



In Control

ONE BETA, ONE PACK, A FORBIDDEN LOVE

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IN CONTROL

IN WITH THE PACK

HANNAH HAZE

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FOREWORD

Ooo I have been looking forward to writing Sophia's story - my little fire cracker of a beta. I toyed with the idea of whether to keep Sophia a beta or have her present as an omega, but ultimately I wanted a story that showed we are all worthy of love whoever we are. It also meant I could write a male omega and make him a ballet dancer - I've been wanting to write a male dancer for as long as I can remember. Gabriel gave me my chance. I hope you love these characters, as well as the rest of the pack, as much as I do!

I'm a British writer and use British English spelling and grammar. If you do spot any typos in this book, please drop me a line so I can make it right: hannahhazewrites@gmail.com (Or just drop me an email anyway. I love to chat!).

You can find a guide to my omegaverse at the end of this book. If you're new to omegaverse, you may want to take a look.

This book is a sweeter 'why choose' (reverse harem) omegaverse with one female character and a pack of male characters including alphas and an omega. The male characters are engaged in a longstanding emotional and physical relationship. The male omega character has experienced trauma in the past and the female character is the victim of stalking. For more detailed content warnings, please visit [my website](#).

S ophia

MY BREATH HOVERS in my throat, my gaze captured by the figure spinning across the stage.

One dancer in particular. The lead. He's formed of densely packed muscle, his thighs and his torso rippling with every move he makes. And yet those movements are graceful, considered, and beautiful. As he lifts and spins his partner, drawing her close to the stage floor one minute and high into the air the next, it is him I can't drag my eyes from. It's as if she weighs nothing, as if it costs him nothing to glide her through the moving spotlights.

When finally he exits the stage, leaving his partner for her solo dance, I lean back in my seat, the velvet brushing against my bare back, and catch my breath.

It's then I sense it. An awareness. Someone is watching me.

The sensation is not unusual. I catch people's eyes. I know that. In fact, I like it – most of the time anyway. It's why I'm wearing this dress tonight – a deeply seductive purple made of silk that swims over my body and pools at my feet.

I'm curious, though, as always, to see whose eye I've caught this time. Is it a catch worth pursuing, or one to discard back into the sea?

It's opening night, and one of my mother's latest beaux has wangled us tickets. All the great and good of the city of Studworth are gracing the theatre tonight. Some I'd like to meet, others I most definitely want to avoid.

Subtly, I lift my gaze, and it's as if it's drawn there. Drawn there by a man sitting in one of the boxes high above me. A man I don't recognise.

He sits at the front, chin resting in his hand, and he's staring right at me. He makes no attempt to disguise it. He's dressed in a dark suit, although, unlike many of the men here at the ballet tonight, his white shirt is open at the neck. He has no bow tie. Even through the layers of his jacket, I can tell he is as well built and as powerful as the man I've been watching dancing across the stage. Although he's larger, making the seat he's crouching on seem minuscule.

And then there are his eyes. Dark and swirling and mesmerising. Capturing my attention and refusing to release it.

My breath stalls in my throat again.

Alpha.

The man is an alpha. And an alpha staring at me with obvious interest.

I quirk my head to one side.

I catch people's attention all the time. Men and women. Old and young.

Not alphas' though. I may be something worth gazing at, but I'm one thing no alpha wants. A beta.

Perhaps he can't tell over the distance. Perhaps he's mistaken me for the one thing every alpha does want: an omega.

I stare back at him. Meeting those intensely dark eyes with my own.

He'll look away now. He'll lose interest.

An omega can't meet an alpha eye-to-eye. Something in their ancient instincts stirs and they're compelled to look

away. I don't own those ancient instincts though. I have no problem staring right back at this man, the corner of my mouth curving in a seductive smile.

Most men like that. A little flirtation has their blood stirring. This man will be different though.

I wait for him to turn away.

The music on stage erupts. Trumpets blare. The pitter patter of many feet vibrates the sprung-floor.

He keeps his eyes fixed on mine and the corner of my mouth drops. A shiver traces its way down my spine. His hair is dark too, and his brows and the stubble that runs across his square jaw.

His tongue darts between his lips and traces along his bottom lip.

Then, eyes still locked on me, he stands, watching me as he side-steps his seat.

There's a command in the way he's looking at me. I'm no omega. I can't read it, but I can give it a damn good guess.

I stand too, and for a minute his eyes leave mine, skating across my bare shoulders, lingering at the cleavage of my dress, warming my blood.

Slowly, his eyes rake up my throat before returning to meet mine. His brow lowers and my knees turn to jelly.

I've never been at the mercy of an alpha before, never piqued one's interest. It is ... intriguing.

I tear my eyes from him and lean down to whisper in my mother's ear.

"I'm going to use the bathroom."

As much as that dancer has held me entranced, I never wanted to be here. But wanting and having to be here are two different things. There was a time when I jumped at every opportunity to attend an event like this. But now there's always that doubt lingering in the back of my mind. Will he be here? At an event like this, it's always a possibility.

My mother slides her knees to the side and I squeeze along the row of people, conscious the entire time that the alpha is still watching me.

In the aisle, I gaze up at him again, meeting that stare which now seems hungry. Then I lift the hem of my dress and saunter towards the exit, hips swaying, giving him my best show.

Out in the foyer, it's cool and goosebumps raise along my arms. I take a deep breath. My skin tingles with anticipation.

Have I caught my fish?

The long elegant bar with its mirror running the full length of the room stands empty. I stroll that way, anyway, finding a jug of water and several glasses.

I pour myself some, half watching the mirror.

I know immediately when the alpha enters the room, before I spy his warped reflection in the dimly lit mirror, before I hear his feet pad across the plush carpet. I sense him. His presence. If I was an omega, I'd know by his scent, but it's not until he's closed the space and I can see his dark eyes in the reflection, closer now, even darker, that I catch the faint whiff of his scent.

Dark too, like treacle.

I inhale, sucking his flavour across my tongue.

I take another sip of water, leaving a red imprint of my lip on the glass, and lower it to the bar.

Turning slowly, I find him so close we're almost touching. Warmth and dominance radiate from his body, and, despite my heels, I have to tip my head back to meet his eyes.

"I'd ask you to buy me a drink," I say, a smile hovering on my lips, "but the bar is closed."

"I don't think you came out here for a drink, little one." His voice is deep, reverberating in his broad chest. It's like a growl, a growl dipped in honey. It has that shiver shimmying down my spine again.

“No, I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t,” he repeats, bending so our eyes are level.

Up close, I observe the colour of his. Not jet like they’d appeared in the theatre. A mahogany brown with a rim of gold.

“You’re very beautiful,” he tells me, reaching out to trace a fingertip down the column of my throat. “Do you taste as good as you look?”

I go to open my mouth, to give him one of my quick retorts, but his mouth has replaced the pressure of his fingers and he kisses my throat.

I guess we’re skipping the small talk, sliding straight past the flirtation, heading straight for the seduction.

I certainly don’t have a problem with that.

The man smells like something I’d like to eat and his lips are plush and tender on my skin. Tender, with a hint of power.

I’m only mortal. Like every other woman on the planet, I’ve fantasised about an alpha’s mouth on my throat, about his strong alpha teeth snapping through my flesh.

I sigh, tipping my head back, leaning against the bar. His large hands come to claim my hips and he holds me still as he kisses up my neck to my ear, nipping at my lobe before whispering in the shell.

“Come with me, little one.”

No pretence at asking me if this is what I want. No ...

He’s an alpha. He’s used to getting his way, to having his orders obeyed.

In any other situation, it would piss me off. I’m not some pushover, some little girl to be bossed about by men.

But in this situation, I’m more than happy to play along.

He takes a grip of my hand and walks us across the dimly lit foyer to a door marked PRIVATE.

I guess I should be thankful he didn’t try to rut me right there against the bar. Then again ...

The door snaps open as he leans his heavy shoulder against it and he drags me along behind him as we enter a pitch-black room. No window. No light.

I want to protest, but then he's pushing me up against the cool wall, my head knocking against the smooth plaster.

With his alpha vision, I assume he can see in this darkness because he finds my ear and whispers, "Such a pretty thing." His hands glide over the silk of my dress, caresses the curve of my waist and my hips. "And this dress."

"You're quite pretty yourself," I tease.

He snorts, his hand travelling down the outside of my thigh until he discovers the slit in my dress. He growls.

A noise that, now it's directed at me, has my core spinning.

"I'm not pretty, little one. I'm not careful. I'm not gentle."

"What are you then?"

His hand slips inside my dress, his knuckles rubbing against the inside of my thigh. Higher and higher until he finds the gusset of my thong. His thumb skates against my mound.

"Dirty," he growls.

I whimper as his thumb skates along the lips of my sex, the thin material doing nothing to mask the sensation.

"I-I-I like dirty." I take a hold of the lapel of his dinner jacket, yanking him closer, feeling the hard outline of him against my belly. "I like bad and rough and dangerous."

He chuckles. "I worked that much out."

He withdraws his hand and I swear at him under my breath.

But he's not backing away; he shifts his thigh between mine, giving me friction where I need it and, clasping my chin between his fingers, lifts my face so he can claim my mouth.

He kisses me hard, the back of my head pressed against the wall, the fingers at my chin leaving to tangle in my loose hair and his other hand squeezing my tit through the dress.

My nipple hardens against his touch, and there's that growl again, rumbling through our kiss.

Then he's slipping the spaghetti straps of my dress down my shoulders and shimmying the whole thing down my body, letting it pool at my feet.

He breaks our kiss, leaning back to look down at me, dressed only in my thong and my heels.

When he dives back in to kiss me, it's more wild, more desperate. His tongue sweeps through my mouth, his teeth drag against my lips, and his fingers tug in my hair.

I've never been with an alpha before. But I know the stories. I've seen the pictures. I know he'll be big and girthy. I know he has a knot that would rip me open if he tried to lock into my unprepared cunt.

But although I should feel caution, I don't. I feel only need and want and—

“Wet for me, little one?” he asks, his finger skating through my folds and finding my hole.

“Yes,” I gasp. “So wet.”

“No, sweetheart.” His fingers swim back to the apex of my folds, hitting my clit. “Need you really wet to take me.”

I yank at his jacket as he circles my clit. He's teasing me. No plans to get me off quickly despite my needy little pleads.

“Make me come,” I order, pulling him toward me and claiming that mouth of his. His stubble is rough against my cheek, in contrast to his surprisingly soft lips.

There's that growl and I'm debating what else I could say to make him do it again, when the pace of his fingers quickens. He's flicking me now. Harder. With more precision and more authority.

The alpha is going to make me come. Like I asked. Like I demanded.

I smile against his mouth. Liking the way that makes me feel powerful.

Alphas, they're all about the power. The dominance. The control.

It's a kick to have the tables turn.

However, they don't turn for long.

As my legs begin to shake and my core tightens, my kiss turning sloppy against his lips, he stills.

"No," I stutter, my eyes flying open. I was so close, so achingly close. I stare straight up into those dark eyes of his.

"You forgot to say please, little one."

I frown at him. He flicks me and I buck, chasing that feeling. A little more of that and I'll be crashing over into the abyss.

"Don't frown at me. Where are your manners?"

"I'm not into games." I scowl at him.

"I think you are. I don't think you'd be here right now if you weren't." He rubs his finger tip against my sensitive nub. "Now come on, ask me nicely." He leans closer, his breath warm in my ear. "And I'll give you what you want."

"Please," I mutter through clenched teeth, wanting his clever fingers to keep moving in that insanely good way.

"Please ... Alpha."

Shit. Is this what alphas are like? They like their games. I know that. I've seen it in classrooms and faculty meetings all my life. They are predators and they like to tease their prey.

But his fingers are stroking around me now, refusing me their pleasure where I need them most. So I'm prepared to play his little game. For the moment, anyway.

"Please Alpha."

He chuckles and then his fingers flicker against my nub so quickly, so powerfully, it rips the orgasm from my core and shoots it through my body, right to the very tips of my fingers and my toes.

“Oh God!” I cry out against his shoulder, his jacket muffling the sound.

When I stop shaking in his arms, he sweeps his finger back to my hole.

“Wet,” he says. “See that’s better. You’re ready for me now.”

I wonder how long we’ve been in this dark room. Will my mother have missed me yet? Is she looking for me? Perhaps the performance has already ended.

“Going to fuck you now, little one,” the alpha says, hands gripping my arse and lifting me up.

“Please’,” I say with as much sarcasm as I can manage after an orgasm that rearranged my senses. “You forgot to say ‘please’.” Another growl. I squirm in his arms. “It’s only polite, *Alpha*.”

“You like playing with fire?”

“Only when the pyromaniac in question has good manners.”

I hear the zip of his fly and he wraps my legs around him.

“I’m going to fuck you now ... please.”

I can’t help a laugh. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

He nibbles at my throat. The head of his cock nudges at my entrance. “Please,” he tries again, his voice softer with what I could almost believe is a whine.

“Hmmm.” I slide down onto his waiting cock. In the dark, I can’t see how big he is, but I can feel. He’s big. Very big. The way he stretches me and my entrance causes me to gasp.

“OK?” he pants.

“Yes,” I pant back. “Don’t stop.”

His fingers sink deeper into my arse cheeks and he thrusts further inside me. Stars roll across my closed eyelids and I

moan.

“You like that, little one?”

“Yes. Keep going.”

“You’re very tight. Not built to take me, are you?”

“I can.” I inhale and exhale, forcing myself to relax around his sheer size, groaning as he pushes even further.

“Never been with an alpha,” he says.

I want to argue with that damn presumption. I’m no innocent. No shy wallflower. I’ve been with plenty of men and women.

But never an alpha.

With a grunt, he bottoms out, his hips flush against mine.

“Fuck, fuck. You’re tight.”

“Move,” I beg. “Move.”

“You want to be fucked?”

“Please,” I say, feeling desperate, remembering how much he seemed to like that word.

“Shit,” he mutters, and then he’s thrusting into me. His entire body is solid and strong, and he drives all that power into me.

It’s overwhelming. Overwhelmingly good. Like nothing I’ve experienced before.

I’ve fucked hundreds of times before. But I’ve never been fucked like this. The pace is relentless and demanding.

He drives sensations from deep within me that I’ve never experienced before, and, just like before, there’s no polite build up to my orgasm, no coaxing it slowly from my body. He demands it. He rips it from me. Tears it straight through every nerve like I’ve been struck by lightning. All I can do is cling to him, cling and ride every wave of electricity.

“Your cunt feels so good when you come, little one. Flutters around me like it can’t decide what the hell to do.”

“I ... I ...” I’m lost for words. I can’t find them. They are usually there, right on the tip of my tongue. I’m always ready with a retort, armed with a quick response. Not now. Now there are no proper thoughts left in my mind. I’m all feeling and sensation as he pounds me against the wall.

I’m surprised the damn thing hasn’t collapsed. I’m surprised the entire theatre hasn’t come crashing to the ground. He’s that big. That powerful.

“Can’t knot you,” he pants, his face damp with sweat. “Want to knot you. Want to knot you so bad. Damn it.”

I’m tempted, sorely tempted, to throw caution to the wind and beg him to knot me.

I’ve always been curious. Like every other beta, I’ve wanted to know, to experience, this thing that sends the omegas and alphas crazy. The knotting. Locking his cock inside my cunt and pumping me full of his seed.

But fantasy and curiosity are one thing. A trip to A&E with a rip in my pussy, another.

Nope, as hot as this is – as hot as he is – I’m not taking that risk.

“You can’t knot me,” I tell him. He nods as he continues to fuck me; those dark eyes a little wild now. “But you can come in my mouth.”

“Fuck! Fuck!”

He thrusts into me once, twice, three more times and then with a pained moan he withdraws, placing me back onto my feet.

I drop to my knees, kneeling on the silk of my dress. It’s going to be creased to fuck, and what with the alpha’s scent smeared all over me, there’ll be no doubt what I disappeared off to do.

I smirk up at him as he glides his fist up and down his long shaft.

I open my mouth and he mutters a string of obscenities under his breath before thrusting his cock between my waiting

lips.

I don't even have to suck. He's coming into my mouth with a violent grunt immediately. His hot spend runs over my tongue and it tastes different. It's salty, sure, but it reminds me of that scent. An Omega will go mad for the taste of their alpha's come, and though I don't have their kind of tastebuds to appreciate his flavour, I like it nonetheless.

I gulp him down, my eyes locked on his, glinting in the darkness.

"That's it, good girl."

He takes my hands in his and squeezes my fingers around his expanded knot. It's hard and hot and big, three times the width of his cock. I flinch, imagining the pain of that ripping into my entrance. But at the same time, another one of those shivers of desire dances through my body.

I'm holding an alpha's knot in my hands, his cock in my mouth, his come in my belly. It's incredibly erotic and ... powerful. Yes, there's that feeling of power again. It maybe me on my knees, but this alpha is at my mercy.

When I've drunk the last drop of his seed, he's still hard in my mouth.

As if reading my mind, he says, "I'm not going soft yet, little one."

I hum around his cock and he chuckles. "It requires a little more work being with an alpha."

I raise my eyebrows. I've never been averse to hard work. I suck at him, hollowing my cheeks and taking him deep inside my mouth, until his knot hits my lips. It's too big for me to suck, but I like the way it pulses against my mouth.

"Fuck, that is a sight," he says from above me.

I run my tongue down his length, then do the same with the slight tease of my teeth. It has him sucking in air, his eyes black as night.

Then he strokes my cheek and steps away, his cock leaving my mouth with a wet pop.

“Stand up.”

“I’m not an omega. You can’t order me—”

“Stand up so I can put on your dress.”

“I don’t think it will fit you.”

The side of his mouth hooks up in a smile. A half smile that makes his eyes twinkle with mischief. My damn stomach somersaults.

I climb to my feet and he crouches down. Finding the crumpled silk, he draws it carefully back up my body, hooking the straps over my shoulders.

I run my hands over the creased material as he tucks his softening cock in his trousers and zips up his fly.

The room we’re in stinks of sex and beyond the door I can hear the rumble of the orchestra.

The alpha takes my chin in his hand and kisses me. This time, it’s more gentle, more lingering and my body starts to respond, wilting under his attention.

But all too soon, he pulls back.

“I think you’re going to remember me, little one,” he says with a self-satisfied smirk.

“No,” I tell him, stepping to the side and reaching for the door handle. “I think *you* are going to remember *me*.”

S ophia

THE LECTURE HALL is packed and stuffy, and although some people wear eager expressions on their faces, most of the faculty look irritated. We've been dragged into the lecture theatre by a three-line party whip. The Physics department's newest member of staff is here to deliver a summary of his work. We aren't allowed to miss it.

I slump down on a seat at the end of a middle row. I'm in the irritated camp. This is the third year of my PhD. I'm so close to finishing I can almost taste it, and being dragged from my work has me royally pissed off.

Especially to hear yet another elderly man drone on for an hour about areas of physics I have no interest in.

Yes, I know I should care. As a scientist, I should be excited and enthusiastic about all fields and new areas of research. But three years of study have ground me down. I've gone from enthusiastic to cynical and snarky. In fact, I don't know what I'm going to do when I finish this PhD.

I nod at my supervisor sitting in the front row and wave to a couple of my friends who nabbed seats in the back row; somewhere they can play on their phones undetected. Lucky bastards.

I cross my arms over my chest and sink low in my seat, stifling a yawn. I was out last night at a bar, and though I didn't drink too much, I still stumbled to bed in the early hours of the morning.

I'm sleepy and as the lecture hall lights dim and a round of polite applause echoes around the cavernous space, I wonder how I'm going to stay awake.

The applause dies down, but there's no sign of the professor. He's probably some doddering old fool, transferred from one of the other universities to waste away the last few years of his career in the prestigious surroundings of Crestmore University. He's probably forgotten he has to do this gig.

I slide my phone from my pocket and flick through my messages. There are two from this guy I've been trying to ditch for the last couple of weeks. Another from a man who works in the lab next door who seems to be ignoring my very obvious hints that I'm not interested. There's one from Rosie, my best friend, asking me round for dinner, and the last one is from my mother, reminding me about some do at the weekend.

I'm replying to Rosie, when the microphone echoes as it's switched on and I hear someone clear their throat and ruffle their papers.

I yawn again, wondering what turgid hell we're about to be subjected to.

And then the man speaks.

His voice is deep, like a growl. A growl dipped in honey.

It can't be!

But my body knows. My body knows it is, every muscle and tendon freezing.

I swallow and drag my eyes upwards, my gaze falling across the people sitting in the rows in front of me and down to the man illuminated at the lectern below.

Tall, large, well-built, with mesmerising eyes.

It's him. The alpha from the ballet.

It's been two weeks since that night and I haven't stopped thinking about him.

I'd strolled out of that room in the theatre, expecting him to catch my arm and demand my number. He hadn't and so I'd kept walking. As I sauntered across the dim foyer in my wrinkled dress, reeking of his scent and his seed, I thought he was playing another of his games. He'd let me get so far and then he'd hunt me down.

He'd insist on seeing me again.

But he didn't and as my feet carried me further and further away, I understood. This was a one time only thing. I am a beta. Of no interest to him.

That hasn't stopped me thinking about him. Fuck, dreaming about him.

I'd considered tracking him down. But that's not my style. Besides, what did I even know about the man? I didn't even have his name.

Now I do though.

Professor Cole.

His slides flick on behind his head, bathing him in a blue-tinged light and he talks through his work with that self-assured confidence and dominance he'd displayed at the theatre. He stands with his feet hip-width apart, facing the audience of professors and students face on. He betrays not an inkling of nerves, although he doesn't smile. His face is serious, all business.

I watch him, transfixed. As entranced as I had been when he'd locked eyes with me in the theatre.

The outfit he wears today is less formal. Jeans, a shirt and a dark blue blazer. The cotton of the shirt strains across his broad chest and the denim stretches across his thick thighs.

I've been dreaming about this man and yet I'd forgotten how exquisite he is in the flesh.

I can't help remembering that voice in my ear, those hands on my hips, that body pressed against mine.

He hasn't spotted me – we're all bathed in darkness – and I have no scent for him to identify.

I can ogle him all I want. I rub my thighs together and float in the dark rumble of his voice.

At the end of his presentation, the lights flicker on for questions.

Sitting up straight and running my fingers through my hair, I raise my hand.

His gaze hovers over the faces in the audience and my heart pounds faster as his gaze edges towards me. Closer and closer until our eyes meet.

There's a flicker across his brow, but apart from that he makes no sign that he's recognised me. In fact, his gaze drifts on and he picks someone else to ask the first question.

As Tony from Professor Browne's group asks a long-winded question, the alpha's eyes dart back to me, sweeping over my form in a way that seems to heat his gaze. Then his eyes flick away.

He knows who I am. He recognises me.

I wait patiently. He picks three more people to ask their questions, but although he appears determined to ignore me, his eyes nonetheless can't help but be pulled back my way.

Finally, there's only me, my hand still raised.

He peers at his watch as if to say he has no more time.

"It's only a quick question," I call out. He meets my eyes and I'm back there, back in that room with his fingers doing wicked things to me.

"Fine," he nods curtly, folding his arms across his chest.

I reel off my question, and he shifts on his feet for the first time. Bet he wasn't expecting me to ask him something challenging.

He lets out a puff of irritated air and leans his weight on the lectern.

“Miss ...” he gestures towards me.

“Sophia,” I tell him.

“Sophia, you may think you’re being smart to challenge that assumption, but I can assure you that far greater minds than yours have scrutinised my research and found it holds firm.”

I frown at him. What the hell does he know about the greatness of my mind? He’s just like every other asshole. Just because I have a pretty face, they think there’s nothing between my ears. My mother insists this is why I decided to study physics.

“Oh Sophia,” she’d said, rolling her eyes at me in that languid expression I’ve learned to copy, “you always want to prove yourself. Who cares what they think?”

I do care. I’m as smart and hard working as any of them, even if I have lost my love for the subject in recent months. It doesn’t mean I don’t know my science. My question was a valid one and he knows it.

I stay in my seat as the other members of the faculty filter out of the lecture hall, some chatting together as they do, a couple stopping by the lectern to talk to the new professor as he packs away his notes.

His eyes continue to dart to me, sitting in my seat as he does, and soon it’s just the two of us, the door slamming behind the last student.

The professor adopts that pose again. Arms crossed, legs firm. He stares up at me.

I rise from my seat slowly and saunter down the steps. His eyes roam over me for a second time, taking in the pleated skirt and silk blouse I’m wearing.

“Hi,” I say, stopping in front of him. I’m wearing flats today and he towers above me.

“Hello again.” There’s a slight tightness to his jaw and his shoulders that wasn’t there the last time we met. “Miss ...”

“Sophia.” I curl my hair behind my ear. His scent is discernible this close, and it makes the man all the more appealing.

“You’re a student?”

I cock my head to one side. “I’m a PhD student in my final year.” His shoulders loosen a fraction.

“Right.” He swallows. “Then I apologise for the other night. If I had known—”

“You wouldn’t have fucked me.”

His eyes dart to the door at the back of the lecture theatre. Then back to me. They darken and his voice lowers. “No, I probably still would have fucked you. You looked delicious in that dress. But it would have been very foolish of me.”

I take a tiny step towards him. He’s magnetic. “Don’t I look delicious now?”

He glares at me. “I think you know you do, and I also think you know I’m not going to do anything about it.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“Miss ...”

“Sophia,” I tell him for the third time.

“Let’s keep this professional, please.”

“Please?” I smile up at him and I swear his hands twitch.

“I’ve worked hard to win this position at Crestmore.”

I wonder what that means. He thinks I’m going to ruin it for him.

“You’re married,” I say.

“No.” He frowns at me. “You’re a very attractive woman but—”

“But ...” He smells so good and I never got to explore what lies beneath all those clothes last time. “You’re a one-time only kind of man.”

“I am.”

I study his face. He's younger than I assumed at the theatre. Early forties perhaps. He is clearly a big shot if he's secured this professorship at such a young age.

"Shame," I say, reaching up on my tiptoes, my fingertips brushing his taut torso as I whisper up at him. "I've been thinking about you. I was hoping we'd meet again."

He grabs my hand in his, yanking it away from his body. His grip is tight on my fingers and for a moment it seems as if he's caught in indecision. For a moment, I think he intends to drag me onto the row of seats. Instead, he pushes me slightly away from him.

"Sophia," he says and god my name sounds electric in that deep growl of his, making me tingle all the way down to my toes.

But he's telling me no. It's clear in his tone, in the dominance of his stance.

I snatch my hand away.

"It was a perfectly reasonable question."

He lifts an eyebrow. "The one you asked after my presentation?"

I nod, folding my arms over my chest.

"Perhaps." One corner of his mouth curves. "But I suspect you were being deliberately provocative." Something else my mother is always accusing me of. "I think you were deliberately trying to seek my attention." The half-smile falls from his lips. "I assure you, you already have it." He spins and collects up his satchel. Then he pauses and peers at me over his shoulder. "I assume I can rely on your discretion about the other night."

I wonder what he'd say if I told him no. If I told him I intend to tell the entire faculty about our little liaison. But I'm not that girl. I've never been one to go broadcasting my love affairs across campus.

"Can I rely on yours?" I ask.

“Of course.” He turns away and starts to stroll towards the door at the back of the lecture hall. At the door he pauses, his hand on the handle. “It was a good question. One not many have picked up.”

I stare open-mouthed at his back as he slips through the door.

My skin is hot. I feel unusually flustered. I’m no man-eater. Well, maybe a little. Most of the time I find men incredibly easy to manipulate, to wrap around my little finger. Especially in this department where most men find women intimidating.

It seems the alpha is a different story altogether.

I’m not sure if that makes me more determined to pursue him or not.

E_{sra}

AS SOON AS the lecture hall door slams closed behind me, I lean against the wall and take a deep inhale. My blood thrums, my heart beats, sweat trickles down my neck.

What was that?

I'm a fucking alpha. I take what I want. I don't even need to ask because it's offered up. Has been for as long as I can remember.

If I want a woman, she's mine.

But this girl. This beta. This *student*.

I can't let this happen again.

I can't have her, even if every instinct in my body told me she wanted me back.

Fuck, I didn't need any instinct; it was written all over her face, in the way she leaned towards me, in the flirtatious tone of her words.

I puff out the air in my lungs. What is it with fate? Giving with one hand, taking with the other.

I'm made. I'm a fucking professor at one of the most prestigious universities in the country, probably in the world.

And what does fate decide to do? Throw temptation right in my face.

The woman is stunning. Stunning and intelligent. I like that.

Usually I forget about my hook-ups as soon as my knot deflates.

Not this girl. I've been thinking about her. Reliving those moments in the dark room.

I didn't consider it a problem. I didn't think I would ever see her again.

I pick up my feet and force myself along the corridor shaking my head as I do. My office is bare. The shelves empty, the drawers not yet filled, cardboard boxes resting on the highly polished floor. I drop my notes and laptop on the wide desk and open the first box.

This isn't going to be a problem. Control and focus have never been a problem for me. It's why I've got to where I am ten years before many others.

But it's more of a problem than I expect, because the woman is everywhere. Every fucking where. When I turn a corner; when I enter a lab; when I arrive for a meeting. There, peering up at me with those dewy blue eyes, plush lips parted. If she was a quiet type who melted into the background, perhaps I could ignore her. But she's determined to grab my attention at every possibility.

By the end of the second week my nerves are frayed. I've been tested before. My alpha instincts strained to their limit. But not so often. Not so many times.

And then she's there, bending over a desk. It's after hours, the windows black with night and the hum of the equipment the only noise in the lab.

I freeze in the doorway, unable to resist the temptation of letting my gaze linger over her body.

But then she senses me, lifting her head and spinning on her toes. She grips the desk behind her, leaning back against

the wood.

Although I seem to see her everywhere, we haven't spoken again since that encounter in the lecture hall.

"You're working late."

"I'm pretty close to finishing this PhD, and frankly I want to get it done."

"What's it on?" I ask, leaning against the door frame. I'd come into this room for a reason, one that's now forgotten.

She flicks thick waves of chestnut hair over her shoulder.

"Are you actually interested? I'm sure you'd consider it pretty basic for a great mind like yours." Her lips curl in that seductive fucking manner again. She's teasing me, throwing back my words at me.

"Ahhh, you're pissed with me about that question in the lecture hall."

"I don't forgive ... or forget easily." She considers me.

I run the pads of my fingers over the stubble on my chin, the sharp ends prickling my skin. I try to keep my eyes fixed to the blue of hers, but I'm weak. And besides, I may be unable to touch, but I can look. I can admire.

She bristles under my gaze.

"Are you sure it's safe to be seen here alone with me, professor?" My eyes dart to her face and I step into the room.

"What does that mean?" As far as I know, she hasn't said anything about our dalliance to anyone in the faculty. She said she wouldn't and I believed her.

"You're very concerned about your reputation."

"I don't give a damn about my reputation." If she knew anything of my career, she'd know that. I haven't been afraid to criticise others, to challenge current thinking, to rock the boat. I've done it all with one goal in mind – progressing my career. "I do give a damn about my place at this university, though. And my career." And the people I care about. I'm not making the same mistake twice.

“It’s very honourable,” she replies, turning back to the machine she’s using and making some scribbles in her note book. “If a little dull.”

“You don’t like dull?”

“Not really.”

“Perhaps you should. Screwing strangers, screwing strange alphas, isn’t safe.”

“Maybe it was the first time I’ve ever done something like that,” she says, flicking the machine off and gathering her book and her pen to her chest. “Maybe you were special.”

“I don’t think it was.” I pause. “I don’t think I am.”

She holds my gaze. “You’re full of assumptions.”

“And I’m wondering if you are always this abrasive with professors in this department or if I’m special after all.”

The machine’s internal fan whirls, then switches off with a loud click.

There are only a few feet between us. I could clear them in a couple of strides and lift her up onto the desk and ...

I gulp. She watches the Adam’s apple in my throat bob.

“It was special,” she whispers, her eyes hovering on my chest. “And I think that’s why you can’t keep your eyes off me.” She lifts her gaze back to mine and the silvery-blue of her eyes is almost grey in the dim lighting of this room. Behind her, my own reflection balances in the window. It’s blurred and yet I can discern the heat in my eyes.

What is it about this girl?

I’ve taught plenty of beautiful women. I’ve supervised and mentored them. I’ve never felt temptation like this before. I’ve had my omega and my one-night stands to quench my lust.

But she’s ... different.

“I think you’d like to believe that. But you forget I’ve had my piece of you and as delicious as that was, little one, I won’t be going back for more.”

She scowls at me and storms out of the room. I listen to her angry footsteps pound down the corridor.

At least she has no fucking scent. Nothing lingering in the air to drive me wild. No scent, but there's the hint of feminine perfume; of jasmine.

I spin around and stride straight out of the room.



THE FRONT DOOR of our pack house opens and footsteps ring out on the floorboards in the hallway.

I lift my glass of bourbon to my mouth and take another sip letting the fierce alcohol sting against my lips and my tongue.

The footsteps continue along the hallway and pause in the doorway.

“Esra?” Liam asks, “is that you sitting in there in the dark?”

“It is.”

He flicks on the light and I groan against the brightness, my own reflection suddenly staring back at me from the window.

My packmate slumps into the drawing room, loosening the tie around his neck as he does. He drops down into the armchair next to me and I spin the glass in my hand, letting the ice cubes clink against the sides.

“Everything all right?” he asks, examining my face as next he removes the cufflinks from his shirt, dropping them on the side table and rolling up each sleeve.

Is everything all right? I don't know how to answer that. Everything should be fine. I've reached the pinnacle of my career at the age of 41. A Professor in Physics at Crestmore. I could almost laugh. Fuck you all those half-arsed teachers who always lectured that I'd never make anything of myself. Just look at me now.

I should be on cloud nine. I should be focussed on my work and making a name for myself in the department. Instead, I've spent my first two weeks at the university focussed on something else altogether.

"Let me guess," Liam says, snatching the drink from my hand and taking a long gulp. "It can only be one of two things. Work or a woman."

"Try both," I mumble.

"Hmmm." He passes back my drink and I take another mouthful. "Sounds complicated."

"It is. The woman is a student."

"Shit. You're not usually interested in women that young—"

"She's a PhD student."

"OK, so that's not so bad."

"It is. She's out of bounds. The university doesn't look favourably on relationships with students. I've been advised — no fraternising with students. No fraternising with your fucking colleagues either."

"Shit, man. That's uptight."

I shrug. There's been enough scandals in academia — tales of professors trading marks for sexual favours — you can hardly blame the university authorities.

"So stay out of her way ... or wait, is she an omega?" He frowns with concern. It doesn't matter that we have our own omega, Gabriel — we have done for a decade. Omegas are always a temptation. A rare temptation. But one we want to avoid. It's one thing hooking up with betas. Gabriel's fine with that. Another omega — no way! "Do you need me to up your dose of suppressants?"

"She's a beta."

Liam is quiet, fiddling with the pair of gold cufflinks on the table top. "A beta."

"Yeah."

“Then what’s the problem? Stay out of her way.”

Yeah, it should be that easy. We alphas aren’t drawn to betas in the way we are to omegas. There’s no scent, no pheromones pulling us that way. No bloody biology taking control and driving our actions. I shouldn’t be this fucking torn up.

“I am staying out of her way,” I snap. “But it isn’t easy. Not when she seems to be in every faculty meeting. Not when I have to watch her sauntering down the corridor every day in her little outfits. Not when ...”

Liam examines me. “You’ve never seemed fixated by a girl before.”

No, I haven’t. I have my pack. I have my brothers. We have our omega. That’s always been enough for me. Sure, it hasn’t stopped me chasing women. I like the seduction, the thrill. But unlike Liam I’ve never wanted a relationship. A date or two. A one-night stand. That’s always been enough for me.

This girl, though, this beta. There’s something different about her. She’s haunting my every fucking thought.

“Maybe it’s the lure of something you can’t have. It makes you want it more.”

“Oh, I’ve had her,” I say, taking another sip of my drink. The alcohol hasn’t kicked in yet. My mind is buzzing. I won’t be able to sleep.

“What?! You just said—”

“It was before. Before I started at the university. Before I knew she was a student.”

Liam brushes his hand across his jaw. “Usually once you’ve caught them, you lose interest, Esra.”

“Yeah.” I knock back the last of my drink.

“What’s she like?”

I groan. I’m not sure talking about her is going to help my situation. I should be forcing her out of my mind, not letting

her dwell there.

“Beautiful. Fucking beautiful.”

Liam chuckles. “There are plenty of beautiful women around.”

“Yeah, but she’s smart too. And she knows exactly how to press my buttons. It’s fucking torture.”

“She’s a PhD student?” I nod. “Well, then, she’s not going to be around forever. You’re going to have to suck it up, mate.”

I groan. Easy for him to fucking say.

“You ever had this problem?” I ask my packmate as he leans back in his chair. “With a patient or ...”

“You know the hospital won’t let me treat any omegas unchaperoned. But I’ve been lucky – I’ve only treated a handful. Each time, though, it was torture – mainly because the little things started mewling and pawing at me as soon as I entered the room. There I am trying to help them, to make them better,” he shakes his head, “and they’re trying to crawl into my lap. One time my chaperone, Dave, had to call for backup because this feisty little omega was fucking strong.”

I laugh. “You fucking pussy!”

“No, mate, you have no idea. You’ve been with Gabriel too long. He’s bonded, mated, settled. He’s not the fucking handful most omegas are.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Gabriel settled?” Our omega likes his dalliances. He’s probably had more lays outside the pack than any of the rest of us.

“You know what I mean. He knows who his alphas are. He always comes home to us.”

I fidget on my seat. It’s true and yet I’m not sure it’s how a pack is meant to work. When we found Gabriel, I thought that would be it for us. No more searching, no more sleeping around. That thirst would be quelled. And it was at first. But then ...

Since then, things haven't been the same between us. Even if none of us will ever admit it.

"Where is he tonight?" Liam asks.

"Out at some after party."

"You didn't want to go."

"I wasn't invited."

Maybe that's half the problem. If I was curled up with our omega right now, that little beta would be the last thing on my mind.

"Does he know about this girl?"

"Why would he? There's nothing to tell."

Liam leans forward, elbows resting on his knees. "That's not how it works, Esra. We have an agreement."

We do. The sleeping around, the dating people outside the pack, that's all fine as long as we're all open and honest about it. Everything hinges on trust. It's a delicate balance.

"I told him after I slept with her."

"If you're lusting after this woman—"

"I'm not intending to do a damn thing about it though, am I, Liam?" I snap, jumping to my feet and slamming my glass on the table.

I'm not risking my career. I'm not going to let what happened before happen again.

"Fuck," he says, flopping back in the chair and raising his hands. "This one's gotten under your skin."

Yes. Yes, she fucking has.

S ophia

THE EVENT my mother insists I attend for her foundation could be worse. It's located in the Studworth botanical gardens. The old Victorian palm house is laid out with food and drinks, the glass canopy twinkling with lights and in the corner a band plays sultry music, a singer in a long black dress crooning into the microphone. The party has spilled out onto the neatly clipped lawns, under the trees and among the tropical flowers and plants. The night is clear and hangs heavy with heady blossoms.

I don't know as many people as I'd expected. It's June and many of my old school and university friends are away on summer holidays. Still, I've never had a problem with intermingling. It's a skill my mother taught me from a young age. Armed with a glass of red, I make my way around talking to the older women and men; some with fortunes from old families, some newly made.

A man my age makes a beeline my way and after a few minutes of small talk about the state of the economy, attempts to place his hand on my hip. I shuffle slightly to the side, sipping my drink, and breaking free of his grasp. He takes the hint and leaves.

I talk to an older woman about modern art, and after fifteen minutes of conversation, she invites me to spend the

summer at her villa in Tuscany. I tell her I'll think about it.

My mother finds me next.

"Having fun, darling?" she asks me, placing her hand on my arm.

I shrug. It's unusual for me to have stayed this long. Usually I take up an offer like the ones I've received. Maybe I'd make one of my own.

But I'm restless.

It's that alpha.

Professor Cole.

I've never been snared before. Never been obsessed.

Sure I've had my dalliances, my brief affairs and flings. But none were serious, all consuming. Any flames were snuffed out as quickly as they'd ignited. The problem has never been me becoming too interested, it's always been the other way around.

Perhaps it is simply the allure of forbidden fruit. A fruit I've already taken a bite from.

I should find someone to take me home for the night. Someone who can make me forget. Maybe that younger man wasn't so bad after all.

I trawl the people all intermingling and from the corner of my eyes I spot the mayor. He's my mother's age, with film-star looks. They call him the silver fox in the press. He spots me too and I look away quickly. Too late. He's heading our way. He's been sniffing around my mother lately, something I've tried to discourage. But my mother lives for her admirers.

I kiss her cheek.

"I'm going to explore the gardens."

"But it's pitch black, darling."

"It's fine."

"Well," she says, stroking her hand down my arm. "Be careful please."

I laugh. “I always am, mother.”

She does that thing with her eyes. Maybe I stay out of trouble these days, but when I was younger, she was always having to fish me out of it. Scrapes with other girls at school, breaking the hearts of unsuspecting boys, arguments with teachers.

I was a whirlwind of energy and passion back then, leaving havoc in my path. I’ve learned over the years to control that passion. To hold it in.

I stroll away before the mayor has a chance to reach us, turning around the side of the building and following the twisting paths, knowing he won’t be able to find me.

I blow out air through my teeth as I follow the winding gravel path under the drooping boughs of a willow tree, down a slope covered in wild flowers and around carefully crafted hedgerows. The stones crunch under my heels and out here, away from all the other bodies, it’s cooler, the air nipping at my bare arms.

The path begins to fall away down a slope and my pace increases as I follow it, faster until I’m trotting, and then I’m laughing, throwing my head back to glance up at the moon and running.

I race down the slope, my hair and my dress streaming behind me, the smile on my face wild, the air whistling past my ears, until I lose my footing.

I yelp as my ankle twists underneath me and I crumple to the ground, landing on damp mossy grass.

“Shit,” I mumble, rubbing at the throbbing pain in my ankle.

“Are you OK?” a deep voice rings out in the night.

The mayor? Did he follow me after all?

My spine stiffens.

I peer through the darkness. There’s a man sprinting towards me.

It isn't him.

Dressed in a dark suit, he's tall and broad and, as he draws closer, I see his short hair is fair and his eyes a light blue.

He drops to his knees beside me and I attempt a self-deprecating laugh which morphs to a wince.

"You're hurt?"

"My ankle," I say, my hands wrapped around the throbbing tissue. "I think I twisted it or something. It's fine." I attempt to roll onto my knees and climb to my feet, but pain radiates through my leg and I wince again.

"Let me take a look." I stare at him sceptically. "I'm a doctor."

This time I manage a laugh. "Is that what you tell all the girls?"

He smiles at me, his left cheek dimpling and his eyes dancing. He's good looking. The kind of man who lands the lead role in a romcom.

"You don't believe me? And here I was thinking I had a trustworthy face."

I lean a little closer to him, lowering my voice. "In my experience, the ones with trustworthy faces are the last ones you should actually trust."

"Very wise. But you can see my British Medical Association membership card if you want?" He reaches inside his jacket.

"Hmmm." I motion toward him with my fingers. "Let's see it then."

He chuckles and draws out his wallet. It's made from leather, soft and heavy. He opens it and pulls out a card which I take from his fingers.

It's then I catch the faintest whiff of it, only just discernible to me above all the floral aromas – a scent. A scent that reminds me of expensive leather shoes.

He's an alpha. I should have known by his build.

I hold the card up to my face and squint at it in the dark.

Liam Stand.

“You’re a surgeon. Do you even know anything about ankles?”

“I’m an orthopaedics surgeon. I know all there is to know about bones.”

I nod, impressed. He’s older than me by a good decade and a half but I note no wedding band on his finger.

“OK. Dr Stand. You may assess my ankle.”

“Mr Stand,” he corrects.

I pass the card back to him and he slides it back into his wallet with a smile.

“Surgeons are always misters.”

“Or missus,” I remind him.

“Of course.” Tucking his wallet back inside his jacket, he rests his fingers gently on my right ankle. “This one?”

“Yes.” His touch is warm and pleasant as he traces his fingers down the bottom of my calf and around the back of my foot.

“It’s a little swollen. I’m going to press a little harder now, to check the bone. Ready?”

I scoff, then squeal as he presses his fingertips into my ankle.

“You can slap me afterwards if you want. You’ll be surprised how many patients do.”

“You like to be slapped?” I try to joke, although the words come out in a hiss through my teeth as he continues to poke at me.

“Depends on the circumstances.” He lifts his gaze to mine and smiles with mischief at me.

I take back what I said before. He is very good looking. The kind of man who causes butterflies to flutter in stomachs.

I bet he charms all his patients. I bet he commands them to get better and they goddamn obey.

“I’m pretty certain that your ankle is fine.”

“No trip to the hospital?”

“Dreadful place, I wouldn’t recommend it.” He holds out his elbow towards me. “Here. I also wouldn’t recommend lying about on the ground all night. You never know what strange man might find you there.”

I hook my heels off my feet and hang on to his arm. It’s solid beneath my fingers and he heaves us both easily to our feet.

“Can you stand on it?” he asks.

I test my weight on it. A little pain shoots through my leg but I suspect walking on it will actually help.

For a moment, I consider lying to him. I like the idea that if I can’t walk, he’ll be required to sweep me up into his arms. In fact, although there are many fantasies I have enacted, being carried in the arms of a stranger is one left untouched. However, I’ve never been any good at faking it.

“I’m good.”

He nods, but doesn’t release my arm, instead guiding me back along the path and allowing me to lean my weight on his arm.

“I didn’t catch your name,” he says as we walk back towards the palm house, lit up like a light bulb against the night’s sky.

“I didn’t give it to you.”

“Will you now? After all, we’re practically old friends.”

“And you felt up my ankle.”

“Exactly. Only polite I know your name.”

“Sophia.”

“Sophia,” he repeats. “And is there any particular reason you were tumbling down hills in the dark, Sophia?”

“Are you telling me that you find that unusual?”

“It’s not every evening I come across young ladies sprawled out on the path in front of me.” He hesitates. “Unfortunately,” he adds darkly.

