



ALPHA'S

Secret Alpha

HOPE BENNETT

SWEET IN SILFORD 5

Alpha's Secret Alpha

Sweet in Silford 5

Hope Bennett

Copyright © 2022 Hope Bennett

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Vic N. Charlie

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1: Josh](#)

[Chapter 2: Nat](#)

[Chapter 3: Josh](#)

[Chapter 4: Nat](#)

[Chapter 5: Josh](#)

[Chapter 6: Nat](#)

[Chapter 7: Josh](#)

[Chapter 8: Nat](#)

[Chapter 9: Nat](#)

[Chapter 10: Josh](#)

[Chapter 11: Nat](#)

[Chapter 12: Josh](#)

[Chapter 13: Nat](#)

[Chapter 14: Josh](#)

[Chapter 15: Nat](#)

[Chapter 16: Josh](#)

[Chapter 17: Josh](#)

[Chapter 18: Nat](#)

[Epilogue: Josh](#)

[Read Liam's story next](#)

[Leave a Review](#)

[Stay in touch](#)

[More books in the series](#)

[Other books by Hope](#)

[About Hope](#)

Foreword

This is set in a British University in the fictional town of Silford. This series is light on details of the school system, so any differences in the national systems shouldn't affect the story.

The only major difference is that, in Britain, University football teams aren't semi-professional. People join the team for fun, not to make a career.

I hope that the experience of falling in love is universal.

This book has been edited using standard British grammar and spelling.

Enjoy reading x

Chapter 1: Josh

One month earlier

He was definitely flirting with me. His smile was seductive and he kept his eyes rivetted to mine as he danced. I don't know about him, but I couldn't look away. He was gorgeous. I'd never seen anyone move like that, swaying in time to the thumping music. His muscles bulged under the thin material of his shirt and his chest was impossibly broad, lit in flashes of colour from the alpha-club lights.

When he began to move towards me, I felt like prey. For the first time, I got what omegas were talking about when they said some alphas could make them feel like they were about to be devoured. I got that feeling right then.

The difference was, I was totally up for it. I *wanted* to be devoured. If it was by this alpha, I did.

He moved until he was standing in front of me and then he kept coming, so close that I was convinced he would plaster himself to me, but he stopped just far enough away that we weren't touching. I could still feel the heat radiating off him, though. He was barely a centimetre away, his face so close that I could lean in and kiss him if I wanted.

Not that I would. I'd read about that. Some alphas didn't like kissing at all, but especially not other alphas and especially not in public.

This close, I could see his eyes were dark green and they sparkled with energy.

"Enjoying the show?" he asked.

I could barely speak. I was afraid that, if I answered, my voice would crack, so I just nodded. It seemed to please him.

“You can touch, if you want.” He undulated his body, making the muscles below the surface ripple and my hands ache to grab hold of him.

I fisted them at my sides, not wanting to embarrass myself.

“No?” he asked.

He looked disappointed. He was about to turn away.

“Yes!”

He stopped mid-turn, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, you want to touch?”

“Yes.”

His lips quirked in another smile. This one wasn’t so much flirty as genuine, and it made me want to smash my mouth against his to feel those lips underneath mine.

He seemed to be studying me and I began to prickle with sweat, sure he could tell that I was new to this, that I was clueless. I couldn’t even have told him what I wanted, other than I wanted an alpha. Someone big and strong. Someone who could manhandle me. I just wanted... I wasn’t sure. But I was sure this alpha would give it to me, whatever it was.

“Want to go somewhere more private?”

“Yes.”

My brain was failing to provide me with any words other than ‘yes’ but it was working out ok for me so far.

The hot alpha grabbed my hand and yanked me forward, pulling me through the crowd. I was too stunned by the fact that he was holding my hand to pay attention to where we were going. I could feel the strength, just in his fingers. His hand was big, as big as mine, and I gripped it tightly, afraid he would let go. He matched my grip and it felt good, to be able to do that, to hold on tight and not have to worry that I was crushing his palm in my giant hands.

We wound our way through the dance floor and I was knocked about by the bodies that flailed into me. I was sure someone slapped my ass, too, but I couldn’t see who it was when I looked over my shoulder. It was just a mess of bodies, all writhing together to the beat of the music.

When we burst into the toilets, my eyes were assaulted by a steady dim light and the deafening music dimmed a little. Not much, but a little.

My alpha friend didn’t even turn to look at me as he dragged me the length of the place, to the very last stall. I saw a couple of alphas making out against one of the sinks, one of them practically bending the other backwards over the hard ceramic as he bit and growled into his mouth.

My whole body pulsed with need. That. That was what I wanted.

