



Eagle Man and
Mr Hawk

By Dawn Sister

written for DRITC Love is an Open Road event

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

EAGLE MAN AND MR HAWK

By Dawn Sister

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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EAGLE MAN AND MR HAWK

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Photo Description

An exquisitely chiselled, muscular man with short cropped, dark hair and wearing only a pair of well fitting, camouflage patterned briefs, stands in open countryside. On his arm is a magnificent golden eagle. He releases the eagle with the confidence of one who has done this a thousand times before. The creature flies from his arm in a flourish.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have never been good at first impressions. This fact has not been much of a problem until the neighboring farm house was purchased by a beautiful, bookish man and all of a sudden I found myself with someone I wanted to impress.

The first time he wandered from his house to mine he found me in a terribly unflattering padded suit, being attacked by a German Shepherd, and today he stumbled across me halfnaked while training Rupert, a hawk needed for a new adventure film, with either a dislike of me, or of my clothing. It wasn't my most shining moment.

See, I train animals for use in movies and commercials, and while I am good at my job, this lovely man seems to just think I am a lunatic. And unlike everyone else I have ever met, I can't change his mind by impressing him with my credentials. He thinks movies and television will be the downfall of society. But still, everything about him draws me to him, even has he wants nothing more than to push me away.

While not a requirement, I would love-love-love this to be taken by a new author. Maybe someone who has been flirting with the idea of sharing in the fun and no longer writing in the closet. I would love the story to have some comedy elements, but also a little depth. Sex is not required but I would hope for at least a first kiss. I'm open to any POV and just want you to have fun.

Sincerely,

Amy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: humorous, man with multiple pets, bookish geeks, lots of animal cuteness, animal handler/trainer, switch/versatile, swearing cockatoos

Content Warnings: some mild peril involving dangerous animals

Word Count: 85,686

Acknowledgements

For the beautiful prompt, that I absolutely fell in love with, I thank Amy. Your Eagle Man called to me, and I knew I had to write his story.

For support and help throughout, I thank Suki. You are the best, you know?

For background support and putting up with my vagueness as I write in my head, on napkins, in notebooks, on my tablet and on my laptop, I thank my long suffering husband, Phil. He is a gem, and he helped me design the cover for this story. I love that he is named as the cover designer. I love that he grouches about my writing obsession but then shouts from the rooftops that he is married to a writer (sometimes in the same breath).

I thank all the volunteers that give their time for this event. I have loved being a part of this for the second year running. It's been great.

Last, but by no means least, I thank Raevyn for once again trawling through my atrocious punctuation. It was better this time around, wasn't it? Yes?

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Chapter 1

Zebra Crossing

Ethan

“Donald, I need a box big enough to transport an armadillo, and I need it like yesterday.” I burst into the shop and slam my hands down on the counter. “That thing is driving me fucking crazy. I mean, how hard can it be to get an armadillo to walk in a straight line across a road when they do it every fucking day in the wild? I’ll be glad to see the back of it. Is your heating stuck on high? It’s hot in here.”

Donald is serving someone. I hadn’t noticed. I never do. I get tunnel vision. I can be pretty focused on my own goals. I never really take note of what’s... oh, hello! The guy Donald is serving is... oh my god... he’s hot.

“Hi!” I give him my thousand-watt smile. “New in town?”

His jaw tenses as he slowly looks me up and down. His expression is part disapproving and part bat-shit scared. I can see the whites of his eyes, like a horse about to bolt. No idea why... oh!

I just remembered what I’m wearing, and why I think it is rather warm in Donald’s Hardware shop, present company excepted.

I’m dressed from head to toe in black and white stripes, and my face is painted to match. It’s the only way I can get that damn zebra to do anything, though. If he thinks I’m another zebra he’ll follow me anywhere. He’s outside right now, attracting the attention of the local school kids. I’ll be getting it in the neck from the Head again, because when the zebra’s parked outside, the kids won’t go in from break.

“Ethan, I’ll be with you as soon as I’ve finished serving... erm...”

“Alex.” The hot guy in glasses and corduroy pants answers reluctantly, as if he is worried about letting us, or me, know his name. His jaw tenses again as he shoots me an anxious sideways glance.

“...Alex here.” Donald gives ‘Alex’ a reassuring smile, but I see the way he rolls his eyes. Judging by Alex’s tense demeanour, I don’t think he’s reassured at all.

“That’s fine. I’ll just mooch around for what I need.” I back away from the counter, hoping that some distance will put this man at ease, and he won’t take

flight before I can get some more information about him. “I can’t stop long though; I’ve left my zebra running.” Donald chuckles as I flick my eyebrows at him. He is used to my eccentricities and the lengths I’m willing to go to for my work. I shoot the newcomer a jaunty wink as I back off down one of the aisles to look for the wood that I need.

This Alex is still eyeing me warily. I’m never the best at making first impressions. He already thinks I’m crazy, obviously, since I’m dressed as a zebra whilst shopping in a hardware store. Judging by his startled and still slightly disapproving expression, he also probably thinks I’m being forward and brash. Maybe the wink was a little too much?

He is dressed, like, well, a normal bloke, in cords, an oversized sweater and waterproof jacket. He looks bookish and geeky. Oh god, I love the geeky, nerdy ones. That sweater just screams: “Too big for me, I need looking after.” And those glasses, they are sexy as hell. His skin is pale, and he watches me with wary, dark eyes, almost hidden behind a fringe of mousy-brown hair that has grown too long. He has freckles, god give me strength, he has freckles.

I am staring, I know, walking backwards as I do. He’s staring back. Is he checking me out? Or is he still trying to work out exactly what I am?

I am flat on my arse, that’s what I am.

“Oof!” I exclaim as I trip backwards over something I swear wasn’t there before.

“Aye, Ethan, look out fer that box there, eh?” Donald calls helpfully between snorts of laughter.

I roll my eyes as I get up and brush myself off. By the time I’ve done that, my bookish, geeky, gorgeous nerd has scarpered: taken flight, like a nervous little bird.

Great, I scared him off. That happens a lot, especially when I’m dressed as a zebra.

No matter. I’ll just find out everything I need to know about the man from Donald there, and then go and dazzle the guy with my impressive credentials. He’s a nerd, so he’ll lap it up. They always do when they find out what I do for a living.

“Ethan, that zebra of yours is causing chaos with the traffic,” a voice calls from the shop doorway.

I exchange glances with Donald and smirk.

“And what traffic would that be, Geoff, eh?” I ask with a chuckle. “We don’t get traffic here, unless you include the odd flock of sheep being herded up Front Street.”

Geoff, our local law enforcement and pub landlord, chuckles and waves as he closes the door and goes off to direct the “traffic” around my parked zebra.

Ours is a small town, situated amongst wild hills that are populated mostly by sheep and wild mountain goats. I live in a cottage nestled cosily between two of those hills, and have a bit of a trek to get to town, hence the fact that I’ve been training a zebra to pull a cart for me.

Well, okay, I know that doesn’t actually sound that normal. Most people would have a horse, and I have one of them too. I just happen to have a zebra as well, and it needs to be trained for a job I’m doing, so I’m killing two birds with one stone. Except I had to walk most of the way because the damn creature wants to follow me instead of lead me. I swear they’re more closely related to sheep than horses.

“So what exactly do you need to make a box for an armadillo, Ethan?” Donald finally has time for me.

I shrug. “I just have the measurements, Don. The rest is up to you. I’m no good with a hammer, remember?”

He nods with a grimace. The last time I tried to make a box for one of my animals, I hammered my thumb so badly I ended up needing an operation to repair it. It still gives me jip. Embarrassing really, since I handle dangerous animals all the time without batting an eye and very few mishaps, but one minute with a hammer and I end up in surgery.

I hand Donald the measurements and the requirements for the carrying case I need and lean against the counter as he peruses it.

“So, er... tell me about this Alex, then?” I try to sound nonchalant, but Don has me rumbled right away.

“He’s not gay!” he grumbles without looking up from the list.

“That’s not what I asked,” I gasp. “And he doesn’t have to be gay for me to be curious about a new face.”

“Aye.” Donald doesn’t sound convinced.

He knows me too well, I suppose, and I have to admit my curiosity is piqued because I thought the guy was a super-hot geekfest just waiting for me

to sweep him off his nerdy little feet. And I am not convinced at all that Donald is right about him not being gay. He definitely checked me out when I fell, like up and down from head to foot, or was that because I was dressed as a zebra? I guess that could be a good reason to give someone a rather startled once over.

I sometimes forget the people that live here know me and are used to my weird ways. Newcomers and holidaymakers can sometimes find me a little too whacko. Until they get to know me of course, and then they fall at my feet.

“Do you think he thought I was a bit weird?” I grimace, regarding Donald with one eye closed. He looks me up and down, before exploding with laughter.

“Nah, who would ever think that, Ethan?”

I make a face at him, sticking out my tongue and pushing myself up from the counter.

“Can I help it if I’m a slave to my art?”

“You’re an animal handler and trainer, Ethan, not a fucking performance artist.”

“I’m getting paid a hell of a lot of money to train that zebra to pull that cart.” I fold my arms across my chest and scowl.

“Aye and that poor man has probably run a mile and jumped a stile to get away from you. He’ll think twice about coming in here again, so ye c’n give me some compensation fer lost business due to whacko residents scaring off valued customers.”

“I’m a valued customer.” I’m feeling badly done to now. “I’ll buy you a pint tonight after I get Bear home. I’ll drive back into town, and we can discuss this further over beer and crisps. I’ll pick up the stuff I need then as well. I don’t think I’ll get it in the cart, and Bear will probably refuse to pull it if it’s too heavy.”

“See, that’s what I mean, Ethan.” Donald throws his hands up in frustration. “Who the hell has a pet zebra and calls it Bear?”

“I do!” I shout snippily as I pull the door open to leave.

“His name’s Alexander Hawking, and he just moved into the Miller’s cottage,” Donald calls after me.

I stop for a second and hold my hand up in acknowledgement. What a perfect name: Mr Hawk, well all right, Hawking, but Hawk sounds better, and he did act like a flighty bird.

That Miller cottage has been empty for ages. It was being done up, but I had no idea it was finished, or for sale or bought or anything. Sometimes I'm out of the loop because my job takes me all over the country, and even overseas sometimes. When I'm home I try to catch up, but that bit of news passed me by.

If this Alex bloke has bought the Miller's cottage, then he's my nearest neighbour, even if he is in the next valley, about three miles from me. Hmm, I'll have to go over and introduce myself, because my new neighbour is hot as hell.

Chapter 2

Sleeping Dogs

Alex

“A zebra? You are pulling my leg, Alex, I mean, really?”

“Yes, really,” I assure my sister over the phone as I stir some soup on my stove. “Large as life, standing out on the street, coupled to a small two-wheeled cart, with a crowd of kids gathered around it like they were in a petting zoo. And this guy, you should’ve seen him.” I want to laugh when I remember how he’d fallen on his arse, trying to look cool when he most definitely did not look cool at all. I am trying not to laugh though, since I can’t talk to my sister, stir soup, and collapse in helpless laughter all at the same time. There will be a mishap. “He was dressed as a zebra as well, Liss.”

“No!” Liss is giggling uncontrollably now, and I want to as well, but I’m busy pouring the soup into a bowl. My hand is shaking though. It’s hard not to find the entire business hilarious. I mean who the hell was that guy?

“Straight up, he was. A fleecy zebra onesie, and his face was painted with black-and-white stripes, I swear to god.”

“Is the circus in town?” She snorts. *“That’s the only explanation.”*

“I thought so too, but there’s been no leaflets, and the town isn’t big enough to hide a Big Top, I mean it only has about half a dozen streets. It’s hardly a town at all.” I’d searched all over but hadn’t found any evidence that there was a circus, so I’d given in and asked someone. “I asked the man that owns the bookshop, and he just laughed and said, ‘*You must have met Ethan.*’ That’s it. He didn’t say anything else. The guy must be pretty well known to everyone around here.”

“So his name is Ethan, your zebra cross-dresser?”

“He’s not mine, Alicia, and he’s obviously completely crazy.”

“Yeah, but you said he winked at you.”

“And I’m supposed to read what into that?” I ask her. I have to admit, it’s not every day someone winks at me, so I’m in no position to be picky, but I usually prefer them to be dressed more, well, normal.

“Read into it what you like, bro, but don’t close the door simply because he was dressed like a clown.”

“Like a zebra.”

“Oops, my mistake.”

We both laugh. I can afford to now, because I’m sitting at the kitchen table with my soup.

“Hold on, Liss, I’m putting you on speaker so I can eat my soup and talk to you at the same time.” I fumble with the settings on the phone and then stand it near my soup bowl. “Still there?”

“Still here,” Liss calls. She thinks she has to shout when we’re talking on speaker phone; she’s a funny bod. *“Are you only having soup for your tea, Alex?”* She sounds concerned, and here we go: the lecture about eating properly. *“You should have more than that.”*

“I’m having apple pie for afters,” I assure her. I’m not; the apple pie’s for tomorrow, but she’s five hundred miles away, so she can’t see.

“You need to eat properly, Alex. You lost so much weight...” I tune her out.

I don’t need to be reminded why I lost so much weight. I don’t even want to think about it. I don’t want to remember why I have chosen to start a new life in a remote part of the country, away from everyone I know.

“I’ll be fine, Liss, and I will eat properly, I promise.”

“Just make sure you do, or I’ll send Mum up to sort you out.”

I puff out my cheeks. She would try, but I doubt Mum would come.

“You know Mum refuses to drive anywhere that isn’t five minutes from the M25, so there isn’t really much chance of her coming all the way up here.”

“She might phone you though,” Liss continues to threaten.

Urgh! I would rather eat and put on twenty pounds than have to listen to Mum’s lectures, even over the phone.

“I promise I’ll eat.”

“Good. Let me know what happens with this Zebra Guy, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She hangs up before I can tell her she doesn’t need to call every bloody day. I think she is shocked by the way everyone treated me after... well, just after.

She feels guilty that I've moved so far away from her, but it was my decision to make. I wanted to find somewhere my old life wouldn't have the slightest chance of touching me, so here I am, all alone, in a cottage in the middle of nowhere, eating soup.

My soup isn't enough to fill me up, so I move on to apple pie anyway. Must be the fresh air here, but my appetite has gone up exponentially each day since I moved in.

The cottage I have bought is nestled in a cosy little valley with only one private road in and out. The nearest neighbour is at least three miles away and over a hill, and the nearest town is a twenty-minute drive. It's perfect.

I've been here a week now, and I'm settling in okay. I ventured into town today to get some supplies. I'd been surviving on tinned stuff and black coffee, and I couldn't exactly go and ask a neighbour. Three miles is a bit of a hike to go and borrow a cup of sugar.

I might have a wander over to that farmhouse tomorrow just to see who lives there. It doesn't hurt to make some connections as long as it doesn't interfere with what I came here to do.

Mainly, that is to relax. The last two years have been horrible. But I am putting it all behind me. City life was grinding me down, and after a particularly bad break-up, I just want to be on my own for a while. I just want to stay in and read by a cosy log fire. And here, there isn't much else to do.

I like books better than I like people. Reading is my gin and tonic. I'll read anything. Old books are my passion though. My precious collection of first editions and signed copies of rare books has moved here with me. It's going to take me an age to sort them all and shelve them the way I want. I have enough shelf space, I hope, after commissioning shelves to be built everywhere they could be fitted. I am taking my time though, to get all my precious books placed just right.

I also repair books. I love binding them, restoring them to the condition they were in when they were first printed. I take commissions sometimes, not that I need to work.

There is a used book store in the local town, a great place. I made myself known to the owner today, and he's already given me two books he wants me to repair. If he sends me regular work it will keep me busy without stressing me out.

Books give so much without expecting you to make small talk or socialise with their friends. They don't care if you're wearing the same corduroy pants you've owned since you were in university, or that your sweater is too big or doesn't match. They don't care if your hair is too long or your glasses keep slipping off your nose. They don't want to spend your money on stupid foreign holidays or designer outfits. They don't even need you to cook and clean for them. They don't need you to pander to their every whim until you don't know if you're standing on your head or lying flat on your back. And they certainly do not cheat on you with another man.

Books love you just the way you are. Books are so much better than people.

My apple pie has gone cold and so has my coffee. I eat and drink anyway. There's no one here to tell me it's wrong. That's just bloody amazing. I am going to love my life here. And tomorrow I will wander over to my nearest neighbour to say hello, not because I feel obliged to speak to them, but because I choose to. It won't matter if I don't like them or they don't like me because there's an entire hill between us.

I settle down by my lovely log fire with one of my precious books, thinking life couldn't get much better than this. Really, right now, my life is just perfect.

I can't concentrate though. Zebras keep creeping into my mind, and not the real one that I saw outside in the street today. I mean, that was shocking enough, because when that guy had appeared and said he'd left his zebra running, I thought he'd been talking about some weird brand of car, not a real zebra. No, I'm not thinking about the real zebra, I'm thinking about the guy, dressed as a zebra. Why? Did he have a zebra fetish? Is there even a zebra fetish scene? Is it here in this remote corner of Northumberland?

Why am I so filled with questions all of a sudden?

Why did he wink at me? Why am I even thinking about it? He was obviously off his trolley. For dressing like a zebra and for winking, because I'm not winking material, definitely not.

He fell over, and I wanted to laugh, but I was in shock. Who wouldn't be, meeting a grown man dressed the way he was? I hope I don't meet him again. He was scary.

Chapter 3

Bee in Your Bonnet

Ethan

“Okay, Paddington, let’s try that again. When I say “attack” go for the arm, okay? Just the arm, though, not the ankle, or the face or the crotch, just the arm, got it?”

My beautiful, eighteen-month-old German shepherd bitch tips her head to one side and gives a soft growling whine in reply. She’s gorgeous, and I love her to bits, but if she bites my nether regions again while I am trying to get her to “pretend” to attack my arm, I am trading her in for a Yorkshire terrier: a miniature one.

“Hear that, Paddy?” She tips her head the other way. “The entire reputation of the German shepherd breed is lying on your lovely shoulders. Oh the shame of it, to be replaced by a yappy Yorkie.” I hold out my right arm, a treat held discreetly in my left hand. She knows it’s there, she can smell it, but she also knows she will only get it if she follows my command. “Attack!”

She runs at me, jumps and grabs my arm with her impressive incisors. Thank god I am wearing a padded suit, she’s so powerful she pushes me backwards, growling and shaking my well-protected arm as if she is trying to shake it out of its socket. I make the right noises, non-verbal yells of fear as I try to fight her off. I’ve taught her to growl alongside the attack to make it look and sound authentic. It probably does look terrifying, but to her it’s all a massive game. I mean, her furiously wagging tail gives it all away. She is having the best fun.

“Release!” I shout, and she immediately releases her death grip on my arm. “Stand down!” She sits back on her haunches, her tongue lolling out comically. “Good girl.” Only then does she go for the treat in my hand. I make a fuss, because she deserves that one.

“I’m not really gonna trade you in, you great softy,” I tell her as she attempts to lick my face while I rub down her back and scratch her ears. “I would never, you lovely, lovely dog.”

I pull back and take out another treat from the endless supply secreted within the padded suit I’m wearing. Paddy smells it and knows the drill now.

We will do this over again, several times until I am sure she has the hang of it, then take a break, otherwise she'll get bored and tired, and I'll most likely end up black and blue.

It's worth it though. I love training her; she's a delight and so intelligent, but her ability to train keeps food on our table and a roof over our heads.

"Ready, Paddy?" She pricks up her ears. "Attack!"

She's on me and growling like a wild animal. Oh, she is so good, a real natural actress.

"Hello?" a voice calls from somewhere on the other side of the yard. What the...? "Hello, anybody about?"

The voice is getting nearer. Paddy has stopped growling and her ears have pricked up, flicking in the direction of the voice. Her eyes regard me with a question, her eyebrows lifting and falling comically, but she won't release her grip on my arm until I tell her because she wants that treat badly.

"Er, hello?" I call back, standing and peering around the corner of the barn and across the yard towards my house.

"Hello! Are you the owner of the house, I mean, farmer, or, you know... er, what I mean is, do you live here?"

Well knock me down with a feather; walking towards me is none other than the hot, geeky nerd from Donald's Hardware yesterday. I forget the way I'm dressed and what is attached to my arm and step out to greet him. What was his name again? Oh yeah, Alex.

"Hello again," I call brightly.

He has that very same expression on his face as yesterday in the shop: a mixture of disapproval and downright scared as hell. I mean, he does actually have a good right to look slightly startled. I've got a fully grown German shepherd dog hanging off my arm, and the padded suit I'm wearing makes me look like the Michelin Man.

"Paddy, release!" Paddy jumps down. "Stand down!" She sits on her haunches as obedient as ever, and I feel a flash of pride. "Good girl!" She takes her treat, and I fuss over her again, crouching down to scratch her ears, laughing as her tongue swipes across my face.

"Er, you were training her?" the man asks as he steps a little closer, his expression now more curious than scared. I nod.

“Yes, her name’s Paddington, Paddy for short.” I squint up at him, shielding my eyes from the bright spring sunshine. “It’s Alex, isn’t it?” I know it is, but I am just creating an opener. He tenses his jaw and regards me with a slight frown.

“Er, yes,” he answers a little hesitantly. “You, er, have me at a disadvantage though.”

Well, I guess we weren’t formerly introduced, but it was only yesterday, and I’m not that easy to forget, am I?

Well, maybe I was dressed a little differently.

“Donald’s Hardware? Zebra suit?” I remind him.

His eyes widen as he makes the connection. His mouth forms an “O” shape, causing me to focus on just how perfect those lips actually are: all soft and pink and pouty.

“Yes, I sort of remember, I didn’t recognise you with... well, dressed like you are now.”

“It’s a protective suit,” I explain. “I have to wear it or Paddy’ll bite chunks out of my arm when I’m training her to attack.”

He looks a little startled but not overly so. “She’s a guard dog?” he asks.

“No, no, nothing like that.” I begin to undo the straps on my padded sleeves. I’m going to invite this beautiful man in for a coffee, and I can’t exactly do that dressed as an iconic tyre salesman. “She couldn’t guard anything for toffee. She’s an actress.”

“A what... sorry, what?”

Alex pushes his glasses up his nose, an action that he’s repeated several times in the few minutes he’s been here. Makes me want to take them off him and adjust them for him, not because it’s irritating—because it’s not—but because, well, he just has this air about him, this air of unloved unkemptness that has my fingers itching to straighten his mousy curls and fasten his coat.

“Paddy’s a canine actress. I train her for TV work and commercials. Movie work too sometimes.” I brace myself for the outpouring of interest, since this snippet of information is usually all that’s needed to totally turn around someone’s opinion of me. It does not come. Alex just continues to stare at me as if I have two heads. “Ethan.” I pull off the right sleeve of my suit and offer my hand in greeting. “Ethan Shaw, animal handler and trainer extraordinaire. A

whole host of animals all highly trained for commercials, TV work, and movies. You name it, I've trained it."

Alex's frown stays firmly in place, absolutely unimpressed by my profession or resume. Well, there's a first. He doesn't take my hand, just stares at it, as if it is somehow diseased.

"So you exploit animals for your own financial gain? Honourable." His tone is dripping with sarcasm as he turns to go. "Nice meeting you, Ethan." His manner tells me he thinks it was definitely not nice.

Oh my god, an animal rights activist! I've met plenty of his sort throughout my life. I pull off the other sleeve from my suit and am left with just the body and the leggings, which I leave in place and run after him. It's more of a lolling gambol though, because the leggings are bulky.

"Hey!" I am angry, because there are two kinds of people in this world, the ones that think I'm nuts and the ones that think I exploit animals for a living. He seems to be both, and neither of them would be right, because I am none of the above. "I do not and have not ever mistreated any of the animals in my care." I love each and every one of them, and they never want for anything. He has no right to judge me so harshly. "I treat them right, and they are perfectly happy."

"Sure they are." Alex regards me haughtily. "And you're t-telling me that every single animal you own would not, given the choice, choose to be set free and live a n-natural life in the wild."

"What the hell?" When did this turn from a pleasant introduction to a full-scale judgement day? "You can't come over here and make assumptions before you even know me, or anything about my life." I shake a padded sleeve at him angrily. "And you're assuming a natural life in the wild is the best option for some of these creatures. In the wild most of them would spend their entire existence in a constant state of stress. You can't tell me there is anything natural about that. Plus if I decided to set them all free right now, half of them would be dead by sunrise."

"S-so you've got this notion that you're doing them a favour then, but at the same time you make a quid or two from their exploitation as entertainers?" He looks me up and down, his expression remains snooty, but he's stuttering as if he isn't too sure anymore. "W-when I first met you I wondered if, by any chance, the circus was in town. I see my assumption was right on that account. Performing dogs or dancing bears, padded suit or top hat and red coat, it's all

the same thing to me, and trying to impress by telling me you work in TV and movies is a highway to nothing, because I don't watch either. They will be the downfall of society and everything that made us great. G-good day, Mr Shaw."

He walks off, just like that, without even introducing himself properly. Stuck-up bastard!

I watch him go. He can go to hell with his double standards, since he seemed fine when he thought I was training Paddy as a guard dog, but when he found out it was for work in front of a camera, he thinks I'm exploiting her. Guard dogs have a terrible life. Paddy leads a charmed existence with me. I spoil her bloody rotten, along with all the rest of my assortment of lively creatures.

Trust my luck to have my new neighbour be some sort of moralising doggo. He's bloody gorgeous as well, which is just typical. He thinks TV and movies are the axis of evil, which is a little weird, but it also means I can't rely on my choice of career to win him over.

I see I am going to have to try harder to get into this guy's good books because he thinks I'm some sort of low life circus ringmaster.

Why would I even want to bother though, since I don't need his approval to carry on the way I am. I know I don't exploit my crew.

I do a hell of a lot for conservation in this area in my very little spare time. I also do a great deal of work with the local schools, teaching them about the wildlife they will one day be expected to protect if they want to keep on seeing these creatures in the wild.

No, I don't need his approval to continue doing that. I'm just really fucking annoyed he didn't hang around long enough to see those other aspects of my life. He just made an assumption based on the few facts he has: that I train a dog to act, and I have a zebra that I apparently force to pull a cart around for the entertainment of the local school kids.

Bugger it. I want to hate him for making the wrong assumptions about me, but I can't, because as I watch him walk off into the distance, I can't help remembering the way he stuttered just that little bit, like he wasn't really angry with me, and it was just an excuse. I can't ignore the way my fingers are still itching to brush his mousy curls out of his wide, dark eyes and pull his sweater straight, and mend the hole in the knee of his worn cords.

What is that all about?

Paddy sits at my feet patiently. She gives a low, confused little growl. It's like a question, and I chuckle. Sometimes I know exactly what she is thinking.

"No, I do not want you to bite his arse." I scratch at her ears affectionately. "Any arse biting of Alex la-de-da Hawking, will be done by me, thank you very much. Although, you are right; he does have a rather nice one." I chuckle at my shamelessness. "Pity his attitude stinks like yesterday's raccoon shit."

The unmistakable roar of tyres grinding over the gravel track towards my home causes me to jump. The noise is deafening in the silence of the surrounding countryside. Paddy gives a warning bark, and I shush her with a hand signal. Whoever it is, they're coming to see me, unless they're lost.

There are several footpaths criss-crossing the hills and valleys that surround my farmhouse. Sometimes I get lost bods, trying to find the nearest parking spot from which to begin their hill walk. I sometimes get the odd one wanting to park in my yard, but that is rare and they usually run a fucking mile when I appear with all my crew in tow. I give a whistle and my other dog, a Border collie called Corduroy, comes bounding round the corner to sit at my other side.

Both dogs give a warning growl as the vehicle comes into sight.

"It's all right, Paddy, Cordy. We'll set Rupert on them if they're unfriendly. Maybe I should have done that to Alex."

The approaching vehicle rounds the base of the hill, and I give a soft sigh of relief. It's Donald, probably bringing the box I ordered. He's made it for me in the end, because he knows I'm completely hopeless when it comes to following instructions, written ones anyway.

"Was that your new neighbour I saw disappearing up the hill just now?" Donald calls as he jumps from his truck and lifts the tail gate down in order to slide the enormous box out.

"Aye, it was, and are you sure this was made to the measurements I gave you, Don? It's fucking huge." I help him lift the box down onto the ground, and then he makes a fuss of Paddy and Cordy, who are all over him like a rash, the tarts.

"And thanks for making the stupid thing for me, Donald," he says in a sarcastic-as-hell tone. "That was so helpful."

I grimace. I meant to thank him, I did. It's just sometimes my brain thinks faster than my mouth does, and sometimes my mouth works before my brain is engaged.

“Thanks, Don, really, this is a godsend. I can transport that armadillo back from whence it came at the weekend. My work with him is done.”

Don stops his fussing of Paddy and stands.

“When’s your next job?” he asks, interested as always.

“With Bear, on that TV series thing.” I rub the back of my neck.

“Oh.” He smiles as he stands. “That’s a biggie, isn’t it?”

“Aye, I’ll be away for three weeks. That is if I can get him to pull that damn cart without me having to dress as a fucking zebra.” I shake my head.

I don’t know why I’m complaining about the lengths I have to go to for my work. I do kind of enjoy it in a warped sort of way. Dressing in a zebra onesie is not the most ridiculous thing I have had to do recently by far.

“You love it really.” Don chuckles, and I nod in agreement.

“Aye, I suppose.” I shrug.

Usually I’d agree wholeheartedly, but I’m distracted this morning. I still can’t work out what I did that got up Alex’s nose so quickly. Even if he is an animal rights nut, he had no right to mouth off at me the way he did. He doesn’t have all the facts, and what was with that stutter?

“What’s bothering you, Ethan?” Don always knows when I’m distracted by something, when something is troubling me. I sometimes think he knows me better than I know myself. Better than my own parents even.

“Alex just stormed off with his knickers in a real twist.” I squint in the late morning sun, looking out in the direction of the path Alex took.

Donald makes a face, like he’s not surprised. “What did you do?” he asks, as if it’s quite understood that I should have done something to upset the bloke.

“Why do you automatically assume it was me in the wrong?” I am indignant, puffing out my chest and curling my lip.

“Because nine times out of ten it is you, Ethan.”

“Well, this time it wasn’t, see?” I start back towards the house. Don follows. “He started spouting all this crap about animal cruelty and exploitation. He doesn’t even know me, and he’s telling me how despicable my career is, earning money on the back of those poor animals’ suffering.” I kick at the gravel and stones on the road in frustration. “Then he as much as told me the television and movie industry is the spawn of the devil and I am the product of

that spawn.” I throw my hands up and out, in the direction Alex went. “And he’s probably a bloody vegetarian an’ all.”

“So are you.” Donald laughs out loud in surprise.

“Yes, but not because I believe that everyone should stop eating meat. It’s a healthy option for me, not an animal rights thing, plus I’m just fussy. I don’t go and protest outside abattoirs and animal-testing labs.”

“No, but given the chance...” Don leaves it hanging. “And I’ve only met Alex the once, but he doesn’t seem the type to go off protesting either. He seemed a little shy and timid actually. Maybe you caught him on an off day.”

I shrug and walk off towards the house with Paddy and Cordy following at my heels.

Paddy reaches up and touches her nose to my hand, which I unconsciously hold within her reach. I am so much better with animals than people. Donald is one of the few humans I feel comfortable with, truth be told. I can sometimes make my mouth go, and I fall out with my friends on a regular basis. Don is a lot older than me. He’s a friend of my dad’s really, so he knows me better than some.

“What he said about you mistreating your animals is bullshit anyway. You don’t have a cruel bone in your body, Ethan,” Donald tells me as he follows me inside for a coffee.

“Yeah, well tell that to Mister hoity-toity, holier-than-thou Alex whatever his name is.” I huff as I pull the kettle over to the sink and fill it aggressively.

The water splashes up in my face, and I shake the drops away angrily.

“He just needs to know you better, that’s all,” Donald assures me. “You know you don’t always make it easy to get to know the real Ethan Shaw. You try too hard to impress instead of just being yourself.”

I fill three water bowls and place them on the floor. My two cats, Boog and Sooty, immediately come and weave between my ankles, mewling like the two Siamese cats in *Lady and The Tramp*. When they do it, I always have “The Siamese Cat Song” in my head. If they ever made a live-action version of that movie then these two would be first in line for an audition; they are perfect for that role, and devious enough too. I laugh at their shamelessness.

“You’re not getting any food, you’ve had plenty today. Next meal is at seven. No one loves a fat Siamese cat.”

Donald chuckles as they slink off, disappointed and plotting their next devious move.

“Where’s the other half of the quartet?” Don asks as he watches the kitchen door warily.

As if they have heard their cue the “other half” come sidling in and squirm their way up onto the table.

“BooBoo, Yogi!” I call to my two mischievous but adorable raccoons. “Get off the table; you know the rules.”

Yogi jumps down and runs to me immediately. BooBoo waits, just long enough to let me know she is not my puppet, then jumps down and joins her brother. They both sit at my feet, their forepaws in the air, watching me expectantly and snickering the way only raccoons do.

I chuckle and reach into the cupboard behind me. Releasing the child lock, I fetch out a box of cheesy treats.

Apparently raccoons will do anything for cheesy treats. They both take one, politely, and then leave to enjoy the tasty morsel, probably in front of the two cats, who will be most discontent.

The noise of the cupboard opening attracts the attention of the last member of my house crew: my grumpy, snickity cockatoo, Beorn. She lands on my shoulder and presents her head to be scratched. I chuckle and sneak her a treat too. Cockatoos will eat anything but Beorn will die for junk food. She takes the treat and nips at my ear before eating, with gusto, and covering my shoulder with crumbs.

My crew. There is never a dull moment.

“It’s all very well telling me to be myself.” I continue my conversation with Donald, as I make the coffee. “Trouble is, myself just isn’t that interesting.”

“Bollocks!” Don laughs as I hand him his coffee. “You live with two cats, two raccoons, a bossy cockatoo and two adorable dogs. How on earth is that not interesting? Not to mention all the other stuff you do, like wildlife rescue, going into the local schools, which you do for nothing. You even hold an unofficial pet clinic every time you’re in the pub. Kids love you. Adults think you’re a hero because you save them a visit to the vet, and it only costs them a pint of beer. You are a very interesting person, Ethan. This Alex guy needs to get his facts right.”

I sit down at the table with him, shrugging as I do. I don't see my life as anything but normal. Maybe he is thinking of someone else's life. True, I do all those things, but I don't do them because I want glory or recognition or hero worship. I do them because there's a need. I take in injured wildlife. I talk to local school kids about conservation. The Wildlife Trust help me out with some funding, but my work makes enough money to be comfortable and to do everything else I want to do. People don't think Ethan Shaw is interesting—it's Ethan Shaw: Animal Man that they want—all except Alex that is.

"Besides," Don continues after we have sat for about ten minutes in silence, watching my two raccoons play with some pine cones and a mug. "Some people don't want exciting. Have a little more faith in yourself as a person instead of hiding behind all these amazing things you do with your crew."

"Whatever." I still don't think I am in any way amazing. I do what I do. I'm very lucky to be doing something I love, but that isn't because I'm amazing. It's because I had some incredible support from family and friends when I first decided to follow my dream.

Alex seems like a bookish, intelligent man. He's maybe a little snooty and stuck up too, but perhaps Don is right: he could have been having an off day. Whatever was going on in his head today, I still think he's beautiful. We have absolutely nothing in common. What interest could he possibly have in someone who hasn't even finished reading a book in his entire life?

I want him to be interested in me though. I don't know why, but the brief encounters I've had with him so far have me intrigued and have evoked feelings in me that I don't really understand. That urge to straighten out his clothes and comb his hair needs more exploration, I think.

I reckon this Alex Hawking needs looking after, and I'm good at that. Very good.

Chapter 4

Birds of a Feather

Alex

“*Oh, Alex.*” My sister’s tone is one of disappointment, with a hint of amusement thrown in for good measure, as I tell her what happened during my first attempt to meet my new neighbour. I’m so happy to have entertained her this afternoon.

I am not proud of the way I spoke to Ethan though. I behaved like an absolute arse. I’ll never forget the startled, hurt look in that man’s eyes, and they were so green. Oh god, why am I remembering a detail like that right now?

“You need to go and apologise to him.”

“Don’t you think I know that already, Liss?” I shouldn’t be so snippy with her, because she is absolutely right. I am angry with myself because I’m afraid I may have burned my bridges. “I just... I don’t think he’ll see me. He was so angry and upset; I doubt he’ll give me the time of day after everything I said. I feel so bad about it.”

“Even if he won’t see you, you still need to try.”

“I know, I know, I just don’t know what.”

“You’re an intelligent guy, you’ll work it out. I’m off to pick the kids up from school.”

I heave a heavy sigh. That is about all the help I can expect from my sister. She might once have been willing to pick up every piece of my malfunctioning social life, but I am thirty and need to learn to stand on my own two feet. Part of the reason I have moved here.

“Give my love.” I hardly know her two children, my nephew and niece. I’ve met them a handful of times, and now I’ve moved so far from anywhere, I doubt I will see them very often at all. I feel a pang of guilt as I tell her to give my love. Even if she does tell them, they probably won’t remember me except I’m the slightly weird uncle that sends them presents on birthdays and Christmas.

“I will,” Liss is telling me as I get lost in my thoughts, *“and when I call tomorrow I want you to have apologised to him, or at least have a plan in place. Don’t make me come over there, Alex Hawking.”* She hangs up with a chuckle.

What is she, my mother? She’s right, though. I have to at least try to make this right. I shouldn’t have said the things I did. I shudder to think what he thinks of me. I made a dreadful first impression.

I wouldn’t be surprised if he refused to see me. He may well turn his dog on me, or worse, that zebra!

I’ve put off making an apology because I’m basically a coward. I read plenty of books about brave, strong characters, so you’d think I could grow some and act like one, but it’s been two days, and I just keep thinking up excuses for not going over there. Except now I’ve run out of plausible ones.

When I got up this morning, I was half hoping it would rain, but the heavens are against me. It is gloriously sunny and clear and warm out there. It’s a damn conspiracy.

I need a game plan, a plan of attack so to speak. I can’t go over there empty-handed. I need a peace offering. I’ve had two days; you’d think I would have thought about this before now, but I was too busy trying not to think about it.

I have wine, would Ethan drink wine? Would he prefer beer? Flowers? Too feminine. There is nothing remotely feminine about Ethan Shaw—even when he was dressed as a zebra he oozed masculinity from his very—stripy—pores.

And his eyes. Oh my god, those eyes. They were so green. But so full of hurt when I said the things I said. I didn’t mean to sound like a stuck-up, opinionated snob, but he had me all flustered, and I don’t make very good impressions when I’m all flustered.

I haven’t got any beer and going into town to get some will take too long and simply be more procrastination. I can’t put this off any longer. Wine will have to do.

I bite the bullet and set off to walk the three miles to Ethan’s house.

The whole point of moving here, somewhere so remote and wild and beautiful, is so that I can get out more and get some colour back in my cheeks. I spent too much time indoors after... well, just after. Today is a perfect day for striding out and enjoying the beautiful Northumbrian countryside. I console

myself with this thought as I walk, so it doesn't feel like I am leading myself to slaughter.

It's impossible, on such a glorious day, to feel anything but joyful. More so here, when gloriously still days like this are so few and far between. Tomorrow could be torrential rain, hail and hurricane-strength winds. The weather here can change in a second.

Today it is perfect though, and so peaceful. And the peace is all encompassing. It isn't silent though, far from it, since there are plenty of noises to hear; just every sound has a purpose here. Nothing is trying to compete and drown out everything else.

Ethan lives in the next valley to me, and I can get to his house one of two ways. I can walk around the base of the hill, which will take longer but give me time to think about what I'm going to say to him, or I can walk over the hill, something I haven't yet managed to do. It's the perfect day for it, so I decide to take the hill path.

I hear the occasional bleating of sheep from further up the side of the hill. The crows caw and the skylarks sing from so high up in the perfect blue sky I cannot see them. There is the occasional car on the road that runs past the entrance to my drive, but most of the time the only sound I hear is my feet mashing through the tough grass, or crunching over the stone-strewn path. Sometimes I can even hear my own heartbeat. It makes me feel alive, more alive than I have felt anywhere else.

Even the distant rumble of a tractor engine sounds natural and unobtrusive. A dog barks, a shepherd's whistle sounds. The air is so still. Today is a day for settling down outside in some sheltered corner and reading an entire book, not trying to build bridges with angry neighbours who may or may not set his rabid dog on me.

I have seen quite a lot of wildlife since I moved into the valley but the usual stuff really: weasels, rabbits, various birds. Something keeps raiding my bin. I guess it's a fox. When I see an eagle swoop over my head, I have to do a double take. I mean, I've seen plenty of buzzards, but this bird is enormous. I watch as it gracefully circles the crest of the hill then disappears out of sight. A golden eagle if I'm not mistaken. How absolutely marvellous.

I continue to look up as I walk, hoping to catch another glimpse of such a magnificent and rare creature.

The path bends as it crests the hill, and as I reach the top, I come across another rather unexpected sight, this one even more rare than the eagle. It's a tall dark-haired man with his back to me and he's only wearing underpants. Is that Ethan? What the hell is he doing? But then I should have guessed it was him straight away, because this is what any self-respecting lunatic would wear when out walking in the hills.

Does this man possess normal clothes? His current outfit is the most outrageous yet. What on earth is he doing up here wearing only his pants, and very brief ones at that? Isn't he cold?

He's looking up at the sky whilst I don't have a damn clue where to look. The man has no shame, and a very nice...

"Ahem!" I clear my throat to attract his attention. He turns quickly, startled.

Holy... if I didn't know where to look before, I'm absolutely flummoxed now. Those briefs, holy shit.

My brain is sizzling out of my ears as I take in his ripped body. He works out, he must do. There was no hint of that glorious body beneath the padded suit I saw him in the other day or the zebra costume the day before that. Those outfits hid every asset but his face and eyes. This outfit hides nothing, and I mean nothing, not even the parts it's supposed to be covering, since the briefs are so tight I can see the contours. They leave absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Why on earth did I attract his attention? Suddenly I want to retreat and find somewhere private to explore what my imagination is currently planning to do with this image of perfection before me.

Oh bloody hell, I'm staring. Have I been staring for too long? I wish I'd put on my sunglasses then I could stare as much as I wanted.

What am I saying?

I force my eyes to wander up his body, between his perfectly placed, tanned nipples, and meet his gaze. He has one eyebrow raised, and I think he may be a little embarrassed.

"Fuck!" I see him mouth the word as he recognises me.

Based on his reaction to my presence, I don't think he was expecting to meet anyone up here, least of all me. There's a slightly panicked expression in his eyes.

He seems to have gone a very pleasant shade of pink. He is blushing: all the way from the roots of his short cropped hair to the tops of his walking boots. I find I don't need much imagination at all in order to guess that the colour dips beneath the waistband of those very brief briefs. Oh, stop!

I try to gauge his mood. Is he embarrassed or angry? Is he going to tell me to go to hell? It's then that I notice the big bold initials on his waistband: ES. Who the hell gets their initials embroidered on their pants? They're as bold as brass, just like him: bold as brass and no shame whatsoever.

He got all angry yesterday when I accused him of being a circus ringmaster, but these briefs are surely just another one of his costumes, albeit skimpy, and lacking in any kind of modesty at all.

"Alex, for god's sake, duck!"

I gasp at the command in his voice. He's looking beyond me and into the sky, his green eyes wide.

"I'm sorry, what?" I frown. Is that a term of endearment, a request, an order?

"Duck, like right now!" he shouts.

I am not accustomed to being ordered about like that. Why does he want me to duck anyway? I plant my fists on my hips.

"Mr Shaw, I don't think I..."

"Jesus, Alex, get off your bloody high horse and do it!" He screeches as he holds out his left arm and braces himself as if something heavy is about to hit him.

It's then that I notice the thick leather glove he is wearing and suddenly my brain is making lightning-quick connections. That golden eagle is about to return to its master.

I turn, and with a cry of shock, I flatten myself to the ground on my back as the biggest damn bird I have ever seen swoops towards me. It flies low over my prone body with a whoosh of air that whips through my hair. From a distance, the bird had looked large and magnificent. Close up, it is huge. I close my eyes, fully expecting this creature to land on my chest and start feasting.

There is a soft *whump* and a jingle of small bells. Ethan murmurs something that sounds like reassurance. I suspect he's not talking to me.

I open my eyes, turn, and prop myself up for a better look.

“Stay where you are, Alex. Don’t move until I get this damn bird hooded.”

I don’t argue. Ethan seems to have this air of command about him, and he didn’t even make the request aggressively. His tone just doesn’t encourage debate. I watch, fascinated as Ethan takes a soft-looking leather hood, seemingly from nowhere, (really? where the hell was he keeping that?) and places it over the eagle’s head. Now it cannot see. Well that’s nice for the poor creature!

“You can get up now,” Ethan beckons. “Nice and slow.” I obey, slowly rising and brushing dry grass and dirt from my clothes. I don’t approach, because Ethan has held his hand up to stop me. “He’s a bugger when he starts bating. He’ll take my bloody arm off one day.”

I realise I am making assumptions again before I know all the facts, and that the bird has actually been hooded to protect it from injury, not to subdue it. I know enough about falconry to realise a bird can be horribly injured if it panics and tries to fly off when it is tethered to the falconer’s hand. I can well imagine this magnificent creature snapping even Ethan’s powerful arm like a twig.

“Is that a golden eagle?” I whisper reverently.

“That’s right!” Ethan’s face brightens with a smile as he nods. “His name’s Rupert, and as far as I can work out, he doesn’t like clothes.” He indicates it is safe for me to approach.

“Clothes?” I frown in bemusement as I take a hesitant step closer. “What does he have against clothes?”

“Nae idea.” Ethan seems as bemused as me by the information. “But when I first got him he would go fucking ape shit every time I went anywhere near him.” He shrugs. “Thought he just didn’t like me at first. It happens.” He eyes me, and I feel my face heat up. “Then I wondered if it was the way I was dressed, so I tried various different outfits. Wearing nothing at all seemed to do the trick. Having me completely naked seemed to pacify him so I worked my way up from there.”

I don’t think there is a creature on this earth that wouldn’t be pacified if they were being trained by a completely naked Ethan Shaw. The man could probably have me jumping through hoops after five minutes. I shake that thought out of my head and try to concentrate on the rest of his explanation.

“I’ve been gradually building up to wearing more and more as I’ve been training him. That’s why I told you to duck. I wasn’t sure how he’d react to you, or your clothes.”

Ethan's voice has a very mesmeric quality to it. I'm not sure if it's to put his bird at ease or me. It certainly makes me forget he's just basically told me Rupert might have attacked me, and ripped all my clothes off.

I'm spellbound by the bird and him. Maybe it's his accent, or his deep voice, or maybe I am just that shallow and it's the fact that he is semi-naked, I don't know. I concentrate on the bird on his arm, instead of the other things going on in my head and around my body.

The bird is magnificent. I pluck up the courage to ease forward. I'm pretty certain those impressive wings could easily swipe me off my feet. Tentatively I stretch out my hand and look at Ethan with a raised eyebrow.

"May I?" I want to touch this creature, feel a connection with it. I'm aware what a privilege it is. "He's beautiful." Just like his owner.

"Gently." Ethan nods in acceptance of my request and my compliment.