“I’d have to dispute your version of events. I certainly wasn’t sprawled.”

“If you don’t mind though, it’s how I will be telling the story to my pack.”

I halt. “Pack?”

“Pack.”

I study him. Packs are still an unusual and unconventional way of living for alphas, although they are becoming more popular, especially among younger men. But this man is in his forties. I’ve never heard of older alphas choosing to live that way. Then again perhaps the other members of his pack are younger.

“You often swap stories about your encounters with women with your packmates?”

“It’s one of the bonuses of being in a pack,” he says with only a hint of a jibe.

We edge closer to the party. There are other people clustered on the path talking quietly and the soft music weaves its way to us.

“I’d ask you to dance, Sophia. But I think you ought to rest your ankle.”

“Perhaps you’d like to ask me on a date instead.”

He halts and I stop beside him. He manoeuvres me around so I’m facing him. “I’m much older than you.”

I tilt my head and examine his face. “Ten, fifteen years I’m guessing.”

“Yes, I think you may be right.”

“It’s terribly ageist of you not to take me on a date because of my age.”

One side of his mouth rises in that earth shattering half-smile of his. “Terribly rude. You’re absolutely right.” He takes a step nearer, his hand rests on my waist. “I’d like to take you on a date.”

I swing my gaze around the party, catching the eye of the mayor talking to a group of old men. “How about now?”

“Now?” The alpha’s eyebrows leap up his forehead in amusement.

I lean in closer. “It’s a little old here for me.”

He laughs, his hand squeezing my waist ever so slightly.

“Come on then. Let’s get out of here.”



HE DRIVES A PORSCHE. Of course he does. What surgeon doesn’t drive some kind of jazzy sports car? Not that I’m complaining. It’s a silver that gleams in the moonlight and the interior smells of the alpha’s scent, the leather seats soft against my spine.

As I run my fingertips over the dashboard and all its gadgets, he reaches across my body and fastens my seatbelt.

“Hey,” I protest, “I am capable of buckling up myself.”

“I wasn’t sure. You are very young, practically a baby.”

“And so where are you planning on taking me, Grandpa?”

“Where do you youngsters like to go? No, don’t tell me, I think I know.”

He smiles to himself, revving the engine and nipping out of the space. The car speeds down the dark road, away from the botanical gardens and back out into the city. Everything is brighter and louder out here. The pavements are full of people, some laden with bags after a day of shopping, some dressed up on their way to Studworth’s clubs and bars.

“We could go to Deep Slick?” I offer. It’s a nightclub I know is popular with alphas and other powerful men.

“You wouldn’t get in.”

I turn from the window and frown at him. “Because I’m a beta.”

His gaze flicks from the road and meets mine. “Because you aren’t old enough.”

I laugh. “You know if you’re so concerned about my age, perhaps you ought to ask me how old I am. I could be underage.”

“You’re not. And it’s rude to ask a woman her age,” he says seriously. “The amount of times I’ve had to ask a patient their date of birth and ended up on the receiving end of a verbal bashing.”

“I’m 26.”

He sighs. “Ahhh, to be 26 again.”

“I’m not sure I’d recommend it,” I confess, smoothing down my black dress against my thighs.

“Why not?” He flicks on the indicator and swerves the car to the right.

“Did you have your life sorted at 26? Did you know what you wanted to do?”

“I was a junior doctor at 26. I was on the path to be who I am. But,” he adds, bringing the car to an abrupt stop, “I didn’t have it all figured out. If I’m honest, Sophia, I still don’t. And I’m not sure anyone ever does. If they say they do, they’re lying.”

“Hmmm,” I say, thinking of my best friend and how sorted her life seems.

I glance out at the window expecting us to be parked outside some sophisticated bar or hotel. Instead, the bright lights of a neon sign flicker in front of us.

“You’re serious?” I ask.

“I am.” He unbuckles his seat belt and jumps out of the car, coming around to open my door for me.

He helps me out, offering his arm again so I can hobble across the car park and inside the fast food restaurant.

“I don’t know about you,” he whispers in my ear, “but I’m fucking starving after that party. Why do they always serve such bloody small portions?”

He helps me into a seat by the window. The place is pretty empty, just a small group of teenagers gathered around a table at the back and another teenager leaning against the counter, chewing gum.

“What can I get you?”

“What would you recommend?” I ask. “I’ve never been here before.”

“My respect for you has dropped considerably, Sophia. How the hell have you never been here? They serve the best kebab and chips in Studworth.”

I crinkle up my nose. “I’ve never exactly been tempted by kebab meat before.” I glance towards the revolving tower of meat. “Is it safe?”

“Fuck knows, but it tastes good.” Shaking off his jacket, he unclips his cufflinks, dropping them into his pocket and rolling up his sleeves. “I’m going to order for you.”

He strolls over to the counter and a second older man emerges from the kitchen out the back. The alpha chats cheerfully to the other two men and soon they’re laughing. I take the opportunity to examine him under the bright lights of the restaurant. It’s obvious he works out, his forearms strong, veins running down his arm, his shoulders broad. And his arse! The material of his suit trousers is taut across the tight cheeks and I have the urge to sink my fingernails in deep.

I sigh a little and shuffle on my seat.

Maybe this is exactly the man to take my mind off Professor Cole.

He continues to chat to the two men as they load two styrofoam dishes with chips and cuts of meat.

“Sophia,” he calls over. “What sauce do you want? Garlic mayo? Ketchup?”

“A bit of everything,” I tell him. I might as well give this a try.

He returns to the table a moment later balancing the two dishes in his hands as well as two cans of coke.

“Oh god, this looks revolting,” I tell him.

“The best tasting food always does,” he says, shaking salt all over his chips.

Hesitant, I take one from my own dish and dip it in the sauce, then snap my teeth through the fried potato.

“Good, huh?” he says with a grin.

I chew, a mixture of fat and carbohydrates, salt and sugar melting onto my tongue. It is good. Really good.

“Meh, it’s all right.”

He laughs. “You wait. An hour or two later and this place will be rammed. They’ll be queuing around the block.”

I take another chip and dip it in the sauce, smiling at him.

His gaze roams my face, dipping fleetingly down to the cleavage of my dress.

“You’re taking a big gamble here,” I tell him, licking salt off my fingertips.

“How so?”

“First date in a kebab shop. Risky.”

“Life’s all about gambles. Every time I slice my knife through a patient, I’m taking a gamble.”

“Eww,” I say, “that is not the image I wanted in my head while I’m eating.”

He laughs and the sound is a rumble in his chest, soothing and seductive all at once. “I forgot you’re a civilian.” He drops four chips into his mouth at once and chews while he looks at me. “So am I screwing up this date?”

I lean my elbow on the table top and rest my chin in my hand. “Depends. Talk me through your thinking. Why here?”

He cracks open his can of coke then reaches over the table to open mine too.

“Let me see. One. You’re clearly too young to take anywhere else.”

I roll my eyes. “I think we established my age.”

“And two,” he slumps back in his chair, meeting my eyes, “you seem like the kind of girl who gets wined and dined a lot, and while I have no problem with doing the same, Sophia, I figured maybe I needed to stand out to be in with a chance of a second date. Because, three, I have a feeling not many men—”

“Or women,” I interrupt him.

“Or women,” he says without flinching, “get to take you on a second date.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask, reaching over to pinch one of his chips.

“Am I wrong?” He grabs my hand and lifts it to his mouth, snapping his teeth through the chip I’m holding, then licking his lips.

“No.”

“You bore easily.”

My eyes flick back to his. “Y-y-yes, I guess I do.”

He nods, clearly satisfied with his deduction. “So do I get that second date?”

“We could skip straight past that,” I say, sliding the remaining half of the chip between my lips. “And you could take me home to your place.”

He groans as if I just gutted him. “As tempting as that sounds, Sophia, I’m going to take another gamble and hold out on that second date.”

I pout at him and shrink back in my chair.

Without warning, he grabs my seat and drags it around the table so I'm sitting right alongside him.

"No sulking," he says, then leans in to whisper in my ear, his breath hot, "you have no idea how tempting that is."

"Not tempting enough," I mutter.

"I'd like to get to know you better, Sophia." He kisses the tender skin beneath my ear. I shiver and close my eyes, enjoying the pressure of his lips there. I want him to drag me onto his lap, but I'm curious. He's different to the other men I've dated over the last few years. Certainly, none have dragged me out for a doner kebab.

I twist my head to meet his sky-blue eyes. "You've set yourself some high standards now. I'm looking forward to seeing how you'll top this date."

He laughs. "Give me your number," he tells me, "and you'll find out."

L iam

I'VE NEVER BEEN able to walk away from a challenge. Especially a challenge laid down by a beautiful woman who has me intrigued. Sure, she's a little young for me, but despite my teasing, she hadn't come across as young. In fact, she seemed more mature than many of the women my own age I've dated.

I spend the next 48 hours fixated on finding a date venue that will knock her socks off. Hopefully, more than just her socks. I'm planning to seduce her. Thoroughly and completely.

Sure, I'd had my opportunity to do so the other night, but I hadn't been kidding. She reminds me of one of my packmates. Only interested in the quick hits, the rushed hook-ups, the one-night stands. That's not me. I've always been interested in something more real, more genuine, more long term.

I want Sophia in my bed. But I want her there more than once.

In the end, I resort to asking Marcus. He's my surgical assistant and while we're scrubbing up for surgery, I decide to pick his brains.

"Where would you take a date if you wanted to wow them?" I ask him.

He pauses the rubbing of his hands, the foam bubbles popping under the sterile light.

“You’re dating again? Didn’t you just break up with Claire?”

I shrug, rinsing my hands under the hot stream of water. “Claire, was nothing serious. I was a rebound after her ex-husband. She was a bit of companionship for a while.”

“You don’t have companionship with your pack?”

“This is different.” I shake my hands over the sink. “So come on, where would you take them?”

“Liam, you earn about five times what I do. I’m sure you can think of any number of fancy restaurants.”

“I’m not interested in fancy restaurants,” I scoff. “This woman’s not interested in that.” I lean against the sink, waiting for him to finish cleaning his hands. “I took her to Hussain’s for our first date.”

Marcus’s head snaps towards me. “You’re fucking kidding me?”

“Nope. And she liked it.”

“This one does sound different.”

“She is.”

He leans his forearm against the tap handle, turning off the torrent of water. “So we’re talking somewhere unusual.”

He follows me through to the theatre, the anaesthetist nods at us, the patient already laid out on the table.

“There’s a fair just pulled into town, over in Victoria Park.”

“A fair?”

“Yeah. I saw the lights as I was passing by last night.”

I smile. A fair. I’d bet my last penny, Sophia’s never been to a fair.



“YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL,” I tell her, outside the door to her apartment block.

She stares down at her jeans and trainers. “You think so?”

I smooth the hair from her face and kiss her cheek. She isn’t perfumed in the scent of an omega or an alpha, but she smells heady. Jasmine on a summer’s night. Besides, I like it. My head is clear. I’m not distracted by my fucking hindbrain trying to decode every hidden message in her scent, instructing me to do this and that.

No, while my alpha instincts may be piqued by the proximity of this woman, I’m in control.

“I’m very intrigued,” she says, kissing my cheek in return. Her lips are soft and slightly wet, and fuck it I’m not in as much control as I thought, because I have a strong desire to bundle her back inside and take her to bed. “I’ve never been instructed to dress down for a date.”

“Your date never took you to a football match or the cinema?”

“Those sound like fifth or sixth kinda dates. And I never got that far before.”

“I’m going to have to question you later to understand how that can be.” I screw my brow up in mock suspicion. “Is there something hideous about you that you haven’t declared?”

“You mean my outie belly button?”

“Revolting.”

“Or the fact I never floss.”

“You witch.”

She giggles. “Come on. I’ve told you mine. Fess up.”

“My mother tells me I’m perfect in every way.”

“Oh I bet she does. Major red flag, Mr Stand.”

I offer her my arm. It's only a short walk to my car but I'm taking any excuse to touch her. "How's the ankle?"

"Fine now. You can rest assured I won't be suing you for medical malpractice."

"It has been keeping me awake at night."

At the car, I open the door for her and watch as she slides into her seat. There's something seductive about a woman climbing into my car, especially when that woman is a pretty little thing like Sophia.

On the drive across town to the park, she flicks through the radio stations, changing it to some station playing dance music from the news channel I always listen to.

"Fuck, Sophia, this is awful. You're assaulting my eardrums."

"It's what all the young kids are listening to, Grandpa."

"Then the young kids have fucking miserable taste."

She flicks through the channels some more, landing on a station playing rock'n'roll hits from the fifties. "More to your taste?" she asks.

"Hey now," I warn her, "I'm not that old."

I jab my finger at the radio controls until I hit upon a station I like.

"Oasis," she moans. "You're really old."

"I was sixteen when this song came out."

"I don't think I was even born," she mutters.

"I think you require some re-education when it comes to music. This was the best era."

"Debatable," she says.

"No, certain," I correct.

The lively streets of the city start to thin as we head through suburbia, passing houses lit up from within.

“Where are we going?” she asks, practically pressing her nose to her window.

“Here.” I swing the car into the turning signposted for the park.

“The park? You told me last time it was dangerous hanging around with strange men in parks.”

“I think you’re misquoting me there, Sophia. But look.” Above the dark trees, their leaves wet with rain from the afternoon, lights from carriages rise and fall. The big dipper.

She swings her gaze to me, her eyes surprisingly full of excitement.

Thank fuck.

“A fairground?”

“You ever been to one before?”

“I mean, I’ve been to the big theme parks, but, no, not one like this. It’s not somewhere my mum would ever want to come.”

“And how about you, Lady Sophia? Happy to grace this fairground with your presence?”

She frowns at me. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No,” I say seriously, “I just suspect our upbringings were slightly different.”

She rests her head back on the seat. “What makes you say that?”

I unbuckle my belt and turn in the seat towards her, lifting a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“I know you probably assume being a surgeon simply involves slicing and dicing people open,” she screws up her nose, “but it’s not. Being a doctor involves understanding people. Deducing what’s wrong with them, concluding what is in their best interests. I’m good at my work, Sophia, and I’m good at understanding people. You come from money. I knew that the moment I saw you.”

“Is it a good or bad thing?” she asks me, her mouth slightly parted.

“Neither. But I suspect it means you’ve missed out on certain things. And I would enjoy introducing you to them.”

She smiles wickedly at me, her palms coming to stroke down my chest and setting my skin tingling. I can’t help myself. I lean across the gear stick and, cupping my hand around the back of her neck, I kiss her. I kiss those warm, wet lips of hers, loving the way her body melts towards me and her mouth moves to meet mine.

I kiss her slowly and lazily. A kiss I know will have her wanting more. This woman will take everything at once if she can and I intend to make her wait.

Her fingers trace across my chest and she sighs into my mouth.

I lean away, watching as her eyelids flicker open and she gazes up at me.

“Come on, sweetheart.”

I hold her hand as I pay our entrance and lead her through the fairground. Bright lights flash and swoop, people scream as they’re thrown through the air and loud pop music thumps into the night.

“What do you want to try first?” I ask into her ear.

Her deep eyes swing across the scene, lingering on each ride.

“That one.” She points to the haunted house, its exterior painted like a crumbling old, gothic manor. Cartoon ghosts and vampires peer out of the windows and bats flocking around a sliver of moon.

She tugs on my hand and skips towards the queue.

“It’s going to be scary,” I warn her.

“I love scary,” she says.

“We’ll see.”

A rickety carriage pulls up alongside the queue and once the current riders have vacated, she climbs onto a seat near the back and I follow her in, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and drawing her close.

An attendant walks down the train, lowering bars and flicking through her phone at the same time. Then the carriage jerks forward and Sophia squeals, swinging her gaze my way and grinning.

The cool, sophisticated act has vanished and I suspect I'm being offered a momentary flash of the real woman beneath the layers of practised charm.

As the carriage lurches forward into the chasm of darkness before us, she snuggles back into my arm and I lean forward, inhaling the jasmine aroma of her hair as it tickles against my nose.

Unfortunately, though, there's no time to savour the moment, because in the next second, we're being spun around and a howling witch swoops down from above to cackle in our faces. Sophia screeches right back then laughs as we spin again. This time bats rack their wings in a swarm above our heads before a ghoul leaps out at us making everyone on the train scream. All except me. When you've seen true horror laid out on the operating table in front of you, when you've seen lives slip away through your fingers no matter how hard you try, there is not a lot that frightens you.

Sophia digs her elbow into my side. "Not scared, Alpha?"

I swallow. That's the first time she's called me that and, fuck me, it's a turn on. Betas use the phrase, the name, all the time, and usually it leaves me cold. Usually it's only a little omega whispering that name that gets me hard. But Sophia, she's special.

"No, sweetheart," I say as she flinches when something wrapped in bandages pops up behind me.

She covers her hands over her mouth, her whole body shaking with laughter and I watch calmly as more ghoulies dart out at us, everyone around us screaming.

Just when I think it's all over, the carriage comes to an abrupt halt. Cold mist creeps in around the carriage and a faint howling plays out over the speakers.

"Now what?" Sophia whispers, squeezing on to my bicep. I'm enjoying this far more than I ought to.

Sophia swings her gaze about, searching the dark space. Others in the carriage are whispering. The mist creeps close.

And a huge ghost crashes through the darkness, screaming right in our faces.

Sophia yelps and buries her face in my chest. I wrap her in my arms, holding her that way as the carriage trundles on again, emerging into the brightly-lit night.

When the train grinds to a halt, she looks up at me with a huge grin on her face.

"I can't tell if you hated or loved that," I confess.

"Loved it."

I climb out and help her after me, our seats quickly taken by a pair of excitable children.

"Where next?" she asks.

"Come on." I drag her towards the candy stall and buy her a giant stick of pink candy floss.

She picks a bit with her fingers and holds it up to her face, examining it with suspicion.

"Come on, try it."

She slips it between her lips and I can tell the moment the sugar melts on her tongue, her eyes widening.

She breaks off another piece, winding the strands around her fingers and offering it to me.

"You are a shit doctor, Mr Stand. So far you have introduced me to some very unhealthy food."

"Nothing wrong with that." I let her feed me the piece of candy, holding still as she wipes her thumb across my bottom lip and then caresses my cheek.

We stand there, in the middle of the fairground, the noise and light and people crashing around us, and it's as if the rest of the world melts away. I lean in and kiss her again, ignoring the whistles and the irritated mutterings.

I grab hold of the collar of her leather jacket and pull her right up close to my body.

Afterwards, I kiss her on the big dipper, as we soar above the canopy of the trees, the city falling away beneath us. I kiss her in the tea cups and I kiss her on the dodgems. I kiss her on the walk back to the car and I kiss her in the car, pushing my seat right back and letting her climb onto my lap.

As she straddles me, hands gripping the front of my shirt, teeth raking down my throat, she asks me, "Are you going to take me home this time, Alpha?"

And fuck yes, I am. I'm taking her home to my bed.

I kiss her again and then I buckle her into her seat and drive her straight home.

S ophia

THE ALPHA DRIVES me to his home; a Victorian detached house that sprawls across a patch of land on the edge of the Greendale suburbs. I can tell it's somewhere that probably cost his pack a couple of million at least and yet it isn't the usual house the rich families in Studworth choose. Chimneys protrude from the slate tiles at haphazard angles and the front door is made from multicoloured-stained glass. The brick work is red and a covered porch runs around from the front of the house to the sides. There are several cars parked in the driveway and lights illuminate the place.

"Is your pack home?" I ask, suddenly wondering if I'm being brought back to his house for an orgy I never agreed to.

Not that I'm opposed to the idea. At least I don't think I am.

My best friend, Rosie, has been part of her pack for coming up six years now and she's always made the love-ins with her four alphas sound like something frankly heavenly. I've always been curious. But I don't like surprises like this.

"No idea, sweetheart. But my room's around the back."

"You don't want me to meet your pack?"

He holds my gaze. "Yes, but not yet. Not now." He growls and I understand. This alpha has no intentions of sharing me.

No intentions of having whatever electricity is sparking between us interrupted.

We walk around to the back of the sprawling house and he unlocks a pair of garden doors, pulling me inside a dark room and up against the cool wall. My lips are swollen and bruised from all the kissing, but frankly I don't give a damn. I close my eyes and fall into his kiss, into his scent and his strong arms. It's intoxicating. I think I could kiss him all night.

But he has other ideas. His fingers work down the zip of my jacket and he yanks it down, my arms catching in the sleeves by my sides.

His eyes flicker with mischief as he leans in to nibble on my throat, his hands swimming from my waist, up the sides of my body and then around to squeeze my tits. I whimper.

"Like that, sweetheart?"

"I'd like it even more if you'd let me touch you too."

"But I like you at my mercy."

I wonder if that is an alpha thing, or a him thing. But I'm not here to be some omega substitute, some poor imitation of the real thing.

I yank my arms from my sleeves and plant my palms on his firm stomach, tugging his shirt free of his trousers, and discovering warm skin underneath.

"Sophia," he growls.

"I want to see you, Alpha," I whisper, reaching up on my toes and sucking on his neck, sucking hard enough to bruise.

He presses into me, hard against the wall, and then with a tortured growl steps away. I hear the floorboards creak beneath his feet and then a lamp switches on, revealing the room in its faint orange glow.

I let my vision roam the room, taking in this alpha's private space.

It has the Victorian charm of the house, dark polished floorboards, a battered leather armchair, and a wide double

bed. A bookcase lines one wall and on the others are a mixture of family photos and small discrete art works.

On the back of the door hangs a white coat and a stethoscope.

I walk over to it and hook the device off the door, cradling it in my hands. The metal is cool to the touch.

“I didn’t think surgeons needed these.”

“Not often.”

Swishing my hair over my shoulders, I plug the stethoscope into my ears and step closer to him. Pulling the hem of his shirt, I slip the end of the stethoscope underneath the material and against his stomach.

He sucks in a sudden breath and stills, waiting to see what I’ll do next.

I come closer. Sliding the stethoscope up the ridges of his six pack, over his ribs and hovering over his solid left pec. Immediately my ears fill with the thump thump of his heart. Loud and aggressive. I realise just how powerful this man is. He has the bedside manner of an experienced doctor. He is charming. But he is an alpha nonetheless. Hidden behind his suits, beneath his white coat, is a body designed for dominance and violence. He could rip me to shreds if he wished. He could crush me in the palm of his hand. But that doesn’t leave me afraid. No, the opposite, it sends desire swirling in my belly.

I’m realising that being with an alpha is like playing with fire. Any moment it could soar out of control and engulf me, but that is half the fun.

I’ve always enjoyed playing with fire. But these days those fires have become harder and harder to find. Nothing excites me anymore.

This alpha, he excites me. What he could do to me, excites me even more.

I run my free hand over his torso, tracing the top of his jeans, holding his hot gaze in mine.

Carefully, he removes the stethoscope from my ears and tugs it from my hand. He places them in his ears and yanks down the neck of my top, exposing a slither of my lacy red bra. Another of those growls and he's pressing the metal against my ribs. It's not as cold as it was but it's still cool.

"Your heart's racing, sweetheart."

"It is?" I ask, breathless. He glides the stethoscope down resting it on the curve of my breast.

Then, with an irritated growl, he's yanking off my top and staring down at me. He rests the stethoscope back over my ribs and whispers, "Let's see if I can make it race even faster."

He cups the side of my ribcage with his hand and glides his thumb over my nipple, the rough lace brushing against the sensitive tip and making it harden with his attention.

"Hmmm," he says, listening. "A little faster."

He sweeps his thumb over again, then rings the delicate tissue, before squeezing the whole of my breast in his palm.

I tip my head back and his mouth meets my throat. He licks a wet stripe down my pulse and nips at my shoulder, his fingers inside my bra now, his thumb more calloused and rough than I'd realised.

It feels divine and I bite down hard on my lip, letting him pull me closer, his thigh jamming between my legs and pressing into my core. I rub against him, my fingernails digging into the plane of his stomach. He bites me in retaliation and then he's chuckling.

"Fuck, now we're getting somewhere, sweetheart. Your heart's pounding for me."

It's not the only thing. There's a pulse between my legs that's making me needy and the friction of his thigh isn't nearly enough.

I grab at his fly, tripping down the buttons and plunging my hand inside his jeans, finding him hard. I trail the length of him, moaning as I do.

He's big. Big like the professor and I remember how good that had been. I could get used to alpha cock.

The stethoscope is thrown aside, landing on the floorboards with a rattle, and his hands are under my backside, lifting me from the ground and towards the bed in the next instance. My back hits the mattress with a soft bounce and then his heavy weight pushes me further into the bed.

"Sophia," he growls, "You're such a little tease. The things you're doing to me."

"I'm not doing nearly as much as I'd like to."

"Do whatever the fuck you want, sweetheart." He pulls his shirt over his head and I can see the red lines my nails have left on his skin. I like that. I like I can mark this big, bad alpha.

"Really?" I ask, quirking an eyebrow.

He grins wickedly. "Do your worst."

I push at his shoulder until he's rolling onto his back and then I crawl towards him, hooking my leg over his waist and straddling him. Immediately, he's gripping my thighs and manoeuvring me to sit over his hard cock. I roll my hips, rubbing along his length, feeling him through the fabric of my jeans. As I do, I reach behind me and unhook my bra, allowing the lacy thing to fall away down my arms.

His gaze leaves my face and lingers on my chest.

"Fuck," he mutters. "Those are pretty tits."

He raises one hand to touch them and I bat it away. He scowls at me, sending shivers racing along every nerve.

"No touching," I tell him.

"You must be kidding."

"No, I'm not. No, touching until I say so." He frowns at me like a kid who just had candy snatched from his hands. "You said I could do whatever I wanted to."

"I had other ideas," he mutters.

"Well, I want to indulge in a little torture, Alpha."

I continue to grind against him, rubbing up and down his shaft as I cup each breast in my hands and squeeze.

His frown grows darker, and I smile at him, licking my lips.

I pluck at my nipples, massaging the soft flesh between my fingers, all the time grinding and grinding. Despite the layers of denim between us, he's pressing right against my clit and the pressure builds. My movements become quicker and more erratic and his fingers dig deep in my thighs, moving me along his cock, his gaze flicking between my face and my tits. They bounce in my hands and he groans, the noise seeming to vibrate through his body and intensifying the sensation between my legs.

"Shit, Sophia. You're so fucking hot. I want to taste you. I want to lick every inch of you. I want my mouth drinking up all that wetness you're making for me."

I'm not an omega. I'm not gushing gallons of slick for him. My wetness has that musky flavour, it's not sweet like an omega's. Maybe I should be concerned. Maybe I should be worried about disappointing him.

But my brain is wired all wrong, because it only turns me on more. I'm not what he should want, what he should need, yet I'm driving this alpha wild nonetheless. I can tell by the jet colour of his eyes, the way his jaw is tight, the grip of his fingers, the jerk of his cock beneath me. He's rock hard.

I moan as the feeling between my legs intensifies.

"You dirty little girl. You like riding my cock. Like getting off on it for your own pleasure. Want to sit on it for real, sweetheart?"

"Not yet," I gasp, grinding faster and faster, building myself up into a frenzy.

"Fucckkk. You are a bad, little thing."

He grips me tighter and takes over the rhythm of my movement, rubbing my pussy up and down his hard cock until my legs shake, my core tightens and then ... and then ... and then I crash over into the abyss.

My body jerks, my head tips backwards and my mouth falls open on one long continuous *ohhhhh*, and I ride the feeling of bliss.

When the last of the shockwaves melts away, I drop my chin forward and open my eyes, meeting the midnight pupils of his.

He's lying perfectly still, almost transfixed.

"Beautiful, sweetheart, absolutely beautiful." I roll my eyes. "Oh no, you don't," he says, this time flipping me over onto my back and crawling on top of me, caging his arms around my head. "Don't dismiss a compliment like that."

"I'm not, it's just ..." I decide to be honest with him. Why not? "I don't want to sound conceited, or ungrateful, but being told I'm beautiful, it gets old. Like all anyone can appreciate about me is how I look."

I expect him to laugh at me or tell me I'm a brat. It would probably be my reaction to anyone who dropped that confession on me. But he doesn't. Instead, he nods like he's digesting that piece of information.

"Noted. Do I have your permission to call you sexy then, Sophia?"

"It's the same thing."

"It's not," he says, lowering his mouth to my neck and littering a trail of kisses down my body. "You can be beautiful and not have an ounce of sex appeal. You can be conventionally unattractive and have sex appeal by the bucket loads. It's about attitude, it's about words, and how you use your body. You have so much sex appeal, Sophia, it's hard to keep control around you."

"Hmmm," I say, letting my hands swim over all those goddamn muscles as he unbuttons my jeans and shimmies them down my legs.

I'm wearing a pair of matching red lacy knickers.

"See," he says, "it's knowing you're wearing sinful little things like this under your perfectly innocent outfit. I knew

you would be and I've been imagining it all fucking evening."

"Want to take them off, Alpha?" I ask, lifting my foot to rest against his pec.

He snatches it in his hand and kisses the tip of my big toe.

"No, sweetheart, I want to eat you out while you're still wearing these, because I want you to make them so wet they'll be ruined, and you won't be able to wear them for anyone else."

I go to protest. I've already come once this evening and am feeling I ought to return the favour, but he sucks my big toe into his mouth and I forget my own name.

I grip the sheets beneath me. "Shit!" I squeal. It feels intense, pleasurable and unbearable all at once. And it's my toe. My fucking toe. I can't imagine how that mouth is going to feel between my legs.

He releases my toe with a pop and tickles his finger down the sole of my foot, making me wriggle on the bed with the same contrasting sensations.

"You like that, do you?"

"Uh-huh," I pant.

That naughty smile returns to his face and I'm wondering if what I've heard about doctors being dirty underneath their freshly laundered coats is true.

He continues to trail his finger up the inside of my leg, aching slowly so that I am panting. When he reaches the gusset of my underwear, I inhale, waiting for him to touch me. But he halts.

I groan, attempting to roll up and tug him towards me. Gently, he pushes me back down into the mattress.

"You had your fun, sweetheart. Now it's my turn."

He kisses the tips of each of my toes, and then glides his tongue down the sole of my foot and up my leg, following the path of his fingers. When he reaches the tender flesh of my

thigh, his kisses become harder, he sucks and nibbles, inching closer and closer to my underwear.

“Are you wet, Sophia?” he says, mere millimetres from the red lace, so close I feel the warmth of his breath.

“So wet!”

He places an innocent kiss above the lace and then he’s gone.

“What?!” I cry out, but he has my other foot in his hands now and he repeats his actions with my other leg. By the time his mouth is back on the lace, I’m a crazy ball of need, writhing on the bed, grinding my pussy unabashedly into his face.

“It’s OK, sweetheart. I’m going to give you what you want now.”

I’m not sure what I want. His tongue? His mouth? His fingers? His cock? Maybe all of it.

I’m rewarded with his finger first though. He yanks my knickers to one side and strokes the lips of my sex.

“All swollen,” he croons. He finds my opening and pushes a finger inside, groaning as he does. “And wet.” He pushes his finger higher inside me, brushing against my g-spot and making me jolt.

“Here?”

“Yes,” I moan.

He plays with it as he lowers his mouth to my folds, sweeping his tongue through me and making me scream every time he connects with my clit.

I am wet – he’s right – and getting wetter. Maybe it’s the doctor thing, because he seems to understand my body and just what he needs to make me come against his tongue and around his fingers.

He laps at me, as I flop down boneless on the mattress, absolutely destroyed by his fingers.

“Enough torture,” I gasp, “fuck me already.”

He brushes his hand across his face, wiping away the mess I've made of his chin and then he's stepping out of his jeans and his boxers.

My gaze lands on his stiff cock. That niggles of doubt plays in my head. Can I take him? But I took the professor and I'm about as wet as I have ever been. I'm more than willing to give this a try.

"Come here, naughty girl," he says, beckoning me with a crook of his finger. "I want you on my cock, riding me like you did earlier."

That bloody self-assured attitude.

I don't move. "Try a 'please'," I tell him.

"You don't want my cock?" he asks, gripping it in his fist and gliding down his long shaft.

Oh I want it, but I'm not his to push around.

"About as much as you want my pussy, Alpha."

He growls. "You don't get to call me alpha, little one, and then act all bratty."

He pumps himself harder, eyes roaming over my body, lingering on my wet pussy. There's a hunger in his eyes.

I spread my legs wider, giving him a more intimate view and then I touch myself, pinching open my folds and playing with my clit before I slip two fingers inside me. I'm even wetter than I realised, obscenely wet.

"It seems we have a stand off, then. I want your pussy. You want my cock. So come here."

"Not until you ask nicely."

"I have asked nicely, Sophia."

I shake my head. "Say the word, Alpha," I say, stealing from that other alpha's playbook. "And you can fuck me anyway you want to."

"Anyway I want to?" He steps forward. "I want to fuck you every possible way. On your back, on your stomach, on

your knees and in my lap, up against the wall and over my desk.”

I suppress a moan. My fingers aren’t nearly enough.

“Just say it,” I pant, “just say it and then we both get what we want.”

“Because you want this?”

“I do!” I whimper.

He steps closer again, and leans over the bed, his mouth hovering above me. I watch his lips form the word, “Please,” and I’m hooking my legs around his waist, yanking him down. He’s inside me in one powerful thrust.

It knocks the air from my lungs and the thoughts from my mind.

There’s only that intense sensation. Too much. Too much pleasure, too much stretch, too much intensity, too much length.

But despite all that, he fits, somehow this giant man fits inside me.

I smile with the satisfaction of it.

“You wet little thing. You’ve taken all of my cock.”

“Hmmm, but you promised to fuck me.”

He chuckles, grinding his hips against me and sucking on my tit. Then he starts.

I lose all control, moaning and groaning, screaming for more and more. He pounds me into the mattress, muttering more dirty words in my ear as he does, and just as I think I’m going to strike it lucky for a third time tonight, he rolls us over, so I’m lying on top of him.

“Ride me,” he says again with more plead and less authority this time. “You looked so goddamn sexy on top of me and I want to see those tits bouncing again.”

I bite him hard on his shoulder, before rolling up to sit. I press my hands onto his shoulders and I bounce on his cock. I

was already so close and this angle has him hitting me right where I need him. Soon I'm crashing into an earth-shattering orgasm and he takes over as my body turns molten, lifting me up and down on his cock as he thrusts up to meet me.

When he comes, he holds me up so I've only half his cock inside me and I peer down to watch as his knot expands at his base and warm fluid hits my insides.

I reach down and touch his knot with my fingers and he groans, his eyes fluttering shut. It's rock hard and hot and three times the girth of his cock.

"Squeeze it. Squeeze my knot, sweetheart." I wrap both hands around the swollen tissue and give him the pressure he needs.

And all of a sudden, I feel it, the crushing inadequacy, because as fun as this was, some of the best sex I've experienced, I can't take his knot. I can't take it like an omega can.

G abriel

I NEED COFFEE.

I need coffee like yesterday.

My head pounds and every muscle in my body aches.

I rub the dust out of my eyes, stretch and kick off the bed covers.

Esra's bed is empty. He was here last night when I rolled in beside him in the early hours of the morning. Now he's gone. Probably for a morning jog.

I wish he wouldn't do that. I like to snuggle in the morning. Heck, I like sleepy, lazy morning sex even better. And an alpha who will fetch my coffee for me.

I'm not getting any of those today.

With an irritated groan, I stagger out of bed, massaging my temples as I find a pair of boxers from one of his drawers and tug them up my thighs.

Then I hobble out into the hallway and along to the kitchen. I had a performance last night, and then Katerina had dragged us all to a nightclub. My hamstrings are tight and my feet raw.

At the kitchen, I open the door and groan again as bright sunshine rushes to blind me. I shade my eyes and stumble through. The aroma of coffee hits my senses and my stomach growls. I squint towards the coffee machine resting on the bloody gleaming counter and blink. Then I blink again.

It's not one of my packmates curled over the machine in a t-shirt that's riding up their thighs and flashing arse my direction. No, it's a woman. All curvy and soft and biteable.

My insides tighten.

I sniff the air. Not omega. No scent. Nothing but coffee.

I let out a long sigh of relief, one our little visitor doesn't hear over the hiss of the machine.

I stroll closer until I'm right behind her, then reach around her edible little body to punch buttons on the machine.

"It's this one," I whisper into her ear.

The little thing jumps a bloody mile and I smile back in satisfaction. Serves her right for snooping about in my kitchen.

She spins around to face me and I examine her face.

I wonder which one brought her home.

Messed-up waves of chestnut hair frame her face – hair that says she's been playing around with one of my alphas. The pink flush of her cheeks confirms this.

She has cheekbones to die for, kiss-me lips and big blue eyes.

She's the kind of girl any one of them would go for.

"Aren't you a pretty little thing?"

I rest my hand on my hip and watch as her gaze flicks down my body. Then her nose twitches.

"What's your name, PLT?"

She stands up straighter. "Sophia."

"And who do you belong to?"

An adorable crease forms between her brows.

“I don’t belong to anyone.”

“So should I be calling the police?”

She stares at me blankly, and this is fun. Toying with one of my alpha’s one-night stands is a perfect hangover cure. Perhaps it’s a little cruel, but as lenient as I am when it comes to my mates’ dalliances – after all I indulge in my own without any complaints from them – jealousy and spite are a hard battle to fight.

“Police?”

“Girlie, if one of my alphas didn’t bring you home, I can only assume you broke into my house.”

“Your house ...” The cogs in her mind whirl and I wait patiently. “You’re the packs’ omega.”

Bingo.

I don’t respond. I’m intrigued to see how this will play out. Will she fall to her knees and beg for my forgiveness, or will she come at me all snarls and protruding claws? That’s what she’d do if she were an omega. But my packmates know that’s not part of the deal. They can have their fun outside our pack, as long as it’s with betas and not omegas.

I’m the only omega in this pack.

“I came home with Liam,” she says, simply. No tears, no challenge either. “He failed to tell me he had an omega.”

I tilt my head, taking in her pissed-off expression. It’s cute. Has my cock stirring.

“Would it have made a difference if he had?”

“I’m no home-wrecker,” she snaps.

I fling back my head and cackle, my hangover fading.

“You’re not wrecking anyone’s home, PLT. Liam can screw whoever he likes. He’s his own man. I don’t keep him on a leash.”

“You don’t mind?” Her eyes grow impossibly wide.

“Why would I mind?”

“He’s your alpha.”

“You betas,” I say, nudging her to one side to claim the coffee waiting beneath the machine. I cradle it in my hands and sigh with satisfaction as the bitter flavour hits my tastebuds, and the caffeine my blood. “You think you understand us, but you never will.”

The crease is back. Oh, she doesn’t like that. Interesting.

“My best friend is a pack omega and she would rather kill her alphas than let them look at another person. Not that they ever would. They’re obsessed with her.”

A slight pang of something unpleasant twinges in my chest. I ignore it, taking another gulp of my coffee.

“Every pack is different and this pack has been happy with how we do things for the last ten years.” I swim my hand through the air. “So if you want to continue screwing Liam, be my guest.”

I take a step towards her, offering up my coffee. Those blue eyes of hers dart up to mine and then her lips open and I pour a little coffee into her mouth. “Screw all of us if you want, pretty little thing.”

She’s smothered in my packmate’s scent, and it smells good on her skin.

When I remove the cup, she licks her lips. I could lift her up onto the counter and take her right here in the kitchen. An even better hangover cure than the coffee and the toying.

“Do I ... do I know you?” she asks, her gaze searching my face.

“I think I’d remember a pretty little thing like you.”

The crease on her forehead twitches and then realisation dawns across her face.

“You’re Gabriel Manchetti?”

I take a long gulp of my coffee. “I am.”

Her face softens. “Wow!”

I chuckle, shrugging my shoulders. “A reaction I usually prefer afterwards, but ...”

“I saw you in Giselle.”

I nod. “You liked it?”

“It was incredible. You were incredible.”

I shrug again. Long past are the days when gushing praise like this did anything for me. I’m good at my job. Fuck it, I’m more than good, I’m one of the best. Everybody’s been telling me that for more years than I can remember.

“This old dog can still move.”

“You’re not old.”

I am for a dancer. I probably only have another couple of years left. My body is creaking at the seams.

I roll my neck, letting the vertebrae crack as I do.

“And what is it you do, pretty little thing?”

Her nose crinkles. “I’m a student.” Shit, she’s younger than I thought. “A PhD student,” she clarifies, reading the misunderstanding on my face.

“A clever little thing too, huh? Now I understand why you’ve caught Liam’s attention. He likes them smart and sexy.”

“Them?” she asks, there’s a little tease in her voice.

“Oh, don’t worry, sweetie. There aren’t that many. Not like some of those in the pack,” I roll my eyes, “Liam is quite particular. Likes to hang on to his discoveries once he finds them too, so I imagine we’ll be seeing more of each other.” I let my gaze roll down her body and soak in those bare thighs of hers. Just as biteable as her arse. “I look forward to it.”

She smiles at me. “We’ll see. I might not want to be hung on to.”

“Oh dear,” I pout at her, “did Liam not give you his best last night? I can make up for any of his shortcomings if you like?” I wink at her.

She laughs. “Oh no, he was good.”

I take another sip of my coffee, eyeing her above the rim of my cup. “He is, isn’t he? All my alphas are.”

I gulp down the last dredges of my coffee and then lean back into her, reaching around to place my empty cup on the counter. I kiss her cheek and smile to myself as she inhales my scent. A beta, so I’m told, won’t be able to appreciate the full effect of my scent. It won’t flood her senses, have her all wound up like it would another alpha or omega, but she can smell it – the citrus orange – just the same. And like my dancing, I’m told it’s pretty damn terrific.

“See you again, Sophia,” I whisper into her ear.

Then I spin and saunter out of the kitchen, pretty sure she’s checking out my arse as I go.

When I stumble back into my alpha’s room, I find him fresh out of the shower, a towel tied around his waist. He’s all wet and glistening and I’m horny as hell after my little encounter with the piece of ass in the kitchen.

I slide up to him, wrapping my arms around his middle.

“Where did you disappear off to this morning?”

“I went for a run.” He’s stiff in my arms and not in a good way. I frown. He’s pissed at me. He’s not a fan of the rolling-in-drunk business. I can sense a lecture coming. I guess this is what happens when your alphas are older than you. They take the daddy act a little too far.

I release him and flop back on the bed.

“Get it over with,” I tell him. “Then we can get to the fighting part and move on to the make-up fuck a whole lot quicker.”

He lets out a huff of frustrated air, picking up a towel from the radiator and rubbing it against his wet hair.

Fuck, I need a shag. A hard, letting-out-all-my-frustration rutting followed by a knotting. Despite my best efforts to seduce him last night, he hadn’t been interested, muttering

something about sloppy seconds, and I had to contend with snuggling in bed with him instead.

But a man has needs. An omega has even greater needs.

Maybe those needs had been somewhat satisfied by the cute little blonde who'd got down on his knees in the club bathroom and sucked my cock. But as fun as it was in the moment, it's never the same. Always leaves me feeling hollow afterwards.

I'm after something more.

"What's the point. You never fucking listen, Gabe."

"I'm listening now, Alpha," I say.

In some ways he's even more attractive when he's pissed. A tense ball of muscle, hard and rough and violent. I want that power. I want it directed at me.

"One of these days," he says, tossing the damp towel at me, "I'm going to be woken up by a fucking phone call and ..." he swallows hard, "why can't you take better care of yourself?"

The old scar running over my stomach twinges with his words.

"Just because I'm an omega, doesn't make me weak," I growl.

Haven't I proved that? Shouldn't he know that better than anyone?

The entire planet thinks omegas are weak, pathetic, little things, incapable of looking after themselves, of protecting themselves. Bullshit! I've been fighting against that misconception since the day I presented as a fucking omega. What I am did not stop me from doing what I love. I didn't quit partying and drinking and fucking. I didn't resign myself to a life locked in some alpha's home. Not then. Not now.

It's just fucking old when it's your own bloody alphas buying in to the bullshit.

“You’re one man, Gabe. You wouldn’t stand a chance if there was more than one alpha.”

He’s being generous. I wouldn’t stand a chance against one alpha, despite my strength and physique. A lifetime of dancing, of lifting, of balancing, I’m fucking strong. But against an alpha? I’m smaller than them and they are killing machines.

What I lack in strength though, I make up for in street smarts. I look out for myself.

My scar’s proof of that.

“Not going to happen.”

He flops onto the bed beside me, cupping the back of my neck and kissing the crown of my head.

But he’s under my skin now. That pounding in my head has returned and I’m irritable as hell.

“Were *you* out last night?” I ask accusingly. Because, come on, why the hell does he think it’s OK for him to go out on the prowl, but me? No, I have to stay home darning their socks or some such bullshit.

“Actually, I didn’t.” He lumbers to his feet, walking over to his chest of drawers and pulling out a pair of boxers. He slides them on, the elastic snapping against the hard planes of his abdomen.

I scoff. I was out last night. Liam was out last night. Who knows what the hell Roman was up to. Ezra expects me to believe he was sitting at home alone.

He scrubs his hand through his still-damp locks.

“I was working late.”

I watch him yank a fresh t-shirt over his head. “You could’ve come out with me, you know, Alpha, if you were that worried about my safety.”

He turns to look at me, his eyes cool. “You never invited me, Gabe.”

He walks from the room, slamming the door behind him and I wonder if I'm not the only one battling those twin demons of jealousy and spite.

I flop back on the bed, sinking into the sheets that smell of my alpha.

There's something not right with the pack.

I've sensed it for a while now, an unease simmering in my stomach. But that look, that cool look of his: it sets that inclination bubbling away.

We used to be happy; content with the way we live, with the set up we have going on here, the dynamic between the four of us.

But then everything changed, everything shifted.

We're not satisfied anymore.

Jealousy, spite, insecurities are leaking into our pack.

I can only hope the chasms they're creating don't rip us apart.

S ophia

I CAN'T GET the damned coffee machine to work. I press the buttons I'm sure the omega did and the machine coughs and splutters and produces exactly nothing.

I give up, opening cupboards until I find glasses and filling one up from the tap instead.

This pack has an omega. Not just any omega: Gabriel Manchetti.

I close my eyes and picture him dancing across that stage again, every muscle in his body rippling as he swayed and glided as if it cost him nothing at all.

