a blissful blur, for the evening meal was just as beautiful as the one she'd woken up to had been. Freya had an exquisite dining room, and they'd eaten in the candlelit room while they had got closer and closer to one another. An anecdote here, a recited poem there...it was like a distant dream, and one that she couldn't leave. It passed so quickly, like time itself had sped up. Indeed, she had difficulty recalling the events of the films, only being able to remember a few short scenes.

This mattered not. There were many other things she wanted to do yet, but simply not a sufficient number of hours in which to do them. There would be plenty of other chances, of course. The very next day, they awakened to the bright sunlight streaming through the windows, with Freya bringing Denise a cup of coffee in bed. For a long moment she lay there, simply staring at Freya blankly.

"Morning Denise!" beamed Freya. Denise noticed she was wearing a purple towelling gown rather than her usual attire.

"Hey, what the hell am I doing here?" cried Denise. "I was having the most beautiful dream." Freya looked surprised at this.

"What of?"

"I dreamed that I was having the day of my life with the love of my life." said Denise, her voice so soft that it sounded like she was speaking in her sleep. "Very soon I'll wake up and be back at my home."

"Oh Denise, this isn't a dream." smirked Freya, reaching down and taking her hand into hers. "You're right here in mine."

"Really?" said Denise, feeling so happy she thought she might burst. She saw Freya looking down at the cup of coffee. One mouthful was all it took before she sprang out of the bed and straight into Freya's arms, as though they had spent several years apart.

"Okay, okay." smiled Freya. "You're awake now, right?" Denise nodded blissfully. "It's seven thirty, snakey. I'll just get your breakfast started while you have your shower." Denise almost turned it down as despite her thirst, she didn't feel hungry. But the thought of spending another moment, another hour, another day with her...she could never refuse to be in her company. As she showered, shedding a layer of her scales, the sweet smell of waffles and buttered pancakes wafted through the bathroom's air vents, and her forked tongue flicked out again in response. By the time she'd dried down, her appetite had returned and Freya arrived at the bathroom door with another towelling gown.

"I smell breakfast!" said Denise brightly.

"I smell love." smiled Freya as she wrapped the towelling gown around her. "Now don't dawdle, Denise. Work is upon us today."

"Work? Well," mused Denise, "what do you say we split a ride today? My car's still outside."

"Ooh, yes Denise." said Freya. "I would like that very much. A break from driving does sound nice."

"So does sharing that ride with you." said Denise.

“Oh, enough already.” chuckled Freya. “You come out with the sweetest things. I’ve noticed that about you, even before yesterday.”

“I do?”

“I wasn’t so sure about this at first,” said Freya, “but now I’m starting to see why you said you find me so appealing. I’m not going to say I’m a natural at this, but...I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t becoming smitten with you.” These words sent Denise’s heart into a spin. They were the words she’d always wanted to hear from her, and now her dormant dream was coming to life. No end lay in sight and the next chapter of their lives was about to begin. Now it seemed that finally, after all this time, the key to Freya’s heart was in her hand, ready for her to unlock the door.

“I don’t think I’ll get any trouble from back home.” said Freya. “Because there is no back home any more. It’s all here now, our homes and our hearts.”

“I can’t disagree with you on that.” said Denise happily. “You know, Freya, I think this could be the start of something amazing.”

“I know.” said Freya, stroking her on the shoulder. “Isn’t it just beautiful?”

The End