Holding my breath I stroke down the bird's back, astonished beyond measure at how very soft and warm the feathers feel to the touch. I give a huff of surprise.

"For some reason I thought the feathers would feel hard and rough," I comment.

"Hmm..." Ethan draws his own fingers down Rupert's back and the bird seems to tremble at his touch in a way it didn't for me. "People always seem a bit surprised by that. I suppose it proves that under all that brawn and muscle he's really just a great big softy."

I laugh, raising my gaze to meet Ethan's. His eyes sparkle with mirth, and I get the feeling he isn't just talking about Rupert.

I am suddenly aware of Ethan's state of undress again. The bird distracted me somewhat. Now, in much closer proximity, I am finding it difficult to know where to look again, and I'm sure he can't be feeling very comfortable having me ogle him.

"So, I, er, was hoping to catch you at home, Mr Shaw, I wanted to apologise for my behaviour the other day, and to bring you this as a peace offering." I hold out the wine, careful to keep my eyes on his bird and not anything else that belongs to him.

"Oh, thanks!" He takes it, surprise in his tone, making me look up into his eyes to see why. He looks delighted. Somehow I get the feeling that this doesn't happen to him very often. "Wine?" He smiles as he examines the bottle.

“I, er, should have wrapped it, but all I had was newspaper after unpacking all of my stuff from the move.” Plus I wanted to get this over with, so I didn’t have time to go into town.

“Thanks, that’s really nice of you. You didn’t have to.”

“I think I did. I behaved like an absolute arse the other day. It wasn’t the best first impression.”

“Well, y’know, I don’t usually gallivant around the countryside dressed like the Michelin Man or like this, so it’s understandable your impression of me is a little warped, I guess.”

“Oh, no I didn’t mean that, I meant your impression of me.” Did he think I was having a dig at him? I wasn’t. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for you to think that... I mean... I wasn’t trying to...” Oh bugger. Why am I such a bungling idiot when it comes to social niceties?

“Alex!” I look up and see he’s smiling. “It’s fine, and thanks.” There’s a twinkle in his green eyes, and I don’t think I’ve seen anything quite so lovely, or so dangerous, in my entire life. Then, he winks and takes it to another level altogether.

Okay, that was unexpected, and now I need to be gone before I spontaneously combust.

“Y-you’re welcome. I’d, er, better be going.” As he smirks at me, I back away clumsily, like I’m under some sort of leg-locking spell. “I’ll, er, be seeing you around, probably. I’m just in the next valley, but of course you already know that, don’t you.” Alex, just stop before you start sprouting nonsense. “We’re neighbours, and you already know that too.” Too late was the cry!

My eyes flicker towards his crotch, and I spin around before he can see what I just did. Oh god!

I blow out my cheeks as I walk away.

“Alex!” Ethan calls after me.

I stop. Now what? If I turn around he’s going to see just how bright red my cheeks have gone, so I don’t, I just wait, and he must think I am a rude, arrogant prick, but I can’t let him see how much he’s affected me, as much for my sanity as his. He has a legitimate reason for being up here in his underwear, and it wasn’t to have other men ogle him.

“Apology accepted, Alex.” He’s still smirking, I can hear it in his voice.

I lift my hand up in acknowledgement, nodding vigorously as I begin to walk again. As I do I thrust both hands into my pockets and hunch up my shoulders, hoping the surrounding countryside will swallow me up quicker if I make myself a little smaller. I just need to get away now before I fall more under this man's spell. Enigmatic and compelling doesn't even begin to describe him. Add drop-dead gorgeous to the mix and I'm pretty much bowled over.

He's not for me though. No one of his physique and temperament could possibly have any interest in a small, bookish, geeky weed like me. At least I can now rest assured that he isn't going to set his animals on me in anger. He didn't seem angry with me at all.

And what was that he said about clothes? I've just realised what he was telling me. Was he implying that at some point in the process of training his eagle he had to do it completely naked?

Why didn't I move in a few weeks earlier, dammit?

Now what am I saying?

Chapter 5

Moth to a Flame

Ethan

“So there I am, standing at the top of the hill in me trollies, and he walks up the path. I mean, howay, Donald, of all the people I did not want to see while I was training that bloody eagle in me keks, it was him.” Donald is laughing so hard he is holding his sides and tears are streaming down his face. “Hey, man! I’m just lucky he didn’t move in a couple of weeks before, because I wouldn’t even have been wearing those pants.”

I’m in town getting my usual supplies of animal feed and other stuff I need. I visit town at least three or four times a week when I’m home. Today is a rare day when I don’t have an animal of some sort in tow. So I’ve popped into the local pub and found Donald taking a lunch break. He made the mistake of asking me how my week had gone so I’m busy offloading the latest encounter I’ve had with my new neighbour.

I think he might be about to have a coronary. I’m good at telling a yarn, and glad that my source of embarrassment is his source of entertainment. I can’t help smiling as well, because even though I was embarrassed to be caught up a hill in my underpants by the most beautiful man I’ve ever met, it was pretty funny. And his face was a fucking picture.

“Rupert, the eagle who hates clothes, was on his way back at that point,” I continue the story, “so I told Alex to duck, and he ended up flattened on the ground as Rupert swept over him. I suppose it’s progress on Rupert’s part, that the bird didn’t try to eat his sweater. I’m afraid the poor bloke might think I’m a bit touched.”

Donald snorts into his beer. “Just a bit?” he asks with great amusement.

Lisa, the girl serving behind the bar, sidles closer. I think she’s been eavesdropping as she cleaned glasses nearby. She meets Donald’s eye as I make my last statement and they both laugh out loud.

“Hey.” I feel just a little offended. “I didn’t come in here to have the piss ripped out of me.” I pout as they continue to laugh helplessly.

“Come on, Ethan.” Lisa giggles. “You know we’re just having a bit of fun. We know you’re not really a crackpot. When you take those animals into

school for all the kids to see, you're the local hero." She's got a kid in the school, so he's probably been telling her about when I took Bear in. He was a big hit. "Oscar wants to know when you're bringing that lovely zebra back to the school."

I smile and shrug. "Not sure, Lisa. In a few weeks' time we'll be down south on the set of that TV series he's been contracted for, so I'm concentrating on getting him ready for that. Plus I've got Rupert to train up for later on this summer."

"Have you really been training him, naked up in those hills?" Her eyes light up as she leans on the bar right next to me.

I narrow my eyes and glance sideways at Donald. "I wonder who told you that?"

Donald holds his hands up and affects a look of complete innocence. "Don't look at me. She probably overheard you anyway; ye've got a loud enough gob." He takes a drink of his pint, wearing a smirk that marks him guilty as charged.

I ignore him and turn back to Lisa. She leans closer as I beckon to her.

"I was up on the moors training him yesterday, Lisa, in my underpants. Just my ES camouflage briefs." I see her dark eyes widen and her pupils dilate. She swallows hard and takes a few moments to respond as she presumably stores the image I've just conjured in her brain.

"It is a damn shame you are only into men," she murmurs, "because that, just what you said, just now, that would have every woman flocking from miles about. You'd be like the bloody Pied Piper of Hamlyn except with women following on behind as you played your pipe."

"Steady on, Lisa." I chuckle as she giggles wickedly at her double entendre. "And who's to say I'm not open to charming the opposite sex on occasion?"

"Now, now, it's your turn to steady on." She waggles her finger at me in admonishment. "You don't want to be giving us all false hope."

I flick my eyebrows suggestively, and she walks away to serve someone else, shaking her head at my shameless flirting.

Don nudges me as I take a sip of my pint, and I'm about to hassle him about his less-than-fantastic timing when I see why he has attracted my attention. Alex has just walked into the pub, with a newspaper tucked under his arm and a slightly distracted expression on his face. His hair has fallen over his eyes, and I

have the sudden urge to brush it back over his forehead. His shirt is untucked, and I want to go and tuck it in just so I can untuck it all over again. The feelings are so strong they have me almost on my knees. What is the matter with me?

The same thing happened when he stumbled across me on the hill the other day. His jacket was unfastened and his cardigan was buttoned up wrong. Does no one look after this man? And why am I itching to do the job?

He doesn't see us as he orders a pint and goes to sit in a quiet corner to read his paper.

For a moment, I just watch him. He is beautiful. He seems so content as he pores over his paper, comfortable and untroubled by crazy neighbours.

"Wakey, wakey, Dolly Daydream." Donald nudges me again, and I turn to him in surprise. Did he say something?

"What?" I ask, closing my mouth to prevent any drool escaping.

"Go over and speak to him, I said, but I think you already were, in your head." He chuckles, and I narrow my eyes before shaking my head.

"Nah!" I turn back to face the bar and take a drink.

I doubt he wants to speak to me. He's in here for a quiet drink, not to be disturbed by the local loony tune. I know he made the effort to come and apologise for his behaviour towards me the first time we met. He gave me that bottle of wine, which was really thoughtful of him, but he couldn't get away from me fast enough, and I don't blame him really. I must have looked a real sight standing there in my budgie smugglers even if they were designer.

I get the feeling he has never met anyone like me before and doesn't quite know what to make of all the weird outfits and animal craziness. I think he would rather avoid it all if he could. I definitely know he isn't impressed by any of it.

I glance back over at him. He has a soft, contented smile on his face as he reads and drinks in his quiet little corner. He pushes his glasses up his nose, something I noticed him doing the day before, and it has the same effect on me now as it did then. I'm itching to grab them and fix them for him. Usually when I see a gorgeous guy, it's not generally the glasses I want to grab.

He is gorgeous, and I don't know what's wrong with me really. I'm not shy, or the type to stand back and admire from afar. If I see something I like, I usually don't waste any time in trying to get it. I was joking with Lisa before,

but I have a bit of a rep for being very forward, with men and with women. And most of the time they've been happy to oblige.

So what's stopping me using that natural charm on Alex? He got the wrong impression of me to begin with, but that has never stopped me in the past. I can usually rectify that with tales of my animal actors and all the famous people we've met over the years.

Alex is different. He's already told me he's not impressed by my work, so I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to actually talk to him about. I want to talk to him though. I'm drawn to him, like a moth to a flame, and I don't even think he's done anything to make me feel he would be interested, except yesterday, of course, when he couldn't seem to take his eyes off my crotch. Straight guys usually don't look for that long, or blush that furiously.

Donald told me to just be myself, but I don't think I am all that confident that being myself will be good enough for Alex Hawking. Not that I think he'll be a snob or anything like that; he just seems well out of my league, that's all. He deserves better than someone who prefers to go off somewhere secluded for a quick shag. Not that I would ever do that to him.

That's a sobering thought in itself. Am I thinking that I would like to have something a little more meaningful with him? I've only just met him. I do have this uncontrollable urge to go over there and brush his hair out of his eyes. I mean, what is that all about?

"If you stare any harder, Ethan, ye'll start drooling," Donald muses without looking up from the paper he has started to read due to my scintillating company.

I draw my hand down over my face in frustration and indecision.

"What if he tells me to go to hell?" I ask with a moan, laying my head in my arms on the bar. "He thinks I'm a raging lunatic."

"Well, ye are," Donald adds unhelpfully. "Just get yerself over there before I go and cramp your style by telling him stories about you when you were a bairn."

"Oh, you wouldn't dare, ye bastard." That is enough to get me moving. Donald's known me all my life, and he knows too many secrets.

With my pint, still half full, I walk over as casually as I can. For a moment I stand, unnoticed, in front of the corner booth where Alex has chosen to sit. He's

so engrossed in his paper he takes a few moments to realise I am there at all and another few moments to realise I am there to see him.

Eventually he looks up with a frown as if he really didn't want to be disturbed. The frown disappears, as he meets my eyes, to be replaced by confusion.

"Hello again." I smile, as warmly and as friendly as I can.

"Hello?" He squints up at me.

He doesn't recognise me? The sun is shining in through the window behind me and it is a little dim in here but still... Although, when we met yesterday he didn't exactly spend a lot of time looking at my face.

"Ethan?" I say helpfully. "From over the hill? We met yesterday when I was training Rupert, the golden eagle." He surely remembers Rupert if he doesn't remember me. "Mind if I join you?" I ask, tipping my head to one side and pursing my lips.

His eyes widen and his mouth makes an "O" shape. Even in the dim light of the pub I can see his neck turn a beautiful crimson. I can almost feel the heat from his burning skin. I bite my lip and try not to smirk.

For a moment, he looks like he might get up and run screaming from the pub. He has that wild-eyed, "rabbit caught in the headlights" expression. If he were a hawk, I'd have hooded him by now to calm him down. Still eyeing me warily, he shuffles over on the seat, folds away his paper, and indicates that I should sit.

"By all means, sit, er... please, yes."

His accent is just delicious. It's soft and silky, like the pelt of a smooth black panther, and those eyes are like melted chocolate.

I think my brain just melted out of my ears as he regards me over the top of his glasses before pushing them up his nose. Bloody hell, it's like a sensory overload. Whether he's agreed or not, I have to sit before my legs give way.

Before I make myself comfortable, I remember my manners.

"Can I get you another drink?"

Alex shakes his head, his mousy curls bouncing about his face. He lifts his glass which is still half full.

"I'm driving, so best not." He smiles.

I'm not sure if it is a nervous smile, or a tight, irritated one, or maybe a mixture of both. He seems to be finding it difficult to look me in the eye. Is it a shyness thing or a confidence thing or what? Do I intimidate him? I don't want to.

"I'm, er, sorry, I didn't er... you know... just now, it's a little dimly lit in here, and well... er..." His blush has just deepened and spread across his cheeks. I think I understand the problem.

"You didn't recognise me with my clothes on." I raise one eyebrow. I suppose it's better to get it out there in the open. I know he's thinking it from the way he's blushing so beautifully.

He bites his lip, and I wonder if it's to stop himself from laughing as if he thinks it will be seen as impolite. I don't mind if he laughs. The situation was pretty crazy, and everyone else has had a good laugh about it, so why not him? I wish he would stop biting his lip like that though, because it's just making me want to bite it too.

"I suppose every time we've met I haven't exactly been wearin' me Sunday best," I muse with a flicker of my eyebrows.

Alex shoots me a startled look, and I can see he doesn't think I'm wearing my Sunday best now either, but at least I'm dressed pretty conventionally today, even if my jeans are a bit ripped.

I finger the rip. It's new. Yogi decided to claw her way up my leg as I tried to leave this morning.

"One of my raccoons thought it would be funny to give me a couple of designer rips this morning before I left," I explain. "I think maybe she fancies 'erself as a bit of a fashion designer."

Alex just stares. Come on, it's not that outrageous a statement, is it?

"You have a raccoon?" he gasps incredulously. I hold up two fingers.

"Two raccoons: Yogi, the would-be fashion designer." He chuckles. "And BooBoo."

"You share your home with some very interesting creatures, Ethan," he muses with a half smile as if he still isn't sure quite how to take me.

"Aye, life is never dull at my house." I nod, although I'm a little distracted by how amazing my name sounds coming out of his mouth in that smooth accent, so I'm not really listening to what he's saying. I shake out of my daze

and try to act as normal as I can. Make small talk, that's what I need to do. "So what brings you into town today, Alex?" I suddenly have the urge to grab his chin and kiss him until his fingers are clawing through my hair.

Urgh! Control yourself, Ethan Shaw!

"I just came in to pick up some groceries. And you?" He's asking out of politeness, I can see, because he really hopes I'm not going to tell him I'm doing something outrageous with a bunch of animals and he's going to be stuck in the middle of it all.

"I came to collect my weekly animal feed supplies from Don's shop. It's cheaper to get it all delivered there. Plus it gets me away from my brood for a little while. They can all be very demanding."

"Quite." Alex frowns slightly and looks down at the folded newspaper in his hands. Then he glances past me at the door.

I suppose he didn't really want me disturbing him after all. I can almost taste his discomfort. I am saved from having to beat a hasty embarrassed retreat by my phone as it sings out loud and proud "The Lion Sleeps Tonight".

I grimace as I take it out of my pocket. That ring tone, hilariously funny most of the time, has suddenly become yet another source of embarrassment in front of this man.

I glance at the caller ID and groan. It's my agent, or rather my animals' agent. She's been trying to reach me all week, and I've been avoiding her calls because I was enjoying my time off. I know she's not calling to offer me more work; it's to hassle me about Bear's training and whether I'll be ready in time.

"Excuse me, Alex, I have to take this."

"Oh, of course!" He actually moves to stand as I do. That's... well, that's way too polite and formal for a place like this. He's like a rare bird.

My phone is still screaming about that damn lion in the jungle as I get up and walk to another part of the bar. I glance back at Alex. Is that amusement I see in his eyes?

The call takes all of two minutes, but that's two minutes too long when it comes to my bitch of an agent. She's good, but she has a reputation for ball breaking. She was checking up on me, even though I have never let her down, ever, and she makes good money out of me and my animals so I don't know why she has to be such a bitch.

When I return to the booth, Alex is gone. He didn't even finish his pint. That's another reason for me to think my agent is evil personified. My little hawk has flown the nest.

"Your date left," Donald tells me with a twinkle in his eye as he joins me at the now empty booth.

"Ha, funny guy. He wasn't my date," I snap back.

Donald just purses his lips and plonks himself down in Alex's spot in order to continue reading his own paper. I bet the seat is still warm as well, damn, I should have moved quicker; then I could be sitting there.

"I ordered you some lunch, since you seem to have forgotten about your old friend here, wasting away at the bar while you play Romeo or Casanova to the new guy."

"I'm neither," I huff as I join him. "We said all of three sentences, and then bitch McAndrews rang."

"Ooooh!" Donald gives a repulsed shudder. "That woman scares the hell out of me. I'm not afraid to admit it."

Somehow, somewhere down the line, the delightful Ms McAndrews got hold of Don's number, and she hassles him when she can't get in touch with me.

"Please don't tell me she's been calling you." I groan. "I told her not to do that."

"She hasn't called lately," Don assures me. "I'm still recovering psychologically from the last time she tried to bust your balls via my phone line."

I chuckle at the thought, then groan in absolute despair, because Alex has gone and next time I meet him I could be dressed as a panto horse, or something equally ridiculous. The things I do for my art are not conducive to building normal healthy relationships. I hadn't really realised that until now, when there is someone I might want to try and have a normal, healthy relationship with.

"Oh, and yer boyfriend said to tell you he was sorry he had to go, but if you'd like to meet him later on, he'll be in here about eightish because he would... and I quote"—Donald makes exaggerated air quotes with his fingers—"quite like to see the rather interesting sounding band that is playing

tonight.” Donald says it in a very clipped English accent, and I chuckle, despite the fact it sounds nothing like Alex’s smooth, clean, mesmeric tones.

“He’s not my boyfriend, and he does not sound like that.”

“No, but he is a bit posh, isn’t he?” Donald pulls out the paper that Alex left behind in his haste to leave. “Ooh, he reads *The Times*.” He leans close to me with a wide grin. “Not posh at all.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a bit posh.” I look away with a soft huff. Certainly not when you’re as gorgeous as Alex Hawking.

“Nothing wrong at all when you’re looking for a bit of posh totty,” Don mutters, his nose now buried in Alex’s paper. He’s not averse to a bit of posh reading then, bloody hypocrite.

I roll my eyes.

“He’s not totty either.” He’s lovely and far too delicate a catch to be labelled as totty.

“Eye candy?” Don nudges me, and I shake my head in disgust.

“No, Don, man. Give it a rest.”

“A bit o’ tail?”

“Not even close.” I snort.

“Hot stuff.”

Oh, well, now he’s talking more sense. I stretch out my hand and waggle it, humming as I consider this last description before nodding.

“Definitely hot stuff,” I admit with an enigmatic smile.

“You’ve got it bad, Ethan Shaw.”

“No I haven’t,” I scoff, although I think I just might have it really, really bad.

We’ve exchanged less than a dozen sentences, Alex and I, and not in any of those sentences has he led me to think he is in any way remotely interested in me, but right now my heart is fluttering like a teenager going on his first date at the thought of coming back here to meet him tonight.

I just have to make sure I’m on my best behaviour.

Chapter 6

A Fish Out of Water

Alex

“A band, for goodness’ sake Alex, you’ve never been to see a live band in your entire life.”

“There’s a first time for everything, Liss,” I huff. I’m wondering what the hell possessed me to say I was coming back to see a band. I don’t need my sister adding her doubts to mine. “Besides, I have seen live... stuff.”

My sister laughs out loud. *“Philharmonic Orchestras and piano recitals definitely do not count in this circumstance, trendsetter.”*

If she could see my physical reply to her ridicule she might not be laughing so merrily.

“Alexander Hawking, did you just flip me off?”

“No!” I forget she’s a mother and has eyes in the back of her head, or can see things other, normal human beings cannot.

“Right!” She sounds dubious. What is she going to do about it though? *“Don’t make me come over there, little brother.”*

“You are welcome to come over here anytime you want, sis.” I laugh, making the invitation like I do every time she calls. I doubt I will see her anytime soon. It’s not that she isn’t desperate to see where her brother is hiding out. My nephew and niece are almost teenagers, they have busier lives than she does, and her husband is a dick, pardon my French!

“You just watch yourself, Alex, you might find us on your doorstep one day.”

She’s kidding; she never did anything that wasn’t planned to the nth degree and juggling her own career with that of her children’s social lives, and that of her dickhead husband, is a full time job. She doesn’t have time to plan a trip to see her only brother who has moved so far away from anything comfortable or normal.

“Do you think he’ll be there then, your Eagle Man?”

“His name is Ethan, Ethan Shaw, and he’s not my Eagle Man. He’s not my anything.”

“Yeah, but he could be. You’re going on a date with him.” Just like my sister to hear what she wants to hear.

“It is not a date, Liss. I just said I would be in the pub. I don’t even know if he even got the message, so I have no idea if he’ll be there.”

“Of course he’ll be there,” she assures me, but I think she’s the one that’s hoping, because she really wants to hear more about this man that gallivants about the countryside in his underpants and is so ripped I could bounce a penny off his abs. I think she may be letting her imagination run away with her. Or is that me?

“So explain to me again why you decided to go completely out of your comfort zone to see this man again?”

My sister has a right to be curious. For years I buried my nose so deep in books I rarely saw the light of day, and then suddenly I’m moving to remote parts of the country and arranging to meet strange men in pubs.

“I felt bad about leaving the pub while he was on the phone,” I repeat for her benefit as well as mine, as I try to work out my thought processes here.

“And why did you feel the need to leave the pub, Alex?” She is such a pain in the arse. I’ve already told her I was in danger of spontaneously combusting in the presence of Ethan Shaw for the second day in a row. If I’d known she was going to take the royal piss out of me I wouldn’t have been so open and honest.

“Liss, I have to go. The band is starting in about ten minutes, and I’m not even dressed.”

“Oh, listen to you, my little brother, so grown up, getting dressed to go out on his first date, going to see a live band.” She sounds wistful and bloody sarcastic.

“Shut up, Liss. This is not my first date. And I’m thirty; I grew up a long time ago.”

She laughs, and so do I, but I have to admit this does feel like a lot of firsts all in one go for me. I’m not usually this adventurous. It must be the fresh country air... or something.

I think that *something* might have a lot to do with Ethan Shaw.

When he first came over to speak to me in the pub this afternoon the sun was in my eyes, and it had taken me a little while to realise who he was. How

stupid was that after I've spent the last two nights fantasising about him in those damn tight, very brief underpants? Of course, he doesn't know that. He probably thinks I didn't recognise him because I take so little notice. He probably thinks he's low on my list of priorities when, in reality, he has been the only thing on my mind since he burst into the hardware shop dressed as a zebra.

It's not even anything he does that's especially hot; he's just so nice, and he winks all the time, and his eyes are always so full of warmth and something else I don't understand. He's like a sunny day, and I don't want him to be, he just is.

Liss thinks I'm going on a date. Will he think that? I doubt he'll even be there, but if he does turn up, will it be a date?

"Take care tonight, bro, and let me know how it went with Eagle Man."

"Ethan," I correct her. She just chuckles as she disconnects the call. I think she delights in finding a different nickname for him every time we speak.

The pub is busy; it's not crowded, but it's busy enough that I consider turning around and running for cover. I've never been one to voluntarily place myself in such a noisy, social situation.

I stand awkwardly at the bar for a few minutes before I get served. I am like a bloody fish out of water. How can I be thirsty and not be able to walk into a pub without feeling like a bumbling, inept fool?

"Hello, back again?" The cheerful young woman who served me this afternoon is still here. Doesn't she get a break? "Same again, Alex?" She continues to smile as she begins pouring a pint before I even answer her.

She called me by name. How does she know my name? And she remembered what I'd had to drink this afternoon. This sort of personal service is unknown and unfamiliar to me. It's nice though, friendly and welcoming.

I'd half expected the locals to all stop talking and turn to stare at the newcomer. Thankfully they didn't. It was quiet in here at lunchtime, so I didn't feel nearly so awkward. It's not exactly crowded now, but there seem to be enough people for another addition to go unnoticed.

I pay for my pint and turn, glancing around the pub and trying not to look completely out of place. Drinking in a pub alone at lunchtime is a little more

socially acceptable than doing it alone at night. I suddenly feel very conspicuous. Is Ethan even going to be here? What kind of fool am I to think that he would seriously consider...?

“Alex!” I turn in the direction of the call. For a moment, I don’t see where the call came from. “Over here!” I suddenly see Ethan, smiling broadly and waving furiously from the booth we were sitting in this afternoon.

It’s surely just a coincidence he’s chosen to sit in the same booth, or is it? Has he chosen that location to make it easier for me to find him? No, he wouldn’t be that considerate, would he?

There are several others sitting on the wide, semicircular, padded bench, and Ethan makes them all shuffle around to create a space for me. I wait, shuffling my feet nervously as I see some irritable looks being shot Ethan’s way.

“Oy, watch it, Ethan, man, I nearly spilled me pint,” a gruff voice calls out.

“Aye?” Ethan calls back. “That’s bollocks, Fred, because even if you went over Niagara Falls in a barrel holding that pint ye wouldn’t spill it, so quit yer moaning and move over.” The group all laugh in response to his quick comeback. Ethan flashes his one-hundred-watt grin my way and pats the seat beside him. “Are ye sittin’ down or what?” He smirks.

“Oh, er, yes, thank you.” I take the seat, smiling nervously.

“Everyone, this is Alex. He’s new, just moved into the area, so behave yourselves.”

I feel the blush starting from beneath my shirt and slowly rising up to inevitably cover my face with red-hot heat. I’m a grown man; I should be able to have a conversation in a pub without blushing like a teenage girl. Apparently my body didn’t get that memo.

Ethan helpfully names “everyone” in order, going from his left all the way around the bench. I immediately forget every single name because I just can’t concentrate on remembering names when his leg is pushed up against mine. There’s not a lot of room though, so it’s not as if he’s doing it out of choice. The fact that my leg is also pushed up against his doesn’t seem to be causing him to want to burst into flames. That’d just be me, then!

Once the introductions are made and I awkwardly answer some general enquiries about how I’m liking it here so far, the group seems to settle down into little cliques all talking to each other and not to me. Ethan seems to be

included in the conversation to his left, so I quietly sip my pint, feeling like a bit of a third wheel really. Of course, he thinks I'm just here at the same time as him, to listen to the band, so why should he pay any particular attention to me?

Why, oh why did I think this was a good idea? Ethan obviously has a large circle of friends here, and they aren't interested in the slightest in a slightly geeky, weedy-looking librarian type. They all appear loud and confident. They all converse with the comfort and familiarity of a well-established group of friends who have known each other for a long time. I'm an interloper, an intruder, a stranger here.

"Hey you." It takes me a little while to realise Ethan is actually talking to me.

"Oh, er, hey you, er hey you b-back." Well that's eloquent, Alex, bloody hell, you might as well just grunt like a caveman.

Ethan is smirking, probably at my discomfort.

"I'm glad you came." His smile is warm, and his eyes are even warmer. I pull at my collar as the temperature in the room suddenly rises. "I'm really sorry about that phone call this afternoon. You must've thought I was rude as hell."

"Oh, no, er, not at all, really." I dismiss his concern. "It was obviously important, and I had to go anyway. I'm sorry I didn't wait to say goodbye."

"Nah, that's all right. Don said ye had an appointment." The warmth in his tone and his smile suddenly makes everything all right.

"I wasn't sure you'd come." I blow out my cheeks as if I've made some sort of confession to him. He nudges me.

"I wasn't sure you'd be here, but I couldn't exactly phone to firm up the arrangements." He makes a face, twisting his lips as if he's thinking. "Phone." He states loudly, slapping his hand on his thigh as if he's just remembered something really important.

"W-what?" I suddenly want to look for exit routes.

"What's your phone number, Alex? Then next time we can make sure the other's going to be there."

There's going to be a next time? He says this with such conviction, as if it's carved in stone. I'm still not sure I want there to be a "this time", even though I know I wanted to see him again and want to find out more about him. The jury's still out on whether it's a good idea or not.

As Ethan takes his phone from his pocket, I grimace. This is going to be a little embarrassing. My phone is a little older than his, a lot older actually. I've had it for about ten years, maybe longer. I take it out and try to hold it in my hand so he can't see.

"Bwhahahaha! What's that?" He snorts and then he sees my mortified expression and immediately schools his features.

I can see the twinkle in his eyes though, and I can see why he would think it ridiculous for me to own a phone that is almost as old as I am. Well, that might be exaggerating. It works though, for what I need.

"If you don't want my number then that's fine." I feel I can afford to act a little offended. The man just laughed at my phone. I have some pride.

"I'm sorry, really." He sounds sorry, and he looks sorry, genuinely so, as if he's worried I might leave.

Well of course he is, like the time I just left after I first wandered over to his house and the time I just left when I found him semi-naked on top of the hill. I have a tendency to just leave. And he does have a right to act surprised at the age of my phone.

"That's okay, don't apologise. I can give you my landline number if you don't think your phone will be able to call mine."

"Why wouldn't it be able to?" He frowns. I shrug. I know nothing about technology.

"I don't know, maybe the technology isn't compatible."

"Hey, yours might be a throwback from the eighties, but I think the signal is still the same." He smirks. He's being sarcastic, chuckling at my lack of knowledge of a subject I suppose he thinks I should know something about.

I sigh with frustration at our obvious incompatibility but also at my ineptness at just about anything that doesn't involve books. If he'd just asked me to produce a rare, signed copy of *The Hobbit*, then I could've definitely impressed him because I have two.

"Tell me your number then?" he demands as he slides his fingers across his ultra-modern smartphone.

As I quote it, the numbers appear on his screen. Even I know that's impressive, for the phone to pick up my voice in a such a noisy pub and convert it to text.

“Hawk.” Ethan speaks into his phone after sliding his fingers across the screen a few more times. “There,” he states, looking up at me with happy, eager eyes. “You’re in there now, no excuse for missing a meeting, ever.” He winks at me, and I look away, feeling my face heat up... again.

Did he just call me Hawk? Why? My name is Hawking. Maybe he calls everyone by their last name, and he just got mine wrong. Not that he’ll ever want me to call him, but the thought of the name “Hawk” appearing on his phone if I did, appeals to my sense of the ridiculous. An animal handler getting a call from a Hawk.

I smile and then gasp as my phone pings out its antiquated message tone.

“Oh!” I glance down at the unknown number and then read the text: *Hello, Hawk!*

“See?” He nudges me, that smirk that has my insides all squirmy firmly in place. “Nineties technology is compatible with modern day.”

I narrow my eyes and shake my head.

“You make me sound like an old man.”

“Not you, I meant your phone. It’s a bit of an antique.”

“Thanks for pointing that out.”

“Anytime, Hawk!” He winks and then takes a drink of his beer, his eyes twinkling.

I swallow in an attempt to lubricate my dry mouth, and then I remember I have a pint and hastily take a drink, which I then proceed to choke on. Ethan pats me on the back.

“All right there, Alex, cough it up. It’ll do ye good.” The others around the table all laugh at his words, and I feel that heat creeping up my neck again.

“S-sorry,” I splutter helplessly, my eyes streaming now. This is ridiculously embarrassing.

“All right, Alex?” a voice from across the table calls.

“Gosh, are you okay?” a woman to Ethan’s left asks me.

“Here, have a hanky.” Someone hands me a handkerchief. I don’t see who it is, since my eyes are streaming with tears.

“Ethan, give the lad some room, man, yer almost sitting in ’is lap.” This statement is followed by some raucous laughter from the entire group, and Ethan scowls at them all.

Ethan, notably, does not move. His hand has ceased its patting and is now rubbing soothing circles around the middle of my back.

Suddenly everyone is fussing over me, and it's so very unexpected. I only just met these people, and their concern seems misplaced somehow. I'm nothing to them. I'm not used to this. Not even my sister, who is quite content to nag me from afar, would ever really be motivated enough to come and physically fuss over me.

It's all proving a bit much really. I accept the handkerchief and wipe my eyes then excuse myself and retreat to the toilets without looking back. The only regret is that making such a hasty retreat has deprived me of Ethan's soothing contact.

Locked in a cubicle, I take some deep breaths to calm myself down. Well that went well, as far as first impressions go, it must be up there in the top three worst ones ever. How can I go back in there when I've made such a fool of myself?

"Alex?" Ethan calls gently, and my heartbeat doubles.

Oh holy shit! What is he doing in here? If I stay quiet maybe he'll think I left, which is something I'm seriously considering doing.

"Alex, are you in here?"

"Y-yes!" Why the fuck did I answer him?

"Sure you're all right?"

"Y-yes, th-thank you." No not really, but he doesn't really want to know, he's just... I don't know what he's doing or why he's asking.

"I'm going to the bar, Alex. Want another pint?"

"Y-yes, thank you." God, why did I say yes? I'm driving, and I don't want to stay anyway.

"I'm sorry about my rowdy friends. They're a good bunch, but they're all a bit over the top sometimes. I've found somewhere a little more quiet to sit. I'll wait for you at the bar, okay?"

"O-okay."

The door to the toilets slams shut, and I let out a heavy breath when I know I am alone again. Why is this man apologising? I should apologise for being such a social pariah. I knew this would be a disaster, but I had to put myself

through it anyway because I wanted to see more of him. I'm like a bloody moth to a flame.

He probably regrets coming now, but then I get the impression he would have been here anyway, with his friends, and now I've pulled him away from them. That's just unacceptable.

When I emerge from the toilets, the band has begun to play, and it's quite loud and screechy, and the singer is horribly flat. I think it might be some sort of rock tribute, but even in my limited experience, they aren't very good.

Ethan is sitting at the bar, as far from the band and noise as he can. I join him, feeling very apologetic.

"Ethan, I'm really sorry about that. I really don't want to drag you away from your friends; I should just go."

"Sorry, what?" he yells over the noise, even though it's really not that loud at this end of the pub.

Somehow I get the impression he is pretending not to hear me, but why on earth would he do that?

"I said..." He cups his hand around his ear and leans sideways towards me, so I am obliged to lean close, grabbing his arm as I do, so I can direct my voice towards his ear. "I said I'm sorry for what happened, and if you want to be with your friends, I understand." It's not as if we're here on a date or anything incredibly improbable like that. This was just a chance meeting that I really shouldn't have even tried to arrange. I have only succeeded in showing myself up. "Look, I'm just going to go."

"But I just bought you a pint!" Ethan gasps, suddenly able to hear me above the noise. He looks incredibly hurt that I should even think about leaving. I'm not sure why, unless he doesn't like to waste money. "If it's too noisy, we can go across the road, the pub over there is much quieter, and I don't mind, really, Alex, I'd rather be there anyway, just you said you'd be here and I..." He stops and regards me with a frown because I'm staring at him with extreme shock. "What?"

"Y-you only came here b-because you wanted to see me?" I can't actually believe he would do something like that. I mean, really?

"Of course!" He nods. "You don't think I would willingly come and listen to this tripe do you?"

“I-I don’t know!” I wouldn’t willingly listen to it, but I have no idea what his music tastes are, or what any of his tastes are, except he seems to have a fondness for wearing rather tight underwear... and nothing else.

Ethan makes a frustrated noise in the back of his throat and jumps down from his bar stool. He holds up his pint and gestures to Lisa behind the bar.

“Lisa, Alex ’n’ me are takin’ these over the way. We’ll bring the glasses back, I promise.”

Lisa narrows her eyes but nods. “Aye, ye’d better,” she says with what seems like an indulgent smile.

Ethan winks at her, an action he’s used on me a few times, causing me to think he is a serial winker rather than the hope that he was winking at me specifically.

He takes my pint from me and indicates that I should follow him. I do so, wondering if it’s actually acceptable to take two pints from one pub into another. I’m sure the pub proprietors will have something to say about it.

We are almost at the door when Ethan stops dead in his tracks. I run into his back resulting in him spilling both pints, luckily not down himself.

“Oh, gosh, I’m so sorry, Ethan,” I exclaim, but he doesn’t even react.

I crane my neck to see what could have made Ethan stop so suddenly. A great ogre of a man is standing in our path. Ethan has managed to spill the pints, not down himself but down this man’s shirt. Neither man looks overly pleased about the situation. The ogre looks livid. I think words are about to be exchanged.

“Well, if it isn’t Noah and his Ark.” The ogre sways as he speaks, causing me to think he has indulged in rather too much alcohol. “Thanks fer sharing that pint with me, ye clumsy fucker.”

“All right, Jack?” Ethan sounds inexplicably calm and cheerful, whilst I am quaking in my boots. “Sorry about that, like, but if you’d been looking where you were going that wouldn’t have happened.” He places the half-full glasses down on a nearby table and then takes a cloth someone hands him in order to start drying off the ogre’s shirt. “Still, there’s no harm done, is there? We were just leavin’ if you’ll move yer arse out of the way.” Ethan makes to move past the man.

“What’s this?” Jack the Ogre blocks Ethan’s way again and tips his head in my direction. He seems to have forgotten that his shirt is soaked in beer as he

regards me with disconcerting curiosity. I have the sudden and very rational urge to hide, because Ethan is tall, but this man is huge. “Found yerself another pet, have ye, Ethan?”

Well, that was uncalled for. I gasp, but a squeeze to my hand stops any retort I might have tried to deliver. When the hell did Ethan take my hand? I don’t have time to think about it though. The squeeze is both reassuring and a warning.

“Jack, we don’t want any trouble,” Ethan tells him calmly. “I’m sorry about the spillage, but if ye’ll just get out of our way, we’ll be out of yer hair.”

“You owe me a drink, Ethan bloody Shaw.” The man leans forwards menacingly, his finger poking beneath Ethan’s nose.

Unruffled, Ethan takes hold of the great sausage of a finger and pushes it away from his face.

“That’s bollocks, Jack, since it was our pints that were spilled, not yours. Besides, by the looks of ye, ye’ve had too much to drink already.” Ethan pulls at my hand as he steps to one side in another attempt to get past his enormous antagonist.

Jack stops him with a hand on his shoulder and leans in. Ethan’s gasp tells me the man’s grip is anything but gentle. Suddenly Ethan is propelled back against the door frame, pulling his hand from mine. I take some hesitant steps back as I look on in horror.

“Buy ’iz a drink now, ye bloody poufter, and I won’t have to smash yer face in fer spillin’ them pints down my shirt.”

“That was an accident, Jack, and I’ve already apologised.” Ethan raises his voice, and it’s impressive, since a stranger, namely me, walking into a pub where everyone knows everyone else, doesn’t turn one head, but Ethan raising his voice even a small amount makes everything stop, and I mean everything, including the band.

“And I say it’s not your bloody call, ye stuck-up, shirt-liftin’ twat.” The two men are now nose to nose and several things are happening at once. People are shouting and converging on our location. Ethan struggles against Jack’s hold on his shirt and as he does, pushes Jack away from him and towards me. I don’t wait around to find out what happens next.

As I duck outside and beat a hasty retreat towards my car, I hear the landlord shouting above the rest of the people attempting to stop the fight.

“All right, that’s enough, lads. Ethan, get him out of here before he does some damage to someone, something, or himself.”

I don’t look back to see what’s happening. I can probably take a guess. Testosterone was flying, and both men had looked pretty angry. I couldn’t wait around to see the inevitable outcome. I hate myself; I am such a damn coward. Ethan could be getting beaten up, and I just ran off. I don’t cope well with confrontations like that. I couldn’t have helped him anyway. I’m the worst person anyone would want as their backup in a fight. I’m a liability where there is any possibility of blood being spilt.

As I get nearer to my car, I realise that my retreat has surely burned any kind of bridge I might have built with Ethan. Not that I could have had any sort of chance with him. He couldn’t possibly find me attractive in any way, shape or form. I’m a weedy, nerdy, socially inept dweeb and he’s, well, even if his face gets messed up by that leviathan, he’s still going to be gorgeous.

Oh, god, maybe I should go back. I turn and take a few steps back the way I’ve come.

Oh, but what if there’s blood? I’ll just show myself up even more if there’s blood. I turn and move back in the direction of my car.

Ethan will hate me if I leave him to the mercy of that thug. I turn and head back to the pub.

Ethan will hate me anyway because I just left the sinking ship, so why am I even bothering? I turn, for the last time and head back to my car.

Tonight was an unmitigated disaster. I know I shouldn’t have come.

Chapter 7

Fly in the Ointment

Ethan

For fuck's sake, when did this evening suddenly spiral out of control?

When Jack Whiteman walked through the door, that's when.

"All right, Jack, that's enough."

As Jack pushed me up against the door frame it forced me to let go of Alex's hand. I don't remember when we had begun holding hands. Did he take mine, or did I take his? Whatever, it'd been nice. Another reason to be angry with Jack.

Several people, including the landlord, get up to offer assistance as Jack grabs me.

"Yer makin' a spectacle of yerself, Jack." I tell him as his hands are prised from my shirt. I don't want this to descend into chaos. Jack's not a bad lad, he just needs a bit of careful handling when he's had too much to drink. He gets himself into real bother if there's not someone there looking out for him. "Let's get you home where you can't get into any more bother." I reach out to take his arm, in order to guide him gently out of the pub. He pulls away from me, and I almost overbalance.

"Get your hands off me, ye sicko," he hisses. "Save it fer that one ye were holdin' hands with. He's probably gaggin' fer ye ta bend 'im over and stick it up his arse."

God what must Alex be thinking? I bet he's never even heard anyone talk like that before. His ears must be bleeding.

"You and I are going to have words if you don't shut your mouth right now, Jack," I hiss. I grab his arm, and this time, I don't give him a chance to pull away as I frogmarch him out the door.

"Gerroff me, Ethan, ye poufter, I'm tellin' ye."

"Oh, and just what are you tellin', me, eh?" I am right at the edge of my patience now, and with two pints in my system I am uninhibited enough to push it just a little too far as well. "Don't flatter yerself, Jack, I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot-fucking-barge pole."

“Aye, just make sure ye don’t either, ye fuckin’ animal-lovin’ weirdo, sheep shagger.”

“You know what, Jack?” I huff as I pull the man out of the pub and onto the street. I need to get him home before he gets himself into more bother. “Bein’ an animal-loving weirdo makes me about fifty times more money than you can ever make being a dickhead twat, so fuck off out of here before Geoff comes and bars your arse from every shop and pub on Front Street.”

Jack is just about to retort when Geoff, our esteemed part-time law enforcement, and owner of the only other pub in town, finally steps in. Someone has obviously called him over from his pub across the road.

“All right, lads, that’s enough. Fight’s over. Jack, yer drunk, go home.” He pushes between us and gets into Jack’s face, indicating the direction of his house with his thumb.

“What, why me?” Jack squeaks, stumbling a little because he is really unsteady on his feet. I catch his arm again to steady him.

“Because you started it, Jack. I don’t even need to have been there to know that ye did. Yer makin’ a bad impression, now go home and sleep it off.”

“Fuck you, Geoff. Yer not the copper now, yer off duty. You can’t tell me to do shit.”

“Copper’s are never off duty, Jack, so I can tell you to leave if I want, but if you’d like, I can arrest you fer being drunk and disorderly, is that what you want?”

Jack sets his jaw, glaring at Geoff and then snarling at me before finally leaving. Not before I’ve managed to snarl back at him though. He’s such a wanker. What Alex must be thinking... oh he’s gone.

“Where did Alex go?” I can’t believe he would just duck out like that, but then I can’t actually blame him.

“Ye don’t do yerself any favours, Ethan, do ye?” Geoff grouches as he follows Jack down the street. “Yer friend left in a hurry about five minutes ago. He went that way.” He hooks his thumb in the direction of the town centre car park.

I hardly think he’s being fair. It wasn’t my fault Jack bumped into me. I’m not going to stop and argue my innocence though. Alex has disappeared, and I need to find him. I take off up the hill at a full-on run.

I don't blame Alex for leaving when he did. He probably thought Jack and I were going to come to blows. It certainly would have looked that way from his perspective, not knowing either of us very well.

Five minutes, Geoff said. That means Alex left before Jack started sprouting all that homophobic shit, or at least I hope he did. The truth is that Jack is about as homophobic as a rainbow at a Pride festival, and a gentle giant really, but when he's had a few drinks, he becomes a different person altogether.

Alex wasn't to know that though. Poor guy probably thought he was about to get beaten up. I just hope I can reach the car park before he drives off.

Sure enough, as I round the corner I see him, doing a strange little dance, walking back and forwards between his car and the road, like he's locked in some sort of indecision loop. What's he doing?

"Alex!" I call.

He stops dead, his hands on his car door. He doesn't turn around, as if he's not sure what to expect when he does. His shoulders look tense, and I yearn to knead my fingers into them to relax him.

"Alex?" I stop more than arm's length away from him, since if I was to stand any closer I would be massaging his shoulders before I'd even given it conscious thought.

He hangs his head and sighs. As he attempts to take his keys out of his pocket, I see his hands are actually shaking. Shit. He was scared. I am such a fucking asshole. How could I have let it get so bad with Jack? I should have just pulled Alex out of there and away before Jack could react.

I reach out and cover Alex's hand with mine. He doesn't pull away. His hand feels small and fragile. He's not that much smaller than me, but right now he seems tiny and precious.

"Alex, I am so sorry about what happened."

Slowly he pulls his hand away, as if he was happy for me to make contact but not comfortable maintaining it.

"I'm sorry I left you," he finally whispers, still unable to look at me, and I realise he is hanging his head in shame. "You must think I'm a terrible coward. I should just go."

"No, Alex, don't go. I don't think you're a coward at all. I completely understand why you left. Jack can be a bit of a twat when he's had a drink. It's all sorted though. There won't be any more trouble from him tonight."

“Did you beat him up?” Alex gasps, finally looking up, his eyes wide.

“What? No!” Does he think I would have done something like that? I know he doesn’t know me well at all, but for him to think I could be so violent is not good. “Geoff turned up and sent him home.”

“Geoff?”

“The local copper. But even if he hadn’t turned up, it wouldn’t have come to blows. Jack gets a bit rowdy when he’s had a few, but he’s mostly harmless really.”

“When he pushed you up against the wall it didn’t look harmless.”

I shrug. I suppose that did look bad from Alex’s point of view.

“There were plenty of people about to stop it going any further,” I assure him. “There always is, so please don’t feel bad about leaving.”

There’s been plenty of times it has come to blows, but Alex doesn’t need to know that right now.

“Look, this night hasn’t had the best of starts.” I try to meet Alex’s eye as he snorts sardonically. “It’s still early though. Why don’t we go back and get a drink in the other pub? It’s quieter.”

“You still want to...? After I left the sinking ship? I mean... really?” Alex seems completely blown away that I would suggest we continue the evening, but why? If I’d thought badly of him running off like that, I wouldn’t have chased after him.