Up close, he was even more beautiful, his golden hair and green eyes making him look like the angel he was named after. He moved unconsciously with the grace of one too, despite his size. Large and well-built for an omega. The few I've met have always been tiny little things you could snap in two like a twig.

Not Gabriel.

I shake my head, wondering what the hell kind of setup I've walked into here.

I knew Liam was a pack alpha. I knew there were others in his life.

But an omega? An omega who claimed he was happy to share his alphas? I've never heard of anything like it.

He should've been scratching my eyes out, coming at me with a knife for touching his mate. Instead, he'd seemed more interested in having what his packmate has already had.

My cheeks warm at that prospect.

I've had threesomes before. Once with another woman and a man, and once with two men. I even had one once with an older couple who picked me up at a bar. But with an alpha and an omega ...

I take a long gulp of the cold water, letting the cool liquid run down my throat.

It does nothing to temper the scorching ideas burning in my mind's eye, and my stomach rumbles.

Toast. I need toast.

I left Liam passed out on his bed. He'd roused slightly as I'd wiggled out of his embrace and climbed out of bed, but after some whispered dirty words, tempting me to climb back into bed, he'd rolled over and fallen asleep. I bet the man works 70-hour weeks. I'm going to let him sleep.

I'll make my exit – as tempting as it is to chase Gabriel Manchetti down the hallway – but first, food.

I open all the cupboards again until I find a loaf of sliced bread. Pulling two from the centre, I start to search for a toaster.

As I do, the kitchen door opens a second time. I smile expecting Liam or Gabriel.

The face that greets me belongs to neither of those two men.

Yet, it's a familiar face nonetheless.

I stare at him in shock, the pieces of bread slipping from my grasp.

Professor Cole.

As his gaze lands on me, his entire body jolts in shock and he stares at me open-mouthed for what feels like an eternity. Then his brows fall like thunder and he glares at me so hard I'm surprised my knees don't shake.

"What the Hell are you doing here?" he snaps.

"What?" Me? What the hell is *he* doing here?

"I said," he snarls, "what the hell are you doing here, Sophia?"

My spine stiffens at his tone and I raise my chin in defiance. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He stares at me, blinking rapidly, like my question doesn't compute.

"I live here." He takes a menacing step towards me, all contained rage, the tendons in his neck straining. "As you are very aware. Don't play the fool with me, sweetheart."

Live here? He lives here? What the fuck?

"I ..."

"What exactly did you think was going to happen here," his gaze travels down my body and, like Gabriel's had, lingers on my bare thighs, "turning up at my house half-naked? This infatuation you have with me has to end, Sophia."

"Don't flatter yourself!" I slam my glass of water on the counter, liquid spilling over the rim. "I'm not here for you." He snorts, and I narrow my eyes at him, taking an angry pace towards him. "I didn't even know you lived here."

He grabs my upper arm, bringing his angry face close to mine. "Bullshit! You're standing in my kitchen in just a t-shirt, Sophia. I can see your arse."

I shake my arm, trying to free it from his grasp. There's anger burning in his eyes, but there's desire too, the two emotions battling one another.

"You're so full of shit. You say you don't want me and then you look at me like you want to devour me. I'm not

stupid. I can see the truth. If you want to deny it, fine, but don't think I won't call your bullshit out."

He glowers at me, his nostrils flaring. It's so fucking hot. He's so fucking hot, and I can feel my body melting in his grasp.

"Let go of me," I hiss, matching his glare with my own. He needs to let go of me because if he doesn't, I'm going to kiss him. I can't help it. "I'm not here because of you."

His eyes dart around my face as if he's trying to determine if I'm lying. "Oh yeah? Then why are you here?"

"Liam," I say.

He releases my arm like it singed his hand, stumbling a step away from me.

"Liam?"

"I didn't know ..." I say, softly. "He's your ..." I swallow.

"Packmate."

I nod.

Fuck. I feel woozy, my head spinning.

I like Liam. I like him a lot.

I also like Professor Cole, far more than I should.

"I'm going to go," I say, but I don't move because as I say the words, Liam comes bounding into the room.

He throws me a big spine-tingling grin, slapping the professor on the shoulder, and then stepping towards me. He gathers me up in his arms, squeezing my arse and nuzzling my neck. "Good morning, sexy."

Over Liam's shoulder, my gaze flicks to the professor. He looks a million times more angry than he did even two seconds ago. His hands are bunched in tight fists, his jaw so tight it might snap and his brow so heavy it could support entire cities. He looks like a man about to commit murder.

I stroke Liam's cheek and wriggle free of his grasp.

“Is this some kind of fucked up game you’re playing, Sophia?” the professor spits. Liam flinches at his aggressive tone and turns to face him, puzzlement written all over his bemused face.

“What?” he mumbles.

“Or are you toying with me, Stand?”

Liam frowns at his packmate’s aggressive tone.

“Would you like to rewind here, mate? What the fuck are you all wound up about?”

The professor points an accusing finger at me. “This is the beta. The one I was telling you about ... but I’m wondering if you already knew that.”

Liam swings his gaze to me with shock.

“I didn’t know,” I say. Although, why the hell am I defending myself here? I’m not interested in getting involved in fights between alphas. This is what I always expected a pack to be like. You can’t tell me numerous, jacked-up men won’t spend their whole time squaring up to one another, fighting, squabbling, trying to assert their dominance.

Yep, not interested in that shitshow.

Last night was amazing.

Liam is amazing.

But the baggage here? Far too heavy for me to be interested in lifting.

I learned long ago to leave when things start to get messy, and even then you might not get away unscathed. This is more than messy.

Liam never told me about his omega. He never told me about the professor. I should’ve known not to trust the smooth and charming act. I’ve fallen for that before.

I’m out of here.

“She fucking set this up,” the professor riles his packmate. “She’s playing games. To get at me.”

“Don’t talk about her like that, Cole.”

I push past them both.

“Where are you going?” Liam calls.

“Home.”

He follows me towards the door.

“Sophia, there’s been a misunderstanding—”

The professor growls and I glare at him.

“There’s no misunderstanding. Your packmate is an asshole and I’ve no interest in landing in the middle of whatever shit this is.”

I storm out of the kitchen, but neither alpha follows me, in fact I can hear them continuing their argument, both their voices fierce and raised. A minute longer and punches will probably be thrown. I’m not here for that.

A door opens in the corridor and Gabriel pokes his head around it. He’s dressed in grey joggers and a soft t-shirt and he looks even more delicious.

“Going so soon?” he asks with a twinkle in his eye.

“Yes.” I peer over my shoulder towards the kitchen, where a bang rings out. “You need to sort out your alphas.”

Gabriel’s eyes flick that way and I keep walking straight into Liam’s bedroom. I tug on my jeans, grab my coat and my purse, and let myself out the garden doors.

It’s drizzling and by the time I reach the end of the drive my hair and face are damp. I rub the sleeve of my coat over my wet eyes and walk some more. At the main road, I call a taxi and tell it to take me straight to Rosie’s.



ROSIE and I met as undergraduates back when we were both studying Physics at Crestmore College, but while I stayed on for my masters and PhD, Rosie moved in with a pack and

landed a job at the International Space Agency. We don't see as much of each other as we used to – she's living some domestic dream, home every night with four of the hottest alphas in this city, while I'm still out trawling bars and nightclubs searching for something meaningful.

I feel like a fucking failure compared to my friend, but she's still my bestie. The person in the world I go to when I need a cuddle and some sense talked into me.

The cab drops me at her front door, a townhouse up near the river, and I knock on the door, sweeping back my damp hair while I wait for an answer.

It's Rosie herself who answers the door, dressed in a pair of snuggly looking pyjamas. She was obviously planning on a lazy Sunday with her alphas, one I am about to unceremoniously gatecrash.

"Soph!" she says, flinging her arms around my neck and dragging me into the hallway. The hallway is littered with kit bags, pairs of trainers and piles of books. "I wasn't expecting you!" She squeezes me tight, then leans back, taking in my damp appearance. "Is everything OK?"

"Yeah ... no ... can we talk?"

"Of course." She grips my hand and drags me down the hallway, meeting one of her alphas, Seb, at the bottom of the stairs.

"Everything all right?" he asks, also examining my slightly dishevelled appearance. I'd never usually show up without makeup and in something obviously worn yesterday. He frowns. "Did something happen, Soph?"

Rosie smiles up at her man with affection. "If you need him to go and break some jerk's neck, you know he will."

"Just say the word."

"No, no necks. Maybe you could bang some heads together ..."

They both peer at me with curiosity.

“We need tea,” Rosie tells Seb, “and also those cookies Ollie brought home yesterday.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Seb kisses her cheek and something twangs in my chest. I follow Rosie up two flights of stairs to the loft room that is hers. Although by the looks of things it’s been invaded by her alphas too. It’s obvious they all sleep in this giant, airy room together. That twinge in my chest seems to grow stronger. I can’t even find one person who wants to be with me, not one I want to be with too, anyway.

I sigh and flop down on the floor, leaning back against the foot of Rosie’s bed. She drops down beside me and rests her head on the mattress, twisting to look at me.

“So is everything alright, Soph? I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

I take her hand between mine, resting it in my lap. “You’re all settled now and you don’t need your wild friend rocking up and disrupting everything.”

“I love when my wild friend rocks up and disrupts things. I wish she’d do it more often.” She knocks her forehead against mine. “Besides, now I’m a bonded woman, I need to live vicariously through you.”

“I wouldn’t bother. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Which bit?” Rosie asks seriously.

I sigh again. “The dating. The hooking up.”

“Oh, come on, Soph. You love that.” When I fail to smile back, she swipes damp hair from my forehead and rests her palm against my skin.

“I don’t think you’re sick ...”

“No, I’m not. But, maybe, I don’t know, tired of it all now. At least tired of being messed about by wankers,” I add with venom.

“Is a wanker the reason for your sudden appearance?”

“Two actually.”

Rosie’s eyes widen. “Two?”

I shake my head. “Seems I’ve got myself tangled up with a pack. Well, maybe not tangled. Maybe stung by one.”

“A pack?” Rosie sits up straight, pulling our hands into her lap and smiling. “Tell me everything.”

But before I can answer, the door creaks open and another of Rosie’s alphas squeezes through the frame carrying a tray with cups of tea and a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

My stomach rumbles. I never did get my piece of toast.

“Ladies.”

“Hi Zane,” I say as he rests the tray on a table then passes us both mugs of tea and places the plate of cookies on the carpet in front of us. Then he drops down next to Rosie and tugs her into his lap.

“What’s going on?”

“I was just about to find out,” Rosie says, jabbing her alpha on the bicep. “Hush up, it’s something to do with a pack of wankers.”

“A pack?” Zane’s eyes flick between me and his omega.

“A pack of wankers,” Rosie corrects.

“Why are they wankers?” Zane’s eyes grow darker.

“I left two of them about to pound each other’s brains out.” I take a long slurp of my hot tea and then break off a big piece of cookie.

Zane and Rosie glance at each other and Rosie giggles.

“What?” I ask, dipping my cookie into my tea and sucking the soggy biscuit into my mouth. My mother would’ve forbidden me to ever dip my biscuit in my tea which is why I relish doing it even more.

Rosie tugs on my hair. “Why am I not surprised you had two men fighting over you, Soph? You’re like a walking, living, breathing siren.”

“Humph,” I say, “it wasn’t exactly like that.”

“No? Then how was it?”

“I hooked up with this man a few weeks ago.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was just a one-night kind of thing and I didn’t even catch his name.”

“Hot!” Rosie says, peering up at her alpha who nods.

“Well, it was until I found out he was the new physics professor at Crestmore.”

Rosie stares at me.

“Shit, that’s awkward,” Zane mutters.

“So ... are you seeing him now?” Rosie asks, looking concerned.

“No, don’t worry, Rosie, I’m not breaking any rules, although that’s more his choice than mine. In fact, he’s made it clear he’s not risking his career for any illicit thing with me.”

“So he was tempted? You were tempted?”

I sink back against the bed, lifting my eyes to the skylights and the grey clouds beyond. “He makes me feel like I could burst into flames whenever I’m with him.”

“Oh shit,” Rosie says with sympathy, “that sucks, Soph.”

“It does. He’s the first guy I’ve felt that way about since ...” I rub at my nose. “And I’ve been feeling pissed about the whole situation but then I met this new guy. A doctor.”

Zane’s ears perk up. He’s a junior doctor himself at the local hospital. “What’s his name?”

“Liam Stand. Do you know him?”

Zane shakes his head and I find myself a little disappointed. I was hoping for some more information about him and this pack.

“I really like him, and the sex ...” I give Rosie a knowing look. She reaches up and places her hands over her alpha’s ears.

“The sex?”

“Was fucking amazing. Like out of this world. He made me come so many times I lost count.” My body tingles with the memory of last night and I rub my thighs together.

Rosie grins.

Zane yanks her hands away. “What? I wanna know.”

“Nope,” Rosie says, bopping his nose with her forefinger, “that was girls’ business.”

“Anyway,” I shake my head. “I thought this was a good thing. Hello new, very hot, very ...” I swoon, “experienced alpha. Goodbye Professor Knobhead. You know I’ve always found the best way to get over someone is to find someone new.”

“But it didn’t work this time?” Rosie asks with sympathy.

“No, because I woke up at his place this morning and discovered two things. One,” I hold up my forefinger, “this alpha already has a pack omega.”

“What?!” Rosie says, shock swimming across her face. “A pack omega? What the fuck?”

“Exactly,” I say although I can’t help noticing Zane doesn’t seem as outraged as his omega, “and two,” I hold up my middle finger, “guess who his packmate is?”

“Who?” Zane asks.

“Professor Knobhead.”

“Fuck!!”

“Wait, they have a pack omega? I mean, how did you find out?”

“Oh, I met him. This morning. In the kitchen.”

Rosie’s eyes nearly pop from her head. “And you’re still alive to tell the tale?”

“Apparently.” I shift on the carpet, breaking off another chunk of cookie and picking out the chocolate chips. “He didn’t seem bothered at all. In fact, he made it seem like this was perfectly normal. That I wasn’t the first individual he’d

sprung shagging one of his alphas.” I miss out the part where he was making moves on me. There’s enough to wrap my head around without that bit too.

“I don’t understand,” Rosie says, “I’d be heartbroken if any one of my alphas even looked at another girl.”

“Not going to happen,” Zane says, kissing her crown. She peers up at him and smiles and there’s that twang.

Zane massages his omega’s shoulder, clearly picking his next few words carefully. “Every pack is different, though. Ours is exclusive. We’ve committed to Rosie and I’m not interested in any other woman.” Rosie positively beams. “But not every pack is like that. Some have open relationships.”

“Even when they’re mated and bonded?” I ask. I didn’t know something like that was possible. I’d always been led to believe the bonds between mates in a pack were too strong and impenetrable to anyone else.

Zane shrugs. “It’s not how I’d want to live. But there are a few other packs that operate that way. Gabriel Manchetti, you know the famous ballet dancer, his pack is an open one.”

I stare at Zane. I’m sure I probably pale.

“What, Soph?”

“That’s the pack,” I whisper. “Gabriel Manchetti is their omega.”

“What the fuck?” Zane says, almost jumping to his feet. “That pack is legendary.”

I scowl at him. “Legendary wankers, remember.”

He grins. “Sure.”

I scowl harder. “Out with it. Why are they legendary?”

“Packs are becoming more common now, but twenty years ago they were practically nonexistent, although I’m sure some existed and were simply discreet or secretive about it. Manchetti’s pack was the first high-profile pack to go public about their relationship. I was a kid at the time, I hadn’t presented as an alpha yet, although I was pretty certain I

would. I remember reading about them and being intrigued. They really influenced my way of thinking. Made me see there were other ways to live. I'd really love to meet those guys."

"Wankers, Zane, wankers."

"Sorry, Soph."

Rosie sips on the last of her tea. "You haven't told us about the fight yet."

"Professor Knobhead found me in the kitchen and blew up." I frown at the memory, shuddering when I remember his anger and the way it had turned me on. "He thought I was stalking him or something. That I was sleeping with his packmate to get to him."

"What did his packmate say to that?" Rosie asks.

"I didn't wait around to find out. I do not want to end up in the middle of some alpha wrestling match. I've had my share of psychos."

Rosie strokes my arm.

"Are you sure?" Zane asks. I begin to talk and he holds his hand up to stop me. "Not about the psychos. I mean about ending up in the middle of an alpha wrestle." He grins cheekily and his eyes meet his omega's, making her blush. I've heard all about their antics. It's why I hadn't run a mile when Liam said he was pack. Perhaps I was curious, tempted. Rosie sure seems blissfully happy since she met her pack.

Not that I could ever have what she has. The protection and the devotion that comes with being a pack omega.

We're all quiet for a moment and I pick at the last of the cookies.

At last, I say, "What do you make of it all?"

Rosie cocks her head to one side. "You don't usually come seeking love-life advice from me, Soph." For a long time it was the other way around. Rosie was hopelessly inexperienced when it came to the dating game.

“I’ve never needed advice about a pack before.” I chew on the cookie, the chocolate melting against my tongue. “I’m right to walk away, aren’t I?”

“Do you want to walk away?” Rosie asks with a slight smile hovering on her lips.

I sigh again, this time dramatically. “The sex was so good!”

“Because it was with an alpha,” Zane says, practically puffing out his chest. Rosie whacks him on his pec with a ‘don’t-be-so-conceited’ look. But I think he’s right. Both these men have my insides spinning simply thinking about them.

“Has being told you can’t have something ever stopped you before?” Rosie says.

I scoff. We both know it hasn’t.

You can’t study physics, Soph? Watch me.

You can’t live on your own? I’ve already signed the lease.

You can’t sleep around and enjoy it? Sorry to disappoint, but yes I can.

“What are you getting at, Rosie?”

She glances up at her alpha and then back at me.

“I think you want them both, Soph.” I stare at her. “I’ve been there. I know what that feels like.”

I close my eyes and search my feelings. She’s right. Of course she is. Maybe that’s why I’d stormed out of the kitchen. Because in an ideal world, I’d have wanted them both to sweep me up in their arms and take me to the nearest bedroom together.

As I sit with that fantasy, it takes root, and I realise I want it badly. I’m just not sure this is the pack to make it happen.

E^{sra}

I'M SO ANGRY. So fucking angry.

I can barely look at my packmate, barely stand to be in this room with him.

Gabriel is here, standing between the two of us and right now he is the only thing preventing me from ripping my packmate's throat out.

She's mine. That woman is mine. He doesn't get to touch her. He doesn't even get to breathe the same air as her.

The logical part of my brain tries to intervene, attempts to make me see reason. She's not mine. She wanted to be and I cast her aside. I made it damn clear that couldn't happen.

Plus we're a pack. Everything we have we share. There's no room for selfishness in a pack.

I don't give a shit about logic and reason right now though. I'm simply a flaming ball of fucked-up rage.

"Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on here?" Gabriel asks, gaze flicking between Liam and me. Liam looks exactly like I'm feeling. His eyes burn with anger and he's pacing back and forth, itching for a way to get at me.

We've had our cross words over the years, our disagreements. But nothing like this. Nothing that has me

swinging to wipe the smug look off his face.

“He’s fucking with me,” I spit, eyes not leaving Liam.

“Bullshit,” he snaps back.

“Playing with you? How?” Gabriel’s gaze flicks further around the room. “Where’s the sexy piece of ass gone?”

I growl so loud, Gabriel flinches and for a moment hurt seems to flicker in his eyes, hurt that has shame swimming alongside my rage.

I shouldn’t be riled up like this. Not for a beta. A girl outside our pack. I have my bonded mates. I have my omega.

But do I? Because most of the time we feel like a loosely connected bunch of men who happen to share the same house. What the fuck has happened to us?

“She left because your alpha here went full-on bloody psycho on her. And on me.”

Gabriel examines me, then cautiously approaches. When I don’t push him aside or growl again, he rests his palms gently on my chest. “Alpha,” he says, drawing my eyes away from Liam’s and to his. The hurt’s still there and concern too. “You know this girl?”

Despite Liam’s words several days ago, I never confessed this infatuation to my omega. Maybe I didn’t want to make him jealous. Maybe I was concerned it might hurt his feelings. Maybe I convinced myself it was nothing really, nothing worth disclosing anyway.

My fucking reaction has blown that assumption well and truly out of the water.

“Yes,” I growl. “She’s one of the postgraduate students at my college.”

Gabriel peers over his shoulder at Liam.

“Something I knew nothing about.”

“You fucked her!” I yell so loudly, Gabriel screws up his eyes. “You must have known.”

“I knew she was a student. I didn’t know where or what she was studying. It never came up.” He glares at me. “But you know what, Cole, even if I had, it wouldn’t have mattered. I’d still have fucked her.”

I launch at him and it’s only Roman, wandering into the kitchen with a startled yawn, who grabs my arm and stops me from killing our packmate.

“What the fuck!” he roars.

Gabriel throws his arms in the air. “Woman drama. I’m over this.” And I watch through red-hazed vision as my omega storms out of the kitchen.

Roman glances after him with a pained expression. We could all detect the hurt and upset in his scent and it tugs at our bonds and our alpha instincts. We are meant to make our omega happy. We are not meant to cause him pain.

“You’re fighting over some woman?” Roman looks at us both with disgust, “In front of Gabriel?”

“It’s not like that,” Liam mutters.

And I scowl at him because it is like that.

“It’s the beta – the one he’s been obsessing about.”

“I haven’t,” I mutter pathetically.

“You slept with her?” Now it’s Liam’s turn to receive one of Roman’s disappointed expressions.

“I didn’t know she was *that* girl, OK?”

“You just said that wouldn’t have stopped you.”

“You said you weren’t fucking interested in her.”

Shit, I’m interested all right. I just can’t do anything about it. And he brought that temptation, that danger, into our house, our packhouse.

Roman lowers his voice. “You can’t be fighting about some girl in front of Gabriel.”

“Why not?” I spit. I’ve lost count of the times I’ve had to sit and listen to Gabriel recount his latest sexual conquest, all

the time my heart splintering into a million pieces and my guts wrenched in a thousand different ways.

“Because,” Roman says, getting all up in my face, “he’s your omega. Underneath that hard shell of his, he’s emotional and vulnerable, and you made a promise to him and this pack to always look after him and care for him.”

I take a stumbling step away, running my hands through my hair. The anger seeps away and I’m left with the image of hurt swimming in my omega’s eyes.

“Shit! Shit! You’re right ... I’m sorry. I’ll go make it up to him.”

“Not until we sort this shit out between the two of you.”

I glare up at Liam. “There’s nothing more to discuss. He fucked up. I’m sure he won’t do it again.”

Liam shakes his hand. “I didn’t fuck up. I met a woman. I liked her. I took her out and then home with me. You’re the complication here, Cole.”

“There’s no complication. My career is important to me, just like yours is to you, Roman’s is to him and Gabriel’s is to him. Fucking around with one of my students is out of the question. You know what happened last time ... How can you even contemplate this, Liam?”

“I’m not fucking around,” Liam growls. “I told you. I like her. I want to keep seeing her.”

“Sophia isn’t the kind of woman who dates.”

“You have no fucking idea, Esra. She’s exactly the kind of woman who needs to be pampered and treasured and I intend to do that.”

“She’s a brat,” I scoff. “You know nothing about women. It’s why you’re always getting yourself entangled and involved.” He always has some girlfriend on the go. Someone he falls for before they finally lay down the ultimatum: them or the pack. He always chooses our pack and it always ends.

I can’t be dealing with that bullshit. It’s why I’ve never let things get beyond one night.

“She’s a grown woman. You want to date her, go ahead. You really think your university will give a shit?”

Maybe he is right. Maybe they wouldn’t. I’m not going to take the risk to find out. It’s taken years of grit and determination to make it to the top, especially someone like me with no exclusive school background, no rich parents to fund me, no connections or mentors.

Besides, our pack is barely holding together after last time.

“Would your hospital give a shit if you dated one of your patients?”

He smirks and I remember the girlfriend before last had been some daughter of a patient. How does he get away with this shit? Because he’s good at his job, that’s why. One of the best.

“Like I said, you want to date her too, then go ahead.”

“And what about Gabriel?” Roman asks. He looks exhausted, tired of always being the one who tries to mop everything up between the four of us. He’s a peacemaker by nature and every raised voice, every harsh word, pains him. I feel it through the bond occasionally when his shields falter.

“I’m going to introduce them,” Liam says. “I think Gabe will like her.”

“Wh-wh-what?” Over the years, Liam has introduced us to his girlfriends, invited them over for pack dinners and celebrations. One even joined us for Christmas one year. But generally he’s kept those relationships separate from the pack. He’s never talked about introducing a woman to our omega so early on in a relationship. “What the hell do you mean by ‘introduce’?” I ask with suspicion.

“Like I said, I think Gabe would like her.”

“Fuck you!”

Gabe will have Sophia falling into bed with him quicker than I can shout the words ‘no fucking way’. The omega has more charm in the tip of his little finger than most people have in their entire being. Plus he’s exquisitely beautiful and

insanely hot. I still wonder how our fucked-up pack landed such a catch of an omega.

“You’re not the leader of this pack, Esra. This is a democracy not a dictatorship. You don’t get to tell me, or Gabe, who we can and can’t sleep with.”

“It’s his career, man,” Roman mutters.

“Is it?” Liam says, staring hard at me. “Is that really the reason? Because I’m not so sure it is, Roman. If Esra ever bothered to sort out his shit from—”

I spin on my heels and march straight out of the kitchen, the blood pounding in my ears, my heart hammering in my chest. My palms are damp and cool sweat trickles down my neck. In my room, I slump down on the end of the bed, head in hands and concentrate on just trying to breathe.

It’s my fault. All of this is my fault. Nothing has been the same since ...

And this is going to go the same way. I can just see it. So why the hell can’t they?

S ophia

I STAY with Rosie and her pack for the rest of the day, joining them for the ritual pack Sunday-night dinner and appreciating the way I'm mollycoddled; Seb piling my plate high with his legendary roast potatoes and Rosie insisting I take the last piece of dessert.

By the time I return to my apartment, I'm satisfyingly full and sedated, the early craze of emotions crashing around my body, calmed.

I check my mobile as I climb out of the taxi, seeing my mum's phoned me twice. I should return the call, but instead I slide my phone in my back pocket and beep myself into the apartment block.

When I headed off to university all those years ago, my dad insisted on renting me out a nice apartment, claiming no daughter of his would be living in grotty student accommodation. It was always my dad caring for me, looking out for me. I never wanted for anything. My brother used to tease me, calling me a daddy's girl, and I guess it was true. I worshipped him. I thought he worshipped me back.

I look back at that girl now with something akin to shame. She never appreciated what she had, never understood the value of it. She took everything for bloody granted.

Well, she had to learn pretty quick. Because when my father disappeared, along with his money, and the entire world came crashing down around me, I'd learned the value of having someone you could rely on, someone you could trust.

Luckily, I had my Trust Fund otherwise I'd have lost this apartment like my mother lost the house. Not that it took her long to find her a man who would buy her a new one.

The lift doors open and I find a visitor waiting for me outside my front door. My cat, Newton, sits on the mat beside him, giving him serious stink eye.

"I don't remember giving you my address," I say, as I duck down to tickle Newton's chin.

"When you're a doctor, it's pretty easy to track down someone's address," Liam answers, leaning against my door and blocking my path.

"Is that legal?" I ask him with an unamused lift of one eyebrow as I pluck my keys out of my purse.

"Not really." He smirks and I lean against the opposite wall, waiting. "You ran off this morning."

"Are you surprised?"

"Hmmm, a little. More disappointed actually."

"I'm not interested in getting stuck in between some alpha dick-swinging contest."

"Again, I'm surprised. I have a feeling that's exactly the kind of thing you do enjoy, Sophia, and I also suspect it's not the first time."

"It is. I've not made the mistake of entangling myself up with alphas before."

"But it isn't the first time you've had two men fighting over you?"

I laugh. He's got me there. Because it isn't.

"Sounds like a story," he says.

"Another time."

He nods and the smile drops from his face. "I am sorry about this morning, Sophia. I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable. I had no idea you knew Esra."

I tilt my head to one side, assessing him, wondering if he knows about my and the professor's liaison in the theatre.

"And I didn't know you were his packmate. I'm not the type to play games like that."

"I know. I'm hoping you can forgive me."

"I can." I swing my keys around my finger and Newton meows, impatient to get inside.

A smirk spreads across his face. "So, are you going to invite me in?"

I hold up a hand, indicating for him to slow down. "You're in a pack. With an omega. And an alpha who doesn't seem to like the idea of you seeing me."

"Gabriel isn't a problem, Sophia."

"Really?" I say, not believing that despite what Zane told me earlier.

"No, I've been seeing other people outside the pack since we formed it. Gabriel does the same. And Esra ..." My body tenses waiting to hear more about Esra, but he changes the subject. "Besides, Gabriel would like to meet you again. He'd like to get to know you better."

That is a tempting offer and yet ... I rub my fingers across my forehead. "Esra ..."

"The thing with Esra is complicated. Shit, Esra is a complicated person. Most bloody geniuses are."

I laugh. "You think Esra is a genius?"

"Probably. I've certainly never met anyone as dedicated to their work, or as driven and determined to succeed, and I work with surgeons and I'm mated to Gabriel Manchetti."

"Esra seemed so pissed off this morning."

“Like I told you. It’s complicated.” He pauses, considering his next words. “It’s not you, Sophia. It’s not personal.”

“It feels a whole lot personal.”

He steps towards me, taking my hands in each of his. “I like you, sweetheart. I want to see more of you. My omega wants to see more of you.”

“I don’t see how this can work when one of your packmates can barely look at me.”

“He’ll come around,” he whispers into my neck, kissing me and making me shiver. “Can I come in now?”

Relationships have been fleeting and casual for such a long time. I haven’t allowed myself to be swept up in the moment, to be carried away. There have been men who have tried. Men who have been insistent. I’ve always kept a cool head.

In this moment, though, my head feels anything but cool and I can’t resist the temptation to let him sweep me away. I hope I don’t regret it.

I unlock the door and we crash through into the dark apartment, Newton racing between our feet. We stumble down the pitch black hallway and into my bedroom. He’s pushing me down onto the bed before I’ve had a chance to switch on a light.

“You still smell of my scent, sweetheart,” he says, nibbling at my earlobe. “Are you all messy with me too?”

He yanks down my jeans and my underwear, sliding his hand up between my thighs. I gasp as he slides a finger inside me.

I was planning on taking a much needed shower when I got home. Well, perhaps, waiting for the morning so I could enjoy the faint whiff of his scent on my skin alone in my bed tonight.

Now I have the real thing with me.

He groans. “You’ve been walking around all day stuffed full of my come. You like that?”

I make a non-committed hum in reply. Then I turn my head and nip his ear, whispering into the shell, “You can come all over me if you want, Alpha, come all over me and rub it into my skin.”

OK, so maybe I have a little, tiny, teeny-weeny come-fetish.

I love the way it feels and tastes and smells. Esra’s come had tasted so good and I am more than intrigued to see if it’s an alpha thing. Will Liam’s taste as good?

“Fuck, sweetheart, doesn’t that sound good.”

I laugh and pull off my t-shirt as he scrabbles to remove his clothes too.

Soon we’re both naked and lying out beside each other, admiring one another’s bodies.

He really is expertly built and I run my fingers down the grooves of his torso.

“You must spend all your time working out.”

“A fair bit,” he confesses.

“I’d like to see that.” I lean in to bite his shoulder and he growls.

“Come-fetish and a voyeur, huh, sweetheart? Is it just the watching you like, or do you like to be watched too? You liked it when I watched you last night.”

My gaze flicks up to his and I meet his smouldering eyes. “I did.”

He hesitates, his tongue darting out of his mouth to wet his lips, making me want to suck it into my mouth. “I like watching you, sweetheart. You’re so damn bea—” he catches himself, the side of his mouth quirking, “sexy.” He trails his knuckles up my body, hooking them under my chin and forcing my eyes to meet his. “I’d like to watch you be fucked. I’d like to watch you be fucked by my omega. I’d like to watch you on your knees sucking his beautiful cock.” I shiver with desire, the fantasy coming alive in my mind. “What do

you say to that?" he says, rubbing his knuckles along my jawline.

"He may not want to fuck me," I say, so turned on by the idea it's untrue and yet aware at the same time that fantasies often fall flat in reality. The dynamics of this pack, the complicated relationships, have me struggling to keep up.

"He will."

"How would you like him to fuck me then, Alpha?"

"Like this," he lunges for me, wrapping his arm around my middle and drawing me up onto my hands and knees. "Like this, so I can see you both."

I whimper, picturing it in my head. He sweeps his thumb through my folds. "I love your pussy. It's beautiful. Am I allowed to say that?"

"Yes," I gasp as he hits my clit.

"Hmmm," he says, dragging his thumb to my entrance and circling the sensitive tissue there. "I wonder if you still taste of me."

His mouth is on me in a flash, and despite what he'd said, he lavishes all his attention on my clit, flicking me so quickly, my orgasm hits me out of nowhere. I cry out and he thrusts his tongue deep inside me, moaning as the flavours hit his tongue.

"So good," he says with a mouth full of my pussy. He fucks me with his tongue, dragging another orgasm from my core and then his attention is drawn to my other hole.

Men have eaten me out here before, but I've never enjoyed it that much. I could never let go and savour it. I'd been too wary of putting on a show, of making it good for them and not me.

This time it's different. There's no expectation between us. I'm already cruising on cloud nine, all dreamily sensitive from the last two orgasms and I allow myself to sink into the feeling, to lean back against his mouth and enjoy the wet lapping motion of his tongue. It awakens nerves in my

backside and when he slides two thick fingers inside my other hole and strokes at my g-spot, I come again.

I want to collapse into the mattress in a puddle after that, but he has other ideas, gripping my waist and thrusting inside, riding the last aftershocks of my orgasm.

“Love the way you flutter around me, little one.”

“I can’t,” I gasp. “It’s too much.”

“What is sweetheart?” he asks, stalling.

“I-I-I ...”

“Sophia, you want me to stop?”

“No!” I cry out, “Yes,” I sob. “It’s too much, too much.”

He slides out of me gently, until only the head of his cock rests inside me, and the friction makes me crazy.

“You want me to stop?”“

“Don’t stop!” I beg, tears rolling down my cheeks. “Don’t stop.”

He grinds his way back inside, so slowly it’s torture.

“Noooo!” I wail.

“You need more than that, Sophia? Come on, tell me what you want. Tell me exactly what you want and I’ll give it to you.”

“I want you to fuck me,” I gasp as he slides out again. “Fuck me hard.”

“You’re a very confusing woman, Sophia,” he grinds back into me, “I’m not sure you know what you want.”

“I do. I want you to fuck me,” I grind out through my teeth.

“Why don’t you let me fuck you like I want to? Why don’t you trust me to know what’s going to feel good for you, little one?”

His fingers start to play at my clit as he continues this slow grind. The tears are flowing freely now, because it feels so

good, and yet it's not enough all at once. He's keeping me hanging in limbo, not letting me fall, not pounding me into heaven. No, he's going to lift me there gradually. Gradually ... gradually ... gradually ... until ...

"Oh God!!" I scream as a wave of ecstasy hits me so hard stars smash across my vision and the blood sings in my ears. My arms and my legs give way and he follows me down onto the mattress, his immense weight pushing me down. Then he kisses my throat, his pace building now I've come. He fucks me hard and then he grunts and I feel his warm come land in ribbons over my backside and my back.

"I'm painting you with my come, sweetheart, just like you wanted."

His palm is there next, smoothing it into my skin in wide sweeping circles. It's warm and smells divine.

"I want to taste," I mutter, and he flips me over onto my back and kneels above me. I open my mouth as he squeezes his knot. More ribbons of come hit my mouth and my face, running down my chin and my tear-stained cheeks.

It's dirty. And I love every second of it, every damn drop.

I've been so busy playing out other people's fantasies. I'm wondering if now, with this alpha, I'll have a chance to play out more of my own.



WHEN I ARRIVE in the office space I share with three other PhD students on Thursday morning, I'm all flustered. This isn't me. I handle stress. I handle the difficult situations. I solve the problems.

But today I'm nervous. Nervous about seeing Esra again.

Because after spending another night with Liam I realise I like the man.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I imagine things with him going somewhere. I imagine things lasting, at

least in the short term. The thought of ending things has a pain aching in my chest.

I'm dwelling on the best way to avoid the professor as I switch on my laptop and wait for the thing to whirl on. As the colours stream across the screen, I click absentmindedly on my emails and swear so loud I make Scott at the desk behind me, leap in the air.

"Everything all right, Sophia?" he asks. I turn around to look at him and watch as he slides his glasses up the bridge of his nose. It took him half a year before he could make eye contact with me and another half before he could actually speak to me. Now, a year later, we're on good terms. Despite his poor social skills and obsession with everything Star Wars related, I like the guy.

"I'm being pulled into some faculty meeting in Professor Cole's office."

"It'll be about the Quantum Ion Trap machine. Rumour has it, he's pissed with other research teams monopolising its time."

"Great! He doesn't own the machine."

"I think he was promised his team would have priority-use when they wooed him here."

"Wooed him?" I scoff. "Like anyone needs to be wooed to Crestmore."

"There were several top universities fighting over him, including some in the States that would have made him a very rich man."

"I wonder why he didn't go."

Everyone keeps telling me how driven and determined the man is.

Scott shrugs.

"Well, he's not intimidating me." I shuffle papers on my desk. "I'm so close to finishing this PhD. I need that machine."

Scott adjusts his glasses. “He terrifies me,” he says honestly.

“Yeah,” I say. He terrifies me too. Although, I suspect for different reasons to Scott’s.

I twist back to my screen. “If you hear any death-curdling screams come rescue me.”

“I doubt I’d be any help. I’ll call the police.”

“They’d never reach me in time. No, grab the staple gun and get your arse in there. You owe it to me after I proofread that paper for you last month.”

“You think a staple gun would work? The man appears to own quite a few muscles. Would a staple even penetrate through to cause any damage?”

“You’re right.” Scott has a very logical brain. “Bring one of the lasers from the lab instead. Our only hope is burning out his retinas.”

“Hmmm,” Scott considers this, “I think that could work.”

I smile to myself, typing out some answer to a few of the emails I’ve received and then, at half-past nine, push back my seat and pull myself reluctantly to my feet.

“Wish me luck,” I mumble.

“Good luck,” Scott responds.

I grab my notebook and a pen and walk down the corridor towards his office. It’s one of the nicest in the building – of course it is – with a walnut door and brass name plate.

I adjust the collar of my blouse and run my fingers through my hair. Apart from yesterday morning, I haven’t spoken to the professor in days, although I’ve seen him lurking about, his eyes always seeming to track my every move. I don’t think he’ll be pleased to see me – not that I give a shit. I wonder if he knows I’m attending this meeting.

I rap my knuckles against the door and his voice from within calls out, “enter”, the timbre making me shiver like it always does.

Why does this man make me feel this way?

I push down on the handle and let out an exhale of relief when I find a handful of other people already gathered on chairs in front of the professor's desk.

I meet his eye as I creep into his office and take a seat towards the back of the room. He watches me sit, his stare on me more lethal than any stupid laser.

He laces his fingers together and addresses us all.

“Now Ms Valentine has joined us, perhaps we can begin.”

Arsehole, it's not like I was late.

Scott's intelligence on faculty politics is always spot on and as usual his deductions about the subject of this meeting are correct. The professor makes it clear in no uncertain tones that he and his team will have priority over the Quantum Ion Trap from now on and everyone else will be required to apply to him for permission to use it. Which means I will have to come begging him if I want to use the machine. I wonder if the arsehole planned that. I bet he'd like me to beg him. I remember his insistence that I use the word 'please' and heat crawls up my neck with a mixture of anger and desire.

He should be so lucky.

There follows some lively debate which he shuts down with his alpha glare and his dominant tone.

I'm barely listening, instead staring out of the window behind him at the view of the college, its ancient buildings spread across the city. I only realise the discussion has come to an end when chair legs scrape against the polished wooden floorboards. I follow suit, standing, happy to escape the repression of his office, that scent of his clear despite my poor sense of smell.

“Ms Valentine, a word if you please,” the professor says in a low voice.

I keep walking towards the door. “I'm sorry, I have to be somewhere.” I don't.

“I’m sure whatever you have planned can wait,” he says in a way that makes me understand I’d be better off surrendering to him. The other members of the faculty exiting the office glance between the two of us.

When the last person leaves, the door slamming behind them and their footsteps retreating down the corridor, I meet his eyes with a nonchalant expression.

“What is it, professor?” I ask.

He stands, walking around his desk and pausing in front of it. He’s only an arm’s length away.

He’s all alpha, all dominance; his broad shoulders tense and hunched, his eyes dark like coal.

I should be afraid. But as always, with this man, it’s a different kind of shudder that winds its way through my body.

“You think it’s appropriate to come into my office dressed in that,” he says, his voice so low it’s almost a growl.

“Wh-what?” I say, automatically peering down at my body. I didn’t have a clue what I expected him to say, but not in a million years did I expect it to be that. “You have a problem with my ... outfit?”

His gaze trawls down my body, and I’m not blind to the flicker of appreciation I see sparking in them.

“You enjoy torturing me? You enjoy driving me to fucking despair?”

I take an angry step towards him. “I think you enjoy torturing yourself. I’ve made it clear you can have me.” I meet his hungry gaze with my own, my skin on fire. “Any time you want, Alpha.”

I forget about Sunday. I forget about the complications with his pack. His eyes are all consuming.

I’m snared, caught in his net, and until he chooses to release me, I’m trapped.

“Any time,” he repeats slowly, the words rolling from his beautiful lips. I can hear his breath grow ragged and I watch

his eyes grow impossibly dark. He prowls closer to me, leaning down to taste the air between us. “How about here and now, little one?”

“Yes,” I sigh, closing my eyes, waiting for him, waiting for him to end this madness, this denial between us, and give in to it.

He takes a pace nearer, his hands landing lightly on my hip bones. He pushes me backwards, his pace matching mine, until I knock against the floor-to-ceiling bookcase in his office.

“You’re fucking him. Do you know how crazy that’s making me. I want you to stop fucking him.”

“You can fuck me too, Alpha.” I push my hips against him, feeling the hard bulge in the front of his trousers.

He doesn’t answer me. Instead, his hands trace over my hips and down my thighs.

“This silly little skirt isn’t appropriate for my office, Sophia. It’s too fucking short.” His hands reach the hem. It’s not short, it reaches down to my knees. “All the way through that meeting, all I could think about, all I wanted to do, was glide my hands up under your skirt,” his hand dips under the hem, resting on the inside of my thigh, “and touch you,” he growls.

I bite my lip and he strokes his hand slowly up my thigh, halting at my underwear.

“All I could think about was what you’d be wearing under this silly skirt. What silly little pair of knickers I’d find. Let me see.”

He hooks his finger into the waist of my underwear and creeps them down, down my thighs, over my knees, and down my calves. He follows my underwear down, crouching and then kneeling in front of me.

“Lift your foot, sweetheart.” I do, stepping first one foot, then the other out of my underwear, my pulse racing all the time.

The door of his office is unlocked. Anyone could walk in on us right now.

He takes my knickers in his fist and stares down at the lacy black pair. He scoffs. "Fucking ridiculous." And then he brings them up to his nose and inhales.

I doubt there's anything to smell. I'm no omega. I don't have that sweet-smelling slick alphas go mad for. And yet he grunts when he inhales like there's something there he likes.

His eyes flick up to mine and he stands, stuffing the pair of knickers into his trouser pocket, and I take a fistful of his shirt and attempt to drag him towards me.

He doesn't move and a sinister smile forms on his lips. He takes my fist in his hands and yanks it from his shirt.

"Don't fuck him anymore and don't come to this department dressed in these silly little outfits of yours."

He drops my hand and strides back to his desk, leaving me leaning against the bookcase, panting, and without any fucking underwear.

"What the hell?" I spit.

"Thank you for your time, Ms Valentine," he says, lowering himself onto his chair and gesturing towards the door as if to tell me I'm dismissed.

I march over to his desk and slam my hands on the surface making the piles of paper there leap into the air.

"Give me back my underwear," I hiss, conscious of ears in the office next door or out in the corridor.

"No."

"What the fuck are you even going to do with them?!" He smirks at me and a number of dirty images swim into my mind. "You're a pervert."

"Maybe I am. And you are a tease."

Maybe *I* am. Maybe I do spend a little more time hovering in front of my wardrobe and in front of my mirror these days.

Maybe I want him to notice me and to regret what he is missing.

But I don't take orders. I'm done with those kinds of games now. I'm in control. I'm nobody's baby and he certainly isn't my daddy. He doesn't get to say what I can and can't wear.

"Professor," I tell him, leaning back and crossing my arms over my chest. "You just made things a whole lot worse for yourself, because now every outfit I wear to this department will be designed with the specific intention of torturing you."

I spin and storm out of his office.

This is fucked up. I'm on the verge of ending things with a man I like because of this alpha. And now he's playing games like this with me too.

No way. He doesn't get to call the shots.

No one gets to tell me what to do.

I'm going on that date with Liam and Gabriel.



SOMETIMES I THINK fate has a truly fucked-up sense of humour, because when I arrive home that evening, there's a white envelope with my name scrawled across it in black ink. For barely a second, I wonder if that asshole professor has had a change of heart and returned my underwear. I'd had to make a mad dash into town to pick up a pair of knickers before a meeting with my supervisor. No way was I going to risk flashing the poor man and giving him a flipping heart attack.

But as I bend down to pick up the envelope, I realise I'm wrong. I flinch, my hand springing away from the evil thing. I recognise that handwriting. I know it well. I just haven't seen it in a long time. I thought that was all behind me.

But fate seems to be determined to remind me that there's more than one man out there trying to control my life.

I kick off my shoes and hang up my key all the time eyeing the envelope sitting there innocently on the mat.

I should throw it straight in the bin. That would be the sensible thing to do. But when have I ever stuck to sensible?

Instead, I feed Newton and brew myself a strong cup of tea before taking the envelope over to the sofa. Curling up on the seat, I take several long sips of tea, turning the envelope over and over in my hands. Newton jumps up to join me, sniffing at the envelope before lying down beside me.

