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Bully For Her

**Written by BlueKittyTales on commission for SaltirePhoenix.
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Part 2 – Breaking Hearts

When Freya arrived at work the next day, she found neither hide nor hair of Denise. What had happened? Was she simply running late? If so, there had been no contact from her. It wasn't like her to do this, nor to remain completely silent about it. Nova was long gone by now and Benny and Anne had both gone home after their night shifts. She couldn't even scent her.

Thirty minutes passed, and none of the calls she'd received had come from Denise. Only calls from members of the public who needed the services of her investigators and departments of the police who passed cases onto them came. She laid her papers onto her desk and grabbed the phone again, hoping Denise would answer her call. But the only thing she got was a dialtone and then her answerphone.

"Denise, it's Freya," she said desperately. "Where are you? You were meant to be here half an hour ago. Please call me back as soon as you get this message." She laid her phone down, but she had barely put it back on the receiver before she heard the sound of a magical spell being cast. *I've got to change that text tone.* she thought as she checked her phone. *Denise! At long last!* she thought excitedly. But then she noticed that there was a photo icon starting the message. And, it had come from a sender her phone identified as *Unknown Caller*.

"Is this Denise?" she asked herself. But when she opened up the message, her blood turned to ice. *You've gotta be fucking kidding me.* she thought. The picture showed Denise in what looked like the back of a van, tied up, gagged and blindfolded and with bruising all over her face and limbs. She never thought she would see the snake she loved looking so utterly helpless. However, the proceeding message was even worse than she could have imagined.

We have unfinished business. You have until eleven o'clock to come to the Last Bastion pub at the edge of Glasgow. If you don't, then I'll slit your secretary's throat. And her corpse will end up on the evening news. Don't make me wait, and maybe, just maybe, I might let her live.

This cannot be happening. thought Freya. *All these years of running my business, and now this happens. If this piece of shit has harmed Denise, they're dead, whoever they are.* Panicking, she punched out a text to Benny.

Benny, you need to come back to the building and take over from me. Denise has been kidnapped. I think someone we helped convict has come after me for revenge.

*

Her mind was swirling as she raced across the city. She weaved in and out of the traffic and on several occasions mounted the pavement and ran red lights. She wasn't concerned about how reckless her driving was. All that was on her mind was getting Denise back no matter what the cost. Trying to trace the caller had proven useless.

When she had to stop at a set of traffic lights, the caller sent her another message that was enough to make her roar with rage:

Where are you, Maxwell? I thought you actually cared about your secretary? To show you that I'm not fucking around, you have until 10:30 to reach me. I don't want to listen to any excuses. Just bring yourself to me and nobody will get hurt, not even your ego.

"I can't wait to see your head pop," growled Freya as she wove around the queue and mounted the pavement, nearly mowing down several creatures who had to dive out of her way. So grimly determined was she to save her secretary that she wasn't going to allow anything to stop her. Fortunately she knew the name of the pub

and had been there once before, but whether she could remember where exactly it was, that was another question entirely.

She cursed herself as she made her way down a dual carriageway, her car's engine roaring as it reached frightening speeds. She wondered if she would end up with the police on her tail for a brief moment, but she no longer paid it any thought. She wished she could have convinced Denise to stay with her that night. Why hadn't she simply locked the door? She should have been more persistent, she believed. And now her life was at stake. How was she ever going to forgive herself for allowing this to happen? Now the accounts seemed so insignificant.

She reached a high street and looked at her watch. She only had ten minutes remaining. *It's got to fucking be here somewhere.* she thought desperately as she passed a convenience store, a hardware shop, an electronics shop...finally, at long last, she found a pub that looked like an old cottage. And it was the one she needed. She did not see any vehicles she recognised in the car park, and as fast as she could, she pulled into the first available space she saw and killed the engine.

Racing in, her heart rushing as though it was running in a marathon, she looked around the run down, seedy looking premises. The barman, a muscular husky, was cleaning beer glasses and didn't seem to have noticed her come in. Only a few punters were present, all of whom looking like the kind of creatures she didn't want to cross in a dark alley.

However, when she turned to one of the tables on the left, she saw a grinning face that filled her with rage that she hadn't felt since a day just prior to fleeing her home country. There was no mistaking who this was. This was none other than her ex boyfriend, Johnny Campbell. But how had he managed to find her? Why was he in the country? He was a well built bull who had both a pot belly behind his shirt and powerful, muscular arms, and he had still kept the small gold ring piercing in his nose that he prized. He was clad in black fur and his pair of horns reflected the dim lights above him, and it was a sight that sent utter revulsion through Freya.