He’s so delightfully unaware of how absolutely delicious he is as he regards me with those chocolate eyes and nervously licks his edible lips.

“There’s another pub, just across the road from The Lion. The one we were going to go to before we were so rudely interrupted.”

Alex bites his bottom lip in indecision. I think I might be winning the battle though.

“I promise it is quieter there. I can almost guarantee there won’t be any rowdy friends, crap bands, or dickhead twats to interrupt us,” I add as an extra argument.

Alex snorts softly before finally nodding. “Okay. Let’s go. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Exactly, Hawk, that’s the spirit.” I think I might be pushing it a little bit by wrapping my arm around his shoulders as we walk.

He tolerates the contact for about half a minute before slowly extracting himself from beneath my arm. He eyes me as if he knows exactly what I’m trying to do. He doesn’t look angry though, just a little startled, as if he never expected me to be in any way interested in him.

We’ve met all of five times now, and I know I find him irresistibly attractive, but I have no idea what he thinks of me. I am just assuming he’s gay, because he hasn’t told me otherwise, unless he’s just too shy and polite to tell me to fuck off when I do things like grab his hand or wrap my arm around his shoulder. These are things I was hoping to find out. The reasons I came out tonight. I didn’t even know he would actually come, I just hoped he would be there.

The evening can still be salvaged. I suspect he wants to know as much about me as I want to know about him. Even if things don’t progress past friendship, he’s still my nearest neighbour. We should at least try to get on, and I appreciate the effort he’s been making, despite my efforts to make him think I’m a complete lunatic.

As we walk, our shoulders occasionally brush. The contact sends electric shocks down my arm every time. I’m not sure if he is walking so close because he feels safer, or if he actually wants to be this close to me. He has his hands thrust deep into his pockets with purpose; as if he’s got them there to stop them from doing something untoward, like letting his fingers brush against the back of my hand, or even lace loosely with mine. It’s just as well, the contact might be too much for my wildly beating heart to cope with.

The live band at The Lion is blasting out a rendition of “Livin’ on a Prayer” as we draw closer, threatening to shake the building apart at the seams. I lean towards Alex as we retreat into the relative calmness of The Bell, directly opposite.

“I’m not an aficionado, but I’m sure it takes more than simply turning everything up to eleven in order to make it heavy metal.”

Alex snorts softly but doesn’t reply. I suppose he is too busy wondering why my hand has moved to the small of his back as I guide him through the door. I was wondering that as well, since it seems to be acting of its own accord.

Geoff is back behind the bar, cleaning glasses as we enter, none the worse for his short stint at law enforcement. His evenings aren't usually that exciting. I bet he bust a gut to get over to The Lion when he heard there was trouble brewing.

"All right, Geoff?" I call. "Did Jack get home okay?"

"Aye, he did."

"I'll have a word with him tomorrow if you want."

Geoff shakes his head.

"Best leave it for a few days, Ethan. He was still ranting about you being an arsehole when I handed him over to his lass."

I grimace. Jack's wife is not one to mess with. Jack's in for a bit of a hard time I expect.

Alex asks for a Coke, since he's driving. I do the same. I've had two pints today. I think that's enough, even if one was at lunchtime. I'm always reminded how much it can take over your life when I see how it affects Jack.

"Is that the same Geoff that you said is the local police officer?" Alex whispers to me as we take a seat.

I nod, swallowing a mouthful of my drink.

"Isn't it a bit of a conflict of interest him working in a pub and being a policeman?"

"Geoff doesn't work here, Alex, he owns the place. Besides, he's only a part-time copper."

"Part-time, my arse!" Geoff interrupts as he approaches a nearby table to clear some glasses and replace beer mats. "They pay me part-time, but it's a full-time job keepin' this lot in line sometimes."

I snort. "I hope you're not including me in that, Geoff."

"Nah, you're practically an angel compared to some." He rolls his eyes and jerks his head in the direction of The Lion. "Although, you cause your own brand of trouble when you bring that damn zebra into town."

Alex snorts then covers the noise with a cough before taking a drink, but I can see the twinkle in his eye and the slight curve of his lips. I narrow my eyes and purse my lips. He gives me an innocent look, and I chuckle.

“Of course, Ethan wasn’t always the upstanding citizen you see here.” Geoff begins to settle himself on the sofa opposite us, as if he’s joining us for a cosy chat. He needs to do one before he reveals too much about me and my not-so-savoury past. I narrow my eyes and hiss softly at him, nodding my head discreetly towards the bar. He takes the hint and jumps up. “Well, can’t stay here and chat with you lads, I’ve got a pub to run. Nice to meet ya, Alex.”

Alex watches him go with a slightly bemused expression on his face. The trouble with living in a place your entire life is that people just know too much about you. Sometimes that can be a good thing, but other times, like now, it is definitely a bad thing.

“You weren’t always an upstanding citizen?” Alex asks with a raised eyebrow. “That does surprise me.”

Ooh, he’s a sarcastic bugger. He’s smirking as I narrow my eyes.

“What Geoff means is that I was a bit of a terror when I was a kid. I’ve matured since then.”

Alex’s smirk stays in place, and for now I think I might have satisfied his curiosity. I do get the impression that Alex Hawking has a healthy respect for law enforcement. I suspect he grew up in a very different environment to me.

I suppose, sometime in the future I will probably have to confess to my almost juvenile delinquent past, but right now is not the right time. Telling him I left school before getting any qualifications and was basically a juvenile delinquent for two years is not going to win his respect. That part of my life is over and done with, and I now need to change the subject, talk about something more positive—like him.

“So, tell me, Hawk, what made you decide to move all the way out here to the middle of nowhere?”

“I saw the cottage advertised online, liked it and bought it.” Alex shrugs.

I suddenly feel a bit happier about not telling all of my story since he is definitely not telling me everything.

“What? Just like that? You just bought it without even seeing it with your own eyes?” He nods. I try not to gape. That cottage must have cost a damn fortune and you don’t spend that kind of money without thinking long and hard about it first, at least, I wouldn’t. “You must have been desperate to get away from wherever you were before.”

“Oxford,” he tells me shortly, not looking me in the eye.

“Are you running away?”

“No!” he answers too quickly. He looks away angrily. I should just open my mouth wider and stick both feet in. I didn’t mean to be so nosy and direct.

“Take it easy there, Hawk.” I backtrack. “I’m not investigating your past or anything like that.” And I am certainly in no position to judge. “I was just curious that’s all.”

“Sorry.” He hangs his head with a deep sigh. “Just, I don’t know why you would be interested in my life; it’s really not that riveting. I’m not here to hide from any kind of unsavoury past or anything like that. I just reached thirty and realised I’d never done a thing in my life because I wanted to, it was always to please someone else.” He gives his head a shake, a wistful, almost regretful expression on his face. “You don’t really want to hear about it. I’m sure it’s nowhere near as interesting as your story.”

“Let me be the judge of that, eh?” I smile, leaning back in my seat and taking a sip of my drink as I do.

Alex regards me with slightly narrowed eyes, as if he’s gauging what my reaction will be to his “story”. Then he gives a deep sigh and mirrors my actions, slouching back into the sofa so we are sitting almost shoulder to shoulder.

“Like I said, I’m thirty. I spent most of my life, well, all of it, doing what everyone else wanted me to do. I went to Oxford because my dad wanted it. I studied English literature because that’s what I was told I would be good at.”

“And were you?” I ask, completely engrossed. I could listen to this man all day.

“Was I what?” He frowns, tipping his head to regard me.

“Good at English literature?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I was. I got my Master’s.” He’s too damn modest, almost as if he’s embarrassed about his achievements. I wouldn’t be; I’d be proud as hell and so would my parents and all my friends. Damn, I hardly know him and I feel proud knowing someone who has a bloody Master’s degree.

“Bloody hell!” I can’t help exclaiming. He frowns, maybe that wasn’t the right way to react. “I mean, well done you.”

“Hmmp!” he mutters, as if he’s not quite sure which reaction he should believe.

“Why didn’t you go for a doctorate then?” I ask him, and his frown deepens into a scowl.

“Now you sound like my mother,” he huffs. “She is never satisfied with what has been achieved, is always looking to the next achievement or rung on the social ladder without acknowledging the rungs already climbed. She never even came to my graduation.”

“Fuck, that must have been a bit of a blow.” I can’t imagine my mother not being there to celebrate every single achievement. She throws a party every time I pass an inspection from the RSPCA, for god’s sake.

“She was angry that I wasn’t staying on to study more.”

“Wasn’t having a son with a Master’s degree enough?” I can’t help the surprise and shock in my voice. I mean really? The man has a Master’s degree in English Lit and his mother wasn’t happy with that?

“Nothing is ever enough for my mother.” He sounds sad now, unhappily staring out of the window into the dark street beyond. Makes me wonder if it’s his mother he is running from. The thought makes me sad, makes me want to wrap him up in my arms and tell him how damn amazing he is. “Enough about me. Tell me about you.” He turns to face me, his expression changed from deep sadness to mild curiosity. “How long have you lived here, Ethan? Tell me some of your story?”

Oh my god. He is an Oxford graduate. I left school with no qualifications. He spent almost a decade longer in education than me. I couldn’t wait to leave school as soon as I legally could. He obviously has never been in trouble with the police, would never dream of doing anything illegal. I spent most of my teenage years in trouble with someone, mainly my very supportive and long-suffering parents, or Geoff who’s currently standing behind the bar polishing glasses. We might be friends now, but it’s taken quite a few official cautions and a juvenile criminal record to get us to this point.

“You don’t want to hear about me, really.” I do not want to go anywhere near this subject. It’s only going to enhance our differences.

“Well, that’s hardly fair. You said I should let you be the judge, now it’s time to return the trust.” He regards me with those chocolate-brown eyes of his, and I melt inside, I mean, I do every time, but this time it is particularly

unnerving how he can just do that, without even knowing the effect he has on me.

I shrug. It gives me time to think of what to say. There are some roads I definitely do not want to go down. They all lead to him making quick excuses to leave and then avoiding me until the end of time. I do not want that at all.

“I’ve lived here, and around here, all of my life,” I begin. “I spent a little time down south. I got a job at a small zoo there, where I learned a lot of stuff about keeping exotic animals and got the qualifications I needed and the licences for keeping all manner of weird and wonderful creatures.”

“Like zebras?” He sounds surprised. “Do you actually need a permit to keep a zebra? They’re surely not dangerous, are they?” He doesn’t sound too sure. I want to laugh at the thought of Bear doing anything that would be considered dangerous. “Surely they’re no different than keeping horses or donkeys.”

“Yeah, but they’re not exactly native to Northumberland, Alex, are they?”

He narrows his eyes. I don’t think he likes having the obvious pointed out to him. I was kind of going for sarcastic funny, but he hasn’t seen it that way.

“Sorry!” I grimace.

“That’s okay; it’s my fault for being so naïve about these things. I mean, I knew you had to have a licence to keep birds of prey, but zebras aren’t exactly endangered.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Hawk.” I shrug. “They’re pretty rare in the Cheviot Hills.”

This time he chuckles, his eyes twinkling as he takes a sip of his Coke.

“So what made you go and get a job in a zoo?” He continues his questioning.

I shrug again. What does he need to hear? That I was sent down there because it was either knuckle down and get a job or end up in real trouble?

“A friend of my dad’s needed someone who was good with animals. I had just left school, wasn’t really into farming or anything like that, but was into animals, always have been, so I took the job. I guess I’ve never looked back really.”

“And coming back up here?”

“I needed somewhere bigger to house my growing crew. I was living in a tiny council house with an even smaller garden and I was... er... in danger of being asked to leave.”

“You mean evicted,” he adds helpfully.

“Maybe!” I smirk. “My raccoon, Yogi, was becoming a nuisance, raiding all the local bins and fighting with the local foxes.”

“Oh! I can see why that would be a problem. Raccoons and foxes just don’t mix.”

“No, they don’t.” I chuckle at his light-hearted remark. “Anyway, my parents own that farmhouse, and they were between tenants when my crew and I were about to be put out on the streets, so they offered it to me. It was a perfect solution for everyone. My career as a handler was taking off, and I had to travel all over the country anyway, so it didn’t really matter where I lived. And there is plenty of space here for wandering raccoons, walking zebras, flying eagles.”

“That is a bit of an understatement really, Ethan, since there is so much space here it’s almost ludicrous.”

I nod in agreement. I’ve lived in cities, not many and not for very long each time, but I know I couldn’t hack it full time, day in day out. Maybe that’s one of the reasons he moved.

There is an awkward silence between us now, since I can’t think of anything else to say to this brilliant man. What can I possibly have to say that would in any way interest him? And I want to interest him so much.

“Hey, Ethan!” I jump half out of my skin at the call from the other end of the bar. Alex reacts too, to my shock rather than to the shout.

I turn to see a woman poking her head through the door.

“Oh. Hello there, Trisha. What’s up?” Trisha, a lass that lives here in the town, steps half into the pub.

“Oh, Ethan, I’m glad you’re in tonight.” Trisha looks stressed, anxious, and worried. I know what’s coming when I see an expression like that, and it isn’t as if many people seek me out for any other reason. I’m glad of the interruption though. “Will you have a look at Minto for me?” Trisha asks. “She’s been limping all day, and she’s licked her paw raw.”

“Geoff is it all right if Trisha brings Minto in for me to have a look at?” I ask our esteemed landlord/copper.

Geoff shrugs. Strictly speaking, he doesn’t allow pets inside because he serves food, and the inspectors would have a field day, especially since he is a copper.

“It’s not that I have much of a choice is it?” He gives me a sullen glare. “If I say no, the town might start calling me a pompous arse behind my back.”

“What do you mean, might?” I flick my eyebrows at him, and he narrows his eyes.

I turn to Alex and grimace.

“Sorry about this, it won’t take a sec.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine, really.”

He’s always so polite all the time, and he probably wants to just go now. Now that he knows I’m just an ignorant grunt.

I beckon for Trisha to come fully into the pub leading a very sorry-looking golden Labrador behind her. I’ve met Minto a few times over the last few months. She’s always sticking her nose into something she shouldn’t. The last time was a hedgehog, the time before it was a bin lid that stuck on her head. Trisha can’t afford a vet though, unless it’s something serious. She trusts me to make that call.

“Come here, Minto,” I call to her, and she limps painfully to my side. I produce a treat for her, because basically I have treats in my pocket all the time. All the local dogs know it. Minto remembers as she greets me like an old friend, wagging her tail and licking my hand.

Trisha laughs. “She’s a big faker. She’s been hanging her head all day and feeling sorry for herself, but as soon as she sees you it’s like there’s nothing wrong. You have that effect on everyone, people and animals, Ethan.”

I chuckle. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Trisha. What’s wrong with her then?” I look at Minto, who immediately tries to jump up and lick my face. “Wisht,” I hiss gently, and she immediately calms down. “What’s wrong with you then, girl, eh?”

“I think she’s got something in her paw, Ethan. She’s licked it raw, but she won’t let me anywhere near it. I wondered if you would have a look since Kelly isn’t around until Monday now, and she charges through the nose just to say hello.”

I turn to Alex. “Kelly is the local vet,” I tell him. “I have to keep on her good side, for obvious reasons, but me and her never see eye to eye about what constitutes veterinary services and outright extortion.” Alex looks slightly shocked, but he smiles, a little nervously. “Trisha, this is Alex. He’s living at the Miller place.”

Trisha's ears immediately prick up at this piece of information. She launches into a cascade of questions for poor Alex as I turn my attention on Minto.

"Come on then, girl, let's see what's going on with that paw of yours." I hold up my hand. "Sit!" She sits instantly. I bring my hand swiftly down. "Lie down!" She does as she's told and gets a treat and some fuss.

Trisha is still distracted by Alex and the opportunity to get some fresh gossip. I get the impression that Alex doesn't talk much when he's in the local co-op so this is an opportunity for Trisha to get first-hand information. She's distracted enough to not be fussing over her dog, which is just as well, because Minto is probably not going to like me looking at her paw and a fussy, anxious owner will only make things worse.

"Come on, then; let's see that paw." I get down on the floor and examine the paw; it's easy to see which one, because it has been licked to a raw, bright pink. I feel gently around the swollen area, using soothing noises and contact in order to reassure the dog. The paw is sore; I can tell by the way she trembles as I touch it.

"See!" Trisha is busy telling Alex, who has no option but to listen. "She wouldn't let me anywhere near. Ethan just has to say sit and she's eating out of his hand. She trusts him, all animals do." Out of the corner of my eye, I see her lean close to Alex and hear her whisper, "Most people do as well. He's got a way about him, Ethan has."

I choose to pretend I don't hear her. It's not that what she's saying is new. I've heard it before. It's just, I don't think Alex needs to know I'm basically a shocking flirt. I think he may have guessed that already.

My finger passes over something rough on Minto's paw, and she flinches.

"Hush," I whisper as I pass my finger tip over the point once again. That's it; I can feel it, a thorn. I look closer, pinching my fingers together and nipping the tip of the thorn. I pull gently, and suddenly it's out. Minto whimpers and then immediately bends to lick the paw. It must have stung having that pulled out.

"Got the bugger. Pine needle." I pass the offending object over to Trisha who peers at it but doesn't take it off me.

"Aw, Ethan, that's great, thanks. I'll buy you a pint next time yer in, or I'll just stick it on yer tab behind the bar, eh?"

“Aw, that’s fine, Trish, really, just don’t let her lick it anymore. Stick a cone of shame on her until it’s healed up, and put a sock on the paw and a plastic bag to keep it dry when you go out for a walk for the next few days so no dirt gets into it. But keep it uncovered when you’re inside.”

“Thanks, Ethan, you’re a real godsend. Nice meetin’ ya, Alex.” She smiles at him and then leans over and kisses me full on the lips before I can stop her. “See ya, tiger.” She winks and then leaves with Minto in tow.

I blow out my cheeks, turning back to Alex who is watching Trisha leave with a mixture of surprise and shock in his expression. He turns to meet my eye, and I shrug. Trisha is always like that. She’s free with her kisses. I don’t think Alex knows where to look though. I don’t think he’s used to that kind of behaviour really. I get the impression he has led a rather sheltered life. Especially if he’s spent most of his adult life at Oxford University.

God, I still can’t get over that.

“Sorry about that.” I feel terrible that this evening is just not going the way I planned, I have no idea what he expected, but I’m sure it wasn’t to sit and watch me hold an impromptu animal clinic.

“Does that sort of thing happen to you often?” he asks with curiosity rather than any kind of irritation. He still looks a little shell shocked.

I rub my mouth. I can still taste Trisha’s lipstick, and it’s all perfumy and sweet. I take a drink and rub some of the cola around on my lips in an attempt to get rid of the taste.

“Not as often as some people would like to think,” I offer.

I’m sure he’s talking about Trisha’s kiss. People gossip though, and I’d be very surprised if Alex hasn’t heard at least one piece of juicy gossip about me since he arrived. It usually revolves around who I might and might not have slept with and is almost always complete fabrication... mostly.

I take a deep breath and face him again.

“Now what were we talking about before Minto showed up?” I smile, hoping he doesn’t ask me anything else about why Trisha might think it was acceptable to snog me full on and call me “tiger”.

“We were talking about how you came back to live up here after working down south,” Alex offered.

Were we? I could have sworn we were talking about him. Is he evading my question about his reasons for coming here?

“I could ask you the same thing, you know.”

“You could.” He is evading, I’m certain.

“But you wouldn’t answer?” I sigh, raising one eyebrow in a query. He chuckles.

“I told you, I liked the look of the cottage, so I bought it.”

“Just like that!”

“Just like that!” He smirks. “Although if you wanted to know more I’m sure you could just ask the town gossip network, of which I think Trisha is a fully paid-up member. She seemed to know more about it than me.”

I chuckle, nodding. He’s right, of course, although I don’t ever have any time to listen to gossip. It’s usually about me anyway.

I open my mouth to ask him another question, because we are on a roll, when my name is called from the doorway again. I groan and hide my face. I think Alex chuckles, and when I look up he looks amused rather than annoyed.

“Ethan, I’m so glad I caught you in the pub. Will you have a look at Princess’s tail? I think she got it trapped in the door.”

A man walks in carrying a cat in his arms. Word must have got around. From behind the bar Geoff moans.

“Ethan’s animal clinic is now open. The Animal Man is in.”

Princess, the Persian cat, has a bruised tail I reckon, after I’ve had a cursory glance. I don’t think she needs to get it seen by the vet, but I recommend it anyway. Her owner is a little better off than Trisha is, and he dotes on that cat. She’s his baby. He gives me a great big bloody kiss as well when he leaves, and when I turn to give Alex a helpless shrug, he is trying very hard not to laugh out loud. I have no idea what he must be thinking now, that’s three people in twenty minutes that have either wanted to punch my lights out or kiss me stupid. Bloody hell.

“Ethan Shaw!” a shrill, woman’s voice calls from the pub doorway before I can even take another breath.

“Oh, shit!” I hiss as I stand. This one needs to be met with caution and from a good defensive position. “Sorry about this Alex,” I say as I stand and walk towards the newcomer to meet her halfway and hopefully head off any nastiness. This visitor definitely does not want to kiss me stupid. “Hello Kelly,” I greet the local vet as amiably as I can.

There is nothing amiable or amicable about the way our esteemed local vet is approaching me though. Kelly has obviously got wind of my impromptu surgery in Geoff's pub. Can I help it if people come to me for advice?

"Don't you bloody 'hello Kelly' me." Kelly stands about a foot shorter than me but at least sixty feet wider.

She has the build of a female rugby player who could probably play rugby for the men's side and no one would even know the difference. I wouldn't want to meet her on the pitch, and I definitely try to avoid meeting her off the pitch.

She stands with her hands on her hips, making her look like a deformed teapot. "Have you been treating animals again, you unqualified oick? What have I told you about taking business away from me? Stick to the local wildlife, Ethan, and leave the local pet population to the professional."

"For god's sake, Kelly, and if you don't mind me saying, your attitude stinks." Like her body odour, but I don't say this out loud.

"My attitude stinks?" she screeches, flicking her lank red hair out of her eyes. "I'm not the one touting business away from a struggling professional."

"Struggling? My arse!" I laugh; I mean, what is she talking about, really? "You are the only vet within a fifty-mile radius in a place where everyone owns dogs, cats and horses, not to mention all the exotic stuff. And then there's all the bloody sheep and cows you get to look after as well, and let's not forget all of my crew that you're contracted to inspect whenever you bloody well feel like it. You're making a mint, Kelly Rogerson, so don't play poor businesswoman of the year with me."

"Careful, Ethan, because I might just have to fail you on your exotic animal's licence next time it comes up for renewal." She threatens this all the bloody time, and it's old news. I yawn.

"Yeah, yeah. And you know I can afford to go elsewhere to get inspected, and when they pass me, it would just serve to discredit you, proving that you are a conniving little bitch out to extort every penny from people who can't afford it."

"Did you, or did you not just treat two animals in this pub?" Kelly ignores my jibe and gets straight down to the nitty-gritty.

"I did, but your surgery was closed and the dog had a thorn in its paw that couldn't wait, or are you such a cold-hearted cow that you would allow an animal to suffer because the owner couldn't afford a call-out fee? Plus, the

second was a cat with an injured tail that I advised to go to you anyway, so I don't know what your gripe is, Kelly. Now, if you don't mind, I am trying to have a quiet drink with a friend."

Kelly looks past me, then up and down the pub and sneers.

"Is your friend invisible, Ethan? Do you need me to issue you with a licence to keep imaginary pets as well?"

I turn with a gasp to see that the seat Alex had occupied is now empty. Once again he has left while I was busy showing myself up arguing with one of the many arseholes in my life.

"See ya round, Ethan," Kelly calls with a cackle. "And keep your nose out of my business or you'll get served with an invoice for my loss of earnings."

I flip her a two-finger salute as she disappears through the door, and then I hang my head with a sigh as I look back at the empty seat where Alex had sat. I pinch the bridge of my nose. Is it worth going after him again? He probably ran this time so he could beat me to his car and get away before I got there. He was probably just looking for an excuse to leave anyway, and Kelly's confrontation provided the perfect one.

A soft touch to my arm has me whirling around in fright. Alex steps back, holding his hands up in surrender and apology for startling me.

"So sorry." He smirks. "Thought I'd take the opportunity to go to the bathroom while you got into an... erm... business discussion with that woman."

"Business discussion would be about right." I snort. "She basically told me to stay out of her business."

Alex pushes past me and sits back down in his original position. I feel amazingly relieved that he hasn't left. I'm actually floating on air, truth be told. Does that mean he really doesn't care that he has a brain the size of a planet and I am basically Winnie-the-Pooh to him?

"I thought you'd left," I admit as I sit back down beside him. He smiles, and it seems a little more relaxed this time, less tight, more genuine.

"I wouldn't do that to you again. I'm sorry you thought that. My fault entirely."

I shake my head at his admission of guilt. "It isn't your fault at all." I take the risk of laying my hand on his knee. "Really, if there's any blame, it's mine."

I left you to take a phone call this afternoon, and then tonight I got into a fight...”

He gasps. “That wasn’t your doing, and I left you to it. Which was rather cowardly of me really.”

“Self-preservation, Alex, that’s what it was,” I assure him. “I don’t think you’re a coward, anyway.”

He looks unconvinced. He hasn’t moved his knee away from my hand though, which I see as a good sign. I want him to feel better about tonight, because none of what happened was his fault, and I’m the one that should, and does, feel terrible about not having any time to speak to him.

“I’m the one that almost got into a fight... twice.” I roll my eyes. “Not that it would have been much of a fight if Kelly had started. She’d have squished me like a jelly.”

“Ethan!” Alex chokes with laughter. He’s scandalised, and he knows he shouldn’t laugh, but he does. I grin, happy that I’ve managed to break the tension between us.

“Well, it’s true.” I laugh. “Then, I couldn’t get two sentences out without getting interrupted by everyone treating the pub as an open clinic.”

“There were only two, and I think it’s rather admirable of you to see them like that. What you did with that dog was pretty amazing.”

Well, I want to just bask in his praise. I thought he’d see it all a very different way. I was certain he would think I was extremely rude, ignoring him most of the evening when it was his idea we meet.

“Listen, I want to make it up to you, because tonight has been one big disaster after another.”

“Oh, you don’t have to...” he begins to say, but I stop him before he can protest any further.

“I think I do,” I tell him firmly, and he sighs but stops his protest. “I know you haven’t been moved in long.”

“A week and half,” He offers, and I nod.

“Right. So I know you must have some things you need help with, stuff that you can’t do on your own or would be easier to do if you had help.” He looks interested now. “How about I come over to yours tomorrow and help you with some of those things.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly... no, Ethan, you’re far too busy, probably, and I can...” I hold up my hand again, and he stops. Sometimes these gestures are universal; this one certainly seems to work a charm when I’m trying to get gorgeous neighbours to stop protesting.

“It would be my pleasure to come and help you, Alex, and I won’t be too busy tomorrow. Tell me what you need doing, and I will endeavour to help you do it.”

He looks interested, curious, as if he’s considering my offer.

“I do actually have something...” He trails off. I lean forward with interest.

“I’m all ears!” I give him my brightest, shiniest grin.

He snorts and bites his lip. Oh lordy, lordy.

“I have a desk that needs assembling. It was just delivered yesterday, but I don’t think I can manage to put it together on my own.”

I try to keep my smile in place as I listen. I know I said anything, but I meant anything *but* DIY. I’ll shift stuff around until the cows come home, but give me a screwdriver, and I’m a menace to society. I said I would help him though.

“A desk, great. Tell me when, and I’ll be round to help you. I’ll just walk over with the two dogs.”

“Oh, well, erm... okay.” He looks unconvinced, and I wonder if he sees the horror in my soul at the thought of me let loose with a self-assembly desk and screws. “How about ten-ish?” he asks me. I nod vigorously, my smile firmly fixed in place. It won’t move from my face now until I physically move the muscles with my hands.

“Ten-ish it is,” I agree.

Alex stands, and I do too.

“Well, that’s amazing, Ethan, thanks.” He smiles softly at me and melts my insides with the warmth in his eyes.

I am suddenly struck by the very real fact that I would happily struggle through endless DIY jobs just to have him smile at me like that every time.

“Anything, anytime,” I assure him. “What are neighbours for if not to help each other out.”

“Oh, well, I’m not, er, sure, erm, what I could possibly do to return the favour,” Alex stutters and bumbles, as if he’s suddenly having second thoughts about me helping him at all, because he thinks he can’t give me anything in return. That smile, for one, makes it all worthwhile.

“Oh, I’m sure we can think of something.” I wink.

Holy crap, Ethan, you were doing so well, what’s with the bloody winking? Alex looks away, his face suddenly flaming hot.

“Well, erm thanks for a…” he was going to say lovely evening, I’m sure, but stopped because it hasn’t really been a lovely evening by any stretch of the imagination, “…interesting, thanks for an interesting evening, Ethan.” He smiles at me again, and it’s like he’s shooting me with a six shooter. There’s surely no more bullets left though, and I’m about to suffer death by smiling. “I really need to get going though, and I’m sure you need to be up early to sort out your crew.”

It’s kind of sweet how he smirks every time he refers to my crew. He turns to go, and I wonder why he seems to feel so awkward all the time. I want to put him at ease, help him relax a bit.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then… Alex.” I add his name in a lower, softer tone after a pause for dramatic effect. It has the desired outcome: he blushes, regards me with wide eyes, and smiles nervously.

“Ethan.” With almost excruciating politeness, he nods his head, and then he’s gone.

I watch him go, and then I just take a moment to breathe. When he said my name just now, it was like a thousand fireworks had ignited in my brain at once. Every synapse lit up like a Christmas tree.

I need to feel that way every time he says my name.

Chapter 8

The Elephant in the Room

Alex

What a night, but despite the drama, I found the entire evening quite informative. I certainly learned an awful lot about Ethan Shaw.

He doesn't suffer fools gladly, and he isn't afraid to stick up for himself. I also learned a lot about myself. I'm a bit of a wuss when it comes to confrontations, and I also need to learn to give people the benefit of the doubt. Ethan wasn't getting into a fight with that man, he was trying to avoid one, and not because he didn't want to fight, but because he didn't want that other man to get into trouble.

I also learned that despite Ethan giving off this impression that he is barn-door crazy he is actually a very clever, caring, and compassionate man. People respect his judgement, especially where animals are concerned. Ethan Shaw is most definitely not a lunatic; he is an extremely interesting and honourable man.

I am very lucky Ethan didn't just cut his losses when I cut mine and left him in the lurch in the first pub. He could have been very angry about that, but instead I got the impression he was concerned I had left and was anxious to find me again.

All the things that happened in the second pub weren't his fault either, and I don't think he should feel guilty at all because it wasn't as if we were really on a date. Did he think we were?

He took my hand, I remember, when that man confronted him. It was a very protective thing to do. Why would he want to protect me? He placed his hand in the small of my back when we entered the second pub. That was a very possessive thing to do. Why would he want to possess me? Do I want to be protected and possessed by him? I don't know him well enough to be thinking along those lines, no matter how attractive I think he is.

He's coming today to help me out. I tried to tell him it wasn't necessary, but he insisted, and to be honest, why would I argue when I do actually want to spend more time with him. I know he's only coming because he thinks he needs to make it up to me for what he saw as a disastrous night. My perception of the evening was very different.

Today will be the perfect opportunity to get to know him better, even if it is just to find out he isn't really all that interested in me as a person and it's just the fact that we are neighbours that he has offered to help.

I got up early this morning in order to tidy up a little. I am not the best at housework or general tidiness, and almost everything I own is still in boxes. I get distracted by books a lot.

I have begun laying out the pieces of the desk according to the list of instructions, just so he doesn't have to spend too much time here. I don't want him to think I'm abusing his generosity.

Good god in heaven, though, who the hell invented flat-pack furniture?

Well, not the actual flat-pack furniture, because that is quite a good invention, what I want to know is who thought the instructions for said furniture were a good idea? I want to strangle that person. I can read and understand three languages, but this sheet of paper—with pictures of screws on it and about six sentences of instructions that are supposed to be simple to understand—is completely beyond my capacity.

Of course, the fact I can't make head nor tail of the instructions perhaps has something to do with the fact that I have absolutely no knowledge of DIY whatsoever. I had to ask the nice man in the hardware shop how to fit my bathroom plug the other day, and who would have thought buying a plug for a bath would be so complicated anyway? I didn't know there were different sized plugs. He must have thought I was such an idiot. I'm just glad Ethan didn't see me floundering around trying to describe what size I wanted without actually having a measurement. Although, he entered the hardware shop wearing a zebra onesie, so I suppose we were both out of our elements at the time.

Now, where does this long bolt go? Urgh! There isn't even a long bolt in the list of bloody contents.

I toss the damn thing back in the pile with a grunt of frustration.

"I bloody well give up."

"Hellooooo, the house?"

I groan. Well, obviously Ethan would turn up now. Is he always this punctual? I said ten-ish. It's dead on ten. I wanted to at least have some of the desk built before he got here. I don't even know why I agreed to let him help me, except he has some pretty well-honed powers of persuasion. Either that or I'm falling for his charms, and I can't admit that, not even in my wildest fantasies.

I'm suddenly accosted by a very excited Border collie, that I assume is called Cordy by the way Ethan is screeching its name to no avail, as it knocks me onto my back and proceeds to lick me to within an inch of my life.

"Bloody hell, Cordy, get off him. He's not your puppy, for fuck's sake."

"Aargh... umgh... oof... get off me, dog," I gasp, trying not to laugh helplessly. Cordy immediately obeys and sits back on her heels, her tongue lolling out like she's laughing.

"You are kidding me, you bloody micey mutt." Ethan gasps in surprise. "Ye'll listen to him when ye've only just met him?" The dog jumps to Ethan's side and sits at his heels, looking up with unadulterated adoration in its large brown eyes.

It's something of a wonder to see how much all of his animals seem to worship him. I mean, given the chance I would be right there with Cordy, at the man's heels, adoring him, but I'm not being given the chance, am I? Won't even get the chance, not in a month of Sundays. Ethan's here to help me out of guilt and not because he wants to be with me.

"All right?" He smiles at me as he casually hands his dog one of the small treats that he always seems to have handy.

I bask for a millisecond in the warmth of those green eyes, imagining, just for a tiny moment, that they are filled with warmth for me alone and that it's not how he looks at everyone and everything.

"Er, yeah, fine." I frown down at the pieces of what is supposed to be a desk. They don't look like they will fit together in any way shape or form. I heave a sigh of defeat. "Well, not really fine, actually."

"Oh ho!" Ethan chuckles and joins me on the floor. "You started without me, Hawk..." He turns to regard me, and for moment, I see something that seems like heat in those eyes. "I'm so disappointed."

There's a wicked twinkle in his eye. Can't he take anything seriously? I roll my eyes and push myself to my feet.

"Alex, could I get two bowls of water for the dogs please, before we start on this lot?" he asks almost meekly.

I nod and disappear to get what he has requested. When I return, he is busy telling Cordy to lie down in a corner of the room.

"Does she want a blanket to lie on?" I wonder out loud.

Ethan snorts. “She’s fine.” He takes one bowl of water from me and places it down beside Cordy. She takes a long drink before lying back down obediently.

“Er, you said dogs?” I am still holding a bowl of water.

“Yeah, Paddy is outside,” Ethan explains. “She’s going through a particularly horrendous moult, so I thought she’d best wait out on the porch.” He takes the second bowl from me. “She’ll be fine out there, and she won’t move if I tell her to stay.” He stops on his way to the front door and turns with a concerned frown on his face. “It is all right for Cordy to be in here, isn’t it?”

It’s a bit late for me to protest anyway, since she’s in here. Besides I would surely look like a pompous ass if I made him send her outside as well.

“She’s fine where she is,” I assure him. I really don’t mind the moulting dog being in here either, but since he’s made the decision I won’t make him second guess himself.

When he comes back from giving his other dog the second water bowl, I try to hand him the instructions again.

“I just thought I’d make a start,” I explain, “but got a little confused by the instructions.” Ethan eyes the offending sheet of paper almost warily.

“You don’t need them, they’ll just confuse ye.” He pushes my hand away, and I frown.

“I don’t think it’s a very straightforward design, Ethan. The instructions might help someone who knows what they’re doing.” I’m hoping they will help him, a practical-minded person, more than they’ve helped me. He surely will be able to make more sense of them.

“Just show me what the finished product looks like,” he demands a little sharply. I stare at him. Surely he’s not going to do it all blind, without even trying to read the instructions.

“I have a photo. It’s in the catalogue, but it’s not all that clear, and you can only see it from one angle anyway. I still think the instructions would...”

“Alex.” He sits back on his heels and stares up at me; his tone is that of an adult explaining to a child. “These instructions have been translated from Swedish, into Japanese, and then into English, very badly.” He sounds calm, but there is an edge of frustration in his tone, or is it something else? I can’t work out why he might be so tetchy about me trying to do this the right way. “We might as well have the Japanese version for all the good it’ll do us.”

“I can actually read Japanese.” I think it might have been better if I hadn’t pointed that out, because his eyes go a bit flat, and he curls his lip ever so slightly in derision.

“Of course you can!” He turns his attention to the pieces of wood on the floor, leaving me feeling like I am two inches tall.

“W-why don’t I go and stick the kettle on?” I have to get out of the room before I end up punching him in the face.

“Why don’t you just do that.” He doesn’t look up. He’s irritated too.

Why is he even here if I irritate him so much?

I stand in the hallway between my living room and my kitchen and clench my fists. How can I simultaneously want to kiss someone and punch them in the face? That’s got to be the most confusing feeling I’ve ever experienced.

I know it perhaps wasn’t prudent to point out I can read Japanese. Nobody likes a know-it-all. I didn’t mean to say it; it just popped out of my mouth before I could stop myself. And he’s probably thinking if I’m so bloody clever why can’t I bloody well put the desk together myself?

I am now trying to pluck up the courage to go back in there and ask a question. It’s a stupid, simple question about whether he wants milk and sugar, but I don’t have a clue how to ask it without (a) sounding like a bumbling idiot or (b) stuttering like a stupid fool. Are those both the same?

I pop my head around the door to see what kind of mood he is in now. He still looks tetchy. I feel a flash of irritation myself though as I notice he is now poring over the damn instructions, the stubborn son of a... I stop in midthought, because he’s muttering to himself, and I don’t think it’s irritated thoughts about me.

“C’mon, Ethan, man, it’s only six fuckin’ sentences. Why do they always print these things in black and white? Why didn’t you bring your green film?” He gives an irritated growl. “Because he’ll think you’re a stupid thick shite, that’s why, because you can’t...”

He looks up with a startled gasp and then scowls, and I can’t retreat because he’s seen me, and I can’t speak because he’s angry I was eavesdropping on his conversation with himself.

“Has no one ever told you it’s rude to listen to other people’s conversations?” he grumbles, looking back down at the sheet of instructions, not to read them, I think, but to hide the fact he is blushing.

“Er, sorry, er... teatorcoffeewithmilkandsugar?” I blurt out in one garbled word. So much for trying not to sound like a bumbling idiot. At least I didn’t stutter!

“Coffee, just milk, thanks,” Ethan grunts without looking up, since he is now concentrating on sliding two bolts into their housings on one of the boards. He’s got further in two minutes than I had in an hour, with or without reading the instructions.

I retreat into the kitchen, my heart beating faster than a bullet train. I think I just saw and heard something he’d rather I hadn’t, but what, I have yet to work out. It is something that has embarrassed him enough to make him blush.

Can he not read without glasses maybe, and he’s come out without them? Why would he be embarrassed about that? He could just say. I never tagged him for the vain type. His wonderfully weird dress sense tells me he doesn’t usually give a shit what he looks like. Plus, I wouldn’t think he was stupid at all if he couldn’t read without his glasses, I can’t read without my glasses either. And if he can’t read for some other reason, it’s still nothing to be embarrassed about.

I shrug. Makes no difference to me if he can read or not. The ability to read is not the only measure of intelligence. He’s offered to help me, and I’m grateful and hopefully, by the end of the day I will have a desk, and I can stop sitting on the sofa with my laptop, and then, after he’s finished maybe I can set his mind at rest about this reading thing. He shouldn’t feel bad about it.

“OH BLOODY HELL, SHITE! YE BUGGER!” The shout shocks me into almost dropping the kettle I have just picked up.

I run into the living room just as Ethan exclaims, rather weakly, “Fuck, that hurt.”

He’s cradling his hand as I rush over to him, not sure what I can possibly do if he’s hurt himself because I am hopeless at first aid. I can’t stand the sight of blood.

“What, what happened?” I ask breathlessly.

“The bloody screwdriver slipped,” he hisses. “Oh god, Cordy, get back in your bed, you pest, I’m all right.” His dog is fussing over him. “Alex’ll look after me. Won’t you, Alex?”

What does he want me to do here? Reassure him or reassure the dog?

“Er, yes... Er, it’s okay, Cordy, y’know. I’m here now.”

“She’s just a dog, Alex, she can’t really understand you.”

I roll my eyes until I realise he is smirking and then roll my eyes again, at him this time.

“Let me see,” I demand, fully forgetting that I don’t do blood very well at all, although how badly can he be hurt? He doesn’t even look pale?

As Ethan slowly unfolds his hand I realise my mistake. I just stare at the gash across his palm.

“Oh god!” I gasp, rather weakly.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Alex, hand me that cloth.” He tugs the tea towel I’m gripping out of my hand and lays it across the wound. He hisses and I jump, gasping again. I feel a bit sick.

“There’s so much blood.” I can feel myself getting fainter.

“Proves I’m human.” Ethan mutters gruffly as he wraps the cloth around his hand gently. “Would you get me the first aid kit, please?”

“F-first aid?” My brain has stopped functioning as the blood drains from my extremities. “F-firs... Ai...”

“Oh, holy shit, Alex?”

Chapter 9

A Pig's Ear

Ethan

What the hell?

Alex just passed out in my arms.

Here's me with a gash across my hand that's bleeding profusely, and he's the one that's getting first aid. He took one look at the blood and flaked.

What am I supposed to do now? I carry him to his sofa and go off in search of a blanket to put over him. Bless him; he's out for the count. I set Cordy to watch him, because she's good like that, and she seems to like him.

That's always a good sign, when a dog likes a person straight off. It's like they smell the goodness. Cordy has never clapped eyes on Alex before today, but she was all over him like a rash when we arrived, as if she was greeting an old friend.

So she's watching the unconscious Alex while I sort out my own injuries.

That damn screwdriver slipped. This gash is nasty. It might need stitches, but I can't do anything about that right now. I certainly won't leave Alex in the state he's in at the minute.

How bloody embarrassing for him. Poor bloke. It can't be good, not liking the sight of blood. He'll probably be mortified when he wakes up.

Not that I can talk. I have weaknesses too. I think he may have observed a little of that just before I decided to stab myself with a screwdriver. I have no idea how long he was watching me from the doorway as I struggled to read six bloody sentences on the instruction sheet. I can read, but black print on white paper just dances about like those annoying little banana gifs people keep sending me over Facebook. It's exhausting and frustrating.

I have always felt self-conscious about being dyslexic, but next to him, I must look like an amoeba. He's intelligent as fuck, and I can't read for toffee. How is that ever going to work?

I want it to work so much though, because he's bloody gorgeous, and he seems so gentle and calm. He's shy, and tends to stutter, as if I intimidate him, but I'm sure that will pass. I hope that will pass. I want it to pass.

I have it so damn bad!

I glance over at the sofa. Cordy is lying on the floor level with Alex's head. She's such a sweet, intelligent dog, and so protective. I think she senses my protective instinct towards Alex, even though I can't explain it myself.

I offered to help him today, because, well, I felt guilty about how last night just turned into a series of unfortunate events involving me, primarily, with some bit players and poor Alex as an innocent bystander.

What Alex thinks of the people and life in this area, I haven't a clue. If he came here with the idea of becoming a hermit, I think we may have just solidified his plans. He'll let me help him with this job then close himself off from the world forever.

I don't want that though. I definitely don't want him to close himself off from me.

I get on with putting the desk together. The instructions are useless anyway and not because I can't read the buggers, but because these things are usually useless. The desk takes me ten minutes to finish putting together. It's piss easy, even for a DIY disaster area like me.

I'm just pushing in the last bolt when Cordy gives a soft, concerned whine. Alex is waking up. What do I say to him? I don't want him to feel bad about what has just happened. He's probably going to feel embarrassed, but I don't want him to.

I pop my head over the back of the sofa and see he is beginning to sit up.

"All right there, Hawk? Welcome back to the land of the living."

He turns his head and gives me a startled, confused look. Then I think he remembers what happened, and he turns away, hiding his head in his hands with a soft, mortified groan.

"I am so sorry, Ethan. That's so embarrassing." His voice is muffled, but he lifts his head as I walk around the sofa to sit beside him. "Is your hand all right, does it need bandaging?"

I hold it up, already fully dressed and bandaged. It hurts like hell, but I'm not going to let him know. He's feeling bad enough as it is.

"I'll live." I smirk at him, and he seems to relax a little, but not enough. "I finished yer desk."

“What?” he asks in complete shock. “B-but your hand...” He looks over the back of the sofa then back at me. “How?”

“I told you, it’s not so bad.” I smile.

He doesn’t look convinced. He still looks pale and very shaky.

“Thank you.” His voice is barely a whisper. He looks away, biting his lip. “You must think I’m a terrible... whatever, thank you. You’ll probably want to... well, I offered you some coffee before. I should go and... erm!” He stands, a little unsteadily, I reach out to help him, but he disappears into his kitchen before my hand can make contact.

All this time, Cordy has been sitting with her head in his lap as he absently scratched at her ears. She follows him into the kitchen because basically I haven’t told her to stop watching him yet. She’ll stay with him until I tell her otherwise.

I get up and follow, a little slower. I don’t want to crowd him, but I do want to check he’s all right. At the kitchen door, I stop when I hear his voice. He’s talking to Cordy.

“Your master must think I’m a total waste of space, Cordy,” he says as he clatters about his kitchen. I can see him now, pale and fragile and just the loveliest... “How embarrassing.” He continues to talk to Cordy. “Ethan needed help from me, and all I could do was pass out. I’m about as useless as a chocolate fireguard. He probably can’t wait to go now, probably can’t wait to get away. Oh god, Cordy. What a stupid thing to do.” He buries his face in his hands in utter despair.

Well, he can’t be allowed to go on thinking like that. He can’t help it if he doesn’t like the sight of blood, and it was my stupid useless fault for letting the screwdriver slip. I’m the world’s worst at DIY. He just has to ask anyone in town.

“Alex!”

I step into the kitchen, and he turns with a gasp.

“Oh, er... Ethan, I, er... you know, I’m really grateful for your help, and the desk looks great, but I’m sure you want to get away now. I’ve taken up far too much of your time, and your other dog is still outside. I feel bad for her. She and Cordy must be out of their minds with boredom. I think, what I’m saying is, I think perhaps you should go.”

“Oh!” I try not to feel completely gutted by this dismissal. I wanted to say something to make him feel better, but I can see that he is never going to completely relax until I’ve gone. No one should feel this tense and embarrassed in their own home. “Okay.” I nod, smiling, hiding how rejected I’m feeling right now. “Cordy, stand down!” I command, and she leaves Alex’s side and joins me.

Alex watches her with wide eyes, which he then turns on me, but I can’t look at them for long, because I’ll want to do something I know will just make him feel even more uncomfortable.