I stare at the envelope, then tear the goddamn thing open.

I shake the note out and it falls in my lap, the same black-inked writing marching across the page.

Gingerly, I unfold it and scan straight to the end.

It's him.

Fuck.

He's back.

I thought by avoiding him ...

I thought he'd moved on ...

I take another long gulp of the tea.

Should I even read the letter? I know what will be in it. The same vitriol. The same name calling. The same insistence that I belong to him and no one else.

Perhaps this time the letter will be different though.

I take another gulp of tea, rest my cup on the sideboard, and scan the words.

Several jump out at me.

Whore.

Bitch.

Slag.

All those top hits. So fucking original.

I roll my eyes hard, and keep reading.

I slow down when I reach the end. He knows. He knows about my dalliance with this pack and he wants it to stop.

Oh look, another man, telling me what I can and can't do?

Is that what's prompted him to get in touch again after all this time?

I scrunch the letter into a ball and throw it across the room, Newton lifting his head to watch it fall.

At first, I told nobody about these letters back when they started two years ago. Not Rosie. Not my mum. Not my brother. Not anyone.

Because how the hell would I explain this all anyway? And it's only ever been letters. If it were anything more, then I'd go to the authorities. Not that it would do any good. Whose side would they take? His: an older man with influence and power? Or mine?

Eventually, I confessed to Rosie. Some of the story anyway.

I didn't want her pack getting involved and getting into trouble.

Seems that instinct was correct because another pack is exactly what's resurrected this creep.

I glare at the balled-up piece of paper.

So he's back? So what?

It's not going to change anything.

G abriel

LIAM IS like an eager puppy dog all week long, bubbling over with excitement at the prospect of me meeting this beta woman, Sophia.

Esra on the other hand is hardly home and when he is, he shuts himself in his room. The few words he's exchanged with me this week have been short angry grunts.

As for Roman, he throws worried glances between all of us, and once or twice attempts to resurrect a conversation about the subject. He even attempts to call a pack meeting. But Liam says he has surgery and Esra insists he's working late.

I don't know what he's so worried about. Esra will come around. I'm pretty sure of that. And if he doesn't, well I'm sick to death of his mood swings.

It's not how it's meant to be between bonded mates. He's meant to be my rock, my shelter, the one I go to when my stupid omega hormones run riot and the self-doubt creeps in. Instead, he's about as far from my rock as a plate of fucking jelly. I can't rely on him anymore.

Roman senses the shift between us but Liam is as oblivious as ever.

At least he wants to spend time with me. At least he still wants me. He's spent the last week whispering about his

fantasies in my ear. He wants to watch me with this woman and I have to admit the idea turns me on.

I'm a performer after all. Have been since the day I learned to pirouette across a stage. I love to be watched. I fucking crave the admiration. I live for the spotlight.

Sure it has its downsides – haven't I learned that the hard way?

But fuck, despite bloody Esra's insistence to give it up, I won't. It's like asking me to stop breathing. Attention is my oxygen.

Liam meets me at the theatre after rehearsals. I've changed into dark jeans and a silk shirt, open at the collar. He's out of his scrubs and tonight he's dressed in one of his sharp suits.

"Don't you look handsome," I chime, letting him kiss my cheek as I smooth my hand down his chest. I try not to think about the fact my alphas rarely dress up for me these days.

"And you look fucking delicious," Liam whispers into my ear, making me shiver. His vivid alpha scent swoops into my sinuses and for a moment I allow myself to buzz with it.

"We could skip this date and head home," I murmur.

Liam steps back.

"You're having second thoughts?" Liam asks, peering down into my face.

Despite the fact that we've all been sleeping together as a pack for ten years now, we've never invited someone else into the bedroom with us. Certainly not a beta and definitely not a woman. But the idea excites me. The image of that pretty little thing in the kitchen has been tantalising me all week along with Liam's dirty ideas.

I drag my nails though the five o'clock shadow on his cheeks.

"No, you just look so damn fine. It's hard to behave around you."

“Who said anything about behaving?” He winks at me and takes my hand in his.

We walk along the dark streets of the city, the air muggy with the day’s lingering heat. Other people, on their way out, weave around us on the pavement and several stare at us with open admiration. We make a handsome pair. We always have, despite the grey gathering around his ears and the lines forming on both our faces.

“It seems like a long time since we did this,” I tell him, leaning into his side.

“Did what?”

“Went on a date.”

“I thought you hated dates.”

I hated them because there was a time when I couldn’t go out without someone somewhere recognising me and getting all up in my face. And after what happened that was too much.

“I never hated them,” I say. “I like to be wined and dined.” And spoiled and cared for and just fucking held.

I peer up at my alpha and then down the street, the shops and bars all lit up.

I can’t blame my alphas for it. It was me who pushed them away. And Liam especially has always needed companionship. It was no surprise he started dating outside the pack.

Hell, I told him to go right ahead.

He hooks his arm around me and pulls me in close to his side. “I like wining and dining you, Omega. We’ll do this again. Just the two of us.”

I smile against his divine-smelling shirt.

We turn into a side street and I realise he’s taking me to one of my favourite clubs. “Deep Slick?”

“Where else?” I squeeze his arms and wonder if this rare feeling of contentment is about to be blown apart by the intrusion of this beta.

I rarely feel content anymore. I'm always on edge. Something I try to keep hidden from the others. No one enjoys a tense little omega lurking around the place. Alphas want us smiling and flirtatious. We are here to make them feel good about themselves, or some such bullshit.

And with those thoughts, that momentary feeling of contentment shatters.

Liam halts at the door, perhaps sensing an inkling of my tension through the bond despite my shields.

"Are you sure about this, Gabe? I'm not pressuring you?"

"You know me, sweetie, always up for something new."

He looks a little unsure, but I roll my eyes and push past the security.

The concierge gushes at me immediately as she takes our jackets.

She's all 'so good to see you' and 'you look fabulous' and 'I hear the latest production is a huge hit'.

Well, of course it is. Would be even better if I could choreograph the damn thing.

She leads us to our usual corner, somewhere quiet and hidden and heads off to find my favourite bottle of champagne.

"She's not here," Liam says, frowning.

"Of course she's not, sweetie. Why the hell would she be early? She wants to make an entrance." It's what I would do if I were on a date. In fact, it's what I did do the first few times the pack took me out, when they were wooing me.

Not that it took much wooing. There was something between the four of us immediately. I just have to keep believing it's still there, somewhere underneath all the baggage and shit.

When the waitress returns, Liam takes the champagne bottle from her hand and pops off the cork, pouring me a full

glass. Funny how even that little gesture of care has my stupid omega insides crooning.

We're so fucking easy to please. It isn't hard.

The bubbles irritate my nose when I take a sip and Liam chuckles at my screwed-up expression, kissing the crown of my head.

"You never fucking learn, Gabe. Slow."

"You know I've never been good at that, Alpha."

He chuckles again. "I do."

He hooks his arm around the back of my chair and I swivel around to lean into him. That contentment creeps into my chest again and I close my eyes and enjoy it. I can hear the pound of his heart against my ear and feel the rise and fall of his chest against my cheek.

"Here she is," he says and I open my eyes to see that pretty little thing sauntering across the club toward us both. She's dressed in a figure-hugging black dress that reaches down to her ankles, with a slit that reaches up to her thighs.

A growl rumbles in Liam's chest and I can smell how much he likes what he sees. Fuck, I like it too.

I sit up straight, resting my elbow on the table, my chin in my hand and enjoy her little show, her hips swinging from side to side in a frankly mesmerising manner.

She halts by the table.

I'd forgotten how young she is. She has none of those lines on her face yet and definitely no signs of grey in her hair.

Liam stands to greet her, holding her arm as he kisses her.

I watch their lips meet like it's in slow motion and wait to see how that's going to make me feel. It's one thing knowing they've been with other people. It's another seeing it.

I wait for my possessive omega instincts to kick in, the ones that should have me launching across the table and scratching out her beautiful eyes.

But those instincts aren't roused. A different instinct rouses altogether.

Desire.

Desire makes me hard as my alpha's hand slides into her hair, cupping her neck as he presses his lips to hers.

Fuck, it's hot. Perhaps watching will be as hot as being watched.

She draws away from him, a slight blush painting her cheeks, and peers over at me.

"Well, hello again, pretty little thing."

She smiles and her shoulders relax a fraction. Was she waiting for those omega instincts too?

"I nearly didn't come," she says as Liam pours her a glass of champagne and she lifts it to her scarlet-painted lips.

"Really?" I say, "do tell."

"Your packmate." She swallows and my gaze flicks to Liam. He takes his seat, his brow creased.

"What do you mean? I thought we'd covered this."

"I had a little run-in with him." She spins the stem of the champagne glass around in her fingers. Her nails are painted a scarlet to match her lips.

"Now I'm even more curious ..." I lean back in my seat. "What did he do?"

"He stole my underwear." She glances towards Liam. "Underwear I had been wearing, I should add."

I throw back my head and laugh. "That fucked-up bastard."

"How exactly did he obtain the underwear if you were wearing it?" Liam asks, darkly.

She takes a long gulp of champagne, not answering his question.

I dry my eyes on a napkin and meet her doe-like eyes. "But despite our packmate's antics, you came anyway?"

“Yes. He told me not to and, well, I don’t like being told what to do.”

“But of course.” She’s a beta. Free of all those pesky instincts. Not compelled to do something she doesn’t want to do just because an alpha demanded it.

A waitress interrupts us and Liam orders some nibbles.

“Have you been here before?” I ask Sophia. It’s not somewhere betas usually come.

“Yes.” She takes another sip of her wine. Tension returns momentarily to her shoulders and I think there is more to this woman than I first imagined. She’s certainly has some guts if she’s prepared to go against Esra. I bet that’s half the appeal for him, part of the reason she’s driving him mad.

He can tell her to go away all he likes. Doesn’t mean she will.

I like her even more.

“Not good experiences? Bit of over indulgence perhaps? Food poisoning maybe?”

She laughs. “No ... it was the company.”

“See I knew there was shit involved.”

“Oh yeah, he was a shithead all right.”

“Shame, though,” I say, “I like a challenge but the bar’s been set pretty low.”

“Quite the contrary. My bar is high.”

I glance at my packmate. He’s undone his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. Veins crisscross his strong forearms. Yes, her standards are pretty high.

“So am I going to have to do something dramatic to meet this bar, then?” I ask. “Let me think, want me to steal back your underwear, my lady?”

“Do you have any idea where he will have put it?”

“I can have a little snoop.”

She grins. "Then, yes, please." She pauses. "Perhaps you could steal a pair of his underwear in retaliation."

I chuckle, sweeping my hair back from my face. "I like the way you think."

"Oh, I'm not very good at taking the high ground. I'm more than happy to partake in some petty revenge."

"This is useful to know. Next time I'm planning a spot of my own, I'll enlist your help."

"You're often plotting revenge?"

"I'm a dancer, darling," I say with an exaggerated flourish of my hand. "It's dog eat dog. You know an up-and-coming dancer once tied the laces of my shoes together. I suppose they were hoping I'd trip and fall and would be so badly injured they'd take my spot."

"Oh my god," she says, those red nails hovering in front of those red lips. Plump red lips that would look stunning wrapped around my cock.

"Don't be fooled," Liam says, sitting back with a glass of water resting in his hands, listening to the two of us talk. His scent is relaxed and interested. "Gabe pulled stunts like that himself to climb to the top."

"No, sweetie. It was all down to my talent," I turn to Sophia and wink, "and some clever manoeuvring." I grin. "Have I shocked you?"

"No, sometimes you've got to do what you have to if you want to succeed in this life."

"Hmmm, intriguing." I shuffle my chair around towards her. "You do like your air of mystery, don't you? I love it."

She smiles at me, not divulging anything further.

I lay my hand on her thigh. Soft.

"Tell me," I whisper.

"I need to maintain the air of mystery," she protests, "otherwise how else am I going to keep the interest of an alpha and an omega?"

I let my gaze sweep down her body. “I think you’re quite aware, pretty little thing, that you own more than enough to keep our interest piqued.”

Closer to her, I can smell the notes of her perfume, so different from the heavy scents of my alphas, and mint on her breath.

Her skin is smooth. She’s young. Young pretending to be older. I remember what that was like. I sense we are similar, the two of us. She’s hiding behind a facade just like me, and I find I have a deep urge to smash that facade into pieces and find the girl behind.

Shit, I want to protect her. I’m an omega. I’m the one who should want to be protected.

“You’re studying physics?”

“Yes ... for now,” she adds.

I stroke my fingers over her thigh and she rests her knee against mine. “Is my alpha scaring you away?”

“No, I’ve fallen out of love with it.” She stares down at her drink. “I don’t know what I’ll do next.”

“You have to decide what you want from your life.”

“You always knew you wanted to be a dancer, I suppose.”

“Yes and no,” I say, swigging back the last of my champagne and holding my empty glass for Liam to fill. “When I presented as an omega, it threw my world into chaos. There were a lot of people who told me I could never be a dancer. That my body would be too weak, that I’d be a mess of emotions, that I’d drive the other dancers crazy with my scent. I was told to find a nice alpha, settle down, and sit back with my feet up for the rest of my days.”

“But you didn’t want that?”

“No, dancing runs through my blood.”

“I can tell,” she whispers, “you look entranced when you dance, like you’re somewhere else, like you’re floating.”

I meet her gaze, staring into the depths of sapphire and silver. “Yes,” I murmur, “that’s how it feels. It’s like sex. You’re in your body but you’re not. And sometimes it hurts but the pleasure, the bliss, blows you away.”

“That sounds like good sex.” She curls her hair behind her ear.

“You should know,” I say, glancing towards Liam.

“She does,” he confirms, and my blood warms, desire threading across my skin.

“Let’s dance,” I tell them both, offering my hand to Sophia.

She takes it and her fingers are warm. I twine mine through hers and offer my other hand to Liam. He takes it and I lead them out onto the dancefloor, my pulse pounding with the need to move, the dance floor vibrating under my feet.

Space forms for us, mostly due to the large alpha in our group, and I spin the sexy thing around to face me, my hands landing on her waist. I turn her slowly 360 degrees, caressing her tiny waist as I do, and then, when we’re nose to nose again, I thread her arms around my neck and pull her in close to me. I sway our bodies in time to the music, encouraging her to go supple in my hold. She leans her head back, swishing her dark locks from side to side, and I nudge my thigh between hers, feeling her core against my leg.

She bites her lip. Her pupils are blown.

I peer up at Liam, hovering behind her, and he understands what I’m saying, can feel my desire thrumming through the bond. He closes the space between us. Sliding Sophia’s hair to one side, he kisses the curve of her neck. Then I grind, I grind my hips against hers as I move us to the music, all the other dancers on the floor, blurring and disappearing away. It’s only us. The three of us. Liam moving with us, grinding into Sophia from behind.

It’s so hot and I realise then and there that I want to do more with this woman than watch and be watched. I want to share her, I want to fuck her with my alpha.

I spin her around again until she's facing my mate and sway our bodies as he reaches down to kiss her lips. I let my hold fall lower to the flare of her hips. I remember how soft her skin felt and I lean down to press my mouth on her shoulder, inching along until I reach her neck.

I can hear the sound they both make when they kiss, The smack of their wet lips, her quiet moans, his loud grunt. The noise penetrates straight to my cock and I grind my hardness into her round little bottom. Soft again, not hard and firm like the cheeks of my alphas'.

Maybe this is what we need in our lives. A sweet, soft little thing, to temper all our hard edges.

"Let's go home," I say to them both and they break their kiss.

"Can we?" Liam asks her. "Can we take you home, Sophia?"

"No," she says, my stomach plummeting with disappointment until she adds: "I'm taking you home."

And fuck, I love this girl.

S ophia

NEWTON'S WAITING outside my door when the three of us stumble out of the elevator. Liam's shirt is half undone and Gabriel has my lipstick smeared all down his neck. I dread to think what I look like. The make-out session in the back of the taxi and all the way up in the elevator had been intense.

Newton looks at me with disgust.

"He doesn't like visitors," I say.

"All animals love me," Liam says, bending down to pat my cat's head. Newton hisses at him and Liam snaps back his hand.

"Don't take it personally. He doesn't like anyone except me. He thinks my honour is his to protect."

"Are we going to have to leave then?" Gabe teases with a twinkle in his eye.

"No," I tell him, hooking my finger through the belt loop of his trousers and pulling him into my apartment.

Newton weaves around my ankles as I flick on the lights, and Gabe whistles as he scans the open-plan kitchen living space.

"This is nice, sweetheart. Rich daddy, because I'm guessing you couldn't afford this on your student budget?"

My shoulders stiffen, but I shake the feeling off, finding a packet of cat biscuits in the cupboard and tipping them into the bowl.

“It’s OK,” I tell them, “Newton’s like most men, distracted easily by food.”

“And other things,” Liam growls, beckoning to me with his finger, “come here, sweetheart.”

But I’m not in the mood to be told what to do. I’m still stinging from my encounter with Professor Arsehole even if I did manage to laugh it off earlier. I’m still stinging from it.

I shake my head and weave through the furniture, switching on something sultry to play over the speakers.

I kick off my shoes and drop down onto the sofa, curling my legs under me.

The two men are watching me hungrily.

“You know what alphas do to little things who don’t do what they’re told,” Liam says, striding towards me.

I shrug, pretending not to care, when really my blood is thrumming.

“Tell her, Gabe.”

“What they do – what mine do anyway – is bend you over their knee and spank you.” He drops down onto the seat beside me and whispers into my ear, “Of course we pretend we hate it when really it feels divine.”

“Do you want me to spank you, sweetheart?”

I shrug again. I’ve been spanked before, but that was on their terms not mine, their fantasies. I was a vehicle, not a participant.

“Yank up your skirt.”

I shake my head slowly, licking my lips as I do, letting him know I want him to continue.

“Sweetheart, do you want to play this game?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “I want to play.”

“If you want me to stop, you just say the word. You tell me ‘that’s enough’.”

“I understand.” My heart hammers with anticipation.

“Fuck,” he mutters and before I know it, he’s in the seat beside me, flipping me over his lap.

I feign a struggle.

“If you want me to stop you tell me: that’s enough. You remember, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” I say, squirming on his lap, feeling his hard cock digging into my stomach.

“Tell me what you have to say if you want me to stop.”

“That’s enough.”

“Good girl.” He tugs up my skirt and palms my arse, growling as he does. “She has a pretty arse, Gabe.”

“Fuck, she does,” he murmurs.

And I like this game. I like this game a lot. I’m wet, wet for them both. And I want to keep playing.

I reach down and pinch Liam on the thigh, hard as I can, squeezing my fingers and thumb together.

Immediately, the flat of his hand connects with my backside. Pain shoots through my flesh, and something else too: a jolt of pleasure straight through my core that has me biting down on a moan.

He slaps me again and then again. Two more times in quick succession. Each slap making the sensation in my pussy even stronger.

I wait with bated breath for the next strike, but instead, he smooths his hand over me, stroking at the flaming skin.

“Are you going to behave for us now?”

I shake my head and kick my legs, and he rewards me with three more slaps.

“She’s getting wet,” Liam tells Gabe. “She’s making her underwear all creamy.”

He raises his hand to slap me again, but Gabe interrupts him.

“That’s enough, Alpha. Now it’s my time to make it all better.”

I swing my head around, wondering what he means, hoping it means one thing.

He winks and slinks out of his jacket, dropping down next to his alpha. Stroking his own hands over my arse, he slips his fingers under the gusset of my underwear and through my wet folds.

“Eat her out, Omega,” Liam says, with a voice so full of authority I don’t think either Gabe or I could refuse him. “Eat her out and then I plan to fuck you both.”

I squeal at the idea and lift my hips, allowing Gabe to wriggle my underwear down my legs.

I’m bare for them both, my arse exposed in the air. I should feel vulnerable and yet I don’t. Despite being the beta in this arrangement, I feel as if I can wield as much power as either of them. That I can make my demands, take what I want. They’re both needy for me and willing to give me what I want.

Liam opens my legs and Gabe nestles between my thighs. His nose knocking against my sensitive arsehole as he laps his tongue through me, hitting my clit and circling my entrance.

“Hmmm,” he murmurs, his plush lips vibrating against me. I’m already wound up, sensitive from the spanking, and it takes only a few flicks of his tongues and my legs are shaking around his head.

“This is so fucking good,” Liam mutters, and I wriggle against his hard cock, manoeuvring my arms until I find his fly and dip my hands inside his trousers. He groans when I wrap my fist around his cock, and I stroke him, stroke him as Gabe flicks at me harder, and the tension in my core breaks, bliss spiralling through my veins and my body jolting about in Liam’s lap.

“Hmmm, I like when you come on the end of my tongue, pretty little thing,” Gabe says, scrabbling up onto his knees.

“Let her come around your cock next, Omega.”

“But you—”

“I want to watch the two of you together,” Liam says, lifting me off his lap and onto my feet, Gabe following after me. Liam sits there, his cock in his lap, hands coiled around his shaft, eyes wild.

“You want him?” he asks me and I glance at Gabriel, his face even more golden in the lamp light. He’s so beautiful and I can’t help remembering how gracefully he moved across the stage, the strength in his thighs, the force of his rhythm.

I’ve never wanted to fuck a man more.

“Yes,” I say, stepping towards the omega, “if he wants me.”

Gabe nods and I reach up on my toes to kiss him, my hands making quick work of his shirt buttons. I yank it away and swim my hands over his smooth chest, trailing my kisses to his neck, and sucking and licking until he’s groaning.

He’s pulling at my own top next, hands inside my bra, squeezing at my tits and tweaking at my nipples.

“Your tits are so soft,” he mutters and he trails his fingers around my stiff nipple until I lose track of what I was doing to him and throw my head back, eyes drifting shut.

I fumble at his clothes and he does the same with mine and soon we’re both standing in front of each other, completely bare. I take a step back and let my eyes roam over his beautiful body. The faint line of a scar runs across his belly and a selection of inks sprawl across his pecs and down his torso ending above the light fuzz that frames his cock. His cock itself isn’t as large as his two alphas’, but it bends in a manner that has my mouth watering in anticipation and as he stands and observes me too, he glides his hand through his slick and coats his dick in it.

He beckons me forward and when I'm standing right in front of him, he sweeps my hair over my shoulder and whispers in my ear.

"You still want to do this? You don't have to just because he wants it."

"I want you," I whisper back. "I want you as well as him." I nibble against his ear. "But only if you want it too."

He has his hands hooked under my backside without another word, backing me up against the wall and thrusting inside me as I wrap my legs tightly around his middle.

"Shit, yes," Liam says, from the couch. "You're both so damn hot."

I wasn't sure what it would be like with an omega. With alphas it's been powerful, brutal, unrelenting and unforgiving. They fuck like they were born to do it. Like nothing else matters in the world.

But an omega. Maybe I thought he would be gentle, more passive.

But Gabriel is strong, and though his rhythm is slow and careful, each thrust inside is powerful; the omega using his entire body to fuck me.

I match his pace, bucking my hips against him and meeting every thrust, clenching around him, and gripping his shoulders, driving my heels against his arse and dragging him in deeper.

I forget we're being watched, forget we're putting on a performance.

I'm too lost to this dance, our two bodies working together.

He leans down to whisper in my ear again, words for just the two of us.

"You feel so good! I can see why you have my two alphas all in a tangle."

"I ... I ..." I stutter but I can't get the words out.

Gabriel looks towards his alpha. Then braces one arm beside my head and fucks me even harder.

Liam stumbles from the sofa towards us. Arm resting against the wall, he kisses his omega, sloppy and wet, and then he twists his head and kisses me too, his hands finding my tits as Gabriel continues his thrusts. Pounding me against the wall.

When we come together a moment later, Gabriel's strong grip finally gives way as he loses himself to the feeling, the two of us tumbling to the floor in a pile of sweat and come.

"Shit," Liam chuckles.

I peer up at him as I pant hard, and this time it's me who beckons, beckons him down towards me, lying out flat on my back and parting my thighs for him. He doesn't need an invitation, ramming inside me. I'm wet, from my arousal and Gabriel's come, and he slides into me, all the way in until he's seated himself. Then he lifts my leg, increasing the angle so I'm forced to take more, and fucks me like something possessed. Like he wants to remind me he's as good as Gabriel, that he can make me feel as good, like he's reclaiming my pussy.

Gabriel curls up beside us on the rug, his eyes bright as he watches his Alpha fuck me. I search for an inkling of doubt, of jealousy, but I can't find any. Not now anyway. Maybe that is something which will come later, when the heat of the moment dies away.

Liam mutters strings of expletives and I know he's close, his pace faltering. But I can't give him that final thing. I can't take his knot, so with a long lingering kiss he withdraws from me and his attention flips to his omega.

Maybe now's the time for me to feel that stab of jealousy. To feel used.

I don't.

There's only unbridled lust swimming in my gut. Watching them fuck is one of the most erotic experiences of my life. I've had my threesomes before. But I've never seen two men fuck before. Never seen an alpha and an omega together.

I watch as Liam comes, his head dropping forward, his eyes scrunching shut and his mouth falling open on a strangled grunt. He plunges deep inside his omega, whose face morphs to bliss as he takes his alpha's knot, the pleasure clear as it swims across his face. They fall into each other's arms, laughing and kissing and holding each other.

And now I feel it. Now I feel that jealousy, because as fun as this was, as wild and passionate, I'll never be able to experience that.

I'll never be able to take an alpha's knot.



MY BED ISN'T BUILT for three people, especially not when one of those people is a giant alpha, but somehow we make it work, snuggling up together and falling asleep in an entangled and exhausted heap. Gabriel snuggled between Liam and me.

At some ungodly hour of the morning, Liam creeps from the bed despite his omega's best efforts to tempt him back under the covers.

"I have an early surgery," he says, peering down at us both, looking like a man who just had his heart torn out. "Any chance you might still be here when I return?"

Gabriel yawns, and pulls me closer against his body. "Nope, we have things to do today."

"We do?" I ask.

"We do." He winks. "After I've fucked you again, I'm taking you out for breakfast and then we're going shopping."

"You don't even know if Sophia likes shopping," Liam says, with a pout as he buttons up his shirt.

"I've seen how this woman dresses. She obviously likes shopping."

"I do," I say, snuggling against him and watching Liam. I sigh as he pulls on his trousers. "Are you sure you can't bunk off? Pull a sickie or something?"

“Don’t fucking tempt me, sweetheart,” he says, bending over the bed to kiss us both.

“Oh, I’m more than willing to tempt you,” I purr.

He groans and marches towards the door. “Patients,” he says. “I have patients,” and he slams the door behind him.

Gabriel laughs.

“Were we cruel?” I ask.

“It’s the best way to be with alphas. Now, back to sleep. I need my beauty shut-eye.”

I wake again much later to the smell of coffee. I drag my eyelids open and find Gabriel climbing into bed with two takeaway cups and a paper bag.

“You went out?” I ask, stretching my arms over my head.

“I figured we needed something dark and bitter to start the day and as my packmate Ezra isn’t around ...”

I laugh and fluff up the pillow behind me, sitting up next to Gabriel and taking the piping hot coffee from his hands. “Oh, it really is dark and bitter.”

“I had a feeling that might be how you like it.”

“I wish I could argue with that, but I can’t.” I take another long sip, the caffeine hitting straight into my blood. “What’s in the bag?”

“Intrigued are we?”

“Yes. Let me guess? Something full of sugar. You omegas are known for your sweet teeth.”

“We are, but unfortunately my personal trainer doesn’t allow it. Even these would cause him to have a heart attack, but we deserve a little spoiling.” He shakes out two croissants. They’re warm and I sink my teeth through the buttery pastry.

“So,” he says.

“So,” I repeat.

“How are we feeling about last night?” I lick a flake of pastry off my lip and grin. “Can I take it you have no regrets

then?”

“I don’t really do regrets.”

His warm eyes swim around my face and trail down my neck. The path of his gaze warms my skin. “I like that.”

“Do you have any?” I ask, placing my cup down on the bedside table.

“No,” he says, holding my eyes. “I’m hoping there will be plenty of opportunities to repeat last night.” He peers over the top of his cup at me and then places it on the table too. He’s back in his shirt and jeans from last night and all of a sudden that seems a mighty shame.

“We could repeat it right now?” I say, crawling towards him.

“Without Liam?”

“Does Liam have to be here for us to do this?” I ask seriously. I’m still feeling around in the dark for the boundaries here, for the outline of the rules.

“No, he doesn’t. This is an us thing. You and me, Sophia.”

“Good,” I say, swinging my leg over his waist and coming to straddle him. I undo the buttons of his shirt and he simply sits back and watches me, a beautiful amused smile resting on his lips.

“Are you a spoiled omega after all?” I ask. “You like being taken care of.”

“Variety is the spice of life, *mon chéri*. Sometimes I like to be cared for, sometimes I like to care.”

“I think it’s time for me to take care of you,” I purr, scraping my nails down the planes of his smooth chest, down his taut abdomen and to the waistband of his jeans. His breath hitches as I unloop the belt buckle and unzip his fly. He’s not wearing any briefs underneath and with two sharp tugs, I force his jeans down his thighs. Then I stare at his lap. His cock with its glorious bend, stands waiting for me, hard and stiff, and there’s enough of his slick I won’t need any lube.

I take him in my hand and stroke his soft skin as I shuffle forwards on my knees.

“Hmmm, I like this,” he murmurs.

“What do you like about it?” I ask.

“How gentle you are,” he croons and I wonder if he craves this. He’s been at the mercy of alphas, of his packmates for all this time. Of strong grips, tight fingers, hard thrusts. Maybe I can give him something different, something he needs just as much.

I continue to stroke him between my legs as I lean in to kiss him. A slow, lingering kiss, barely touching his wet lips with mine, designed to tease him.

When he starts to grow restless, his hands landing on my waist, I rise up on my knees, lining him up below me and then sinking down onto him.

He lets out a strangled cry and I lick my tongue down his jaw and his neck, skating it along his collar bone.

“Move,” he gasps. “Fuck, Sophia, move.”

I wait a heartbeat before I do, and then I circle my hips in an excruciating pace that tortures me as well as him, his cock hitting every live wire inside me.

His right hand slides up my body, tracing my figure as I continue to grind into him, and halts at my tits. Here he skims his fingertips over my nipples making me cry out with the electricity.

His other hand skims around to my arse cheeks and finds my tight hole. He strokes at this too, carefully adding a finger inside me. I cry out again.

“You like that, huh?” he asks, continuing to play with me, cupping and squeezing and tweaking and probing. I increase my movements, rising up and down his shaft, up and down, up and down, until I’m bouncing on his cock. “Two holes, little beta, two holes to play with, now just think what we could do with those.”

The bed rattles. The headboard slams against the wall. My tits bounce in his hands and his jaw grows tighter and tighter.

I brace myself against his shoulders, working so hard, sweat pools along my collar bones and rolls between my breasts. The pressure inside me builds as I fuck him harder and harder and harder, and then, finally it breaks, the two of us coming together, his hot spend flooding inside me as I clench and convulse around his cock.

I collapse into his arms and he holds me, panting as I regain my breath.

Finally, he rolls me back, still seated on his cock, and sweeps damp hair from my face. Unlike his alphas, his cock is softening.

“What’s it like,” I ask him, “to be knotted?”

He eyes me with suspicion. “Why do you ask? You want to try it?”

I scoff. “I’m a beta.”

He captures a bead of sweat rolling down my chest on his tongue and sweeps it away. “There are ways to train a beta to take an alpha’s knot.”

I stare at him. “Are you insane?”

He glances up at me. “What, sweetie pie? You think you were the first beta that ever got curious?”

“No, but it sounds ... dangerous.”

“I wouldn’t know.” He traces the line of a love bite Liam left on my neck last night. “A knot is mind blowing, Sophia. Fucking mind blowing. It’s like ...” his green eyes swivel around as he searches for the words, “oh fuck, I’m bad at words. I could probably show you much better in a modern dance interpretation.” He laughs and tries again. “It’s like being ripped apart, completely and truly destroyed, until there’s nothing left of you, and then slowly, carefully, rebuilt, every single molecule. It’s like being reborn.”

“Shit,” I laugh, “that sounds intense.”

“It is. It’s the best orgasm ever.”

“No wonder you omegas go gaga for it.”

“I don’t know if it would be the same for a beta though.”

Involuntarily, we both peer down at his lap and I shudder.

“You don’t fancy that, huh?” he leans in to whisper in my ear. “How about the double d?”

“Hmmmm.”

He chuckles. “Is that a yes?”

“It could be.”

He chuckles harder, flipping me onto my back and caging me with his arms. “Enough teasing me. Time to get up. Go get a shower.”

“If you join me.”

“Fuck,” he shakes his head. “Your appetite is nearly as big as mine.”

Roman

I PROMISED to drive Gabe to his performance this evening, but it takes me all fucking day to track him down. He didn't come home last night and neither did Liam, plus he's not answering his phone. My anxiety levels are spiking and the only thing preventing me from tearing through this city in search of him, is the flutters of happiness I keep catching through our bond. Not just normal Gabriel contentment, off-the-charts excitable happiness. It tastes like giddiness and rapture. I wonder what the hell he is doing and who he's doing it with.

It's in strong contrast to the tension that's been plaguing our house. Tension that's finally coming gushing to the surface. It's why I'm working late more than I need to, working clients' cases longer than I have to. But even when I'm out of the house, I can still feel that tension vibrating through our bond.

When we first mated, those bonds were always open. We couldn't get enough of each other, feeding off one another's emotions, good and bad. The tiniest inkling that my omega was unhappy, I'd be rushing home to make it right. These days our shields are raised more often than they're down. It's for the best. I've never enjoyed the feeling of my packmates being with someone outside the pack. Unlike the others, I've never

wanted that. I always like it best when it's just the four of us, focussing on one another, wallowing in each other.

A spike of jealousy sears in my chest. Whoever is making Gabe feel this way isn't one of us. One of the alphas. I don't think we've made him feel like this for a long time.

I've tried, but he's been so distant since everything went wrong. As for Esra, he blames himself and anyone can see things have shifted between him and our omega. Liam just bundles on as always, unaware.

And now things are even worse.

I've hardly seen Esra since Sunday morning. I'm not sure if he's even been at home to sleep. Liam and Gabriel insist he'll come around, that, in Gabriel's words, "he'll get over his temper tantrum and calm the fuck down". Neither of them are prepared to back down about the girl.

Is that who Gabe's with? Esra's student? The beta?

Eventually, when I've worn away the floor in my goddamn office, Gabriel finally answers his phone.

"Hey, Ro."

"Gabe, are you all right? Is everything OK?"

He laughs in the light-hearted manner I remember from our early days together, when we spent all our time flirting or in bed. God, that laugh could get me hard in a heartbeat. Still can.

"I'm absolutely fine. Are you OK? I have like twenty missed calls from you."

"I was worried about you."

"Tsk, no need."

I frown. There is a need. He knows that.

"Where are you?"

"I've been out shopping with Sophia."

"Are you buying her stuff?" I frown harder. Gabe's generosity, like the rest of him, can be taken advantage of.

“Sadly, not. She won’t let me. Says she has her own money, thank you very much.”

A feminine voice murmurs in the background and there’s that flash of joy through his bond again.

So it’s her. She’s the cause.

I rub at my brow.

Fuck. This is fucked up.

“I’ll come pick you up and take you for an early dinner before curtains up.”

“Let’s take Sophia to Riccardo’s.”

“You’re not bored with each other yet?”

“No,” he says, making an adorable little omega growling noise in his throat, like I threatened to take away his new toy.

I rub my head again. That description is probably closer to the truth than I’d like.

I switch off my laptop, lock up the office and duck into the car, jumping two red lights to arrive at the designer shopping district within fifteen minutes. I park on a double yellow line and ping Gabe my location. Five minutes later, he comes strolling out of a shop, his arm wrapped around a tiny little brunette’s neck, his free hand full of shopping bags, and his attention captured by her.

I understand immediately.

She’s stunning. The type of girl who has breaths catching, steps halting, jaws dropping. Big blue eyes, smooth skin, soft looking lips, and a figure men would die for and women would kill for.

I watch as they chatter to each other, laughing and giggling, and I realise they look like some superstar couple. The type you see advertising perfume or blockbuster movies.

At the car, the woman’s gaze glides over my car with apprehension as Gabe opens the door for her and she slips inside. Gabe follows straight after, leaning his forearms on the headrest on the seat in front of him.

“Ro, this is Sophia. Sophia, this is Roman.”

“Nice to meet you,” she says, silvery-blue eyes alighting on me. “Nice car.”

“Thanks,” I say, diverting my attention to Gabe. “Am I your taxi driver?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “I’m not leaving Sophia to sit in the back while I sit in the front. And you know I hate sitting in the back on my own.”

Sophia giggles. “See, I knew it. You are a precious little omega.”

“He’s precious, yes,” I say, meeting her eye in the rear-view mirror as I pull out into the traffic.

Esra has a problem with this woman. She may be beautiful but looks can be deceiving. I don’t want her hurting our omega. Shit, I don’t want her hurting our pack.

Although, as I lean back in my seat and listen to them chattering away behind me, I find it hard to believe she could. She’s sharp-witted, causing Gabriel to cackle twice and snort once with her comedic observations, but she’s also sweet and clearly intelligent. I understand why Liam likes her too. As I pull up outside Riccardo’s, I’m even beginning to see why she’s got Esra all choked up.

I hand the car keys to the valet and open the back door of my car, holding out my hand to help Sophia out first. Her hand is warm in mine and up close I receive a whiff of her perfume. Usually, such an artificial scent, brewed in some factory somewhere, would have me gagging and holding my breath. But it smells good on Sophia’s soft-looking skin. It suits her.

“Thank you,” she says, releasing my hand and making room for Gabe.

As I bend down to help him out, he hangs on my shoulder and whispers in my ear.

“You’re going to like her.”

That frown creases my brow again. I’m not sure liking this woman will be a good thing, and yet, I can feel it happening,

feel my eyes drawn her way, and my attention too.

The evening is still early and the restaurant only opened a half hour ago, only one other table occupied. Ric, the owner of the restaurant isn't here, probably home with his own pack, but the manager finds us a table at the back, somewhere Gabe can't be bothered by admirers.

"Last night Deep Slick, today Riccardo's. I've never been to so many alpha haunts in such quick succession," Sophia says, as she drums her painted nails on the table top and scans the menu.

"This is an alpha haunt?"

Gabe scoffs. "Ro, darling, can't you smell that it is."

I suppose he's right. I'd never really considered it before.

"You alphas – and omegas," Sophia observes, "like to hang around together."

"Safety in numbers," I mutter.

"Like you need safety."

"There's a sizable majority in every city who would like to run us out of town with pitch forks. They think we're monsters."

She leans forward on her elbow, meeting my eyes, hers dark in the dim light of the restaurant. "And are you? Monsters, I mean?"

I stare back at her, electricity seeming to skip between us.

"Sometimes they are, darling," Gabe says darkly, "but then aren't we all."

"It's funny," she says, curling her hair behind the delicate shell of her ear. "When you're young the books you read, the movies you watch, are full of scary-looking monsters. Then you grow up and you learn the monsters are just as likely to lurk inside the princes as the beasts."

"You think Ro looks like a beast?" Gabe asks, resting his arm around the back of her chair. "I mean, his beard could do with a trim and his hair is looking especially wild today—"

I rub my fingertips across my chin.

“No, that’s the thing. Alphas always look like princes.” She looks like she might say more. She fiddles with the thin chain and pendant around her neck. Then whatever it was passes, and she smiles, twisting back to my omega. “And omegas too, of course.”

“And how about betas?” I ask, not prepared to lose her attention just yet.

“Betas?” Those pretty eyes return to me.

“Are they beasts or princes?”

“You already said it yourself, we’re the ones watching from the side lines, the bit parts, the side-kicks, the ensemble.”

“Not you,” I say, meaning every word.

Gabe was right. There’s something about this woman. Like she controls all the electricity in the room, all the light and the oxygen.

She could no sooner be a bit part, a side-kick, than someone like Gabriel.

A tall, skinny waiter arrives with a tray full of entrees and we’re silent while he lays them across the crisp linen tablecloth.

When he’s done, Gabriel takes an olive and pops it in his mouth.

“I always found the beast far more attractive than the prince,” he says.

And therein lies the problem. An omega like Gabe will always be prey to every monster out there, beautiful or beastly. It’s what concerns Esra the most.

“I’m afraid, it’ll only be a light meal,” Gabe tells Sophia. “I can’t eat anything heavy before a performance.”

She then asks him a series of questions about his dancing as we finish the starter and make our way to the main.

By the time we've finished the food, I think I know more about Gabriel's career than I ever have done in our ten years together.

"What will you do afterwards?" Sophia asks him, as entranced by my omega as I am.

"Afterwards?" I ask.

"A ballet dancer can't dance forever," Gabe says with a hint of comedy that seems to fall flat. Sadness flashes through his bond before he shuts it down. A sadness that's all too familiar now, a sadness I've been trying to understand.

"It must be hard to contemplate stopping something you love."

"Yes, but we all grow old. It's the bitter irony of life."

"When?" I ask, the sadness infecting me, seeping into my gut. "How much longer do you have?"

"A year, two or three if I stay injury free."

So soon. Shit. I've been so fucking blind.

"What will you do, Gabe?" I ask and he looks up at me, vulnerability shining in those emerald eyes of his, so usually fierce and defiant.

"Oh, it won't be the end of me, Ro. They'll have to drag me kicking and screaming ... or hand me a job as a choreographer." He manages a smile.

And I want to wrap my arms around him and make everything better. Like I always do. It's Sophia, though, who rests her head against his shoulder.

"You'll never stop being the best ballet dancer," she says.

"Now that is true." Gabriel pushes his plate away. "Now as nice as this was, pretty little thing, this is where I have to leave you. Duty calls."

"Of course."

I wave the waiter over and settle up, and we walk out to the car. The sun dips low in the sky painting the shop windows

golden and the air blows cool.

“Thank you for dinner,” Sophia says, fastening her denim jacket around her body. “Call me,” she says to Gabe, going in for a kiss.

“Hang on,” he says, grabbing her by each elbow. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home.”

“Ro will drive you.”

“I can grab a cab.”

“Sophia, my alphas are gentlemen ... well, two out of three. You don’t mind, do you, Ro?”

I stare back at them. A mixture of emotions collide around my body like bumper cars. I can’t deny my attraction to Sophia – like everyone else in this pack it seems – and the idea of driving her home excites the alpha prowling in my chest. But then there’s the concern – about my packmate, about my omega. It’s all a tangle.

If Gabe senses any of it, he ignores it, bundling Sophia into the car with him so I have no choice but to follow them.

When he climbs out at the back of the theatre, he hustles Sophia into the front seat next to me and, after kissing us both, winks at me and shuts the door.

Seems my omega isn’t averse to a little matchmaking. I’m not sure whether to be alarmed or impressed.

As I lean my elbow against the open window, and weave us back into the early evening gridlocked traffic, Sophia eyes my dark blue suit and wrinkled shirt.

“Were you working today?”

“Yes.”

“Huh,” she says, fiddling with that pendant between her fingers. I squint at it, trying to deduce its shape.

“What?”

“Liam is working today. We just dropped Gabe at work and Professor Arsehole probably is too.”

“Professor Arsehole?”

“He’s not my favourite person right now.”

I decide it’s best not to ask, not if I want to avoid being dragged into the middle of it. Not that being dragged into the middle of something with Sophia sounds so bad ...

“We all have demanding careers.”

“It doesn’t leave much time for each other.”

I wet my lips, considering this. “No, not as much as I’d like.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a lawyer.”

She frowns. “Oh poor you.”

I laugh, swivelling my head to see if she’s serious. She is.

“You study physics, right?”

“Yeah, but law. And on the weekend too.”

“Hey, law can be exciting.”

“It can?”

“Yeah.” I shuffle on my seat, realising I want to impress her. Fucking stupid alpha crap. “I’ve had to track down clients’ ex-husbands before. Trail them. I once followed this guy halfway around the world.”

“Wait, what do you mean ex-husbands?”

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel and decide to start at the beginning of the story. “My dad,” I said, “was a lawyer too. The boring kind,” I smile at her, “dealt with tax for fuck-off big companies and stuff.”

“Oh ... kay ...” she says, struggling to see where this is leading.

“He ran off with his secretary. But the bastard was clever about it. Tied things up so my mum never saw a penny of his

money – neither did I for that matter. He walked out on her when I was ten and she had to scrimp and save, work her fingers to the bone to keep me fed and clothed while he was swanning off around the world.”

“Bastard,” she mutters.

“So, I guess, I made it my mission to stop that from happening to anyone else. I couldn’t help my mum, not back then anyway, but I can help people now. Mostly women, some men too.”

“Like a real life avenging angel.” I drag my eyes from the road to glance at her, expecting to find amusement skipping over her face. There’s none, she’s deadly serious. “It happened to my mum too.” She holds my gaze for a fraction of a second before breaking away to look out at the window, at the people passing on the street, the tree branches dancing above the sunroof. “There wasn’t another woman involved, though. At least not that I know of. Things started crumbling for him. And instead of sticking around, instead of pulling together and getting through it together, he up and left. Vanished. Left us high and dry.”

“It hurts the most when it’s the people in the world who should love you who let you down.”

“Yes,” she says. She rests the pendant against her collarbone. “I take it back, what I said, about your work.”

“Don’t. It’s fucking dull most of the time, paper work and legal shit. I was trying to make it sound more exciting to impress you.”

“I am impressed,” she says. I glance at her again, trying not to notice the way she’s crossed her legs, the fabric of her skirt shifting up to reveal a flash of soft thigh. “Most men, I guess most people, are only interested in making money. Here you are, and Liam too, working to help people. And Gabriel is working to make something beautiful, something unforgettable. I have no idea what I want to do with my life.”

“Not physics then?”

She picks at the hem of her skirt and shakes her head.

“You don’t have Ezra’s passion for it?”

“Passion suggests the man has a heart and I’m not sure that is the case.”

“He has a heart,” I say seriously, then decide it best to change the subject. Besides, I don’t want to talk about my packmate. I want to learn more about her. “Why are you studying it then?”