"Oh Freya!" called Johnny, sitting at a table with two small glasses of whisky in front of him. "I'm glad you made it!" His voice showed no sign of the menace that the text message conveyed, and Freya's anger grew even more when she saw him smiling. Seething, she marched towards him with her fists clenched, but he showed no reaction at all.

"You piece of shit." she growled. "I should have known it was you who did this!"

"Now, now." smirked Johnny. "That isn't a very nice way to greet your former flame, is it, my dear?" His endearing tone disgusted her. She wanted so much to wipe that grin off his face any way she could.

"Where's Denise?" she demanded.

"The snake girl?" he said.

"Tell me where she is, right fucking now!" roared Freya, pounding her fist on the table.

"Hold your tongue." he said, looking very smug. *Still the arrogant prick you were back in America.* she thought furiously.

"Just answer the question!" snapped Freya.

"She's not hurt." said Johnny, sounding very dismissive. "Sit down, Freya."

"I don't believe you." snarled Freya. "I saw the photo you sent me."

"Is that so?" smirked Johnny. "If you must know, she's in a safe location right now. And she's fine. She's just waiting to hear from you. But all roads lead to you, my dear Freya."

"I'm not going to let you get away with this."

"Sit down." he finally snapped. "Now. Otherwise, I will reconsider keeping your colleague safe." This threat was enough to stop her in her tracks. Reluctantly, she sat down, still looking edacious for his blood. She looked up at him, still feeling ready to viciously attack him.

"What the hell do you want?" sneered Freya.

“Always angry, huh Freya?” he said. “Didn’t I say your temper would get you into trouble someday?” *Temper?* she thought in disbelief. *Temper, Johnny, you haven’t seen my fucking temper! Just punching you is too kind after what you’ve done.*

“Why did you come here?”

“Looking for a change of scenery.” he said with a grin. “And then I stumbled across you again. It’s been a decade now, hasn’t it? That’s the last time we saw each other.”

“Yes, it was.”

“It’s been so long.” he said. “What brings you here?” Freya didn’t answer him. She didn’t want to say anything that he would be able to use to his advantage. It was as though she was in what was termed in chess as zugzwang, feeling that no move could be made without her losing something to him.

“What *have* you been doing with yourself all these years?” he pressed, draining his whisky in one gulp. “We’ve got so much catching up to do, you and me.”

“What do you think this is?” she spat. “Some kind of family reunion? What right have you got to even look at me after what you’ve done?”

“I asked you a question, my dear.” he said politely. “Questions demand answers.”

“Not if I consider them personal.” She quickly grabbed his empty glass, but he gripped her hand when she went to throw it.

“I’m being nice.” he said obsequiously. “You glass me, your secretary dies. Sit back down.” Her hand gripped the glass so tightly, she thought it might start to crack. But ultimately, she relented, not wanting to risk him going through with his threat.

“Fine.” growled Freya, reluctantly putting it down. “I don’t know how you got my phone number, but you still have a *lot* to answer for.”

“I’m glad you understand me.” grinned Johnny. “Now, I will explain why I’ve come here, despite your refusal to tell me where you’ve been.” *And still you refuse to accept what you did.* thought Freya bitterly.

“This had better be good.” she said. Johnny looked around him. Freya turned to her right, and it was easy to see what he was doing. *Making sure nobody else can hear us.* she summarised. *You’re still cowardly, obviously.*

“I’ve still been in the football leagues since the day I lost you.” he began in a hushed voice. *You think I miss you?* she thought in disgust. “The teams I’ve been on appreciate a bull’s power. But since the day you *made your scene*, things have not been going so well.” *Ah, so somebody did see you for what you really are.* she thought, resisting the urge to cast a jubilant smirk.

“I should imagine not.”

“The incident went public, as you will be aware.”

“You don’t have to fucking remind me.”

“Since that day, I’ve had trouble getting into the bigger leagues. Some of the better ones have taken me on, but right now I’m stuck with The Dallow Rangers. The team’s been winning games, but the big problem is, they hardly pay anything at all. They’re a low division team and my coach doesn’t plan to get into the big leagues. I tried to get transfers to better teams, but for whatever reason, they didn’t want me. And what is that reason, hm? Let’s talk about that.”

“You’re trying to pull this shit in this country? Haven’t you done enough already?”

“You can’t run away forever.” said Johnny, showing her a toothy grin. “I was a big cheese, prior to the day you assaulted me. And I do believe that is a crime.”

“What did you expect me to do after you cheated on me? You treated me like a trophy girlfriend as well.”

"Too bad you didn't want a life as a footballer's wife. We could have had so much together." Freya rose from her chair.