“I’m glad I could help, Alex,” I tell him as I turn to leave. “And, look, don’t feel bad about what happened, could happen to anyone,” I assure him.

“Has it ever happened to you?” he asks me bluntly.

“Well, no, not that I recall...”

“Well, that means it couldn’t happen to just anyone then, does it?” He sounds angry. Is he angry with me, or himself, or with what I’ve said?

“Oh, er, well, no.” I blow out my cheeks, wanting to say something else but not really knowing what. He needs me to go, so I guess I’d better go. “Well. Bye then.”

I retreat across his living room and out of the door before either of us can say anything else that can be taken the wrong way. I just wanted him to feel better. I didn’t mean to make him angry.

I don’t want him to feel anything but happy.

“I made a right pig’s ear of that, didn’t I Cordy?” I mutter as I walk back up over the hill with her and Paddy at my heels.

I can’t help thinking I might have made a mistake leaving him like this. He assumes I think he’s useless. That couldn’t be further from the truth. I think he’s a lovely, gentle, but lonely man. I don’t think he would have accepted me telling him that right now though.

I’ll get my opportunity eventually. He only lives next door, after all.

Chapter 10

A Little Bird Told Me

Alex

“Five stitches I heard he needed.”

“Five? He wants to be more careful, the daft bugger.”

I have just walked into the local supermarket and overheard the woman behind the counter gossiping with a woman she is serving. I don't think they saw me come in. I'm not really eavesdropping, I'm just within earshot, and the place is quiet. I can hear every word.

“He did it over at the Miller's Cottage, putting up a desk for that new bloke, I think.”

I freeze in the fruit and veg aisle, and for a moment, I battle with the dilemma of either continuing to listen or running a mile in embarrassment. Listening wins, because they are obviously talking about Ethan, and they mentioned stitches. The two women continue talking, oblivious to my eavesdropping.

“What was he thinking, trying to do anything like that? He's absolutely useless with a screwdriver.”

“Ethan's absolutely useless with any kind of tool, except the obvious one he's got between his legs.”

The two women giggle wickedly, and I retreat further up the aisle with a flaming face. That's what I get for listening to other people's conversations.

Stitches though? Really? Ethan never said anything about the cut on his hand being that bad. He certainly never looked as if he was in that much pain.

I didn't get a good look at his hand, obviously because, well, I passed out in his arms in perhaps the most embarrassing episode of my entire life. I wasn't completely oblivious to his suffering, though. I was going to offer to bandage it and give him painkillers. He just beat me to it that's all, while I was out for the count.

I was so utterly embarrassed about what happened. I kind of forgot to make him any coffee and couldn't really get rid of him fast enough. Perhaps he misinterpreted that as me pushing him away.

That was a week ago, and we haven't spoken since. I've seen him around town. He's pretty hard to miss when he's got a zebra following him, or sometimes he has his two lovely dogs in tow. I even saw him carrying a raccoon one day. I hid behind my car and watched him walking into town surrounded by a bunch of kids asking him all sorts of questions. He had the broadest grin on his face as he answered them, all the time cradling that raccoon like it was his baby.

He is the quirkiest, most interesting, and, not to mention, drop-dead gorgeous man I've ever met, and I would like more than anything to get to know him better. He's keeping his distance though, and I don't really blame him. I should have made the next move but instead I've hidden every time there was a chance we might meet face-to-face.

Stitches? I can't believe he wouldn't say anything. I have to find out how he is. If he's really hurt that badly has it affected his work? I feel terrible. And I never really acknowledged that he'd managed to put the desk up for me, I just shoved him out of the door without so much as a thank you. What must he think of me?

All the way back to the car I wonder about how Ethan is. Has he been working all alone with an injured hand? I didn't even notice a bandage when I've seen him around town. Granted I was usually hiding behind newspapers as he passed by the café, or ducking around corners.

I am not the only one that has been playing the "avoiding game" though. I followed Ethan into The Lion at the beginning of the week, two days after the screwdriver incident, only to find he had left by the back door. It was left up to a very cagey and embarrassed Lisa behind the bar, to explain that Ethan had gone to see a man about a horse.

I know an excuse when I hear one, although I admit it is perfectly feasible that he could literally have been seeing a man about a horse.

Of course, there is a rather obvious explanation for his avoiding me. He probably thinks I'm the most ungrateful and unsociable bastard that ever took a breath because I kicked him out of my house without even making him a coffee.

Well, I'm going to remedy that: prove I have some manners. I have grapes! And I actually have beer this time. I am going to pay him a visit.

Cordy comes out to greet me as I step out of my car at Ethan's house. I scratch at her ears as she practically wags herself into a circle because she is so happy to see me. She's only met me the once, but she's greeting me like an old friend. Are Border collies always this friendly?

Another dog is barking from somewhere else in the sprawling yard. I assume that is Paddy. Other than the two dogs though, the yard is deserted.

"Hello!" I call. There is no answer. I look down at the dog, regarding me with her tongue hanging out as if she is laughing. "Is your master about, Cordy?" I ask her as an afterthought. "Where's Ethan?"

She shoots off in the direction of some outhouses and barns. With a shrug, I follow.

The first time I wandered over here I ended up so high on my "high horse" that I never really got a good look around. He has some extensive outbuildings here. There are two very big barns, some stables, and some newer looking sheds. Beyond those I can see a paddock and a small fenced enclosure where I assume the zebra is kept. I have no idea how many other animals Ethan has, but I know he at least shares his home with two raccoons and keeps a vestiphobic golden eagle somewhere around here.

The yard is clean, immaculate in fact. I wonder how much help Ethan gets around here. He surely can't look after all of this by himself. I feel even worse now, thinking that he has had all this to do with an injured hand.

"Cordy?" Ethan calls as he emerges from one of the larger outhouses with Paddy at his heels. He notices me and almost immediately his face breaks into a broad, welcoming grin. "Hello, Hawk!"

Well, he doesn't seem unhappy to see me, quite the opposite. I might even go as far to say that he seems overjoyed to see me, which is of course, a ludicrous thought. Why would he be overjoyed to see me? I'm the cause of his having five stitches in his hand.

"What brings you all the way over here, then?" He's asking as he approaches. My ears start to ring.

What's my excuse? Why am I paying him a spontaneous visit? The sight of him and the way his green eyes lit up when he greeted me just now sent every thought out of my head. Then I notice the bandage on his left hand, and I suddenly remember.

"Why didn't you tell me you needed stitches in your hand?" I ask indignantly, forgetting to greet him, like a normal person would have.

He stops a few feet away from me, looking slightly taken aback by my question and my total bypass of any normal social niceties.

“I, well, I, er...” He grimaces, glancing down at his hand. “I was busy?”

Is he asking me, or saying he can’t remember?

“How the hell should I know?” I hear my voice go up an octave. “All I know is that I had to hear from some woman in the supermarket that you have five stitches, and you’ve been avoiding me all week when I could have been helping you out if you’d just said, since it’s my damn fault you’re hurt in the first place.”

“*I’ve been avoiding you?*” Ethan laughs, as if this is completely ludicrous. “What about the day you ran and hid behind your car when you saw me walking over the hill into town? Or the time you found your newspaper extremely interesting when I walked past the coffee shop.”

Oh my god, did he see me do those things? I thought he hadn’t noticed me?

“Yeah?” I refuse to be so easily flummoxed this time because I’m not the only one in the wrong here. “Well you walked out of the back door of the pub the other day when I walked in the front.”

“Oh, you noticed that?”

I fold my arms in front of my chest and nod. He simply shrugs.

“Sorry!” He grimaces. “I had my reasons, Hawk, but if I try to explain ye’ll think I’m doolally. And it wasn’t your fault; it was mine.”

“I beg your pardon?” Sometimes I think this man speaks a different language to me.

“The screwdriver cutting my hand, Alex,” he explains, “it wasn’t your fault, it was totally mine. I’m no good with any kind of tool.”

I am suddenly reminded of what the women in the shop had had to say about that, and I bite my lip as I try not to think about the only tool he is apparently very good with.

“Quite!” I state, unable to meet his eye. “I brought you some grapes.” I thrust the bag at his chest, looking in any direction but directly at him. “And beer,” I add as an afterthought, holding out the bag in my other hand. I am still unable to look at him without bursting immediately into flames.

“Oh, er, thanks, er, Alex. You didn’t need to.” I can see his bemused smile out of the corner of my eye. He must think I’m completely bonkers.

I have to admit I do quite like it when he calls me Hawk. In a perverted sort of way, it fits. It's kind of distracting when he calls me Alex, because it always sounds like he's huffing out the name breathlessly. I refuse to be distracted from my goal though.

"Yes, I did have to, Ethan!" I don't want to feel or sound snippy about this, but the truth is I'm angry with him. "Have you had to work on your own all week with your hand like that?" I point to his bandaged hand.

"Erm, yes and no." He sounds contrite and apologetic. His lips are slightly pursed and my eyes are drawn to them. Annoyingly, my brain begins to note just how deliciously soft they look.

"Well, which is it?" I snap to distract myself from such an unattainable goal. This man is frustrating and infuriating, and I want to kiss him. I think I'm going crazy.

"I've had help," he snaps back, narrowing his eyes as if he knows what I'm thinking and doesn't like it, "but not because I hurt my hand."

"Oh!" I fold my hands across my chest because they're shaking now. I hate confrontations. At least he hasn't been on his own, but then he could still have let me know what was happening. "Do you need any more?"

"Any more what?" He does seem a bit thrown by my sudden change of tone, but, oh for goodness' sake, are we speaking out of sync? Am I speaking a foreign language?

"Any more help, Ethan," I snap again, and then I take a deep breath, holding the bridge of my nose to calm myself down. "It can't have been easy for you, trying to do everything one-handed."

"It wasn't so bad really, I..." He starts to dismiss my concern, but he stops as I narrow my eyes. I think he sees I won't be placated. I don't need him deciding what will and will not upset me. Granted, I passed out when he first cut his hand, but that was because of the blood. It's not as if I'm going to pass out knowing he has stitches or how difficult this week has been for him. "Now that you come to mention it, Alex, I could do with some extra help." He smirks as if he's the cat that managed to get all the cream. "Come on, Hawk, the others'll be here soon. I'll set you to work doing something useful that shouldn't involve any blood."

"Thanks!" I reply, not bothering to hide my sarcasm.

I follow him across the yard, wondering what weird and wonderful animal he'll have me looking after. Oh, god, I hope it's not that psychotic eagle.

I don't really think there was any need for that dig about the blood. I only just register what else he said.

“What others?” God, how stupid am I to think I would have him all to myself?

Thought you could come over and play doctor and have him all grateful for looking after him, did you, Alex? When of course he hasn't been on his own, has he? He said so. And he hasn't asked me to stay because he wants to spend time with me, he's just using me as an extra pair of hands, which is all I deserve really, because I should have been here all week instead of hiding away from him in embarrassment.

He'll probably find the worst, muckiest duties in order to punish me for being an arse.

Chapter 11

A Bird in the Hand

Ethan

Just pinch me, someone please?

Alex Hawking is here, in my yard, practically begging to help me out, and I didn't even have to do anything to get him to come. He came of his own accord. I am as happy as a clam.

I knew stepping back and giving him some space was the right thing to do, even if it did mean an awful lot of patience and practically going cold turkey not seeing him for an entire week.

I should learn not to doubt my gut instinct, it's always served me well with my crew, and now it has with Alex.

He was mortified after he passed out, almost to the point that he couldn't even put a full, coherent sentence together. There was a lot of blood, but it's not the first time I've needed stitches because of a disastrous DIY incident. I just took it in my stride. He didn't. I admit to feeling a little hurt that he kicked me out after I took such good care of him, but as I walked back over the hill with the dogs, I had time to think it through.

I can see it from his point of view. He pushed me away because he was embarrassed. I told him everything was fine, but he was still uncomfortable. I had no choice really, but to back away and wait for him to calm down. I just had to wait it out and let him come to me.

I don't know how he found out about my hand though; he's so shy he doesn't speak to anyone. He smiles at them and nods, but that's about it. I can't imagine him eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. He's too damn polite. God that is funny, imagining him listening in to gossip about me. He must have been pretty desperate to hear what was being said.

I was so surprised when he turned up all full of concern, I almost played down the stitches in my hand, when it has actually been pretty frustrating, all this one-handed stuff. He's offered to help out of guilt, I realise that, but it's a foot in the door, so to speak. He's here, and I almost sent him away again. How stupid would that have been?

However, I wasn't lying when I said I'd had help this week.

"What others?" Alex asks me as he follows me across the yard. Does he sound disappointed? Did he come here thinking he could play nursemaid to me and receive my undying gratitude?

Hmm, that's an interesting thought. I need some sort of plan to get him alone, in my kitchen, so we can play nurse/patient.

"I've got a team of students from the local Agricultural College helping me out this week and next," I explain, trying to stay focused on what we're doing now and not what we might be doing later. "They have to do some sort of practical, saving the environment, local conservation stuff for their course, so they come here."

"Yes, I can see how looking after a zebra and a psychotic eagle can teach students about local conservation."

I stop and turn, regarding him with narrowed eyes. I think my Hawk has a bit of a sarcastic streak. He thinks he knows it all after seeing me with a few of my crew. Bear and Rupert are just the tip of the iceberg.

"All right, sarcastic bugger." I nod, giving him a look that I hope is telling him I am about to get one up on him.

He raises one eyebrow in a gesture that makes me want to push him up against the nearest wall and snog him stupid. Instead I grab his hand and pull him into the nearest barn, just to show him exactly what I do here in my private paradise.

"Ethan, for goodness sake...!" he gasps as he stumbles after me. He doesn't withdraw his hand though; that's a good start.

Alex gasps as we enter the barn, and he sees just what I mean by local conservation. I'm quite proud of this place actually, even if my practical input was simply to offer advice on the design.

"This is The Barn," I explain with pride. "It's actually called that. It was an original outbuilding to the old farmhouse, used for storage of feed and equipment and such. Three years ago it was converted, with the help of quite a few volunteers and some grants from various conservation charities and organisations. It is now full of small enclosures lining either side of the exterior walls: twenty in total. Some are open plan, some are closed in to cater for the different animals that might pass through here. It's my own private animal

sanctuary, although most of the time it isn't me that keeps it running smoothly, it's the volunteers."

"Oh, you shouldn't play yourself down, Ethan," someone calls from close by. "You're here most of the time, and the food is awesome."

I roll my eyes and shrug. "I work away an awful lot." I know Alex definitely isn't interested in that aspect of my life in any way, but that part of my life is pretty important since it pays for The Barn and all the other things I do. "At the weekends people from the Wildlife Trust come in, and I get a lot of students through here doing various animal-related college courses. I try to make it worth their while though. I offer to feed them when they're here."

I don't want it to sound like I'm boasting. I don't think that will impress Alex at all. Although, he seems to be pretty impressed so far, or is he just being polite, as he always is?

I'm still learning his idiosyncrasies. He pulled his hand from mine as soon as he heard that voice. Why was that? Does he not want me to hold his hand or doesn't he want me to do it public?

There are four students working in here at the moment, and they all greet me with cheerful hellos when they hear my voice. There are another two somewhere outside, probably in Bear's enclosure. No one seems able to resist paying my quirky, clingy zebra a visit.

"Guys, this is Alex. He's my neighbour from over the hill. He's volunteered to help today."

"Hey, Alex. Do you know what you've let yourself in for?" one guy calls.

Another yells from the far end of the building, "A neighbour, eh? Bet you don't get the muckiest jobs, he'll need to keep you sweet."

Everyone laughs. I purse my lips and turn to Alex, who is regarding me with one raised eyebrow and amusement in his dark eyes.

"Ignore them." I sniff. I see some signs of relief on his face. Ha, he doesn't get off that easily. "Every job here is mucky."

Alex gives a soft, indignant gasp, and I walk off smirking.

The four kids in The Barn are cleaning out hutches and checking out the critters that are being housed here.

"Are all of these enclosures occupied?" Alex looks around in awe as he follows tight on my heels.

“Nah, there’s only half a dozen critters in here at the minute. It can get pretty busy though.”

He turns to me. “So the animals in here aren’t permanent residents then?”

“No, they come in injured, lost, pregnant, abandoned at birth sometimes. They’re nursed back to health and released back into the wild when they’re strong enough to cope out there in the cruel natural world.” I see new respect in his dark eyes, and I don’t want to lose this momentum, but I can’t take all the credit myself. “I don’t do it single-handed. I have help from the Wildlife Trust, mostly volunteers, and the local College, like I said, sends students on placement here.” I grin. “Helping to look after Bear and Rupert is one of the perks of the job, Hawk.”

Alex gives me a dubious look. I’m sure he’s thinking my idea of a perk is a little awry, since he knows first-hand just how crazy Rupert actually is, and he also knows what I have to do to get Bear to do anything at all.

“Do the students who volunteer to come here know the dress code?” He isn’t looking in my direction, but I can hear the amusement in his tone. He definitely has a sarcastic streak.

“They can’t come unless they provide their own zebra onesie.”

He chuckles. “And what about camouflage underwear with their initials emblazoned across the waistband?”

“My...?” I frown. “My what?” I’m slightly confused.

“Your initials,” he explains, making gestures around his middle with both hands, “ES, Ethan Shaw. A bit flamboyant, even for you, Ethan.” He continues to smirk, but I think he’s serious. Doesn’t he know they’re a designer brand? Maybe he only wears Andrew Christians. Maybe he doesn’t wear any at all.

Okay, I need to stop that line of thought before it becomes obvious what I’m thinking about.

Thankfully one of the students, Melanie, walks over and distracts us with one of the hedgehogs she’s got cradled in a towel in her arms.

“What’s up?” I see her concerned frown, and worry that she’s going to show me a dead hedgehog. This one was in pretty poor condition when he was brought in.

“I don’t know, Ethan, he just seems less perky today.”

“Maybe change to feeding him every half hour, with a pipette of water at the same time?” I ask her, and she nods and walks away. “Don’t handle him too much, Mel, pet. He needs to go back where we found him eventually and he won’t have warm cuddles there.” She lifts her hand as she disappears behind some hay bales.

“Sorry, Ethan.”

“She’s willing to take on that responsibility, it’s admirable,” Alex comments quietly as he watches her leave. I nod.

“I’ve done it countless times, and it’s pretty thankless. They get released back into the wild and they either survive or they don’t.” I shrug. It upsets me, but it’s a fact of life. “Hedgehogs are in decline, we have to do our part to help.”

Alex nods again and gives me a quizzical look. He rubs his hands as if he’s getting ready for some hard work.

“So where do you want me?” he asks, looking away quickly when he sees my eyebrow quirk at what his suggestion could possibly mean. I know he didn’t mean it that way, but it’s fun to see him blush.

“We have plenty help in here. Let’s go out into the paddock.” I lead him outside.

In the yard, the thunderous sound of a car driving through the valley to my house distracts us.

“What’s that noise?” Alex asks in alarm, looking towards the gate with wide eyes.

“It’s car tyres on the gravel track through the valley,” I explain. “I reckon it’s the tutor in charge of that lot.” I wave my hand back towards The Barn.

I pull him to the gate, and he just allows me to lead him by the hand again. I wonder if he even knows he’s being so damn adorable. Somehow I don’t think he has a clue.

“I keep meaning to get the drive laid properly, but that would involve a lot of time and an awful lot of money.” I make plenty of money, but there is always something else more pressing to spend it on, and the gravel might be loud, but it acts as a sort of alarm. It’s impossible to drive along that part of the drive without making a noise.

We reach the gate as a car pulls up.

“All right, Dave?” I grin at the college tutor as he climbs out of his car.

Me and Dave have known each other a while now, since he first approached me a couple of years ago about sending his students over. Dave gets straight to the point.

“Ethan, I’ve got a couple of others asking to come over next week because they’ve finished another placement early. Can I send them? Is that okay?” He always asks, but the truth is, there’s not that many I’ll turn away as long as they pull their weight. He always stays with them so there’s never really any bother.

“Course it’s okay, the more the merrier.” I turn to smile at Alex. He pulled his hand from mine when the car pulled into the yard, but I can still feel the warmth of his fingers between mine. “Alex, this is Dave, college tutor.” I turn back to Dave. “Alex lives over the hill.”

“Ah.” Dave nods and shakes Alex’s hand. “The new neighbour.” He turns to go, and out of Alex’s sight, he winks. “Nice to meet you, Alex.”

I narrow my eyes as he follows his students into The Barn. Me and Dave had a bit of a chat the other night, and by chat I mean we got stottin’ drunk and spilled about our shocking love lives. He’s been having wife problems, and I spilled my guts about how head over heels I am about this man currently standing by my side, even though I hardly know anything about him. I guess Dave is happy to see there is actually something happening, even if it is just Alex coming here out of guilt.

“So, what is it that you would like to do, Hawk?” I turn to Alex when we’re alone in the yard again. “Feed the zebra? Walk the raccoons? Eagle training?”

“Oh my god!” he exclaims, looking more than a little wild-eyed. “Anything but that eagle. I’ve never been so bloody scared in my entire life as when that thing flew over me the other day.”

I laugh, take a chance and drape my arm around his shoulders, then guide him away from the aviary and through the farm to the field where Bear currently resides.

“In that case, I’ve got a very tame zebra that needs feeding and grooming, and I promise you, no animal onesies will be involved.”

He snorts softly as we walk towards the paddock. He allows my arm to stay just a little longer than I think he would if he didn’t want it there.

“Doesn’t your vet friend do this sort of thing?” Alex asks me a little later after we’ve moved back into The Barn and on from underweight hedgehogs, to a barn owl with a broken wing and now a roe deer fawn whose parent was run over by a car just down the road.

“Ha!” He surely knows the answer without me having to elaborate, but maybe a little more explanation about how the local vet, Kelly Rogerson, definitely does not do this sort of thing. “You met Kelly that night at the pub.”

“Oh!” He nods. “Yes, she didn’t seem the most agreeable soul.”

“Disagreeable is her middle name, Hawk.”

“Quite.”

Every time I call him by this nickname he narrows his eyes, looks as if he’s about to say something then thinks better of it. It doesn’t look like he’s about to ask me to stop, it’s that he doesn’t quite know why I call him that. It’s not hard to work out, though is it? He’s a clever man, far cleverer than me, anyway.

“Just, you did say she comes over to check you out, er, I mean, check over your animals.”

I chuckle at his choice of words, and he smirks, blushing from the roots of his hair to the collar of his shirt. Gotta admit, he does blush beautifully.

“She comes over to inspect the premises once a year according to the stipulations in my exotic animal handler’s licence, and every now and then, I get a surprise check from the RSPCA, usually when I’ve pissed her off, and she’s reported me. The RSPCA guys know her well though. Other than that, there is absolutely no love lost between us.” I grimace. “Sometimes I don’t give the best first impression, and I’ve just never been able to repair that with her.”

“She didn’t strike me as the kind of person who would see reason.” Alex regards me thoughtfully. “What you did in the pub, that dog with the thorn in its paw, was pretty amazing really. She can’t have that much of a commitment to animal welfare if she expected the dog to wait all weekend in pain.”

“Well, exactly.” I hear myself say the words, but in truth, my ears, my brain, in fact my entire body is ringing with his words of praise.

I set up the bottle to feed the little fawn then hand it over to Alex. He looks unsure, but I insist. There’s always that slight hesitation before jumping in with both feet. I like that about him. It’s like he needs that extra little push, as if his confidence has had a knocking, and he just needs reassurance.

The fawn follows the bottle and attaches to it with gusto. The soft look of wonder on Alex's face as he begins to feed the creature is a thing of beauty in itself. He looks up at me and smiles, not a tight, tense, unsure smile, but a genuine, bright smile that lights his entire face. I feel my breath catch in my throat, because if I thought he was beautiful before my socks are well and truly knocked off now.

Today is turning out to all kinds of incredible, and it's only just begun.

Showing Alex around and having him with me as I work has slowed things down though, and I have a list of things to do as long as my arm. I need to do something with Rupert yet. I try to fly him every day, or at least handle him. He's had a bad time of it with a previous owner that is still in the process of being prosecuted. Poor Rupert. No wonder he hates people. The trouble is, he'd be put down if I hadn't taken him on. He hates people to the point of attacking them when he sees them. That isn't a good thing at all for a wild creature to be doing. So he's practically a prisoner here until I can desensitise him. It's a gradual process, but it is working, because he didn't attack Alex that time on the hill. That is very positive progress. I doubt Alex thinks that way though, which is why I won't be taking him with me to Rupert's aviary.

"Listen." I stay quiet, so as not to disturb the skittish fawn. "I have to go and sort some things in Rupert's aviary." Alex gives an involuntary shudder. "You seem to have everything under control here."

"Oh, er..." There's that hesitation again.

I smile and pat his arm. "You're doing fine. When he's finished, would you mind sweeping out the next enclosure?"

"Oh, yes, of course, anything." He glances at my hand and then meets my eye again. "Be careful with... you know..." He looks away again, blushing furiously.

"I'm always careful, Alex." I chuckle as I walk off and hear his huff of disbelief.

I'm touched by his concern, though. It seems to stem from more than just guilt. Am I reading too much into it? I hope not. My plan to get him alone in my kitchen is taking form.

Chapter 12

Butterflies in My Stomach

Alex

“Hawk,” Ethan hisses furtively at me from the door of the enclosure I am busy sweeping out.

There’s nothing being housed here, but it needs to be kept clean just in case, and there seems to be an inordinate amount of mouse droppings. I suppose it is a barn.

“Hawk, when you’re finished there, could you do me a favour?”

I lean on the brush and wipe my brow. This is hot, thirsty work, and not what I got up this morning expecting to do. I wish I’d worn lighter clothes.

“Of course, I’m done here. What do you want me to do?” I leave the brush leaning against the door frame of the enclosure and follow him as he pushes away from the wall and walks quickly towards his house. I have to run to catch up.

He looked a little shifty just then... No, not shifty: unsure and a little self-conscious.

Every time I see Ethan, he’s smiling, grinning in fact, and irrepressibly confident. What has happened to make him so unhappy?

We reach what I’m supposing is the back door to his house. As in all rural parts the back door of the building is actually the main door. I doubt Ethan uses his front door at all. I rarely use mine. Although my house is ten times smaller than his.

He beckons me inside, and I find myself in a cosy farmhouse-type kitchen which is as immaculate as every other part of his setup. The large oak table in the middle of the room is scrubbed clean and everywhere is scrupulously tidy. I can’t say the same of my place. I’m just not that organised. Ethan seems to be a bit obsessed, or maybe he has someone that comes in and cleans for him.

“Want a coffee?” is the first thing he asks me. “It’s time for a break anyway.”

He’s acting weird, not meeting my eye. It’s as if he didn’t seem to have anything else more urgent for me to do. It seemed pretty urgent when he asked me in here, but now he seems to be worrying about making me feel at home.

His two dogs follow us inside, and they fuss around him as he rummages in cupboards for mugs and stuff.

“No treats right now, guys. There’s water for you both over there.” He points, and they go off immediately to drink from their water bowls before being told firmly to get in their beds. I watch with wonder at their absolute obedience. He’s not even that firm with them. He’s very good.

I have to admit that despite the extreme cleanliness, this kitchen is homely and inviting. I could sit in here for hours. There’s even a comfy chair. It’s currently occupied by a sleepy-looking cat: Siamese, I think. It lifts its head and regards me with feline disinterest. I can imagine myself lazing in that chair, by the fire, with a good book, for hours.

“Alex! Coffee?” Ethan’s sharp, but amused tone snaps me out of my daydream.

What a silly thing to imagine. This isn’t my house. That chair is obviously Ethan’s anyway.

“Oh, er, thank you, yes please!” I sit at the table when he pulls out a chair for me.

Well that was very chivalrous.

I shouldn’t be surprised. He has never come across as being bad mannered, quite the opposite. He’s brash and sometimes swears a lot, but then so do I. He seems cocky and over confident occasionally, but he’s always been very polite and considerate alongside all those other things.

He pulls up a chair next to mine after he’s filled the kettle one-handed. I kick myself because I could have been doing that. I’m the ill-mannered one. Whatever I was dreaming before is just that: a dream. He’s never going to want me, despite the signals he’s been sending out. I’m sure he just wraps his arms around everyone, holds hands with everyone. He’s the touchy-feely type.

“Hawk.” He smiles as he shuffles closer and lays his injured, bandaged hand on the table in front of me. “You’re not going to get squeamish if I ask you to help change my dressing are you?” This time he isn’t making fun of me. He is genuinely concerned I will pass out again.

God, what must this week have been like for him? I look down at his hand lying palm up. The dressing is a little dirty, but neat. It certainly doesn’t look a week old.

“Who’s been doing this for you?” I ask him softly, reaching out and tracing the edge of the bandage. The action is unconscious, but when I realise what I’m doing I can’t withdraw because he’ll think I don’t want to help him when I do very much.

“I changed it myself a couple of times, badly.” He grimaces. “I asked Dave to do it yesterday, but he was a bit rough. Melanie, one of the students offered as well, but she’s kind of got a bit of a crush I think, so I said no.” He shrugs this all off but seems unhappy about it all, as if he would rather not have had to ask anyone to help him. He’s fiercely independent, but everyone needs someone.

I could have been here doing it for him. The thought of him coping with this all by himself upsets me. I feel horrible.

I gasp when his hand lies gently across mine, and I look up into his eyes, gasping again at the concern I see there. How can he still have concern for me when it is him that’s suffered this indignity?

“I can ask Dave to do it again if...” he begins, and I stop him. He misunderstood my hesitation.

“It’s fine,” I say too quickly and then clear my throat and smile reassuringly. I need to man up or there’s a danger of this man thinking I’m some sort of wimp. I don’t want him to think that, especially not after I passed out. I have some ground to make up, and I have this urge to be strong for him. I’ve never felt that way before. “Really, it’s fine, I’m fine. As long as there’s no blood, I’m good.”

“Ah, well, I’ll try not to bleed too much then.”

I chuckle, trying to hide the shudder of horror. It won’t be bleeding, will it? It’s stitched and a week old to boot. The wound must be healing quite nicely by now.

“I just need it covered when I’m working,” he explains, “and I try to wear a glove, but it gets sweaty, you know?” He looks apologetic, as if he feels the need to explain why the dressing is dirty. He doesn’t need to explain himself to me.

“First-aid supplies?” I ask.

He grins and jumps out of his seat, bounding over to a cupboard and bringing back a large first-aid box. There was one a similar size in the Barn as well. Maybe that should serve as an indication of just how many accidents this

man has on a regular basis. If I'd known that before I'd agreed to him helping me with that damn desk, I might have thought twice about saying yes.

"Thanks, Hawk." He sits back down and that irrepressible grin is back on his face.

There's also a soft flush to his cheeks. We're so close I can see he has freckles. It makes him look far younger than he actually is and somehow very vulnerable. I never saw him like that before: as needing someone to look after him. He always seems so self-sufficient. I wonder how old he actually is.

He blinks several times as he waits patiently for me to start fussing with his hand. Damn it, it's those thick lashes and dark eyebrows framing those gorgeous green eyes that I just can't seem to get out of my head.

I change the dressing, hoping that it will be sufficient to distract me from looking at his lips, which I've done several times just to avoid looking at his eyes. It hasn't helped. It is a little difficult to change the dressing on someone's hand without actually touching them, and every time his skin comes into contact with mine, I tingle all over.

I'm not very efficient either. I hope he doesn't think I'm taking my sweet time because I'm using it as an excuse to stay this close to him. I'm sure this is awkward enough for him as it is. I'm a relative stranger, and he's asked me to help him with something very intimate because he just doesn't have anyone else to do it. God that sounds awful, how horrible must this have been for him?

Without thinking, I curl my fingers around his bandaged hand and rub my thumb over his exposed fingertips. His breath catches, and I ready myself for the inevitable withdrawal, but it doesn't happen.

I can't actually look up at him, because I am once again in danger of spontaneous combustion. I'm sure they could run an entire village on the heat emanating from my body right now.

He's in this position because of me, I remind myself. He isn't here out of any kind of choice. I hang my head further.

"I'm so sorry, Ethan."

He gasps and his good hand covers mine and his.

"I told you this was not your fault, Alex."

I shake my head wondering if I should withdraw my hand or not. I don't want to, but does he want it there? His fingers close more tightly around mine. He seems to want to keep it there a little while longer.

“I still feel bad, though. You’ve had no one to do this for you all week.”

“No, but you’re here now. The job’s yours if you want it.”

I look up with a surprised gasp, why would he be so... I stop, all thoughts disappearing from my head. The way he’s looking at me. There’s no way I can misinterpret the heat in his eyes.

He leans forward hesitantly. I lean forward, breaking eye contact only to look at his lips, again, then back up to his smouldering eyes. Oh my god, I think I’m going to kiss him. I want him to kiss me.

“Ethan,” I whisper, closing the gap.

“ETHAN!” a voice interrupts us as it calls his name with some degree of panic and urgency from outside.

I gasp and pull away, my wide eyes staying on him as he looks towards the back door.

“Bloody bollocks,” he hisses. “Why the fuck now?”

“Ethan!” A breathless girl, Melanie I think her name is, appears at the doorway and leans against the door frame, taking in great gulps of air as if she’s run a marathon. “The ducks are out and they’re ganging up on Bear.” There’s a giggle in her tone, and it is kind of a ridiculous thing to be telling anyone. Ducks don’t gang up on people, or zebras in this case. I want to laugh. “We can’t stop them,” she continues, sounding semi-serious. “They won’t listen to any of us. You’re the duck whisperer.”

With further curses Ethan pulls his hands from mine and gets up from the table.

“Bloody ducks. I swear they’re related to bloody Houdini. I’m going to eat each and every one of them. Fancy some duck paté, Alex?”

“Oh, er, I’m vegetarian, b-but thanks anyway.” I chuckle.

He gives me a funny look so I turn away. It surely can’t be that weird that I’m a vegetarian, especially for someone who appears to love animals as much as Ethan does.

I busy myself putting stuff back into the first-aid box. It had all been arranged so neatly. I’m not doing a very good job.

“I’m off to sort those damn ducks out. Coming?”

I look up again. He's smiling, the smile that churns my insides; the one that is millimetres away from being a cocky, sexy smirk. He is far too hot for me. Why would he want to kiss me? But he almost just did.

"I'll, er, just get this box tidied up and join you." I mumble something about washing my hands as well, without looking up. He leaves with a huff of breath that sounds almost like frustration.

Should I have followed him out? I can't actually stand up right now; my legs have turned to jelly. I don't seem to be able to process this attraction I have for him. He's almost too attractive, too beautiful, too good to be true. Oh. My. God!

Did he really want to kiss me just then, or were we just caught up in a moment? Did he make the first move, or did I misinterpret the mood and press the advantage? Let's face it; it's an advantage I will most likely never get again. He couldn't get away fast enough.

He asked me to come with him, but that was surely just because he doesn't want me snooping around in his house unaccompanied. Except I'm not unaccompanied, since Cordy has stayed with me. Probably at Ethan's request: she's guarding his territory.

I have a little trouble stashing the first-aid box back in the cupboard. The cupboard door appears to have a childproof lock on it. Why on earth would he have child locks fitted when he hasn't got children? I pull at the door, rattling it to no avail. I eventually work it out. Never mind childproof: try Alex proof.

I nearly jump out of my skin when something brushes up against my leg. I look down to see the rather exquisite Siamese cat that had been lazing on the comfy chair, now weaving between my ankles and purring. Is there something she wants?

She's joined by another, and the two do their best to trip me up, insistently purring and twisting around my ankles. I turn around and regard them suspiciously. My guess is that the first-aid box cupboard is close to the cat food cupboard.

"Am I right?" I tip my head to one side and chuckle as both cats stop to regard me in much the same fashion. Cordy is also watching me with a very expectant look on her face. Possibly the dog food is kept there too.

A touch on my arm has me whirling back to face the bench.

"Oh my giddy aunt." I clutch my chest at the completely unexpected sight.

It's a raccoon, sitting large as life on the bench in front of me. It looks so comical, like it's wearing a bandit mask across its face. They always make me want to laugh when I see them on screen. Right now though, face-to-face, I haven't a clue what the protocol is. The need for childproof locks becomes clear. They're raccoon proof too.

The creature snickers at me, tipping its head to one side before turning and laying a paw on the cupboard door to the left of the one I just opened. I chuckle.

"Is that where your snacks are kept?" I can't believe I am taking a non-verbal prompt from a raccoon. When did my life become so bizarre? I think I might be able to pinpoint exactly when, actually. "Well, dearest raccoon. Whilst I do think you are very pretty and kind of sassy trying to get me to open that cupboard door, I very much doubt that Ethan would be happy with me allowing you to snack between meals."

"And you'd be right," Ethan calls from the kitchen door. I turn with a gasp and watch, as he pushes himself away from the door frame and approaches, a strange look on his face that I just can't interpret. How long was he there? Did he see me ineptly trying to interact with his pets?

"Er, I was just putting the first-aid box away when I was accosted by your... er... charming friends." I glance down at the two cats and Cordy, who I am sure were all part of the campaign to get me to open that cupboard door.

"Yogi, you are incorrigible." The raccoon pads along the bench at the sound of its name spoken in such smooth, affectionate tones, and jumps nimbly into Ethan's waiting arms. It rubs its face against Ethan's neck, and I feel an irrational flash of envy and jealousy. "Where's BooBoo, eh? Off chasing moths somewhere?" The raccoon snickers and squeaks in an almost affectionate way. It makes me smile.

The cats abandon their newfound rubbing post in favour of Ethan's legs, and once again I feel I should be there instead. God, what is happening to me?

"I-I was just about to come out and join you," I explain, trying not to watch as he communes with his animals, but it is a pretty incredible thing to witness.

"No need, problem's been sorted." Ethan winks as he gently lowers Yogi to the ground. "And stay there, young'un," he orders, pointing a finger sternly. "Nae jumpin' on the bench when I'm not lookin'." The raccoon hides its face in apparent shame, and I can't help laughing out loud. Ethan looks up, wearing a

broad grin as he steps around his cats and the raccoon to get closer to me. “You and I have some unfinished business, Hawk.”

I bite my lip, feeling suddenly very weak at the knees again. Irrationally I look about for exits, but there’s nowhere for me to go but back against the worktop.

“I-it wasn’t me that r-ran off,” I remind him, cursing the stutter that seems to manifest itself every time I speak to him.

He narrows his eyes as he takes another step, crowding me now, his hands on the bench either side of me, leaving me with no doubt as to what his intentions are. We’re having another go at that “moment”.

“I had a duck emergency,” he huffs. I snort out a nervous chuckle.

“I-if I had a penny for every time someone’s used that excuse...” I can hear the sassy words coming out of my mouth, but I am sure he can also hear the nervous quiver in my voice as I say them. My entire body is shaking. He’s so close. I can feel his body heat, or is that mine? I gulp.

“You’re a funny guy, Alex.” He smirks, his green eyes boring into mine, seeing much more than I would normally allow anyone to see.

He reaches up and brushes away a strand of hair from my face, and I feel myself tremble as he touches me.

“Finish what you started, Hawk.” His lips are so close I feel his warm breath across my cheek.

I gasp. “I didn’t start anythi...” His lips are on mine, firm and insistent, and as warm and as soft as I imagined they’d feel.

I can’t help lifting my arms and weaving my fingers through his short, dark hair. Nor can I help the moan that escapes from deep within me as his tongue brushes against mine.

I arch into the kiss, giving it all I can because this will probably be my only chance. The kiss is so deep, so full of promise, I think I might pass out... it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve collapsed in his arms.

He’s crowding me though, and I don’t want him to think I’m some sort of pushover, despite the ease with which he manipulated me into this situation, and I do recognise he manipulated me, from the moment he asked me to help him with the dressing on his hand. The only thing I expect was genuine was the

duck emergency and the flash of vulnerability I saw whilst I was actually changing his dressing.

I push, and he gives way. I grab his shirt and turn him, no mean feat since he's at least four inches taller and wider at the shoulder than me. With a surprised huff, he is pushed up against the kitchen bench with me crowding him this time. I'm not sure who the surprised huff came from though, because I have never been so proactive.

He makes me want to do things I've never wanted to do in my entire life. He makes me want more than I have ever wanted. The physical attraction is almost overwhelming.

I pull him down by the front of his T-shirt and my lips are on his again before he can protest, or put a stop to the proceedings. His hands grip my hips and pull me against him, leaving me in no doubt as to how much he is enjoying this kiss. My own reaction throbs inside my jeans, the friction of his leg between mine just tantalising enough to make me moan. I don't want to stop kissing him. He tastes delicious. And I definitely want to get as much kissing done before he comes to his senses.

We have to come up for air eventually though, and once again I can't meet his eye. I think I've already burned to a cinder though, so what have I got to lose?

I chance a look and my breath catches in my throat. He looks just as affected as I am. His eyes are wide, his cheeks are flushed and his lips are pink and swollen. He's gorgeous. What on earth is he doing kissing me?

I'm sure if I wanted to move away he would release his hold on me, but I don't want to, and he isn't trying to move either. We're at an impasse.

I look down and not because I want to look at his body, but my eyes lock on the sight of his slightly taut T-shirt anyway. My hands move of their own accord again, and my fingers trace the impressive six-pack hidden beneath his clothes. I remember every single detail of those ripped muscles from the day I saw him training his eagle in his underwear. Now I'm committing more to memory. I gasp in wonder as those muscles twitch and flutter when my fingers move across them.

I reach his chest, and my thumb traces over the nub of a hardened nipple. His breath huffs as he shudders beneath my touch.

"Alex, holy shit, you're killing me here."

He's like every gay man's wet dream and I'm killing him?

He leans in, and I brace myself to have my world rocked for the second time in five minutes.

"ETHAN!" a voice calls from outside.

Ethan leans back and groans, rubbing his hand down his face in frustration.

"What now? I swear I'm gonna change my name."

I step away with a soft chuckle.

"Is it always like this?" I ask. "Your life I mean?" It was like this in the pub as well, everyone vying for his attention. I'm beginning to think his life is just a series of interruptions.

He uncovers his face and grimaces, closing one eye and twisting his lips to one side.

"I want to say no?" He makes it a question. "But the truth is..."

"ETHAN!"

"OH BLOODY HELL! I'M COMIN' OKAY," he shouts towards the door. "Something must have gone wrong somewhere. Sorry." He lays his hand gently on my cheek. I wrap my fingers around his.

"No problem. Go!"

He jogs towards the door, then stops and turns back, biting his lip.

"You're staying for lunch aren't you?"

"Er... I... er..." Should I? Shouldn't I?

"Fantastic." He winks and then jogs out of the door and away before I can give him my answer.

I can't stay for lunch. I hadn't even planned on staying this long except I was actually having fun, despite the fact I was basically shovelling shit for some part of the morning.

I've met some of his animals and some of the people who help him out around here. He seems like a very popular and well-liked man. I have no idea why he seems so enamoured with me, and I can't see when we'll have any time to talk about it.

I really do have to go, though. I promised Liss I would phone her at lunchtime, and she's been acting strange lately: all clingy and concerned for my

welfare. If I don't call her when I said, I suspect she'll take measures to have someone check up on me.

I don't want to interrupt Ethan when he's so busy and so in demand. What he was called away for was obviously pretty urgent. I also don't want to leave without saying anything.

I look around for a pen and paper, so I can leave him a note, and then make my way down the path and out of the yard onto the track that leads over the hill to my house.

I'm halfway up the hill when I realise I am being followed, well, not so much followed. I have a walking companion in the form of Cordy.

"What the devil are you doing, Cordy?" I stop and regard her. "Are you Ethan's spy? Has he set you to watch me and not told you to stop?" She wags her tail and her tongue lolls out of her mouth, like she's laughing at me, or agreeing with me.

What can I do? Walk her back down? Send her back down?

"Go on, go home, Cordy." I wave my hand in the direction of Ethan's house. She doesn't move, just wags her tail harder. "Cordy, go home!" I tell her a little more firmly. "Go to Ethan!"

She stubbornly stands her ground, and I huff in frustration. Ethan makes it look so easy when he gets them all to do anything. He's like a damn modern-day Doctor Dolittle.

It's going to take forever to take Cordy back down the hill, and the other alternative is calling Ethan, but I didn't want to interrupt him, plus he'll think I'm completely useless if I admit to not being able to get his dog to go home. Besides, the mobile signal isn't all that reliable around here.

Suddenly my phone rings. I almost jump out of my skin.

"*Hawk.*" Ethan's voice calls cheerily when I answer.

"Oh, er, Ethan. I would have called, but I didn't think the signal was any good."

"*In the valley it's crap, but up the hill there's better reception.*" Which explains why I don't get a mobile signal at all at home. I never tried to get one anywhere else.

"*Not running away from me are you?*"

“No!” I did not want him to think that at all, I put measures in place so he wouldn’t think that. “I left you a note.”

“*So I see,*” he huffs.

Didn’t he read it... Oh!

I suddenly remember the trouble he had reading the instructions for my desk last week. How stupid of me. I should have spoken to him face-to-face. God, it must be horrible for him!

“*Hawk, you still there?*”

“Er, yes I am, and I didn’t run away. I explained in my note: I have to call my sister, and the landline is a better bet than the mobile signal.”

“*Course, it might not be the signal that’s the problem, Hawk, it could be your throwback to the eighties mobile phone.*”

“Oh, well, if you’re just going to get personal...”

“*Hey, no offence meant, Alex, sorry.*”

“That’s okay.” I chuckle at his less-than-sincere apology and the amusement in his tone. I can almost hear the smirk on his face. “Er, Ethan, I kind of have a small problem here.” I glance down at Cordy sitting obediently at my feet.

“*Is it in the form of a black and white dog, with a stupid grin, that won’t leave you alone?*” He chuckles indulgently, as if this isn’t the first time Cordy has done something like this.

“Yes, she seems to want to follow me home.” She’s displaying that stupid grin right now. She makes me want to laugh.

“*That’s okay, just let her walk you home, Hawk. She probably thought you were a good bet for a walk. I’ll come over with Paddy later on to pick her up okay?*”

“Oh, okay. Should I give her anything to eat?”

“*Nah, just some water and she’ll be fine, and don’t let her hog yer sofa.*”

I laugh, but I have no idea how I’ll stop her if she does try to take over my settee.

“*I’ll see ya later, Hawk.*”

He disconnects the call, and I’m left with a warm feeling I don’t really understand, except it might be a touch of anticipation since he’s coming over later to pick Cordy up.

As I take a moment to catch my breath, I think over what I've seen today. Ethan's a pretty damn amazing guy, making such a success of his life despite the problem he has. My respect for him increases every time I meet him.

It leaves me feeling slightly inadequate really. I'm thirty and never had a real job. I've spent most of my life in school and university. I buried myself in books and study because I didn't really know what else to do.

For a short time I thought I had a chance at happiness with someone special, but it turned out it was what everyone else wanted, not me. That life's gone. I moved here to finally leave it all behind.

Now I wonder if I even know what I want. Although, there's a quirky, cocky smile and a pair of hooded green eyes that I can't seem to get out of my head. Add that to the fact that my lips are still tingling from that interrupted kiss, and I think I might have found something, or rather, someone I want very much.

"Come on then, Cordy, let's get home." I look down at the lovely Border collie. She tips her head to one side as if she's listening to every word. I wouldn't be surprised if she understood every word either. She's just as quirky as her owner. Fancy wanting to follow me home.

