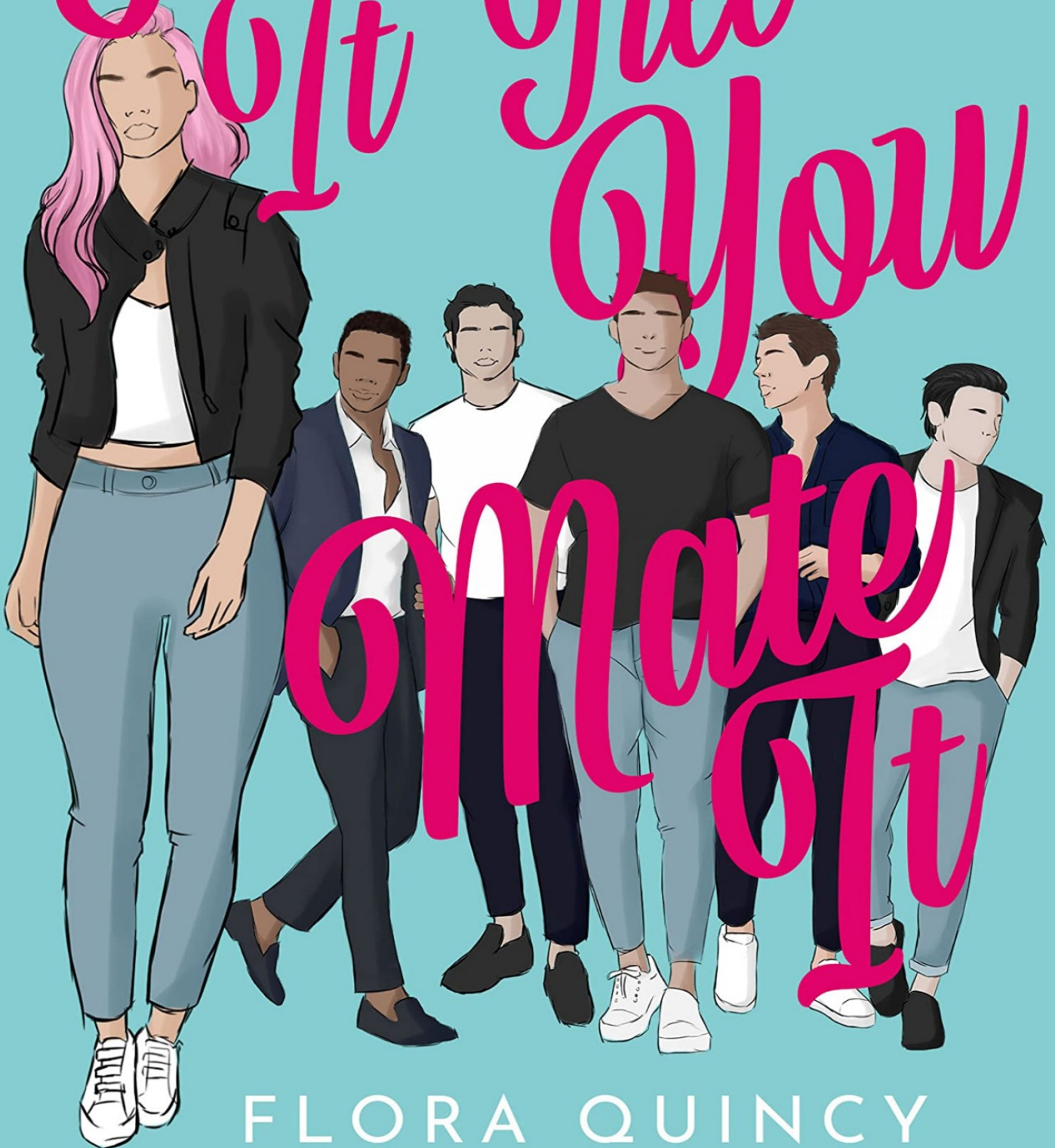


# fake It Till You

*a package deal*



FLORA QUINCY

FAKE IT TILL YOU MATE  
IT

A PACKAGE DEAL

FLORA QUINCY

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*To those who dream of travelling and then returning*

# CONTENT AND TRIGGER WARNINGS

This is a non-exclusive list of content and triggers that appear in this book. Please see the end for a more extensive list.

- FMC is in an established relationship when she moves in with her ex-pack.
- Attraction to others when in an exclusive relationship.
- MC who is a recovering alcoholic.
- Other-woman drama, not between the FMC and MMCs.
- A parent with a terminal medical condition.
- Ableism and ableist language.
- Mental illness, including on page anxiety attacks.

Kinks: D/s dynamic, exhibitionism, primal, mild Daddy kink, medical play, group scenes. Any and all kink found between these pages is fictional and should not be taken as a depiction of real kink relationships. If you are interested in any of the kinks described, please do your own research and learn as much as possible before engaging in any risky activities.



# TONI



## TEN YEARS AGO

I woke up late. My alphas had kept me up most of the night, teasing my body and convincing me to do ridiculous things with whipped cream and chocolate-covered strawberries. Now, I was in the enormous bed we shared, naked, satisfied, and not lonely, even though I was the only one in my nest under the eaves. The pack-sized mattress in the far corner was heaped with blankets and pillows, and fairy lights twinkled overhead, bathing my favourite place in the world with a soft, homey light.

Their scents surrounded me, having absorbed into my skin and hair. I didn't need to think about it when I rolled to my feet, stripped the bed, separated the pillows from their cases, and collected everything—including those pillows, thank you very much—into a large storage bag that would go with the others. Each container was stuffed to the brim with nesting material. Grabbing the marker, I wrote “Christmas Eve” on it. If I could have added the mattress, I would have, but... my omega relished that it had collected all of our scents. When I built my nest there, it would be a monument to every dirty, delicious, depraved act.

“What is the omega doing?” A gruff voice sounded behind me. “Your heat—”

I turned to see Rafe lounging against the doorframe. His nostrils flared, his alpha instincts primed to my omega's. He was short for an alpha, at five-seven, but he exuded pure alpha intensity. A presence that made even mature alphas defer to him. Square jaw, piercing eyes the colour of a winter sky, and persistently tousled hair. Those chestnut locks were the only warm thing about him. It was his posh upbringing as the second son of one of England's most influential packs. And he had walked away from all that money and power because his pride, honour, and loyalty demanded it.

That fierceness drew me like a moth to a flame. I craved his attention. And, Goddess, he gave it to me. Gave it to me now, making me wish my heat was soon and not three months away. I wanted his Claim on my neck, proving to everyone that we were bonded for life.

"Just collecting them," I smiled nervously, well aware that my scent was filling the room. "I..."

"I can't believe there are any pillows left."

"You knew I was taking them," I pointed out. The bed was between us, but the room seemed to shrink to just my alpha and me.

"I thought you were stealing them for your studio at the omega flats." He pressed his lips together. "I'd prefer if you gave the room up," he allowed a hint of alpha to sneak into his tone, although I didn't assume he meant to. That was something I liked about these alphas—not just Rafe but Julian and Guy—they were all alpha, but they never barked, never pushed too hard.

A thought occurred to me.

"Do you think I'm easy? Is that why you never bark at me or use your alpha to—"

"Easy? You?" A rare grin caused a dimple to appear. Fuck, I loved seeing past his stiff facade to the subtly teasing man underneath. "You aren't easy. Nothing about you is easy, which makes your submission so much sweeter. Only weak alphas use their bark. It is..." He paused, a slight frown

creasing his aristocratic brow. “A true alpha doesn’t require his bark.”

“Is that what your dad taught you?”

Wrong thing to say. He stiffened, his scent turning dark and tormented. “My father is dead. To me, and to you, because you are my omega.”

“Yes, alpha.” The honorific slipped out by mistake, and I clapped a hand over my mouth.

“Yes, your alpha. Don’t forget it,” he all but purred. “But you must come downstairs. The others have a surprise for you.”

A surprise. A thrill of excitement shot through my body. Growing up, I hadn’t had many of those. With one glaring exception. No one expected me to be an omega. I’d presented at eighteen and suddenly was required to cram in all training most omegas had from when they presented in their early teens. I had none of those graces or talents that the senior omegas in a pack looked for. They were picking for the next generation, and who wanted an omega who didn’t have any accomplishments? Who but my three alphas.

We weren’t officially the Ivy Place pack. Not yet. We couldn’t be a true pack until my alphas had Claimed me, but that would happen in the next heat. We all knew that, so the idea of surprises from my alphas on Christmas was... special. Because this would be our first holiday together as a pseudo-pack.

I pulled a t-shirt over my head and jumped over the bed into Rafe’s embrace. It was a quick, chaste kiss that he planted on my lips, but the sharp smack on my ass sent a completely different message. My pussy pulsed with need

“You won’t get a pleasurable spanking if you don’t get your pretty little arse downstairs, omega.”

I swallowed. Omega. The way he growled the word made my toes curl. I didn’t drop slick, but my knees went weak. Omega. They were the first who made me feel like my

dynamic. When I was around other people, my designation felt like a job. Career not undecided but “omega.”

“I like that,” I whispered. “I want you to Claim me.”

“Soon. Then you’ll never be able to leave us,” he promised. “Go on before Guy loses his control over Julian and that idiot runs up here.”

I grinned. Julian was the most impulsive. I almost fell down in my haste to get to him and Guy.

I skidded into the cosy sitting room, made smaller by the two huge alphas. My childhood friend, Julian, dominated the room. He was the largest alpha I’d ever seen. His hair was jet-black, with eyelashes that made a girl jealous. I’d nicknamed him “Superman” because that was precisely who he looked like. Clark Kent on the streets and Superman in the sheets. But he had a different disguise on today. My alpha was dressed as Santa Claus, with a fake white beard and a wide black belt over what was most likely a sofa cushion—conspicuously missing from our battered three-seater.

“Hohoho!” he chortled, throwing his arms open. “Well, who is this? A little omega? And do you have any wishes?”

“Sit on his lap,” Guy said from where he sat sprawled in a cracked leather armchair. “Show Santa what a good girl you can be when given the proper incentive.”

I took the moment to admire my quiet alpha. He wore nothing except a loosely tied bathrobe that showed off his chest covered in dark hair. He was the least classically handsome—his lips too thin, his nose too crooked, and his eyes too sad—but there was something that dragged your attention to him. A lazy power infused every word and a look which he let out in drips, but I’d seen him unleash it, and then, Goddess, it was perfect.

Last night, he’d fucked Julian with hard and ruthless thrusts, dominating the larger alpha. I’d watched the whole thing, whining my own pleasure on Rafe’s knot. I rubbed my legs together at the memory, and my nipples peaked at the

genuine possibility that if I played my cards right, I'd get a repeat performance this afternoon.

“Bad omega, having naughty thoughts. Tell Santa what you want, and then maybe if you have been a good girl for us, you can have what your needy quim wants,” Rafe chided before grazing his teeth along my neck, nipping on my pulse point where he intended to place his Claim.

“Ho ho ho!” Julian slapped a hand on his thickly muscled thigh. It was hard to sit on Julian's lap with the cushion, so I ended up straddling his thigh, enjoying the way I could grind my sensitive, panty-covered pussy on him. “Fuck, you're going to leave a wet spot.”

“Uh-huh.” I rocked my hips chasing the delicious pressure on my clit. He grabbed my waist and growled at me to hold still.

“Be serious. I spent a lot of money to hire this suit. What do you want for Christmas?” Santa Julian asked.

“I have everything I want,” I said. “I mean, other than you for my pack. But we have to wait for my heat... I'm not big on material things.”

“You must want something,” he cajoled, jiggling his knee, which caused my breasts to bounce underneath my thin t-shirt.

“Your knots?” I teased.

“You can have our knots whenever you want them, Antonia,” Rafe said. “Christmas is for something special.”

“Really?” I frowned. “I mean... you are talking more than presents? Because there are a lot underneath the tree.”

“Something unique. Something extraordinary we can give you as a courting gift.”

I felt my spine straighten. A courting gift. The formal, slightly old fashioned practice of demonstrating to an omega how serious pack was. The gifts ranged from a secondary nest to jewellery to large quantities of food. “You don't need—”

“We want to,” Rafe assured me. “Whatever you want. I have the money.”

I looked around the room, trying to figure out what a pampered omega would want. It was a struggle, I wasn't big on things. I preferred our simple existence to the excessive luxury of other packs. We were unique and I liked that. Not brought together by our families, being forced by the senior pack members to form bonds. So different to all the packs I'd "auditioned" for. Ours wasn't a multigenerational pack, with senior omegas picking the next omega for the pack. We didn't have servants to do laundry or clean the house. Instead we divvied up the chores, everyone chipping in.

Just four people in their early twenties who'd met, almost by chance. Julian had always been in my life. Childhood friends and first loves from exclusively beta families, and both surprised when we'd presented as alpha and omega. I couldn't imagine a pack without him. Still, we didn't know anyone else and were actively, if reluctantly, looking for at least two more alphas—the government minimum being three alphas and an omega to form a pack.

We'd met Rafe and Guy the day I'd been rejected by a pack. Feeling like shit, my eyes stinging with unshed tears, I'd slammed the door to the interview room closed. In the hall were two alphas. They'd been looking at a smartphone, the sound of tennis commentary soft but distinct. They'd glanced up, a glimmer of...something? Recognition? Perhaps surprise flashing over their faces. The connection was that immediate but I'd had to leave before learning their names. The next day, I'd received a call from the Omega Centre saying two alphas were interested in meeting me. Instinct had me calling Julian, inviting him to the meet these two strangers. "Maybe they're the ones," I whispered, half excited, half worried that I shouldn't get my expectations up.

We'd clicked. Six months later, we were practically living together full-time in Rafe's mother's house. A month after that, we were married. The final, most vital, box to check was sharing an unmedicated heat where they could officially Claim me. The Claiming bite would cement our bond and spark a psychic connection allowing us to feel each other's emotions.

*Soon, my omega crooned.*

But until today, we hadn't talked about mating gifts, and now, they were asking what I wanted.

Then it caught my eye, a movie poster for *Roman Holiday*. It had caused a mild scandal when it premiered. A story depicting an omega princess running off and exploring Rome with a new pack whose omega wanted the isolated girl to have a chance at a real life before she was mated off to a stuffy royal pack. The world worried that omegas would start wanting to travel the world and become too independent.

"Rome," I whispered.

"What was that, love?" Guy asked.

"Rome," I said, stronger this time. Rearranging myself, I stayed straddling Julian but with my back resting on his chest, so I could see my other alphas. "I want to go to Rome. I've never travelled before."

"Of course you haven't," Rafe said kindly. "You've never been part of a pack."

"And Mum couldn't afford it," I pointed out. I relaxed against Julian's cushion belly, relishing the way he hugged me close. Safe, loved, cherished the words thrummed through me. "I want to go there. I don't need fancy stuff. I like cosy but I have that. Rome, travel... I want to experience the world with all of you. Have adventures."

"Only you would want to travel the world as a mating gift." Julian ran a gentle hand across my hair. "You are supposed to want to settle down."

"Julian." My growl was nothing compared to an alpha's, and all three of them chuckled. "I'm serious!"

"Then we'll go to Rome." Rafe made it sound all so easy. As if booking the flights and wherever the hell we were going to stay was really as simple as ordering a pint of beer in a pub.

"It costs..." I began.

"It is a courting gift. Courting gifts can cost money. And we get to go as well... Perfect. Now, presents."

I bit my lip, not wanting to argue, not wanting to let the argument go either because I still didn't know how to accept the idea that people, alphas, might just give you something without an ulterior motive because even if they called it a courting gift, there were no strings attached to this. We had all the paperwork ready. All of our documents, the duplicates, the triplicates lined up. The only things missing were the Claiming bites on my body. It wasn't going to be a sexy thing when they photographed them for the records, but the thought of us finally being an official pack made my heart sing.

“Earth to Toni...” Julian shook my ankle.

“I'm just excited. For when we are a pack.”

The alphas' grumbling purrs of pleasure filled the room. A pack. There was so much meaning in that word for all of us. We'd found each other, almost like fate had brought us together.

“A pack. Our pack.”



# TONI



## PRESENT DAY

I jerked awake, my brain fuzzy from disrupted sleep and the lingering anger that my exes haunted my dreams.

“It is a balmy nineteen degrees Celsius with light cloud cover and bright blue sky!” the pilot announced as the plane began its final descent into Heathrow.

“What is that in Fahrenheit?” the old woman next to me asked.

“Uh.” I froze before my brain kicked in and did the rough-and-ready conversion. Two nineteens was thirty-eight, plus thirty was, “Sixty-eight, give or take,” I told her and then turned back to watch London come into view.

I hadn’t seen the city from the air before. The last time I’d seen the city was ten years ago, but nothing had changed. At least not from a distance. I could pick out all the familiar landmarks, but I knew up close I wouldn’t recognise London at all.

My fingers itched to dig my phone out of my bag and snap a couple of pictures. And just as I decided that was too touristy, we turned, and the graceful curve of the Thames, the patches of green representing the major parks, came into view. I scrambled to dig through my backpack for the phone and

pressed it up against the glass to snap, snap, snap as many pictures as I could. The dirty window gave the photos a very noughties hipster filter vibe that reminded me just how ancient this city was compared to the one I'd left seven hours ago.

"Honey, look. The Thames," my seat neighbour said. Fighting back a stab of possessiveness, I leant back into the stiff, narrow seat, so she and her husband could get a glimpse.

I might have abandoned London, but this magical view was mine. My homecoming. Or, more accurately, the first sight of the battlefield. I had a score to settle, and like every good general, I deserved to see the lay of the land the day before the battle. My old pack hadn't moved, so they had the advantage, but I'd changed in the last ten years. I had my own tactics and an arsenal of confidence and worldly knowledge they could only aspire to. I grinned. They wouldn't know what hit them.

Perhaps that was a little melodramatic, but the way things were playing out felt like a Christmas Pantomime, and I was half expecting an invisible audience to boo-hiss at the mention of my ex-pack.

"Dear, do you think we will be able to withdraw cash out at the airport, or should we use one of the exchange shops? I'm worried we didn't take out enough cash."

It took me a beat to realise she was talking to me. "I don't know, sorry."

"Oh, I just thought you might know since you're English."

"I haven't been back in a while. But probably, there will be a hole in the wall—an ATM, that is. Heathrow is one of the biggest airports in the world." I wished they'd stop talking to me. Not because I didn't like them; I knew nothing about them. The problem was the omega in the middle section of our row. He kept staring at me. It wasn't likely he would recognise me because I'd dyed my naturally auburn hair pink two days before flying.

Still, last week, my fiancés, the SweetNothings pack, had featured in a full-colour spread in *The Times*, and there had

been a pretty clear picture of me in it. To make it worse, I'd be on last month's cover of *The Nester*, an omega-focused lifestyle magazine. They'd done a piece on my life as a nomadic omega who travelled the world as a photographer and diarist. My agent had arranged it and sprung it on me as a "surprise."

Publicity wasn't my thing, but my pack-to-be had been thrilled and came along to the shoot to give me pointers on posing. I adored them and their support. They made me feel like my work mattered, that my dreams mattered. Not so with my exes, who'd put their careers before me, the omega they were meant to love.

Well, fuck them.

I was getting riled up. My temper had always been short, and I noticed it bubbling to the surface. Inexplicably, I peered at the omega. Shit, he really was looking at me, his eyes studying my face. Shit. The longer I thought about it, the more I realised pink hair might not be enough of a disguise while I was in London. Not that I planned on socialising, but people noticed omegas. We were the rarest dynamic. Alphas outnumbered us four to one, and they were only a quarter of the population.

Even with scent blockers and suppressants, people would know. Sometimes I wondered if people had some sixth sense when it came to picking out omegas from a crowd. Physically we weren't so different. A teensy bit shorter than the average beta but nothing extreme. So, I definitely didn't want some fan of my future pack to realise I was in town and spark speculation about the SweetNothings. Or for one of my fans to come up to me. I hated saying no to fellow omegas, but this was an in-and-out operation. No detours or distractions. I hadn't even told my old friends I was in town.

Operation: Cut the Knot, as my best friend slash lawyer, Gwen, called it. Because while I might be due to marry the SweetNothings in November when their world tour ended, I was still legally married to the Ivy Place pack. I was here to finalise the divorce and nothing else. Well, that and convince my stubborn mother to move to New York with me where I

could care for her while she underwent her cancer treatment. I really didn't want to think about that because that was going to be a bigger hassle than getting the judge to grant the uncontested divorce.

Our bumpy landing lurched me out of my brooding, and I tried to keep my leg from jiggling as I waited for us to taxi to a gate.

The seatbelt sign pinged off, and passengers unbuckled their belts and dragged their bags from the overhead compartments. I stayed seated. It was one of those unspoken rules. Omegas got on first, and we got off last. Just to minimise the occasional disruption an omega's scent sometimes caused when they were caught in a crowd.

When I met the eyes of the male omega, he gave me a jaunty wave. I didn't return it, too alarmed, too English, even after travelling the world for the last decade. Soon, the aisles were clear, and the packs and omegas began gathering their belongings.

"Here, let me get that for you," the smiley omega said, his voice having a pleasant, rolling Southern twang. He was American and exceptionally well dressed now that I had a closer look. I wondered why he wasn't travelling first class, especially since he was travelling alone as far as I could see.

"I'm Josh, by the way." He was all perfect white teeth, all-American blond hair, blue eyes, and Southern charm.

"Thank for the help. Uh, Toni." I smiled, uncertain if I should shake his hand or did he want something else.

"Nice to meet you. So, I'm going to confess. I recognised you. Toni Vane, the travelling omega. The most famous solo omega in the world and part of the SweetNothings pack." He grinned, even though he couldn't miss my wince.

Yup, I was a fairly recognisable omega, and my future pack was even more well-known as internationally celebrated rockstars. Still, I'd hoped dying my hair cotton-candy pink would give me some anonymity while I did my business here. Guess not.

“I’m not part of their pack yet,” I hedged, as if it was nothing when that was the complete opposite.

“How did you find it? Travelling? Did you ever feel unsafe?” He indicated I proceed him down the aisle. I took my bag from him and answered without looking over my shoulder. In a way, I was answering myself. No need for Stranger Josh to ask when I wasn’t sure how I felt about it all.

“I’m not sure how to answer that. Is it ever safe being an omega? I mean, in the way you are talking about. What about you? I don’t see any alphas.”

“Oh, I’m meeting them here. My pack flew over early. I still had some work to do and needed to change my flight. I won’t tell the SweetNothings you flew economy if you don’t tell mine. But I’m a guy. Makes it easier.”

We passed through the tunnel into the main terminal. Our strides were evenly matched, and for the first time in a while, I noticed myself relaxing. The thing was, I thrived around omegas. Memories of the omega-only residence I’d lived in at university had me straightening my spine. The safety, even the sex, was extremely comforting.

Nothing like alphas. They were too type A, too on top of it. They needed to be on top of everything. Pun intended. It was impossible to let loose around them. Simultaneously, holy-fucking-hell, alpha sex made me weak. Just the thought of knots made my cheeks heat. Shit, I really needed to check when my next heat was. I’d removed my implant and relied on oral suppressants, so I could have an unmedicated heat with the SweetNothings. It was going to be our first heat together, and I wanted it to be perfect. I cleared my throat and focused back on the here and now.

“Is there a reason your pack, I assume you are all American, are over in London?”

“Darell wanted to give us a treat as a pack. We are staying at this fancy hotel, going to a show, and all the other indulgent things he can think of. Makes me sound spoiled.” He winked.

He blushed when I didn't reply, so I hurried to fill the silence. "It doesn't sound too spoiled. Just the right amount of spoiled."

"I ask if you could join us? For the show? You don't have a pack with you. I bet you haven't been spoiled for a long time."

"My future pack spoils me rotten." I laughed, a genuine, bubbling laugh that brought tears to my eyes. "Even before that, you have no idea how spoiled some people consider me. I'm a solo omega who travels the world as a diarist and photographer."

"But that is your job," he persisted. "Surely—"

"A pack doesn't just let its omega travel like that," I pointed out. Another blush. Damn, he was cute. Slightly more built than a lot of male omegas. His tan looked natural, and so did his blond hair. And I was doing my best not to get distracted by the smell of sea salt and sunshine.

I kept thinking about my situation as we chatted about various tourist spots that he should visit. The correct pronunciation of places like Chiswick and Leicester. In return, he told me about his pack and their plans. Supposedly, one of their stops was spending a weekend with a pack whose head alpha had gone to college with Josh's alpha, Darell. "I don't know any details," he pouted. I'm not meant to know anything. It is supposed to be a surprise. They are one of those old-fashioned packs where they have arranged Claims with omegas. Sounds..."

I tuned him out again as memories of standing in line waiting to be picked or tossed aside by a pack's senior omega flooded my mind. The way I'd smiled and spoken in a soft voice, trying to hide my working-class accent. I'd spent hours practising how to say "London"—the city I'd never left until I was eighteen—with a posh omega, for fucks sake. All the while, only wanting to be accepted by just one of these packs. Any pack. Then they had come along, and everything had changed. They didn't care how I spoke or where I'd grown up. It should have been enough.

“Toni? You okay?” a semi-familiar voice broke through the haze of unpleasant memories. There were other memories, of course, but I was strong enough now, and they didn’t haunt me anymore.

“Sorry. Just lost in memories. It has been a long time.”

“Oh. Okay. So long as you are alright. Hey, can we give you a ride? I don’t like the idea of letting you get on the subway alone.”

“The tube,” I corrected him. “Thank you. That would be appreciated.”

“Great! I can’t wait for you to meet my pack. They will love you!”

I got caught up in his enthusiasm as we were whisked through the solo omega traveller border control and picked up our bags. Including my rolling cabin bag and camera bag, I had a heavy-duty backpack that I’d snatched from my mum’s closet when I’d been desperately packing for my midnight flight. It was army camo, and I was completely dwarfed by it. After all, it had been made for an alpha, not a petite omega.

Arrivals was bright and echoey, with drivers in dark suits holding up signs. Josh was looking around for his pack, and I heard him squeal with excitement, weaving through the other weary travellers before launching himself into the arms of a broad alpha before being pulled away by a statuesque alpha with post-box red hair and a matching pantsuit. I shook my head and pushed the trolley with all of his bags towards them.

“Oh my gawd! I’m so, so sorry. I left everything. Everyone, this is Toni! I met her on the plane. She doesn’t have a pack, so I said we could take her in our car. Do we have space?”

I caught the moment the alphas registered that I was packless. They puffed up, making themselves look bulkier and more impressive. If I’d been an alpha, that would have been to intimidate me. But as an omega? Their biology wanted them to assure me that I was safe with them.

I barely caught their names, but I could remember the faces. The stunning female alpha was replaced by a pair of alphas who had to be brothers, and finally, the one I assumed was Darrell. Only for my heart to stop.

“Toni?” His voice was a blast from my past. Everything slipped away. Back to university when the handsome, though much younger, alpha had sat in seminars. His all-American look had the girls and boys swooning, and the alpha scent just drove the omegas up the wall. Since then, it has mellowed to more like old leather and oak.

“Cameron?” I forced out. “Why are you going by Darell?”

“You know each other?” Josh’s voice was tight, and I realised that Darrel and I were still holding hands.

“Sorry, Josh,” I tugged my hand free and rubbed it on my leg desperate to rub away the scent. Fuck, that was well inappropriate. You didn’t linger with another omega’s alpha. “Cameron was a friend at university. Just a friend.”

“We’ll see you next weekend, won’t we?” Cameron—no, Darrell—focused on me. I shifted on my feet, my skin itching under the scrutiny. “Sebastian didn’t mention anything about Rafe and the others. Why isn’t Rafe here to pick you up?”

“It didn’t work out,” I choked out, feeling physically sick. It hadn’t occurred to me that my ex pack hadn’t told Cameron. “I thought they would have told you. Josh, it was really lovely to meet you, but I have to go.”

I pulled away from him and ran towards the signs for the London Underground. I was panting by the time I arrived, suddenly frozen with the realisation of how unprepared I was to be surrounded by so many strangers.

Had I really been that careful while I travelled? Had I taken that many cabs that I didn’t remember the claustrophobia of being crushed between weary commuters in a metal tube hurtling underground? I sucked in a deep breath. I’d just been on a flight, for fucks sake. I’d been on a metal tube hurtling through the air, and I was panicking about the London Underground on a Wednesday morning?



“Get a grip, girl,” I muttered. But the nerves wouldn’t let go. Instead, I bought a ticket for the Heathrow Express and tried to relax during the fifteen-minute trip.

London Paddington was everything I loved and loathed. The sounds of train platforms being called, delays announced, and the smells of burnt, chain-brand coffee and slightly stale sandwiches. All of it soothed me, but I hadn’t anticipated how the memories would rush back. All fond memories but memories nonetheless of a time I’d been a different woman, perhaps only a girl, and had wanted such different things.

I hadn’t even spent much time in Paddington that I could recall, but I was so starved for an actual London train station that the nostalgia was almost overwhelming. So were the changes. I stopped before the ticket barrier, annoying the family behind me, and looked out at the fancy new facades of shops that hadn’t been there a decade ago.

I was so lost in the wonder of it all that I almost missed my phone ringing.

Mum was calling. My thumb hovered. I was going to answer. I always answered when she called, but things were different now. She was sick, dying, though it had been like drawing blood from a stone to get her to tell me that. I could hear it in her voice during the last few calls.

“Hey, Mum,” I sighed into the handset.

“Have you landed yet?” she asked. Her voice was softer and weaker than I remembered it from three days ago. The guilt bit into me harder now that I was so close.

“Yeah, I’m at Paddington. I’ll catch an omega black cab. Won’t be long.”

“Oh, good. I’m sorry I couldn’t come to meet you.”

“No. Don’t be sorry.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. How could I expect her to make it all the way out to Heathrow when she had a neighbour buy her groceries?

“Mum? I’m really happy to be home.” And despite the heaviness in my heart, I wasn’t lying.

\* \* \*

Mum lived in a little top-floor mansion block flat with a large blonde Labrador called Daisy. She was the sixth such dog Mum had owned, but only the third I had ever known. Twice a day, Joyce, an exuberant woman with six grandchildren and more energy than the Energizer Bunny, would come and take Daisy for a walk and have a cuppa with mum. It had been that way for five years, and yet, as I trudged up the stairs, it was the first time I’d ever met Mum’s friend and neighbour, who was heading down with a Daisy dog, who I was meeting for the first time.

“Joyce?” I asked. We’d video called a couple of times, but nothing would ever quite prepare anyone for Joyce in the flesh.

“You—you must be Toni!” Joyce crowed.

She dropped the old rope lead and threw her braceleted arms around me in a cloud of Chanel No 5. It was the sort of artificial scent that irritated some omegas who had more sensitive senses of smell, but it brought back memories of my beta grandmothers who seemed to bathe in the stuff—part of a fashion trend in the 60s when betas had wanted to mimic the same sort of natural “perfume” omegas and alphas had.

“Yes, that’s me,” I said once she’d let me free. “I can’t thank you—”

“No, no! It is good for me! A bit of exercise. Why, when Gloria was well, we used to walk for ages.” She gave me the sad sort of smile that people get when they realise they have said or might have said the wrong thing. “Your mum is so excited to see you. I’ll just take Daisy for a walk, and then if you aren’t back from the appointment, I’ll use my key...”

“Joyce...” I trailed off. “I really am glad—”

“So long as you let me take Daisy here for a walk, I’ll be fine.” She wiggled her eyebrows, and it only made me more

grateful that there had been people like her here. People who'd actually stayed. "Ta-ta, darling!"

After more waggling figures and cheerful calls to Daisy to keep up, they disappeared down the stairs.

I stood in front of the door to my childhood home. That strange out-of-body sensation when you watch yourself do something took over. or that is how it felt when I reached into my pocket for a bunch of seven keychains—including a red postbox, a phone booth, and Big Ben that I should have thrown away ten years ago—on which hung three keys. The heavy brass one went into this door, and I watched, almost bewildered, as it turned in the lock. As it always had, the door swung open until it bounced with a thud against an old, hideous ceramic umbrella pot.

"Joyce? Is that..." Mum's voice called from the lounge, and it was so much more real than when we called or video chatted. So much more real... and so much less like I remembered. Had she forgotten that I was the only person in the world who just let the door swing open? Or maybe I wasn't the only person now, and that made my tummy roll with anxiety. Being replaced had always been a boogey man. That insidious fear that creeped up on me sometimes. Usually triggered by the most innocuous things.

"No, Mum. Just me," I managed to say.

"Oh! I... I. I didn't expect you so fast! Oh..." I heard her shuffling about and dropped my bags with a thump. "Oh, Toni, you really are here. You still let the door slam. Oh, my darling girl. Come here! I need to see you."

I didn't have to run, the flat was that small, but I did almost overbalance as I skidded around the door to see my only family in the whole wide universe sitting in her chair by the window, a pile of knitting in her lap.

"Toni." She raised her arms, and I dropped my bags and ran in to her hug. "You're home."

She wore a beautiful blue lace-like cardigan she had knitted herself. Her auburn hair was now a wig and only

highlighted her pallor, but I had expected worse. Mum had that soft beta smell that always made me want to melt into her arms and allow the world to slip away. But now, it was tainted by illness, by cancer, and she could barely pick herself up.

“So, what are your plans?” she asked as if I was a kid and she needed to know everything about my social life.

“Just the divorce.”

“Good. That means you can come to my doctor appointments with me. Not all of them. Just a few.” She gave a satisfied nod. “Unless you can’t go out and about because of the paparazzi?”

“My solicitor friend is not worried about any leaks.” I blew out my lips. If it was leaked? Could the SweetNothings forgive me for hiding my past from them? It ate at me. But too much time had passed, and telling them now was worse than protecting them from the truth—I was a mess. “I never thought I’d need to keep my personal life so hushed up.”

“Darling, I always knew the spotlight would be on you.”

“Mum.” I rolled my eyes, and she cackled, not caring when it turned into a cough. “Careful, or you’ll hack up the last bits of lung you have!”

She laughed harder. The sound hit me like a punch in the solar plexus. How many more times would we laugh like this? Her cancer wasn’t curable. But neither was her love of life.

“Just wait until you meet them.” I grabbed her hand. “They are so carefree. It is like being a teenager again. They make me feel so fucking free.”

# TONI



I grabbed a quick shower and pulled on a worn grey t-shirt and culottes before joining Mum back in the lounge.

“Get yourself something to drink, then come here and we can chat.”

I grinned. “Biscuits?”

“Always.”

Her kitchen was just as neat as I remembered. The aged Formica countertops were clear of clutter and the same electric hob remained from my childhood. I made a mental note to get it replaced. Hell, I could get everything replaced, but Mum wasn't like that. She liked things predictable and simple. If it wasn't broken, why get something new had always been her motto.

Growing up like that had prepared me for travelling without much money. I'd learnt how to grift from the women in my family who worked hard to put food on the table. But since meeting the SweetNothings, I'd gotten used to certain creature comforts I wanted to share with Mum.

“You are a health freak,” I tutted as I hunted through her cabinets for caffeine. Coffee, tea, or one of those disgusting energy drinks the band downed before a gig. But there was nothing. There never had been. I didn't even experience caffeine until I'd gone to uni, and it was now the necessary poison that kept me going. There were only two reasons I wouldn't drink it: one—I was dead, and two—I was dead.

“I have builder’s tea somewhere. I wouldn’t have any friends if I didn’t have some tea people could put milk in,” she chided from her chair. It was the same one I remembered my grandmother using, a high back covered in faded chintz. Mum called it a carver though had never explained what that meant. “The tea should be in the pig.”

I found the pig mug tucked in the back and the three circular tea bags that sent a wave of nostalgia through me.

“Proper tea, Mum. This is proper tea.” I filled the kettle and set it to boil. “You have a kettle, Mum. Americans never have electric kettles.”

I stroked the battered cream exterior before it got too hot. They say a watched pot never boiled, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the basic kitchen device I hadn’t owned in ten years. The whole thing rattled before settling, the little flip switching. I poured the boiling water over the tea bag and attacked it with a teaspoon, trying to make my tea as dark and strong as possible. Grabbing the milk from the fridge, I added a dash before squeezing the life out of the tea bag against the side of the Cookie Monster mug. A ripple of satisfaction went through me as I pulled it out and dumped it in the sink.

“Hobnobs are in the tin,” Mum called. I grabbed the opened packet—dark chocolate heaven—and rejoined her in the lounge. Putting my mug on the side table, I tucked my feet under me, plumped a pillow against my legs, and draped an old fleece blanket over my lap. Another velvet pillow called to me and I tucked behind my back before grabbing my mug.

“Well, now that you have created a mini nest and are drinking the Devil’s brew, are you going to tell me why you came back? And I don’t think it has anything to do with my oncology appointment on Monday.”

“Devil’s brew is coffee, Mum.”

I held my mug in between my hands, allowing it to seep deep into my bones. I’d distracted Mum when I told her I was coming home by Claiming I wanted to meet her doctor. But now that we were sitting face to face, she wouldn’t let up until I’d given her answers.

“Answer the question, daughter.”

“Meany. Remember how I was close to signing the paperwork with that pack? Julian Williams, Rafe Harcourt, and Guy Greene. They were...I had my first unsuppressed heat with them?” It came out as a question. Mum and I hadn’t been too close for the early years after I’d presented. The fact I was an omega had surprised everyone, and I’d gone from everyday beta to surprise omega at eighteen. My family didn’t have the resources or the mental space to deal with the change. The centre had recommended I live with a pack for a bit to get a feeling for it, and Mum hadn’t forgiven me for declining that and moving into a dorm.

“Of course.” Her voice was level, not judging me for that hasty exit, or the letter I wrote her a month later. Or her trip to visit me when I’d lost a part of me I didn’t know I had to lose. “Julian’s pack.”

I winced. Julian. She’d known him as long as I had. Twenty long years. The first ten we’d been inseparable. In the last ten, I tried to put as much distance between us as possible. Still, he was my first real friend. Fuck, he’d been all my firsts, including starring in my first experience with heartbreak.

“What I never told you is that we got married. Spur of the moment thing.” I waved my hand in the air as if we hadn’t had to give thirty days’ notice at the registry office. It had been the autumn equinox, unusually cold but with bright sunshine. Me and my three alphas had giggled through the service, or whatever it was called. They’d bought me a bouquet from the lady selling flowers by the newsagents. “I’m sorry for...for not telling you about what was happening back then.”

“Go on.”

“I left.” I waited to see if she would ask me for more details, but she kept her peace. Mum would never question my decisions. It was one of her life lessons. You are accountable for your actions and when you make your bed, sleep in it. “I filed for divorce. Genuinely, Mum, I thought I was divorced until a month ago when I was filing for my G4 visa to stay in the US. That is how I found out I was still married. Rafe—he’s

the posh one—never submitted the paperwork. I was so lucky. Gwen is a solicitor and she got in touch with him and arranged the court date for Friday.”

I sucked in a breath, my chest aching with the need to scream at Rafe for doing this to me. For forcing me to return and see him again. To explain myself to a judge. It was horrible. I wanted to rip him to shreds, but then, he’d always made my blood boil. And a tiny part of me had missed that.

“That sounds very overwhelming,” Mum sighed. “Come here.”

To make her happy, I gave up the comfort of my makeshift nest and perched on the arm of her chair.

“You can sit on my lap. You are pretty little. My little girl.”

I hesitated. She looked so...breakable. Staying away had been selfish. We’d met up once a year all across the world, but I hadn’t come home. Hadn’t seen her slow, painful decline.

“Mum.” I choked off the tears my guilt inspired. I felt it in my gut, twisting and ugly, reminding me what a shit daughter I’d been since I presented. “I didn’t want it to be like this. I didn’t want to be coming back like this.”

“It can’t be helped.”

“I didn’t want to leave in the first place. I was so scared, Mum.”

“What happened to you was ugly. And instead of retreating to safety, you fought,” she insisted. “You fought and you won. If you’d come home, you might never have had the courage to leave again.” Her hand made lazy circles on my back. “I’m so proud of you, Tones.”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. We sat there in silence, not talking about the Incident in the Berlin airport that had changed everything—the real reason I hadn’t been able to come home. But now, I was back.

“It isn’t so bad. Being back I mean,” I said, trying to stop the ugly way my thoughts were spiralling.



“Well, anytime you want to talk, I’ve two working ears,” she said briskly. “Do you have plans for the rest of the day? I need to go to my swim class.” She slipped her hand along my side. I yelped as her icy fingers tickled the scrap of skin that wasn’t covered by my t-shirt and splashed tea on my leg. Thankfully, Mum had escaped getting doused in cold, milky tea.

“Damn! Fuck.”

“Oh! Darling, I’m so sorry!”

“No, I was just surprised. It was cold.” I giggled. It was hardly nice spilling cold tea on myself, but it would have been worse than drinking lukewarm tea. “I’ll clean it up. You get ready for swim class and I can take you. I’m meeting Gwen for a coffee to talk about the case and go over paperwork.”

“Gwen, yes! How is she?”

I stood and crossed to the sink to grab some supplies to clean up the mess. The floor and my thigh weren’t so lucky. While I cleaned, I answered her question.

“Gwen is good. Back on her feet, which is amazing. She can walk again. Not for long periods of time, but it is huge progress. She’s opened a solo practice as well, though she shares offices with an alpha she knows from when she was studying. Gwen is...she is a such an inspiration.

“Good for her! Does she have a pack yet?”

I smothered my cringe at that all-too-common question omegas had to deal with. “Have you found a pack?” was an earworm from the minute an omega presented. I hated it. But in Gwen’s case, it made some sense. I thought about my omega friend who’d been in a car accident a year after I’d left—we’d met through a chat for pack-less omegas and become closer and closer over the years. After her accident, she’d been in and out of surgeries and then had to go through months of rehab. Now, she was walking again and back to work as a solicitor, dealing with omega and pack law.

I was so proud of her, but it couldn’t be easy to be an unmated omega with any kind of disability. We might be the

rarest dynamic and considered somehow valuable by the accident of our birth, but packs, at least the kind you wanted to end up with, often demanded perfection. Especially the established packs where omega relations would interview you, expecting perfection in form and ability. It had been a horrible shock when I'd been asked if I played the piano during my first ever pack interview and the sour-faced omega had dismissed me immediately. Gwen finding a pack would be a massive success for her. It was something I wanted for her.

“No. She doesn't, but she's finally signed up with the centre rather than her foster pack, so that is good. She's living in the Omega Block and loving life. Seeing her is kind of like a blind date.”

“I'm sure you two will get on like a house on fire.”

\* \* \*

I met Gwen at a cafe close to her flat in Camden Town. It was my “old stomping grounds”, as my gran would have said. Camden Town, a magnet for tourists and a market that had lost its edge in the last ten years, had the same weird Twilight Zone feeling as Paddington. Some of it hadn't changed, and other bits made it unrecognisable. The new development where Gwen lived overlooked the canal and sat next to the same graffiti-covered, piss-smelling arch where my bus dropped me off for the short walk to the new boutique coffee house she'd picked.

When I came in, the beautiful omega was already sitting at one of the large, unfinished oak tables. I ordered a double espresso and crossed over to my best friend.

“Toni?” Gwen's voice was like honey and velvet, even when she sounded excited. She struggled to stand, putting her weight on the table to help leverage herself up. I rushed into her arms for a tight hug.

“Oh my god. In the flesh, Gwen!” I laughed and scented her. Taking in deep breaths of honey and thyme. “You smell exactly like you sound. Honey.”

“Says the girl who smells like champagne! I could probably get drunk off your scent.” She exaggerated her inhales before we broke away to get a good look at each other. “Wow. Pink hair! It suits you.”

“And you are so tall!” I laughed. She was. I was five-foot-three—average for an omega—but she must have been five-ten. Svelte and elegant. “You could have been a model. What are you? Five-ten?”

“Yeah. I was always tall. They thought I might be an alpha; can you believe that?”

I shook my head because I couldn't believe it. Gwen looked like the perfect omega. If it wasn't for the way she leant heavily onto the table or the fact there was an antique cane propped against the table, visually, she was the ideal—if tall. Ideal except for the puckered scar on her jaw. She made it less noticeable by wearing her silky brown hair long and around her heart-shaped face. When the barista came over with my espresso, I bit back my smile as he openly stared at Gwen with little hearts in his eyes.

“O-M-G, he was checking you out,” I whispered, and we giggled. “Wow. It is so good to finally meet you in the flesh. I need you to take me to all the trendy bars. And the galleries. I need to see what they have on at the White Cube. And, of course, you are coming to my exhibition. I'm afraid it will be extremely boring arts people and wealthy packs.”

“Slow down, Toni!” Her laugh was husky and sexy. I grinned. “That sounds great, by the way. But let's get you divorced first? And sorry about not meeting at my office. I'm renting a desk in a very posh pack firm, and they are...too much. The pack's senior omega is in today, and she looks at me like I'm shit on the sole of her two-inch court shoes. She would never allow me to even apply to be her precious son and his pack's omega.”

I rolled my eyes. That would be the case. Some posh omega coming in and acting like the lady of the manor around a “broken, pack-less” omega. How cliché could the world get? A wicked thought occurred to me.

“Are your office mates going to rebel and sweep you off your feet?” I smirked, knowing the answer. Hell, yes. They’d given her a desk in their office—as good as inviting her to live with them. Regardless, they’d be idiots not to see Gwen’s value.

“Of course not!” she said. I didn’t question the way my friend’s cheeks flushed when I mentioned getting swept off her feet. I didn’t blame her if she had even the tiniest of tiny crushes on a pack of wealthy, prestigious alphas. It was hard not to be affected by alphas. “Can you imagine a disabled omega daughter-in-law? The shame! She’d never let it happen.”

“The infamy!”

“The horror!”

We burst into laughter. It felt good laughing with Gwen. Precisely like I had hoped it would be. We caught up on a few random acquaintances and friends, most of whom were scattered across the globe, before the conversation quieted, and Gwen looked at me with an overly serious expression.

“Toni, your case is serious. Pack divorce is still uncommon, and I don’t want you to get your hopes up that this will be in and out. There might be an issue of dividing assets. You don’t have a prenup, and they are rich.”

“You said Rafe wasn’t contesting. I don’t want their money or the house. And despite who I’m planning on marrying, I don’t have a lot of money in savings.”

“That won’t make things easier, I’m afraid. The law says you are eligible for alimony or even fifty percent. Which, yes, is crazy because you are one person; they are three alphas. Are you planning on hanging around before heading back to New York in case it drags out?”

“Yes. I need to convince my mum to move to New York. She owns the flat, so we have to figure out how to sell that first. Then, I have the exhibition, when I’m hoping you’ll meet the SweetNothings.”

I sucked in a breath and blew it out slowly. My therapist liked me to do a bit of deep breathing when I started hyperfixating on things. But sometimes, all it took was one crazy deep inhale and exhale. Feeling no better than I had before my breath, I caught Gwen's eye, and by some magical silent conversation, we decided to drop my drama. "Hey, do you know of a decent place to grab lunch? I'm starving."

"Actually, there is an amazing place. Mouthwatering." She grinned and leant close as if she was disclosing a state secret. "The owners are so hot. I pretty much go to drool over them."

"Alphas?" I asked.

"Nope, owners are an omega and beta. Bubble and Smoke is the omega-friendliest spot in London. Plus, they make amazing food, and Ciarán's cocktails are to die for."

"Do you think they'll be serving cocktails at this hour?"

"Toni, I have to go back to work after this." She cringed.

"Whatever. Lead the way, fair omega!"

On our way out, I grabbed another double espresso and bought a fancy to-go mug for an iced coffee. When we stepped out onto the sunny street, I dumped the espresso into the iced coffee.

"It was a red-eye flight," I explained with a blush.

"How much coffee do you drink?" she asked.

"Too much if you talk to my pack. Not enough if you talk to my body. The only person who likes coffee as much as I do is an alpha who looks like Clark Kent and runs on the stuff."

I mentally patted myself on the back for casually mentioning Julian without any constriction in my chest. It felt...nice, comforting, to remember that there was someone else in the world who was as addicted as I was.

"Still..." She wrinkled her nose. "I'd be having the shits if I drank that much coffee."

I shrugged. That had never been a complaint I'd had. "Each body is different," I said. "How far?"

“We just take the bus for about ten minutes?”

After a quick jaunt on the bus, we looked up at the painted exterior of Bubble and Smoke, which was—surprise, surprise—a dark smoky grey. The name was painted in bold gold lettering with a precise black outline. It looked equal parts classic chic and contemporary trendy. Just the sort of place that was progressive and hired omegas, creating a safe work environment for them.

“Hey!” Gwen called out when she walked through the glass door that had been propped open to allow for some breeze to enter the hot interior.

“A/C is blown,” came an annoyed grunt from behind the bar. An older, stocky omega with a bald head and tattoos peeped out from his t-shirt. That must be Ciarán, one of the co-owners. “You the new bartender?” he asked.

“I brought her in for lunch,” Gwen explained. She sat at one of the banquettes and patted the seat next to her. “Is Ciarán in?”

“In the back with Ivo. They are on the phone with the engineer.”

“That bad?”

“That bad.” A soft Irish accent wrapped around me like a hug. “How are you, love? Who is this—”

I turned to see the most staggeringly beautiful man I had ever seen. If Gwen was tall for a female omega, he was unbelievably tall for a male omega. Over six feet, and he was young with rich brown skin and closely cropped black hair. And he was dressed immaculately. Looking between my friends, I considered breaking my general rule that I didn’t take portraits. The two of them, side-by-side, did my head in they were that beautiful. Perhaps if I’d worn something other than a denim playsuit with an oversized linen Oxford shirt to protect my skin from the sun, I wouldn’t feel so inadequate. Next to them, I didn’t look professional or trendy enough to be in the same space as these omegas.

I stumbled out of my seat, which was mortifying because I wasn't a clumsy person, and stuck out my hand. "Toni Vane."

"Toni Vane," he purred my name with that deep, panty-melting Irish lilt, and I thanked all the gods that I was on suppressants because otherwise, my scent would have spiked to an embarrassing level. Instead, I watched the gentle smile twist as if he could see right into the heart of me. Pick apart all of my secrets. And when he took my hand in his, I realised he had noticed. But he was in no place to judge. His was thicker as well. The burnt sugar like the topping of a cr me br l e with a herby sage underneath drawing me closer. Fuck, I wanted to bury my face in his throat and suck in deep lungfuls of his scent. "I bet people say this all the time, but I could get drunk on your scent."

"You are making me blush." I swallowed.

Our eyes met, held, and I lost track of time for a moment. I couldn't remember reacting like this to an omega ever.

"You know me, by the way," he smiled. "A tall glass of slick?"

My jaw dropped. This was the male omega who was in our group chat for omegas who were pushing the boundaries of what kinds of jobs were appropriate for our dynamic.

"What? Oh. My. God. Gwen! You were holding out on me. A tall glass of slick?"

"That's me. Can I ask why you are here? In London?" He gripped my hand a little tighter. And his face hardened a little. "Did you come for the bartender job?"

"No..." I looked at Gwen, who shrugged. "Just lunch."

"Shame. We really need someone for the weekend. Things get pretty busy around here."

"I mean, I can help. Omegas look out for each other. I used to do a bit of bartending. The universal job."

He continued to hold my hand in his, almost squeezing it to the point of pain. Not that I minded pain. I liked it in the right circumstances and with the right person, but that wasn't

this. Instead, the uncanny sensation that he was looking deep into my soul and found me lacking. I fidgeted under his intense scrutiny. “Want a trial? Can you promise not to run when the going gets tough?”

I narrowed my eyes at his questioning. He could be teasing, but I had this weird feeling that he was being serious. “I don’t run scared. Test me. Go on.”

His eyes widened a little at the aggression in my voice. I tightened my grip. It was like we were two alphas facing off. I half expected him to growl at me.

“A martini. Make me a martini. The best you can.”

He released my hand, and I made a point of shaking it out. “Good thing I’m left-handed.” I smiled.

“No harm meant. Not every day one meets,” he closed his mouth. He suddenly grinned and winked at me as if the standoff was forgotten. “I’m a huge fan, even before being added to the group chat. You’re pretty famous. I wanted to see if you were as tough as they told me you were. Friday nights here can be a war zone. If you can make a passable martini, the job is yours.” He slid into the seat I’d vacated and nudged Gwen with his shoulder. “So, how did you find out this foxy omega was in town and kept me in the dark?”

While I explored the ingredients, Gwen made up some bullshit excuse about my mum being sick and wanting to surprise him. She was the only one in the group chat who knew the real reason I was in town. And if I was completely honest with myself, I didn’t want Ciarán judging me for getting a divorce. For failing to be a good omega.

It didn’t take me long to decide that I wouldn’t impress him with a straightforward martini or even an inventive one. This guy had everything a mixologist could imagine wanting, and my fingers lingered on a bottle of gin that was only marked with a date.

“That is my own gin. I make it offsite. Small batch.” He glowed with pride.



My eyes bugged out of my head. “Could you be more perfect? Handsome and you make your own gin? Can I?”

“You like gin?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess. But I like artists more.” I winked.

His face went a little slack. “No one has called me an artist before.”

“Then they don’t appreciate art when they see it...” I allowed my eyes to travel all over him, letting him know I liked what I saw. I reached for a shot glass and poured a tiny amount of the alcohol into the glass. I sipped it. “Or taste it,” I huffed.

“Like it?”

I blinked. I couldn’t put into words how sublime it was. The florals danced in my mouth, and I closed my eyes. “It is... it tastes like sex.”

“Yeah?” He grinned.

“Yeah. Omega sex,” I corrected. “Like an omega orgy.”

“Damn, girl!” Gwen crowed. “This is the first time you are meeting Ciarán and George.”

I looked at the bald omega, who had a grin tugging at the side of his mouth while he cleaned glasses.

“Are you saying you haven’t had omega sex?” I asked the room. “What? Like...are you crazy?”

“I can honestly say I have not had omega sex,” the Irish sex god said from his position next to Gwen, who also admitted to the blasphemy.

“Not for a long time. But I was in my twenties in the seventies. Free love.” George winked. “Nothing like a bunch of heat-crazed omegas going at it for five days straight. You don’t even need a knot or lock because there are toys for that.”

I put the glass down and high-fived him.

“That is what I’m talking about,” I laughed. In the mirror behind the bar, I caught Ciarán’s eyes on me. He confused me.

There was an attraction there, but then, when I wasn't looking or when he let his guard down, I got the feeling he was assessing me.

"I'll make that martini now." I rolled my shoulders and turned back to the shelves of spirits. Eventually, I decided on what my gran had called a Churchill 2.0. A Churchill was basically "only the faintest glance at a bottle of vermouth", the driest of dry gin, and an olive garnish. The 2.0 came about because gran hated olives, so she substituted with a grapefruit peel.

"Here." I slid the glass in front of Ciarán and tried to act blasé. "Nothing fancy."

"Why didn't you use my gin?" he asked as he raised the glass and looked at it from all angles as if he was inspecting a jewel.

"It was too nice. That I could sip chilled, maybe with one of those not-water ice cubes."

He nodded, then sniffed the glass. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Gwen pressing her lips together in suppressed laughter. I raised my eyebrows, trying to get some read on the situation.

"I like it," Ciarán said after taking a small sip. "Nice. You're hired."

"That's it? I mean, I can do this weekend, but I am going to be gone by next week."

"I only need you for this weekend." He smirked. "You, Miss Globetrotting Omega, are a pair of hands behind my bar on short notice. I know you won't stick around. You have those sexy, globetrotting rockstars to get home to. Welcome to Bubble and Smoke, Bubbles."

He reached across the bar. His hand hung in the air between us for a heartbeat before I found the courage to take it. It felt like I was signing a deal with the devil.

# CIARÁN



Shit, shit, shit.

This was my pack's old omega. I knew her, and I didn't. In person, there was something electric about her. I'd expected someone more settled. Instead, she bubbled and charmed in a way that drew you in. And she was aware of it. You could see it in the way she made eye contact—direct, confident, smiley eye contact.

When she shook my hand, cementing our little bargain, I felt the sparks again. The attraction was undeniable. I understood exactly why my alphas hadn't completely gotten over her.

Along my neck where my alphas had Claimed me, I felt a curious pulse of consciousness. They must have picked up on my emotions. I scrambled to mute my response. Focusing on the flush of pleasure at meeting her for the first time and dampening the rush of anxiety and attraction. Theoretically, these emotions weren't unusual, just the intensity would spark their curiosity. I'd need to text them and say I'd been scrolling through pictures from my last heat when someone looked over my shoulder.

The truth would wreck them because she was... I didn't know yet.

She was the...competition? The other omega? That felt wrong because we'd never competed for them and never would. Regardless, she was their past. But that wasn't fair to her or them. She might have a past with my pack, but that

didn't mean she was their past, or they were hers. They hadn't kept in touch with her.

I felt a headache come on as I tried to unpick and piece back together the tangled feelings messing with my head as I watched this pink-haired, casually dressed woman who would breeze out of my life before my pack even knew she was here.

As a newly presented omega, I had stayed up late stalking her website, looking at pictures of her, and reading articles she'd written. I'd watched her career since she first burst on the scene eight years ago.

At eighteen, seeing an omega travel the world on her own had blown my mind. I remember vividly the fight with my parents about travelling to Paris with another omega friend, waving a magazine with her face on the cover to prove omegas could travel safely. Then, last year, Gwen had invited me to join an exclusive group chat for omegas who were leading independent lives and running businesses, that kind of thing. I knew Gwen from a book club that I stopped going to months ago because—not to yuck on anyone's yum, but—who actually wanted to read fiction? Gwen also wasn't on social media. So, I was eighty percent sure she didn't know about my pack. But I was flabbergasted that Toni hadn't stalked my pack. I would have stalked my ex-pack if I had one. And there were hundreds of pictures of me with them on social media.

Credit was due, though. If she had stayed, I never would have met three of the best men I'd ever known. My little broken soldiers, I called them in my head. Rafe, who, like me, struggled with being the “spare”, had that everlasting drive to prove himself. He was a control freak, which was part of the reason we didn't work in bed. And I could see exactly how Toni would've made him feel like he was losing control as they'd battle to see who would end up on top.

Then Guy, our sensitive banker babe who did pro-bono work for charities that helped abandoned and abused omegas—his own mother's trauma driving his almost dangerous protectiveness. He'd struggled with alcohol after Toni had left, though his high-pressure job hadn't helped. Hell, they were all drinking like fish until I showed up.

Last but never least was Julian, who wanted everyone to get along. Who never gave up on any of us when we fell to the ground. Who had been best friends with Toni since they were kids.

If she found out who I was...not good.

If they found out she was here...not good.

Shit, this was a minefield of interconnecting relationships. If we weren't careful, it would blow up in our faces.

If I wasn't careful, I'd mentally spiral and go crazy with what-ifs. I gave myself a mental shake.

"Tell me, Bubbles. Why have you come back to Blighty? Break up with your boyfriends? Girlfriend? I have to admit, I don't follow the SweetNothings."

Lies.

"Urgh. I can't imagine dealing with my pack right now. I love them, but they'd go all alpha when what I need is just normalcy. Sorry, I should explain. My mum has cancer. And, well, the prognosis isn't brilliant. You know when you used to do something all the time, but then suddenly you can't? It is like that for her. Sorry. None of this is very clear. But when I left ten years ago, she was fine. We meet up every year, but she is very private, so I just didn't know until it was too late."

"That's a lot. I don't know what to say. Still, if you need anything tell me. One of my alphas is a doctor. If you want a second opinion I'll make it happen." I nearly died when I realised what I'd offered. Julian was the last person she'd want to be her mum's doctor. How the fuck was I going to take that off the table? But the idea she was struggling without a pack broke my heart. I couldn't help myself and asked, "Why did you leave London?"

Twin hands reached up and tucked some of that luxurious pink hair behind her ears. I counted her piercings while she thought about it. Five on one ear and then four on the other. From there, I looked at her sparkling, whisky-coloured eyes. Okay. I finally understood why Guy despised whisky. I would, too, if I saw her eyes every time I poured a drink to drown my

heartache. Only now, I wanted to go through my collection and see exactly which barrel of single malt could match or if I'd need to make a custom blend to catch the way the light played across the flecks of honey amidst the richer colour.

“I almost had a pack. They were three pack-less alphas. My childhood best friend. Then this really, what is the word... compelling alpha? He just...he was like the perfect nest.” She shivered, but her eyes sparkled. Yeah, I knew. Guy was like that. She sucked her lips between her teeth and blinked. “Last was this short king, but he was so deliciously alpha. I was a good girl, but he made me want to be so, so bad. It got serious very quickly.”

“I'm just going to make a call,” Gwen said and moved to the back. I wanted to growl at her for leaving me alone with Toni. This was the biggest shit show in the world. But I couldn't find the words in me to tell her to stay.

“They wanted me to settle down,” Toni continued. “I was twenty-two and wasn't ready.”

Now, she had my full attention. I put down the martini glass I was cleaning and watched as she slouched against the banquette. It made her look smaller than she already was. And the impulse to hug her tugged at my heart.

“We were twenty-two. We got married, and it was amazing. I have never been happier than those months between getting married and leaving.”

“What happened?” I had to know, and I found myself leaning towards her, wanting all the details and dreading them at the same time.

“They were all starting their careers and needed to be in one place. Doctor, finance, and law.” She ticked them off on her fingers. The difference between their conventional jobs and the life she had led didn't need more explanation than that. “They couldn't go travelling or any of the things I wanted... No, I needed to do. So, I left before they Claimed me. I was convinced it was the right thing. Then I got to Berlin, and...” She looked at me. “We don't know each other very well, but it isn't exactly a secret. Gwen and the other omegas in the chat

know. It is the reason I met Gwen through the omega support group. Don't judge me?"

"No. Yeah. Sure. No." I froze. Her scent had spiked sharply but now softened, and I picked up on a hint of chamomile.

"I was assaulted in an airport bathroom." She sucked her lips between her teeth and frowned as if she was trying to keep control of her emotions. "Someone stepped in before that happened. But it was scary. I..." This time, she wiped away a stray tear. "I was...just that weak omega that everyone knows. Right? They say we are vulnerable and can't protect ourselves. Well, I couldn't protect myself. I didn't want them to be right. It made me sick to run back to them because what if they threw me into the nest and locked the door?"

I growled; they wouldn't do that. But what if they had? I met them later when they were older, more settled. "Sorry. Not you. Just...what did those alphas say?"

She took a deep breath and pointed to my gin. I nodded and grabbed two glasses and some ice. She poured a unit over it and scented the alcohol as if it could bring her comfort.

"I didn't tell them. I freaked out. I didn't feel like I could tell them at that point. When I say I just left them, I mean it. I had a huge fight with the pack leader, then grabbed my purse and slammed the door in their faces."

"Did you report it? The assault?" Every fibre of my being was primed to tell her how stupid she was, but wouldn't that just prove her point?

"Yes and no." She took another sip. "The guy, a beta, was arrested. I had to go to the hospital to have all my stats checked and spent the night under observation. I told myself that next time, I'd be more careful. In the morning, I was back at the airport. Ready to go back and fix things with my exes. Or at least talk, tell them. But I needed to pee, and when I walked into the bathroom, I had a panic attack." She waved away my sounds of distress. "Instead of London, I bought a ticket to Sydney. My therapist said I was brave to keep going. Brave. I can't stand how people say that, you know? I kept

going because I was a coward, too afraid of what would happen if I let myself be vulnerable and admit I needed their help.”

She didn't look up, and the way her hair fell made it hard to see her face. I stayed quiet. Waiting for her to talk, waiting for her to show she wanted a hug, just...waiting. I wanted to comfort her so bad it hurt.

“I couldn't go back after that. You don't know what alphas are like. They have strong feelings. Wild and crazy and intense feelings. They would have told me it was alright. Then they would have never let me leave or travel...”

“That's a bit extreme,” I said without really thinking. “I mean...I wasn't there. Alphas, right?”

She nodded absently, and I wondered if she'd heard me. I reached over and tucked her hair behind her ear. My fingers lingered on the skin behind her ear. I couldn't seem to pull them away.

Toni turned and rested her cheek on my palm. The movement was intimate. A mutual scent marking that sent a shiver of awareness through me. I'd never scent marked someone outside of my family or pack. But here I was I was pumping out soothing pheromones and wanting to drag her into my lap and bury her face in my neck.

“I can't remember the last time someone touched me like this. Softly, I mean...Thank you for listening.”

“Thank you for your trust. I know they—” I threw a hopeless look at George, who had been lurking in the background. He shrugged. Even though my gut told me to be honest, it was the worst possible time to blurt out the truth about my pack.

“Hmmm?” She rubbed her cheek against my hand.

“What about your old alphas? Do you know what they are up to?” My heart pounded while I waited for her to speak. I wasn't pleased that she'd run like that, but part of me understood as well. I was only five years younger than her and wished to travel. But I'd never really get the chance to



experience the world the way she had. It made five years feel like five hundred.

I watched her straighten and missed the warmth of her cheek. Toni moved closer until I could feel the heat of her body across my front. She stood on her toes and kissed my cheek, then settled back down and grinned, but the sadness still lingered in her eyes.

“No. I didn’t keep up with them.” She laughed, but her scent was bitter again. “I bet they’ve found an omega who fits their lifestyle perfectly. I was a mess back then. I mean, my hair was this crow’s nest, and I wore black leggings, no matter the weather or occasion. I practically lived in a series of boho peasant tops. Trust me, a mess. I learnt how to dress all and that kind of thing about five years ago?” Her smile became soft. “The SweetNothings helped with my wardrobe. They love buying me clothes. More than I’ll ever be able to wear.” She fiddled with my fingers. “But if I saw them? I’d be...I hope they’ve found a wonderful omega who makes them feel wanted and loved. That is everything I want for them.”

“I bet they haven’t forgotten. I wouldn’t have forgotten.”

“Hey! Sorry, those assholes are trying to get me to join their firm.” Gwen returned, leaning heavily on her cane, a dazzling but brittle smile the only hint that she was unsettled by her “colleagues”. She was the reason I opened Bubble and Smoke. No matter how amazing, too many “imperfect” omegas were cast aside. So many jobs wouldn’t hire them, and they ended up in a weird limbo where they relied on omega centres for housing and could only do boring work-from-home jobs. Gwen, more than Toni, was a real inspiration to every omega who’d been looked down on by a pack. And by the look on Toni’s face, she would agree.

“I cannot believe their nerve,” she snarled. “It is almost... Did you know that they refuse to let me be in the office when they have meetings with clients? For my own safety?” She stopped when she saw Toni’s red-rimmed eyes. “What happened, love?”

“I told his beautifulness about my past.”

“Ooofff.” Her eyes darted to mine. I gave a small nod, telling her that Toni was okay. She smiled, a little sadly, but still a smile. “You are officially part of the inner circle now.”

Gwen’s words hit me in the gut. Forcing a smile, I was grateful as fuck that the girls started looking at the menu. My loyalty would always be to the pack, but now, I didn’t feel good about exposing them to her, or was it her to them? It all cartwheeled in my head. I wanted to talk to Ivo and ask for his advice. But what Toni had revealed was hers to tell. Even expressing a hint of trepidation would have him on high alert.

So, I did what I’d done for years and pushed all those feelings away, putting on the smile and demeanour of a perfect omega. The kind of omega my parents had wanted me to be after the bitter disappointment when I hadn’t been an alpha. But as they chatted, I kept looking at how Toni wasn’t as bubbly as she had been. It struck me that under any other circumstances, we would be friends.

I’d have to tell her I couldn’t hire her. My skin crawled as I thought about how I would feel if my new boss and long-term group chat friend turned out to be Claimed by my old pack. No. I wouldn’t put her through that because, unlike them, I knew the truth. It had never been their fault she hadn’t come home. It had always been, and always would be, that dark place in her head telling her she wasn’t enough. And if there was anyone who knew how that felt, it was me.

Stupid. My parents hadn’t meant for me to overhear them lament that I wasn’t an alpha. They loved me. They didn’t care I was an omega, but the pack and its lands would pass to a distant cousin because of alpha primogeniture. I’d been so tall and assertive as a kid that they’d assumed I’d hit fifteen and reveal as an alpha. My older sisters were classic, delicate omegas. Like my moniker, I was a tall glass of slick, six feet and a half-inch. A full five inches taller than Rafe, who reeked of alpha energy.

And Toni looked achingly normal for an omega. I remembered the first time I’d seen a picture of her next to some alphas. She wasn’t this petite little omega, barely reaching five feet. Instead, she made eye contact with my

nipples; kissing her wouldn't break my back. Which was perhaps not the best comparison.

I was fucked in the worst way possible because Toni pressed another kiss to my cheek and whispered, "Thank you. You are brilliant."

"What's going on?" Ivo grumbled. George must have slipped away and told him we had customers.

I had to grin at Toni as her eyes bounced from mine to the final pack member—even if he refused to sign on the dotted line. Ivo was that sexy, older-alpha type who made most people want to beg "Daddy". And he wasn't even an alpha. Add in the muscles under his t-shirt and the tattoos he had hidden underneath? Yeah, he was a silverback gorilla because they didn't make foxes that big.

"Ivo...this is Toni Vane. Your new bartender for the evening." Gwen swept her hand towards Toni—who, except for a hand out to shake, didn't seem to recognise Rafe's cousin. I suppose she wouldn't. Ivo was ten years older, forty-two this year, and there was no reason for a bunch of college students to think about him.

Ivo, however, stiffened, those great big shoulders rolling back, reminding me he was actually bigger than Julian. Toni, though? She didn't back down. Her scent told a slightly different story. The champagne was a little too sweet as she pumped out pheromones similar to the ones omegas threw out to calm alphas. I snorted. Yeah, I knew that feeling. Ivo had that power over most omegas, and being a beta, he didn't even realise his appeal. He appealed to our need to be cared for. And if it wasn't for his...thing...I would be all over him.

"You tested her?" he asked.

"Of course. Try it," I passed him the martini.

Ivo probably had the best palette of anyone I'd ever met. And when he tasted the martini, I could see his brain working out exactly what she had put in.

"Nice. Drinkable. If people ask for a recommendation for the fish starter, make that for them."

“Good job, Bubbles. Eat something. Ivo, whatever you want to cook these lovely ladies. Then I can teach you the house cocktails.” I grinned. “Right, Ivo. Did the engineer say when he could be here?” I waved to the others and followed him back into the office to take care of ensuring the air conditioner was working.

# CIARÁN



The night was crazier than usual. One saving grace was that the pack wasn't there. It was a normal Friday routine for them to take the table near the kitchen, so they could keep an eye on us, but somehow, Ivo convinced them to stay away.

Toni'd been fun to work with, slotting into our team with only a few mistakes that she promptly fixed without begging for forgiveness—there was no time for forgiveness on a busy night. One thing was obvious, bartending was not her calling. The martini she'd made when there wasn't any pressure didn't become sloppy as the night went on, but she did rush. Not that the customers cared, and I only noticed because I was watching her.

Maybe it would be more honest to say she'd been a distraction, one I kept brushing against—almost but not quite scent-marking her as if I was an alpha. When I bid her farewell, I had no words for the feeling of watching her walk away from me, then. It couldn't be anything like what my alphas had experienced. But it made me feel, to use a fancy word, bereft. This was probably the last time I'd see her when she was ignorant of my pack affiliations.

Ivo and I hadn't talked about her all day by a kind of mutual understanding. That lasted until we were closing up for the night. It was late, and we were exhausted, but I was too restless to be in a taxi for fifteen minutes. "Let's walk?"

Ivo grunted and stretched his arms over his head, twisting his back with a series of loud cracks.

“How’d she do?”

I considered my answer as we turned down Kentish Town Road towards Camden Town. “Good. She did pretty well for a first night. Kept up with everything. Clean. It helps that she smells like champagne. I swear people at the bar were buying more of the stuff than usual. She’s friendly. She’s hot...”

“She’s an omega. Of course she is attractive.”

“Yeah, but still.”

“Did you tell her to come back?”

I linked our arms and rested my head against his shoulder while I gathered my thoughts, my feelings, and our needs at Bubble and Smoke. “Yes. No. I don’t know. But I don’t want the pack to know. Not yet.”

“Come here, then.” Ivo pulled me into a big bear hug, the smells from the kitchen erasing the faint whiffs of Toni’s scent from my body. “Now you don’t smell too much like her. Not even Guy with his super nose will be able to tell.”

“Thanks. Okay. What about you? Thoughts?”

Ivo had this one habit I hated. He would tug at his nose like a fly had flown up it. He did it when he was thinking, and it drove me up the wall. But I kept my peace. Learning his thoughts was much more important than reprimanding his manners.

“She has a pack. That will be a problem and a blessing. Rafe wouldn’t be...Rafe is probably losing his mind now that she’s linked with the SweetNothings.” I hid my surprise that Ivo knew about her new pack. Ivo was more of a jazz and blues kind of man. Pop rock, not so much. “He is a possessive, jealous fucker.” He grimaced. “Keeping them away from each other will be the kindest thing for everyone involved. Toni—”

“Bubbles,” I corrected. I didn’t want us slipping up in front of the others.

“Bubbles, if you insist.” I insisted and waved for him to continue. “If Toni, Bubbles, seems like she knows who we are

or learns, we have to come clean. If not... well, we have the excuse that we didn't know her when they were a thing."

"That doesn't tell me what you think about her," I pushed because it went without saying that I agreed with everything he'd said.

"Her scent has an undertone of chamomile. The champagne is dominant. But...I like the chamomile. I...if I tell you this and it goes any further, I'm going to reveal to the others that you bought every single size of that dragon dildo in the Boxing Day sale."

"You. Horrible. Friend. An omega needs his secrets. Mine is collecting dragon dildos. I told you that in confidence," I hissed, mock horrified. "Fine. I'll keep whatever thing you want to reveal. It better be good."

He stopped, and I watched in awe as he swallowed and blushed under the harsh lamplight. One of his big hands went behind his head to scrub the back of his neck. He looked at the night sky. "Okay. I...I want to read a book with her curled on my lap while I drink a mug of chamomile tea."

It was good.

It was good enough that I could have scraped my jaw off the pavement.

I pinched myself. Nope, I wasn't dreaming. Tall, aged, and handsome wanted to cuddle with the omega who'd caused so much chaos because she smelled soothing to him. I was happy Ivo was openly talking about his attraction to someone, anyone. I was bruised because somehow, his little crush felt like, once again, I wasn't good enough—not that he would ever have a crush on me. After all, he was straight. So, his confession hurt in a goodish way.

"You're telling me that the omega people get drunk on... you want to snuggle with her and drink herbal tea."

"I also want to read her the riot act for what she did to the pack. But, yes. Her scent makes me want to read a book and drink tea."

"That is worthy of dragon dildos."

He huffed a laugh. “Let’s get home. I’m exhausted.”

The house was quiet when we got back. Our pack house on Ivy Place was a traditional mid-terrace, grade-two Regency house. It was five stories tall, with a brilliant blue door bracketed by two planters overflowing with ivy. I followed Ivo down the area steps to the entrance to his suite on the lower ground floor instead of the door to the main pack house. This part of the house had undergone a massive restoration when I’d moved in five years ago and had a sleek contemporary feeling compared to the more traditional-slash-mid-century look our interior designer had gone for.

“Whatcha doing?” he asked as I toed off my shoes and headed into the kitchen.

“Just need a small drink.” I pulled out my keys and opened the liquor cabinet. I never felt comfortable with the lock, but Guy insisted. He was five years sober, but sobriety was a daily commitment. The fucking irony that I was a bartender had never been a problem. We’d gotten him sober, and he worked at it. Still, he insisted on the lock. “Want one?”

Ivo nodded, and I poured out a small portion of one of my gins, then, remembering Toni’s words, I added an ice cube.

“Are you going to find one of your alphas?” Ivo asked as he sipped the drink.

“How did you know?” I tended to sleep alone on Fridays because they were exhausting, and I needed my beauty sleep as much as the next person in the service industry. But tonight, I craved the soothing presence of Julian and Guy.

“We’ve known each other a long time, and you’ve had a stressful day.” He shrugged.

I felt caught out. I hadn’t said anything, but as my best friend, he could read me like an open book. “You aren’t the only one who likes to cuddle.”

“Don’t you dare!” He poked a finger between my eyes.

“Yes, yes. Our secret.”



“Get out of here, scamp.” He laughed, polishing off the drink before rinsing the glass, the ice cube clunking in the sink, and going back towards the front of the house and his room. After a moment, I dragged my tired legs up two flights of stairs to Julian’s room. I poked my head in and grinned to see Guy sprawled out over half the bed. The TV was on, showing whatever game they’d been playing flashing was paused. I grabbed the remote and turned the tv off before crawling in between them. I was still fully clothed, but right then, being with my alphas was more important.

“You’re back,” Julian mumbled and rolled me into his arms. “You smell good enough to eat.”

“He always smells good,” Guy said from behind me. “But why are you here?”

“Just wanted a cuddle,” I let them know. “Just to cuddle and sleep with my alphas.”

“It’ll be tight...” Julian sighed.

I nibbled on his jaw. “You like it tight.”

“Babe...sleep! I need my beauty sleep,” Julian groaned.

I whined, wiggling between them but not meaning anything by it. This was Julian’s first weekend off in a couple of weeks. I had him all to myself for two days. There was plenty of time to tire him out in my nest with its giant bed and thousand-count sheets.

### *Five Years Ago*

*“It is a dark and stormy night,” I told my beta friend while I muddled ginger in a cocktail shaker. We were almost entirely in the dark, having just closed on the space we were going to turn into our restaurant and bar, Bubble and Smoke. Right now, the walls were painted neon pink from when this place had been a short-lived desert café, and there was no bar as such, but we had a fold-out table and a pair of metal chairs. Most importantly, we had a bottle of rum and a cooler with all the ingredients I needed to make a celebratory cocktail.*

*“Ciarán, that’s a shit joke.” Ivo chuckled anyway. He liked bad jokes; it was one of the reasons we’d become friends*

*about a year ago when I'd showed up at his restaurant in Liverpool and told him he needed a better bartender. He'd hired me, and now we were planning on opening a restaurant in London after Ivo decided he wanted to be closer to his younger sister, who was starting university in October. "So, you'll come to the party?"*

*"Sure, why not. You say it is an omega-less pack? How did they manage that? It's illegal for a pack to be omega-free."*

*"They're legal. But why is their business."*

*"If you are trying to set me up with them." I paused. "You are trying to set me up with them, aren't you?"*

*"I am not. But I'd like you to meet them. The pack leader is my cousin and a potential investor."*

*I grabbed the rum and free-poured it over the ginger, then left it to marinate while I sliced the limes into thin, almost-translucent slices. Each of our glasses got a single slice, then two ice cubes. "So, they must have had an omega...Did they die?"*

*"Stop fishing for information."*

*I shrugged because if Ivo wasn't going to tell me, it meant he wasn't going to tell me. I strained the infused rum over ice and lime, then poured the best Jamaican ginger beer over it until the ice cubes just lifted off the bottom. For a final flourish, I flam-fucking-bayed a slice of lime and rested that on top. "Drink."*

*"Bossy omega." But he sipped from the low-ball glass. "Perfect. We need to do a ceviche and have this on the menu."*

*I licked my lips and took an experimental sniff. Ooooh, yes. Good. I drank it too fast, but Ivo wanted to get there before it got too late. We closed up and grabbed a taxi to their house on the border between Camden Town and Primrose hill. Not exactly up to the same geographical standards as I would expect for Ivo's old money family, but perhaps, it was a poor relation.*

*The alpha who opened the door was sharply handsome with a defined jaw and wearing a crisp suit without a tie.*

*Everything about him screamed inherited wealth. I side-eyed Ivo, trying to understand why someone like him lived here, of all places. The alpha was shorter than me, maybe five-seven to my six feet, but as his intelligent, bright blue eyes travelled up and down my body. I gently tipped my head to the side, signalling my submission. Shit. The only alphas I had ever done that for were family.*

*He tipped his chin at Ivo, who did the same and immediately passed into the house without a backward glance. My host frowned after him before turning back to me. "Good evening, omega."*

*I offered him my hand, which he took in one of his in a firm up-down.*

*Giving myself a mental shake, I plastered a smile on my face. "Ciarán."*

*"Rafe. Please, come inside." He took a step back, allowing me to enter. Ivo had already disappeared into the party, leaving me with the powerful alpha. To my surprise, Rafe eased my coat off my shoulders and carefully hung it on a coat rack by the door. My cheeks felt hot, and I was grateful he couldn't see my blush under my brown skin. "I'm glad you came. There are a few other omegas here, but please let me know if you need some space."*

*"That's very considerate. Won't your omega mind?" It was a cheeky way to find out about how they managed to be three alphas, an official pack, and no omega.*

*"We have been separated from our omega for five years," he said, his cheeks pinkening now. "It isn't something we talk about."*

*"I'm sorry..." I trailed off. He sounded sad, almost as if she had died. "It was vulgar. My apologies."*

*His hand rested on the small of my back as he turned me into the sitting room, which leant towards shabby rather than chic, and the laughing crowd. "It was rude but not an unreasonable question."*

*Fuck. Alphas. They knew exactly how to...whatever Rafe had just done. "Still."*

*"Do not give it another thought, omega. Come, I want to introduce you to my packmates. I'm sure they would love to meet you and would think my manners appalling if I didn't bring your presence to their attention."*

*He guided me to a pair of alphas standing by the fire. One was huge, Clark Kent in the flesh with a chiselled jaw, broad shoulders, and large hands. The man next to him was leaner, better dressed, and not handsome but striking. My omega responded even more strongly to them than Rafe, and already I was already drawn to the stern alpha by my side.*

*"Ciarán, I want to introduce you to Julian and Guy, the other two members of my pack."*

*"Pleasure." I held out my hand but couldn't hide how my scent bloomed when instead of taking it, Julian rested a hand on my shoulder and pressed our cheeks together. The blatant scent marking sent my head into a tailspin, especially when Guy did the same.*

*"Our pleasure," they said as one. I'd never wanted to be sandwiched between two alphas more.*

*"You shouldn't scent mark him," Rafe grumbled next to me. "I don't—"*

*"Stop being so protective, Rafe." Guy took his almost overflowing glass of whisky from the mantelpiece. I saw his hand tremble a bit, and the amber liquid sloshed over the rim of the cut crystal tumbler. He was drunk, too drunk. I didn't like drunks, but the way his eyes held mine sparked my omega purr. I wanted to protect him from himself so much. If I could, I wanted to clear the sadness from all of their eyes and see them smile. "What is—"*

*"Did you come with a chaperone?" Julian cut in, his arm going around his packmate's waist. He appeared to be propping him up. Interesting that his protective instincts extended to another alpha.*

*"Ivo."*

*“Oh!” Julian’s eyes twinkled and darted about the room, no doubt looking for my friend. “You are that Ciarán.”*

*“How many does he talk about?” I asked, cocking my hip and smirking at him.*

*“Only the one handsome one.” Julian flirted right back. “We’ve been looking forward to finally meeting you.”*

*“I have a lot to live up to, then.” I should be nervous. Ivo had said he wasn’t trying to set me up, but so far, I felt like my friend was acting more like a matchmaker than my own mother or any omega centre I’d ever visited.*

*Towards three am, the crowd thinned until it was just the five of us. Ivo was passed out on the sofa, snoring. While I had curled up in a worn leather armchair that carried the not-quiet-there scent of an omega. It was one of the nicest things I’d ever come across. I inhaled the heady combination of champagne and chamomile, and strangely, it calmed my racing heart. Because I’d found my pack. I knew it in my bones. Fate, in the shape of a big beta, had brought us together.*

*As I watched Guy cuddle into Julian’s side on the beat-up love seat by the fire and Rafe light a cigar, puffing the sweet smoke into the air, the certainty that I was meant to be here solidified even further.*

*“So why bartending?” Guy asked, his voice a little slurred.*

*“I wanted a job that gave me the freedom to move around,” I admitted. “I ended up in Liverpool at Ivo’s old restaurant because I heard about the cocktails there, but on trying them, they were shit. When he offered me in on his new venture, I said yes.”*

*“Are you from the Irish Dillon pack?” Rafe asked, a frown creasing his brow.*

*“Yes.” I didn’t like to talk too much about my family because I didn’t want to be associated with their wealth and power. I wanted to be recognised on my terms because of the things I had done. Just like the omegas in the group chat I’d*

*just become a part of. Lawyers and globetrotting photographers, just to name two. “But—”*

*“Just curious. I remembered they had an omega son.”*

*“Rafe becomes a snob when he’s drunk,” Ivo muttered.*

*“I was curious.” The short alpha scowled at his cousin. Though you’d never know it to look at them, both came from two of the oldest packs in England. Rafe threw a glance at the other two. I watched, fascinated, as the three of them seemed to have a silent conversation. “It is too late for you to go home, and I don’t trust omega-only taxis. There have been too many incidents of omegas, especially drunk omegas, being attacked for my liking. You’ll stay over in the nest.”*

*I gaped at them. “You’re crazy. I can’t just spend the night with strange alphas.” Because they were strangers. “It isn’t appropriate.”*

*“I agree with Rafe.” Julian shrugged, the warm smile sending a shiver of awareness through my body. If I wasn’t careful, I’d be sporting an erection while leaking slick like a teenager. “Don’t read into it.”*

*While Rafe went around the house to check that all of the doors and windows were locked, I helped Julian and Guy tidy up. “We have someone coming tomorrow, so just pile things on the counters,” Julian said. “Actually. Guy, can you grab our handsome guest a toothbrush and something to sleep in while I finish up here? Can’t have you tidying up when you aren’t pack.”*

*Yet.*

*That word hung unsaid.*

*I tried hard not to give it away, but I’d never had a sleepover with an alpha. Sex, sure. But even during my heats, they’d always slept somewhere else—a simple precaution to keep young omegas safe when they were at their most vulnerable. Now, I had a toothbrush loaded up with toothpaste in one hand and a pair of tracky bottoms and a t-shirt in the other.*

*“Goodnight, darling.” Guy swayed into me, his lips catching the corner of mine, our chests brushing against each other. I whined. He chuckled. “Sleep well.”*

*He stumbled back, his eyes never leaving mine, almost crashing into the room across the hall. When the door had closed, I brushed my fingers over the spot where he’d kissed me, smearing toothpaste over my cheek.*

*Fuck. I was done for.*

*And after that night, I just hadn’t left. I fell, maybe jumped was a better term, straight into a relationship with the Ivy Place alphas. From the moment I walked into their house, becoming pack seemed inevitable, perhaps an “at last” than a traditional courting.*

The morning after meeting Toni, I almost died of laughter when I saw Ivo sitting at the kitchen table with a book and a mug of chamomile tea.