"Is that what you told your side chick? As far as she was concerned, I was nothing but 'bumpkin trash'." She made a speech marks gesture. "I know that in reality, I'm simply not thick enough for you to boss around like you wanted."

"There's your problem." said Johnny. "You never did know when to shut your mouth and listen. A snake girl's life is at stake. You don't want to put that at risk, do you? Sit back down." Gritting her teeth, she reluctantly sank back into the chair. "It was after you attacked me in public that I started losing everything I'd worked for. I tried to recover from what you did."

"You've got some nerve, trying to turn this around on me."

"I wanted to live a comfortable life," he continued, not appearing to notice her scowl, "but the meagre pay made it impossible. I didn't want to live like a chump. I couldn't be seen waiting for a bus like a nobody. I couldn't wait in line with common creatures just so I could buy my food from somebody who will never be anything more than a failure. Football is everything in my life, therefore I deserve the goods." Freya snorted. "Don't interrupt. Relax. Let me finish."

"Don't tell me to relax! Just give me Denise back!" But Johnny continued on, completely ignoring what she said.

"So, in order to supplement my bad pay, I started taking out bets. I got in touch with some of my contacts in the casino so I could win myself more money. I started off well and I won about forty grand from the games I fixed for them." *This guy just gets worse and worse.* thought Freya. "After my car got conveniently set on fire the week after the last time I ever saw you, I splashed out and bought a car with my winnings." *Two can play at this game.*

"Watch your tone." snapped Freya. "You can't seriously think I'd torch your car. Setting that tinpot alight or smashing it to a tin can would have been a total waste of my time."

"I wouldn't past it past you." said Johnny caustically. "I bet you don't even remember how much I paid for it." Freya held back the urge to give him a smirk of her own. *Getting our just desserts, then?*

"You were talking about it non stop for weeks. How could I not remember?"

"I loved that car." said Johnny. *More than you ever cared about me.* thought Freya bitterly. "And I fell in love with the new one too. But then it got stolen. And that was a week after somebody rear ended me. My insurance wouldn't pay out for either of those vehicles."

"Isn't that the greatest insurance policy there ever was?" said Freya sarcastically. "They don't even cover you when you leave your car's windows open."

"Nah, they screwed me over royally." said Johnny. *Look at this guy.* thought Freya. *He's so stupid, he doesn't even understand sarcasm.* "I deserved their money, but I didn't get it. After what happened to my cars and I lost a big game, things started to go to shit. I ended up two hundred grand in the hole." Freya grunted.

"Give me a break, Johnny." she groaned. "This is your own fault. You buy a car, but you don't save any money for something like this?" But Johnny completely ignored her again.

"I lost several bets in a row. I thought I could win back the money I'd lost on the vehicles by fixing a few matches. Then I ended up having to pay the guy who hit my car compensation. He had some powerful lawyers on his side, and I lost a lot to him. My debts got even worse, and now my contacts are piling on the pressure and the interest. I went and won two games that I should have helped my team lose, and now my debts are even higher."

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" asked Freya, barely able to conceal her glee at the idea that he'd befallen misfortune. But he didn't appear to notice, or if he did, care. "Does your coach know about this?"

"No, he doesn't." he said. "That's despite the press reporting on my every move, as you'd expect from a footballer. Nobody apart from my contacts knows about my debts. Nobody except you."

“Boy, Johnny,” said Freya dryly, “who’d have thought?”

“Now, these psychos are after me,” he said, his tone suddenly much more urgent. “They followed me when they found out I was coming over here. I’ve already had one of them send a gang after me. They came looking at me at the bar I go to and they smashed the place up.”

“What’s this got to do with me? And why get Denise involved? She doesn’t even know who you are!” Johnny’s panic vanished, and his face twisted into a wicked grin.

“That, my dear Freya, is where you come in.” Freya gritted her teeth, furious at his use of this nickname. “They’re coming to see me at midnight tonight. And they’ve found out where I’m staying. They’ve said that if I haven’t got the money for them by then, they’re gonna tear my chest open.”

“Are you seriously expecting me to bail you out?” asked Freya. “What do you take me for?” Her ears twitched at the sound of the bull’s low pitched laughter.

“If you want to see snakey here again,” he said, showing her his mobile phone with the picture of the tied up and frightened secretary, “then that’s exactly what you’ll do. That’s the reason I came over here in the first place.”

“What do you mean?”

“I knew exactly where you would go. I thought you would flee to your family’s homeland, and it seems I was right. You owe me compensation, both for the beating and for what has happened since then. And your company has more than enough to see me through.” Freya’s mouth dropped open in horror. *He’s been stalking me. she realised. And he’s read the documents I gave to Denise. I should have convinced her to stay. Now look at the shit I’m in.*

“Are you for real?” cried Freya.