At the top of the hill, I stop again and glance down at Ethan's house. The walk isn't that far really, but the hill is pretty steep, and from here everything looks tiny. Down the other side is my own little cottage, even tinier from this vantage point.

With a sigh, I start the descent to my house, Cordy at my heels every step.

I have some tidying up to do if Ethan is coming over. Should I make some supper for us both? Would he like that? I hope he likes vegetarian food.

I quicken my pace. I'll have to consult my recipe books and see what I have in my fridge. I don't usually cook for two.

I'm already planning the evening. What if he just wants to pick up the dog and go? He probably won't be able to stay long anyway, since he has responsibilities at home. I understand that. I'd like him to stay for a coffee at least, and perhaps he'll appreciate someone else cooking for him instead of having to go home and do it all for himself.

So, I'll make something simple, and if he doesn't stay it won't matter that much.

Would I be disappointed? I think I would. Oh my, I think I would.

I now have the worst case of butterflies in my stomach. I wonder if Ethan's ever tried to train them.

Chapter 13

Duck Soup

Ethan

So Alex didn't do a runner because I scared him off. That's a relief.

He had to call his sister. That's nice.

I hate those bloody ducks with a passion.

Because of them I never got to explore just where that kiss was going.

Because of them we've spent all afternoon moving Bear and the two ponies that share his field, over to the next field to put some distance between the two groups. And by moving the animals I don't just mean *moving the animals*. Their water troughs had to be moved, their feed troughs and their bloody lean-to shelter.

It's taken all afternoon, and my fucking hand is throbbing, and I feel like I've been run over by a steamroller.

"It's weird about that gate between the duck pond and Bear's field," Dave muses as we take a break and drink some coffee one of the students was good enough to make us. "It's never been opened for years, has it?"

"No!" I blow out my cheeks. "It's a mystery, but stranger things have happened in this place, believe me."

He nods and chuckles.

"You seeing your boyfriend later on then?"

"I'm seeing Alex later, yes." I give him a sideways look. "Because I'm going to pick up the tart that is Corduroy the Border collie. Alex is not my boyfriend though."

Dave arches his eyebrows in disbelief. "Melanie seems to think he is, since she's been going round telling everyone she saw you both snogging."

"Has she indeed?" I click my tongue and roll my eyes. "Sheesh, they're students, surely they've seen guys kissing before. Haven't they got anything better to do than talk about my social life?"

"You're obviously not working them hard enough." Dave's eyes sparkle as he pats me on the back. "Come on, let's get this last trough moved."

There is much cussing of ducks as we struggle to pull the trough. It takes four of us, mainly because I can only use one hand. Bloody clumsy oaf that I am.

“Bloody ducks,” I hiss and puff. “I’m going to make the lot of them into duck soup, duck *a l’Orange*, Peking duck...” I check off a list of duck recipes as we heave the stone trough across the field.

“Er, Ethan, I don’t think Peking duck actually has duck in it,” someone helpfully points out.

“That would be Bombay duck,” I correct them darkly, “but anything with duck in the title works for me.”

Everyone laughs. A bit of humour makes the work go a little smoother. They all know I’m kidding. I wouldn’t really eat those ducks. I’m a vegetarian.

It’s funny that Alex is too. I know I joked about it after I’d first met him, but it’s nice that we at least have that in common.

Because, let’s face it, we don’t have much else in common, apart from an obvious physical attraction. That much was evident during our hot-as-hell kiss in my kitchen. Oh boy, if those ducks hadn’t got out a second time, how far would that have gone?

I kind of invited myself over to Alex’s later. I do have a legitimate excuse to be there in the form of my wayward Border collie, but still, I hope he doesn’t think I’m chasing him. I might take that wine over that he brought me, because I can’t drink an entire bottle of wine by myself. But will he think I have an ulterior motive?

I want to explore what that kiss meant. There is definitely a mutual attraction. Is it purely physical for him? Do I mind if it is? I doubt it would go any deeper than that really. Intellectually he’s miles superior to me. He has a Master’s degree, and I’ve got zilch in the way of qualifications that would impress him.

I’m staring at his note as I get ready to go over there. Even his handwriting is sexy as hell. He writes my name the way he says it: all smooth and silky. I wonder what he’d do if he saw my handwriting, or if he knew I couldn’t read for toffee.

That’s not strictly true. I can read. Just not quickly. Most of the time, if I have to read something quick I manage to pick out key words and my brain fills

in the gaps. Handwriting is particularly difficult for me to read because it isn't uniform. His isn't too bad though. It's very neat.

"Ethan?" a voice calls from downstairs. Bloody hell, I can't even have a shave in peace.

"What is it?" I ask as I walk downstairs wiping my face. Melanie is standing in my hallway. God, that girl needs some limits setting. She's been told not to come in here, and she's done it again. "Mel, what are you doing in here? Where's Dave?"

I have to have some boundaries where these students are concerned, and one of them is my house: it's out of bounds. It's my sanctuary, plus it upsets my house crew when a string of strangers troop through. It gets like a train station at rush hour.

"I'm sorry, Ethan," she interrupts, nodding in acknowledgement of her gaff. "I wouldn't have come in, but..." She looks upset, and she's holding a bundle in her hands. Oh shit, it's the hedgehog she's been looking after. "It just gave up, Ethan. I did everything you said." She's close to tears. She's put in so much work over the last two days as well, bless her.

"Aw, Mel!" I sympathise as I reach the bottom of the stairs. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

I put my arm around her and guide her back into the kitchen and out into the yard. No matter how upset she is, I'm still not willing to have her upset the cats, or Beorn, who has a tendency to lash out with her beak. I've seen it happen before. It's not pleasant when that cockatoo takes a dislike to someone.

Dave comes over to see what's up, and we both offer some words of sympathy then we make a thing of burying the poor creature, just to give Mel some closure. I'd have been a little more practical about the entire business. Don't get me wrong, I'm still upset, but it's a fact of life. A survival of the fittest, and the dead are part of the circle of life, aren't they?

About half an hour later, I climb over the hill with a heavy heart. Paddy's at my heels and seems to understand my sombre mood. Not even the thought of seeing Alex and exploring this kissing thing is enough to lift my spirits.

Well, what a bundle of laughs I'm going to be tonight, and I forgot the wine. Just as well if Alex simply wants to hand Cordy over then say goodnight.

He answers the door, and I put on my best devil-may-care grin.

“All right, Hawk. Nice evening.”

He regards me with pursed lips. “What’s wrong?”

How can he know there’s anything wrong? Is he psychic?

“Nothing!” He doesn’t need to know how weepy and depressed I get when we lose a rescue animal.

Cordy and Paddy greet each other in a frenzy of tails and other stuff dogs do to greet each other that is pretty gross really. You’d think they hadn’t seen each other for weeks instead of one afternoon. Their antics serve as a distraction from Alex’s question.

“Did she behave herself?” I ask, feeling like I’m picking up a kid from a play date. Alex nods and smiles indulgently.

“She was an angel and an excellent foot warmer.”

I chuckle. “I warned you not to let her hog the sofa.”

“She didn’t, much.”

Alex’s eyes search my face, and I’m trying not to react too violently, and by violently I mean push him up against the nearest wall and snog him stupid, because those damn eyes get me every time. He pushes his glasses up his nose. Ungh! He’s just lovely.

I distract myself by settling the dogs down. Alex has already put out a water bowl at the back door. I get out the small box of kibble I’ve brought and place it beside the bowl. Both dogs dive in, eating with gusto.

When I stand up, I see Alex studying me intently.

“You look done in.” He sounds concerned. “Come in for a coffee. Or would you like a beer? I made some supper if you want to stay.”

Now that’s lifted my mood.

“That was really nice of you, Alex. A beer would be great. And ye didn’t have to cook anything.” God dammit, I knew I should have brought that wine!

“I felt bad about leaving before lunch, and straight after, well... you know.” He looks away with a blush as I step into his house.

His kitchen is tiny compared to mine, but I don’t notice that, I notice his blush. It’s lovely really. Seeing him has made me feel a thousand times better.

I approach him as he takes out two bottles of beer from the fridge and then opens them at the bench. I know he knows I'm there, right behind him. I think he's having trouble breathing right.

"T-tell me what's upset you then," he urges, as he turns and hands me one of the beers.

Once again I wonder how he knows I'm upset. Does he even need to be told though? Will he be interested? I take a long swig of beer before telling him anyway.

"Remember that hedgehog that Mel, one of the students, was nursing?"

He looks up with a gasp, his face a picture of shock and horror.

"Did it die?" He sounds really quite upset. I nod, feeling a lump form in my throat. What the hell? I am absolutely not going to cry in front of him. "Oh, Ethan, I'm so sorry."

I turn away with a shrug. What is the matter with me? He's going to think I'm such a wuss, crying over a hedgehog.

He moves around so he's standing in front of me, his finger hooks beneath my chin to lift my head. His chocolate eyes are full of concern and sympathy.

"Need a shoulder to cry on?" He smiles softly.

"Are you offering one, Hawk?" I'm hoping he is. He nods, taking the beer from my hand and placing it next to his on the bench. He steps closer.

My hands automatically move to hold him in place, resting lightly on his hips.

"Which side do you prefer?" He smirks at me, his eyes hooded.

"Either one looks equally tempting." He doesn't meet my eyes, but lifts his hand to flick imaginary dust from my own shoulder.

"As do yours." He's acting all coy, but he's also as subtle as a kick up the arse. "It's not just the shoulders I'm interested in, Ethan, truth be told." He still doesn't meet my eye but stares at my mouth, his meaning pretty clear really.

I pull him tight against me with a soft growl, and he actually yelps in surprise as I capture his lips with mine. This is far better than getting all emotional over a bloody hedgehog, and it allays all my doubts about his retreat this afternoon. He definitely isn't running away now.

His body melts against mine, as our tongues brush together. He tastes of beer, and I wonder how many he's had already. Did he need some Dutch courage to make this first move? He smells fresh and clean, and he shaved, just like I did. His skin is warm and smooth.

Arms wrap around my neck and pull me deeper into the kiss. I'm pushed back against the bench and I just let him lead. He's just about the best tonic ever, after such a busy day.

We pull apart slowly. His eyes stay closed as he licks his lips and hums, like he's tasting the best ice cream in the world. That is far too hot. What is he doing to my insides?

He opens his eyes and reaches up to caress my cheek. "Just thought it might be best to get that out of the way first." He smirks. The look in his eyes takes my breath away. "How's your hand?"

It takes me a while to register the change of subject. Then I hold up my hand for his inspection. He gasps.

"Look at the state of that dressing!" He frowns at me, pursing his lips. It is in a bit of a state.

"Hey, I was working hard this afternoon, Hawk," I tell him archly. "Unlike some, who were swannin' it on the sofa with a dog as a foot warmer, talkin' to their sister." Alex's lips firm up in a straight line. "How is she by the way?"

"She's fine, thanks!" He chuckles, as if he's surprised I would ask. It's only polite. "You're not doing too much are you, Ethan?" He sounds concerned, and I'm touched and also still a little disoriented by that kiss and the way he says my name, and, well, everything about him that just makes me want him more.

I snort and slide along the bench away from him though. I think I'm about to be lectured about resting my hand, and there's been plenty of people doing that this week, without him adding his voice.

"Who are you, me mam?" I snort as I run my hand along the smooth granite surface of the bench and check out what he is cooking for supper. "Mmmm! That smells nice." I want to change the subject. I want to keep kissing him, but the moment seems to be over, for now.

"It's veggie burritos," he explains. "And courgette salad."

Alex nudges me away from the food prep and begins to assemble the burritos. My mouth waters. I like burritos.

“I’ll change your dressing for you before we eat if you want,” he offers.

“Thanks.” I pick up my beer and lean back against the bench opposite him. “Sorry I got it so dirty after you did such a good job this morning.”

“You should look after yourself better, Ethan.”

Alex isn’t looking at me when he says this otherwise he would see my expression of utter incredulity. I look after myself fine. He’s the one that wears sweaters too big for him, has holes in his jeans that definitely are not designer rips, and his hair looks like it hasn’t been brushed for weeks even though it smells really, really good. Really good!

As I glance around his kitchen, it’s clean, but it’s disorganised and messy, and there’re books everywhere. He owns more books than a public library. Who the hell has bookshelves in the kitchen anyway? I had no idea so many recipe books existed.

“Sit down,” he orders, pulling out a chair then clearing the space on the table by just swiping everything to one side. He plonks a first-aid kit down in front of me. It looks brand new. When I give him a questioning look, he bites his lip as if he’s about to confess something. “I bought this after last week, just in case.”

“You thinkin’ of a repeat performance?” I flicker my eyebrows, and he sneers at me.

“No! And neither, I hope, are you,” he huffs before taking my hand and gently peeling off the bandage.

Suddenly he tenses up and looks away. “Oh, my god, Ethan, there’s blood.” He jumps up and walks away from the table. He leans over the sink and takes some deep breaths.

“What?” I gasp and look down at my hand, sure enough there’s a stain on the dressing. This must have happened when I was pulling those damn troughs into the next field. “Bloody hell, Alex, I’m sorry.” I grab a clean dressing and slap it over the stitches then jump to his side. “It’s covered, hen, there’s nothing to see now. I’m sorry. Please don’t pass out on me, sweetheart.” I’ve wrapped my arms around his shoulders, and he leans against me.

“I’m all right, I’m all right,” he chants, like a mantra. “You shouldn’t be apologising.” He turns his head and glares at me. “How could you let it get so bad? It’ll never heal if you don’t rest it.” His expression turns to one of extreme

concern. “Oh god, it must hurt like hell, Ethan. I’m sorry for being such a wimp.”

“I don’t think you’re a wimp, Alex. Stop sayin’ that.” I rub my hand soothingly down his arm, and he relaxes a little. My heart rate quickens as I pluck up the courage to say one more thing. I whisper, my mouth close to his ear, “I don’t think you’re a wimp, Hawk, I think you’re beautiful.”

I feel him shiver, his breath leaving him in a soft, silent sigh. He turns to face me and grabs my hand, turning it over to inspect the dressing. Swallowing hard, he reaches for the tape to fasten the dressing pad in place, and then his fingers close around mine, and his thumb traces across my fingertips.

“You need someone to look after you,” Alex muses, and I smile and shake my head.

“Here’s me thinking the same thing about you,” I confess. He gives me a startled look then looks away with a sardonic snort.

“Why would you think that?”

I turn his head back to face me, and he catches his breath as our eyes meet.

“I’ve thought that since I first set eyes on you, Alex.”

His eyes don’t leave mine as his fingers continue to trace the outline of my hand. I feel the tingle of his touch ride up my arm and travel all over my body like he’s lit a touchpaper and set off fireworks inside me. I need him to touch me everywhere.

“You’re like an itch I can’t scratch, Ethan Shaw.” Alex’s lips brush across my chest; his breath is hot through the fabric of my T-shirt.

“You know what happens when you scratch something too much, Hawk,” I warn. His breath stutters.

“Maybe I want to scratch it too much,” he murmurs. “Maybe I haven’t been able to think of anything else but scratching it since I first met you.” His breath is too hot, his words are too urgent, his fingers too insistent. “And when you call me Hawk, it just fires me up even more.”

“Holy shit, Alex,” I gasp before pulling him closer and pressing my lips to his.

He pulls away only to remove his glasses before going in for the kill in a frenzied mess of lips, tongues, and teeth.

I grab hold of his hips and manoeuvre him to a bench. I lift him, and he lets out a surprised laugh.

“Whoa! Ethan, you’re strong,” he exclaims breathlessly. His pupils are already blown so wide his eyes are black.

“I’ve had years of practice handling wild animals.” I hum as I run my fingers through his hair, messing it up more than it already is.

I grab his buttocks and pull him to me, crowding between his legs. He gasps as he regards me with hooded eyes, wrapping his legs around me and pulling our groins together. It’s incredible how well we fit.

His hands rest on my shoulders, holding on for dear life. He already looks completely wrecked, but I want so much to mess him up more until he loses control; until his bones turn to liquid and I am his only source of support.

“I’m not a wild animal.” He chuckles and then gasps as I press up against his crotch to feel the warmth of his arousal trapped between us.

“Not yet, you’re not.” I attack his neck with a growl, getting a good suction hold on his delicious skin.

“Oh god, Ethan.” Alex’s fingers dig into my shoulder muscles as he tips his head back to allow better access. He begins to rut slowly against me, his cock pressed against my stomach.

I could just let him do that. He could do that until he came, the heat of his semen soaking through his clothes, the sensation sending me over the edge, because bloody hell, my cock is so hard I think I might pass out from lack of blood to my brain.

Or, I could just take him here, undress him, spread his legs and stretch him. He’d just let me; he’s frantic enough right now, to want the release anyway he can. His chest is heaving with breathless gasps. He’s so damn beautiful.

“Ethan!” His desperate plea jerks me into action, and I claim his lips, our tongues twining together.

I want him, and I want him to come, not from his rutting against my stomach but from my hand wrapped around his silky, smooth erection. I thrust my hand into his pants and his cry is muffled as he swallows my tongue. He gasps for breath, throwing back his head and breaking the kiss.

“Oh, god, yes, Ethan, please, god please.”

I give him what he wants, my fingers wrapped around his cock, sliding up and down the length with increasing speed. His pleading becomes garbled, and he babbles incomprehensibly.

“Come for me, Hawk,” I whisper in his ear. He takes a sharp breath and shudders as his heat flows over my hand.

Time stands still as he sags against me, his breathing ragged and his limbs boneless, but I’m not done with him yet. I’m determined to make him completely mine.

The result of his orgasm is rinsed in the sink as Alex buries his face into the crook of my neck.

“Ethan!” His voice is deep and relaxed. “Take me to bed.”

“What about the food you made?” I chuckle, scooping him into my arms, since I doubt he can walk right now.

“It’ll keep,” he assures me. “This won’t.”

His arms fold around my neck and his face nuzzles against my skin. His body is relaxed as I carry him through the cottage to his bedroom, his breathless directions interspersed with warm wet kisses.

He lies on his back on his bed, still fully clothed but exposed, since his pants are open and his shirt is pushed up over his ribs. He makes no attempt to move though. His face is flushed with post-coital afterglow and he regards me with dark, beautiful eyes as I undress.

“Oh my god!” he exclaims with wide eyes as I pull off my shirt. I look down and wonder what he is staring at. “Y-you’re just... Ethan, you’re beautiful. I thought so when I saw you out on the hills in your underpants, and I know for certain now.”

I widen my eyes and raise my eyebrows in surprise. He watches as I unfasten my trousers.

“Please tell me you’re wearing those camouflage underpants!” He pleads, his eyes bright with desire. I feel a smile spread across my face.

Slowly I push my pants down, and he groans when he sees that I am.

“Are there any other pants to wear?” I ask with a smirk. What can I say? I indulge myself with designer underwear. It just so happens these particular ones have a practical use as well: they’re good for taming eagles and Hawks.

Alex sits up and shuffles to the edge of the bed. His shirt is discarded quickly and his pants are shuffled out of equally as swiftly. Before I know it, I've been pulled on top of him, my briefs still firmly in place.

I gasp as he flips me easily onto my back. He's stronger than he lets on, my Hawk.

With almost reverent fingers he traces the contours of my muscles. I shudder and tremble beneath the worship of his touch. I throw my head back with a gasp as he runs his thumbs, followed by his tongue, over my nipples.

His hand moves lower. My skin flutters uncontrollably, and he chuckles, as if he's surprised he would have such an effect on me.

His goal is clear though, as his hand makes its way towards my crotch and my aching erection, restrained by those pants he finds so fascinating. The first touch, felt through the fabric almost tips me over. So feathery and light, and bloody amazing.

"You made me come too quickly," Alex whispers.

"S-sorry," I breathe, hopelessly aroused and almost beyond rational thought. I'm on the cusp of babbling. I need him to touch me, but I think he's going to make me wait.

"I need you to last longer than I did, because I want to come again, with you inside me." He dives down and buries his face in my crotch, taking a deep breath, scenting me. God, it's like he knows just what to do to turn me into a babbling mess.

"Hawk!" I sob.

"You smell so good, Ethan. God I could eat you." His fingers fold inside the waistband of my briefs and slowly pull down. "Maybe I should just make it quick."

Before I can form a coherent reply his fingers pull harder, exposing my groin. Without warning, he engulfs my cock in wet heat.

"Hawk!" I cry out. Grasping handfuls of sheet to anchor me. "Shit, I'll come," I pant, trying to control it, but he's relentless. He hums around my cock as it hits the back of his throat. "Bloody hell, it's always the quiet ones." I almost shriek and the vibration of his chuckle sends me over the edge. "Hawk!" The cry is long, breathless and ends in a sigh as he sucks everything from me.

I just lie there, spent beyond thought as he pulls off and makes his way, via breathless, wet kisses, back up to my head. For a moment he regards me with

those chocolate eyes before capturing my mouth and giving me a taste of what he's just done.

My hand moves to cup his head, pulling him deeper into the kiss. My other arm wraps around him, and I flip him onto his back, surprised I even have the energy.

He falls back with a cry of surprise and then looks up at me, blinking, smiling, his tongue pressed against his teeth.

"Mmm!" He licks his lips. "That was better than burritos."

I throw my head back and laugh. Then catch his gaze again. "Bloody hell, Hawk. Where've you been keeping this personality?"

With a low chuckle, he pulls me down into another blistering kiss. He's relentless.

"I save it for special occasions," he whispers in my ear. "Plus, you had me all fired up this afternoon, and there were just too many interruptions and calls on our time."

"Yeah!" I frown. "Sorry about that, and I would have brought you one of those ducks, to roast, except we're both vegetarian, so it might have been in bad taste."

He laughs, pulling me down into a warm, tight embrace.

We lie there, entangled in each other's arms and legs, comfortable and sated. I glance over at him, and his eyes are closing. I feel my own getting heavier.

"I can't stay all night," I confess reluctantly. "Even though I want to," I quickly add before he thinks I'm leaving for reasons to do with what we've just done.

He rouses his body and moves to kiss me with a soft moan that vibrates from deep within him. It's a much more gentle, tender kiss. The urgency has gone, but not the need, or the passion. I wrap my arms around him and pull him on top of me.

"That's okay, don't worry about it," he whispers against my chest.

I've heard those words before, but this time they sound sincere. They aren't followed by a sad but forced smile, as if it was expected I would just dash off once it was all over. He expected it, but he's not unhappy about it. He knows. He understands.

“You have commitments.” He rests his head in the crook of my neck. “Can you stay long enough to eat?”

“I thought we just did?”

He snorts and punches me gently in the ribs. “I mean food.”

I chuckle. “Of course, Hawk, anything you say. Just as long it doesn’t have duck in it.”

Chapter 14

Don't Count Your Chickens

Alex

“Hawk.” a voice whispers in my head. A lovely, soft voice, inserting its owner into my dreams.

“Mmm! Ethan,” I moan softly.

I hear his soft, huffed chuckle.

“Wakey, wakey, sleepy head.” A finger traces down my cheek, and I smile, snuggling into him.

My head is still on his chest, and his arms are still wrapped around me. Our bodies are pressed as close as physically possible in a safe cocoon of warmth. Why would I want to wake up?

“Alex, I feel like a real shithead, but I have to go.”

“No!” I groan. I knew he couldn't stay the night, fully accepted he probably couldn't before I jumped in with both feet, but still, I am rather comfortable here.

“It's my crew, see,” he explains as he tries to move my resistant, reluctant, relaxed body. “I need to get back, they'll all be clammin'.”

“I have no idea what that means, Ethan, but I'm sure it isn't good for an animal to be... er... feeling it?” I push myself to sitting and sleepily rub my eyes. My throat feels a little raw, but that's my own fault for... ahem... well, it's just my own fault.

“It means they'll be starving, Hawk.” He laughs, not at what he's saying, but at me, I think, because I'm all confused and sleepy. “I need to start early if I'm to get them all fed.”

“What time is it?” I ask, lifting my head and looking around in confusion. He said he couldn't stay all night, but it's beginning to get light outside.

“It's four a.m.,” Ethan states as he sits up, and I lose my comfortable pillow. “Sorry it's so early.” He sounds like he's grimacing, and I don't want him to feel awkward about this. “I didn't mean to stay all night. I didn't want to have to disturb you.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I squint at my clock, trying to focus. I’m a little unsure where I put my glasses.

Sure enough it is four a.m. Far too early for me to be functioning on anything but a really basic level. Ethan must be used to early starts though because he begins to bounce about the room like Tigger.

I swing my legs out of the bed and look around in the predawn light for my jeans. I can’t actually remember where they were discarded when we reached the bedroom. We never bothered getting dressed last night when we eventually decided to eat, and after that we kind of ended up going at it again. Ethan brings out some sort of animal lust in me I didn’t even know I had.

It all happened in a blur, and it’s going to take some time to unravel it all in my head. I don’t have a clue how it all happened so fast. Ethan Shaw is a force to be reckoned with, that’s for sure. I’ve never met anyone that turns me on as much as he does.

“Do you want me to give you a lift?” I ask, as I watch him pick up discarded pieces of clothing and sort them into his and mine. Our clothes are in as much of a tangled mess as our bodies just were.

“Nah, yer all right,” he huffs, pulling on his socks, then... oh boy... that camouflage, designer underwear. Doesn’t he wear anything else? Not that I’m complaining.

In the dim light of my bedroom I can watch his reverse strip tease without him realising. I feel like a voyeur, but I do kind of have a legitimate reason, don’t I? We just had hot, mind-blowing sex. Aren’t I allowed to gaze with adoration on the object of my affection?

Whoa! Try not to count your chickens, Alex. He may be the object of my affection, but am I his? He might just like the sex. I might just be a way to pass the time for him. An opportunity. I should be careful with my heart. It’s still bruised from the last time I allowed my heart to rule my head.

Am I being overcautious? Ethan’s a lovely man; every time I meet him I find out something more amazing about him. The fact that he could quite easily get a job modelling those designer underpants he loves so much is beside the point but also hot as hell.

Ethan pulls on his trousers and looks up at me as he fastens them. His eyes, even in the dim light, shine with an inner glow, and his smile is just like the surface of the sun. God, is that smile just for me?

My doubts about his intentions diminish beneath that radiant grin. This isn't my life repeating itself. I don't know how I know, but this time it's different. Ethan is different. He's not someone that's been chosen for me, a puppet easily manipulated by my mother. He's his own person, like no one I've ever met. He isn't a peacock, dressing to impress. He has a body that could easily have walked off the set of a movie because he works hard, not because he spends hours preening himself at the gym. He wears that underwear because he indulged himself, and they feel comfortable, and he needed them in order to train his eagle.

I don't think there is another person in the world who could say they bought designer underwear to impress a bird... well, okay, probably most heterosexual males on the planet... but I know what I mean.

"Hey, dolly daydream." Ethan has now pulled on his T-shirt and is standing in front of me. How could I have missed that delicious part of the act? That shirt is far too tight... phew! Far. Too. Tight.

I am just a little underdressed in my boxers and self-consciously try to back away in search of a T-shirt, any T-shirt, to cover up my weedy, pale body. He places his hands on my hips, and I stop with a gasp. They're warm and bring back memories of just how they feel all over my body, not just on my hips. He pulls me close, and his lips are on mine before I can process the sensory overload.

I weave my fingers through his hair and deepen the kiss with a moan. His arms wrap around me and pull our bodies together in a delicious smorgasbord of sensations.

If he wants to get away in order to feed his crew he needs to stop now before I get the urge to rip off his clothes and revisit the buffet.

"Mmm!" He breaks the kiss first, thankfully. "Thanks for last night, Hawk. It was great."

"Oh, er, n-no problem, really, anytime you feel the need to share your dog with me, come over... I mean, thanks, yeah thanks." God, what do I sound like?

"Okay." He backs off, biting his lip; I think to stop himself from laughing. He must think I am such a geek.

"Are you sure I can't drive you round the hill?" I ask. "It's really no problem, and it's still kind of dark outside. Aren't you a little... you know?" I

was going to ask if he would be scared walking home in the dark. What a stupid thing to ask. I doubt Ethan is scared by anything. He handles dangerous, exotic animals all the time. I can imagine him wrestling a crocodile whilst I stand by and scream like a distressed damsel. A short walk in the dark is hardly going to cause him stress.

“I’ll be fine, Hawk, thanks for the offer. It’s getting lighter by the minute.” He leans in and catches my lips a second time for a much briefer but equally as hot kiss before whistling for his two dogs.

This time Cordy has no problem leaving my side. She has obviously accomplished her goal of bringing Ethan and I together, and now her loyalties are back where they belong. I can’t help feeling just a little bereft. For a wonderful few hours I got a taste of what it would be like to have a constant companion that didn’t make any unreasonable demands. Maybe I should get myself a dog.

At my kitchen door, Ethan pulls me into another kiss that leaves me in a hot mess. He has that smirk on his face again, like he knows exactly what he’s done.

“Just so you don’t forget me when I’m out of sight,” he mutters into my ear.

“Oh!” I chuckle ironically. “I very much doubt that will happen.” I fully intend to go back to bed and be shouting out his name as I take care of the raging hard-on I now have. “You’re not so easily forgotten, believe me.”

He chuckles, plants a firm kiss on my cheek. “Come round later? When ye’ve woken up properly,” he asks in an almost vulnerable tone, like he thinks I might make excuses not to.

“Yes, of course I will.” Wild horses couldn’t keep me away. Even if last night hadn’t happened, I’d still been planning on going back for more... hard work I mean.

“Great! Bring some breakfast, Hawk. I’ll be starving by then.” He smiles that irresistible smile and then leaves, shouting for Paddy and Cordy since they’ve bounded off somewhere.

I watch him disappear, flanked by his dogs.

Back in my room, after I’ve, well... taken care of things and cleaned up... again, I lie back in my pillows with a soft, contented sigh. That went better than I ever could have expected. I mean, I was hoping that was what would happen, but hoping for something like that and putting those hopes into reality don’t

always play out the way I want. I knew Ethan wanted something more than just a kiss, but I had no idea it would all happen so fast.

Is it happening too fast? He wants me to go round there for breakfast. I know that's what would be happening if he'd stayed a few hours longer anyway, but still, it all seems somehow too good to be true.

Oh, stop it, Alex! Those insecurities and doubts stem from the life you left behind. No one here has an ulterior motive. Ethan is honest and upfront about his feelings and what he wants. He's not gone to any extraordinary lengths to win me over, he's simply been himself, and that's all I've ever wanted from someone.

He has his faults, he's not perfect. Neither am I. But if we can't build a relationship around those faults, making them strengths instead, then what is the point of trying? I certainly don't want to change him and he seems completely content to accept me as I am: geeky warts and all... I realise I don't have warts, but I know what I mean.

I wonder what time breakfast is in the Shaw household. I'm guessing pretty early. He asked me to bring something. I have some croissants in the freezer. I jump up and take them out. They'll be defrosted by the time I've had a few more hours' sleep

I'll get up about six and go over then. We'll see what happens after that. I doubt we'll have any time during the day to talk, but the evening could be very interesting. If he can't stay at mine all night because of his animals, then I could stay at his. Would he have me?

Okay, I'm counting my chickens again, and there is always the possibility that he might not want hot monkey sex again so soon. I'm not usually this wanton, myself. He's just the hottest creature to walk the earth.

Oh... I should stop thinking about him because I think my body is reacting again.

I set my alarm, something I have avoided doing since I moved here. I've actually enjoyed being able to wake naturally.

Settling down to sleep, my dreams are filled with Ethan in his underwear, with an eagle on his arm and a raccoon showing me where the buffet bar is.

My alarm jolts me awake. I hadn't realised how much my body had become accustomed to just waking up without it. I feel grumpy and gritty-eyed. I never was much into mornings.

The thought of seeing Ethan again is the only thing that gets me out of bed and jumping into the shower.

I wonder how long it took him to get home. I wouldn't have wanted to make that journey so early in the morning. He's a hardy soul, but maybe I should have been more assertive in my offer of a lift. I feel a little guilty that I've had two more hours sleep when he won't have had that luxury. While I've been in dreamland, he's been working hard.

That makes me more determined to do as he asked and take him some well-deserved breakfast. I don't think the students will be there until about nine, so we'll have a little time to talk until they arrive.

Dressed and ready to go, I take one last look in the mirror. Should I shave again? I don't think it will matter to Ethan, since he'll just be glad to have an extra helping hand.

I'm determined to make sure he rests that hand of his today. It was bleeding yesterday because he did too much.

I grab the bag with croissants and open my door, rushing through without looking and colliding with...

"Liss?" My sister? What the hell is she doing here? And her two kids as well. They wave from the car.

"Hi, Alex." She smiles a little weakly in greeting. "I know you said we could come visit any time, so here we are."

Chapter 15

Going Cold Turkey

Ethan

Where the hell is Alex? He said he would come.

Damn it, I feel like a bloody teenager waiting for my crush to walk in the room so I can “crush” on him. If Alex doesn’t hurry up and get here though, there’s not gonna be any time to do any crushing because everyone else will be here, and then we’ll have no time until tonight.

Anticipation would be enhanced though, if we have to wait until tonight to get some quality time.

I’m just looking forward to seeing him again, even though I have just left his house after seeing more of him than I actually expected to last night.

Last night and this morning was pretty intense and everything happened so fast. One minute he was changing the dressing on my hand the next I was jerking him off on his kitchen bench. Then he gave me the best... oh my god... I’ve ever had. That never happened to me before. Well, I’ve had blow jobs obviously, but not as good as that one.

It’s usually me that’s the forward one. Alex had a personality change; a bloody hot one. I need to find out if that’s going to happen every time.

Every time? Aren’t I getting a bit ahead of myself here? What if that was the only time? What if he’s satisfied that itch?

I wish he would get here so I can find out.

I have things to keep me busy while I’m waiting. It’s just when my stomach begins to rumble that I realise it’s way past breakfast time for me, and he still hasn’t arrived. I glance up at the clock in The Barn. Nine am? The others will be here soon. Alex said he would come over for breakfast. Was I too pushy about that?

Should I call him? What if he’s slept in and he really wanted to be here earlier? He’ll feel really bad about it. But what if he thinks I’m pushing too hard and too fast by calling him just five hours after I said goodbye to him?

God’s sake, it’s like I’m addicted and being forced to go cold turkey. I’m getting withdrawal symptoms from that Hawk of mine. Is he mine? Can I even say that?

I don't have time to wonder about that as I hear a vehicle coming along the valley. I know it won't be him, because he'll be walking over. It'll be the students arriving, driven by Dave in his mini bus.

Sure enough it is.

After their arrival, I don't have any more time to wonder about Alex and his conspicuous absence. I don't have time to call him. I don't even have time to think.

It's lunchtime, and he's still a no show. I finally find some time to nip away to the house and try to call Alex. There's no answer, and now I'm frustrated.

"What's got up your nose this morning?" Dave asks as we sit in the sunshine, leaning against the wall of The Barn and wolfing down some sandwiches and chocolate muffins someone handed around.

"Nothing!" I reply rather sullenly. He's not fooled. I see him narrow his eyes and look a bit smug.

"Where's yer friend from over the hill? Thought he was coming back today." He exchanges knowing, smug looks with several of the students.

"He was!" I really can't be bothered if they're going to start taking the piss.

This isn't funny, this feeling of helplessness. It's like I've opened myself up and just let everything fall out because there's no one, namely Alex, here to stop it. I get up and walk away from the group, kicking stones as I do.

"Hey!" Dave follows.

What does he want? I know we kind of shared about our relationship problems the other night, but he's not really that close a friend. I mean I only know him because of this college thing. I quicken my pace, hoping he gets the hint I don't want to talk.

He doesn't and catches up with me on the other side of the duck pond. If he asks me too many annoying questions I can always throw him to the ducks. They'll soon make mincemeat of him.

He leans over the fence with me and throws the remnants of his sandwich at the ducks, rather than to them. They don't seem to care that they are being abused, and they eat eagerly. Bread isn't that effective a weapon, to be fair.

"So, what's up, big lad?" He calls me this even though we're the same height and he's quite a bit more portly than I am.

“If he had other plans why didn’t he just say? Instead of leaving me hanging like this,” I huff, throwing my hand out in front of me and causing the ducks to run to where they think the food has been thrown. “And don’t feed my ducks bread, Dave. Bloody hell. It’s bad for them.”

Dave chuckles.

“Uh oh, so the love interest hasn’t turned up, eh?” He quirks his eyebrow. “Trouble in paradise?”

“It’s not trouble, Dave, I’m just confused, and I don’t like being confused.”

“Did you and him, you know, last night?” I give him a quick, startled look, and then frown.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” I huff, turning away from him. I really don’t want to talk about this, it’s making me hot under the collar just thinking about what Alex and I did.

“I’ll take that as a yes, judging by the nice shade of pink you’ve just gone.” Dave chuckles.

“Urgh!” I bury my face in my arms that are folded on the fence. “I stayed the night with him, Dave. I left his place at four this morning, and he said he would come round later for breakfast, but he hasn’t shown up.”

“Day’s not over yet.” Dave shrugs, picking at a splinter in the wood.

I’m sure he thinks I’m being a drama queen. Maybe I am. Our plans today weren’t exactly firm, but Alex said he was coming over, and he hasn’t, and there’s no phone call to say his plans changed.

It was one hell of a night. One that I’d happily repeat, but I guess he just hasn’t seen it the same way.

Oh well, back to meeting him on the top of the hill or in town wearing weird costumes. I mean me, not him.

“I’m sure he’ll turn up or have a good reason for not coming.” Dave tries to assure me. I nod. I know he’s right.

I just want to wallow for a bit that’s all.

“It’s not like you to get like this over someone you’ve just met. You usually love ’em and leave ’em,” Dave muses. “I remember all the things you told me about this man. You’ve really got it bad, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I groan, turning and leaning back against the bench. “It feels different, Dave. It feels right. When I’m with him I want to wrap him up in cotton wool. I’ve never felt like that about anyone before.”

Maybe I’ve met my match though. Maybe I’m getting the treatment I give to everyone else. Charm them; love them; move on to the next. I’ve never been in a long term, monogamous relationship. It was always too complicated, and the other half always wanted to make unreasonable adjustments to my life. It was never what I wanted: to be tied down. But if Alex turned up right now and told me that was what he wanted, I’d say yes. I know nothing about him, but I wouldn’t even hesitate.

What has my Hawk done to me? Maybe he’s the falconer and I’m the hawk.

Urgh! That reminds me.

“I have to fly Rupert now.” I push myself away from the fence and walk slowly towards The Barn.

My hesitation isn’t purely to do with wanting to stick around in the yard in case Alex turns up, but because of what I have to do in order to exercise my maladjusted eagle. For one thing, I get too much attention when I’m getting ready and contrary to opinion I am not an exhibitionist. Thankfully, this time I can keep my T-shirt on. Rupert is progressing quite nicely. Thanks to Alex’s untimely appearance on the hill that day I’ve realised that Rupert might be ready for more clothes.

Oh god, everything was going so well. I went into Rupert’s enclosure wearing the usual camouflage briefs, except this time I added a matching vest. He was doing fine. Perfect in fact. He came to me no problem. I got his jess fastened to my glove and I was just putting his hood in place so I could carry him through the yard without him freaking out when I stepped back and tripped.

Everything went downhill from then.

Rupert is going absolutely crazy because he is still attached to my glove. I try to unfasten his jess, but he’s too bloody big and those wings are so damn powerful he could almost take off with me attached to him.

I finally get his jess untangled, but he’s obviously had enough, and the source of his fright is me, so he just dives at my chest and knocks me onto my back.

My calls for help are answered by everyone at once. Dave takes all the meat I had ready for treats and throws it to the far end of the enclosure. Rupert jumps over to snack on them instead of me.

When I'm finally out of the enclosure Paddy and Cordy are all over me like a rash. They're barking, everyone is shouting at once. It's bloody chaos.

"His hood," I gasp. In the panic I can't remember whether I fastened it or not.

"It's okay," Dave assures me. "He's shaken it off."

"Is he hurt, Dave?" Oh god, please don't let him be hurt.

"He's fine. He's over in the far corner of his enclosure eating all the meat chunks you had in that bag for him."

I sigh with relief and collapse onto my back in the dirt.

Someone starts trying to dab my chest and arm with a cotton pad. It's Mel, one of the students.

"I'm fine, Mel," I assure her as I brush her away and scramble to a sitting position. She gives me a slightly hurt look. I know she's only trying to help, but still, it's hardly appropriate. I'm in my underpants.

It's mayhem in here. Cordy and Paddy are still barking. Dave is shouting instructions to everyone and people are just running around like blue-arsed flies.

"Cordy, Paddy, man, settle down, I'm all right." I try to stand, but grimace and grab hold of the nearest thing I can. I must have twisted my ankle when I tripped because it fucking hurts.

"Dave, will you help me into the house?" I gasp.

Conveniently, Dave's the nearest thing I grabbed hold of. Huffing, puffing, and cursing, he takes my weight and helps me hobble out of The Barn.

"Bloody hell, Ethan, you need to get rid of that bloody eagle. It's a bloody menace."

"But he's a golden eagle," I wail. "They're a protected species."

"You should be a protected species, Ethan. You need your head examined going in there on your own."

"It's not Rupert's fault, it's mine. I fell. He got a shock. You can hardly blame him for protecting himself."

Dave gives me a sceptical look as I order everyone to get back to work.

“Go on, everyone,” I urge. “I’m fine now. I don’t need more than Dave to help me across the yard. I’m not that badly hurt.” I doubt Paddy and Cordy will allow anyone else near me anyway.

I look down at myself. It looks worse than it actually is. Rupert wasn’t trying to eat me; at least I hope he wasn’t. And there’s not that much blood.

“Bloody hell, who’s this coming?”

I look up at Dave’s exclamation. A car is pulling up to the gate. The dogs start barking again. Paddy and Cordy run off to check out the new arrivals.

I can’t deal with visitors right now. I’m about to tell Dave to get rid of them for me when I see who it is and groan.

Of course Alex would turn up now!

He is about to open the gate when he sees me and Dave, and instead he vaults it. Oh my!

He’s running over with an excited Cordy at his heels when I realise he might have a problem: there’s blood.

“Oh my god, Ethan, what the hell happened?” He stops with a gasp when he sees the state of my chest and arm. His face goes pale, but I see steel in his eyes, and he grits his teeth with determination. He immediately, without hesitation, takes over from Dave as the tutor tells him what happened.

“You went in there alone?” he asks, in an accusing tone.

“I’ve been in that enclosure hundreds of times.” I dismiss his accusation. “Besides, he didn’t attack me, he was freaked out when I tripped, and he was attached to my glove. He took most of his anger out on my shirt. I don’t think he liked the pattern.” Paddy is still barking at the gate. “Dave will you go and see what the fuck Paddy’s barking at please?” I’m suddenly feeling a little weak at the knees, and I’ve got no energy to shout at her. “Alex, will you help me inside?”

“Damn it, I liked the pattern on that shirt,” Alex mumbles as we reach the kitchen door.

I muster a weak chuckle as he helps me sit in a kitchen chair. He still hasn’t met my eye, or offered any kind of explanation for his late arrival, or anything. He turns away and goes for the first-aid box. He knows where it is now.

I sit with a sigh of relief. I need somewhere to put my foot up. Cordy is fussing over me, her head on my knee. She's joined by two cats trying to vie for space there too and then there's a raccoon, I think it's Yogi, on the table, adding her snickering comments to the fuss being made.

"Oh good lord!" Alex turns back with the first-aid box. "This is no good. Is there another place we can do this where there's room for your animals and me?"

"Or maybe I just need a bigger lap?" I suggest. He snorts.

"I don't want to sit in your lap, Ethan. I just need to get to your chest."

"I bet you say that to all the guys." Finally he looks at me as he laughs. Then he shoves everyone out of the way and plonks himself down on my lap in order to start dabbing at the cuts on my chest.

"I thought you didn't like the sight of blood." I frown as he concentrates on sorting out shreds of shirt from open wounds. I gasp, and he grimaces.

"Sorry," he mutters. "I don't, believe me, my stomach is turning over like a butter churn. I'll go and find somewhere quiet to vomit in a while, but I think I'll live. I decided after yesterday, that I need to grow a pair."

"The pair you have are fine for me."

"Urgh, stop flirting with me, Ethan," he orders. "At least until I've finished cleaning up your chest." He regards me with hooded eyes. "Then you can flirt to your heart's content, if you want to, that is."

"If I want to?" I grasp his chin, since he's looked away again. "Why wouldn't I want to, Hawk?"

He shrugs as he grabs a clean cotton pad and dips it in the bowl of water he somehow managed to fill without me noticing.

"I just thought you might be angry that I've only just turned up now, when I said I'd be here before breakfast."

I hook my finger beneath his chin and tip his head so he looks at me. "I'm not angry," I assure him. "I'm sure you have a good reason."

"I tried calling. I don't have your landline."

Of course he doesn't. I only gave him my mobile number, and there's no bloody signal unless I walk halfway up the hill. I'm such a dunce.

"What did happen, Hawk?"

Dave runs in as Alex is about to explain.

“Er, Alex, er what should I do with your visitors?”

“Your visitors?” I exclaim as he gives a shocked gasp and jumps off my lap. I frown at Dave who shrugs helplessly.

“Holy shit, I forgot.” He slaps his forehead with the heels of both hands.

“Your visitors?” I ask again, looking from Dave to him. “Want to catch me up? Anyone?”

“The reason I didn’t come this morning,” he explains as he moves to the door. “My sister turned up, with her two kids, out of the blue. I’ve been sorting out a family crisis, Ethan, I’m really sorry.”

At the kitchen door, I can see three figures hovering: a woman, a little older than Alex with long dark hair and the same dark-chocolate eyes, and two children, a teenage girl about the same height as the woman, and a boy about eight or nine. They are all peering into the kitchen with wide eyes.

“Alex, is he all right?” the woman asks, sounding full of concern.

Alex glances back at me with a mixture of apology and concern in his expression. I smile at him reassuringly. I’m not angry with him. I don’t want him to ever think that. I was confused, yes, but the doubts were all in my head. Finally he smiles back and all my doubts and fears are dispelled. It’s that tight, shy smile of his, but I now know what it holds at bay. I know what he hides behind that smile, and he’s hiding nothing from me.

A wave of relief washes over me. Or is that faint feeling something to do with delayed shock due to being attacked by a fucking huge golden eagle that may or may not have been trying to eat me?

“Ethan, we should get you somewhere you can lie down.” Alex is back at my side a few minutes later, looking worried.

“What about your sister and her kids?” I can hear my voice, but it sounds far away.

“I sent them off into town. They need to get some supplies. My nephew wanted to meet the raccoons, but I told him later, because they’re both in here at the minute.” He lifts my chin, looking into my eyes, and I give him a weak smile. “Are you sure you don’t need to go to A&E?”

I shake my head. “If I go, then there’ll be questions, and the shit will hit the fan if the authorities think Rupert’s gone loopy.”

“You’re not protecting him, are you?” Alex sounds shocked, angry almost. I grimace. “Ethan, he could have really hurt you.”

“No, see, he didn’t attack me. He was attached to my glove, and I tripped. He freaked because he was attached to me.” I shrug. “It was my fault for trying to do two things at once.”

“Promise me you won’t try to go in there again without some backup.” Alex is sitting down beside me now, dabbing at the wounds again, although they are almost all clean. I quite liked it when he was sitting on my lap, but I think I might be pushing it a bit if I asked him to get back up here. “When was your last tetanus jab?”