She tosses her hair over her shoulder. “Because why not? It was the least likely thing people expected me to do, and I like surprising people.”

“And why was it surprising?”

“Because I’m pretty and my parents were wealthy. People expected me to fuck off travelling around the world or get some job in television or politics. Something like that. Maybe even follow my dad and be a city trader.” She leans her head against the window and I catch more of that perfume. “Physics isn’t a husband-bating career.”

“I’d have thought it was. On account of all those men.”

“Not the right type of men,” she says with obvious disdain.

“You have no intention of bating a husband then?”

“No, that’s my mum’s life-plan. You know what she did as soon as my dad disappeared? Hooked herself the next husband. She’s had another since then.”

The lights in front of us turn red, and I slow the car and turn to look at her again.

“I’m gathering you aren’t a fan.”

“No,” she says and something flashes in those blue eyes. “Relying on other people to look after you is a bad idea.”

We’re both quiet as oncoming traffic streams past the window.

“You don’t have to decide, you know. It’s a fucking myth that you have to have your life sorted and all mapped out in your twenties. You have time to decide what you want to do.”

“Maybe I’ll experiment a bit. Try a few personas on for fitting.”

“Whatever you choose to do, Sophia, you’re going to be successful.”

She screws up her face like she’s not so sure.

“It’s round the next corner,” she points to a turn coming up. “Do you want to come in for a drink?”

“I ... don’t think that is such a good idea.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Why? You’re assuming a drink is an euphemism for something else.”

“Isn’t it always?”

“Maybe I just want to talk some more.” She leans her head against the window again and smiles, her eyes brightening in the dark of the car. “You’re easy to talk to and the night is young. I’m going to go up there to my apartment with only my cat for company. I assume you’re driving to a home that’s also empty as all your packmates will be working.”

“Esra might be home. I might have other plans.”

The smile falters on her lips slightly and I feel like a creep.

“I’d like to come up, Sophia.” I press my foot to the accelerator as the light turns green. “For one drink,” I clarify.

“One drink.” She twists her head away to look out of the windscreen, the smile returning. “Of course, I may pour you a very large drink.”

I laugh and follow her instructions, finding a space on the road outside the apartment block. It’s a nice area of the city centre, not far from Crestmore College, and it’s new. I wonder how she can afford it on a student wage. Unless of course her mum’s latest husband is paying for this.

“I was going to try to meet you,” I say as we ride the lift together, a dimly lit box with mirrors reflecting our faces from every angle – hers flawless from each, mine looking older against hers. She stands wedged into one corner and I lean against the opposite and we watch each other as the lift rises.

“You were curious,” she says, lips twitching with that smile.

I shake my head. “No, actually,” I wet my bottom lip, “I was going to ask you to stay away from my pack.”

Her mouth makes a silent ‘oh’ and she tilts her head. “You thought if you asked nicely I would.”

“I had no idea, but I was going to try. You see – I’m sure you see – things in the pack aren’t how they should be. There are these fissures,” I drag my finger through the air as if I’m tracing them, “and no matter what I do they seem to be growing bigger and bigger by the day.”

She watches my hands. “And what have you decided now? Are you still going to ask me to leave your pack alone?”

I shake my head. “No, not now I’ve seen you with Gabe. Today, he was the happiest I’ve seen him in a long time.”

Her eyes soften. “I like him. I like Liam too.”

“And me?”

The doors slide open and I watch her walk out of the lift, appreciating the curved silhouette of her body and the fluid way she moves.

At her door, red like her nail varnish, she fumbles for her key and opens the door.

On the mat she kicks off her heels and freezes for a fraction of a second as a small tabby cat circles her calves. Then she swoops down to pick up a square envelope.

She drops it on the sideboard along with her keys and walks into her apartment, switching on lamps as she goes.

I shut the door, and stare down at the envelope. Her name is printed across it in neat block handwriting. Ice swims through my veins and I flick my gaze to the young beta.

“What’s this?” I ask, pointing to the envelope as she pulls a bottle of red out of a small wine fridge.

“What’s what?”

“This letter.”

She jolts ever so slightly, then recovers herself, swinging two glasses down onto the counter, and unscrewing the top of the wine. “Personal mail,” she says with an attempt at a bemused expression.

I stride towards her, peering down into her face.

“I know what kind of personal mail that is,” I say, anger in my voice. I deal in broken relationships, shattered marriages. I’ve seen many of those type of letters.

Her hand shakes and she lowers the bottle before raising her eyes to me.

Vulnerability.

She’s like Gabe.

Just like him.

Tough and charismatic on the outside.

Not on the inside.

No one ever is.

“Show it to me.”

“There’s no point.”

“Have you reported it?”

She sighs, slopping wine into her glass. “No.” She takes a swig of the alcohol, staining the corners of her mouth a burgundy red, the full-bodied aroma of the wine filling my nose. “They stopped. I hadn’t had any for months and months.”

“But they’ve started again? How many?”

“This is the second.”

I take a hold of her elbow and pull her against my chest, wrapping my arms around her, holding her in my embrace.

If I’d asked, she’d have refused. Just like Gabe. And yet my alpha instincts tell me she needs it. This. To be held.

“OK?” I ask her.

She doesn't pull away, leaning her forehead against my chest.

"Will you read it for me?"

"Yes." I smooth my palm against her back, soothing circles. She's so small, so little, so fragile. Something stirs inside me. That ancient alpha instinct to protect what is mine.

I step away, although I can't quite bring myself to let her go. I grip her upper arms.

"Go sit down. Take your drink. I'll read it and then we'll talk about it."

S ophia

I CURL up on the sofa with my glass of wine and watch as Roman rips the envelope open. His jaw is tight, his temple creased, his shoulders braced.

His ocean eyes swim across the page as his knuckles grow whiter and whiter. I try not to, but I can guess what it says. I take a long gulp of my wine. When he's done, he folds the letter in half and slides it into the inside pocket of his blazer.

"You know who it's from?"

I hesitate.

I like these men. I like this pack. I'd like to spend more time with them and get to know them better. But who am I kidding? As fun as this is, it's not going anywhere. I'm not an omega. I'm not meant to be a part of a pack. Besides, Esra hates me.

"I have my suspicions."

"Have you reported it to the police?"

"No." I spin the stem of the glass around in my fingers, the dark red wine swirling as I do. "What would be the point?"

"The point would be they'd put a stop to this before it ..."

He strides to the sofa and drops down beside me. "Before it becomes more serious."

I crick my neck. “I can look after myself.”

He rubs at his chin, his fingertips sinking into his thick beard. I notice for the first time, an ink protruding from under the cuff of his sleeve and I wonder where it leads.

“Who is it, Soph?”

That name sounds nice in his mouth. Soft and warm and strong.

“It’s fucked up.”

“Didn’t I just confess to you that our pack is too?”

I down the last of the wine and slide the glass onto the coffee table.

He squeezes my hand. “Have you told anyone else? Your mum—”

“Doesn’t know. She’s not a bad person, Roman. But she’s fragile.” Haven’t I learned the hard way that the only person you can trust is yourself? First my dad. Then ... I snatch my hand away and walk towards the large window overlooking the city. I stare down at the weaving traffic lights and cross my arms over my body. “Nobody would ever believe me. If I ever told anyone, he’d twist it somehow, make it my fault.”

I hear the sofa groan, followed by the floorboards creaking. Then I feel his warm body behind me. He rests his hand on my shoulder, carefully like he doesn’t want to frighten me.

“Tell me and I’ll sort this for you, Sophia.”

I cover his hand with mine and he weaves our fingers together. Is it possible to trust someone ever again? If I could, it would be someone like Roman. There’s a calmness and a power that exudes from him as if there isn’t a problem in the world he couldn’t fix. Could he really fix mine?

No, Sophia, he couldn’t. He said so himself, he can’t even fix his own pack’s issues.

His fingertips sweep against the skin of my shoulder, tangling in my hair, and his other hand comes to rest on my

hip. I catch the blue of his eyes in the dark reflection of the glass.

Slowly, I spin around, my heart pounding in my chest. I'm tight against the glass, the pane cool against my back. He pulls my head back, bending down to claim my mouth.

He kisses like an old movie star. With force and passion, strength and care. He kisses me in a way that makes my knees weak and my head giddy, hooking his arm around my middle and dragging me against his hard body.

Then he's kissing my jaw and my ear, my neck and my shoulder.

"I thought you were only coming for a drink."

"Sophia," he murmurs, "you want me to stop?"

I want to tell him the truth. I want to step back three minutes and have the courage to tell him everything. Would he still want to help me? Would he still have swept me up in his arms like this?

But it's too late now. The words won't come and I can't stop him.

"How can there be any cracks between you?" I whisper. But I don't think he hears. How can there be? They're perfect. All damn perfect. Even Professor Cole.

I take a handful of his hair, tugging until he lifts his mouth back to mine.

Finding the hem of my skirt, he lifts it, stroking the insides of my thigh with his knuckles. Up and down, up and down, as he kisses me, not venturing any higher as if he's satisfied with this.

"Why are you spending time with us, Sophia?" he asks, nibbling my ear.

"For this," I say, grinding against him.

"We're too old for you."

"You're not."

“How old are you?”

“26.”

“Fuck. I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“But I want you to. That’s all that matters.”

“Are you sure?” His hand creeps higher.

“I am,” I say, rolling my hips into him, daring him to reach right up where I want him.

He finds the lace of my underwear and traces the trim, leading to the waistband. Sliding his thumb under the ribboned elastic, he shimmies them down.

“This had better not be it, Alpha,” I warn, reminded of his packmate’s antics.

He looks at me sternly and forces me to turn so I’m leaning up against the glass of the window.

He takes both my hands in his and pins them above my head and then he rides up my skirt and squeezes my arse.

“Shit,” he mumbles, “you’re fucking beautiful, Sophia, and I want all those people down there below the window to watch as I fuck you.”

I draw in my breath.

He skims his thumb along my crease, finding me already wet for him.

“Would you like that?”

I peer down at the tiny people. They are nothing but ants from up here, but there’s still a chance someone might glance up or someone in another building might look across. The idea has my core spinning with anticipation and excitement.

“I want you to fuck me here and now.”

He nips at my shoulder, sucking on my neck and I hear the zip of his fly, then the nudge of his cock between my legs. He doesn’t enter me though, instead, crouching, he glides his big cock through my folds, hitting my clit with his head and making me rise up onto my toes with the electricity.

“Yes,” I moan, “there.”

“There?” he asks, pressing me against the glass and sweeping through me again, hitting my nub a second time. It’s sensitive already and I wait for him to hit it again. His pace increases, he works his cockhead against my clit, until I’m tensing and tensing and then I come, dancing about in front of the window as the pleasure soars through my veins.

I notice they’ve all done that. All made sure I come first. All wanting me to have my pleasure before they take theirs. It’s so different from the other men I’ve been with. I wonder if it’s their alpha instincts to care, or their experience.

“All wet and ready for me now, Sophia?” he asks, right by my ear, his breath hot.

“Fuck, yes,” I say, and he slams into me, the force lifting me up onto the tips of my toes for a second time.

I pant as he thrusts all the way inside me, deeper and deeper, stars crashing across my vision as he rubs against every sensitive part of me, until finally I’ve taken him all.

He grunts and the noise is so raw it makes my body shudder.

I can’t get enough of this. Of being with an alpha. Of the power, the strength, the pure drive to rut and fuck and mate.

I forget about the letter, about the truth, about Esra. I forget about my future, about what I’m doing with my life. I forget that and all I do is feel.

I want him to use me. To fuck me. For this to be nothing but sex. To be as raw and wild and free as he is right now as he pounds me against the window.

“Fuck, that feels good,” he growls. “Are your eyes open, Sophia?” They’re not, they’re screwed shut. Every part of me focussed on the sensations between my legs. “Sophia, answer me.”

“No.”

“Then open them and look, baby, look at me fucking you.”

I do as he says and meet his eyes, much darker now in the reflection of the glass. He looks like something possessed, like every illustration of a feral alpha ever drawn.

As he holds my gaze, his free hand reaches around me and yanks at my top until the material rips. He tugs away my bra next and then squeezes my tit in his hand as he continues his unforgiving pace.

“I should be fucking you gently, little one. Treating you carefully, you’re not built for this.”

“I am,” I growl through clenched teeth, holding his gaze. “I’m not someone you need to protect.”

“You are,” he insists. “And next time, I promise I’ll worship you with my body. I’ll go gentler and slower. But, fuck, Sophia, fuck, the things you’re doing to me.”

I don’t know how long it lasts. The second orgasm rips through me and whips away any concept of time and space I had.

When I return to the present, he’s coming too, pulling out of me, and coming all over my backside.

“Shit, sweetheart, sorry, I didn’t want to—”

“It’s fine.” I twist my head around to look at him. “I like it.”

He chuckles. “You really are a dirty girl, Sophia. I fucking love it, but I’m going to clean you up. Stay there. Don’t move.”

I catch sight of my own reflection as I wait for him. I have a wide smile on my face, my hair’s dishevelled and my cheeks pink. I look like I got fucked good. Shit.

Where the fuck will all this lead?

But I decide not to worry about that now. To enjoy the moment while it lasts.

He’s back a moment later with a flannel and gently he wipes away the mess on my backside and between my legs, then turns me around to kiss him again. He’s still half hard.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

“What, Sophia?”

“Is it painful if you don’t knot after fucking?”

He wriggles down my skirt and bundles me to the sofa, curling me up across his lap. He smooths the hair away from my face and strokes my cheek.

“No, it doesn’t hurt.”

“But it’s not ... comfortable.”

“Sophia, fucking you was truly amazing. I enjoyed it a lot.”

“But you’d have enjoyed it more if you’d knotted me.”

“I enjoyed coming all over your arse! Painting you with my come.”

I frown at him. “Tell me the truth, please.”

He stares at me. “Fine, it feels a little frustrating, like I haven’t completed. But it’s nothing I can’t live with. It’s part of being an alpha. Even an omega can’t be knotted all the time or even wants to.”

I scoff. “Gabe says it’s the best orgasm you can have. Rosie gets all fidgety if she hasn’t been knotted by one of her alphas recently. I doubt either would pass on the opportunity.”

“Rosie?”

“My best friend. She’s a pack omega like Gabe.”

He nods and kisses my forehead. “I liked fucking you. I’d like to do it again. Fuck,” he drops his head backwards against the sofa, “I don’t know if Liam is going to be mad or elated.”

“Why would he be mad?” I ask with suspicion.

“Because now he’s going to have to share you.”

“I think Liam likes sharing.”

Roman examines my face. “Do you like to be shared, Sophia?”

I shift on his lap. “It depends what you’re asking.” I flick my gaze up to his. “I haven’t been shared in all the ways I’d like to be shared.”

“Fuck,” Roman mutters and before I know it I’m on my back and we’re going for round two.

This time when he comes, I grip him around his knot like I’d done for Liam and Esra, and watch as he screws his eyes shut and grunts.

“Awww fuck, Sophia, fuck. That feels good. Your little hands wrapped around my knot, squeezing my knot, feels so damn good.”

He comes all over my hands, ribbons and ribbons of the stuff and I realise if I’m going to keep sleeping with these men, I’m going to have to ensure I take every single one of my birth control pills.

“It feels different, though, doesn’t it, my hands?” My hands are made of bones. They’re not soft like a pussy, like a male omega’s arse.

“Sophia,” he sighs.

“I just want to know.”

“It feels different, like a finger feels different to a cock or to a tongue. They can all feel good.”

“Gabe said—”

“Oh fuck, what did Gabe say?” he asks, still throbbing in my hands.

“That there are ways to train a beta to take a knot.”

His brows drop heavy over his eyes. “Sometimes Gabe talks bullshit.”

“It’s not true?”

He unwinds my fingers from his cock and we lie down together on the sofa. “It isn’t a good idea. The damage it can do ...”

“If you can train an asshole to take a cock, I don’t see why you couldn’t train a beta pussy to take a knot.”

“You’re serious?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, snuggling my head under his chin. “I want to be with you – I want to be with Liam – properly. I want to take all of you.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Sophia,” he mutters and then we’re quiet.

As I start to drift asleep, he whispers, “I’m going to stay the night, baby girl. Keep you safe.”

And I wonder again if I should have told him the truth.

L iam

I'M WALKING around on cloud fucking nine, a huge grin pinned permanently to my face. Even the nurses notice. I catch them nattering about me as I walk into theatre, debating the cause of my good mood.

“We’re going to get a new packmate,” I announce.

Marcus peers up at me. “Really?”

“I think so.”

“So it’s not certain?”

“No, but I think it’s going to happen. Gabe absolutely adores her and now Roman’s been won over to our way of thinking too.”

“And Esra?”

I shrug. “He’ll come round too. You just wait and see.”

I signal to one of the nurses to ramp up my music choice for today, Coldplay, and hum along as I work, everyone in the theatre throwing me strange glances.

I don’t give a shit.

At the end of the back-to-back hip replacements I’m performing today, I shower in the staff room, pick up a bouquet of flowers from the gift shop, and walk the few streets

to Sophia's apartment. I should probably call first, but I like the idea of surprising her. I'm going to take her out to dinner.

But when she buzzes me up to her apartment, I am not surprised to find Roman already there, pouring over a takeaway menu.

I kiss both their cheeks and hand her the big bunch of red roses.

"Fancy," Ro says.

I spot the large bouquet of dusty pink dahlias already resting on the counter. I assume they are from my packmate. "How long have you been here?"

"An hour. I came straight from work ... and I'm gathering you came straight from the hospital."

We grin at each other. We're as keen to see this woman as each other.

"You really should have called first, both of you," Sophia says, arranging the flowers in a vase. "I may have had plans."

"It was worth the risk," I say, coming to stand behind her and sliding my arms around her waist. It's been three days since I've seen her and the time felt infinite. "It seems," I say, spinning her around to face me, "that you are now on familiar terms with another of my packmates." I motion my head in Ro's direction.

She straightens my collar. "I've no doubt you already knew that, Alpha." She peers up at me, her blue eyes almost violet this evening. "Are you mad about it?"

"No. I'm loving every part of this, Sophia."

"So you really don't mind the idea of me dating both of you?"

"We like to share."

She tilts her head. Of course, there's still the issue of Esra. We all know that. But I'm not derailing this evening by bringing him up.

"Do you?" she asks. "I have no idea how this works."

“Come on, pick what you want for dinner,” Ro says, slamming the menu down on the counter beside us. “I’m starving here.”

“We’re all eating together, then?” Sophia asks, her gaze flicking between the two of us.

“If you’re happy with that, sweetheart,” I say, unable to help from kissing that sensitive spot below her ear, even if it earns me an irritated growl from Roman.

“I thought you liked to share.” Sophia lifts my chin and looks between us again. “That did not sound like a sharing’s-caring sort of noise.”

“Ro gets narky when he’s hungry. He’s worried I’m going to delay him from getting his dinner.”

“Exactly,” Ro says, pointing to the menu.

Sophia pouts at Ro. “So dinner is more appetising than me, is it?”

I step back with a chuckle, knowing she’s playing with fire.

Ro stalks towards her. “You are a lot more appetising, Sophia, trust me.” His heated gaze drags down her blouse, over her skirt and travels her long legs. “But I was raised to be a gentleman.”

“Maybe I don’t want you to be a gentleman.” Her voice and her eyes are full of challenge and he has her perching on the edge of the counter before her next breath.

“So what are you going to offer me then to appease my appetite? I’m starving here, little one.”

Her eyes flick to me, and I smirk, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Me,” she says, hoisting up her skirt and then shimmying her underwear down her legs. She kicks away her knickers and then rolls back to lie on the countertop, spreading her legs wide for Roman.

“Fuck,” the two of us mutter in unison, and it takes every drop of willpower I have not to barge my packmate out the way and feast on the woman myself.

Instead, I have to contend with watching as Ro grips the edge of the counter top and leans down, swallowing the whole of her pussy into his mouth.

She whimpers, her spine arching, her chin tipping right back. She looks like a piece of artwork. Something I ought to photograph and hang in a gallery for the world to admire.

“Gabriel is going to be pretty mad he missed out on this.”

“Where is he?” Sophia moans.

“Rehearsals.” I watch as my packmate’s head bobs between her legs, and her thighs shake. I decide I want to eat my dinner off this woman. Fuck the takeaway.

I open the fridge and smile when I discover what’s inside.

Strawberries and cream. I grab the punnet and the carton to the sounds of her moans and walk them back over to where she’s all spread out.

“Undo your shirt, sweetheart.”

A little crease forms between her brows. This one really hates being told what to do and I love it.

“Come on now, do as you’re told. It’ll be worth your while.”

Still scowling at me as she bites down on her lip, stifling more delicious noises, she unbuttons her blouse and lets it fall open, revealing the lacy bra beneath, the pink of her nipples visible through the material.

I skim my thumb around the cup of the bra, then yank it down, finding her nipple stiff. Lifting the container of cream, she sees too late what I’m going to do, her eyes going wide. I pour, letting the thick, cool, liquid drizzle between her breasts, over her ribs and down her stomach.

“Ro?” I say.

And with a grunt he lifts his head, his chin a mess of spit and arousal. I keep pouring and she squeals.

“She was already sweet,” Ro says, before he returns to his feast, taking a strawberry with him. He dips it between her legs and swirls it around her entrance. Her eyes go wider still.

I take a strawberry too and drag it through the cream between her breasts, before I use it to paint the delicate areola of her nipple. It creases and I take a bite of the fruit, snapping my teeth through the fleshy fruit before offering the rest to Sophia.

Her eyes are closed now and her mouth making little ‘oh’ sounds, her fingers tightening in Ro’s hair.

“Open your mouth,” I tell her and she’s so close to coming there’s no resistance. She parts her lips for me like a good girl, and I place the strawberry in her mouth. Her eyes begin to flutter open. “No, sweetheart, keep your eyes shut. That’s it, good girl. Is he making you feel nice? Is his tongue making you feel good?”

“Hmmm,” she moans around the strawberry and my fingers.

“Yeah, like that, suck, sweetheart.”

She sucks harder, the strawberry dissolving in her mouth, until she’s slurping on my fingers. I bend down and drag her nipple between my teeth, eyes flicking down to Ro, his tongue swirling around and around her sensitive nub as he teases her entrance with the strawberry.

When she comes, her spine arches a second time, crushing her tit against my mouth, and she bites on my fingers, the pain sending a thrill right down to my cock.

Then we forget all about dinner, skipping straight to dessert. Roman scoops her into his arms and marches her through to the bedroom where we all strip off our clothes. Sophia’s gaze skips between me and Roman, our gazes remain fixed on hers. She’s still smothered in cream, drips of it racing down her body, and as soon as my boxers are off, I’m diving for her, licking and sucking every inch of her. Roman joins

me, and we're like two hungry wolves devouring her body. Soon I'm where Roman was, between her legs, wanting to make her come like he did, but I find the cream has run right to her back hole and I decide I want to eat her there.

I lap at her tight hole, raising my eyes, to peer up her beautiful body and finding her mouth full of Ro's cock.

God, I want to fuck her. God, I want to fuck her with my packmate. I want to fuck her with Ro while she sucks on Gabe's dick.

The possibilities are endless. We can do so many things to her. Pleasure her in so many ways. Make her feel so good, she'll want to join our pack forever.

The thought has my heart swelling. I may have spilled my guts in theatre today, but this blossoming idea of mine hasn't been shared with the rest of the pack yet.

But I want it. I want her. She's exactly what our pack needs.

And I have to show her that we're what she needs.

Continuing my attention on her hole, I slide two of my thick fingers inside her pussy, massaging her clit with the heel of my hand at the same time. That does the trick, soon she's even wetter, my fingers sliding in and out of her easily as her pussy clenches and her clit quivers. When she comes, I thrust my tongue right inside her tight hole and she howls. She fucking howls.

Roman grunts a moment later and then she's swallowing down his come as he cups her face in his hands.

When she's licked the last of him from her lips, she whispers, "I want to take you both. I want to take your knots."

I shake my head. "No."

"I talked about it with Ro."

I frown at him. "I said we would consider it," he says. "I said we'd have to take it slow."

I chuckle. "I see. This one is just too fucking impatient."

I flip her over onto her stomach. “I think I should spank you for this impatience, sweetheart.”

She wiggles her arse, her cheeks wobbling, inviting me to make good on my promise. I give her three sharp slaps across her cheeks, and then I’m angling her hips upwards.

“Need to fuck you, Sophia. Need it so fucking badly.”

“Yes,” she moans. “Fuck me, fuck me Alpha.”

I grip her hips and plunge into her. With her bottom raised up for me like this, her face and her chest sunken into the mattress, she looks like every man’s fucking fantasy.

I grit my teeth and fuck her hard. All my own impatience bubbling over and needing release.

I know Ro’s watching us, his hands clasped around his expanded knot, but all my attention, all my focus is dedicated on the writhing woman below me on the mattress.

I want to take her home. I want to keep her in my bed. I want her. Mine mine mine.

The sentiment is reflected back at me through Roman’s bond. That same possessive word and soon it combines, bleeding into one, morphing into a new word: ours ours ours.

Ours.

We’re as obsessed as each other.

When I come inside her, it’s fucking torturous to withdraw, to stop myself from burying my knot in her tight pussy. My hindbrain has already determined she’s ours, our mate, part of our pack. I should be knotting her and claiming her, snapping my teeth through her neck like I’d done that strawberry.

But I force myself to whip back my hips, painting her once again with stripes of my come, and resort to my own hands for the pressure I need.

I stare down as my come drips through her folds, mixing with the last of the cream.

What a waste! What a fucking waste! It should be in her belly. I should be breeding her.

I shake that thought away and raise my head to Ro.

“We need to get this one cleaned up. We’ve made a mess of her.”

She moans from the bed. “You can make a mess of me any day.”

“But a good alpha does more than fuck up a girl’s sheets, Sophia,” Ro says, already dragging her to the edge of the bed. “He feeds and looks after her too. You know that’s what we want, right? We didn’t turn up on your doorstep for a quick tumble in your bed. We want to spoil you too. We want to look after you and keep you safe.”

Together, we wash her under the hot stream of water, soaping every part of her body and massaging and stroking her soft skin. When we’re finished, we help her out and wrap her in warm towels, combing through her hair and helping her to brush her teeth. She laughs at us and rolls her eyes, but I can tell she’s secretly loving it. If she were an omega, she’d be purring for us. I can’t help the noise rumbling in my own chest as we curl up in bed together and she rests her head against my beating heart.

I wonder when the last time was that she let someone care for her like this. I wonder if she ever has.

Soon she’s fast asleep, her shoulders rising and falling softly.

I catch Roman’s eyes, glinting in the darkness and whisper to him, “I want her to join the pack.”

He strokes his hand down her hair, brushing her cheek. “I don’t think it would be fair on her, Liam.”

“Why?”

“We need to sort our shit out before we bring her in.”

I sigh, knowing he’s right, knowing we’re going to have to sort things out with Esra. He’s my mate, my brother. I’ve loved him for twenty years, since we all met back in our university days and worked out that we wanted to live in this

unconventional way, despite what society thought, despite what our families said.

I don't want to lose him. I don't want him to be unhappy.

I also really want to keep the little beta sleeping in my arms.

"I haven't felt this way about a woman before," I tell him.

"It's still early days."

"I know you feel the same, Ro."

In the darkness, I see him nod his head. "And I haven't seen Gabe this happy in months. Years probably. But she may not want it, Liam. She's not the type to be tied down."

"We'd never do that."

If she were mine, I'd let her fly as high as she wanted.

Roman

WE MEET in our favourite coffee shop, each grabbing a sofa. Me with my flat white, Liam his latte, and Gabe a creamy sugary monstrosity he only indulges in occasionally.

Esra was invited to this meeting too, but he's failed to show, probably well aware of the main topic of discussion. Sophia.

Maybe this is a bit of fun for Sophia, a fling she'll bore of soon enough. But the three of us are clearly infatuated. It's never been like this before. I've never found myself thinking about someone outside the pack – not just thinking of, dreaming of. I'm like a lovesick teenager, texting her throughout the day and desperate to see her every evening. The others are the same, and we have to force ourselves to give the woman some space.

"So," I say, leaning forwards and resting my forearms on my knees. "I'm assuming we're all feeling the same way about a certain young lady."

Gabe licks cream from his top lip and grins. "You alphas," he shakes his head, "can never just spit out how you're really feeling. Yes, I do think we all feel the same way. You want to use your words, Alpha, and tell me how that is."

I roll my eyes at him but indulge. He's right anyway. We need to be clear we're on the same page. There's no room for misunderstandings.

"I like the woman. I like her a lot. She's smart, interesting, sensitive—"

"And sexy as hell," Gabe interrupts.

"Yes, that too," I say, trying to keep my mind from the images of her laid out under me. Shit, an image that's been playing around in my head and heating my blood continually these last few days. "I want to make this official. I want her to know where she stands. We're too old to be messing girls around." I'm not my dad. Not some player.

"What are you thinking, Ro?" Liam asks.

"I'm thinking we take her out, all of us, lay our cards on the table. Tell her we want to date her as a pack."

"As a pack?" Gabe repeats, lifting an eyebrow. "And Esra?"

Ahhh, Esra.

"Any ideas?" Liam and I may have known Esra longer, but it's Gabe who understands him best. Always has. It's why the strain in their relationship has caused so many problems in our pack. Strain I'm still at a loss to know how to ease.

"With Esra?" Gabe throws up his hands. "No. You know he's stubborn as hell. When he's made up his mind on something it's near impossible to change." I sink back into the sofa, feeling deflated. "But," Gabe continues, "it's obvious half his problem is that he likes Sophia too."

"He's obsessed," Liam mutters.

Gabe giggles. "He stole her underwear. He's more than obsessed."

"He what?" I gasp.

Gabe waves me off. "Esra has always been intense. It's what we love and hate about him."

I can't argue with that.

“I think he’ll come around,” Liam says. “When he realises this is different. When he sees it’s nothing like ...” He glances at Gabe and trails off.

“I agree,” Gabe says, scooping cream off the top of his drink with his finger and sucking it into his mouth in a manner that has my cock stirring. I’m taking him home after this meeting. “He won’t be able to help himself.”

“I’m not so sure.” If it were just his concerns about his career or just his fears because he’s been burned before, I could see it happening. But both these issues together ... “I don’t want to lose him.”

Gabe lowers his cup onto the table. “Not happening. I’m keeping all of you and I’m having Sophia too.” He flicks his gaze between the two of us. “You can never accuse me of being one of those pampered, spoiled omegas, but on this I’m insisting on it.”

“You deserve to be spoiled and pampered,” I say quietly.

“I do,” he tells me, his tone back to its light, teasing manner. “And I also deserve to do some pampering and spoiling and that’s what I intend to do with our girl. So where do we start? I’m thinking we hit her with the full force of our charm and take her out together.”

We spend the next thirty minutes discussing where we’re going to take Sophia and then become distracted contemplating all the things we’d like to do to her. It’s lucky we’re tucked away in a quiet corner of the cafe because the conversation takes an X-rated turn.

Soon, we’re all sitting back in silence sipping our coffee and imagining those things.

“Esra is missing out,” Gabe mutters under his breath.

He is and I know it won’t be the same without him. Pleasuring Sophia as a pack, a complete pack, is the ultimate fantasy. Plus the man is a demon between the sheets. I’ve seen him plenty of times with our omega. I’d like to see him with our girl too.

But it's not only Esra's absence that's been weighing on my mind. I haven't forgotten my promise to Sophia.

"There's something else we need to discuss," I say, placing my empty cup down on the coffee table. "Someone has been sending Sophia letters."

"What kind of letters?" Liam asks, his scent peaking.

"The only type of nasty letters a woman ever gets. The kind calling her all sorts of delightful things – whore, slut, slag."

I see every fibre in Liam's body tightening, the alpha in him responding to the threat. Gabe's face pales.

Liam's voice is an octave lower when he speaks. "Does she know who they are from?"

"She does. But she's not saying."

"Why?" Gabe shuffles on his sofa.

"I don't know. Says it's nothing she can't handle."

"We can sort this for her," Liam says.

"That's what I told her, but Sophia is the kind of girl who will dig her heels in all the harder if you push her."

"We'll look into it, though?"

"Yes, I already am." Not that I've found anything out so far.

"Ro," Liam growls, "I'm telling you now, whoever is sending her those letters is going to need a surgeon a lot better than me to mend all their broken bones."

I growl my agreement.

The bastard is going to regret the day he ever sent our girl a letter.



GABE INSISTS on taking Sophia on a backstage tour of the opera house before dinner on Saturday night. There's no ballet

performance tonight, it's a production of *Carmen* and the dressing rooms are full of the cast tugging on elaborate costumes and having their faces painted in vivid colours.

Sophia holds Gabe's hand and lets him pull her through the chaos, Liam and I tagging along behind. It's been a while since I came backstage and I'd forgotten how awe-inspiring it is, the whole place buzzing with energy. I understand why Gabe gets such a kick out of this place.

He takes us down into the vaults first, pulling out some of the costumes from past productions and letting Sophia fawn over the intricate lace and tulle encrusted with jewels and sequins of every colour under the rainbow.

"Want to try one on?" Gabe asks as she runs her hand over a dress with a strapless bodice and flared skirt.

"It's tiny! I'd never fit in it."

Gabe rests his hands on her waist. "You would."

She hesitates and it's clear she's tempted. "I used to dance," she whispers, "when I was younger, but I didn't really have any talent."

"I find that hard to believe," Gabe says.

She whacks him playfully on the pec. "You're such a damn flatterer. Show me some of your costumes."

"Show her the one you wore for the *Romeo and Juliet* performance," I tell Gabe. I turn to Sophia as my omega starts searching through the wardrobes. "He looked his most handsome in that one."

"Now who's being a flatterer," Gabe says, although I can feel through the bond how much he likes the compliment.

He holds up the costume comprising a red velvet jacket and breeches with gold trimming. Sophia practically swoons.

"You must look like a Prince in this costume."

"I do. Maybe I could borrow it for an evening." He winks and places it carefully back on the rack.

Next he shows us backstage, where the props and scenery are kept. Sophia gasps at the artwork, and Gabe explains how each backdrop is painted by hand.

Then he leads her out onto the stage, and she persuades him to pirouette across the sprung floorboards. He adds some leaps in for added effect and all three of us are clapping by the end.

He smiles at us broadly and I can feel that happiness in his bond again. It's not just Sophia's presence, it's the fact Liam and I are here too.

"Your turn, Sophia," he says gesturing to the empty stage.

"I don't think I can remember any of the steps."

"Well, go stand in the centre and show me your best first position."

She strides right to the middle and positions her feet in a V shape. Gabe comes to inspect her, adjusting her chin and straightening her spine. "Not bad," he tells her, before sweeping her forward and kissing her lips. "I always wanted to do it up here," he whispers loud enough for both me and Liam to hear, but if that was his hope, he's out of luck. The stage manager comes and shoos us off in the next moment.

"Shame," he mutters as we duck behind the curtain. "Let me show you my dressing room instead."

Liam freezes and my own spine stiffens.

"Are you sure, Gabe?"

As lead male dancer for the Studworth company, he has his own private dressing room, reserved exclusively for him. In recent years, nobody but the pack has been allowed to enter.

Gabe tries to hide it, but I can sense the tension in his shoulders.

"I want Sophia to see it."

"Oh God," she jokes, "is it hideously obnoxious? Am I going to have to break up with you when I see it?"

"Probably," he says, lightheartedly.

It isn't. Unlike other dressing rooms I've seen, it's not cluttered with photos of himself, awards or billboards. The walls are bare apart from a mirror or two and most of the contents are there for fitness and recovery. Around the mirror on his dressing table, though, are photos of us, his alphas as well as photos of the pack together. The one at the top stands out. It was one taken when we'd only just bonded, our faces so young and our unbridled joy shining in our eyes. Gabe sits in the middle of us, the rest of us gathered in close around him. There's also a photo of his mum, the woman who raised him and died before we met him.

Sophia examines the photos, her eyes lingering on the picture of Esra.

"Is this a one-time-only invitation or can I come visit you in your dressing room again?"

"I'd very much like to find you waiting here for me when I finish a performance, pretty little thing."

"Don't be fooled," Liam teases, hooking his arm around Gabe and kissing the crown of his head. "It's only so you'll give him a foot massage."

"So are we staying here for the rest of the evening?" Sophia asks, sauntering up to Gabe and Liam.

Gabe sighs dramatically. "As good as that sounds, I really don't need the stench of sex in my dressing room, not if I don't want to be dancing with a hardon."

Sophia's eyes automatically drop down to the crotch of his trousers.

"Would you like to come back to our place?" I ask her. "With all three of us?"

"Esra—"

"Isn't a problem," I tell her.

"We could go back to mine."

"There's more room in my bed." Gabe smirks.

Sophia bites her lip. Just like down there in the vaults, she's tempted again.

"You don't need to worry about Esra," Gabe says softly and it seems his reassurance is what she needs. She nods and he steps in closer, wrapping her up in his arms and nuzzling her neck. "We want to make you ours, Sophia," and there's something about the way that Gabe says it – not full of possessive alpha bullshit – that has her melting in his embrace and agreeing to everything.

S ophia

I HAVEN'T BEEN BACK to the packhouse since the morning Esra and Liam started squaring up to one another. This time I get a proper look at the place, Gabe insisting on giving me another tour. I have to admit I love the place. They've kept all the Victorian character of the place, from its high ceilings and fireplaces to its picture rails and wooden floor boards. Downstairs, as well as Liam's room, there's a living room, kitchen, dining room and a study with bookshelves brimming over with books. It's so cosy with its armchairs that I try to convince Gabe to leave me there to explore all the books. But he grabs my hand and pulls me up the staircase to his room, Liam and Roman prowling close behind.

The room is gigantic, taking up most of the floor. I suppose that's not so surprising seeing as Gabe has three alphas. The bed is also enormous, full of soft-looking pillows and throws. If I owned a bed like this, I'd never want to leave it. Which, eyeing up the three men watching me hungrily, sounds like a very tempting idea.

"Take your clothes off, sweetheart," Liam tells me as he shuts the door behind him.

I roll my eyes in the way I'm learning stirs his blood. "You are so damn bossy."

“I just know what I want.”

“You don’t like my outfit,” I tease, peering down at the light summer dress I picked out for this date.

“I love this dress,” Gabe says, “I’d like it even better on my bedroom floor.”

“I’m only getting undressed if the three of you do too because—”

I don’t finish my sentence. They are already shedding clothes all over the floor and then three very naked, very hot men are stalking towards me.

I stifle a moan, wondering what I did to deserve a fantasy like this come to life.

As they come closer, Liam drops to his knees, Roman comes to stand behind me with Gabe at my side. Did they coordinate this? Are they well practised? Or perhaps it’s something in their bonds, that mythical way they have of communicating.

Roman lowers the zip of my dress and Liam tugs it down my body. My heart drums with anticipation. I have no idea what they have planned for me and it has a pulse beating between my legs and my curiosity seriously piqued.

“What ... what were you hoping ...”

“Would happen here tonight?” Gabe finishes, cupping my chin and turning my face towards him.

“Yes.”

“More’s the question, what would you like to happen here tonight, because, Sophia, we’re prepared to make your wishes come true.” He winks at me and I wonder if he’s a goddamn mind-reader because he always seems to know what I’m thinking.

“Why?” I ask, seriously, a little distrustful of their motives. I’ve been with plenty of men before and they usually have one motive in mind, satisfying themselves. There’s been enough times I’ve been left wanting.

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” Liam says, peppering my thighs with butterfly kisses.

“No.”

“We’re trying to convince you to be ours,” Gabe answers.

I close my eyes. That sounds magical. And wholly unrealistic. I’m a beta. I’m younger than them. And their packmate hates me.

But as Liam slides down my knickers, Roman sucks on my neck and Gabe kisses my mouth, I decide not to worry about that, to go with the flow, to enjoy this moment.

Liam swims his fingers through my folds and I moan as he slides two fingers inside me. Gabe deepens our kiss, swallowing up my noises and sucking on my tongue. Roman nips at my throat, his hands coming up to cup my breasts.

It’s overwhelming and all consuming. I sink deeper, deeper into the sensations and feelings, closing off my thoughts and my doubts and allowing myself to be.

When Liam makes me come with his clever fingers, I know exactly what I want from them.

“I want to take two of you at once,” I gasp, as I ride the aftershocks of my orgasm.

“Two of us,” Gabe whispers into my ear.

“Two of you.”

Roman growls by my other ear and pulls me backwards onto the bed, my body landing on top of his. His hard cock nudges between my arse cheeks and I don’t want to wait. I don’t want time to find a reason not to do this.

“Now,” I plead, “I want to take you now.”

“She’s wet,” Roman says, “but we need her to be wetter.”

I hear floorboards creak and then the feel of a finger sweeping lube through my folds and around my puckered hole. Roman smears his cock in it and then I’m lifting my backside and letting him sink slowly inside me. This isn’t the first time I’ve tried anal, but Roman is a lot bigger than other

men and he goes in slowly, patiently sinking further and further.

“Good girl,” he purrs in my ear, his hands dictating the movements of my hips. “Such a fucking good girl.

I look up at the other two, eyes wide as they watch me grind on Roman’s cock.

“You’re sure about this, pretty little thing,” Gabe asks, his gaze falling between my legs.

“Yes, very sure.”

He turns to Liam.

“Fuck her, Omega,” Liam growls. “I want to watch.”

I smile up at him. “I like you watching, Alpha.”

Gabe rests his knee on the bed between my open thighs, and the mattress dips. Then he places a hand either side of our heads, bracing himself above Roman and me.

“Shit!” Roman moans, beneath me as Gabe lowers himself down, finding my entrance and thrusting his cock inside me.

I moan so loud I’m sure the walls shake, the noise guttural and raw. I can’t help it. It feels so intense, I can hardly breathe, my mind blanking.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” Liam whispers, from beside me on the bed, hard cock in his hand. “Just breathe. You’re doing so good, so good for us.”

For once, I obey without argument, letting loose the captured breath in my lungs.

As I do, it creates more room for the men, and Gabe pushes further inside me, his cock rubbing against Roman’s through my walls.

“Jesus, that feels so good,” Roman cries, “but I need to move.” He rolls the three of us onto our sides and then somehow they find a rhythm together, their bodies knowing what the other will do. They dance in time together, one withdrawing from me as the other plunges in.

The friction, the pleasure, it generates has me screaming their names, my fingers sinking into Gabe's shoulder, my legs twisting around his waist.

They don't pause, their rhythm unstoppable.

I drift away, lost in the ocean of ecstasy, taken to some other heavenly place.

And in the midst of it, in the middle of it all, my eyes drift open, and I see him. I see him standing in the doorway, his mahogany eyes glinting in the darkness. There's want and lust shining clearly in them and I raise my arm toward him automatically, beckoning him to join us, wanting him too.

For a fleeting moment, it looks as if he will. He takes a step inside the room.

Then his eyes turn angry. I flinch. And he sinks away into the shadows, the door closing.



AFTERWARDS, it's like it was before. They insist on taking care of me. A girl could get used to this. Liam runs me a bath and I sink into the giant tub with its claw feet and lie against the alpha's broad chest.

"Are you sure you didn't mind being left out?" I ask as he runs the soap over my shoulders.

"I'm hoping it wasn't a one-time-only thing. I'm hoping you enjoyed it enough to want to do it again. It certainly seems like you enjoyed it," he teases. "You made enough noise to wake the living dead."

And tempt your packmate, I think, deciding to keep that piece of information to myself. I was the only one to see Esra lurking in the doorway like that.

"I did enjoy it," I say, resting my head against his shoulder. "I do want to do it again. Although not right away," I add, hastily, "I'm going to need some time to recover."

He washes away the soap from my shoulder and kisses the skin tenderly. “We’re not doing that again until you’re ready. But, sweetheart, I like watching. I always have. It’s one of the things I enjoy most about being in a pack, watching the people I love most pleasure one another. It’s special in a way I can’t describe.”

“What else do you like about being in a pack?” I stroke his leg under the warm, bubbly water. I can hear the other two murmuring in Gabe’s bedroom. “Why did you decide to form one?”

He presses his lips again to my skin, clearly thinking about his answer. “I knew it would make me happy. When I met Roman and Esra we had this connection right away. We thought about things in the same way. We wanted the same things from life.”

“Like gang bangs,” I tease.

“We tried those, not the same thing. But anyway, it’s not just about the sex, Sophia. It’s about choosing to spend and share your life with the people you love. For some people that’s just one other person. For us it was always more than one.”

“And Gabe?”

“We always knew we wanted an omega for our pack, to complete our pack. Esra met him first, fell head over heels for him. The rest of us fell pretty soon after.” He motions for me to lift my leg and runs the soap over the sole of my foot, cleaning between my toes. “But we were wrong.”

“About what?”

“We weren’t a complete pack. We were still missing something.”

“What?”

“You.”

I frown. He sounds so sure of this and yet it’s clear his packmate disagrees. How can he go against his wishes? I could understand it if they were viewing this as some short-

lived fling, but the way they're talking, it's as if they want more.

Is that what I want? Floating here, in the fragranced water with the strong alpha at my back, I think it might be. I hadn't lied to Rosie. I am bored with the short-lived romances. I want something more, something meaningful and real. I want to be wanted forever.

But I'm not stupid. I know this pack isn't as it should be. And if they can't tell me the truth, how can I trust them with my heart?

"What happened? What happened to your pack?"

"What do you mean?" Liam asks. But it's clear from the tension in his voice that I've hit a raw nerve.

"I don't know a huge amount about packs, but I've met a few now. I know one very well. Packs are solid, unbreakable things, bound together by their bonds. Yet yours ... isn't. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you'll tell me you're rock solid. But I don't think you are. Not with Esra acting like he is. I don't think it was always like this. I think something happened."

"You're right," he says wistfully. "A pack relationship is stronger than stone. Time and the tribulations of life don't wear it down. It takes something more substantial to break a pack apart."

"Like an earthquake," I say softly.

His hands come to rest on my shoulder and I can feel his heartbeat slow against my back.

"An earthquake. Perhaps. It ripped us apart, shook the ground beneath our feet, and left everything changed. Nothing has been the same since." He stills. "Not until you."