“As real as it gets.”

“Have you been stalking me?”

“My plan wouldn’t be any good if I hadn’t.” smirked Johnny. *I fucking knew it.* she thought, even more revolted just looking at the bull before her. “I’ve been on your tail since I came into this country. And I thought, why should someone like me get fucked over again and again, while you, the woman who destroyed my reputation, get all the glory?”

“Are you forgetting what you did to me?” snarled Freya. “The whole southern United States thinks I’m a psychotic maniac because of you.”

“Have you really got the right to judge other creatures?” he said with a grin.

“Are you trying to goad me into attacking you again?” she snapped. “You’re pushing it.”

“You know what happens if you hit me.” he said bluntly. “Denise gets it. My friends are waiting for my word. And one call is all it takes.”

“You really are something else.” said Freya. “How could anyone sink this low?”

“I’m not finished yet, moo moo.” sneered Johnny. Freya gritted her teeth, resisting the temptation to punch him for this slur. “My debt, with interest, now stands at six hundred grand. And yes, I’ve checked the currency rates. To you, that’s about five hundred thousand Pounds. And like I said, you are going to relieve me of my debts.”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kick the crap out of you right now.”

“I’m about to.” said Johnny. “And you really should learn to control your temper.” *You haven’t changed at all, have you?* she thought in disgust. “Your debt to me is massive. However, if you so much as lay a finger on me again or get any of your colleagues involved, it won’t only be Denise’s blood you’ll have on your hands. It’ll be your own too. Step out of line for even one second, and guess what?”

“What?”

"I'm going back to America once I'm done here. And on my way out, this miserable country gets to learn the secret of why you're better known back home as Freaky Freya."

"Don't you fucking dare!"

"Do you remember the newspaper headlines? They'll take my side again just like they did last time because I'm more famous than you'll ever be, Daisy." *Another slur towards my species.* she thought. *I know what he's trying to do.*

"You call me that one more time and you're a dead man." But the cocky smile on Johnny's face didn't fade.

"One wrong move is all it takes to make your world come crashing down. Remember – I'm the only creature on this Earth who knows where Denise is. I'm the only creature you can trust now. Do I make myself clear?" By now, Freya was shaking with rage that threatened to overwhelm her. So strong was the desire to attack him or try to glass him again that her claws dug into the table far enough to scratch its surface. Eventually she bowed her head, realising that her hand had been forced. She had no choice. She'd have to gravely harm or perhaps even ruin her own business to secure Denise's safety. It was a thought that made her want to vomit.

"Just don't hurt Denise." she said.

"Will you get me that money?" pressed Johnny.

"If that's what it takes to get her back safely." she said, not looking up at him. Johnny wasn't slow to pick up on this, however.

"I'm talking to you. Look up at me." She did so, feeling sick at having to meet his eyes. "Five hundred thousand Pounds. In cash. Bring it to me before 4PM today." He drew a suitcase out from underneath the table. "And you don't even have to pay for the use of my suitcase."

"What's the combination?" she said as she inspected it.

"It's 0310." he answered. Freya's eyes sprang open when she made the connection with the numbers. *He's playing me like a game.*

"That's the month when –"

"That's right." said Johnny, before he smirked at her again. "And to repay me for the other things I've lost, now you're to bring me £750,000 instead."

"What are you trying to do to me?" screeched Freya. "That's nearly the entire amount that's in my business."

"Exactly." he said. "Don't make me wait, Freya." Snarling, she turned away and began to walk out of the bar. "Hey! Don't you want your drink?"

"I'm not drinking *anything* you've had your hands on." she barked at him. "I promise you this, Johnny – if Denise has got even one more scratch than that photo shows, I'd prefer whoever you've got yourself in debt with to rip you to pieces. You even think of killing her, you won't have anywhere left to hide."

"Whatever." said Johnny dismissively. "I'll be waiting here." Not wanting to grace him with a backwards glance, she roughly sat down at the bar. The bartender immediately noticed her, his curved tail swaying as she looked up at him.

"Whisky." she requested.

"Which one?" he asked.

"That one." she said, pointing at an almost empty Bell's bottle. The husky presented her with a shot glass. Irritated, she threw it away, her ears flicking at the sound of it smashing against the wall.

"Double." she growled. Now looking quite scared, the bartender poured the remains of the bottle into a small tumbler, filling it a quarter of the way. Feverishly, Freya grabbed it and drained it in a single gulp, feeling the liquid burning her throat as it went down. She slammed down the empty glass while the prospect of what she

was about to do started to swirl around her mind. It was a day she'd hoped would never come to be, and now, her nightmares were no longer confined to just her brain.