“Are you kidding me, Hawk?” I snort. “It’s well up to date due to the amount of times I get bitten, scratched and attacked by eagles.”

“Oh god, how can you even joke about it? How often does this kind of thing happen?”

“I’m not changing my job, Hawk. Don’t ever ask me to do that.”

He gives me a startled look, as if it’s the last thing he would ever ask.

“I would never...” He shakes his head, as if he wants to say more, but now is not the right time. “You need to get that ankle elevated with some ice on it,” he muses, changing the subject completely, or avoiding it. Can’t say I blame him. I think I shocked myself. “I’ll help you into your living room,” he continues. “You’ll be more comfortable there, and then you can tell me where I can find you some clothes.”

I look down at myself as he helps me stand, only now remembering I am only wearing those camouflage briefs he likes. His eyes have wandered down there too.

“How many pairs of those do you actually have?”

“They came in a pack of three, Hawk.” I flicker my eyebrows at him. “So there’s another pair in my room, just waiting to be worn.”

“Oh my!”

We struggle into my living room and with some choice curses from me, because my ankle is swollen to twice its size, Alex manages to get my boot and sock off. He helps me settle on the sofa, places a cushion under the injured foot and gently places an ice pack on it.

“You’ll make someone a wonderful nurse one day, Hawk.” I grin at him, feeling much more comfortable, even if I am still semi-naked.

He just rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling.

“Where’s your bedroom, so I can get you some clothes?”

“Up the stairs, turn right, follow the landing around until you turn right again, then it’s the second door on the left.” I sound like a sat nav, but it is a bit of a maze, my house.

Alex frowns at me, then leaves the room and is back in a few minutes with some sweatpants and a warm hoodie.

“Your house is huge,” he muses as he helps me pull on the hoodie over the dressings he’s placed on my chest.

I shrug. “It belongs to my parents. They rent it out, well...” I correct myself. “They did, until their prodigal son returned.”

“I thought you said you got evicted from your flat and you needed a place for you and your ark to live.” Alex sticks his tongue firmly against his front teeth as I narrow my eyes.

“All right, aye, that’s what happened. I was just testin’ to see if ye were listenin’.”

Alex laughs, and it’s a lovely sound. He crouches down at my side, once again battling with my crew to get some space near me. None of them seem to have any problem making space for him. It’s like they accept he’s one of us now. He places a hand on my cheek and runs his thumb along my bottom lip.

“How do you feel now, intrepid animal man?”

I capture his hand in mine and hold it to my lips for a gentle kiss. I hear his breath catch, and his pupils dilate as he meets my gaze.

“All the better now you’re here.”

“I’m so sorry about this morning, Ethan.” He looks full of regret, and I don’t want him to feel bad about it.

“Don’t, it’s hardly your fault your sister decided to spring a surprise visit on you. Funny she didn’t mention it though, eh, when you were just talking to her yesterday.”

“Yeah, well, things kind of went pear-shaped for her after she got off the phone, and by the time she was thinking straight, it was after midnight and she

was travelling and thought it was probably too late to call me, that I'd only worry until she got here." He rolls his eyes. "She'd have been right. Can I make you a cup of tea or coffee?" I guess he doesn't want to tell me more. It's none of my business really.

"Coffee would be great, Hawk, thanks."

He gets up, brushes his lips across my cheek then disappears into the kitchen. I touch my cheek where he kissed. I can't help smiling.

Suddenly I'm inundated by animals. All except Cordy, who has followed Alex back into the kitchen. They all fight for space on me and around me on the sofa.

"Oh, yes, you are all very protective of your main source of food, aren't you?" I mutter. It's comfortable and warm though. "Well then, everyone." I sigh as I relax into the soft cushions. "What do you all think of Alex?"

I don't really need to ask that, since not one of my crew so far seems to have any problem with him. I don't often invite many people into my house for that very reason. Always at least one of my house crew gets upset by visitors. They all seem to have accepted Alex into the pack. He's yet to meet BooBoo, my other raccoon, or Beorn, the Cockatoo, but I'll make sure he has some treats handy when he does.

Beorn is on her perch, snoozing. I'm not fooled though, she knows everything that goes on in this house. Suddenly she perks up and listens. The others around me also prick up their ears. Alex is obviously rummaging through cupboards searching for mugs and stuff. Every one of my crew turn their head towards the kitchen door, and I chuckle. Alex has found the snack cupboard.

"Not that cupboard, Alex, remember? You'll be accosted by animals again." Like he was yesterday when he was putting the first-aid box away.

Beorn gives a loud, obnoxious squawk and takes off for the kitchen. Uh oh, Alex is about to meet one of the more bolshie members of my crew.

"Oh, god, there's a... there's a bird, Ethan," he exclaims. I hear Beorn squawk. "What do I do? Bloody thing's dive bombing me." He yelps, and I laugh helplessly.

"Just give her a cheese treat out of the snack cupboard. She'll kill for one of those."

“Oh hell, I hope not.” He yelps again. “Here, have this, you crazed raptor.”

The squawking and the yelping stop, and I wipe the tears from my eyes as he appears in my living room, preceded by Beorn who lands back on her perch and proceeds to eat her ill-gotten gains in triumph.

Alex’s hair is everywhere, not that it was all that neat and tidy before, but now he looks like he’s been dragged through a hedge. I snort. I can’t help it.

“Yes, very funny,” he snarks as he places two steaming mugs on the coffee table. “You didn’t tell me you owned two psychotic birds.”

“Beorn isn’t psychotic, she’s just a bit bossy, that’s all.”

“Just a bit,” he huffs as he urges me to sit up and then makes space on the sofa behind me. “Beorn?” he asks with a bemused frown. “Why are all your animals named after bears?”

I shrug. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.” I snuggle back against him, and his arm snakes around my chest. Well this is nice.

“So now we’re on an even keel,” Alex muses.

“Eh?” I tip my head back to try to meet his gaze.

“We’ve both been attacked by birds today.” He pulls a white feather from his hair, and I snort.

“I hardly think Beorn’s attack is in the same league, Hawk.”

“No,” Alex muses as he sips his coffee. “Beorn’s attack was much worse.”

Chapter 16

Snug as a Bug

Alex

I think today might be turning out to be one of the most stressful days in my entire life. And I moved here to get away from stress.

I take a deep breath and relax on the sofa. With Ethan's head lying safe in my lap, I try to make sense of everything that's happened so far.

Liss turned up out of the blue, and when I should have been with Ethan, I had to sit and listen to her rant about her cheating dickhead of a husband. Thankfully I was spared her rants *to* her dickhead of a husband because he doesn't have my landline number. She had to walk halfway up the hill to get a good enough signal on her mobile in order to make all of her many calls to him.

She looked increasingly more hassled every time she came back down, and she had a shitload of stuff she needed to offload on me. Am I bad person for thinking she could have done a lot of that over the phone during our daily phone calls over the last few weeks? Now I know why she's been so chatty and clingy. It was too much to hope that it was simply her concern for my well-being.

To add to the stress, her kids have been going through some sort of culture shock because I have no TV, no Wi-Fi, and absolutely nothing to do in my house that would possibly interest a nine- or a fourteen-year-old. Apparently books are not "something to do". The fact they've been getting books from me for birthdays and Christmas every year of their short, inconsequential lives seems to have escaped their memory.

When Liss wasn't on the phone to her husband she was fending off her children's whining. And whining is the correct term for it. They have whined constantly since they arrived. They have it down to an art form.

By lunchtime I'd had enough. If they were going to stay I had to do something about the sleeping arrangements. My two spare bedrooms aren't bedrooms at all. One is full of empty moving boxes and the other has the infamous desk that Ethan put up for me, since I was making that room into a study.

Liss had been driving all night so I offered to drive them all into town to get some supplies. On our way there, I pulled into Ethan's place in order to explain why I hadn't turned up.

When I saw the state he was in, everything else went out of my head.

Eventually I remembered my family were there, and I handed my car keys over to Liss.

She was so shocked that she didn't even question my reaction, or the fact that I was abandoning her. She's gone off with the kids into town. I have no idea what is going to happen when they come back. They're going to have to fend for themselves until I get things sorted here. I'm not leaving Ethan in this state, no way.

He's fallen asleep, and I am reluctant to move. I don't want to disturb him. He had a nasty accident, and his body needs time to recover. The cuts on his chest are mostly superficial, but there are a few nasty ones. It's his ankle that I'm worried about. It is quite swollen, and I'm still of a mind to take him to casualty to get it X-rayed.

"You know, if you want to get back to your sister, I'll be fine on my own." Ethan's voice is croaky and sleepy. He shocks me though.

"They've gone off into town," I murmur, stroking his hair gently. "I thought you were asleep."

He reaches up and takes my hand in his, pulling it to his lips. "I was just resting my eyes, Hawk."

"How do you feel?" He looks pale and tired, and he actually needs to be in bed.

"Sore!" he replies, and I give a wry chuckle.

"I'm not surprised really. Getting attacked by a golden eagle is probably up there in the top ten of most dangerous animal attacks, Ethan. Along with lions, tigers and bears."

"Oh my!" Ethan adds for effect. I laugh. Mostly with relief that he's sounding more like his sassy self. "I wasn't attacked, it was an accident."

"Okay, okay. I get it. Rupert isn't a man-eater."

"No, he isn't." Ethan sounds a little relieved that I've said. "He's damaged, Hawk. He needs careful handling, but even the best hand-reared bird would

have panicked under those circumstances. He was attached to me and I fell. He was defending himself.”

“Ethan, you don’t need to explain it again,” I assure him. I’m actually pretty damn impressed by his dedication and devotion to his job. He really does love what he does very much.

“I think I do have to explain, though, because you asked me if this sort of thing happened often.”

“I did, but I was shocked to see you in such a state. It wasn’t very nice, especially after I’d spent all morning worrying about you and how you felt about me not turning up.”

“Aw, Hawk, you did? I’m touched.” Sometimes I can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic or not. There’s times when I think I can read his expression so well, like last night, when I knew he was upset, even though he said he wasn’t. And I’d been right.

“You told me not to ask you to change your job.”

“I remember!” He’s gone quiet, like he’s waiting to hear something he might not like.

I remember his reaction to my shocked exclamation. He seemed quite concerned that I would make such an unreasonable demand.

“No one should ever ask you to stop doing something you obviously enjoy, Ethan. And I’m in no position to ask you to change anything about yourself. Why would I even want to? Even I can see you’re very good at what you do.” I think for a moment before adding, “So your job is sometimes dangerous. Every occupation has a degree of danger. It’s unreasonable to ask you to stop because of one accident. It would be like you asking me to stop reading books because I got a paper cut.”

Ethan laughs and then winces, as if clearly hurt.

“Don’t make me laugh, Hawk. It hurts.”

“Sorry!” I grimace, but I’m smiling, since the comparison I made was hardly a comparison at all really.

He reaches up and takes my hand again.

“S’okay,” he murmurs. After a few moments’ silence, he speaks again. “Tell me what’s going on with your sister, then, Hawk?”

I heave a deep sigh. It's not that I don't want to tell him, it's just that he doesn't really need to hear the entire sorry tale of my dysfunctional family.

"She left her husband and needs somewhere for the kids to stay while she goes off and sorts everything out."

Ethan whistles. "Bit out of the blue isn't it? Since you only spoke yesterday?" he asks. "Spur of the moment girl, is she? Your sister?"

"No." I frown. "I suspect it's been building for a while, but she didn't want me to worry." I feel a little guilty that I haven't really been around. "Her husband's a dickhead. I've always known that, and she's always defended him. I guess she's done defending him now."

"So you've got the kids for how long?"

"A week," I explain. "It's their half term, so Liss is leaving tomorrow and coming back next Saturday to pick them up."

"Sounds like a great arrangement, Hawk. I'm sure they're thrilled to be staying with their uncle." He doesn't even sound sarcastic. In fact he actually sounds quite excited for me. I blow out my cheeks slowly.

"Not entirely sure what either party thinks of the idea, really," I admit. "I'm not relishing the thought of looking after two kids I hardly know for six days. Their faces when Liss told them they were staying with me were a sight for sure."

"Are you kidding me, Hawk?" Ethan tips his head to look up at me. "I bet you're a fantastic uncle. Your house is awesome. You have more books than a public library, and don't forget you have the coolest guy living right next door."

"Right," I huff, stroking his hair and smiling at his brash self-confidence. "You're probably right about having the coolest next-door neighbour anyone could ever have, but the rest? I doubt they will see it the way you do."

"Why?"

"Oh, let me list the things they've already whined about." I mark off on my fingers. "I don't have Wi-Fi. There isn't any mobile signal unless you walk up the hill. I don't live near any shops. My house is tiny, and I don't have any spare beds. They've gone into town to get some airbeds for the kids to sleep on. I'll be on the sofa tonight while Liss is in my bed. Oh, and the worst thing." I take a deep breath. "I am totally weird because I don't have a TV."

“Well, I’d have to agree on that last one, Hawk, but the rest is just circumstantial. If your nephew and niece are so desperate for a Wi-Fi connection just let them use mine.”

“Every day?” I gasp, ignoring the fact that he’s just called me weird.

“Why not?” He shrugs, laying his head back down on my lap. “They are welcome to come over here anytime, every day if they want. Means I’ll get to see you, and they’ll get their Wi-Fi connection, and mind...” he holds up a finger, tipping his head so he can meet my eye “...I don’t give out the password to just anyone. They’re a special case. The students that come here don’t even get that special privilege.”

“I’ll make sure they know what an honour it is.” I chuckle, and then I frown, because does he really know what he’s offering? “You don’t want two whiny kids underfoot,” I huff. “Although your offer is very tempting.”

“Hawk!” He sounds a little frustrated with my reluctance. “My offer makes sense. I need help around here, and your niece is how old?”

“Sophia’s fourteen.”

“That’s not much younger than some of the students working here this week. Just hand her over to Dave, and he’ll sort her out with some jobs. And I’m sure your nephew...how old is he?”

“Ben’s nine!”

“There you go then.” He shrugs. “He’ll think this place is awesome. Nine-year-olds always do.”

“This nine-year-old seems to think the only decent way to spend the day is locked in some sort of live online battle on his Xbox, which he brought, by the way, and is totally disgusted there’s no TV to plug the thing into.”

Ethan laughs. “Oh my god, he sounds like a real charmer. Tell him to bring his Xbox over here, and he can keep me company while you do my chores out in the yard. I guarantee though, he will spend more time outside than in.”

I want to accept his generous offer. It would solve all my problems. But does he really want to get so involved in my life? We’ve only just begun whatever it is that’s going on between us. Surely he’ll be put off by having my family descend on him when he’s feeling under the weather to begin with.

On the other hand, he needs some help. Whether he needs my help in particular is another matter. I do want to spend some time with him though. What should I do?

“I can see the battle being fought all over your face, Hawk.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just debating which is the best option.”

“Stuck at your place with your sister’s whiny kids, or stuck here with me. I don’t whine by the way, and…” He snakes a hand from behind his head and between my thighs. I gasp as he cups my cock and kneads it gently. “Being here with me has other advantages, Hawk.”

He continues to knead, and I try to catch my breath as my cock thickens and strains against my trousers.

“Ethan!” I swallow hard, gripping the sofa cushions as he grins at me.

With some effort he turns and pushes himself up so our faces are level. He pushes me back against the arm of the sofa, a dark, lustful look in his eyes as he settles between my legs.

“I keep thinking about your personality change last night, Hawk,” he tells me breathlessly, “I want to know if it’ll happen again.”

“I t-told you I save it for sp-special occasions.”

“This is a special occasion.” He leans in and presses his lips to mine, stopping me midgasp as I respond to his kiss.

His hand continues to knead my groin and my breath stutters. I feel him smile against my lips.

“Ethan,” I breathe, leaning back to break the kiss, “we shouldn’t be doing this, you’re hurt. It’s the middle of the day. Anyone could walk in.” I bite my lip as I list the reasons we shouldn’t be in this position, but that personality change Ethan mentioned, it’s beginning to take over as he turns me on more than I’ve ever been turned on in my life.

“No one can disturb us, Hawk, with half a dozen burglar alarms watching out for intruders.” He indicates his crew, all either on or lying around the sofa. I suppose he’s right. No one could come in without them knowing first.

“But what about you?” I don’t want to make things worse for him. I’m losing control as it is, anything could happen.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you hurt me, Hawk.” He lowers his head until his breath is hot against the fabric of my trousers. “Got me all fired up when you vaulted the gate to come to my rescue. That was pretty hot stuff.” I gasp.

“I didn’t come to your rescue,” I protest, although I have to admit, I’ve never vaulted over a gate in my life. “Dave was already helping you.”

“Yeah, but really, Hawk, given a choice between him or you, I’d chose you any day. Dave sweats like a fat lass.”

“Ethan!” I exclaim at his outrageous statement. He chuckles, and the heat travels over my crotch again.

I breathe hard and swallow as my mouth goes dry. There’s no way he can’t see how this is affecting me, but this is hardly appropriate when he’s hurt. He needs TLC not sex. I don’t think he is of the same mind.

“I want to taste you, Hawk,” he mutters, as his good hand fiddles with my button and then pulls open my fly, so he can mouth my swollen cock through the fabric of my boxers.

“Jesus, Ethan.” I buck into the heat of his mouth, and he chuckles as his fingers grip the waistband of my boxers, pulling them down. “I don’t need a blow job to help me make up my mind about coming over here every day.”

“Maybe not, but you’re gonna get one anyway.” He chuckles. “I’m collecting what I should’ve had this morning, except life got in the way.”

I choke down a protest as he sucks my cock into his mouth. “Oh god!” I dig my fingers into the sofa cushions.

It doesn’t take long. I buck into his mouth as his tongue swirls around my shaft. My fingers weave gently through his hair. His moans vibrate over my skin, and I tingle all over as I lose myself to him.

“Ethan!” I cry out as I come, shooting into his mouth. He swallows around me and catches every drop.

When did this suddenly move from me taking care of him to him taking care of me?

“Bloody hell!” I gasp as I come down from the high he just gave me.

He moves so he has his back to me, cradled between my legs as he lies back against my chest. I glance down at his own erection, mounding in his sweat pants, and I remember that package is neatly encased in another pair of those sexy briefs he likes so much. I swallow, my mouth dry, and my brain on autopilot.

“Want me to... you know...?” I can’t even string more than two words together. I think he’s blown my brain out of my ears.

Ethan grins lasciviously, like the Grinch in the Dr Seuss story. But instead of Christmas, I think he may have stolen me.

I move my hand down to brush my fingers over the bulge in his pants. His eyes flutter closed, and his head falls back against my shoulder. He gasps as he bucks into my touch.

Sex in the middle of the day was never my thing, especially not impromptu sex with someone who's just been attacked by a golden eagle, but somehow, that fact makes him even hotter than he is; if that's physically possible.

"Oh, shit, Hawk, I need you to touch me." He gasps and I laugh, because I can't even begin to understand what he sees in me that has him so fired up.

I give in to his demands, feeding my hand into his pants, savouring the feel of those briefs before I move them out of the way. Why am I so bloody obsessed with his underwear? I think I might be developing a fetish.

He bucks again as I wrap my fingers around his straining cock. Somehow I don't think he's going to last long either as he breathes my name. He can't decide what he's calling me now: "Alex, Hawk, Alex, oh my god."

He babbles incomprehensibly, and I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing at the absolute ludicrousness and inappropriateness and utter sexiness of what we're doing.

He comes with a shudder and a cry of "Mr Hawk!"

Mr Hawk? I mean, really, Ethan? This guy makes me laugh so much.

He relaxes after several more shudders, and I wipe my hand on some spare bandage left over from binding his ankle.

"Now I think I'll definitely sleep," he murmurs, his head settling back down on my chest as I fumble to fasten my button and fly.

"Good," I tell him, a little squeakier than I intended. He opens his eyes and smirks and then reaches up and pulls me down into a desperate kiss that isn't quite happening because of the awkward angle.

The kiss deepens anyway. I think I might just be losing myself to this man. I think he might just have stamped his ownership on me. I find the thought quite appealing.

Shuffling back onto the sofa to lie alongside him, I pull him gently into my arms, and we fall asleep together with his crew positioning themselves around us to keep us cosy and safe and snug as a bug in a rug.

Chapter 17

Two Birds With One Stone

Ethan

I am lying in a cocoon of warmth and loveliness.

Until I try to move and all hell breaks loose. Raccoons start huffing and scratching, and cats start kneading in places they have no business kneading. Why do they have to stick their claws into the most sensitive part of my thigh, like every bloody time?

Beorn starts swearing.

“Shut up, Beorn. Jeesh, Alex’s never heard that sort of language before. Behave yerself.”

To be fair she doesn’t swear, or even talk, that often. She’s usually content to just squawk obnoxiously until you just can’t ignore her anymore. Alex is honoured that she’s spoken in front of him.

That’s when I notice Alex isn’t even here. Where the hell is he? I lift my head to see if he’s at least in the room.

“Hawk? Ow, holy shit!” I fall back with a cry. Everything hurts, bloody everywhere.

To cap it all I need to go to the bloody toilet.

Where the hell is Alex? How could he abandon me? Again?

I instantly feel guilty for thinking that. I take the thought back. He hasn’t abandoned me. He has his own problems to sort out, or rather his sister’s problems. He stayed long enough to make sure I was all right. At least I know he cares, a little, or a lot actually, if the vault over that gate was anything to go by.

The things he said to me, before we got down and dirty again. They were pretty awesome. He thinks I’m good at what I do. Was that a note of respect I heard in his tone? He respects me for what? For looking after a horde of animals? It’s not exactly a great chore for me, because he’s right: I do enjoy my work, very much. Except when it gets icky, like now as Paddy sticks her face in mine and starts licking me happily.

“Eugh! Paddy, knock it off.” I push her away and the space is immediately filled by Cordy, doing exactly the same thing. “Eugh! Cordy! If I wanted a bloody tongue bath I could’ve asked Alex.” I chuckle, and then I stop and make a face. “Except he’s not here, and I really need a piss, dammit.”

I try to sit up, and everything starts hurting again. My ankle is killing me, and I can’t push myself up with my left hand because it has stitches in the palm; or my right hand because it’s covered in scratches from Rupert’s talons. Rolling over is like stabbing broken glass in my chest. The only time the pain was dulled was when Alex and I... well, I don’t have that luxury right now. I am a fucking mess.

“Okay, guys, I’m gonna need some help here.” My crew all stop their various activities and look at me, before resuming their various activities immediately. I sneer at them. “That’s great, guys, thanks. And Boog, stop licking yer arse, that’s disgusting. You are an elegant, pedigree Siamese cat. I thought they bred those behaviours out of you.”

She glances at me and then looks away with a feline dismissal that makes me feel six inches tall. I can see I’m getting no help from any of them, so I knock them all off the sofa then roll over, cursing profusely, until I fall off and onto the floor. I manage to crawl on my knees until I reach the door, and from there I can pull myself up with a lot of cursing and groaning and creaking.

“I am twenty-six. I shouldn’t be creaking.”

Stick it up yer arse!

“Oh god, Beorn. Shut up!”

Shut up, Beorn, shut up!

The downstairs toilet is just across the hall, but it feels like it’s five miles away. I try hopping, but I’m not very coordinated. I try to limp, but the pain in my ankle when I try to bear any kind of weight is so bad I feel faint. I opt for crawling on my knees.

I think I might need crutches if I’m going to cope just moving around the house. I’m definitely going to need some help over the next few days. Maybe I could call Donald, although he can’t be here during the day. Dave can take care of daytime stuff. He’s sure to be okay with that. My parents will be available from the weekend. They won’t mind coming a little earlier than they planned.

I’ll speak to Dave before he leaves, and then I need to make some phone calls. I’ll do it all after I’ve been to the loo.

I hope to god my ankle is just twisted, or sprained. If it's worse, I'll be in big trouble. I'm supposed to be on set with Bear for his starring role next week. That won't be happening if I can't walk, or drive or anything. I don't relish the thought of telling my bitch of an agent I can't make the call.

I take care of business and emerge from the toilet to a captive audience.

"What the...?" All of my crew are there waiting for me in a weird little semicircle. It's like a scene from *The Birds* except there's only one bird involved in this re-enactment. They are either being very protective, or weird, or... wait a minute, what time is it?

I glance at the clock and groan. They're not being protective, or weird; they're hungry. They're just proving animals can tell the time.

"All right, you ingrates. I get it. It's feeding time at the zoo." Phone calls will have to wait, and if it's that late, then Dave's already left for the day, damn. Somehow I will have to go out and lock everything up.

Painfully I hobble, crawl, and claw my way into the kitchen. By the time I get there, I'm a sweating mess, but due to my well-organised kitchen, I can lean against the bench and reach almost everything I need in order to feed all of my crew. I also reach into the first-aid cupboard for some more painkillers. They make me sleepy, but they serve a purpose.

As I reach into the food cupboard and pocket a bag of my crew's favourite cheese treats for later, Sooty and Boog weave in and out of my legs, purring loudly. Yogi and BooBoo direct activities from the bench beside me. Beorn is sitting on my head, bouncing up and down and squawking encouragement. Every now and then her bright yellow crest comes into view in front of my forehead. It's annoying, but at least she's stopped swearing.

Paddy and Cordy sit patiently behind me, waiting for their turn.

Suddenly Paddy lets out a low, warning growl, deep in her throat. It's the only alert I get before...

"What the hell are you doing on your feet?"

I whirl, in shock, to see Alex, standing at the back door with two carrier bags in his hand and looking just as sexy as ever, despite the angry flash in his eyes.

For a moment I just stare. Both dogs greet him happily. What's going on there? Cordy loves everyone, but Paddy usually reserves her affections. I

grimace, because Alex looks pissed off, and then I smile, because that always seems to melt him.

“All right, Hawk?”

He narrows his eyes as he drops his bags on the kitchen table. He also has a messenger bag across his shoulders. I wonder what he’s brought. He deposits that bag on the floor before approaching me.

I’m so overwhelmed with relief to see him back it takes all my self-control not to reach out and collapse into his arms. I have to get these animals fed before they all pass out from hunger, and then I can pass out from pain and exhaustion.

“Ethan!” Alex hisses. I think he sees my attempt to hide my battle to stay upright. I wonder how he can read me so well. “You should be resting.”

“Aye, well, I woke up, and ye were gone. I needed a slash, and this lot needed feeding.”

“And they couldn’t wait?” He looks slightly less angry and a little more guilty and concerned.

“They get fed at the same time every day. No, Hawk, they couldn’t wait, and besides, I didn’t know you were coming back.”

“Urgh!” He sounds frustrated.

“Yer back now though, hello!” I wink at him.

“Don’t bloody wink at me, mister.” He places his hands on his hips again and then grabs hold of me as I overbalance and cry out when my bad foot hits the floor.

“Holy crap!” we both exclaim at the same time.

The pain hits me right between the eyes, and for a moment my vision swims. Alex is the only reason I don’t fall.

Beorn is dislodged from her perch on my head and squawks indignantly as she jumps up into the air and flaps about trying to find another perch. She lands on the bench and bounces angrily from one foot to the other.

Holy crap!

“Beorn, I said shush!” I hiss weakly.

“Did your cockatoo just swear?” Alex asks me, his face a picture of disapproval and bemusement.

“See, Beorn, I told you he wouldn’t be happy.”

Shut up, Beorn!

Beorn follows this up with a particularly obnoxious squawk that makes everyone jump half out of their skins, including Alex and me. The cats hiss, the dogs yelp, and Yogi and BooBoo start snickering and waving their paws indignantly.

“This place is a madhouse, Ethan, honestly.” With a helpless chuckle, Alex grabs my arm and pulls it over his shoulders. I suddenly feel better for him being here. Even though he’s angry with me.

As if she’s been usurped, Beorn gives one of her signature obnoxious squawks and flies off to one of the many perches I’ve installed about the house for her. She continues to bounce up and down, raising her crest and basically provoking us. If Alex was another cockatoo he’d be toast by now.

The rest of my crew settle with some hushed words from me.

“Where are you taking me, Hawk?” I ask as I realise Alex is urging me to move. “I need to finish feeding this lot.”

“You need to sit down. That’s what you need to do,” he huffs. “You rest. Let me feed the animals.”

“You?” I try not to laugh, but for someone who admits to never owning a pet in his life, how does he expect to know what to do? “No, it’s better if I do it. They know me. They don’t know you.”

“You’re going to be right here, Ethan. Just tell me what to do from this chair.”

He helps me settle in the comfy chair that is most often used by my cats. I rarely sit in here if I’m in the house. He gets a stool and cushion for my foot and then stands and regards me for a few moments.

“Okay?” He’s rubbing his chin, and it’s distracting me from the pain. I nod. “Want me to take a look at the dressings on your chest?” He pushes his glasses up his nose, and I think I might be about to implode. God, he is so damn gorgeous. I shake my head. “Right.” He rubs his hands together, ready to get started. “Tell me what I need to do.”

God, this man! Every moment he’s with me I see another aspect to his personality. He’s so willing to help me, and I have no idea why, when we

hardly know each other. When we first met he was so disapproving of what he thought I did. When did he change his opinion?

I grab his hand before he moves out of my reach and tug him to me until he's pulled, laughing, into my lap. His laugh sends shivers up and down my spine, and his surprised smile is a thing of beauty.

"Tell me why," I demand as he kneels on the chair, straddling my thighs. I hold him in place with my hands on his hips.

There's a look in his dark eyes that takes my breath away. No one has ever looked at me that way before. Tenderly he brushes the backs of his fingers across my cheek then runs them through my hair.

"Why what?" He smiles.

"Tell me why you want to help me so much." I repeat my question breathlessly.

"Why do I need a reason to want to help you out?" His eyes search my face; his fingers trace my jaw. "You're hurt, you need someone here."

My bones have turned to jelly, and I've completely forgotten what it is we are supposed to be doing. All I can think about is the fact he came back, and I want him to be here, believe me, but I suddenly want, no, need a full explanation.

"Just tell me, Hawk!" His first answer was not enough. "Why are you here, when you could be with your sister and her kids?"

He gives me a look that clearly says I am being a complete dork about this, like it's a total no brainer.

"My sister did not get attacked by a golden eagle today, Ethan. She's left her husband, and whilst she might have some minor mental scarring, I'm sure I won't factor too highly in the recovery process. She'll heal."

"I'll heal!" I protest, although I don't know why I'm trying to argue against this. "I heal pretty quick."

"And that's probably a blessing in your line of work." He leans in and kisses me gently on the cheek. "But while you're healing, you need someone here to help you."

"But I can get Dave to come back after he's dropped off the students at the train station, or I can call Don; he'll come over."

What the hell am I doing? I have the sexiest man in the world sitting in my lap and I'm looking for excuses for him to not be here. I have no idea why, except... maybe I really want him to be here for the right reasons and not because...

"Hawk, I don't want you to feel obligated to be here just because we... erm..."

"What?" He shuffles in my lap, and I bite my lip to stifle a moan. "Because we had hot monkey sex?" He raises one eyebrow, pushing his glasses up his nose at the same time. I don't think I've seen anything more seductive in my entire life. I laugh at his choice of words.

"Oh my god, Hawk, I think I like the way you put that into words, because that is exactly what we had." I think that personality change from last night might be coming into effect again.

He chuckles and shuffles some more. Is he grinding on me? Oh my god, I think he's grinding on me. This guy is insatiable.

"I'm not here because of the sex, Ethan." He rolls his eyes when I regard him with disbelief. "Well, okay, maybe that is part of it." He leans in and brushes his lips across mine. "Because so far, it's been great." I raise one eyebrow, and he chuckles. "Well, okay, awesome, but that's not the only reason I'm here."

His fingers toy with the zip of my hoodie while he thinks about his other reasons.

"When I saw you were hurt this afternoon I was shocked to the core," he explains, not meeting my eye. "I've never been in a situation like that before. I thought my heart would never start beating again. I wanted to make it better for you. I wanted to be here for you." He frowns as he tries to put his reasons into words. "I spoke to my sister this afternoon, after you fell asleep. She understands that I need to be here more than she needs me to be with her. She even did some shopping for us." He indicates the bags on the table. "And she packed an overnight bag for me. She's got it all under control over at my place. She's bringing the kids over first thing tomorrow before she leaves. I hope that's okay."

Dumbly I just nod. I think he's offering to stay the night, but somewhere during that speech he just made, my ears started ringing. I could see his lips moving, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. I could hear his voice though, washing over me like water over a smooth pebble.

Somewhere between meeting him in the hardware store four weeks ago and now, he has decided that I am more important to him than his sister who's having a marriage crisis.

What did I do to make that happen? I can't remember. I was busting a gut trying to impress him, but every time it seemed to blow up in my face. He's here despite all of that. Somehow I've gained his respect and his presence by simply being myself. Maybe Don was right. Being myself is enough. Who knew?

"Ethan?"

I shake my head to clear it. The painkillers I took earlier are starting to take effect. Things are getting fuzzy around the edges. Or is that just his presence here?

"M'okay," I assure him. "Just a little tired, Hawk, that's all."

"Well that's understandable." He traces down the line of the zip of my hoodie with a concerned frown. "You're okay with me staying, aren't you? Just say if you're not."

He looks like he's waiting for my approval. He's busy grinding on my lap, and I'm still not sure if he's doing it on purpose or unconsciously. It doesn't matter. I want him here; I'm hardly going to say no.

"I'm okay with you staying, Hawk. More than okay. Thanks." I smile up at him, but his smile in return is brighter than the fucking sun.

My heart misses several beats, and all the oxygen has been consumed by the fire he's set inside me. Oh my god, if this is falling then I don't ever want to stop. I want to fall forever.

"Ethan!" He looks concerned, brushing his fingers across my forehead, laying his hand gently on my tender chest. "Are you really okay? You look a little dazed."

"Yes." I nod. I can't tell him he's suddenly become the most important thing in my life. It's hardly the right time. He'll run a fucking mile. Fortunately I have a good excuse. "I took painkillers before you came. They're pretty strong."

"So basically, you're high right now."

"I'd be high anyway, because you're here."

“Right!” he snorts, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “Let’s get these animals fed before you fall asleep and they start eating you instead.”

I chuckle. “That’ll never happen, Hawk, they all love me too much.”

“Right!” He doesn’t look convinced.

He moves to get off my lap, but I stop him.

“Hey, I’m a lovable guy.”

“I’m sure you are.” He leans in and kisses me again, soft and slow and altogether too damn well. He is far too good at this. It’s always the quiet ones!

He gets up, leaving my lap, and my lips, feeling empty and cold.

“So, come on, tell me what to do with these animals before you get any more high.”

I chuckle. He’s approached the bench where everyone is still waiting patiently.

“Yogi, BooBoo, go and wash your hands!” I order my two wayward raccoons.

They immediately slink along the bench and fight for space around the sink in order to wash their hands while Alex looks on in bemusement.

He turns to look at me. “Seriously?”

I nod. “Seriously! They dig for worms in the garden and eat grubs out of rotten stuff, Hawk. They wash their hands before they sit at the table.”

“They sit at the table?” He looks even more bemused.

“Where else are they going to eat?” I ignore his incredulous laugh. We have manners in this house; we are not animals! “There’s some grapes in the fridge for them, and there’s some sweetcorn for Beorn.”

At the sound of her name and the flick of my fingers for her to come, my unruly cockatoo flies over to land on my hand. She has managed to not squawk too badly, or swear any more since Alex first arrived. She presents her head to be scratched. It’s her way of showing she’s sorry and re-establishing the bond through grooming. I pick out one of the treats I placed in my pocket earlier, and she takes it and then settles on the arm of the chair to eat.

“You have an endless supply of treats in your pocket, I’m sure,” Alex comments, watching me with interest and a little respect I think. I shrug.

“That’s the real reason all of my animals love me so much, Hawk. I’m a constant, consistent source of food.”

He frowns, as if he doesn’t quite believe me. I am under no illusions that my crew would switch their loyalties in a heartbeat to whoever has the food; a fact being demonstrated quite effectively right now, since they are all ignoring me and only seem to have eyes for Alex. I have to admit, so do I.

“How much of the grapes should I give them, Ethan?” Alex asks, as he brings the box of grapes to the table followed by BooBoo and Yogi, snickering at his feet. “Okay, okay, sit at the er, table, you two.” They obey him, and he laughs as they watch him expectantly. “It’s like feeding kids.”

“It is, in a way. Look at them as toddlers, into everything and looking for mischief everywhere.”

“Hence the child locks on the cupboards.” He nods in understanding.

“And the reasons for keeping my house so tidy,” I add. “You don’t think I’m this tidy by accident do you?” He chuckles. “Just split the bunch and give them half each. Eat nicely.” I tell them as Alex hands the two raccoons their grapes.

“Is that all for them?” He watches them as they both eat eagerly.

“They’ll spend all night digging for grubs, chasing moths and eating worms, Hawk. They’ll eat anything they find, including our leftovers. They’ll be fine.”

“Do they raid bins by any chance?” He raises his eyebrows. I can see by his expression that he’s probably already had the pleasure of a visit from something that’s raided his rubbish bin.

“I wouldn’t put it past them to wander over the hill to yours if they think there’s easy pickings. Put a couple of bricks on the bin lid. Don’t tie it down though, because they can undo knots.”

“Who taught them to do that?” he asks with a surprised laugh.

“Might have been me!” I look a little sheepish, biting my lip. “What?” I ask as he places his hands on his hips. “It’s a good trick.”

He laughs and then holds out an ear of corn, a quizzical look on his face.

“Cut it up into four pieces, Hawk. She can’t handle anything bigger in one go.”

“I’ve heard that before.” He flickers his eyebrows, and I laugh. Was that a flirt?

“Hawk! I’m shocked.”

He huffs out a laugh as he turns away to cut the corn up. Beorn takes interest, but doesn’t leave the arm of the chair. Alex approaches with one piece of corn and she regards him with distrust. She takes the corn from him with her beak and transfers it to her talon before beginning to eat without so much as a second glance.

“Really, Beorn, manners.” I sniff.

Thank you, y’bugger.

I gasp, mortified. Alex laughs out loud.

“Oh my god, this is amazing. If anyone had told me four weeks ago, when I moved here, that I’d be feeding raccoons and listening to cockatoos swear, I’d’ve thought they were crazy.”

The rest of my house crew are pretty straightforward to feed. The two cats and two dogs get dried food, which they all eat quite quickly because they’ve learned if they don’t, raccoons’ll have the lot.

Alex then turns his attention to the bags of shopping his sister kindly bought us. There’s a veritable feast for us both. He helps me back into the living room where we relax on the sofa, eating and watching TV, or at least I watch TV, while he snuggles beside me reading a book he’s found on my one and only bookshelf.

“Okay?” he asks as I feel my eyes growing heavy.

“Yep, fine,” I murmur, feeling relaxed and content. This is a nice feeling, sitting here with him, just chilling. It’s something I’d like the chance of repeating, often.

“Anything you need?” His words spark my interest, and I’m suddenly alert.

I twist and pull him into my lap. He gives a soft cry of surprise as he drops his book, which turns into a giggle as I nuzzle his neck.

“Oh, I know exactly what I need, Hawk.” His body gives a shiver.

“Oh, and what might that be?” He arches one eyebrow and places his glasses to one side. God, that action drives me completely crazy.

I can see by the heat warming his dark eyes that he has a fair idea what I need.

“You, Alex Hawking,” I whisper in his ear, feeling him tremble and gasp. “I need you!”

He kisses me, breathlessly and thoroughly on the lips.

“Mmm! I think I like being needed, Ethan.” I love it when he says my name, I mean, really, it lights me up inside. “What is it that I can do for you, Mr Shaw?”

He hasn't called me that since we first met. Then it was out of politeness; now it has an altogether different feel to it. It sends shivers up and down my spine. He turns so he's once again straddling my thighs. I think he likes this position.

“Take me to bed, Mr Hawk,” I demand.

He snorts, cupping my face in his warm hands. He leans down for another kiss that starts slow and builds to a crescendo before he pulls away, leaving me breathless and panting.

“Oh, I think I can manage that, Eagle Man.”

Chapter 18

Wild Horses Couldn't Keep Me Away

Alex

“Good morning, Hawk!” Ethan’s cheerful voice invades my sleep, and I groan as the day breaks with a vengeance through his thin bedroom curtains.

“Stoo early,” I croak, throwing my arm over my eyes to shade them.

“Hey.” He pokes me in the ribs. “The day starts early in the Shaw residence I’m afraid.”

“What time is it?” I rub my eyes in an attempt to open them, but no amount of rubbing will force them to wake up.

“It’s five a.m.,” Ethan informs me cheerfully as he nuzzles my neck. “Time to get up and get some breakfast with my Hawk.” This much enthusiasm should be illegal at this ungodly hour.

“Jesus!” I groan and turn on my side, away from him, pulling the pillow over my head.

Ethan chuckles and slides up to me, his naked body pressed firmly against mine, his morning wood pushing insistently against my buttocks.

That wakes me up.

“Oh!” I breathe.

There’s another chuckle, and Ethan’s hot breath against the back of my neck sends shivers down my spine.

Before I can take another breath, Ethan’s fingers find my own morning hard-on and wrap gently around it. My next breath is a gasp, and the next, and the next as I arch into his touch.

“God, you are so incredibly sexy, Hawk,” Ethan gasps into my ear as I push my buttocks back against him, feeling his cock press between them.

“I don’t know about incredibly sexy.” I chuckle. “Incredibly horny, definitely.” Incredibly desperate to feel him inside me again. Without. A. Doubt.

I push back insistently, and Ethan chuckles.

“All right, hold your horses. I need to fetch a condom, matey.”

I realise the flaw in that plan and immediately stop him, because he shouldn't be doing any fetching or carrying, or anything really, except he insists on screwing me into the bed sheets. I can't really argue against that one.

“I'll get one.” I turn and place my hand against his chest, and he gasps as I press against a dressing. I grimace. My first priority should have been to ask him how he felt. I feel terrible that I've just allowed myself to jump straight into sex without even enquiring about his health.

“Are you sure you're okay, y'know, to erm...!” How can I feel awkward after everything we've shared over the last two nights?

“Have sex?” Ethan states. I nod, with a frown. “Get down and dirty?” I nod again, grinning this time. Ethan leans close, his lips brushing mine. “I'm up for it, if you are, Hawk.”

His green eyes meet mine, and they're full of warmth, not lust. He wants me, but it's not just sex for him, I'm certain. He wants me; not just my body. I want him too, just as much, just as passionately. I pull him to me and kiss him deeply. With a moan he responds, pushing me back into the pillows, pinning my arms above my head with one hand.

As we kiss I wriggle one wrist free and reach over to the nightstand. I take a condom from the packet deposited there last night, knocking the box on the floor as I scabble about on the bedside table. There's lube too. I hand both to him and then squirm my wrist back into his firm hold. He grins.

He regards me with lust-filled eyes before he turns me on my side. I gasp. This is a better position for him, it causes less pressure on his ankle and chest, and I have to admit, it's quickly becoming a favourite for me too. I loved the way it felt last night and I want more of the same.

The sound of the condom packet ripping sets off a reaction in my brain, like Pavlov's dogs, the anticipation is almost excruciating.

What we did last night involved a fair amount of stretching, and I don't need much of that attention this morning. With a lubed finger, Ethan pushes inside me, and I arch back against him with a soft gasp as he presses kisses between my shoulder blades.

“God.” The air escapes my lungs, and Ethan stops with a mumbled apology as if he's worried he's hurt me. “No, don't stop, you haven't hurt me, Eagle Man, it feels so damn good.”

“Eagle Man!” He groans. “I love that name.”

“Good, because I think it’s stuck on you.”

“I’m stuck on you, Hawk,” he murmurs in my ear as he positions the head of his cock at my opening.

I brace myself as he pushes inside. He slides in far easier than he did last night, even though that had been delicious too, this time the sensation is almost too much. I squeeze the base of my cock to stop myself from coming too quickly, but he bats my hand away and wraps his own fingers around me.

“Not gonna last long, Hawk. You feel so good.”

“God. Ethan. Holy. Crap.” Every word is emphasised by a thrust from him and my panting breaths synchronise with the movement of his hips until I am gasping for air, whimpering and pleading for him to let me come. “Please.” He’s so good. So. Good!

“Hawk, I’m close,” he gasps.

“Yes. Come,” I hiss, gripping the sheets and pushing back against him as hard as I can. He nails that spot every damn time. Oh my god! Could this get any better?

“Hawk!” His mouth is close to my ear. “Next time, I want you to do this to me.”

And that’s how it could get better, so much better. I gasp, crying out as his request tips me over the edge. I might worry that someone could hear us, except I know there isn’t anyone about but his animals, and I couldn’t really care about anything else other than coming, and coming hard.

I feel him throbbing inside me as my muscles clench around him. His movement becomes stuttered and his breathing ragged before he stops altogether, burying his face in the fleshy part of my shoulder, breathing my name: “Alex, Hawk. You do me in.”

After a quick, but tender clean up, we collapse onto our backs, both out of breath. For a moment there is silence except for our ragged breaths as we fight to get oxygen into our lungs.

“All wake-up calls should be this good.” I sigh, and he laughs helplessly.

“I’d be dead within a week, Hawk.” He chuckles. “You’d kill me with too much sex.”

I gasp, pushing myself up and turning to face him.

“Never!” I grin, pressing a kiss to his firm, full lips. “You can never have too much sex.”

We lie together for a few more minutes. I’m reluctant to move, and so, I think, is he. I heave a deep sigh.

“Hmm...” Ethan breathes, as if he’s agreeing with me. He pulls me to him, and I snuggle up to his side.

This comfort and ease I feel when I’m with him is something new for me. I have never felt so relaxed in anyone’s presence, let alone someone I only met four weeks ago. This personality change I seem to have when we’re together like this is something that’s never happened to me before.

The more time I spend with this man the more I surprise myself. I suspect he isn’t done amazing me yet either. The more I learn about him the more my respect for him grows. He’s twenty-six, and he has done so much with his life.

I haven’t done anything of note. He might think having a Master’s degree is an accomplishment, but to me it’s just a piece of paper that I don’t ever intend to do anything with. I never did. Staying on at university was just another way to hide from the world in general.

I don’t want to hide from Ethan.

“When is your sister getting here?” Ethan breaks the silence, turning my thoughts to practical matters and bursting the bubble we have created around ourselves.

“Probably about nine-ish.” I blow out my cheeks and groan. I am not looking forward to this.

“You’re not looking forward to this, are you?” Ethan once again demonstrates how much we appear to be in tune with each other.

“No!” I heave another sigh.

“Why not? It’ll be fun.” Ethan sounds far more enthusiastic, but he hasn’t met Sophia and Ben yet. I’m sure even his irrepressible personality will hit a brick wall there.

“I hardly know these kids, Ethan.” That’s partly my fault, but not entirely. I don’t need to go into details. “From what I saw yesterday, they are definitely not looking forward to spending the best part of a week with me.”

“But this is the perfect opportunity to get to know them, Hawk. You just need to find some common ground.”

Ethan makes it sound so easy, as if finding common ground will come as naturally as breathing to the three of us. The truth is I have absolutely no idea how to relate to kids, and teenagers especially, scare the shit out of me.

“I doubt very much that they want to find any kind of common ground with me. I suspect they don’t really want to know me at all.”

“Bollocks!” Ethan snorts. “Of course they want to know you. You’re their uncle, and a pretty damn awesome one at that.”

“Not according to them,” I huff, although I am practically glowing in his praise. He thinks I’m awesome. That’s all that should matter, but I still have nagging doubts. “Apparently no TV equals zero coolness.”