“Who wants mimosas?” I asked as I sat down beside him. “I want bubbles!”

Ivo choked on his tea.

“Special occasion?” Julian asked from where he watched the espresso machine fill up his first shot of the dark, bitter brew he preferred.

“We hired someone for the bar.”

“That deserves mimosas?”

“Of course.” But I shifted in my seat, suddenly uncomfortable with withholding any information from the pack. At the same time, why the hell was she here? And why spoil the mood by bringing her up?

# TONI



I glared at my reflection in the mirror while I brushed my teeth. What the hell was I thinking when I told Ciarán all of that? We had just met. And sure, I'd told Gwen, but we were closer in age, and she'd had disappointments as well. Ciarán, for all I knew, lived a completely charmed life. He had a pack of alphas. He had a fantastic job. A hot co-owner. And I itched to look up his pack now that I knew his name. Well, his first name and Bubble and Smoke.

Last night while I built a little nest in my childhood bed, I agonised over whether it was prudent to indulge my curiosity. I grabbed my phone and opened Instagram. "Oh, this is a bad idea, Tones," I murmured as I typed out Bubble and Smoke.

"Toni?"

Surprised, I dropped my phone. "Yeah, Mum?"

"Can I come in?"

She'd come in and said goodnight. Fate had intervened.

Fate, it seemed, didn't want me to find out about Ciarán's pack just yet. Actually, it was for the best. This was an in-and-out operation without getting side-tracked or making more of a life here than I needed.

And now, this morning, jet lag was kicking my ass in a way it hadn't in my twenties. But the day couldn't be brighter when I saw a private message. I spat into the sink and rinsed. This needed my undivided attention. Ciarán'd messaged.



@Atallglassofslick: Nice to put a scent to a face. And a voice. Especially when they are both so lovely.

He liked my scent. I grinned. Everyone wanted their crush to like their scent. Fuck. No. I didn't need to spring a crush on a random omega.

@Travellingnest: yes! Sorry for spilling my guts.

@Atallglassofslick: No. I appreciate it. If I'd known before, I wouldn't have pressed.

@Travellingnest: I'm glad to talk about it.

I held my breath, watching the three bubbles blink in and out of existence.

@Atallglassofslick: How long will you be here for?

@Travellingnest: Not sure. Why?

Why did I feel disappointed that he only wanted to know about how long I was staying?

@Atallglassofslick: Just wanted to know if I was going to see your pretty face again. We will probably have to hire a full-time bartender. Hope you don't mind when I fire your fine ass for being prettier than me.

I sent him a winky face. What a flirt! I hadn't expected to unload on him, but when he'd asked, the words just slipped out until he had my whole messy life handed to him on a cracked china plate. Or at least as much as I told the few close friends who knew.

@Travellingnest: Probably a week or two. But happy to help whenever.

@Atallglassoflick: k

I practically skipped back to my bedroom and wriggled deeper into my pile of blankets and pillows. It wasn't perfect, but that same familiarity wrapped around me, settling more than my nest in the SweetNothings loft. I should call them, or at least message more than "landed safe / with mum" like I had last night. They'd all replied with thumbs up and promises to call. Of course they hadn't. Their schedule was always a bit crazy. Weirdly, the lack of communication never bothered me. They had their life. I had my life. When we were together, it was great, magical even. Still, after all these years, I didn't need the constant assurances most omegas desired.

"Breakfast!" Mum shouted. "Come and eat something."

I shuffled into the kitchen and saw her flip the kettle. "Milk's in the fridge."

Milk. Oh. My. Dear. God.

I had forgotten how good milk was. Not cloudy water but milk full of yummy full fatness.

"I have never heard you purr before!" my mother exclaimed.

"Milk."

"You are such a little cat. Is it that bad in America?"

I nodded fervently, promising myself I would hunt down good milk when I returned to New York. Maybe I could find a small farm and pay an outrageous sum of money to get bottles of milk delivered to my door.

"What about the butter?" Mum asked.

I looked at the options she'd put on the table. The tub of Lurpak looked as creamy golden as the slab of unsalted butter. I swallowed down my moan of ecstasy before I'd even slathered my bread in the heavenly creamy goodness.

"You can't put both on at once!" She laughed.

“I can.” I looked up, my eyes wide, and to my shame—or not—I pouted. “Do you have Marmite?”

“Of course.” She nudged the muesli aside, revealing the little brown jar with its yellow lid.

“I am—” The rush of emotion gave me a moment before tears pricked my eyes. “Mum.”

“Have your Marmite. But I didn’t think it would be possible to get it in the states.”

I shook my head as I picked up the jar and turned it this way and that, inspecting it like it was the crown jewels. “I never thought about it until right now.”

“How long will I be seeing you?”

“For good, Mum. I’m not leaving you again. Which is why you are moving to New York with me.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“I should have come sooner. But now that I’m here, I’m going to insist you come home with me.”

“Hush, I am home. You did the right thing. It can’t have been easy living so far away. How is New York treating you?”

“Busy. So many things to learn about being an omega to a famous pack. Once the divorce is finalised, I want you and Daisy to move back to the States with me.”

“Darling, I’m not moving across the ocean just because I have a little bit of cancer.” She laughed at my sour expression. No one ever had a “little bit of cancer.” “Don’t roll your eyes at me. Now, are you up for coming to my doctor appointment? He is very handsome...”

“Mum, are you trying to set me up?” I laughed.

“No.” She winked. She’d dropped the idea of luring me back to London with new alphas a long time ago. “I just want you to meet my boy toy.”

I groaned but couldn’t help the smile tugging at my lips. “Fine. But can I shower and change first?”

“Please. I hate black.”

I didn't dare tell her that ninety percent of my wardrobe was black. Instead, I rooted about in my old closet until I found something that might make her smile. Then it caught my eye. A pale pink dress. One I'd made for myself at university when I'd thought about going into fashion. It had blocky cut-outs along the bottom and delicate embroidery that was terribly uneven in places. Mum had called it my nude illusion because the summer I'd made it, I'd fallen asleep in the park with friends and burnt all over.

“Nude illusion...” Mum grinned. “Are you sure you don't want me to set you up with him?”

“Mum.” I did my best alpha growl, which set her off laughing like a hyena. I could see how much it took out of her, but I could also see her eyes sparkle, and our eyes met in silent agreement. Mum would be willing to be a bit tired if it meant we were laughing together.

It was work getting her down to the ground floor. The lift started the floor below, and then we had more steps before we stepped out into the balmy summer air.

We took a taxi to University College Hospital, and a staff member appeared with a wheelchair to take Mum in. I raised an eye as Mum began introducing me to all the staff who seemed to know her by name. While she signed in, I asked a nurse about Mum's popularity.

“Oh, Ms Fletcher is a great favourite here! She always remembers everyone's name, and sometimes it seems like she has been coming here all her life. I can't say that I enjoy having anyone as a patient—of course, I don't want people to be sick—but your mother makes me love my job.”

I nodded with a sad smile. That was Mum. I couldn't remember a time when she wasn't the favourite. Sometimes, it left the bitterest taste in my mouth. Years of being dragged into conversations with strangers haunted my childhood memories but watching her now, I could only be grateful for her natural ability to make people feel good about themselves.

“Toni, darling! Come on. Dr Williams can’t be kept waiting!”

I thanked the nurses and trotted to where Mum was sitting. “Are you having an exam?” I asked.

“Oh, no. Just a discussion of my care plan, and they are thinking of doing surgery.”

“Mum! You should have told me.”

“Hush. I didn’t want you worrying.”

“Mum, I get to worry. Sugar—” I glared at her.

“Ms Fletcher? I’m ready—”

My whole body stiffened. I knew that voice. I knew that voice like I knew my own reflection. “Williams...” I whispered.

I straightened and turned around to confront a figure from my past.

Julian Williams was one of the largest alphas I had ever known. Tall, muscular, with a healthy tan and piercing blue eyes and dark hair. He would have looked at home on the red carpet rather than in a white doctor’s coat. He was my Superman. Clark Kent on the streets and Superman in the sheets. My cheeks flushed at the sudden memory.

From across the waiting room, I could not catch his scent, but like his voice, I remembered too well. Coffee. Not just because he was addicted to the beverage but he had to smell like rich, dark coffee with a hint of citrus. I remembered his taste as well from lingering autumnal kisses and stolen pecks between tutorials.

“Mum...”

“Well, isn’t this a coincidence!” she trilled. “Wheel me over.”

I gritted my teeth, then remembered that if I wanted to get through this appointment, I needed to breathe through my mouth. Being so close to an alpha would drive me mad.

“Mum, I’m going to kill you,” I hissed.

“Oh, I know,” she said, her eyes glittering. “Julian!”

He watched us approach, and I was revealed that he looked as fucked in the head about this situation as I felt. How did I know-know? Well, his shoulders hunched in because he'd been caught being my mother's doctor when he should have found someone else to take care of my mother. Then he adjusted his glasses and rocked back on his heels. The bastard was going to try and bluff his way out of this shit show. Yes, it might have been ten years, but I clocked every single one of his tells.

“Gloria, how is my favourite patient?”

“Hoping every day that I never have to see you again,” she flirted right back.

I snorted.

“Are you going to introduce me to your beautiful companion?” he asked as if we hadn't known each other since we were thirteen.

I growled. “This is bullshit.”

“Toni, darling, language. Dr Williams is—”

“Julian. His name is Julian. If you can call him Julian, so can I.” I bit my tongue until it hurt. I was so mortified by my second outburst within as many seconds. What did it matter what I called him? There was nothing personal between us. We were divorced. Almost divorced. I glared. He was just the primary care physician or whatever for my mother, who was dying of fucking lung cancer. I glared at him as if he'd somehow concocted this whole thing to annoy me. But it was my mother. I could practically feel her vibrating with pleasure.

“I'd love to hear you call me Doctor Williams,” he said. “But I'm a mere surgeon, so it is Mr Williams.”

My cheeks flushed hot, and I forgot to breathe through my mouth. His scent was as heady as I remembered.

Julian, Guy, and Rafe haunted my dreams. Just brief flashes of our time together. The fact I'd started photography after Rafe had given me an old Nikon for my Christmas

present. The way Guy would hold me tight and spin me around, humming some song. And, of course, my Superman picking me up and blowing raspberries on my stomach as I squealed in delight. “Mister Williams. Do you—”

“Well, don’t mind me. I didn’t bring you here to flirt, Toni darling.”

I fisted my hands in my dress until my knuckles cracked. “Mother...”

“If you could push me through, we can get this whole appointment over with.”

Sounded like a brilliant plan to me. I nodded and bent to grab the handles of the wheelchair, but the bulky alpha was before me. His arm brushed against my breast. We both froze, and his scent intensified. And I would be lying if I said mine didn’t either. Thank fuck my mother’s beta senses would not be as sensitive to the changes.

I licked my lips and took a careful step away from him, my heart pounding at the contact. Pushing her down the hall to his office, I jumped ahead to hold the door open, pressing myself as flat as possible so we would not touch again.

He moved behind his desk and watched as I closed the door with a gentle click.

“You can leave the door...I’ll open the window.” He spun and cracked open the window. As the appointment stretched on, the gentle breeze did not help. Instead of clearing my head, it wafted the alpha’s scent in my direction, and despite my suppressants, I began to react. My core felt warm, and I found myself unable to focus on what he was saying.

“Toni? What do you think?”

I blinked at my mother. “Whatever the doctor thinks is best.” I smiled.

Her sparkling eyes told me she knew I hadn’t been paying attention.

“Well, then. I think that is what we shall do.”

“What is that?” I asked, now determined to pay attention.

“The body can’t tell the difference between surgeries.” Julian smiled gently. “But I think the Harrison technique will have a shorter recovery time and won’t put as much pressure on her body.”

I sucked my lips in, suddenly overwhelmed. I sniffed and nodded. “Whatever...whatever you think is best.”

“Toni, I’ll do everything—”

“Oh, the two of you! Please. We are here to discuss cutting me up. Not for you to look at each other, all tortured with suppressed longing.”

“Gloria!”

“That is so inappropriate, Mother.”

“You asked if I was trying to set you up, and I said no.”

“Mum!” I glanced at Julian, who was blushing a deep red. “I am sure the doctor—sorry, the surgeon, Mr Williams. Julian,” I said with more emphasis. “Julian has a lot to do. Thank you, Mr Williams. I...I am glad Mum is in your care.”

If you could drag someone in a wheelchair out of somewhere, then I did. Maybe I was the first person to drag someone in a wheelchair anywhere, but it was satisfying to watch her grip the arms of the chair while I whipped us around the corner and back into the waiting room. By the time she was on her feet, my emotions had settled a little. Guilt churned in my stomach.

“Mum, I’m sorry. It caught me off-guard. But you put us in an impossible situation. I might still legally be married to him, but what if he has another omega? It must—”

“I’m sorry, Tones. I shouldn’t have done that. I should have warned you. Both of you.” Her laugh was more of a nervous giggle this time. “I guess...I’m still grieving how things turned out. It wasn’t my relationship. It isn’t mine to grieve. When I met him three months ago...everything came back. All that time you spent together as children. And you left, and I never understood why.”



I looked up at the ceiling of the hospital. Blinding LEDs made me blink away tears. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't anyone's fault for having emotions. But she could be so... selfish. At the same time, I understood her. She was sick. And the man she'd always expected to be her son-in-law was taking care of her. Bringing us together was misguided, but she was lonely and perhaps more of a romantic than I had guessed.

"It isn't your relationship to grieve," I said at last. "Let's forget it. There are a lot of emotions going on."

As I helped her into the waiting taxi, I looked back at the doors, half expecting Julian to be standing there. He wasn't, and it almost stung that he hadn't followed me out, seen Mum and me safely to our taxi. I shook my head. Julian Williams, an oncology surgeon, wasn't my alpha. I couldn't expect special treatment. That hurt more than it should have.

"How about ice cream?" she asked as if everything was fine. It was her way of letting me know she wanted things to be normal between us again. If there was one thing our family were good at, it was pretending everything was alright, even when the world was falling apart. "If you're good, you can have a flake? We can watch the ducks like when you were little."

I gave her the sweetest smile imaginable. I was finished with sweeping things under the rug. "And while we watch them, you are going to explain what the fuck you thought you were doing. And why he accepted you as a patient. Jesus Christ, Mum. I'm still married to him. It is a conflict of interest, and I hate that—"

"Oh, I missed my little girl!" She rested her head on my shoulder, and I felt the slight shift of her wig.

"I missed you too, Mum. But you seriously fucked up."

"Then don't think about it." Bingo. We were going to ignore her throwing emotional grenades. "Now. I tell me if I should change doctors. I want you there..."

“Fuck. I am sure he is excellent. Stick with Julian, Mum. I’ll be okay. I just wasn’t expecting to see him. Next time will be easier.”

“He is very, very handsome.”

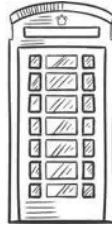
“Yeah. He always was.”

“Is.”

“Fine, is.”

I definitely deserved an ice cream with a chocolate flake for putting up with her.

# JULIAN



Antonia Vane. I couldn't have known she was back in London. When Gloria had first become my patient, I hadn't immediately connected their names. Toni used her dad's name, which she hated. She was only waiting until her marriage heat to change it to Ivy. It was old fashioned for omegas to change their surnames to the name of the pack, but it got Rafe growling with satisfaction every time he'd called her "the future Mrs Ivy, the first of her name". Physically, though, Gloria and Toni were exceptionally similar—except Toni now had pink hair.

Antonia Vane.

Antonia Vane who was wearing a dress the colour of her nipples, and damn me for thinking that when I had an amazing omega of my own. I shouldn't be thinking of her nipples at all. I shouldn't be thinking of her at all. I had to throw the window wide open and prop the door ajar for the rest of the day to get rid of the smell of chamomile and champagne. I was drunk on the scent. I mean who wouldn't be? Champagne! We didn't have the stuff at the house because it was a constant reminder of her.

Tones. Toni. Little Lettuce—because she'd dressed as a lettuce for Halloween one year.

Duck a fuck.

I closed my eyes and conjured forth my personal siren. She looked older now but with age came a kind of beauty I had never expected. When she had been mine, been ours, her face

still carried puppy fat, she had never been able to sit still, and she'd kept her hair long and balled up in a knotty bun on the top of her head. New York, or wherever she'd been, had changed her. Now, her cheekbones created harsher planes on her face that made her neck seem longer. I'd wanted my Claim on her neck, and now all I could think about were those SweetNothings fucks taking what had been mine.

Antonia Vane.

And that hair now was some kind of silky wavy bob thing that teased her jaw. She looked like she'd just stepped out of a magazine shoot because she was wearing makeup. Not a lot but just the right amount. When had she started caring about her hair and appearance?

Did I tell the pack that she stumbled back into my life? Did I warn them? Did I keep this from them?

My phone rang. The caller ID read "Ciarán Ivy" and my heart relaxed a little.

"Hey, love," I sighed, the Claim pulsed with love and a tinge of concern.

"Long day?" Ciarán asked, his soft Irish accent acting like one of his tonics. "You were all over the place for almost half an hour at one point."

"I need a drink," I admitted.

"Oh, no. If you are going to be like that, tell me now."

"Does the name Antonia Vane ring a bell?" I winced and pinched the bridge of my nose. Fuck. Why did he make it so easy to talk to about the ugly past? Because you love and trust him. Because he is the strongest, loyalist person you've ever met.

"She who must not be named?" he asked. Of the pack, he was the only one who had never met Toni. And Ivo hadn't either, come to think of it.

"She came into my office today. Her mother is a patient. I never should have taken Gloria as a patient. I fucked up, love.

I had her in my office...and have been fumigating since she left.”

“Patient?” he choked on the word and the revelation that I’d been keeping a really fucking big secret from him and the pack. “Meet me at home. I don’t need to be here. We can fuck it out and then talk.”

Damn but the man understood me. It wasn’t that I was hard. I’d not gotten an erection that needed adjusting. I just felt wound tighter than a jack in the box. Ready to explode. “Okay, I’ll walk. I need to think.”

“See you in twenty.”

“Make it thirty. Love you,” I volleyed, then hung up on my omega.

A nurse knocked on my door to talk about a colleague while I hummed in agreement and began packing my bag.

The walk home through Regent’s Park and into the heart of Primrose Hill left me more time to think than I wanted. And all my thoughts centred around the petite omega who had picked up and left our pack without a goodbye or word since. The only thing any of us knew was that there had been a huge fight between Toni and Rafe, our pack leader. A fight they refused to discuss but clearly one big enough that neither felt that the relationship could be saved. Neither Guy or I had pushed but I did wonder if it had been over something trivial, the kind of fight that seems insurmountable when you are in your early twenties but only needs a good night’s sleep and clear heads to sort out.

And now, she was back in London.

It was quiet when I pushed open the main door. I looked it over with fresh eyes. Toni wouldn’t recognise it. The sitting room was immaculate instead of filled with second-hand furniture. The kitchen was in the new lower ground floor extension rather than crammed into what was now a cosy media room. Everything was so clean and we hadn’t entertained in months. We were at the height of our careers or

moving so quickly to the top that our work took all of our focus.

That had been our reason for not bonding with an omega. Everyone we had interviewed had been rejected. Too quiet, too much of a partier, too this or that. Too not-Toni. And the more time that passed, the more I wondered if Toni was some ideal we had built rather than remembering her as a person.

A person who could fit in here. In the pack house with its mix and match of antiques and second-hand furniture, threadbare rugs on original oak floors, and the walls painted rich colours we all loved. All but Rafe who would have happily had us living in shades of grey and maybe some orange and russet.

For years, it had worked for us. But always, something was missing. Someone. An omega to occupy the huge suite on the first floor, overlooking the quiet residential road. It sat there unused, even while we had wild parties. It sat empty when we brought home one-night stands. It sat vacant until one day, Ivo had introduced us to his newest business partner. Ciarán, all tall, lean, dark skin, and hazel nut eyes filled the hole with ease and grace.

He never tried to be Toni. How could he be? He was sunshine smiles, coy looks, and an ability to joke about himself that even had Rafe smiling. Hell, he was a bartender, a mixologist who insisted on keeping the house dry except for weekends and special occasions because he watched over Guy like a mother hen. He'd ended our blindly wild days within weeks of meeting us. Within three months, he had signed the papers and moved in. He was ours, and we were his. I didn't want it any other way. I couldn't imagine it any other way. but fuck...Toni.

I turned around and climbed to the top of the house where the loft bedrooms were. Just off the landing was a narrow room with enough space for a sink. You wouldn't be able to guess what it was if you didn't know what the double doors were for. Rafe had given her a dark room when she'd moved in. It was now a linen cupboard, and I just stood in the doorway looking at the neatly folded sheets and towels as if it

would somehow tell me something. Maybe an apparition would appear. A friendly ghost to tell me that I was just dealing with the surprise and maybe even trauma of the woman who'd abandoned us.

It just didn't make sense how strong my reaction to seeing Toni was. We had never Claimed her, and it had been a decade. Ten long years. We'd been with Ciarán for five. I slumped against the door frame and took in a couple of deep breaths. Counting in and counting out. But when I looked back at the space, I could only think about this one day when Toni had showed up at the pub with a packet of photographs. They were of me, Guy, and Rafe in bed. She had taken them while we'd slept. It was the first heat of hers we'd shared, and as I looked through them—embarrassed that someone might see—she laughed and said she couldn't wait for her next heat, so she could see what someone else would capture in our blissed-out state.

“Hmmm...you look a bit lost.”

Ciarán stood on the top step. He was the tallest omega I knew and perfectly proportioned, and was blessing me with a wide beautiful smile that was equally capable of brooding. He would always be the best-looking man in the room. He liked to joke that he was the walking definition of Black Irish because his mother was Nigerian and his father a pasty white Irish aristocrat. To me, he was the walking definitions of sin and home.

“But found again.” I raised my arm, beckoning for him to join me.

“Nope. Not hugging you in the closet. We are definitely not doing that. Come here.” He dragged me by the hand into the spare room which overlooked our garden. It was full of leftover furniture and an unmade bed, but it wasn't Toni's old room, which was what mattered. His embrace grounded me, steadied me, and after a long day of work that was haunted by mine and my pack's past, I was grateful for this man in more ways than I could count.

“So. Is she as perfect as you all make her out to be?”

I groaned in frustration. “She never was perfect.”

He raised an eyebrow. I rolled my eyes.

“She was perfect for us. At the time,” I hastened to add.

“Fuck. That is even worse than when Guy used to get drunk and began telling me about the colour of her eyes and single malts.”

I huffed a laugh but secretly thought that Guy might actually be right.

“Do you want to fuck it out?” My ever-direct packmate, friend, lover, and omega asked.

“I thought I did. But I’d rather, and don’t laugh, but I’d rather ask if you think I should tell the others.”

“Tell the others what?” Our heads snapped up. Guy in all of his ruffled glory was twiddling a finger in his ear as he stood in the door. Our resident banker had his too-long hair pushed back off his face, more likely from running his hands through it in frustration than excess product, and wore a dove-grey suit that matched his eyes. “Had a bloody mare today. Fucking hate political shit. Came home early. What were you talking about? Something I need to know?”

“Toni is back.”

Only I wasn’t the one revealing the news. Nor was Ciarán. The voice came from behind Guy. Rafe, our pack leader, was maybe five-eight on a good day, but if you asked, he’d say five-seven. Didn’t stop him from being the most alpha-alpha I’d ever met. He was unfriendly, and the only thing warm about him was the chestnut hair and matching eyes. Otherwise, every line and movement was uncompromising and full of latent power.

“No. Not Toni. She...” Guy stuttered. Her abrupt departure had destroyed him for a while. Another reason Ciarán was perfect for us because he’d painstakingly put Guy back together until he was whole, healthy, and happy again. “Ha. Some joke. Nearly...you must be joking. Why would she be... did she contact you?”



“Her lawyer,” Rafe said. His attention was focused on me however. “But I’m curious how you know.”

“Her mother is my patient.” I cleared my throat. “Has been for a couple of months, but we’ve never talked about Toni.”

“And you decided to hide this information from us?” Guy growled.

I cursed. “It just happened. I couldn’t turn Gloria away and we never, ever spoke about Toni. How do you know?” I asked Rafe, ignoring Guy’s string of profanities. “Unless...”

“Darrell Cameron’s omega met her on the flight over. Landed in Heathrow. He was shocked. Didn’t know that she had left us or that she was in the States.”

“Fuck, is he living under a rock? She is dating the SweetNothings.” Ciarán sagged against me, but his body was stiff. “What are you going to do?”

“Nothing,” Rafe snapped. “She is nothing to this pack.”

“Bullshit, Rafe.” Ciarán shook his head. I was surprised because he rarely confronted Rafe about anything. As the youngest and most junior member of the pack, it simply wasn’t his place to call out the pack leader. As an omega, he should never show any aggression to one of his alphas. At least, not like this. “She is like a...I don’t want to say cancer. She is...fine, she is a cold none of you can shake. And that you like having. The man-flu of exes. Every time you interviewed an omega, you’d find a reason to reject them. Some of those reasons were good. But others didn’t make any sense—trust me, you had a reputation at the omega centre. Rafe rejected one because her hair wasn’t, and I quote, the colour of a fox’s coat, and that if she had to have red hair that would be the only colour of red you’d accept. Or don’t you remember that?”

The silence was deafening.

“And I will bet my inheritance that Antonia Vane’s hair colour would match perfectly with the colour of a fox. And I don’t give a damn if you were drunk when you said it. Guy could pick out a single malt the colour of her eyes. Julian,

here, can certainly wax lyrical about exactly which vintage of champagne she tastes like...need I go on?"

"You've made your point," Rafe growled.

"Good. I vote we just let her be. All done. How does that sound? Or should we get her to ditch the SweetNothings and become our second omega," he challenged.

An image of the two of them twisted together, of them fucking, made my skin feel tight.

"No," I barked. Alarmed by how appealing I thought his outrageous suggestion was. "No. We have you. Ciarán, you are our omega. We can't have two omegas. We can't. And we love you. And if we didn't? Too much time has passed. We are all different people, and you are right; we've put her on a pedestal."

"So? Is there a law saying a pack can't have two omegas? So? Time has passed, but learn who she is now. And if it doesn't work, you go your own way at the end. But either get her in the nest or get her out of your head. One or the other because frankly, I'm sick of how you pussy foot around this issue." His breath came in hard as he squared up to me, a look of disdain in his eyes.

"This is madness. Whatever we want, it doesn't matter. She doesn't want us," Guy said. It broke my heart to hear him say it. Fuck. Her leaving had made him nearly lose his shit. He had lost his shit, and ended up in a therapist's office—though he probably should have been there before, just Toni leaving sent him over the edge. Fuck, I didn't want that to happen again.

"Give us a minute?" I asked Ciarán with my eyes on Rafe. Guy clenched his jaw but nodded, accepting he needed to take some time. Ciarán kissed me and whispered, "behave" before dragging Guy away. I closed the door, and turned to my pack leader. "Ciarán doesn't know what he's suggesting."

"I have to see her," he said, his posture stiff. He walked to the window and rested his forehead against the glass. I'd never

seen him look so small before, so defeated, and it killed me that she had done this to us. “I actually have to see her.”

“Are you sure about this, Rafe? Are you truly ready to see her? Because I was in a room with her for forty minutes, and it was hell, and I wasn’t even talking to her.”

“Hell?” he asked but gave nothing away except that he had caught me using that word.

“Because she is the same and different,” I told him. “How do I even begin? She is still vintage champagne and camomile. She still has that hair, but now, it is short and sophisticated. Everything about her is sophisticated. She’s not the girl we knew. And her face—” I waved my hands in the air. “She grew up.”

I watched his jaw clench and then release. “I know. I’m... I’ve kept tabs on her over the years. I couldn’t help myself.”

My whole body stiffened. “Tell me what happened? Ten years ago. What happened? Because Ciarán is right. We haven’t had closure. What happened?” I begged. Something none of us had dared do after she had stormed out of the very house we were standing in, tears streaming down her face, and screamed with all her power how much she hated us before slamming the door and never coming back.

“I had to let her.” Rafe’s lip pulled back into a snarl and his shoulders hunched into an almost defensive position, as if he thought one of us might attack him. “She asked for her freedom, and I couldn’t give it to her. Not like she wanted. She wanted to travel and explore and be so much more than an omega who stayed home in a nest. So when she gave her ultimatum, I held the door open and watched her leave.”

“She didn’t want to,” I told him.

“I don’t think she wanted to leave us. But she didn’t want us enough to stay.”

“I want to try again?” I asked him. “What did you say to her?”

“Please don’t ask me that. I hate myself enough for what I didn’t say to her that day.”

“Afraid?” I sneered. So unlike me, but I just didn’t understand him right now.

“I’m terrified,” he admitted. “I’d rather be without an omega than give her the chance to rip my heart out again.” He lounged against the window, trying to look casual but failing miserably. It wasn’t hard remembering how useless he’d been after she’d left. He’d dated a bit in the intervening years, but it had been a hollow kind of thing. After Ciarán had joined the pack, he’d become a monk, except during our omega’s heats. “And I don’t want to hurt Ciarán. I can’t stand the idea of him being hurt because we are still panting after another omega. He is ours. We love him. We can’t put him through this with Toni.”

“Of course, we love him! I know that you two don’t have a traditional sexual relationship, but you love him. I’m not saying you are not his alpha, but you don’t have an omega. You know what I mean.”

“Would he, though? It is immaterial. That isn’t why I have to see her.”

“Let’s have a pack meeting. We can talk about it,” I urged.

“Sure. Besides, I have some things that need to be said.”

We went downstairs just in time to catch Ciarán and Ivo heading out the door. Guy slouched against the counter, a steaming mug of tea cupped between his hands.

“Hire someone new and come home, so I can drown myself in your top-class whisky!” I shouted as Ciarán walked out the door, dragging the beta behind him.

“That man has the most perfect ass,” Guy huffed. “Every time he walks away, I forget why I was annoyed at him.”

“Jesus Christ.” Rafe chuckled. “Thank god they’re gone.” He pulled out his phone and ordered Indian food, including beers—non-alcoholic for Guy. “What? We can sit on the terrace and drink. That isn’t inside the house, and he’ll never know.”

“You are an idiot. He will know. Don’t forget the garlic naan. Ivo will want some.”

Somehow, we chatted about our days while we waited for our food, but it was painfully obvious what was going on. Or more accurately, what wasn't going on. We weren't talking about Toni. Or the fact that Indian was her favourite. Or that it was the only time she drank beer. Or that she was back.

Nope. For now, we were going to practice the art of denial.

"It's not just a river in Egypt," I muttered as I took just a swig from my cold beer.

Ultimately, we had our meeting that evening when Ivo and Ciarán returned. Rafe gathered us in the dining room, where we had our formal pack meetings. The room was dominated by a large dining table that had belonged to Ciarán's something-something great grandmother, and the only thing modern was the light fixture that Guy and I had been allowed to pick. It looked like fluffy clouds. We all hated it.

Fuck, this room made me uncomfortable. I shifted in my chair, as if getting comfortable would somehow make this shitty situation less shitty.

No such luck.

"The divorce is being finalised tomorrow," our pack leader said in his lawyer voice. "I kept her on the pack registry on the chance that something happened, and she needed help. I wanted her to have as many legal protections as possible."

"Which is why you never let us see the registry." Guy sounded tired.

"Correct."

"Still married?" Ciarán cleared his throat. "Does she know?"

"No."

"How? I mean, she sent you the divorce papers after she went to Berlin. How didn't she know?"

"Wait." Guy turned to Ciarán. "How do you know she went to Berlin? We've never mentioned that."

He open and closed his mouth a couple of times.

“Tell them,” Ivo urged. He sat at the other head of the table.

“Well...I’ve been in a group chat with her for five years. She doesn’t know who I am. And she is also the person we hired—”

“You’ve known her for—”

“You hired her?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were still married to her! And she’s here to help her mother!”

“This is a mess. A fucking mess.” Guy pushed away from the table and began pacing the length of the room. “What else do you know?”

“Stuff.” Ciarán tilted his chin up like a stubborn child. “But that is her business, not yours.”

Okay, perhaps not stubborn...Did I dare say protective? That was the emotion pulsing through my Claim. Then it clicked. He’d projected some powerful emotions the other day. They must have been sparked by Toni. Arousal, anxiety, and excitement. It didn’t answer any questions about how he felt but at least I hadn’t detected anger or hatred. I didn’t want him hating her for some reason. No, it was because if he hated her, would that mean he hated the alphas we had been when we were with her?

“Fuck.” I probably should have shouted the word with how much emotion was charging through my veins. Instead, it came out like a whisper. “I...I personally can’t think straight right now.” I waved at the emotion clogging the air—a combination of invisible anger and bitter alpha and omega scents. “I think—”

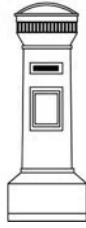
“We’ll fire her,” Ivo cut me off. “The divorce will go through. And then she’ll go. There isn’t a need to cause anyone more distress by letting her know Ciarán is your omega. And if it comes to it, from what I’ve seen of her, she isn’t going to act irrationally.”

I thought back to Toni. My decades with her and then the brief moments from this afternoon. She’d react alright; that

was part of her. Strong emotions erupting out of her. Looking around the table, I could see the others felt the same.

Regardless, having still-married-to-us Toni back in London had been on my bingo card for this year or this lifetime.

# RAFE



If the Goddess had been kind, I would have made it out of the door before seeing any of my pack. But fate and the Goddess were a bitch. I walked into the kitchen to see everyone eyeing me up like I was the grim reaper about to pick one or all of them to be dragged into hell. The lucky bastards weren't about to face our ex-omega in family court to negotiate a divorce.

I didn't know how much she would want. Ten years was a long time. We were successful. She was successful. There was no prenup. No omega price was paid. This might get ugly. But I was ready to settle, even if it meant dipping into my private funds and lying to the pack about the whole thing. Whatever it took, we were drawing a line under this mess today.

Ciarán and Ivo had already seen her, scented her. Fuck, so had Julian. I was going in blind, my whole body primed to be wrecked by the only omega who'd ever tied me up in knots.

Ciarán was the glue holding us together, but our tastes differed, so my Claim on him was incidental rather than because we fucked. Maybe that was why his expression was the most sympathetic. Guy scowled at his empty plate, and Julian was putting another pot of coffee on.

"I'll be home early. I cleared my schedule," I told them. My pack remained quiet, watchful. Julian opened his mouth, then closed it. I couldn't know what he was about to say, but I was sure it would have challenged my surface-level calm. He'd remind me that seeing Toni was going to drive me insane. Shit, my head fell back, and I looked at the ceiling. If



this went down the pisser, I'd have to retreat to my club to lick my wounds in peace. "Or I'll be late."

"We'll let staff close up," Ciarán said. "How about take out? Pizza."

"Pizza it is. I'll pick up Leo's on the way home," Julian said, sounding more like he was going to battle instead of picking up pizza.

I looked at Guy. His silence was stubborn, a mutinous tilt to his chin as he dared me to call him out for not contributing to the most awkward conversation this pack had ever had. Too many heartbeats later, I decided that if he didn't want to say anything, I'd not push him.

Family court was held in the same building we'd married Toni in. There were subtle changes, but ten years had yet to reinvent the wheel. The restrooms were in the same place, and I hovered in front of the mirror. Staring at my reflection, I tried to catalogue the physical differences. There weren't many. Three years ago I'd started going to the gym, but you couldn't tell when I wore a suit. Which meant Toni would see exactly the same arrogant alpha she'd fought with. I might as well have pushed her out the door. I'd misread her and the situation and paid for it.

I watched my face twist into a disgusted snarl. "Get this over and done with, and move on," I told the beast in the mirror. "You fucked up, and this is your chance to fix it."

Straightening, I made my way to the courtroom. When I slipped in, the case before ours was finishing up. Grabbing a chair at the back, I crossed my legs and watched as a custody battle unfolded between a beta family and the foster pack of their alpha son, who wasn't older than fifteen. The teenager sat slumped, head bowed, as the adults argued about visitation and child support.

Unlike omega minors, who could live under the protection of the Omega Centre, alphas out of beta families had to move in with a pack. The judge listened to the various arguments and, when it was her turn to speak, simply awarded fifty-fifty custody and equal support payments. The beta parents smirked

at the pack's lawyer, who hissed at the pack leader and the pack omega while he put his papers away. I glanced at the alpha. He hadn't moved. Poor kid.

I wondered if I should talk to the pack about signing up to help foster alphas. We weren't likely to have kids of our own. Ciarán, Ivo, and I had grown up in large packs, and Julian had been born into a beta family. They'd like the idea, I decided.

The sound from the hall swelling before being cut off again jerked me out of my thoughts.

She had entered the courtroom.

I twisted in my chair, wholly unprepared to see her but helpless to stop my eyes from travelling to the beautiful woman stalking down the centre aisle.

My first sight of Toni in the flesh took my breath away, and I wasn't even close enough to catch a whiff of her champagne and chamomile scent. She wore a deliciously formal black sheath dress and spiky black heels. We'd be eye to eye. Fuck. Some might think being a short alpha was shameful, but how many alphas got to stare down their omega while their noses brushed and their breaths mingled? She was the perfect height for me. She was perfect for me. And I was getting ready to divorce her.

And if that didn't trigger the deeply rooted guilt, what else would? We'd been on the cusp of happily ever after, then fucked it up royally.

The manner ingrained in my DNA forced me to stand when she paused by my chair.

"Rafe." Her voice had lost some of its London accent. I missed the way she made a mouthful of my name compared to my birth pack's cloying poshness.

I blinked, realising I was meant to say something. "Antonia."

Did I imagine the way she stood a little straighter when I called her by her full name? I liked calling her Toni. But Antonia dripped sex, reminding me I needed to get laid. Five years without sex—except during Ciarán's heats—had seemed

like an appropriate penance, but I was beginning to question my plan to self-flagellate over my...pink-haired, perfect-on-paper match. I doubt she thought we were perfect on paper, but we were.

“My lawyer, Gwen.”

I looked at the tall woman behind her and forced down my surprise. I'd known Gwen through the courts for years now. She gave her head an infinitesimal shake of her head. Well, then. “How'd'ya do.”

As we shook hands, I felt the judge's gaze on us like a physical weight. My shoulders dropped. This was good. He'd see we were cordial, and therefore, the divorce would be granted quickly. No haggling. Thank fuck for that.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

“I'm afraid that we won't be able to go forward with this case.” The judge tapped the papers with her finger. “You don't meet the threshold for divorce. The grace period is twelve months.”

“Impossible. I sent the documents within the application window,” Toni argued. Gwen whispered something in her ear, causing her to flush.

“Perhaps, but the other party did not file on time.”

Now, my cheeks were heating as I braced myself for her wrath.

“Would you care to explain that, Mr Harcourt?” Toni asked, her voice dripping venom.

“You needed legal protections.” I kept my eyes on the judge but was keenly aware of her regard. Her fury was a palpable thing and coiled around my cock, threatening a very unprofessional reaction. I would like nothing better than to take her over my lap and spank her idiocy out of her. Of course I wouldn't leave her unprotected. Of course we would ensure her protection.

Foolish omega.

She inclined her chin. Was she acknowledging that I'd done the right thing?

"How can we rectify this?" she asked.

"A sixty-day probation," the judge said. "You, Ms Vane, will stay at the Ivy Place pack house during that time. The only reprieve will be if your heat comes before those ninety days."

"Outrageous, your honour!" Gwen stood up too quickly and hissed with pain. That there was an omega who needed a pack to remind her of her limits and pamper her.

"Ms Crail, I'm afraid the only other solution would be for a lengthy court battle, which given Ms Vane's situation, does not seem advisable."

"Why a court battle?" Toni asked.

"You'd need to submit proof of incompatibility. Which, given that you have lived apart for ten years, will be impossible. This way, you are able to provide proof of incompatibility because you'll meet with a court-sanctioned psychologist to record the incompatibilities."

"Ten years not living together proves incompatibility!" she protested.

"You didn't follow up on the initial filing. You should have ensured that the divorce went through," the judge admonished, remaining remarkably calm about Toni's outbursts.

"And a heat?" Gwen pressed.

The judge's mouth twisted with consternation. "If you go into heat, you will either reject these alphas, or you will be Claimed."

It was barbaric. A disgusting throwback to a less civilised age.

Toni threw a startled glance my way. "I don't want to be Claimed."

"Then wait out the requisite ninety days. The Omega Clinic will provide you with suppressants and heat blockers if

you want them. I'll put in a follow-up court appearance in sixty days. My clerk will be in touch. Next!"

The three of us stood there stunned. The whole thing had taken less than twenty minutes and subjected us to a living nightmare. I indicated for Toni and Gwen to proceed me out of the courtroom. The hall was buzzing, and I was hyper-aware of how crowded it was.

"Antonia," I called out to her. "A word."

The two omegas shared a look, one of those wordless conversations that people who know each other, who trust each other, can have. Toni and I used to be like that. "Of course. I'll see you later, Gwen."

I indicated a small reception room and followed her in, locking the door behind us. These rooms were reserved for conflict resolution, and the bitter scent of resentment and anger clung to the thin blue carpet and stained the walls. I crossed to the window and threw it open with more force than was necessary.

"This is a mess." She tapped long, varnished nails on the table. When had she started getting manicures? "Can you... No. Never mind. No need to explain why you would think keeping me on the pack registry would be a good idea. What do the others know?"

"I told them last night. You saw Julian."

"Yes. He seems to be doing well." Her comment was absent as she was lost in thoughts. "And Guy? I doubt he'll be thrilled to have me."

"I think he is more concerned about our omega." I clenched my jaw, not liking that I had to lie by omission and not tell her Ciarán was our omega. That was his little mess to clean up.

She sucked in a breath, her jaw tightening imperceptibly. "Omega."

"Five years ago."

“Five years,” she repeated, refusing to meet my gaze. “Congratulations.”

“You moved on.”

“True.” She swallowed. “So I did.”

“What are they like?”

“They are nothing like you.” Some might have taken that as an insult, but she meant it in its most basic way. They were fun, spontaneous, and all the qualities we weren’t; she’d found an essentially nomadic pack. “Not that you give a fuck.”

I snatched her chin, pinching the stubbornness out of her. It was a mistake, but my alpha instincts rode me too hard to let me regret it. “No, omega. You will not flash fang at me.”

“We’ve evolved beyond that,” she snapped, her eyes mutinous. But she didn’t pull away, which clawed at my resolve. Hell, how could I let her go when she didn’t try to remove my hand? In some way, we had evolved beyond the beasts we’d been. The obvious exception being the hindbrain. When it came time to mating and Claiming, then our most basic biology raced to the forefront. The pons controlled arousal, knots, slick, and heats. There was no way to escape from our most basic natures. I felt my canines elongating, sharpening because our omega was so close. Unclaimed and more ours than any snivelling skinny-jean-wearing warbler.

“Perhaps,” I conceded. “But the law has made it clear. You are still ours, still mine.”

“You were always such a feral fuck.” She shook her head, but the sweet tang of her arousal spiked. She might hate me, but her omega called to my alpha, and vice versa.

“You’ve always known that. And you’ll have to put up with it for ninety days, three turns of the mother moon, or until the Goddess calls your heat.”

“You posh packs and your superstitions and rituals.” But her tone was soft, reflective. Those colonials had given up tradition. The original packs kept to the old ways, different ways but still the old ways. “Progress is a good thing,” she said defensively as if she could read my mind. She probably

could. Despite the difference in our backgrounds, we had always been able to read each other. “Your neanderthal—”

“Do you want me to behave as you accuse me? Assert my dominance on the little jewel?” I was helpless when I felt myself sway towards her, scenting her. “That is what we must contend with.”

“We are completely wrong for each other,” she whispered, her nostrils flaring as she took my scent into her lungs. “You know that.”

I disagreed, but then again, maybe she was right. Ten years was a long time. We had all changed, matured. But so far, she was exactly who I remembered. Proud, stubborn, and smiling—though she hadn’t smiled at me. “Perhaps.” I could only give her that much. “When can you move in?”

She shrugged. “I want to see my mother settled first. Spend some time with her.”

“You can spend as much time with her as you want, but you will sleep at Ivy Place.”

“Tomorrow?”

It was satisfactory. “Tomorrow.”

Instead of going home, I went to my office. When I pushed the door open, I found my half-brother sitting behind my desk.

“What do you want, Sebastian?”

“I heard Antonia Vane is back.” His hand was stuffed in his pocket, where he undoubtedly had a small fidget toy. My brother was never as composed as he would like the world to believe.

“Correct.”

“For good?”

“Of course not. I believe she is here to see her sick mother.”

“Cut the crap, Rafe. Xander saw you both at the courthouse. With Gwen.”

His and his pack's obsession with the omega was disturbing. I empathised.

“She'll not have you.”

He shrugged. His mother was a snob. Sarah'd never allow her precious alpha son to marry a cripple—the bitch's word, not mine. I liked Gwen from what I remembered of her. Liked her more knowing she was close with Toni and had her back.

“She'll come to her senses.”

“You didn't come here to discuss your obsession. What's on your mind?”

“To discuss father's estate.”

“I'm not interested in the pack.”

“It's yours.”

My lips twisted. I was the elder by four months, but my mother was a beta that his omega mother had hounded out of the pack because my father loved my mother and had Claimed her.

“I have a pack.”

“You could have more.”

“What brings this on?” My brother had spent our childhood tormenting me. First at school where he'd encouraged the other children to bully me for my size, and then during the holidays when he basked in his mother's grace.

He flushed. “If I don't have the pack, Gwen might look at us.”

“Pathetic.”

“You wouldn't understand. You have two omegas.”

“One.”

“You smell of her and arousal. If she isn't returning, then why is Toni back? Wasn't she here to sign up? Come home after getting the travel bug out of her system.”

“She's suing for divorce.”



“You married her!” He slumped into his chair. “You married, and she left?”

I looked over at my brother. He was so sheltered in many ways. Protected by a pack that established hundreds of years ago. He had never been denied anything until Gwen turned him down. On top of that, understanding emotions came hard for him. It had caused friction between us when we were younger. But Julian had helped me understand, and now, I just pitied my brother, who on reaching his maturity had learned he couldn't have everything he wanted.

Then again, neither could I. Did any of us get our hearts desire just as we had pictured it? I certainly thought the Goddess had blessed me before all others when Toni woke that fateful morning with her too-sexy smile, and a scent full of promise. Her heat had been near. We would finally Claim our omega. Then it exploded in my face when I'd lied to her.

Pissed at my brother and aware that going to my club was waving a flag, I grabbed a black cab and headed home. The pack house was quiet when I pushed the door open. Tugging my tie off and dropping it in a heap on the floor, I finished stripping down to my briefs and socks, the only articles of clothing that didn't carry her scent.

I stank of my own arousal, but that couldn't be helped. I needed to get everything cleaned before Julian came home and lost his mind at the smell. Besides, Ivo felt uncomfortable when we wandered around naked. One day, he might trust us enough to share that he was straight, but we wouldn't pressure him when he'd only just started feeling safe enough to join us for meals and other pack-ish activities.

I walked to the stairs and heard the sound of the BBC World Service letting me know someone was home. I knew Julian wouldn't be home, and Guy usually had meetings on Thursdays. Ivo was most likely prepping for tonight, so the only person potentially lurking would be Ciarán.

Unsurprisingly, he met me on the first floor, wearing a long silk dressing gown over a pair of boxers. He truly was the most handsome man I'd ever met, but right now, his face was

drawn. He looked as if he hadn't slept well and hadn't done much about getting dressed or showering, which under normal circumstances would have me concerned he was sick.

"You're back early."

I was glad it was just us. I needed to break the news to him before the others. "It's complicated," I said without preamble. "Because of things I did, we can't just get a divorce. I'm sorry, but she is staying here for sixty days or until her next heat."

"Why?" Jesus, he sounded so resigned.

"What's the matter? Do you have a headache?" Every alpha instinct roared at me to take care of my omega.

His lips twitched. "I never expected her to stay. You all say you are over her, but we all know it is a lie. She was your first omega."

It hit me like a tonne of bricks. I knew his feelings probably more than he realised. Hells, more than I had realised until just now. We were never number one. I grabbed his wrist, squeezing it to the point of pain. "You are our omega. You, Ciarán. Our omega for five years. Not her. Not for ten years. We are all different people. She—"

"You want to fuck her. I can smell her all over you. I can smell you."

"And I am not going to deny that," I told him. "But fucking and loving and living with someone is different." I laced our fingers together and pulled him into my arms. He had five inches on me, but when I wrapped my arms around his waist, it was an alpha comforting his omega. "Rub that scent of yours on me," I growled. "Drown her out."

"Rafe," he whined, but he followed my order and ran his hands over my skin, nuzzled my head, and down to my throat. He kissed my racing pulse. We were always like this. Never crossing the line because I needed too much control during sex. His heats were different. He'd beg for my knot then but outside of the nest we had to be satisfied with these brief, stolen moments of intimacy. "It isn't that."

“I know,” I whispered, cupping the back of his head and holding him close. “But think of it like this. She left. We didn’t go after her.”

It was bitter to say that, to be thrown back ten years to the emptiness we’d felt. Swiftly followed by a wave of anger so vicious that I choked on the growl that rose in my chest.

“Would you come after me?” he asked.

“Yes.” It came out fast and sure. I inhaled his burnt sugar and sage scent. My sweet and savoury omega.

He sniffed, and I felt his breathing even out. Ciarán liked to play tough, but he had been hurt too many times, disappointment by a thousand cuts. I decided that before we finished our conversation about Toni moving in, he and I needed to address his feelings and needs.

I hated pulling away first, but it was necessary. “Let me shower, then I’ll meet you in the kitchen for some lunch. There is something I want to talk to you about before we discuss everything else with the pack.”

I waited just long enough for him to nod, giving me some sign that he knew we had his back, before climbing the next flight of stairs. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom on this floor. Just us alphas. Which meant Toni would be at the top in one of the bedrooms. Probably the one with the ensuite. Her old room, which we used for storage. Fuck.

Stripping off my briefs and socks, I turned on the shower. As hot as I could stand it. Just this once, I told myself as I took my dick in hand and conjured her up. I was contending with two omega scents.

My omegas, my primal brain growled out.

Except, she wasn’t ours. Still, I fucked my hand and remember the way her eyes flashed when she looked at me. The jarring difference in her appearance. The sinful curves I knew so fucking well. But her scent was what made me hard. It was what made my cock ache to slide into her pretty pink cunt. It was the tidiest quim I’d ever seen. Perfect like a master

sculpture had designed it instead of DNA. The sweetest too. Not just her slick but that womanly taste.

Growing up, they made it seem like omegas just made slick, but that wasn't true. Only when they were in heat or getting ready to take a knot. Most of the time, they were just men or women with the same kind of arousal as any other person.

I wanted a taste; I admitted that. I had wanted to push her against the wall, drape her legs over my shoulders and feast on her until her legs trembled and I was drowning in her release. My hand moved faster, root to tip, strangling my cock as I let myself get caught in the fantasy. I eased up. If this was going to be the only time I masturbated to her memory while she stayed here, I wanted to make it last. I'd let her choose how I fucked her mouth. She loved to take her time and had a thing for using her teeth, reminding an alpha that we were at her mercy. The fantasy was both too real and not real enough.

"Antonia." Her name was pulled from me, a guilty pleasure I'd indulged in when I'd seen her in the courtroom. Those furious sparkling eyes and her pink hair flashed before me, and I came with a shout, shooting ropes of cum onto the shower's wall. "Dammit."

I got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around my hips, then found the bleach and cleaned the bathroom.

When I got to the kitchen, Ciarán sat at the island with a green smoothie and his tablet, flicking through something with a soft look on his face.

"Did you bleach yourself?" he asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Yeah, uh. I didn't want the others to smell her."

"Real smooth, alpha."

"It makes me uncomfortable," I admitted. I filled the kettle and flipped on the switch. Opening the cupboard, I saw a jar of chamomile. Ivo loved the stuff. And now, we had an omega moving in who smelled of it.

"Don't throw it away," Ciarán said in a rush. I glanced at him, a clear question on my face. "Ivo has met her. He likes

her scent, the chamomile tones.”

“Oh.” I nudged the jar aside and grabbed the tin of loose-leaf tea, filling the pot with three scoops of tea, one for the pot and two for the number of people drinking. It was my omega grandmother’s rule. This had been her house after she’d become the dowager omega to my father’s pack. I suspected she would have stayed with the pack if she hadn’t despised Sarah. My mother had moved in after she’d left the pack, and I’d taken it two years later when she’d died. A broken heart. You wouldn’t convince her family otherwise.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

“I wanted to make it explicitly clear that you are our omega. You are the one we have Claimed. We never claimed her in a heat. We had the papers signed and certified. But there are no Claiming bites.”

His shoulders dropped and a frown formed. “Why would you do that to her? Not Claim her? Did you not share her heats?”

The kettle whistled, and I let making tea distract me while I gathered my thoughts. Those heats we’d shared were hot as hell. Everything about them made my blood heat at the memory, and my cock grew hard once again. Ciarán’s scent bloomed. Was he responding to an alpha’s arousal, or was I stupid in wishing even for one moment that he was fantasising about us with her?

“We shared her heats,” I began. “But we were a completely new pack. We didn’t have much money. Just this house. I didn’t have control of my trust fund. We were all at university. Claiming would have meant that Toni and Julian would lose their scholarships because of combined pack assets. Guy’s student loan conditions would have changed as well. It would have been a huge financial burden on all of us. And we were alphas. We wanted to provide for our omega. Money stress can rip packs apart. We all agreed we would wait until she graduated and we had full-time work. We were waiting for her next heat when she left.”

“So, you wanted to Claim her.”

I didn't flinch when I met his steady gaze, but I wanted to. It was so damned awkward having this conversation with him. But better me than the others who were his lovers as well as his alphas. "Yes."

"Did she care about your money?" he asked next.

"No. She didn't grow up with much. You've, uh, and do not repeat this, but you've heard her accent. She isn't one of us. Dammit, she thought this place was a fucking palace before we'd done it up."

We shared a smile. We'd both grown up in ancestral seats. My birth pack had three houses scattered across the country and a huge house in Eaton Square. My stepmother had referred to this as a hovel.

Ciarán's pack was no different. He'd grown up in a castle complete with a mote and secret passages. His mother had grown up equally privileged in Nigeria. She'd fussed about him about moving into such a cramped nest and offered to buy us something bigger. I'm not sure who was more shocked when he declared that he liked a small nest because it was cosier. Because I could afford something bigger. Guy could as well. Ivo had more money than both of us combined—even if he wore the same ratty clothes as he had ten years ago.

"So, she didn't care, but you did."

"Yes."

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, which I soaked in. Ciarán was taking Toni's re-emergence in stride—no doubt helped by the fact he knew her. I was still wrapping my head around the fact that he'd known our omega for almost, if not as long as, he'd known us. And never once said a word. I suppressed the urge to cross-examine him. What did he think of her? Had she ever mentioned us? Did he think he could live with her until the next court date? Dammit all to hell, but I really hoped this went smoothly.

"This is bad."

"No. It won't be," I rushed to assure him.

"Not her moving in. This."

He spun his tablet towards me. An article from a tabloid had the damning headline: *Packed up! SweetNothings soon to Claim omega photographer Toni Vane!*

I skimmed the contents. Most of it was fluff, talking about the band with only a few passing comments on Toni until I got to the bottom and a blue box appeared asking: *Who is Toni Vane?*

“Thank fuck.” Somehow, they’d gotten all the important information wrong. It seemed like they hadn’t been able to find out much before she became famous. Smart girl had never put much online until she’d left. They stated she was originally from London but claimed she’d grown up in an established North London pack. “Well, they didn’t get much right.”

“Rafe, you idiot. They didn’t get the connection right, but you, we, are the established North London Pack. Don’t you understand? This is a cluster fuck. How are we going to hide the connection? People will be looking out for her here. In North London.”

“The media doesn’t know she is in London,” I pointed out.

“Yet.”

“Yet.”

# TONI



Rafe was more potent ten years on. Of course he was. How could his arrogance and alpha-ness have shrunk? I didn't know if I wanted to kill him or kiss him. Shit.

At least he seemed as surprised as I was that we couldn't dissolve the marriage in the course of a morning. It was barely noon, and I was still married. "Fuck my life," I screamed. "Worst possible outcome."

"A bit dramatic, it could be worse. Not sure how but things can always get worse," Gwen huffed from the other end of the sofa in her one-bed apartment in the omega building. It was almost worse than students' accommodation because she couldn't have lots of her own possessions. It was called a "courtesy flat" because while she and the other omegas paid well below market rates, they couldn't furnish or decorate. After all, it was meant to be temporary.

Gwen had stayed the longest at eight years. Nevertheless, she'd made it homey with almost twenty orchids and a never-ending collection of vanilla-scented candles in exquisite glass bowls. She sipped her glass of champagne. This morning, we bought the best bottle we could find. But we'd bought it to celebrate, not commiserate. "Also, not gonna lie, but I'm super grateful that he kept you on the registry."

I grunted, then had to concede. "I am, too. It also explains why I never had problems getting visas. Now that I think about it, there are probably a lot of ways that it helped."

"Don't be angry."



I turned my head and found my friend looking at me far too seriously. “Angry? I’m not angry. It was the least they could do under the circumstances. I’m just pissed off that nothing worked out like I’d wanted.” I finished my glass. Did I admit I wasn’t just talking about the divorce but also that if I’d had my way ten years ago, I would still be with them? Nope. Better to keep that myself. “I clearly didn’t do enough research on divorce.”

“Neither did I,” she groaned and poured more bubbles for both of us. “At least the judge has discretion in divorce proceedings. I was thrilled that she’d be overseeing this case. Normally, she gets people in and out without fuss.”

“Do you think she knew about the SweetNothings?”

“I don’t see how that would prejudice her against the divorce. If anything, I’d think, based on past rulings, that she would have made so that everyone could sign on the dotted line right then and there. You have no claiming bites, even though you shared five unmedicated heats with them. And they have an omega. It makes no sense.”

I nibbled on my lip as a thought, more of a suspicion, entered my head. “Divorce is rare. It only happens in extreme cases. Most packs would never admit to having problems. So, then she would only see the worst. Abuse. That kind of thing. So what if...what if she sees our no-contest, incompatibility situation as just a lovers’ tiff? Nothing a little forced proximity and counselling can’t fix. She also saw our score sheet.” I flinched at that. Ten years ago, we submitted it with all the other paperwork. Biologically, personality, and financially, we had been a near-perfect match. Genetically diverse, no clashing personalities, and at least two alphas who were financially stable enough to support the rest of the pack. On paper, there was nothing wrong with us. At least not at the beginning

“I need to find the wrong. What makes us not work. That way, in the therapy session, I can outline everything, and poof! The problems go away.”

My phone jangled. It was the SweetNothing's Christmas number one single. They'd insisted it be their ringtone on my phone because Christmas was my favourite holiday. It wasn't entirely true because I didn't have a favourite holiday, but they didn't need to know that.

"There's our stunning fiancé!" Liam grinned. He was English in a band of California bros, so his cockney accent stood out. I knew he liked to lay it on thick, especially with me. Immediately, I started smiling at his handsome, almost-boyish face. The pack was made up of three alphas and two betas. Liam was front and centre like always, shaggy mouse-brown hair tied back in a man bun. Flanking him were Frank, the drummer with his shaved head and sparkling smile, and Gabby, our golden girl guitarist. Dean, on the base and vocals, leaned in to blow me a kiss, and Jimmy, second guitar all-rounder, popped up behind the others.

"Hi, loves." I gave a little wave. "How's the tour?"

"Boring without our little cotton candy, Candy." Dean pouted. Candy was a nickname I'd grown to like, and an ache filled my chest. They made things so easy. Nothing like the overwhelming feelings my ex-pack inspired. I might not feel electricity with them, but I'd been burned once, and had no intention of living through that again. "Wish you could be here with us. I know you hate touring, but we miss you."

"I only hate always being in hotels," I objected. "I love travelling and being with you. And that is what matters."

"Facts. How's your mom?" Gabby asked. Trust her to remember I had family I rarely saw. Her parents had died years ago, and I sometimes wondered if she wanted mum to be part of the pack.

"She's okay. Not doing amazing, but her doctor is the best." It was another missed opportunity to tell them about the Ivy Place pack. But every time the chance popped up, I barely paused before moving forward. "I'm going to another appointment with her soon."

"I still think you should have brought her over here or gone private."

“The NHS is important to Mum,” I reminded them. “Plus, she doesn’t have insurance, and I can’t afford to pay for her out of pocket.”

The lack of money never bothered me. I made enough to live the life I wanted to live and still put some aside at the end of every month.

“We would pay,” came out of everyone’s mouths. We’d had this argument so many times, it was almost soothing.

“No. But thank you.”

“When we’ve claimed you.” Jimmy’s tone brooked no argument. “Then what’s ours is yours, and yours is ours. No way would we let any of our parents not have the best possible medical care.”

Affection flowed through me. “I love you.”

“Aw, shucks, sweetheart.” He actually blushed. Fuck, I wanted to jump through the screen and squeeze them all into a tight hug.

A sound dinged in the background. “Shit, Candy. We gotta bounce. Plane is landing.”

“Will you make it to the exhibition?” I rushed to ask. “I added it to the pack calendar—”

“Don’t know. We’ll be in Berlin.” Liam was looking at his phone when he said it. I hated when he did that because he was always on his phone. Always.

“Okay, don’t worry about it.” I forced my smile to be a bit brighter. This was the compromise I had to make. A life of travel and freedom balanced out with a pack whose schedule was chaotic. They’d always have to put their career ahead of mine. I wasn’t stupid. Gwen had already commented on the fact I treated them differently. I’d walked out on Rafe, Julian, and Guy for focusing on their work. On the flip side, I let the SweetNothings do it. But was it really a comparison when my new pack encouraged my plans and dreams? Still, it hurt that they couldn’t guarantee they’d make my very first solo show. “The tour was scheduled first.”

“We’ll make it, babe,” Dean assured me. If it had been one of the others, I’d have doubted them. Lots of promises meant fewer could be kept—rationally. But Dean never promised things he couldn’t follow through on. “Love you.”

“Love you, too. Break a leg.”

They chorused their goodbyes and promises of sending pictures and emails and memes. Filling me with a sense of belonging. They were some of my best friends long before they’d been lovers. Easy-going, outgoing, going-going. We’d bonded over travel, airport delays, and the excitement of new projects, creative blocks, and more. But when they hung up, and I’d had the chance to adjust the pillow I’d pulled into my lap, I realised that if they hadn’t called me, I wouldn’t have remembered to call them.

“So, they legit don’t know about the marriage or divorce?” Gwen asked.

“No.”

“You need to tell them. Urgently.”

“Why? You didn’t think I had to before.”

“This just came out.” She handed me her phone, a celebrity gossip column on me and the band. Most of it was puff-piece stuff, but the blue box with information about me was a little more troubling.

“Thank god I dyed my hair pink before coming here,” I noted. The pictures they had were from when I was in my box-black phase. The new pink hair had taken hours to perfect because it was a delicate ombre, a darker rose at the bottom to the pale pink at the roots. My naturally red hair would be noticeable as it grew out, but if I was desperate, I could always find something at the drugstore until I made it back to Stella’s in New York.

“You do look different,” she agreed before pouring out two more glasses of pink bubbles. “Still, be careful. Use whatever tricks you have to stay under the radar until you are officially free. Now what?”

“I guess I’ll tell Mum and pack my bags again.”

“Or you could lie and stay with your mum? I’m pretty sure the Ivy Place pack won’t mind.”

We rolled our eyes. Lying to the court was a non-starter. I hated lying and liars and any kind of deception, with the glaring exception of lying to myself. Like most people, I was a pro at that. “I’ll also need to register at the omega centre. Get suppressants, et cetera. Urgh. Nothing like packing for a week and then having to extend your stay for months.”

“Aw. I thought you’d be happy to explore London with me!”

“Gweny, that is about the only thing I’m excited about. Be prepared to be over girl-nighted.”

Three hours later, tipsy, and resigned to my awful fate, I grabbed a taxi to the North London omega centre, which was housed in an unfortunate modernist failure. The concrete was dirty and the windows were deeply inset, giving the impression of an old man squinting.

I rang the bell and waited for the receptionist to buzz me up. The interior was in sharp contrast to the exterior. Sleek and minimalist, it looked more like a spa than a government office. There was even a humidifier that puffed out eucalyptus and mint scent.

“Ms Vane?” The crisp accent pulled my attention away from a medical-looking poster explaining heat cycles. The head of the centre was the same omega as when I’d first come here ten years ago. No, it was longer than that. Fifteen years ago. Mrs Clare had the rigid posture of an omega matriarch, however, the harsh lines of her figure had softened with age. Even her face, unnaturally wrinkle-free, was plumper, though no less severe than when I first came here. While I’d been looking at her, she’d been looking at me. No doubt horrified at my hair clashing with the clothes I’d worn to court. “This way, please.”

I followed her down a mutely lit hall and through glass doors into an office that must face the street if I had my bearings correct. But you wouldn’t be able to tell because it was so quiet.

“You’ve renovated,” I said after sinking into one of the plush chairs in front of her glass and chrome desk. “Interesting use of government funds.”

A flicker of a smile surprised me. “They offered to move us to a more modern, larger facility. I said I’d take a fraction of that budget and redo the interior here.”

“How very omega of you.” I wasn’t surprised that she would refuse to move. We liked, or rather most omegas liked, to have one place. Most omegas liked stability. Prizing a single nest over constantly moving, at least, I did.

“May I ask why you are here?”

“To register. For the next two months. I also need to collect suppressants and heat blockers.”

“You’ll need to see a doctor for the latter, but I can give you some samples until you have time to make an appointment.”

“You don’t have someone here who can do it for me?”

“No. The policy changed. We have omega-only doctors, but they are based at a special clinic, I’ll give you the address.”

We kept looking at each other. I wondered if she remembered my first visit and how I sobbed while a stranger, a male OB/GYN, had done a medical under her watchful eyes. I’d never been touched there, and the blue medical gloves probing me had been too much. She’d been there because, while the doctor had been a beta, the potential for abuse was too high and there weren’t many omega doctors at the time.

Thinking back, I imagined her physically attacking the doctor if he had done anything she deemed inappropriate.

“I’m glad to hear that. Is there anything else you need from me?” I asked.

“Your current address?”

I bit my tongue. I knew this question would come up. Now was the chance to lie and give my mother’s address. Hell, even an omega flat. I could give Gwen’s address. But the pack

house rushed to the fore and I rattled off my last known address in London. “Fourteen Ivy Place, NW4 6–”

“So the same as before.” She caught me before I finished the postcode. Her lips disappeared. She was clearly thinking of the SweetNothings. And judging me. “I have followed your progress,” she began, confirming my suspicion. “You can count on the discretion of the omega centre.”

“I... Thank you,” I finished.

“You have made something of yourself, Ms Vane. It is both impressive and aggravating. I have far more omegas asking about programs and work placements. They wait longer before joining packs in a bid for independence.”

“That is a good thing,” I snapped. “Anything before twenty is ridiculous.”

“Believe it or not, but I agree. Society, however, hasn’t moved fast enough to provide adequate opportunities.”

“Oh.”

“Perhaps while you are here, you might consider giving a talk?”

“I–”

“Just consider it. My number hasn’t changed.”

Her number hadn’t changed. My number hadn’t changed. Had the alphas changed their numbers? When I reached the street, the rain had begun to fall. That soft rain you only could find here.

More than Paddington, North London felt like a homecoming mixed with the twilight zone. When I’d last been here, there had been a newsagent’s across the street. Now, it was a cafe chain where you paid a premium for so-so coffee. Further down, another chain, this time a bookshop, had taken the place of a famous clothing boutique. The nineteen-twenties facade had featured in an Oscar-winning film in the seventies, but the business had fallen on hard times.

I’d only heard about the campaign to save it from a stylist for the band. She’d lamented the fact that mom-and-pop shops

were closing. I doubted she had ever been into a mom-and-pop clothing store before, but it didn't matter. Standing there, taking in the changes, I considered my options. Go home and break the bad news to Mum. Call, no, try to call Rafe about when I was showing up. Or just potter around for a while. Mum was the best option.

She rolled her eyes when she learnt about the verdict, as she was calling it.

"I don't want to leave you," I told her. "It isn't fair."

"Nothing about that pack was ever fair to you, darling. Why couldn't you and Julian just be together? You didn't need the other two. Then you could have had a normal home life. None of the responsibilities of being a pack omega."

In many ways, she was right. It would have been simpler. We both came from beta families and had known each other since we were young. Not exactly childhood sweethearts since I didn't really look at boys until I presented because boys were immature, rowdy, and impulsive. Everything I wasn't until I moved out and saw more of the world. Then, I couldn't get enough. Now, I was paying the price.

No. That was wrong. I wouldn't be living my fairytale life if Julian and I had claimed each other so young.

"Toni?" Mum's papery hand rested on my arm. There were bruises around the swollen knuckles. I didn't know if I hadn't noticed them or if they were new. She was sick. "Don't look at me like that, daughter of mine. Or feel guilty because I didn't tell you. That was my choice."

"Why didn't you tell me?" My voice was small.

She sat back, watching me. "Do you remember when your gran died? She told me that she wished we hadn't known because she hated watching us mourn her while she wasted away. It stuck in my head. We love each other so much, Toni. I knew you would give everything up if I told you. You were moving on. Finding love."

"I thought you were angry, and that was why you didn't tell me."



“Never angry.” She held out her arms, and I fell into her frail embrace, which still gave me more strength than I probably gave her. “Now, tell me. What are you going to do about these alphas? They have an omega and a beta?”

“How...” I blinked, then remembered that her doctor was my ex. “Julian.”

“He’s a good boy.”

We both chuckled. There was nothing boyish about Julian since he hit his first growth spurt at thirteen. “I think it will be okay. I’m going to find a way to stay out of the house most of the time. Spend days with you. Nights, I’ll try and maybe reconnect with friends? I can—”

“Don’t overdo it,” my mother warned. “But the more time I get to spend with you, the better. Anything else?”

“I have to go to the clinic for a medical before I can get suppressants and blockers.”

“Perfect! I have a doctor’s appointment, not with Julian, that is near the clinic. We can both go. And let’s bring Gwen. I want to meet her.”

“Medical date with my friend and my mum? I’m not pregnant.”

“Ooh, grandchildren! Don’t dangle that before me.”

I rolled my eyes. Mum had never been interested in having more children after me, but the way she said, “grandchildren” warned me that she was expecting a pack full of little screaming brats.

My appointment with the omega doctor was predictably simple. A gynaecological exam, a detailed history of my heats, and overly intrusive questioning about the little scar on my inner thigh. But she hadn’t had any reservations about giving me a repeat prescription for suppressants, heat blockers, and oral birth control.

While we waited for the hospital pharmacy to fill the scripts, Gwen and Mum were bonding over, of all things, curling—specifically, debating the fashion choices of the

Swiss and Scottish teams. Who knew that was something to debate?

“Miss Vane?” I went up to the counter, confirmed my identity, and pulled out my card to pay. “Sorry, miss, uh, ma’am. You don’t have to pay,” the pharmacist apologised.

“Why are you looking like that?” Gwen asked. “Heat suppressants, blockers, and birth control are all free on the NHS.”

“Oh. Right.” I blinked at the white, pink, and purple boxes. This was the UK. Heat suppressants were free on the NHS. Somehow, I’d forgotten that.

Gwen blinked at me like I’d just declared the sky was green. “Yes, Toni. The NHS. The reason no omega should want to live anywhere else in the world.”

“Oh, come on.” Mum snorted. “They aren’t perfect.”

“Nothing is perfect, Gloria. But at least single omegas don’t go bankrupt trying to get basic health care, so they can work.”

Work. Right because without heat suppressants, omegas were not permitted to have full-time employment. Gig work and work from home were fine, but heaven forbid that an omega’s natural cycle disrupt an office of betas and alphas.

“Work!” I smacked my forehead. “Shit. I forgot. I promised to call Ciarán.”

“Let’s grab some lunch, and you can make your call.”

We went to a small French place that had the aesthetic and waitstaff of a real Parisian bistro. After we’d been shown our table, Mum and Gwen went to the bathroom to give me some privacy while I called Ciarán.

“Hey, you.” I smiled when he picked up and asked for a video chat. His face was pinched and his eyes darted to something out of shot. “So, do you need me to come in? I won’t lie, I could do with a real distraction—”

“Toni, I need to stop you right there.” He sounded upset. I looked around, hoping Mum and Gwen were still occupied.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to come over?”

“No. I know about your divorce. Shit, I don’t know how to say this.” He looked out of shot again, and his eyes pleaded with someone. “This isn’t how I wanted you to learn about my pack, but Rafe is my alpha.”

The glass of water I’d picked up fell from my lifeless finger, shattering on the marble floor. Naturally, people looked over, and I immediately dropped down to pick up the shards.

It was impossible. He had...he hadn’t lied. He hadn’t misrepresented anything. He couldn’t have known that I knew his alphas. And then it struck me. Ivo. The beta had seemed familiar from the start, but I’d put it down to the fact I wanted him to seem familiar. I wanted him, period. But now, I realised the connection. He looked like Rafe.

They must be cousins, I reasoned.

Different last names. He’d known who I was. Instinctively, I knew Ciarán hadn’t known about the divorce when we’d met. He might have known I was an ex but not that I was still legally married to them.

“Waiter, can we clean this up?” The woman sitting at the next table snapped her fingers. “Hey, lady, get up. Someone can do that.”

“It’s fine,” I mumbled. My heart was going a million miles a minute. I couldn’t shake the image of Ciarán with his arm through Julian’s while he smiled at Guy. They would make an amazing throuple, especially with Rafe calling the shots during Ciarán’s heat. Why did my mind have to go to a pack’s most intimate moment when I had just learnt that my new boss-friend was my ex-pack’s omega, and I would be living with all of them for the next sixty days?

“Let me.”

I looked up to find the waiter squatting next to me with a handful of paper napkins in one hand while the other propped him up.

“Toni? Shit, Bubbles? Are you there. I heard something break.” The words were muffled because I’d dropped my

phone when I'd started to clean up.

Picking it up, I took a calming breath, and turned it over. The screen was cracked beyond repair. What a cliché metaphor for my composure.

"I'm here." Our eyes met in the screen, and I saw remorse. He knew. I didn't know how or when he had found out, but he knew. "I dropped a glass. You're their omega?" I asked with a steadier voice.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't know how—"

I squeezed the phone tighter. "It's okay. It was a long time ago."

It wasn't okay. We both knew that. I'd broken them, like they'd broken me. He'd put them back together. And Rafe, the cause of this whole disaster because he just had to keep me on the pack registry, was now forcing us to live cheek by jowl for three months.

"I didn't notice when we first met. I couldn't smell them."

"I use scent-nude when I work. People like the idea of being served by an omega without a pack."

"Fuck. That makes sense."

"Yeah. Business decision."

"We'll figure this out," he insisted. "If you want, I'll get Ivo to take one of the spare bedrooms, and you can have his room on the lower ground floor. Your own bathroom and entrance. I will make them understand. I don't want you to be put in an uncomfortable position."

"Me in a comfortable position? Can we talk later?" I asked Ciarán, needing time to process what he had said. "I'll...I'm moving in tomorrow. We can message about timing."

"Please...just know that I'm really sorry you had to find out this way."

"I'm sorry, too. And if you talk to Rafe, tell him..." I closed my eyes. Nope. I couldn't use Ciarán as a go-between. Equally, the idea of calling Rafe myself made my stomach

roll. “Tell him that Gwen will be in touch with the paperwork.”

I hung up, only to realise I had a captive audience. The neighbouring table flashed an awkward smile and turned back to her bouillabaisse. Mum and Gwen had slipped into the seats opposite, and the waiter, catching my eye, gave a single nod before moving swiftly away.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I told them. And suddenly, it struck me that I hadn’t even considered telling the SweetNothings. They weren’t even on my radar of people I could talk to about this really kind of major upheaval in my life. In fact, they were the last people I wanted to talk to.

“Food first.”

A second later, the waiter returned. “On the house,” he said, putting a bottle of red on the table.

Gwen poured three large glasses, and smirked at me. “Medicinal.”

# GUY



My office was smaller than most people in my position, but I liked the view and had refused to move until there was an office with a similar view. Otherwise, it looked like every banker's office with no-personality furniture, an aesthetic reminding the occupier that they were merely an easily replaceable cog in the machine. If I'd been in an office that matched my position in the hedge fund I'd co-founded, a decorator would have made sure everyone knew exactly who owned it. The answer was a wealthy beyond my wildest imagination banker.

Since I'd branched out with my other co-founder, we'd grown our clientele to include some of the wealthiest packs in the country who wanted to establish or expand the portfolios of the pack's omegas.

Not even an IPO for an American start-up offering omega-focused underwear to help with "slick spills" and a blip in the price of copper could distract me from the knowledge that Rafe was facing off with Toni today.

I crossed off the last task I'd set myself for today. The clock told me it was five past seven, but I couldn't seem to unglue my ass off my chair. I should go home. But home meant facing the pack and hearing Rafe talk about Toni. I'd heard nothing all day...by choice. I'd turned off my personal phone the minute I'd arrived in the office. The pack would expect this and would call my direct line or use the messenger app on my tablet to get in touch if they needed to.

Still married. Had she known when I'd called her? Those infrequent conversations in the first two years after she'd left haunted my therapy sessions. I was still grieving her loss, except we hadn't lost her. Not legally—though, that was a recent revelation. I snapped a pencil in half and pressed my thumb into the ragged edge, letting the soft bite of pain recentre me. Registering what I was doing and why, I threw the two ends away.

My next therapy session was in five days, but I needed to talk to someone sooner. Blasting off an email to my psychiatrist and then another to my sponsor, I pulled out a beat-up cricket ball and began tossing it up at the ceiling, alternating which hand I caught it with. I hadn't spoken to Jack in two years—hell, I was a sponsor these days—but I needed to hear their voice. Their name popped on my tablet, and I picked up the call.

“Heya, pal,” Jack said in their strange humming accent.

“Fuck, Jack.” I leaned back in my chair. “Just tell me something simple that is good.”

“The taste of Irn Bru is fantastic.”

“Bullshit,” I huffed. “Did you get the last shipment?”

“Aye, ye generous bastard.” There was a pause before they spoke again. “What's on yer mind?”

“I'm being haunted by the ghost. She's like a phantom limb. Not an itch, a heartache...”

“I once drove to Land's End from Glasgow without stopping. Drove right up to the edge of the land. Walked until it was only one more step into the sea. Fuck, I was so sleep-deprived. But after sleeping the night in my car, I realised running wouldn't change anything. Same devils would be there, even if I wasn't in the same country. Even if I was one step from the big drink, I was still a drunk.”

I closed my eyes and tried to block out the vortex of... anger. I wasn't depressed about her being back. No. I wanted to find her, shake her, and then demand she explain how she

could still fuck me up so much after ten years. “It’s depressing.”

“That’s why we take it one day at a time.”

“What are you doing? Reading from a list of sentimental quotes?”

“Aye. And remembering that it is one day at a time. You’ve always had enough anger to propel you through the shittiest of times.”

“I am tired of being angry.”

“If you weren’t angry at her, what would you feel?”

I grimaced. Jack was a children’s psychologist and couldn’t help professional hangups sneaking in. “I’m so fucking proud of her,” I breathed. “She makes me proud.”

“One day, I wanna know who this magical woman is.”

“She’s just a woman like any other. I was there at the start of her journey. I’m jealous that I haven’t been part of her journey but so fucking proud of what she’s made of her life.”

“Good on ya’ for knowing how you feel.” Their use of Australian slang through me before I remembered.

“Shit. I forgot. You’re in Sydney now. What time is it?”

“Don’t know or care. I’ll always have time for you when you need me, big man.”

“Yeah? Thanks, mate.”

“Nae bother. Get some rest, you scummy capitalist bastard.”

“You too, you stinking commie hippy.”

They ended the call, and I tossed my tablet onto my desk, which brought my attention to the picture of our pack standing outside of the house, smiling with Ciarán at the centre of everything.

Now, I didn’t have enough excuses to stay in the office. I had to go home and face the music. Divorce. By now, we were divorced.



“Mr Greene?” My assistant knocked on the open door. “Do you want me to call a car?”

“You’re here late, Mags.”

“Admin.”

“Not because I’ve been a bear all day?”

She cracked a smile. “I’ve been running interference with the babies. This lot are more hopeless than any. Do they learn anything about real life at university these days?”

“Most of them won’t make it.”

“Thank goodness.”

We shared a smile, and I logged off before shutting down the four screens. “I’ll take a car.”

“Already ordered.” She smiled.

I could almost feel her need to ask me what the hell was up. It was the alpha in her. But I brushed past her before she could pry. I debated taking the stairs. Either way, I’d be stuck with my thoughts, and with the stairs, I’d be a prisoner to them longer than the metal box dropping twenty stories. I jogged down them.

The car waited for me outside of the office. I scrubbed my eyes when I saw it. It looked like a hearse, not a luxury car used by a high-flying banker.

I slouched in the back seat, tugging my tie loose and counting to one hundred before turning on my personal phone. Ciarán would complain about my posture. If he wanted me to sit properly, he could suck my cock first, the posh ass.

Fifteen missed calls from the pack number. And fifty unread messages. I fired off a note, letting them know I was on my way home, knowing it would ring a second later.

“It’s a clusterfuck,” Rafe growled into my ear. “The divorce was denied. She’s moving in for sixty days.”

I didn’t even think about it; I just hung up. My stomach rolled, and I gripped my hair hard enough to hurt. Shit, shit, shit, shit.

This was a nightmare, not a clusterfuck. Toni reappearing as if nothing had changed was my personal nightmare. A nightmare I'd dissected with my therapist on a regular enough basis that I should be emotionally prepared for it to become reality. Nothing quite like the sucker punch of the first omega you loved forcing her way into your pack with the omega you love.

What must Ciarán be going through?

I turned my phone on again and called his private line. He picked up on the first ring. "Sunshine."

"Guy? How are you feeling?"

"What about you? She's coming into your nest."

"Ha! No. She'll have the storage room at the top of the house. I'm not giving up my nest to anyone." There was a mildly hysterical sound that made me grip the phone tighter.

I counted to twenty. "What do I say to make you feel better?" I asked at last.

"Say that you love me?"

"That should go without saying."

"I still like to hear you say it."

"I love you." I don't say it enough, I realised. "I love you so much." I looked at my watch. "I'll be home in about twenty minutes if the traffic isn't shit." Then, like a coward, I hung up and put my phone on silent again.

A short time later, the car pulled to an abrupt stop, pitching me forward and out of my thoughts. I dragged myself out and looked at the house I'd called home for the last twelve years. Our door was a bright, shiny sky-blue colour that glowed almost purplish in the dark. I patted down my pockets for my keys, the same set we'd gotten when we first moved in. Hells, the same keys from when the door was first installed how ever many years ago that was—centuries more like.

Inside was a different story. When Ciarán moved in, we had it redecorated. Not just for him but because everything was so tired. It'd been the same furniture that Rafe's mother

had and a couple of pieces that pre-dated people cleaning their teeth. Originally, we had planned to redo it when we Claimed Toni, but that never happened, so we just waited, in case an omega wanted us. It was nice. Better than nice because it was home. I gathered the uncanny power of “home” to settle my nerves around me like armour. This development could destroy my pack.

Everyone was seated in the sitting room, staged like some magazine spread. Rafe stood at the fireplace, an empty vape pen in one hand, the other stuffed in his pocket. Ciarán had seated himself next to Julian, playing with his hands—the pair of them iconically handsome. Ivo was in the armchair, sprawled and too large for a beta. I could see precisely where Toni would sit. The low dark green velvet ottoman in front of the fire. She’d lean back, resting on her hands, her body angled towards the others.

I licked my lips and had my excuses for who-the-hell-knew what on the tip of my tongue but instead, I found a scent choking me. The hauntingly familiar combination of Toni and Rafe. Aroused Toni and Rafe.

My hands fisted at my sides. “You bastard. You. Fucking. Bastard,” I growled as I tamped down on the way my cock twitched in my slacks. “You fucked her, didn’t you?”

The twin spots of colour on Rafe’s cheeks confirmed my suspicion. I clenched my jaw and held my breath because if I caught the smallest whiff of sex, I was going to pummel him, pack leader or not.

“He didn’t.” Ciarán was in my face, hands on my chest, pushing me back. “He did not fuck her.”

“Explain that scent, then.” I pointed blindly at the crumpled clothes on the floor.

“Dammit.” Rafe gripped the vape pen so hard it snapped in two. “I forgot to send those things to the dry cleaner. I didn’t, and I won’t. I wouldn’t fuck her.”

“They shared space, not fluids.” Ciarán grabbed my face in both of his warm hands and forced me to look at him. He was

maybe an inch or two shorter than me and was incredibly strong. He made it to the gym more than his alphas. “Rafe and I talked. He got aroused when he was near her, and clearly, she did as well. That doesn’t mean they fucked.”

Except, I couldn’t convince my alpha of that. Anger was tinged by jealousy. Julian and, now, Rafe had been within touching distance. Ciarán and Ivo had touched her. Even the most innocent touch sparked my territorial instinct to mark my omega again. Shit. I needed to talk to her. There was so much we needed to discuss that the others couldn’t know about.

I swallowed the bitterness. The two people, the two alphas who had pushed her away were the ones...No, I wouldn’t dwell on their perfidy or my own, unknowable, contact with Toni.

A desperate silence clogged the air, and I jerked away as if to escape this purgatory I’d unwittingly stepped into. My hands went to my hair again, and I caught Ciarán’s concerned look. A flash of shame shot through me. I needed them, my pack. But they needed me, as well. We had to face these next ninety days together. I wasn’t the only one reeling from Toni’s reappearance. “I’m going to shower,” I said, my voice hoarse as if I’d been screaming. “Then, uh, we should talk.”