"I don't want you telling anyone I was ever here," she said. "Understand?"

"Yeah, I get it," said the husky. "But the time has come for money to change paws." Freya paid him and left without another word, her fist clenching around the suitcase handle so tightly, it dug into her palm.

*

Part of her wanted simply to crash or vandalise her car and fake her own death. Another part of her wanted to give him fake money. But even though she remembered Johnny as never having been very bright, she also recalled that he would at least know not to take things like these at face value. She believed he would no doubt discover, either through his own means or those he was allied with, that any such money was counterfeit, thus resulting in Denise's demise. She was surprised that there was no sign of the police looking for her when she moved through the dual carriageway, but soon put it out of her head. She knew what she had to do, and the very thought made her feel sick. Even she had never foreseen how low Johnny was prepared to stoop, and in her mind, it couldn't be anything other than some sick plan for revenge.

Now that she thought about it, she shouldn't have put it past him. Close circles considered him to be a womaniser, and he never seemed to stay with any one lover for very long. Due to his fame, many women of a variety of species had flocked his way, and it had quickly gone to his head. Over time he had become distant towards her and would regularly miss their dates, often simply telling her he was too busy. *Of course*, she thought. *Because why should I have expected a relationship that actually fucking meant something? Why didn't I see you for what you really were before you cheated on me?*

The very thought angered her even more. And when she got stuck behind a queue of traffic, she slammed her foot down on the accelerator and revved the engine. She gritted her teeth when the traffic in front of her didn't move an inch. Even though there was still plenty of time left, she knew there was a chance he would move the goal posts again. Not bothering to check what was coming, she pulled out and overtook the entire queue, almost hitting an oncoming car in the process.

"Johnny," she growled, ignoring the loud horns of two vehicles she cut across, "I promise you, you will be punished for this."

She arrived at one of the banks in the city's centre soon afterwards and killed the engine. But when she went to climb out of the car, her heart fell. Thinking about it, there was no way the staff would allow her to draw out that much money in cash. *What a waste of time*, she thought. *Why would they do this for me? They'd see something's wrong the instant I try to funnel anything out of the company coffers. There's got to be some other place I can get three quarters of a million from.*

She called up every loan provider she could think of. Only three would allow her to request that amount of money, and all four of them told her that the money would not be with her until the week after. She reversed out of the car park back onto the main road. She pounded the steering wheel and floored it as a set of traffic lights turned amber in front of her, and just in time, she got through. And then, an idea hit her.

"Peyton!" she said aloud. "Both he and his wife are very wealthy creatures." *He's my last hope*, she thought. *He probably won't give me shit, but I've got no choice.* But just when she was about to dial his number, Peyton's name appeared on her phone's screen.

"Hello, Peyton," said Freya, her voice faint.

"Freya, we've got big problems," said Peyton. "I need to make a request of you."

"Where are you now?" asked Freya.

"My home," he answered.

"I thought you'd be at work?"

"I couldn't do it today. Not after what Julia did. I thought I was paranoid, but I was right all along. I don't think she really knows what she's done to me and our children."

"Hang tight. I'll be there soon," said Freya.

"Don't hang up on me yet." he persisted. "Things are going so bad so fast."

"How?"

"Before I say anything about this," said Peyton, "I'll tell you that right now...after what you caught Julia doing...you're the only woman I trust right now." Freya remained silent, not knowing how to respond to this statement. *He's going to break.* he thought. *Just like I will if I don't get Denise back.* "I need the photos."

"I can get those over to you. You got a printer?"

"Yes."

"Make sure it's turned on when I get there." She hung up and stopped at another set of traffic lights. *Oh, great. More crap to wipe up. What did I do wrong in a past life?*

*

Denise couldn't see. The blindfold cut off her vision. The ropes bound her limbs to the chair. Although she wasn't gagged, she couldn't speak. She had no idea where she was at that moment. Her already chilled blood seemed to cool down even further at the feel of the metal around her. Through the blindfold, however, she could make out light. She sensed the presence of two creatures, whose taste in the air told her that they were both well built humans. She had no idea who they were, nor who the mastermind was. Whoever he was, he wasn't there. Hadn't been for at least two hours now. But she was well aware that this man had instructed the humans to keep her in place and to strike her if she fought back.

She thought of Freya. She wondered if she was looking for her now. She felt tears begin to sting her covered eyes on the possibility that this was the end, that she might never see the cow she so adored again. She never imagined that her final day alive would go anything like this, if today was her time. She still had no idea what this man wanted or what he wanted with her. He at least hadn't tried to remove her undergarments, and she recalled him telling the humans not to do so either, saying that raping her would achieve nothing. At least he wasn't completely depraved.