Ethan snorts again.

“Well, you know the offer is still open for you all to hang out here. They can be here during the day, helping out around the place and in The Barn if they want, and at night they can watch all the TV and use all the Wi-Fi they need to before you take them home.”

“That’s really very nice of you, Ethan.” I am quite blown away by his generous offer when he doesn’t even know these kids, but I guess it’s in his nature. He’s nice to everyone, and they all just melt at his feet.

“Least I can do for my guy,” he mutters as he pulls me close.

I must have tensed, ever so slightly, out of shock at his words, but not in a bad way. He senses it though because I hear his sharp intake of breath as I lift my head to regard him.

“Your guy?” I raise an eyebrow, and he grimaces.

“Well, er, y’know, not that I’m making any kind of claim over you or anything, just that, y’know...” He sighs and meets my gaze unblinking and with such earnestness I feel my heart flutter. “You must know I’d do anything for you, Hawk.”

I really have no words. He’s rendered me speechless. No one has ever said that to me before. I shake my head in complete incomprehension. How can I have become that important to him? I’ve never been that important to anyone.

“Alex?” He sounds concerned, and well he might, because I think all the colour drained from my face. “Say something, sweetheart.”

“I-I can’t... I-I don’t...” I shake my head again.

When did I become his sweetheart? I fall onto my back and hide my face with my arms. I can’t deal with the turmoil of emotions swirling around in my head right now. I want to be his, and I want him to be mine, but can this really be happening so fast?

“Oh god, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Ethan gasps. “Shit, I shouldn’t’ve been so full on, but you’ve gotta cut me some slack here, Hawk, I’ve never done this before.”

“Never done what?” I reveal my face and give him a bemused look.

“This.” He props himself up on his elbow and waves about us in an encompassing arc. “This whole relationship thing. Y’know, if it’s moving too fast we can slow it down. Just tell me I haven’t messed it up already, because that’s the last thing I want to do.”

I stop him with my fingers over his lips, his delicious lips. He gasps and falls silent.

“Shush!” I tell him, in a fair imitation of the way he speaks to his crew: gentle yet firm. “This is moving fast, I agree, but you haven’t messed it up, Ethan, I doubt you ever could, and I don’t want to slow it down.”

“Oh.” He looks relieved beyond words, and he heaves a reassured sigh as he moves to lie on his back once more. “Good!”

“Things will slow down naturally anyway,” I muse, “since I can’t stay here at night while Liss’s kids are here. We can stay as long as you will have us, but I will have to take them back to mine every night.”

Ethan groans. “I guess I knew that but didn’t really think about it. When is Liss coming back for them?”

“She’s coming back Friday, and when she does I should really spend some time with her, Ethan.” I feel like I dropped them all like a stone when I saw Ethan was hurt, and she’s leaving as soon as she’s dropped the kids off here. I feel bad about it really.

“Of course, god, Hawk. Of course you should spend time with her. We have plenty of time after they’ve...” He gasps. “Oh!” he adds, sounding a little unhappy.

“What is it? What’s up?” Has he thought of some reason that I can’t be here with my nephew and niece?

“I just remembered I have a job next week. I leave on Monday.”

“Oh!” I knew he worked away, but he’s been here all the time I have, so I hadn’t really thought about it. This is how he makes his living though. “How long will you be gone?”

“About three weeks,” he says with a grimace. “Sorry, Hawk. I guess that slows it all down to a full stop, whether we want that or not.”

“Why are you apologising?” I stare at him. “This is your job, Ethan. Why would you think I’d be anything but supportive?”

“Because it’s a TV job and you think movies and TV will be the downfall of society?” He echoes my words from three weeks ago, when I first wandered over to his farm. I grimace as I hear them repeated back to me and groan in embarrassment.

“I am so sorry I said those things. I didn’t know you then.” I decide not to mention I was so flustered by seeing him again I would have used anything as an excuse to get away. “I didn’t know how good you are at your job then, or how dedicated and committed you are to everything you do.”

“Wow, Hawk. Thanks.” He sounds surprised, but he shouldn’t be. He really shouldn’t be.

“What you have here is amazing, Ethan, you must know that.”

Suddenly I realise he is blushing. I made him blush with my praise. I think I’ve managed to turn the tables on him. I like the way he blushes. I lean back into the pillows again with my hands laced behind my head.

“Anyway…” I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. It’s usually me blushing furiously. “Liss will take the kids home on Saturday, so we have two nights before you have to leave for work.”

“Hmm, two nights, eh?” His eyes sparkle as he leans over to kiss me gently. “That’s something to look forward to, Hawk.”

“Definitely. When you come back, I’ll be here.”

Ethan growls; he actually growls. It makes me laugh that he can find me so attractive.

“Is that a promise, Alex?” His breath huffs across my earlobe, and I shiver with delight at the sensation.

“It’s a promise, Ethan,” I whisper, unable to make my voice work properly, since he takes my breath away when he breathes my name that way.

I turn my head and capture his lips. He presses me into the pillows with a soft moan.

“Enough pillow talk, Hawk!” Ethan breathes, breaking the kiss. “I think we need to get up now, before we start anything new. We’ve got things to do, people to see, places to go.”

I lift my head and press a light, soft kiss to his lips, and he pulls me in. We part wordlessly, my eyes meeting his the only communication. I nod and slide from the bed.

I step on a cat, well not on her, but kind of on her tail. She yowls.

“Bloody hell, what did you do?” Ethan sits abruptly.

“I think I stepped on her tail. I’m sorry.” I turn to the cat, I can’t tell them apart. “I’m sorry, er Boog?”

“Sooty!” Ethan corrects me.

She’s disappeared under the bed, probably the safest place with my clumsy feet floundering about.

“I hope she’s okay.” I try to lift the covers and look under the bed.

“She’ll be fine, and watch it,” Ethan warns me. “If she’s pissed she’ll scratch you. Just leave her be until she’s cooled off.”

Paddy and Cordy begin a dual, discordant whining at the bedroom door. The door is open, but Ethan told them to stay out last night, and they have obeyed so far. They don’t sound too happy though, since the cats are in here. Luckily we had no other audience. I think the raccoons must sleep elsewhere.

I feel bad that the dogs were sent out. I got the impression they sleep in here with Ethan, although the thought doesn’t appeal to me. Maybe they sleep on the floor, and not on the bed. I am probably being over hopeful there though.

“Paddy, Cordy, cut it out,” Ethan calls. “Come in here, ya great softies, come on.”

Ethan pats the bed, and instantly they bound into the room and circle around me, sniffing me a few times before jumping onto the bed where Ethan makes a great fuss of them both. The fuss results in the two dogs lying on their backs having their tummies rubbed. I chuckle at the utter ecstasy on their faces.

“I’m going to take a shower, if that’s okay,” I inform him, thinking I’m probably a third wheel at this moment in time. “Want me to run you a bath or something?”

Ethan seems to give the question some thought before answering.

“Aye, that would be great, but I might need a little help, Hawk.”

I smirk when I see the flicker of his eyebrows and the broad grin that spreads across his face. We may have to slow things down when my sister gets here and deposits her kids into my care for the rest of the week, but it’s still early, and in Ethan’s head, that means we still have time for more fun before the work starts.

“Saturday seems like an age away,” Ethan murmurs as he pulls me back onto the bed for one last kiss before we start the day, “but if we keep busy and have fun, it’ll be here in no time, Hawk.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Eagle Man.”

I cannot believe it is already Thursday night. Ethan was right about the time flying by.

I am sitting on Ethan’s sofa, with his feet resting in my lap as I massage them gently and balance a book in my other hand. Beorn is perched on my shoulder of all places. Every now and then she presents her head, giving a soft squawk. I reach back and scratch her feathers. Ethan looks up from the Xbox controller since he is playing some sort of adventure game that involves a lot of shooting, with my nephew, Ben.

“She has you wrapped around her little finger, Hawk.” He smirks.

“Why do keep calling him Hawk?” Sophia asks.

My niece is curled up on the other sofa with Ethan’s two cats, hunched over her phone whilst she interacts with her friends over whatever social media site teenagers use these days.

“Shouldn’t be that hard to work out, squirt.” Ethan replies.

She wrinkles her nose and sticks out her tongue at him, an action he mirrors, and they both laugh.

“Shoot him, Ethan!” Ben shouts, completely oblivious to the outside world.

“I am!” Ethan jerks the controller, his tongue sticking out in extreme concentration. “Bloody thing won’t die.”

“He calls me Hawk because that’s the name he put in his contact list when he first got my number, and it’s stuck,” I explain, then as an aside I add, “And he’s a bit weird like that.” Sophia snorts and Ethan clicks his tongue in disgust.

“Aye? I’m not the one that owns more books than god; or a phone that could quite happily be donated to a museum.”

“Oh, shush!” I meet his gaze, and his warm green eyes sparkle as he winks, grabs my hand, and kisses it gallantly before turning back to the video game.

“Urgh!” Sophia rolls her eyes. “Get a room.”

“You’re just jealous because I’ve got a boyfriend and you haven’t,” Ethan sings.

Sophia snorts again, giggling at Ethan’s childishness.

“Doesn’t bother me, just as long as I get to be bridesmaid when you get married.”

“Sophia,” I exclaim, blushing furiously.

Ethan just makes another face at her.

“I don’t think you can be a bridesmaid when there isn’t actually a bride, Sophe,” Ethan points out. “Unless, of course we can persuade Alex to wear a dress.”

“Why would it have to be me?” I gasp. I’m ignored as the discussion continues between Ethan and Sophia.

“I don’t care about the details, I just want the opportunity to wear a dress that will turn my friends green with envy.”

“Sophia, really!” I try not to sound like her mother, but I guess I’m taking on that responsible role right now.

I roll my eyes. Ben complains we are affecting his concentration, and Beorn squawks for more attention. We all turn back to our separate activities except we aren’t really separate, we’re all together in a little bubble of domestic bliss which I am sure is due to the man that currently has his feet resting in my lap. This is nice, and I can’t believe I wasn’t looking forward to this week. It’s been amazing really. This is like a taste of family life: the whole family together, and I include the animals as well.

Sophia is surrounded by cats. Beorn, of course, is still on my shoulder. Paddy sits on the floor next to Ethan; I presume the raccoons are out hunting and scavenging, since they are inherently nocturnal. Cordy has transferred her affections from me to Ben and is currently lying on her side next to my nephew on the floor.

Cordy has been Ben's constant shadow whilst he has explored Ethan's farmyard. I'm certain Ethan has had something to do with that, since his animals never do anything unless he asks them to. I suppose having Cordy as a chaperone has been much better for Ben than having an adult breathe down his neck the whole time. Ben has been in his element having Cordy at his beck and call. He is a different kid from the scowling, angry boy that arrived on Monday morning.

Sophia has also emerged from her sullen teenage shell. She's spent most of her time in the company of the other students working for Ethan over the week. She's had a whale of a time, and the rapport she and Ethan seem to have developed is amazing to watch.

I feel I haven't done anything special, yet my relationship with my nephew and niece is now better than it ever was, and that, I am certain is due to Ethan's easy manner with everyone. Everyone likes him, and he had Sophia and Ben eating out of his hand before the dust of their mother's car had even settled when Liss left here on Tuesday morning.

I can hardly believe Liss will be back tomorrow. I'll be sad to see them all go, but also, I'm looking forward to spending some time with Ethan before he leaves for his job on Monday.

All we've managed over the last few days are some stolen kisses, and one quick, yet incredible handjob in the stable block with Paddy on guard in case we were disturbed. I'm sure the orgasm that almost had me on my knees was partly due to the fact that we could have been caught at any time.

Ethan is a very bad influence in a very good way.

Liss arrives the next day and the kids are reconciled to leaving, when they originally didn't even want to be here. Liss is overwhelmed by the change in her two kids. She thanks both me and Ethan, although I cannot take any credit really.

Just as we're about to leave for the night and after the kids have said a tearful farewell to Ethan, my Eagle Man pulls me to one side.

"What time is Liss leaving in the morning?" he asks me, after he's kissed me several times and Liss has honked her horn, and the kids have made several loud sucking noises as they hang out of the car windows. I ignore them, caught in a bubble with Ethan as the centre.

"She's hoping to get an early start."

“Are you coming over as soon as she’s gone?” He sounds unsure and a little insecure as he asks me, as if he’s afraid I’ll say no.

I brush my fingers over his cheek. How could he think I wouldn’t want to be here?

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away, Eagle Man.”

He smirks, pulls me into another kiss before I pull away and join my family.

“How are you going to cope without your Eagle Man for three weeks?” Liss asks me later on when the kids are in bed and we’re enjoying some wine and a chat that is long overdue.

“I’ll cope.” I smirk. “And he’s not mine, Liss. We’ve only been together a short time.” Ethan and I haven’t even discussed what that means so I’m not going to speculate with my sister.

“He’s lovely, Alex, everything you described and more. And the kids love him to bits.”

“Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual,” I mutter, then splutter as I try to retract what I’ve apparently just admitted.

“Can’t take it back now.” Liss chuckles, pointing a finger. “From what I’ve seen the feeling’s mutual with him as well.”

I can’t stop thinking about it, all night and the next morning when Liss and the kids finally leave. Did I admit that I love Ethan? Can I even feel that strongly about him in such a short time? I have to conclude that it is a very real possibility that I do.

Twenty minutes later I leave the house myself and make my way over to Ethan’s. Even twenty minutes is too long to wait, because what I said to him is true: wild horses couldn’t keep me away.

Chapter 19

Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle

Ethan

Today's been a hard slog. Saturday is most weeks. Donald's here, and I have two volunteers from the Wildlife Trust working today as well, but even with their help it's a full on work day.

My ankle is a lot better, but it's still aching, despite the tight bandage. Donald brought me some crutches that I used the first two days, but they just get in the way, and I can weight bear now, so I have resisted using them when Alex isn't here to nag me.

He will be soon, though. Liss was leaving first thing this morning, so Alex will be coming over that hill any minute now, I'm sure.

Anticipation is a wonderful thing, isn't it? We won't be doing anything energetic until this evening, but just having him near is enough. Good god I have it bad; really, really bad.

Limping across the yard, I hear a car coming along the valley. Is this Alex? Can't think who else it might be. I did expect him to walk over, since it isn't that far, and it's not as if he has to go back tonight.

I hobble to the gate to wait for him, Cordy and Paddy barking excitedly at my feet. I know I'll get grief for not having the crutches. I'll just kiss him to within an inch of his life and see him melt before me in a puddle of goo. He'll forgive me then.

The car isn't Alex's. As it pulls into view, I groan as I recognise the van of our esteemed vet, Kelly Rogerson. I need a visit from her like a fish needs a bicycle.

Kelly and I have an uneasy professional relationship. When she set up her veterinary surgery in town I was one of her first customers. I mean, having a vet almost on my doorstep was a godsend. The nearest vet before her arrival had been about thirty miles away.

We started off on the best footing but somehow, somewhere down the road she began to change, and now she is just a bitter and twisted soul. I don't know if she's disillusioned with her work or if something went wrong in her personal

life, but she seems to want to take it out on me. For the last six months, it's like she's been on one long, hormonal rampage with me as the focus.

I have no idea why.

Under the licensing agreements with the local authority she is entitled to make unscheduled visits to check on the welfare of my animals, but I suspect she does this just to get up my nose. It's frustrating, but I have to be polite and bite my tongue or she could have me shut down.

Cordy and Paddy give low, menacing growls as Kelly climbs out of her car. They both hate her almost as much as I do. I place calming hands on their heads.

"Stay!" I tell them firmly. I will not have them upset and biting her by accident. She'll have a bloody field day and carry them away in her basket, like the Wicked Witch of the West.

"Heard you had an accident with one of your maladjusted monsters." She cackles as she joins me at the gate, huffing and puffing from that simple action.

"So nice of you to come and visit me, Kelly." I smile at her, a strained, forced smile, which she returns, just as forced. "I never knew you cared so much. I'm gutted you haven't brought grapes."

"I haven't come to enquire after your health, Ethan," she snaps. "I'm just sorry the thing didn't eat you whole. I only wish that someone had videoed the event. I'd pay money to see one of your famous training fails."

That's why she's here, to gloat. If she'd been here at the time, I wouldn't even have ventured near Rupert's enclosure. Her presence upsets everyone, and Rupert's temper is a fragile thing at best, although I'd quite happily let him eat her whole if I didn't think she would give him indigestion.

Cordy and Paddy are still growling. Cordy did bite her once, under extenuating circumstances obviously, because Cordy doesn't have an aggressive bone in her body. I don't blame her, though. I would bite too if someone shoved a thermometer up my arse without so much as warming it first. Kelly's bedside manner needs serious work. If I ever need to take my dogs to the vet I have to go elsewhere. I hold their collars, and they stop growling but remain tense.

"Want to call off your mutts?" she sneers. "Such a big, strong man as yourself shouldn't need two dogs to protect him from me, or are you a coward as well as an animal trafficker."

“So what brings you all the way out here on this beautiful day, Kelly?” I ignore her jibes. It’s the best way; otherwise she’ll be here longer than I want her to be because she loves nothing better than an argument. “If it’s not to ask after my health, what is it? And by the way, Rupert is uninjured, thanks for asking.” It always surprises me how someone who is supposed to be in a caring profession can hold such little concern for the animals she is supposed to care for.

“That bird should have its neck wrung,” she hisses, and I gasp. Even for her that’s a heartless thing to say.

“Now, you know that isn’t possible, even if Rupert wasn’t ever allowed out of his enclosure again. He’s a member of a protected species. You’d need a court order, Kelly.”

“And I can get one, if it would help shut you down.”

“And you’d also need to prove he was a danger to others, which he isn’t when he’s with me, so that’s an end to the discussion.”

“We’ll see.” She sniffs, looking disdainfully at me and the dogs. Paddy gets in a sneaky growl, and she takes a step back.

I feel a little smug that she’s intimidated by a dog, when she’s supposed to be the regional expert on dangerous animals. If she hates animals so much then why the fuck is she still a vet?

“Now that you’ve had your little dig why don’t you try telling me your reasons for gracing us with your presence, Ms Rogerson?” I ask in feigned politeness, taking a deep breath to calm my temper but not bothering to hide the fact I am being sarcastic.

“I’m here to do a full inspection,” she tells me, getting out her clipboard and pen and handing me the paperwork to read.

I groan. A full inspection means inspecting everywhere, including my house, because Beorn, Yogi, BooBoo and Paddy are all registered animal performers and therefore their residence needs checking too.

Last time she even insisted she needed to see the bedroom. I can’t say anything about it though because she will give her report to the authorities, and if they find something wrong, they really could shut me down. I’d lose my crew. I’d lose my livelihood, and I’d probably lose the farm if I tried to fight the decision in court.

I need to find another vet with the right qualifications to treat my assorted crew, but until then I have to put up with her.

I look over the paperwork she handed me, trying hard to concentrate on what is written there, but having her looking over my shoulder, impatiently tapping her foot as she waits for me to finish, doesn't help my concentration. The words just dance across the page. I'm bloody useless.

"Hurry up, Ethan. We haven't got all day," she spits. "Or should my first comment be: reluctant to allow access to his property?"

She is a complete and utter bitch. I pass the clipboard back and clench my teeth.

"Fine, let's get this over with." There is no way I will ever admit to Kelly fucking Rogerson that I need help reading her stupid checklists.

Donald and the two volunteers know Kelly well, and have all the paperwork ready for her inspection when she enters The Barn. I'll have to remember to thank them all profusely when Kelly's gone.

Donald peruses Kelly's clipboard himself, knowing she would not have given me time to read it properly and knowing I couldn't have made head nor tail of it without help.

God, it's times like this when I hate this crap brain of mine. Why can't I just fucking read?

I wish Alex was here! He'd be able to make sense of it all and read it to me. He could even make Kelly's bloody checklist sound like a fairy tale with his smooth, calming tones.

"You know, legally, you should give Ethan at least twenty-four hours' notice before a full inspection," Donald informs her as he hands back the clipboard. She snatches it from him irritably.

"I'm not interested in your bureaucratic nonsense, Donald," she sneers. "I'm only interested in the welfare of the animals in his care." I want to laugh until I hear her next words. "He's a reckless, irresponsible animal exploiter." And now I want to strangle her.

Donald shakes his head.

"Ethan is the epitome of a professional when it comes to his animals, Ms Rogerson. If you've had some sort of tip-off that he's been anything other than that, then I'd have to suspect there was someone doing it out of spite."

“What exactly are you implying?” she asks with more venom than a cobra. She replied to that too quickly, out of a guilty conscience no doubt.

The man shakes his head again in dismay. He clearly thinks she is the unprofessional one.

“I’m not implying anything, Kelly.”

“Good, then I can count on your full cooperation, can’t I, Donald?” She sneers at him before turning her back on him and storming off in the direction of the next barn and the aviary.

I shrug and smile at Donald. I know he’s trying to help, but Kelly is the kind of person that needs to be the most important person in the room or she takes it as a personal insult.

“Everything seems in order, Ethan,” Donald mutters to me as I begin to follow Kelly.

“Aye, thanks Don.” I look down at my two dogs. They are an asset and make me proud, but in this instance they could get me and themselves into real trouble. “Don, will you take Cordy and Paddy and keep them well out of the way?”

Don agrees, and I order the two dogs to go with him. They aren’t happy about it, but they both like Donald, and he’ll make a fuss of them at the house.

Kelly is already ticking things off on her clipboard as I catch her up. She hums in disapproval then begins inspecting the aviary. I notice she steers clear of Rupert’s enclosure. She’s not that dedicated to her job that she wants to risk a peck from a golden eagle then.

We manage to get around most of the farm without too many more snidey or bitchy remarks. I’m beginning to get a bit tired of trying to constantly bite my tongue as we finally reach the last leg: the stables. She’s now been here an hour, and I really need her to fuck off.

“And what’s being housed in here, exactly.”

For a moment I just stare at her. Kelly’s a vet, for Christ’s sake, and we’re standing in a stable. Why the fuck does she need to ask me what’s housed in here?

The block is actually empty right now. I often stable horses for the neighbours, but have none at the moment, apart from the two Shetland ponies that are currently living in the lean-to with Bear, because it’s summer. The

stable stalls are as clean and pristine as the rest of my property. There is nothing in here that Kelly could possibly find fault with.

As we walk along the line of empty stalls we pass the one where Alex and I managed to snatch a private half hour yesterday and where I experienced quite possibly the most incredible handjob of my life. I can't help smiling. I've never come so bloody hard, and the way he licked my cum off his hand afterwards threatened to tip me over the edge again. That man will be the death of me; I'm certain. I continue to grin until I realise Kelly is watching me with undisguised contempt.

"I don't think you're taking this very seriously at all, Mr Shaw," Kelly hisses, bringing me out of my daydream.

I've had just about enough of her bitchiness. I was dwelling on a perfectly lovely memory, and she's sullied it with her bitter and twisted comments. She's completely killed my mojo.

"Look, Kelly, there's nothing wrong anywhere on my property, and no amount of searching will find anything untoward, so I really think it's time you left."

"I'll leave when I'm satisfied, Ethan, and not before."

She ticks something else off on her bloody list, and I have the sudden urge to ram that bloody clipboard down her petty little throat.

This is like a bloody witch hunt, except she's the witch and I'm the one being hunted. I don't even know what it is that she's looking for, because if it's faults then I have many, but the places I house my crew are perfect.

We reach the last stall which is as empty and as clean as all the others. There aren't even any signs of mice in here.

Kelly bends down to inspect the floor more closely. What perverted pleasure is she getting from this? She mustn't have a life, or she'd be out there living it instead of here harassing me.

"Okay?" I ask as she stands and ticks something else off on her damn list. "Happy now? Want to eat your dinner off the fucking floor, because you could it's so fucking clean, Kelly?" I shouldn't swear at her, I know it'll just get her more riled. I can't help it though. I'm tired, my ankle hurts, and I'm missing my Hawk.

"Not quite finished, Ethan," she mutters, laying her clipboard down on the floor. I groan and rub my hand down my face in frustration.

“What else could you possibly need to see?”

“This!” she breathes, and suddenly I’m being pushed back against the wall of the stall and her hand has a vice-like grip on my balls.

“Holy shit!” I exclaim, but that’s all I can manage as Kelly uses the opportunity to pull me down by the neck and force her tongue down my throat. She just took harassment to a whole other level.

My eyes are wide as my brain takes a few nanoseconds to register what is happening. What the hell am I supposed to do now? She has me by the balls, and she’s squeezing hard.

I could push her away, but I’m stronger, and no matter how much this disgusts me, I don’t want to hurt her.

Mumbling a protest I grip her shoulders and firmly but gently push, breaking the suction she has on my mouth and spluttering to get rid of the taste of her tongue. God, that’s just gross.

She’s still kneading her hand in my groin, and my traitor of a cock is responding to the touch. That has to stop as well before she gets the wrong idea. I grab her wrist and pull the hand away.

“Kelly, what the fuck?” I squeak, holding her at arm’s length.

“Don’t tell me you’re not up for this, Ethan,” she murmurs, glancing down at the slight bulge in my pants and then up at me with hooded eyes. She’s trying for seductively sexy, but coming across as disgustingly creepy. “Word on the street is you’re up for anything.”

“Word where?” I gasp. “And on what planet would I be up for anything with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Oh my god, she actually sounds indignant. “My body’s as good as anyone else’s.”

Do I have permission to laugh now? I was too shocked when she first made her move. Is she just acting stupid or is she really this clueless?

“Maybe you didn’t get the memo, Kelly, but I don’t like you, and newsflash—I’m gay.” I cannot spell it out any clearer. And the way she’s been acting towards me, she really doesn’t deserve to be let down gently. I don’t like her and I’m gay, well, mostly: two massive barriers to any sort of physical encounter.

Kelly smiles, stepping away from me as she does, thank goodness. She still has a predatory look in her eyes though, so I remain on my guard, a position I wish I'd been in before it happened.

“So you say you're gay?” Kelly asks, her smile broadens as I nod. “That's not what I heard, Ethan Shaw. I heard you were bi.”

“So being bi means I'm up for anything? It doesn't actually make any difference because I'm in a relationship with someone.”

“Who?” she sneers. “That skinny, librarian geek from over the hill?”

“That's none of your bloody business,” I gasp, curling my lip and pushing away from the wall. “And leave Alex out of this. Is that why you're here? Because you can't stand not being the centre of my world?”

“Don't flatter yourself, Ethan Shaw. You might have been a temptation when I first moved here, but now you're just good for a quick shag.”

“Oh my god!” I pull at my hair. “You are completely deranged. I never ever made any move on you, Kelly. Not then, and certainly not now.”

“Yeah? Well that's your bloody loss, and it's your bloody loss this time as well, because don't think I'll be offering it again.”

“Thank god for that!” I push past her to finally make my escape.

She looks as if she might stop me, but she doesn't, and I think the look of utter contempt I give her as she moves, tells her I am now in a much less charitable mood. I was careful with her before, but if things get physical again, then I will defend myself. After all she did just sexually assault me. Eugh!

“Is it that bloke from over the hill?” She continues to grill me as we walk back to the entrance of the stables.

I quicken my pace because I need to get somewhere where others can see us. I am not comfortable at all now that she's confirmed she is off her rocker.

“I said it's none of your bloody business, Kelly.”

When we get out into the yard, I see to my relief that Donald is waiting with Paddy and Cordy. I call them over, and Kelly snorts a derisive laugh.

“Got your bodyguards back, I see.”

Now I know why she requested they be called off. I am now really, really pissed off.

“Did you come here with the sole purpose of getting me alone in the stable block?” I hiss at her.

Her face pales slightly as she steps back involuntarily. She doesn't answer, but her defiant expression tells me everything I need to know.

“Get lost, Kelly. In fact, get so lost you end up back here and then you can get lost all over again, because I have a list of vets as long as my arm that I can call on to look after my crew. I don't need you.”

“You need me to sign you off on this inspection or you're knackered, Ethan Shaw.”

“So what?” I fold my arms across my chest. “You'll only sign the forms if I sleep with you? Is that right? Because that sounds like professional misconduct to me, Kelly Rogerson.”

“You've got no proof,” she spits back.

Well, she's right, I haven't, but at the same time she doesn't want me going around telling everyone what she did.

“You tell anyone about what happened, Ethan, and I'll cry rape faster than you can blink.”

She is a self-satisfied little bitch. She knows people will be more willing to believe that I attacked her than the other way around. I'm six foot two, and she's a shrimp, despite being as wide as she is tall.

God, I feel dirty.

Without another word, she turns on her heel and leaves, slamming the gate shut and dislodging one of the posts with the force.

Paddy and Cordy chase after her, barking and growling and generally looking scary. I doubt Cordy would go beyond barking, but Paddy would definitely attack if she thought I was in danger. Kelly is very lucky.

Her truck tyres scream as she pulls away, leaving a trail of dust along the valley track.

As soon as she's gone I feel myself sag. What a trip. And now I have no idea if she will sign off my inspection or not, or even if that was a genuine inspection.

I think I can expect a visit from the RSPCA though, because this is usually what happens when she's pissed off with me. Although I have to admit, it's

usually my attitude that pisses her off, not the fact that I turned her down for sex.

“Bloody Norah!” I yell into the sky.

“What the hell happened?” Don asks as he finally approaches me. “Couldn’t you have at least kept it together for a few more minutes? You were doing so well when you went into the stable block.”

I whirl on him, feeling all the anger and helplessness welling up inside. Don doesn’t know what happened though; he has no way of knowing Kelly would be doing what she did.

“God’s sake, Don, why is it always me that gets the blame if something goes wrong?”

With that, I storm back into the house, and Don knows not to follow me when I’m in this sort of mood.

Sitting in my kitchen with a cup of coffee and some cat therapy after having had a very long and very hot shower and cleaning my teeth for over five minutes, I realise it is now well past lunchtime and there’s no Alex yet.

Where the hell is he? His sister was starting off early this morning, and he was coming straight over, or so he said. His exact words were, “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away”. If that’s the case then why isn’t he here?

I finish off my coffee and then decide it is time to take the dogs for a long walk. Ignoring the pain in my ankle, I call them, and we set off over the hill without telling anyone where we’re off to.

I don’t have a plan, but perhaps the walk will take me past Alex’s house, and I’ll make an impromptu visit. Even if it does look needy and desperate. I am needy right now. I need to see Alex, to feel him in my arms, to kiss him and feel him melt into me. I want him, not Kelly Bloody Rogerson. I need to cleanse my brain of the reaction my body had when she forced herself on me. It was just the physical touch, but she got the entirely wrong idea. She thought I was hard for her. God, that just makes me feel sick.

At Alex’s house there is no answer at first. I knock again. Only Alex’s car sits in the drive, so his sister must have left.

Movement inside alerts the dogs, and they start to bark. I wait patiently for the door to open, but it takes a good few minutes before I eventually see his face as he cracks the door open a few inches.

“Yes?” Oh my god, he looks dreadful. His eyes are all puffy and his face is red. Has he been crying?

“All right, Hawk?” I frown in concern as he opens the door a little wider.

“What do you want, Ethan?” He swallows, unable to meet my eye. What is going on here?

“Your sister and the kids get away okay?” I try to make light conversation. Maybe it’s something going on between him and Liss. Did they have words before she left?

Alex still won’t look at me. He takes a deep breath, heaving a sigh that sounds angry, frustrated, irritated? I don’t know, I just can’t read his expression at all.

“Yeah, they did.” He looks past me and then down at his feet. He is definitely not happy about something. “Look, Ethan, I’m kind of busy right now. I told you I’d come over if I could. I don’t know why you came all this way, especially with your ankle still strapped up. A bit of a wasted journey really, so if you’ll excuse me...” He moves to close the door, but I stop him. He was going to close it in my face. What the hell?

“Hawk, what’s going on? What’s wrong with you?” He tries to close the door again, but I have my foot inside, preventing him.

“Do you mind?” Alex hisses angrily, his dark eyes flashing, and not in a sexy way at all. “I told you I am busy right now, that should be enough to let you know I don’t want to see you.”

“Alex!” I cry as he pushes me away from the door. “I’m not leaving until you tell me what the hell is wrong with you. Yesterday you couldn’t wait to get rid of your sister so we could be together tonight. What’s happened between then and now to make you change your mind so drastically?”

His eyes narrow, flat with anger. His face is pale, and his hands make fists, as if he’s trying very hard not to punch me in the face. I take an involuntary step backwards, regarding him with wide eyes. What the hell?

“Why don’t you have a long hard think and then tell me what you could possibly have done to make me feel this way?” he almost growls.

“Something I’ve done?” I frown, swallowing hard as I try to think what it is that has him so livid.

“Oh my god!” I gasp, as realisation dawns on me. “You were in the stable this morning.” I don’t ask, I just state, because that is the only explanation. I can’t think of anything else that might cause him to react like this.

“I was in the stable this morning, yes, and I saw everything, Ethan.”

“You-you saw everything?” I stutter, stunned. Why didn’t he say something at the time? Why didn’t he make his presence known then, and the whole sorry, sordid business with Kelly could have been avoided? Suddenly I’m angry that he kept quiet when he could have come to my rescue, dammit. “Why the hell didn’t you try to stop her?”

“What?” He looks shocked, but still angry. “What the hell do you mean, stop her? In what universe would I even think you needed rescuing?” He gasps. “She wasn’t punching you in the face, Ethan, she had her hand down your pants. You were kissing her.”

“What?” I squeak. How can he have read the situation so wrong? “She was kissing me, and I damn well wasn’t—” He cuts me off.

“And what the hell difference does that make?” he yells. “It was still a kiss, and I didn’t see you trying to stop it at the time.”

“You didn’t see me...!” I pull at my hair. “What the hell difference does it make? It makes all the difference in the world, Alex, and I was trying to stop her. Didn’t you see that? I pushed her away. How long did you stand there watching?” Was he actually there? “The whole thing can’t have lasted more than a few seconds, Alex. How much did you see?”

“I saw enough.” He curls his lip in disgust. “Enough to know I didn’t want to stay around to witness the rest.”

“The rest? What the hell do you think happened after that? How much more do you think there was to see?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you tell me?” He folds his arms across his chest. “Why don’t you start from the point where she was kneading your cock with her hand and you were enjoying it.” His voice becomes a harsh whisper. I gasp. How could he think that?

“Nothing happened after that, Alex, absolutely nothing. She followed me into the stable, pushed me against the wall and kissed me. I tried to stop her, but obviously not hard enough if you think I was enjoying having Kelly bloody Rogerson’s tongue stuck down my throat.” The thought makes me want to gag.

“The size of you compared to the size of her, Ethan, I don’t think you did try hard enough, no, or maybe you didn’t want to.” He’s glaring at me with daggers in his eyes.

Oh my god. I can’t believe this is happening. Of all people, I’d have thought Alex would be on my side. What is going on in his head?

“Alex, nothing happened. What you saw was what it was, and I ended it, pushing her away. Didn’t you stay to see that? Or to see the way she spoke to me after we left the building and walked out onto the yard?”

“Why would she follow you into the stable in the first place, Ethan?”

“You think I encouraged her?” I can’t believe this is happening. How can he think that? “She was there doing a spot inspection, or at least that was her excuse.”

“If you didn’t encourage her then why would she even think to try to kiss you?”

“Oh my god, Alex, I hate her guts, you know that. You’ve seen how she is with me. Why would I think I needed to be on my guard when she was inspecting the stables? I never did anything to encourage her, I swear.”

“You were nice to her, I saw that much.”

Oh my god, is he serious? Is he talking about the time we met in the pub? I was polite to her yes, but I always am, until today when she showed her predatory personality to the full. I’ve been brought up to be polite and well-mannered to everyone. Kelly gets on my nerves, but I’ve never been openly nasty to her, until today that is, when I got angry.

“And what? I should have been an asshole? I’m nice to everyone, Alex.” I shout, in utter frustration. “I had no idea she was going to try anything like that!”

“And she had absolutely no reason to think you would be receptive to a quickie in the stable block, because you are partial to them, Ethan. I know from experience.” He sounds as if he’s already made up his mind; like I’m already condemned. “Because in my opinion, Ethan Shaw, there is no smoke without fire.”

“I... I can’t believe you’ve just said that,” I whisper in horror, stepping away from him. His eyes burn into me with pure hatred. He really believes I would entice someone into a quick fuck when I hate that person’s guts, and I

would never cheat on him, doesn't he know that? "How can you think that? How can you think I would do something like that to you?"

"I don't know, Ethan, I don't know you at all."

"No, you don't, if you think I could do this to you." I shake my head, my breathing shallow.

Christ, I'm shaking. My throat is dry, and my eyes are burning with tears as his words rattle around in my head. He really doesn't know me at all if he thinks I could possibly contemplate doing something like this. I definitely don't know him. I wouldn't even have dreamed he wouldn't take my side in this. I'm the wronged one here, the one placed in a vulnerable position. He hasn't even considered that I might be traumatised by the fact that a woman, who he knows I do not like, just accosted me and assumed I would be up for more than conversation in my stable.

Suddenly, I'm angry. Angry that this has happened at all. Angry that I was placed in that position. Angry that Alex was there and didn't even think to step in and help me, and bloody well angry it hasn't even crossed Alex's mind that I might be the innocent party.

No, I really don't know him at all.

"You know what? I should just go, because you've obviously made up your mind about me, Alex. You automatically assume the worst, that I would cheat on you. You can't have a very high opinion of me at all. The fact that I could never ever do that to you hasn't even figured in your reasoning, has it? That I would never jeopardise what I thought was developing between us hasn't even occurred to you. I mean it never even occurred to you that I might need your help. You just stood by and let it happen. The Alex I thought I knew, that wanted to be there for me, he just doesn't exist, does he?"

After my speech I turn, unable to look at him any longer. My words had some effect, since his face turned more pale and his eyes widened in shock, but I can't stay here and listen to any more of his accusations. I just... I can't.

I walk away, whistling to Cordy and Paddy as I do.

"Ethan!" Alex's voice sounds small, hoarse, as if he's trying to hold back tears. I hear him step up behind me.

"Don't!" He halts at my command. He's standing right behind me. I can hear his hard breathing after he's run to catch me up. I can't turn around though. I can't face him after the things he said. I can feel him reach out to me.

I don't want him to touch me though. I feel dirty, and he made me feel that way. "I can't do this, Alex," I whisper, unsure if he can hear me. "I'm sorry that you witnessed this thing with Kelly, but I'm more sorry you don't believe my side of the story. I would never do anything to hurt you, Hawk, at least try to believe that. I have to go."

"Ethan!" he calls again. I hear the catch to his voice. Is he regretting his words now? Is he rethinking his outrageous accusations?

Don't even turn! I tell myself. Just keep walking.

How could he think I would ever do anything like that to him? How dare he think I would do that to anyone?

I don't think, I just walk blindly back up the hill. I don't stop until I reach the top. Once I'm there, I let rip with my utter frustration.

"Aaaargh!" I scream, falling to my knees and covering my face. "This is not my fault. Why is this happening?"

It's dusk, and the sun has turned the sky scarlet. It'll be another fine day tomorrow, but I don't care about that.

It may as well rain forever now, nothing will ever be as bright as Alex's smile, or sound as good as his laugh when I've said something funny.

How could he think those things about me? How could he ever think I would hurt him?

I don't know the answers. I don't know what to do.

Cordy nudges my hand, and I realise both dogs are sitting beside me. I hug them to me and shed a few tears of joy for the love, loyalty and devotion they show me.

I might have lost my Hawk, but I still have so much. I'll get over it eventually; I'll just throw myself into my work. I'll be too busy over the next three weeks to dwell on this anyway.

By the time I get home again in three weeks' time, things will have gone back to normal, and Alex will just be a passing acquaintance.

I think I might have a hard time convincing myself that's true.

Chapter 20

If Wishes Were Horses

Alex

Oh my god, what have I done?

I've lost him before I even knew I had him, and I don't have a clue how to make this right.

The things I said to Ethan were unforgivable. He tried to explain what happened, and I wouldn't listen.

I've had all night to think about it now, and his explanation makes sense. What I saw was only a few seconds of the entire encounter, and I know he has no fondness for that woman. I saw what she was like in the pub that time. Her attitude stank. Ethan is polite to her because he has manners, but he doesn't like her, so why the hell would he be kissing her? People kiss him all the time though. I witnessed that in the pub as well. How could I have misjudged the situation so badly?

He walked away before I could take any of my words back. I tried, but he wouldn't hear me. I think I may have broken his heart.

My last relationship ended badly. I caught my fiancé at the time, cheating on me with another man. It took me two years to pull myself out of the depression after that break-up. I built myself a new life though. Moving here was the end of that process. Opening my heart to Ethan and his unusual, unconventional family had signalled the beginning of a new chapter.

When I saw him with that woman my brain refused to believe anything but what I could see. I'm once bitten twice shy, and when I saw that scene my brain imploded.

Now that I've heard his side, I realise I have made a terrible mistake that I may never be able to rectify.

Ethan is not the type to cheat on anyone. He wasn't boasting when he told me he is nice to everyone. And that includes women who are forcing their affections on him. He wasn't pulling her to him, he was trying to gently push her away. Of course he could have used more strength, but it isn't in his nature to cause harm.

I just didn't stay around long enough to see the whole thing unfold. And that is another unforgivable action. He was basically at the wrong end of a sexual assault, and in his eyes I didn't even try to defend him.

Now what? We're never going to recover from this, I'm certain.

I need to get over there and explain why I reacted the way I did, and maybe he will understand why I was such an arse. Then he'll know why he needs to forgive and why I should be given a second chance.

Oh, bugger. I draw my hand down my face in despair. Even I don't think I deserve a second chance.

I drive over to Ethan's first thing. It's about nine a.m., and I know he'll be taking a break for breakfast.

The yard is deserted. Ethan will be in the house no doubt. There are a couple of unfamiliar cars parked outside the gate. Probably the weekend volunteers. I pull up behind them and jump out.

Once I'm through the gate Cordy comes out and greets me like an old friend. Is that a good sign? Ethan hasn't told her to see me off as soon as I set foot on his property, although he doesn't know I'm here yet.

I walk up to his open back door and call inside.

"Hello? Er... Ethan, are you in?"

"Hello?" An unfamiliar woman appears at the other end of the kitchen. She is older than me, perhaps in her late forties? She's petite and her short, light-brown hair is greying at the temples.

She frowns as she sees me, obviously because we've never met, but there's something about her that's very familiar.

"Well, hello there!" She greets me with a twinkle in her eye and a smirk on her face.

Suddenly it hits me like a brick. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that this woman is Ethan's mother.

"Er, h-hello, I'm l-looking for Ethan," I stutter; why do I always stutter?

The woman smiles broadly, and I see where Ethan gets his bright smile.

"Come in, darling, come in. I've just put the kettle on. I'm Stephanie, by the way, Ethan's mum." She introduces herself with a warm smile, confirming my assumption.

I step inside, looking about warily for Beorn, who seems to delight in dive-bombing me every time I enter the house. I think she's establishing the pecking order. She doesn't appear, and I sigh with relief.

"I'm Alex, Alex Hawking. I live in the cottage over the hill."

Stephanie grins, her light-grey eyes sparkling. "Oh I know who you are, Alex. Great to finally put a face to the name, but Ethan's description wasn't too far off. Now, take a seat. Will you have tea, or are you a caffeine addict like my wayward son?"

"Oh, coffee, p-please."

Cordy nudges me, and I take the hint and sit. She's like an over-the-top hostess, and if her tail wags any harder it will fall off. I'd laugh, but I'm too shocked that Ethan's mum knows about me. Ethan told her about me, and she's still smiling? He can't have told her about yesterday then, or she'd be setting Cordy on me, or Paddy.

Oh, Paddy isn't here. She must be with Ethan somewhere else on the farm.

This is going to be awkward if Ethan finds me here talking to his mum like we're best friends. I need to find him and talk to him alone. Cordy lays her head on my lap, and I absently scratch at her ears as she whines. She's unhappy about something.

"Oh, Cordy, stop being such a worry wart," Stephanie chides. She turns to me and smiles. "Don't mind her; she's always a bit clingy when Ethan's not here."

"W-when he's not here?" What does she mean? Is Ethan out somewhere on the farm, or has he gone into town for something?

"Yes." Stephanie nods as she pours water into two mugs and stirs in some milk. "She pines for two or three days then she's fine."

Two or three days? My head is suddenly spinning. What does she mean two or three days?

"M-Mrs Shaw, where has Ethan gone?" I can't help the catch in my voice, and if I wasn't already sitting down, I think I might have fallen.

"Call me Stephanie, sweetheart," she reminds me as she hands me a steaming mug of coffee. When I don't immediately take it she places it on the table in front of me and sits down on the chair beside me. "Ethan called us last night, said he had a change of plan and was leaving first thing this morning. He

didn't tell you, did he?" She searches my face. I think I must have gone quite pale because she looks really concerned.

"I thought he wasn't leaving until tomorrow," I whisper, hoarsely. "I thought I had another day to..."

Oh my god, he's gone. He'll be gone for three weeks, and he's gone before I could say sorry to him, or tell him how I feel, or make this horrible mess all better.

He's gone thinking I hate him, and I don't, I love him. I. Love. Him. I suddenly can't get my breath.

"Oh my golly gosh, Alex, sweetie." Stephanie's voice is very far away as my ears ring. I feel dizzy and place my head between my knees, breathing hard.

What have I done? He'll spend three weeks away from me, thinking I hate him, and he'll come back hating me. Please don't let that be true.

"Alex, are you all right, honey?"

Stephanie must think I'm a total headcase. I come in here stuttering like an idiot then I pass out while she makes me coffee. She obviously has no idea that Ethan and I argued last night.

"Ethan...!" I begin, but feel nauseous and have to stop. I need to speak to him, but he isn't here. The only alternative is to call him. I didn't want to do that. I wanted this to be face-to-face. "I'm sorry, Mrs Shaw, er Stephanie..." I grimace. "I-I have to make a phone call, and I don't get a signal down here."

I get up, steadying myself by gripping the table. When I feel stable enough, I leave, at a run, Cordy barking at my heels.

"You could've used the land line," Stephanie calls after me. When I don't turn she adds, "At least come back and finish your coffee when you're done, sweetie."

Why is she being so nice? I don't deserve it. If she knew I'd basically called her son a slut last night then she'd have me fed to Rupert, or those psycho ducks, or worse, she'd have me trampled to death by the zebra.

Halfway up the hill my phone vibrates in my hand. It's a text.

It's him! My heart leaps.

It's not him. My heart falls.

It's a text from Liss, telling me they're home safe and sound, that she didn't call because she knew I'd be busy. She added a winking smiley face icon to indicate she knows why I'd be busy. Little does she know I had already made a mess of the evening before she even sent the text.

I find a rock and sit. Cordy sits by my side. She seems to have attached herself to me. I scratch at her ears.

"What a fool I've been, Cordy." She turns her head and licks at my face, giving me that goofy, stupid grin that Ethan thinks is hilarious.

What should I do? Call him? He's travelling. He won't answer the call. And there's a very real possibility he won't answer if he sees it's me anyway.

I could leave a voice mail, then he can decide to listen to it or not. If I send him a text will he be able to read it. We haven't really discussed it, but I know he has some difficulty in that area. There are apps that read texts out, aren't there? The thought of my apology read out by a mechanical-sounding woman's voice does not appeal. I press call.

I get his voice mail. His voice sounds as smooth as ever as he invites me to leave a message and he'll get back to me. Will he though? I doubt it.