Spinning on my heel, I jogged up the stairs. Ciarán was at my back, following at a slower pace. He wouldn’t say it out loud but worry pulsed in our bond. And an older, softer alertness reached out with a soothing brush against my senses. I pushed aside the ghost-like touch.

“It was bad luck,” he said. “Julian seeing her, I mean. Rafe had bad luck, as well.”

“Not now.”

Ciarán didn’t stop. “Ivo and I have met her.”

I nodded. I knew about that. He hadn’t said anything, but her scent was all over him the other night and lingered at Ivo’s door. Then their confession confirmed everything.

I went to the dresser and pulled open my sock drawer, retrieved the key at the back, and unlocked the small safe I

kept under the bedside table. Ciarán hissed. He had almost all my secrets but this one. I pulled out the photograph I was looking for and handed it to him. His hand trembled when he looked at the image of a woman's inner thigh and a bloody bite, her fingers had smeared the blood rested just above it. It shouldn't be erotic, but there wasn't any porn in the world that could compare.

"Is that... You Claimed her?" my Claimed omega asked.

"No." I took the photograph back from him. "I bit her during one of her heats. It would have been a Claim, but it didn't stick. I went on a bender when I saw it had healed. She was never going to be ours. She knew that; I knew it. Rafe and Julian didn't need to have their hearts broken. That is why she left. Not some fight with Rafe. She knew. Her face." I closed my eyes and remembered the look on her face when she had shown me that the mark hadn't taken. Flawless skin two days after I'd sunk my teeth into her. "She looked right through me when she left."

"You bought her photographs," he said, like it meant something. It was a non sequitur, but I welcomed it.

"She needed money. We fucked up, Ciarán."

"I don't think you did." He searched my face, then a sad smile tugged at his full lips. "It makes sense. When I met her, I was drawn to her. That was you and Julian. I saw my rival, and instead of wanting to claw her eyes out, I wanted to touch her. Scent mark her."

"She isn't like other omegas."

He barked a laugh. "No, love. She is like other omegas. I mean the travel thing is different for an omega. What makes her unique is that she is special to you. Another pack fabulously would have picked her up if she was rare. She isn't some trinket to show off."

I growled, offended on my ex's behalf.

"Simmer down. That is a good thing."

"Those assholes...She messed us up. And this is going to hurt you the most. But you have my loyalty," I pleaded with

him to believe. “You have to believe me. I’m yours. Not hers.”

He pressed his lips to mine. “Sure thing, Romeo.”

“Romeo ended up with Juliet, not Rosiland.”

“Romeo and Juliet also ended up dead.”

“Romance sucks.”

“Yeah. Get showered, changed, and come down. I think you are too tired to have this conversation on an empty stomach, and Ivo is poaching sole with new potatoes.”

“No pizza then?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Julian forgot to pick it up. We can still order if you can wait?”

“Pizza.”

He pecked my cheek. Rocking back on his heels his eyes traced over my face. Then a wicked gleam came into his eyes. He grabbed my face, holding me still while he kissed the ever living shit out of me. Devouring, tasting, forcing me to admit him, and accept the fire building in him. Each press of his lips, each pass of his tongue along mine burnt to a crisp all my anxieties and fears.

“That’s better,” he said a little breathless. “Fuck, you are beautiful...Go and shower before I drop my knees and beg you to fuck my mouth.”

“That was very naughty omega,” I growled, reaching around to grab his ass and drag him into me, pressing our hard cocks together.

“Yeah.” He pulled away and cupped my erection through the thin material of my trousers, squeezing where my knot began to throb. “Real, real naughty.”

I fisted my hands and swallowed down the moan of need. “Ciarán,” I ground out. “Do you want to be on my knot for the rest of the night.”

“I’d love it, especially if Toni was to see how well I take your knot.”

I gaped as he sprinted down the stairs. The base, primal, animal part of me wanted to chase after him. Pin him and fuck him until he admitted that fantasies like that were dangerous.

Fuck.

Double fuck, because double omegas.

A growl of pure sexual frustration tore through me and I spun away and stalked into my room, ripping my clothes off and dropping them in a heap on the floor.

Ten minutes under the waterfall shower head was all it took to settle my mind. Or should have been. Instead, the image Ciarán had painted made my cock ache. And the taste of Rafe and Toni's arousal teased my senses. They'd always been so beautiful together. The unbidden image of him fisting her hair while he fucked her mouth hit me like a slap. I bit my lip until it bled, hoping the pain would banish the way my cock thickened even more at the memory. My body didn't get the message, though. Rafe and Toni. How many times had Julian and I gotten each other off while we watched him rut into her while she clawed at her nest, begging for permission to come? Too many.

I balled my fists and forced my fantasy in a different direction, substituting Ciarán for Toni, instead he merged into the memory. Taking to his knees beside Toni, his mouth moved along Rafe's cock until jealousy bloomed and it was my cock lavished with wet, sucking kisses. His lips travelled the length of my cock to meet at the weeping head before they exchanged a deep, heated kiss, my erection completely forgotten.

"Omegas," I groaned aloud. Gazing up at me, they looked fucking decadent. Their lips puffy from their kiss and the way they'd been sucking on my dick. "Stop," I choked out. I was an alpha, I was better than my base needs.

But they saw through me.

Grinning at each other, the cheeky creatures went on. Ciarán swallowing my cock until the leaking head slipped into his throat. Toni cupped my balls, while her fingers massaged

my taint. “Do you like that, alpha?” Toni’s voice was thick with arousal. “Do you like it when your omegas service you? When they are little sluts for your cock and knot?”

“Fuck.” I looked down at my cock. It was heavy, thick, the veins throbbing along the length, pre-cum pearling at the tip.

“Hmm,” Fantasy Toni hummed. She gave me a single wicked grin before sliding behind me. The memory from when we’d done this and she sucked my balls while playing with my hole shot through me as vividly as if she was there. I didn’t dare touch my cock, but I reached behind and pulled one ass cheek away, as if to give her access. Even that created a pull on the tight ring of muscle. “Fuck.”

I reached out with my other hand, smacking it against the slick—no, wrong word—the wet tiles. I tried to prop myself up while the fantasy played out, Ciarán pleasuring me from the front while Toni sucked on my balls and used her slim fingers to probe my ass.

Finally, the completely physically impossible feeling of Ciarán and Toni deep throating me at the same time made my balls draw up, and I shouted my release. I hadn’t touched myself. Hadn’t needed to when they starred in my fantasy. I kept coming as I watched in horror as my knot began to swell at the base of my cock.

I stood there, panting and exhausted by the force of my orgasm, trying to collect my thoughts. I couldn’t tell the others. They’d understand for all the wrong reasons because my biggest fear of this illicit, so impossibly good fantasy was that we would all start imagining them together. That Toni would painlessly insert herself.

And how the hell was I going to explain this to Ciarán? Especially since he probably knew something had happened through the bond. “Guess what, darling. I wanked off to the image of you and my ex giving me the best blow job anyone has ever had?”

Didn’t matter that he had planted the seed of the fantasy in my hind brain.



Didn't matter that she was engaged to some obnoxious, skinny-jean-wearing twats. If she and Ciarán could create this affect in my imagination, they'd be a million times more dangerous in the flesh.

After scrubbing myself clean and disinfecting my bathroom, I pulled on a pair of joggers and snagged one of Ciarán's t-shirts. I needed to remind myself that no matter what, we couldn't have expectations for the next sixty days.

The pizza had arrived by the time I made it downstairs.

As I took my seat next to him, Ciarán wrapped his arms around me and gently bit my upper arm. It was a peculiar gesture he did when he wanted to demonstrate comfort. He even claimed he had been doing it since he was a toddler.

"No sex," Rafe said to kick off our conversation about boundaries while Toni stayed with us.

"Nope. I'm not taking sex off the table," Ciarán said. "That is my veto."

"No sex is a veto?" Ivo sounded stunned. Hells, I think we all were.

"And if things click? What if sex happened because you're still attracted to each other, or her heat happens? Personally, I don't want anyone wracked with guilt over a little hide the carrot."

"Hide the carrot?" Julian blushed.

"Okay." No one was more surprised than me when I agreed to that. "Come on, I'm the only one here who hasn't seen her. And from what I can smell, none of you are immune to her."

"And you will be?" Rafe snarled.

"No. I don't think I could be immune to her appeal." I looked at Ciarán. He nodded. I had his support on this. "I Claimed her. Tried to Claim her," I amended when Julian and Rafe growled. "The bite faded. It never stuck. It was never going to stick with me. Maybe your bites would have stuck,

but mine never would. We are fundamentally, biologically incompatible.”

Rafe’s growl rose to a crescendo that had the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. Ivo grabbed his bicep, holding his cousin back. “You—”

“What would have been the point in telling you?” I snapped. “It healed in a couple of days. It wasn’t like we weren’t all fucking her at the time. You were there. I’m not responsible for the fact you were so deep in your rut that you missed it.” By the end of my little speech, my lungs were burning from lack of oxygen. Rafe’s head dropped forward and Ivo released him—the danger had passed. Ciarán wrapped an arm around my waist, pressing his front into my back. I leaned into my omega, soaking in the love that radiated off his body. “So yeah. Sex with her seems pretty whatever to me when I know nothing permanent can ever come of it.”

The lie was flawless and as I met each the eye of each packmate, I knew they bought it.

“Why didn’t you say?” Julian asked.

I gripped Ciarán’s wrists, pulling him into my side. “This is an inappropriate conversation to have. Ciarán has vetoed a prohibition on sex with Toni. Moving on. Living arrangements. She is going to be in her old room at the top of the house. We need to move the boxes. Into the loft. Ivo can you help with that? I have a meeting—”

“Guy, you can’t be serious. You really think we are going to ignore what you’ve just said?”

“We can talk about it when everyone has cooler heads,” Ciarán barked, immediately turning it into an omega’s purr, soothing the rough edges of three alphas. “What else?”

“Does she plan on loafing around the house? Are we expected to do her laundry?” Ivo asked.

I blinked. What the fuck kind of question was that?

“She needs to take care of herself. I’m not—I’m not her parent.”

Ciarán laughed. “No, you aren’t her daddy.”

They shared a pointed look, keeping the rest of us in the dark. Their relationship confused my alpha. It wasn’t sexual, but it was intimate in a way that had driven Julian and me crazy in the early stages of our courtship. “I think I deserve a drink,” Rafe complained, his eyes laser focused on Ciarán.

“No.” Our omega pointed at the packleader like their roles were reversed. “I have to go back to the restaurant. House rules. No drinking without me here.”

“You are doing this on purpose,” he growled.

Even while seated, our omega managed to sweep a deep bow. “I exist to drive you crazy. I won’t stay all night. But we are short staffed, and I need to help out. I told Toni about us, and she isn’t going to be able to help tonight. She sounded distressed. Come on, Ivo.”

Hours later, the mattress dipped as Ciarán climbed in next to me. Another dip and Ciarán shuffling me along signalled that Julian wasn’t just dropping off Ciarán after fucking his brains out. “Puppy pile,” Ciarán said softly, wrapping an arm around me.

Julian’s heavier arm settled there as well, and I realised it had been a long time that he and I had fucked each other outside of Ciarán’s heat. The other night we’d fallen asleep waiting for Ciarán to come home but that was the exception that proved the rule. Hells, it had been years since just me and Julian. And the last time Rafe had fucked us was when Toni had been there. She’d come so hard on my cock when she watched Rafe ram his knot into Julian.

I cursed myself for thinking of her when my omega was in my bed, but the fact of it was her scent combined with Rafe’s prayed on me.

“Guy, you smell too good. Stop having sexy thoughts.”

“Tired out, omega?”

“Yeah. Just tired. So much shit going on.”

“I could fuck you while you slept. A good bit of somnophilia for my slutty little omega.”

Ciarán wiggled his hips, his cock nestling against my ass. We were almost the same height, but he loved being called my little omega.

“Sure,” he mumbled into my back. But it wasn’t sexy to fuck an exhausted, sleeping omega. It was better for both of us when he was sleeping just deeply enough to wake up with my knot throbbing inside of him. Another night, I decided.

# Ivo



Having an ex-pack-member—an omega no less—move in for ninety days should have had the pack freaking out. It surprised me when they spent the morning going through their routines as if their lives, all our lives, weren't about to be ripped apart. As the person least impacted, with the lowest emotional stakes, I should have been calm, instead, I was a secret wreck. The only one who seemed to notice was Ciarán, who'd handed me a mug of chamomile tea with no questions or teasing. Inhaling the subtle fragrance, reminded me that she was going to be here in a few hours and that I was going to be part of the welcoming committee. I couldn't drink it and dumped the tea and left the mug in the sink.

Ciarán had been pretty closed-mouthed about how she'd responded when he'd told her he was the pack's omega. But this morning, he buzzed around the house cleaning and fluffing cushions, paying attention to the furnishings. Normally, he didn't he didn't pay attention to dust on the skirting boards, today he was on his knees with a dust rag sweeping away the smallest flecks.

“She doesn't need to think we are slob. Should we hire a cleaner? I've never thought about it before. She'll have her own bathroom—”

“She can clean up her own mess. And we don't need to roll the red carpet out for her,” I grumbled, fully aware that he'd caught me cleaning my knives last night, and we'd both seen Julian polishing his shoes this morning.

Julian was the only alpha who could stay home. I wondered what strings he'd had to pull to be here so last minute and why when his nerves were clearly getting the better of him. Strangely, his curtain twitching calmed me down, that and the glass of whisky that Ciarán had shoved into my hand an hour before she was due to arrive.

When the clock chimed three, she still hadn't shown.

"What if she bails?" Julian asked, drumming his fingers against his thigh.

"She won't." Ciarán looked up from his phone. "She is on her way. There was a delay getting an omega car service because of the school pickup rush."

Julian turned back to the window, reaching for the sheer privacy curtain. "Fuck," he breathed a heartbeat before the doorbell rang.

"You open it." Ciarán poked me. "You're neutral."

I swore. I was going to pack up and move back into my family pack house if they used me as a referee.

I jerked the door open with too much force, making it bounce against the umbrella stand.

"Hi," she said the word as soft as a breath. This unknown variable stood there, an old army-issue backpack leaning against her legs, a small rolling suitcase, and a black camera bag over her shoulder. She wore a pair of acid-wash jeans, cropped white t-shirt, and a worn leather jacket with scuffed white trainers. If you passed her on the street, your eyes would've passed right over her. It was only when a soft breeze carried her scent to me that I remembered she was an omega and, therefore would never be overlooked.

"You're late. That's all you have?" Shit, I was a fucking asshole, and I didn't need a therapist to tell me that I was running scared from my very dangerous crush on Antonia Vane. Except, legally at least, she was Antonia Ivy, this pack's senior omega. I frowned at her. If she fucked life up for Ciarán, I was going to find a way evict her. She wasn't my omega. I owed her nothing.

She ignored my rude greeting and smiled, though it didn't make it to her eyes.

"Yes. I didn't bring much. I didn't plan on being here longer than a week." Her laugh was painfully self-deprecating.

I fisted my hands, so I didn't crush her in a hug and promise that she was perfect and I was an absolute, irredeemable ass. Her smile softened. "It's good to see you again, Ivo."

"Hey, Bubbles. Do you have more stuff in New York?" Ciarán pushed me aside and took her suitcase from her. This was surreal as fuck. They were acting like we hadn't withheld the fact we had known who she was when we first met. "I always wondered how much you travelled with."

"I have some clothes in New York, I guess. And nesting material. But I'm used to being on the road."

"Can you run away carrying that?" I asked. Dammit. Why did everything coming out of my mouth sound so aggressive? "From trouble. If someone was stalking you?"

"Don't you read her blog? She runs towards trouble."

This time, her smile was bright, and I allowed myself a moment to imagine what it would be like if this wasn't some shit show. Because from what I'd seen, the others were still tied up in her, and this was guaranteed to blow up in all of our faces. It didn't stop me from watching her take a slow, almost reluctant step into the house.

"Oh." She blinked. "You've changed some things."

"Hi, Tones." Julian cleared his throat, only his head poking into the hall. "I—"

"Jules." She glanced helplessly at Ciarán. For the first time, my friend was speechless. How was she supposed to address the alphas? Did she touch them? Fuck.

"You, uh..."

Julian saved all of us and answered her original question. "We renovated the house about five years ago."

A muscle twitched in her jaw, and her eyes darted to Ciarán. “You are lucky. This place was...a house only the people living in it could love.”

Ciarán’s grin was strained. “Right. Uh, you’ll be on the top floor. Rather than the nest.”

“I never stayed in the nest,” she rushed in. “I never lived here full time. And when I did, it was at the top of the house.”

Those words worked like magic, and Ciarán stood a little taller.

His nest was his, I realised.

She’d confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was his house. She’d just been passing through. Which was the biggest lie anyone could have told, but if it kept the peace, I’d keep my mouth shut and pretend with everyone else that this was perfectly normal.

“Then let’s get you settled. Alpha, beta. You can carry the bags,” Ciarán announced. He linked his arm through Toni’s, turning his face into her hair. She tilted her head to the side, their temples brushing in the faintest ghosting scent marking. The gesture was so intimate that I forced myself to look away. I didn’t luck out, though, because I met Julian’s eyes, which were bright and slightly blown with arousal. Shit. I didn’t blame him. I was straight, but damn they looked good together. Natural.

I grabbed her backpack and the camera bag, letting Julian take the suitcase. We trailed after the omegas as they walked up in silence.

“She isn’t the Toni I remember,” Julian murmured.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She’s still Toni. She doesn’t feel like a stranger. But she has matured. A more realised human being with an extra spice that wasn’t there before.” He fell silent, leaving both of us to our thoughts. If his were anything like mine, they revolved around how she would alter our lives. Not just for the next sixty days but forever.



On the top landing, Toni hesitated in the doorway. Ciarán flipped the light switch, bathing the cramped room in a warm light, augmented by the sunlight streaming in from the ceiling windows.

Ciarán and Julian had hustled this morning, moving boxes into one of the other rooms, leaving it unfurnished except for a large bare mattress in the corner. Fresh sheets, pillows, and a duvet were folded in the centre of the bed. Even to my eyes, it looked uninviting, cold, and impersonal. And with the way the ceiling sloped, making it impossible to stand in the majority of the room, it felt cramped and uncomfortable. How was she going to be happy or comfortable living here for two months?

I threw Julian a desperate glance, and he looked equally shocked, as if seeing it through her eyes for the first time.

“Oh.” She inspected the room that was woefully inadequate for an omega to nest in. Omegas wanted cosy, luxurious nests, and we’d offered her something that looked like we didn’t give a shit about her wellbeing. “There were no windows ten years ago.”

“We installed them when we had the place redone.” Julian sounded defeated.

“Are there blinds for them?” she asked.

I reached up and pulled the blackout blinds closed, putting us into near-complete darkness. I heard her sigh and the thunk of her bag hitting the floor.

“That’s better,” she said, her body visibly relaxing as she moved into the room. Her fingers traced the grain of the oak chest of drawers, and I wondered if it was the same ones she remembered.

“Extra bedding is in the closet,” Ciarán offered and flicked the wall switch that turned on a sad-looking table lamp that was gathering dust on the floor. Now, he sounded embarrassed. We were all embarrassed by the impression the nest made on us. It was impossible to know how she felt because her expression was blank, even as her eyes fluttered

across each surface. “And if you want, we can get more blankets and pillows...”

“I’ll let you know once I’ve unpacked.”

“Sure, sweets,” I said, the endearment slipping out of my mouth. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” the omegas said simultaneously. The silence was tense. Omegas could be extremely territorial.

“We’ll be in the kitchen. Which is on the lower ground floor,” Julian cut in.

“You dug it out?” she asked softly, rubbing her hand over her chest like she could ease her obvious discomfort with the simple movement that carried so much baggage.

“Fuck, your bags. Here.” I slung the backpack off my shoulder and carefully placed the camera bag on the floor next to it, which drew my attention to the fact that only Toni was in the nest. Already, we were treating it with the same sanctity as we treated Ciarán’s nest. Never to enter except at her express permission.

“Thanks.”

Yeah, that was a dismissal.

“Okay, see you in a bit.” Ciarán grabbed Julian’s hand and practically dragged him away.

Alone with Toni, I surveyed her from head to toe. She was something. She gave the impression of always on the move. But twice now, I’d seen her standing still in the dark. Even then, there was a restfulness that I wanted to protect. I had no idea how I knew it, but Antonia Vane projected strength. However, under the surface lurked a fragile woman desperate to hide her weaknesses, her emotions riding her hard, but her head and body standing firm.

It would take a lot to break her, I realised. Which meant that whatever had driven her away from this pack had been extreme. The ugly realisation that I was planning on defending a pack who’d hurt an omega like her pushed me to take a step back and retreat to the kitchen.

When I arrived, the other two were sitting at the table with a pitcher of iced coffee between them.

“Did she say anything else? Does she need anything?” Julian asked. Ciarán’s face held the same expectant expression, as if they believed she’d actually open up to me instead of one of them.

“Nah.” I went and made myself a cup of tea. When in doubt, drink tea. A good strong tea with a splash of milk and a teaspoon of sugar to combat the headache that teased my senses.

“Right,” Ciarán said, draining his glass and crunching on one of the remaining ice cubes. “Explain her nesting preferences.”

“What?” we asked at the same time.

He rolled his eyes. “She likes a lightless, cramped nest. But you put her at the top of the house?”

“She picked that room ten years ago. I guess I never noticed that she picked a room that had no windows. Does it matter?” Julian poured himself another iced coffee.

“No windows. That explains why the top floor.”

“What do you mean?”

Ciarán shrugged. “Omegas can sorta be classified in three types.” He held up his fingers. “Denner want dark, secure, easily defensible places, like Toni. You have nesters.” He pointed at himself. “Who prefer light, breezy spaces. And finally, the chaotic types who need every type of nest possible. It is just unusual for a denner to like moving around. They are usually the ones who settle early.”

Julian gaped at him. “How do I not know that?”

“You don’t read omega magazines or do online quizzes.” He rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner. “Don’t worry about it, Jules. She’ll sort herself out. But I doubt she’s had a settled nest for a long period of time. So, it will be interesting to see how she feels about one nest. That’s all.”

He might as well have activated a nuclear bomb with a sixty-day timer. One so deadly neither Julian nor I could respond.

Julian, the lucky bastard, was saved by his phone ringing.

“Work. I have to take this,” he said as he dashed up the stairs.

Shaking my head and in desperate need of a distraction, I went to my happy place: recipe building. I wanted to cook something that would require my full attention and help me forget that we were in the eye of the storm. My current project was a small book full of unintelligible scribbles. Yes, I was trying to decipher a seventeenth-century recipe book I’d found in a rare bookshop.

“Still looking at those recipes?” Ciarán asked, sidling up to me. “Caraway seed cake?”

“I thought it might go nicely with poached pears or quince jelly. I was going to experiment for the restaurant.”

“Seriously? Seventeenth-century cooking holds no appeal to the modern palate.”

“Innovation sometimes means reaching into the past,” I grumbled and made a note in a notebook I kept with me at all times. “I might toast it first or lightly fry it.”

“I’ll trust you. Just don’t poison us because you misread how long you were meant to ferment something.”

“Promise.” I frowned at the recipe, losing myself in scrawl and vague references to proportions of ingredients.

I was just putting the cake in the oven when we heard her on the stairs. Bare feet came into view, then a shapely calf covered in black leggings, and last of all, the full view of Toni appeared.

“Hullo.” Her voice was crisp yet smoky.

“Toni.” Ciarán smiled, more and more natural each time. “How is settling in? Do you need anything?”

“I might grab a few blankets from John Lewis.”

“TK Maxx has a better selection. Maybe we can go later.”

She flushed. “Uh, that is kind?”

“I know how stressful it can be without your favourite nesting materials.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Thank you. I hate intruding like this. It...I’m talking with Gwen about launching an official appeal. It is negligent of the judge not to consider your feelings. The court should have at least cleared it with you first.”

“Is that how it works in America?” I asked.

“All I know about American pack separation is that the pack must provide adequate accommodation for the omega. Which, by the way, is ridiculous. If the omega is bringing in the money, a pack might not have the resources to provide for the omega. Because an—”

“Omega’s money is an omega’s money,” the omegas said in perfect synchronisation before sharing a rueful smile.

“You don’t believe with the equal division of assets?” I asked. Ciarán’s glare was a physical thing. I ignored him and leaned against the island, my arms on the granite, my attention focused entirely on Toni.

“I believe that every pack is different.” She met my eyes full-on. “I shouldn’t have equal access to this pack’s funds because a piece of paper says I am.”

“But if you didn’t have any money.”

She laughed. “I don’t have much money. It comes in spurts when I sell photographs. My writing doesn’t exactly pay the bills. I work a lot for not much, but it makes me happy.” She seemed rushed to add the last bit, and I realised a small rumbling had come from Ciarán. No doubt furious at the idea of an omega, any omega, without financial, material security.

“Don’t the SweetNothings take care of you?” he growled.

“I mean, yes. But not like that. They spoil me with designer stuff and I can use their private jet whenever I want

to.” She frowned. “I don’t want them to do everything for me, Ciarán. I can take care of myself.”

He ran a hand over his face. “Taking care of yourself doesn’t mean people can’t help.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever, alpha.”

The energy flipped.

“Did you just call me alpha?” Ciarán’s body tensed, his eyes sharpening on her face, then her body as he dragged his gaze up and down her very shapely form. And his scent flared, filling the room and forcing me to take shallow breaths and grip the countertop to prevent myself from physically separating them.

Toni was the only one who seemed to have control, her chin tilting up, nostrils flared. The omegas glared at each other, a silent argument louder than if they’d been screaming at each other. “Tell me. Who’s your alpha, Bubbles?”

Toni looked away first, shaking her head. She wrapped her arms around herself.

“They aren’t my alphas,” she said with a soft sadness that ripped a hole through my chest. Ciarán jerked as if she’d slapped him. I had no idea how the conversation had leapt from her calling him alpha to her, what? Admitting that she didn’t have a Claim on his alphas. “I’ll go buy those blankets. Oh, I’m having dinner with Gwen and my mum tonight. Don’t wait up for me.”

She floated upstairs again, leaving Ciarán and me watching the space she’d occupied for only a few moments.

“What did she mean by that?” I asked him. “The SweetNothings aren’t her alphas?”

“Fuck if I know,” he sighed. “The guys are going to be pissed that she won’t be here for dinner though.”

At one o’clock in the morning, I still couldn’t sleep and rolled out of my bed to pour myself a glass of water or something stronger. Anything to settle my thoughts. Dinner had been a mess. Rafe’s fury that Toni wasn’t there manifested in curt

replies and leaving us early because he had work to do—which was bullshit. Guy had taken a huge dose of suppressants to kill his sense of smell because Toni’s soft champagne and chamomile lingered in every room, reminding us that she was here, even if she wasn’t in the room with us.

Opening my door, I saw that the light was on in the kitchen. Toni was perched on a stool with a mug of tea and her phone. She wore the same clothes from earlier, and when I cleared my throat, she looked up.

Fuck, she was so beautiful. And tonight, she knew it, and that was sexy. That idea that women who-didn’t-know-they-were-sexy was sexy had never worked for me. I liked my women confident, able to look around a pub or party and then walk straight to the person they wanted to flirt with. She could destroy this pack with that easy, almost cute sexuality. She could turn us all inside out with the smile she was sending my way.

That’s what omegas could do. Rafe’s shitty childhood was a perfect example of the damage a beautiful omega could do. That bitch Sarah had forced his mother out because my aunt was a beta. Then his father refused to acknowledge his pack was rotten because their omega used sex to manipulate the alphas.

The warning built inside of me. A dressing down, my granny had called it when we were dragged in front of her so she could rip us a new asshole. I knew I could get up in my head. My thoughts cranked up until they poured out of my mouth in an unfiltered mess. Could introverts speak without thinking? It didn’t seem like they could, but I did.

“If you hurt them, I will make your life a living hell while you are here.”

“What the fuck?” She blinked. “Why would I want to make their lives miserable? I want in and out as much as they do.”

I was undeterred by her denial. “Ciarán is my friend. I won’t see him hurt because a bunch of alphas get hard for you.”

Even her frown was pretty. “You are being mean for no reason. I’m trying to get a divorce, remember? The judge ordered me to be here. I don’t want to face the memories of this place—” She cut herself off. Jumping off the counter, she charged into my space. “You wouldn’t understand what it is like to be made to feel a stranger in your own home. And I’m not talking about now. I left because those alphas—the ones you think want me—offered me everything my heart desired and then snatched it all away with no remorse or understanding of how much they hurt me.”

The memory of my earlier realisation that Rafe, Guy, and Julian must have really fucked up came rushing back.

“I understand rejection,” I said quietly.

“Oh?” Even from her comparatively tiny height, she looked down her nose. It was adorable, goddammit.

“I almost joined a pack,” I confessed, the fight and anger leaching out of me as her soothing chamomile aroma filled my senses. “And then they made it clear through little things I wasn’t welcome.”

“Oh?” She sounded defiant, daring me to confess things I hadn’t been willing to share with anyone in years.

“They stopped telling me about plans they’d made. Then they claimed I was too busy with work, and that was why they hadn’t bought a ticket for me to a concert.”

“Because you were a beta.” She nodded in understanding. Except she’d jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“No. Because I’m straight.” I waited for her horror, and when it came, I waited for that same twisting shame that always accompanied when I talked about my sexuality.

“Those assholes,” she hissed. I shook my head. Was she horrified on my behalf? “I’m so sorry. But why? Why would they do that?”

“I’m ten years older than you. This was twenty years ago.”

“Still! That is horrible.” Just like that, the temperature changed. The whole fucking mood changed. As she glared into



the distance. “Why do people care about that?” she asked, but it was a rhetorical question. One I’d asked myself many, many times. “Why should it matter if people just like women or just like men?”

“Because people are cruel, sweetheart.” This time, I didn’t mind the endearment.

“Does the pack know?”

“Ciarán does. I think the others guessed it. My open secret.”

She shook her head. “Jules won’t guess because it would never occur to him to think about it. Rafe knows. He has to know everything about everyone. Guy definitely knows because he has a nose for these things. Literally. He sniffed out that Rafe got off on being a Dom.”

“You still love them.” Fuck. I should not have said that.

“I love the people we were in those moments when we didn’t think we needed to make plans, so long as we were all together.” She turned her head. “Please. No matter what, help us all get through this. Even if I have to fake hating them for sixty days. This divorce has to go through.”

I looked at her in shock. I had never pegged her for an old soul or a reflective one.

“Why did you leave?” I asked.

“Because. Because it was the only thing I could control.” She wrapped her arms around her body. “I wanted to travel, see new things. But leaving was about taking charge of my future and protecting myself.”

I cupped her cheek and turned her face towards me. I opened my mouth to say something, but her vulnerability mentally knocked me back. She must have seen every thought and feeling because she jerked away. “Don’t you dare pity me!”

I surrounded her with a hug. Her body remained stiff until suddenly, it wasn’t. She melted into me, her cheek pressed against my racing heart.

“I’d never pity you, sweetheart,” I said, just forcefully enough to let her know I disapproved that she would think even for a moment that I would pity her.

Her hands on my pecs felt warm and natural, and when she tilted her head back, it took every fibre of my being to hold back from kissing the mulish expression off her face. She fisted her hands in my t-shirt and stood on her toes, bringing her closer and closer to the disaster of a kiss.

“Sweetheart—”

“You shouldn’t call me that. I have a pack,” she snapped, her eyes darting to my lips. “I can’t.”

“But you want to. Like I do.” Dammit. I pushed her away, releasing her waist—when had I grabbed her waist?—and stepping out of our really fucking inappropriate embrace. “That’s enough.”

# TONI



I blinked up at him. This beta gave me whiplash. One minute, he was understandably warning me off, then the next, he looked at me with such carnal hunger that I felt slick gather between my legs. Which I should definitely not have anything to do with because I had a pack.

Oh, shit. What kind of messed-up situation was this? I'd nearly cheated on my pack. And if he hadn't called me sweetheart, I would have kissed him. It was unexpected. Unwelcome because the very last thing I needed was acting on attraction to anyone but my current pack. Shit. How could I forget about them?

Holy fuck, I had almost kissed Ivo.

I needed to keep away from him for the rest of my stay. Well away. He'd awakened something inside of me that I had buried for years. I mean, there were books. Not that I believed that we were naturally submissive, but I was definitely an omega with a socialised need to submit to alphas. But Ivo wasn't an alpha. He was huge, like an alpha. Gwen said Ciarán called him the "silverback gorilla". What called to me was the complete sense of safety that came with being in his arms.

That scared me more than the near kiss. Because the last time I'd felt at home in someone's embrace, they'd ripped my heart out.

Slipping out of his reach, I bolted for the top of the house and my nest.

After locking the door, I sagged against the one barrier between me and all my worst impulses. I slid down the cool wood until I sat with my legs drawn up next to me. Curling into myself, I faced the ugly truth. I hated this place for unearthing every ugly emotion I'd thought I'd exorcised.

This afternoon has been a mess of nerves and a bubbling excitement I couldn't ignore. Sorting through the chaos of thoughts would give me a headache, so I focused on my nest.

A real nest, my omega reminded me. A real, cosy, dark, secure nest.

When I'd first seen it, the bare space brought back memories of when it had been full of bedding and scents. Back to a time when you couldn't see the floor because of all the pillows and discarded clothes. I had so little with me that the space looked more like the hotel rooms I was used to. And yet, this wonderful, familiar room brought an immediate, visceral sense of belonging. My space. My nest.

I looked at the bags from TK Maxx, which were full of soft blankets. I'd already raided the cupboard—which had been my darkroom before, just another change I had no control over—and the room already felt more crowded. Crawling to the bags, I began the process of actually building my nest. The first serious one I'd built in ten years. My final touch was the fairy lights, which I strung along the perimeter of the room, just bright enough to let you see where you were but not irritating the way bright artificial and natural light could be. The only thing missing were scents. And the only scent in here, except for me, was Ivo. I pressed my thighs together as forbidden thoughts of the enormous beta snuck through my defences.

“Build the nest, you idiot. For fucks sake, stop fantasising about hugging sexy older men when you have a pack.”

Lying on my back, staring at the slanted ceiling, I forced my mind to clear and then refocus. My goal while I was here was to get a divorce and convince my mum to move to New York. It wasn't to get attached to a nest. But if someone asked

me what my ideal world would be, I couldn't tell you, except it would have a nest like this.

I loved nesting. Both temporary or what I'd dubbed capsule nesting was fine short term. I had a great capsule nest in New York, but I hadn't brought it on this trip because I'd assumed I'd be staying in my childhood home. But a capsule wasn't the same as the real thing. For one, it looked like a one-person tent. The kind that really intense campers used. But technology hadn't figured out how to soundproof them because so few omegas used them enough for it to be worth the R&D.

Hells, I was the face of capsule tents because I'd been chatting to a pack in Yosemite and mentioned it in passing. At the time, I hadn't known they were a camping supplies designer pack. Nestules were a hot item for about a year before the sales plunged. They were still a product people wanted, but they hadn't taken off in a big way. Not enough omegas travelled for them to be with it.

They sent me the latest designs, which I usually donated to omega shelters. Not because I was some wonderful altruist. But I felt a lot of empathy for runaways. I couldn't donate huge sums of money, so I gave Nestules and used my contacts to get omegas jobs. Safe jobs.

And that tripped me into thinking about Bubble and Smoke. I'd done my research. Ciarán and Ivo were splashed across magazine covers as the restaurant to visit if you wanted an omega-friendly environment. They were in the top ten employers for omegas in Europe. Top ten in the world. How had I not come across them or made the connection between Ciarán and @atallglassofslick?

Because he'd never hinted what his real name was or where he lived. All I had known was that he was a business owner.

Except, of course, he'd wanted to keep me in the dark because of my connection to his alphas.

"You're overthinking it, Tones." I hit my fist on my forehead. "It is what it is. Just twenty-nine more nights here.

That is doable. You do not need to spend time with them. Just nights. Just nights in your nest.”

I rolled onto my stomach and let out a frustrated scream. I was going to murder Rafe. This was all his fault. If he'd just filed the paperwork, like a good alpha, we wouldn't be in this position. Oh, yes. That was better. Focus all my anger on Rafe. Bad Rafe. Controlling Rafe. High-handed, stick-his-nose-in, thinks-he-knows-better-than-everyone-else Rafe. This wouldn't pass. I'd get him. I'd make him regret it...The how was another matter entirely. But I had eighty-nine days to plot my revenge.

Which meant I couldn't walk away from them. Not yet.

First, I needed to take care of the ache between my legs. I couldn't escape the onslaught of delicious scents that filled the pack house. When I'd passed through the floor where Ciarán, Julian, Guy, and Rafe had their rooms, the smell of alpha and omega scents had nearly choked me. Then Ivo and, of course, Rafe in the courthouse. Far away from my own pack, my mind, body, and heart were all over the place as I wrestled with my new living situation. It was no wonder I felt the undeniable throbbing sexual frustration in every fibre of my being. I wanted to be kissed, fucked. I wanted to swallow cock and cum while grinding down onto a hard knot.

My hands drifted closer and closer to my sex, but just as I was about to reach my clit, I pulled my hands away. If I touched myself when my fantasies were focused on my ex-pack, their new omega, and the beta I'd desperately wanted to kiss, that was as good as cheating on the SweetNothings.

“Wrinkly walnut-sized balls. The way people actually like cilantro. The smell of hot garbage.” I recited my least favourite things, like a prayer, until I couldn't think of anything else. I switched to multiplication, which only caused my mind to buzz more.

Rolling over, my face landed on a blanket I'd forgotten that I'd pilfered from the office. A deep breath brought back Guy's scent. My body relaxed, each muscle releasing, and then my mind followed.

I woke refreshed and more determined than ever to get a divorce by proving to everyone that the Ivy Place pack and I were completely incompatible.

The perfect revenge was a non-starter, way too juvenile. Unlacing one shoe of each pair. Putting his socks through a hot cycle. Cutting nipple holes in undershirts.

“You are jumpy today,” Ciarán said when he came back into the main bar at Bubble and Smoke. I’d agreed to help because it was a Friday, and they still hadn’t found a replacement bartender. Also, I had nowhere to go. Mum, despite being exhausted after our dinner last night, was on a day trip to Manchester with her friends, leaving me completely on my own for the first time in months. The bar was better than staying at the pack house. “Bubbles? Lost in your thoughts?”

“Yeah. I was thinking of ways to get revenge on Rafe for not filing the paperwork.” I flinched. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Yeah, probably not.”

“They were childish pranks,” I rushed to explain when I saw just how sour his expression was. I knew that it would be like this now that I had discovered who his alphas were.

“Toni, Rafe does need to be taken down a peg. But this isn’t the time.” His expression shuttered. “Let’s try to cohabit for now. It is all new—”

“I get it,” I snapped. “I get that you don’t want me near you or your pack. It isn’t normal to want another omega in your space. At least not one who has fucked your alphas,” I gasped and put a hand on my mouth in horror at what I had said. “I am so...I cannot believe I just said that. Dear god, I am so sorry.” My breath caught in my throat. This was a disaster. The biggest, worst disaster I’d ever landed myself in. “Oh. God. Oh. God.”

A panic attack? Really? Oh. God. I sunk to the floor, dropping my head between my knees.

”Uh...Toni? It’s okay. Uh, I’ve never thought about the fact that you fucked my alphas. Not explicitly, and now? Now, Bubbles, that is the only thing I can think about.” His arousal tickled my senses, causing my body to pulse with a sudden need.

“What the fuck?” I giggled. I really needed to get my shit together. Talk to Gwen about petitioning the judge. Call the SweetNothings to remind me what they looked like, how they sounded because all I could see right now was well-oiled oak floorboards and the rush of blood in my ears.

“This is all too quick. I’m scaring you.” Ciarán’s soft breath tickled my hair, and his warmth seeped through the thin cotton of my t-shirt.

“Scaring me?” I repeated with enough sarcasm that he dropped the hand that was reaching out to me. “You aren’t scaring me. I’m not emotionally prepared enough to handle this.” I waved my hand around without looking up and felt it hit his cheek. “Soz.”

“It’s okay, Bubbles,” he purred for me. Tears pricked my eyes. He was the perfect omega, caring even to a stranger who’d fucked up his life.

I owed him. Rather, I wanted him to understand. I’d never wanted anyone to understand before, I realised. “I’m angry at myself. For...for being here. Here in London. Here when I should have been here all along. People say I’m brave for travelling. I was running. I was running each time. Do you think I didn’t meet other packs? Amazing alphas who were willing to take on a broken omega. I had to keep on running. I am a coward, and you need to know that I do not care. I don’t mind being a coward if it protects me. Mum will stabilise. Julian can take care of her like she deserves to be taken care of,” I sniffed. “Now, I’m here and feel even more like I don’t belong than before.”

I wouldn’t cry. I wouldn’t. Still, the tears rushed out. I gulped in air that didn’t seem like it could fill my lungs. I was hyperventilating. I couldn’t draw in another breath, and the harder I tried, the less oxygen seemed to reach my chest.



“Bubbles? Deep breaths, lovey. You are okay. You are safe. It is okay. We got you. Shit, Ivo!”

My vision had narrowed, so I could only see my knees. When did that happen? What was happening? Who was holding me? I struggled, but the arms only pulled me tighter into a warm, broad chest. Someone rocked me back and forth, the gentle smell of a just blown-out candle soothing me. I connected that smell with a person; I just didn't know who. Then, I knew. Like seeing a light at the end of a tunnel, I knew. “Ivo?”

“Yeah, little girl. It's me. Ciarán too.”

“Ciarán?” I reached out, and someone took my hand.

“Do you get panic attacks often?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Sometimes?” I felt cold and nestled further into Ivo's arms, hoping to somehow leech all of his heat.

A hand ran up and down my arms while the other cradled my head against his shoulder. Betas didn't smell as strong as alphas or omegas, but sometimes, they had a stronger scent than others. Often if their parents were alphas or omegas. After our incident last night, I should have been pushing him away, but the thought of leaving the closest thing to a human nest I'd ever experienced didn't seem possible.

”Shh...you are just overwhelmed. We all are.” Ciarán scooted closer and enveloped me from the other side, cocooning me between them. “It will work out. Go home today. Rest up.”

“I...” I stopped myself before I said I didn't want to leave. That I wanted to stay wrapped in their arms forever and never leave. “Okay.”

Ciarán turned my face, so I could look into those endless brown eyes. “Call when you get home? I'm not letting you go anywhere. Well, I'll let you go now. But I want you on time for work tomorrow.”

I opened my mouth to say that Mum wasn't home and I'd be alone with my thoughts for the rest of the day.

Giving him a watery smile, I made no move to get away from Ivo's warm embrace. "Come on, Bubbles," he whispered into my hair. "I'll get you a taxi."

I didn't think it would be possible for me to sleep, but the second my head hit the throw pillow on the sofa, I passed out. Hours later, I woke to the incessant screaming of my phone. Ciarán's name flashed on my screen.

"Hello? Ciarán?" I snuggled deeper into my makeshift nest of blankets and Daisy, who'd managed to snuggle between my curled legs and the back of the couch.

"You aren't home!" Ciarán practically barked. "Where are you?"

"Home. My mum's."

"I wanted you to go home-home. To your nest. Idiot, stubborn omega."

"I am not an idiot," I protested. Why was he chastising me when I did exactly what he'd asked me to? Daisy jumped up when she heard the door open, diverting my attention as Ciarán continued to poke me about why I thought he meant anything but Ivy Place.

"Come home. Now," he said with force. "It is almost ten."

"I can't. Mum just got home."

"Then come as soon as possible. While you live under my roof, Bubbles, you follow my rules. Got it?"

A reluctant smile tugged at my lips. Bossy-bitch-Ciarán was like an extra warm, weighted blanket in the middle of winter. Mum walked into the room and waved. I pointed at the phone. She nodded and settled into her chair. "Yes, sir."

"Oh, yes." His purr reverberated through my chest. "I like that. Call me 'sir' again."

"You're incorrigible."

Mum's eyes twinkled. She was clearly amused by this situation.

"Call me 'sir' again, and I'll let you go."

“If you want, sir.” I dragged the last word out.

“Okay. Glad you are okay, Bubbles. Don’t scare me like that again.”

“Bye. I’ll let you know when I am leaving.” I ended the call and met mum’s curious expression. “I am in trouble for thinking home meant here instead of Ivy Place.”

“Is that all?” I shook my head no. Mum’s eyes narrowed, and she reached into her knitting basket. I pushed myself into a seated position and curled up on one end.

“Drink,” she held out a bottle full of amber-coloured liquid. I hadn’t seen her this morning. Even though she’d spent the day in Manchester—Fucking Manchester, which was a six hour round trip—she looked energised. But her face was full of the same concern I’d seen the day she landed in Berlin after my assault. “It’s medicinal.”

“Thanks.”

The whisky she’d offered me wasn’t fancy, but it still had the right kind of smooth burn that you’d expect. I waited for her to ask, to prod, but Mum was better than that.

“I had a panic attack, so they sent me home. They being Ivo and Ciarán. I freaked out.”

“You...what do you mean?”

“I’m all tangled up because of that pack. Being here is messing with me. I wanted to pull some revenge pranks on Rafe. Ciarán said it wasn’t the time. And he’s right, but it hurts all the same.”

“Oh. Darling...”

“Fuck.” I bounced my head against the sofa cushions. “I’m sorry for being a crap daughter. I should be taking care of you, not the other way around.”

“You aren’t. Though I wish you would stop swearing quite so much. Where did you pick up that appalling habit?”

“New York.”

She shook her head.

I wanted to be in and out. Get the divorce finalised, grab Mum, and return to New York. The Dean's email this morning assured me I could get signed as their official photographer, which would give me health insurance to help Mum. That was the dream. Have her with me, and not have to worry about spending any time in London going forward.

"I should get going," I sighed and pushed myself off the sofa. My back ached and I longed for the soft blankets and pillows of my nest. "I need to get back."

"Oh?" Mum smirked. "Are you sure you don't want to go back?"

"I plead the fifth."

"So American."

"And you need to go to bed."

"Yes." She held out her hands. "Help me up. I don't think I can make it on my own."

I moved around to her side and wrapped my arm around her back, lifting her carefully. "Sleep in."

"I will. You too. Nice lazy mornings in your nest, young lady." She patted my cheek and brushed my hands away, pottering off slowly. Watching her walk away, felt more like she was pushing me towards Ivy Place rather than rejecting me. Shit. Shit. Shit. Why was it only just occurring to me that she might want me to stay? And stay with Julian and the rest of his pack. Perhaps if I'd introduced her to the SweetNothings sooner, then she would have gone down to the courthouse and charmed the judge into granting the divorce.

"Toni?"

"Yeah, Mum?"

"Go home."

"No." I shook my head. "I'm going to stay here tonight."

She sucked on her teeth. "At least tell them."

@Thetravellingnest: Staying at mum's because it is so late.

I flicked the deadbolt and drifted through the flat, flicking the switches off at the wall. Mum was all about saving on her energy bills, but the ritual was more religious than financial for me. At last, I had nothing to occupy my brain but the conundrum I'd already made a decision on.

I needed to be rid of packs. They only caused me heartache and guilt. I was picking flight over fight, but fighting meant picking, and I knew myself, or I thought I knew myself, and that version of me couldn't make a choice and not break the hearts of the other pack. They were all too good to deserve me picking the other one.

I went back to the lounge to get my phone and as I picked it up, I saw a new message from the SweetNothings Pack chat. A picture of all of them at a pub or bar, it was hard to tell. They smiled at the camera. As I was about to reply, a video came in and the caption: Wish you were here to party with us. I clicked on the video, and could barely hear them above the sound of the crowd.

“Love you! Candy Girl!”

My name was called out as they drunkenly swayed.

I bit my tongue to keep from smiling at their antics, and then sent them a quick note and kisses.

Then I waited.

And waited.

Hoping that maybe Ivy Place Pack would send their own message, reminding me that they were thinking about me. That I should head home.

I opened the chat and the only message was from Ivo saying he was closing up.

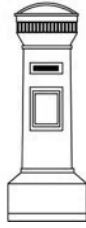
Someone had done a thumbs up reaction, but that was it.

I shouldn't be angry. Being at mum's meant I was setting up boundaries. But there was space and there was space. I hated that I needed them to wish me goodnight.

“Fuck you. Fuck you to hell and back,” I snapped at the pack who were doing what I asked.

“Show me you care,” I said more quietly. “Please, please. Ignore me, barge in here, and demand that I return.”

# RAFE



I didn't smoke anymore, but I still took smoke breaks, though now, I preferred to sneak up onto the roof of the steel and glass building my office was located in. Crammed between a pair of industrial-sized air conditioning units, I soaked in the summer warmth and finally acknowledged that Toni hated my guts.

She'd avoided us last night, and when I'd come down for breakfast this morning, she was missing. According to Julian, who hadn't seen her, she was still asleep, which he knew because Ciarán had gone to check on her.

Hiding. Any other omega, hell, any other person, I'd say they were hiding. Not Toni. She was too ballsy to actively avoid us, to actively avoid me. Instead, I suspected she didn't know what to do with herself. She might appear to be a rebel, but I had an instinct for what she needed: stability and structure. How she'd waltzed around the world without those things still puzzled me.

I should resist the temptation to strip away the layers she'd added to see if the kernel buried in the centre was the same as when I'd first fallen in love with her. And only having a few stolen moments with her wasn't nearly enough. I craved what she didn't owe me: her time.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled back to the earliest pictures synced to my cloud. A picture of a polaroid photo with the four of us, looking so much younger. Toni had tucked herself under my arm with the other two behind us. It had been at some stupid Halloween party, and we were dressed as the

Scooby-Doo gang. I looked pretty damn good as Velma, but Toni's Shaggy stole the show. She'd put on fake whiskers, a wig, and one of Julian's t-shirts.

My heart swelled. We didn't have a Scooby-Doo at the time. Ivo would be perfect. And Ciarán was the only one of us who could pull off Vincent Van Ghoul. But recreating the photograph would be impossible. Toni would be gone and married by Halloween. I pounded my chest with my fist, trying to suppress the possessive growl that tore through my body.

It intensified when I saw a call coming in. Shit. Ciarán. I need to get myself under control.

"Omega."

"Are panic attacks normal for Toni?" Ciarán asked in a rush.

I froze. The Toni I knew had never had panic attacks. "Not that I remember. Why are you asking me?"

"Because you aren't going to freak out on her. And if you do, she'll punch you in the face," he said with so much confidence that I didn't argue.

"Fair." I licked my lips. "Did she—"

"Yes. She went to her mum's last when I told her to go home. She will be home for dinner tonight, or I will drag her back here myself." He continued to splutter indignant complaints about Toni not being a good omega. My shoulders dropped, and my head lolled back onto the hot metal of the air conditioning unit. We were blessed to have such a caring, concerned packmate. He had been looking out for all of us since the beginning, and, fuck, we would be nothing without him. "Rafe?"

"Sorry. What did you say?"

"For fuck's sake. This is important."

"Ciarán, I know. I was thinking about how lucky we are to have you as a packmate. I don't say that enough." I blew out a breath. "If she went to her mum's, that is her choice. But I will



support you one hundred percent. While she is living with us, when we say home, we mean home. She's legally a part of this pack."

"Exactly." No inflexion. I itched to question him more about how he felt about her staying with us. Just not right now when I needed to get back to work so I could get home as fast as possible. My pack was in flux and needed me to step up and be the alpha they needed me to be.

"I'll be home soon, omega."

"Thank you, alpha." There was a pause. "Don't mention it to her. If she wants to talk about it—"

"I understand. Love you."

"Love you right back." He ended the call. The phone slipped from my fingers, and I scrubbed my face, letting my constantly cold hands try to smother my racing thoughts. My omegas were distressed. But the worst thing I could do was rush home and smother them. That is what Ciarán really meant when he said I wouldn't freak out on Toni. Of all three alphas, I was the most feral. The most likely to go on an alpha rampage and, therefore, ironically, so painfully aware of my lack of control that I would force myself to act like I wasn't internally battling instincts that were more animal than human.

Asshole. Fucking manipulative little shit who had demonstrated that he put the pack before everything else. God, we needed him to help us get through the next ninety days.

I was still thinking about my conversation with Ciarán when I walked in the door that night before stalking straight to our communal office at the back of the house. It had once been a dining room, but when we'd built the extension, we'd converted it into an office. Bookcases lined the walls, and a pair of desks faced each other in the middle of the room, twin monitors ready for people to plug their laptops into.

I heard the clatter of fingers on a keyboard before I realised that Toni—not smelling of distress but the grating, almost metallic stink of suppressants—was sitting in an armchair, tucked out of view. It was old, the same leather one

we'd had when she lived with us, and I wasn't surprised to see her covered in a cocoon of blankets while she typed on a wireless keyboard, her laptop perched on the side table dragged in front of her. It was an achingly familiar sight, like watching a memory materialise.

This was what I had always wanted to come home to. The reality was almost overwhelming. My whole pack was here. My alphas, my beta cousin, and my two omegas. I bit back the possessive, satisfied purr that would put her hackles up.

"Hey," she said without looking up. So, we were playing this out like everything was normal between us. I could do that; well, I could try. "What is a fancy word for 'similar'?"

"Similitude."

"Perfect." She tapped it out and closed the laptop. She rolled her shoulders and finally turned her face towards me. Her smile was self-deprecating but sincere. "I'm writing the text for my exhibition, and they love fancy words."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if she wanted us there, but instinct held me back. Not instinct, the hard lesson that she didn't want to be crowded by us.

"Now that's done, I'm going to help with dinner. I'm meeting some people from the group chat for drinks. I hope that is okay? It was planned—"

"Toni, you don't have to explain. But we would love to have dinners with you most nights." Her eyes widened before she spun around and dashed out of the door. "I'll be down in a minute," I called after her.

Closing the door behind her and locking it, I sat back in her favourite chair, sucking in her scent like an addict taking a hit. I felt sick like I was betraying Ciarán by even letting her curl up in the office. But my thoughts circled that this was the last piece of furniture from our house from when she knew it. If this was her safe place while she was here, I'd protect it to my dying breath, especially if she was having panic attacks. And I couldn't, no matter what common sense screamed at me to do, take this tiny bit of comfort from her.

It cut me up. This beautiful woman, who seemed like a towering pillar of strength, was still curled up in a quiet corner.

Except her strength was just that. The ability to carve out a little spot wherever she was and make it hers. From what Ciarán had told me last night, she hadn't stayed in one place for very long, but I bet every material thing I owned that she had carved out a little space, and when people looked at it, they thought of her and only her.

Nesting was her passion. Her instinct.

I fished my phone out of my pocket and called Gloria.

"Rafe Harcourt, my favourite alpha." For a beta, she could make herself sound exactly like my father.

"Gloria, I was wondering if we could talk. The trust—"

"Needs wound up. Guy called me."

"Of course. Look, unless you told her, Antonia doesn't know about it."

"Unless she has to know that is probably for the best."

"If you think we overstepped—"

"You are still my son-in-law until the courts say otherwise. I'm not going to be angry at you for trying to protect her in your—"

"Misguided way," I finished for her.

"Don't interrupt me. Your pack-oriented way. I'll say this, I owe you a debt of gratitude for knowing about pack life. My daughter is a beta, at least in the way she works out her problems. She doesn't and never will think in pack dynamics. I love her. I'm glad she didn't have to deal with the pain you experienced with your mother. But I am not blind to her stubborn ignorance. You and Guy protected her. Even if I won't ever forgive you for hurting my girl. If I think you might hurt her this time around, I'll gut you."

I had enough experience with fiercely protective mothers to know it was better to keep my mouth shut. Gloria reminded me of my aunt, Ivo's mother. Though they'd probably laugh in

my face at the comparison. Aunt Fiona was the prototype for a pack omega. Gloria was from a long line of pack-less betas. Descended from the old demi-monde, the men and women in their line turned their backs on pack life. But both women were made of steel, matriarchs to their fingertips and viciously practical.

“I doubt Antonia will see it that way.”

“My daughter takes after her father with her tunnel vision. Now, he was an angry man with a chip on his shoulder. Ended up moving to the States and marrying the first beta woman he met.”

“Did she look him up?” I asked. Toni had spoken of her father once when we’d had a pregnancy scare. She hadn’t wanted to call him and ask for his medical history.

“No. Never. As I said, he had a chip on his shoulder. I doubt finding out his daughter was an omega would have gone over too well. I will have the paperwork ready for the trust.” She hung up with a click.

It was exactly like when we’d met for the first time, and I’d told her about the trust I had set up to provide for Toni in case she needed emergency funds. We’d agreed she would claim it came from her—that time, Gloria had told me she was going for a walk with the dog. She might as well have been the Queen of England dismissing a courier she thought smelled of the stables.

For dinner, Ivo made a roast chicken. He’d surprised everyone by taking the night off. Ciarán had already taken it off, making us a full pack for the night. A full pack and Toni, who was hanging around until it was time for her to leave for drinks with friends. It was uncomfortable watching her sit at the island with a glass of wine and her book, quietly reading while the rest of us ate.

During a natural lull in the conversation, her phone rang. Ciarán looked up, his eyes sharp and angry. Phones were off or on silent during meal times. No exceptions.

“Shit.” She stood. “I thought it was off. It’s the SweetNothings. I’ll take it upstairs.”

“Answer it,” Ciarán said. “Talk to your new pack. On speaker.”

Hells, he made the entire room freeze over. He wasn’t pissed off at the call but because he knew who was calling.

“Hi, guys.”

Shit, were we really going to hear her pack?

“Candy!” a woman’s excited squeal made Guy sit up straighter. “Babe, we miss you. You look tired. You are...wait. Are you at your mom’s?”

“Uh, no. A friend’s place.” She plucked at her lip. “A pack I knew from before.”

“A pack?” The man’s voice had an alpha’s edge. I didn’t blame him. Were the situations reversed, I’d be the same.

“Oh, just from uni.”

Just from uni. It hit differently when she put it like that. University was ten years ago. History. Fuck, it hadn’t felt that long when she’d moved back. Everything had felt like yesterday. Now, I realised just how much time had passed.

“You never mentioned any packs.”

“They weren’t a pack, then.” She glanced at us, her face a little tense. She wanted to leave. I could feel it. But she stayed where she was.

“Can we meet them? I want to see your old friends.”

Her eyes pleaded. But Ciarán popped out of his seat and sidled up behind her. “Hi. I’m their omega. The alphas are eating.”

“Oh, uh.” The woman’s voice came again. “Wow.”

Toni faced Ciarán, her eyes shining with something I couldn’t place. “Ciarán runs an amazing restaurant and bar that is for omegas,” she said, still focused on him. “They are so lucky to have him. I’m a little jealous of them, actually.”

“Bubbles, if I was as pasty as you, I’d look like a lobster.”

“Right. So. Seems like you are busy. We can call...”

“No. I’ll, uh, step out, and you can tell me everything about the tour. They’ll be here when we’re finished.” She rushed from the room, phone clutched to her chest, eyes meeting mine before the sound of her feet on the stairs.

“So...” Julian cracked his knuckles. “We clearly mean—”

“She definitely is just uncomfortable being here,” I interrupted. “They don’t know who we are to her. Were to her.”

“Are to her,” Ciarán corrected. “Though, I’m confused why she wouldn’t say. It isn’t like you are anything to be ashamed of.”

We finished the meal in silence.

“She’s probably gone,” I said and gathered the plates to give myself something to do instead of brood. “I’m going to get some emails cleared.”

I reached the office in time to hear one of the alphas, with a comically exaggerated cockney accent, ask, “Do they mean anything to you?”

I froze. I shouldn’t eavesdrop, but it was hard to walk away when hearing her answer meant more than I was willing to admit.

“Of course, they mean something to me. They are good alphas. Some of the best I know. They are like you. You are both found packs. That is special. Precious, even. Found packs are the only kind I could ever imagine joining.”

I backed away, unable to listen for a moment longer. Taking the stairs two at a time, I went straight to the medicine cabinet and pulled out a bottle of suppressants, which thankfully weren’t expired, and popped two. They’d take about thirty minutes to kick in, and while I waited for the chemicals to suppress my alpha drive, I stripped down and stepped into a freezing shower. That fantasy of us dressing up for Halloween, the ache for that found pack, burning in my

gut. The pain was sharper than when she'd left because after overhearing the end of her conversation, it was easier to pretend the future I wanted was possible.

Toni walking into the kitchen hungover, ruffled, and cranky—absolutely adorable—was a slap in the face after last night's disruption. She'd looked like this the morning she'd left. Everything about that fight haunted me, and I lived in a sort of daily fear that I'd mess up with Ciarán in a similar way. That I'd somehow choke off his joy and leave us broken.

“Morning,” I greeted her, thankful there was a kitchen island between us. The silence that followed made me realise we were the only two up at this hour. Except maybe Ivo on his morning run.

“Morning.” Her eyes darted around as she realised we were alone. “I should have thanked you for what you did.”

“It was nothing.”

“Also...” Her eyes darkened as if she was remembering something. “How dare you? How the fuck dare you?”

I suppressed the urge to smile. She'd always burned hot and fast. That independent streak that I hated because it put her in danger, I'd protected that. But the sensible side of her understood why, and it must be so annoying for her.

“I hate that I put us in this position.” It was impossible to know what position I was talking about. The only position I wanted her in was bent over while I fucked her, which was a deeply inappropriate thought. “But I don't regret it.”

She licked her lips, still standing in the archway that separated the old house from this new extension.

It was a threshold I wasn't sure she would cross. Not literally but figuratively.

Strangely, it reminded me of the day we'd met. She'd stepped out of her “audition” with my birth pack. Looking defeated, Guy and I had looked up. I'd just met him when he'd asked how the tennis was going, and almost in the next breath, an omega so simply beautiful that she stole my breath had walked away from the pack I hated and into my arms.

“Coffee?” I asked. “We have an espresso machine. Or I can make you—”

“I can use the espresso machine.” She must have seen the single French press sitting in front of me. “Would you like one?”

“Thank you.”

“Does, uh, Julian know how to use this?” she asked, pointing to the very expensive, state-of-the-art machine.

“No.”

Our eyes met, and we shared a laugh. One that lingered between us like a lover’s caress. Then her face blanked as she realised that things weren’t awful between us. I see-sawed between wanting to irritate her and make her see that she’d made a mistake. Was it petty to want to rub what could have been in her face? Yes. But I couldn’t help needling her.

“He broke the first one we had. Only Ciarán and Ivo are allowed to touch it.”

“And now me.” She found the beans and started to do whatever it was that made coffee. “I worked as a barista for a couple of months in Italy. They wanted an English speaker for the tourists.”

“Did you speak Italian?” That was the most neutral question I could find.

“None. A little by the end. I never stayed anywhere long enough.” She handed me a small espresso cup and settled with her own on the stool opposite me. “I gave up coffee for a while. I gave up a lot of things. I didn’t have the money or it reminded me of you all too much.”

Her honesty was a punch in the gut. I wondered why she was being so open. Hell, it could have been to punish me, and I’d have taken each blow without complaint.

“I don’t think Jules could have given up coffee,” I admitted. “But we didn’t order Indian food for about six months.”



“Jesus, we are fucked up. It is called pack withdrawal.” Her laugh this time was bitter. “You have to purge elements of a pack member. You went through it with your mother.”

I cocked my head to the side. We’d talked about her, I remembered that, but I hadn’t linked it to the same feelings as when Toni left. With Mum, we’d avoided talking about her and her room had been left untouched, like a kind of shrine, as if she had died rather than moved out because that bitch had told the pack it was her or my mother.

Packs always chose omegas, my mother had explained. But try being a fifteen-year-old alpha who had to stay because a beta was never going to get full custody if a pack was an option.

“Don’t dwell on that bitch, Rafe. Do not dwell on it.” Her words were firm, clipped. Commanding. “What that waste of oxygen drove your pack and your mother to is nothing short of criminal.”

What did I say to that?

“Morning.”

We both jumped when Guy walked in. He was dressed for work. Tie stuffed into his jacket pocket and hands running through his hair, making it stick up in places.

“Coffee?” Toni asked.

“Please.”

That same something was between them. The crackle of awareness made my cock twitch. He scowled at me when her back was turned. That fucker’s nose was too sensitive. I wanted to snarl that he should mind his own business, but Toni didn’t need to know.

“Almond milk,” he said in a rush when he saw her pull out the milk. “I gave up dairy.”

“Oh.” She pulled out the carton. “Do you want to do the honours?”

She watched, eagle-eyed as always, as he poured a dollop of the stuff into his mug. She took it back and returned it to the

fridge.

“Do you have plans for today?” I asked, easing myself towards her.

“I’m going to be talking to some omegas. They want me to be a sort of person to look up to and person to warn everyone that filling up a backpack and buying the first ticket out isn’t smart.”

“You changed things.”

“Because I was running.”

“Does it matter why?” Guy asked. I’d forgotten he was there for a moment.

“It matters. You know it matters because if I’d had my way, you would have all been at my side each step of the way. Enjoy your coffee.” She put her cup in the sink and turned towards the stairs.

“Wait.”

“This isn’t about who did what right or wrong, Rafe. That happened ten years ago. What matters is looking those kids in the eye and telling them that I’m packing up with the SweetNothings because I want to share my experiences with people. I want to share my life with people. Being on my own wasn’t the choice I wanted to make. That any of us wanted me to make. It happened. I made the best of it. Now, I’m packing up with people who have the same desires and interests that I do. I’m going to travel the world with a pack at my back. That is why it matters. Pack matters. I learnt that, and I’m glad I have one. Ciarán really is a lucky son of a bitch. He gets to have some of the best alphas I’ve ever met. I’m glad you are happy.”

Her speech, the way her voice carried its modulated tones, and the way she sounded more like a proper North London girl told me all I needed to know. I’d ruined our chances. We were happy. She was happy with her new pack. I was happy with my pack. But both of us had fucked up and missed out on who knows what.

“Whatever happens, Toni, you changed things.”

“I’m just a pick-me girl, Rafe. Always have been, always will be.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

She grinned, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Don’t worry about it. Drink your coffee before it gets cold.”

She had inherited her mother’s ability to dismiss me. Only with her, I basked in the fact she hadn’t just walked off or ignored me.

“She isn’t a pick-me,” Guy said softly when we were alone. “She isn’t. I hate that she would say something like that about herself.” He slammed his coffee cup next to hers and stormed out the door, leaving me just as confused as I was before.

On my way to the office, I searched for “pick-me girl”.

Someone who acts differently, or claims to, to get the attention of the object of their affection.

Says they are low maintenance. E.g., they don’t wear makeup. They don’t do drama.

The list went on. Only the first one seemed negative, but when taken as a whole, I understood why Toni would see herself as a pick-me girl. In fact, the description—with the glaring exception that she didn’t do it to attract people—was so accurate for her ten years ago that I nearly laughed on the crowded tube.

We had been drawn to her because she was different. I continued to scroll, smiling at all the different ways girls could be “pick me’s”. No, what they wanted to be was someone like Toni. Someone who was so comfortable in her skin that she just was. Even now, with her pink hair—which even I knew was a big trend—she was different from a lot of women. But a lot of women were different to her, as well.

I looked around the carriage. There were women in business attire and a pair of goths with someone in a frilly pink dress perched on their lap. Were they “pick mes”? Only out of context. In context, they were just one of a bountiful chaotic pool of options.

If Toni was a “pick me”, it was because she wanted to belong, be loved and cherished, and be made to feel safe. We’d failed her miserably. No. I had failed her miserably. Now, she had been picked by a pack who appreciated her and could give her what she wanted because Toni would only choose to be with the best.

Pick me, indeed.

I’d pick her out of all the women in the world, every single damn time.

# TONI



Mum was up for a show at the South Bank Centre and insisted on taking the tube because paying for a taxi was unnecessary when the northern line was right there. It was a treat to be back in a city. Ivy Place was lovely. Our little part of London was familiar, but it lacked the real bustle of a city, which is what I'd grown used to while in New York.

I wasn't even that bothered by the looks because an omega was cramming herself onto the crowded carriage. I was taking my suppressants, but even they couldn't completely dampen my scent. A couple of younger alphas had edged towards me, but a beta woman got in their way and made herself absurdly large by putting all her bags in the aisle and talking loudly to her friend, who snickered at the absurdity of her friend.

"We are taking a taxi back," Mum declared when we stepped into the warm spring air. "I didn't think about how it is for an omega. Those alphas were looking at you like you're a piece of meat."

I shrugged. "It isn't uncommon. And being on my own is the problem. They wouldn't have looked at me if I had a pack at my back."

The exhibition was on textiles, and Mum chatted away with the curator, who she knew from her days teaching at the RCA. I watched her and decided then and there that there was no way my mum was going to move to New York with me. London was her home. I'd be selfish for dragging her to a new city. I'd make it work. When the SweetNothings were out of town, I could come visit.

“You are looking awfully serious,” Mum said as she took my arm. “Tell your mother.”

“I’d like you to move with me. Back to New York. I know it would be a big change, and I respect that. But I don’t want to leave you here. And—”

“And you want to be with your pack.”

“I want you to be with me. But I know you love this city. So.” I winked at her. “I’ll make a grand concession and let you live here so long as I can come to visit whenever I want.”

“Deal.” Mum held out her hand, and we shook on it. “But only if I can come and visit you whenever I want.”

I’d been an idiot. Coming home wasn’t a terrible choice. It was a great one. A healthy one. My mental palace was getting tidied up. I was refurbishing my relationship with my mother. I was chasing the ghosts of my ex-pack out of the darker corners. This was a long overdue spring clean.

After dropping off Mum, I holed up at the National Portrait Gallery on the top floor, where all the pre-eighteen hundred portraits were displayed. No one would look for me among crusty packs and idealised images of omegas who were little more than property. Which weirdly suited my mood. I’d wanted to stay at the house, in my temporary nest, but after my admission, I had to get out of there. I hadn’t lied to Rafe this morning when I’d told him if they’d been there, my adventures would have been better.

I was pulled out of my reverie by my phone vibrating incessantly.

“Toni! Babes. So glad you picked up. I have news. Excellent, amazing news,” my agent Joel said in his typical rushed New York City manner, with a no-time-for-time-wasters tone. I couldn’t get over the fact I had an agent. He was a relatively new thing in my life, but when he called, I answered. Mainly for the novelty of hearing his no-nonsense stream of thoughts about how to get my work in front of people.

The SweetNothings were the ones who'd encouraged me to go that route after a small solo show had sold out, with one buyer snapping up five pieces. It was nice to think people wanted my photographs, especially the more whimsical ones. It gave me a sense that if things went tits up with travel photography I had something to do. And I could tinker from my nest. In fact, since being back in London, an idea had been tickling the back of my mind. Pigeons. There were pigeons everywhere, and each part of London seemed to have its own tribe. It was impossible to ignore the fact that North London, Regent's Park, pigeons looked much better fed than the ones shitting from the rafters of Waterloo Station.

"A fan wants to meet you. Elias Pollak," Joel said, his voice brimming with excitement. "I've set up a lunch for next week and am trying to get another one of your buyers there. Second buyer is being stubborn, saying she doesn't want to bother you, but Guy Greene is one of the most—"

"Did you just say Guy Greene?" I groaned. Of course. How could I have been so stupid?

"Financier. Mainly works with omega trusts and businesses, but his investments are legendary. When he buys, people follow."

"I have to call you back," I said in a rush and hung up on him. Realising it had been a bit rude, I fired off a text with a white lie saying I had a phone call I had to make. Of course, it wasn't planned, but I needed to confront Guy about this now.

He picked up on the third ring.

"Toni? Is everything okay? Do you need me?"

"Can you do lunch?" I asked. I wanted to see his face when we talked about this. He was expressive, and I knew him. Well, I thought I knew him.

I grabbed a taxi to the city. I'd never spent much time amongst the towers of steel and glass that housed the people who controlled more money than I would ever understand. Even though many of the buildings were young, the alphas and betas walking through the lobby of Guy's building reeked of

old money. Of those in the pack, it was the kind of wealth Rafe, Ciarán, and Ivo could understand. They might live in a house with only eight bedrooms now, but they could buy every house on our street three times over.

Guy's family were about as normal, middle class as you could get, living in a vicarage in Kent. His mum's used to send him homemade jams that we ate with spoons in bed on lazy Sunday mornings. The memory eased my nerves...and reminded me that I was hungry.

I saw him before he saw me. Tall, perfectly suited and booted, he—objectively—didn't stand out in the crowd. It was only my relationship with him that made him immediately recognisable. When his eyes met mine, we moved as one until we stood in front of each other, soaking in the other's scent.

If he was anything like me, he was also taking in the new look. The Guy I remembered never wore suits. He was more casual, but I couldn't deny he looked like the epitome of a wealthy banker, oozing confidence that bordered on arrogance. Sue me, but men in suits did something to my simple omega instincts.

He ran his hand through his hair. "What brings you here?"

"Lunch. Remember? I asked you to lunch."

"But why?" He stuffed his hands in his pockets, most likely avoiding the temptation to run his hands through his hair again.

"Can we eat first?" I bargained.

"Sure. Um, what would you like? There isn't much around here."

"Nothing special."

He reached for my hand. Without thinking, I took it and let him lead me out of the building and back into the lunch crowd rush. We crossed the street and walked for a few minutes in silence before entering a trendy Skandi-sandwich-and-juice-bar chain. After ordering from the beta, who looked like he'd just stepped out of a photo shoot, we snagged seats in the window and waited for our meal.



“You’ve been buying my work.”

“Fuck.” Again, he ran his hand through his hair. It was longer than I remembered. I wanted to ask if he kept it like this because Ciarán liked it. I definitely liked this length. It broke up the wanker banker image, making him more approachable and a hell of a lot sexier than most of the people drifting around the city. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Only if you bought them just because you wanted to give me money.”

“Partially guilty.” He smiled. “I knew you wouldn’t accept it. But I also didn’t know what your finances were like. I keep most of them at the office. My clients like seeing omega artwork on the walls. Ciarán has a couple—the Giant’s Causeway series. He bought them knowing about you. Those are in his nest.”

“I didn’t know.” I hadn’t ventured to look at his nest out of respect, but now, I wondered if I could be bold enough to ask him to show me the pictures. My pictures.

“How, uh, did you find out?”

“My agent. He organised a lunch with one of my buyers. Elias Pollak, I think? Then Joel mentioned you didn’t want to meet.”

“Absolutely not. You are not meeting that dick.”

“What?”

“Elias Pollak is a creepy collector. He is an alpha whose pack don’t have an omega. I don’t like him. I don’t want you near him without me or one of the others at your back. Preferably with a gun pointed at his head.” If he hadn’t spoken with such seriousness, I would have been tempted to laugh at how intense he was. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to call you alpha.”

The red flush on his cheeks spread down his throat and to his ears. He'd just opened his mouth when the gorgeous server set our sandwiches in front of us. When we'd been left alone, he cleared his throat before continuing, "Toni. I just wanted you to promise you wouldn't meet him."

"Oh." I sucked my lips between my teeth. I hated how easy it was with him. And a traitorous part of me loved how he didn't seem angry when I'd teased him about the "alpha" thing. And in the back of my mind, I found a sliver of satisfaction breaking through the bond. No. I wasn't going to think about my superstitious feeling that we had a connection that should be impossible.

"You're different," he said after a while. "I remember you being a picky eater."

"I remember that." I picked up a piece of grilled pepper and popped it into my mouth. "I hated soggy veggies."

"I don't think anyone likes soggy veggies."

"They aren't so bad when you are hungry."

"Did you go hungry?" His growl crept into the question, and I had to suppress the urge to purr to calm the alpha next to me.

"No. Not like that. But some days, I was out all day. Walking or whatever. Then I'd get home, or wherever I was staying, and pull out a container of food, and instead of heating it up, I'd stand over the sink and shovel food into my mouth."

"That sounds like you." He cleared his throat. "Have I changed?"

"You dress better than you used to. You don't drink. Your hair is longer."

"First is money. Second, I had a problem, and Ciarán dragged me out of it. He likes long hair."

I focused on the most important part of his response. "I'm glad Ciarán makes you happy and takes care of you as you deserve."

“Same.” Then he surprised me and took my hand, rested it on his thigh and squeezed. “But I was wrecked when he found me, found us. Wild. We were alphas without an omega. We partied a lot. The house wasn’t exactly hospitable.”

“In other words, you needed an omega.”

“Yes.”

I sipped my juice and decided to confide in him. “I needed a pack. That’s why I met the SweetNothings. I was looking for a pack, and they appeared. Like in one of those romance books. Perfect meet-cute.”

“I won’t say I’m surprised you needed a pack.”

I rested my head on his shoulder.

“It’s nice having lunch with someone who isn’t a colleague. Ciarán hasn’t come for lunch. He likes to have his space.”

“He has the restaurant to run. You know it isn’t just standing behind the bar mixing cocktails, right?”

“I know that.” His lips pressed into my hair. “He doesn’t come because he doesn’t want to see me go all alpha on him. Strong independent omega.”

“Or he just doesn’t like the city.”

“No, silly. He knows I’d go alpha on him if someone so much as looks at him funny.”

“You used to go alpha for me.”

“Yes. And since we are making confessions, I’d still go alpha if someone bothered you now.”

“Thanks.” I laughed, forcibly ignoring how comfortable leaning against Guy felt, my cheek on the fine wool of his suit jacket and my nose full of his scent—resin and old wood. “Since we are confessing, that gives me the warm fuzzies.”

“Remember that time we were at a party? In...shit, where was it?”

“Bermondsey. Mel’s old place. That converted warehouse. Damn, is she still with her pack?”

“Yup. Anyway. Remember that asshole who slapped your ass? And I went feral? Punched the guy. Rafe threw you over his shoulder, and Jules—”

“Was so drunk that he fell down four flights of stairs, and we ended up in the Accident and Emergency.”

“Our first of many trips to A&E. God, we were so young.”

“We were a team.” This time, the flair of recognition was too strong to ignore. Where he bit me on my thigh ten years ago pulsed with a feeling of belonging. The pain of his Claim not sticking had hurt both of us. Now, a decade later, I knew that the Claim had worked, even if the traditional scaring hadn’t.

“We still are. You want this divorce. We’ll help you get on with your life. Rafe wasn’t trying to be a controlling arse. He wanted you safe.”

It was my turn to turn and kiss his shoulder. “I know that now. I knew that before. I was just angry. I thought that maybe all of my achievements were because I had this safety net of alphas.”

“No. You did it all on your own.”

It was a great moment, even if he didn’t know it. The warmth that spread through me told me that he believed that. I’d have to tell him at some point, even if he already knew. I would have to tell him at some point that his Claim had stuck. Faint but there. We had both cried when the mark hadn’t healed the way it should have, but when I ran my fingers over my inner thigh, I could feel two barely-there bumps. Proof that I belonged to an alpha.

I could have told the judge, and the marriage would have been dissolved right away, but Rafe would have known. If he had learnt Guy and I had cemented half of a Claim because I hadn’t Claimed him back, he would have lost it.

“Tones, look at me.” He tipped my face towards his, those eyes full of swirling emotions that I was too scared to

catalogue.

I sucked in a breath, not at all ready to confront the truth. “I should probably let you get back to work.”

“Okay. If that is what you want.”

“Yeah.” What a lame word, but what the fuck was I supposed to do? Discuss heavy emotional shit with him in the middle of a sandwich shop? A slight ringing in my ears warned me that I was on the edge of triggering my anxiety.

Digging in my bag I pulled out my meds and popped a pill. After the disaster with Ciarán and Ivo, I’d decided I wouldn’t skimp. Better to take them than brave it. Fuck. My hands were shaking. What I needed was another coffee... Though maybe I’d order decaf this time.

I hadn’t even finished paying for my coffee when my phone started ringing again. “Hello?”

“Toni. Me. Nini! I summon you with a wave of my magic wand.”

“How the hell did you know I was in London?”

“Joel.”

Ah. “What do you need?”

“You and your magical camera. I have a gig that will pay good money, and I haven’t seen you in weeks. I miss my wifey.”

This was the distraction I needed after the emotionally heavy non-confrontation with Guy. I grabbed another cab and arrived at the shoot, which was in a white box gallery full of sculptures that looked like it had been designed by some art student who thought they were being edgy when it was just a derivative Dadaism that they’d probably seen at one of the exhibitions twenty years ago. Jesus, maybe not. They probably hadn’t been born then.

“Toni! The queen returns! Everyone, this is Toni Vane. She is the famous omega photographer I was telling you about,” NiNi cooed.

When she was on the job, she dressed and talked like any in-your-face agent to the stars, but behind closed doors, she was a pyjama-wearing slob below the boob line and next season's spring collection at the top. She didn't cook and, on a good day, used dry shampoo. We'd been holed up in her New York City apartment during the first lockdown when the SweetNothings were in California in the recording studio. Since then, she had turned into this perpetually video-call-ready woman.

I loved her like a sister, and after so long with just us and no other human contact, I was glad that we had an entire ocean between us. Still, it was always amazing to see her.

“Hey, sis.”

“Since when do you smell of a pack who aren't your rockstars,” NiNi hissed as we sipped iced coffee.

“I am staying with friends,” I whispered. “Why am I here exactly? You have a photographer...”

“I wanted to get some shots from behind the scenes for their social media.”

“You're doing that now, too?”

“The money, my dear omega friend. Do you know what lockdown did to my industry?”

“And me?”

“You were the only person I knew who could show up so quickly.” She shrugged. “So, what about this pack? Are you finally getting back in the saddle?”

“Jesus. I'm engaged! Betas and their constant belief...”

“Oh, that is just an American thing,” the omega tinkled. She was willowy and graceful and had the kind of cheekbones that cast shadows without the help of makeup and hair so long and blonde that I was relieved when NiNi told me it was a wig. “All you English omegas are so old-fashioned.” Turning back to the group, she yelled, “Guys, did you know omegas have to interview over here? Like a job!”

“As opposed to a mixer? That is so backwards...”

“It has to do with money or inheritance,” I interrupted, feeling weirdly defensive over a tradition that, to this day, made me angry. “The old packs hold eighty percent of the wealth. I wouldn’t exactly think they want the management of that money and power to just fall into anyone’s lap.”

“What about your pack?” asked the young alpha, who clearly had eyes for NiNi and couldn’t keep checking out anything in a skirt, including me. It reminded me too much of the alpha at Bubble and Smoke, and I wished Guy was there to scare him off.

“My pack? The SweetNothings are new.” I knew it wouldn’t stop him from asking more questions.

“Do you have a big mansion?”

“Am I being the one interviewed?” I laughed.

“Come on. Tell us!” The actress giggled. “What is it like being with rockstars?”

“A bit like being with movie stars.” Before they could pry more, the actual photographer and art director called their attention. I grabbed my camera to get those special behind-the-scenes photographs they could post on their social media to show how “real” it all was.

“So, why are you here?” NiNi pestered me. “Are you meeting up with them in Berlin?”

“I’m here for my mum,” I whispered. “And they’ll come here for my exhibition. Art photography is going to be a blessing. No more wild trips or last-minute flights. I’ll be jetting around to whatever destination I want to go to. Maybe take a holiday.”

“Is that really what you want? When we were in New York, you couldn’t wait to get out into the real world again. Hell, I thought that you would just use your English citizen thing to actually get out of there.”

“Lockdown was hell, but I learnt what kind of work I wanted to do at least, and I can do that here. I don’t need to travel in the same way anymore. I’m turning thirty-three this

year. I think I've got globetrotting out of my system. Where are you staying?"

"Grabbed an Air BnB. Staying a few days to do some shopping, see the palace and the crown jewels."

"Then we are going to need to meet up again. I'll show you around."

While the shoot was wrapping up, I got NiNi to introduce me to the gallery owner, who actually turned out to be a good egg. The weird sculpture things were a favour for some students at one of the art colleges.

"Please don't judge us on this. We normally only do wall art."

"Never heard it called that before." I smiled.

A perfectly uncaring shrug paired with a self-deprecating smile, and I suddenly felt like I was home. That this city, this country, was a place I loved and had denied myself for the last decade.

"So, your portfolio?"

I pulled out my tablet and flicked to my website. She took her pierced lip between too-white teeth as she scrolled through my art photography.

"Wait. You are the omega who travelled the world. How could I miss it? I recognise your work! Why isn't a picture..."

"It was for safety reasons. Travelling on my own without a pack is, well, it can be dangerous. So, I tried to keep at least my face invisible for my public-facing work. Until recently." I winced at the memory of the recent articles.

She nodded with her eyes still focused on the work.

"What new stuff do you have? How big do you print your work?"

"Does print it however big makes sense? I've got a show at the George Street Gallery as part of the Omega Wellness Drive. I was going to do a love letter to London for my next project."



“Keep us in mind when you are ready for that. I’d love to add an omega to our books.”

An hour later, I stood at the podium, feeling awkward at the sight of all these omegas smiling up at me like I had something worthwhile to say.

The hands shot up. So many at once. And right as I looked over the field of faces, I knew I was going to answer every single question, even if they were repeats because it mattered to answer them.

One by one, they asked their questions. Some were silly. Others were more serious.

“How do you nest if you are a denner?”

I smiled, a little nervous about answering this question. “Well, Nestecules are a solution for when you are travelling. There are more places that have quiet, uh. They are basically closets, where you can set up the Nestecule.”

A laugh spread around the auditorium.

“But I think it can be just as difficult for nesters.” I thought about the official nest at Ivy Place. It was essentially a large bedroom. “Omegas like to make their own spaces with their own scents. Whenever you travel, it will always smell wrong.”

“How do you cope?”

My cheeks heated. “I get my pack to wear t-shirts and then put them into zip-lock bags. At night, I’ll take them out and then pack them up the next day to preserve the scent.”

“How do you feel when you are separated from your pack?” a petite omega asked.

“I trust them. They trust me.” I smiled. “Whatever situation you find yourself in, the most important thing is trust.”

You know what they say about “famous last words”? Those were my fucking famous last words, and I didn’t even know it yet.

# TONI



That turned out to be the end of the questions. Ciarán's text had told me to come home for dinner, and I was running a few minutes late because I had been talking to some omegas after my talk.