Suddenly, there came a loud squeak as a door opened. Her captor had returned. And his tone sounded oddly endearing, perhaps even pleased.

"Did I miss anything good?" he asked.

"Not a peep." said one of the humans. "She's been as good as gold."

"We never even had to use any force." said the other.

"Denise." he said simply. She didn't dare to answer, not even when she felt his furred hand lift her chin. "I suppose you want to know why you're here." She remained silent.

"Let me explain it to you." he said. She kept still, sensing that he could smell her fear. "Your boss owes me, big time. I suppose you don't know what she did to me ten years ago." *Johnny?* she thought. *Is this really him? That monster? What's wrong with this guy?*

"I don't think she does." said one of the men. "She hasn't said anything since we got here."

"Why don't we let her tell us that, eh?" said Johnny harshly. "Let's see what lies she's been planting into her secretary's head."

"Take off the blindfold." requested Denise. She cursed herself for saying this and thought that Johnny would attack her. But much to her surprise, her request was met with two simple words.

"Not yet."

"Please, tell me what you want from me." asked Denise desperately.

"You're part of my plan, snake." said Johnny menacingly, the friendly façade quickly evaporating. "I know who your boss is. She's my nightmare, is what she is. Trying to destroy my life one way or the other." *If he's got even the slightest clue that I know what he is, she thought, I'm dead.*

"Why get me involved?" asked Denise. "Whatever this is, surely this is between you and her." But Johnny ignored her.

"I lost everything after she attacked me." he snapped. "Now we'll see whether she values the life of one of her most faithful and useful employees."

"What are you gonna do to me?" she asked, her voice wavering in panic.

"You've already come close to outliving your worth." smirked Johnny. "What I will do is graciously thank you for all the information you've given me and for your friendly cooperation."

"I don't understand."

"I have been following you and your boss." he said. "I know what goes on in your business. I have no idea why you two are so friendly with each other, but those documents you showed me last night told me everything I need to know. And that's when I started to get creative. She owes me a lot of money." Denise felt like she was about to vomit.

"You're extorting her?" she said. *How could this fucking happen?* she thought, utter revulsion towards herself filling her brain. *Now, thanks to me, look what this lunatic is doing to Freya. How can me and Freya ever go on after this?*

"Are you really that thick, as they say in this country? Of course I am." She heard the sound of a knife being unsheathed. "My associates are both armed. I won't be doing this forever. And if your moo moo boss doesn't get her ass over here with my money, do you know what's going to happen?"

"What?"

"Boys, show her." She felt a heavy thump on the side of her head with enough force for her chair to topple over. Her head hit the metal floor and she could taste her own blood. Then she realised that what had whacked her wasn't a fist, but the butt of a pistol. *You're really enjoying this, aren't you?* she thought, straining against the ropes on her limbs.

"After the things she did to me," said Johnny, "I've decided that two can play at this game."

"You've got it all wrong!" cried Denise. "She's a good woman, not a maniac! Don't do this!"

"I can do anything I want!" sneered Johnny. "Gag her." One of the humans forced open her jaws and tied a cloth around her head and around the inside of her mouth.

"You see, Denise," said Johnny, "creatures who mess with me don't last long. Now get up!" She tried to move her limbs, but found herself unable to move them even an inch. This was followed up with a kick to the torso that left her winded and gasping for air. Though she couldn't tell who had delivered the kick, she heard the sound of Johnny's laughter.

"I used to make women like you fall at my feet." said Johnny. "And I'll make sure it happens again. If moo moo doesn't do what I want, the next time the pistol touches you will be from a bullet. Pull her back up." One of the humans did so, and she was returned to a sitting position.

"Let's get Freya to take me seriously, shall we?" With that, he removed her blindfold, giving Denise her first look at him. He was a muscular bull clad in black fur and clothing that barely concealed his figure. A shiver coursed down her body when she saw the wicked grin he wore. Without waiting for her to take in her surroundings, he grabbed hold of her by the head. And the moment he tugged her, her wig came straight off, revealing her bare snake head. Both of his associates were stunned into silence, but Johnny's smile widened even more until he cracked up and started to laugh.

"This isn't even real hair?" he sniggered. "Oh, my ribs! Look at this crap! Freya's even more unhinged than I thought. She hasn't even got the decency to respect sentient nature by not being able to tell something so ugly when she sees it! Instead, she hires you. At least American women actually take pride in themselves. Not like the women in this miserable country." Shocked by this cruel insult, Denise sniffled and she felt a tear slide down her cheek.

"Oi!" cried one of the associates. "I was born here! Don't talk shit about Scotland."