"Ethan..." Oh god, what do I say? There's a lump the size of a football in my throat. I disconnect, my hand shaking so much I almost drop the phone.

I press it against my forehead and groan.

"What the hell am I doing, Cordy? He's never going to listen to my apology in a voice mail, no matter how heartfelt it is."

I have to say something though. I can't leave it like this: hanging for three weeks. I'd prefer to do this face-to-face, but I don't even know where he's gone for this job.

I call him back. His warm voice, once again invites me to leave a message.

"Ethan, I-I'm sorry. Believe me when I say I regret every word I said to you last night. I take it all back. You don't have to call me, and you don't have to forgive me. I just wanted you to know I believe you, and I should have trusted you. I should have helped you instead of running away. I'm a stupid, dim-witted fool. When you get back in three weeks' time, I'll be here if you want to talk. Take care, Eagle Man. I lo... oh god!"

I disconnect in panic and drop my phone into the heather at my feet. What the hell was I about to say? I love him? He doesn't want to hear that from me right now, when he's angry and hurting. Jesus, Alex, what a stupid thing to say.

I retrieve my phone then take a deep breath, trying to let the sunshine calm me and the still quietness of the hillside wash over me. A skylark is singing somewhere. It reminds me of the day I discovered Ethan standing on the top of the hill in his underpants. I thought he was a complete and utter lunatic—fucking gorgeous, but nutty as a fruitcake. He was a magnificent sight, standing there semi-naked with that Eagle on his arm, though.

I'm the crazy one, for allowing my insecurities and past relationships to dictate my reaction when I saw Ethan with that woman.

I have to make it up to him somehow. When he comes back I need him to see that I am committed to making amends. A plan is forming in my head.

I glance down at Cordy, sitting so patiently and loyally by my side.

“What do you say, Cordy?” She licks at my hand and up my arm, and I laugh at her silliness. “Do you think your farm needs an extra hand over the next three weeks? Because I'm going to do everything I can to let Ethan know I'm here for him. Come on.”

I stand, and Cordy follows suit. We walk together down the hill towards Ethan's farm.

“Cordy seems to have found herself a new friend.” Stephanie laughs as we return to Ethan's kitchen. “Come in, Alex, don't hover in the doorway. Your coffee got cold, I'll make you a fresh cup.”

“Stephanie!” a man's voice calls from the yard outside. He sounds so like Ethan for a moment my heart skips a beat. Then the man appears at the doorway. “I thought that bloody eagle was going with Ethan this time around.”

My heart still beats a little faster because he is quite simply an older version of Ethan. He has the same hair, the same warm green eyes and the same smirk. It must be a family trait.

“Ethan said something about Rupert not being ready, Matt.” Stephanie muses as she wipes the bench. “But he wasn't contracted for this job anyway. He's later on in the summer, some kind of adventure film I think. He took Paddy, a hawk, and Beorn with him this time around, as well as Bear, bless him.”

I get the impression Ethan hasn't told them about the mishap he had with his vestiphobic eagle.

The man turns to me and purses his lips, frowning, and then smiling as he gives me the once-over. “Alex, I presume.” He grins.

I am a little surprised. They both act as if they know me already. Why would he tell them about me and not that he was attacked by one of his animals?

“Alex, this is my husband and Ethan’s father, Matthew.”

“Aye, call me Matt.” Matthew sits down beside me and bangs on the table aggressively, making me jump. “Coffee, woman, and food for your lord and master.” He winks at me, and I want to laugh, because I bet this man taught Ethan everything he knows.

Stephanie turns with pursed lips and a bleach spray in her hand, aimed at Matthew.

“You are heading for a knuckle sandwich, Matthew Shaw.” She sniffs. “That’s the only food you’ll get with that sort of attitude.”

Matthew jumps up and swings Stephanie’s tiny form into his arms, nuzzling her neck.

“Aw, you know I don’t mean it, Steph.”

Stephanie giggles and pushes him away.

“Calm down, we’ve got guests.”

Matthew instantly changes his demeanour and takes the seat next to me once more, turning it around and sitting on it back to front. He leans his arms across the back of the chair and regards me with a serious expression. I feel like I’m being scrutinised; assessed for suitability. I suppose Ethan’s father is entitled to inspect his son’s potential partners.

I hope he doesn’t find me lacking.

“He’s just as good looking as Ethan said, isn’t he, Steph?” Matthew eventually says to his wife, as if I’m not even in the room. I feel my face heat up, and I stare into my coffee, unable to look at either of them.

“Matthew, you’re embarrassing the man,” Stephanie chides. “But you are right, he’s a cutie.” She grins at me, and I blush even harder.

“How old are you?” Matthew asks, in a tone that suggests I’m about to get a grilling.

“I’m, er, thirty,” I reply.

“Ye don’t sound too sure about it. Got your maths right?”

“Er, yes, sir.”

“Sir?” Matthew snorts. “What the hell?”

“Matthew, he’s being polite,” Stephanie intercedes. “I think it’s sweet.”

Matthew narrows his eyes as he regards his wife and then turns back to me.

“What do you do, Alex?”

Oh god, here comes the crunch. They want to know if my prospects are good. Even though it’s useless them knowing, since Ethan isn’t mine anymore. He never was.

“I-I don’t actually work.”

“Hmm, unemployed,” Matthew says with much disappointment, as if he is ticking a box on a form.

“N-not exactly.” I feel the need to defend myself. “I’m not unemployed because I can’t get a job or anything, I’m just not looking for one.” Urgh, I could have worded that better.

“Sponging off society!” Matthew mumbles.

“Matthew!” Stephanie chides once more.

“I don’t actually need to work, Mr Shaw,” I begin, trying to word my lifestyle in a way that doesn’t sound like I’m boasting. “My father died when I was fifteen and left me a lot of money. I live off that.”

“Oh, that’s so sad.” Stephanie reacts with surprising sympathy to my story. Matthew, however, continues to scrutinise me.

“So, what do you do with all that free time then? You need something to occupy the mind.”

“I spent a lot of time studying at university. Then I did some charity work for a while, before moving up here for some peace and quiet.” They don’t need to know the ins and outs of my reasons for moving here. “I bind books as a hobby really, but I take commissions from the local book store.”

Matthew snorts, and I think he’s going to scoff at my choice of pastimes, but instead he adds, “You came here for peace and quiet, and then you met Ethan.” He exchanges looks with his wife: knowing looks and affectionate ones. Stephanie smirks and looks away. “Ethan is the complete opposite of what I would think of as peace and quiet. You’ve met his crew.” He indicates

Cordy who, once again, has her head on my lap, and the two cats that are currently curled up together on the easy chair.

I can't help smiling as I nod. "Oh yes, I've met them all."

"Just be thankful he's taken that damn cockatoo with him this time. Bloody thing swears like buggery."

I chuckle, and Stephanie gasps.

"And I bet you can't think where the bird gets it from," she snaps, flicking her husband with a tea towel.

"Ouch!" Matthew yelps, rubbing the top of his arm and scowling.

I can't help it, I laugh. Stephanie grins at me and then turns back to her husband.

"Get your coffee drank, then get back out there, or I'll call your son and tell him you're slacking off."

"Humph!" Matthew continues to scowl but does as he's told, taking a sip of his coffee and a bite of the scone that was placed in front of him when he sat.

Stephanie hands me a buttered scone as well, and I accept gratefully. Matthew sits in silent contemplation, having turned to sit in his chair properly.

Stephanie is singing as she cleans up around the kitchen, and Matthew is eating quietly. It isn't an awkward silence though; it's a homely, comfortable one.

"So, you're the reason our son decided to take off early for this job of his then?" Matthew suddenly asks me and then helpfully pats me on the back as I choke.

"I-I didn't know he was leaving early," I splutter. "We er... we had an argument," I add in a quiet, sad voice. "S-sorry." I hang my head.

Matthew sighs, and I think I'm probably making him feel uncomfortable. To my surprise though, he places an arm around my shoulders.

"I suspected as much, when he called us. He sounded upset, didn't he, pet?" Matthew exchanges glances with his wife, who nods and takes the seat on the opposite side of me and lays a gentle hand on my arm.

"It was all my fault," I whisper, trying hard to keep it together.

These people are not what I expected. My mother hardly has any instinct for mothering at all. She's more worried about what others will think than how

those close to her will feel. She never offered me any comfort when I split up with my fiancé two years before. All she could say was “pull yourself together, Alexander”. Needless to say it didn’t help. I moved here over six weeks ago, and she hasn’t even called me. I called her and got the brush off because she was on her way out. Seems to happen every time I call her.

And now here are two relative strangers offering me comfort for arguing with and upsetting their son. I’m completely baffled.

“Ethan didn’t say anything about it, Alex,” Stephanie explains, “but I’m sure he’s not completely blameless. And don’t you worry. He sometimes has a quick tongue, but he never stays angry with anyone for long. Did you get in touch with him just now?” Stephanie’s words make me feel a little better and give me a little hope.

“No, I got his voice mail, but I left a message.”

Stephanie exchanges glances with her husband, and they smile ruefully.

“Ethan never was one for keeping in touch by phone,” Matthew explains. “I’ve no doubt he’ll listen to your message, but he prefers to talk face-to-face. You know, when he was a kid, talking on the phone, he would nod or shake his head when someone asked him a question. Bloody useless!”

Stephanie laughs, nodding and smiling as if reliving a fond memory.

It’s obvious to me that these people love their son very much. It is easy to see Stephanie and Matthew’s influence on Ethan has been a very positive one. He’s learnt his people skills from them, his confidence and outgoing personality. He’s also inherited his gentle nature and big heart from them, I’m certain.

The more I learn about him the more I fall in love. I’m basically up a creek without a paddle.

“Right.” Matthew once again slaps the table causing both Stephanie and myself to jump, and Cordy to yelp. Stephanie regards her husband with pursed lips. “Time to go back to work, I think. Are you here to help then, Alex?”

I am a little taken aback by his question. I’m astounded he’s willing to have me around, despite knowing that I’ve argued with their son.

“Oh, erm, yes, that’s what I’d planned.” I hadn’t discussed it with Ethan, but I was planning on offering to be here while he was gone. “I’m free for the next three weeks.” I just hope Ethan doesn’t mind. But I think I need to be here, rather than moping around at home.

“Come on, then.” Matthew stands, rubbing his hands. “You can tell me more about yourself while we’re working, Alex.” He turns and winks at his wife as we step outside.

I don’t know if this is a good idea or not. I’m not sure Ethan would approve of me being here at all. I’m here now, though, committed for the next three weeks.

I thoroughly enjoy helping Matthew and Stephanie around the farm, getting to know them quite well. The weather has been absolutely glorious, and I’m led to believe this is totally out of character with the area for it to be so fantastic for so long. I’m not complaining. We’re into the third week now, and the time has passed in the blink of an eye. Ethan will be home at the weekend.

Cordy has attached herself to me and comes home with me every night whether I want it or not. She’s basically become my dog over the last few weeks.

I just can’t help thinking that I’m making a mistake getting to know these people and getting more attached to Ethan’s farm, family, and crew. The more attached I get the harder it will be when he returns and decides he wants nothing further to do with me.

He still hasn’t returned my calls, although I console myself with the fact that he hasn’t phoned his parents either, and neither of them seem to think this is unusual.

I wake up today with the knowledge that I only have three more days before Ethan returns. That thought slows my steps a little, and I reach the farm a little later than I usually do, that and the fact that the weather seems to have finally broken.

The sky is grey and there is a light drizzle that soaks me and Cordy as we walk over the hill to Ethan’s farm. I should have driven really.

When I get there Stephanie is waiting anxiously at the gate. I didn’t think I was that late, and I certainly didn’t think I was so important that she would miss me if I was.

“Oh, Alex, I’m so glad you’re here. There’s been an emergency.” She looks worried and stressed.

I look beyond her in shock as I open the gate and walk through.

“With one of the animals?” Please don’t let us have to call Kelly out. She is the last person I want to see.

“Not with any of the animals,” she assures me.

“With Matthew then?”

Where is Ethan’s dad? I feel panic rising in my gut. As if on cue he appears out of the house with a couple of overnight bags. Where could they be going? Oh my god, if they’ve packed for overnight, is it Ethan that’s had an accident?

“Ethan?” I gasp.

Stephanie places a hand on my arm. “Steady on there, Alex, Ethan’s fine, sweetheart. It’s my aunty. She’s had a fall. She’s getting on a bit, you know? We said we’d go down and get some things sorted for her. She doesn’t have any kids of her own. I’m her closest relative.”

Matthew joins us, placing the bags down to fish for his car keys.

“We hoped you would be able to stay here while we’re gone, it’ll probably only be two nights, and then we’ll be back at the weekend for Ethan coming home.”

How can I possibly refuse this request? These people have been nothing but nice to me. Even though they know Ethan and I aren’t exactly friends at the minute.

Would Ethan even want me to be here, though?

I can’t think about that right now. They are desperate and need my help, and I can’t say no, despite the situation with Ethan. I feel a little pride that they have such confidence in me. I know there’ll be others here during the day, but it would still be me locking up and feeding the house crew and staying in the house and sleeping in... Ethan’s bed again.

I agree, and not because I’m a pervert and want to sleep in Ethan’s bed. That would be a bit stalker crazy I think. There are spare rooms I can use.

“Great.” Matthew thumps me gratefully on the back. “We phoned Ethan and left a message for him. But...” He shrugs. “Like we said, he never answers his phone when he’s working.”

Matthew and Stephanie look concerned as they drive off. I don’t think they’re worried about my ability to take charge here; it’s more for what they are going to than what they’re leaving behind.

Well, I can't stand around procrastinating. If I'm in charge then I have work to do.

By the time early evening comes around and everyone has gone, there's really not that much left to do except make sure everything is locked up for the night. I've done this enough times with Ethan and then with Matthew to know the routine off by heart. It still takes me twice as long. Some of the locks have a knack to them, and I haven't quite mastered it. The ducks get out, and I need Cordy's help to round them up. They're vicious things.

The weather doesn't help. The light drizzle turns into heavy rain at about seven and just gets steadily heavier. The wind gets stronger, and by the time I've finished the lock up, I am soaked to the bone.

I've never known rain like it. It's a real storm.

Cordy is a godsend, since she knows the routine better than I do. She stays by my side, despite the fact she is now resembling a wet rug. She keeps me right when I forget to check an enclosure. I'll have to remember to give her an extra treat when we get in the house. I should really take a leaf out of Ethan's book and have treats in my pocket all the time.

When we get inside I find some towels by the door. I rub Cordy down, which she absolutely loves. Then, while she is busy having a daft half hour and rubbing against all the soft furnishings like a crazy thing, I dry myself.

I picked up some things from home earlier on. I get changed into something dry and then turn my attention to Ethan's crew.

Wet raccoon smells almost as bad as wet dog. They also enjoy a rub down, and then they stay in for the night, because nothing, not even the most tempting rubbish bin, is worth braving the harsh Northumbrian weather.

The cats don't even look in the direction of the door. They stay put, watching me with disdain until I open the food cupboard, then everyone is suddenly my best friend.

Feeding Ethan's crew has become almost second nature to me, and the raccoons don't even have to be asked to wash their hands tonight. Not one of them seems to be bothered that it is me here instead of Ethan's mum, or Ethan himself.

I need a shower to warm up after my soaking, so I make my way upstairs. There isn't much choice in bedrooms. Despite Ethan's house being enormous, he doesn't have that much in the way of furniture. There are only two bedrooms

with beds in them. One is being used by Stephanie and Matthew, so I have no choice but to dump my stuff in Ethan's room.

After my shower, it's a little early to go to bed, so I settle on the sofa with a book. One by one Ethan's crew join me until I have a dog, two cats and two raccoons fighting for space around me. It's very cosy.

This is a taste of something I really cannot even begin to hope I might have if Ethan and I are not reconciled. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. I can dream though and make the most of it until Ethan returns.

I soon feel my eyes growing heavy. Today's been quite tiring really, even though I haven't done anything extra. Being in charge is exhausting.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I'm semi-conscious and barely rouse when Cordy leaves my side, probably to go and get a drink or something. I'm too cosy to move and go up to bed so I settle back to sleep, covered by Ethan's warm woollen blanket and surrounded by his crew.

Chapter 21

Home to Roost

Ethan

“Mr Shaw, they’re ready for you and Bear on set.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in two minutes,” I call back out to the kid they sent to get me. I hear him snort as he walks off.

Well he can fuck off!

I lean back against the wall of the stable where Bear has been housed for the last two weeks and groan. How did I get myself into this situation?

Bear gives a snuffle, and I glance down at him.

“This is all your fault,” I huff. Paddy sniffs about Bear’s legs, and the zebra gives a warning tap at the dog with his back hoof. “Behave!” I hiss as Paddy yelps. “And hush, Paddy. He hardly touched ye.”

Bear gives me a rueful look then goes back to munching his hay.

“Right, come on then, it’s time to do our thing, Bear.” I untie the reins from the bar beside the feeding trough and tug at Bear’s head gently. He huffs, grabs a mouthful of hay then follows me.

At the door, I take a deep breath. This will be the last time, I tell myself, the last time I have to do this in front of anyone. The last time I humiliate myself by walking out onto that damn set dressed in a zebra onesie.

It’s not so bad at home. Everyone knows me. They know I’m not really a crazed, eccentric loon. Here though, this is the impression they get of me every day. I’m not Ethan Shaw to them; I’m an extension of Bear the bloody zebra.

I console myself with the fact that almost everyone else is in the same boat, because when the writers found out Bear would only perform if he was following someone dressed as a zebra they only went and wrote it into the damn story.

“You can be a stunt double, Ethan!” I was told with great excitement, as if it was some kind of reward. Talk about pandering to the star’s every whim. This is just ridiculous.

I lead Bear out of the stable and into some kind of weird “Where’s Wally” reality show. There are people dotted all over the place wearing zebra onesies. They all look ridiculous, but the “Wally” they all want to spot is me, and I feel self-conscious and stupid.

I mean, there’s suffering for your art, and then there’s this.

“All right, Ethan? Nice day for it?” someone calls. I hear a giggle from somewhere. I don’t turn, I just scowl.

Any other time I would have lapped this kind of attention up, but this last fortnight my heart just hasn’t been in it.

My animals have done everything that was asked of them, and they’ve performed without fault, but me: I’ve just been going through the motions.

This thing with Alex has just had me in bits. I can’t think straight. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. Nothing seems to take away this feeling of loss. I can’t get the man out of my head. I know I should call him, but I just wouldn’t know what to say. What do I say to someone who’s broken my heart?

Work has been my only salvation, really. I’ve thrown myself into it, hoping that I’d be too tired at night to think about much else. I’ve had no such luck, though, and I’ve woken every morning gritty eyed and dog-tired.

The filming is ahead of schedule though, so I just need to concentrate on this last scene and then we can go.

Bear performs perfectly, as usual. The production crew take their time resetting after each take. They know I’m leaving straight after this, so they want to get it right.

“Would you like to take Bear back to the beginning of scene six hundred and thirty-two, Ethan?” a bloke with a clipboard asks me. I shrug and lead Bear back over to the beginning of the scene.

The scene is played through once more as we begin to lose the light, and then the director calls it a day.

“And that’s it for today, guys. Great work.” He turns to me with a grin. “And you will all be pleased to know that was Bear’s last scene. We can ditch the onesies!”

There’s a whoop of delight from the entire set. I can afford a small smile, but for them, not for me. I have to keep my onesie. Bear won’t go anywhere without it. Damn zebra.

After settling Bear for the night, I take a restless Paddy out for an evening stroll and give my Goshawk, Ted, a bit of exercise as well. People are still about, and I chat to some of them, but I mostly avoid talking to anyone. I'm just not in the mood.

"Are you coming out for a last drink, Ethan?" one of the production crew calls to me across the field. There's a group of them off to the pub.

"Nah, Karen, I'm gettin' an early start in the morning, but thanks for askin' anyway."

"Night, then. Safe journey home. See you at the end of the summer for that adventure flick, no doubt."

I call goodbye to them and a couple come over and give me a hug. I've been out twice in all the time I've been down here, but they've asked me every night anyway.

I've worked with a lot of these people quite a bit since I started doing this. I'll see most of them at the next job, the one I've been training Rupert up for, if he ever gets past attacking me, or freaking out if people wear clothes.

I'm pretty certain the writers won't write that into the story.

"Come on, Paddy!" I call as I fasten Ted's jess to my glove. He's a lot easier to handle than an eagle, that's for sure.

My crazy German shepherd has decided to start chasing butterflies in the nettles. She'll get stung, the stupid mutt. How can she be so bad ass on set, when she's such a goofball in real life?

Her antics manage to cheer me up a little, but as I get closer to my trailer my mood begins to darken. Every day, I've worked so hard I've managed to avoid thinking about Alex. But once I've housed Ted and I'm alone in my trailer with just Paddy and Beorn for company, the events of that last day play over and over in my head, and I know I won't sleep again. Maybe I should have gone out for a drink. Being blind drunk would certainly clear my head of any thought whatsoever.

The idea is appealing. I could just do that here, on my own: get so drunk I didn't care, except I want to make an early start tomorrow, and I'll still be over the limit if I get blatted tonight.

Best not.

At least I now know Alex believes me, since I listen to that voice mail every night. I suppose I just like to torture myself. I can't speak to him over the phone

though. I need to see his face. He needs to see mine when I apologise for being an arse and leaving early without telling him.

Oh, god, I just keep imagining his reaction on the Sunday when he realised I was gone. The tone of his voice in the first message he recorded says it all really. He sounded close to tears. He couldn't even finish his last sentence. I wish I knew what he meant to say before he sobbed "oh god!" and ended the call.

He's left two more voice mails since, but they were much calmer; much less emotional.

I hate myself that I haven't got the guts to call him. Every day longer I leave it is a day for him to begin thinking I don't care or haven't forgiven him. Is he going out of his head or is he angry with me? Well, I'll find out soon enough because I'm going home tomorrow.

I'll find out if there's anything that can be salvaged from this horrible mess. I'll find out if Alex really does trust me enough to take up where we left off.

God, I hope he does. I want my Hawk back. I miss him like crazy.

With that thought I settle myself into bed, ready for an early start tomorrow morning. Beorn settles on my stomach and snacks on peanuts while I watch some crap reality show on TV and eat a crap takeout.

I look forward to some home cooking when I get back. Mam'll have been baking up a storm. She always does.

I wonder what Alex has been doing over the last fortnight. Probably what he wants, without crazy neighbours interrupting his solitude.

I'm very aware that he didn't move into that cottage with the express goal of making friends with his crazy neighbour. I'm sure he'd be perfectly happy to be left alone.

I was the one who wanted something to happen between us, and it did, and I know that wasn't all due to me. He played a big part in it as well. It's just now, I want more; I want it all. I want him, but I'm not sure he wants me after this drama with Kelly.

Urgh, bloody Kelly Rogerson. What was she even thinking? I'm bloody gay, well, all right, I'm mostly gay. And if I'm with a man, then people will just assume that anyway. It doesn't really bother me. We never even had a conversation about it, Alex and I; we just fit so well we didn't need to.

I guess things were happening a little fast, but he said he was fine with that, until this Kelly thing.

I close my eyes. Alex's face is there, as it has been constantly over the last two and half weeks. I want to see his smile again. I want to hold him in my arms again. I want to see that personality change as he goes from shy and retiring to confident and pushy when we make love. He goes from cool as a cucumber to red-hot chilli pepper in one tiny step. It's a massive turn on, added to the turn on that he is anyway.

It's not just the sex, though, it's everything, because he makes me feel alive and wanted and really, really good. I want everything that is Alex Hawking, my Hawk. Can I still call him that? Am I just torturing myself?

God, I want tomorrow's journey to be over, so I can get home and go round to his place and see if this break can be repaired. I'm just afraid that by not calling him, he'll think that's it for us.

Will he move on? Because I sure as hell won't be able to. He still is and will always be the most beautiful man I have ever met.

A good few hundred miles and several stops for zebra breaks later, I finally drive through the edge of town and onto the final leg of the journey.

The last few miles are driven through torrential rain, over flooded roads, battling to keep my truck steady in hurricane-force winds. What a humdinger of a storm. I'm bloody exhausted.

I'm soaked within seconds as I get out of the truck to open the gate. I drive straight into the yard and pull right up to the stable. Bear will have company, I notice, since my two Shetland Ponies are already here. Dad must have brought them in before the storm hit.

Ted, I take straight to the aviary. She stretches out her wings and flies off to her perch, preening her feathers almost as soon as she gets there. Poor thing got a soaking just being carried from the truck to the aviary. I think she's pleased to be home though.

Beorn squawks obnoxiously from the front seat of the truck, but I hush her. "Give me a break, Beorn. Let me get Bear settled, and then we can go into the house." Paddy whines. "Stay there, Paddy, it's horrid out here."

Bear is going to be the problem. I'm already soaked to the very bone. I really do not relish the thought of donning that damn onesie just to get him the few yards from the travel box to the stable.

“Just for once, Bear, come out of the box without me having to put on that damn onesie!” I plead.

Without any further ceremony, Bear backs out of the box and walks into the stable stall for all as if he has done this every bloody day of his short fat stripy life. For a moment, I just stare at him and then take a few deep breaths, walk out of the stable and scream up at the stormy sky.

“Aaargh! You bloody striped devil. Why?”

I go back and make sure he has enough straw on the floor and feed in the trough, close the door and lock it, then jump back into the truck to drive the short way across the yard to the house. I’m not walking over in this. Paddy will be soaked anyway because she’ll need a wee, but Beorn hates getting wet, and she hates the wind. I’ll never hear the last of it if she gets a soaking.

I’m surprised mum or dad hasn’t been out to greet me. They must have heard the truck. Although the rain is pretty heavy, maybe they didn’t. I didn’t see their car out on the track, but they’ve probably put it in the garage due to the torrential rain.

Beorn gets wet anyway, poor thing. I’ll have to get the hairdryer out. She’s the only reason I actually have a hair dryer.

Paddy goes off and does her business but looks a sorry sight when she joins me in the kitchen. I grab a towel off the pile that I keep just inside the door for this very reason and rub her down.

Cordy is suddenly there, wagging her tail like it’s going to fall off.

“Hello, girl.” I stop rubbing Paddy down and make a fuss of my Border collie. “I’ve missed you.” She’s so pleased to see me and Paddy that she almost doesn’t know which way to lick first. Paddy is pleased to see her too.

I step out of the way to allow them to do what dogs usually do when they’re greeting each other. Paddy and Cordy sometimes take it to extremes when they’ve been apart for a while, but it’s best to let them get it out of their system.

I take off my soaked jacket and shake it before hanging it on the back of a chair. I open Beorn’s carry box and let her out. She squawks at me but not as angrily as I thought she might. The house is strangely hushed, and I think she senses that. I hand her a treat, and she’s fine, if a little damp.

Mum and dad must be in bed. I suppose they weren’t expecting me home tonight, and I didn’t call them in advance, so I can hardly expect a welcome party.

I grab a clean towel for my hair and then go to the fridge and grab a bottle of water.

Beorn squawks again, shaking out her feathers.

“Yeah, yeah, okay, Beorn, shush, man, people are asleep. I’ll get the hairdryer in a minute.”

I wonder where the others are. They’re usually all over me when I get home. I’m feeling a little neglected. Rubbing my hair I make my way into the living room. One of the side lights is on, but the rest of the house is in darkness.

At the door I stop dead, rubbing my eyes to check I’m not seeing things.

Alex is lying on my sofa! He’s wrapped in my woollen blanket and surrounded by raccoons and cats, none of whom even lift their heads to see who has just walked into the room. They all look very cosy.

My Hawk is lying on his back, his glasses balanced on the top of his head and a book lying on his chest. One hand is holding the book; the other is above his head. He’s fast asleep. He looks, oh my god, he looks adorable. I step to the foot of the sofa and gaze down at him. Smiling in bemusement.

I can’t believe it. What is he doing here? It’s like the most amazing coming-home present ever.

Cordy pushes past me, having finished the ritual arse sniffing with Paddy. She goes straight up to Alex and nudges his arm.

He stirs and my heart flutters in shock. I don’t want to startle him by standing over him as he wakes up. I step back.

Cordy continues trying to alert Alex to our presence, this time she uses her tongue, licking Alex’s face. He groans and covers his face with his arm.

“Cordy, that’s gross, stop it.”

Undeterred, Cordy continues to lick his elbow. He smiles, giggles, and then reaches out to scratch at her ears. At the same time his other hand reaches down to smooth over Yogi’s head as she starts to snicker at me.

“Hush, you lot. Sleep time,” he murmurs to them, and they settle.

It is the most amazing sight I have ever seen. He’s so natural with them all. I’m mesmerised.

“Oh!” he exclaims as he finally opens his eyes and regards me with slight confusion. He places his glasses back on his nose and then sits, dislodging

animals left, right, and centre. “Shit!” he exclaims, a little shakily, as if this is the last position he wanted me to find him in.

I bite my lip and smile, hoping he’ll accept that as an apology for disturbing him.

“All right?” I breathe. I want to add “Hawk”, but it’s by no means certain that he is still my Hawk. I mean he’s here, but there could be any number of explanations for that.

There’s a scrabble of animals as they all find new positions, and Alex pulls the blanket from around his legs, swinging his feet onto the floor. He looks a little bleary-eyed. He really must have been out for the count.

“Er, hi, er, Ethan.” He rubs his eyes and stretches his neck, tries to stand, sits straight back down again and then looks back up at me where I am still rooted to the spot. “I thought you weren’t back until Saturday.”

He looks awkward, like he didn’t want to be here when I got home. There’s something missing here though. What am I missing?

Oh my god!

“Alex, where’s my mam and dad?”

“Oh, they, h-had to go. Your mum’s aunty had a fall.” When I gasp, he shakes his head and assures me, “N-not a bad one, but they had to go and sort her out. I said I’d stay. Y-you weren’t due back until Saturday, so I figured it would be okay.”

“Okay?” I frown. I’m still not getting all the jigsaw pieces to fit.

My brain is fried from seven hours of driving. I’m hungry and tired, and I still have to sort Beorn out. She’s still wet. An obnoxious squawk from my bedraggled cockatoo also serves to remind me.

“Shit!” I exclaim as I run back into the kitchen, then back into the hall to look for the hair dryer, and then back into the kitchen to dry my diva of a bird.

By the time Alex gets there, I am drying a very content Beorn with the hairdryer from across the table.

She is facing into the air flow, tipping her head from side to side, then lifting her wings and spreading each one into the flow of air as well. She makes me laugh; she’s a picture of ecstasy.

Alex stands to one side and watches as he tucks in his shirt, yawning.

I have the inappropriate urge to reach to the side and untuck it again just to hear him click his tongue and see him smirk at me. I don't though, because I don't know what the reception will be. To be honest, my heart hasn't quite stopped beating ninety to the dozen just from finding him here. I thought I would have to wait until tomorrow to go over and talk to him. But here he is, watching the impromptu cockatoo salon, and he smells nice, like he's just showered.

"What are you doing?" he asks in utter bemusement.

"I'm drying my cockatoo, what does it look like?"

"Oh!" I can hear a small hint of amusement in his voice. "Because that's what hairdryers are for, obviously."

I see him roll his eyes, and I bite my lip. I want to sweep him into my arms and kiss him. It's so damn good to see him.

"It's raining cats and dogs out there, Hawk," I explain. "And howling a gale. We got soaked in the half a dozen steps from the truck to the house, and I drove the truck as close the door as I could. Bloody Northumbrian weather."

Beorn gives a squawk, signalling the end of her beauty session, then takes off, causing Alex and I to duck as she flies over our heads. She's a menace.

"Aw, Beorn, no tip this time?" I chuckle. "Cheapskate."

Alex laughs and then stops when I turn to look at him. He looks away, hunching his shoulders awkwardly. I raise one eyebrow waiting for him to speak first.

"So, your mum tried to call you about this morning." He won't meet my eye no matter how much I will him to.

"I don't answer my phone at work."

"So I understand." He sounds unhappy about this, but also resigned, as if he already knew. Did mam or dad tell him?

"I got your messages," I add, just so he knows I at least listened to his apology if I haven't formally accepted it yet.

"Oh! Well, g-good." He looks extremely tense and uncomfortable. Does he not want to be here? He keeps searching my face and then looking away when I look his way.

"So have you been helping out the entire time I've been away?" I can't imagine my dad being happy to leave someone in charge who didn't know the

ropes. He must trust Alex, and therefore, by deduction, they must have spent some time getting to know each other.

“Y-yes.” Alex nods. “I, er, came round that first Sunday, but you were gone.” His voice catches, and he is clearly still upset about the fact I left a day early. I feel like a right bastard now. “I offered to help over the three weeks. I-I h-hope that’s okay.” Without meeting my eye, or waiting for a reply, he continues, walking over to the table and away from me. “I did the lock up and put the horses in the stable because of the storm.” He lists off the jobs on his fingers as he continues. “The crew have all been fed, so you don’t need to do anything tonight.”

“Thanks for all of that.” I am blown away that he’s managed so much by himself after only a few weeks’ experience. I smile.

He returns it with a tight, quick twitch of his lips, and then he bites his bottom lip, and I realise it is to stop it from quivering. Is he trying not to cry? I blink away tears of my own. For a moment there’s a connection as our eyes meet, and then it’s gone, and I let out the breath I was holding.

“Erm, your mum made some pies and stuff.” Alex jumps over to open the fridge door, seemingly glad to have an excuse not to look at me. “Would you like something to eat?”

“No!”

I’m starving, but I don’t want to eat until we’ve established some sort of equilibrium here. He’s all over the place, awkward and tense. He thinks I can’t see as he wipes away tears from his eyes, but I’m in bits watching him. He closes the fridge door and jumps because I am right behind it.

“Oh... Right, I’ll, er, leave you to it, Ethan. There’s plenty of coffee in the pot.” He moves to go past me and towards the door. “I’ll be... er... going then.” I stop him with a hand placed gently on his arm that makes him gasp and tremble.

“Alex!” I can’t let him go without finding out if he still feels the same as he did, or if he still wants me. I can’t let him go out in that storm anyway. “You don’t have to go. It’s horrible out there, the road around to your place’ll be flooded, and besides,” I lower my voice, and my eyes, “I don’t want you to go.”

His sharp intake of breath gives me goosebumps. He covers my hand with his, and he still won’t look at me, but he steps closer.

“That’s good,” he manages to say, despite seeming out of breath, “because I don’t want me to go either.”

“Oh, god, Hawk!”

Then he’s in my arms, and I’m holding him tight, but he’s holding me as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear. He buries his face in the crook of my shoulder, and I feel his chest heave with great sobs.

“I’m so sorry!” he whispers. “I should’ve believed you. I should’ve known you couldn’t do anything to hurt me. I just... my brain... refused to let me think straight.”

“Shush!” I smooth down his unruly dark hair and breathe in the sweet, just-washed scent. “I missed you so much.” God he’s got me blubbing too. What a couple of old women. “I’m sorry I didn’t call,” I whisper softly. “I wanted to, after I listened to your voice mail, but I just didn’t know what to say.”

“Neither did I.”

“Well, that would have been a scintillatin’ conversation, wouldn’t it, Hawk?” We both give weak chuckles.

“I see you’re still calling me Hawk then.” Alex gives me the first direct look since I arrived. He’s holding his breath for an answer.

“Oh god, yes,” I breathe. “I’ll call you Hawk forever.”

“Ethan!”

I don’t even know how, but suddenly he’s kissing me. His lips are pressed against mine in a mess of teeth and tongue, and his arms are wrapped around my neck, then snaking up my back, and then he’s pulling at my T-shirt as he pushes me back against the kitchen bench.

I gasp as his warm hands play across my ribs, touching the now almost healed scrapes and scratches from my encounter with Rupert.

“They’re healed?” Alex sniffs, his breath hot across my skin as he lifts my shirt up.

“Uhuh!” I grab the neck and pull it off over my head. It’s wet anyway, and I was starting to get cold.

“And your ankle?” he continues as his fingers play across my ribs, causing my muscles to flutter.

“Good as new, Hawk.”

Alex’s fingers explore my chest almost reverently.

“God, you’re so bloody ripped, Ethan.” He growls. I throwback my head and laugh. I shiver too, and not from arousal. “And you’re freezing. Get out of those wet things, and I’ll run you a hot bath.”

I can’t actually form words right now. All the blood that might be feeding my brain has gone south to feed something else.

“Hawk, I don’t need a bath to warm me up. I only need you.” I try to turn him so his back is against the kitchen bench, but he resists.

“After you’ve had a bath and something to eat.” He stretches up and kisses me gently. “You’ve had a long journey, and you’re tired.”

“I wanted to get back as soon as I could because I needed to see you, Hawk,” I confess as he pushes me towards the hall and stairs.

“I came here every day to feel closer to you.” He makes his own confession as we stand at the bottom of the stairs. “I wanted you to know I still cared, even after everything I said to you.”

“The words are all forgotten, Alex.” I wrap my arms around him again.

“Really?” He stares at me in disbelief. “Because I thought I’d broken your heart.”

“I think you just mended it.” It feels mended, now that he’s back where he belongs, in my arms.

“Eagle Man!” He places his hands flat on my chest, and I feel the heat pass from him to me. The look in his eyes as he searches mine blows me away, but his next words etch onto my heart. “I love you.”

I catch my breath, stunned.

“Oh my god, Hawk!” This is a bombshell I never expected. How can he love me? We hardly know each other. He doesn’t even know my worst habits yet.

He kisses me again, and I just melt. He loves me? How is that even possible?

I let him lead me upstairs to the bathroom in a daze. He runs a bath for me, and I get in without even noticing that he’s undressed me.

“You love me?” I eventually manage to ask him as he scrubs my back.

He chuckles. “Oh god, Ethan, yes!”

“But how?” I still can’t fully accept it. “I mean, I’m nothing special. I’m certainly not as clever as you, Hawk. You’ve got a brain the size of a planet. I can’t even spell planet.”

He chuckles, leans over, and kisses my cheek and then returns to scrubbing my back.

“I don’t know about you, Eagle Man, but what I look for in a man is not his ability to spell the word *planet*.”

“That’s not what I meant, Hawk.” I chuckle.

“Then what did you mean?” His thumbs knead into my shoulders, and I stifle a moan. I’m all stiff from driving for so long, but his attentions are threatening to make another part of my body even stiffer.

“Well, basically, you’re clever and I’m not,” I explain, although I shouldn’t have to explain this to him. He’s clever and I’m not!

“Is that what you think? That you’re not clever?” He gasps, seemingly shocked that this is what I could think.

I shrug. He sighs heavily.

“You are amazing, Ethan Shaw. You have this empire that you’ve built, despite not being able to spell *planet*, or *empire*, or anything else. You are an inspiration and quite possibly the cleverest man I know.”

I snort. “Right!” I really don’t know what to say to that. I’ve never thought of myself as clever. “I’m just lucky to be able to do something I enjoy, Hawk, and make a living from it. So many of my friends haven’t been so fortunate.”

“You’re still clever. You know I’m right,” Alex huffs in my ear as he continues to lavish attention on my back and chest.

I lean back as he sits on a stool behind the bath. He kneads his thumbs into the tense muscles of my neck and shoulders and slides his hands down over my chest and abs.

“This is nice.” I feel very relaxed. “Ten minutes ago I was outside in the torrential rain thinking I just wanted to fall into bed and get some sleep. I was hoping my mum had made something delicious for dinner, but this is much better.”

“Good, because I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about me being here.”

“I feel great about you being here. It was the best surprise.” I reach back and pull him into a kiss, his head on my shoulder, my head turned to meet him.

“Ethan, are we good, now?” he asks, as if this is the most important question he will ever ask.

“I can hardly say otherwise when you’ve got me in such a vulnerable position, Hawk.”

He purses his lips. “Answer me seriously, for once, Eagle.”

I regard his dark eyes, and watch the play of emotions on his beautiful face. I’ve known him for such a short time, but how could I ever imagine life without him now?

“Yes, Alex. We’re good.”

He leans further around my shoulder, and we kiss again. It isn’t the best angle. It would be better if he was sitting in my lap. I’m still fired up from our first kiss, and my spirits are pretty high. With a wicked grin, I reach back, grasp his arms and pull.

When he realises what I’m trying to do he gasps and struggles, but it’s too little too late.

“Ethan! Don’t you dare!” He yelps. “I’m still dressed.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I pull him the rest of the way, and with a great big splash, he lands in the bath, gasping and spluttering. Now he’s on my lap, where he should be.

“Ethan, you arsehole!” he spits, and hisses like an angry cat. I just laugh. “I’m soaking wet.”

“We’ll soon rectify that, Hawk. I’ll help you out of your wet clothes, just like you so deftly helped me out of mine.”

He tries to pull himself out of the bath, but I have a good hold on him. I pull him back into a kiss. With a moan, he stops resisting and kisses me back, threading his hands through my hair and pushing his tongue against mine.

“Say it again,” I murmur as I brush my lips across his cheek.

“Say what again?” he breathes, smirking, since he knows exactly what I want to hear.

With a move faster than I’d have thought him capable, since he is wearing wet clothes that weigh him down, he splashes water in my face and then takes the opportunity to jump out of the bath.

“Hawk!” I shout. I hear his breathless giggles as he runs out of the bathroom, discarding wet clothes as he goes.

“First one to the bedroom gets to be on top,” He calls.

I jump out of the bath and give chase. Laughing hard, I rugby tackle him onto the bed, which is ultimately where we both want to be.

Except, this is where everyone else wants to be as well, and we are surrounded by two over-excited dogs, raccoons, and a squawking Beorn, who has come to her bedroom perch. The cats don't join in, but they're here as well, supervising the proceedings.

“Jesus!” I exclaim as Cordy tries to lick both our faces at once.

“Enough, Cordy,” Alex exclaims. “I got here first. He's mine tonight.” He laughs helplessly as he tries to push her away. “Eugh!”

Paddy decides to bark in my ear, and that's the last straw. I absolutely will not share my Hawk with anyone tonight.

“Right you lot, off the bed now,” I yell. “Paddy, Cordy, Yogi, get down!” They immediately obey. “Out,” I command, pointing to the door.

I feel Alex tremble below me, and I regard him with one raised eyebrow.

“Ooh!” He shivers, running his hands up and down my back. “I love it when you do that. So commanding, Eagle Man.” He makes the words sound sexy as hell. I chuckle.

“And I like it when you take charge, Mr Hawk.”

He snorts and then gives a low chuckle that turns my spine to liquid. I grab his wrists and pin him to the bed beneath me. His chest heaves and his dark eyes are hooded.

“Say those words again, Hawk,” I demand, and then I gasp as he moves his hips, pushing up into mine and reminding me we are now both naked.

We both shiver because we are still wet.

I jump up, pull back the covers and pull them over us both. He giggles something as we squirm together to get warm.

“What was that?” I smirk, even though I know what he said.

“I said, I love you, Ethan.” He laughs out loud, pushing me over onto my back and straddling me. “Now I do believe I have a prize to collect.”

I lick my lips in anticipation. “First one here gets to be on top?” He nods.

He bends down to capture my mouth, and I moan into the blistering kiss as our bodies connect completely, skin to skin. He feels amazing.

His arousal presses against my stomach before he manoeuvres us so he is between my legs, our cocks rocking together in his hands.

“Holy Hawk,” I gasp. He chuckles.

“Holy Hawk?” He sits back on his heels, smirking.

“Shut up.” I chuckle and then pull him back down to continue the kiss.

There’s a scramble for lube and condoms, and then he has his fingers at my entrance, and I’m breathing hard as he pushes inside.

“Slowly, Hawk,” I gasp. It’s been a while since I was on this end of the equation.

His finger hooks inside me, and I gasp and push down against his hand. I’d forgotten just how good it feels. The slender fingers of his free hand wrap around my cock, and I buck up, breathless from the double arousal.

“God, more, Hawk, I need more!” I almost sob, and he indulges me by adding another finger, his face a picture of concentration as I keened and writhe and am basically a sweating mess. “Just, oh my god, just fuck me now, Alex. Please.”

He grins at me and then rips the condom packet with his teeth, before withdrawing his fingers in order to place the sheath over his cock.

I sit, take the condom from him and place it myself, rolling it slowly down his shaft as he tips his head back with a gasp.

“Ethan,” he breathes, shuddering with pleasure.

Then he pushes me onto my back, hooks one of my legs over his arm and places the head of his cock at my stretched entrance.

“Ready?”

I nod, and he slowly pushes in. The burn is almost too much, but then I see the look in his eyes, and I forget the pain; I only feel the pleasure. He pushes inside me all the way, then waits for me to nod before he pulls out and pushes back in, beginning a slow, inexorable rhythm. His hand closes around my cock again, but I bat it away.

“I’ll come too fast,” I warn him. “T-together. We should come together.”

“I’m close, Eagle. So good, so good.” He grimaces and then buries his face in my shoulder, quickening his pace and hitting my sweet spot with almost every thrust.

“Now,” I gasp, and his hand closes around mine as I lift my hips to meet his.

“Ethan, I’m coming.” He gasps. I feel him throb inside me as he moves his thumb over the tip of my cock. It tips me over the edge.

“Yesss!” I hiss, lifting my hips to meet his as we come together, until his thrusts come to a shuddering halt.

He pulls out slowly and discards the condom.

“In the bathroom bin, Hawk, or one of the crew’ll try to eat it,” I manage to gasp out as I collapse back into the pillows.

“Eugh, Ethan, that’s gross.” He screws up his nose as he makes his way to the bathroom.

“Sorry, Hawk, that’s life in the Shaw residence. If it’s in an accessible bin it’s potential food.”

He returns with a towel and a warm cloth to wipe me down. In his absence his warm spot has been taken by a cat.

He rolls his eyes and clicks his tongue.

“Hop it, Sooty. That’s my spot.” He hooks his thumb over his shoulder and with a grumbling mewl, Sooty moves.

I can’t help my surprised laugh because my cats don’t even do what I ask them most of the time.

Alex snuggles in beside me, and I wrap my arms around him.

“Hello, Mr Hawk!”

He snorts. “Hello, Eagle Man.”

“I’m so glad you were here when I got home,” I whisper into his hair.

“Me, too,” he murmurs. “Although I really can’t think where else I would rather be.”

“You could have been at home, Alex.”

“Home is where the heart is, Ethan, and right now my heart is right here, with you.”

I feel the air leave my lungs all at once. My head swims from the very magnitude of what he has just told me. I know he says he loves me, but this: this confirms it. He seems so sure about it all.

“Oh my god, Hawk,” I huff into his mop of dark hair, taking a deep breath as I drink in his scent. “I love you too.”

I feel his contented sigh as he settles against me, and I close my eyes ready to sleep.

One by one, we are joined on the bed by my crew, our crew, since they all seem to look to Alex as much as me now.

“Sleep now, Eagle Man,” Alex orders, and I do.

Eagle Man and Mr Hawk have come home to roost.

The End

Author Bio

Hi there, I'm Dawn Sister. I live with my family on the North East Coast of England.

I have been writing forever, and I mean forever. I started off on a proper old-fashioned typewriter that was missing the letter 'B'.

I wrote about romance but my writing was inert and sullen when writing about men who fell in love with women.

For some reason writing about men that fall in love with men feeds the flames and who am I to go against the grain?

So this is me, writing as Dawn Sister. I write M/M or Gay Romance. Sometimes it's a bit racy, but mostly it is just cheesy. I hope you like cheesy.

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