@Travellingnest: Start without me, I typed out and stuffed my phone into my bag.

It wasn't until I was in the taxi heading back to Ivy Place that my phone started blowing up. Messages pinging so fast my phone couldn't keep up. I dug it out of my bag and stared at the screen full of dozens of notifications, but the one at the top from my agent caught my attention.

"I'm so sorry, love, but if you haven't seen this yet, you need to." It had a link to a gossip website.

Shit. Fuck. Had someone found out about the marriage? That I was getting a divorce? How? No one knew I was here. Fuck. The pack was going to be devastated.

Pack. But which one? The SweetNothings, I convinced myself. They were the ones who'd be upset at being dragged into the tabloids like this when they should focus on the tour. Shit, I needed to call them.

First, though, I had to see what it was. Maybe it was just a walrus masturbating. Joel had done that before as a joke and then howled with laughter when I called him outraged that he'd conned me. That's right. It would be something stupid, and the other messages were just coming in because my phone had been in a dead zone in the lecture theatre. I was now in

two pack chats. And I hadn't been in touch with friends. Naturally, I was going to have lots of notifications. Even if it hadn't happened before, it could happen.

Having talked myself back from the edge, I clicked. The social media app opened. My eyes and brain weren't in sync because it took a minute to understand what I was seeing.

A single photograph of the SweetNothings and an omega. She was right between Dean and Gabby. Dean's hand was wrapped around her waist and splayed across her hip. The girl was pretty, young, and hot with big perky tits and ass-long chestnut-coloured hair. She wore a red body-con dress and a pair of spiky heels, with glamorous makeup with lavish lashes. She fit their vibe. Not something anyone had ever said about me.

And she was smiling with her eyes. Somehow, that made the whole thing worse.

Holy shit, she looked like she was part of their pack. Of my pack. The SweetNothings were mine...weren't they?

My phone blared. The SweetNothings were calling.

"Candy! Oh, fuck. Why haven't you been answering or reading our messages? Tell me you haven't seen it."

I hung up. They called back. And because I was a fucking masochist, I answered. "What?"

"Did you see the picture?"

"It meant nothing; don't worry."

"We were drunk. She was a mistake. But nothing happened, I swear."

"Someone definitely sent her there to cause drama. We love you."

They talked over each other, shouting their defences and reassuring me that it was all a misunderstanding.

"Candy, come on," Dean wheedled. "You can't be angry about a photograph."

“I can’t be angry?” I saw red. “Fuck off, Dean,” I snarled. “I trusted you. Trusted you assholes. Then your first international tour, and I have a million people sending me a picture and fucking articles about you with a hot omega in a red dress.”

“Babe, it isn’t like that,” Gabby, usually the voice of reason, said. “I promise we didn’t cheat. And we didn’t know we were going to be photographed.”

“You are rockstars. Of course you are going to get papped. None of you is that stupid.”

“You’re our omega. We love you. But you are overreacting.”

I froze. Literally, the blood in my veins stopped moving as the temperature in the cab dropped because I’d heard that before from another pack leader. That I was their omega, that they loved me, but that I wasn’t behaving rationally. Last time, I’d cut ties. Because fuck alphas who thought they could tell me if I was overreacting or not.

“Lose my number, Dean. Do. Not. Ever. Call. Me Again.”

“You have to trust—”

I ended the call and blocked their numbers.

My therapist told me I had trust issues. I didn’t. You didn’t have trust issues when your feet were firmly placed in reality. I hadn’t, wouldn’t ever, find a pack I belonged to. It just wasn’t in the cards for me. I screamed my hurt away, pounding my fists on the seats.

“Everything okay, miss?” the driver asked through the privacy glass.

“Yeah. Alphas are shits.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that. They clearly don’t deserve you,” he said sternly. “That’s what I keep telling my daughter when she says she wants to present as an omega. Stick to being a beta, love, I tell her. Betas are steady.”

“I never had a dad to tell me that.” I couldn’t be bitter that the sperm donor was long gone if he’d never really been

present in the first place. I cracked my neck. “My pack was photographed with another omega.”

“Well, listen up. I’m telling you that a real pack will love you. They might not love you perfectly. But they won’t ever betray you by looking at another omega.”

I bit my lip. Unwittingly, he’d just delivered the killing blow. “Thanks.”

The rest of the blessedly short drive happened in silence—in part because I’d turned my phone off to escape the barrage of “concerned” friends wanting to know if I’d seen the photographs and if I wanted to talk. No. I wanted to curl up in my nest after eating a home-cooked meal and drinking a bottle of wine.

“You will not cry yet,” I growled to myself. “Let that temper drive you until you’ve eaten and then you can yell and sob as much as you want.”

Slamming the front door, I grabbed my boots and tugged them off, stripping away my socks and stuffing them in. The only one who might notice the potent scent of my socks was Guy, and he was too much of a gentleman to say anything. My feet were killing me and the cool wood was heaven, easing my heart just enough. It helped that even after a few days, the pack house smelled familiar.

Drawing in a deep breath, I caught a whiff of some kind of spicy stew and the scents of the pack. I could just skip dinner because even if I was starving, my appetite had fled. Absorbing the calming chill from the wood, I lingered in the hallway and stared at my reflection in the hall mirror. I looked like shit. My eyes were puffy and mascara trails coated my red cheeks. “Fuck.” I wiped away the tears I hadn’t realised I’d shed. “You will eat something and then you can cry.”

My reflection nodded. Good. At least someone was taking care of me.

I went into the office and dropped my bag on my chair. I knew I shouldn’t think of it that way, but it was impossible

when it was the only thing I recognised. The only piece of furniture that remained from my time here.

They'd cheated on me. It still wasn't real.

All I wanted was my nest.

The chair and the blankets and pillows that I'd left around it called to me. The pack had left them there for me. What I didn't reveal at the talk was that I was a hardcore denner. I like familiar things, cosy things, my things—especially during stressful situations. And Goddess, but this was a stressful situation.

I craved a little bit of normalcy, and though it sucked, and I'd never admit it, this beat-up chair gave me more peace than my mum's flat or even the nest upstairs. Just for a moment, I decided. I curled up in my chair and did some deep breathing exercises. The second my ass made contact with the worn leather, I bounced back up again. Striding around the room, agitating my hands—first fisting them, then shaking them out.

I was tipping into a panic attack. It was like watching a movie. My consciousness dislocating, blindly looking around me for a place to hide.

The sound of jazz jerked me out of the office. A pack. I wanted to melt into Ivo and Ciarán, bury my nose into Julian's neck, and allow Guy to stroke my back, with Rafe hovering, looking out for any potential danger. An aborted sob caught in my throat. They weren't my pack. But they were pack. They'd hold me. Tell me it was okay. Oh, Goddess, I needed them.

There were voices downstairs, loud enough to carry up. Through the numbness, I listened to them chat about their days as I walked down. Through the fog of anxiety, it felt like coming home. Like something I could get used to if I was stupid enough to want to put roots down.

Except that I was now royally screwed over by the people who were meant to be pack to me. Who were meant to have my back.

The new kitchen and dining area was ultra-modern without clashing with the carefully restored historical detailing in the

rest of the house.

No one looked up. They had before. I was like a small elephant walking downstairs, but they didn't look up.

The pack was laughing as they sat around the dinner table. My eyes flitted across the scene, taking in the composition—a work reflex I couldn't let go of, even when my world was falling apart. Domestic, happy, even the plates were full of delicious food cooked by Ivo, who chuckled at something Ciarán had said. I hunted for any hint someone was missing from the tableau. It was like some kind of Norman Rockwell painting with no space for me to fit.

They hadn't waited for me. I'd told them to start but had romantically thought they'd wait.

Looking at the table, I realised they hadn't even saved a place for me. A single empty plate would have sufficed.

My thoughts spiralled. How naïve was I?

I was living here now, but they weren't going to change their routines for me. Or didn't care. They'd just keep living their happy lives. A perfect pack. While I was forced to hide in the shadows. Forced to witness what I had denied I wanted for ten years.

I wanted what they had.

Not the SweetNothings, who were wonderful and so damn perfect if you looked at every point on paper. But with them, I'd never have a nest. Not like the one in Ivy Place. My, what? More recent ex-pack had betrayed me with an omega who fit their image. But they weren't the pack laughing over a family meal, one that Ivo had cooked instead of catered. They weren't the ones full of easy joy, hope, and love.

They weren't for me, though. I'd made my bed, and I'd lie in it. Just like my therapist had told me. I was responsible for my actions. I was accountable. It had seemed harsh at the time, but I understood her now. Because everyone made their own bed. I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my sack dress to hide how they trembled. Parroting my therapist's words didn't stop the hurt. Nor the dull ache I'd grown accustomed to.

What I felt now was a fierce, twisting, stabbing pain that left my guts on the floor.

I squeezed my eyes closed, pulled my hands free to cover my mouth to capture the sob, and slowly, quietly backed away. When I reached the stairs, the first tears began to fall, as I remembered exactly which ones squeaked. I could retreat to my room, and they would never even know that I'd witnessed their happy moment. Grabbing the bannister, I carefully put one foot in front of the other and took myself up to my nest, which had been nothing but a storage room a week ago.

Not bothering to turn the lights on, I fumbled through my suitcase for the little bottle and pulled out a single small orange pill, washing it down with the last of the water in the glass on the nightstand. It went down easy, and I had to remove the temptation to take another right away, so I tossed the bottle across the room.

Lying on my back, I stared out the window. Counting in for four and out for four. But my breaths didn't align, causing me to cough and gasp as I tried to pull in as much oxygen as my body could.

How could I have prepared for this? No amount of therapy would have provided me with the ability to detach myself. Every day I spent here was one reactive response rolling into another. Each action or word over analysed to the point of madness.

But it didn't stop the overwhelming loss that pressed on my chest and made me feel so exposed that the mere thought one of them might come looking for me sent me scurrying away from the door. Gathering my pillows and blankets and pulling open the wardrobe, I crawled inside to build a tiny nest cramped in the furthest corner from the door.

Not that they would know.

They'd forgotten all about me.

"Hello, stranger," I leaned on the doorjamb, hands thrust into the pockets of my skirt, feeling like a hero in a romance novel, even if I was diminutive and was grinning like a fucking idiot.



“What are you doing here?” Guy removed his glasses, thick blue rims making his eyes pop. Not like the ones he’d owned ten years ago. Fashions changed, and in this case, for the better.

“I wanted to tell you that you were my first love. That I love you all so much. I’ll move in with you. Sign the papers. All of it.” I was so happy to finally be able to say the words.

Guy sprang from his chair, and in a blink of an eye, he was on me, kissing me with a fury that had me moaning even while I knew it was wrong. People could walk by. He had an omega.

“Guy...”

Then he started laughing. A cold, cruel sound that had nothing to do with the man I knew.

“Alpha?” I tried. Something was wrong, but I couldn’t figure it out. I tried to reach for him, but my fingers only touched air. He was away again and behind his desk. The lazy way he spread out and commanded the space was Guy all over.

“No one wants you, Toni,” he sneered. “It is an act. Who wants an omega as old as you? Dried up? We were never going to Claim you,” he said. His face couldn’t settle. Sometimes, it was Guy, then Julian, and Rafe. Ivo, too, and Ciarán? Why? Maybe it was the wine we’d had at dinner? Wine? At dinner? I hadn’t eaten last night.

“Don’t say it. Please,” I begged.

“Oh, I wasn’t going to call you a slut. No. A frigid ice queen. We were young, stupid, and only thinking with our knots, but you never let us in, did you? You needed to keep us at arm’s length so you could have whatever your selfish heart desires.” His lips twisted into a smile. “That’s what happened with the SweetNothings. You shut them out. Acted like you were happy when they knew you weren’t. You’re never satisfied, are you? Selfish, self-centred—”

“I’m not selfish,” I insisted. “It was better for everyone.”

“Then don’t be surprised that we moved on. We found an omega who loves us. And we love him. The SweetNothings

are the same. They've found someone better than you.”

“Stop!” I screamed. “This is a dream. This has to be a nightmare. Stop!”

My eyes snapped open, and I looked around me in shock. This wasn't...it wasn't Guy's office. Hell, I didn't even know if he had an office.

And me?

I was in the nest in Ivy Place. The room was dark as my heart pounded.

It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It wasn't real. They didn't hate me. They didn't hate me. They didn't hate me.

I fumbled for my phone and jabbed the call button. What if he didn't pick up? When he was on his meds, he was a heavy sleeper. When he wasn't? Well, I didn't know what he was like. Ten long years separated us. Even though we lived in the same house, his room directly below mine. Ten years was still a long fucking time. Three rings rang out that felt like an eternity before he picked up.

“Toni? Is everything okay? It's like three o'clock in the morning.” The voice was thick with sleep but still Guy.

“Do you—do you hate me?” I whispered.

“Wait a sec,” he mumbled. For a minute, all I could hear was his breathing, then the sound of a door. My heart clenched with shame. He'd been in bed with someone. Julian? Ciarán? Both? “What happened?” he asked.

Trust him to know that my question wasn't the real issue. He'd ferret out the truth. But I still needed to know. “Do. You. Hate. Me?”

“No. Never. Why would you think that? No. Fuck. No. I don't hate you. I could never hate you. What happened?”

“I had a nightmare, and you said you hated me.” I sounded too small even to my own ears. The details of the nightmare were already hazy, but that dread remained like a weight on my chest. “It was terrifying. It scared me.”

“Where are you? Are you in the nest?” he barked. “Are you safe? Tell me where you are.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from crying, maybe screaming at him. Why did he have to care? Why did he have to know how I was feeling? Why did I want him to come upstairs, break down the door, and scoop me into his arms and promise to never let me go?

“I’m in my nest. Safe.” I reached for the switch and flicked it, flooding my nest with a soft, warm light. “I turned the light on. My name is Antonia Laura Vane. I’m thirty-mumbleyears old...”

“That’s it, Toni. It was just a nightmare, Bambi. Do you...” he paused. A voice I couldn’t make out sounded. Guy must have covered the speaker, but I could hear him nonetheless. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I shouldn’t have called,” I said. Suddenly, painfully aware of how big a boundary I’d overstepped.

“Tones, you can always call me. Call us. It is why we never changed our numbers. Do not, I repeat, do not go down that hole again.”

“Do they know? That I called you, then?” I asked. Six years ago I’d found myself in the middle of nowhere Ohio, so lonely I couldn’t breathe. We’d talked, drinking too much and ignoring the pain in our voices. I knew the answer. Julian and Rafe weren’t good enough actors. I reached between my legs and brushed against the small, raised scar on my leg. The sense of worry that overwhelmed me mellowed to a tentative soothing peace.

“No. I never told them you called me,” he sounded a bit more awake now. “I should have come and dragged you back.”

“No regrets,” I told him. “You told me no regrets when you meant I’d regret not travelling.”

“Yeah. I didn’t really mean it, you know. I was just scared you’d hate me if I did.”

“I’ll let you get back to sleep,” I whispered. “I’m calm now.”

“Tones?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be afraid to hang out with us. We missed you at dinner.”

“That is what I’m afraid of,” I whispered, then ended the call before he could respond. I rolled on my back and looked up at the blank ceiling. “That is what I’m afraid of.”

# GUY



She hung up, and I felt like I was falling back into the endless void that had almost destroyed me when I'd first understood exactly how horribly we'd fucked up with her.

I closed my eyes and tried to forget what had led up to her call because I wasn't stupid. She'd been triggered by seeing us at dinner.

*"She seems to be running late because of her talk with the omegas." Ciarán smiled. "And says we should start. Should we start?"*

*"Yes," Rafe said. "She's at the Omega Centre. It is a ten-minute taxi ride. I want her to come home to the smell of food. Not us hovering. Let her see—"*

*He cut himself off and his cheeks turned pink. Oh, so he wanted her to see us as a happy, stable family. Not to rub it in her face, but to tempt her away from her perfect pack.*

*"It won't work," I muttered to him as we filled our plates. "She's determined."*

*"I know," he growled. "I can't help it."*

*I looked over to Ciarán. He liked Toni, but inserting another omega? Was that something we really wanted or was she just an old, forgotten toy we were all excited to play with again?*

*The door opened and closed with a slam hard enough to make Julian jump.*

*The spell broke.*

*Ciarán grinned at his wary alphas. She was going to come downstairs to a pack dinner.*

*“I’ll check on her.” Julian bounced up, light on his feet for such a big man. “Just see what is keeping her.”*

*“Leave her alone. She probably wants to put her things away.” I popped the top off a bottle of non-alcoholic beer and took a sip. Though my eyes kept dancing over Ciarán, my nostrils flared as if I could scent her from a floor away. “I had lunch with her.” I sounded smug and soaked in the shocked looks. “She knows you have her photographs.”*

*Even after we’d all sat down, no one taking the first bite as we waited for our reluctant omega guest to join us.*

*But she didn’t come.*

*“I guess we should start?” Julian asked. Ciarán looked at Rafe and they shrugged at each other. Somehow, we found ourselves eating the delicious food Ivo had prepared.*

*“I can’t wait for her to try this. She’ll spontaneously combust. Do you think she’ll sit next to me?” Ciarán asked as he mopped up sauce with a tear of pita bread. “I want to ask her about the food far away from Ivo and his anxiety about her trying his food for the first time.”*

*“She’s tried my food,” he grumbled.*

*“But not something you cooked with her in mind.”*

*I wanted to smack him upside the head for his impudence.*

*Then it hit me. The bond I’d denied it for too long burned in my chest. It had to be the Claim, surely. And through the rich spices of Ivo’s dinner, I caught her champagne and chamomile. I couldn’t hear her steps on the floor, but I could see her face in the mirror. I opened my mouth to say something when her eyes dimmed as she watched us, and with it, her scent.*

*I clenched the fork in my hand to counteract the stabbing pain from our partial Claim. She was hurting. She hurt. Something so visceral it had no name. Her hands pressed over*

*her mouth when suddenly, she turned and quietly but swiftly fled.*

*“Is she coming down?” Ivo asked, noticing the direction I was looking.*

*“I’ll check.” I rose from the table and took the stairs two at a time. On the top landing, the nausea coming through the Claim was so strong I had to go into the bathroom and throw up. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I hunted for toothpaste, anything to get rid of the taste of vomit.*

*I sunk down outside her door.*

*“We have dinner for you, Toni,” I whispered through the crack. “Ivo cooked this feast, and I’m sorry you... We have a plate warm for you in the oven. I’ll bring it up to you if you don’t want to eat with us.” Silence. The Claim pulsed again, even more anguish pushing through the bond I’d tried so hard to suppress. “Open up. I need to know if you are okay.”*

*I imagined her response: “I didn’t want to interrupt.”*

*I traced a finger along the door frame, hearing past her words. Didn’t want to interrupt meant she thought she wasn’t welcome.*

*“We should have waited for you,” I whispered at the wood.*

*In the silence, I projected what she would say: “I told you to go ahead.”*

*“We should have waited, darling. I don’t know why we didn’t. Honestly, I don’t know. Don’t know who served first or sat first. Except, we heard the door and assumed you’d be down in a minute.”*

*“It doesn’t matter. Goodnight, Guy.”*

*Then I heard a sob that couldn’t be muffled. Anguish. Unadulterated anguish that hit me in the solar plexus, stealing my breath away and causing my heart to falter in my chest. Immediately, the rush of concern from Ciarán flooded my system, but I pushed it away from me, trying to channel the emotion towards Toni. She needed his love and warmth now.*

*I'd take her hurt, pull it into my own soul, so long as she could have even a thimbleful of Ciarán's pure love.*

*But her hurt was too visceral and powerful. Whether it was the bond or reality, her tears tore at my heart, reminding me that I had been, and would be incapable of caring for her the way she deserved. I hadn't cried since my mother died, but hearing my omega cry? How could I stop the tears streaming down my cheeks? Why had she left?*

*Not just us but tonight when she stood in the hall, watching us. I'd been happy. She'd see a pack that loved each other. Exactly what I wanted her to have.*

*Did she miss those bastards?*

*Instinct demanded I rush in there and comfort her. But she'd locked the door.*

*"Is she okay?" Ciarán asked. "Are you okay?"*

*I rolled so I was lying on my back outside her door, not bothering to hide my tears. Alphas could cry, my dad had told me that. I cleared my throat. "No. She's crying. She's hurting. And it is my fault. I'm sorry you can feel it."*

*"You were young. It is in the past. Even if you both remember it, you are..." he continued talking, and I didn't correct him. It wasn't the past. It was the immediate, moment before. "What do you need?"*

*"Just to stay here for a bit. Until she goes to sleep."*

*"You can feel her through the Claim."*

*"Yeah," came out rough as if I'd been screaming her pain.*

*A sharp cry had us both looking at the door. "I can stay with you."*

*"Go to bed, Sunshine. I'll be down in a minute."*

*"You aren't responsible for whatever caused this," he said with so much certainty that I had to believe him or lose my mind. "I love you."*

*"I love you," I whispered. When Ciarán had disappeared downstairs, I turned to the door and pressed my lips to the*



*keyhole. "I love you, too. Always."*

Ciarán was still asleep when I went back to bed. Julian was waiting for me to tell me what the hell Toni was doing calling me at three in the morning. We'd talk outside but were close enough to go in if Ciarán stirred—all we needed was to hear the snoring stop.

He stepped close so we could keep our conversation quiet. I don't know who was more surprised when I let out a soft growl and buried myself in his arms, pressing my nose into his throat, trying to soothe myself. Without his arms around me, I'd be on my knees, utterly defeated by how broken our connection was.

"Guy?" he whispered. "What happened?"

I rested my cheek on his chest and released a heavy sigh. "She had a nightmare and called to ask if I hated her. If we hated her."

"Shit. What was the nightmare?" He gripped me tight. "I... I don't know how to talk to her. I'm living vicariously through all of you and it eats me up inside that I can't just go to her. She never talked about nightmares. Her dreams tended to focus on tea parties with ladybugs or flying. So many flying dreams. Perhaps that should have warned us."

"She didn't give details. But her voice...and when I said she could join us. That we wanted her to. She said it scared her."

"Something has spooked her," he said with that kind of quiet but abrupt realisation you get. The same one I had come to. Those ideas that shift the ground beneath you until the landscape changes. I thought back to everything. Back to my conversation with her when she told me that omegas couldn't live together. Then Ciarán's anxiety. She must have said something similar to him. "Did she say if she was afraid of two omegas living together?" he asked, easing us towards the stairs. He manoeuvred me so I sat between his thighs.

"No." I let my whole body fall against him. I needed this sometimes in the same way I liked the weight of the other

alpha pressing me back. “Is that what the others are worried about?”

“We need to have a pack meeting.”

“About what?” I twisted in his arms.

“Multiple omega households in the same generation.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I...fuck. I can’t really explain the details, but I had a job when I was a junior doctor. And I needed to—there are communities in places that are omega packs with one alpha and maybe some betas. I had to befriend one of the packs, and it was fine. Just like any pack, there was tension. But it works.”

“It’s my day off tomorrow. I’ll do research.” I kissed him firmly, proud of him for giving me the information I needed. “I’ll do a PowerPoint.”

He groaned in frustration.

“Wa’dja doin’?” Ciarán’s muffled voice came from the bed.

“Just plotting,” I said and drew Julian back to the bed. We bracketed our omega and purred. He relaxed back into sleep. Everything would be revealed tomorrow.

But I couldn’t sleep. The way Ciarán fitted in my arms, the way he fit in our lives, reminded me of how broken I’d been when we’d first met, how I’d stumbled from one day into the next day. Always looking to my next numbing drink.

One night, while I’d been nursing a bottle of cheap whisky, he’d come to my rescue. Taking the bottle out of my hand, he’d drawn me into his arms and ordered me to cry. “Let it all out,” he’d said. “It is okay to cry.”

I’d shaken with the effort to hold back for years, but gravity worked against me. The tears slipped down my cheeks, and when they slipped along my lips, they rubbed salt into a wound I’d watched fester from the moment I realised she wasn’t coming home.

He hushed me with a kiss. “You need to finish grieving. Be sad. I promise you aren’t less of an alpha for it.”

“I know,” I sniffed. “We fucked up. What if we fuck up with you?”

“Everyone fucks up, babe.” His arms bound me to him.

“I’ll never fail you,” I promised. “I’ll never fail you.”

“You don’t need to make any promises to me,” he’d murmured into my ear, kissing my neck as if he could calm my racing pulse. “We’ll take each day as it comes.”

“I’m going to stop drinking.”

“Okay. How can I help you do that?”

How could he help me? Fuck. I sucked in an uneven breath. My diaphragm stuttered. I couldn’t draw enough air into my lungs, and with each attempt, it became harder. I was drowning. Logically, I knew I was hyperventilating. But I was powerless to help myself. Ciarán, however, caught me up.

“Let’s sit down.” He put pressure on my shoulders, gently easing me to sit on the floor. “Bend forward.” I did what he asked, burying my head between my knees. “That’s it. Deep breaths. You’re safe. I have you. That’s it.”

I clung to the sound of his voice, my lifeline dragging me to the surface and safety. He continued murmuring soft words of encouragement.

“We don’t deserve you,” I gasped with another unsteady breath. “But please, please don’t leave.”

“Don’t be crazy. I’m here.” He pressed a kiss to my temple. “I’ll always be here.”

But that was what she said. Look how that had turned out. Walking out the minute things—

I cut off that thought. We’d been the ones who’d fucked up. “We destroyed her trust. What if we do it again?”

He didn’t question the change of topic. “Then you fuck up, and we work it out.” He chuckled. “I don’t think Rafe will mess up this time around.”

“He hasn’t learnt his lesson,” I argued.

“He has.” He cupped my face and turned me so that we could look at each other. The man was so handsome that, for a moment, I was distracted. My breathing eased. “And if he acts like an alphahole, I’ll punch him in the face.”

A laugh bubbled up inside of me. “You wouldn’t.”

“Maybe not. But one of you would.” He dropped a kiss on my lips. “Maybe I’ll get you and Julian to do that anyway. It could be cathartic.”

I considered it. Genuinely considered whether beating the shit out of our pack leader would make me feel better. “Maybe at the beginning,” I confessed. “But not now. He beats himself up enough already.”

Already the tightness in my chest was easing.

“Do you feel better?” he’d asked the next morning.

“Yeah.”

“Take today off.”

“Why?” I frowned. “I feel...I feel a lightness now.”

“False high,” he insisted. “You’ll crash by lunchtime. I want to be there for you when that happens.”

I woke with a start. At some point in the night, I’d drifted off, but even the tumultuous events of last night couldn’t break the habit of years of waking at six am. Ciarán was still asleep, draped over Julian. Sitting up, I watched the omega who had been there at our lowest point.

My heart swelled. He’d nudged us towards healing long before we’d Claimed him.

While I was making coffee after my morning run through Regent’s Park, Toni swanned into the kitchen. No sign of tears. No makeup covering up dark circles. No one would guess she’d been crying her heart out the night before. But like a swan, she might seem serene on the surface, but underneath, she was paddling for dear life.

“We missed you at dinner,” Rafe said. No doubt, he only wanted to let her know he had wanted her to be there, but he still managed to make it sound like an accusation. “And you look like hell.” Poor fucker didn’t know how to tell her that his feelings were hurt and that he was worried. Not that I would have been any more eloquent.

She froze. For a second, her eyes flashed to me, and then she straightened her shoulders and faced him.

“Between the Omega Centre and coming back here, I found out those fuckers cheated on me,” she snapped. “So, I’m sorry if I messed up your happy-families plans because I didn’t want to spend time around a perfect pack when the people I was supposed to be making a pack with are cunts, who deserve to have all their future concerts cancelled. People in happy packs are high on my shit list right now.”

Happy pack. She’d repeated the phrase like a curse, and she wasn’t done. “Then they had the temerity to tell me I shouldn’t judge their actions based on a photograph that is plastered across every gossip magazine in the western hemisphere.”

Our twin alpha growls grew to a harsh crescendo by the time she’d finished.

“Repeat that,” I barked.

“They cheated on me. And then you tell me—” She stopped abruptly. A noise on the stairs had her straightening her spine.

Ciarán and Julian came down the stairs together, looking tired, but when they saw Toni, both of them broke into bright smiles, which dimmed when she didn’t return their greetings.

“Can someone get Ivo?” she asked when they had entered the kitchen, frowns digging into their foreheads.

“He left for the fish market,” Ciarán said, snatching my mug out of my hand.

She sucked her lips between her teeth. “I need to let you know things have changed. I want to say this now and not have to again. Things are over with the SweetNothings. You’ll

probably see something in...Maybe not if you don't read tabloids, but they cheated with this other omega, and—"

"They did what?" Ciarán barked.

"Cheated."

"Fuck." I watched my omega throw the mug against the far wall, causing it to shatter, black coffee running down the white wall. "Have you spoken with them?"

"That is a bit of a strong reaction, but yes. They had some excuses, but...It won't work for me." She bit her lip. The pink emphasised how pale she actually was like she'd become a ghost overnight. Gone was the woman I'd had lunch with yesterday. "Look, I've told you. Now, I'm going to spend the day with my mum. So don't expect me for dinner."

It took a hell of a lot of self-restraint on all our parts not to argue with her. And somehow, I knew she could see that. Not somehow, really. The pathetic excuse of a Claim let me feel her gearing up for a fight and then smoothing out as she realised we weren't going to throw a tantrum because she wasn't having another pack dinner with us.

That lasted until we heard the front door close.

"I can call the embassy and have them thrown out of Germany." Rafe was practically shaking with rage. "The ambassador is my cousin."

"That doesn't help, Rafe," Ciarán growled. "The SweetNothings don't care about being in Germany. My sister has friends in the fashion industry. I can get them blackballed from every big designer in the world. They'll be wear off brand Gucci for the rest of their lives."

"It isn't a competition." I grabbed the brush and dustpan from under the sink and cleaned up the mess Ciarán had made. "We all have the contacts or skills to destroy their lives."

"Or we can stay still and make Toni feel loved and safe," Julian said. "I'm not going to pull the I'm-her-childhood-friend-and-therefore-know-her-best card, but for fucks sake. She has broken up with them. Focus on that." He gave us each a pointed look. "We want her to feel safe and wanted...right?"

“What are you implying?”

“If you want, I can say it. I don’t want Toni to leave London.”

Damn, he was a sneaky fuck. I grinned.

But Rafe snorted. “You must be mad to think she’ll stay with us. No, the best we can do is—”

“Listen,” Julian growled. “Listen. This.” He jabbed a finger on the kitchen island. “This is her home. That upstairs? That is her nest.”

“What are you saying?” Ciarán asked, his posture was stiff, and I reached for him, brushing a kiss on his lips. “You want her to stay pack? Is this because of Guy’s Claim?”

His question hung in the air.

“No. Yes...She’s my friend. My oldest, bestest friend.” He rubbed his chest. “And sure, I want to destroy those fuckers, but her feelings? We made mistakes and drove her from her nest. Let’s not do that this time, okay? I don’t want to drive her from another nest.”

Silence.

“Okay?” Julian barked.

“Yes, alpha,” Ciarán breathed. “We make her feel welcome.”

“And we ground their jet so that they fly commercial for the rest of their lives.” I grinned. “I’m calling my guy right now.”

“Do it.” The others said at once.

We now had purpose. Toni would have alphas and an omega who cared for her, protected her, and destroyed her enemies. Perhaps we were being childish, but I felt no guilt when I called my client and asked to “find” some irregularities in the flight logs for the SweetNothings’ jet.

# TONI



Nothing cures heartache overnight.

But, ironically, fighting tooth and nail against the onslaught of messages from “concerned friends” acted like a tonic against the empty hole in my chest previously occupied by my heart. That fucking thing had skipped town and was on permanent vacation on I Hate All Alphas Island.

Thankfully, my social media was limited to very close friends. My spam filter for my email—business and personal—took the biggest hits. There had been two articles about the “cheating” scandal, both claiming that I had broken up with them before they “cheated”. And muckrakers kept trying to get my side of the story.

Neil, the band’s manager, a savvy, tough-as-nails beta, who would protect all of us to his dying breath, was the only call I’d accepted. Because they hadn’t stopped trying to call me, even using a payphone in Berlin that was now in a long list of numbers I had blocked. When I picked up Neil’s call, the promise that they hadn’t cheated was the first thing out of his mouth. But it fell flat. There had been other pictures—obviously from that night—leaked, and the omega was named as an up-and-coming model. She could be a plant, an attempt to gain some not-very-flattering press for herself, but I already felt lighter since I’d—potentially—rashly broken up with them.

I hadn’t confessed to anyone, including my therapist, that I knew there was a chance I’d jumped to conclusions when I first saw the pictures. But after the dust had settled, while



holed up in the nest I'd made in the cupboard at Ivy Place, the growing realisation that the tabloids would inevitably be part of my life for the rest of my life granted me a new kind of clarity.

As much as I loved the SweetNothings, I could no longer say that I wanted to live in their world. While we'd been courting, it had been fun, glamorous, flattering even, to be papped or ushered into exclusive parties by a group of rockstars.

Only now was the reality sinking in.

Thrown into the stark contrast of life at Ivy Place, where Rafe still wore the same suit to work as he had ten years ago and no one stayed up late drinking or partying with strangers every night, the SweetNothings were exhausting.

What really saved my-heartbreak-bacon was my upcoming solo exhibition, which was scheduled for a week after the break up.

There seemed to be a never-ending list of things that I needed to coordinate, including getting several of my photographs through customs. And deciding on prices for the newer pieces. There were more questions than I could answer, and fuck me, it helped keep me distracted in the week after I'd discovered just how much no pack wanted me enough to change their ways.

“We are going to make this a success. Get rid of all that bad energy from cheating packs,” Gwen declared a couple of days before the exhibition opened. “Get your face in a couple of arty journal things. Show those fuckers that you give zero fucks.”

“Thank you for being an amazingly angry friend and thus demonstrating to me how little they deserve my anger.” I pulled her into a one-arm hug; the other was busy pouring a splash of whisky into our coffees. “Liquid courage before this meeting.”

While I did not promote day drinking like this, Joel had neglected to tell me that The George Street Gallery was

operated by public enemy number one—also known as PENO: Sarah Mountview, Rafe’s stepmother. She was a bitter hag, jealous of Rafe’s beta mother, who had been, from all the stories, a wonderful woman who had never made a big deal about the fact she was the oldest daughter of one of the wealthiest packs in the country.

Sarah, who was merely upper middle class instead of aristocratic, wanted to throw her weight around because she was an omega. As if that meant something. Sadly, in that generation, it did.

I hated her for more than how she’d gotten his mother thrown out of the Mountview Pack. She’d also been part of the committee judging me when I’d first come to the Omega Centre. She was one of the seven omegas who got to determine if I would have a foster pack or if I would be remanded into the custody of the centre. I’d been considered too disruptive and too rough around the edges for fostering because my “flirtatious behaviour” would tempt impressionable young alphas and—

I pushed the thought away and fisted my hands, letting the knuckles crack and pop before pressing my finger to the shiny brass bell. Urgh, even that was fancier and more exclusive than the SweetNothings’ twenty-million-dollar penthouse on the Upper West Side. The glossy black door swung open to reveal a stylish and bland young omega. Yup. One of those posh little English omegas who was working in an upmarket gallery until she found an equally posh pack. But as she murmured a quiet hello, I noticed her equally quiet smile. Gwen chuckled behind me, reminding me I wasn’t alone.

“Good afternoon, I’m Toni Vane. Here for the walkthrough?”

“I know,” she said, her face transforming into something more human. “It is very exciting to meet you. We are all thrilled you agreed to—”

“That is enough, Celeste!” Sarah called, her black court heels clicking on the highly polished marble floor. PENO was dressed in an impractical, though flattering, cream sheath with

discreet gold jewellery that pointed to her quiet consumption of wealth. “Celeste!” she screeched.

“Celestine,” the young woman muttered, but her face remorphed into the bland smile we’d seen when she first opened the door. “Ms Vane is ready for the walkthrough.”

“You haven’t offered Miss Vane anything to drink,” came the waspish reply.

I ground my teeth at the bitch’s deliberate dismissal of Gwen, who worked in her son’s office.

“We’re fine.” I raised the iced coffee laced with whisky that was now more ice than coffee and shook it, irrationally pleased when Sarah glared at the dribble of condensation that landed on the marble floor. “Let’s get through this.”

The interior was not what you might expect for contemporary photographs or at least not what I expected. The Honourable Allegra Demora, the alpha who owned the building, typically sold eighteenth-century antiques and paintings. The latter had been taken down from the walls, and in place were printouts of my photographs. I’d be deciding on the final arrangement—though I was pretty sure I’d thumbs up everything because knowing how to arrange art was not in my wheelhouse.

The huge square pieces focused on similitude and whimsy, as I had written for the pamphlet. I had to chuckle. On top of my own fluff, a curator had written that the out-of-focus, foggy seascapes of Antarctica reflected my rejection of traditional pack life. When Ivo had asked about it that morning, I’d explained that the fog meant the autofocus wouldn’t work and my hands were too cold for manual focus.

“You know, I really adore them in contrast with the antiques,” Gwen whispered. “It just fits.”

“Ooh, look at you being fancy,” I teased. We rolled our eyes and continued deeper into the gallery. “The SweetNothings would hate this place.” The musing was out before I could take it back. Instead of wincing and pretending I hadn’t said anything, I leaned into it. Probing at the emotional

wound. “They like street art and those weird contemporary art pieces.” I laughed. “I think they find most of my stuff boring.”

“Since when is a picture of an elephant shitting Niagara Falls boring?” She giggled, referencing one of the more bizarre photoshopped pieces I’d created during lockdown, then it cut off abruptly. “What are they doing here? Do we have to go over and play nice?”

Ten metres away, the Mountview Pack stood around an older omega in a perfectly tailored Chanel dress. “Fuck,” I strung out the word. “We have to play nice. That’s the owner.”

“We need to be on our best behaviour, then. I’m going to take your arm.”

We walked over slowly. I could feel how stiff Gwen was, how she hated having to go over and be judged by some pattern-card omega in front of a pack who could trace their line back generations. A pack who was rich and powerful and sneered at omegas like us. An omega who had none of the training and the other who was “broken.” It didn’t matter how obsessed they were with Gwen. Their critical regard was a palpable thing.

“Here she is! Miss Vane,” cooed the alpha before turning to Gwen with a smile. “And this is?”

“Gwen, my friend,” I said, taking her hand and shaking it. Okay, I liked her. Her look was old money, but her vibe was relaxed.

“Gwen. The lawyer. Such a pleasure to meet another omega who is independently pursuing a career.” Shit. So, she knew who Gwen was. Perhaps Sebastian had said something. “Have you met Sarah’s son?”

“Antonia,” Sebastian, the pack leader and Rafe’s half-brother, gave a stiff bow, hands clasped behind his back. They looked alike, I realised with a pang of yearning that I didn’t deserve to feel. But Sebastian was taller and more precise in the way he dressed. In the way he stood like he literally had a stick up his ass instead of just figuratively. Even his features were sharper and more defined. He was so much less attractive

than Rafe. Even now, ten years on, there was a sense of relief that I'd never been good enough for Mountview. Because Rafe and the others were perfect for me.

Perfect for me, then, I had to remind myself.

“Sebastian, how are you?” I smiled my polite smile. The same one that the Omega Centre had you practice in a mirror until your cheeks hurt. The one you gave when you weren't that into a pack but still had to finish the thirty-minute interview. I transferred my attention to the two alphas and beta, who stood in a loose semi-circle. “Gentlemen.”

“Toni. So lovely to see you again!” Jasper, the most outgoing member, stepped forward, almost pushing Gwen aside so he could shake my hand. I glared at him, then, when he stepped back, again brushing his body along Gwen's, I realised he was scent marking her. I glanced at my friend and realised she hadn't noticed or pretended not to. Sure, her cheeks were flushed, but it was out of anger, not awareness. Was she so used to this that she didn't even notice the intimate gesture?

“What are you talking about?” Sarah asked, shuffling her son and his pack out of the way, as if she could protect them from us.

Gwen tossed her head, her hair shimmering in the light. “We've been discussing the incredibly talented and able omega whose art you are appreciating. Come, Toni. I think Celestine needs to talk to us about placement.”

“Oh? Yes, you must go,” the Honourable Allegra Demora said, looking over my shoulder and waving. “Enjoy yourself, and don't worry about moving things around. Just tell Javier what you want to move where. I can't wait until the show opens. We've already had several closed bids based on the invitation alone.”

“Thank you. And thank you for holding my show here.”

“Oh, please. The pleasure is mine.” She took my hand in hers, giving it a careful squeeze. “You're helping me keep up with the times.”

“Lead the way, Gwen.” I smirked at a glaring Sebastian over my shoulder, and let Gwen swan off with me on her arm, a satisfied edge to her omega scent. The alphas were all watching my friend like hawks. Or, to get poetical, they were like greyhounds in the slips, straining up the start. They wanted her and it was bare civility holding them back. I wondered what it would take for it to crumple, and how much egg would end up on their faces when Gwen turned them down.

For the first time since I’d arrived in London, I was having fun.

The night of the show, I swanned through the doors wearing one of Gwen’s slinky wrap dresses that worked, even though our bodies could not be more different. She’d given me a chic but refined vibe that I was digging and the confidence was needed. No one there tonight would give two fucks about my social life or current living situation. They’d be looking at the photographs, hopefully buying them, and drinking as much free champagne as possible. And maybe, just maybe, the Ivy Place Pack would find a way to shoo my blues away.

They’d set up my work in a way that looked really fucking edgy and cool. The contemporary photographs hanging above French antiques and next to classical sculptures kinda rocked.

The omega I’d spoken to before winked and handed me a glass of champagne. She was one of many black-dressed men and women who were there to be invisible until they spied a potential buyer, and then they were on them like a rash or hailing someone more senior. I was willing to bet they had a binder somewhere with photographs and detailed notes on everyone who was expected to come through that door. Because this exhibition—my exhibition—was invite-only.

“There is the bitch,” Gwen murmured in my ear. We both looked up to see Sarah standing with her son and the rest of their pack. “Since we saw her this morning, do we have to speak with her again?”

“You don’t,” I reminded her.

“Have to have your back. I’m not sending you to speak to that viperess alone.”

“Is viperess even a word?” I asked.

“No idea.” She let out a glittering laugh, and I joined in, so when we were mere feet away from my less-than-welcome patroness—I let out another snorting giggle at the word—we appeared to be having a joke at their expense. And we were, in our own quiet way.

“I hope you are satisfied with the arrangement of your art,” Sarah sneered—well, something had crawled up inside her and died since I saw her earlier today. “It was so kind of you to let us display work for such a contrary omega.”

“I can only hope that the buyers feel the same way.”

Gwen snorted and did nothing to hide it. I bit the inside of my cheek. Sarah couldn’t hurt my career, but she could damage Gwen’s because omegas were bitches.

“Good to see you, Gwendoline,” Sebastian purred, all aristocratic smoothness. “You look—”

“Thank you,” she snapped before he could compliment her.

“Toni, I see my brother isn’t here,” Sebastian drawled, completely ignoring his mother’s spluttering remarks to his packmates, who appeared to have selective hearing tonight. I clenched my jaw, prepared to tell him that his brother’s movements were none of his business, when he caught my eye and gave a subtle nod. “But there seems to be someone who wants to speak with you.”

I blinked. Was he giving us a way to escape this train wreck with his mother?

“I believe Darrell Cameron and his pack have just arrived.”

I looked over my shoulder, and two familiar faces—Josh and Cameron—appeared through the crowd, and it was a crowd. Sarah might be a right royal cow, but the omega bitch had come through, and the rooms were packed. It was

probably the free champagne and not the fact they were interested in the art. Or not yet. I bet that most of the work will be sold by the end of the night because of the scandal with the SweetNothings rather than my talent.

“Wow! Toni!” Josh pulled me into a hug. “I’ve already told them what I want and we haven’t even gone upstairs yet.”

“You want to buy?” I asked, flummoxed.

“Oh, yeah. That pink and purple piece at the front? The balloons? It is going to be mine. I need it for my office. And I really want the elephant for the guest house in Palm Springs.”

“Hey, when were you going to tell me you were some big hotshot movie lawyer?” I poked his arm.

He wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Never. Not right away. But what about you miss omega world traveller? Never mind. How are you? I saw the tabloids.”

“Things are over,” I said firmly.

He hummed, but it was hard to tell if it was in agreement or if he didn’t believe it would blow over. “Just remember, there are photographers here. Right now, you are having a great time and people will speculate. Especially since there have been no official statements.”

“People are always speculating,” I said a bit too sharply.

“True, but you look like an omega who is happy. Not one whose engagement ended because her future pack was photographed by a classless, wannabe, Z-list celebrity—”

“Let’s not talk about things we can’t control,” Gwen cut in.

“I’m told off.” He laughed, throwing his hands in their air. He was gorgeous. Not as beautiful as Ciarán, but then I wasn’t sure anyone was as perfect in form or face as Ciarán.

“Oh, who are they?” Josh raised his chin towards someone behind me.

I turned and saw the Ivy Place Pack enter the gallery. They came dressed to make a statement. Ciarán, Rafe, and Ivo



showed off their aristocratic blood with tailoring so precise it could only come from Saville Row. Guy and Julian looked just as dapper but without that same old-money confidence that typified the other members of my pack. No, not “my pack”. Their pack. I needed to get my head on straight. I’d come here for a divorce, but the more time I spent with them, the easier it was to forget that, especially now that I was single again.

It was particularly challenging when, holy mother of god, they looked good.

People were already turning in their direction, looking at the charismatic pack making their way through to crowd... towards me.

“Ms Vane, a photograph?” A photographer hired for the evening slipped in front of me, his camera already raised.

Josh wrapped one arm around my waist and the other around Gwen’s.

“I’m sorry, Toni. This is exactly what I was hoping for. Let those alphas drool,” Gwen joked. She saw the others and beamed. She waved. “And Ciarán to the rescue! Four omegas are better than three.”

“Have to take care of my favourite omegas.” He grinned, joining our group. He nestled into my side and leaned forward. “Ciarán.”

“Josh.”

“Smiles, everyone!”

I gasped when I felt two fingers pinch my ass. “Ciarán!”

He turned and smiled down at me. “Hello, beautiful. You look delicious this evening.”

I jerked my chin in the direction of Sarah. “I didn’t tell them about her. Sorry.”

“I get it.” He squeezed my hand. “Rafe knew. Plus, he’s a big boy, and Mountview owes him more than he owes them.

The photographer thanked us and melted into the crowd, clearing the way for the Ivy Place Pack.

“Toni/” Rafe stepped in and kissed my cheek. His scent sent me into a tailspin of desire and the lingering fear that we’d be photographed and would end up in the tabloids. “It’s been a while.”

“Since breakfast, ass,” I hissed at him, eliciting a chuckle.

His whole behaviour was almost exactly the same as Sebastian’s, only he then turned to Gwen.

“So, Gwen. Are we going to continue pretending that we don’t know each other?”

“What?” I looked at my friend-lawyer, whose cheeks were bright red.

“I swear I didn’t know Ciarán was his omega. But I’ve known Rafe for a while.”

“Casually,” he emphasised.

“I didn’t mean...I never thought...” Gwen’s scent soured, which, more than her words, told me how distressed she was. “I just didn’t want you to pick another council.”

“It’s fine,” I assured her. “I’m not exactly one who can judge about keeping secrets.”

The rest of the evening passed in a blur, spurred on by fine champagne and the fact I spent most of it with the pack. When I wasn’t with them, I was chatting with Josh and his alphas. They were very swish and Hollywood. I didn’t think they realised the number of times they dropped the names of movie stars or other celebrities they were “best friends” with, but I liked their openness. A whole lot more than Mountview. That had been a difficult encounter when Darrell—although always Cameron in my mind—had called them over to reminisce about “old times” as if Rafe and Sebastian didn’t hate each other.

“We’ll have to have a big party. Really go all out at one of your fancy members’ clubs. Are there any that are actually cool or are they all really stuffy?”

“Mayfair House is pretty nice. Fancy but classy,” Ciarán said. “I know their bartender.”

“We’ll have to exchange numbers,” Josh said and pulled out his phone.

By ten o’clock, the crowd had swelled to the point of someone joking that it was a “crush”, which turned out to be some sort of regency term for a really popular party.

“Gorgeous,” Ciarán whispered into my hair, his arm snaking around my waist and pulling me close. We were both buzzing from the unlimited alcohol, and I swayed into him, nearly losing my balance.

“Careful,” I warned. “If people see...”

“Are you ashamed?” he asked carefully. I wanted to kiss his worries away, but there were already too many eyes on us. Oh, and the fact that he wasn’t mine to kiss.

“No, but SweetNothings...even with the scandal, people—I just don’t want to bring the ugly spotlight onto you and the pack.”

“Right.” He pulled away—though not entirely—and immediately, I missed the warmth of his body against mine. “You need to speak with them first before you decide.”

“A decision? It’s over.” My thoughts whirled.

“True.” He smiled, a glint of triumph in his eyes. “And after that? The judge hasn’t granted one yet, so on paper, you are ours. Don’t keep us waiting too much longer. We might not have said it in words, but we all want you to stay. I think Rafe might lose his mind if you don’t beg for his Claim. I’d had to physically restrain him when he heard you dropping the glass over the phone. We wanted you safe, even then. To keep you safe, away from shards of glass as if you were some breakable object instead of one of the bravest women I’ve ever met.”

“Ciarán.” He was drunk. That was the only excuse for saying things like this. For...offering me something I hadn’t even considered wanting because it was so farfetched and ridiculous.

“I know. Look. There is Guy facing off with that arse who also buys your things.” I allowed him to distract me because I needed a distraction. None of them had hinted that they

wanted me to withdraw the petition for divorce. “Oh, he looks like he is about to spend his entire paycheque.”

“Did you know he was collecting my work? Did it bother you?”

His grin was rueful. “Yes, he told me. He could appreciate your art. But he couldn’t drink my cocktails.”

“You did so much for him. He appreciates you,” I said quietly. “Besides, I get to enjoy your cocktails.”

“But you aren’t my alpha.” He couldn’t hide the sadness in his voice. “But I like your work, too. And I’d rather he bought your photographs than tried to drown out the memory of you with alcohol.”

I turned into his arms, resting my cheek on his chest, just above his beating heart. “It’s so fucking complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be, Bubbles,” he said after a pause. “It could be simple if you just realised that you need a pack...our pack.”

My heart leaped. He was going from my break up to my staying within days. “Ciarán—”

“Julian! I can walk!”

Our heads whipped towards Gwen’s squealing laugh of delight. Julian had swooped her into his arms and was carrying her upstairs in a feat of alpha machismo that sent half the women and all the omegas into a complete tailspin. “But if I can offer the fair omega assistance, I must do so!”

“He still likes to show off those muscles,” I snorted.

“You have no idea.” Ciarán smiled. “Was he that big when you knew him?”

“Yup.” I nodded.

“Damn.”

“Yup.”

“What do you think of Ivo?” he asked. “He thinks you’re the bee’s knees—the best and the drink.”

My mouth dropped open and stayed that way until he closed it by placing a finger under my chin and drawing my jaw up until my teeth clinked. “You want me to talk about your packmate? In a sexual way? That...that...”

“So, you think he is sexy?” The grin was a little manic and his eyes sparkled.

“Doesn’t everyone?” I sipped my champagne.

“Oh, Bubbles. You are so in for it,” he whispered into my ear. My body reacted to the sweet arousal in his scent. Thankfully, I wasn’t drunk enough to ask if he thought I should sleep with Ivo. “He looks like he’s about to devour you.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see the mountain of a beta behind me. The man I’d crushed on from day one, belonged in rooms like this. Dressed in a suit, with his hair slicked back, he strode towards us scowling in a way that was meant to be intimidating but instead reminded me that we were both single.

“Damn. Looks like I’m in trouble with daddy.”

# Ivo



I'd been glaring at Ciarán and Toni for most of the evening. I rarely got angry at Ciarán, even when he was being self-indulgent in the way omegas could get. But tonight, he shouldn't be sticking so close to her. Tonight, he needed to be with his pack, showing where his allegiances were. Especially with my "Aunt" Sarah flitting about like the blood-sucking vampire she was.

She'd glided into my space, asking how my father was, insinuating that if his pack were looking for a new omega, she'd be willing to take the role. Like fuck my dad would look twice at the omega who'd treated his sister like shit.

"Fuck," I snapped. Ciarán was up to no good because he and Toni were looking at me. He wasn't an ass. He wouldn't tell her about my little, and completely inappropriate, crush.

"What?" Julian asked, having just come down from dropping Gwen off on the first floor. Of all the pack, he seemed to be the only one relaxed enough to handle this evening.

"Those two," I growled. "Ciarán should be with you, not talking to Toni."

"Actually, I'm fine."

"You are fucking on edge," I told him. "You all are, and he should be with you."

"You're projecting, Ivo." He chuckled.

I wasn't touching that accusation with a ten-foot pole. Pack came first, and Ciarán was treating Toni like pack. So, I deflected by attacking our common enemy. "Sarah should shrivel up and die."

"Now that I think we can all agree with."

"I'm making this right."

I stormed over to the two omegas. Perhaps that was a bit dramatic, but it pissed me off. I'd told Rafe to avoid Sarah's gallery like the plague. Just for tonight. But he'd insisted because the idiot was a control freak who dipped into emotional masochism. I glanced over to where he and Guy were chatting with Cameron, who seemed completely unaware of the drama going on. Ass.

But Rafe? My favourite cousin? No. He was looking at Toni with a fierce possessiveness that she was clearly not aware of. He did that sometimes with Ciarán, even though they were platonic. But the way he looked at Toni? It was a full-on alpha staring at his mate. Part of me was jealous of his open confidence, but a larger part was grateful that I was a beta who didn't have to deal with those emotions that could ride alphas and omegas so hard. The point, though, was that Sarah had noticed. She'd do anything to ruin his happiness, which was why I had to use Ciarán to distract Rafe and pull his attention away from Toni.

"Ciarán, go take care of your pack," I said when I reached his side. I couldn't look at her. Not yet. I could see the rebellion flash across his face. "Please. Sarah is being a cunt, and...they need their—fuck. Look, they need you—their omega. Sarah will cause trouble if she notices that Toni has connections with the pack still. And." I met Toni's eyes. "We don't need more speculation."

"Toni—" He turned to her, pleading and a bit urgent. Perhaps I'd interrupted at the wrong time. That would be just like me.

"I'll talk to you back at the house. Ivo's right."

He nodded and left without a word.

Toni and I stood there with a Ciarán-sized gap between us. I took a calming breath but instead, inhaled that heady mix of chamomile and champagne. Everyone else seemed to pick up on the bubbly sweetness, but it was the soothing herbal scent that got me going. Immediately, I found myself relaxing. Realising how rude and careless I had been.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I was rude—”

“I was being selfish. I wasn’t thinking about it.” She waved a hand around. “I think Ciarán thought he was making it up to me by sticking by my side.”

A waiter passed with a full tray, and I had him stop and load us both up. We now had our hands full of decent cava, of all things.

“Drink up,” I told her.

“Oh, Christ. You’re a trip. Are you going to get me smashed? Drink away my problems? I don’t need to get grunk. Drunk. My mouth isn’t on autocorrect.”

“Drink, Bubbles,” I ordered. “I’m drinking my problems because I have to deal with the back blow. Rafe is barely holding his shit together...”

“Shall we go punish Sarah?” she asked out of the blue. “I mean, we have a common enemy. And we’re uniquely placed to torment her.”

“And how is the dedicated bitch your enemy?”

“She was mean to Rafe. She sneered at me. She was more than mean and patronising to Gwen.” Her smile was a little lopsided. “I think you and I are friends. Allies. In the pack, but not part of the pack. I could use an ally like you. And allies help each other fight battles.”

She may have a point...

“After you.” I gestured toward the stairs, where Sarah was standing with the editor-in-chief at Bite Magazine. “The alpha she is with is Rolf. He is deaf in his right ear.”

“And she is on his right side.” She snickered.



“I’ll introduce you.” I glanced down at her profile. Her scent was refined champagne compared to the liquid in my glass. “It probably won’t be very interesting, but he hates omegas like her. The posh ones.”

“No...I. Holy shit.”

I looked up.

Sebastian was walking down the grand marble staircase with Gwen in his arms, her bare feet poked out, and she clutched her flat shoes to her chest with one hand while the other was wrapped around his neck. She looked furious. In fact, I couldn’t remember ever seeing the omega anything but happy. Yet, here she was, stiff as a board.

If she was a dragon, fire would be coming out of her mouth. Sebastian looked grim too, and at one point, said something to her that had her spine straightening. Neither of them was speaking, and the entire space had gone silent. The only sound was Sebastian’s shoes and then the clatter as Jasper, the only member of that pack worth anyone’s time, plodded down the stairs behind them with Gwen’s cane swung over his shoulder.

I sensed Toni move forward, and I growled.

“Wait until they are off the stairs,” I hissed.

Of course, she didn’t listen and pushed forward until she stood, looking up at them.

The second Sebastian’s foot hit the floor, Gwen spoke. “Put me down.”

“Put her down,” Toni echoed.

“Put her down at once!” Sarah shrieked. As if, somehow, Gwen was contaminating her precious alpha son.

Sebastian, in that obnoxious arrogance, kept walking, Jasper at his heel like a good dog and the rest of the pack trailing behind.

I had to move fast and grabbed Toni by her wrist before she confronted the alphas. “Don’t. Not by yourself.”

“Sebastian!” I called. It wasn’t an alpha bark, but it was enough to get him to stop. I pulled Toni after me until we were facing off with the pack. “Put her down. The lady asked—”

“The lady fell and broke her ankle.”

“The lady can speak for herself,” Gwen snarled. “It is sprained, not broken. I insist you put me down.”

I could see the moment Sebastian reined in the feral alpha. It was something he and Rafe had in common. This base, primitive need to dominate that boiled under the surface. For whatever reason, he was taking the situation with Gwen personally. Probably seeing an omega fall and hurt herself had triggered it, but I’d known him his whole life and had never seen Sebastian come close to losing his temper in public.

“Sebastian, give her to me. You know I’ll take care of her,” I said calmly. “I’ll take her home—”

He held her tighter to his body, then Toni just had to stick her nose in.

“Why the fuck do you think you have the right to hold her like that? Put her down, you stuffed shirt. Ivo will take care of her.”

“Simmer down, girly,” Jasper said. “We are just taking care of her. Gwen needs medical care.”

“Which I can provide,” Julian stepped into the frame, and I groaned. We did not need a pack stand-off. Too many eyes were on us, piecing apart the tension between the brothers’ packs and the omegas at the centre of the conflict.

“I want to go with Ivo,” Gwen’s voice was tight. “Please.” She tacked on the word when Sebastian’s grip tightened, his fingers biting into her thigh and arm.

I took that as my cue and stepped forward, slotting my arms around her. The transfer was not smooth in the slightest. Sebastian seemed reluctant to let her go, and it is much harder to carry a woman who is not relaxed.

“I want to hear what your progress is—”

“I’ll take you home now,” I cut Sebastian off. “Toni, come with me.”

Our little group cut through the crowd, who began murmuring as we passed.

“My cane!” Gwen twisted in my arms.

“We can get it another time.”

Outside, it was dark and quiet. We were lucky a taxi was waiting, and I bundled them inside. “A&E,” I told the driver.

I was exhausted by the time we made it back to the house. We’d dropped Gwen off at her flat, with strict instructions to stay where she was until tomorrow when one of us would stop by, and then the taxi had turned in the direction of Ivy Place, and Toni had promptly fallen asleep on my shoulder. She had only snuggled in closer when I tried to wake her, which is how I ended up carrying the sleeping omega up to her nest. I hesitated at her bedroom door, uncertain if I was even allowed inside. “Toni?”

She grumbled, her hand fisting my suit jacket.

“Sweetheart, you need to wake up.”

“Don’wanna.”

“Come on. We are at your nest.”

“Nest.”

“I’m going to put you down.”

“No. Nest. Tuck me in.” Somehow, a word was left unsaid. If she wanted to call me that, then I would probably perish. But I wasn’t going to force her. No. I was a let-it-go-naturally kind of man. One who had fantasies about omegas that were increasingly depraved.

“Fuck.” I should be looking anywhere else, instead, I looked down into her face. She’d gone through hell these last weeks. I knew the agony of losing a pack, being pushed aside for someone who was a better fit. And regardless if those punks had cheated on her or not, they didn’t deserve her if they could even for a moment consider exposing her to that

much pain. “You’re too beautiful for your own good,” I whispered. Just like with downstairs, I shifted her onto my shoulder, my hand cupping her ass over her dress, while I fiddled with opening the door. Her nest was dark except for the faint twinkle of a single strand of fairy lights. There were more strands swooping across the ceiling like a giant spider’s web. I hadn’t been in here since the first day, and in such a short space of time, she’d converted it into a real nest. The kind I remember my mother having.

Over the next week, we all relaxed into a routine. But I had to watch Ciarán scent mark Toni at every available opportunity. Little brushes of his fingers along her bare arms were the most obvious. Then it escalated to a hand on her waist when we walked home on the nights she bartended at Bubble and Smoke. Julian was worse, knocking their shoulders together, tugging on her hair, and laughing with her at every chance he had. Rafe followed her every movement with his eyes, missing nothing with his hungry gaze. My cousin didn’t have the balls to talk to her like an adult had settled on angry pining. And Guy? He hadn’t worked from home this much since lockdown. I’d lost count of the times I found him working in the office with Toni curled up in her chair with her laptop.

Me? I did my best to hold my distance...And I thought I was succeeding until Ciarán pointed out that I had filled the cupboard with her favourite snacks. I hated snacking. I hated myself for falling under her spell when she hadn’t once said she wanted to stay.

“You don’t have to do that.” I grabbed the laundry basket out of her hands one night when I found her loading the machine with my things. “We do our own laundry.”

“Not often enough. I’m an omega, I love pack scents but stinky socks are gross.” She tried to tug the basket out of my grasp. “Stop being so stubborn.”

“You’ve been taking dirty laundry to your nest,” I ground out. “Do you have their consent to do that?”

She jerked back like I’d slapped her and nearly lost her balance. “Fuck you. Ciarán leant me some sweats and Julian

some shirts. I washed them first.” She shook her head, then laughed in my face. “Are you jealous? Do you want me to wear your t-shirts around the house? Huh?”

Fuck. I swallowed. A self-conscious flush heated my cheeks. “No.” It was an obvious lie.

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll return their clothes. Will that make you feel better? Do you want to go through my nest and make sure it only smells of me? Because it is pretty rich when you carried me into my nest and left your scent all over the place.”

“You were asleep!” I shouted. “What was I meant to do?”

“Dump me on the floor the next time,” she snapped. The anger didn’t reach her eyes, which were glassy with unshed tears. “Fuck you, Ivo. Fuck you.”

“Language,” I growled.

“You aren’t my dad.”

Something twisted inside of me and I felt my cock harden in my jeans. Thank god the basket hid my embarrassing and illogical reaction. She was going to hate me if she smelt my arousal, and then what? I watched her, trying to pick up on any hint she’d noticed. Miraculously, she didn’t say anything. Instead, I had to watch her spin on her heel and stomp up the stairs. Halfway up, she stopped and came back down.

“You want to know something? I loved waking up to your scent in my nest. And I asked for those clothes because I need something to sleep in. I normally sleep naked but that isn’t exactly appropriate here. Now is it? And even if I was doing it for their scents, there is nothing wrong with wanting to be pack. So yeah, you caught me. I’m an omega who likes the scents of the people around me. My bad.”

“Toni.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She ran up the stairs, leaving me flustered, angry at myself, and stupidly jealous at the past version of myself who’d carried her upstairs and laid her down in her nest.

Julian had told me that her temper burned hot, so I tried not to take it personally. Especially when my instinct was to drag her into my arms and hug her, tell her I was so fucking sorry. But it seemed like my family had a natural gift for saying the wrong thing in the worst possible way to her.

I stuffed the clothes into the machine and put it on. Then grabbed tomorrow's load from the shelf and put it on top, that was our system. Normally the concentration of one person's scent didn't bother me. But this basket was full of Toni's sheets and her chamomile and champagne filled my senses.

Instantly, I had the vision of myself grabbing one of her shirts and huffing it while making myself come. All the time, imagining it was her smaller, softer hands on my cock.

"You're disgusting old man." I imagined her saying. "Jerking off and thinking of me. Do you think I'd let you touch me like that?"

Degradation wasn't my love language until that moment. But I wasn't painfully hard because of it. Because I'd flip her over my knee and turn her ass red for trying to top from the bottom. She'd be wet and begging.

And I'd be that disgusting old man getting off on it.

Slamming my door shut, I lay down on top of my blankets and conjured up the dirtiest fantasy I had of Toni, bent so far over that her hands were on the floor, exposing herself to me.

"Hold your ankles," I'd say. She'd give out a little moan as she shuffled her hands back, causing her legs, glistening with slick, to tremble as she tried to keep her balance. "Good girl."

Palming the soft cheeks, squeezing the flesh, I'd kneel behind her so that I could inspect her most intimate parts.

Her puffy, pink, wet pussy looking like the best meal I'd ever seen. I'd taste her with a few licks, savouring her arousal. She'd beg, so sweetly for more.

"Fuck," I gripped my cock at the head, manipulating the piercing at the tip to heighten the already overwhelming pleasure. "I'll make you feel good."

The fantasy took over. No longer content with a taste, I skipped teasing to suck on her clit. She'd moan, beg, plead for me to fuck her. As a gentleman, I'd oblige, thrusting my tongue into her sex and using my fingers to work her clit, pinching the sensitive bundle of nerves. I'd have to hold her steady with my other arm, banding it around her trembling thighs as she teetered on the brink of orgasm.

I'd ignore my rock hard cock. Until she came all over my face once, twice, I'd wait. In reality, I was fucking my fist, precum making my dick as slick as if I was buried deep in her tight quim. And each stroke, tugged on the row of barbells along my length. Jesus, what kind of heaven would it be to feel her squeezing down on me?

The fantasy morphed. She was now on her knees, presenting while I slammed into her. Each thrust pushing her up the mattress until I covered her completely. My sweet little girl would start getting desperate at this point, incoherent mewling gasps and the occasionally helpless pleas to let her come.

“So good, baby. So fucking good. Now come all over my cock like a good girl.”

And because in my fantasy, she was a trembling mess on my cock while coming all over her face, drowning me with her cum.

I was going insane, was already insane because I swore to god that I could taste her as I drank up her sweet release.

I came with a shout, ropes of cum landing on my stomach and chest. I didn't even care that it was a filthy dirty fantasy that she'd lick it off me if she was here. Just the thought caused me to come again. A reminder that I wanted someone so far out of the realm of possibility even fantasising about her made my head spin.

Still feeling guilty about the fight with Toni and what I'd done afterwards, I came home after a long night at the restaurant to find her still awake, her hair in a messy knot on the top of her head, wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt tucked into a pair of sleep shorts. It was the pair of socks that reached her

thighs which made my cock twitch. I'd been awake since five am, it was now two in the morning, but I still had the energy to have these fucking inappropriate thoughts about this—and only this—omega.

I watched her move around the kitchen as if she'd been there when it was designed. Hell, she'd been there for every pack meal for the past week, always ready to help out with washing dishes and setting the table.

“Hungry?” she asked when she noticed me. “I'm heating leftovers.”

“Sure.” I guess we were going to ignore what an asshole I'd been.

She wasn't graceful as she opened and closed drawers to pull out plates and reheat the cottage pie Rafe had made the other night, but she was brutally efficient, and the chef in me liked that. She handed me a plate and a glass of water.

“Eat and drink,” she said, digging into her own food as if she hadn't eaten in days. “I've always liked his cottage pie. Who knows why.” She licked her lips. “Probably because it was the only thing he could make that was halfway decent when we were students. We split the chores up and the only thing he excelled at was ironing.” She paused again. Then, without warning, a cloud passed over her face. “Do you want to tell me why you see me as such a threat to this pack? Because you were not it last night. I was trying to help lighten the load. And instead of accepting my help, you attacked me.”

I should have known better than be lulled by the comfortable lie that she'd forgotten what I said.

Tugging on my nose, I tried to formulate a response that wasn't insulting to her or Ciarán. “I'm worried that you are pulling Ciarán and the pack's interest when you have no intention of staying. You've ended things with the SweetNothings. I believe you don't want to get back together with them, but I also believe you aren't planning on dropping the divorce.”

“Wow. So you think I'm leading them on?”



“I’m not presuming anything, just watching how you act and what you say.” I grabbed her wrist as she tried to push away from the table. “But unconsciously, maybe, you are giving the impression that you want to stay.”

My grip tightened as she twisted her wrist as though testing how strong I was. For once, I wanted her to listen to me and understand I had her best interests at heart. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes bright and fierce at the same time. Did she like being restrained? That really would derail this conversation.

First, I had to apologise. “I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am for what I said last night. I’m out of my depth. You’ve been acting like you are pack, but we don’t know what your plans are after the divorce. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. Least of all you.”

“What if I told you I don’t want to leave?” Her question blindsided me.

“Don’t get attached until you know for sure,” I warned her. If it didn’t work out, if she left us, no them, again it would hurt a million times more than the first time. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Because that would break my heart.

“Sure thing, Dad,” she snapped and pulled her away, shoving her chair back and taking our plates, then slamming them in the sink. I rose from my chair and crossed towards her.

“Do you think I’m your daddy?” I asked, entirely on edge now.

“No.” She spun around, glaring at me. “If anything, you’ll be calling me daddy by the time I leave.”

“You have been allowed to run wild for far too long.” I felt the growl building. Her nostrils flared, a muscle ticking in her jaw. I reacted. Spinning her around, I forced her to bend forward and gave her three quick spanks on the sensitive skin where her thighs met the generous curve of her ass. “Fuck.” I stumbled away. “Fuck. I shouldn’t have done that.”

I shouldn't have done it, not just because I'd stepped right over the boundaries—discussed and implicit—we'd agreed on, but because even to my beta senses, her pussy smelled like heaven, her arousal blooming and driving me wild with the need to rip her sleep shorts off, tug my cock out and fuck the sass right out of her.

“Ivo.” Her voice was soft, breathless, and needy. I opened my mouth but had nothing to say to her. She straightened and turned towards me, nipples poking through that thin t-shirt and begging to be toyed with.

Without warning, she jumped. She fucking launched herself at me, legs going around my hips, face close enough to mine to kiss. I instinctively grabbed her waist, holding her steady and trying—and failing—to keep her from rubbing her pussy over me like a cat in heat. “I think you shouldn't tempt an omega like that...Daddy.”

I lost it. My sanity, my control, and every logical reason I shouldn't let myself taste her. “Baby girl.”

“Kiss me,” she sighed against my lips.

# TONI



The first brush of his lips was like showing a parched man water without letting him taste it. I couldn't let him stop there. Not after everything that had passed between us, not just the electric zing of arousal every time I was near him. Or the way he lifted me onto the countertop, the cold stone contrasting with the hot press of his body against mine. His hips slotted between my thighs, and the ridge of his cock was pressing against my core, making me wet. So wet.

Goddess, I needed this. Some human contact to create a new memory in this haunted house.

And we needed to exorcise all the anger from last night. We'd lashed out at each other. "I'm sorry for last night," I said, pecking the corner of his mouth. "I hate when we fight. I hate when we are pushing each other away, instead of being in each other's arms."

"Me too. I don't want to fight." He peppered my cheeks with swift presses of his lips. "Fuck, I've wanted to kiss you for the longest time."

I didn't want those almost innocent kisses though, and grabbed his face, holding him in place. "Kiss me like you mean it."

To put it simply, we were starved for each other. We were biting, sucking, devouring kisses paired with groping hands. Mine moved along the firm muscles of his barrel chest, up and around his thick biceps before plunging into his hair, holding him steady as if I feared he'd try to pull away.

He had his hands around my waist, then my breasts were weighed in his palms, squeezed. My nipples were plucked by skilful fingers.

“Have to taste,” he mumbled into the kiss. I grabbed the hem of my shirt and dragged it up to expose my naked breasts. He cupped both before latching on, drawing the hard, aching tip into his mouth, groaning as his tongue played across the sensitive flesh. He transferred his attention to the other, repeating the heavenly torture.

“More,” I begged. “More, or kiss me.”

“Toni,” he groaned, nuzzling my breasts. “We can’t do this.”

“Yeah, yeah. We can’t.” But we were. And then he was kissing me again, all the urgency returning tenfold as I wrapped my legs back around him. Hells, we weren’t just kissing anymore, but our bodies were pressed together, leeching each other’s warmth until an inferno burnt along where our bodies touched. He finally kissed me again, moving so that one thick thigh pressed between my legs and onto my exposed pussy. But he didn’t completely leave me. His hands remained on my thighs, stroking up and down, grounding both of us as we collected our ability to think again. “We can’t, Ivo.”

He stepped out from between my legs. I missed his heat, but the cool air on my slick sex helped me see things more clearly. Any of the pack could have walked in on us. And he was right last night. I couldn’t become attached, or attach them to me, until I knew what I wanted. Staying here was tempting, but who knew how long it would last. The travel bug might bite again and then I’d be off without looking back. I couldn’t do that to them. Especially not Ivo who had nobody and had been alone for so long.

“Whisht, Toni. Hush. I’m sorry. I took advantage. I’m a complete idiot. What was I thinking? Don’t kiss Toni, the dangerous omega.”

I realised he wasn’t speaking to me but to himself. I bit my tongue. He wasn’t wrong. Except, he was the dangerous

one. And for all of our sakes, but mainly the pack's, we couldn't do this. I couldn't allow myself to rip this pack apart. I had to make sure he would never try again. A small hurt now was better than a big one later. "Thanks, by the way. I'm glad I got that out of my system."

"What?" He blinked at me.

"You know what they say. The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else."

He sort of shrank in on himself, and I felt like a complete bitch. The only thing he had done was protect the interests of his pack rather than the woman he'd only known for a week or two. There was nothing wrong with that. Even in that kind of pain, because he looked hurt, he was still beautiful. Some kind of fallen angel.

"Thank you for telling me. I'm glad I could help."

He set me aside and walked off as if we hadn't just been playing tonsil hockey like a pair of kids.

I needed to sort through my feelings and get a fucking grip. Because right now, the only thing that had made sense was the beta with the fat cock and a mouth that convinced me kissing was a whole lot sexier than fucking.

I went to the basement bathroom and stripped my clothes off, threw them in the laundry with scent-cancelling detergent before stepping into the shower and scrubbing myself raw. Guy and his super nose would scent me if I wasn't careful. I didn't want to pass by Ciarán's nest or the alphas' rooms smelling of Ivo and arousal. It wouldn't be fair to rub it in their faces when it had been a moment of madness.

As my core ached to be filled, I refused to touch myself while I was here, or at least, only touch myself in the nest I was borrowing, and then make sure I washed before leaving the place.

Creeping up the stairs, I counted my lucky stars that the alphas and Ciarán weren't fucking. I didn't think I could handle that because Ciarán was sexy, and after tonight, I wasn't sure how I would handle being the other omega in this

house. How was he putting up with me? Multiple omegas in one home was rare, but it happened. It just tended not to be the ex of the pack.

I turned the handle and stepped into the perfect darkness of my temporary nest. I hadn't been lucky enough to have a proper nest in years. The one exception was during lockdown, and that had been the year I discovered that I loved photomanipulation. Before that had been temporary nests, or at worst, a huddle of blankets and pillows in a hotel room or on the band's tour bus. None of them was as cosy as this, though.

Especially after I'd unlocked one of the storage spaces under the eaves and pulled out a bag of unopened pillows and blankets. They were a little musty after ten years, but I'd chosen quality pieces for the heat I had hoped to be Claimed. I ignored the four suitcases in the other cupboard because it scared me a little that they hadn't thrown them out. Fuck, if Ciarán had opened them and discovered the airlock bags full of nesting materials, smelling of me and his alphas, he'd probably go berserk.

The next morning was the hottest on record for London.

Too hot for a flat that had no air conditioning, which, after spending time in New York City, seemed like a luxury I now couldn't live without. We threw open all the windows, and I ran to the shops to buy ice, but it wasn't enough.

"Let me go get a fan," I begged Mum, who stubbornly refused to do anything to make herself more comfortable. I also wanted a fan, so I could stay in my...I didn't dare say it. I wanted to spend time in my nest before I had to go to work. There were ten weeks before my next heat. Ten weeks to be at Bubble and Smoke, though I hadn't considered that when I'd made my deal with Ciarán.

Mum glowered at me. "Fine. But I don't like the idea of you going about on your own."

"Because I'm an unmated omega?" I asked. "It didn't bother you before. That isn't an accusation."

“Darling, I had no idea how...how transactional it was. I didn't think there was anything romantic, but I'd always assumed it was like an arranged marriage. Not omegas being picked out like a piece of real estate. I thought you had a choice.”

I blinked. “I do.”

“Do you? It seems that leaving caused more waves than just breaking up with a boyfriend.”

I knelt by her side. “It was a big deal. But I have a choice. You can't force an omega anymore.”

“I failed. I thought I failed you. I thought you were angry with me because I had failed to raise you as an omega.”

“Mum, there hasn't been an omega in our family. Ever.”

She nodded and brushed a hand across my cheek. “Still.”

I turned my face, so I could kiss her hand. It would have been a lie to say that I hadn't been angry with her. That I hadn't felt like a giant omega failure, that it was tattooed on my forehead, but I'd been to a therapist. I'd let go of that anger towards the woman who raised me the best she could. Who had always had my best interests at heart. “I'm going to get fans for us. Stay put,” I warned her.

“Go. Don't forget you have work tonight.”

I choked on a laugh. Forget? How could I forget when I'd woken up surrounded by the soft scents of Ivo and Ciarán?

I after lugging out at three shops, I finally found fans. It was a bitch carting them back to Mum's. The two fans had helped but it wasn't the same as the icy blast of American AC. That was one thing I missed about the States. Air-conditioning in the summer. The sun and heat hit differently here and it was easy to forget that the whole country was further north than the entire continental United States. We were closer to St Petersburg's latitude than New York's.

Thankfully, Bubble and Smoke had a working AC that hit me in the face with cold air as I pushed through the door.

“You look terrible,” George chuckled. “But cute. You look very cute.”

I caught my reflection in the mirror. My hair was in a high ponytail to keep my neck cool, I had a thin t-shirt over a full coverage bra and short circle skirt that I’d found in the back of my closet.

“I didn’t get much sleep, and I hate the heat.”

“You lived in New York City. How did you avoid the heat?”

“I lived in New York City where they have this little thing called air-conditioning,” I groused. “Did Ciarán get a new bartender? He said I was doing some hostessing today.”

“Aye, there is a new one coming in. He found someone but is a bit hush-hush about them,” the older omega said. He would be in the kitchen with Ivo all night, and a spark of jealousy flashed through me. I had no Claim to Ivo. George had his pack. It was stupid, idiotic, chaotic, and so many other things, but it certainly wasn’t rational.

“Will he be okay on his own?” I asked. “Ciarán, I mean. We have a large party, a birthday...”

“Don’t worry about me, Bubbles.”

I hadn’t noticed Ciarán enter. Despite the heat, he was in a long-sleeved linen oxford shirt. His only concession seemed to be unbuttoning it two or three buttons too many, which exposed his muscled chest. And then there were his forearms. My own catnip on a man, highlighted by the white fabric against his dark skin.

“If you keep salivating, I’m going to charge you for clean up,” he said, stars dancing in his eyes.

It wasn’t a birthday, which was the first sign that we were going to have problems. Instead, it was a young, newly formed pack. The alphas were puffing out their chests, ordering everything to shower their new omega with attention. Their friends were equally high on the pheromones that were pumping out of the happy pack.



“This isn’t good,” Alice, one of the beta waitresses, whispered. “A fight is going to break out.”

“Do we call someone?” I asked.

“I’ll ask Ivo,” she whispered.

“Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t like alphas,” she said even more softly. “I just...I don’t like alphas.”

“Then, let’s switch,” I told her. Sitting at the door would keep her away from the increasingly boisterous group. I squeezed her hand. “I’ll take them.”

I crossed to the bar where Ciarán had his head down, fixing another round of cocktails. They were the kind that early twenty-somethings thought were fancy. Every one of them was going to end up with the worst kind of hangover tomorrow morning, and they deserved it. “I’m taking over the party, group, whatever. Alice isn’t feeling very comfortable around the alphas.”

“What? She didn’t...” He frowned at the young waitress, who had settled on the stool by the door and was speaking to someone on the phone. “Okay. But let me know if—”

“I’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t fine. They didn’t notice at first that their server had changed, but once they did, the young alphas in the party who weren’t in a pack—or didn’t have an omega, it was hard to tell—started to make comments. My scent wouldn’t proclaim me as being unclaimed, but at the same time, there were no alpha scents clinging to my body.

“What is a pretty omega like you—”

“Can I get you any dessert?” I asked. I hadn’t done much waitressing as an omega. There was a physical barrier between omegas and customers when you worked behind the bar, so this was a new experience and one I wasn’t enjoying.

“I’d have a taste of your sweetness...” he leered.

“If you—”

He reached around and put a hand on my ass. I don't know if I was more shocked by the contact or the fact he was doing it in a place like Bubble and Smoke, which had been featured in magazines as an omega-safe space and which had a reputation for being classy if you wanted to be a little crass.

"Take your hands off me."

"An omega like you should be taken—Fuck!" he shouted.

Guy had appeared out of thin air. I hadn't even realised he was behind me. He was the least classically handsome of the pack. His lips were a little too thin, his eyes a little too bright blue, his hair a little too long and curly, his jaw too sharp and long, and his forehead high. Overall, he was a little too everything, and I loved every angle and peculiarity that he represented.

He was, if I was being honest, my first love. My first and deepest love, the one whose eyes haunted me when I thought about the day I left. And now, he'd appeared like a roaming knight, saving the fair damsel.

"Keep your hands off her," he growled, putting all of the weight of an older alpha behind the words. The restaurant went silent. The once loud and happy table stilled as they watched their friend bow to the force of Guy's personality. "Take your hands off and get out before I make a phone call. Touching anyone without their permission? Yeah? That is assault. Touching an omega without permission..."

"Mate, sorry. I didn't know she was yours," he muttered and tried to pull his hand from the vice-like grip.

"I am not your 'mate', mate. She is her own person and not the property of anyone. Get out of here." Guy released his wrist, and with an arm wrapped around my waist, he stepped back.

It wasn't until he stood that it became clear how drunk the young alpha was, but he obeyed, and that was all that mattered.

"Your bill will be with you shortly," Guy informed them. "And show some respect towards omegas if you ever want to

come here again. Otherwise, I'll report all of you."

All throughout, my heart pounded in a mix of relief that someone had stepped in but also a thrill at Guy, sweet Guy, had been the one to do it. Ivo? I might have expected that. Ciarán, too, because he was here. But my Galahad was Guy. I relaxed in his arms as he backed us away.

"Come on," he said and pulled me into the small bathroom. With ease, he lifted me onto the countertop. I watched in fascination as the alpha, who'd always had a kind of lean strength to him, ran hands over me as if searching for an injury we both knew wasn't there. Of all my ex-alphas, he was the most mysterious. The one who called to my soul. The one I'd literally called when I was at my lowest because all I ever heard from his voice was understanding.

"Guy, I'm fine."

"He was touching you," he growled. "He put a hand on you."

I cupped his face between my hands. His eyes closed, deep breaths filling his lungs before he slowly released them. "I am fine."

His eyes snapped open. The light behind them was feral. I'd never been so close to a feral alpha before. It was so unusual, but in the tiny bathroom, in a major city in the world, I was closeted with a feral alpha, one barely controlling himself. And a thrill shot through me. This was what it felt like to be an omega, my instincts cried. Back when we knew nothing about being civilised and relied on raw instinct.

"I'm fine," I tried to soothe him with a purr.

"I am not going to let someone, anyone, touch you without your express permission. Ever. Not me, not the pack, not anyone," he said with such force that it left me rattled. Where was this coming from? It hadn't been an innocent touch, but I could have handled it.

"Guy, I am okay."

"Bambi..." He sounded pained when he used his old nickname for me. My hands dropped to his neck so I could

draw his face closer to mine, allowing him to scent me. It was wrong; it was taboo to have another omega's alpha scent me. I wasn't thinking clearly, though. It even excited me to think about Ciarán knowing what we were doing.

He had said it excited him to think of me with his alphas. But this wasn't about sex; this was far more intimate. And as Guy nuzzled my neck, drawing his nose against my throat, I sighed. I'd missed this intimacy. Guy's mixture of ginger and wood shavings had always calmed me, and I leaned closer to get more of his scent. That was when I felt his lips hovering above my scent gland—the traditional place for a Claim. Warm breath tantalised my skin, and the throb on my thigh was nothing to do with arousal, though I was that. Aroused, that is. And from the press of him between my legs, so was he.

“You can scent mark me if it would make you feel better,” I said, terrified that he would. Terrified that he wouldn't.

“I know,” he whispered. My breath caught when those lips brushed the sensitive spot. “But. You. Are. Safe. From. Me.”

Each word was clipped, defined. It sounded like a rejection, it really did, but I didn't feel the sting of not being wanted. Quite the opposite. I felt a heady power over him that he needed to be so precise with his words. The power flowed through my veins like a drug, and when we parted, when he stepped out from between my parted thighs, the electricity that had always hummed between us sparked and shimmered in the air.

“Ciarán will want to see that you are safe.” His voice was raspy. There was no guilt, no worry that his omega would protest. It took all my control not to have a panic attack. How could he be so confident that Ciarán wouldn't fall into a jealous rage? It was only the knowledge that Guy knew his omega better than me that gave me the courage to leave the bathroom with Guy pressed against my back, a hand on my waist.

Ciarán hovered, arms crossed, his face pinched. But on seeing us, he stepped into my space, pushing me against Guy's chest. The omega dropped his face to where Guy had been

scenting me and released a deep, shuddering breath. He peppered kisses along my neck.

“You’re okay.” He seemed to reassure himself. “You are okay.”

“I’m fine. It wasn’t a big deal. He was drunk, Ciarán.”

“He was...he overstepped,” Ciarán snarled. “This place has a reputation for being a safe place for omegas to work without getting harassed by our customers.”