I may not have a bond, but I can sense his sadness in the air.

"It was Esra, wasn't it?" I ask.

"Esra and Gabe."

"What happened?"

“Esra had this student. He was this bright, young thing. Very intelligent. Esra’s star student. His prodigy, I guess. He was an undergraduate, but he’d show up at Esra’s office with all these ideas and theories, and Esra loved his enthusiasm, his genius. He didn’t see it for what it was. Not at first anyway.”

“What do you mean?” I say.

“The boy was in love with Esra.” He sighs. “Infatuated. Esra didn’t feel the same way. When he realised the boy’s feelings for him were inappropriate, he tried to distance himself. He knew it didn’t matter that he’d never reciprocated those feelings, that he’d never laid a finger on the boy, never said anything to lead him on. The entire situation could be enough to end his career.”

“Surely people would have—”

“The truth gets twisted. Especially when you’re an alpha. Especially when you’re a pack alpha.”

I twist around and kiss his neck. I remember all the bullshit Rosie had to face when she’d joined her pack, all the prejudice and rumours. Even her own parents were against her decision. Liam, Gabe and Roman formed their pack even longer ago, when the world was even less accepting. I wonder what ugliness they’d faced.

“The boy didn’t take it well,” Liam continues. “He was convinced that Esra loved him back, that they were destined to be together, and it was only Gabe standing in their way.”

“Shit,” I whisper, shivering in the water as I start to see where the story is heading.

“The boy found Gabe and wormed his way into his life. Gabe thought he was his friend. When Esra found out, he warned Gabe the boy was bad news and Gabe cut him out.”

“Poor Gabe,” I whisper.

“That isn’t the end of this story, Sophia,” Liam says darkly and I peer into his eyes. “The boy started to harass Gabe. Letters, messages, videos. Esra told Gabe to ignore it. That the student would move on, get bored.” Liam’s jaw flexes. “He didn’t. He broke into Gabe’s dressing room after a show and

attacked him.” Liam hesitates, swallowing down bile and I think I might vomit. “He tried to slit his throat.”

I gasp, grabbing onto Liam’s arm as if his words might send me spiralling away. Gabe attacked. Beautiful, graceful, magical Gabriel, attacked.

“We weren’t there that night. We weren’t there to protect our omega,” he says, and I can hear the pain in his voice, so raw it makes my heart ache for him. “Gabe managed to fight him off, called for help. But not before the fucker stabbed him in the gut. He was in hospital for two weeks. Took him another month before he could dance again.”

I remember the scar, the red line tracing over Gabe’s stomach. I never thought to ask how he got it.

“It was more than an earthquake,” Liam says. “We nearly lost our omega.”

And then I understand. Disbelief punches me in the gut.

“Esra, he thinks ... he can’t think ...”

Liam strokes his hands down my arms.

“No, he doesn’t. Of course, he doesn’t. But he blames himself for what happened. Gabe pulled away from us for some time. He was processing what happened. And Esra took that to heart.” He scrubs his hand down his face. “It’s complicated, Sophia.”

And I realise it is.

A lot more complicated than I ever imagined.

S ophia

A FEW DAYS LATER, my phone buzzes and I'm somehow not surprised to see it's Gabe.

"What you doing?" he asks as soon as I answer.

"Right this second? Stepping out of my spinning session and heading for the shower."

"And what are you doing after your shower?"

"Why – what did you have in mind?"

"I thought you might want to come over here and hang out with me."

"I'm not sure that is such a good idea. Esra—" After what Liam told me the other night, I'm more uncertain than ever about stepping between Esra and his omega. They should be working on finding a way back to each other.

"Is out for the day. And so are Roman and Liam which means I get to have you all to myself."

"I thought you boys liked to share?"

"We do, but I'm in pre-heat and feeling horny as hell. And well, I'd like your undivided attention."

"Pre-heat? Shouldn't you be spending that with your alphas?"

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, they’ll be home before the main event. So what do you say?”

I’ve received plenty of booty calls in my time. Hell, I’ve made plenty myself. Usually they occur late at night. Not at – I check my watch – 10 in the morning. And I’ve never received a booty call from an omega, an omega in pre-heat. I’m curious. Very curious.

Damn it. My good intentions are going to go to hell. I can’t resist Gabe at the best of times. But when he’s asking me to help him like this? No chance.

“I say, give me half an hour and I’ll be there. Would you like me to bring anything?” I know my friend Rosie stocks up on all sorts of food before a heat and I’m also aware I’m coming without the one piece of equipment he needs: a knot.

“You’re all I need, pretty little thing,” he purrs.

A little over thirty minutes later, I’m on his doorstep with a box of condoms, massage oil, candles and more chocolate than you’d find in the Easter Bunny’s warren.

It takes Gabe a while to answer and when he does, his face is flushed, his golden hair dishevelled and his eyes glazy. His scent, which I usually struggle to smell, is so potent it makes my mouth water. If it’s this strong for me, no wonder alphas go fucking crazy when an omega is in heat.

“Shit, are you sure you’re not in heat already?” I say, as he grabs my wrist and yanks me inside.

“No, this isn’t the full-blown thing. No cramps, and I can still string sentences together. But fuck, I’m horny, and you, sweetheart, look incredible.”

I look down at my jeans and plain top and decide the heat is definitely warping his vision. But I’m not complaining as he starts stripping me off as he manhandles me through the house and into the garden.

“Where are we going?” I ask, as he tosses my top on the lawn.

“My nest.” He points to a cabin nestled at the back of the garden between the trees. “It’s soundproofed and heated and designed just the way I like it.”

“Wow.” I’m intrigued. I’ve never been inside an omega’s nest before. Not even Rosie’s. They are deeply personal spaces. Of course, I’ve seen them in magazines and movies. Stepping into a real life one is completely different though. Even my weak beta nose is overwhelmed by the aroma of the pack’s intermingled scents as well as the strong smell of sex. The room is lit in mellow lights with fairy lights strung over the ceiling and along the walls. There’s one giant fourposter bed positioned against the back wall, what looks like a sex swing, a chaise and several cushions scattered about the floor. The floor itself is covered in a carpet so soft I don’t think it would be possible to injure yourself with a carpet-burn no matter how hard you tried.

“Wow!” I repeat, this time with my eyes popping out of their sockets. “This place is beautiful.”

“Isn’t it?” Gabe says, nuzzling my neck, his skin scorching hot against mine, as he unbuttons my flies. “Glad you came?”

I roll my eyes. “I think I could live here permanently if you let me bring my Kindle and hooked me up to the WiFi.”

“If you moved in here permanently, you’d have no time for reading.”

I pull his t-shirt over his head and run my hands all over his warm skin. He rolls his head and his shoulders. “Hmmm, your cool hands feel nice against my skin.”

“Does it hurt anywhere?” I massage his lower belly.

“Not yet.” He takes my hand and draws it down into his sweatpants. He’s not wearing any boxers and I coil my hand around his cock. It’s hot and impossibly hard. I sink to my knees, dragging his sweatpants down his muscular thighs and legs. When I reach his bare feet, I notice for the first time how bruised and battered they are from all the dancing. I sweep my fingers gently over them.

“Want me to give you a foot bath, followed by a massage?”

He growls, a noise not as deep as his alphas. “Next time, when I’m not dying to jump your bones.”

I take the hint, lifting my gaze to his cock. He’s dribbling pre-come and I lean in to capture it on my tongue, another growl issuing from his throat. Then I grip his hips and take him into my mouth. The taste is dense, exploding on my tongue and making my head buzz. It’s heady.

I go gently on him at first, unsure what he can take or what he needs so close to his heat. I swirl my tongue around his head, tracing the thick vein that runs his length. He strokes my hair, making satisfied purring noises, his eyes closed in contentment. I’m reminded how beautiful he is, with the sunlight creeping in behind him, catching the strands of hair so they appear as if they are alight.

As I stare up at him, his eyes flutter open, the green of them so piercing, I suck in an inhale.

“A little more sweetheart,” he says, stroking my cheek.

Cupping his ball sack in one hand, I suckle him, increasing the pressure and depth with each suck. He moans, his fingers tightening in my hair, until he’s holding my head tight.

“Need ... to ... thrust,” he tells me, staring down at me. His teeth clenched together.

“Hmmmm,” I moan around his cock, gripping his hips and encouraging him to move. He thrusts into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. For a second, I can’t breathe, and then he withdraws, allowing me to catch my breath, before he thrusts in again.

“Fuck, Sophia, your mouth is like your pussy. Small and wet and perfect for me.” He thrusts again and I suck on him hard, so hard, he groans and empties into my mouth.

It’s more, a fuck-load more, than I’m used to, and I guess this is what it’s like to be with a male omega so close to his heat. I swallow it down as best I can, but most of it spills over my lips and dribbles down my chin.

Gabe laughs, scooping it up with his thumb and painting it across my collar bones. "Want you smelling like me."

When he pops from my mouth, he's as rock hard as he was before. I stare at his cock in astonishment.

"You're still ... you're still erect."

He laughs again, shaking his head and pulling me to my feet. "Yep, will be for the next 72 hours, sexy little thing. I'm a fucking baby-making machine and my spunk is like baby-making dynamite. I hope you're on birth control."

"I am," I tell him as he finishes his earlier job of undressing me. "But I brought condoms with me as added protection."

"I'd love to knock you up," he says, kissing my belly as he helps me out of my jeans and my underwear. "I'd love to see this belly rounded with my kid."

I think it's the hormones and the fever talking. But I let a little fantasy flicker through my mind anyway, one where I'm curled up in bed with Gabe and our baby. It's surprisingly tantalising. I've never entertained the idea of children before.

Shit, those hormones must be catching. Or maybe it's the strength of his pheromones, or the citrus taste of him in my mouth.

He leads me to the bed and we snuggle up together in the layers of soft mattress and blankets. We lie there naked together, wrapped up in each other and we make out like a couple of kids. I don't know what I expected sharing an almost-heat would be like – frantic, crazy, and rushed – this is slow and languid. Like he's enjoying just being with me, his hands stroking over every inch of my skin as we kiss and kiss and kiss some more.

After a while, though, he grows restless, like the calm his orgasm brought him is wearing thin. He squeezes my tits and my arse and leaves my mouth to nip at my throat. I want to take care of him. I want to make him feel better. So I roll him onto his back and climb onto his waiting cock. I can see it brings him some peace. His face mellows as I slide down his

cock. Like I did before, I start off slow and gentle, grinding into him and circling my hips. But he has less patience now. He whines for more, his tight fingers digging into my waist. I bounce on him, finding a rhythm that is hard and fast.

He groans and grunts beneath me, his face burning hot, sweat pooling along his brow and his chest, his eyes wild. It's so erotic, and I'm so wound up from the slow build up and his teasing, that I come, clenching around his cock as waves of pleasure cascade through my body.

When he comes, he holds me firm on his cock, mumbling words about wanting to fill my belly and he floods me, floods me so much, his come leaks out the bottom of the condom.

I count my lucky stars I wasn't relying on it for protection.

I expect this second orgasm to sedate him like the last one did, but he's nearer his heat-proper now.

"Need a knot," he pants. "Need a fucking knot." I gaze down at him, panic spiking my gut. I can't help him. I can't give him that. "The cabinet," he tells me.

I scuttle off him and hurry to the cabinet in the corner I hadn't paid any attention to. When I open its doors, I find the contents of half a sex shop inside.

"What—"

"The black dildo!"

I scan the objects and find it, long and girthy with a knot so big it makes my eyes water.

I bring it back to the bed and offer it to him. He shakes his head. "You."

"I don't know—"

"I'll show you." He drags me back into the bed and soon we're kissing together as he guides me with his hands, showing me how to work the dildo inside him, pumping it in and out easily with all the slick he's making. As he starts to lose control, I take his cock back in my mouth, and work the knot inside him. He comes hard, his seed blasting down my throat and his whole body tensing like he's been hit by

lightning, before turning limp and pliant, his eyes rolling around in his head and the noises issuing from his lips so sweet it sounds like he found paradise.

I hold the knot in place and finally he floats back down to earth, opening his eyes with a massive grin peeled across his lips.

“Shit,” he licks my nipples, “that was fucking amazing, Soph.”

“It looked it,” I say. “Is it anything like the real thing?”

I have my own beta-shaped dildo at home. It serves a purpose, but it’s nothing like the warm flesh of a real cock. Too rigid, too cold.

“It’s not bad,” he says, pulling me to curl up against his chest and kissing the crown of my head. “You want to try it?”

I snort. “That dildo would fucking rip me in half.”

“I have smaller ones.” I lift my head and look up at him, his glassy eyes, still managing to shine with their usual mischief. “Come on. I want to train you for it, Soph.”

His words make me shiver.

I look at his blissed-out face. Could it possibly be that good for me? I’m desperate to find out. Besides, I’ll never take a real knot if I haven’t used a fake one first.

“Which one is it?”

He grins. “Let’s start with the purple one first.” I pace back to the cabinet. “Fetch the lube too, Soph. You don’t have the advantage of slick like me. And grab the red dildo too.”

As I grab the required equipment, he slides the dildo from himself and then rests on his knees waiting for me.

“On your hands and knees, sexy little thing,” he instructs me, patting the mattress in front of him.

I should be sore from the sex we just had. It wasn’t exactly gentle. And yet I’m throbbing downstairs for entirely different reasons. This room is intoxicating.

I position myself on the bed, but he doesn't fuck me like I expect. Instead, he spends the next ten minutes licking me out, making me come so many times I lose count. Only then does he slide the purple dildo inside me. It's cool as I expected, and I wince at first, but then he's using it to hit my spot inside me, working me so well, I struggle not to faceplant onto the bed. He has me coming again and in the throes of my orgasm he glides the knot inside me. It's a tight fit and I curse as I'm forced to stretch to accommodate the bulge, but he's careful with me. He pushes a little further, and a little more. I clench my teeth.

"Good girl," he purrs. "Just relax. You're doing so well. Look at that pussy of yours, stretching like an omega's. So damn good."

I inhale and then exhale slowly, the lack of oxygen and the extreme sensation at my entrance making me light-headed. The dildo's knot is firmly lodged in my cunt now and I smile with pride, but the earth-shattering orgasm he promised is nowhere to be seen. Not until he wiggles the shaft against my spot and then it happens, stars shattering across my eyelids, and sound and sight and smell wiping out so that all I sense is the ecstasy spreading from between my legs along every nerve in my body to the tips of my toes and the top of my head.

"Oh my God!!" I squeal. "I can't ... I can't ... it's too. ..."

This time I collapse down on the mattress, my whole body exhausted and limp from the orgasm.

Gabe nuzzles my ear.

"Good, huh?"

"So good."

"I can't wait to watch you take the real thing."

I roll onto my side, the knot still locked inside me. "You really won't mind if your alphas knot me?"

"Sweetness, I can't fucking wait."

We play with the dildos for the rest of the morning and over what must be lunch, taking it in turns to knot each other, Gabe carefully working me up to the larger knot. It's still

nowhere near as big as the one he can take, but then I'm not sure that knot is even anatomically possible.

There's a lot more talk about knocking me up and when we take a break to snuggle up under the covers and feast on chocolate, I ask him, "Do you actually want children? I mean, why don't you have any?"

They're an older, well-established pack. They can certainly afford children.

He smiles, but the expression doesn't reach his eyes. "I would love children. Like, really, really love them. We tried a few things. It didn't work out."

He snaps a piece of chocolate off and pops it into my mouth before diving in to suck on my neck, and I don't press him. It's clearly a topic he doesn't want to discuss.

As the day wears on, his heat is obviously drawing closer. His scent becomes impossibly stronger and the first of his cramps hits his abdomen. He's streaming slick and there's little recovery time between his orgasms.

I'm pressing a heat pad onto Gabe's belly to relieve his pain as he rolls around on the bed moaning, when the door of the cabin flings open.

I freeze. Gabe promised none of his alphas would be home until the evening. I planned to be long gone before they arrived. As much as three out of four packmates say they want me, I'm not pack, and I don't belong here in a heat. Not if I don't want to be the reason for breaking this pack apart.

But it seems someone is home early.

I squint against the sunlight, and my stomach plummets.

Esra.

It fucking had to be Esra.

"Omega?" he growls, and Gabe whimpers, immediately scrabbling up onto his hands and knees and crawling towards the end of the bed. I shrink back, hoping I can disappear into the shadows, maybe creep out before he sees me.

Esra strolls across the cabin in three long paces, clutching Gabe's upper arms and staring down into his face.

"Are you OK?"

But Gabe's too far gone to respond. It's as if the appearance of one of his alphas has tipped him straight over the edge.

He nuzzles his cheek against his alpha's, stroking his palms down his chest as he grinds his hips.

"It's OK," Esra whispers, stroking back his hair from his face, and rubbing his lower back. "I'm here."

I've never seen them together.

Something in my chest spasms, and I suddenly feel alone. So very alone.

I clutch the heating pad to my body and stare at them, unable to drag my eyes away.

I've never felt alone before. I've always been content with my life and my relationships. I've never wanted anything more than casual. I've been happy to look after myself. And now? Now I find myself wanting more. Now this ache pierces my chest.

Was this a mistake? Tangling myself up with these men. Will I regret having ever trusted them?

As I watch them together, I finally catch Esra's eye. We stare at each other over the distance for what feels like an eternity and his gaze is the fiercest I've ever seen it. I want to melt away.

"You," he spits, clutching his omega to his body. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

I wait for Gabe to answer, to speak up for me, but he doesn't. He's too lost in his fever.

"He asked me to help," I finally manage to say, determined not to let him cow me.

"He doesn't need your help. You're a beta," he spits, "you can't help him. He needs his alphas." His eyes thunder darker.

“You don’t belong here. Get the fuck out of my mate’s nest.”

His bark is so menacing, for the first time, I feel afraid. He’s plunging into rut, and fuck knows what an alpha would do in a rut.

I don’t hang about to argue. I don’t wait to find out. Gabe has his alpha now. Ezra, as much as it pains me, is right. Gabe has no need of me. I scoop up my clothes, clutching them to my chest.

They’re already tumbling together on the bed, Ezra tearing off his clothes, Gabe rolling onto his stomach and lifting his hips for his alpha.

“Get the fuck out!” Ezra roars, as I hesitate for a moment by the door, watching their beautiful bodies combining in power and grace.

I run. But not before I grab the purple dildo, hiding it in my bundle of clothes.

With the image of these two men circling in my head, the temptation to use it will be too much to resist.

E^{sra}

I'M EXHAUSTED. Exhausted and knackered. Three days of caring for an omega in heat will do that to you, even if you have two packmates to help you out.

Usually I'm floating in a wiped-out state of bliss in the days following a heat, happy to stay home and curl up with my omega.

Not this time.

This time I'm plagued with thoughts of the past. I keep torturing myself, going over and over how I could have prevented things from happening.

I should have prevented them. I'm his fucking alpha. It's my duty.

I can't let the same thing happen again.

I need to protect my omega. I need to protect our pack.

But my packmates seem determined to make the same mistake again, letting an outsider worm in between us and destroy us from the inside.

If they won't listen to me, then I'm not prepared to stand around and watch the car crash in slow motion. Fuck that.

I'd rather tuck myself away in my lab every night and brood like an asshole.

Brood and try not to think of my omega. Of the happy sensations I keep catching through our bond. Of the fact he asked her to come to his heat.

Brood and try not to think of that woman too. Of her sandwiched between my packmates, moaning like they were delivering her to Heaven itself.

She's fucking everywhere in this department. Despite my attempts to keep her out of my lab.

What's worse than that vision of her in Gabe's bed? The way she smells. Oh yeah, she reeks. Of my packmates, of what they've been doing to her. I can smell them inside her and it's fucking tearing me apart.

I want to fuck her. I want to watch them fuck her. I want to fuck my omega as she watches.

I want to share her and rut her and roll around in bed with her and my pack.

I can't. It's too dangerous.

But the idea of it is driving me half mad.

Perhaps I look it.

At the coffee machine on Tuesday morning, my colleague, Professor Chan, rests her hand on my shoulder, standing on her tiptoes to reach me.

"Are you all right, Esra? You don't look so good?"

I manage a nod, failing miserably at a sociable expression. "Just having trouble sleeping."

She looks at me with sympathy – an expression I've always hated. Look at me with lust, with fear, perhaps even admiration, never fucking pity.

"The pressure here at Crestmore can be hard for us professors," she says. "It's a step up. I remember feeling it acutely in my first term."

Professor Chan is a decade older than me and she's been here for three years. Usually, I like her. She's one of the more open-minded, forward-thinking of the faculty, not like some of the other professors stuck in the past.

But today, I find her concern irritating.

The work's not the problem. The pressure neither. I can cope with both of those easily.

It's the temptation that's eating away at me.

I look down at her face. She'd be one of the first queuing up to report me if she found out I was sleeping with one of the students.

Yeah, I won't be confessing my troubles to her anytime soon.

Snatching the plastic cup brimming with jet black coffee, I step to the side.

"Thanks, Maggie, but I'm fine. All I need is a good night's sleep."

She smiles flatly and I stomp off down the corridor before she can halt me again.

As I round the corner, I smell a familiar scent.

Not Sophia.

Roman.

What the hell is he doing here?

I ask him as I swing open my office door and find him sitting in front of my desk.

"As you're never fucking home, I figured this was the only way to see you."

"I have a meeting," I say, throwing my jacket on the hook on the back of the door.

"Don't be an asshole, Ezra."

"Me, the asshole?" I snort. "That's rich."

"Sit down," Ro says. "We need to talk."

I consider turning around and walking out. What's there to say? We're at a stalemate here. I don't want them seeing Sophia, and they don't want to stop.

But then he says, "I was going to ask her to leave us alone."

I slump into my chair. "But instead, you decided to join Liam and Gabe and fuck her instead." He raises his eyebrows obviously surprised I know. "I could smell it, mate."

He shakes his head. "Shit, you have it bad."

I rub the heels of my hands into my eye sockets. "This rupture in the pack is killing me."

"It's killing us all."

"Really? Doesn't feel like it from this end of the bond. You're all behaving like lovesick, giddy fools."

"She's special," he says simply.

I rub my eyes harder. Behind Ro, the office clock ticks the passing seconds.

"Esra," he says at last, "did you know she's being stalked?"

My whole body tenses, my blood suddenly cold in my veins. I lift my head from my hands and stare at him. Is he serious?

"Are you sure? It's not some twisted—"

"No. I saw the note."

"It's not—"

"No. No, it isn't."

I lean back in my seat. "This is why. You know this is why ..."

"This is different, Esra. You have to let that go."

"I can't and it's not."

"It is. There's ..." he peers out the window, "there's more to the situation than she's letting on."

“She’s refusing to tell you.”

“No, I just have this feeling. I wondered ...” his eyes return to mine, “if she told you anything.”

“We’re not talking.”

“She likes you.”

“Maybe she did. Now she hates me.”

He shakes his head. “This could be different. This could be good, if you’d let it be.”

I stand up and lean on my desk. “You just told me yourself, she has a stalker. This is foolish on so many fucking levels. I don’t understand why you and Liam can’t see that.” I crunch my hands into fists. “It’s our job to protect him, Ro. To care for him.”

“And we’re doing such a good fucking job,” he mutters.

“What does that mean?”

“You know he’s going to have to retire soon. Give up the dancing. It’s his life, and he’s going to have to give it up.”

“Why?” I say, utterly shocked.

“We’re all getting older, mate. Even Gabe.”

My head drops forward and I stare down at the pile of papers on my desk. My scribbled notes from last night rush across the page. Half of it is illegible. I must have been half asleep.

Seems I have been in every sense.

Gabriel stop dancing? I can’t imagine it. It’s been his passion all the time we’ve known him. His passion and his love. Gabriel was born to dance.

“You remember the first time we met him?” Ro asks.

“Yeah, of course I do.”

“It was at that fucking boring party Liam dragged us to because he’d heard there would be omegas coming. Some stupid dinner-dance with everyone dressed up like stuffed turkeys. He was dancing then. In the middle of the dance floor

and, fuck, he was the only person who seemed alive, real ... free.”

“He was also the only omega who would actually talk to us.”

Ro chuckles. “You know they say things are changing now. More omegas are actively looking for a pack. Gabe was ahead of his time. He saw the advantages of having more than one alpha.”

“And yet, when it came to it, it didn’t make a difference, did it? Pack or not, we still failed to protect him.”

The happy memory that was shining in Roman’s eyes fades to something darker. He scrapes back his chair. “Stop being a dick and come home tonight, OK? We all miss your sorry arse.”

I push off the desk and nod.



IT TAKES me half a fucking Goddamn hour to find her, scouring the labs, all the offices and even the faculty library. Finally I find her in one of the smaller common rooms, brewing a cup of tea. She has her back to me and I halt in the doorway soaking up the shape of her. So small, so soft, so delicious.

“Have you just come to glare daggers at me?” she asks, not turning around. “Or are you actually going to start lobbing knives into my back?”

I wonder how she knew it was me. My scent? A beta’s sense of smell is pathetically weak compared to an alpha’s or an omega’s.

“No, I came to talk.”

“Talk, yell, growl. They all sound pretty similar coming from you.”

“Who’s the stalker?”

She spins around and frowns at me, the usually haughty expression gone. “Roman told you?”

“We’re packmates. We tell each other everything.”

She snorts. “Really?”

And now it’s my turn to frown. Shit. I don’t mean to. I don’t want to be this pissed-off asshole around her. I want to be civil. I want to be indifferent.

“Just because you’re fucking around with my packmates, don’t think that means you know them better than me.”

She spins back around to her tea, scooping out the soggy tea bag with a spoon and dropping it in the bin.

“Whatever, Esra. I’m tired, OK. I’m not interested in starting a fight with you.”

She does sound tired. Weary almost. It’s not like her. She’s usually so full of life, she makes everyone else in this department look like a walking corpse.

Something inside me softens. My spine? My hard heart? My resolve? Fuck knows.

“Sophia, if you know who it is, we can do something about it.”

“Why do you care?”

Her words hit me like a tonne of bricks.

Why do I care?

Because, despite all my best efforts, I can’t stop thinking about her, and the thought of something bad happening to her makes me so sick I can barely stand upright.

But I can’t say any of that. I can’t admit any of it.

“You need to take it seriously.”

She turns back towards me, her dark tea untouched beside her. She crosses her arms over her chest and leans back against the counter.

“I can handle it. It’s fine. This isn’t the same as—”

“Tell me who it is,” I say, trying to keep my voice level, hearing it come out as a snarl through my teeth. I can’t let this happen again. I can’t. “And I’ll sort it for you.”

“Roman already offered.”

“Then we’ll sort the motherfucker out. Ensure they never bother you again.”

I’m holding on here, holding on to every last piece of restraint. The thought of some piece of scum writing her poison, threatening her. I can’t let it happen. She’s mine. Mine to protect and ...

I close the space between us. I lean into her, my hands coming to rest on the counter either side of her body. She’s caged. Trapped. She’s not going anywhere until she tells me. Until I sort this for her.

“Sophia,” I say, pain in my voice. “Tell me who it is.”

Her eyes turn molten under my stare and there’s that pull between us, like orbs in space, unable to resist each other’s gravity.

Her chest rises and falls. She opens her mouth to speak. Then pauses.

“It’s complicated.”

“I’ll put it all right.” I try to read what’s behind her hesitation.

Her hands lift into the air between us, for a moment I think she’s going to reach up and touch me, but then her hands fall away.

“Esra,” she says, “I can’t tell you because I don’t trust you.”

I stumble away. I feel like she just slapped me hard across the cheek. Fuck, I deserved it. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. Doesn’t mean it stops the anger from boiling in my gut.

I’m trying to help her. I’m trying to protect my omega and my pack.

“And you don’t trust Roman enough to tell him either, yet you’re sleeping with him.”

She scowls at me, her chin lifted in defiance.

“Why are you sleeping with my pack?” I spit. “Why are you pursuing them? What the fuck do you hope to achieve? If you think it’s a way to worm into my life ...”

“Don’t flatter yourself, professor.”

“You know what, Sophia? I don’t trust you either. I won’t let you fuck with us. Stay away from my pack. Stay away from my omega. Keep whoever your psycho stalker is away from them too because if you hurt them ...” I swallow. “If you lead trouble to our door ...”

“You’ll what?”

“Don’t test me.”

“Fuck you, Esra! I’m not who you think I am!”

She storms out of the kitchen, her trainers squeaking on the lino, pushing straight past me and out the door.

Good.

Good fucking riddance.

That girl is trouble. That girl will rip apart our already fragile pack. This is for the best. The others will be pissed but when I explain ...

Yeah, when I explain ...

Except, unease brews in my veins and I can’t stop thinking about the way her fingers had strayed towards my heart.

Fuck.

S ophia

SOMEHOW I MAKE it through the rest of the day. Scott eyes me with suspicion from the other side of our shared office. Obviously deciding I look too volatile to actually risk spoken words, he sends me an instant messenger instead.

Are you alright?

I send him back a string of expletives and he hops off his seat and heads straight out of the office. Yep, seems I'm that scary. However, ten minutes later he returns with three chocolate bars and a packet of sweets from the vending machine and dumps them beside me on the desk silently.

"Thank you," I say, and god is my period coming because I have to hold back the tears. Especially when Gabe messages me with a list of ideas of how we can spend our Saturday together.

I'm not sure what to tell him. This has all become too complicated. It's clear Ezra is never coming round. His wounds run too deep and he will never believe I'm not out to tear his pack apart.

And in the end, pack comes first. I know that. This was never going to last. And I can't take the drama any more. I have enough of my own.

So instead of calling him like I should, I rip open the Wispa bar and munch my way through it. By the time I'm finished, I pack up my bag and walk out with Scott. He natters on about his latest experimental results and for once I'm happy for the distraction.

"I'm off to play D and D at Dom's tonight. Sure you don't want to come, Soph?"

He's been trying to persuade me ever since we struck up this unlikely friendship.

I shake my head. "Another time."

"You say that every time."

"And yet you keep asking."

He chuckles and waves as he heads in the opposite direction. I scuff my trainer along the pavement and consider what I will do with my evening. I could go and see Rosie, but I've already turned up unannounced once recently. If I do it again, I'll have the entire pack interrogating me and arguing over the best ways to dispose of dead bodies.

I'm not sure I can stand the noise. A night on the sofa with Newton would be better. A chance to gather my thoughts and nurse this bruised heart.

It hasn't felt this bruised for a long time. Was I developing feelings for these men? I rub at my ribcage. Maybe it's indigestion. I wouldn't be surprised. The way Esra scowled at me was enough to give anyone a bellyache.

I decide to call Rosie instead. She answers after seven rings and her voice is all flustered. I wonder what the hell I just interrupted.

"Soph, what's up?"

"Men crap."

"Oh." There's a pause down her line, then some scuffle noises and whispering. "Hang on," she tells me and I hear her feet hurry down a hallway and a door shut.

"Did I interrupt something?"

“No, we just finished– were just finishing up – just–”

“Rosie, I know exactly what you were doing.”

She sighs. “Sorry Soph.”

I laugh. “Why are you sorry? You deserve to be this happy, Rosie.”

“Yes, but I want you to be this happy too. But I’m guessing that isn’t sounding likely.”

We’ve been texting back and forth, me keeping her updated about my encounters with the pack. My friend has been super excited – the number of emojis in each of her texts off the scale. She seems to think I can follow in her footsteps and end up happily-ever-after with a pack of my own.

But my story’s different. I’m a beta, not an omega. And this pack already has an omega anyway.

I scuff the toe of my shoe again, and force myself to start walking.

“It’s over, Rosie.”

“Oh no, really? What happened?”

“Professor Arsehole happened.”

“Him again? I was convinced you would win him over.”

There was an alpha in Rosie’s pack who was against her joining the pack. Turns out he was secretly in love with her. This is different, though. Like I said, my story.

“He was actually being nice for once – I should’ve known it was just a front.”

“Being nice how?”

“Concerned about my welfare.”

“Awww Soph.”

“It didn’t last,” I swallow, “he wanted ... he wanted me to tell him who’s been sending me those letters.”

There’s a pause down the end of the line. “I thought those letters stopped, Soph.”

“They started again.” Rosie is the only person who knows. Well, was the only person who knew. “I told him I didn’t trust him to tell him who they were from.”

“I don’t blame you, Soph. He hasn’t given you much reason to trust him. So, don’t tell me? The asshole got all stinky about it.”

I manage a laugh. “No, not exactly. He jumped back to his usual conclusions, that I’m somehow out to destroy his pack. All because he rejected me.”

“You told him that’s not true?”

“I started to,” I sigh. “But what’s the point, Rosie? If he thinks that about me ...”

“King of Arseholes. Want Seb to go beat him up?”

I laugh. “I don’t want Seb getting hurt.”

Rosie snorts like that would never happen in a million years. It’s actually pretty cute how gaga she is about her boys. “Do you want to come round, print out a picture of his face and throw darts at it?”

“As tempting as that sounds, I think I just want to go home to bed.”

“Then we’ll meet for lunch tomorrow, OK? I’ll come meet you at the department. My treat.”

“I’d like that.”

“Of course you would! Soph?”

“Yes?”

“Forget about that piece of shit. He isn’t worth it.”

He isn’t. The rest of the pack were.

I try not to think about that. They come as a package.

I hang up and walk the last stretch of road, students on bicycles whizzing past me and the smell of freshly mown grass in the air.

My apartment isn’t far from the Physics department – the main reason I chose it. At the corner store, I pick up another

bar of chocolate and the posh kind of cat food Newton goes cross-eyed over.

The apartment foyer is empty when I arrive and I key in the code and lean my shoulder into the door. I should have asked the building owners to change the code. I should never have let him see me key it in. Then he'd never have been able to leave those letters on my mat.

But there's nothing I can do about that now. A job for the morning.

As I wait for the lift, the red arrow announcing its descension, I ponder over the alpha's reaction to the poison-pen letters. Have I become too blasé about them? At first, they pissed me off. At first, I responded to them with a flurry of emails telling him where to go. It only encouraged him, so then I went radio silent. That didn't stop him either, but I got used to finding those sinister letters waiting for me on the mat. In the end, I stopped opening them altogether, using them to line Newton's litter tray instead.

And then they stopped. And I hadn't thought about them, or him, in months.

The lift doors slide open, and I step inside, trying not to think of my passion-filled ride up here with Gabe and Liam, my hands down Gabe's pants, my mouth on Liam's neck, and their hands and mouths—

Nope, I'm not thinking about that, or my tension-filled ride up with Roman either, when the electricity between us had crackled so violently you could practically hear it.

The lift stops at the ninth floor. The doors open and I stand up straight waiting for someone to enter. The hallway is empty, though, and I jab the close-door button and slouch back against the wall.

On my floor, I find Newton pacing back and forth in front of the door. He scurries towards me as I climb out of the lift and meows at me loudly.

"OK, OK. I'm here. And look, I brought us treats. This for you," I hold up the packet of cat food, "and this for me!" I

hold up the over-sized bar of chocolate, one end already slightly nibbled.

Newton meows louder and I crouch down to tickle behind his ears. He meows a third time, racing around my ankles in a hurry.

I guess this kind of cat food really hits his buttons.

I tut at him, and hook my key out of my bag, but as I go to slide the key in the lock, the door falls open.

Did I leave it unlocked?

It wouldn't be the first time. And I did leave in a hurry this morning.

"Hello?" I call anyway, stepping cautiously into my apartment.

"Hello, Sophia," that all-too familiar voice says as a hand slams over my mouth and an arm wraps around my middle.

G abriel

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” I ask, storming into his room and slamming the door closed behind me.

Esra’s already up, standing in front of his mirror, towel wrapped around his middle, face lathered with shaving foam. He looks like he stepped right out of a razor commercial. If I wasn’t so angry, I’d be jumping his bones.

He drags his razor down his cheek, eying his work in the mirror, then dips the razor into the bowl in the sink, shaking it through the water.

“No idea. I need more detail, Gabe.”

“To Sophia,” I say, shaking my phone at him.

“You’re assuming I did something to her?”

“I’ve been texting her all day and all night. And nothing.”

“Maybe she’s not being as needy as you are. Maybe she lost interest already.”

“Fuck you, Esra. She’s been messaging me over text all week. And then all of a sudden, nothing. Poof!”

He meets my eye in the mirror. “Again, why do you assume it was something I did? Isn’t she dating all of you? Have you even asked the others?”

“Because if they’d fallen out with Sophia, they would have told me. You’ve been all secretive these last few weeks. You’ve hardly been home. You’ve hardly looked at me, let alone spoken to me.”

“We just spent three days rutting together during your heat.”

“That isn’t the same, and you know it.”

I try to ignore how much the truth of my words pierce my heart. I’ve been so wrapped up in Sophia, it’s been easy to forget the alpha who’s removed himself from my life.

Now he’s standing in front of me, his bare chest still damp from the shower, it’s impossible.

He scrapes the razor over the last of the foam covering his chin. Then wipes a towel over his face and turns to look at me.

“We had an argument yesterday.”

There was something buzzing about in Esra’s bond that had my spidey-senses tingling. He may try to keep his feelings on lockdown, but his emotions have always been most clear to me.

I lean my hip against his dresser and fold my arms over my chest. His scent is all tense and so is his bond.

“So, you going to tell me what it was about?”

He suddenly looks sheepish, like a dog who just got caught with a stolen bone.

“Sit down, Gabe,” he says.

And even though he doesn’t bark the command, my legs take me to the edge of the bed and deposit me there. His tone wasn’t authoritarian, but it was serious. My skin turns cold.

“Has something happened to her, Esra?” I say, those omega stupid hormones making my bottom lip threaten to tremble. Goddamn.

“No.” Esra comes to sit on the bed next to me and I realise it’s the closest we’ve been to one another in weeks. And God I’ve missed his touch. You’d think an omega could make do

with two. But, no, I'm always aware, aware of the mate who is missing.

He takes my hand in his and I'm reminded of the time Nial O'Hern broke up with me in school.

I snatch my hand away from Esra, bringing it to hover at my throat.

"Are you leaving us, Esra?"

"What?" He stares at me, wounded. "No, I'd never leave our pack. I'd never leave you, Gabe."

"Then what is it?"

"She isn't who you think she is."

"Sophia?" I laugh, suddenly relieved. "She's exactly who I think she is. Smart, sassy and sexy."

"She's using this pack to get to me."

I rest my hands on his chest. "Alpha, this isn't the same situation."

He frowns. "I know you want to believe it's not, but she has a stalker and—"

"Esra," I say, this time taking his hand in mine and scooching closer to him on the mattress until our thighs are touching. "Sophia isn't Andrew. And I'm older and wiser. Nothing bad's going to happen to me."

He squeezes my hand back. "Because this time, I won't fail you. This time I won't let anything bad happen to you. This woman, she's—"

"Like hot chocolate sauce on an ice cream, like a cherry on an iced bun, like ketchup on a hot dog."

"What, Gabe?" he says, looking frustrated.

"She makes everything taste so much better." I smile at him wickedly. "And Roman will find this stalker and sort things out. It isn't going to affect us."

"I don't want her hurting this pack."

I rest my palm against his smooth cheek. What I'm about to say will gut him, I know. But it's about time one of us said it.

"You're the one hurting this pack, Esra."

He screws up his eyes. "Gabriel."

"I know you're trying to protect us. But sometimes you go about it the wrong way. What happened was horrible," I shudder, "and I know I went crazy there for a bit. I know I pushed you away. But it wasn't because I blamed you. It's not because I thought for one minute you failed me. It was because I was trying to sort out my own feelings. I needed time and space. But I'm OK now, mostly," I smile, "I was probably never right in the head in the first place."

"You're perfect, Gabe. And I'm sorry. I just ..." He exhales. "I can't lose you."

"Alpha," I stroke his soft cheek, "I don't need you to protect me. I need you to love me."

I lean in and kiss him, and he wraps his arms around me and kisses me back. It's familiar and comforting, and exciting and new all at once. It's what I've missed so badly. What I've been searching for everywhere else. But it's here, right here. With him. With our pack.

"I missed you, Omega," he whispers against my mouth, as he buries his finger in my hair and pushes my mouth hard against his.

"Likewise, Alpha," I say, letting my hand trail from his cheek and down his sculpted chest. I love how hard he is, how solid, how strong. "In lots of ways." I trail my hand lower, to the towel in his lap and his hard cock beneath. "Need you," I gasp and he rolls us down onto the bed.

It's always been this way between us. From the first moment I caught the treacle aroma of his scent, the honey tones of his voice and those dark brooding eyes. He's always affected my body and my heart, had them competing between themselves over who can go most liquid.

He tugs at my hair, grinding against me, his hard cock rubbing against mine.

“Fuck, I missed this,” he says again, sucking my bottom lip between his and then raking it through his teeth before he nips at my throat.

Not only am I liquid, I’m hot, molten lava, burning up the sheets for him, already nice and wet like the good little omega I am.

He strokes his hand down my body, taking a hold of my calf, and forcing my leg up into my chest, then he’s searching for my hole with his fingers, circling me, teasing me until I’m begging him to take me.

He lifts my other leg, bracing himself upwards on his arms and then he thrusts his way inside me, both of us grunting in unison as I take him all.

“So tight, so wet,” he groans, those dark eyes drifting shut as he savours the feel of us joined again. Through our bond, I feel the intensity of it, his pleasure reflected in mine, both of us feeding off the other’s emotion.

It’s different from the heat. Then we’re both half-crazed, heat and rut dazed, not of our right mind. It’s like a hazy dream.

Whereas this, this is all real.

He rocks his hips and I mewl like a kitten.

He’s always known just what I need, just how I need it.

I grip the headboard behind my head as he increases his pace, thrusting deeper and harder. We grunt together, every time he bottoms out, our eyes locked together.

“Gabe,” he groans, just as his hips stutter and the way he says it, the way it feels through our bond, full of love and longing and want, has me crashing, crashing over as his knot expands and he holds me tight, collapsing on top of me, spent and sweaty and smelling like everything good in the world.

I stroke my fingers up and down his neck, over his mating gland and the scar my own teeth left in his neck. I kiss his jaw.

Our ragged breaths calm and so do our heartbeats.

“You need to put this right, Esra,” I whisper, “with Sophia. For me. For the pack.”

His head nods on my shoulder.

I smile against his skin. The man is so goddamn stubborn. It drives me wild.

“Is that a ‘yes’, Alpha?”

“It’s a yes,” he says grumpily.

I cup his face, and lift it from my shoulder so we’re staring into each other’s eyes. “You’ll have to do a lot better than that if you hope to win her round.”

He groans. “I know.”

“Can you do contrite and apologetic, Alpha?”

“I can do fucking grovelling if required.”

“Now that I’d like to see,” I tease, before kissing him again.

Afterwards we take a shower together, soaping each other’s bodies and washing away the suds, basking in the sensation of each other’s touch, something we admit under the steamy water to each other that we’ve missed.

I love this grumpy, stubborn man so much and, though he often has a funny way of showing it, I know he loves me too.

Once we’re dressed, I drag him out to the kitchen and hunt down the others.

Roman makes us all scrambled eggs and I tell them Esra has fucked things up with Sophia.

Again.

Liam looks like he might launch across the table and throttle our packmate, but I rest my hand on his arm and soothe him.

“He’s going to fix things, aren’t you, Es?”

“Yes,” Esra answers, and I could throttle him myself. He could give the others a little more.

I roll my eyes and turn to the others as Ro tips rubbery egg onto our plates.

“Turns out our friend here jumped to some conclusions with our girl yesterday and got right up her nose. She hasn’t been returning my calls ever since.”

“Nor mine,” Liam adds. Roman nods in agreement.

“I told her she was done with us,” Esra says, eyes fixed on his plate as he shovels eggs onto his fork.

“Bloody Hell,” Liam says, ruffling his hand through his hair. “What conclusions?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I intercede. I don’t want to start an argument. I want to get Sophia back. “I’m taking him round there this morning to put things right.”

“You are?” Esra looks up from his plate.

“Yes, the longer you leave it, the longer it will fester.”

Esra pulls a face and lowers his fork.

“I’m going to come too,” Liam announces.

“And me,” Ro adds.

“I don’t think that’s—”

“Good,” I say, giving a just-try-me stare at Esra.

We’re going to do things my way.



A COUPLE with their arms linked push through the entrance to Sophia’s apartment block and I dart forward, snagging the door from them and holding it open for my alphas.

“You don’t think we should call up?” Esra asks. If I didn’t know better, I’d guess the man looks a little nervous.

“And have her refuse to let us in?” I whisper. “Nope on a rope.”

“She might refuse to let us in her apartment.”

“Yes, but we’re a lot harder to ignore standing right outside her door.”

We ride up in the lift and I remind Ezra and the others for the one hundredth time to let me do all the talking and to only come in once I signal that they should. I don’t need Ezra putting his giant alpha foot in his mouth and undoing any of my good work.

The couple leave the lift two floors before us, throwing curious glances our way as they do, and we ride the final floors in silence.

I squeeze through the opening doors first and dart down the hallway towards her door. Her darn cat meets me halfway there, mewling angrily at me. I’m guessing I didn’t make a great impression on him last time. Ignoring the grumpy beast, I walk the last few steps to Sophia’s door and freeze.

The door stands ajar.

“Her door’s open,” I mutter as the others catch up to me.

Liam walks past me and pushes the door open. “She must have left it open. Sophia?”

There’s no response, just the cat continuing to wail at our feet.

Liam curses.

My blood runs cold.

This isn’t right. I knew it the moment I saw the door.

“What is it?” Ezra asks, crashing past me and into the apartment.

Roman takes a protective step towards me, his hand landing on my shoulder.

“Fuck,” Ezra calls and I shake off Ro’s hand and dart into the apartment too.

It takes my brain a few moments to understand what my eyes are seeing. Furniture turned upside down, cushions ripped open, stuffing and feathers scattered across the floor, cupboard doors ajar, contents strewn over the worktops and onto the floor. The paintings on the walls hang ripped and the curtains shredded. The freezer door's been torn away and water drips onto a puddle on the floor.

"Sophia!" Liam and Esra call together, tearing through the other rooms. Roman runs to join them.

I stand in the centre of the apartment, staring at the mess as my three alphas finally race back to my side. They're panting, their eyes wide with alarm. Usually, their discomfort would have me flitty as shit. But not today. Today, an icy fear washes over me.