"Don't talk back to me, you drunken Scottish prick!" snapped Johnny. "I think it's time for us to show Freya exactly what's at stake." He grabbed hold of Denise by the neck. "She's going to be really happy to see how comfortable her bald little dipshit is."

*

When Freya arrived at Peyton's home, a sombre mood hung in the air. Julia's car was gone from the driveway and she was nowhere to be seen, and both of their daughters were gone too. While the photos of them were still up, all of the photos of Julia had been taken down, and the possessions she was aware she had were missing. Peyton sat on a loveseat, adorned in black pyjamas and turned away from Freya.

"Peyton?"

"She doesn't want to wait." he said, without looking up at her. He sounded even more miserable than he had at the end of the party. "She wants to just get the divorce over with as fast as possible so that she can move into her love nest with her new man."

"What is happening here?"

"I thought I understood her." said Peyton sadly. "I thought I knew my wife. I thought I had the life of my dreams with the woman I loved. It didn't matter to us that a human and a vixen had started a family. And then I woke up, and realised it was only a dream. Julia, Dorinda, Rita, Percy, my home, my life. I'm losing everything." But Freya was in no shape or mood to sympathise with him.

"What did you need from me?" she asked. But he continued on as though she'd never said anything.

"Why couldn't Julia have just bitten me through my neck instead?" he said resentfully. "She made it perfectly clear through what she did that I mean absolutely nothing to her even after we were married for twelve years. Everything I did in my job...it was for her. It was for our family. My daughters...they don't know yet. But they were always close to their mother. They'll both find out...when they come home from school. My son is absolutely devastated."

"I bet he is." said Freya woodenly. Suddenly, Peyton rose bolt upright in the chair and looked at her with eyes filled with utter despair. *You feel just like I do right now.* she thought, wanting so much to say this to him.

"Look at this place." he snapped. "It's like something out of a magazine. I don't even know if this will still be my house. Julia hasn't said anything to me about what she wants out of our divorce." Freya sensed there was more.

"Nothing at all?"

"We...agreed to pay for the party as a joint venture." said Peyton. "But I didn't let on that I was using it to prove my suspicions that she was cheating on me with my colleague. I don't understand, Freya. Why would she do this to me?" Peyton clung desperately onto her when she trod closer.

"I don't know." she answered simply.

"What leads a woman to stray away from a good man like me?" he asked, almost begging her for an answer. "I spoilt her. I gave her everything I had and she did the same for me. What's mine was hers and vice versa. And that's how she repaid me. She wouldn't even tell me why. And now...she's refusing to pay for the costs of the party." *Sometimes, she thought, I wish I'd met someone like you in my past instead of the piece of shit who's kidnapped my girlfriend.*

"What did you need from me?" asked Freya. Peyton looked even sadder.

"You're really distant, Freya." he said. At that moment, her mobile phone went off. She pulled it out, and Peyton heard the snarl she released when she read the message to herself. Attached was a photo of a smiling Johnny posing with Denise, who now had another bruise on her right cheek:

Hey sweetheart, it's me. I'm getting impatient over here. Did you get my money yet? Your secretary is counting on you.

"Freya?" said Peyton. Then there came a chiming sound as the grandfather clock in the corner struck, telling her that it was midday. *I can't believe I've sunk this low. But I've got no other options. No counterfeiter will be able to get that many notes printed fast enough.*

"You wanted the photos?" she asked.

"Yes I do," he answered. "My printer's in the corner, but...I don't know if I can look at them again. Could barely do it before. Can't do it now. The wireless code's on the sticker on the front." Freya was aware of him watching her ceaselessly as she found each picture and sent them through, although he eventually turned away from her again, seeming eager to hide himself away as much as he could.

"Years of effort and love wasted," he said. "And she tells me nothing. Except that she's saddling me with the entire cost of the party. Getting to find out who my wife was fucking behind my back cost about £30,000 to put together." Freya remained silent, watching him as he buried himself into the sofa on the sight of the sordid pictures coming out of the printer one by one.

"If I had met and fallen in love with someone like you instead of her," he said, "this never would have happened. How could she, Freya? How could she do this to me?"

"The only creature who can answer that," said Freya, "is Julia."

"But she won't tell me anything," said Peyton. Despite her mind brimming with her hatred for Johnny and visions of the further injuries inflicted upon Denise, she found herself forming an idea.

"I can help," proposed Freya.

"How?" said Peyton incredulously. "How on Earth are you going to do that? We don't even know where she is now."

"Don't you remember why you hired me and Denise?" said Freya stolidly. "You wanted us to discretely find out what your wife was doing."

"You know she'll freak out if she finds you here," said Peyton.