“And it is still that. Thanks to Guy, who arrived like a knight in shining armour, a real Galahad.”

“But if he hadn’t...”

“Then, you would have helped. Or Ivo,” I said. The pack’s response baffled me. It scared me. I was in danger of falling into a need to be around these men. I couldn’t let myself get caught up in a pack where I had no place. Mum had been right; I needed to find a pack. So, I reluctantly stepped away from the two men who seemed determined to drench me with their scents.

“Also—”

“We closed for the day. We can take you home,” Ciarán said quietly.

“That’s fine. I’ll call a taxi.”

“We will take you home,” Ivo said. I hadn’t seen him before. But when our eyes met, I saw a furious stubbornness that I wouldn’t be able to fight, even if I had tried.

“Okay,” I sighed. I wanted to kick myself for giving in too quickly. “Let me get my things.”

They decided that Guy, who still seemed on edge, would drive me home. I nodded absently as I pulled out my phone to check my messages. Seven missed calls from Mum in the last thirty minutes? Five messages? A voicemail? I opened the first message which was sent over two hours ago.

@Mum: Darling, I’ve fallen. Please call.

An hour later she'd tried calling me for the first time.

@Mum: Can't reach you. Called 999 and they are sending an ambulance.

@Mum: Please call. They think I've broken my hip. Going for x-ray.

@Mum: Broken hip!

@Mum: Having surgery.

"Fuck," I whispered. "Mum fell. I need to find out which hospital. Where would they have taken her? She has lung cancer. Oh god. Oh god. What am I going to do?"

"Toni? Deep breaths," Ivo said, pulling me close and running a hand up and down my back. "Ciarán, call Julian. She lives near King's Cross if that helps."

"Then it will be University College Hospital," Guy said with the authority of the only alpha in the room. "I'll take her. Call me if you learn otherwise."

"Sure. Toni, your mum will be fine."

"I'm coming, too," Ciarán said.

"I'll close up. Go with her."

I wanted to complain and say Ivo needed to come with us, but that would be unreasonable. Completely unreasonable for every possible reason, but it didn't stop my desire for him to be with me. To have his strength next to me.

Julian was waiting for us at the entrance to A&E. He grinned at me. "Sorry. Your mum is a nightmare patient. She complained to the nurses that there is no herbal tea."

"Is she out of surgery?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"No. She is in surgery now. I know the surgeon. She is in expert hands. I'm just reporting what the nurse said. I also saw

the x-ray. It is a simple fracture, so it's straightforward. She'll need to be in—"

"How did it happen?" I interrupted.

"She was going down the stairs and slipped. The carpet on the stairs was loose."

"Fuck. I told her to be careful about that."

"Don't overthink it, Tones." He wrapped his arms around me, stiffening for a moment when he caught Guy's scent on me—most likely on my skin, hair, and clothes. "We've got it taken care of."

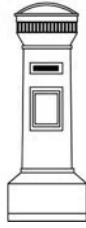
We. Was that the hospital or the pack? I pulled away and immediately missed his warmth and that all too-familiar scent that, for a moment, had me forgetting I didn't belong to this pack.

While we waited for news, Guy prowled in front of us, keeping Ciarán and I hemmed in with Ivo sitting to the side, legs spread so wide it would be impossible for anyone to sit next to him. It felt like pack. I snuggled into Ciarán and tugged Ivo's sweatshirt around my body. It wasn't a nest, but it was as close as I was going to get under the circumstances.

"Get some sleep, Bubbles."

I hummed and closed my eyes.

# RAFE



Hospitals.

I'd never met someone who actually liked them. Prior to today, I'd never had many feelings or opinions about them. They were not places of calm or quiet. I had no control over the comings and goings.

But today, I cared.

But today, I watched Toni pacing up and down a corridor, looking lost, and I knew my place was not at her side.

"Everything alright?" I asked Ivo. My cousin and I were close. He'd been living with us for nearly two years now. What had meant to be a few months had extended, and I was patiently waiting for the right time to tell him that I had put his name on the pack registry.

"The surgery should be simple. Julian is with a patient now, so he can't be here, but he met us when we arrived." He did the nose thing. A habit from the time he had always had hay fever. "Gloria will have to go somewhere with fewer stairs to make a full recovery. At the moment, she has to climb fifteen steps from the road to the flat, and the lift is unreliable. And they don't have a walk-in shower. Not like the one in my suite." His point was left unsaid.

I nodded, not quite trusting myself to speak, to act. I'd have to leave that to someone who had more finesse than I possessed. Ciarán probably would have the pleasure of wheedling Toni into having her mother move into Ivo's room.

"I'll order a shower seat and see about—"



“That is not what I mean,” he snapped. “I do mean for you to move Gloria in with us. But gently. Asking rather than acting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think I was the one who got the number of steps out of her? Guy and Ciarán have been pestering her since we got here.”

“Have they mentioned Gloria moving in?” I stuffed my hands into my jacket pockets.

I needed to...No. I didn't need to have Toni's mum under my roof. I wanted her to be there, to find another way to tie Toni to us. Since her breakup, I'd held back staking a claim. Fate was handing me the most perfect opportunity to manifest my ideal pack. As much as I knew Ciarán would be part of our pack the first time we met him. As much as I knew Ivo belonged with us. As much, if not more, I knew that Antonia Vane was ours. Not just mine but Julian's, Guy's, Ciarán's, and Ivo's. Her mother was merely the carrot.

“It's not the time,” he insisted, almost to himself. He was a huge man, a gentle giant who had gone too long without someone to love. “Rafe...what am I going to do? I like her. That little omega is unlike any I've ever met. I'm not going to let any of us cram our fences and spook her. We need to go slow over unsure ground.”

“That is why all contingencies must be considered.” I frowned into the distance. We'd veered completely off-topic. Ivo was correct. We were rushing into an impossible fantasy where Toni wanted to stay. And instead of considering what she wanted, we made plans and discussed outcomes without speaking to her. Manoeuvring her had pushed her away the first time. I opened my mouth to take back everything I'd said, but Ivo was there before I had the chance.

“Sometimes, you sound so much like your father. You look like the general, too. And at some point, you need to stop thinking that is a bad thing.”

“I don’t hate my father,” I snapped. “I don’t. I hate what he did to my mother.”

“Rafe?” I turned to find Toni looking at me with those eloquent eyes that spoke to me, sometimes louder than words ever could. “Can we talk for a minute?”

“I’ll go. Stay strong, sweetheart.” Ivo gave her shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the others. The intimate gesture caught me off-guard, and a sting of fierce jealousy flashed through me.

“Antonia.” I shifted my weight as if I could physically restrain myself from touching her the way Ivo had. Then I caught the whiff of Guy all over her. As if he’d scent marked her beyond recognition.

“Thank you. For not.” She closed her eyes and held herself so still before letting out a soundless breath. “Thank you for being here but not being all alpha about it. Guy got to be the alpha today.”

“Is that why you smell of him?” I asked.

She smiled at me. She used to say she could only take so much alpha, and if more than one of us started being alpha, she’d stop us by saying she didn’t have time for that kind of drama.

“What can we do?” I asked. I wouldn’t be an alpha if I didn’t have the instinct to come to the rescue of an omega.

Of my omega, my heart told me. I looked over at Ciarán. My omegas. Plural. “Anything. Step back, step in. Take your pick,” I added.

“Can we keep things like they are? Try not to act like I’m pack? I never thought I’d see you all again like this. Maybe at court, yes/ I knew I’d see at least you, then. But not so up close and personal. Not as a pack with another omega.”

I wanted to purr for her, pull her close, and tell her it would be okay. Not because of alpha and omega dynamics. But because I’d spent four years with this woman. I knew her, even if that her had changed in the last ten years, her

fundamental goodness wouldn't have been altered. And when she nodded, I could see that she trusted me.

"I'll explain to the pack that you want us to back off," I assured her. It was exactly what Ivo had suggested. "Take care of your mum. And Toni? None of our numbers has changed."

"Neither has mine."

I clenched my jaw. "Thanks. I, uh, need to get going."

"Okay. I'll, um, tell the others you are at the office?"

"Thank you."

"Rafe? You are looking good. I'm happy you have Ciarán. I—" She swallowed and flushed from the roots of her hair all the way down to the deep V of her shirt. "I probably shouldn't say that. And, oh, I'm such a mess with all of this. I need you to know that I didn't leave because of you. Or them. But it was never because of you."

If I'd been clenching my jaw before, it was even tighter now. I had to get away from her before I went full alpha on her. She said Guy had done that. Hell, she had thanked me for showing restraint.

I got out of there. But when I hit the street, I had nowhere to go. I didn't want to go home. For God knows how long, I'd be waiting for news. I could go back to the office. I'd ripped out of there like a tornado, and there was work to do. But all I could think about was the fact we had been a phone call away. A message away for ten years. And my fucking pride had been so destroyed that I'd never once reached out. Never once checked in with her or asked if she was okay.

It wasn't enough to keep tabs on her blog, to use my father's government contacts to keep an eye on her and ensure no harm ever came to her. No, that was the high-handed bullshit that only ever went down in fictional situations. And even if this was fiction? Toni was not the heroine who would appreciate such tactics. Somehow, I was grateful that she'd told me. That she'd laid it out so cleanly. The line had always been open, just none of us used it.

"Hey, Rafe! Wait." It was Ciarán. "Where are you going?"

“She doesn’t need all of us standing around right now. And I’m on edge. It won’t help. Pack meeting tonight.”

“Whatever. Where are you going? You know I can be worried about you even if we aren’t fucking, right?”

I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, forcing him down to my height. Exerted that little bit of alpha through my Claim and watched him relax. That was all he had needed. But I put it into words anyway. “You are my omega. Always. And I like that you worry about me. I really do. But this? Me going for a walk. That is about being a good friend to Toni. She told me Guy alpha’d her today. I’m on my last tether. I don’t want to get on her bad side just because I want to go around and hulk smash.”

He leaned in close and kissed my lips. Nothing sexual, but a kind of benediction of understanding. “You are a good alpha and the best pack leader. Take care of yourself? I don’t want to worry about you.”

“Ciarán? Let me give you a bit of advice. It is past its expiration date by ten years, but that woman in there? She is like a rare orchid or a cat. Too much attention, then she withers and dies or scratches your face off. Too little, and she fades or scratches your face off. The key is patience and listening, watching, and learning what she likes. For example. Right now, she is going to want coffee. Lots of coffee.”

“Got it. Orchids, pussy, and coffee.”

I grinned and gave his cheek an affectionate pat. “I’ll be at the office. Maybe pick up Indian on my way home. That’s her favourite.”

“So, we can add spice to your little list.”

“Brat.”

“Just because you like it.”

*Ten Years Ago*

*A low-key Christmas, surrounded by the people I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, beat every holiday memory I had. Just the four of us, some homemade decorations, a platter*

*of store-bought mince pies, and a cheap bottle of Prosecco beat the pack of my childhood, swathes of red velvet ribbon, and smoked salmon with champagne.*

*Of course, I had a bottle of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti 1990 ready in the dining room, but none of them knew the difference between a thirty-pound bottle of red and one that cost thirty thousand. But that, for me, was the thrill. They loved life without caring for prestige or the price tag. Hell, Julian preferred a pint of whatever was on tap. And dammit, I loved them for not having expectations, for taking me as I was, emotionally stunted and aggressively alpha.*

*That is why it gave me so much pleasure to watch Toni as she opened the simple blue wrapping paper of Julian's gift. We'd talked about presents and courting gifts. How we needed to woo her in a different way to what other omegas expected. Julian had been a big help. He'd grown up in a beta family, surprising everyone when he presented as an alpha. His advice had been to not overwhelm her. I couldn't stop the smile when she finally got to the small box. Other omegas might expect velvet boxes to hold expensive jewellery, and in its past life, this box had held a priceless diamond and pearl collar I'd inherited from my grandmother. One day, I might persuade Toni to wear it, but for now...Julian was borrowing it to hold his present.*

*"Oh, Julian!" She pulled out the first of three brass and enamel keychains. Each had our name and number on it and was shaped like a red postbox, a phone booth, and Big Ben. "I...I don't know what to say."*

*"Just wanted to make sure that nothing could ever keep us from you if something happened. It isn't..."*

*"It is perfect." She twisted in his lap and kissed him. There didn't need to be hungry and desperate explorations of mouths to demonstrate the passion and love in their kiss. So different from the upper-class packs, where omegas and their alphas didn't pick each other. Love was far from the minds of those omegas. It might be the alphas who ran and owned the pack, but the senior omega was the one who determined the future of the pack.*

*I hadn't waited to tell Toni that the omega who'd rejected her that day we met was from my pack. At the beginning, I'd felt a small thrill knowing I was the one who'd swooped in and chosen and been chosen by this incredible omega. I'd heard from my godfather, one of my old pack's alphas that Sarah was furious when she'd learnt that Toni was mine. She hated the idea that I was forming a pack with no issue. While my half-brother, her precious alpha son, struggled to find an omega.*

*"Me next.," Guy said, handing over something heavy. I didn't know what he'd picked up for her. Of the four of us, he was the most mysterious.*

*"God, why is this so heavy?" She hefted it in two hands.*

*"You'll never find out if you don't open it."*

*She straddled Julian's thigh, perching the present on her lap. Her pink tongue flicked over her bottom lip, fingers hovering above the long rectangle. "Here goes."*

*The wrapping paper came away slowly as if it, too, wanted to prolong the suspense.*

*"What...Oh!" She hefted a long cylinder of white marble over her head, waving it like a sword.*

*He'd picked out a marble rolling pin, and if she wasn't careful, Julian's head was about to be bashed in.*

*"So that you can beat us if we misbehave," he coughed. "I didn't want to buy the normal dagger."*

*I shook my head. It seemed that both of them had gone for very traditional gifts—with a very modern twist. The keychain represented the collar engraved with her alpha's names and the dagger meant to protect the omega from strangers.*

*"Rafe?" Julian prompted me.*

*"Right." I reached under the scrawny Christmas tree. "It isn't...It reminded me of you. How you are always wanting to make new memories."*

*She jumped up and kissed my lips. "That is exactly what I want. You thinking of me."*

*“Fuck. If that is all, you should have said,” Julian joked. “It would have saved me a lot of money.”*

*“Open it, Antonia,” I ordered.*

*She ripped the paper off this time. Inside the shoe box, which was the only thing I could find that fit was, “A camera?”*

*I felt my cheeks heat. “It isn’t clever—”*

*“I love it, alpha. I want to use it during my next heat. I want to capture your face when I suck you off. Or when Guy ruts into Julian...I want to keep all of those memories.”*

*“We will make so many memories that you won’t be able to keep up.”*

*“But you’ll only Claim me once,” she said, all teasing leaving her voice. “I want to make sure that when we are old, when our children are picking out their own omega, I can look at those pictures and remember exactly what being part of a pack is about.”*

*“Omega.” Guy prowled towards us, pressing himself into her back and crowding her against my chest and aching erection. “Why not start now? Suck your alpha off. Make him come with your mouth. I’ll take that picture before fucking our sweet Julian so hard that he goes crazy, his knot lodged in your hot cunt—”*

*“Guy—” Julian sounded like an omega in heat; his voice was that strained with need. I looked over at him and smirked at the sight. He’d removed the Santa costume, except the red trousers, which were tented. “We have to wait and fuck after we’ve opened the presents.”*

*“Nuh-uh.” Toni shook her head, bringing my attention right back to her and the way her hands fumbled with my buckle. There was the sound of clothes being removed, but my eyes were focused on the omega in front of me. “I want to thank my alphas properly before we continue opening presents.”*

I blinked awake and rubbed a hand down the length of my hard cock, which was trapped in my trousers. I must have

fallen asleep and ended up in that strange dream memory of one of the happiest days of my life.

“Sorry,” Toni’s soft voice had me jerking, looking down, relieved that my desk hid my erection. “You were sleeping.”

“You woke me—”

“Sorry about that. How do you find anything in here?” she asked, moving into the space.

“Just don’t touch my very specific filing system,” I said in all seriousness, eyes darting to the piles of paperwork I had stacked on all the flat surfaces in the home office.

“Of course not.”

I heard when she turned the key, locking us in. Instinct had me drawing in a deep breath, trying to catch her scent and maybe, hopefully, understanding her mood. Nothing bitter, just the smooth bubbles of the most expensive champagne and the underlying mellowness of chamomile. It all indicated her mother was in the clear.

“Are you all going to sniff me out today?” she asked, her tone so light I knew she must be hiding something.

“We could. But I don’t think we need to. I don’t need to. You belong here as long or as little as you want.”

“And if Ciarán realises he doesn’t want to share his alphas?” She walked all the way to my side, leaving barely an inch between us.

I wasn’t going to risk an argument by asking why she wanted to know these things. If she was talking about staying with the pack, I’d do everything in my power to assure her she would be welcomed with open arms.

“A pack is a democracy. I’m not going to have one member dictate to the rest.” Gritting my teeth, I explained, “I mean myself. I wouldn’t dictate, not this time.”

“Rafe.” She reached out and took my hand—it was the first time she had voluntarily touched me in ten long years. A chaste press of skin that sent a rush of need through me. Arousal added spice to the deep desire for what I had thrown



away. Her trust. I'd destroyed that beyond saving. "Rafe, that isn't what I meant. Ciarán isn't Sarah. Regardless, omegas aren't exactly built to share their alphas. The whole reason—and it isn't likely they tell alphas this—but the older omega picking the next one is so he or she can control the passage of power. One omega per generation. That is how it works. We are conditioned that way."

"Sarah kicked my mother out because she was jealous that my father loved my mother more. That had nothing to do with whether or not she could share because she was an omega. A true pack has enough love to go around. Understand?"

"You are trying to put theory into practice," she pushed on. "Generations of reality. You cannot remake the rules to suit your desires. You manipulated the system to sign two omegas into your pack, even when you are perfectly aware of how... forbidden it is."

"Then know that you have my vote, and you have Ivo's, you have Guy's... You have Julian's, you have Ciarán's. But the most important vote? The only one that matters? That's your vote. If you want to stay with us, then we can do that." She shook her head, tugging her hand away, but I refused to let her pull away. "Not fighting for you was the biggest mistake of my life."

She gave me her profile. "Don't say that."

"Why not? I should have tracked you down and showed you exactly how much I'd fucked up."

"And Ciarán?"

"I am greedy. If I want the two best omegas in the world, then I will make them mine. Ciarán's heat is near. I'll remind both of you why I lead this pack, then."

"You talk about democracy in one breath, and the next, you brag about your dominance." Despite her snappy retort, her scent blossomed between us, rich with arousal and longing.

I caged her against the desk. "I never claimed to be a simple man."

Her head whipped around, and she glared. “You are not a gentleman.”

“No. I am above such petty moralities. I do what I want. And the one time I didn’t, I lost you.”

I ducked close to inhale the champagne and chamomile. I grew hard, my cock reacting to her proximity and the illicit fantasies of her and Ciarán. She whimpered, tilting her head to the side, offering me greater access to where her scent was strongest. It was perfection that I would hold onto for the rest of my life. “You’re mistaken if you think I’ll permit you to get away this time.”

“You have to think about the rest of the pack,” she insisted, pushing me away with the gentlest touch. “This isn’t about me. It will never be about me.”

“You care for this pack as much as any of us. Don’t fake indifference when you would sacrifice your own happiness to protect each and every one of us. No one would believe it.”

“Then I’ll have to make them believe it. Don’t underestimate me.”

I was on her again, grinding my hips into hers. Nothing could stop me now, instinct gripping my thoughts, reactions, and every part of my being incapable of rational thought now that I was drunk off her scent and the soft press of her body against mine. “I did that once; I’ll never do it again. But return the compliment. I mean what I say. I want you to be part of this pack, legally and sexually. Ciarán’s due for his heat, and you will be there. Stuffed full of cock and opening his eyes to the best blowjob of his life. I haven’t forgotten how clever your tongue is.”

“Rafe,” she growled. “That won’t happen.”

I moved further back, throwing my hands in the air. “Fine. But if you continue being a brat and doing the opposite of what I say—”

“There you go.” She shook her head. “Centring yourself because you can’t imagine that I can’t act independently.” She grabbed her laptop from the chair and stormed to the door. Her

next words were so soft I almost missed them. “I guess I was right. You haven’t changed.”

I watched her leave. Why was I always watching her leave? Didn’t she understand how I knew what she needed, and she was pursuing what she wanted. Running a hand over my face, I cursed myself for doing precisely what I knew was by far the worst way to behave with her.

“You are a fucking idiot,” Guy growled from the shadows.

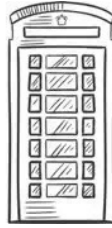
I jumped.

“What matters is her. If she goes after something we don’t agree with, it isn’t, never was, and never will be, our place to tell her what to do. You can let Ciarán make decisions but not Toni. Is it because you aren’t fucking him?”

“Ciarán is different. I understand him.” I ground my teeth together. “She...I lose my mind with her. The idea of her acting without my knowledge—”

“Then you don’t deserve her.” His lip curled. “Sometimes, you disgust me.”

# JULIAN



Watching my old friend bounce back from the end of her engagement should have been torturous. Instead, I struggled to keep the grin off my face. Toni was charging full steam ahead, just like she had when she'd failed her geography exam when we were fifteen.

“Fuck that.” I remembered her burning the textbook, cursing maps and landmasses, and the next day, vowing never to let rote memorisation ruin her life. She'd walked into our lesson, looked Miss Grant straight in the eye and declared that she would be symbolically dropping the class in favour of focusing on religious studies—which she hated with a passion—and home economics, which she equally despised. Miss Grant had nodded and asked the class to turn to page one-fifty-seven.

Whether spite motivated her or the determination not to dwell on failures, she'd pulled off a remarkable perfect score on our next geography pop quiz. I'd barely passed and asked how she'd achieved her grade. “I stopped memorising and started looking at the colours on the map.” She'd shrugged like it was nothing. Simply put, Tones was able to move on through sheer tenacity.

This, I realised, was how she hadn't been pulled into a spiral of self-destructive behaviour after she'd left. We'd been consigned to “geography” status in her mind. Knowing that made me smile. Being a colour on a map reminded me that even fifteen years didn't change the core of a person.

I kept my mouth shut every morning when she walked in with Ivo after a run or I caught her scraping out the last bite of peanut butter at one am when the two of us slipped out of bed for a midnight snack. No words, just passing the jar back and forth before trudging upstairs, and giving each other small smiles when we spilt to go to bed.

I didn't want to know what she was thinking. Actions, they said, spoke louder than words and she was acting just like the Toni I'd grown up with and fallen in love with.

As much as my stolen moments with Toni, made my heart skip, Ciarán remained my priority. My omega who got served first, who I opened doors for, who I took out for a date to his favourite restaurant for no other reason than I got off on the face he made when he groaned in culinary heaven with each morsel of muscles.

"Alpha," he purred, running his foot along my calf. "I think you are trying to woo me."

"I'll never stop wooing you," I replied. "I want you feeling as special and precious as those early weeks when we were courting."

"And Toni? Is eating peanut butter at the witching hour courting her?"

I shrugged and searched for the words. "She was my friend first. Losing that relationship hurt. Having her around reminds me of the past. But, looking back, I don't know how much effort we put into wooing her. Things just came together."

"Then you need to woo her."

I grabbed his hand. "Is that really what you want?"

"She...Rafe described her as a cat. I want to lure her in like a stray cat. Tasty treats until she's brave enough to come inside. Eventually, if we treat her right, she'd climb into Rafe's lap for a nap." He sipped his glass of champagne and winked at me.

"Isn't that what Ivo wants? Her napping with her pussy in his lap?"

He choked. “How do you know about that?”

“You teased him about it. I overheard.”

“Just, uh, don’t let him know that you know.”

I leant across the table and stole a quick kiss. “Hmm, sounds like there is a story there.”

“Mind your own business, alpha.” He leant forward. “You want to know a secret?”

“Sure.”

“I think asking Gloria to move in might convince Toni to stay.” A cheeky grin crept over his face. “Besides, I miss having a big pack. If you want to woo me, you can get me Gloria moving in.”

I sat back. “Shit, that isn’t a bad idea.”

“And don’t worry about space. Rafe mentioned fostering alphas and omegas from beta homes, so I’ve made an offer on the house next door. We can knock through on the ground floor. Toni and I can kick you lot into the other house and we can finally have alpha and omega wings instead of living on top of each other.”

The house next door wasn’t on the market. My mouth dropped open. “I thought you liked it when I lived on top of you.”

He rolled his eyes. “This isn’t the time for flirting. When it’s just the six of us, yes I like how cosy the house is. But Gloria plus anyone we foster? Nope. More space is required, alpha mine.”

I shook my head, flabbergasted by how quickly things were changing. Toni had been with us for almost a month and Ciarán (and Rafe because that toffy-nosed wanker was probably making similar plans) was already thinking up ways to grow our pack.

“Do it. So long as you add a door from our side of the house to yours. Because I’m not walking up and down stairs to see my omega.”

The day after date night with Ciarán, I stopped by to see Gloria. My mother-in-law was as tough as old boots. It took a lot to be part of a beta lineage that originated in the demi-monde and rejected everything from packs to marriage. Independence had been bred into Toni, something I should have realised. But the rush of creating a pack had blinded me to the quiet ways she'd chafed at the restrictions of pack life. Keeping her flat in the omega residence, for one. The fact she'd asked to travel when there were a million other things an omega might prioritise—like a real nest.

As her oldest, closest friend, I'd failed her, and that weighed heavily on me when I visited Gloria.

"You look like a kicked puppy," she said. I took her snappy tone as an indication she was feeling better.

"I can't be sunshine and smiles all the time, Gloria."

"True. How is my daughter?"

"She's your daughter. She's fighting and moving forward because she doesn't have regrets."

"Or she knows regrets won't get her anywhere."

I scrubbed a hand over my face and slumped into the chair next to her bed. "To be honest, I came here to talk about your treatment not lament how much I regret not recognising how badly she wanted to see the world before settling down."

The humph was almost forgiving. Then those eagle sharp eyes darted away from me, looking at nothing. "I know I should have gone home by now. Are you keeping me here because of the cancer or is something else you aren't telling me?"

"Both-ish," I hedged. "You live up too many stairs and alone. The cancer makes you weaker. And the chemo increases the risk of another fall."

"Am I going to be stuck here then? Until I die?"

"Hardly. But we are thinking of continuing your cancer treatment since you are here for a couple of weeks. Additionally, we can monitor your physical therapy and

general health. Also.” I cleared my throat. “How would you feel about moving in with us? We have a lower ground floor bedroom with a wetroom shower. We’d have to get you down to that level but there is a small sitting room and you’d have access to the garden and kitchen. We might even extend the pack house by buying next door.”

“And it binds her to the pack.”

I felt the blush heat my cheeks and then up to my ears. “Is that what you want?”

“I want my girl happy and taken care of when I’m gone. But if you hurt her again, I’ll bring all of you down.” She scrunched her nose. “Except that nice omega. I like him. I’ll make sure he is taken care of.”

It wasn’t an idle threat. You had to take Gloria at face value and assume everything she said was true.

“You can leave me now. Love Island reruns are on and I need to catch up for the next season.”

I grinned. Gloria only dismissed people she liked. She’d confessed to me when Toni had moved away for university that she hated saying goodbye. Then she’d sworn me to secrecy because she didn’t want people thinking she cared. “Night, morning glory.”

Her eyes grew wet, and she snatched my hand. “Love her, Jules. Love her more than you did before, when you loved her more than anything in the world.”

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, I squeezed her hand. “We never stopped loving her. That’s the amazing thing about packs. You have an infinite capacity for love.”

Jazz music was playing on the house speakers when I walked through the door later that night. Like always, I gravitated to the kitchen where we congregated, especially in the evening when everyone snacked—a Toni development—before digging into either an Ivo deliciousness or leftovers. It still blew my mind how much food pack’s ate. Beta families, even larger ones, spent a fraction on food. Alphas had larger appetites and omegas were almost as bad. Before we’d had an



omega, we'd consumed processed food. Occasionally attempting to cook a proper meal. Ciarán had introduced salads, then when Ivo had moved in, home-cooked meals had supplanted the junk we'd been eating.

Toni was snacking at the kitchen table, a blanket draped around her shoulders and a couple of pillows crammed into the remaining space between her and the armrests. The scene threw me back ten, fifteen years when we had been studying for exams. Increasingly, she'd slipped into our routine and subtly altered it as well.

I grabbed a bottle of water and slid into the chair opposite her's.

"We need to talk."

She froze, a handful of grapes hovering just before her mouth. "Oh?"

"About your mum."

Her shoulders dropped. "Please, tell—"

"It isn't anything bad. Not bad, exactly. I was wondering if there is somewhere she can stay with fewer steps?"

"Jesus." She sighed with obvious relief. "Lead with that instead of we need to talk."

I began to reach for her, to pull her into a hug. At the last minute, it was her who grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. My heart kicked at the intimate gesture and I quickly suppressed the urge to transplant her and her blanket into my lap.

"Is she being difficult?"

"I was thinking she could move into Ivo's room. We have the space. She'd be on one floor while she recovers, which will take a couple of months, maybe longer."

"You want my mother to live in a pack?" she asked. A bubble of laughter escaped. "She'll never agree."

"She did. But in a couple of weeks. With the chemo, we want to take it slow and make sure she is one hundred

percent.”

“Weeks?” She chewed on her bottom lip. “Is Ciarán okay with this?”

“It was his idea.”

“Fuck. He should know better than to do this.”

“Ciarán grew up in a large pack,” I reminded her. “We are the weird ones.”

“Omegas are different,” she dismissed my comment with a wave. Then quieter, more thoughtful she said it again. “As a pack omega, he should know better. He has more experience than me with packs, but even I know that bringing people in on a whim is a bad, no, terrible idea. Or maybe it is because he is a pack omega. I don’t know. Our backgrounds are so different.” She nibbled on her thumb, an old indicator of nerves. “Maybe I’m wrong. I’ve always been shit at being an omega.”

Fuck it. I got up and came around the table to sit next to her. I manoeuvred her chair to face me and put my hands on her shoulders.

“You went out and gained experience,” I reminded her. It was a dangerous subject to bring up. But I just wanted her to know how special she was. “You, honestly, I am in awe of what you have accomplished. What you continue to do. So many omegas will want to follow your lead. I’m so proud of you, Lettuce.”

“Thank you. And I’m proud of you. All of you. Urgh. Let’s talk about my mother at another time.” She turned her head and kissed my wrist. “Do you want a coffee?”

“Is the Pope catholic?”

“Is Ciarán capable of being ugly?”

“Is Ivo really a beta?”

She cackled. “You know... Are people sure he wasn’t misdesignated? How can someone so alpha not be an alpha? He is more alpha than Rafe who is probably the more feral alpha I’ve ever met. And his scent. It’s subtle but—”

“Does this mean you haven’t had sex with him?”

Her flush spread down her chest. “I can’t believe you’d actually ask that.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That isn’t a no.”

“We’ve not.”

“When you do, you’ll need to share the details with Ciarán. He would do anything to see his silverback gorilla in the buff.”

“You are the worst.”

But she didn’t deny that it might happen. Fuck. It might happen. And once she’d had sex with Ivo...Ciarán would insist on dragging her into bed, and that? I wanted a front-row, participatory seat for that.

That night was my day to pick up everyone’s laundry, and like always, I started at the top of the house. Usually that meant Rafe’s things, but now Toni’s basket was the first one I collected.

Her basket was outside her door. I froze, hand raised to knock on her door to ask if she needed anything, when that purely omega scent that indicated an omega was very, very aroused flooded the landing. My cock became steel faster than my scent could change. I stumbled back, half afraid, half wanting her to know that I was on the other side.

“Ahh...” A woman’s voice gave a strangled sound. “Make me come.”

“Fuck,” I muttered and dropped the laundry basket which bounced down the stairs, her clothes falling all over the stairs. They said that discretion is the better part of valour but I’d never been so tempted to lunge for the door and throw it open, damn the consequences.

“What the hell is this doing down here?” Guy’s voice snapped me out of my haze.

I nearly broke my neck as I tripped down the stairs to get to him. “I dropped it...”

“Your scent.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Is she...”

“Not heat.” I managed to say. “Guy, I don’t think I can go on like this much longer. With both of them in the house.”

“You’re hard,” he growled. His eyes were blown black, and, fuck me, his scent hadn’t made my mouth water this much in years. During Ciarán’s heats, our attention was on him. It had been years since we’d fucked without Ciarán. This was the first time I’d found myself needing him with a fierceness that drove the thought of Toni out of my mind. I grabbed him and crashed our mouths together. His taste undid me and made my cock throb.

“I need you,” I begged him. “It’s been way too long.”

He wrapped his hand around my throat, providing just enough pressure to remind me that between us, he was in charge. Fuck. Just the way I liked it. “I’ll make it good. Make up for all of those years.”

I groaned. “Please.”

We were kissing again. Being with an alpha was different, aggressive, hard. A fight for dominance that we both knew he would win. We detoured by Ciarán’s nest to grab lube before returning to my room with its bigger bed.

“We need to slow down,” he muttered against my throat.

“No. I need you too much.”

He shoved me in my chest. Putting enough distance between us so that we could strip. My hands shook when I fumbled for the buttons of my shirt. Julian, however, wasted no time and ripped his shirt open, the buttons pinging free and revealing a trail of dark hair.

“Fuck,” I breathed and shoved my trousers and boxers down in a rush, blushing when I felt his eyes on the tip of my cock, which leaked precum. I grabbed the base, right below where my knot would form and squeezed in a failed attempt to dull the harsh rush of arousal.

Licking his lips, he slowly undid his jeans and pushed them down his slim hips, revealing he'd gone commando. His cock bounced free, smearing precum on his taught abs. He was longer than me, his cock a ruddy colour that had a slight curve. Guy had a runner's body. Lean, defined muscles, without an ounce of fat on him. I knew my body. Bigger boned, bigger muscles. I could (probably) bench press him without breaking a sweat but the sight of him, the smell of him made me weak.

"On the bed," he growled. "Hands and knees. Ass up like a good slut."

I scrambled to do as he asked. He hadn't called me slut in years and I'd forgotten the power of that word had over my cock.

Now that he had me on my knees, ass presented, Guy took his time. The mattress dipped as he positioned himself behind me. His hands eased up my thighs, and over my lower back. I was in his thrall, painfully aware that he was touching me everywhere but where I wanted him to.

"Please," I begged.

"So impatient." His laugh was dark and dangerous. I felt his fingers dig into my ass before spreading me open until there was a delicious stretch and a cool breath of air on my hole. "You're going to feel so good when you squeeze down on my cock. You remember what that feels like, right? To be fucked by an alpha."

My brain couldn't form the words, all I could formulate was a pathetic growl.

"Hush," he said just as he pressed the pad of his thumb against my hole. "I know how eager you are. What a slutty alpha you are for me, but I also know you might as well be a virgin because it has been that long since I fucked you."

I panted and did my fucking best not to beg when his thumb disappeared and the cold wet feel of lube landed on my crease.

"I'm going to prep you, stretch you out," he purred and inserted a finger, letting me get used to him. "You aren't like

Ciarán who takes it from both of us.”

“Fuck.” I suddenly had the image of Ciarán bending me over and fucking me in his nest.

“You smell so good when you’re thinking dirty thoughts.” He added another finger to the first and began scissoring them, making me ready for him. “That’s it. I need to taste you.”

I froze. I wasn’t some omega whose holes were always ready for oral; I hadn’t prepped for this. “Guy. I didn’t exactly plan on having...I’m not—”

“Not your ass. Your mouth, you idiot,” he laughed. “Roll over.”

He flipped me on my back and I looked up at the man whose relationship I felt like I’d neglected for the last ten years. “Hi.”

“Hi, handsome.” He swooped in for a kiss that stole my breath away. I reached between us and grabbed his cock, stroking along his length, reminding myself of his girth. “That’s right. I’m going to fuck you with my fat cock.”

“Shit.”

“Harder.” He grabbed the lube and coated his cock with enough that there was a slick sound as I ran my hand down his length. “That’s right...So good for me...Now, spread for me.”

I let go of him and grabbed my thighs, holding myself open for him. “Don’t make me beg.”

“Oh?” His fingers were back, spearing two into my hole, then three. Fuck, the sensation of being filled...I’d forgotten how good it felt. Better than good. “I think my big, alpha slut is ready for my big, alpha cock.”

“Please!” I gave in and begged. Yeah, I fucking begged. I would have gotten down on my knees and offered to do anything for his cock in my ass at that moment.

“Open for me,” he groaned as he fitted the head against the tight ring of muscle. I bore down, and we both moaned as he began a slow, burning slide of him entering my ass. Two

inches in, an inch out, he took his time, completely ignoring how I squirmed and tried to hold him in me. “So greedy.”

He snapped his hips and bottomed out, grinding against me.

“From behind,” I groaned. “I want to feel you fucking me from behind.”

His expression turned feral, his lips twisting into a vicious snarl. “Do it.”

If I could have somehow moved into position without his pulling out, I would have but I wasn't that flexible. But somehow it didn't matter how awkward I felt as I rolled over. The way Guy's hands travelled over my body, scent marking every inch of skin he touched, a bone deep sense of being desired spread through me. I knew, whatever I did, he'd still be there. Because after spending my days caring for sick patients and being Ciarán's alpha, relinquishing all those responsibilities and just giving in made me feel special, loved.

“You are so beautiful like this. Giving yourself up to me.” He ran a hand down my back, cupping the back of my head with one hand while the other reached around and stroked my cock. “And for being so vulnerable, I'm going to fucking destroy you.”

He pushed in, fucking me hard and deep, hitting at just the right angle to make me see stars. This. This is what I'd missed being taken, being forced to submit to an alpha. All my early-teen fantasies of being fucked by an alpha were realised as my packmate's cock rearranged me from inside. I rested my weight on my shoulders and reached both hands behind myself. Guy grabbed my wrists, holding them in place. “You dirty boy. Such a good—”

The door banged open and Ciarán stuck his head in. “Jules are you watching porn?”

I knew the moment it clicked because his scent grew thick and sweet. “Fuck. This is... This is hot.”

Guy's cock slammed into my ass. “You like that, omega? Seeing me fuck your alpha like this? Putting him on his

knees...Do you want me to knot him?"

"Fuck." I arched back, excited and nervous about the stretch of a knot. "I'm not ready."

"Oh?" Guy pressed me into the mattress, his weight and the power of his alpha pinning me in place. "But you'd like it. I can feel your ass clamping down on my cock like an omega in heat. God, you feel so good. Missed you, babe."

I turned my head and saw Ciarán sitting on the edge of the bed, he'd stripped and had his cock in his hand, idly stroking himself as he watched Guy pound into me.

The alpha behind me pushed himself up and released my hands. He gripped my hair and lifted my head. "Suck your omega off," he growled.

Ciarán knelt on the mattress and threaded his hand through my hair. His cock was thick, veiny and the tip leaked precum. But it was the scent, his heady omega perfume, making my balls draw up. "Fuck. I'm going to come."

"No," Guy barked. "You don't come until Ciarán. Our omega comes fist, always."

"Give it to me," I begged Ciarán. "I need to suck your cock."

"Superman, I didn't realise what a complete cock slut you were," he purred. He threaded his fingers through my hair. Now, two hands held my head in place. "Keep your mouth open, tongue out." Ciarán guided his cock into my mouth, resting the tip on my tongue, rubbing himself along my tongue. "Now suck."

Going down on him was always one of my favourite things but trapped between these two, I found a new kind of bliss in servicing Ciarán. I sucked hard, doing my best to use my tongue to tease the head while he fucked my face.

"So sloppy." Guy grabbed my cock. "Come on, Sunshine. Fuck his throat. Shoot your cum into him so that he can come."



My eyes rolled into the back of my head as I moaned around the thick intrusion. Ciarán wasn't as brutal as Guy but he didn't lighten up. He was relentless, and I relaxed my throat and he slid into my throat. Fuck. I could die like this and be happy.

"Look at me, alpha," my omega ordered. I did, the slight change in angle causing me to gag. "Love that. Fuck."

Ciarán screwed his eyes as he came with a string of curses. At the last minute, he pulled out and shot his cum all over my face.

"Clean him up," Guy commanded.

Ciarán tugged me back and gave me a sloppy, bruising kiss. Licking away his own release and then sharing with me. I greedily sucked his tongue hoping to get more of him. He tasted better than anything. Richer and sweeter, somehow than an alpha or betas cum. The kiss became more intimate. Guy slowed his pace until, fucking turned into loving.

"Come for me," Ciarán whispered into our kiss and then he bit hard on my lip. The sharp sting triggered made my balls tighten and the base of my cock throb as my knot began to swell.

"Fuck!" My orgasm hit me so hard my eyes rolled into the back of my head.

"Dammit." Guy slammed in once, twice more. Groaning, he filled me with his hot cum. God, I felt the rush of endorphins that you got from an alpha's cum. My reaction wasn't as strong as an omega's, but, fuck me, it sent tingles up my spine and I came again. The alpha behind me, dropped his full weight on top of my boneless body. I slumped onto the bed, completely uncaring that I was lying in my own cum.

Ciarán stroked my cheek. "Please, someone tell me how this all started."

"I caught Toni masturbating," I said before thinking. "I'm sorry..."

"Did you see her?" He lay down next to me, his nose pressed against mine.

“Just heard.”

“Damn.” He sounded disappointed.

“You don’t mind?” Guy asked.

“I’m the one who vetoed vetoing sex,” he reminded us.  
“Whatever, I’m tired. Let’s sleep.”

“Shower first,” Guy groaned. “Let’s clean up superman and then we can sleep in your nest?” He left it as a question since Ciarán didn’t always want us sleeping in bed with him—he moved around too much.

“Yes. Definitely.” His eyes sparkled. “Do you think we should ask Toni?”

“No!” Guy and I barked.

“Fuck, are you crazy?” I hissed.

He smirked. “I just want to know if she’s a cuddler.”

The next morning, Ciarán made a sly, flirtatious comment to Toni as he came down. She parried with one of her own coy rejoinder. I grinned like a loon as I watched them from my place at the kitchen table.

Every day could start like this, I realised. I really wanted every day to start like this.

# GUY



The sun was shining the day things went to shit. After two days of riding the high of fucking Julian, things felt right again. Even the pack meeting where Julian officially proposed inviting Gloria to move in went surprisingly smoothly. Toni's objection was half-hearted and fell apart when she admitted her mum had informed her that she'd be moving into the house.

The easy vibes came to abrupt end when Toni's phone pinged. Ciarán glared. "If you don't turn that thing off during meals, I'll hide it."

"Sorry," she whined and clambered out of the beanbag chair and layers of blankets she'd dragged out of Ivo's room and shoved in the corner of the kitchen near the garden door. She'd declared that if she was going to stay here, she might as well be cosy.

"We have the session tomorrow." She glared at her phone. "I'd hoped the letter would get lost in the system, but it seems they use email. When did the government start using text?"

"And how do they have yours?" Ciarán asked, taking the phone from her hand. "Seems like an invasion of privacy."

"No kidding."

"Wait, from the Omega Centre. I recognise the number."

"Figures," they said at the same time. They looked at each other. And while they laughed, I glanced at Rafe, who looked like a junkyard dog with two bones all to himself. We were royally fucked if he lost his control tomorrow.

“Are you going to make it?” she asked. “I mean this is last minute.”

Rafe cleared his throat and his turned an alarming shade of red. “I took care of it and put it in the pack diary. The centre was in touch with me and Gwen.”

“Oh?” The deadly calm of her voice sent a shiver up my spine.

“It’s not my fault if Gwen didn’t tell you,” he said mulishly. “Or that you didn’t check the pack calendar.”

“I’m not on it,” she snapped back.

“Get a room!” Ciarán groaned. “Fuck it out already.”

That shut them both up. But you could cut the tension with a knife. Part of me wanted them to jump each other because Ciarán deserved to see what they were like together. They were explosive together. I sucked in a deep breath and caught their scents. Aroused and angry. Ciarán’s scent thickened next to me, a muddled combination of interest and desired to soothe. Then the throb of the Claim.

Fight or flight, I wondered.

Toni snarled, her body primed. Shit. I needed to defuse the situation. If she was going to launch herself at him, it would be to scratch his eyes out.

“I’ll add you to the calendar,” I offered and opened the app and added Toni. Internally, I breathed a sigh of relief that my assistant had already marked it off for me. I hadn’t checked the pack calendar in weeks because we rarely used it.

“Thank you,” she said, still looking at Rafe. Then she turned to me. “And thank you as well.”

I blinked. Fuck me. She’d just thanked Rafe for organising the counselling session.

We took a pack carrier to the Omega Centre. I’d been there a handful of times and it looked like the most depressing place in the world. The office was along a long, narrow corridor that opened into a cramped waiting area full of single chairs.

“I guess they don’t want us to canoodle,” Ciarán said, trying to lighten the mood.

We were called in by a statuesque female alpha. She smoothed her skirts as she sank into a deep armchair. Her colleague, an omega, did the same but sat prim and proper on the edge. She was a society omega if her nude court shoes and coiffed hair were anything to go by. I’d done some research and they were a Claimed pair. Normally the idea wouldn’t put me on edge. but today, I would have preferred a beta, someone dynamically neutral.

“According to the file, you are here for court-mandated counselling before finalising a pack divorce?” the alpha asked. “Antonia—”

“Toni,” my omega corrected. Toni smiled at Ciarán’s quick interjection.

“Of course, Toni. I apologise.” She made a note in the file. “Could you please tell us why you are seeking a divorce?”

“I filed for divorce six months after I left, which was ten years ago.” She glared at Rafe, whose jaw jutted forward. Any hopes of a peaceful hour rapidly fled. They were going to end up throwing things. Julian had a similar idea because he picked up the table lamp and put it on the floor, far out of reach. I nudged the glass coffee table further away. Catching on, Ivo toed the other end until there was a good yard between them and the most breakable objects in the room. “However, it wasn’t filed properly, which I didn’t learn until a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yes, but why did you want to file for divorce?” The alpha leant forward just a little. “Being part of a pack, even if you didn’t know, hasn’t disrupted your life, has it?”

I don’t know what I expected the answer to be, but it wasn’t what she said.

“I’ve met a new pack. Who love me, value my independence, and don’t put their careers above mine.”

“That doesn’t answer the question, Toni.” The omega half of the counselling pair clasped her hands around her knee, but

her foot bobbed in the air. She was distressed, and her mate fisted her hands in an effort not to comfort the omega. “Why did you want to file for divorce in the first place?”

“My therapist sent her notes to you, so could you please explain why you are asking?” she asked almost robotically.

“Yes. But do the alphas know why you left?” the councillors said as one. They looked at each other and shared rueful smiles.

She sucked on her lips. “I filed because they put their careers above the promise to take me to Rome.”

Thank fuck we were smart enough not to say that it was small and, at least in part, wrong. It might seem small to us, but for Toni, it was enough to pick up and leave without a backwards glance.

Then it hit me. She didn’t know. Rafe hadn’t told her the truth about Rome. With the way he stared straight ahead, he was going to be a stubborn fuck about it. Except that his pride was digging the whole pack’s grave, not just his own. I looked at Julian and found him frowning. Should we say something? No. It was Rafe’s rope to hang himself with.

The omega met each of our eyes and then cocked her head to the side. “Is that true? Did you put your careers ahead of your promise to your omega?”

“Yes.” Rafe spoke with such heavy certainty that a bark entered his voice. “We wouldn’t have changed our plans to accommodate the trip. We were wrong. I was wrong. And insensitive. I hurt her because of it. I thought we had time.”

“Is that how they made you feel?” Everyone’s attention returned to Toni again. She’d blocked off the fragile connection we had. But her scent reeked of bitterness, of regret, of aching sadness that filled the small room. If I could have, I would have pulled each member of my pack into my lap and purr for them.

Toni turned to Rafe, her body language saying that she was listening; her face, though, was closed off. “It is in the past.” Her head whipped to the omega-alpha pair. “As you can tell,

this isn't a productive conversation. I've worked through my issues with my therapist. We have grown up in the last ten years and are not the people we were. They've moved on and have an amazing omega whom I admire and think has made all of them better people. I want them to be happy. They want me to be happy. A court-mandated counselling sessions won't change what happened in the past. Or we what we want in the present."

That was the most words I'd heard her speak since she entered the pack house.

"These sessions were to determine whether or not you are compatible," the omega said softly. "And I agree there are a lot of incompatibilities...on paper. But from what I can see, this session could be very beneficial for everyone."

"Do not talk down to us," Toni snarled. "They do not need therapy. They are, despite my experience with them, incredible, giving, generous, thoughtful men who adore Ciarán and would do anything to give him his wildest dreams. I was the one fitting a square peg in a round hole. Trying to do some reconciliation bullshit is like mixing oil and water and expecting them not to separate when the spoon is removed."

"That isn't what she meant," the alpha growled. "And you know it. I'm not sure we are a good fit for you."

"You can't fire us." Ciarán sounded offended.

"Yes, she can. This goes two ways." Toni folded her arms over her chest and glared at the counselling pair.

"Everyone out," the omega counsellor's voice cut through the tension like a chainsaw. "I wish to speak with Toni alone."

"Babs—"

"Out." The word was sharp, unforgiving and completely infuriated.

We alphas all jumped up and filed out into the waiting room. Ivo was the slowest to move, Ciarán even slower.

The waiting room was even more cramped now. The aggression emanating off of everyone made me shift on my

feet to distract myself from the instinct to dart back into the room and drag Toni away from this place.

“If your omega upsets mine,” the therapist snarled.

“Right back at you,” Rafe snapped.

The heavy silence hung about us in a way that reminded me of families anxiously waiting to learn if their loved one’s surgery had been a success or not. The comparison hit home when Ciarán nipped my shoulder. I wrapped an arm around him and projected confidence through the Claim. Through both Claims. Toni needed to know that no matter what happened, what was said, we had her back.

It felt like the door opened hours later. Both omegas walked into the waiting room, their scents bitter and faces resigned. “We’ve come to a compromise. We will finish this session. I would like to do another, but we will extend today by thirty minutes.”

We traipsed back in and settled in our seats again.

“I think it would be best if the alphas could now talk about how they felt when Toni left.”

“Don’t put them through this,” Ciarán begged. “Not on the first day.”

“I felt like I’d betrayed her.” Rafe’s confession was short and sharp. A defensive declaration that challenged us to contradict him.

“I felt alone.” I stared at Ciarán. “And then I felt less alone. But I still missed her.”

Ciarán smiled. “Love you.”

Julian took a deep breath. “I lost my best friend. It’s been like having phantom limb syndrome.”

“Jules.” Fuck, she sounded sad, but she was too far away, so she turned beseeching eyes to Ciarán, somehow telegraphing her need. He wrapped an arm around Julian, tucking it close, his head resting on his shoulder. Seemingly satisfied, she turned to me. “You...I am sorry.” Finally, she switched her focus to Rafe. “You fucking sucked.”



Rafe gave her an abrupt nod. “I know. And if there is anything I can do...No. Hell. I regret how things ended, but I won’t apologise for keeping you on the pack registry. You are pack until you find another pack.”

“Do you want her to find another pack?” the alpha guided the conversation in another direction. I frowned. I thought they wanted us to work through our feelings, not jump from topic to topic.

“No.” The single word was brutally honest. I searched for Ciarán’s feelings through the Claim and his scent. Both were strong but steady and showed no surprise at Rafe’s words, almost like they were his own.

“I think—”

The omega raised her hand, forestalling whatever Toni was going to say. “Let them speak.”

“I don’t think any of us want her to find another pack. But it is her decision. I’m angry, but it’s at the judge and the system rather than anyone else. Certainly, no one in the pack.” Rafe sucked in a deep breath. “I think the SweetNothings don’t deserve an omega if this is how they treat one as special as her. I don’t deserve her either, but at least I know that.”

Toni buried her face in her hands.

“What does that even mean?” she asked.

“They should be taking care of you, even if you aren’t officially pack. They shouldn’t have let—”

“Let?” she growled.

To my utter surprise it was Ivo who intervened. “Toni. Their work isn’t stable. That isn’t how a pack should operate. If we are worried it is because we want to know how they’ll take care of you in the future.”

“A lawyer, a doctor, and a banker!” she cried. “Do you know how scary that was at twenty-one? I didn’t have a plan. And when that became clear, you told me it didn’t matter. That I could stay at home until I worked it out because you would take care of everything. I could have all of this.” She flung her

are out to take in the universe. “You’d take responsibility for everything...And I realised I didn’t want that.”

Oh crap, I realised. I threw a hopeless glance at Ciarán, but he had tears in his eyes as he watched her bare her soul to us. “We wanted to give you a structure. And then we could plan —”

“We could plan? It wasn’t our plan. It was yours. At least with the SweetNothings—may they rot in hell—let me make plans. We accommodate each other’s needs.”

Rafe grabbed her hands, and I think we all held our collective breath, waiting for her to pull away. “Toni—”

“Darling, don’t you understand?” she pleaded with Rafe. Had she caught the endearment? The way his eyes flashed, I knew he had. “I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t me yet. I was fun and playful and scatty Toni, who made you all laugh and relax because was different to all the omegas you grew up with. But I didn’t love myself or think I had a place in your world.”

“But you found it.” Trust Ciarán to know what to say and when to say it.

“Yeah. By accident but I did.”

“And they made you feel—” the omega counsellor prompted. Fuck, I’d forgotten they were there.

“It wasn’t about feelings. On paper, I wasn’t a perfect fit for them,” she said and squeezed Rafe’s hands right before pulling hers away and messing her hair into a bun, which she immediately pulled down again. Ciarán snuck up behind her and began carding his fingers through her hair. “I’m not the perfect fit for this pack by any metric. But we found each other. Chose each other. And made them perfect for me. Just not perfect-perfect.”

“But perfect doesn’t mean perfect,” Ivo insisted. “Perfect is about doing something completely. You work towards perfection. Perfection isn’t an inanimate object or concept. It is constantly evolving and growing and adapting.”

“You deserved more from us.” Rafe pushed in, hell bent on reminding her how badly we’d fucked up instead of

demonstrating how we'd changed.

She curled in on herself, like an animal wanting to protect itself from a predator.

“What if I am the one who doesn't deserve a pack?” she hissed. Her Claim flared so bright and hot that Ciarán's eyes widened as the rush of panic flared through her. “What if I'm the defective one?”

“Don't you dare, fucking say that,” I barked. My eyes went wide when I realised what I'd done. Then like a marionette, I slumped forward, covering my face with my hands. My body heaved. The pack turned in my direction but it was Ivo who got there first. Kneeling in front of me, he gripped the back of my neck and squeezed.

“We have twenty minutes left,” our beta he said. “You know the first session is always the worst.”

“I didn't mean it,” Toni whispered into my ear. I turned and found her squeezed between me and Julian. “I know I deserve a pack.”

“I think this is more than enough for one session,” the alpha counsellor said. “We can schedule another meeting for later.”

I hung back, waiting until the others were out of the room. “How bad...”

“Like your beta said, the first sessions, especially with the whole pack can be the worst. But my omega's speciality is body language. And, I shouldn't be saying this but when one of your packmates needs reassurance, all of your step in. Your pack body language indicates a group who know each other and want to be here together. Even Toni.”

I hadn't realised how much strain I was carrying in my body until she said that. “Thank you.”

“It will take time, but don't give up hope.” The omega reached out to shake my hand. “It means a lot to open up like she did. I hope next time, you will do the same.”

If there was a next time.

As I walked out, I wondered if they thought Toni was serious about petitioning for divorce or they believed some run-of-the-mill talk therapy could bring us together.

Fuck. In the end, it didn't matter to me whether we went through therapy or not. Healing the rift, ensuring that the people I cared most about were happy was all that mattered to me. Therapy could do that, but first we had to build trust.

We piled into the pack carrier, the silence overwhelming. But the thing, good or bad, with being an alpha with an exceptional sense of smell meant I could pick up the subtle variations in my packmates scents. Rafe reeked of self-loathing and fury. Julian had pulled Ciarán into his lap because there weren't enough seats for all of us. Their's combined in a tangle of concern for the other omega whom they couldn't take their eyes off of. She was looking out the window, her scent bitter and stale at the same time. Only Ivo's beta-soft scent had a positive flavour. He even looked relaxed. Somehow his confidence, reassured me. He was older, had gone through a shit time in his youth, and so I trusted his scent. If he didn't think things had been a monumental disaster, perhaps there was light at the end of the tunnel.

"I'm going to take a nap," Toni said, dropping her bag and toeing off her shoes. Historically, I would have joined her—fuck that felt like ancient history now. I bit back a jealous growl when Ivo surprised all of us when he grabbed her elbow and gave her a quick kiss on her hairline.

"Brave girl," he murmured before disappearing downstairs.

Rafe gave her an intense look before retreating to the office.

"Therapy sucks," she muttered, watching our pack leader's retreating back. "It fucking sucks."

"Aw, Bubbles. I thought it went well." Ciarán wrapped in a hug, shifting his weight back and forth until they were rocking like a boat in choppy waters. "You and Rafe didn't kill each other. I'll count that as a win every day."

“Idiot.” But he’d gotten her smiling which I counted as a win. Seeing anyone in my pack sad ripped me apart. “I’ll... I’ll see you guys for dinner.” She jogged upstairs. Leaving the rest of us in the hall.

“Sure,” I called out after her. The word was inadequate. She was joining us for dinner? Somehow that seemed like the biggest win yet. “I need time with you,” I whispered to Ciarán. “Just us.”

“Yes.” One simple word and already the anxiety that had been building evaporated. As the one with mental illness, the one everyone kept an eye on, when this sense of dread built up inside me, I knew the only one capable of handling it was the weight of our omega sleeping on my chest. Toni had been that omega at one point, which was why I ached at the thought of her napping without me. Ciarán filled a similar role now, but before I took a nap, I had to exorcise the demons lurking on the periphery.

“Go for a run with me?” I asked my omega.

“Only if you change.” He plucked at my shirt. “I’ll meet you back here in five?”

In the end, Ivo joined us as well.

We halted in front of an ice cream van and ordered overpriced, shit ice lollies. Ivo got two.

“Fuck these are good,” he groaned, sucking one far into his mouth.

Ciarán muttered about the unfairness of Ivo looking like he could suck cock like a pro while only being interested in pussy. I held my breath waiting for Ivo to change the conversation, pretending he hadn’t heard the references to his sexuality but this time he laughed.

“It isn’t like I chose to only like pussy.”

“Do you think Toni’s dyed her pubes pink?” the devil made me ask.

“It is incredibly difficult to dye pubes,” Ciarán said. “Well? Ivo, you are our Toni expert at the moment.”

Ivo ignored him and bent down to tie his laces. I caught Ciarán smirking at Ivo's back. "He's loosening up, don't you think?" he asked. "It's her. Bubbles makes him relax. You love to see it. Hell, I'm obsessed with their little crushes on each other."

"Do you think they've done anything?"

"Sex?" He grinned. Only this wasn't a joke to me, but I shrugged to hide my insecurity. "No. They'd be torn up with guilt if they'd done anything." He linked our fingers together. "But they want to. At some point one of us will truly snap and then we'll all be fucked because there won't be going back."

I drew him into my arms and kissed him. First light and then deepening it until Ivo grunted that he'd agreed to a run not watch us canoodling in the park.

Toni

I left the others in the hall and ran up the stairs to my nest. The counselling session had been a disaster. In part because we'd all been too honest. Sometimes, people needed to lie to make things work. And none of us had been on top of it enough to do so.

When the omega had kicked everyone out so she could talk to me one on one, I knew what she was going to say.

"You won't solve your problems here. It will take time. And they'll need to grovel before you take them back."

Before you take them back. She'd said it like it was a sure thing. That I'd be their omega at the end of this.

I curled into my nest and scrolled through social media, losing myself in stupid videos and the even stupider satisfaction that they hadn't noticed that I'd stolen pillow cases from their rooms. I'd convinced myself that it was safe to take the pillowcases because they weren't people and they made my nest look pretty. Each was a different colour, artfully arranged so that my nest looked like a field of wildflowers. When, at last, I fell asleep I had their scents with me. All the better to soothe the edges of the wound that had been ripped

open by too much honesty. Only more honesty would heal us.  
And I fucking wanted that more than anything in the world.

# CIARÁN



After dinner, Toni was spending the night at the hospital with her mother. Which gave Rafe the perfect opportunity to make the rest of us have a pack meeting.

“I want to put it on the table that we try to convince her to drop the divorce proceedings.” Rafe’s scent bristled. “I don’t feel comfortable with her single now that she won’t be joining another pack.”

“Give over.” Guy crossed his arms. “You don’t just want that.”

Rafe didn’t reply.

Ah, my turn to step in. “Multi-generational packs often have more than one omega. So, there is no objection there. But two omegas in the same generation is very unusual.”

“How do you feel about it, though?” Julian pressed. “Rational thought has its place but not in the question of bringing another omega into your pack.”

“Technically, you brought me into her pack.”

“There is no hierarchy in this pack,” Rafe barked as if he didn’t rule us from his throne at the head of the table.

“The law, however, is clear.” I glared at him. “Stop being obtuse. With Guy’s Claim on her, however weak, she is the senior omega of this pack.”

“Wait. If she has Guy’s Claim, why hasn’t she moved forward?” Julian asked. “Legally she could petition the court tomorrow.”



“She’s figuring herself out,” Ivo scoffed. He leant back in his chair, tipping it back dangerously. “Do you really think she’s planning on running now?”

Julian shook his head and finished his beer. We’d needed them after the overwhelming day we’d had. “After this afternoon, I don’t know.”

“Let’s just leave it for now.” Ivo was a voice of reason here that none of us wanted to hear. “Let’s wait before asking her directly to stay. After today—”

“The session was a mess,” Rafe said. He sounded so defeated. An almost haunted expression, crossed over his face. He’d looked like that when he’d told me how his mother had died from a broken heart. She’d left him this house, a farewell gift from his father when she’d been kicked out of the mansion on Eaton Square. He growled and pushed away from the table.

I stood up, every omega instinct urging me to comfort him.

Guy grabbed my wrist and shook his head. “Don’t. He has to figure himself out.”

Pulling away, I glared at my alpha. “He better get it done soon. I want them ripping each other’s clothes off, not ripping each other’s hearts out.”

It had been one night, and I wanted Toni back in my space. Rafe’s words, when he compared her to a cat, kept intruding. Did we just ignore the elephant in the room and not ask her to stay? What if she was ready to move on? I’d never had a cat, let alone a stray. We could wake up one day and she’d be gone because we’d rubbed her the wrong way the night before. It had given me a shit night’s sleep.

When she’d text this morning asking to take some pictures of Bubble and Smoke and work on our website today, I jumped on the offer. She was a lot better at that than bartending and it gave us an excuse to hoard her at the restaurant. Guy and Rafe had stolen enough of her daylight hours when they all worked from the home office. So I was literally bouncing on the balls of my feet, waiting for her to show up.

“Afternoon!” Toni came in, nervously grinning like she’d done something wrong, with a bag of pastries in one hand and coffees in one of those trays in another.

“I come with gifts.” She waved the bag. Damn, she was beautiful. Today, she had paired black culottes with a black linen shirt painted with the Gemini star sign. All that glorious hair was braided around her head like a crown. Oh, I wanted to muss that hair up. I wanted to go over and rub my scent all over her. It was only shower sex that morning that had prevented me from showing up to work smelling of my alphas.

“You look happy. Considering yesterday—”

“Therapy can be like that.” She shrugged, then gave me a guilty look. I wasn’t having that. I could practically see her preparing an apology for not coming home last night. Nope. Not happening.

“Hug,” I demanded. “Please?”

She rolled her eyes and leant into my chest. I wrapped my arms around her thighs, lifting her up and blowing a raspberry on the v of exposed skin. She squealed and wrapped her legs around my waist. Her arms draped over my shoulders, she grinned down at me. “Hi, handsome.”

Cupping her perfect ass, I buried my face in her neck. Fuck, she smelled of pack. All of our scents perfuming her skin. She hadn’t showered and washed away their scents, fucking perfect.

“Are you planning on letting all my alphas scent you? Should I be concerned?” I asked. Not for a second did I have a problem with my alphas scent marking her. Not a chance. Still...I couldn’t help but tease her a little. She tried to pull away. “Shit. I didn’t mean it like that. I love you smelling like pack. If I could, I’d pay you just to hang out with me all day so that I can huff you.”

“Well, as sweet as that is, it sounds boring as fuck. Oh, Gwen says hi. We had breakfast and she told me that Mountview are convinced she’s their true mate.”

I nearly dropped. I had not been expecting that drastic change in topic. True mates was a strange superstition only old-money packs seemed obsessed with. My dad and the pack claimed mum was their true mate, and I believed them. I grew up with that idea, even felt it was true when I met my pack. But then, I'd learnt that Sarah had used that very concept, one sacred and pure, to kick out Rafe's mother. She'd convinced her pack that because she was their true mate, they didn't need a beta.

"You probably know how I feel about that," she said quietly as if she was thinking about the same thing.

"Sarah is a cunt."

"Hey." She punched me lightly on the arm. "Cunts are good. She is the devil."

"Phew. I'm not into Satan worship." I kissed her forehead and put her back on her feet.

"I kind of want to see Mountview pursue Gwen and her to turn them down just to rub it in."

"Stay," I blurted out. Fuck. We'd agreed that we wouldn't ask her to stay. "Gloria can have Ivo's suite. And I can buy next door and we can expand. Maybe put in a lift—"

"Ciarán. Stop. Please. I know you mean well, but it doesn't work. Omegas can't share a roof; it just doesn't work."

"Hey. I'm not asking you to drop the divorce." I tried to backtrack. "Just until Gloria is better or back on her feet... literally. Come on, Bubbles. Look at me."

"Urgh! I did not come back to London to be dealing with this."

I dragged her into a hug. "Hey. Relax, Bubbles. We will figure it out. But you said it yourself, she can't go back to the flat, and she's moving in already. Just stay. Come on. I'll worry about you otherwise."

"Ciarán, I need to let you know. Mum will be in the hospital until I leave. She and I talked about selling the flat and finding..." I squeezed her hand so tight that she stopped

talking. Our eyes met. Mine were pleading, begging for her just to listen and consider my proposal. Hers were more shuttered. “She’s going to move into her own place, not the pack house.”

“Rafe described you like a cat. You know how you need your space but also someone to drape over and purr for?”

She wrinkled her nose. Even with all the emotional rollercoasters we’d been dealing with just in the half-hour since she’d arrived, I still felt like we were getting somewhere. “I can’t believe he is still calling me a cat.”

“He likes pussy,” I teased, and she gratified me with a blush that spread down to her chest.

“Ciarán. We have to maintain boundaries.”

I let her go and took a step back. This is what Rafe had meant, I realised. He hadn’t been making light of it. “Boundaries. Sure. So, um, the new bartender is coming in. A beta. She is in the middle of her transition. She’s a bit anxious about passing but hasn’t said as much, so upbeat and positive vibes.”

“How’d you know? That she’s anxious, I mean.”

“I’m a bartender. I know.”

“Okay. Hug? Peace?” She opened her arms, and we slotted...dovetailed and perfect. No matter that I wanted it to be more, I didn’t dare ask her again. Instead, we just stood there. Unable to do more. Incapable of doing less.

The night was busy.

Alice, who was about Toni’s age, was nervous, but she didn’t need to be. That pixie cut was sexy on her tall frame, and it took about half a second for her to relax. I was relieved. My little team meant everything to me, and finding people who needed a safe place to work and find themselves just made me feel good.

“Hey, Alice? Can I get two house number sevens and a couple of IPAs?” Toni asked with a grin. She’d offered to help

out when one of our regular serves had called in sick. “I am loving this first date. So cute.”

“Oh?”

“He is definitely nervous. Not every day you get to see a beta pack coming together. The brunette is cute,” she cooed and winked at Alice, who blushed.

“Toni, you are mine. Quit flirting with Alice,” I snapped harsher than I intended. Toni flipped me the bird and took the drinks from Alice with a wink. “Uhhh, the thing with Toni...”

“You guys are cute together.” She grinned. “Your pack are gorgeous. Ivo is...”

“Delicious,” I filled in. Then, my gossipy side took over, and I told her about how Guy had gone all alpha over the kid who’d copped a feel. “Shit. This place is safe,” I promised her. “That was super rare. Nothing like that has ever happened before.”

She laughed. It was deep and warm and happy. “I haven’t laughed that hard in a while,” she confessed.

She is going to fit right in, I realised. Of course she was. She was one of the best mixologists I’d come across, and the only reason she was here was because of some harassment at her last workplace. We were fucking lucky to have her.

“How’d you like your first shift?” Ivo asked her as we closed up for the night. Alice grinned. She looked exhausted but happy. And I just wanted to give her a hug. So, I did, then froze.

Over her shoulder, I saw Toni. She looked pissed off, her nostrils flaring in anger and her hands curling into claws. And my fucking heart soared. Yeah. She didn’t like me hugging Alice. Brilliant. Jealousy never felt so good.

“Let’s all have a drink,” I said in a sing-song. “I’ve a new cocktail I’d like to try out.”

I slipped behind the bar, whistling, grinning, and totally high on Toni’s the little display. Toni followed me and began cutting lemons.

“So...Alice settle in okay?” Toni asked. “You won’t need me any more.”

You could stay here, I wanted to say. Just accept that the attraction was there. That we all felt it. Hell, we were acting on it half the time. Little touches leaving traces of our scent on each other. And the pretty little thing was a denner. I’d snooped in her nest. How she could lie to herself and act like she was able not to stay in one place? It pissed me off knowing she was denying part of herself. Because omegas were...Fuck.

I wanted to save her like I’d saved my pack. Like I had found and collected omegas and betas. Given them a job. Mum had always teased me about collecting broken things because they needed to be loved. Now, I was looking at one of the most renowned solo omegas and wanting to add her to my collection.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out. A text from Dada, Ivo’s younger sister, asking for a movie date soon. Now there was an omega who would break things rather than breaking. She was intense. One of those “not like other omegas” in a way that Toni wasn’t. Sure, she had that pick-me vibe when you read about her. Then you met her and it was only the fact she was an omega that made her special on paper. If she was a beta, she wouldn’t be notable.

When George turned the music on and Toni began swaying to the music next to me, I realised how fucked I was.

Because even if she didn’t want to talk about it, Toni had moved on from the SweetNothings. I saw it in the way one of their songs came on and she changed the song and continued dancing.

An hour later, we were buzzed and laughing. The waitstaff were joking with the kitchen staff, and Toni was sitting in the centre of it all, but her eyes were trained on me. I glanced over at Ivo, who was chatting with George and one of the older omega’s alphas who had come to pick him up then decided to stick around. Ivo sensed my glance. He gave me a slow nod. It felt like permission. And I winked.

“What was that for?” Toni asked, clearly catching the interaction.

“Come with me for a minute. Alice? Take over with your magical mixing magic.”

Our newest team member gave me a salute, allowing me to slip around the bar to grab Toni by the wrist. She followed me without a word, a little buzzed, I could tell, but not drunk. I didn't want her drunk; I wanted her in control this entire time.

I stood in front of the bathroom and looked her dead in the eye. She knew what was coming. She knew what was going to happen next, which meant I had to surprise her.

“Did you know that when Guy dragged you in there the other day, I really wanted you both to come out smelling of sex so I could vicariously fuck both of you?” I asked.

My reward was the most adorable little gasp.

“Then you just smelt like him, and it wasn't quite as exciting as I'd been imagining.”

“What had you been imagining?” she asked, and I grinned. Yeah, she thought she was on solid ground.

“I could show you?”

She burst out laughing. “You have never had to pick someone up before. You are like blunt force trauma.”

“Trust me. I'm not blunt force trauma.” I held the door open for her and watched her ass as she moved into the enclosed space. She went right to the sink and jumped up onto it.

“No,” I told her. “I want to know what Guy did. I'll be you. You be Guy.”

“Oh.”

I wrapped my hands and lifted her up and off the counter, then turned us. Boosted myself up and drew her closer until she stood between my thighs.

“Now, I know Guy,” I whispered. “He can get a bit feral when he is worried.”

“He ran his hands up my arms.” She mimicked the motion. “Checking for injuries that weren’t there. And he needed to scent me.”

She rose up on her toes and ran her nose along my jaw and down my neck to my scent gland. My blood pounded through my veins, and I took in deep calming breaths. Only instead, I got hits of her champagne scent that did more to get me drunk than any amount of alcohol.

“Can you imagine it?” she breathed against my neck. “How he is? The intensity. The way that resin scent makes you high? I knew I should push him away. Instead, I drew him closer. Pressed his nose into my throat...”

I groaned and threaded my hand through her hair, bringing her as close as possible.

“What else?”

“I loved it. I loved how he held me, even as I worried what would happen.”

“I have to kiss you,” I groaned.

“Okay.”

Our heads tilted in synchronisation. Our lips brushed at first, and everything about every moment was so charged with repressed need and desire.

“You’re the first omega I’ve ever kissed,” I murmured. Her fingers slipped under my shirt. “Fuck. Bubbles, you are going to undo me.”

“Never kissed an omega before? Why not? Let me show you how omegas do it.”

Her fingernails scraped along my abs, and I moaned into her mouth. “This is hot.”

“Ciarán? I needed to do this from the first moment I saw you.”

“Before you knew about the pack?”

She stepped back and searched my eyes. Her palms moved up, taking my shirt with them. “Jesus, Ciarán. I wanted you



before the pack. Of course. I did. You are divine. You smell like the most delicious treats in the world, and I just want to lick you all over. Ivo? I want him too. Nothing to do with the pack.”

“We want you. We want you so much. I want you. Look —”

“No talking.”

And she bit my lip. The shock of pain had me gasping, giving her access. The whole kiss deepened. I just wanted to melt into her. My hands collapsed to loosely bracket her hips, and then that tempting swell of her ass had them gliding there, cupping, squeezing, and lifting her closer as I slipped off the sink and arched into her, putting some relief on my aching cock, which pressed against my jeans. “Fuck, Bubbles.”

Of course! Of course we had to be interrupted.

The banging on the door.

“If that is Ivo,” I growled.

“Hey. I really fucking need to pee!” It was one of the waitstaff, Carrol.

“Come on,” she sighed. “Let’s get out before he goes in the palm.”

I felt like a guilty teenager with my first girlfriend before I presented. Everything had pointed to alpha, but things turned out differently. And I wouldn’t change a god damn thing about it.

“Fine—”

“Think of it as history repeating itself. You interrupted Guy and me.”

“I was hoping to join in.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I had wanted to join in, but I’d also felt that spark of jealousy. Watching one of my alphas snap because he was concerned for another omega had me tensing with something akin to envy. Then he’d dragged her into a bathroom. It wasn’t the physical I worried about. That

had tingles of desire pooling in my gut. What had my gut rebelling with anxiety was the idea that he was expressing in words, in emotions, that he loved her still. I was ready for shared physical intimacy between Toni and the pack, but emotional? No, I hadn't been ready for that. And when I considered it all, there were times when I worried.

She was this perfect and wonderful creature that they had held on to for a decade, even if I'd been with them longer, and even if I had five years compared to her three years. Toni would always be the one who got away. My moment of fear had been confirmed when they'd rushed her to the hospital, but by then, I was caught up in soothing her.

She opened the door, and when I just sort of hovered on the brink of not knowing what I could handle now, she laced our fingers together and led me through the door. Instead of inserting us with the others, we found seats with Ivo, George and his alpha, Constance.

The two women started chatting about nothing in particular—honestly, even if I had been part of the conversation, I wouldn't be able to recall what we were talking about. Toni hadn't let go of my hand. For the first time, I worried about what it would mean to have her actually in our lives. Would I be able to sleep wrapped up in Guy while Julian whispered endearments into Toni's ear?

I needed to know. I needed to know fast, in case she took me up on my offer to stay for good. Because with Toni under our roof, there was no doubt in my mind that we would end up in an all-pack orgy. Fuck.

My cock ached with the idea of her quim and slick.

My phone buzzed again. I pulled it out, expecting another pushy text from Dada. Instead, it was something worse. An alert for my heat. It was coming up. How? Ten years in, how did my heat always sneak up on me?

# TONI



I wasn't sure if Ciarán was worried that someone would know what we had been doing in the bathroom or if it was something else, but the longer we chatted with Ivo and the others, the more withdrawn he became. Gone was that flirtatious glint that no one could have missed as he practically dragged me to the bathroom for our little role-play game that had left me grateful as anything that slick-protection panties existed because I'd been ready and needy from the moment I had guessed what he wanted.

Now he was acting distant, and I didn't have the balls to ask him why.

I pulled out my phone to give myself something to do. Just in time to get a message from Gwen saying that she was ordering midnight takeaway rather than cooking. I needed to talk to her about eating takeaway all the time. I wanted to grow old with her, not watch her die of a premature heart attack because she lived on a diet of junk food and ice cream.

Please come and rescue me from making bad choices like eating an entire pint of ice cream and bag of pretzels by myself?

"Hey." I bumped Ciarán's shoulder with my own to get his attention. "I'm going to get going. I'll call for a taxi."

"Home?"

"Gwen's." I let him know. I'd already had to find a place for Daisy though luckily mum's neighbour was more than

happy to take her in for as long as needed, and I got the sense we both knew that a stay might become permanent.

“Toni?” He was looking at our hands.

I wanted to lean in and kiss the worry off his brow. “Yeah? Is there something...”

“Uh...” He looked up and then back down. I knew it was to hide his thoughts—which he had every right to do—but it hurt all the same. “Tell her hi.”

“Oh, okay. Night?” He’d shut me out, and it stung. We’d just made out in the bathroom, probably would have had sex if we hadn’t been interrupted. And now he refused to meet my eye.

“Night.” His voice sounded strained.

I stood, nodded, forced a smile and a laugh to say goodbye to the others, neither knowing or caring if they saw how awkward we were. I opened my mouth to say something, though I didn’t know if I wanted to scream at him or beg for him to tell me what I had done wrong. Instead, I closed it with a snap.

“Night,” I repeated like an idiot. “Night, Ivo.”

He raised his hand in a silent wave.

“Right.”

I made it to the door before I let myself look back. Ivo was whispering something into Ciarán’s ear, and the intimacy was a punch in the gut. I knew, or I thought I knew, what their relationship was, but I didn’t. Ciarán thought Ivo was sexy. And Ivo wasn’t blind to how gorgeous Ciarán was. Then again, Ivo was a beta and straight.

Alphas and omegas were what I liked to think of as exclusively “pansexual polyamorous.” Betas occasionally had preferences. None of that mattered, though. None of it. Because sex? Yeah, I could understand that they were both sexually attracted to me. But the intimacy? Neither of them had ever offered me. Hugs and scent marking were friendly, shared between packmates all the time. What if Ciarán only

wanted sex? I knew I was attractive—it came with being an omega. But it sucked to think that was all he wanted. What any of them wanted.

I'd asked for boundaries. I needed to remember that went both ways. Boundaries for him and for me and, I guess, with Ivo, too, even though we hadn't talked about it yet. Neither of us had brought up our stolen kiss. It was almost like it had never happened. I hated the feeling that just when I had started to consider the pack home, I was waking up to the fact that our feelings were a whole lot more complicated than just wanting to have sex or wanting to stay. Ten years ago, things had seemed so straightforward. Now I didn't know which way to look.

When the door closed behind me, the music and laughter were cut off, replaced by a fox screaming and the screech of a bus breaking at its stop.

The weather was still warm and tonight a little muggy, which reminded me of New York's humidity. Would I go back? Where things were simpler? Where I had worked lined up? Fuck, I needed to talk to Gwen about it. I slouched against the wall and waited, half-hoping Ivo would come out and ask me to stay with him. Say that he just wanted to be around me. That sex wasn't the only thing we had to offer each other.

The tears refused to fall on the ride to Gwen's. I wanted them to, wanted the catharsis of crying, my therapist called it. Gwen lived in an omega-only mansion block on the ground floor, and I saw her in the window when the taxi pulled up. We hadn't known each other for that long, but I felt more comfortable with her than anyone else. Our lives weren't so different in many ways. She'd been born into a pack with little genuine power or standing, a modest upbringing like mine. We shared values and had a more practical outlook than Ciarán, who'd never heard no in his entire life.

“What happened?” she asked the minute the door closed behind me with a thud loud enough that had me jumping.

“Urgh. I don't want to talk, but like, sharing is caring?”

“Toni, you can tell me everything.”

“Don’t you mean anything?”

“E.V.E.R.Y.T.H.I.N.G. Everything,” she said.

“I made out with Ciarán, and then it was like he took my request for some boundaries so literally that he couldn’t even look me in the eyes when I left.”

“Fuck,” she sighed as she flopped onto the sofa, immediately swearing as she tweaked her sprained ankle.

“Shit, Gwen. You need to be more careful.”

“Yeah, I know. The pain isn’t anything close to like when I got into the car accident, so I forget.”

“You are remarkably cool about it.”

“I’m not one to dwell,” she said, but let me help her get stretched out with a stack of pillows beneath the injured ankle. “Can you get the ice pack?”

I grabbed it from the freezer and with it a pint of ice cream.

“We should really go to sleep. It is late,” I said.

“Nope. Don’t avoid it. Spill.”

“Ugh. First, Guy went alpha on me the day Mum had her fall. Then the pack offered to have Mum move in. She accepted. Then we had therapy and it was a disaster. And tonight Ciarán and I kissed.” I ate a scoop. “Oh, Ciarán wants me to stay.”

“Okay, that is serious...”

“I know! I told him it was a bad idea. And he didn’t seem to care. Then we all stayed late to try a cocktail he was working on. People were buzzed. And he dragged me into the bathroom and we were making out but got interrupted. I thought we were, oh, I don’t know! Good? Relaxed? But he just froze up on me. I thought maybe he realised everyone would know what we’d been doing.”

I took another bite of ice cream.

“But then, when I said goodbye? He didn’t look at me. Ivo just waved. Nothing. And now that I think about it, he looked pissed off. It was bad. Then I left, and I looked back because I’m stupid, and Ivo and Ciarán looked so intimate, so close. And...oh god. I just miss that.” I felt deflated. Exhausted. “I came home for this divorce, and now I have to deal with them every single day. A constant reminder of what could have been and what I can’t have, and it makes me sick to my stomach. But I promised to keep working...”

“Quit,” Gwen said without hesitation. “This is killing you. Quit. You don’t need this bullshit. We can file tomorrow that you have a Claim. Or move in here with me.”

“Gwen. I can’t just break the court order. And if I leave? It just feels like I’m running again. The whole point of coming back was that I wouldn’t be running away anymore.”

“Toni, you’ve been through enough. And enough with Ivy Place Pack. I adore Ciarán, Ivo, and all of them. But no one is worth this level of stress.”

“Are you saying that as my lawyer or my friend?”

“Both. I’ll look into it. I’m sure we can find a way. Maybe get you to have a medically induced heat?”

My heart lurched. I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t just...“I can’t.”

“You are so fucked, aren’t you? Who’s D are you getting?”

“No one.”

My phone rang. I picked up without checking who it was. There weren’t many people who would call me at this hour.

“You ready to come home? Ciarán and Ivo just got back. Do you want me to order a car to pick you up from Gwen’s?”

“Jules, I’m going to stay over to help her wash her hair in the morning.” It was the lamest excuse in the world.

“Sure! I’ll let the others know. Tell her hi from all of us. Do you want me to order delivery for you? I know how you girls like to eat your pizza.”

“No, thanks. We have ice cream.”

“Night, love.” He ended the call so fast I didn’t have the chance to respond. Hell, even if he hadn’t, I didn’t have the bandwidth to respond.

Much later, at the witching hour, I was still awake. I told myself it was impulsive to call. That I was just giving in to that part of myself that liked to flirt with danger. But I knew the truth. I was shit at letting go.

He picked up on the third ring.

“Ivo?”

“Hey, little girl. What can I do for you?”

“Can we talk? In person? Tonight?”

“Uh...Not in person. I’m in bed, but I can talk to you from here.”

I lay down on Gwen’s sofa bed, keeping the phone between my ear and the pillow. “Okay.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

I closed my eyes to better bring up the fantasy that he was with me. That he was lying behind me, that I could smell him. I found a lighter and lit one of Gwen’s many candles, then blew it out to help keep the lie alive to myself that Ivo and his smokey scent were there.

“I miss them,” I whispered. “I miss them so much it hurts, and I can’t lose them again. But I don’t know what would happen if I stayed.”

“Oh, Toni,” he sighed. “Baby girl.”

“I promised...” My voice sounded small. “Ivo...”

“I’m grabbing my jacket. I’ll be there in...maybe fifteen minutes. Be waiting outside.”

Fifteen minutes passed by so fast that when I pushed through the door onto the street, Ivo was already there. He leant against a black motorcycle, a black leather jacket



straining over his shoulders. I paused. We looked each other up and down.

“Wanna take a ride?” he asked and picked up a pink helmet from behind him. “Uh, it belonged to my ex, but it is the only one that might fit you.”

“Oh.”

“She hated pink,” he let me know as if that meant something. “But, because of your hair, I thought you might like it.”

“Thanks.” My feet seemed stuck. I wanted to run into his arms and was afraid that he didn’t feel the same way.

“Don’t make me come get you.” It wasn’t a threat. There was nothing, oh god, dominant in the way he said those words, but my insides melted at the rumbling way his voice carried across the short distance between us. I didn’t want to examine too closely why I was tangling with him. Rafe was the dangerous one. The feral one. The one who had always held back something of himself.

Ivo, though? He was new. Shiny and new but comfortable. Safe. A hedgehog with spikes to scare people away and then soft and cuddly underneath. With that in mind, I stepped forward, smiling up at my hedgehog.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked as he fit the helmet over my head.

“You are just a cuddly hedgehog,” I told him.

He froze. I had to tilt my head back so far that my neck hurt, but it was worth it to see the look of shock on his face. Or perhaps, bewilderment. I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, suddenly afraid that I’d said something wrong.

His hands flexed against my shoulders before setting me away from him. One hand went to his nose, plucking at it in a strange way that I’d seen a couple of times. After a minute, his hands fell to his side, and he cracked his neck first one way, then another. He was behaving strangely. Had I offended him? I floundered. Surely...He didn’t seem like the kind of man who would be offended.