"She's not here." They nod.

"Looks like a robbery," Liam says, tugging out his phone.

"No," I say, "it's more personal than that." I point to all the smashed photo frames.

"Someone's trying to scare her," Ro growls.

I shake my head again. Nausea sloshes in my stomach, but I'm surprised at how calm I feel. My hands don't shake and my vision seems especially sharp. I see clearly. I see exactly what's happened here.

"He's taken Sophia."

S ophia

I'M LOCKED in a bedroom that smells of dust. There are no clothes hanging in the closet and the drawers in the chest are empty. The walls are blank and the furnishings are sparse.

I'm guessing it's a guest room and, judging by the height of the locked window, I'm on the second floor.

He told me I was to stay in here until I'd 'calmed down' and was ready to talk to him in 'a civilised manner'.

That's because I'd yelled and called him a string of choice adjectives and nouns when he'd removed the gag from my mouth.

Motherfucker.

He'd untied my arms too, slipping out of the door before I'd had a chance to scratch his eyes out.

I take another circuit of the room, this time checking under the bed and behind the curtains, searching for a weapon of some sort. There's nothing. The room is completely bare.

I glance at the bed, then drop down onto the carpeted floor and rub at my wrists, bruised and chafed from where they were bound together.

What the fuck does he want from me?

What the fuck does he hope to achieve?

When he first covered my mouth with his hand, I thought he was going to kill me. I closed my eyes and waited for the impact, thinking of Gabe, thinking of a knife and blood. But there was no impact. Instead the world faded to black.

Drugs. It must have been some kind of drugs.

I woke up in this room, my head pounding, my eyes stinging and my mouth dry. My mind ran through all kinds of gruesome possibilities then. All the terrible things he could do to me, here alone, half drugged, my hands tied, my mouth stuffed full of cloth. I couldn't even scream.

But he hasn't touched me. Hasn't laid a finger on me. And as the minutes and hours pass, I become more certain his intention is not to kill me, or harm me.

No, the twisted fuck has some other plan. One I imagine involves making me his.

That's what he thinks I am.

Another possession. Another belonging. Another thing to be owned.

He never liked the fact I didn't agree with this assessment.

I wonder how long it will be before anyone notices I'm gone. A whole weekend before I fail to show up at the college on Monday and even then they might write the first days of absence as sickness. I'm pretty much left to my own devices most days – only checking in with my supervisor once a fortnight. Scott is so wrapped up in his own work he probably won't know I'm missing and my mum will assume I'm avoiding her calls. That leaves Rosie. But how long until she realises I'm not simply missing her calls but am actually missing?

And Gabe and the others? They'll probably think I'm ghosting them.

Shit!

I creep to the door and rest my ear against the wood, listening. I was invited to this place on numerous occasions.

Every time I refused. Now I'm debating if that was so smart. If I'd come before maybe I'd know more about this house. Then again, I'd always had my reasons for never accepting an invitation back to his house. Reasons that, under the current circumstances, seem justified.

We only dated for a few weeks. Enough time for me to see behind the mask of charm and pleasantries and glimpse the real man. Another man I'd trusted. Another man who'd proved I was a fool to do so.

The house is silent. I know he lives alone, but I also know he's fuck-off wealthy and so I wouldn't be surprised if he has staff – a cleaner or a house keeper. Someone who might be able to help me.

I keep listening, hoping to hear a creaking floorboard or a tap running. Nothing.

I try the window again, even though I've tried it three times before. Even though I know I wouldn't survive the fall and there's no convenient drainpipe to shimmy down. Nor is there an air vent in the ceiling or a secret door in the closet.

I stifle a sob in my throat.

I am not going to cry.

The fucker is not going to have the pleasure of seeing me cry.

I am not his. Not his to manipulate and control.

I breathe. Deep, lungfuls of oxygen. In. Out. In. Out. Ignoring the stale taste of the air.

I am going to find a way to escape.



THE LIGHT HAS FADED by the time I hear footsteps in the hallway outside my room. I scramble to my feet, wishing to high hell I had a weapon, and having to make do with forming my hands into fists.

The lock in the door turns and the door swings back, the light flicking on immediately and blinding me.

I blink, my eyes adjusting.

When I finally focus, he's there, standing in the doorway perfectly calm, like he didn't just drug and kidnap me.

Justin.

"Would you like to join me for dinner, Sophia?" he asks.

I've been strategising in my head all afternoon, determining what I would do when he opened that door. The man isn't an alpha, but he's tall and well-built. If I ran at him now, I'd bounce right off him, and he'd probably snap my arm in two if I swung at him.

I'm going to have to use my wits and my charm. The two assets I've always relied on.

"Yes," I say. I should add a 'please' or a 'would love to'. Words that suggest I've become compliant. He might not believe I'd bend that easily and willingly. Then again, the man has a massive ego. Maybe he would. But anyway, I can't muster the ability to swallow my pride.

"Excellent. I have had my chef prepare us lobster. I remember that it is your favourite."

It isn't. We didn't date long enough for him to learn anything about me really.

"Thank you," I manage.

He offers his hand to me and I force down nausea and take it.

Our relationship never proceeded to the hand-holding stage. It was meant to be casual, a bit of fun, like every other one of my relationships.

Until he wanted more. Until he wanted to make me his. I called things off at that point.

That was never going to be satisfactory for a man like Justin Hollows. A man who controls everything, who has everything he wants. He wanted me. He still does.

His hand is cold in mine and his hold too tight on my fingers. He pulls me along a corridor and down a sweeping staircase. The rest of the house lies in darkness, the other rooms bathed in shadow. Doors are shut, windows locked, and I don't see or hear another living soul.

On the ground floor, he tugs me into a grand dining room, a glass table all laid out with gleaming china, sparkling glasses and polished silverware. Overhead a huge chandelier of cut crystals twinkles and candles flicker on the table top.

He leads me to a chair and pulls it out for me. I stare down at the knife set at my place and take the seat. The knife is sharp, its blade serrated. I could saw out his liver with it.

Justin reaches into an ice bucket and retrieves a bottle of champagne so expensive it could buy me a house. He pops the cork and pours bubbling golden liquid into my glass before strolling around to the other side of the table.

"I thought we should celebrate." He fills his own glass and I stare at mine with suspicion. I want to escape. I don't want to have my senses impaired. I don't want him to drug me again either. "Drink up, Sophia," he says, lifting his own glass to his lips.

"I don't feel like it," I mumble. He was always trying to get me drunk, refilling and refilling my glass every time we went out. It was the first sign.

"Just a little sip. It's a special occasion."

If I grabbed the knife, could I lunge for him before he realised? Could I hurt him enough to make a run for it? Would I even be able to open the front door?

He snaps his fingers at me. "Sophia, drink."

And damn it. If I want to play along for the time being, I'm going to have to.

I lift the bubbles to my mouth and take the tiniest, teeniest sip. It's enough to satisfy him. He smiles and lifts a silver domed platter with a flourish. A cooked lobster lies beneath, its beady eyes dull. I want to throw up.

“Why have you brought me here, Justin?” I ask.

“To start our new life together. This is your home now, Sophia, our home, one where we can raise our family.”

I shake my head, ignoring his frown, ignoring the danger I’m tempting. Maybe I can reason with him.

“You can’t do this. I have a life. I have friends and family. People who will be looking for me.”

“People who will be so happy for you. Happy you have found the man you want to spend the rest of your life with.”

“No, I don’t love you, Justin.”

His voice turns sour. “You told me you did.”

“I didn’t. I never told you that. I was always very clear.”

“But I am in love with you, Sophia,” he snarls through gritted teeth, slamming the lid back on the lobster. I repress a jolt, keeping my spine stiff.

If I can make him see reason ...

“I don’t love you,” I repeat, hoping the message will sink in.

He swallows down his anger, adjusting the tight tie at his neck. “And who are you in love with?” he says with false sweetness. “That pack? Are you selling yourself to them like a whore?”

I stand, the chair behind me tumbling to the floor. “I’m not a whore.”

“But you will be if you give yourself over to a pack like a cheap slab of meat for them to tear apart. I won’t allow that, Sophia.”

“You don’t get a say!” I shout, despite my efforts to keep my emotions in check.

He jolts at my raised voice and his face turns angry.

“I’m afraid if you can’t behave in a civilised manner, I will have to return you to your room without any dinner. When you have regained your manners, we can speak again.”

“No,” I say, swiping for the knife. He stalks around the table and I lunge at him, slashing through air with the knife. He darts away, side stepping my attack. I try again, and again. And every time he dodges me with ease until at last he grabs my wrist and squeezes until I scream, dropping the knife.

“Let me go,” I plead. “Please, Justin, this is ridiculous. Let me go.”

“No, Sophia, you’re mine. You aren’t going anywhere.”

He pulls me along so violently my arm tugs in its socket and I have no choice but to follow along behind him.

Roman

THE FOUR OF US scour Sophia's apartment, turning it upside down, hunting for clues – anything that will point to the psychopath who's grabbed her. We can't be certain that's what happened here, but as soon as Gabriel said those words we all knew it to be true.

We find nothing. Nothing at all.

"We should call the police," Liam says.

"Fucking police will have us lined up for the crime quicker than you can say panda car," Gabe mutters.

"We should still call. We don't know what the fuck we're doing here and he could ..." Liam swallows, his Adam's apple sliding up and down his throat and the muscles in his jaw twitching.

"*You* can call the police," Esra marches towards the door. "I'm not hanging around here waiting for them to show up."

"Where are you going?" I call.

"To the college. I'm going to track down all her friends and her supervisor, anyone she's ever spoken to. Find out if anyone knows anything."

"She has a best friend, right?" Gabe asks, swinging his gaze between Liam and me. "Renee? Or Rhian?"

“Rosie,” I say, “an old college friend who’s with a pack.”

“I know who she is,” Liam says. “One of the pack is a junior doctor. I’ll track the pack down, find out if their omega knows anything.” He heads for the door too.

“I guess I’m heading for the police station then.”

“Wait!” Gabe shouts and we all freeze. “Let’s keep each other updated here, OK? If we find anything out, or even if we don’t, we check in.”

“You’re right.” I stroke my hand down his back, feeling how tense he is. Knowing we all feel the same.

I can’t believe we let this happen again. That we didn’t force her to tell us who it was, that we didn’t hunt them down and fucking pound them into the ground.

I need to know she’s OK. I need to hold her in my arms and know she’s safe. If anything happens to her ...

“I’m going to have a dig around online. Look at her social media and stuff. See if I can find anything out that way,” Gabe says, righting a chair and dropping down into it.

“You’re staying here?” Liam asks.

“They might come back,” Gabe says, “and I’ll be here for them if they do.” His eyes turn murderous. Gabe may be an omega, but he’s no shrinking violet. He’s tough. He wrestled that fucking knifed-up psychopath to the ground.

“In that case, fuck going down to the police station, I’m staying with you.” I push the sofa back up onto its feet. “I’ll call them.”

I spend the next forty-five minutes talking to a series of dead-weight police officers, each one passing me on to another department, none of them appreciating the seriousness of the situation, despite me explaining it in no uncertain terms.

Finally, the last officer tells me because Sophia hasn’t been missing for 48 hours yet, they can’t do anything to help. “Until she’s been gone that long, she’s not classified as officially missing.”

“She’s been fucking snatched,” I snap.

“Have you tried calling her friends?”

I hang up and have to restrain myself from crushing my phone.

“I did tell you,” Gabe says, his eyes locked on his screen as he scrolls away furiously.

“I’m going to see how the others are doing.”

I speak to Ezra first who sounds like he’s been terrorising half the student faculty by pounding on their doors and interrogating them about Sophia. So far all he has is a couple of ex-boyfriends’ names, none of whom seem to be living in Studworth.

I’m ending the call, when Liam phones me. He’s tracked down Sophia’s friend Rosie but the girl has no names for us.

“She says Sophia never revealed their name. She did know about the letters though and had tried to get Sophia to go to the police about it. Our girl refused though.”

“Why?” I mutter in frustration.

“Rosie thinks he may have been someone important, someone with influence. It’s possible she didn’t think the police would help.”

“What’s that?” Gabe says, glancing up from his phone.

“It could be someone influential.”

“Hmmm.” His bond sparks.

“You’ve found something?” Hope jumps in my chest. Please let us have found something. We can’t fail her. We can’t be too late.

“There’s this dude ... he was commenting on her stuff about a year ago. She seems to have ignored most of his comments and they vary from overly flattering to downright nasty.”

“Right ...”

“His username is Liberty Defender.”

“You think he’s—”

“A politician? Yes, maybe. Or a judge.”

“Can you tell who he is?”

Gabe snorts. “I’m a ballet dancer. Not a cyber whizz.” He scrubs his hand through his hair, thinking.

“But I know someone who is.” He’s helped me with some of my cases.

I message the others. Telling them I think we’re looking for a politician or someone involved in the judicial system. Someone with power and influence. Then stroll into the bedroom with the phone to my ear.

Ten minutes later, I stroll back to Gabe. “He’s on it.”

“Who is?”

“My contact.”

Gabe swings his gaze around the apartment. “I don’t think there’s anything more we can do until we hear back. Let’s clean up for her.”

I look at the havoc this psycho has wrought on Sophia’s home and get to work. We sweep away as much of the broken glass and feathers as we can, mop up the puddle and bin all the ruined food in her freezer, then we hang all her clothes back in the closet. We try to return all her belongings to their rightful place and the apartment looks a little less devastated by the time my phone chirps in my pocket. I answer it immediately and listen anxiously as my contact tells me what he’s found.

“Shit,” I mumble, shaking my head. “You’re sure, Sonnie?”

“Pretty certain he’s your man. Do you need any help sorting him out?”

“No, thanks, my pack can handle this. We’ll call you if we need help.”

I hang up and stare at my phone for a good five seconds before raising my eyes to Gabe’s.

“It’s Justin Hollows.”

“Wh-what?” he says.

Because we know him. We all know him. Fuck everybody in the city knows him.

Justin Hollows.

He’s the city fucking mayor!



GABE HAS to use all his charm, pleading and influence to prevent Esra from storming straight to the mayor’s house all guns blazing, ready to tear the world apart and beat the living daylights out of the man.

We don’t know what the hell we’d walk into and we don’t know where he has Sophia and what the hell he’s doing with her.

We need a calm, considered approach. Something Esra loathes with every molecule of his body, but for once he’s going with what the rest of the pack’s decided, and we’ve decided to formulate a fucking plan.

We meet at the coffee shop at the bottom of Sophia’s building. We’re all fucking twitchy. I’m not saying for one minute it’s easy to show this restraint. My alpha wants nothing more than to break down the psycho’s front door and pound him into oblivion. But I want Sophia unharmed. I want her safe. I want her back.

“Any ideas, then?” Esra snaps, not touching his black coffee.

I’m finding it hard to think straight.

“We need to get into his house,” Liam says, pouring a sachet of sugar into his drink, and then another, and another.

“If he’s been stalking her, watching her, he’ll know about us. There’s no way he’ll let us in willingly.”

“He won’t know about me,” Esra says. “He won’t have seen me with her.”

“If he’s that obsessed, he’ll have done his homework. He’ll know you’re part of our pack.”

“Shit!” Esra thumps his fist on the tabletop, making all our untouched drinks leap into the air.

“We’re going to have to sneak in, then, aren’t we?” Gabriel says.

“It’s too dangerous. If he’s with Sophia when we find her ...” I trail off not liking where that thought process is headed.

“He’s the mayor. He can’t lock himself in his stupid house forever. He has engagements and shit. Meetings that he has to be at.” Gabe mops up spilled coffee with a napkin, thinking.

“Right ...” I stare up at my packmates, my hands forming tight fists on top of the table. “Then I say we give this fucker a taste of his own medicine. I say we snatch the fucker like he snatched Sophia.”

“How?” Gabe asks.

“You said it yourself, he’s going to have to leave the house. And when he does, we’ll be waiting for him.”

Liam nods slowly, then hesitates. “But what if he doesn’t? What if he cancels everything and stays home?”

“Then we revert back to my plan,” Esra growls with so much venom I’m surprised his words alone don’t melt the fucking table.

I know how to do a stakeout. I’ve done plenty. Following low-life ex-husbands and discovering where they’ve hidden their money, parked their luxury sports cars, or moored their yachts. So we drive straight to the mayor’s house, a stupidly big mansion right on the edge of the city surrounded by parkland. It means anyone can see us coming if we head straight down the main road, so we cut the lights, choose the back lanes and weave through hedgerows until we can see the building in the distance. Most of it lies in darkness, but some of the downstairs rooms are lit up.

“It says on his social media feed that he’s attending a drinks reception for the city’s business leaders later tonight,” Gabe says, peering at his phone. “It’s our perfect opportunity to grab him.”

I park the car on a verge of grass, hidden among the country lanes, and we all bundle out, jogging the last mile to the house.

Esra has a coil of rope slung over his shoulder that he snagged from the boot and Gabe has the pocket knife he carries everywhere with him these days. We’re hardly a fucking army. But there’s four of us and one of him. Of course he may have security, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.

The mansion itself is circled by high fences, electric fencing rimming the bottom and barbed wire adorning the top. I can’t see any security cameras or motion sensors, though.

“For a politician who’s so well loved, he really wants to keep people out.”

“Or people in,” Liam says darkly, and his words have us all leaping over the electrified wires and shimmying up the fence. At the top, Gabe cuts through the barbed wire with his pocket knife and Liam wraps his hand up in his jacket and peels the razor-sharp wire back, creating a gap for all of us to climb through. The drop on the other side is high, but it’s soft grass beneath. With deep breaths, we suck it up and drop down.

The house is across the lawn, and so close I have to work extra hard to hold back the alpha storming inside.

We draw closer, keeping to the shadows. There are no security guards patrolling the house and no signs of anyone at the main door. We circle the house anyway, on the lookout for cameras and anyone inside. The house seems eerily quiet and my heart thumps at the thought that maybe she isn’t here. Maybe we got the wrong guy. Maybe we got the right guy, but he’s taken her some place else. Maybe she’s already ...

I swallow away that thought. It's too painful to contemplate. We can't have come so close to finding someone so valuable to have them taken from us.

Sophia is ours. She belongs with our pack.

When we're satisfied nobody has clocked our presence, Esra peers at his watch. "It's another hour until the drinks. He'll probably leave in thirty minutes. What do we do until then?"

"Wait," I say. "He might come out earlier. If he does, we go for him."

Esra stares longingly at the mansion, his whole body twitching. "Can't we just storm in? I can't wait around outside. He could be—"

And then we hear her scream.

Everything changes.

E_{sra}

FUCK CALM. Fuck patient. Fuck tactical and planned and meticulous.

When I hear her scream, the world turns scarlet red and every rational thought, any restraint I clung to, blasts away in a thunderclap of rage.

Need to get to her.

Need to help her.

Need her.

I sprint. My legs carrying me like the wind over the grass and to the front door.

I don't bother to check if it's open, I crash my shoulder against the heavy door, all my weight and power trained on that damned panel.

It groans but doesn't budge.

I howl. Fucking howl with rage, barrelling again and again at the door, launching everything I have at the damn wood. Soon the others are there too, helping, and I don't feel the pain in my shoulder, in my arm, in my elbow. All I feel is need.

Need to knock this Goddamn door down.

Need to get to her.

Need to help her.

Need her.

Finally, with an almighty groan, the door splinters and the whole thing falls away, crashing to the floor.

I storm my way through, not caring as the fractured wood scrapes my face and my body. I land in some expensive hallway and swing my gaze around, my vision tinted blood red.

And there she is, halfway up a grand staircase, the mayor gripping her upper arm.

In his hand, he holds a knife.

A knife.

A fucking knife.

My heart slams in my ribcage.

No! Not again.

I won't fail again. He won't hurt her.

I fly up the stairs three at a time, howling with rage and pain and this need. This. Need.

The knife glints. It slices through the air. I reach for it.

I don't feel the pain. I don't see the blood. All I feel is his body under mine, his bones crunching under my knuckles, his blood wet on my hands. And all I see is his evil face wincing in pain as I hit him over and over again.

The world is scarlet red, violent and deadly.

I will kill him.

I will end him for this.

"Esra!"

Her.

"Esra, stop! Esra, you're bleeding."

The man underneath me lies motionless, motionless but breathing.

I glance down at my side, blood seeps through my shirt,
running down onto the priceless cream carpet.

A touch on my shoulder.

I blink.

And she's there, hand pressed to my wound, the other
stroking my cheek.

"Esra!"

I wrap my arms around her and hold her close. So close.
So close I can feel her precious heart thumping against mine.

"Did ..." I swallow. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, Esra, I'm fine."

Relief floods through my body.

Relief.

Goddamn relief.

How did I get so lucky?

How did I get so lucky a second time?

I cradle her close. I kiss her temple and her cheeks. I
whisper her name. I tell her how sorry I am. I tell her what a
fool I've been. I tell her I've been in love with her all along.

Then my eyes drift shut and I float away.

E_{sra}

I WAKE in a room so white and gleaming, I lift my arm to shield my eyes, wires tugging under my skin when I do.

Is this ...?

I blink.

“Esra?”

I turn my head and find Sophia and Gabe crammed together on a chair, their faces anxious.

“Where am I?”

“The hospital, Alpha,” Gabe says, reaching towards me and brushing hair from my face. “They had to stitch up a stab wound. Seems you and I now have matching scars.”

“A little bit extreme,” Sophia says, smiling, and I feel her fingers coiled around mine. “Couldn’t you have gotten matching tattoos like every normal couple?”

“You should know by now, we are anything but normal.” Gabe bumps her shoulder with his. “How do you feel, big guy?”

“Fuck knows,” I croak, my throat parched. I assume I should feel like shit. But maybe it’s whatever drugs they’ve pumped into me, or maybe it’s the sight of Gabe and Sophia

sitting there beside me, but I feel light-headed and fucking giddy.

“Where are the others?”

“Talking to the authorities. You know Roman does have his uses. They were ready to haul your arse off to the lock-up, but there’s nothing like a sweet-talking lawyer to save the day.”

“Am I under arrest?” I frown.

Gabe leans forward and strokes his fingers over the crease in my brow. “No, Alpha. You’re not. They have the whole story now.”

But I realise I don’t.

I peer at Sophia. There’s blood smeared across her cheek and her hair is a tangle around her face. “What happened?” I ask her, squeezing her hand.

“The poor thing’s already had to repeat the horror story countless times already today, Es.”

“It’s fine,” Soph says, blue eyes not leaving mine. “He was there in my apartment when I got home. He took me by surprise. I woke up in his mansion with him rambling some deluded shit about us being together.”

“They think he gassed or drugged her or something,” Gabe adds.

I growl and Sophia smiles.

“Did he hurt you?”

“You asked me that already, Alpha. You don’t remember?” She strokes her fingers over my knuckles, her touch featherlight yet electrifying.

“I remember,” I say, holding her hand and her gaze, “I remember everything.”

Her smile is teasing as always. If she chooses to be ours, if she chooses to be mine, she’ll never let me get away with my bullshit, she’ll always keep me on my toes. “And you meant it?”

“Yes. Every word of it.”

A door on the other side of the room opens and a doctor and nurse walk through.

“Ahh, you’re awake,” the doctor says. “How do you feel?”

“It depends,” I say.

The doctor looks up from her notes. “It depends?”

“Yes, on how she feels,” I say, motioning my chin in Sophia’s direction.

Her blue eyes are violet today against the landscape of white, and I remember the first time they locked with mine, how alive and beautiful she looked.

“I feel the same,” she says and my heart kicks so violently I’m surprised all the machines I’m hooked up to don’t go into meltdown.

“Yes, well,” the doctor says, still looking confused, “we need to do some checks. If you wouldn’t mind ...” She points to the door and Gabe and Sophia reluctantly squeeze out of their seat and walk away. I don’t let go of Sophia’s hand, tugging her backward.

“I’ll be right outside,” Sophia says, prising my fingers open. “We all will.”

We all will.

I like the sound of that. I like it a lot.



I’M DOZING when they all creep into my room later, Sophia and Gabe claiming the chair again while Ro and Liam stand by my bedside.

“How you feeling, mate?” Ro asks.

“Groggy and sore,” I confess. I guess those drugs are wearing off, or maybe it was the absence of my pack. The room seems brighter with them in it and my head less painful.

“Are you drinking enough?” Liam starts to flick through the notes hanging at the end of my bed and then goes to read the various monitors they have me hooked up to.

“How long do you think they’ll have me in for?”

“I think they’ll keep you overnight and let you out tomorrow.”

“So soon!” Sophia gasps as I groan.

I want to get home with my pack. I want to talk about the future. I want to hold Sophia in my arms and never let her go.

“You’re lucky you have a medic as a packmate,” Ro says, slapping Liam on the shoulder. “Apparently his quick actions saved you a lot of blood loss and a transfusion.”

“Thanks, man,” I say, trying my best not to choke up.

“It was nothing,” Liam waves his hand at me, “nothing I wouldn’t do for any other stupid tosser who ran at a mad man with a knife.”

Gabe snorts and I smile sheepishly. “I wasn’t exactly thinking straight.” I peer over at Sophia. “I just wanted you safe.”

Gabe hooks his arm around her and snuggles into her neck. “And she is.”

There’s a faint knock on the door and when it creaks open, a pretty omega is standing there with a tray of coffee cups.

“Rosie!” Sophie cries, jumping up and rushing to her friend, dragging her into the room.

“Is everyone OK here?” Rosie asks, her eyes travelling anxiously over her friend before darting to me in the bed.

“We’re all fine,” I assure her. Rosie stands there with her arms full. “Are you going to introduce us, Soph?”

“Oh, yeah.” Sophia jolts into action, introducing us one at a time as Rosie hands out coffees. Rosie eyes us all with interest, her eyes lingering an especially long time on me.

“So you’re the arsehole professor then, are you?”

“Not anymore.” Sophia motions for Gabe to make room for Rosie and they sit in the chair together, arms linked. “All’s forgiven on account of him rescuing me from a madman.”

“Mayor Hollow?” Rosie asks.

Sophia nods.

“How do you know him, Soph?” Gabe asks gently, his hand resting on her shoulder.

“We dated for a short time a few years ago.” Rosie rests her head on her friend’s shoulder. Sophia’s eyes dart to mine. “My dad had vanished. I was feeling pretty lost. My dad was always the one who took care of everything, of all of us.” She fiddles with the pendant around her neck. “My mum was a mess and Justin was ... He was a friend of my dad. He was there. He took care of things. He was nice to me, at first anyway.”

“You don’t need to talk about it, Sophia.”

“It was fun too. Flirting with this powerful man. But Justin,” she lets out a puff of air, “he always wanted more than I was willing to give. I ended it.”

“So he started harassing you.”

“Yes, but only those letters—”

“And the social media crap,” Gabe points out.

“Yes, that too. I never thought he’d pull something like this. I didn’t think he was this ...”

“Crazy?”

“Love will make you do crazy things, I guess,” Sophia says.

“No,” I say so firmly, everyone stares at me, Rosie’s eyes widening with alarm, “That isn’t love. That’s infatuation. That’s control. He never loved you, just like Andrew never loved me.”

“Andrew?” Rosie whispers, confused.

“I’ll explain another time,” Sophia says.

“And the mayor?” Rosie asks.

“In a police cell where he’d better hope he stays,” Ro growls.

Rosie lifts her head and nods, and we all sit there in silence, sipping our coffees.

“Should I go ... or ...” Rosie asks. “Do you want me to drive you home? I could come and stay at your place tonight if you need company or—”

“Sophia can’t go home,” Gabe says.

“Why not?” Rosie asks, frowning and Sophia looks up at my omega.

“He trashed your apartment. I’m sorry, Soph. Ro and I cleared it up as best we could, but I don’t think you should stay there.”

Sophia’s hand flies to her mouth. “My cat!”

“Is fine.”

She sinks back into the chair.

“You can stay at our place then,” Rosie offers, “and bring Newton with you.”

“I was rather hoping Sophia would come and stay at ours,” I say. “Permanently.”

“Oh!” Rosie gasps as Sophia mutters, “what?”

“I was hoping you’d be coming to live at our house permanently.”

“What?” Sophia repeats a second time.

“I think I’d better go and leave you to it,” Rosie mutters, kissing Sophia’s cheek with sudden excitement. “I’ll be out in the hall.”

She hurries out, gaze flitting around the pack before she closes the door.

Roman comes to sit on the side of my bed facing Sophia, and Gabe squeezes back into the chair with her. Liam stands by the side of the bed.

“We haven’t talked about this as a pack yet,” I confess, “but I have a strong inclination that my packmates want this as much as I do.”

“Want what?” Sophia asks. For such an intelligent woman, I think this is the first time I’ve seen her so easily confused.

“You,” Gabe says, nipping her shoulder. “For our pack.”

“But I’m—”

“Sexy, beautiful, intelligent, brave and sassy to boot.” Liam grins and she rolls her eyes.

“It’s true,” I insist.

“I’m a beta. A beta has no business belonging in a pack.”

“Says who?” Gabe lifts his head from her shoulder. “Because if you want to be a part of this pack, there’s nothing stopping you.”

“But if you need some time.” Roman cups his fingers under her chin and strokes her jaw. “We understand. You’ve been through hell, Sophia, and we’re here for you, whether you decide you want to be a part of this pack or not.”

“I ... I’m not sure.” She stands up suddenly and both Gabe and Ro follow her. “It’s been a,” she screws up her face, “day. My head and my heart are all a mess. I need to get my thoughts straight ... and I need to find my cat and ...” She looks around us all, meeting my eye last of all. “I’m sorry but I think Rosie’s right. I’ll go stay there tonight and I’ll call you all in the morning.”

Gabe goes to argue, but Ro shoots him a look and he falls silent. She kisses each of the other’s cheeks and then leans down over the bed to kiss mine. As she does, I slide my hand into her hair and pull her towards my mouth, sighing when her warm lips hit mine and that jasmine perfume fills my nose. I kiss her gently with my eyes closed as if there’s no one else in the room. Just the two of us.

I want her to know I’m serious. My offer is serious. How I feel about her is serious.

She kisses me back, but then she's pulling away, and I hope to god all my previous fuck-ups haven't blown this for us.

S ophia

ROSIE GIVES me the side-eye all the way home and up the stairs to her loft room, tucking us into her bed with her laptop and a movie.

When the film ends two hours later and another of her alphas has dropped by with drinks and snacks or just to check we're OK, she shuts the laptop and swivels round in the bed to face me.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on? I mean, you don't have to if you're feeling all shaky from today. I can't imagine how—"

"I don't want to think about it, Rosie. I want to put it out of my mind and forget it ever happened."

"That doesn't sound very healthy, Sophia. You know there's a reason they send teams of shrinks along to disaster zones. You should be talking about this stuff." She curls my hair behind my ear. "You know Sophia. You're so open about some things – about sex and sexuality. When we first became friends, you had me blushing every other minute – you were so upfront about everything." She strokes my cheek and holds my gaze. "But there are other things you keep so close to your heart. Your feelings, your emotions, the way you feel. You

have this hard, confident shell, but you're allowed to reveal what's lurking beneath. You know that, right?"

Is that what I do? I've always tried to be tough, clever, to be more than people expect of me. When my dad left, I was the rock that my mum leaned on because I never falter, I never crack, even when that frigging psychopath had me locked in his house, I didn't break.

But it's exhausting. So exhausting. And I'm tired. So tired.

A tear slides from the corner of my eye and runs down my nose.

I think of Gabe and the pack and everything that was allowed to fester after his attack. I think about my dad's disappearance and the unspoken pain he left behind.

I think about how much I want to be held and protected and looked after. I think about how I want someone to be strong for me.

I guess Rosie might be right.

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Leave it to me, sweetie. I'll talk to Zane and find someone you can speak to."

"Thank you."

"But you know, you can start now."

I let out a huff of strained air. "I know I'm going to need to, but I've gone over the events of the last 24 hours so many times today already."

"Then tell me about this pack." Rosie smiles. "I liked them. Even the asshole."

"He took a knife to his gut for me. I think we can forgive him. And," a laugh breaks free of my chest, "I like them too."

"And they want you to join their pack?" Her smile grows wider.

"But I'm a beta, Rose! I can't join a pack!"

"So, you want to join?"

“That’s not what I said.”

“So you don’t want to join?” She frowns.

I flop onto my back. My life is a chaotic mess. I don’t know what I’m going to do when I finish my PhD. I don’t know who I’m meant to be. But one thing I know, I feel more myself when I’m with those men than at any other time.

I sigh dramatically. “I think I’m in love.”

“Oh my God!” Rosie nudges me in the ribs. “I’ve never ever heard you say that before, Soph. You’ve liked guys and girls. You’ve been pretty wrapped up in them. But you’ve never used the L word.”

“Am I mad?” I ask, swinging my head to look at her and read her truthful expression.

“Probably,” Rosie pinches me, “but love is maddening.”



I SLEEP like a log with Rosie beside me the entire night and when I wake up I have a message from Gabe saying Esra has been discharged from the hospital and they’ve taken him home.

I take a taxi straight there, not even bothering to put on fresh makeup or do my hair. My conversation with Rosie has been buzzing around my head and my gut is full of uneasy butterflies I need to put to rest.

Liam opens the door in grey sweatpants and a soft-looking t-shirt. His face lights up when he sees it’s me.

“Sophia,” he says, taking my hand immediately and leading me though to the sitting room where the others are laid out on sofas watching cricket or rugby or some such nonsense. Spotting the remote, I switch off the TV and stand before them.

“Sophia!” Gabe yelps, beginning to jump to his feet. I signal to him to halt and Liam drops down next to him.

I take a deep breath. I'm not someone who usually gets nervous. Want me to stand up and deliver a presentation? No problem. Want me to argue in a debate? Easy. Want me to go and make small talk with a stranger, maybe even seduce them? Simple.

But right now, I feel nervous as hell. Those uneasy butterflies have turned rabid in my gut and I think my knees may even be shaking. Because Rosie is right, the L word is a big deal and I've never felt it before. Standing in front of this pack and confessing how I feel, cracking myself open and letting them see all the squidgy bits inside me, is terrifying.

"I've developed feelings for you. All of you," I spit out, determined to get straight to the point and not beat about the bush. "I have to confess that ... that this is something completely new for me. I'm used to holding a lid on my feelings and my emotions. I'm used to having them under control. And all of a sudden, I feel anything but in control. Seeing," I choke and it takes me a moment before I can find my voice again, "seeing you take that knife to your stomach," I tell Esra, "made me realise how much you mean to me." He goes to speak but I raise my hand. "But things have been messy between us all from the start, and asking me to be a part of the pack before we've even sorted through our feelings, it's too fast, too much." All four of them look like they might argue with me so I raise my hand once again to hush them all. "I want to see where this goes. I want to make this work. But let's start over. Let's start from the beginning. Let's take it slow." I smile. "I know that might be hard for all of us – we're a million-mile-per-hour kind of people – but let's at least try. Which means," I say, addressing Esra again, "going to see the dean and declaring our relationship."

He nods and I feel a little relief. It's a risk. Esra may receive some disciplinary action, or maybe the punishment will be less official. He's prepared to take that risk for me, though.

"If that's what you want, Sophia," he says. "We fucked things up," Gabriel whacks him around the back of the head

playfully, “*I fucked things up and I’m prepared to do whatever it takes to win you over and make this work for all of us.*”

“I didn’t handle things the best either,” I confess.

“None of us did.” Liam stands up from the sofa. “So let’s start from the beginning.” He motions towards the door.

“What?” I ask.

“Are you free on the 16th, Ms Valentine?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Yes.”

“Then we’ll take you out on a date. Wine and dine you. If you’re lucky, it might be a curry house this time.”

He gives me a little nudge towards the door.

“Are you throwing me out?”

“I wouldn’t exactly put it like that, but, yes, I am. In two weeks’ time, our man, Esra, will be well on his way to recovery and in a better state to woo you too. We’re going to do this together, the right way.”

I laugh. “Are we allowed to message and call before then?”

“As long as you keep it clean.” I pout at him and he bends down to meet my eye with a stern look. “I don’t want my packmate busting stitches when you send him some eye-popping selfie, Sophia.”

“Fair point.”

Esra groans. “Two weeks!” Giving me a heated look before he throws his head back against the sofa. It makes my skin warm and sends those butterflies swooping. It’s been like that from the beginning with us, but I’ve waited long enough for him, I can wait a couple of weeks more. The suspense may even be pretty thrilling.

I blow Gabe a kiss and follow Liam back to the door.

“Are you going back to your place?” he asks, with a concerned look.

“No, I think I’m going to stay with Rosie for a bit.”

“I’ll drive you there now,” he tells me.

“No, I think actually I might walk.”

“It’s a hell of a way. Are you sure you’ll be OK?”

I give him a big grin. I’m feeling better than I have done in months and months.

“Yes.”

“I’m going to give you a respectable peck on the cheek now, Sophia.”

“Oh, you tease.”

But I savour the feel of his warm lips on my cheek and the leather scent in my nose.

“Do we really have to wait two weeks?” I sigh.

“I think we tortured Esra enough, don’t you? He’ll be pounding at my door if he hears you moaning in my bed, and I really don’t want blood all over my sheets.”

It’s a fair point, and anyway, I think he is right about taking this from the beginning.

“Goodbye then,” I call as I step down from the doorstep and walk down the path. He stands there watching me go, not turning away until I’m out of sight.

The 16th can’t come soon enough.



ALTHOUGH THERE’D BEEN this promise to keep things respectable for the next two weeks, I didn’t believe three alphas and an omega would actually be able to hold up their end of the bargain. However, I’m surprised to find they do. Even when I give in halfway through the second week and get a tad flirty over text, my messages are met with polite responses that swiftly detour us back to safer ground.

It’s funny because, keeping it PG-safe for all this time, has me wanting them even more than I did before. Or maybe that’s

just because I haven't seen them for fourteen long days – even Esra who is at home recuperating and not in the department.

Or perhaps because we've laid our cards on the table, opened our hearts, revealed how we really feel, I'm now keen to see what it will be like to be with men I really care about and who care for me too.

I keep myself busy. True to her word, Rosie finds me a shrink and I book an emergency appointment. The first two appointments are tough, and I can tell the issues I need to unpack will be painful. I can also see it will do me good. Just opening up to the woman in that first session has me feeling a little lighter as I leave her office despite the numerous tears I'd spilled.

I move Newton into Rosie's place, along with some of my other belongings, packing the rest of my things up and placing them in storage. I'm not going back to that apartment. I'm going to have to find somewhere else to live. Where, is going to depend on what I decide I want to do after this PhD and how things go with the pack.

Could I be a packmate?

Could I live with Gabe and the others like that?

Being around Rosie and her alphas makes me think I could. I've always been a little greedy for attention and affection, and Rosie has all that in bucket loads. There is always one or other of her alphas about for her to snuggle up with, to chat about her day with, to share a meal with. And at night ... well, she's definitely one satisfied lady.

It's incredibly cute – if a little nausea-inducing.

Yes, I could definitely live like she does.

By Friday 16th I'm brimming with so much anticipation and excitement, I feel queasy. Those new butterflies that have hatched in my stomach are flitting about like crazed things and I'm so ready to jump the first packmate I see, it's obscene. Liam texts me in the morning and tells me to be ready by 7pm. I message back asking what I ought to wear. I don't want to come dressed in some slinky number if we're headed for KFC,

but neither do I want to rock up somewhere like the Ivy dressed in jeans.

After a few minutes, he texts me back, *Esra requests that you wear one of your inappropriately short skirts. The rest of us agree this is a very good idea.*

A month ago, a message like that would have me rolling my eyes. Now I actually giggle like a schoolgirl. I am that stupidly giddy.

The rest of the day drags and as soon as the clock-hands hit five o'clock, I'm out of college like a bat out of hell and cycling like the wind up to Rosie's house. She returns an hour later and helps me pick out my outfit (mini skirt included), style my hair and do my makeup. We temper down my usual sex-goddess look, opting for hot girlfriend instead – swapping blood-red lipstick for pink gloss and smoky eyes for pastel colours.

"Wow," Rosie says, stepping back to admire our work when we're finally done. "You're going to give these men heart attacks, Soph."

"I think they can handle it."

"Are you sure? They are very old," she teases. "Practically grandads."

"They are not. They're not even old enough to be my dad."

Rosie starts counting on her fingers. "Well, technically, if they—"

I pick up a pillow from my bed and toss it at her head. "Rosie!"

"Sorry," she chucks the pillow back at me, "I think old is better for you anyway."

"You do?"

"Yeah, you scare the shit out of most men our age." She steps closer and lowers her voice. "Even Duncan's a little intimidated by you."

I roll my eyes. All Rosie's alphas are over six feet tall, built like fridges and sporting stars to boot. There is no way a single one of them is daunted by someone as titchy as me.

"How are you feeling?" my friend asks, straightening the pendant I'm wearing around my neck.

"A little sick and so fucking horny!"

Rosie laughs. "I think that is a problem that will be solved today!"

L iam

I DIDN'T THINK it was possible to forget how damn beautiful this woman is, but when she draws back the door and I see her standing there framed in the light of the hallway, she whips the air straight from my lungs.

So goddamn beautiful. Her blue eyes almost silver tonight, her hair falling in waves around her shoulders and her skin so soft looking I want to stroke it.

It takes me a full minute to find my voice.

“Wow, Sophia!” I offer her my hand. I’ve been dreaming about this woman for two very long weeks. We all have. She’s been the topic of our every conversation. We’ve talked tactics and strategies and game plans, promising each other to take this slow like she asked. But fuck, when she stands there looking like that I wonder if I possess the will power. All I want to do is bundle her into the car and drive her straight to our pack house.

She peers down at her outfit. “Is the skirt too short?”

“I’d say,” I growl, leading her down the front steps. “It is the perfect amount of short, sweetheart. But maybe go easy on Esra, he isn’t fully healed yet.”

Her face falls in disappointment.

I chuckle. "I'm sure you can be gentle with him."

I lead her to the limo we've hired for the evening. If she's joining the pack, we're going to need to buy a bigger car, something that will fit three alphas, an omega and a beta. Plus other additions in the future. I wonder if she'd be up for that.

Not a topic for tonight. Not when we're taking it slow.

"You told me we weren't going anywhere fancy." She smooths down her skirt in alarm.

"We're not. Doesn't mean we can't travel in style."

"Style?" she asks sceptically, eyeing up the bright pink limo.

"It was the only one we could place our hands on last minute. According to Gabe, anyway ... Hmmm, you don't think—"

"You got punked," she laughed. "Totally."

She ducks inside and I watch as the others greet her, all their eyes lighting up and their scents darkening. Yep, everyone is feeling the same way about this girl as I am.

"You like the car?" Gabe asks. "It has a mini bar." He presses a button on the central console and a lid opens followed by a selection of brightly lit-up bottles of spirits. "And there's karaoke."

"Karaoke? Fuck, no," Esra mutters.

"You don't like it?" Sophia asks him, choosing the seat next to him, eyes swimming over him as if she's deducing how well recovered he is.

"Do you?"

"I never tried it."

I shake my head at her. "Call yourself a fucking student."

"A posh student," Esra says. "Too much prancing around, and not enough enjoying herself."

"What does that mean?"

“I mean, I met you at the ballet, Soph. No PhD student has any right being at a ballet where the seats cost more than £100. You should be hanging out in dive bars and stinky nightclubs.”

“There is nothing wrong with the ballet.” Gabe points a finger at Ezra as he pours champagne into flutes.

“Nothing wrong with the ballet. I’m making a point. What this girl needs is the opposite of a glow-up or whatever you young folk call it these days. We need to take her to all the shittiest places this city has to offer.”

“Liam already took me to a kebab shop and to the fairground.”

Ezra nods in approval.

“And tonight we’re taking you to The Star of Asia. Best curry house in Studworth – if you don’t mind cheesy music, warm beer and peeling paint work.”

“Sounds great!”

“Here.” Gabe offers her a glass of champagne.

“Oh God, I can’t drink that in the back of a car. I’ll spill it all over myself.” She snuggles up against Ezra, carefully pulling his shirt from his trousers.

“Hey!” I warn her. “No funny business, remember. Not before dinner anyway.”

“I want to see,” she says.

Ezra’s bandages came off yesterday, the wound needing air to heal. An angry ragged line crawls across the left of his gut, level with his belly button.

Sophia touches it gently. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” he says, his voice dropping low. I can’t blame him. Her fingers on his skin – I know what that feels like.

She bends down and kisses the wound. “Good.” Then she turns to us. “So who’s singing first?”

“Roman!” Gabe announces. “He has a voice like an angel. He used to serenade me when we were first dating,” he adds

wistfully.

“I thought you hated when I sang,” Roman says, taking the microphone from Gabe’s outstretched hand.

“No, darling. I loved it.”

It’s hard to tell in the dim light of the car, but I think Roman actually blushes.

Gabe selects ‘Somewhere Only We Know’, a Brit pop song from the nineties I’m sure Sophia’s never heard before. It’s a song we played a lot when we first got together with Gabe. Roman sings the words and I sink into the seat, a sense of contentment and peace filling through my chest. I peer over at Sophia. She’s tucked up against Ezra’s side, his arm around her shoulder and her hands linked with Gabe’s in her lap. She looks content too.

“He used to be a choir boy in school,” Gabe whispers to her. “You wouldn’t think it now, would you? Such an innocent little angel grew up into one dirty old man.”

Sophia elbows him in his side. “Shhhh, he’s so good.”

We make Roman sing to us all the way across town to the curry house, singing all the songs we danced to when we were students, reliving tales of our youth, of finding Gabe and convincing him to join our pack.

She laughs at our stupid mishaps and misadventures, and we even convince her to sing a song of her own, ‘Wannabe’ by the Spice Girls which she claims to actually know.

“Which Spice Girl was your favourite?” she asks, when the song finishes and she hangs up the microphone.

“Posh,” I say with a smirk.

“Scary,” Roman tells us.

“I was too young.” Gabe throws up his hand.

“I was more of a Britney fan,” Ezra says.

“Is that where your obsession with short skirts started?” Sophia asks him with a cheeky smile that has me wanting to tell the driver to pull up and take a long walk.

Esra gazes down at her bare thighs with longing. “I think that started with you. These silly skirts will be the death of me.”