"I didn't expect you'd still care about that," said Freya pointedly. "But I should point out that you never paid me for my company's investigation." Peyton looked worried.

"That slipped my mind," he said tonelessly. "How much was it again?"

"You should get your invoice for this by the end of the week," said Freya. "It's already been sent out, but it comes to approximately twenty grand. But if you're worried about...what she'll try to do during your divorce, we can keep watch over her for you. We can keep you in the loop about whatever she plans to spring onto you."

"Oh, yes, Freya," said Peyton. "That would be good."

"I'm glad you think so," said Freya formally. "This will be costly because of the amount of resources that will be needed for this. It could take some time, and on this occasion I will require the money in advance. A card and cheque payment is not going to be possible because I plan to start this off immediately." She laid down the suitcase. "It'll need to be in cash, I'm afraid."

"Anything," said Peyton. "I just want to know what's in her head."

"It's going to get steep."

"I know."

"We're talking at least a quarter of a million due to the scale of this operation," she said. *I hope he buys this.* she thought. *This won't be enough to pay Johnny off, but this had better be enough to convince him I'm at least trying to get Denise back.* "This will involve her business as well as her own personal affairs. This may take a very long time, and it's also very risky due to the probability of Julia discovering the presence of my employees and –"

"I don't care what the price is," cut in Peyton, "as long as I find out what she wants. She's ripped me to pieces, and if this is enough to stop her from trying to take everything else away from me, then I'll do it." He finally got up, brushing himself down. "I've got some money in the safe upstairs. Good job I never let her handle my bank cards or told her what the combination is, or she'd have had the lot from me faster than you can say divorce." With that, he left the room. But the moment he'd left, Freya spotted a glint underneath the electric fireplace.

"What the hell?" she quietly said to herself. Looking around to make sure he wasn't in sight, she pulled the unit to one side and discovered, much to her surprise, that there was a second safe hidden behind it. And even more surprising was that this one was open. Had Julia known about this one? More importantly, was there anything inside it? She peeked inside it and was aghast by what she saw.

"Bloody hell," she said, her voice so hoarse it sounded almost like a whisper, "there must be millions of Pounds in here!" *Whoa, hold on.* said the voice in her mind. *You can't resort to doing this.* Her heart sank when she turned over her options. *I really don't have a choice here.* she thought. *It's either this or I lose Denise for good.* A shudder rippled through her body from the thought of what she was about to do.

She opened the suitcase and started to put bundle after bundle of notes inside the case. She guessed from the denominations that each bundle of money was £20,000 each and she kept looking behind her as she did this. Her heart was beginning to race and she began to feel very sick. The consequences would be as dire as the situations they were both in, and the knowledge she was about to make his so much worse, got her feeling like vomiting.

After she had taken 45 bundles, finding they neatly filled the case, she shut it up as fast as she could. Peyton still hadn't come back yet, so she closed the safe's door and slid the fireplace back to its original position. She knew she wouldn't be able to face him after what she'd just done, so as quickly and as quietly as she could, she slipped out of the house, just in time to avoid him spotting her as he finally appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Freya?" she heard his voice call. *Shit, shit, shit,* cried the voice in her mind, *he knows! I have to get out of here right now!* With that, she threw the suitcase into her car's rear seats and slammed her foot onto the accelerator at the very moment the politician opened the front door to watch her speeding away. *He'll never forgive me for this.* she thought, not daring to look back. *Now the police won't have my back any more. They'll come for me next.*

When she got onto the dual carriageway, she whipped out her mobile phone and called Johnny's number. Just the memory of the photos was enough to fuel her anger towards him as the dialtone was answered with an unusually smooth sounding voice, although no less coarse.

"I was wondering when I'd hear from you." said Johnny. "Have you got my money yet?" It was a moment before she answered, biting back the urge to rip into him as hard as she could.

"I've managed to get it." she said. *You piece of shit,* her brain added, *making me do this to one of my most prominent clients.* "I got every last penny." *And now the police will be looking for me thanks to you.*

"You *have* been a busy girl, haven't you?" said Johnny, sounding amused. "And I suppose you're on your way back to the pub with it?"

"That's exactly where I'm coming." snapped Freya. "You told me you'd be there. Now tell me where Denise is!" Johnny started to laugh.

"I can't believe you actually trusted me when I said that." he replied. "You're even less rational than the media said you were!" *I'll fucking show you who's irrational!* thought Freya angrily, gritting her teeth.

"Just tell me where you want me to meet you." barked Freya. "Then once you get the money, will you give me Denise back?"

"Oh, I'm not finished with you yet, moo moo." sneered Johnny. "There's something else I want you to do before I give you her location."