“Ivo?”

“I like hedgehogs. They are cute.”

“Oh.” If there was one thing about Ivo that I knew for sure, it was that he could rob me of speech.

“Come on, little girl, before...” He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. I hid my grin and obeyed as he instructed me on how to get on behind him. At first, there was about a handbreadth between us, but I wasn’t going to give up what I wanted, what I had fantasised about. More accurately, spooning this man and inhaling that intoxicating scent of a just blown-out candle. I shuffled forward, wrapping my arms around his waist. “Hold on tight,” he said.

Then, we were off.

I’d read about riding on the back of a motorcycle and how sexy it could be. It was always in romance novels. All of them made it seem like this amazing, sexy experience. The major difference, I realised as we took off, is that one, books and real life do not correlate in the way you think they will. But secondly, none of the books I had read were set in urban locations. More specifically, they were not set in London, where the press of traffic was around us constantly.

There was nothing free about being surrounded on all sides. Taxis, cars, buses, and even cyclists had me squeezing Ivo as tightly as possible. I didn’t dare close my eyes for fear of missing some impending crash that would kill both of us. Perhaps Julian would have to be called to the scene and save us. Or we would die while he tried to save us. The ride had me on edge until we turned into Regent’s Park and suddenly, everything changed. The streets were almost empty. The city faded away until, there was only the sound of the bike and my own blood pounding in my ears. I could imagine we were alone.

Ivo pulled over. “You okay?”

“It was something,” I said and realised I’d shouted. “Sorry.”

“No worries, love. I thought we could do some laps. It is different than being on the road.”

“Sure,” I said with more bravery than I really felt.

It was all he needed.

Soon, we were flying.

If I had been wild and stupid and reckless, I would have let go of him and thrown my arms in the air as we went around and around. Fast along the straightaway on the Camden Town side, slower around the curve at the top, then fast again. Around and around we went until I lost count of how many times. He slowed again and pulled to a stop in front of the black iron gold-tipped gates that led into Rose Garden.

“Are we getting off?”

“Yeah.”

I hadn't expected to feel unstable on my feet, but I took a moment to regain my land legs.

“You were so tense. Though, you loosened up at the end.” He chuckled.

“It wasn't like in the books.”

“The books?” He frowned.

“Motorcycle club romance books.”

Ivo started laughing. “What?”

“Books about... Oh, never mind.”

“Tell me.” He tugged on a bit of my hair.

“You'll make fun of me.”

Silence. He just looked at me. This great hulking man, who belonged to one of the wealthiest and most powerful packs in the country after the Royal Family. This man wore jeans he'd owned for ten years, drove motorcycles, and wanted to know about the dirty books I read. His face was stretched into a generous smile that revealed his white, straight teeth.

“Fine. So...there are books where the heroine ends up with a biker pack in a motorcycle club. Usually she's from a fancy

background.”

Silence.

“That’s it.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“What do they say about riding motorcycles?”

“That it’s sexy.”

“Riding with me wasn’t sexy?” He didn’t seem offended.

“It was terrifying when we were in traffic like that.”

“I was careful.” He stepped forward, took the helmet from me and placed it carefully on the seat of the motorcycle. “I will always be careful with you.”

“I’m not that breakable,” I breathed. Somehow, things had gone from innocent romance books to this weird, electrified feeling. “You don’t have to be careful with me.”

He lifted a hand to my hair, tucked it behind my ear, letting his fingers comb through its length, and my breath caught as the back of his hand brushed against the top of my breast.

“If I want to be careful with you, I will be.” His voice was rough.

“Don’t be...I don’t want to feel breakable.”

I knew he had closed his eyes because I could see the crescent of black eyelashes against his sharp cheekbones.

“Antonia Vane...” He breathed in. “You are not broken. You are not breakable. You are perfect the way you are. And we both know this is dangerous.”

“Ivo...” I took a step closer. My breasts ached to be touched. I needed him to touch me. Softly, roughly, I didn’t give a fuck. All that mattered was feeling the heat of him on my skin. “Please. If you don’t Claim me, I’m going to go crazy”

“I am a beta,” he emphasised the word like he was telling me he had leprosy. And even touching him would sentence me to a living death. “I can’t Claim you like an alpha.”

“There are other ways of claiming me. I don’t want you to be an alpha. I want you to be you.” I cupped his cheek, stretching up on my toes so that I could reach him. “Kiss me like you did before.”

He grabbed my wrist. “I will not stand in for Rafe or the pack. I won’t be the pick-up, second place prize because...”

“Don’t say that about yourself. Don’t talk like that,” I snapped. Suddenly, this all seemed like a bad idea. I’d put us both in a horrible position. “I’m...I’m sorry, Ivo. I—”

“Baby doll, it isn’t that this can’t happen. But there is a lot of...There are a lot of people who could end up hurt if we are impulsive.”

“I’m a fucking omega. I’m...”

“You are more than your designation. I wouldn’t feel any different if you were an alpha or a beta. But there is history. There is a lot of heartbreak. Only you and Rafe know what was really said. Or what kept you away. But we cannot happen...Fuck,” he shouted so loud that a couple who were walking arm in arm actually looked over at us. Ivo stepped close, took my hand in both of his and lowered his voice. “Impulse. Sex. Attraction beyond the physical? It is there, little one. Don’t ever doubt that. But I don’t want either of us to wake up one morning and regret anything. Whether it is the next morning, the next month, or years from now. Understand?”

“The sex would be fucking explosive,” I muttered.

“Fuck, baby. If we have sex...Don’t worry. I’d wreck you just like you want.”

And even though I could feel myself grow slick, he said nothing about intimacy.

“Take me back, please,” I said because I didn’t want to be this omega. The one whimpering and begging to be accepted by anyone. It wasn’t me. A wind picked up, and I missed his heat.

“Can I have your jacket for the ride back?” I asked. Ivo and I were going to happen, I promised myself. We had to

happen because I couldn't leave Ivy Place without...without showing him how I felt. Because if I used words then I would never be able to leave. A fling could be justified but emotions were a lot more dangerous.

"Sure." Ivo shrugged out of the leather. It was still warm from him, and a plan started to form in my head. A twisted and masochistic plan, but instinct was riding me hard. I needed this, him, more than I could really put into words.

The ride back was...less stressful? Perhaps it was because the traffic was lighter, or maybe my thoughts were too caught up in the feel of the thin cotton between my hands and the taut muscles of Ivo's stomach. I was bad, naughty, and dangerous at a red light, when I allowed one of my hands to drift up over his chest, feeling the flex of his abdominals as my palm brushed over his nipple. Fuck. No wonder men were so obsessed with tits and nipples when you could just turn a man on with such an innocent touch. Very well not that innocent, but certainly chaste.

I hopped off when he pulled to a stop. I needed to escape as quickly as possible before he had a chance to guess my game.

"I'm keeping this," I told him. Then I hefted the helmet. "This too."

"I would prefer if you don't keep the jacket for good. It is my favourite."

"I promise to return it," I lied.

I felt guilty and messed up as all heaven and hell as I watched him pull away. He had no clue what I was going to do with his jacket. An alpha would know. An alpha would be crowing if I'd asked for an article of clothing, but a beta? Even if Ivo recognised the exchange between an alpha and omega, he would never put much weight on me stealing his jacket.

Back in Gwen's flat, I put the helmet on the chest of drawers and then turned to the sofa bed. It was wrong. So twisted and wrong. But I had to do something before I could sleep. I shrugged the jacket off and draped it over a pillow

which I positioned so that it could be “big spoon.” I then went to the pile of dirty laundry and picked out the outfit I’d worn to Bubble and Smoke. I raised it to my nose and inhaled. There was a hint of beta, but Ciarán’s omega scent overwhelmed me. This, I placed along the front of the bed, a barrier to protect me. I looked down at my...

“Nest,” I whispered. Even though it felt like my nest at the pack house was a million miles away, I had at least some of the pack with me.

My logical brain was rebelling, saying how wrong it was to begin a nest with the scents of a beta and another omega, but it felt right. And the very first lesson of nesting was to follow your instincts. And my instincts were extremely clear. I wanted to be sleeping with these scents. I would only be able to sleep with these scents around me.

At some point, this adventure of getting to know the Ivy Place Pack had ceased to be an adventure. Now, I didn’t know if I could exist without them.

# TONI



Was it cheating if I skipped going back to Ivy Place and instead, spent Saturday morning in a pair of Gwen's pjs eating ice cream while we debated the attractions of the "hot teacher" in the newest YA fantasy tv show she was obsessed with? Or was I keeping healthy boundaries? It was a question for my therapist when we spoke next week. For now, I was going to enjoy watching the werewolf teacher get stern with the self-righteous teenagers.

"Did you have a teacher kink?" Gwen asked while I was sorting her recycling—big surprise that she wasn't an anal-retentive recycler.

"No. I was more into doctors." Her head popped up, just so that I could see her smirk. "Yes, Gwen. I'm aware of the irony. But isn't it nice when someone kisses it better?"

"I wouldn't know." She wrinkled her nose. "I definitely didn't have a thing for doctors when I was in hospital. Oh! Are you going to see your mum?"

"I'll pop by in the late afternoon. Jules, uh, sent a message saying that she was complaining of difficulty breathing and they wanted me to come in."

"Ah."

"What is that meant to mean?" I glared.

"I was wondering why you were hiding here."

"I'm not hiding because of Julian," I mumbled. I wasn't. I was hiding because I'd made out with his omega who'd then



given me the cold shoulder. And then I'd gone on an illicit bike ride with their beta—whose leather jacket was draped around my shoulders.

The rain arrived mid-morning and with it Ciarán and Dada. Ivo's sister gave me a once over and flashed a sly grin.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you," she said in the poshest accent I'd ever heard. "I'm Davinia."

"Toni."

She turned her attention to Gwen who sat like a queen in a recliner with her ankle propped on a pillow. She'd tweaked it again, and the doctor told her to rest it for a couple of weeks. To say my friend was losing her damn mind was an understatement. It didn't help that all the alphas were hovering over her and that she kept looking at her phone as if she expected someone to call her. When Sebastian rang the bell and brought her cane, she said she wouldn't see him. When she learnt it was just a courier, she growled that they were cheap fucks for having someone else doing their dirty work. "And you are Gwen. Is it true that you work with Seb?"

"Stop being nosy, Dada." Ciarán pushed her towards the armchair. "I need to cuddle with Toni."

My heart kicked in my chest when he shuffled one of my pillows over so that he could stretch out next to me. His leg pressed against mine and he draped an arm over my shoulder, tucking me against him.

Dada watched us with interest and then all faux-innocence she asked, "Is that my brother's jacket?"

"Shut up, Dada. Or I'm never bringing you anywhere again."

"Let's play word association," Dada declared when the credits rolled two hours later. Ivo's little sister scared me. She was equal parts charming and bitingly insightful for someone only twenty-one.

"Really?" Gwen wrinkled her nose. "That's pretty childish."

“Please?”

“Fine.” I grinned at Ciarán’s grumpy response. For a bartender he drank relatively little, but I’d learnt that when he indulged, he became a curmudgeonly old man the next morning who liked to argue in the most adorable way.

“Cumin...”

“Side me.” I giggled. I was drunk on Ciarán’s scent but when my eyes met his, there was a sudden heat that made me squirm. “I...I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Oh, I think you did.” Dada sipped her tea. “And about time.”

Ciarán rounded on her, his too-handsome face marred with a frown. “You are trying to set us up.”

“No...Yes. Complicated.”

“Explain yourself.”

“There is just so much chemistry between you two. And then there is the chemistry with the alphas. I think you make a lovely pack and I want to be in the wedding party when you get married to them again.”

I blinked at her. How did she know any of this? I quick look at Ciarán showed that he was equally surprised.

“And your brother,” Gwen pointed out.

“Ick. But that, too.”

“So, what are you saying?” Ciarán asked. “What do you know?”

“That Toni used to be married to Rafe and the others but then she left.”

“That’s true—”

“Why can’t you get together? It isn’t like two omegas in a pack is illegal.”

I felt my shoulders sag. “It can’t be like that. We don’t.” I sighed. “We can have all the attraction in the world, but that isn’t enough sometimes.”

“You want to settle, though.” Ciarán surprised me by pointing this out.

“I don’t know,” I hedged and pulled Ivo’s jacket around my shoulders.

“Bullshit. You are a classic nester. I mean, come on. Look at yourself.”

My eyes rolled on their own as I snuggled deeper into the pile of pillows I’d created. “Nesting is mobile.”

“My clients spend thousands of pounds on their nests. And some of them are never used except during heats. I’m not saying you can’t create a mobile nest. I am asking if you feel satisfied with just mobile nesting or if you wouldn’t prefer something more permeant.”

Jesus fucking Christ in a handcart. “Are you an interior designer or my therapist?”

“She has a point,” Ciarán added more slowly. “You nest a lot at the house. I don’t think you even realise how many pockets of each room are blankets and pillows that you’ve piled up.”

“This conversation had gotten completely derailed from me wanting to fuck Ciarán.”

His phone rang.

“Saved by the literal fucking bell,” he muttered and picked it up. “Jules!” A look in my direction as he listened to Dr Alpha. “We’re all here. No. Yes, we are going to take a taxi home and drop Dada off at her place.”

Home. After our conversation about nesting, home hit differently. I had my little apartment in New York, but when was the last time I’d spent any time there? When I was with the SweetNothings, we had the tour bus or when we were in New York, their loft...which didn’t have a nest. And because Dean was a neat freak, they’d converted the walk-in wardrobe into a nest for me instead of letting me leave blankets in their minimalist sitting room. Which meant the spare room was storage, which had been a sticking point because I’d wanted Mum to live with us—

“Shit, I need to go see mum in the hospital.” I peeled myself off the sofa and twisted my back, wincing when it cracked.

“Jesus. I hope that when I’m your age, I at least have an alpha to give me a back massage.” Dada popped a handful of popcorn in her mouth making her look like a chipmunk.

“Bitch.” Gwen shook her head. “You’d be lucky to get a pack with your attitude.”

“I so will!” The brat whined. “I already have one picked out.”

“Do daddy and big brother approve?” Ciarán asked. His smirk made me smile.

“We don’t live in the dark ages,” I groaned. “Okay. Everyone needs to get on with their day. Gwen, work. Ciarán... whatever your are doing. Dada, just stay out of trouble.”

“You are so square. I thought you’d be more fun.”

“Whatever. Major. Looser.” Gwen accompanied her words with the cringe, yet classic hand gesture.

“What the fuck was that?” Dada blinked.

“Oh, god, please. The youth! The youth will be the death of me!” Gwen screamed. “Get out all of you. I’m going to binge all the classics.”

When I finally came out of “hiding” and made it to the hospital, the nurses remembered me, or rather, they remembered Mum and me by association. She was sharing with a young woman who’d fallen off her bike and broken her elbow who gave me a jaunty wave when I walked in. Something told me that the nurses or Julian were responsible for finding an upbeat roommate for Mum, which I couldn’t be more grateful for. Mum lay in bed, looking sicker because the stark, harsh hospital light washing her out.

“Hey, lady.” I sat on the edge of her bed and leaned in to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. “How are you? They said you were struggling with breathing.”

“This hospital air!” she complained. “It is dry. Joyce brought me a humidifier.” She looked at the small glowing box huffing out lemon and lavender scented steam. “She’s going to take Daisy because we all know that dog prefers being spoiled rotten than being cooped up with me.”

“I saw that coming.”

“So, Julian has been very solicitous and insisting I move into the house.”

“It is a great room,” I conceded, but I couldn’t keep the irritation out of my voice. “I wish they had let me ask you.”

“They care.”

“Mum!”

“What?” Her eyebrows shot up, and when she shook her head in a ‘don’t look at me’ motion, her wig shifted. “Anyway, it is my choice. And I want to see what’s so special about pack life. I’ve got two weeks here, which will give you enough time to get used to the idea...If I decide to go down that route. Or I can buy something...But I’ll need somewhere to stay—”

“My two favourite ladies!” Julian boomed as he walked into the room. I’d texted him to let him know I was visiting Mum, but I’d never expected him to come find me.

Mum smiled, reaching out one hand, which he took with exaggerated gallantry, placing a kiss on her fingertips. “There you are. Why have you’ve visited before now?”

“I was here yesterday, Gloria. I have other patients, you know.” Julian perched on the other side of her bed. “But, and do not hate me, I’ve come for your daughter. This is my last free day before I have to work like a madman.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Ciarán’s heat. I’m saving up leave days.”

My cheeks flushed. Heat. Oh, wow. I hadn’t even considered that he might go into heat while I stayed with them. “Right.”

“Let’s go. We’re having a pack dinner, and I wanted to make sure you had a decent pub meal before Ivo starts feeding us his pre-heat menu.”

“See,” Mum said, sounding unbearably smug. “Packs take care of each other. I should definitely move in during my recovery.”

“But—” I cut herself off. “What if I’m not ready?”

Not what if I was gone. Just what if I wasn’t ready to admit how much I didn’t want to leave.

“Not your choice, darling. He’ll talk you through it.” Mum patted my thigh. “Go, eat something delicious and think of your invalid mother starving on hospital food.”

“Goodbye, gorgeous Gloria. She’s stubborn, but I’ll convince her,” Julian called over his shoulder at Mum as we walked out of her hospital room. In the hall, he pulled me to the side and cuffed me gently on the chin like he used to when we were kids. “Hey, if you don’t want her to stay, just tell us. Everyone, including her, would understand. We...we are trampling all over your boundaries, but if you don’t tell us, we won’t know.”

There was a beat which I tried to figure out who deserved the most of my ire. Mum, I decided. Pack mentality was hard to escape, arguably, it was ingrained in their DNA, but Mum had more perspective. She knew exactly what she was doing when she suggested she move into the Ivy Place Pack house. “I’m leaving in a month. She needs more than a month to recover. Are you suggesting that she bounce around? Are you offering as a way to keep me?”

He walked us out of the hospital without answering.

“I really missed going on walks with you,” I said softly as we headed towards Regent’s Park. “At the beginning, I would pretend you were with me. Except, I had to be a hell of a lot more careful because I was on my own.”

“Remember when we went to Manchester and went for bagels because Neil had said they were the best outside of New York?”

“Oh. My. God. Neil!” I laughed. “I haven’t thought about him in years.” A flash of the awkward teenage boy went through my mind. He’d worn too-large t-shirts, and had stayed away from all of us. “He really needed to learn about deodorant.”

“That isn’t fair; all teenagers suck at hygiene.”

My cheeks heated at the gentle reprimand. “I guess. What is he doing these days?”

“Would you believe me if I told you he was a late blooming alpha and now runs a successful construction-slash-architectural business?”

“Wow. Hot? Massive glow up?”

He pulled me close and gave me a noogie. “Yeah. Super-hot.”

“Wow.”

“He did the work at the pack house.”

“Wow.” I shook my head, trying to imagine the skinny man-boy I remembered and an alpha doing construction. “Do they have an omega?”

Julian stopped. “Are you looking for a pack?”

“What? No. I...” I gaped at him. “I was just curious.”

“It was hard for all of us that you wanted to leave.”

“Just us? Friends us?” I asked. He nodded, even though I knew it was hard for him to disengage and revert to only friends. It was hard for me too, but he knew me best and sometimes, I needed that friend, no matter how unfair it was to him. “I like my nest, and there isn’t anywhere else I want to be.”

“Just friends?” he returned. “If you never leave your nest, you’ll make three alphas, an omega, and a beta the happiest men in the world. I don’t just want my omega back. I miss my friend, too.”

“Phantom limb syndrome,” I echoed his words from our counselling session. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and

bury my face into his chest, sucking in deep lungfuls of his scent. “Me, too.”

“Always love you, Lettuce. No matter what you choose. I’ll always support you.”

My legs weren’t entirely steady as we walked through Regent’s Park towards the zoo.

He finally broke the silence as we reached the innocuous chain-link fence which separate people from animals.

“Did you know that it is the Zoological Society of London?” Julian asked. He draped an arm over my shoulder and tugged me into his side. I took comfort from his familiar presence, but I felt sick that I was moving in on Ciarán’s territory. “ZSL, I mean.”

“No.” I blinked. “Wow. Huh. That is one of the most British things I’ve heard in a long time. Zoological,” I tried the word. “Why isn’t it zoo-oh-logical? That sounds fancier. Want to sneak in?”

“Hell, yeah.” His hands were huge as they wrapped around my waist and hoisted me over the fence. “If we get arrested for this—”

“Rafe will get us out of it. Legally or by bribing someone.”

“He’d be mortified.” I laughed. His baritone joined me, and a sense of peace I hadn’t experienced in what felt like years washed over me. The zoo was quiet as we walked through the enclosures. “I loved coming here as a kid. It was one of those special treats.”

“Do you remember that time you cried because you weren’t allowed to get a flake because they’d run out?”

A flash of memory, more sensory than anything, took over. Julian hugging me, patting my head and telling me we could go to the shop and buy one. I’d only cried harder. “Omg. I was fifteen. I bawled like a baby.”

“You were menstruating.”

My head whipped towards him. “I was?”



“I could, uh, smell it.” He sounded as awkward as a teenage boy.

“You were having alpha signs then?”

“Just around you, and I couldn’t tell who were omegas. It is fairly common to know with a friend, though.” A friend held special meaning. Friend had started to blur with like-liking around that time.

“You never told me.” I wanted to press him on why, but the answer was fairly obvious because we had both wanted to stick together, then—our biology pushing us together.

The sun was setting and the summer night was cool against my bare arms. Julian didn’t say anything, and I was too nervous to talk. He just kept walking until we reach the Heath. And he didn’t stop there. Not until we were deeper in and he could spin me around and pin me to a tree, my back scraping against the rough bark. Not physically pinned, of course. Just with a look he had me all tied up and confused.

“Eh, an alpha can be protective of his omega without needing to tell them. Sorry not sorry, Tones.”

“Julian, it can’t be like that. You have an omega. I appreciate your...” I squeezed my eyes closed, trying to find the right words. Everything seemed inadequate. “We aren’t like that anymore.”

“Don’t worry about labels, darling.”

“Julian,” I pleaded and hoped my eyes were better at expressing all my conflicting emotions.

“Yes?”

“Please? Don’t call me darling? Please?”

Do you ever hope that someone will flinch? Feel embarrassed? And then they don’t, and you realise that they are being honest in a way you aren’t ready for yet? Well, Julian just had to be that person. “I can’t make that promise. None of us can.”

“You have Ciarán.” I pressed my hands to his chest. “Here. In your heart is Ciarán. It is only because you have...because

we have loose ends. But you can't have two omegas. It doesn't work that way. Ciarán and I would tear each other apart. There would be so much jealousy. Maybe not at first, but eventually."

"I don't think you understand..."

"Julian, listen to me. I know. I travelled with another pack. I was friends with their omega, and after a month, we had to part because of her jealousy. Nothing even happened with her alphas. We were friends, nothing more. But it drove her mad. I had to find another group, a beta family, to travel with. I'm not making excuses. I'm telling you my experience."

"It wouldn't have to be like that," he told me in a soft voice. "Do you want a hug? Just friends, I promise."

"I..." Something in me broke at that moment. A hug. When was the last time I'd had a proper hug from someone who wasn't Mum or Gwen? I came up blank. I literally couldn't remember the last person I'd hugged.

"Oh, darling. Let me be the one to hug you, then."

And I realised I must have voiced some of my thoughts.

Julian's hugs had always been the best of the pack. It was a scientifically objective comparison. But the way he seemed to nestle you closer until there was no way of knowing how you could possibly be two people when it felt like you were one made them the best. And perhaps it was because I always kept my arms tucked into my chest so he could envelop me completely. Or maybe it was how he rested his cheek on my head, even though it meant we were bent in an odd-yet-not-uncomfortable way. I wiggled my arms until I'd twisted them behind his back and slotted us together.

It took me a moment to realise this hug was different and more an embrace, on the cusp of something far more intimate and achingly familiar. Julian laced his fingers through my hair, and like a magnet, angled my head back so he could brush his lips over my half-closed eyes and down the tip of my nose.

"Darling, darling Toni. You make me drunk, and I haven't even tasted you yet."

I choked on the moan that threatened to escape. “Julian... Please...” I hoped he would be the wise one, the one to show restraint because this was too close to what I needed, what I craved that if he did not pull back, I knew I wouldn’t be able to let him go.

“Not now, then,” he sighed. His fingers ran from my hair, down my back, and up again. “Not now,” he repeated. “Fuck.”

He swooped in and kissed me. It was as sweet as our first one. He ran his tongue along the seam of my lips, teasing me into opening for him. Our tongues met, tasting at first and then devouring, becoming hungrier with each passing moment. I clutched his arms, holding myself back from climbing him like a monkey. I’d missed him. This easiness that I’d never found with anyone else.

“There.” He pulled away. “I think I can survive.”

“Jules...” I couldn’t stop the smile on my face. “Hi.”

We stood there for an eternity. And for a moment, I entertained the fantasy that I could have them all. And that they could have me.

# TONI



We met the others at the Holly Bush Pub in Hampstead. They'd claimed a window table in the historic establishment whose white-washed front was punctuated by colourful, overflowing window boxes. The whole thing belonged on a postcard. The interior was the same. Worn oak tables, with chairs that had lost all their padding while the scent of stale beer and people from all walks of life lingered in the air.

I let Julian lead me through the crowd to what he called the pack's regular table. The first one who jumped up was Ciarán. My fingers flew to my lips, aware that they were probably swollen from my kiss with Julian. "Ciarán."

"Hey, Bubbles." He reached for my hand, drawing me close before pressing a soft kiss on my temple. "How's your mum?"

"She's well." I tugged him away from the others. "I am so sorry. We got carried...I got carried away. Julian didn't do anything wrong."

"I don't mind, Toni." A shy smile appeared. "I knew something was happening through the bond."

"I should never have overstepped. Again."

"Bubbles, stop beating yourself up. If I minded, I would have said something. To you. To him. I'm a big boy."

Before I realised what I was doing, I stood on my tiptoes and placed a kiss right at the corner of his mouth.

“Hungry?” he asked. But with the way his eyes darkened and his scent deepened, I knew he was talking about more than the food.

“Starving.”

“Then let’s order,” Guy interrupted. “Otherwise, the two of you are going to start a riot.”

I looked around, and several tables were staring at us.

“Right, food.” I stepped back and let Ciarán lead me to the bar.

The world had nothing on a pub meal. I stared at the menu, unsure what to pick. Ciarán made it harder with the way he pressed into my back. And Guy’s looming on my other side while he glared at the beta on the other side of the bar didn’t help either.

“What about we pick a mix for everyone tonight? We’re ready to order.” Ciarán flagged down the beta barman, who smiled and took Ciarán’s order of fish and chips, pies, and a Sunday roast that he managed to flirt out of him, even though it was Saturday.

I moaned at the thought of having proper fish and chips again on top of the steak and ale pie that had caught my eye.

“I’m going to explode,” I told him.

“Only if you think about it.” Guy pinched my waist and softened the teasing by wrapping his other hand around the back of my neck. I needed to talk to all of them about scent marking me, but it felt too good, and I was too touch-starved to protest. He paid and carried our drinks while I walked in front, forcing people to make way for the omega—perks of the dynamic that I would never give up.

While we’d been ordering, the others had found some cushions, worn so thin you couldn’t see what the original colour and pattern had been. The table was a little sticky, and everything had that old wood and yeasty smell that only existed in a pub.

We settled next to each other, and I cuddled up close to Guy as if no time had passed at all. He draped an arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer. I turned my head to the side then stiffened.

“Wait. Is...is this where we had our first date? As a pack, I mean. With Julian.”

“Is it?” Guy asked. He looked around. I watched his face and caught the second he remembered. “How?”

“I know! How don’t you remember?” I smiled. My constantly watching alpha had missed it.

“We were more focused on you than on where we were,” Rafe pointed out. “We fell right into bed after that.” He swallowed, cheeks turning pink as he realised his faux pas of talking about it in front of Ciarán.

But, and heaven help me, Ciarán’s scent flourished, followed by the unmistakable sweet tang of slick. He more than liked the idea of us falling into bed. It was like a little red flag before the bull. I resisted the urge to stuff my hand into his back pocket to give his ass a squeeze and see how needy he was. He was not so gracious and slid his hand up my thigh to run a playful finger along the sensitive skin just below my panties.

“Not here,” I hissed, wiggling my ass to try and dislodge his hand.

“Bad omegas,” Rafe growled. “I can scent both of you from over here, and if you continue acting like a pair of out-of-control teenagers, I have to warn you that I don’t have enough money or clout to get us out of jail without going to court if you start an orgy in the middle of a public establishment.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He must be winding us up on purpose because both of us wiggled in our seats.

“Separate.” He snapped his fingers. We shuffled away until there were a couple of inches between us. Julian pushed us even further apart, inserting his large frame between us. Our pack leader’s scowl at the change in circumstances was almost

comical. “Julian, if you start something with them, I will sabotage the espresso machine.”

Ignoring Rafe, Ciarán leaned around Julian and snapped his fingers at me. “Sleep with us tonight,” Ciarán commanded. “I want you in my nest tonight.”

My cheeks burned. My nipples became hard points, aching for attention. I couldn’t look away from the heat in his eyes. In them, I saw not only lust but softer emotions, ones I wasn’t ready to admit to yet. “I’ll stay with you and Julian.”

“Good. We’ll go slow, if you want.”

“What do you want?” I asked him.

“To spread you out and eat your pussy until you’re begging me to stop.” He smirked. “I won’t stop.”

“Omegas!” Rafe’s bark made us jump. “Please. For my sanity, stop.”

“Yes, alpha.” Ciarán’s unmoving smirk ruined the submissive tone. “But if you want to join us, you’ll have to ask nicely.”

“I can wait my turn,” he grumbled.

I choked on my glass of red. “You—”

“Steak and kidney pie? Veggie Wellington?” the server asked, interrupting the very charged conversation. She put the plates down, and by silent agreement, we put the conversation aside while we ate.

As we eased into a fourth round of drinks, I kept sneaking glances at Ciarán throughout the evening. I hadn’t dressed to seduce. I hadn’t groomed my lady bits, shaved and moisturised until I was softer and smoother than a baby’s bottom. I was about as everyday as you could get, yet I’d never felt more secure in thinking that I was desired.

Now, I was hiding behind a large potted plant in the short passage to the bathrooms, so I could watch the pack and get my head on straight. Julian had pulled Ciarán into his lap, ignoring Rafe’s glare. I wasn’t the only one watching. A small group of young omegas and their chaperones were all

watching the interaction. I wouldn't put it past Ciarán to play it up for them, and would bet a pretty penny that when I passed the table, the perfume of slick would be gracing the air. Yes, they were that beautiful.

And it only made me nervous. Petrified of how I would slot in between these two men, who were so clearly in love.

Did I admit to them that it had been years since I'd had a knot? That I was nervous and desperate for a knot? As many knots as I could possibly take? I was nowhere near relaxed enough to take two at once, but did I want to? Yes. However, we'd agreed slow. Tonight would be just me and Julian and Ciarán.

“Are you nervous?”

I jumped as Ivo came up behind me. “No,” I squeaked. “Yes...maybe a little.”

“Why?”

I started to turn, but he put a large hand on my waist and held me in place. There was something illicit about how he was standing there at my back. And I felt a kaleidoscope of butterflies take off inside of me. Where was the restraint he'd shown last night? Poof up in smoke. Had the pack had another meeting and decided it was open season on Toni?

“Toni? Why are you nervous about spending the night with Julian and Ciarán?”

“Because it is not just sex.”

“Do you want more than sex?” He must be leaning down because his breath tickled my ear. “Or do you want them to fuck you?” I turned towards him, but a firm hand on the back of my neck forced me to look forward. “No. Keep looking ahead, little omega.”

Holy Jesus and all the saints. How did this man, who was a gentle giant, just turn on this dirty-talking thing that had me squirming and that kaleidoscope refusing to settle?

“Tell me. What do you want them to do to you?”



“I want them to make me feel special,” I gasped. Ivo’s hand slipped under the hem of my top, and his callused hand now rested on my waist. His hand was so large that his thumb brushed against the underside of my breast. I’d foregone a bra but now wished I’d worn a corset to protect myself from the delicious feeling of Ivo touching me.

“Give me details,” he purred, moving up to tweak my nipple.

“Ivo.” I couldn’t dare be loud. Then everyone would look over and see this sex god playing with me while I just writhed in a helpless attempt to steal whatever pleasure I could. I looked over my shoulder, and Ivo’s steady eyes met mine, watching and assessing each and every one of my reactions. “Ivo...please.”

“Do you want something, little omega?” He smirked. He knew what he was doing, and I was too far gone to care that I was about to beg him to fuck me. Here. There. Anywhere. So long as he was making me feel as good as I imagined, no, as good as I knew he could make me feel.

“Please, what?”

“Please make me come?”

He grinned. “Here? In public? You dirty girl. A naughty, little exhibitionist.”

Normally, I thought those grins were happy, maybe teasing. This grin filled me with the kind of anticipatory dread that you could only feel if you were into one thing: a little bit of kink domination and submission. I didn’t subscribe to the idea omegas were naturally submissive. In fact, I knew an omega who was a professional Domme, and that was my only official experience with kink. Ivo and Mistress Michelle could not be more different. Michelle had rules. Ivo teased.

“Do you want to come? That is very, very inappropriate. We are in public. Anyone could see us.” I whimpered as a rush of slick reminded me of just how vulnerable I was. “Do you want me to touch you, Toni?” His voice was deep, dark, and so delicious. “Shall I keep you on a knife’s edge? Or shall I tip

you over, so you are all ready for Ciarán and Julian? So you go out there and finish your meal smelling of sex? Smelling of slick? Smelling of me? Do you like the idea of that?”

What is a girl to say to that? How can you speak after that because I'd pretty much dissolved into a puddle of slick.

“Use your words, baby girl.”

“Fuck, Ivo...please. We...I...at least...not here?” Complete sentences were beyond me.

“Here or nowhere.”

And there it was. Ivo had an exhibitionist streak on top of his dirty-talk-Dom-sex-god thing.

“Here,” I whispered, a delicious, erotic shame driving me to lean forward just enough for Ivo to reach underneath my skirt from behind. The rough hand left dragged down my torso, along the back of my legs until he caught the hem of my skirt and slowly ran his fingers up my thigh. He teased me through my soaked panties, murmuring about how wet I was while I rocked my hips, trying and failing to get any more pressure.

“Careful. I'll take care of you. You just need to stay still and very, very quiet.”

I whimpered. “I—”

“Hush,” he warned before he tugged the gusset of my panties aside and thrust two thick fingers into me. “If you need something to keep you quiet, suck on these.” He pushed his thumb in my mouth, moving it in and out in time with the fingers in my pussy. I lost control and bit down on his thumb. Only, it seemed to excite Ivo, who began to grind his erection into my ass. Fuck. We were completely clothed and yet I'd never felt more exposed.

“Good girl. What a good little omega,” he praised me. “So wet for me. You're going to come just like this. Your slick and cum coating my hand. Because you can't control yourself, can you? Come, baby. Come for me, now.”

My body felt like it was a marionette arching back, controlled by invisible strings that had me arching back, going up onto my toes as I came around Ivo's fingers. I couldn't fucking see straight. I couldn't see.

He petted me, pressing kisses on my hair. When I could stand on my own, he removed his fingers and held them to my lips. "Taste yourself."

I opened my mouth and cleaned away my release.

"What about you?" I asked.

"I'm good." He gave my ass a light smack and pushed me back in the direction of our table. "Let's get back to the pack."

Even though I knew we must smell of sex and pheromones, no one looked at us. Not the customers who were eating their meals. Not Ciarán who was scenting a pint of IPA. Not Julian who was looking at something on his phone.

Guy's lips twitched. "Were you being sweet for Ivo?" he asked.

I slid in next to Ciarán. Ivo put himself on my other side and rested his hand on my bare thigh.

"Stop," I hissed.

"That's not what she said," Ciarán snorted.

"For fuck's sake." Rafe threw up his hands and stood. "I'm getting another round."

Under the table, Ciarán took my hand. It fitted into mine so perfectly that I wanted to superglue us together forever. And it scared me how long I wanted that forever to be. Infinite forever. Forever-forever. Anything else would break my heart.

As we entered the house I kicked my shoes off, giggling when Ciarán grabbed Julian by the waist and started pushing him upstairs. Their trousers stretched over their asses in a way that should be illegal or at least come with a warning. Thank god, people weren't exposed to this sight because it was very N.S.F.W. Hell, it wasn't safe for my sanity right now because just before they disappeared from view, Julian called out,

“Toni! Save me! He’s going to ravish me. Save me from the feral omega.”

Then a yelp. “He bit my ass, Toni! Hurry. I’m being mauled by Ciarán!”

For the first time in weeks, all my cares were set aside. My mum was happily terrorising and enchanting the nurses, the pack I had thought I’d spend the rest of my life with had finally left me alone, and I could live in the moment. And the moment was with these men.

“He’s horny.” Guy whispered in my ear...Very unnecessarily. “You’ll have to take responsibility. Julian was all over you when you arrived. Then you were very naughty and let Ivo take care of you. His fingers...If he was anyone else, I’d be sucking his fingers to have my own taste.”

I was still wet from my encounter with Ivo, but when Guy put a hand on my waist, my sex clenched around nothing. All the illicit encounters with Ciarán’s alphas—my alphas—came rushing back. I should put more distance between us. Pushed them away or at least faked hating them. Because we couldn’t go back after this.

Ivo cleared his throat. I froze. He and Rafe had heard every word Guy’d said.

“Ciarán likes it,” Rafe said. I think he meant to reassure me, but instead, it brought back all my fears I had about staying. All the freedom I’d gotten used to taken away. And what did I get in exchange? A nest and sex.

“He wants pack to smell like pack,” Guy purred. “We all want you to smell like pack.”

Words stuck in my throat, because beneath that fear, I wanted my own pack. “Guy—”

“Go to them.”

“But.”

He pulled me in, burying his face in my neck. Between my legs, the dormant Claim throbbed with contentment. “Just them tonight. Unless you want every hole to be filled while we

fuck you until you can't move. Because, Bambi, your scent right now is the sweetest thing I've smelled in a long, long time.”

I hadn't thought of that. Three cocks. Yes. That sounded heavenly. Not tonight though. My pussy was that greedy, but my heart was the voice of reason—it wasn't ready for that level of intimacy. “Thank you for being sensible.”

“I think there is only one sensible brain cell living in this house at the moment, and we are all having to share it,” he chuckled. “Go show those horn dogs what you can do.”

# TONI



I half expected they'd gone to Julian's room because it was neutral ground. But it was from Ciarán's door that the delicious scents of omega and alpha arousal drifted from. And so, I went towards the house's nest. Nudging the door with my toe, I was at a loss for words. Julian had Ciarán pinned against the wall, the pair of them caught in a wild, powerful kiss.

"There she is." Ciarán turned his head, giving Julian access to his neck. His eyes were blown wide, and his lips, wet from the kiss, spread into a smile full of promise. "Come and kiss me."

Julian stepped back just enough for me to be pulled between them. Julian's hand landed on the back of my neck, guiding me towards Ciarán. "Kiss him, omega. Show me what you did the other day."

"Pleasure," Ciarán mumbled. Our first kiss had been a fumbling attempt compared to this. All those weeks of attraction exploded when our lips met, tongues already tangling. I dug my fingers into his shoulders, trying to drag myself up his body because he was too strong to pull down to my level. Good god, that was hot. The fact I had to chase him? I wanted to. Like some alpha stalking their omega, I hunted for his pleasure with my hands, my mouth. I pulled away to ghost along his jaw, which was prickly since he hadn't shaved. I traced the shell of his ear with my tongue, biting the lobe. "Toni, you're everything."

"You're more," I whispered. "I've wanted this since the first moment I saw you."

“Same. Fuck, same.” His hands slipped under my top, fingers glancing over my sides.

“Not ticklish?” he murmured into our kiss.

“Nope.”

His hands moved higher, teasing the underside of my breast. “No bra. Do you ever wear a bra.”

“Nope.” I grabbed the hem of my t-shirt and tugged it over my head, dropping it onto the floor. He did the same, revealing a broad chest. I scratched my nails over his pecs, chasing my fingers with sucking kisses. Gods, he tasted good, and I needed more. “Tasty.”

“Now, these are special.” He cupped my breasts, thumbs teasing my nipples. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such beautiful breasts.” His hands roamed around my ribcage to my back. “Look at you. Here, in my nest. Never in a million years did I ever think I would be this lucky.”

A shiver ran up my spine that had nothing to do with how precious he made me feel with every touch, every word, and look. “Oh, Ciarán.”

“Get on the bed, omegas,” Julian growled. I’d almost forgotten he was here.

Ciarán turned me in his arms, crossing his arms over my chest, his naked chest pressing against my back. “She’s mine, alpha,” he growled. “I get to play with her.”

“Of course, you can, darling. But on the bed. I want to watch you perform. Let’s see how well you eat pussy.”

“Please,” I begged, letting my hands reach behind me and fiddle with Ciarán’s belt. “I want to taste you.”

“Later, gorgeous. Ciarán first,” Julian replied. He’d removed his shirt and trousers. Fuck, he was huge. I glanced down at his equally large cock. A whimper escaped when he fisted himself, squeezing the base where his knot would swell and not go down until he was buried deep in an omega. “Focus. Ciarán always goes first, and his pleasure is making you come. Isn’t it omega?”

“Yes, alpha,” Ciarán purred.

And fuck me, that made my empty sex clench and a rush of slick escape. Omegas always went first, but I didn’t want to be the omega right now. I liked the idea of Ciarán being my omega. If that meant he would be between my thighs, then that was what I’d give him.

“On your back, legs spread.”

I flopped on my back, sinking into the deep feather mattress topper that smelled of Ciarán, Julian, and Guy. The zipper of my skirt caught, and I struggled to push the flimsy material down my hips.

“Fucking soaked.” Julian rubbed my pussy through the thin material of my panties. “But we need these off too.”

He used his alpha strength and ripped them off me. “That’s better.”

A whimper escaped as my legs fell open, my sex slick and ready for them to take whatever they wanted.

“I haven’t smelled pussy in years,” Ciarán said, skirting the bed until he stood at the foot. He didn’t take his eyes off me as he undid his trousers and shoved them and his boxer briefs down his thighs. His cock sprung free. Thick enough to stretch, long enough to make me feel him in the deepest part of me.

“Ciarán...” I propped myself up on one elbow then reached towards him with the other. “Come here, omega.”

He crawled between my legs, arms bracketing my hips as he lowered himself down, dropping kisses on the swell of my stomach, trailing them down until he nuzzled the seam of sensitive skin where my thighs and sex met.

“Do you need this?” he asked me. “Do you need me to eat your cunt like a good omega?”

“Yes.” I groaned. Years ago I’d taken what my alphas had given because you didn’t make demands of alphas. Recent experience had taught me that I would get what I wanted faster if I did. “I want you to fuck your tongue into my pussy.”



“That’s what I like to hear,” Julian purred. He manoeuvred me so that I was reclining between his legs, his hard cock pressed against my lower back. “I want you to watch him,” he said. “Tell him how good he is.”

I met Ciarán’s eyes and stopped breathing. God, he was so beautiful. Not breaking eye contact, he lowered his head and sucked on my clit. My hips jerked up. “Yes!”

Ciarán released my clit and began to taste me. He lapped up my slick and lulling me into the warm high. I relaxed, prepared to enjoy a lazy, slow build orgasm.

Suddenly, he changed his tactics, his tongue probed my opening. “I need more.”

He moved up, teasing my clit with his tongue. I mewled putting a hand on his head and holding him steady so that I could grind myself against his face. Julian’s hand covered mine, adding more pressure. “More.”

Julian chuckled. “Not yet. He’s just getting started.”

I lost track of time while Ciarán feasted on me. But never, never did the greedy omega let me come. Edging me with an expertise that sent an irrational spark of jealousy spear through me. Mine, my omega snarled. Mine.

I couldn’t push the thought away. Even while I cursed him for teasing me, I didn’t want him to stop so that I could hold on to him for as long as possible. If he was edging me, I could pretend that I was his, and he was mine. “Please,” I sobbed, bucking against his mouth, grinding against the hard ridge of Julian’s erection. “Good. Fuck, so good.”

Ciarán looked up, his lips glistening with my slick. “What kind of more?”

“I need to come.”

“Aw, Bubbles, you should have said.” Two fingers rubbed teasing circles around my opening. “Are you feeling empty?”

I whined. “Yes.”

“Do you want a knot?” His pressed his fingers in, curling them to rub against the sensitive front wall.

“Fuck.” I clenched down on him. My brain turning into mush when he ducked down and nipped at my clit. “That’s it.”

“You like a little pain? Fuck. And you are so fucking tasty...I could eat you out for hours and still not get enough.”

“Please. Oh, god. My body is a void that needs to be filled.”

“And the rest of you?” Julian whispered in my ear.

“Full.” I turned my head and kissed him. He cupped my face and deepened the kiss with a moan that sent another spasm through me, reminding me that I was... “Empty. Please.”

I bent my neck and gave them access to my neck. Julian scraped his teeth along my pulse and bit me just above my collarbone. “I need you, alpha,” I begged.

“Fuck. Just what I’ve been waiting for,” Ciarán groaned. He joined our kiss, sharing my taste with us. I arched into him, pressing my breasts against his chest. They had me caged between them, but I felt free. Every worry I had was chased away because the now was too incredible to ignore. I tried to pour all of that hope and expectation into the kiss, wishing we could share a Claim so that they would know how I felt. “Fuck, her Jules. Please. Fill her up. I want to see her come on your cock. I want her release soaking into my nest.”

I bit my lip, trying to hold back the orgasm that threatened, simply out the euphoria that came when he declared he wanted my scents mingled with his alphas.

“Are you sure?” Julian asked.

“Yes,” we said it together.

I rolled out of Julian’s embrace, once again exposed to their hungry gazes. “Like this,” I said. “I want to see you while you fuck me.”

Julian rolled his head, squeezing his eyes closed. “Fuck me.”

“Shit. Condom.” Ciarán blindly reached for the drawer. “I don’t know if they’re expired or not.”

I sat up and grabbed his wrist. “I’m on the pill and clean. I want your cum inside me.”

“Christmas came early.”

“Condom.” Julian insisted, rolling over to grab a box. There were only a few but enough. “Not expired.”

“But—” Twin omega whines.

“You’re going to fuck her. First in the ass and then her pussy because it’s sweet, sweet heaven. So condom now. You can take it off for round two.”

“Oh.” Yeah. That was kind of important.

Ciarán grabbed the condom, and I watched as he put it on. He grinned. “Done.”

“I haven’t been with a woman in five years,” Julian said, stroking a hand down my body and dipping his fingers into my pussy. “So, forgive me, but I might not last long.”

“I haven’t had a knot in ten years,” I confessed. Though I didn’t want to think about the SweetNothings, we’d been happy to have sex without knotting. They’d wanted to keep it for something special and had been more than happy to use toys. But I’d missed the intimacy of being tied to an alpha, giving them as much pleasure as they gave me. And somehow, it was fitting that Julian would be the one to break me in again when his had been my very first knot.

Ciarán leant down and suck on my nipples. “I also haven’t been inside a woman in five years. Two five years equals ten years. I think we are equal.”

“You’re both crazy.”

Julian rolled on top of me and slid his heavy erection between my slick folds. He was bigger than most alphas. It had been a while since I’d had sex. And I was nervous. Oh my god, I was nervous. Because this was Julian. My Julian. And Ciarán was here as well. Beautiful Ciarán, who was playing with my breasts like he’d never seen a pair before.

The broad head of his cock butted against my slick opening, and I whimpered at the flash of pain.

“Easy, there. Let’s put you on top,” Julian crooned. “Give you a little control. I don’t want to break you just yet.”

He flopped onto his back and dragged me across his lap. Ciarán came up behind me and arranged me so I was straddling the large, endowed alpha. “He’s big, isn’t he? He’ll stretch you so good, Bubbles. You’ll have to take it slow the first time. Not just because your pussy is so tight, but it will make him crazy to see how he stretches you.”

“Ciarán,” Julian barked. “Stop. If I come...”

“Oh, a little dirty talk is going to make my big, strong alpha lose control?”

“Do you want to switch positions? Because you’d be erupting if our roles were reversed.”

“Stop,” I gasped. I shouldn’t find their bickering funny, but the back and forth and the way their hands continued to glide over my body soothed my nerves. “I need cock.”

“I’m all yours.”

I rested my hands on his pecs and rubbed myself along his length before tilting my hips just so, allowing the head to catch my opening. Pressing back, my sex stung with a sweet stretch as I lowered myself onto his thick length. Lifting myself off, I tried again, nudging the broad head against my opening. I couldn’t take him all at once. He was too big, and even though I was more aroused than I had been in a long time, it wasn’t like my sex could automatically accommodate his size.

“That’s right. Take your time.”

“Fuck me,” I gasped as I took in another inch. Ciarán kept praising me as I began to ride Julian, with each down stroke, the stretch growing as his knot began to swell. “I need you to fuck me.”

Julian growled and thrust into me. Strong, sure movements that rubbed his cock against my g-spot. When he filled me to the limit, he held me and ground the top of his knot against my opening. The added pressure caused my eyes to roll back as pleasure exploded, catching all of us by surprise. “Oh!”

“Did you just come?” Ciarán kissed my neck. “Love that. Are you going to come all the time? Multiple orgasms all night?”

“Yeah.” I sounded drunk, my soul still existing above my loose, pleasure-addled body. “But that’s never happened outside of my heat.”

“Come here.” Julian eased me down, stroking my back as I lay collapsed on his chest, panting. He hadn’t come, his cock still hot and heavy inside my sex which quivered with the aftershocks of my surprising orgasm.

“Rest. Just...do not move. You feel too good squeezing down on me like this,” Julian huffed. “I’ll fuck you when you have recovered. I want to make this last as long as possible.”

I peppered his jaw with kisses. “I want this to last as well.”

“Hello, Toni’s ass,” Ciarán purred. His hands began to grope my ass in the most deliciously obscene way. Pulling my cheeks apart, massaging me before leaning down to place a soft kiss on my lower back. “I’m going to take you here, Bubbles. Do you like that?”

“Fuck, yes.” Double penetration? I was never going to say no to that. And to enjoy it with these two, I craved the increased intimacy.

I rested my head on Julian’s chest, primed for the first touch, a firm yet teasing press on the tight ring of muscle. Then the cold sensation of lube, allowing him to insert another finger. He took his time, scissoring his fingers until he pulled away, dropping a brief kiss on my neck before slotting his cock against the opening, easing himself in until I was trapped between him and Julian.

“Breathe through it.” Julian’s words could have been for any one of us. I had done this before, but I had never felt so full. How incredibly bland those words were. It was more than that. Every fibre of my being vibrated. This was more than physical. My heart reached out as if searching for the psychic link of a Claim. Then it latched onto the thread which would lead me straight to Guy. He wasn’t here in the flesh but

somehow every inch of skin became more sensitive, my sex more slick, and the stretch in my ass more pleasurable with that little connection between us.

“Jesus, this is hot,” Ciarán muttered from behind me, his cock easing in and out to the time to the pulsing of my ass.

“Please, Ciarán...” I tried rocking back and forth on their cocks, taking as much from them as I could.

“I’m going to knot you.” Julian flexed his hips, the defined swell of his knot nudging my entrance at the same time as Ciarán bottomed out. “But first Ciarán needs to feel the sweet embrace of that perfect ass coming all over his cock.”

“Alpha, I want you to kneel while our omega is impaled on your cock.” Ciarán’s voice had a deep, gritty quality.

Only Julian would be strong enough to shift onto his knees while I remained impaled on his cock and Ciarán’s cocks. In this position, my legs were spread wide, and Julian’s size meant my knees couldn’t reach the bed, forcing me to cling to him, completely helpless. Completely free to give in to pleasure.

“I’m going to knot you now,” he warned, a breath before he held me steady and pushed the swelling into my slick heat. “That’s it. You’re taking me so well. Just...Fuck, I’m going to knot you so good.”

An alpha’s knot bloomed inside of an omega like one of those time-lapse videos of a rosebud slowly releasing its petals. It didn’t happen all at once but in stages. That initial lock. That faster swelling. That final flutter until it expanded, and the fullness stole your breath away.

“Fuck.” The word was drawn from me, and my first orgasm on a knot in a decade overwhelmed me. “Full, alpha,” I whined as my body adjusted to the intense pressure that radiated from my quim, all the way to the top of my head and the tips of my toes.

Julian rutted into me, soft yet urgent. “Toni, you’re perfect. So, so perfect.”

He growled profanities as he came, filling me with his cum. The euphoria hit as his cum entered my womb. My mind transported to another plane as the high completely took over. Sex with an alpha was amazing without a knot, but with one, this feeling of shattering into a million pieces would last until the knot went down. “God. God. God. Fuck. I can’t...It is too much. More. Please give me more.”

“Yes,” Julian growled. “All of it. I’m going fill you with cum. You won’t be able to go out in public for days because it will be leaking out of you. Fuck. Take it.”

“Jesus, I can feel your knot,” Ciarán groaned from behind. “Guy better come in here—”

“You called?” Guy asked. I looked over and saw him standing in the doorway, his hard cock tenting a towel slung low over his hips. His arousal pulsed through the Claim, stronger now that he was in the room. “This is a pretty picture. My, my, my...”

“Alpha...” Ciarán reached towards him. “I need you.”

“You do. Shall I lick that slick hole for you? Make you come even harder in her ass with my tongue on you?”

“She likes that,” Julian purred. “She’s squeezing my knot all over again because she wants you to eat him out.”

“He’ll take good care of you,” I added. “He’ll drink all your slick up...” Like female omegas, male omegas produced slick when they were aroused, and I could scent Ciarán’s, which had a slightly deeper smell than mine.

“Fuck.” Ciarán’s curse was muffled in my hair.

“Tell us what he’s doing,” Julian inserted a little bark in his voice, causing Ciarán’s hips to buck forward. Or that could be in reaction to whatever Guy was doing.

“He’s...Fuck, he’s spreading my ass open.” Ciarán buried his face in my hair; his breathing laboured as Guy teased him. “Now his tongue. Just like that, alpha. Fuck.”

“Use your words, omega,” Julian growled. He reached across my shoulder, drawing his omega to him for a fierce

kiss. It took a slight shift, and I joined them in a messy three-way kiss that ended too quickly when Julian pulled away. “I want to hear everything he is doing. Tell the doctor how it feels.”

“Using the flat of his tongue to lick me from taint to hole. Now. Now, he’s fit, fuck, two fingers inside...Can you feel him?” he asked me.

I couldn’t but it didn’t matter because I was so full already that anything more might kill me. “Fuck. Fuck...”

“He’s massaging my prostate.” Ciarán bucked. “Please, alpha...”

“There’s my good omega.” Guy’s voice was thick with lust. “You taste so sweet. Are you going to be good and come for me?”

“Yes.” Ciarán was shuddering, his cock pulsing in my ass as he was rocked with orgasm. He collapsed against my back, his cock still pulsing inside of me.

I gasped when another orgasm caused my cunt and ass to clench down on the two cocks inside of me. “Fuck.”

A moment later, and then Guy was moving into my line of sight, towel still wrapped around his waist.

“What about you?” I asked Guy. “Aren’t you going to stay?”

He tweaked my nipple. “Another time. When it’s just us.”

I wanted to protest, beg him to be with us. But another, more primal part of me, like the idea of having him to myself. We could be selfish with each other, something I’d never felt with the others. Julian had always loved sharing. Rafe’s need for control meant the more the merrier, though he did like taking me in hand. Even though I shouldn’t, I wanted all of them. One on one, together. Everything. “Okay,” I said at last.

I watched him leave, closing the door behind him.

“It isn’t personal,” Ciarán murmured. “I know you know that.”



“I do.” I reached behind me and wrapped my arm around him in an awkward hug.

“Okay.” He pulled back, and I gasped when I felt him slip out of me. It would be a while before Julian’s knot went down, and without a word, he eased us onto our sides. We stared at each other while Ciarán took care of the condom. “How are you doing?”

“Better than ever before.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I never imagined this could happen.”

“Sure you did.” I smiled. “I did.”

“As a fantasy, maybe. But since the day you left, I didn’t think I’d get to have you back. Let alone in bed with you and Ciarán.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to think about that right now. Not when I was so relaxed.

I must have fallen asleep because I missed Julian’s knot going down. Instead, I woke up and heard the others moving around. A pang of guilt reminded me that I was a visitor in this nest. And while the shame of intruding, should have sent me running to my own nest, the fear that if I left, I’d never be allowed to return. So I snuggled deeper into Ciarán’s pillows, squeezing my eyes tight and praying he didn’t ask me to leave.

Then, warm arms wrapped around my back, snuggling me into a now familiar chest, firm with muscle and smelling of sex and whisky.

“You aren’t going anywhere,” my tall, dark, and handsome omega purred in my ear. “I still need to feel your pussy around my cock.” He rocked his cock against my thigh. His hands bit into my ass, holding me steady while he pressed his erection against my clit. “Shit. You feel so delicious. Your slick is heavenly. I need to taste you.”

He cupped my sex and then dipped two fingers inside. He sucked them into his mouth and moaned. “I can taste Julian as well. Love this combo. Best cocktail, though would be if you had mine and Guy’s cum in here as well. Open up for me.”

I raised my leg and draped it over his hip. Reaching between us, I cupped his balls, giving them a slight tug before dragging my hand up his length.

“Like this?” I asked and notched the leaking head of his cock against my opening. He hummed his agreement and thrust into me, easing into me with languid strokes.

We rocked against each other. Shallow, slow, loving.

“Perfect,” Julian’s alpha rumble covered me like a weighted blanket. He rubbed his callused hands down our sides. “You look so perfect together.”

He lay down behind Ciarán, who swore.

“I’m going to fuck him, Toni,” Julian said. “He’s been so good that I think he deserves some alpha cum.”

“I’m not going to last,” I felt Ciarán grow impossibly thicker, before he came deep inside of me. “Fuck. Alpha, harder.”

Julian rolled us over, pressing my back into the nest with Ciarán on top of me. He was still inside of me, still hard, which could only mean one thing. His heat as near. And he was a mess. Because Julian was fucking him hard, and fucking me by proxy. Ramming his cock deep inside our omega, forcing his knot past the tight ring so that he could knot him. Each thrust pushed Ciarán deeper inside of me, until he nudged against my womb. I cried out when Ciarán came, coming on his cock, gushing my release.

“Fuck.” Behind him, Julian picked up his pace, and with a final brutal thrust, locked himself inside of Ciarán. “Fuck,” he sighed. “Fuck.” He collapsed on top of us. “Fuck.” And he rolled us over.

Ciarán shuddered through another orgasm, clutching me as close as possible.

We rested but after a while, the nagging feeling that I was intruding tugged at me. I mentally prepared myself to leave, shower, and sleep in nest...Alone.

“Stay.” Ciarán held me tight. “Sleep with me. With us.”

I didn't have the courage to argue and relaxed against him, allowing a lovely, easy, perfect peaceful sleep to pull me under.

At some point in the night, Julian rolled over both Ciarán and me...Which, no shit, woke me up. I lay, staring at the ceiling and asking myself why I had stayed away so long. In the last decade, there had been nights like this, a lover or lovers asleep next to me while I questioned things I'd rather not think about. Such as the homesickness that came upon me at odd times.

Say a summer evening while walking through Central Park and wishing it was Regent's Park, and that I was with friends, sipping wine and eating charcuterie still in its plastic packaging. Or the visceral yearning for the smell of my mother's perfume. I'd begged for a sample of it in a department store and sprayed it over my pillowcase, crying and wanting nothing more than to hear the sound of her voice.

And then these alphas...It hurt like a knife through the heart how much I had missed just eating leftover pizza for breakfast with them. Since I'd moved in, we'd never once had pizza for breakfast. Irrationally, that hurt too. They had grown up, and I was the sad loser holding on to the past.

I turned my head to where Ciarán was snoring, and fresh tears came to my eyes. They'd found the most glorious man, and oh Goddess, I was happy for them. Yet, the jealousy reared its ugly head. I wanted what they had. And somehow, we'd twisted that up, and it seemed like they were courting me.

Would I stay happy if I stayed here? I didn't have to have a pack. I could just find a pair or a lone alpha who wanted to travel. I could just be happy with one. It was possible—it had been done before. I could do it. I could, but it was a lie. Oh Goddess, but I never wanted to feel that homesickness for Ivy Place again because this time, it would be worse. I'd be losing Ciarán and Ivo as well. I'd be letting go of so much more. And Mum...I was a horrible daughter because even when she was lying in hospital, I was having sex with my ex and his omega.

But I couldn't, wouldn't regret any of it.

Hot tears leaked out of my eyes and I let them, knowing that they were healthy, even if each one hurt like a punch in the gut.

“Hey? Were you crying?” Ciarán asked, his voice thick with sleep.

Fuck. I hadn’t noticed him waking up; my fingers flew to my cheeks and came away dry.

“Happy tears,” I sort of lied. The feelings were too big for “happy”. One night with them was more gratifying than my years with the SweetNothings.

“I...” He kissed my forehead. “Okay. If you say they are happy tears, then they are happy tears.”

# TONI



Being sex-satisfied was hell on my work ethic.

Especially after waking up with Ciarán wrapped around me. And if I kept my eyes closed, which I did, Julian and Guy's lingering scents reminded me of ten years ago. My omega purred, in a way that scared me out of my mind. This wasn't safe. This was dangerous to get too comfortable or too close when I knew I'd be leaving, had to leave. I had my own nest upstairs, and the future looked like an abstract painting that a toddler had shredded and taped that back together.

Still, I convinced myself it was okay to curl up in Julian's lap during breakfast. Afterwards everyone had drifted off to work, leaving me alone, with the house to myself. Without realising, I'd gravitated to the home office and worn leather chair. Despite the heat wave, I had collected blankets and pillows—only a few of them from Ciarán's nest. The rest of it was from the others and pilfered from the laundry baskets in the utility room. No one said anything or tried to take them back, because I'd eventually wash and return the t-shirts, sheets, and pillowcases.

When I first moved in and overheard Ivo grumbling that no one doing their fair share of laundry, I'd started making sure that the washing machines were emptied and the clothes folded. Julian and Ivo had seen the worst of my domestic impulses. The former because he'd caught me with my head in the machine, cursing about matching socks. The latter when I'd been loading the machine. He'd snapped at me. Oh, it had made me angry. So fucking angry, but looking back, it was

pure Ivo. Now all he did was grumble “Don’t do all of it” before stalking off. “Damn omegas,” he’d mumble as he banged around in the kitchen while I finished. Then I’d go in, and he’d have a grilled cheese, some steamed broccoli, and a glass of milk ready for me. “Good girls eat broccoli. You’ll be a good girl for me, won’t you?”

My cheeks flushed at the memory. Since when did I blush because someone made me a sandwich and told me to be a good girl? Since the chef was wearing a pair of grey sweats and a t-shirt stretched over his broad shoulders. That’s since when.

“Focus, girlie,” I reprimanded myself and grabbed my noise cancelling headphones. I opened my laptop and brought up my latest project: I was photoshopping dinosaur heads onto pigeon bodies. The pigeons were, in my humble opinion, a great commentary on evolution and my own deep fear of pigeons. Decades from now when art history students studied my work—perhaps getting ahead of myself, but why not?—they would have a wealth of theorising about why I decided to photoshop pigeons and dinosaurs together.

The first step was finding stock images of dinosaurs because it wasn’t like I could just pop to Longleat’s safari park and snap a few pictures of them. Pretty soon I was lost in my work, collecting and filing the images I needed.

I don’t know how much time had lapsed when I looked up, Rafe was watching me from the desk. He was dressed casually for him, and I took a moment to admire how the Bubble and Smoke t-shirt stretched across his chest.

“When did you get here?” I pushed the headphones down. “Are you home? Is—”

“Ten minutes ago. I came home and was thinking of working here for the rest of the day.” He scrubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not disturbing your plans...If you made plans with the others, I can leave.”

“No.” The word slipped out. “I don’t have plans with the others.”

I licked my lips, the internal debate causing my normally sweet scent to turn bitter. “Stay. Do your work.”

“Alright.” But he didn’t turn back to the desk.

“Are you sure there isn’t something you want to talk about?”

“Last night—”

I threw up my hands. “You don’t have to worry we used condoms.”

Fuck. Why was that the first place my mind went to?

“I’m not worried about anything. You made Ciarán and Julian very happy. Wait. Condoms?” He grinned. “I assumed you’d be on birth control. Unless you’re planning on getting pregnant soon?”

I froze. Pregnant. Pregnant. That word. That look in his eyes was teasing, as if he didn’t really think I wanted to be pregnant. I gripped the chair’s arms to stop my hands from covering my belly. I hadn’t given a second’s thought to children until just this moment. They—the children that didn’t exist—flashed before my eyes. Lining up in order of height for the first day of school photographs. Shit. This was bad.

“Toni?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head trying to banish the potential for mini versions of this pack running around and disrupting all of Rafe’s piles of paper. “No. I am not planning on getting pregnant soon.”

He sucked in a breath. “There was actually a thing I wanted to talk with you about. When it was just the two of us here.” He unlocked the desk drawer. He stood up and handed me an envelope, the long kind and yellow with age. “Here.”

Dread. Fear. Those were the words that came to mind as I took it from him. “What is it?”

“Please open it.”

The glue was tacky when I tried to open it and I almost asked him to do it for me. Somehow protect me from what the

contents. Inside were four tickets. Heathrow to Rome. Flying out ten years ago on the day before my birthday, Valentine's Day, returning a week later. I choked on the sob. I shook with the effort to keep in the agony that closed around my heart like a vice. "You had those that day. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise." His words were no more than a whisper.

"A surprise," I stuttered because I couldn't breathe. I could not breathe. I. Could. Not. Breathe. "I hate you."

"I deserve it." He dropped to his knees, his hands hovering over mine. "You might never forgive me for not telling you. I'll live with that. But don't hold it against the others. Guy and Julian didn't know I didn't tell you about the tickets."

"Why did you let me go? When you had these. Why did you let me go?" I shouted, finally having enough air in my lungs. I launched myself at him, hitting his chest, needing his strength to hold me together.

"Because what you said was true," he said, holding me close like if he let me go, then I would shatter. The only time I'd seen him look this devastated was in the photograph of him at his mother's funeral. "We all got that week off. But if we hadn't? I don't think we would have begged or bargained. And that was what you accused us of. You were right, and I couldn't lie to you."

"Why are you telling me now?" I sniffed. The urge to beat him to a bloody pulp seeping out of me.

"Because of the therapy sessions. After the other day, I made an appointment. I've been going twice a week." He cleared his throat. "I thought I was angry with you for not trusting us. But really, I was angry at myself for not trusting you. Or trusting that you knew what you wanted. Fuck, I'm not good with this."

He was a shit. But I saw and heard in his voice, that he wanted to take responsibility for his part in this mess. "You're doing great," I told him. "Shit delivery, but thank you for the attempt."



“I’m not. Doing great, I mean.”

At least he was being honest. Painfully honest, based on the way the tips of his ears had turned an unattractive red. I tamped down on the omega instinct to comfort him. He could be learning how to share his feelings and come face to face with his part in this fucking melodrama, but my feelings still hurt. I fisted my hand and was physically reminded of that aborted trip. Four tickets looked back at me, damning them and damning me for reacting instead of listening to him. Maybe that was just who I was, jumping to conclusions. I’d done the same with the SweetNothings, cutting them out with a single swift phone call. “I don’t know if I can forgive you.”

“Of course.” He sounded resigned.

“I need to call my therapist.”

“Do you want me to go? Leave the house, the room. Whatever you want.”

“I’ll go to my nest.” I wedged my laptop under my arm and fired a text off to my therapist begging for an appointment asap.

Taking the stairs two at a time, his words battered me. He’d bought tickets, which he wanted to surprise me with, and then it had all gone to shit when he’d realised that they wouldn’t have made the effort to go to Rome with me. Ten years ago I wouldn’t have been able to take that kind of brutal honesty. Now...Fuck it was hard to listen to him, and at the same time, I was grateful. Not that I’d jumped to the correct conclusion, that hurt. But that they’d wanted to do something special even if they’d fucked up spectacularly.

My foot hit the landing, and the memory of that fateful fight hit me like a freight train. We’d been standing just here, just inside of my nest. I’d been painting my nails barbie pink. They’d just finished drying. And I’d been grinning like a loon when Rafe had walked in and looking serious—my second favourite look on his face. The first was the snarling need when he was about to knot me.

*“Rome isn’t happening.” His words were clipped and definite.*

*“What?” My smile—so bright and happy—trembled. I staggered to my feet. “You mean we can’t go to Rome?”*

*“Maybe next year.” He kissed my forehead like he wasn’t going back on his promise. Rafe’s word was his bond, and he was brushing me off like he’d announced that they didn’t have my favourite ice cream but they did have my second favourite. “Julian can’t get away for long, and Guy can’t get time off to match Julian’s. And I’ve got exams and applications. Next year isn’t too far away.”*

*“No.” I pulled away. “You can’t just put it off.”*

*“Why not? You can take the year to decide what you want to do. Maybe take some classes? Photography? Pottery? Music?”*

*“What about a weekend in Paris?” I asked. That would work. After Rome, Paris was the next place I wanted to go. The city of romance was closer, we could jump on the Eurostar and be there and back.*

*“I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep.” That was Rafe through and through. So why was he breaking his promise?*

*“But you promised.”*

*“And I’ll keep my promise to take you to Rome. Don’t worry.”*

*I felt my anger rise like a tidal wave. No. Fuck them. With or without them, I was going to Rome. “I’d rather go by myself than wait a year.”*

*“Absolutely not,” he barked. Not his normal bark but an alpha’s bark putting his omega in their place. I flinched. So much for alphas not using their barks to subjugate omegas. But even the souring of my scent didn’t bank the anger. “It would not be safe. My omega will never be without all the protections they need. It isn’t safe for omegas to travel on their own. Especially one who has no experience with the wider world.”*

*Tears pricked my eyes at his harsh words. My eyes darted to the cupboard where I’d squirrelled away all my nesting*

*material. Suddenly, this room didn't feel cosy and safe. Constricting. That was the world. My heart wasn't breaking. It felt like it was being squeezed tighter and tighter until all the love, my life's blood was pooling at my feet, leaving me drained.*

*"You don't know anything. You don't even know what you want. Who you are." Rafe's tone was gentle, his words a violent attack, shredding the fragile confidence they'd built within me. "We'll provide for you. Our pack is young. You need to let us build a safe home and nest for you."*

*He sounded so earnest. They were building a home and a nest. No. Not in a million years was anyone but me building my nest. My nest. They wouldn't be able to take that from my cold, dead hands.*

*"Say something. Toni? It's for the best. Once you have a home and a nest, we'll work out going to Rome."*

*I cracked. My hurt transformed into fury.*

*"I had a safe home and nest," I spat. "I had it here. With you. Not anymore, though. Unless you can compromise—"*

*"What do you mean had? You have a nest and home here. The one we are building together."*

*"You are putting your careers above my one ask: a trip to Rome."*

*"I don't understand," he growled. "Why is this such a big deal? Rome isn't going anywhere."*

*The muscles in my jaw twitched. "Of course you don't. And it doesn't matter if Rome isn't going anywhere."*

*"Then help me understand, dammit!" he shouted. He had never shouted at me. Not once and my ears rang.*

*"No. You think about it."*

*"This isn't twenty questions, Antonia."*

*"And you won't make time in your schedule for me."*

*"Our lives aren't flexible like yours."*

*I blinked. Flexible. He was right. My schedule was flexible. I could leave whenever I wanted. "Thank you for reminding me," I shouted over my shoulder as I ran downstairs.*

*"Antonia, get back here."*

*In the hall, I grabbed my bag, my brand new passport already inside. I'd been carrying it around for days now on the off chance they surprised me with our trip and whisked me away before I had time to pack. Oh, the irony.*

*"Toni?" I spun around. Guy was in my favourite armchair with his laptop balanced on one knee. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Did something happen to your mum?"*

*"When can you take me to Rome?" I asked.*

*"Uh...Probably not until August? I don't know."*

*"Right." I turned my back on him and used my key to unlock the top lock, then threw back the bolts and rushed out into the crisp January air. One breath, two, three...They didn't follow. They didn't come after me.*

*Somehow I ended up at Heathrow.*

*But it wasn't until I was standing in the security line that the first tear escaped. A pack who couldn't be older than me was ahead in the queue, laughing as they opened their bags. That wasn't me. That would never be me. When it was my turn, I opened my bag and found the camera Rafe had given me sitting on top. With more love and tenderness than he deserved, I put the camera back in my bag. They loved me, is what the camera said. But the fact I was here on my own meant they didn't love me enough.*

*"Here, dear." The elderly beta handed me a packet of tissues. I sucked my lips between my teeth, biting down to quell the sob that threatened to explode. "Oh, love," the old woman said, putting a gentle hand on my back. "There, there, pet."*

*The memory faded until all that was left was the bone deep ache.*

*I reached for my little orange pills when my phone rang.*

If there was one thing I loved about my therapist was that when I sent her a frantic text, she's always call me within the hour.

"It is an emergency," I said right away.

"Toni." My therapist smiled and gave a little wave. Video sessions were strange, but the distance was like a shield. She'd not notice any of my normal tics and, therefore, wouldn't press on certain issues. It helped that we hadn't spoken since my anxiety attack—the time difference made it hard to find something that worked for both of us. "Let's start off simple and ground you. How is London now that you've been there for almost two months?"

A muscle in my jaw ticked. I could do this. I had to master myself before digging into that deep ugly wound.

"Annoyingly beautiful. More than I expected." I swallowed, knowing that wouldn't be enough for her because I'd been holding back and we both knew it. The little boy with his finger in the hole and now all of it was going to come out in a single roaring mess. "It is familiar, achingly familiar. Like waking up from a dream and seeing the sunrise for the first time. And different. Painfully different. Like waking up from a coma and finding out you've missed half your life."

She nodded. "How does that make you feel?"

"Homeless. Rudderless. Less. I feel less and less and less each day." I bit my lip. "And I don't mind. The city is like a comfortable silence. Like this city doesn't need me because it knows I'm never leaving."

"Explore that."

"I don't want to say it."

"Toni, I need you to articulate your feelings. I'm so proud of the work you've done and how you've handled the breakup. But—"

I waved that away. "I thought I didn't want them to be pining for me. Told myself that I'd feel guilty. But I wanted them...to have missed me? Felt even a tiny bit of the emptiness I'd felt. Ciarán is amazing."

I was jumping all over the place in the vague hope that I wouldn't have to face the reason I'd called.

“Tell me more about him.”

“He is their omega. They didn't copy-and-paste replace me. Rather, they found the perfect omega for them. Aristocratic pack, flawless looks, and talented. I'm pretty sure every pack was panting after him, and he chose the alphas who abandoned me.”

“Abandoned?”

My jaw clenched “I left, but they left me behind in favour of their careers. I was...” Tears threatened. The ominous portent of a panic attack teased my senses. “I wasn't good enough for them to put their plans aside for a week to take me somewhere special.”

“Toni—”

“Fine. Fine. He said...He said that they wouldn't change their plans. That—”

I couldn't meet her eyes. Shame was my shadow when I thought about how I'd been convinced I was the problem. That if I had been a little bit good enough, they would have whisked me off to Rome the next day. Instead, it was—

“Rafe bought tickets to Rome. He had them all these years,” I screeched, unable to keep it in any longer. “They were meant to be a surprise. Tell me we couldn't go and then miraculously we could. So fucked up. So not them. So painful. So, so much.” I sucked in a breath, held it and breathed out over a count of four. “He told me that he was only showing me the tickets now because I was right. When I accused him of breaking his promise, he said that back then, they wouldn't have taken time off. That they were career focused.”

I grabbed Ivo's jacket and put it on. It didn't smell like him anymore but it comforted me to imagine his arms around me. “Rafe's going to therapy. Ten years ago he didn't understand why I was upset. He told me he wouldn't let his omega travel without protection. And he kept that promise. He's angry at himself. He sucks at apologies.”

It must have taken all her professional training not to react—with the caption of dropping her bottle of water all over her blouse. “What emotion did you feel?” she asked after recovering.

“Rage but also relief. Anger that he didn’t fight for me when we argued. Relief that I wasn’t crazy to have loved them and trusted them the way I did back then.” Suddenly, it didn’t matter. The world shifted, tilted and settled. “I’m not angry anymore. No. I mean, I’m angry, but...” I cocked my head to the side and tried to piece the words together. “We had a really shitty ending. I felt abandoned, so I left. For the next ten years, I fought against it.” I frowned. “Okay. So, I wanted to prove them wrong by travelling and making a name for myself. But all I really wanted.” And this was going to be hard to admit. “What I wanted was my pack back. To belong to a pack again. And I found the SweetNothings. On paper, they were a bit of me. Entirely me. Perfect.” I used my hands to emphasise my point. “But look at me.” I held my laptop back and then spun it around the nest. “I am a nester. Nesters can’t travel all the time.”

She kept me talking, shifting through the emotion wheel until we’d covered everything from anger to guilt to betrayal.

And by the end, I wasn’t just exhausted I was in desperate need to search out the man who’d hurt me so much and curl up in his arms. How twisted was that?

# TONI



When I came downstairs after my session, the office door was closed. Good, I needed a moment before confronting Rafe. I went to the kitchen and made a pot of tea, and added a plate of Jaffa Cakes, a way to demonstrate I came in good faith, because who likes squishy, cakey biscuits with orange goop covered in chocolate? Rafe. I'd once wondered if he was a psychopath for liking them.

I didn't bother knocking on the door, instead pushing into the office. He sat at the desk, but his chair was turned so that he was looking out the window. The window framed the composition in a way that reminded me of a renaissance portrait. The aristocratic alpha at rest. A totally different species that even in modern times was above the law, above responsibility, above reproach. The only sign he wasn't completely relaxed was how he flicked an e-cigarette through his fingers in a twisting, almost manic pattern that I couldn't focus on.

But boy oh boy I was going to reproach this asshole, and then, because I was weak and he was him, maybe beg him to fuck me. After all, giving in to him made him lose control, let the mask slip, and the beast underneath emerge. I'd fallen in love with that arrogant alpha ten years ago, and it seemed I was just broken enough to still crave his toxic love.

"Can we talk?" I asked.

The three dreaded words. Though who dreaded them more, I wasn't sure.



He dropped the e-cigarette and nearly fell off the chair in his haste to turn around.

“Tea?” I asked, moving into the space. Jesus, I was stalling when I needed to be working on expressing my emotions with words.

“Please, not on the piles of paper,” he said in all seriousness. I nearly laughed. The piles of paper looked like a parapet protecting him from my wrath.

“Of course not.” I knelt and put the tray on the floor, then stood up and locked us in.

“Is this so no one can come to rescue me when you eviscerate me after feeding me my dick and balls?” Oh, he was nervous.

“Your dick and balls are better where they are,” I said, trying to keep my tone light.

“Good.” He rolled his shoulders and crossed his arms over his chest. “Now, what did you want to talk about?”

“It isn’t enough. Saying sorry, you taking accountability for your actions. That doesn’t wipe the slate clean.”

He uncrossed his arms and sat up straight. I clenched my jaw, prepared for him to say he couldn’t do more than he already had. That he’d somehow done enough, and I was being unreasonable.

“I agree. Even if you never forgive me and are just using me to scratch an itch, I’ll do it.”

I bit my lip to stop myself from laughing that he’d just offered to let me get my rocks off with him.

He stood up and came close enough that I could feel the heat of his body and smell the unpleasant tang of suppressants. He’d been using them regularly to dampen his scent...Or rather the scent of his arousal. I understood. I did the same but if I could smell them, then he was taking a very high dose. It broke my heart that he felt he needed to essentially poison himself when I was around.

“For you, I’d do anything,” he whispered and brushed the back of his hand down my cheek. My heart raced at the intimate gesture. And when his nostrils flared, I knew he’d caught how my scent blossomed. “Anything,” he repeated.

Anything. I wondered what that meant.

I trembled with the power he had offered me. What would he be willing to give? Especially with the way he gave off that aristocratic arrogance that was equal parts attractive and infuriating. Could I ask him to buy me a private jet? Give me a credit card without a limit? But he wouldn’t think twice about spending his money on me or any member of the pack. Then it clicked. He was the most prideful alpha I’d ever met. I knew what I wanted from him on a primal, visceral level.

“Then get on your knees like the peasant you are, and beg for my forgiveness.” I held my breath. “Then I might consider—”

Before I could finish my thought, Rafe dropped to his knees, hitting the ground so hard the teacups rattled in their saucers. He watched me silently, waiting for my next demand.

“Beg.”

“I’m not perfect. I can’t avoid fucking up. But if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I’ll spend the rest of my days proving to you with words and actions—and the occasional grovel—that I am the alpha for you. That this is the pack for you. Antonia Ivy, will you forgive me? And if you can’t, please do not hold my mistakes against our pack?”

He used my married name and “our pack.” I ducked my head and brushed away a tear that escaped.

“What is it, Toni?” He grabbed my waist, stroking up my sides. “I should never have shown you the tickets. That was selfish. All I wanted was for you to know that we had them. It wasn’t their fault. Julian and Guy did nothing wrong. I fucked up. Forgive me. Please, fuck, please forgive me for ruining the best thing in my life.”

“Just hold me, Rafe.”

He dragged me onto his lap, tucking me against him.

How had he given me up when he could hold me like this, I wondered. I belonged to him. His arms wrapped around me but not too tight, so I would be able to break away should I choose. I was priceless to him. “A rare and precious jewel” was what he had called me once, “precious beyond imagining.” The knowledge had always been there. I’d interpreted his desire to keep me as the possessive, ugly feeling that I’d seen in the few packs I knew. It always led to omegas being relegated to staying at home. Unable to go anywhere without an alpha or guard.

“I was scared.” The admission was followed by the tension leaving my body. “And instead of reassuring me, you confirmed those fears. You said I was inexperienced. You didn’t trust me to know what I wanted.”

You want to lock me in a cage because you thought I was happy there, but I wasn’t ready to say that out loud.

“The idea of you leaving terrified me,” he purred, carding his fingers through my hair. “I knew you wanted to go to Rome, but I didn’t understand why. I assumed you wanted the thrill. Really you wanted the chance to spread your wings.”

“Did you read my mind?” I had to ask. “Or did I say it out loud?”

“Neither.” He chuckled and tightened his hug until my ear was pressed to his chest. I could hear his heart through the thin cotton of his shirt. Rafe was always warm and always smelt of ink and wood shavings from all the whittling he did. “I was just thinking of my mistake. For thinking keeping you ‘locked up’ was a better idea than showing you off by travelling the world with you.”

“I was scared that I was just an omega to you and not a whole person.”

“Ha.” He kissed my forehead. “You’re right. I didn’t understand that omegas could exist outside of a pack. I’ve evolved; you and Ciarán proved to me how wrong I was. But the idea of tying you to your nest so that you can’t leave will never lose its appeal.”

“I’m only opposed to bondage when it isn’t consensual,” I joked.

“I would love to tie you up sometime if you are available and interested,” he said so calmly that I wondered if he was teasing or if this inscrutable, near-feral alpha had built a sex dungeon somewhere on the property. He shifted, and I felt his erection pressing against his trousers.

Fuck me.

I was a greedy omega. Greedy and needy for the man who held me. Not just for his body but his incredible responsiveness to me. I wanted all of it, but most of all, I wanted back into his life. Because I had things I wanted to ask him. Silly things like, when had he started wearing boxer briefs? Would he accept my decision to finalise the divorce even if I wanted to stay? Was TF’s still the best place to buy gourmet frozen food? Would he, please, stuff me full of his cock and knot or did we have to wait?

Oh Jesus, was I really thinking about initiating sex with him before I’d given him verbal confirmation that I forgave him?

The sensible side of me said that this was too fast, too reckless. We should probably sleep on it—preferably curled up in my nest. But too-fucking-bad because he smelled like an alpha who wanted to knot an omega. And that omega would be me.

“No zip ties.”

“Never. Only silk scarves for my omega.” He trailed his lips along my hairline. Barely-there kisses that were achingly tender and brought up every emotion I had tried to bury. Not just towards Rafe but Julian and Guy and them as a pack, a unit.

There had been a time when we would just flutter kisses over each other because we couldn’t keep our hands to ourselves. Even in passing, they would land. Through it all, Rafe had always been the most interested in my hair. Wanting to brush it and bury his face in it, even though it was so short.

Now...now they felt like different. More personal and full of reverence.

I tipped my head to the side as he got to my ear, then travelled along my jaw until our lips brushed.

I gave a little moan for encouragement, and all the gentle restraint in him vanished.

His kiss demanded everything. Entry into my mouth, nipping at my lips, thrusting his tongue deep while his left hand gripped my hair tight, tugging to the point of pain.

“Remember your safe word?” he asked, a little breathless, his eyes blown black with desire. We’d gotten the idea out of a book instead of any formal interest in kink.

“Red,” I breathed. I’d almost forgotten that I might need a safe word, but Rafe had dark places that bubbled to the surface. In a flash of insight, I wondered if the safe word was more for him than me. A reminder that if he went too far, something would stop him.

“Don’t hold back,” I begged.

“Toni. I need you to know...”

“Less talk, more action.”

“Dammit, Toni.” He gripped my chin and glared at me. “I haven’t knotted an omega in a while. Ciarán only wants me for some of his heats...But I never knot him. Our relationship is different.”

“He told me. I haven’t been knotted much.”

He frowned. “Why not? What about your heats? Omegas need knots.”

“Julian’s knot was my first in ten years. I...I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it with other alphas.”

I didn’t know what to expect, but it hadn’t been the growl or the way Rafe dragged me off the floor. His eyes travelled up and down my body, stripping me bare. I remembered each imperfection that had appeared over the last decade. I’d been a girl before with a perfectly toned body. Now I had dimples on

my thighs and stretch marks on my bum. My stomach and breasts were softer. What if he remembered one body and then didn't want the one I had?

"I look...I didn't. I don't need to get naked." I resisted his hands undoing the buttons of my shirt, Julian's shirt.