“They nearly were,” Gabe points out and we all stare at him. “What? Too soon.”

Esra chuckles and soon we’re all joining in.

God, this feels good. Like it used to be. Like it should always have been.

I’m pretty certain The Star of Asia curry house has never had a limo pull up outside its doors, pink or not. The staff actually gather around the entrance, watching as we all tumble out still laughing after we finally let Gabe take a hold of the microphone. That man cannot sing for shit, yet he wails as if he’s Celine Bloody Dion.

The curry house itself is small and filled with rugby and football teams and groups of students, plus a few groups of older guys like us who still remember that this place serves the best peshwari naan on the planet.

As we settle into cushioned chairs with velvet surfaces that have been rubbed away over the years, I pass Sophia a menu. “Have you ever eaten Indian before?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, but it was in a five-star restaurant, wasn’t it?”

She doesn’t answer that, hiding behind the menu instead.

“Need help choosing? How spicy can you handle it?”

She lowers her menu, and peers over the top. “I think you know I can handle my spice, Alpha.”

“Do not get into a dick swinging contest with Liam over spice, pretty little thing. I have plans for you tonight that do not involve a toilet bowl,” Gabe says. Roman prods him with his elbow. “Innocent plans,” Gabe qualifies, then adds in a low voice, “Mostly.”

“Do not worry. I intend to walk out of this restaurant with all my taste buds still intact. I’ve no interest in having my

tongue singed off.”

“Want something sweet instead, sweetheart?” Ezra asks, and I’m wondering if this is Sophia’s influence because I’ve never seen him so relaxed and ... attentive.

“Hmmm.” She scans her eyes over the menu. “Just pick what you want and I’ll have a bit of everything.”

I shake my head, covering my mouth to suppress my chuckle. I can’t catch the eye of the others or I’ll erupt into full-on peals of laughter, but I can hear Gabe sniggering beside me.

“What?” Sophia asks, flattening the menu down on the table and smoothing her palms across it.

“That’s our girl,” is all Gabe will say.

We order every type of curry and rice dish we think Sophia should try as well as the usual poppadoms with pickles, samosas, bhajis and three different types of naan. There’s enough to feed a bloody army but with three alphas around the table we make a pretty decent job at finishing off the food.

Sophia does exactly as promised, spooning a bit of everything onto her plate and umming and ahing her way through the dishes. Sometimes her face melts into pleasure, sending all the blood in our bodies running south; at other times she screws up her nose and sneezes when the spice is too much. It’s actually fucking adorable and has me wanting to drag her onto my lap.

Finally, we’re defeated. Roman crunches up his napkin and tosses it onto the table.

“I’m done. I can’t eat any more.”

“There’s so much left!” Sophia says.

“We’ll ask for doggy bags.” I signal to the waiter.

“They do that?”

“And here I was thinking you were worldly-wise.”

She settles in her chair. “This was fun. Thank you.”

“Oh jeez, we’re doomed,” Gabe says. ““Fun’?””

“Fun is good,” Sophia says, before scrunching up her nose, “trust me a lot of dates I’ve been on were not fun.” She dabs her mouth with her napkin. “So where to next?”

“Home,” Esra tells her. A wicked smile forms across her face. “No, we’re taking you back to Rosie’s.”

“I’m not sure she’d appreciate all of you—”

“No,” I clarify, “we’re not coming in.”

“Why not?”

“You said slow,” Roman explains. “We agreed slow. We’re keeping to that agreement.”

“But—” We all shake our heads. It’s torture. Fucking torture. But we’re keeping our word. We’re pressing the rewind button.

“Patience,” I remind her with a wink.

She obviously decides to make us pay for our self-control, because once we’ve dropped her at Rosie’s and returned to the packhouse, our phones all ping.

Looking at one another, we pull out our phones and find Sophia has sent us a detailed account of how she has relieved her frustration.

I drag my hand down my face.

Fucking torture.



THE FOLLOWING week we take her to watch a football match and buy her hot Bovril in a styrofoam cup. She wrinkles up her nose as she tries it but drinks down the lot and ends up being noisier than the rest of us when Studworth scores three goals in a row.

Sophia insists on picking the venue for date three. I half wonder, half hope it’s somewhere she hopes to seduce the four

of us. We meet after another week apart on a Saturday afternoon in the botanical gardens where we first met. She packs a picnic and after strolling through the tropical flowers, we lie out on a stretch of grass in the sunshine.

“I made these myself,” she says, as she passes out neatly wrapped bundles of sandwiches and sausage rolls.

“I never took you as a domestic type,” Gabe teases.

“Neither did I, but I had a craving for home-made sausage rolls and it seems I like caring for all of you – some of the time, anyway. Don’t get any bright ideas that I’m going to move in and start washing your pants and cook your dinners.”

“If you move in with us, sweetheart, we’ll have much better uses for your time, I promise.”

“Like what?” she asks, resting back on her elbows and stretching out those long legs of hers. She’s wearing another of those short skirts and Ezra has been unable to drag his eyes away from the hem.

“Let me see ...” I say, “like serious debates about the current state of politics in this country and games of scrabble. Maybe if you’re lucky, we can do a crossword or two together.”

She rips off a piece of her sandwich and throws it at my head.

“Liam, mate,” Ezra growls, “you can choose to spend your time with Sophia that way. I have much more interesting ways of entertaining her.”

“Like pouring over the latest copy of Physics weekly,” Gabe scoffs.

“Hey,” he winks at our omega, “I’d have ways of making it sexy.”

“I once won a game of strip scrabble,” Sophia says, tearing off another piece of bread. “I’m pretty good at it.”

“No way you’d beat Roman,” Gabe tells her.

Sophia shrugs like she could take him down easily.

“Is that a challenge, baby girl? Because I’d really like to get you out of that skirt.”

“Me too,” Ezra groans.

“It’s a challenge,” Sophia says. “We can head back to your packhouse for a game after our picnic.” I exchange looks with my packmates. “Oh, come on, it’s been four weeks and—”

Gabe rolls over and kisses her nose. “Four weeks too long.”

“You’re sure?” I ask her. “You asked for slow.”

“There’s slow and there’s the chance you leave it so long I become a born-again virgin.”

Ezra places his hand on her thigh like he’s been clearly dying to do all afternoon. “It’s been an agonising four weeks.”

His hand remains on her thigh for the rest of the picnic.

There’s no argument from any of us this time when Sophia suggests we go back to our house for that game of scrabble an hour later.

But if I was hoping scrabble was an euphemism for something more explicit, I’m disappointed. Sophia seems determined to beat all our arses. Soon I’m down to my boxers and socks, Gabe has lost his trousers, and Ezra is in just his pants. Roman is faring slightly better, but unfortunately Sophia is still wearing most of her clothes. That’s about to change though, because on her next go she’s unable to spell out a word that scores any more than ten points.

“Looks like you’re going to have to lose a piece of clothing, sweetheart,” I tell her, trying really hard not to lick my lips like the pervert I am.

She stands to her feet and hooks her thumbs into the waistband.

“Skirt?” she asks, with a curl of her lips.

“I’m taking it off,” Ezra growls, and before any of us can argue, he’s on his knees in front of our girl, tugging the thing down her legs.

Sharp intakes of breath resound from all our lips as he does. Sophia is wearing the teeniest, laciest, silkiest pair of knickers I've ever had the pleasure of laying my eyes on. Black.

Esra twists her around slowly, so we all get a look at the back. The underwear is cut away to emphasise the globes of her arse. I want to sink my teeth into those cheeks.

"Does the bra match?" Esra asks, his voice throaty.

He spins her back to face him and reaches up to undo the buttons of her blouse.

"Hey," she protests, "those aren't the rules of this game."

"Fuck the rules. Fuck the game." He takes a grip of the blouse and rips the front straight open, buttons ping-pong in all directions.

"Jesus Christ," Sophia says with an eye roll. "So bloody dramatic."

"That's nothing," he says, hooking his fingers inside her underwear and ripping those away next.

"You seem to enjoy either stealing or destroying my underwear."

"Yes. I do."

He grins and she returns his smile indulgently, and then he looks up at her properly. My gaze follows his and we both see it at the same time.

The slight curve of her belly.

S ophia

THE LOOK on Esra's face turns from one of mischief to one of reverence.

"Sophia," he says as he rests his warm palm gently on my belly.

I take a sharp inhale. I had no idea it was obvious yet.

Liam shuffles forward, landing on his knees beside his packmate.

"Are you ...?" Esra asks, and my heart pauses in my chest.

"What?" Gabe asks.

A blush spreads over my cheeks. "This wasn't exactly how I'd planned on telling you."

"Telling us what?" Gabe asks, swinging his gaze between us in confusion.

I catch his eye. I have no idea how he'll take this news – no idea how any of them will. But I hope they'll be happy. "I'm pregnant."

"P r e g n a n t," he repeats slowly as if he can't comprehend the word. Then a look of astonishment crashes over his face. "Is it mine?"

I bite my lip to try to stop the nervous tremble and nod. “I think it must be. I’ve been on birth control for years.”

Liam adds his palm to my belly.

“We dreamed of children,” he says, “but we knew the likelihood of making it a reality was slim. Nobody wanted to let a bunch of alpha males adopt a baby. Nobody was willing to be a surrogate.”

“It’s early days. I haven’t had my scan yet or—”

“But you took a test?” Esra asks.

“Yes, this morning. I’ve been feeling a little sick. I thought it was nerves or something, but”

“How long? How far along are you?” Esra whispers, his eyes locked on the slight curve of my stomach.

“Eight weeks.”

“Soph,” Liam asks me. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m going to keep it,” I say. Perhaps I haven’t had much time to think about it, and yet it was my immediate reaction. “I’m not sure I’ll be the best mum in the world, but I know I will love this baby. I already do.” I pause. “But that doesn’t mean you have to be involved or feel responsible—”

Gabe is beside me in an instant, taking my hand in his. “You know, Sophia, that we want you to join this pack.” I smile, and damn these hormones, because tears well in my eyes. “This just makes it all the more perfect. And,” he squeezes my hand, “I know you’re still trying to work out what you want to do with your life. This won’t restrict your options. You know I’m going to have lots of free time on my hands soon and I can’t think of a better way than spending it raising our child.”

“What about the choreography?”

He swishes his hand through the air. “I can take a break before that. And luckily I ... we ...” he winks, “have a pack of wealthy alphas so money won’t be a problem.”

“Of course not,” Liam says. “We’re going to take care of all four of you.”

“Hmm,” I say.

“What?” Esra asks, frowning at his packmate. “Four?”

“I’d wager a guess there’s more than one baby in here given Soph’s showing already.”

“Excuse me?” I say, alarmed. One baby was a big enough shock this morning, but two?

“Twins probably.”

Gabe’s grin grows even wider. “The more the merrier.”

“The taking care of you starts today, sweetheart,” Esra says. “We’re moving you in with us. Today. I know you wanted to take this slow and—”

“I’d like that,” I tell him. I’ve had four weeks to think about what I want, and even before the baby bombshell, I’d made up my mind. I want to be with these men. I want to make them mine. I want to be a part of this pack.

“Good,” Esra says, and the others agree.

“But,” I say, combing my fingers through Esra’s hair.

“But ...” Gabe repeats.

I take a deep breath. I’m not sure they’re going to like this bit, but it’s important to me. We’re starting from the beginning and so I’m laying my stipulations out on the table. “I don’t want to join a pack that isn’t exclusive. I know this pack is open, but that isn’t something I can handle. If you want me to join this pack, then it has to be the five of us, and only the five of us.”

The pack is silent for a moment and Esra sweeps his fingers backwards and forwards over my stomach.

Gabe speaks first. “I don’t have a problem with that, Sophia,” he says simply. “I wouldn’t want to share you with anyone outside this pack.”

“You’re sure?” I ask. The others always made it sound like Gabe was the one pushing for the pack to be open. I thought he’d be reluctant for it to be exclusive.

“I am. I have everything I need right here in this pack.” He smiles at his mates and Liam rests his palm on his omega’s calf.

“And the rest of you?”

“I believe it’s the way it should be,” Roman says and Liam nods.

I peer at Esra.

“If it’s what you want, sweetheart.”

“Is it what you want?”

He kisses my stomach. “It is.”

I let out a puff of air, relieved. “Good, because I’m a jealous, greedy little bitch and the idea of sharing any of you with people outside this pack,” I screw up my nose, “I can’t do that.”

Gabe chuckles. “We’re going to have our hands full taking care of you, pretty little thing.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “I think I’ll have my hands full taking care of you,” I point out. “And I was hoping you’d start taking care of me right now ...”

It’s been four very long, very frustrating weeks, and if they don’t lay their hands on me soon I may actually combust.

Esra takes my hint. “But the baby—”

“Babies,” Liam corrects, “will be just fine.”

“We should be gentle with her, though,” Esra insists.

“If she wants. What did you have in mind, sweetheart?”

“First, I want to finish crushing you all in this game of Scrabble, and then—”

Esra knocks me backwards onto the sofa and parts my thighs.

“Enough teasing.”

I pout up at him. “I was winning that game, though.” But he sweeps his tongue through my folds and my head falls back against the cushions, my eyes falling shut, and all thoughts of Scrabble are well and truly abandoned. He makes me come with his tongue easily and I have a strange sense of pride in my chest at how fucking good my future packmates are at pleasuring me. All of them. Each in their own way. It’s what I need. I’d never be satisfied with just one man. I need all four of them to keep me challenged – intellectually, creatively, emotionally and sexually. We all need that. It’s why this relationship between the five of us works.

When Ezra rocks back onto his heels, his face a mess with my arousal, I smile up at him, bliss surely written all over my face.

“Oh god, I’ve been dreaming of that,” I murmur. I’ve been dreaming of it ever since that night at the theatre.

“Me too, sweetheart,” he whispers. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life looking after you. I am going to spoil the fuck out of you, woman. You won’t want for anything. Then when the babies come ... Babies?” His smile is delirious with happiness, an emotion reflected on Gabe, Liam and Roman’s faces. An emotion reflected in my heart. We’re going to be a family. We’re going to make a family.

Ezra leans forward to press his lips to my belly again. “I know I messed up. I know I treated you,” he glances up at his omega, “and Gabe badly. I promise, I’ve learned my lesson. I promise I will love both of you, all of you,” he peers round at Liam and Roman, “with all my heart.”

Gabe kneels down beside him, resting his head on his shoulder. “We all need to get better at talking, at sharing our hopes and our fears, our darkest thoughts and our wildest dreams. Especially when these babies come. Raising kids is no walk in the park.”

“I can’t wait,” Ezra says, drawing Gabe in closer to kiss him.

Gabe reaches for me as he kisses our alpha and their attention turns to me, Esra kissing me next as Gabe nibbles my throat. The others draw closer too, but then Gabe whispers in my ear: “You’ve been wanting him, wanting Esra, haven’t you?”

It’s something I can’t deny. Even when we were hating each other, yelling at each other, there was always this pull, this magnetism, between us.

“Hmmm,” I murmur and Gabe pushes us onto the sofa, Esra rolling carefully on top of me. I can feel how hard he is beneath the fabric of his jeans and his scent engulfs me, suddenly powerful in my nose.

“You sure about all this, Sophia?” Esra asks me, trailing a forefinger down my body and making me shudder with desire. “Because once we begin we’re not letting up, not until every single one of us has rutted you. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Rutted and knotted,” I say, desperate for them to have me in all ways.

Esra glances to the others.

“Sophia, we’ve talked about this,” Roman says.

“I’ve been preparing. I want you to knot me.”

“Preparing?” Roman asks, desire shining in his ocean eyes.

“Gabe showed me how.”

Gabe simply shrugs. “The girl deserves the mind-blowing ecstasy of a knot.”

“She does and I’m more than willing to give it to her,” Esra growls, making quick work of his fly.

“Is it safe for the baby?” Roman asks.

Liam rests a hand on his shoulder. “Mate, I’m not going to let any of you arseholes do anything that ever hurts our girl or our children. I promise you that now. If this is what Sophia wants—”

“It is,” I say.

Esra positions himself between my legs and I spread them for him, my heart pounding a beat that reverberates around my body.

“Sophia,” he whispers in what sounds like reverence. “How were we so lucky to find you? So lucky my stupid crap didn’t scare you away? So lucky that man didn’t ...” He screws up his eyes, that thought too painful to bear.

“Alpha,” I whisper back and when his eyes flutter open at the sound of my voice, I know his dark eyes will never cease to steal my breath away. “I know I can never share the bond the way you all can. I know you can never claim me like you can an omega, but I do want to be a part of this family. To make it mine. To make it ours. I’ve never wanted that before, but the four of you have changed me, have shown me there are things I could have that I never considered I’d want.”

“Sophia, I don’t need to sink my teeth into your neck to make you mine. I don’t need to do that for you to know that you’re mine. I will make it damn clear to you every day for the rest of my life.”

“All of us will,” Liam adds.

He teases me first, dragging his cock head through my sensitive area, knocking against my clit and I wonder how he has the self control. All I want is for him to plunge deep inside me. To claim my body as his.

But though I beg him, he waits until I’m coming. Then, satisfied I’m wet enough to take him, he grips my thighs and drags me onto his cock.

Finally, he fucks me. After all these long weeks of longing, he fucks me. Fucks me with the whole of his body and the entirety of his soul, wanting to show me with every stroke of his cock how much he wants me, how much he will always love me.

When I come, I’m greeted by the sight of bliss streaming across his face, and he falls straight after me.

“Sophia,” he moans, as he holds me to him, holding me tight. This time he doesn’t pull away. This time he fills me.

This time he knots me.

It's different from the dildo, his flesh warm and hard and growing in size, stretching me at my entrance, stretching me wide to take him as he utters words of encouragement and wraps me in his embrace.

I can't deny there's a little pain, my eyes smarting with it, but then a silent 'ohhh' issues from my lips and pleasure blooms deep in my core, spreading through my entire body, only this time, more powerful, more potent than before.

It's better than Gabe described, the ecstasy mind-shattering, and when I float back to Earth, loving the way he's locked into me, I find four faces staring at me in wonder.

"How do you feel, PLT?" Gabe asks, stroking my cheek softly.

"Pretty damn divine," I laugh.

And as the other three move in to pepper me with kisses and murmur declarations of love in my ear, I realise just how true those words are.

Divine. There is no better way to describe how I feel when I'm with these men. How I will always feel with them. And I know I want to belong with them for the rest of my days. Belong completely.

"Bite me," I tell them. "Bite me, please."

G abriel

I LIFT my head and peer down at the pretty little beta joined to my alpha, stare down at where she's taken him. This strong, determined woman. Carrying my child in her belly. I'm overwhelmed with emotion, the force of it leaving me stunned.

Everything has been so messy and wrong for such a long time and now it's as if it's all falling into place. Rearranging to make room for this woman in our lives, this woman who was made for us.

"Yes," I tell the others.

Liam kisses Sophia's jaw. "We can't bond you, Sophia, you know that, it doesn't mean—"

"It doesn't matter," I say. "I want my teeth marks in her neck anyway. A permanent reminder to everyone that she's mine."

Esra growls clearly liking the sound of that.

"It will hurt," Roman says, stroking his fingers along her throat anyway.

"I don't care," Sophia says with defiance, her cheeks rosy, her eyes bright and her hair spread about her head on the cushion. She looks like a fucking angel, like something ethereal, too good, too precious, for us mere mortals.

“Gabriel,” she says, meeting my eyes with hers and I wonder how it’s possible for one set of eyes to hold so many of the universe’s colours – blues and greys and silvers like the night sky floating in her irises.

I inhale the smell of her, the fragrance of her skin, the traces of her perfume. I drag my nose down her throat and rest my teeth on the sensitive spot where her neck meets her shoulder. I don’t own the sharp teeth of an alpha. But it’s another way Sophia and I are alike. We won’t let our designations stop us from being what we want, from having the people we love.

“Ready?” I breathe.

“Never more so.”

I lick my tongue over her flesh, tasting salt on her skin, and then I sink my teeth through the tissue. Coppery blood fills my mouth and she cries out, my mates shushing and comforting her.

I swallow her blood, my teeth plunging deeper into her neck. I close my eyes. Tasting her, hearing her breath and her heartbeat, feeling her pulse upon my lips. And then more. Deep in my gut. Pushing up against my mates’ bonds. Creating space for itself. Warm and electric.

Sophia gasps and I withdraw my blood-stained mouth, peering down at my stomach, resting my hand there.

“You ... you feel it too?” I ask her.

“Yes, is it the baby?” she asks, alarm in her eyes.

“No, sweetheart, no, it’s ...” I can hardly believe it. This can’t be. Can it? “It’s a bond.”

The others stare at us.

“That’s impossible,” Esra mutters, forever the scientist.

I laugh. “I have three bonds, Alpha. I think I know what one feels like.”

His gaze shifts to Sophia, her eyes wide with disbelief and then he’s diving in, adding his bite to the base of her neck. She

cries out again as his teeth snap through her skin, but then the look of pain morphs to more astonishment. Esra laps at the wound, licking and kissing it.

“You feel it?” I ask him, my fingers tracing the scar of my teeth marks on his neck where I claimed him all those years ago.

“Yes,” he whispers, “I feel it. How is this possible?” He turns to Liam.

“I don’t know. I never heard of it happening before.” He kisses Sophia’s mouth as Esra continues to sweep his tongue over her fresh wound. “Can you take another, Sweetheart?”

“Yes.” She smiles up at him with love in her eyes. “Yes, I want you all to claim me.”

He rests his hand on her belly and Esra reluctantly lifts his head, making room for our packmate.

“I don’t know if this is some kind of biology gone wrong, or a miracle, but, fuck, Sophia, I want to feel your bond in my gut. I want to be linked to you, to feel you there forever.”

“Then bite me, Alpha.”

He does, his teeth sinking into her neck alongside the wounds we’ve already made. The bonds in my body hum, vibrating. I can feel the incredulity Liam experiences as Sophia’s bond nuzzles alongside the rest of the packs’ in his gut.

Then there’s only Roman left to go. I hook my arms around his shoulder and nuzzle his ear. “Do it, Alpha. Claim our girl and make our pack whole.”

Liam backs away, his lips stained scarlet with Sophia’s blood and Roman hovers above her, stroking her face, whispering words to her that only the two of them can hear, words I can feel in Sophia’s bond delight her. There’s one spot left on her neck, room for one more bite and Roman claims it as his own. Sinking his teeth gently, softly, carefully into her skin. He’s always been the most sensitive of us, the one taking care of us all.

My bonds vibrate more violently and the sensation echoes through my body and my bones, lighting up every part of me.

“Wow,” I whisper. It’s as if the bond was never complete, never whole. Because now, with Sophia bonded to us all, I feel just how powerful, how awesome, it truly is, and I know that this was always meant to be our destiny.

I wrap my hands around my mates, drawing us all into one giant hug, and we all collapse together onto the sofa, laughing and crying and happier than it should be possible for five people to possibly be.

A pack.

Finally, the pack we should always have been.

Roman

“ARE YOU NERVOUS?” I ask Sophia squirming on the seat beside me. I take her hand in mine and lace our fingers together and on her other side Ezra leans down and kisses her shoulder.

“Yes ... no ... I just really need to pee.” She screws up her eyes. “The letter said I had to drink a pint of water before this scan and now I’m desperate.”

Ezra jumps up to his feet. “I’ll go see where Liam went. See if it’s OK for you to pee.” He’s obviously nervous too and in need of a mission to keep himself occupied.

Me, I’m cool as a cucumber. Everything has been perfect since Sophia stepped into our lives permanently and I know deep down in my gut this scan will be too. I let my calmness seep through our bond and her legs stop jiggling.

She keeps fiddling with the pendant around her neck, though, something she always does when she’s tense. “What if there’s something—”

“There won’t be, Soph. It’s going to be just fine.”

I take the pendant from her fingers and twist it over in my own. She wears it most days. The stone is a silvery blue like the colour of her eyes. I’ve never asked her about it before and

I realise there's still so much we have to learn about one another. "Was it a gift?"

"Yes, from my dad on my 18th." She peers down at it. "I should have given it away. I meant to put it in a pile to take to the charity shop." She strokes her thumb over the stone. "But I couldn't do it."

"You miss him."

"I wish I didn't. I wish I could just hate him. He's going to miss this too, the arrival of his grandchild."

I let the pendant fall back against her collarbone and stroke her cheek. "I miss my dad too." He wasn't the best dad even when he was around, but there are moments like this when I feel his absence most keenly. I want to be the best dad I can for this kid. I want to make my packmates happy. It would be nice to have someone to turn to for advice.

She swallows and chews on her lip again. "What if we're like them, Ro?" she whispers. "What if we turn out to be the same and screw up this kid?"

"We won't. We aren't them. I may not have made this baby, Soph," I say, laying my hand against the little bump at her stomach, "but it's mine. I love it already and I always will. I'm going to make sure this child knows that every day of their life." I pinch her chin and kiss her lips. "I'm going to make sure you know it too. It's what you deserve."

She beams back at me and, through our bond, I feel that tension leaving her body. "You always make me feel better," she mumbles, cosying up to my side.

I smile, pride swelling my chest. I may not have Gabe's charm, Liam's wit or Esra's ... whatever the hell you'd call that, but I know how to take care of my packmates. I know how to take care of Sophia especially.

Liam and Esra stroll back to where we're waiting on the bench.

"Go pee," Liam tells Sophia, "it'll be fine."

“Oh thank god!” She springs to her feet and dashes off towards the bathroom. A minute later, Gabe comes skidding into the corridor, panting and red faced.

“Shit! Did I miss it? Am I too late? Where’s Sophia?”

Liam squeezes his shoulder. “Breathe, Gabe. You didn’t miss it.”

“I’m here,” she says, creeping up behind our omega and wrapping her arms around his middle.

“Phew.” His body sags in relief as a nurse steps into the corridor.

“Miss Valentine?”

“That’s me.” Soph steps towards her, taking a steadying breath.

“We’re going to have to change that,” Esra rumbles. “Don’t want everyone thinking you’re fucking available.”

“I’m not changing my name unless you do too,” she says.

Gabe takes her hand in his. “Hmmm I like that idea. We could create a pack surname.”

The nurse’s gaze flicks around the five of us. “When you’re quite ready, only one of you can accompany the mother-to-be.”

“Err, no,” Liam tells her. “All of us will be accompanying our beta. She belongs to our pack.”

The nurse frowns. “It’s against the hospital rules—”

“Which can be bent in this circumstance,” Liam says firmly, his tone making it clear he won’t be losing this argument.

“Fine.” The nurse’s shoulders sag in resignation and she pushes against a door. We step inside a darkened room, a bed resting in the centre with a trolley and a computer screen alongside. The nurse points to the bed. “Up there, please.”

I help Sophia onto the mattress and hold her hand, my eyes locked on hers as the nurse shimmies up her top and squirts

clear gel onto her skin.

“I can’t look,” Sophia whispers to Liam. “You’ll tell me when it’s OK?”

“I will,” he promises.

Sophia may not be able to look, but my gaze is pulled towards the screen as the nurse lowers a device to Sophia’s stomach and wavy monochrome lines fill the screen. For a while, the lines make no sense and all we can hear is the device scraping lightly across Sophia’s lower belly.

Then, all of a sudden, a noise fills the room. Loud and strong. The *thud thud* of a heartbeat.

Sophia chokes on a sob. “That’s ...”

“It is, sweetheart,” Liam says, stroking her arm. “That’s our baby’s heart.”

“And is it healthy ...”

Liam’s eyes are drawn to the screen, to where strange blobs float, blobs I can make head nor tail of.

“Nurse?” Liam asks.

“Everything’s looking healthy.”

We all let out a combined relieved sigh and Sophia ventures a peek at the screen. “Is that ...”

Liam walks over to the screen and points. “Here’s our baby’s little head and here is its spine. Can you see? And look here’s a leg – long legs like yours, Sophia – and a tiny, teeny hand.”

I can hear the tears in his voice as we all stare transfixed and water slides down Sophia’s cheeks too.

“Beautiful. Can we tell if it’s a girl or a boy?”

“Too early for that,” the nurse tells her, “but everything is looking fine. I’m going to take some pictures,” she presses some buttons on the machine, “and then I just need to check some more things.” She slides the probe over Sophia’s

stomach. The heartbeat fades, then grows again. “Oh,” the nurse says, eyes darting to the five of us.

“There’s another one, isn’t there?” Liam grins.

“Yes, you appear to be carrying twins. Congratulations.”

“I knew it!” Liam punches his fist into the air in triumph.

“Is this baby healthy too?” Esra asks, squinting at the screen.

“Yes, perfectly healthy.” The nurse presses the buttons a second time, capturing the image of our second baby.

“I’m just going to check we have no more lurking about in here.”

“Oh god,” Sophia says, glancing up at Liam.

The nurse sweeps the probe over Sophia’s stomach a final time.

“No, just two.”

“Just?” Sophia says, shaking her head. “Thank goodness.”

“You’re going to be just fine,” Gabe tells her, kissing her forehead. “You have your own personal doctor on call day and night.”

“He’s an orthopaedic surgeon.”

“I did a stint in obstetrics when I was training.”

On the other side a printer rattles and then the nurse hands Sophia printouts of the images of our babies.

She cradles them to her chest as though they’re the most priceless things in the world.

I think they possibly are.

“Can we have one more peek before we go?” Liam asks the nurse.

She peers up at the alpha towering above her. However, now she’s learned he’s a doctor, she seems more amenable. She nods and zooms the image right out so this time we have a

view of both our babies side by side floating about like little aliens in our girl's stomach.

My heart swells violently inside my chest and I know that what I told Sophia out there in the corridor was true, every single word. I'm going to love these two little people to the end of my days.



WE CLAIM our sofas at the back of our favourite coffee shop, spreading the pictures of the babies across the table. We sit staring at them, each of us wearing a ridiculously wide grin on our faces.

"They're the most beautiful babies in the history of the world, right?" Gabe says for about the one hundredth time.

"Sure are," I say, "but that was never in doubt considering who their parents are."

"You can see this one has my nose," Gabe says, pointing to the twin on the right. "And this one has Sophia's chin."

"Is that a chin or a foot?" Esra asks, and Gabe pinches him on the bicep affectionately. Esra kisses our omega's brow. "Chin, foot, it's still darn adorable."

"Did you see how much they were jiggling about inside me, though," Sophia says resting her hand on her little belly bump. "These two are going to be a handful."

In the last week, she's started to feel flutterings in her belly, all of us running to her whenever she experiences a new one. Belly flutterings and cravings. Each of us has been sent out late at night in search of strange food sources. Yesterday I had to track down lemon meringue pie.

"If they're anything like you and Gabe, then yes, they're going to be a handful," Liam agrees.

"If they're anything like Gabe and Sophia, they are going to be the two most adorable babies ever," I say, lifting one of the images to my face and gazing at it in awe.

“Our lives are going to change so much,” Sophia says wistfully, resting her head on my shoulder and staring at the image too.

It already has.

It’s been a month since Sophia moved in with us, nearly four weeks since we found out about the pregnancy and bonded her. So much has changed in that time. So much has changed for the better.

But she’s right. Life is going to change some more. For all of us. Sophia hopes to finish her PhD in a month or two, and Gabe’s already handed in his resignation at the ballet. He’ll dance his last performance at Christmas time, right before these babies arrive.

We’ve been told the mayor’s trial won’t take place for at least six months, but we’re trying our best to keep Sophia’s mind off that.

I’m already working less than I used to and even Ezra is too. We’re all keen to be home together as much as we can.

Where will life take us? What will it bring? It’s impossible to predict. Maybe that’s what I love about it most.

Who would have known this woman, this beta, would have changed our lives so fundamentally? Would have given us the things we were craving so desperately. Yes, children, sure. But love and stability too. And we’ve given her those things in return.

“You want another decaf coffee, sweetheart?” Ezra asks Sophia, kissing the knuckles of her hand.

“You know what, I’m going to have one of those strawberry milkshakes with cream, marshmallows and sprinkles – the candy kind not the chocolate ones. And it needs to be really cold, not lukewarm.”

“Got it,” Ezra says, grinning.

“I’m eating for three now, after all.”

I think pregnancy suits her well. She was already fucking stunning but now she seems even more so – her skin glowing,

her eyes brighter and her belly getting rounder by the day.

When Esra returns with fresh drinks for us all, we all watch anxiously as Sophia inspects her milkshake and takes a sip through her straw.

“Is it OK, sweetheart?” Esra asks, still on his feet, ready to change it if she asks him to.

“Hmmm,” we wait, “perfect.”

“Thank fuck,” Esra mutters, sinking into a seat.

“I was serious, about a pack surname,” Gabe says after a moment’s silence, “I want the world to know we belong together. I want the world to know that when our children arrive, they belong to this pack too.”

“I like that idea,” Sophia says, hooking out a marshmallow from the cream floating on top of her shake. “What were you thinking?”

“Me? No idea! Obviously I’m rather fond of Manchetti but ...”

“It should be a combination of all our names,” I say.

“That would be one fucking long mouthful.” Esra chuckles.

“No, we combine them somehow.” I pinch a sweet from the top of Sophia’s drink and pop it into my mouth. “Because that would be symbolic too.”

“How?” Sophia asks, swiping at my fingers when I try to take a second sweet.

“This pack is formed by each one of us. Without one, the entire thing falls apart. And we are all needed, all special, all have our part to play, whether we’re an alpha, omega, or,” I hold Sophia’s gaze, “beta. We all belong. Don’t you see?”

“You were a pack before me.” Sophia whispers.

“An incomplete one.”

“Then we should take Sophia’s surname,” Esra says.

“Mine?” she asks.

“Yes, we never did that whole naming our pack thing. But Gabe is right. We should. And while I understand what Ro’s saying, I think our pack should be named after the member who brought us together.”

“Pack Valentine,” Sophia says. The name has a ring to it and as she says it out loud an electricity hums in the bonds connecting the five of us together.

I smile as I gaze around my packmates, the people I love most in the world, the people who mean the most to me. “Pack Valentine. Yeah, I like the sound of that.”

Epilogue - Five years later

S ophia

I DRAG the brush through Millie's chestnut hair, peering first at the clock on the wall and then towards the staircase.

"Stella? Have you found them yet?"

My daughter's blonde head pokes over the bannisters at the top of the stairs and she shoves her fist through the rails. "These ones, Mummy?" she asks, holding out a pair of sparkly hair grips.

"Those will do," I say, tugging the hairband from my teeth and securing a braid in Millie's hair.

Stella bumps down the staircase on her bottom and comes to stand next to her sister. She hands me the grips and I slide one into each of their hair, Millie's above her right ear, Stella's above her left. Apart from the colour of their hair, they are almost identical to look at. The shapes of their faces are similar to their dad's, but the colour of their eyes and the tilt of their mouths are all mine.

"How do we look?" Millie asks, holding out her skirt and twirling like she's been taught by a professional ballet dancer. They're both having lessons, of course, as well as belonging to a science club and attending debating classes for kids.

"You look beautiful, just like your Mummy," Esra says, strolling into the room with Toby in his arms. Our son has a mop of dark hair like his dad and he rests his head against the alpha's shoulder as he sucks his thumb.

Esra lowers our boy to the floor and he sets off crawling, chasing his sisters around the kitchen.

"He's meant to be winding down before bedtime," I sigh, "he'll never settle for Rosie if he's all wound up."

“She’ll be fine.” My alpha closes the space between us and rests his large hands on my waist. “She’s babysat our kids through three of Gabe’s heats. One night is nothing.”

I peer over as the twins squeal and dart out of their brother’s way. Toby giggles and Stella bends down to kiss him.

Esra pinches my chin and turns my face back to his. The man seems to grow more handsome by the day. His face a little more lined but his hair and his eyes still midnight black. I think he’ll be one of those men who still turns heads even in his sixties.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach like they always do when he meets my eyes, making my knees feel weak. I kiss him and he sighs into my mouth with satisfaction.

I’d been worried that the passion between the five of us would wane and fade over time. It hasn’t. Like his good looks, our desire has deepened, as our lives have become more entwined, as our love for our children has blossomed, as we’ve all come to know each other better. I want them all now more than I ever did.

“Ewww Mummy and Daddy are kissing,” Millie giggles and Esra pulls away.

“I can’t help it,” Esra tells her, “Mummy’s too pretty.”

“And Daddy is too handsome.”

The doorbell rings and Esra steps away, scooping Toby back up into his arms.

“That’s Rosie,” he says, as I brush the hair from Toby’s forehead and kiss his soft skin. He smells all milky and delicious.

“Give Mummy a goodnight kiss and we’ll go see Auntie Rosie.”

I give my little boy another peck. “Goodnight, little man.”

“Night Mama.”

Esra winks at me and carries him away.

I glance at the clock again.

We can't be late.

Roman strolls in next, car keys in hand. "Ladies, are we ready?"

"Yes, Daddy," the girls chime together, bouncing eagerly on their toes.

"Then let's leave Mummy to finish getting ready herself and go get in the car."

I throw him a thankful look as he bundles them away, and stroll towards the mirror, twisting up my lipstick as I do. I smear scarlet over my lips to match my dress and as I do a pair of strong alpha arms wrap around my middle. "You look damn sexy, sweetheart," Liam whispers in my ear.

"After three babies?" I say, rolling my eyes.

"You're even more sexy now than when we first met you."

I twist in his arms. "You're not bad yourself, you know, for such an old man."

"An old man who can still swing you over his lap and give you a good old fashioned spanking."

I sigh. "Oh god, don't tempt me, Alpha. We can't be late."

"No we can't," Esra jogs down the stairs, "put her down, Liam."

Now it's Liam's time to sigh. "It's damn near impossible."

"Try," I whisper, "for our omega's sake."

He kisses my neck with a growl and then I follow my two alphas out of the house and into the waiting car.

The drive isn't a long one but the twins are overly excited, swinging their legs and squealing. It's the first time we've taken them to the theatre, the first time they've seen a real ballet. They're still a little young probably, and I expect both of them to fall asleep before the curtain falls, but they wanted to be here. We all did.

The foyer of the theatre is jam-packed with smartly dressed people and as Liam clears a path through, my eyes can't help but drift to that door on the far side. Esra's do too and he glances at me, sparks flying through our bonds.

Who would have thought all those years ago that passing through that doorway, letting the alpha with the bottomless eyes pull me into that room, would lead to all this. A family of my own. Four men who love me, plus three beautiful children. Maybe more to come if Ro has his way.

And a career. A career I love. Something I can be passionate about.

Several people stop us as Liam leads our family up the staircase towards our box. Five years ago they'd have stopped me to solicit me, to ask me out, to invite me into their beds. These days the invitations are different. There's an older woman who wants me to come and talk about my work at her institute, a younger man who wants me to write an article for his magazine and a young woman who just wants to shake my hand. I accept business cards and promise to get in touch. Every bit of publicity helps to spread the word, to help victims like me, like Gabe, like Esra.

As expected, the mayor's court case was high profile, attracting media attention from all around the world. If I hadn't had my pack and my best friend there to support me, I might have crumbled under the scrutiny. Instead, I testified with my head held high, and turned my new found infamy into a way to help others.

Justin's in prison now. Will be for a very long time.

A testament that even the powerful will be held accountable for their crimes.

Esra hooks his arm around my waist as Liam scoops up Millie and Roman lifts Stella.

"I'm proud of you, Sophia," the professor whispers into my ear.

"You are?"

"Yes, very. You're amazing, do you know that?"

I smile at him, his love for me radiating through our bond and my own reflected straight back at him.

Yes, I do know it. And I'm damn proud of myself. Damn proud of this pack and our family too.

His voice grows darker. "Maybe we can sneak off later and find that room again."

"And miss the performance? No way." He frowns at me and I lean in closer to him. "But you might be interested to know that I am not wearing any underwear beneath this dress."

His gaze sweeps over the slinky red outfit I'm wearing. "Fuck," he mutters, "you've always enjoyed torturing me with your silly outfits."

"I have." I squeeze his hand, breathing in his treacle scent.

In the box, the girls argue about where to sit, but then the lights dim and the orchestra hums and from the moment the curtain lifts, they are mesmerised.

We all are.

It's beautiful, bloody beautiful, and original and unique. By the final act I have tears tumbling down my cheeks that won't stop flowing.

When it ends, I'm on my feet, clapping and cheering with all my heart. The others follow, the whole theatre soon giving a standing ovation.

The curtain falls, then rises and the principal ballerina returns first, bowing and accepting a bouquet. She's followed by the principal male ballet dancer and then several of the other lead dancers. Then finally, it's Gabe's turn.

He strolls out onto the stage and I'm taken back there, back to the night I first saw him, as magical as ever under the spotlights, his golden hair catching in the beams, his bright eyes sparkling.

I think I fall more in love with him than ever, smiling out at the audience as they whistle and cheer and call his name.

He bows, then looks up to us, his pack in the box, and blows us kisses.

“Daddy!” the girls yell, jumping up and down. He waves at them, then catches my eye.

“I love you,” I mouth at him, the tears still streaming down my cheeks, and he winks back, before bowing again for the audience.

It’s been five long years since the renowned Gabriel Manchetti graced the stage and the public has missed him.

There was talk that he’d never return. That he’d turned his back on dance in favour of his new family. But I knew it wouldn’t be forever. Dance flows through his blood. It flows through his girls’ blood too. The number of times I’ve walked in on an impromptu ballet performance from the three of them in the kitchen is countless.

But his absence from the stage has been worth the wait.

Gabriel Valentine’s new ballet just blew the roof off the theatre. Tomorrow it’ll be on the front page of every newspaper. Gabriel may have been a phenomenal dancer. He’s an even better choreographer.

I always knew he would be. His creativity and vision are what I’ve always loved most about him. Creativity and vision to see, to know that our pack could be different, that the connection between us was real, that we could create exactly the pack we wanted, with no boundaries or limits imposed by anyone else. Three alphas, an omega and a beta.

I place my fingers in my mouth and whistle with all my might.

I couldn’t be prouder.

I couldn’t be happier.

~ The End ~

Have you read the other books in this series?

Check out Rosie’s story *In Deep*

Want to read a bonus heat scene with Sophia and her pack?

Download their bonus scene from my website www.hannahhaze.com

Join my VIP reader Facebook group, [Soft and Steamy omegaverse](#), for all the latest news and goodies.

Thank you so much for reading. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review or rating — it's a great help to indie authors like me!

A GUIDE TO HANNAH'S OMEGAVERSE

I write soft and steamy omegaverse romances — stories that are on the sweeter side — mixing the sauciness of omegaverse dynamics with contemporary plots.

My omegaverse stories are set in a modern world just like ours, except people can be one of three kinds — Alphas, Betas and Omegas. Betas are just like you and I, but Alphas and Omegas are slightly different biologically. In my stories, the characters are often battling with their biological urges, needs and instincts, and trying to fit into a modern world which can be judgemental and sometimes prejudiced.

ALPHAS

Alphas are generally larger, stronger and more aggressive. Their instincts can make them domineering and controlling. Alpha males are also a little anatomically different where it counts the most. Yep, I'm talking the peen — at the base there is a knot which expands when an Alpha comes, locking him into his partner where they remain stuck together for a period of time. Biologically, this increases the chance of pregnancy. Some Alphas can control the expansion of their knot, others can't.

OMEGAS

Omegas are smaller and their instincts can make them more submissive — especially towards an Alpha. Only an Omega can 'take' an Alpha's knot. An Omega has regular heat cycles where they are especially fertile. During this period

they become hot and horny and very uncomfortable unless they are fucked and knotted frequently by an Alpha.

HEATS, RUTS AND BITES

Similarly to menstrual cycles, the Omegas in my world have differing heat cycles. Some have very regular heats, some have them less often, and others control or suppress them with medication. A heat typically lasts three or four days. When an Omega falls into a heat, their scent alters and they become especially alluring to any Alpha close by.

An Omega in heat can drive an Alpha into rut. An Alpha in rut isn't hindered by the usual biological restraints that your average guy is. I'm talking about permanent erections, no recovery, and the ability to come multiple times! (Sounds like fun, huh?)

Both Omegas and Alphas have glands at the back of their necks, the source of their scents. These glands are especially sensitive when the Omega or Alpha is turned on. Biting this gland is known as claiming and binds the pair together, often irreversibly. It also leaves a scar and changes the Alpha or Omega's scent which signals to others that they are 'taken'. During a heat, when an Omega is at the mercy of their biological urges, an Omega can often beg for an Alpha to 'claim' or bite them.

SCENTS, BLOCKERS AND SUPPRESSANTS

Both Omegas and Alphas have heightened senses of smells and distinctive scents. An Alpha and Omega can recognise another Alpha or Omega by their scent alone, often over great distances. Their scents can also signal how they're feeling — especially when they are aroused or aggravated. Omegas and Alphas can mask their scents using blockers. They can also try to quell their Alpha and Omega instincts with the use of suppressants — for example an Alpha might take an emergency suppressant to stop themselves responding to an Omega in heat.

SOFT AND STEAMY OMEGAVERSE

In my world, Alphas and Omegas are rare and viewed as a source of fascination by Betas. Alphas are often struggling to fit into a society where aggression and violence isn't tolerated, and Omegas are torn between their desire to be independent and their instinct to be controlled. It is often true love and the perfect partner that allows them to find the balance, acceptance and happiness they need and deserve. Happily ever afters guaranteed!

ALSO BY HANNAH HAZE

More Soft and Steamy Omegaverse.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a British romance author who loves writing soft and steamy omegaverse romances, sure to get your pulse racing and your heart fluttering. My couples are destined to find each other - and when they do, oh boy!

My other loves include long romantic walks in the countryside, undisturbed soaks in a hot bath and even hotter stories. I have one husband, three children and a very naughty cat. When I'm not writing stories, I'm thinking about stories, listening to stories, reading stories or dreaming about them. Come follow me!

Sign up to my newsletter:

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Thanks you to my amazing beta readers - Deanna, Linky and Melissa. Your feedback is always super helpful and I am grateful for your ongoing help.

Lastly, thank you to Mr D and Stephy for continuing to support, help and push me. I don't know where I'd be without your love and encouragement.

And Mum, although you will never read this — because, well, smut — thank you for letting us invade your house while our kitchen was being ripped out and sacrificing your card table so I could type!