"Did Julian and Ciarán see you naked?" he asked with a bite of bark in his voice.

I glared. "That isn't your business. I don't go the gym," I tried to explain. "I'm self-conscious."

"I seel." His voice become velvet and steel. "What parts are you self-conscious about, little jewel?"

The old nickname undid me.

"I've put on weight." I tried to speak clearly, but my voice broke.

"Take it off. There will be consequences if you disobey."

Consequences. A delicious, melting feeling that was a precursor to slick shivered through me, and I rubbed my thighs together as I felt slick begin to leak from my sex. I whined, almost ashamed at how easily he caught me in his net.

"Do it." This time, the bark whipped me into action. I pushed at the sweatpants I'd stolen off of Ciarán. Of their own will, my fingers worked the buttons of Julian's Oxford free until I paused. "Antonia..."

The shirt dropped away, revealing my naked breasts. I fisted my hands so that I wouldn't cover myself.

"Spin."

I shuffled in a circle, until I was facing him again, but I kept my eyes on the floor.

He fisted my hair and forced my head back. His eyes were black, blown with lust and something darker that never failed to make me quiver with need and anticipation. He had a crooked grin, almost not in Dom mode but something more... gleeful. "Your breasts perfect handfuls, nipples little pearls. This ass, that flesh that will redden so prettily when I remind

you who to belong to. Somehow, you managed to improve on perfection, as the poets say. However, I think you need to see why you are so perfect. Go to my bedroom.”

“Naked?”

“Yes, I want to parade you through the house, even if there are no witnesses. And if there are, then they will know you are mine for the moment. I can share. But until I choose, you are mine.”

Before this, I had resisted poking around his bedroom and stepping inside I couldn't stop myself exploring. It was on the floor below mine, facing the street, and immaculately barren. The only piece of decoration was a large mirror that rested on the ground and reflected the trees on the street. But closer inspection revealed personal touches. A collection of miniatures were arranged on a shelf. Every member of the pack with a conspicuous space at the end...For me, I realised. He'd left a place for me.

“Rafe—” I spun around to find him watching me. I pointed to the self at a complete loss for words. “You—”

“Of course.” He swallowed. “Now that I have your full attention again. Come over here.”

He stepped aside and I saw he'd dragged a low dark green velvet armchair in front of the mirror.

“Hold on to the back of the chair.” I obeyed, bending over the back of the chair and gripping the arms. If I remembered, I'd asked him if he'd had this chair custom made. Luxury sex furniture for the discerning aristocrat. Fuck. Just the fantasy that it might be true had me arching my back, presenting myself. “Good. Can you see yourself in the mirror?” He knew I could. How could he not? But he wanted me to say it out loud. Wanted me to watch everything he was about to do to my body.

“Yes.”

With the mirror, I could see his hand rise before coming down hard on my ass. I gasped at the sting. “Ten. One for each year,” he growled, catching the sensitive skin where my thigh

me my ass. “One for each year that I worried about how much danger you were in. How I couldn’t be there.”

The other side got the same treatment.

“You put me through hell, Toni.” He stroked me between my thighs, teasing over my clit. “I’ve fantasied about punishing you for reckless risk you took.”

Oh, that should have made me angry. But the rational part had bowed out the minute I’d submitted to his command that I walk through the house naked. “Yes,” moaned.

“And then...orgasms.” Smack! “I think you need orgasms.” Smack, smack, smack. “Because I have missed out on giving them to you.” He rubbed my lower back. In the mirror, I could see how much I’d affected him. His cheeks were flushed, his breathing shallow, but what made my pussy clench was the way his hair fell over his face. Undone. I undid this alpha, and that was the greatest power anyone could have. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous like this.”

A wicked, sinful smile spread across his face. “Why don’t you go lie down on the bed?”

The question was innocent enough, but his scent shifted, the hint of ozone filling the air. The sign that an alpha was near a rut. It wasn’t a heat. More like a heightened libido that demanded the alpha breed their omega. It meant lots of knotting and lots of cum.

“Fuck,” I moaned. Ruts were rare, but then again, Rafe was essentially celebrate outside of Ciarán’s heats so it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that he would react this strongly to being with an omega.

“Omega,” he growled. “Bed.”

I stood up on shaky legs, very aware of my stinging ass, and turned to the large bed covered in dark purple bedding that dominated the room.

Suddenly, I was scooped up into his arms and dropped onto the firm mattress. He pinned me in place with a hand on my stomach. “There. You liked that didn’t you?”



“Yes.” I circled my hips, appreciating the textured linen against my skin.

“Show me how wet you are.”

I spread my legs and parted my pussy so that he could see how slick I was. Only he could get me worked up from spanking. Or maybe I was the only one I’d relaxed around enough to enjoy impact play with.

“And how many more do you have?”

More? Oh, fuck. “Four more?”

“Correct. And where do you deserve them?”

“My clit,” I breathed. “Please, alpha.”

“Correct, again.”

The tug between desire and pain zipped through me, making me aware of how swollen and exposed my clit was. The impact on the bundle of thousands of nerves was very different to getting spanked on my ass.

Before I could brace myself, he brought his hand down in a quick, sharp movement that landed right where he intended.

“Fuck,” I cried out.

His expression changed, and he caught my chin in one hand. “Are you alright?”

“More.”

“Brave girl,” he purred. This time I was ready, and when his hand snapped down, I was able to relax into the sensations he exacted from my body.

“Two,” I said without being asked.

“You mean eight,” he laughed. “But I can give you eight more if you would prefer.”

I felt my eyes widen. “Next time?”

A muscle in his jaw clenched. “Next time.”

He said it like it sealed my fate. There was no chance of escaping him now that I had offered him more.

The final two were barely love taps, his fingers circling my clit in a way that made me squirm.

“Please,” I begged. “Please.”

“Hmm. I’ve always liked this more than I should. Watching you beg because your quim is so fucking needy...”

God, he made me weak.

“I want to share that with the world but I’m a jealous fuck and the idea of anyone else seeing you like this makes me feral,” he growled.

“Even the others?” I asked.

“They are just an extension of me. The pleasure they give you is pleasure I am giving you because we are pack and therefore one entity.”

“Oh,” I could barely get the word out.

“Even the orgasms you give yourself come from me, from all of us.”

“Always.”

“Yes. Every time you came, it was us, your pack.” He leaned over me, his fingers slipping inside of me. “You’ve always been ours.”

I closed my eyes, blocking out the purity of everything he said. I didn’t want to believe it, but then again, I hadn’t wanted anyone’s knot for ten years.

“Toni?”

“Yes.” I blinked up at him.

“You’re crying.”

I brushed the tear away. “I’m just very emotional today.”

“Do you want to stop?” He frowned. “We can stop. Maybe we should stop.”

An omega’s growl tore through me. I grabbed his face and pulled him towards me. “If you stop, I will kill you.”

“You make it very hard to refuse.” He dipped close, sucking my lip between his teeth. Then kisses along my jaw, down my neck, across my breasts with no particular destination. Like he was trying to reacquaint himself with every part of me. “I want to make you come in so many ways.”

I threaded my fingers through his hair, urging him to where he needed to be.

“Such a greedy girl.”

“Yes. I want you to make me come.”

He stopped. “I—”

“Yes?” I stroked the side of his cheek. I smiled when he just stared at me. “What?”

“Can I be selfish?” He swore and buried his face into my side. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“No. Wait.” I sat up and held his face between my hands. “You need this don’t you? The control?”

He shook his head.. “I...” His eyes pleaded with me to understand without him having to say it. Then his expression firmed. “I don’t trust my ability to make you come. Not without my cum.” He clenched his jaw.

My mouth fell open with shock. Of all the men in this house, Rafe was the last one I expected to worry about performing.

“I’m sorry.”

I slapped a hand over his mouth. “Stop, Rafe. You don’t need to explain. I was just surprised. You were always great, you know?” I reached for him, for his cock which lay hard and heavy in my hand. “Fuck me, alpha. Use me. I want you—”

He didn’t let me finish, surging up my body and claiming me with a kiss. “Thank you,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

His touch was possessive and when he arrived at between my legs, he pressed two fingers inside, seeing how ready I was. How slick and hot and tight I was for him.

“That’s right. Fill me up,” I moaned, stroking him from base to tip, squeezing the head and teasing the foreskin up and down. He’d always been so sensitive, and it was the same now. “Do it. Come on. You know you want to. Do it. Fuck me like you own me.”

I didn’t know why I was taunting him. But it seemed like it was what he needed to get over whatever had held him back moments before.

“Not like, omega,” he growled. A third finger punched into me, twisting and curling against my front wall, while his thumb circled my clit. “I do own you. Say. It.”

“You own me,” I moaned.

“Again.” He slapped the head of my cock on my pussy. “Again.”

“You own me,” I cried out as he thrust into me, his knot hot against my opening. I rolled my hips trying to steal more of him. “Please.”

His eyes were feral, too bright, and unseeing. The rut had taken over, each thrust was brutal and perfect. But I wanted my alpha not some mindless beast controlled by instinct.

“Rafe!” I said, grabbing his arm. “Look at me.”

My alpha turned his face in my direction. “Omega.” His voice wasn’t his.

“Alpha.” He needed to come. If he came, some of the haze would go. Fuck. I needed to help him come. I wanted a feral Rafe, not an animal. I squeezed down, holding onto him.

“Fuck. Fuck. I—” He groaned. “I’m going to come. God. Fuck. I’m going to breed you, my sweet little jewel. Fill you up.” He came without knotting me, sending a burst of bliss through my system. “Think how much better it will be when you have my Claim.”

Fuck. It was impossible to argue with him when he was so deep in a rut. And part of me didn’t want to.

“More,” I begged, wrapping my legs around his waist, digging my heels into his ass, refusing to let him withdraw

even a little. “More.”

He came again. “How do you like that, omega?” he growled. “Do you like when you alpha fucks you?”

“Yes. Knot me. Please, I want your knot.”

His eyes gained a bit of awareness.

“My knot?” He pulled out, still hard, and his cum spilled out over my thighs. “Come here.”

He grabbed my arm and dragged me back in front of the mirror. He sat on the chair. Arms draped over the sides, like a king on his throne. His legs spread and his cock stood proud against his taut stomach. It was hard and glistened with our combined release. At the base, his knot was the size of my fist and it would only get bigger, swelling until it would be impossible for him to leave me.

I moved between his legs and went to kneel, ready to worship him at my own pace. He preferred his lovers to do the work while he whispered to words of praise.

“No.” He caught my arm. “Ride me.”

“Alright.” I began to climb onto his lap.

“The mirror. I want you to watch yourself.”

I turned around, moaned when he groped my ass, and let him pull me back by my hips. He guided me. Taking first one ankle and wedging it next to his thigh, and then the next.

Straddling him like this reminded me of trust fall. Exposed, precarious, depending on someone I already had faith in, yet hadn't quite learnt to fully rely on. When I saw—not felt but saw—his hands cage my ribs, fingers splayed so that they brushed against my breasts, all my fears fled. Not just the immediate ones but all of them. I knew it with a strange clarity. My home, my nest was with them. On my own (negotiated) terms, I'd stay.

“Hold yourself open for me,” he murmured against my back. One of his hands slid up between my breasts and cupped my neck. His hand flexed around my throat. It was just there to remind me of his power. And like that, he lowered me onto

his cock. Each inch by glorious inch until he touched my womb.

“So beautiful.”

“Alpha,” I gasped when I met his eyes in the mirror. “I want your knot,” I begged.

“Not yet, little jewel. I’ll give you my knot when I’m ready. And then you will be mine like you were always meant to be.” The steady slide reached so deeply, leaving me panting, breathless, and completely dependent on the alpha behind me to hold me up. My cunt—what a delicious word—squeezed down on the welcome invasion. I wanted to weep at the pleasure just his words could inspire in me.

Up and down, I watched his cock stretch me. But there was more. At the base his knot had expanded, a hot ball of sensitive tissue that threatened to split me in two. Normally, an alpha would be driven to fill an omega at this point, our slick providing relief to the tension that would build in a knot. But Rafe was one of those alphas who held off knotting an omega even after their knot was fully formed, even when he was in rut. “Knot me,” I pleaded. “You’re in pain.”

“You aren’t the only one who likes a little pain.” He bit my shoulder, soothing it with a licking kiss. “All the better when I’m inside of you and you’re coming—”

My body trembled, morphing into full body spasms when with a single, vicious thrust he slammed his knot inside of me, locking all the cum he had already given me. Once we were tied together, he pulled me back against his chest, teeth latched onto my neck where he would make his Claim. The rut had made his canines drop, the sharp bite breaking the skin but not enough to form the psychic bond.

Even after his knot went down, he didn’t stop. The rut lasting for hours. All through the night he kept me near him. When he wasn’t coming inside of me, we napped or showered together. He refused to fuck me in the shower, claiming it was too dangerous.

At last, and too soon, the lingering smell of ozone disappeared, and the rut ended.

“Will you stay with me?” he whispered. “Just lie here. Sleep a little before you go. I’ve missed sleeping next to someone.”

I felt tears prick my eyes. Ten years. He’d slept alone for ten long years.

“Of course,” I assured him as I stroked his forearms. “I’m here. I’m not going. Go to sleep.”

It didn’t take long for his breathing to even out. I turned over in his arms so I could study the man who had called me his jewel. I wanted to reach out and touch that oh-so-aristocratic face. One that would look more at home in a grand palace than a mid-terrace house in a middle-class neighbourhood. Certainly not asleep on a bed with dark purple sheets. I leaned forward and kissed the tip of his nose.

His eyes snapped open. “Is it really you?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m sorry for waking you. Go back to sleep. I’ll be right here.” I cuddled closer and rested my head above his heart. The steady beat lulled me back into sleep and as I was drifting off, I heard him speak.

“Don’t say anything. But I love you. I haven’t stopped. I never stopped.”

# GUY



God, I'd gone crazy, knowing that she was in Rafe's bed and waiting to see if she would sleep over with him or not. I'd been home, though, in my room when she'd walked upstairs—naked and smelling like heaven—with my packmate walking behind her with a lascivious smile on his face...which I knew because he stuck his head in, the bastard.

The spike of jealousy that he was going to have one-on-one time with her was mitigated by the relief that they'd worked it out or were going to fuck it out—ideally both. He'd taken my advice, which I was grateful for. I wanted this to work for us.

I waited. And waited. And waited for my special time with her. Sharing her with the others was one thing, but I was selfish.

I fell asleep with that greedy, possessive lust and a cock I refused to touch. The next time I came I would be buried, knot deep, inside of her quim.

When my alarm went off, I rolled out of bed, showered and dressed in a slack and shirt. Then, like a lovesick schoolboy, I haunted the landing. Her scent lingered, telling me she was still inside with him. A good sign. But I was done waiting.

With each passing minute, I told myself one minute more. One second longer, and I would burst into his room and drag her out of his bed. Maybe I wouldn't even bother doing that and just fuck her while he watched. Then I'd take her to her



nest and be the first to knot her there. Spill inside of her, over her breasts, and rub my scent into her skin.

The door opened, and she was there, stepping out of his room, a goofy smile on her face. She wore a pair of Rafe's athletic shorts and a t-shirt she'd stolen from me—though I didn't when she'd nabbed it since I didn't remember her leaving his room last night.

A growl built in my chest. "Hullo, Bambi."

That had always been my name for her. Bambi. Little girl, because she'd looked up at me with such big eyes that first day. An entrancing nymph who disappeared in the blink of an eye. Rafe had tracked her down, a lethal predator. I'd been the one to stalk her, learn what she liked so that when we met her, we had prepared for her. Not for some arranged date with a traditional omega. Instead, we had her in mind when we'd suggested a walk through the park and then a pub lunch. When I'd reached under the tabled and brushed my hand up Julian's thigh. Because following her meant seeing him and once I had, I knew he had to be mine as well.

Mine.

"Guy." She took a flying leap into my arms, her legs wrapped around my waist and her face buried in my neck. Clinging to me like her life depended on it. I instinctively held her close...like my life depended on it. "Why are you still here?"

"Working from home today." I moved my hands to cup her ass so that I had a better hold of her. "You stayed the night with Rafe."

"Do I still smell of him? I took a shower."

I walked us to the wall, pressing her into it, and nuzzled her neck where their scents were strongest. "You smell like pack. Can we have a morning date?"

"Yes." She was breathless, her eyes dilated.

I didn't want to break the spell, but I also wanted so much more than was possible if we were standing here. I carried her downstairs into the sitting room, then into the back, where my

piano was. It was a little too large for the space. The house was too clean for my taste, but Rafe could only stand untidiness in his own office. Anywhere else, and he got twitchy. But the neutral colours in this room were soothing, and I appreciated the fact he'd consulted the best architects who worked with engineers, so when I played, the sound came out pure and powerful.

She clung to me, giggling when I kicked the bench out of the way. I sat, and her ass connected briefly with the keys, setting off a discordant series of notes. Might as well have been the sweetest symphony I'd ever heard.

Her eyes met mine, bright, clear. Those eyes were all mine to love.

*I love you*, I said.

*I'm sorry for leaving without saying goodbye*, she replied.

*Don't worry about it. You are here now*, I assured her.

*I love you*, she said, but there was hurt, worry even, as she said that.

I did the only thing I could do to let her know that she was safe in my arms. I kissed her forehead. My eyes fell closed as I relished the feel of her smooth skin under my lips and the way she ground her pussy against my cock.

"Play for me," she whispered.

"Hold on." I moved my hands to the keys and did a quick run for my own joy. "What would you like?"

"Hm," she hummed into my neck where she had resettled.

I began to play our favourite lullaby.

When I got to the end, she asked me to play again. This time, she joined the simple melody with her gentle, sweet voice. It was not a strong voice, but to me, it was the easiest to listen to.

Golden slumbers kiss your eyes  
Smiles await you when you rise  
Sleep, little darling, do not cry  
And I shall sing a lullaby  
Lullaby  
Lullaby  
Sleep, little darling, and I shall sing a  
lullaby.

“That was lovely.” She kissed my throat.

“We won’t force—”

“I’m staying. For now. I need to figure some things out first.”

“Good choice,” I agreed. “Just be aware that Julian will hover over whoever moves. Ivo will force us all to eat ultra-healthy meals and buy her all the snacks. Ciarán will pamper her. Rafe will, is, probably already has commissioned Dada to redo the entire floor for her. It might be hard for her to leave after that.”

“And what about you?” she asked, laughing and still tucked into my neck. “What do you do when she stays?”

“I’ll sing her lullabies.” I stroked her hair.

“Guy...” She sat back, and again, I had the pleasure of looking into her eloquent eyes.

“Yes, Tones?”

“Thank you. For all those years ago. I can’t imagine what it took for you not to hunt me down and drag me back.”

“You know me.” I grinned. I didn’t want either of us to remember the pain in her voice when she’d called me eight years ago. I hadn’t asked then what had prompted it. I wasn’t going to ask now. And I would guard that privacy until she didn’t want it to be a secret anymore.

“I know you. Which is why I’m so impressed.” Her tone was light, mirroring my own, but her eyes were shuttered. She shifted in my lap. “You like the chase.”

I grabbed her by the neck, so she couldn’t avoid the kiss I pressed chastely to her lips. “Of course I like the chase. But I also very, very much like my prey to be happy to be caught.”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s just sit here for a minute.”

“Or we could move somewhere more comfortable? Like a sofa?”

“As the lady demands.”

I let her go.

I should have known. I knew her. I knew her like I knew myself.

Because the minute my hands fell from her hips, she was off.

“Catch me, Guy!” she called over her shoulder as she dashed for the door, grabbing a pair of beat-up trainers before bursting out onto the street.

My blood went hot at the thought of the chase. How many times had we done this? But also, how long ago? Fuck. I needed to think. Instinct said go, grab her. But things were moving fast with her. So, I hesitated.

“Guy?” she called. Then her head poked around the door. “Chase me, alpha.”

“Fuck.”

She had me. I could tell in her eyes that she wanted it, and I needed to give that to her.

“The big bad wolf is coming for you.”

“Holy shit.” She dashed off. I shoved my feet into a pair of shoes and locked the door behind me. She wouldn’t be able to go too fast in Ciarán’s shoes which gave me time to catch up.

She'd turned towards the park, which was a smart choice since no one would take notice of two people running after each other.

She had chosen to sprint. Damn she was fast even in shoes too big for her.

The run was fun, if brief.

I grabbed her around the waist just before she stepped foot into the park. "Gotcha."

"Dammit. I thought you'd get slower in your old age."

"But I got faster."

"Chase me," she begged. "I'll call red if I need to."

I flipped her over my shoulder. "My little sack of potatoes."

She tried tickling me. I swatted her ass. "I am going to take you somewhere we can finish this little game."

A few people stared, but mostly people were enjoying the nice weather as I walked her through the park to a walled garden that belonged to the Head Gardener of the Royal Parks. Normally, Farhad would be in residence, but my old friend was currently in Paris for a conference. He'd asked me to keep an eye on the garden. Instead, I would be fucking my omega in it.

I used the keypad to let us in. "I'm going to kiss you. Then give you a ten-second head start." I dipped in to peck her on the lips, then moved back to put my hands in my pockets. "One one-thousand..."

She giggled, jogging backwards. "It's beautiful, Guy."

"Run, Bambi. I'm—"

She took off, heading straight for the large oak at the bottom of the garden.

Fuck. I raced through ten seconds, because she was going to climb that tree. Dammit. My heart raced as I remembered when she'd done something similar and tried to pull herself up on a rotted branch, falling and breaking her elbow.

“Five, four, three—”

I took off. And slammed into her, crushing her between me and the rough bark of the tree. “No. Climbing.”

“Get off me!” She struggled, grinding her ass against my groin. “Off.”

“No. Climbing,” I bit out. “You broke your elbow last time. And keep it quiet.”

I fisted her hair, careful to guide her rather than pulling her, and dumped her on the soft grass. Where she would—nominally—be staying. I loved how she blinked up at me, the t-shirt rode up to reveal the soft swell of her stomach and broad splay of her hips. Childbearing hips, my mind whispered to me. It was premature to talk about filling her with pups, but one day soon, we were going to have that conversation.

She scrambled back like a crab, a delicate snarl on her face.

When she tried to kick me, I grabbed her ankle, making it impossible for her to get away. Oh, and she struggled, twisting and bucking. She lashed out with the other leg, which I caught with ease.

“Get away from me. Let Go!” She sounded so desperate to escape, but her scent, her arousal was too sweet, and my cock thickened in my trousers.

“Naughty girl, struggling when you know it’s hopeless.”

I kept her legs raised as I dropped to my knees. Pinning her ankles to my shoulders, I bent over her, bending her in half.

“Ouch,” she said the word clearly. I swallowed down my smile. She remembered that when she was uncomfortable but didn’t want to stop, she would say that one word. Or maybe she didn’t remember, but I did. Releasing her ankles, she dropped her legs down my arms, falling to one down one side. Fast as lightning, she rolled onto her knees and tried to get away.

“Bad omega.” I flopped onto her. She collapsed with an “ooff” and gave the most adorable growl as I pinned her down.

She tried so hard. I chuckled, grinding my erection against her ass.

“Are you going to do something to me?” she asked, wriggling herself onto her back.

“I’m going to eat you alive.” She giggled as I grabbed the waistband of the shorts she’d borrowed from Rafe and dragged them down her hips. No panties. And on her inner thigh my Claim. The scar was more pronounced than ten years ago. Raised, purple, obvious. Mine. It was fucking hard to look at the Claim and not do something drastic like beg her to give up the divorce. Still, I watched my thumb rub circles over the physical proof of our link. “Look at you. All that beautiful slick.”

“Fuck, that feels amazing.”

I covered her mouth with my hand. “You to be quiet, little slut. I know how much you like the potential of getting caught, but I doubt Rafe would like to bail us out for public sex.”

“Fuck. Shit. Yes.”

“What a dirty mouth,” I purred, my hand cupping her sex and smearing that sweet slick over her thighs. I fucked my fingers into her cunt. It was fucking obscene how it sounded. “Look how wet you are. Can you hear how wet you are?”

She whined.

“Answer me, slut.”

“Yes.”

“All because an alpha chased you. Poor little omega can’t control herself. She gets wet from be being roughed up. Are you going to be quiet for me?”

“Please.”

“Taste yourself.” I smeared my slick-covered fingers over her lips, encouraging her to suck on them while I made my way down her body. Her cunt smelled like nothing else.

No. It smelled...Heat. I knew that scent well because I’d tasted it on Ciarán the other night. His slick richer than

normal. And so was hers. But that was crazy. Crazy. For her to go into heat without knowing? I remembered the lead up to Toni's heats being chaotic. She'd complain of cramps and was constantly irritable. No. I was wrong. She couldn't be in heat.

And the only way I could ignore what my base instinct was screaming at me was if I didn't taste her.

"I'm going to fuck you here, Bambi-slut. Knot you in public so that anyone who walks in can see exactly what you are." I raced to undo my trousers, pushing them down just far enough to get my cock out. Squeezing the base, I guided myself into the sweetest heaven in the universe. My instincts were going haywire. Part of me wanted to fuck her rough and hard. Really make her scream. And then another part wanted to use her quim to keep my cock warm for hours while I whispered dirty nothings into her ear.

"Move," she begged. "I really need you to fuck me."

Holding her hips glued to mine, I reared back. Kneeling over her, I ate up the arch of her back, the way her breasts fell against her rib cage, and the obscene sight of my cock spearing her into her slick cunt.

"Harder."

I hitched her knees over my arms and leant over her, hammering into her cunt. With my face buried in her neck, I could pick apart all the delicious layers of her scent. Not just the champagne and chamomile but us, Rafe, nature, and that intoxicating fragrance that might be her heat.

Shit. She smelled too good. Heat good. Oh, fuck. I had to be out of my mind to still be thinking that. There would be a riot if she went into heat in the middle of Regent's Park. Dammit, my alpha loved the idea. Rutting, knotting her in public so that the whole world would know. Rafe would never forgive me but fuck him. It was my Claim on her thigh. I had every right to take her heat like this.

"Shit. You aren't going into heat are you?" I had to know. She froze underneath me and her scent thickened. "Because —"



“No. Impossible. I’m on suppressants. Not for a month. In a month.”

“Shit. Fuck, Bambi. You smell like heat.” My cock pulsed, a barely there orgasm causing me to fuck some cum into her. “You need to come now. I’m going to knot you. I need to knot you.”

She bit my arm to muffle her scream.

“That’s it. Claim me. Mark me.” I was coming and twisted my hips to get my knot inside of her before any of my cum could escape. “Come on. Take it. Fuck. Take. It.”

“Alpha!” Her quim stretched and my knot locked us together.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head as the Claim burst to life. I felt her psyche as clearly as Ciarán’s. “Bambi, you are going to be the death of me.”

When I woke up, Toni was making a daisy chain.

“Hello. You passed out. I think you were overwhelmed, when the Claim snapped into place.” She grinned down at me and her fingers brushed against my conscious.

I grabbed her hand. “Do you want to tell the others?”

“I thought about it and no. There isn’t much point. They know it is there. Telling them now seems superfluous.”

“Alright.” I laced our fingers together. “You aren’t mad?”

“About the Claim? Why would you think that?” She frowned. “Let’s not talk about it. Or talk about it later?”

I didn’t have keys to the lodge, so we had to walk back smelling of sex and sweat. Fuck. This time people noticed. I dragged Toni in front of me, glaring anyone who looked at her. Most alphas stopped and turned their back to us, a general sign of respect. But a couple younger betas openly stared.

“Their jealous,” she purred. “But I won’t let them touch you.”

“Don’t,” I growled. “You’re cum drunk.”

We returned to a quiet house.

“Shower?” I asked.

“Upstairs?”

“Are you sure?” I tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

“I want to use my own shampoo.”

I grinned. I’d take that as an excuse.

She led me to her nest. Throwing the t-shirt onto the bed instead of the laundry basket, she led me into the small, plain bathroom. The white and black tile were new from five years ago but the Victorian clawed bathtub and layout was the same.

“So. Why do you like chasing?” she asked as we stepped into the shower.

“I’ve never given it any thought. I don’t need to do anything other than chase...unlike Rafe.” I bent down and bit her shoulder. “Rafe likes the control. I like the thrill.”

“I like both of you.” She grinned. “I’m going to need to buy better shampoo. I don’t like this one anymore.”

“We could have gone to Ciarán’s bathroom. He has fancy stuff.”

“No, I want to have you to myself for a bit longer. And he only has scent cancelling shampoo.”

“Have we always been this selfish?”

“Yes,” she said it casually and squeezed some shampoo into her hands and began to wash her hair. I took the bottle from her and did the same. Easy, routine. Like this was our every day. I knew it for certain when she started humming the lullaby again.

Ciarán dragged Toni to Bubble and Smoke the second she stepped out of her nest.

“I’ll talk to you later!” He called over his shoulder.

“I was going to take a nap with her! You could join us!” I shouted at the front door. “Dammit.”

I should try and get some work done or I'd be up all night catching up. But this was my first semi-day off in months, and I trusted my team to cover for me. And if anything came up, they'd call. So I found myself sitting at the piano again, plunking away at whatever tunes caught my mind.

"You're playing again." Julian sat next to me, his broad shoulder pressing into mine. "I like it."

"You're home early."

"Eh." He must have had a bad day. A really bad day if that was all he was going to say.

I ran a scale. "When did I stop?"

"Eh, about when Toni was first photographed with the SweetNothings."

"What the fuck?" Had I? I couldn't remember.

"Ha. No. About when you started having to work late nights because of that overseas merger."

"Asshole." I poked out a few random notes, then fell into Chopin's Andante Spianato, which was the hardest piece I knew and therefore, one of the few I'd memorised since I'd practiced so hard back when I thought I wanted to be a concert pianist. Turns out, I didn't have the patience to practice as much as I needed to. When I'd given up that dream, I'd gone back to university, which was why I was three years older than the others. "It's nice having both of them in the house, isn't it?"

"The best. Hey, do you have any idea what she and Rafe talked about?"

"No. I was too busy fucking her in Regent's Park." I lifted my hands from the keys and cracked my knuckles. "Why?"

"I gave her the tickets," Rafe announced.

Julian jumped and bashed his knees against the piano. "Fuck. Can you please not sneak up on people like that?"

"Sorry. You're playing the piano again."

“You gave her the tickets?” I shook my head. She never said anything.

“Yes.”

“Wow. And you still have your balls and dick?”

“Yes.” Rafe smirked. “She likes them just where they are.”

“It wasn’t a question.” Julian laughed. “We all got to hear you last night.”

“So...What do we do tonight? They are all gone.”

“We could go there,” I hedged. “I haven’t been since Gloria’s trip to the hospital.”

“We are whipped.” Julian laughed. “But I could do with a drink.” Oh, Gloria mentioned that she will move into Ivo’s rooms. So who wants the job of telling Toni?”

“That is on you,” Rafe chuckled. “I’ve only just squeaked out of the dog house.”

# Ivo



I was just getting home from my five am run, so I was surprised to Julian and Ciarán sitting at the kitchen island, both dressed in tight black t-shirts and black jeans.

“Morning.” I went straight for Ciarán and put my hand to his forehead, checking for fever. “What dragged you out of bed?”

“Stop fussing.” He batted my hand away but after years of knowing him I knew he liked the attention. “Guy woke me up very early while he was fucking Toni—who is not quiet. So, I woke Julian up. My heat is soon, which also messes with my sleep schedule.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say. I’d grown up in a pack, a fairly large one too, but I’d never been involved in the sexual dynamics and still didn’t know what was appropriate. I’d never paid much attention to where Ciarán slept except knowing he preferred to sleep on his own because he snored. Did I ask about his heat? Were Toni and Rafe going to spend it with him? “Guy and Toni.” Was all I managed to say.

“Morning!”

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Toni walked out of the laundry room with an armful of lingerie. She drifted over to where we were gathered and gave the other two sweet kisses. She didn’t owe me any kisses but a pang of jealousy stabbed through me. Things had changed. Not that I was complaining, and since the Holly Bush I hadn’t had any time

with her. Meanwhile, everyone, including Rafe, had fallen into bed with her.

I'd just fallen in love with.

“Good run?” she asked.

“Nothing special.” I stepped back, giving her room to pass me and head upstairs.

“Stop running,” she laughed, walking into my space, backing me against the pantry door. The blood was pounding in my ears, then heading straight to my cock, which seemed to be on a hair trigger whenever she was near. She ran her free hand up my arm, curling it around my neck. “Good morning, daddy,” she murmured.

I forced myself to hold back, to restrain myself from pressing her against the wall and fucking the cheek out of her. Daddy? Dammit. Damn her for making me want things I shouldn't.

“Kiss me?” She slipped her hand into my hair and drew me closer. “Please?”

“Bad girl. You are a little tease.” I cupped her waist as she balanced on her toes and brushed my lips over hers.

“More.”

“No.” I slapped my hand on her ass and squeezed, grinding her against my thigh which had somehow made its way between her legs. She deserved better than a quick fuck. When I finally got my cock in her, I was going to make it last, and if I got into her now, I wouldn't last. “Later. Not like this.”

I couldn't resist another kiss. She tasted of toothpaste and smelled of Guy, of pack. She ended the kiss first, sliding away from me with wicked eyes and the scent of slick. Shit. There was a wet patch on my shorts where she rode my thigh for a few brief moments. I gaped as her sashayed away, Rafe's work shirt barely covering her ass. Scratch that. It didn't cover her because as she headed upstairs I got a full view of it and a teasing glimpse of her pussy.

Julian wolf whistled, reminding me that I was standing in the fucking kitchen with a boner and two packmates.

“Does she have to do that?” I grumbled, adjusting myself and trying to accept that if things went to plan this would become normal.

Ciarán sidled up to me and elbowed me in the side. “You should, you know... Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.”

“Brat. I have. I was the first one to make her come.” I smacked Ciarán upside the head.

“You are the last one to fuck her. Please.” He rubbed his hands together in supplication. “Ivo...pretty please. And take her on a date. It is mandated by I, Ciarán Ivy Place Pack omega, that you Ivo Ivy Place Pack beta, go and date Antonia Vane, Ivy Place Pack omega. That about covers it, I think.”

Those weren't the formal words, but they were how pack omegas ensured that the entire pack got to meet an omega before the new omega was officially invited into the fold. “Arsehole.”

“Shower first. You stink.” Ciarán pointed towards my rooms.

“You know I do. Don't forget, I've got to pick up Dada, and then we are heading to Eynsford for lunch with Pa. I'm spending the night so you have full control at Bubble and Smoke.”

My room was a chaotic mess. I'd packed most of my things, ready to move upstairs to the room across from Toni's nest. So, this would be my last shower in my own bathroom before I started sharing with my cousin. I looked at myself in the mirror while the watered warmed up. I looked my age, which wasn't a bad thing. And I wasn't an idiot, Toni liked me. She didn't care about my sexuality or the fact I was a beta. Nevertheless, I couldn't shake the underlying nerves that my piece of the puzzle wouldn't fit when it came down to heats.

I had enough distance now to admit this, but the heat I'd spent with my exes had traumatised me. They'd never forced me to be intimate with a man, but when I'd flinched away

from one of the alphas as he'd stroked my back...God, even now I felt guilty. What was wrong with me? It had taken a support group with other people who were only attracted to one gender to accept that some people were straight or gay. While the shame had receded, the idea of being part of Toni's heat and what might happen if Ciarán, Guy, or Julian felt an urge. Rafe I trusted. Evolution meant near blood relations had a negative reaction to relatives during heats. But the others? In the literal heat of the moment? Shit. I knew I needed to talk about it with her, because I wanted to be there for her. Fuck. I wanted to be there for the pack.

My much younger half-sister was a terror. As the only omega and the baby, she was the obvious favourite. Thankfully, being spoiled hadn't given her any bad ideas. In fact, it had had quite the opposite effect. She'd rebelled, hoping to receive some form of punishment, but we'd all just chuckled at her exploits, which only made her wilder. It was only under Ciarán's patient tutelage that she had gained any calming influence and turned her extensive talent for making things beautiful into a career as an interior designer. At sixteen she'd helped decorating the Ivy Place house. Now, twenty-one, she'd had nests featured in design magazine and charged crazy fees to decide between paint colours like lingerie pink or elephants breath.

A long way to say that a quiet Dada was a plotting Dada, so I immediately went on high alert when I picked her up.

"I have picked the pack I want," she told me. I simply blinked in response. This was much more forward than her normal evasive plotting.

"Am I being recruited to convince Pa?"

"No...I don't think so."

"Are you going to tell me who they are?"

"Are you going to tattle?"

"I'm your big brother not your keeper." I glanced at her. "Dada..."

"I'm not going to tell you...Not because I don't trust you, Ivo, but...I want to make sure of them first."



“Are they...” I took a calming breath. “Would Pa disapprove?”

“Dad might, but not Pa. Not once I talk him around to it,” she amended. “So. How is Antonia Vane? Has Rafe signed her up behind her back yet?”

I glared at her. “None of your business.”

She rolled my eyes. “Oh, phooey. We both know that Rafe will leap at the chance to keep her on the registry. Did you know I met her? She seems really normal. Everyone seems to be obsessed with her. Is she one of those perfect people who you want to hate but can’t?”

“No one is perfect, Dada.”

“Then does she have a magical pussy?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Jesus she was a nightmare. I really hoped that whatever pack she’d picked out would be able to handle her. Probably not. She’d step all over them and end up board to tears.

“You’ve always been such a prude. Is it because you are a beta?” She raised an eyebrow in a disconcertingly familiar way. I’d seen our aunt, Rafe’s mum, do the same thing when she caught us as kids with jammy hands.

“Probably.”

“Wow. Closed-lipped today, big brother. I guess you want to talk about something else?”

I relaxed. “Yes. Tell me about work.”

My father and sister had manipulated me like a pro. He hadn’t invited us down to Mote Abbey for a family meal but to talk about Toni. Dada had opened her big mouth and spilled the beans. Then I’d had to endure my five siblings and pack-fathers ask about her.

The real confrontation was saved for after dinner when my Pa made me join him in the library for a “little chat.” Even at forty-two, I braced myself for the vague sense disappointment I’d grown used to since I failed to present as an alpha. Shit. Being in this office brought back horrible memories of

doctors' appointments and my parents screaming at each other about how to handle the inheritance. I could take over the pack, but the bulk of the pack's fortune was entailed to the oldest child. Me. When my father died, the pack would be living in my house and there was not a damn thing any of us could do about it.

I poured myself three fingers of whatever whisky was in the decanter and drained it without tasting the undoubtedly exquisite flavour. "Well. What did you want to talk about?"

"I'm happy for you, son," Pa said, handing me a cigar. "I know you smoke them. Take it out to that garden at the back of the pack house and smoke it. I have your mother's wedding rings, which she always wanted you to have." He fiddled with the keys to my mother's old desk before pulling out a gold cigarette box. It had belonged to my mother. She never smoked, but she'd had a severe anxiety disorder and used cigarettes as an excuse to leave social gatherings. "I've kept your mother's rings in here. She wanted you to have them."

"You said that already."

"I miss her, Ivo. Like a piece of my soul was taken from us the day she died."

"Us?"

"She was the love of my life. Remember, she also had the love of four other alphas. I don't think a pack fully recovers from losing their omega. But Rafe is getting a second chance. And so are you. Don't let her slip away. Claim her."

"I'm a beta."

"I raised you better than that. You might be just a beta but you come from an unbroken line of alphas. From one of the oldest packs in England. You and Rafe better put pups in her. Continue our line and carry on the family name. Your mother would have wanted it."

I fisted my hands. I loved him, respected him. But fuck I wanted to beat the shit out of him for reducing Toni to a womb and dismissing Ciarán for not having one. "Thank you for the rings, sir."

“Yes, yes. And bring her with you next time.”

I made it to the door and then stopped. I couldn't leave things like this. “Pa, if you ever reduce an omega's value to their ability to have children, you will never meet your grandchildren.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

“I'm serious. And one more thing.” I smiled. “They'll carry the name Ivy. Not Harcourt or Grace. I'll see myself out. Tell Dada she can catch the train, I'm going home.”

“We're going on a date,” I told her the next morning. I'd given it lots of thought. I could have cooked for her or taken her for a ride or made love to her, but there was that one fantasy that haunted me every time I saw her. I was going to live it out right, fucking now.

“Huh?” she asked, still focused on whatever game she was playing. I snatched her phone and stuffed it into my shirt pocket. “Hey. I was doing something with that.”

“Not anymore.”

“Ivo, you are being unreasonable. Give me my phone.” She held out her hand and looked at me like I was a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

My cheeks were getting hot. Somehow I'd messed up already. I should have asked. Stupid. “Do you want to go on a date or not?”

Her expression softened. “Oh, hedgehog,” she purred. “Of course I do. Right now?”

I grunted.

“That sounds lovely.” She hopped up, landing a kiss on my chin and grabbing her phone at the same time. “What do you want to do? Should I change?”

“Surprise.”

She'd wrapped a silk scarf around her hair. It looked lovely, but I had much better ideas for how I wanted to see that scarf used—like blindfolding her. She grinned when I pulled it

free and tied it around her eyes, securing it with a bow at the back. Her hair was sticking up awkwardly in places and I tried to smooth it down.

“I like this date already.” She gave a little shimmy, which made me painfully aware of her braless tits.

“Behave,” I groaned. I threw her over my shoulder and had to pop her on the ass when she tried to wriggle free. “I want to go on a date with you, not get distracted by your refusal to wear any of the lingerie you own.”

“Where are we going?” Her voice somewhat muffled.

“Somewhere.” I headed towards the garden and the little summer house at the foot of the garden.

“I’m guessing we don’t have too far to go if you are carrying me.” She sounded smug as if she had solved the riddle of the sphinx.

“Very well. Three guesses to where we are going.” I smiled.

“No. I want it to be a surprise.” She patted me on the ass. “By the way, I talked to a gallery and they are accepting my proposal for a solo exhibition.”

“That’s great!” I grinned. “I’m so proud of you. What are you thinking?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Pigeonsaurs.”

“What?” I asked, assuming I’d misheard her.

“Pigeonsaurs. Half-pigeon, half-dinosaurs who are going to take the world back from humans.”

“Jesus. Where do you get these ideas?”

“Where does any creative get ideas? I was thinking we could go on a field trip to Borough Market so that I can photograph some south London pigeons.”

“I’d like that.” We. I like the way she said that. We. A unit. A unit within a unit, I reminded myself. And in a way, all the

more special. Since visiting my birth pack, I'd been revisiting all the messy memories of my youth. Even after living with the Ivy Place pack for four years, I'd always felt on the fringes. The house mate who wasn't part of the established friendship group.

Toni was my bridge into one of the most fundamental realities of pack life. That was the problem with packs. Sex bound them together. You could only form a Claim, a mystical link even scientists couldn't explain, during an omega's heat or an alpha's rut....That meant sex. Lots of sex.

Sex. It was on my mind constantly and with her pussy inches from my nose, I was...needing to focus on our date.

The summer house was a large room with solid walls on three sides and a row of floor to ceiling sliding glass doors facing the house. Normally I used it as a living space when I wanted to get away from the others but since Toni had moved in I hadn't been down here once. I unlocked it and carried her into the hot, stale interior. "I'm going to leave the door open for ventilation."

I lifted her off my shoulder and walked into the middle of the room. She tilted back and used those enhanced omega olfactory senses. As a chef, I had always been jealous of omegas for their uniquely enhanced senses. There were those in the scientific community who often wondered why it wasn't alphas with the greater sensitivity. I, however, postulated that omegas were ultimately responsible for choosing packs. Dogs could sniff out cancer. Omegas arguably needed to be able to sniff out the best possible pack for them to raise their children with.

I had some spare clothes here and found a t-shirt that didn't smell too funky. Keeping it as clinical as possible, I stripped her out of her little floral dress. I liked it, but I wanted to see her in my t-shirt more. I had to move quickly and efficiently because I didn't want to get distracted by the killer little body that my little one had. And it was dynamite. All classical Greek sculpture with smaller, pert breasts and a softness around the middle and her hips that just begged to be grabbed. The little bit of stomach, the stretch marks on her

thighs and dimples on her ass. I'd been in New Orleans the first time I'd heard the phrase "a little cushion for the pushin'" and that just about perfectly described the curves this woman had on her. It was a shame to cover it all up, but I had a plan.

"Oh," she sighed as the t-shirt slipped over her head. "You've always smelled of just-blown-out candles."

I grunted but couldn't stop myself from grinning.

"Come on, Ivo. Don't you know how many women love the smell of just-blown-out candles? That warm, smoky smell."

She shivered.

"Cold?" I asked.

"Shivering with how sexy that smell is." She chuckled. "Can I take this off now?"

"One minute." I dragged my armchair in front of the window and moved the kettle to the little table so it'd be easy to reach. I could turn it on now, but I didn't want to hint at what was going to happen next. It was maybe a little... childish. I analysed what I'd set up, and suddenly, it felt either too ancient or too young. Not sexy enough? But that wasn't my fantasy or how I wanted to spend my date.

"Ivo?"

"Uh, don't move." I changed into a pair of grey trackie bottoms. I'd noticed the way she watched me when I was wearing them and like an idiot they gave me a bit more confidence. I scooped her up and settled us in the armchair so her legs draped over my lap. She wiggled experimentally before curling into my chest, her head resting over my heart, which I could swear hadn't ever beat so loud. I inhaled that chamomile scent. "Okay. You can, um, remove it."

She pulled the scarf down and blinked up at me. "Heya, handsome."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and nuzzled my throat. "Are we going to cuddle?" she asked.

“I was going to read a book.” I cleared my throat. “And drink chamomile tea...”

“Are you telling me that you are spending your pack-designated courting date snuggled with me while you read a book and drink tea?”

“Uh...yes?” All of a sudden, I felt nervous and regretted the fact I hadn’t chosen to take her somewhere nice. “How do you know about courting dates?”

“Ciarán.” She looked around, her whisky eyes taking everything in. “I like this. Do I have a book to read?”

“Can I read to you?” My throat felt dry. This had been a mistake. “Toni...”

“If I’m your baby girl, of course you can read to me.”

“Why is that so much dirtier when you say it?”

Her fingers tickled me under the chin, then stroked down my bare chest, curling in the hair there. “Probably because you are a dirty old man.” She grinned. “Read to me, daddy?”

I tweaked one of her nipples. “You know I can’t say no to you when you call me that.”

She bit her lip and grinned. “Yeah. I kinda know.”

“What would you like? I’ve—” I turned around to see what was nearby. I had planned on the tea but not what I was going to read. “Let’s see...”

I found the stack of books I always kept by my chair for nights when I couldn’t sleep and would come down here.

“Pick one, baby girl.” I handed her the four books that were my constant rereads—again, there was no time to be embarrassed by the selection. To distract myself, I turned the kettle on and prepped the tea. “I got this directly from a small farm set-up in—”

“Picked one.”

“Oh.”

“I really can’t believe that this is on your reread list,” she said and twist over the chair’s arm to put the other books on the ground.

“Hush you.” I brought a hand down in a smack on her exposed ass. Her little gasp at the contact was going to have me distracted, especially when I, a beta, for fuck’s sake, could smell the spike in her scent.

She looked over her shoulder. “That was...very, very hot.”

“Behave, and you won’t—”

“Are you going to read, or are we going to fuck?” There was a lot to say in the look we shared. “Fuck it. We have all afternoon,” she muttered and rolled out of my lap with a thump. “I’m going to suck you off, daddy.” She dragged the word out. “Give you a very special kind of kiss.”

“You don’t have to.” I closed my eyes to hide the sight of her. “Shit. If you want to wrap those lips around my cock, I’m not going to say no. But I really only wanted to read with you.”



# TONI



Ivo sat there, legs spread in his ridiculously large armchair, like a king on his throne. At forty-two, he had a bit of weight around the middle. The kind a heavyweight boxer might have where it was all muscle underneath. He looked effortlessly strong. Effortlessly? Dude ran at five in the morning, so he must make an effort. I wanted to lick him and rub my slick-coated cunt against his abs until I came so hard that I fainted. But that would have to wait. I wanted to see the erection tenting his sweats. It was big.

Extremely, intimidatingly big.

But there was no going back. From the moment I'd called him "dad," and he'd retaliated by spanking me, I'd discovered a new side of myself that wanted to just let him take care of me, give me boundaries. It was a different kind of dominance to Rafe's intensity or Guy's teasing control. This felt protective almost but with the edge of reprimand if I didn't follow the rules.

And I found I liked Ivo's rules.

Which is why I had every intention of getting my little hands on not-so-little little Ivo.

I ran my hands up his thighs, as eager as a kid to unwrap my present on Christmas morning. He batted my hand away, reached under the waistband, and grabbed his cock. "Now, sweetheart. A couple of things before we start. I've had my fingers inside. I know how strong that pussy is. But I'm big." I could see the tip, leaking precum through the soft grey

material, and his thumb spreading it over the head of his cock. He slipped the other hand in and wrapped his other hand around the base of his cock. Fuck. You could see a gap between his hands. “Bigger than most alphas. But when I fuck you, I’m going to destroy that pretty cunt because I’ve got a surprise just for you that has nothing to do with a twelve inch cock.”

I squirmed. “What is it?”

“Why don’t you find out,” he growled. God, he was calm, and I wanted to shatter that because fuck me but he was a cock tease. “Come on, sweetheart. Take my sweats off and see what daddy has for you.”

He raised his hips so I could pull his sweats down but kept a firm grip with both hands on his cock. With a final stroke, he released his erection. And I was finally able to see what he meant.

My eyes must have been as huge as saucers. The underside of his monster dick was pierced. A frenulum piercing and six rung Jacob’s Ladder, my thirsty self supplied. I knew all about them...

Fictional ones, I had to remind myself. I had no idea if those were first-hand accounts, or if the authors had personal experience with erections that came with their very own accessories. And I was about to attempt to give this a very special kind of kiss.

“Fuck,” I sighed as my fingers caressed down the barbells. The metal was warmer than I thought it would be and tugged at the skin, making him groan. I licked along the piercing, feeling each bar under my tongue, before sucking on the head. The precum that had pearled on the tip was sweeter than an alpha’s. When I tried to wrap my hand around him, my fingers touched, just. A small part of me relaxed. He was thick but not impossibly thick. I’d be able to suck him deep into my throat. Fuck. I loved giving head. But the alphas hadn’t really given me the opportunity. So I was going to take my time with Ivo.

“That’s it, baby girl. Get comfortable because you’ll be choking on my cock very soon,” he murmured. His words

might have been soothing but he didn't have any manners and gripped my hand squeezing him, showing how he liked it. Hard. Rough. But I was the one in charge of this blow job, not the giant-erection-owning beta.

"My treat," I told him. I knew before I started that I was never going to fit all of him in my mouth, but I wanted him to feel good. So, so good that I would do my best. "I'll do my best, I promise..."

"You're killing me," he growled and fisted in my hair, holding me off his cock. "And I'm going to hell for not making you come first."

"They say the road to hell was paved with good intentions..." I caught the piercing through the tip with my tongue and teased it. He muttered a curse and let me go. Grinning, I licked from the base of his cock, along the barbells, which felt so good on my tongue, and up to the swollen head. I went up on my knees and then slowly lowered my mouth until I could fit the first couple of inches of it without triggering my gag reflex. I pulled back a little, but Ivo fisted my hair, preventing me from moving.

"I'm going to control this so we can both enjoy it for as long as possible. Nice and slow because you've never played with piercings before. Do you think you can do that for me? If you need to stop, pat my thigh three times."

All my good intentions flew out the window, when he said that. How the fuck did he make me want to beg for him to use me? Looking up at him, I knew why: I trusted him.

"Good girl." My nipples tightened as those two words spread through me. It wasn't so much the praise as the tone in which he said them, soft and honest.

He grunted and began to thrust his cock into my mouth, never going so deep that I would gag around the piercing at the tip. I could also feel the bell bars in my hand, but I wanted to feel them against my tongue.

Every time he thrust up, I forced myself to take more until I could feel the first, the second, then the third against my lips.

As each went in, I could feel him inching into my throat. I swallowed around the intrusion.

Ivo groaned with that masculine need that had the slick rushing from my cunt. I hadn't ever given a blowjob that had turned me on so much. I reached between my thighs and began rubbing my clit. Fuck, I was wet. Almost to wet because I could get any friction or enough pressure to alleviate the pressure building inside of me.

"I need to be inside of you." He let my hair go and grabbed me under the arms, lifting me like I weighed nothing. My legs stretched over his powerful thighs, spreading my pussy open. Slick slid down my thighs, dripping onto his cock, making both of us moan. His hands travelled all over my body, cupping my breasts and lovingly gripping my soft stomach. His touch was everything and not enough. There was never going to be an "enough" with Ivo. I would always crave more and more. Not just the intimacy of skin on skin, but the way he looked at me. The hunger paired with wonder. I felt the same.

Never would I have imagined a man like this for myself. But here I was. Ready to give him everything for the simple reason that it gave me joy. I cupped his face and leant in for a kiss, when he stopped me. "Wait."

I froze.

"I want..." He didn't finish the sentence, just started to squeeze and caress my ass. "Someday, I'm going to tenderise this," he murmured. "Not today. But we are going to have consequences for derailing my quiet afternoon of drinking tea and reading to you."

"But—"

"First," he talked right over me. "First, I'm going to give you a good hard fucking. That should soothe you. Then we are going to read. Understand?"

"Alright, —." I stopped myself just in time. I'd almost called him alpha, but I wasn't sure how he would feel about that. It didn't really matter what I called him. Ivo was here and was about to fuck me, just like we both wanted. Then I would

get to cuddle with him. It might not have been exactly what he had planned, but I'd long since learnt that what we planned for and what we got in life were two different things.

“Use your words, sweetheart.”

“Yes, daddy.”

“Good girl,” he purred and ran a reassuring hand up my spine until he had a grip on the back of my neck. “Now... lower that perfect, pretty little pussy onto my cock, and let me ruin you.”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Shit. Condom,” he cursed.

“No. Remember. We talked.” I tried to drop my weight down, but he was so strong I only teased the head of his cock against my opening.

“Are you sure? You want me to fuck you bare? Fill you up.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ivo. Are you trying to kill me?”

“Oh, that was a mistake. I don't like it when you use that kind of language. I asked you a serious question.” He swatted my ass, and I gasped.

“Ivo!”

He lifted me higher, lifting me away from his cock. I gripped his wrists to maintain my balance—the only thing holding me up were his hands around my waist. Then Ivo surprised me by biting my breast. Hard. This was no love bite. It was a hot as hell, and I moaned. “Again.”

“Dirty girl.” He chuckled and sucked one of my nipples into his mouth.

It felt like slow motion as he lowered me again. The first brush of his cock against my sex had me gasping as it slid against my clit. Again, I was raised up. Again, lowered. Again, he didn't catch my entrance. I couldn't tell if he was doing this on purpose, rubbing his hard hot length over my slick pussy, but it was hell and heaven at once.

“Please,” I begged. “I need to feel you inside me.”

He grunted, and this time, he slid home, but only just. He was large and knew it. He gave me time to adjust. He gave me time to whimper with desperate need. Then his grip relaxed and gravity took over. I started to slide down.

“Fuck, god!” I moaned. I was dripping slick, but he was still stretching me, and I felt as each piercing slipped in. I gasped a little with each one because it increased the stretch just a little bit more. He began to nudge at my cervix, that bite of the intense pleasure had my moans converting to pants. An uneven exchange because he wasn’t even all the way in, and I was already orgasming with each additional millimetre. “Oh, God.”

He chuckled. “I think that we are going to have to learn all about delayed gratification.”

“Do not talk to omegas about delayed gratification,” I snapped. “I can’t help if you make me come.”

“Shit, baby.” Ivo began to tilt his hips in rough-if-shallow thrusts, pushing more and more and more of himself inside of me. “Going to come if you keep doing that. Fuck. I’d...”

“Ivo,” I whined. “Please.”

He lifted me again, turning me around so that I faced the garden. “I want to see your ass. Fuck.”

“Ow!” He’d bitten me again. “Canibal.”

“You’re tasty.”

I closed my eyes and moaned as he lowered me onto his cock again. “Fuck.”

“Yeah, yeah. I got you. I got you.”

How he knew that I wanted him to fuck me harder, I’ll never know. Or maybe we were just wired the same way when it came to sex. With each powerful thrust, I began to understand the real power of those piercings. They weren’t just rolling along the ultra-sensitive front wall but hitting my g-spot as well.

“Oh my god,” I gasped as he slipped out of me and each of the bar bells teased my sensitive entrance.

“Touch yourself. Come for me, sweetheart. I need to feel you coming on my cock while I fill you up.” I rubbed my clit forcing another orgasm that left me a trembling mess, my inner walls spasming with my release. And his cock felt impossibly larger, swelling inside of me before coming with a shout. He fucked me through his orgasm, flooding my womb with cum and kept coming until it leaked out of me, filling the small room with the scent of sex and cum. “Yeah, honey. That’s it milk me. Fuck.”

“That was amazing,” I sighed. “Can I admit that I’m really, really happy that you are a beta? I don’t know if I could handle you with a knot. That is a super good thing, by the way. And means we need to do this again.”

He kissed my forehead. “Any time. Let’s clean you up.”

Cleaning me up meant, wetting a flannel and rubbing it over my skin, between my legs, and across my breasts. “Sorry about this. Next time, we are going to have a shower.”

I snorted “Or a bath.”

“It’s not my fault you seduced me in the summer house,” Ivo chuckled, settling me on his lap.

“This one,” I said, handing him the copy of Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit that I’d chosen before our little detour. I’d been surprised to see it, but there was something charming that this beast of a man reread a children’s book. “Also, why do you have this?” I needed to ask.

“I like it.” His deep voice rumbled through me. He nuzzled my head. He smelt of me and that purely Ivo smell that I loved.

I am sorry to say that Peter was not very well during the evening.

His mother put him to bed, and made some camomile tea; and she gave a dose of it to Peter!

‘One table-spoonful to be taken at bed-time.’

But Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail had bread and milk and blackberries for supper.

I reached up and brushed a tear away.

I'd started tearing up because I remembered my nana reading the story to me as a little girl, and it was like hearing a song for the first time in a while, knowing all the words but having the timing a little off.

"Toni? Are you okay?" Ivo asked, sounding worried and confused. "Are you—"

"Thank you," I sniffed. I drew his face towards me so he could see in my eyes that I was serious, that I was okay. "Thank you. I haven't had anyone read to me since my nana died. She used to read Beatrix Potter to me. I'd forgotten. I'd almost...I hadn't realised how I would just, remember."

"Do you want me to read it to you again?"

I snuggled against my beta. "Please."

"I love you," I blurted out. "Love, love you."

His blush stopped all my nerves in their tracks. "I kind of figured that. I'm still baffled as to why though."

"Ivo," I whined. "You—"

"Love you too." He brushed a strand of hair off my shoulder. "Like crazy."

"Kiss me."

"Demanding." He landed a peck on my hairline. "But before we do anything else, we need to talk."

I winced. "I like things how they are."

"As precarious as they are?"

"They are only precarious in a legal sense. Emotionally... You can't tell me that our emotions are precarious. They aren't."

"Have you told the others how you feel?"

"I'm waiting for alone time with everyone."



He sighed. “We are almost at the court date. Don’t wait too long.”

I bit my lip. It was stupid but I wanted them to trust me while I figured out how to get the best possible outcome for the pack. The one where we were unencumbered and therefore able to choose each other without all the mess of never getting the divorce.

They’d object though. I knew that in my bones. And even if the end result was the same, I’d live with a niggling feeling that I’d snuck back into the pack through the back door.

“Oh...what have you been doing?” Ciarán sniffed me when we finally made back to the house. “Is this what you call going on a date?” He shouted after Ivo who was sprinting upstairs.

“I seduced him,” I preened, in a vague hope that he wouldn’t pick up on the undercurrent of emotions. “He wanted to read a book, but I changed his mind.”

He buried his nose in my hair. “You are a lucky, lucky omega. I am man enough to confess that I am jealous that you have the bits that Ivo likes. Do you think I can watch? Not now, but later?”

“I don’t think he would mind,” I choked out the words. “But I’ll ask.”

Then he scrunched his nose. “It is weird. He’s attractive. And even though the idea of watching him with you is hot. I’m actually attracted to him. I tease. But...” He shook his head. “Yeah. I would find it weird, you knowing, doing bits with him.”

“No, I understand. And speaking of ‘bits.’ He’s a biter,” I warned, my heart full of Ivo, Ivo, Ivo.

“Prove it!”

Laughing, I pulled Ivo’s t-shirt off revealing the livid bruise on my breast and then my ass.

“Put some clothes on!” Rafe shouted from where he was working at the kitchen table. “I have work to do. You can’t

parade around the house in the middle of the day, naked and smelling of sex, when I have work. I have to concentrate.”

“Then go to the office.”

“I can’t. Guy’s on a business call,” he snarled. “This is your fault, Antonia. Before you moved back, he never worked from home during the work week.”

“Rafe, if you are going to act like a brat, then I won’t give you a blow job when you clock off.”

The sound of an e-cigarette breaking, made me burst into giggles. “Antonia. Do. Not. Try. My. Patience.”

“You are going to be so, so sexed up by the end of the night. You’re gonna walk around like an American cowboy,” Ciarán could barely speak he was laughing so hard. “Come on, let’s leave grumpy alone and have shower sex.”

I laced our fingers together. “As much as the idea of more sex with you is thrilling. I’m going to be out of commission for the rest of the day.”

“That big?” Ciarán hissed.

“Pierced.”

“Out!” the very angry alpha shouted. “Out. I’ll give you my credit card. Buy a first class ticket to wherever you want to go, but for the love of god, please let me finish my work.” By the end he was vibrating with anger, his scent so bitter that I nearly choked. “Please.”

“Hey?”

“Yes?” he growled.

I moved behind him and rested his head between my breasts. Threading my fingers through his hair and down his neck, I massaged his shoulders. “Talk to us.”

He relaxed into my touch. “What do you want to know?”

“Why are you so stressed?” Ciarán asked, leaning against the table, his knee pressed against Rafe’s thigh.

“I’m not.”

We waited.

“A couple of weeks ago, there was a custody case. An alpha in a beta family was being fostered into a pack. It was a mess.”

“That happens every day. It’s sad but true.”

“Well, it didn’t sit well with me. I started looking for a new foster family for him. But the system is broken. Omegas have the Omega Centre, but alphas are just thrown into a pack.”

“That’s terrible,” I murmured.

“You want to foster him?” Ciarán asked like he already knew the answer. My heart. Oh god, I loved this alpha and his extreme instincts.

Silence.

“We can’t.”

“So you looked into it?” I asked. “Why can’t we.”

Rafe’s scent unfurled a little. “We don’t have the space. To foster, the alpha needs their own bedroom and bathroom. There needs to be a guest room if their parents want to visit. When Gloria moves in, we will have one spare bedroom.” He grabbed my wrist, making me realise I’d stopped rubbing his shoulders. “And I haven’t asked if you want—”

“I love the idea of you fostering,” I rushed in. “This pack will be the perfect foster pack.”

“Right.” He sat forward.

Shit. I’d fucked up. “Rafe. Let’s look into it. Ciarán’s wants to buy next door, right?”

The other omega was staring at our alpha like he’d never seen him before. I looked at him. There was nothing different, he was being his usual overly alpha, domineering, protective self. Maybe Ciarán hadn’t thought he was serious about fostering.

I returned my attention to Rafe. “And you still have the people who did the work here. It shouldn’t be too hard. And with your connections...” I looked at Ciarán, pleading with

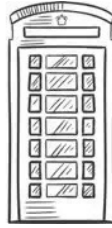
him to jump in. Instead he just watched me, the smallest of small smiles teasing his lips. I could lose myself in his smile and the way his eyes sparkled. “Ciarán? Help me.”

“Aw, Bubbles. You know I’ll do anything to grow our pack.” He winked and clapped his hands together. “Right. Rafe, are you feeling better?”

“Yes,” the alpha grumbled. “But I was serious about clothes. I don’t want people wandering around naked and smelling of sex.”

I laughed. I loved this fucking hypocrite so much.

# JULIAN



I should have finished for the day but I'd had an opening in my schedule, and the nurse had let me know that someone had popped in and begged for an appointment. That wasn't how things worked but occasionally patients pulled strings and got bumped.

I shifted in my chair, cheap office one that needed replacing, and the office was as tired as I felt. Hell, I'd taken a nap on the examination bed during my lunch break.

Not that I could complain. Ciarán's heat was soon, and my alpha was in overdrive with the instinct to provide for him. Food, physical touch, whatever he wanted...Including curling around him in his nest while he snoring kept me awake. I was a light sleeper which was—

A triple knock let me know that my mystery patient was here.

"Yes?" I called out.

Toni stuck her head in. "Hi. Aren't you meant to come and get me?"

"What? Toni. I have a patient."

"Me." She closed the door but hovered on the other side of the room. Her hair had started to grow out revealing darker red roots that clashed with the pink. "I should have said. I wanted to surprise you. And, I didn't want to lose my nerve."

I frowned. "What?"

“I need to have a doctor appointment for my omega stuff. And I wasn’t comfortable finding a stranger when there was a doctor in the pack.”

“This isn’t my area of expertise,” I reminded her. “Even if I could, I can’t sign off on your papers. We are married.”

“Right. Married.” She blushed. I itched to go over and remind her what else were to each other. Instead, I rubbed my hands on my thighs. “Do you have someone you would recommend?”

I couldn’t stomach the idea of another doctor touching her, even if that doctor was guaranteed to be an omega. I didn’t know Ciarán’s doctor for exactly that reason. I got his paperwork because I’d go crazy if I didn’t know, but he blacked out the doctor’s name.

“Ask Ciarán.” I must have sounded harsh because he eyebrows jumped into her hairline.

“Wow.”

I let out the growl I’d been holding back. “I don’t want to think about another doctor examining you.”

Her eyes softened and drifted over to my desk. “Okay. But since I’m here now... how about we play doctor?”

Fuck. Fuck. I was in so much trouble. When I’d been at medical school, I’d used her as my guinea pig to practise take blood pressure and so much more. It always led to us sweating and panting, my textbooks pushed aside as I fucked her over my desk, against the wall, wherever the nearest surface was.

I stood up, absorbing how small she was compared to me. An omega’s physiology was different to an alpha’s.

“I want you to kiss it better.” She battered her eyelashes at me and pouted. “Doctor...”

“Fuck, this is what you planned along.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “I have... There are rules Toni.”

“We’re married, remember?”

If she was going to say that, it would be rude to ignore her.

“Get on the table.” I pointed to the examination table, suddenly resenting the fact it didn’t have stirrups. “Wait.” I cleared my throat. “Mrs Ivy, I’m going to step into the hall. If you can strip down to you pants and lie down on the examination table with the sheet over your lower half. No need to remove your top.”

“Yes, doctor.”

I walked into the hall and collapsed against the door. This was bad. If I was caught, I might lose my job.

“Mr Williams?” a passing nurse caught my attention. “Your wife’s files. I forgot to give you them before.”

“Thank you, Jane,” I choked out. Jesus, did everyone know?

“She even prettier in person.”

“Yeah. Right.” I spun around and escaped into my office.

When I walked back in, my “patient” was lying on the table. She’d decided to go completely naked. And my eyes went straight to the sharp points of her nipples under the thin sheet. I reached behind me and locked us in.

“So. Can you tell me what the problem is?” I pulled on my gloves and wheeled the little stool to the end of the table, positioning.

“I have a strange ache inside of me,” she said and listed a couple of other symptoms. “I’m producing a lot more slick than normal.”

“Thank you. Now, since we don’t have stirrups, can you please please put the soles of your feet together and then press your knees down.”

“You don’t have stirrups?” she asked as she followed my orders.

I started breathing out of my mouth to lessen her scent. “I’m an oncologist, not an obstetrician.”

“Right,” she chuckled.

I grabbed the sheet and draped it onto her stomach. Her scent gathered as her knees relaxed and opened her even more. My cock started to swell as I breathed more and more of that champagne and chamomile cocktail.

“I am going to begin the exam. Please let me know if you feel any discomfort,” I said, sound a whole lot more composed than I felt, when her slick trickled out of her sex and down to her second hole. “First, I’m going to do an external examination. It is a good thing that you removed your top. Can you please remove the sheet?”

She pushed it around her waist. “Like this.”

Walking around to her side, I admired the swell of her breasts. They really were lovely, round and firm. “From a visual, you look healthy. But...”

I cupped her left breast, circling it. She moaned when I reached for the other side, massaging both at once. “Do you do regular at home checks?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Do your alphas help?” I rolled her nipples between my fingers.

“No.”

I hummed, pinching the hard peaks. She thrust her chest up. “I think you should. But if you don’t think they can be as thorough as I can, I recommend you make regular appointments with me.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Now, you said that you had an ache inside?”

“I feel empty.”

“In your stomach?” I smoothed my hands down her torso and palpitated her tummy. “Does this hurt.”

“Lower,” she said, breathless with a hint of impatience.

I cupped her sex. My middle finger spilt her folds. “You are very wet.”



“I don’t understand why. I get like this sometimes.”

“Ah. So you are a stranger to arousal.” I adjusted myself. Innocent Toni was so out of character. She’d always been confident. Even when we were younger, she’d been as likely to initiate sexual encounters as anyone else. Still, “unawakened” Toni, held an allure.

“Can you help me?” she asked, wide-eyed and pleading. Fuck, that shouldn’t be so hot.

Of course, I growled. Outloud, I tried to keep it professional. “I’ll do my best, but in my professional opinion, a more thorough internal examination is required.”

“If you think...” she managed to sound uncertain. “Whatever you think.”

“I need to test your responsiveness,” I said in my most doctorly voice. “There might be some discomfort at first, but you’ll grow used to it.” I demonstrated, grinding the heel of my hand against her clit. Her hips bucked. “Please try to stay still.”

“I don’t know what you are doing to me,” she moaned.

I didn’t respond, focused on making her lose her mind with my fingers rubbing her clit to opening. “Your labia are swelling nicely. That is what happens when a woman becomes aroused.”

“But doctor that isn’t helping the ache. It’s worse now than it was before.”

“I see.” I inserted two fingers. It would be a soft stretch but I wanted to really feel it.

“Oh!”

“Hmm.” I curled my fingers up, finding the sensitive spot on her front wall. “How does that feel?”

“Good?”

“That sounded like a question.”

“It feels tingly but the symptoms are worse.”

“I wonder...” I moved closer. “Perhaps...” I sucked her clit between my lips. She tasted like an ambrosia. Sweet with a subtle something that made her Toni. I thrust my fingers into her, making sure to hit her g-spot.

“Yesh,” she moaned through the hand she’d slapped over her mouth.

“I think maybe you need more?” I added a third finger and replaced my mouth with my thumb. Standing up, I watched her writhe. She was so beautiful as she lay there panting, clenching around the fingers sinking into her. But I wanted more—had from the moment she’s spread her legs. I massaged my thumb against her asshole, applying the slightest pressure and the initial resistance.

“What are you doing?” she whined.

“Seeing if you are this responsive.”

“Fuck.” She planted her feet on the padded table and pushed up giving me better access. “Thank you, doctor for taking care of me.”

“Language, madam. You can trust me. I’m a doctor and this is just part of the most thorough examination they teach at medical school.”

The individual packets of lube were within reach, and I grabbed one. Opening it with my teeth, I spread it over my fingers and pressed one against her asshole. She gasped, bearing down and allowing my finger to slip inside her tight hole. “That is very good, Mrs Vane.”

“The empty feeling has returned.”

“We can’t have that.” I plunged all my fingers up to the knuckle back into her quim.

“Fuck,” she groaned. “Like that.”

My cock was too hard to ignore. I needed inside of her.

“Mrs Ivy, I think I need to probe you a bit further to see how deep the problem is.”

“Oh, do you have the right implements?”

“Don’t worry, I’m a doctor.” I pulled my gloves off and expertly tossed them into the bin. Then I undid my trousers and fisted my cock. My knot ached to be buried deep inside of her. “Are you ready?”

“Always.”

One quick thrust, and I was in her balls deep.

“Hard and fast,” she begged. “I’m close.”

Thank fuck. I pulled out almost to the tip and then surged forward snapping my hips against her ass. Making her come became the centre of my world—cock in her quim, fingers rubbing her clit, and pinching nipples.

“Kiss me.”

I snarled. The combination of this brutal fucking and the intimacy of a kiss, nearly sent me over the edge. Typical Toni to want everything at once, typical me to do everything in my power to give it to her.

It was embarrassing how quick I was but the second before I came, she trembled through her orgasm. I caught her cry in our kiss and groaned my own release. Fuck, the feeling of my cum in her hot pussy triggered my hindbrain. Breed, breed, breed. Pup her and keep her safe in her nest. I cursed and allowed myself to live out the fantasy...At least while I was buried inside of her while she milked me dry.

The only instinct I resisted (barely) was knotting her. I had a stranglehold on the ball of nerves that was the closest thing to a clit an alpha with a dick could have. It wasn’t anything like an omega’s slick hole, but it would be fucking irresponsible to knot her here, when someone might come along with a key or worse an accident happened.

“I think you’ve awakened something in me,” I whispered into her thigh, nipping her neck where I wanted to put my Claim. The temptation was made worse because my canines were dropping, their sharp points grazing her skin.

“Same,” she huffed.

“Let me clean you up.” I grabbed wipes and cleaned her up, then had the embarrassment of dealing with the examination table, which was stained with cum. “Next time, I’m going to bring one of those waterproof sheets.”

“Next time? Are you going to bring Ciarán in here?”

“Yeah. Might have to get one of these for the house, though.” I rubbed her clit one last time, causing her to curse. “But with stirrups.”

“What had you changing your mind?” I asked while we waited in line for coffees from the hospital’s cafe. It was surprisingly empty but it didn’t stop me from being surprised that she answered so honestly.

“Not what, who. All of you. I am still afraid, but if I don’t, urgh. I’m not sure how to explain it. If I hadn’t left, I’d regret you. We are all different people now. So different.” She huffed a laugh and braided all that glorious hair so that it hung loosely over her shoulder. “And yet...everything just feels good. Ciarán feels good. You, them. All of you feel good. Wholesome and sexy. Omegas like that, you know. We are drawn to wholesome and sexy. To people we want to bring together. I have had a sample, and now I want the whole thing.”

“Your coffees are ready!”

“I’m playing a ten-year catch-up game.” She sipped her coffee, and a bitter little smile tugged at her lips. “I’m trying to find out where I fit in. With Ciarán, with Ivo, and with the rest of you. I’m not ready to go all in yet—”

“Are we friends?” I asked suddenly.

“Best friends. Best friends and lovers and all of it. Why?”

“Because...” I grabbed her hand. “Because as a friend? I’m telling you that you left for the right reason or reasons. Rafe is a pain in the ass. A posh alpha used to getting everything he wants. He has the looks, the money, and the influence. But of all of us? I think he knows what you need. I’m the most selfish.”

“No, you aren’t!” She laughed.

“Lettuce, let’s make a promise. Honesty. Between us, always honesty.”

“Okay?” She didn’t know what I was going to say. I wasn’t entirely sure about what I was going to say either, but I needed to give it a go.

“Lettuce, honestly, I’ve been selfish when it came to you from when we were kids. I didn’t think about what you wanted. Rafe and Guy brought you in, but you were my omega already. I agreed to share because you liked them. I’d have kept you all to myself. It genuinely didn’t once cross my mind that you had plans.” She gasped. “I assumed that whatever you and Rafe had fought over must have been trivial and you’d come back to your senses. That cooler heads would prevail. You never came back, though. It was like a punch in the gut. I realised I didn’t know you as well as I thought I did.”

She laced our fingers together. “It never occurred to me that he wouldn’t tell you.”

“He’s proud and assumes he knows best. He let you go, even though it killed him. It is the same with the rest of us. It isn’t that Rafe and Ciarán aren’t attracted to each other. It’s just that Ciarán isn’t into the control bits. But every heat, Rafe is there, and it is hot as fuck. Ciarán lets go, Rafe lets go...”

“How soon is Rafe’s heat?” She asked. “Soon?”

“Uhh...” I flushed. I hadn’t mentioned it to anyone, but his scent told me that it would be soon. “I think so.”

“Well, duck a fuck.” She sipped her coffee. “I mean, he always smells like that perfect mix of sweet and savoury, but lately, I just want to devour him.”

“Toni, there’s more.”

“You don’t need to explain.”

“I do. When I saw you for the first time in a decade, I only could really think about myself, what you’d done to me. How beautiful and fresh you were. I wanted you even though I had Ciarán...my Claimed omega. Rafe told me he let you go, and I nearly snapped his head off because...Well, just how could anyone let you go?”

“We were kids. Baby twenties,” she murmured. “I’m not... We can’t get hung up on the past.”

“So, what is holding you back this time?” Because something was.

“Two omegas. Do you really need me if you already have an omega? There are surrogates if you want kids.”

“So you aren’t uncomfortable about being a second omega?”

“Urgh, I don’t know. Maybe I keep waiting for Ciarán to put his foot down and say he can’t do it now that I am actually sleeping with his alphas, his pack. It isn’t a question of this or that. You’ve said honesty?” She was quiet for a while, and I was happy to wait for her to gather her thoughts. “What if this just gets taken away from me?”

“Can I tell you a secret?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“When we were kids, I believed in true mates.” It was strange to keep something like that a secret. But Rafe’s visceral hatred for true mates had kept me quiet for the fifteen years we’d known each other. Toni just grabbed my hand and squeezed.

“I’m sorry.” Her eyes pierced my heart; they were so violently projecting anger. Not towards me, but herself.

“Stop jumping to conclusions. Let me finish. I believed in them, and you were my omega. It broke my heart when you left. Then Ciarán came, and it was the same. Just that instinct that he was the one. Wait a second, Lettuce.” I covered her mouth with my hand to stop her from butting in.

“You showed up a few weeks ago. I was bowled over again. I didn’t know how to feel or what to say to the others, but you were back. Back in our lives and we all agreed that we couldn’t let you go again without a fight. Ciarán told us to go after you. It was a pack decision. Maybe not to rush you, but to at least try. Lettuce, my first love, do you understand what I’m trying to say? You can be my true mate as well as Ciarán. And why not? If an omega can have a pack as a true mate,

why can't more than one omega be in a pack? What is a pack but a group of people who want to live together? Bond? Love? My parents were betas and while they legally couldn't form a pack when I was a kid, they did the minute it became legal. They rushed to the courthouse. Them and another two beta couples who I grew up with. So, I kind of have a family pack."

Her eyes were so prominent now that my hand covered so much of her face, but I was too shy to look. What if she thought I was desperate or lying or trying to make her feel better when I just needed to let her know how desperate I was for her to want to be with us. Needed her to be with us. Tucked up in her own bed, panting and begging during her heat.

There was scientific proof that omegas who were in close contact with each other synced their heats. What would it be like to share a heat with Ciarán and Toni? More than all of that, I just didn't want to lose my friend. The one who clung like a limpet to my side in the morning as we tried to consume as much coffee as possible.

"Toni, you are my person. Do you get that?" I whispered. "My best person."

"And best people love each other," she replied, eyes steady and fierce.

"Really?"

"Really, really."

It wasn't an out and out declaration of romantic but for right now, could we really say more?

"Jules." She shook our hands. "Don't look so dejected. I love you. You made a big speech, which I loved. But the only thing I can say is that I love you."

I grabbed her face, squishing her cheeks together, and kissed her like my life depended on it. "Love you. Love you to the moon and back, Lettuce."

Waking up with my omega thrusting his erection against mine was heaven. I reached around and pressed two fingers into his slick hole.

“You make me so fucking wet,” Ciarán hissed and nibbled my ear.

“I don’t get much one-on-one with you.” I grinned as I began to kiss my way down his chest. He was perfectly cut and so responsive as I changed tactics—just to torture him—and made my way back up to lick his nipples. His scent told me he was close to his heat, we had days, maybe only hours before he submitted to biology and became a delicious mess of sexual need. We’d be at his beck and call for the weekend, perhaps a few days longer, knotting him, feeding for him, caring for him. And yes, I loved the heightened sensations and the fact I could go for hours because my alpha biology demanded I take care of my omega, it was the pack intimacy. The chance for the world to go on pause.

“Julian.” He wiggled beneath me, trying to get some pressure on his erection. Yeah. I was in the mood to torture him and myself—I was a firm fan of delayed gratification and had every desire to indulge in it today.

“Did you know that morning wood isn’t necessarily sexual but a natural and healthy response to various stimuli and reactions to the environment and chemicals and...” I licked my way down to his belly button, which I briefly teased with the tip of my tongue. “It isn’t about any desire?”

“What are you saying?” he moaned. “Is this really time for a lecture?”

“No. But I just thought you might want to know that this.” I grabbed his cock and gave it a too-light stroke, knowing it would drive him mad. I was rewarded with a begging thrust of his hips. I squeezed him tighter as a reward. “This erection? This has nothing to do with me. Just a natural reaction.”

“Fuck that. It definitely is.”

“No. You sex-crazed omega. It is just a healthy function of your body.”

“I woke up aching for you both.”

“Is that so?” I slid lower until I could place open-mouthed kisses at the base of his cock. I wanted to do more. To keep



this up, slowly building it until we went crazy and couldn't do anything but fuck.

“Julian, I need you. But like need, need you.”

“Fuck, darling.” I took him into my mouth, running my tongue around the tip. Ciarán grabbed my hair and tried to fuck into my mouth, but I used my strength to hold him still. “Yeah, I'm going to draw this out. Make you come so hard your eyes cross.”

“I don't think I'm going to last that long.”

“Yes, you can,” I told him and sat back up. “Sorry, love, but this isn't going to be fast.”

“Alpha, I need you to fuck me.”

I urged him to straddle me, and together, we guided my cock into his ass. No one ever felt so good than Ciarán around me while he looked down at me, need in his eyes, his muscles tensing, and then his mouth dropping open as gravity took over and he slowly got impaled on my cock, his omega slick easing his way.

“Come here. I want to kiss you.” I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck and pulled him close. The kiss was languorous. Our tongues playing. Our lips. Our feelings just coming together as our bodies were. My hand on his hip urged him to move, beginning the rhythm of our lovemaking.

I'd hoped to prolong it. But there was something about this man that made me lose control.

“I love you,” I whispered into our kiss.

“Love you, too. But fuck.” He squeezed his eyes together and his ass pulsed around my cock. “You feel so good inside me!”

“Ciarán. I love you.” I grabbed his face. Made him look at me. “I. Love. You.”

He was panting rocking himself back and forth on my knot like he was trying to force me to knot him. “I know. I always will know that you love me.”

“You want my knot?”

“No. I need your knot, I’m going into heat.”

I looked down and saw that he’d released a flood of slick.  
My alpha wanted to roar. Our omega was going into heat.

# CIARÁN



My alpha rolled off of me.

“I’m calling Guy.” He frowned as the phone rang out. He redialed. “Dammit, he’s not. Wait...Mags? Thanks for picking. It’s, Julian. Guy needs to come home, Ciarán’s going into heat. Yeah, I know. It came on fast,” Julian said over the phone. “Thanks. Bye. Fuck baby, I’m going to have to cuff you until he gets here.”

I grabbed his arm. “Where is she? I need Toni and Rafe—if he’ll come.”

“Are you sure?”

About Rafe, was what he was asking. Rafe had always made me a little edgy when it came to sex. He liked control and the first time we’d had sex when we’d been courting it had felt like trying to swim up stream. He was holding back and I was trying to like things he wanted to try. In the end, he joined my heats sometimes but generally our love was affectionate rather than passionate.

That had changed for me during our conversation about fostering the young alpha. I’d felt the pull in my core. Rafe’s Claim was usually dormant but it had flared to life in that moment. Protection. An almost destructive desire to protect everyone he cared for. And he cared for me. So, “Yes. I want him here.”

“Fuck, one more taste before I have to share you,” he moaned. Flipping me over, he pinned me on my back and

began licking my hole. “That right, omega. Come for your alpha.”

A single digit slid into my slick hole. Oh, fuck. I was ready and exploded without any more encouragement.

“Fuck—” I lay gasping through my orgasm as Julian dragged my hips back and thrust deep into me. The pleasure sent my eyes rolling into the back of my head.

He snapped his hips, forcing his knot against my entrance, but never putting it in. “Gotta keep you on edge, baby.”

“Knot,” I whined. Behaving pitiful usually got me what I wanted in bed, but Julian had no interest in what I wanted.

“Alpha knows best,” he growled. His phone pinged. Without stopping he grabbed it and read the message. “Toni’s on her way.”

Like he’d summoned her, she crashed into the room, her nostrils flared. “Fuck me.”

“That’s my line,” I panted. God, she looked delicious with a giant t-shirt hanging off her shoulder and her pink hair in a high ponytail. “Come here, Bubbles. I need to taste you.”

She stumbled over her feet as she pulled the shirt over her head, revealing her soft breasts and sharply peaked nipples. I licked my lips, desperate to taste her again.

The hormones rushing through my system made it impossible for me to think entirely clearly, but she seemed to glow. Her skin had a healthy tan that made the parts she covered look almost fragile because of the paleness. I liked that. Fuck, I liked the idea that she covered up to the point that she had tan lines. It meant that only we got to see her killer body.

“Ciarán, baby. Look at me.” She cupped my face, and I realised I’d missed the moment she’d crawled onto the bed and into my lap. “How are you doing, baby? What do you want?”

“To come,” I whined.

“Not happening, love.” Julian pulled out of me, leaving me feel empty, bereft. “On your back.”

I growled. “No. I won’t.”

“It’s all right,” Toni cooed. She kissed me, rolling me onto my back. Julian took advantage and fitted a heat cock ring around my cock. It reached halfway up my length and stimulated the feeling of fucking someone. “See. You can wear that until you get to fuck me, isn’t that nice?”

“I really wanna come.” I wasn’t above begging and maybe Toni would sympathise and release me, allow me some kind of release when my alpha was being cruel.

“Soon.” She rained kisses across my face, along my neck and down to my nipples, sucking one into her mouth, torturing the other one with her fingers. “You know we are doing this for you.”

Julian grinned from behind her, stroking his erection while he watched us. “Maybe if you beg, I’ll let Toni suck you off.”

“Absolutely not.”

I whipped my head towards the door where Rafe stood. He was dressed in a dove grey three-piece suit. He shrugged out of his jacket. Toni moved like she knew exactly what he expected and took it from him, carefully draping it over the occasional chair in the corner. I watched eagerly as he rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt to reveal forearms of lean muscle and bulging veins. There was another kind of bulge in his slacks, an erection pressing against the Italian wool, a wet spot where his cock leaked precum. Toni knelt at his feet, untying his shoes and removing his socks. Still kneeling, she undid his belt. He whipped the leather free, barely missing slapping her in the cheek. But she was already pulling his trousers and boxers down. His cock sprung free, slapping his stomach, leaving a smear on his white shirt. It jutted out, parting his shirt tails in an obscene manner.

“Rafe.” I reached out to him. “Alpha.”

“Omega.”

“Come here,” I demanded.

“I’m going to redo that with proper ring and separator,” he said, eyes focused on my cock. Fuck, yes. He was going to touch my cock, and I was going to explode because, with Toni’s champagne scent and my alphas pumping out pheromones, a breeze would set me off. “Antonia, I want you to keep your mouth on him the entire time. Ciarán? You will not come until all of your alphas are here. Do you understand?”

“No.” I pouted. “I can’t. I can’t hold off if you touch me.”

“Darling, you will be a good boy for your alpha,” Rafe purred. He came and sat next to my head. “This needs to happen. Let me help you.”

I hated that he was right. Orgasm denial and hours of teasing without coming would mean an even more powerful release.

I should have known that his purr was a lie. Rafe wasn’t soothing dominant in bed. And my proof arrived when he pulled what would become an elaborate torture device out of his jacket pocket...A coil of red silk rope.

He started with my balls, working like he spent his days tying up balls. Once they were separated and pulled down away from my body, he eased the cock ring off. My cock was encased in a lace-like collection of knots. Each pass of his hands sent need straight to my balls followed by a pinch of pain as they were restricted from drawing up.

While he worked, he murmured reassurances that he was almost done and what a good boy I was being. Fuck, it wasn’t my thing, but I was fast becoming addicted to being pinned down and tied up by the stern alpha and Toni.

She was another beast entirely. Her touch was always light, but the teasing play of her fingertips and mouth over my skin equally distracted me and drove me wild from Rafe’s devious hands.

“God, that’s hot,” she moaned. “Can I have a taste?”

“Yes,” I begged, and Rafe granted her permission at the same time.

“Just the head. And only use your lips; none of that clever tongue.”

Looking down the length of my body, I watched as she bent her head, pink hair draped like a curtain, obscuring my view. Then the firm pull of her lips, slick with spit.

“Let him see,” Julian said as he gathered her hair up and held it in a ponytail again. Those lips of hers, all bee-stung and pink, looked obscene as she sucked. My hips bucked, chasing the possibility of more.

“No.” Julian rested a hand on my stomach and held me still. “Finger him, Toni. Start stretching him for our knots. We are going to knot you so good. Stretch you out. Make you come for hours until you’re full of cum. Then we’ll plug you while Toni rides you. That sound good to you?”

“Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me,” I repeated like a prayer, even before I felt the press of her fingers against my slick hole. She was a tease, massaging circles on the ring of muscle. “Please.”

She hummed around my cock, sucking hard. I closed my eyes, my balls unable to draw up and give me release.

I felt a hand on the back of my neck and scented Guy, who must have arrived in the last few minutes. Fuck. I was so gone in my heat that I hadn’t noticed.

My smile was dopey and eager. I had my pack with me. He traced a finger over my lips. “Prettiest mouth I’ve ever seen. Come here, Sunshine.”

I pushed my desperation along the Claim. Maybe he would let me come now that they were all here. “Please.”

“Nuh-uh,” he chuckled. “I’m going to fuck your throat. Then I am going to fuck your ass. And you are going to be quiet and not come.”

“You are a fucking asshole,” I spat and pressed my lips together. Two could play the denial game.

“Aw, baby. You are going to regret that back chat.” He grabbed his cock by the knot and smeared the tip along my

cheeks, scent marking me with his pre-cum. It was primal and dirty and so hot that I fisted my hands, feeling my short nails biting into my palms so I didn't touch my cock...Or open my mouth.

Toni let go of my cock and stretched up my body, licking Guy's precum off my face. "He tastes so good. Are you sure you don't want some?"

"Bitch," I growled. "Manipulative."

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," Julian cursed.

I looked over and saw Rafe on his knees, deep throating Julian's cock. My mouth dropped open.

"That's it," Guy growled and slipped himself inside of me. Once I had a taste, I began sucking, licking, doing everything I knew to tease more of his precum from the tip. "That's right."

He fucked his cock into my throat with rolling thrusts. That I mimicked, jabbing my hips into nothing.

"You can touch him, Bambi. Give him some love."

I moaned, when the hot suction of her mouth returned. Between sucking on the head, she scraped her teeth over my shaft.

The bed shifted and a strong pair of hands, rolled me on to my side. "Julian is going to fuck you and Rafe's going to fuck him," Guy explained. "You'll like that. So will Julian."

"Yes," my big alpha sounded both excited and nervous. "It's been a while since..."

"I'll take care of you." Rafe might have been talking to Julian but it felt like his words were meant for all of us. Or maybe that he was reminding himself what his job was. To take care of us.

"What about me?" Toni's soft, feminine voice made the whole room go still. I couldn't look at her with Guy's cock in my mouth, but I reached for her, threading my fingers through her hair.



“Bambi. You have your orders. Suck your omega’s cock but make sure he doesn’t come.”

“Oh.”

Fuck. I tried to scream around the thick length filling my throat. Julian’s cock was pushing inside of me, his knot halfway into my hole. But it wasn’t that which was driving me crazy. Rafe’s Claim was flaring hotter than it ever had. Hell, all my Claims were active, bright, and so real I thought I could touch them if I wanted to. But Rafe’s stood out because he was battering his cock into Julian, who was a mess of pleasure and begging words for the other alpha’s knot.

Guy pulled out of my mouth and began jerking his cock.

“Coming,” he growled a second before he shot hot ropes of come over my body, some of it even landing on Toni, Juan, and Rafe. “That’s right. My little sluts and not so little sluts. Covered in my cum,” he crowed.

Fuck. Toni did something with her tongue, teasing my foreskin.

“I need to come,” I cried out, my back bowing with the pain of denied release.

“Off.” Rafe’s bark caused Toni to scamper into Guy’s arms. They were so beautiful together.

“How are you doing?” my short alpha asked.

“Didn’t you knot Julian?”

“No, silly boy. I can’t knot Julian while you’re tied up. That would be irresponsible.” He ran a hand along my cock, which was now agonisingly sensitive to even the slightest touch. “Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” I whined.

“Julian. I want you to knot Ciarán on my count. You will both come at that time.”

“Yes, alpha.” I bucked against Julian, trying to tease him into disobeying.

“I see what you’re doing,” Rafe growled. But he didn’t stop reaching for the knots, if anything he worked faster, deftly untying me. “I’m going to start counting.”

One. Thrust and my cock was free.

Two. Thrust and my balls were free.

Three. Thrust and his mouth was on my cock, sucking me into the back of his throat.

Come pulsed along the Claim as clear as if he’d said the word outloud.

Thrust and I was coming down my alpha’s throat while my other alpha pumped me full of coming, sending me into cartwheels of pleasure.

Soft kisses landed on my skin. “That’s it. Go to sleep, darling.”

I woke up, knotted and satisfied. Julian’s hands feathering up and down my back, a lazy caress while we waited for his knot to go down. The floor show was spectacular: Guy and Toni had fallen into a tangled kiss.

When they broke apart, they stared at each other in a way that was almost too intimate. But I couldn’t look away because it threw me back to a conversation with Guy after we’d gotten home from taking Gloria to the hospital.

“It should feel like cheating,” Guy’d said. I’d never seen him look so distraught, hollow, like he had carved out his heart and offered it to me, knowing I could throw it away because that is what omegas were expected to do with alphas who looked out of the nest.

“I know, big man.” I tried to dislodge his hands, so I could smooth out those curls, but he wouldn’t let go. Instead, he twisted in my arms and buried his face in my chest.

“It doesn’t, though. It is like...I’m not a poet. Not with words. But numbers, formulas can be poetry, too. Open a spreadsheet, and it looks clean, but then you click on a cell, and the formulas can be complicated. They look messy, but the result is clean. It fits in a box. When I look at all of us, I see

the pretty numbers, Ciarán. I see the way we all work together to make something whole. But I know.” He pounded his chest. “I know how those numbers came to be. Sums and square roots and equations you never learned the names of, all of them working hard to make a single number. It should feel like cheating, but I can’t feel that way. No matter how hard I try. I love you. You know that. But I love her, as well. I never stopped loving her.”

“I know. I just don’t want to be the other omega.” The confession was dragged out of me.

“No, love. You are the glue that binds us. The one and the zero that makes it all possible.”

He sounded so earnest, but I let out a chuckle. “I think you have pushed the analogy too far.”

“Maybe, but she was the one who said it. That if anything was possible, it would be because of you.”

That responsibility hit me like a tonne of feathers. Exactly the same weight as any other tonne, but everyone thought feathers were lighter. Somehow, less of a burden.

“I can’t be that person, Guy. She has to decide if she stays.”

My heat was winding down, hours. During one of the lulls, while the alphas slipped away to eat and nap, Toni brought her laptop to the nest and spent time researching the best dinosaurs to use for her new project.

“Urgh.”

“What’s up, Bubbles?” I rested my head on her shoulder. “Still dinosaurs?”

“Yeah.” She cupped my cheek. “Do you mind that I’m not at Bubble and Smoke? That I quit, so I can put dinosaur heads on pigeons and call it art?”

“You wouldn’t be the Toni I’m getting to know and falling in love with if you didn’t go off and do your own thing.”

“Falling in love?” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “We’ve only known each other a couple of weeks.”

“Why not? I knew I would fall in love with the pack in about half an hour after meeting them. Why can’t I fall in love with you at first sight?”

“I was teasing.” She cleared her throat, her tell for a bit reveal. “Rafe told me he loved me.”

My breath was caught in my throat. I wasn’t surprised that Rafe had confessed. Hell, I was more surprised that he hadn’t done it the day she moved in. But her reaction? Things were going well. I sure fucking hoped things were going well. This was the best heat I’d ever experienced and all because it finally felt like I had a complete pack around me. “Now, that is a story I haven’t heard.”

“I…”

“Toni, you can’t leave me hanging like that.” I slapped her laptop closed and put on the bedside table.

“Yeah.” She snuggled us into the nest. “I need to go back a bit to explain how I feel? Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

“Did you ever meet Rafe’s parents? I mean if you were a society omega, you might have met them.”

“No.”

“Okay. So I met his father once. It was right after we were married. They look exactly the same but his dad was taller. About your height. But sitting down, they were equals.” She sighed, caught up in an unpleasant memory. “He didn’t talk to me. Just Rafe. And it really pissed Rafe off but he bit his tongue. Then he said something that I think Rafe found unforgivable. He told him that Rafe had made a mistake marrying the first omega he fell in love with. That he should have waited and married an omega he loved.”

“Shit.”

“It was worse. He said that he had been in love with Rafe’s mother.”

“What did he do?”

“He left.”

“And you?”

“I asked him what the difference between love and being in love was. I’ll never forgive him for what he did to Rafe and his mother, but what he said helped me understand him a little.”

“What is the difference?”

“He said that being in love is only seeing the good, to be blind to the person’s faults. And love is when you see all their faults and love them because of what a rich and varied person they are.” She cleared her throat. “He said that he was blind to the fact Rafe’s mother had been raised to be an omega. She wasn’t happy being a beta. She would take charge of things that were technically Sarah’s job. And he defended her when he should have made peace.”

“Fuck.”

“I think he resented how much he loved her. He pushed her out of the pack because he thought his love for her was poisoning the pack. Sarah was an excuse.”

“Do you think Rafe was in love with you? Instead of love, I mean.”

“Yes. He had a vision of me.” She sounded aching affectionate.

“You shattered that pretty spectacularly.” I tucked her closer and prepared to confess. “He can do both, you know. He can be in love with you and love you. I can do that too.” My heart was in my throat, and I could feel the stirrings of my heat, a pressure building in my core. I gritted my teeth when a cramp was followed by a rush of slick. “Shit.”

“Ciarán.” She touched my face. “Are you okay? Another wave?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re back.” Guy opened the door. All three of them were carrying trays of food and carafes of water and fruit

juices. “You smell...Let’s feed you first and then take care of the last wave.”

She helped me sit up, piling pillows under my knees. I frowned. “What are you doing?”

Another cramp...but this one somehow was more bearable.

“Old wives’ tale. Drink some water.”

My pack fussed over me. Feeding me small morsels of food Ivo had cooked.

“Out.” Toni dismissed the alphas when my cramps were too strong to ignore anymore. Fuck being a male omega. Female omegas did best when they were constantly stuffed. Meanwhile, I had to be edged for knots and cum to work their magic.

“Can it be just us?” she asked. Her hair was in a messy crown braid, tendrils escaping down her back. “I want just us... If that is okay with you?”

My heart thundered in my chest and I had to clear my throat so that I didn’t blurt out how badly I wanted to be just us. She’d had one-on-one sex with every member of the pack except for me.

“Where do you want me?” she asked, her eyes blown black with lust and something softer too.

“Everywhere,” I moaned. “Mouth?”

“Happily.” It was the last word she said before wrapping her lips around my cock and taking me into the back of her throat in one smooth motion.

“Fuck, talking dirty and taking charge. You sucking my cock has got to be my favourite thing in the world.” She hummed, and it took all my will power to stop myself from coming. Suddenly I needed to be face to face with her. “Come here.”

She let me go with a pop. “Eager.”

“Ride me, Bubbles.”

She grinned. Grasping my cock at the base, she lowered her slick quim until I was nudging her womb.

“Ciarán,” she cried out. “You make me feel so good.”

“Slowly. Make love to me.”

Her scent shifted and she draped her body over mine. “Slowly.”

We began a subtle dance, gentle thrusts and grinds, accompanied by panting words and promises. When I came it was almost an afterthought. Her cunt pulsing around me and a soft gasp were the only indication that she had come as well.

We were at the end. I was lucid enough to remember our conversation, and the fact it had been interrupted.

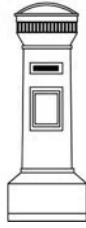
“Toni, I think I love you. And I’m pretty sure I’ve been in love with you from the moment we met. So you need to stay,” I whispered into her ear. “Stay because this is too good. You won’t survive without us. We won’t survive without you. I won’t survive without you.”

“I love you, too.” Her words were a breath against my skin. “I love you and am in love with you. From the moment I saw you.”

“Don’t say it if you—”

“I’m not. I promise.”

# RAFE



We'd been invited to a cocktail party hosted by Darrell Cameron's pack. I'd wanted to refuse but had been outvoted. It seemed that everyone wanted to go to a party to celebrate Toni's pigeonsaurs.

"I told you this was a mistake. My brother is going to start a brawl," I growled at Guy when my brother and the Mountview pack cornered Gwen after they saw her talking with a very eligible pack from Dublin that Ciarán had introduced him to.

"Eh. Gwen's going to accept them." He shrugged and sipped his orange juice. "You should know Toni's pissed off."

"Why?" I looked up at him. "Because we came?"

"Yup." He popped the p, a habit he'd picked up from Toni.

"She told you why?"

"No. I overheard her talking with Jeff."

"Who? Do you mean Josh?" I asked.

"Cameron's omega. The chatty blonde one." Guy's eyes ping-ponged across the room as if he was expecting someone to arrive at any minute.

"Are you going to tell me what you overheard?"

"No." He stared right at me. Then cursed under his breath. "Josh told her that he invited the SweetNothings. I don't know if it is reconciliation or not, just keep a lid on your temper tonight if they show." My pack mate wandered towards Ciarán



who was surrounded by a crowd of admiring young alphas. Good. Let him guard that bone. I had another one to take care of.

I intercepted my brother and cousin as they shared a rare conversation.

“Take Toni.” I told Ivo. “I’m asking you. Please. Because they will listen to you.”

“Why?” my cousin asked.

“The omega organising this little do invited the SweetNothings. I don’t want Toni to be embarrassed.”

“You don’t want her to see you loosing your shit.”

I shrugged. I wouldn’t deny it.

“Fine. But I’m asking Gwen if she wants to leave as well.”

“I can take her,” Seb growled.

“Like she’d go anywhere with you.” Ivo shook his head. “Christ, Sebastian. You’re thirty-three. She won’t accept you while you act like a spoilt child who can’t play with a toy.”

Half an hour later, Toni and Ivo left with Gwen. One look at my half-brother’s stormy expression hinted that it was more than her talking to the pack that had exacerbated what was an already complicated relationship. Seb had obsessed about Gwen for years, and not in a kind way. He had wanted her under his heel and now that she had a desk in his office, he didn’t know what to do with her.

At the door, Gwen turned towards us. One look was all it took for my brother to take a step towards her.

“Don’t.” I put a hand on his chest. “It really isn’t the time. Think of your mother.”

“What about her?”

“If that bitch thinks you care about Gwen, she’ll make her life hell.”

He clenched his jaw. “She oversteps.”

“She doesn’t give a fuck about anything but controlling you and the pack. One day, you are going to wake up and realise that she is nothing but a two-faced snake. Get out of here. Grab your goons and leave.”

His growl was a nasty, feral thing pulled from deep inside him. I used to hate him, but now, I pitied the man he’d let himself become. He’d always had a choice, and at each step, he’d chosen his mother over everything else.

A gasp caught both of our attention, and we turned towards the front door. The SweetNothings stood on the threshold, the crowd whispering as the famous band moved into the bar.

I smiled. Perfect. With Toni gone, I didn’t have to watch myself and play nice for her sake. Better to apologise in this case, I thought.

They stood out like a sore thumb. Clothes horses with no sense of fashion—if that was even possible. Guy in his bespoke suit jacket over a graphic t-shirt and jeans was more fashionable than whichever alpha was wearing the same combination. It was the way Guy held himself. Call me arrogant, but breeding always showed.

“Looks like your rivals are here.” My brother’s words weren’t unkind. There were times when blood was thicker than years of resentment.

“Except, she is mine, and will always be mine,” I said without looking at him.

Ciarán appeared at my side and grabbed my hand. “What are they doing here?”

“I presume they came to see Toni,” Seb said, sounding bored.

“What do we do? Should we call security?”

“Nothing. They are nothing to us. They are nothing to her. They cheated on her.”

“She hasn’t said anything to you?” His scent soured. I wrapped my hand around his neck and massaged the tension away.

“No. But she doesn’t want them. She wants us.”

“Is she brave enough, though?” he asked softly. “It would be a lot of...I don’t even know what I’m talking about.”

“You are crazy. She gets scared of—”

“You’re Ciarán?”

We both turned. The lead singer of the SweetNothings stood in front of us. A smile on his face. Ciarán stiffened. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.”

“We met on the video call.”

I decided then and there that I hated American accents.

“I suppose we did.” Ciarán raised his chin, projecting every aristocratic omega arrogance. He looked stunning. On my other side, my brother radiated that same sneering superiority. “My alpha, Rafe Harcourt. And Sebastian Harcourt, my brother-in-law.”

“How’d yah do?” Sebastian drawled, dipping his head just a fraction. I followed his overly formal greeting, because I was happy to let this ass think we were rude. In the back of my mind, a plan was forming that was best kept from the others. Ciarán might agree, but he would definitely show our hand. He lacked control in his youth. But he would enjoy the idea of being so rude to these Americans that they gave up their attempts to contact Toni. And that’s what I needed from him.

“Hi.”

We said nothing for a beat.

“We are Toni’s pack while she is in London,” Ciarán said smilingly. “She’s been making her nest with us.”

“What?” The singer looked shocked.

“You know how old-fashioned this country is. She needs a pack or to stay at the omega dormitory. Toni is too much of a homebody to stay in those personality-less cells. We can offer her a home.” Ciarán could hold his own with this lot. “And a nest.”

“Dean, there you are.” A SweetNothing with a forced cockney accent draped his arm over his packmate’s shoulder. “Ciarán, right?”

My omega raised a well-groomed eyebrow and then exchanged a look with my brother. Fuck, I could kiss him and maybe thank my brother for the way they fell into my plans perfectly.

“Yeah, he’s Ciarán,” The one called Dean rolled his eyes and did the introductions. “They have Toni staying at their pack house.”

“What the fuck? Why is our omega staying with you?”

“Your omega?” Ciarán growled. Dammit. He was going to lose his cool and spark a confrontation here, which I didn’t want. “The one you cheated on? She wants nothing to do with you.”

I put my hand on Ciarán’s arm to calm him down. His rage burned hot. Mine was cold. I was going to make sure these pathetic excuses for alphas knew exactly how little we thought of them. They needed to be provoked into showing their true colours. But not here. I had a different audience in mind. Catching Julian’s eye, I gave him a subtle nod towards the door. He nodded and cut through the crowd.

“I think it’s time for us to leave,” Julian interrupted with a faux apologetic smile. He looked at the strangers. “Lettuce, is expecting us.”

“Good night, then.” I bowed to the skinny-jean-wearing twats.

“Wait! Is Lettuce Toni?” A not-Dean one asked.

“None of your business.” Julian smiled.

Perfecter and perfecter.

We got into a pack carrier and drove home. Ciarán fidgeted the entire way, playing with his phone and jiggling his lets. Normally, it would have provoked me but I was jealous that he had something to distract himself. I’d left one of my e-cigarettes at home. I never used them, but they were the

perfect weight and size to play with when I needed a to take my mind off something.

“Someone’s following.” Guy growled.

I twisted in my seat and felt a thrill of satisfaction. “Good.”

“You wanted them to see her?”

“No. I wanted her to see them,” I said. “They’d never listen to us. But if they have any respect for her, they’ll listen to her. Or they’ll piss her off to the point she makes their knot and ties shrivel up inside of them.”

“You clever bastard.” Ciarán grinned.

“I have my moments.” I offered him my hand, helping out of the cab. The air had a chill, and I wished briefly that I could slip my suit jacket off and offer it to the man next to me. That was my only regret with him. I couldn’t dress him in my clothes the way Julian and Guy could. It had started bothering me more since his heat. I’d started watching him more. The memory of his taste on my tongue and how he’d trusted me to take control, cuff him, and fuck him.

His nostrils flared, and he glanced at me. “Really?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He ducked his head and ran his nose along my throat, scenting me and marking me at the same time. “Fuck.”

“Another time. We need to take out the trash first.”

A car door slammed. “Hey!”

“Let the games begin,” I said under my breath.

“Hey!” Dean shouted. “Don’t ignore us.”

The band was spreading out on the pavement in a semi-circle. They looked even more ridiculous now that they were posturing in front of us.

“You are distressing my omega,” Guy growled, resting a hand on Ciarán’s shoulder.

Ciarán crossed his arms over his chest, glaring fire at Toni's exes.

"I think, perhaps, you can come back tomorrow," I said.

"Nah, you posh fuck. I want to see my omega." The git took an aggressive step forward.

I smiled. "I didn't realise you had an omega."

"What? And a fucking shorty like you thinks he can get with an omega like Toni?"

"Shorty?" I blinked. I'd expected something more original.

"Come on, mate. No hard feelings," the smirking, try-hard Brit said.

Mate? He really thought he could speak to me like that? Me?

"I'm not your mate, mate." I sneered. "Get out of here if you know what is good for you."

"She would be happier to stay with us," the woman said. "She can't be comfortable staying with strangers and another omega. No offence." She smiled at Ciarán, who bared his teeth, his body tensed. Ready, I was sure, to throw a punch. I nearly swore.

"I would like you to leave my house right now," Ciarán said very, very softly but with so much venom I almost felt sorry for the woman. "I am willing to call the police for harassment."

"What the fuck? We just want to see Toni and apologise."

"You can see her tomorrow if she wants to see you." Ivo appeared behind us. He stood in the door, backlit, making him seem bigger than normal. The SweetNothings took a step back. My cousin was a giant and the fact he wasn't an alpha didn't change a damn thing. "She is sleeping. Are you really stupid enough to drag an omega out of her nest after the kind of day she's had?"

He radiated disdain. And the ragtag crew in front of us shifted, clearly uncomfortable with how their little siege was

playing out.

“It is okay, Ivo.” Toni’s voice broke through the tense silence. “I’ll talk to them.”

“They aren’t coming in,” Ciarán spat, anger and pain glinting in his eyes.

“Of course not. We can talk out here,” she assured him. “But I think I should say...Hello.”

“Fine.” I threw my hands in the air to preserve the pretence that I wasn’t getting exactly what I wanted. At the same time, I knew if I didn’t remove myself from the situation, I would tell them that she was ours and they could fuck off. But I couldn’t leave, so I sat in the sitting room. Julian opened the window, letting their conversation come through.

Guy sat next to me, radiating anger. “If they—”

“Shut up,” Ciarán hissed. “I want to listen.”

Toni’s voice came in crisp and clear, but the pack was talking loudly over each other. “I do not appreciate your coming to my home and upsetting Ciarán.”

“You smell like you’ve fucking all of them,” one of the alphas said.

“And how is that your business?” Toni snapped.

“I’m saying I’m angry. I don’t care about the cheating. But if you wanted to get revenge for that photograph, why them?”

Guy surged to his feet, and my eyes flicked to the cabinet where I kept my gun locker. I was feral enough to consider it. Americans weren’t the only ones who believed in using force when it came to protecting their packs.

“That’s rich. But who I sleep with is really none of your business. So you can kindly, fuck off.”

“Everyone calm down. If we want to be technical, we never broke up.” That was my best mate Dean. I fisted my hands so tightly that my knuckles cracked.

“Exactly,” the woman said. “All packs need to be tested. We were. And now we all know that we should be together,

right? Pack a bag and come with us.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Toni had never sounded so London. “I’m going to bed.”

I smiled. Perfect.

“Are you breaking up with us?” The brit was closer, his voice sounding in the hall instead of the window.

“No. Because we already broke up. Or didn’t the fact I blocked your numbers and ignored all your emails sink in? It is over between us, Liam. You cheated on me. And if you hadn’t, instead of coming here right away to grovel, you continued with your tour. Then you have the audacity to show up here. So, yeah. I’m staying right the fuck where I am.”

“We couldn’t just leave; you know that, babe. It would have cost us millions.”

“You can’t break up with us,” another one said—I really couldn’t tell any of them apart except for the woman and the git. “Go pack your bag and move to the hotel with us. We’ve got one of those nest things you like. You can set up in the walk-in closet. You’ll be happier.”

“I would rather sleep on this doorstep than in your fancy hotel suite. They are my pack,” she said. “My legal pack.”

“What?” There was anger interlaced with that question but the silence after it was worse as we all waited to hear what she said.

“I’m married to the alphas of Ivy Place Pack. They gave me legal protections while I was travelling. I haven’t seen them for ten years, but I will always be grateful for their patience and care.”

“They have an omega.”

“Two omegas aren’t unusual here.”

“Jesus, fuck. Why didn’t you tell us? It’s bigamy.”

“The whole reason I came to London was to get a divorce.” She sounded so exasperated that I smiled even though I hated what she was saying.



“But why are you staying with them?” the woman asked.

“The judge couldn’t grant us a divorce right away. I have to stay here for sixty days until she can.”

“But Toni, why?”

“Come on, Gabby,” Dean barked. “Let’s go. I can’t...I can’t look at you, Toni. I’m so disappointed that you didn’t trust you enough to tell us the truth.”

“You didn’t tell me I would have to sign an NDA when I married you. Yet your lawyers did just that.”

“Standard procedure, babe,” the nonce said.

“Standard?” I felt her growl in my balls. “You don’t get to tell me shit about trust. A NDA in a relationship is the exact opposite of trust.”

“Nah, baby. This is different.”

“And your brand of cheating? Is that different? Should I just expect you to cheat if I am not there?”

“It is a lifestyle. It is crazy. Shit happens.”

“Leave,” she said. “Leave right now because I am so angry, I might do something I’ll regret.”

The house shook with how fiercely she slammed the door in their protesting faces.

The air crackled when she stepped into the sitting room. Guy took a step forward, and it snapped Toni out of her trance. She launched herself at him, burying her face in his neck, scenting him. Julian crowded into her, and she turned to take in his scent. She stalked down Ciarán next, biting and sucking his throat. Ivo stood strong when she approached him, dragging him down until they were eye to eye before she hooked her chin over the back of his neck, so she could rub her scent all over him.

When she looked at me, that electricity was back. Her eyes flashed as she stalked towards me. At the last moment, she bared her neck, exposing the graceful column of her throat.

“Alpha,” she purred.

It was almost holy to experience my, our, omega submitting to me and begging to be scent marked by her pack leader. Brushing my lips over her pulse, I traced my way along her ear, down to her fine clavicle, before finding her pulse again and pressing a biting kiss, marking her. Not as good as a Claim, but I'd take it for now.

The serenity of knowing she was choosing her nest over those assholes was broken by one of them banging on the door. Ciarán stormed out of the room and yanked the door open. "Learn some manners and fuck off."

"She is our omega, you asshole."

"She is no one's omega but her own omega. My alphas made sure she was safe to travel. And they never asked her to do anything she didn't want to do. And guess what? You shouldn't either. What? Do you think that I haven't talked to her about you? You haven't given her a secure nest. Making her sleep on a bunk bed in a tour bus? A private jet?"

Toni stiffened in my arms, and I tucked her closer, running my fingers through her hair.

"She likes to travel." But I could hear the uncertainty in the alpha's voice. "She'll get bored living this picket fence lifestyle."

"She likes what she likes, and she likes to nest. You never gave her a real nest. I know what she wants, and it is a nest."

He slammed the door, and I wondered if it would need to be replaced with all the slamming.

Julian closed the window and sat down. His eyes were wide open like he had just seen a ghost. And it seemed the ghost was Ciarán, because when their eyes met, Julian spoke like he was trying to placate a monster. "Remind me never to get on an omega's bad side."

"Those fucking cunts. Even if you wanted to, I won't let you become their omega, Bubbles. If I have to bring them down, I'll do it. I'll ruin them rather than let them near you."

We all waited for her to respond. "I don't remember telling you they couldn't give me a real nest.."

“No, but I read between the lines.” He ran a hand over his face. He looked uncomfortable. “I shouldn’t have lost my temper but those... They wanted you to sign a NDA? Really?”

Toni pressed her fingers against her temple. “Yeah. Jesus. Why did I accept that?”

“You loved them,” Guy said softly. “I think everyone’s tired. Let’s go to bed. And deal with any fall out tomorrow. I can call the company’s PR team. But tomorrow.”

I bit my tongue. My plan had gone perfectly. I didn’t need some PR team to smooth the edges.

But everyone else agreed to his plan, and I played along. Because I ran this pack as a democracy.

“I’m getting a headache,” she mumbled. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Ciarán linked his arm through hers, and we watched them head to their nests.

“Well, that went well.” Julian groaned. “Alright chaps. I’m for bed. Unlike the rest of you I have to go into the office.”

I waited until the rest of the house had gone to sleep before knocking on Toni’s door. I didn’t expect her to answer, but when she called me in, I pushed the door open. The fairy lights twinkled around her, illuminating my omega’s pink hair and the white t-shirt she’d probably stolen from Ivo. Her nest smelled of us. Not sex, but our pack. At times like this, I had to trust the hindbrain, the primal instincts that pointed to her staying right where she was, instead of worrying about why she hadn’t pulled the divorce petition.

“Hey.” She was propped up by about a million pillows with a beat up paperback. “Come here.” She patted the bed next to her.

I crawled over and made myself comfortable, all the while painfully aware that I was in her space. “I know this doesn’t mean you chose us.”

She rolled onto her side, looking at me. Her eyes steady on my face, none of her emotions showing.

“I know you manipulated them into following so that I confronted them,” she said. “I don’t like it. You have changed. But I’m still scared that you will try to manipulate us because you don’t consult with the pack. What if we clash again? We do. We will.”

Her words cut like a knife. I didn’t have an argument to say we wouldn’t fight because I was too alpha sometimes. It had taken all my control over the years to just keep tabs on her and not hunt her down and read her the riot act every time she did something dangerous, every time she put herself at risk.

But I’d rather fight and go after her than lose her again. “I’m not a good enough man or alpha to let you go a second time. I’ll go mad if you leave.”

She cupped my cheek, stroking her thumb over my lips. “It kills you. I see that now. It kills you that you lost your birth pack, and now you are feeling like that is happening all over again.”

“Are you talking to my therapist?”

“Don’t deflect. You hurt, Rafe. When you ripped my heart out, you convinced yourself that you were all the worst bits of your dad.”

“Stop.”

“Okay.” She pressed a tender kiss against my lips. She fiddled with a piece of hair. “Ivo and I read together. It was perfect, if I’m completely honest.”

I blinked, surprised by the change in topic. “You just want time with us, don’t you?”

“And I want you to want the same thing. Just people together. Like this.”

“Come here.” I patted my lap.

Swinging her leg over mine, she straddled me. I stroked my hands up her thighs, luxuriating in her warmth. It was meant to be innocent, but our scents shifted. Fuck. I grabbed her waist and dragged her closer so that her pussy was pressed against my half hard cock.

“I’m addicted to you,” she murmured, reaching up to trace a finger down my nose. “I shouldn’t be. I tried going cold turkey and thought I’d kicked the habit, but one minute alone with you and I knew... I knew I’d never get you out of my system. I love you so much it hurts, Rafe.”

“I know.” I kissed her. “I know.” And because I was a masochist, I dared—I fucking dared—to ask the question that would break me if she gave any other answer than no. “Promise you won’t leave?”

“Rafe.” My name was said as a warning. “Don’t.” She kissed me, hard and brief. “Let’s just be. No thinking tonight. We were taken by surprise. But don’t forget you are my penny so that I’m never penniless.”

I flushed remembering the first (pathetic) courting gift I’d given her: a shiny, freshly minted penny taped inside of a cheap card with those words scrawled underneath it. “I can give you more than pennies, you know.”

“Of course you can,” she said, slipping off my lap. She lay on her back, hair haloed around her face. “Come here.”

“You, uh, don’t want me to get the others?” I asked.

“Maybe later.” She let out a yawn and dragged me on top of her so that all my weight pinned her into her nest. “Be my weighted blanket tonight.”

I let myself breathe her in. My omega. My perfect omega. If she wanted me to a penny or a blanket, I could try to be that for her.

She was sleeping when I heard Ivo moving around on the landing. I risked rolling off of Toni to convince him to sleep in her nest.

“Join us.” It was probably more bark than I needed but my cousin had to learn. Pack slept together. When his eyes nearly bugged out of his head, I found myself smiling. “Sleeping you, idiot. She doesn’t want sex all the time.”

“Of course.”

“You’d think with your upbringing...”

“Let’s just go to bed.”

I grinned at my cousin. He was pack now and needed to start acting like it.

All in all, I liked how the night had played out.

# TONI



The morning after the SweetNothings tried to barge into the pack house, I called Neil, the band's manager. "I want to talk to them. Lunch?"

"We'll send a car," he replied. "I didn't approve their visit. It's toxic for them and for you."

"Let's just clear the air, okay?"

Next I called Gwen, asking her to come over. We huddled with Ciarán in the sitting room, going through the photographs from their wedding. "It was so different for us," I said, tracing my finger over their faces. "We just showed up at the registry office. I had a cheap bouquet."

"What happened to it?" Gwen asked.

"I dried it. It's probably in one of the boxes under the eaves with the rest of my stuff from back then."

The doorbell rang, and I dragged myself to my feet. Ciarán and Gwen's eyes followed me. Even though I hadn't said anything, both of them got why they were here and not the alphas.

Jimmy stood on the pavement, his hands tucked into the pockets of his leather jacket. He didn't say anything, just held the door open for me. I slid inside and saw Neil sitting in the front seat.

Fuck, this was going to be awkward. How hadn't I realised how not-private this pack's personal lives were?

We arrived in Chelsea at the Palm Leaf, a swanky restaurant and bar that celebrities used as a lunch spot. The minute I saw where we were, I knew they were expecting to be papped. I gritted my teeth and swallowed my irritation. They wanted some good publicity. They wanted. Not what I wanted. Had this always been the case?

“What happened?” I asked.

“We had a fight with your precious pack at that party and it doesn’t look good,” Jimmy growled. “Fuck, I didn’t mean it like that. You threw us a curve ball, Candy.”

“So did you.” I sucked my lips between my teeth and stared out the window. They’d been smart to send him. If it had been Liam, I’d already be back at Ivy Place.

“Jesus. We already to you it wasn’t like that.”

“Oh?”

“Let’s join the others,” Neil interrupted.

We stepped out of the car, and I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. Someone had their phone out. So they weren’t even relying on professionals. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and walked in, head high, and with enough space between us that armchair body language experts would have a field day.

At least they’d booked a private room, but the long rectangular table reminded me of that first day in court with Rafe. This was a negotiation not a reconciliation. Well, that suited me just fine. I slipped into the chair directly across from Dean who didn’t bother looking up. Only Gabby smiled at me.

Liam sat at the head of the table like a fucking CEO. I ground my teeth together. Why had I decided to meet them?

“So, we’re all here.” He cleared his throat. “We’ll take you back if you—”

“You’ll take me back?” I scoffed. “Really?”

“No one did anything wrong,” Neil said. “But the way this is playing out in the press—”



“Shut the fuck up,” Liam barked. “You are the reason we are in this mess.”

“Oh?” I cocked my head to the side.

“He’s the one who invited that wannabe to the party and got her drunk—”

I faked puking. Frank chuckled. My lips twitched against their will. “Stop with your excuses. You are grownups and know this world. One I realised after this little drama, I don’t want any part.”

“We want you back.” I stared at Liam. He had the same growly alpha thing Rafe had but with a bark. So fucking unnecessary.

“You can’t dictate to me, though. If I don’t want back in, that is my choice.”

“You messed up too,” he growled. “You never told us you needed to get a divorce, or that you had been married.”

“Because I thought I was already divorced.”

“You didn’t tell us about them.” Jimmy sounded hurt. Ah. So he still had an emotional stake in this.

“I’m sorry about that,” I sighed. “I didn’t talk about it with ninety-nine percent of the world because omegas get marked as damaged goods for the stupidest reasons. And I wanted to be defined by my actions instead of the fact I’d had a pack and it hadn’t worked out.” They responded with silence. No words of encouragement. “A younger me would have thought you were judging me,” I said.

“We wouldn’t have,” Gabby said. She’d been quiet the whole meeting, watching and listening like always. “But I understand. You didn’t do anything illegal or phobic or an -ism. We all had a past. Have one. I just wish that we could put the past behind us, way behind, and go back to how things were.”

A staggering sadness descended. Going back was never an option. If she’d said going forward, maybe I’d have listened to

them. Not changed my mind, just listened. And I caught the moment she realised the same thing.

“Fuck this.” Dean—who still hadn’t looked at me—pushed away from the table and stormed off. “I’m going to take a piss.”

I fisted my hands underneath the table. He was probably just going to the bathroom, or he could be doing drugs. They all did drugs.

“I’ll get going then.” I stood up. “Just say that I reconnected with a pack. Paint me as the villain, whatever. I don’t want this dragged on any further.” I shot Neil a look. “And my guess is you’re the same.”

“Wait—” Gabby jumped up and followed me out. “Please let me take you back to them. Not for publicity.”

I knew she was guilt tripping me but I agreed because people were watching. Thank fuck, it was easy to catch a cab, and we left before... Well, I don’t know how many people took pictures but their publicity wasn’t my problem anymore.

“We’ve been together for years,” she said as we pulled into traffic. She was right. I’d had five years with them. Five years and less than a month with my ex-pack. It was fucking with my head. My eyes grew wet. “Aw, don’t cry, Candy. No alpha is worthy of your tears, baby. You get me?”

I inhaled her scent, a soft combination of weed and cedar. In the SweetNothings, she was my Julian. My friend who knew how to be there without needing anything in return.

“Would it have been different if we’d come to your exhibition?” she asked after a moment.

“You mean randomly showed up like you did the other night to corner me in public?”

“Shit, I didn’t mean it like that.” She dug her fingers into her hair and pulled. “If we hadn’t, you know.”

It was the closest any of them would come to hinting it wasn’t just a photograph.

Still, I owed her the truth. “No. It wouldn’t have changed things. These last two months have taught me I need a nest. A proper one.”

“We should have noticed. I’ll talk to the others about nests and our schedule.” She still didn’t get it.

“It’s too late for that.”

“I don’t want you to give up on us,” she begged. “It won’t be the same without you. We really love you. I like how you are with us. I don’t think you would have stayed away from them so long if you really wanted to be with them.”

I blinked. “Do you think I haven’t thought about that?”

“Can we come to the divorce thing?” she pressed.

I didn’t bother trying to hide my surprise. The fucking audacity. “Really?”

“Please? Can we be there? They might be your legal pack, but we’re your pack too.”

The cab broke abruptly ending this one sided conversation.

“Sure,” I lied. She wasn’t pack. Impulsively, I cupped her cheek and kissed her before I had to go inside. She tasted of regret, goodbyes, and lonely roads with the promise of home if she just kept following the path. She might not get there tonight or tomorrow or ever, but that kiss told me that she’d keep looking.

It was goodbye forever. I knew that even if no one else did. After taking a shower, I went looking for Ciarán. I found him in the kitchen, scrolling on his phone but stopped when he saw me.

“How’d it go?”

“Shitty.”

He opened his arms for a hug. It was so tempting to fall into him and pretend I had all the answers.

“Do you...Do you want space?” he asked.

I blew out a breath and wrapped my arms around him. “Yeah. I think I need to clear my head without a bunch of alphas hovering.”

“Maybe go to your mum’s?” He kissed the top of my head.

“Yeah, that was my thought.”

A real porky pie. I’d booked a room at a hotel, away from any distracting memories and smells, after I’d scrubbed the SweetNothings scents off my skin.

“Escape now. Before they get back. I’ll explain.”

“Love you.” It slipped out.

“Aw, Bubbles. Love you more.”

To divorce or not to divorce, that was the question. And why I couldn’t be with the pack.

And it was my decision, which made the whole mess worse.

If I’d been conflicted, the pack could’ve fought over me. Get in a dick-measuring contest and hurl insults at each other because that was the way to turn it into a pack versus pack contest. I’d be absolved of any responsibility because one pack would, on points, come away victorious.

Hells, even taking the matter to the Omega Centre and allowing a committee to hear their arguments would have been better than thinking about what I wanted, what I would or might want in twenty years.

But I was staying. However in the five seconds it’d taken me to walk from the cab to the door, I’d realised I needed a plan for how I was going to demonstrate that I was fully committed to them.

Despite my need for neutral ground, I still found myself standing in front of mum’s door with an overnight bag and a healthy dose of feeling sorry for myself.

I scrolled through the local takeaways, hunting for the best comfort food option. My finger hovered over an Indian place, but it was the one the Ivy Place Pack ordered from. The

second option reminded me of the SweetNothings. Taking a sip of my beer, I glared at the list as if it was responsible for my current predicament. How was it that these packs had essentially ruined guilt-free takeaway?

“Fuck.” I slammed the bottle down, grabbed my purse, and stalked into the cooling night. I was in London. Surrounded by some of the best take away in the world. I’d walk around and then make a decision. Let my nose lead me to the best option.

And lead me it did. Because as I crossed the street, a couple of teenagers walked by, swinging a white plastic bag from which the mouth-wateringly perfect scent of kebabs wafted.

“Hey, where did you get those?” I asked.

They blinked at me like they’d never seen an omega before.

“Uh, around the corner?” the kid sounded completely clueless about the origin of his food. But his friend, thankfully, was able to confirm.

I waved and was proud of myself for not sprinting the rest of the way.

The shop was small, the counter taking up most of the space and a row of slowly rotating meats behind the counter. The two young betas who were serving were on their phones when I walked in, and as I looked at the menu, they didn’t bother to look up. I loved it. I loved how unremarkable I felt.

“You know what you want to order?”

I rattled off my order and swallowed around the whimper that threatened to escape when one of them squeezed on extra garlic sauce.

“Eight quid,” his friend said and pushed the contactless payment thingy towards me. Oh, yes. On top of a greasy, cheeky kebab, I loved contactless. And soon, I was walking into the night with my own white plastic bag.

I wanted to text Ivo and tell him I was being a good girl and waiting until I got home before I began stuffing my face,

but it was a near thing as I inhaled my treasure.

The lift was out of order, forced me to climb the stairs—so many stairs—until I arrived panting at Mum’s, suddenly grateful that she was moving in with the pack, safely installed in Ivo’s room while he moved upstairs. Our pack was growing.

Shit.

I really shouldn’t be thinking of them as “our pack.” Tonight was thinking about me and what I wanted.

I pointed the gun at the tv and scrolled through the channels until I found Goggle Box, a truly ridiculous show that followed people watching tv. I watched for a minute, marvelling that people actually cared how a middle-aged pack felt about a bunch of celebrities dancing the tango, but hey, whatever floats your boat. In the end, I settled for a rerun of a nature programme.

Then, I tucked into my food. The flavours burst across my tongue, and I was pulled back years to drunken nights in uni when we omegas would wander around in herds from clubs back to our omega-only residence. Laughing and gossiping about the alphas in our lectures and the ones who had hit on us in the club or the betas who just made us swoon because they didn’t rely on their dynamic to get us slick and needy.

All I’d wanted then was a sense of belonging, a pack who would wrap me in their arms and provide for me. I’d wanted a job, of course. I wasn’t ever going to be a stay-at-home omega. But that didn’t take away from that sense of not belonging, that felt like it was tattooed on my forehead. I’d been pulled into a group who had all come from established packs. They’d grown up in big homes with weekly cleaners or, live in beta servants.

And none of them had ever dealt with poverty. Not like pack poverty didn’t exist, but pack poverty and beta poverty were never on the same level.

I opened another bottle of beer and tried to ignore the invasive memories of my feelings of inadequacy when I’d first turned up at the halls of residence with just my mum and my

great-gran's battered suitcase because we'd never travelled and never needed to buy a new one.

"Fuck." I took a drink and tried to get my focus back on the dilemma. The question. The fucking mountain of a stressor.

Did I end the divorce proceedings?

"Well, that's a terrible idea!" a woman squawked. I jumped. Fuck. The nature programme had ended and something new had come on.

I laughed. She'd answered my question without meaning to.

I wanted the divorce. End that farce and start fresh with them. We deserved a fresh start.

The Claim pulsed. Guy psychically seeking my feelings. I pushed "fine, thanks" along the link. I still needed Rafe and Guy to Claim me, which meant going into heat.

Pushing myself up, I hunted in my bag for the packet of suppressants. If I threw them out, I'd be leaving myself vulnerable to fast onset, unmedicated heat. Shooting a text off to Gwen with my plan, I took a deep, soothing breath and chucked the pills in the bin. Decision made, I picked up my phone dialling the Omega emergency hotline.

"OEH. How can I help you?"

"Hi, I was wondering if I could schedule an appointment..."

The doorbell rang as I was finishing up my call. "Thanks for your help," I said in a rush. "Coming!"

My heart raced. Instinct screaming that it was one of my pack. Tossing my phone on the sofa, I cracked my neck like a boxer getting ready to fight. I took a second to check my face in the hall mirror. Okay. I didn't look hopeless. Forcing my face into a scowl, I flung the door open to find a really guilty-looking man.

"Hi." He offered me a guilty smile. "Please don't kill me for intruding."

“Fuck. I guess you better come in.” I stepped back and watched Julian walk into my mum’s flat.

He toed his trainers off. “Look, I know I shouldn’t have barged in, but you weren’t answering your phone, and we were worried.”

“I was on the phone with...Never mind who. Before that, it was...I guess it was on silent. How did you know I was here?”

He grinned, relaxing when he realised I wasn’t going to kick him out. “You used the pack’s account to book a cab. So, when Rafe called, I took a detour on my way home.”

I turned away from him for a moment. Julian, of all of the alphas I was dealing with, was the most familiar. I knew him, and despite the ten years, I felt like he was the one I still understood.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“She’s fussing.”

I frowned. “That means nothing, right?”

“Nah, I think she’s bored. Guy visited her and claimed she threatened to break out.”

“Mum fussing is not new.” Suddenly, the hallway felt too small. His excuse was lame and they’d ignored my request for space. Fuck. Why was I getting angry? “I asked for the night to think. Away from alphas. Away from packs or anything to do with—”

“I’ll go,” he offered. “It was really invasive.”

I looked at the giant alpha and remembered, suddenly, when we’d been fifteen. Something like that age, and he’d come over one night. We’d sat on the sofa, trying to pretend that he hadn’t come over because he liked me but because we were both failing French.

“N’cest pas,” I stuttered out.

“Tones...”



“Seriously.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Either get out or take a seat on the sofa.”

“Fuck.” He turned into the lounge and plopped down onto the sofa.

“Can you, I don’t know. But as my oldest friend, can you be objective for a second? Just, I guess...you are my oldest friend, and I just need to vent for a minute?”

“Shit. That is.” He looked around the coffee table, counting the bottles of beer and taking in the aluminium foil with its coating of garlic sauce. “Okay. Sure. I can be quiet and listen.”

“Great. So. Like.” I sucked in a breath and let it out. He sat back and put on his listening face. “I am trying to take the alpha-pack thing out of the equation, and think about what I want. But growing up like we did, it was hard to imagine I’d ever be in this position. You’ve known my mum. And I’m pretty sure you’ve pieced together that my dad is one of those “beta rights” extremists. So, picking a pack, hell. Having packs to pick from wasn’t on my list.”

I begged him with my eyes to understand. To remember how much it fucked with my head when he presented as an alpha and I was just a beta. How my head had spun a million times harder when I’d presented as an omega two years later. “I’m not good at picking a pack because I never thought I’d have to make the choice, and I was lost, Jules. I was so lost the last couple of months. No matter what I decided, I just wanted to curl up in my nest and tell the world to fuck off. To just pick the easy road, which is not picking at all. Let the Ivy Place Pack go. Let the SweetNothings go. Put all of that in my past, so I can get on with my life again.”

He folded in on himself, his eyes closing.

“Fuck, I’m—” I needed my friend again. My friend before life and hormones and dynamics changed everything. I wanted to talk through what I wanted to do and why. But until everything was ready, I didn’t know how I could make him understand. Any of the pack understand. “I’m sorry. This was really unfair.”

“Tones, I just...You need someone who doesn't have a stake in this. I can't be that person, no matter how hard I try. I can't give you neutral advice. But I can give you a hug, and I can tell you that no matter what you pick, the people who love you will support you.”

A whimper escaped. If he thought that wasn't enough, he was crazy. “Maybe a hug, and then go home?”

“Sure.” He pushed himself off the sofa and stepped over the coffee table. Shit, he was big, so much larger than the Jules I remembered.

The hug was kind of pathetic. The kind you gave a stranger. “This sucks.”

“We love you so fucking much, Lettuce.” He kissed my temple. “But I get it. Clear your head and come home when you're ready.”

He left me standing there, and I couldn't move until I heard the front door slam.

I was fucked in the head and I knew it. I was doing exactly what Rafe had done. Holding back the trump card because I thought it would make a bigger impact.

I grabbed my phone to send them a message but instead found a bunch of unread messages.

@SUPERMAN ON MY WAY HOME. TONI! LUV  
U

@TALLGLASSOFSLICK DOING LAUNDRY AND  
THINKING ABOUT YOUR PUSSY.

@JUSTRAFE COME HOME

@HEDGEHOGDADDY TONI. CHANGE MY  
NAME BACK.

@NOTJUSTGUY CIARÁN, COME TO MY  
ROOM. I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU.

@THETRAVELLINGNEST LOVE YOU(PL).

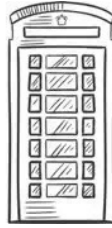
Moving in with my ex-pack was like studying for a test you didn't study and were definitely, beyond a shadow of a doubt fail.

You might get a couple of questions.

Then you get the results back, and it is a perfect score across the board. I wanted to jump up and shout bingo as loud as possible.

Because falling in love with my ex-pack was recognising that I'd known the answers all along.

# JULIAN



Rafe was raging the morning after my late-night visit to Toni.

Gwen had messaged him saying that the judge had approved that Toni could move in with her for the next week.

That was bombshell number one.

The second was that, impossibly, the court date was moved up by a week.

He spent the rest of the day calling clients to reschedule everything. Guy was the same. Hell, I'd called in sick and returned to the house because the creeping feeling in my gut... I didn't want to think about it.

How had Gwen managed to do it and what did it mean?

Toni hadn't, I knew, chosen to get back together with the SweetNothings. She loved us. She'd told each of us that she loved us. She couldn't. Then why do this? How could she? Legally how could she?

"No, Gwen. I do not understand but we will all be there," Rafe snapped into the phone. He was going to wear a hole in the sitting room carpet. "Yes..." He looked over his shoulder where we sat waiting to hear. "Dammit. Why?"

We waited on tenterhooks unable to piece together the one sided conversation.

"She needs a doctor's appointment?" He glared at me like it was my fault. "Is she okay? Where is she? Do I need—"

Ciarán's grip on my hand could have broken bones.

"She's fine. Fine? What does that mean?...Then why was she at a hospital this morning?" Gwen must have said something to soothe him because his shoulders dropped, and a smile ghosted across his face. "Fine. Tell her we love her and to answer my calls." He tossed the phone on the table and turned to us. "She says she loves us."

The collective breath released with an audible sigh. My heart started beating again.

"I, uh, might know why she wanted to move it forward," Guy said. "During Ciarán's heat, her slick tasted different."

"Is she sick? Did Gwen lie to me?" Rafe asked.

"She's not sick," I snapped. He was getting himself worked up for no reason. "You're saying you think she was in heat?"

"A little? I don't even know if it is possible."

"It happens," Ciarán hedged. "You get a bunch of omegas living together and we can sync up, even if we are on suppressants."

"If she's had a heat then we don't need to wait any longer. She doesn't have to wait any longer. She can divorce us next week."

A crash and bang of the front door made us jump.

"Toni," Guy said with confidence.

A moment later, she collapsed into the room, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Rafe was closest and caught her by the shoulders. "What. Happened?" he barked. "Why do I have to talk to Gwen instead of you? Why were you at the hospital? Are you sick?"

"Stop!" She broke out of his grasp and her tears fell harder down her cheeks. "I need—"

Ciarán stepped forward, opening his arms. She collapsed into him, gasping empty lungfuls of air. Was she having a panic attack? Whatever was going on, she allow him to rock

her slowly, murmur into her ear, and stroke her hair. “That’s it, Bubbles. I’ve got you.”

Too long. It took too long for her to stop crying. And when she did, Ciarán carried her into the tiny nest she’d made in the hall cupboard. They curled into each other. A space too cramped for any alpha or beta to join them. It reminded me of when we’d snuck into his nest at the end of his heat. They’d been fused together, the sheets kicked to the end of the bed and the whole place smelling of slick and sex. It was the sight of a bite on Ciarán’s shoulder. Omega’s couldn’t make a Claim, but Toni had tried. Of course she’d tried to Claim him. Nothing in this world had ever made me want to break down in tears before, but them together? Fuck, it made my knees weak.

“Your nest?” Ciarán asked.

“No.”

She turned her eyes towards me. Please let me have this time, they said.

“Do you want to go to your mum’s?”

“I need go to Mum’s,” she said.

“No.” Rafe had to put his foot down.

“It isn’t what you think.” She sniffed and used Ciarán’s t-shirt to wipe her eyes. “Mum. She—”

My heart dropped. “Toni did she—”

“No. She’s too stubborn to die. She’s in remission.” A smile peeked through. “The tests she had when you were on heat-leave. They got them back. I wanted to tell you in person. And then get her some clothes. It was just a lot.”

“Will you come home after that?” Rafe asked.

“No. I’m going to stay with Gwen. It’s two nights. She needs me right now. It isn’t like I’m going anywhere.”

A last ditch effort to prove to myself at least that she meant it, I stepped in front of her.

“A or B?” I asked her, my heart in my throat. Ciarán frowned, no doubt wondering what the hell I was on about. Toni, however, swallowed. A blush heating her cheeks.

“Lettuce.” It came out as a growl and the tension in the room spiked.

“A,” she said. Out of the corner of my eye, Rafe’s shoulders dropped and Guy grinned, pulling Ciarán into his arms.

“What does that mean?” Ivo asked.

“Nothing.” She sniffed and wiped her cheeks. “Just getting the chance to make my own choices.” She bit her lip. “Before I go, Ciarán can you help me with something?”

“Sure.”

A long, torturous hour later, we heard a thumping sound. Multiple thumping sounds.

We gathered in the hall in time to see Ciarán and Toni dragging overstuffed suitcases down the stairs.

“Okay. Time to clear the air,” she said, her focus on our pack leader. Rafe’d been sitting in the corner, brooding in silence. She climbed into his lap, snuggling in so close that the blacks of their jumpers faded into one. He wrapped his arms around her and scented her, still not saying anything because the poor sod hadn’t gotten his way. “I want to be completely honest. I’m not certain how easy it will be to put down roots after travelling for such a long time. But I want to try. So, there are some things you need to see. A kind of deposit to show I’m serious. Jules, can you get my suitcase? Doesn’t matter which one.”

I must have hesitated because Ciarán rolled his eyes and shoved me in the lower back until we were in the hall. “Which one?” I asked my omega.

“The big green one.” Ciarán pointed to the most battered suitcase. “With the Christmas tree decoration thingy.”

It was squishy with clothes. It did my head in trying to understand why full suitcases were going to prove to all of us

(read, Rafe) that she was going to stay.

“Oh. That one.” She sounded amused. I sure as fuck hoped it wasn’t going to be some kind of gotcha prank. “Uh, I think the alphas should, you know. Rafe, give me to Ivo.”

Surprising everyone, he followed our omega’s orders and handed Toni over.

Then it was us, the original trio of fuck-ups, standing around a suitcase.

Rafe with his hands shoved in his pockets, and his eyes firmly glued to his shoes.

Me, a schoolboy brought to the front of class when I hadn’t done the revision.

Guy felt oddly relaxed, but he had a Claim on Toni, which gave him a leg up.

“It won’t open itself,” she prodded.

When we didn’t move, Ciarán pushed his way between us and unzipped the suitcase. “Open your present!”

We sat down as a unit, legs getting tangled as we pulled out vacuum-sealed storage bags. Each one had a piece of masking tape, and Toni’s familiar messy scrawl labelling them with a name and a date.

“I don’t understand.” I glanced up.

Rafe opened a bag with all of our names and Christmas Eve eleven years ago written across it.

“Oh, fuck.”

The scents coming out were sex and us. Not very strong, but it wasn’t hard to pick each of us out. The hairs on my arms stood up, and I opened the bag in my lap marked with my name and Guy’s. More sex, but just us. No hint of Toni to be found. “You—”

“My nesting materials,” she said. “All of those bags are from our time together leading up to the WDE. Worst day ever. I haven’t known what to do with them. I wanted Ciarán’s advice.”



“So, none of those bags were for moving out?” Rafe, the lawyer, had to have the confirmation.

“Nope.” She shifted in Ivo’s lap. “It was Ciarán’s idea, actually. I’m going to take them to the dry cleaners since the washing machine might not cut it.”

“Trust the baby to have the answer.” Ivo chuckled.

“Whatever you say, Daddy,” Ciarán purred.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” Ivo’s cheeks turned magenta, and he worked his mouth like he was trying to say something.

“Ivo, I’m not known for being quiet,” Toni said. Like any of us needed reminding.

“Really?” Ivo groaned. “This is not—”

“Are you dropping the divorce proceedings?” Guy asked the question all of us had been too shy to ask.

“No.” Her eyes shifted to her hands. “Look, um, I need to get going.”

“Why?” Guy pressed.

“I have my reasons.” She looked at Ciarán who nodded. Ah. He knew what the reasons were and even agreed with them. That was why’d she’d wanted to speak to him. She climbed out of Ivo’s lap and went over to Guy and kissed his cheek. “But I’m not going anywhere. See. Deposit for my heat.”

I blinked confused and a little pissed off that she was keeping secrets. But when I opened my eyes, she’d disappeared and it was only the warmth of her kiss on my cheek that told me she’d said goodbye.

“It’s only two nights,” Ciarán assured me. “She’s been collecting materials for her Claiming heat with you for over a decade. Stop worrying.”

We arrived at the courthouse half an hour early. Everyone too on edge to sit around the house doing nothing.

When we walked in, the SweetNothings were in the row of seats behind where Toni would be sitting. They wore fashionable suits, the trousers almost as skinny as the ties. The lead singer caught me looking and smirked.

“Why are they here?” I growled.

Ivo kept a hand on Rafe, who was vibrating with wordless fury.

“She’s going to be pissed,” Ciarán whispered. “Those cunts are way out of line.”

“Sit down. I don’t want to get kicked out because we started a fight with them.” Ivo hissed, pushing us towards our seats.

At exactly three p.m. Toni entered the courtroom with Gwen. They had boss-bitch suits on, and Toni had scraped her hair into a high ponytail. When she saw her exes, her scent turned so bitter I could smell it on the other side of the room. Next to me, Guy tensed, probably feeling her through the Claim.

“What are you doing here?” she asked them.

“We wanted to support you,” the one in a skinny tie said.

“What? I did not—”

“Ms Vane, if we could begin?” the judge intoned. She gave a jerky nod and let Gwen drag her to stand in front of the judge. “I see that you have registered a heat? One that ended within the last two weeks? Why was the court only informed this morning?”

“I could only schedule an appointment for this morning,” she replied.

“Do you have those documents? And the report from the counselling session?”

“Yes.”

Gwen stood and handed one slim file to Rafe and one to the judge, who opened it.

“Do you know what it says?” Guy asked. I shook my head. “Do they?”

“No,” I said softly.

The judge frowned at the papers. “Ms Vane, are you satisfied with the recommendation of the assessment?”

“No.” Her tone was clipped. From my angle, I could see Rafe clench his jaw. Behind her, the band shifted in their seats and I saw two of them give a high-five. I was going to contact someone and get the dirt on them.

“Oh?”

“Your honour, if you could read out the findings?” Rafe growled. “My hasn’t had the opportunity to read them.”

The old alpha pushed her glasses up her nose. “Given the circumstances, I’ll ignore your tone. The findings conclude that the pack are compatible, and they find no reason to recommend a divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. Ms Vane’s blood tests show that she has had a heat within the last two weeks.”

Toni smoothed down her skirt. “I would like the fact I had a medical heat struck from the record.”

The judge chuckled. “Ms Vane, I’m afraid that is not the correct legal language. But I understand what you mean. Could you, please, tell me why you think it should be struck? If you do, you’ll have to reschedule once the original sixty days have been completed.”

“Both conditions are wholly unnecessary since I was Claimed during my heat.”

“That was not reported.”

“It wasn’t?” She blinked innocently.

“Clerical oversight.” Gwen handed the judge another file. “Oops.”

“Oops is not a response.” The judge sounded less and less amused.

“What the fuck, Toni?” the lead singer snapped. “You let those assholes Claim you? That is assault. Your honour, have these men arrested.”

“Ms Vane, do you want them arrested?”

“No. The Claim happened ten years ago.” She looked over her shoulder at Guy. “We only just had it medically confirmed this morning. The question of compatibility is not necessary.”

“So, you want the proceedings stopped?”

“No. I want a divorce. I want it. Badly.”

“Ms Vane, this is unorthodox.”

“I want it because I want a clean slate. I want it so that when I marry them and they Claim me, we are coming into this as equals.”

My heart stopped. Of course. I’d been right. She was doing an elaborate “gotcha”. I glanced at Rafe, who looked resigned and—dared I say it?—amused.

“What the fuck?” Guy hissed.

“Sorry for not telling you,” Ciarán whispered.

“You knew?” Ivo asked.

“Yeah...She just wanted to have confirmation first.” He shrugged. “Because the strategy or whatever would have changed if it wasn’t a legal Claim.”

“You can marry the other two—” the judge was now exasperated enough to release an aggressive growl that raised my hackles.

“No.” She shook her head almost violently. “I want a proper pack wedding.”

“Mr Harcourt, do you want to contest?”

“I want a divorce.”

“Fine. This turned out to be a complete waste of my time, your time, and public funds. Divorce granted.”

It took a moment to sink in. We were legally divorced. Divorced so that we could get married again. It was mad,

bonkers, and perfect. A giddy thrill shot through me and sent me out of my seat, shouting like England had won the World Cup.

“She’s coming home! She’s coming home! Toni’s! Coming! Home!” I sang. Fuck, I was off key, but Guy was laughing at my antics then jumping up next to me singing at the top of his lungs.

“Get out of my courtroom!” the Judge shouted. “You aren’t hooligans at a football match!”

Ciarán pushed us out, grinning the whole time. “Brilliant. Bloody brilliant.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Toni talking quietly with Rafe. The SweetNothings looked like children who’d been denied sweets until Toni turned to them. Then they looked like they’d seen a ghost. I tried to dig my heels in so that I could watch the confrontation, but it was much ado about nothing. Toni said something I couldn’t hear and then linked her arm through Rafe’s and let him lead her down the aisle. Ivo offered Gwen his, and they followed, both of them grinning at whatever she’d said.

“Did they say why they came?” I asked when we climbed into the pack carrier.

“They misunderstood something,” she said, a wry smile. “Or maybe they just heard what they wanted to hear.”

“You should have let me deal with them.” Rafe sounded like a petulant child. Ciarán tried to cover his laugh with a cough.

“I told them that an article was coming out in The Nester about green living, and they should think about the environment and stop using a private jet.”

“You did not!” Ciarán gasped. “Wow. I thought you liked the jet.”

“I did. But I am also very petty. If that means calling in favours so they get bad press for a couple of months...” She grinned, pure evil and mischief. She shot Guy a look. “More

impactful than getting their jet grounded for irregularities in the flight log.”

# TONI



## ONE WEEK LATER

I slumped against the door front door, too tired to unlock the door. It had been a long day of packing Mum's things and then the Omega Centre for another check-up...And to get a shot artificial alpha pheromones. Reaching into my purse, I popped the bright purple pill I'd been given as part of my treatment. If I kept taking them regularly, they'd trigger my heat. I didn't want to wait, especially since Mum was going to be discharged in a week. The only potential downside was it increased my fertility so that had been another set of pills I needed to take.

Guy opened the door, catching me when I fell backwards with a scream.

"What the fuck?"

"You were taking too long to come inside." He pressed his face into my throat. "You smell of alpha."

"Creep." I pushed him away. "You, uh, probably want me to shower and change?"

"You don't need to." His grin was dry. "I'd prefer it. Care to share the secret?"

"You know I did an article about walking packs. How the omegas have one or two packs? They stay in their nests, and

their chosen packs visit them on rotation.”

“Why are you changing the subject?”

“Let me finish, you ass. When I was staying there, I always wondered what that would be like. To have so many Claims.” I brushed my fingers over my thigh, right over his Claim. “And I knew it could be quite nice because love isn’t finite.”

“American quite or British quite?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. I was courted by two packs while I was there. It started off as a joke because I was a shiny new toy. But I think they started to take it seriously. For the dynamic to work, the omega had to juggle a lot of personalities.”

“Just like packs.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Just that there is no limit to my love. But there are only a limited number of people I want to share it with.”

“Bambi—”

“Alpha?”

“How long?” he asked me. “I’m not an idiot. The alpha scent is artificial. Are you try to force your—”

“My heat? Yes. I know we wanted it to be unmedicated, but I don’t want to wait.”

“What do you want from us?”

“Knots.”

I was a fucking idiot for trying to force my heat. Two days of taking the pills and I was worshiping the porcelain goddess in the basement bathroom.

After hovering over the toilet bowl for what seemed like hours, there wasn’t anything left in my stomach. Thank god. All I wanted now was to I brush my teeth and take a shower.



My stomach rolled, and I covered my mouth as a wave of nausea sent me to my knees.

Shit. I pressed my hand to my stomach. A fresh wave of cramps had me doubling over, and then the unmistakable feeling of slick leaking from my sex. Not a little but a rush of slick that splashed on the floor.

“Really?” I growled. “I’m going into heat now?”

At least it wasn’t a full heat. That would come in a couple of days, but I’d been an idiot not to speak to a doctor after Ciarán’s heat when I’d experienced a mini heat. Shit. I had thought I could get away with all of it. I was supposed to go into heat in two months. Shit. Shit. Shit.

I grabbed my phone off the basin ledge and punched at the screen until I had Gwen’s number dialling.

“Hey! Girls’ Night?”

“Gwen?”

“Shit. You sound like, well. You sound like shit.”

“I’m sorry. I just. God, I feel horrible. I’m can’t do tonight.”

“Did those assholes do something?” she growled. “That family need—”

“No.” I cut her off, really not in the mood to hear her bitch about Seb. “PHS.”

“Really? Pre-heat syndrome? But you told me you weren’t due for a while.”

“Biology sucks. And I took something to force it.”

“Take some suppressants and call your alphas. That should help. Do you ever wonder what it is like being an alpha? Like alpha-only problems?”

“Hell no. Dynamic is the only thing we don’t have a choice over. And since that is the case, I’m—” I whimpered as a cramp sent me to my knees. “Fuck, these cramps.”

My eyes pricked with tears. The fucking futility of my situation was only just settling around me.

I hear her speaking to someone. “Jasper is calling Seb. He’s having lunch with Rafe. I’ll stay on the phone with you.”

Then the fucking doorbell rang. Not the buzzer for downstairs but the legit front doorbell. “I need to go. Someone rang the doorbell. I’ll call you back.”

“Absolutely not. You are way too vulnerable to opening the door to strangers. Take half a suppressant, some pain killers, and make a hot water bottle. I’ll get your alphas.”

I ended the call and crawled to the medicine cabinet in the kitchen where we kept pills.

“Jewel? Wake up, darling,” Rafe purred. He had a cool flannel and was dabbing it on my forehead. It smelled of lavender, how nice.

“I’m going into heat,” I choked out. “Love. I’m going into heat.”

“We know, love.” Julian crouched on my other side. “You fell asleep on the floor.”

“Toni’s going into heat!” Ciarán shouted from upstairs. “Shit I can smell her from here. She’s going into heat.”

“I forced it,” I whined. “Big mistake.”

“Come on,” he said, his voice soft. Hmmm. It was nice when he was soft. “We need to get you to your nest.”

“Can’t move. It hurts.” Urgh. I hated this. Normally my heats were more like Ciarán’s had been. Not fun cramps but nothing like the crippling pain I was experiencing.

“Okay. Julian, what can we do?”

“I’ll knot her and carry her upstairs like that,” he said. I whimpered. Knot and nest. The only things I cared about.

“Please.”

He grabbed me by the waist lifting me up so that my pussy hovered above his cock.

“Shit. Someone get me out of these scrubs,” he growled. Rafe grabbed the waist band and yanked them. He grabbed the bigger alpha by the knot, hold him steady so that Julian could lower me onto his cock. The hot length was heavenly, my cunt squeezing down on him.

“All the way, Jewel,” Rafe growled. “Take his knot, darling. You need it don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“She’s not open enough,” Julian grunted when my pussy didn’t stretch over his knot.

“Force it,” I begged. “Please, just force it.”

“Shit, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t and I need your knot.”

They told omegas that taking a knot was “no small thing” and that there was a “natural discomfort” when you were getting used to one.

Having an alpha fuck a knot into you was an entirely different experience. Julian lay me on the kitchen table. Rafe helped him hold me in place. Then it began. He pounded his cock into me splitting me open. I gritted my teeth. There was pain, but because of my heat, my body craved the knot and produced a flood of slick, making it easier for his knot to (finally) slip inside of me.

“Fuck.” He came with a shout, half collapsing on top of me.

His cum flooded my womb. My first heat orgasm hit me like a freight train, causing full body tremors and incoherent sounds. The alphas purred for me. Julian peppered my face with kisses. “That’s it. Yes, just like that. You feel better now that you’re filled with my cum.”

I whimpered.

“Take her to her nest,” Rafe commanded. “I’m right behind you.”

Julian stumbled into my nest. Guy and Ciarán had already discovered the cupboard with the nesting material I'd saved.

"Don't you dare touch it!" I snarled. Ciarán threw up his hands, backing away a grin on his face.

"You're spicy when you're in heat, Toni."

Ten minutes later, I dragged myself off Julian's knot and began pulling the plastic boxes I'd stored bedding and clothes out of the cupboard. Just like I had ten years ago, I'd sealed clothing and bedding in sealed bags. It was a far cry from past generations where the whole pack had slept in one bed to ensure that nest material was always ready. These days, we could control when our heats happened with suppressants and other drugs.

"Hello, sweetheart." Ivo whispered into my hair as I was re-arranging some pillows.

"When did you get here." I twisted so I could smile at him.

"Who goes first?" He smiled.

"Whoever gets to me first."

"Oh."

I glanced over at what had caught his eye. Julian had Ciarán pressed into the nest. Their kiss deep and all-consuming. Ciarán was struggling against the large alpha. It was half-hearted. I grinned. It looked less like a struggle and more like Ciarán was trying to get some pressure on his dick, which Julian had a hand on, using the heel of his hand to put pressure on the base of his dick. I loved omega cocks. They were almost always perfect and always far more sensitive than a beta's or alpha's.

"Kiss me," I begged.

"Yes," Rafe said. He'd come up behind me. "Ivo, kiss then fuck her. Stretch her out for us. Show us how good you make our omega feel."

Things moved fast after that. Ivo kissing me. Everyone manipulating my body so that my back was to his chest and my legs draped over his arms.

“So open,” he murmured into my hair. “Hold onto my shoulders, baby girl. I’m going to fuck you so that everyone can see how good you look coming on a beta’s cock.”

“Oh, fuck,” Ciarán gasped as he watched Ivo fuck me onto his pierced cock. I’d convinced him to fuck me so that Ciarán could see every detail. And boy was Ciarán enjoying the view. Ivo had a hand gripping around the base of his dick so that he didn’t go too deep. With the heat, my cervix was dilated, to help the cum enter the womb. The stupid beta was afraid of piercing my womb and horrified when I told him I want it.

“Up,” Rafe growled in Ciarán’s ear and arranged him so we mirrored each other. Both of us were impaled from below, both of us so completely dominated.

“Rafe, alpha.” Ciarán turned his head to find Rafe’s kiss. I’d never seen anything so hot.

“Do you like watching them, baby girl?” Ivo asked. “Do you like seeing Ciarán getting fucked by Rafe?”

“Yes!” I moaned. “I like it.”

“Do you love it? Isn’t he beautiful?” Ivo kept talking, but his thrusts were becoming more shallow, rougher as he got close to his climax. “I want to watch you suck him off while we fuck you.”

“Oh God. Please.” Ciarán broke from the kiss, his eyes wild. “I want that. I want that so much.

Ivo stopped thrusting so he could shuffle us forward. Then, as if he had done it a hundred times before, fisted my hair and guided me until my lips were just brushing the swollen head of Ciarán’s erection. “That’s it. I’m going to hold you while Ciarán fucks that pretty mouth of yours.”

“Slowly, love,” Rafe hissed at Ciarán. “Can’t lose control with our jewel. I control the tempo.”

And we omegas quivered at the dominating web of lust that these two forces of nature wove around us. I caught motion out of the corner of my eye. Julian and Guy had broken away from each other and moved closer. I turned my head to get a better look. Julian was standing, fisting his cock, and

smiling as Ciarán, wild on my heat pheromones, turned towards him. Guy took up his place behind Rafe, kissing our pack leader's neck and shoulders.

“Focus, baby girl.” Ivo turned my attention back to Ciarán's cock, which was leaking precum. “That's it. Give our omega a special kiss...”

Ciarán groaned around Julian's cock when I licked along his shaft. Under normal circumstances, I would have taken my time. I would have savoured each swallow, but a heat was different. Ciarán needed this. Needed to come again and again and again until we'd rung out every drop from him.

The alphas were large, Ivo was large, and Ciarán was just right. The absolutely perfect cock and one I couldn't wait to get into my mouth.

It helped that he loved receiving blow jobs and knew how to draw them up, knew that the best blow jobs aren't about fucking into your mouth. However, Rafe and Ivo weren't going to let us steal the show. We could have, perhaps. But there was something thrilling about knowing that Rafe was in control of how deep Ciarán could go.

Then, I heard Rafe swear.

“Easy, Rafe,” Guy's voice carried in the now-silent nest. My mind went blank as I realised that Rafe was letting Guy fuck him. And here I was, with my favourite treat in my mouth, unable to see the pure sensuality of the tableau we must have created, the warring passions exploding and fluctuating as Ciarán pumped into my mouth. As he pumped out omega pheromones which kept the alphas in rut, which had me teetering on the brink of a not-heat need. The only one who was not mad with lust was Ivo. Fuck, but he was hard and once again thrusting into me. Each one of those barbells rubbing against the front walls of my sex.

“That's it. Use your hands, Bubbles. Please, Toni,” Ciarán begged.

“Focus,” Julian barked, and a small muffled moan told me that once again, Ciarán's mouth was full of alpha cock.

Not one to deny my omega, I reached forward to cup and tug at his balls. I had to trust the others to hold me stable, and I did. God, but I loved these men. And I loved how Ciarán tasted. How he smelt. How his hips jerked when I massaged his taint. How I could feel Rafe thrusting into him. The masculine groans sounded like the accompaniment to the sexual ballet we performed.

Ciarán lost control first, thrusting erratically into my mouth. Ivo pulled me off him at the last second, so the omega's cum landed over my tits. Julian caught the visual and held Ciarán while he exploded with his own orgasm, squeezing his knot that was too big to fit in Ciarán's mouth. He dropped to his knees and began to kiss Ciarán.

The right had me locking down on Ivo. He pulled me back so he could kiss me. His hand holding my breast while the other began to rub at my clit. "I'm going to blow my load in you, baby girl. Fill you up while Ciarán watches. Two greedy omegas. Am I right?"

My alphas and omega groaned. For all of Ivo's worries that he wasn't going to fit into the dynamics of heat sex, he was a fucking natural.

"Please," I begged. I locked down on him, holding him tight inside of me, forcing him to rut into me using shallow thrusts. Then, I felt how he swelled inside. And... "Oh, fuck. I'm going to come!"

"Do it," Rafe ordered.

Ivo's hips began to snap into my ass, the barbells tugging a bit, sending me higher and higher. I felt him come inside me, just as I was collapsing from the overwhelming pleasure. Ivo pulled out of me slowly, and made me comfortable in his lap. Julian lay down with his head in my lap, a hand held my thigh while we watched the trio before us.

"That's it..." Rafe grunted. "Fuck..."

I loved how Guy held Rafe steady while they fucked. How Rafe arched back until his head rested on Guy's shoulder. Ciarán had dropped to his hands and knees, fucking himself

back onto Rafe's cock. The two of them using Rafe. I'd never seen him give in like this, give up his control.

"Aren't they beautiful?" Julian smiled. "I love watching almost as I love being there."

"Yes."

"Oh god!" Ciarán was coming again.

Rafe followed, his eyes and mouth open in a silent scream of pleasure.

That was the beginning. They focused on fucking me through the most intense waves, but on the third day Rafe, feral Rafe, grabbed my chin, tilting my head back to the point of pain.

"Eyes open, Antonia," he slurred because, Goddess, his canines were long, engorged with the secretion that created the psychic link between alphas and omegas. "We couldn't agree who would go first so we do this together."

Ciarán gasped. "That's—"

"Not as dangerous as it sounds," Julian interrupted. "I'd never put her in harm's way."

"On my count."

Rafe claimed the curve of my neck.

Julian took the other side

Guy's bite over his old claim sent a vicious shock to my system as the already soft connection flared blindingly hot.

They each took a part of me and in doing so became part of me.

"Shh...be careful. Let her rest."

## TWENTY NINE DAYS LATER

We were running very late.



First, because Ciarán's new kitten had needed to go to the emergency vet. The little blighter, it turned out, was allergic to her very fancy cat food.

Second, because I couldn't decide what to wear.

"Coming!" I pulled on my sequin dress—the first outfit I'd tried on this morning—and stuffed my feet into a pair of spiky sling-backs. I shouted again and began running down the stairs, using the bannister to help swing me around until I was on the last step, the alphas waiting there in varying states of fashionable dress. "Well aren't you all the sexiest thing to step out of a girl's wet dream."

Ciarán winked at me and discretely wiggled his fingers so that I caught the sight of his ring finger missing its gold band. I bit my cheek to stop from smiling. He'd insisted on removing his so that he could renew his vows with everyone.

"Come here, Jewel." Rafe's tone was snappy, edging into feral.

"Yes, alpha?"

"Hand."

I gave it to him. "This isn't the most romantic way to propose."

The velvet jewellery box better not hold a collar but I held back the words. When I opened it there was folded piece of paper which I folded out. A printout of an email.

"First class tickets to Rome." I shook my head in disbelief. "But we're getting married today."

"You don't want to go?"

"Rafe. As you so clearly said ten-ish years ago, Rome isn't going anywhere. I want to get married," I whined. "And we're already late."

"Look at the dates, sweetheart."

I re-read the email. "Oh. My birthday. February fourteenth."

“You can thank us properly later.” Julian grinned. “But I agree. Let’s get married.”

I slid into the taxi, brushing the hair out of my face. Turning to Ciarán, I had about a heartbeat before he kissed me.

“Happy wifey-to-be?”

Kiss.

“Happy hubby-to-be?”

Peck.

“Very. Did you tell them?” His eyes gleamed with a feral intensity as they dipped to my still flat stomach.

“Absolutely not. And if they think they can cancel Rome just because I’m carrying a little extra weight, I will murder them and whomsoever has the stupidity to tell them.”

# Ivo



## TWENTY YEARS LATER

After almost a year of renovations, we were finally settled back into the new and improved pack house.

I'd bought the house on the other side of us, adding a second wing to the original house. Meaning, we were now a block of three terrace houses knocked together. There had been a lot of shuffling around during the construction. We'd been forced to move into a single house for six months while the new wing was completed and original pack house got a facelift. With the kids on the top floor, Ciarán and Toni on the next floor, and then the rest of us squeezed in where we could, it was cramped...to put it mildly. Then there was the young alpha we were fostering, who was in the basement—much to her annoyance because she didn't have much privacy. But the builders started at eight in the morning and the noise gave her headaches.

Sadly, Gloria had passed shortly after the first set of twins was born. But it was hard to enter certain rooms and not think about her. Toni's obsessive nesting had morphed into a love of documenting our lives with candids that she then printed and placed next to wherever they'd been taken. So my mother-in-law watched over a lot of bickering for a year, but without her

usual caustic commentary about packs breeding nothing but overgrown children. Sometimes I agreed.

“Hey.”

I looked up from where I was putting fresh sheets on the bed, carefully bagging the other ones for Ciarán and Toni’s heat which they thought would be in the next week.

“Hey,” I raised my arm and she rushed into my side. “How are you feeling about this heat?”

“Excited? Is that perverse? It is our first heat back in the nest for a year. And the kids are moved out or away with friends. It feels like old times.”

“Except we are older,” I reminded her. Thank god, I thought. I don’t think I could keep up with the same amount of sex that we used to have.

Hell, I was pushing sixty. And, while heat sex remained a heightened experience it had none of the gymnastics from when we were younger. I’d removed my piercings for good after the boys were born. Rafe had mellowed in the bedroom, and I loved catching him being almost tender with Ciarán outside of heats. Never the same romantic passion that Julian maintained with the rest of the pack. Or Guy’s inventive quickies that he would get smug about—of all of us he was the one best at finding corners to fuck where the kids couldn’t find him.

“Sweetheart, there is something I want to ask you.”

“Yes?”

”Would you like me to read you a story?”

“Please.”

I moved to my bedside table and pulled out something I’d been agonising over since I found out that Toni was pregnant twenty years ago—shit, had it really been that long? “You know how I’ve been talking about retiring?”

“Every year for the last ten years.” She narrowed her eyes. “What is this about?”

“Well,” I found my face flushing suddenly embarrassed.

“Ivo? You can tell me anything.”

”I wrote something. Just come here.”

There was nothing more perfect than Toni curled into my lap. Twenty years. I’d never thought to find a pack or even a family like the one I’d grown up in but I had a pack with a wonderful, mad group of people who made me smile and roll my eyes in turns.

“What is this?”

“The Woodland Pack?” I told her suddenly hesitating over the title that I’d agonised over. “We can change it, if you don’t like it.”

“You...Is that a hedgehog? You wrote a picture book about us?” She gasped and stole the book from me. “Oh, Ivo. It is so lovely.”

“Our daughter did the illustrations,” I told her. I’d wanted to share the new with Vicki’s help, but our oldest insisted that I showed Toni on my own. “She deserves a lot of credit.”

“But, Ivo...Oh...This...This is just...”

“Love you, baby girl,” I murmured against her lips. The swelling in my chest only matched the swelling in my cock. I’d not gotten excited like this in a while but Toni in my arms just knowing the rightness of this acted like the most potent aphrodisiac.

She pushed me onto the bed and then straddled me. “Love you, daddy-hedgehog.”

And fade to black...

# BONUS CONTENT

Thank you so much for reading *Fake It Till You Mate It*. I would love it if you could go and leave a review on Amazon. This helps spread the word and would make me all warm and fuzzy inside!

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# THANK YOU

*Fake It Till You Mate It* was a labour of love. I wanted to write an omegaverse set in London, which I was having a bit of homesickness for. The story is set in North London where I lived for many years. I wrote the first draft in February 2021 during lockdown. At the time I was missing London and travelling so much and that bled into this book. As I write this, I wonder if I shouldn't have just scrapped that original draft entirely and started completely fresh. But the first chapter, when Toni flies into London, is me every time I fly over the Thames and pick out familiar landmarks, greedy for the city I called home for so many years. So yes, this book is too personal in many ways. But here it is anyway. To be taken or left as the reader sees fit.

it came about thanks to the generous support and help of several people. Special thanks to Patty for reading the absolute first and roughest draft. Penny and Kitty who came in for the alpha/beta read.

Penny, I can't thank you enough for the incredible character art. Follow her on instagram @penny.jillian.leigh

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Lo, for the line "Then get on your knees like the peasant you are, beg for my forgiveness, and I might consider it." Follow her on tiktok @wellreadnurse