I barely had time to register my arousal at the sight before I was pushed roughly into the last stall and the door slammed behind me, cutting the two of us off from everyone else. It was a small space, especially filled with two alphas. Our bodies brushed together as we stood there, breathing. I was breathing a bit harder than normal, staring at the sexy man before me. I didn't know what to do, I just wished he would do *something*.

“You still want to touch?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Kiss?”

I had to restrain a whimper.

“Yes.”

That was it. He didn't wait for anything else, and I cried out as he lunged forward and mashed his mouth against mine. It might have been a sound of pure relief, but it morphed into a groan of desire at the feel of his big, hard body against mine.

He pushed me back against the wall and I jolted at the sudden coldness at my back, but he pushed again and leaned into me, pinning me in place. I could probably have thrown him off me but I was damned if I was going to try.

His chest pressed against mine, the muscles hard, and his groin ground against mine, lining up the bulges in our pants perfectly. I was hard. Had been almost since the second I'd walked through the door. So much flesh visible, so many male bodies, so many alpha muscles, the huge chests, the broad shoulders, the thick body hair, the alpha pheromones permeating the air... I'd been hard just looking.

And then, looking at *this* alpha, with his graceful body, trim waist, dark brows, skin slick with sweat... I'd been leaking pre-come into my pants in a steady stream.

He ground into me and the stimulation was wonderful. I groaned again, chasing his mouth for a deeper kiss. I wanted more. More of everything.

And he gave it to me. As though he'd been holding back, he unleashed a harsh kiss, desperate and greedy, biting and licking and pushing into my mouth and making me feel owned. His body pressed against mine, jamming me harder against the wall, rutting up against my body.

I could feel the heat of his erection. I got a sense of the sheer size of it. I'd only ever been with omegas and non-presenting men before, with their slender dicks that I could encircle completely with my hand. I wanted so badly to get my hand on this alpha's dick. To hold it in my palm, to feel its weight and girth.

With that thought in mind, I began to scrabble at his clothes, yanking his shirt up and getting my hands on his bare flesh for the first time. He was scorching hot, slick with sweat, and I ran my hands around his waist and up his back, pulling him into me as hard as I could. The growl he let out vibrated through my lips in an exquisite way.

Amazingly, I wasn't messing up. I had no clue how this was meant to work – two alphas together – and I'd heard enough horror stories of assaults and social pariahs that it had taken me a long, long time to build up the courage to admit to myself what I really wanted, and then even longer to act on it. But at last I was here and my biggest fear right now was that this man would stop kissing me.

His lips were sinful, pressed against my own. I was harder than I'd ever been and my body was moving without my permission, bucking up against him, trying to get more friction on my dick.

He gave as good as he got. I was pinned in place and he rubbed his groin over mine, pulling back from our kiss just enough to look me in the eyes. He ground against me, watching my reaction, and I saw the lust and pleasure in his eyes spark as I bit back another whimper.

At last, he lifted his top up, pulling it over his head so it was wound around his shoulders. He did the same to me and it felt weird, to have my shirt on my arms, stretched across my back. I let him work, though. He knew what he was doing and I got to see his whole chest.

I wanted to run my fingers along it and see what it felt like, to suck on his nipple perhaps and make it hard, but that seemed strangely intimate, even though he was unbuckling my jeans and shoving them down my thighs; this was just about getting off, not about exploring another alpha's body for the first time. At least, for him it wasn't. I very much doubted I was the first alpha this man had been with.

"Fuck," he said as he saw my dick, which was so hard it was standing up like a soldier, so thick and full that it was

purple at the head. For a second, I had a flash of doubt. Maybe he didn't like....?

He was clawing at his own jeans in seconds, shoving them down over his slim hips and I caught a glimpse of his dick before he had his own hand wrapped around it and lunged for me again, locking his lips to mine.

“Yes,” he groaned.

He wrapped his hand around my dick, pressing it right up against his. I could feel the length of it pressed against mine, the heat and the silky skin. When he moved his hips, it dragged his dick against mine and made me want to thrust up desperately. My hips stuttered with the need to move but I restrained them. I was already too close. I would blow any moment if I wasn't careful and I didn't want my first time with an alpha to be me blowing my load after a quick fumble and some lip-lock.

He growled into my mouth, “Wrap your hand around my dick.”

I obeyed and he let go of my neck to position my hand the way he wanted before returning his hand to grip my neck. He wasn't holding hard and he certainly wasn't cutting off my air, but it felt like he was staking a claim. I was his.

My dick throbbed at the thought. It was enough to make him start stroking me in earnest.

His big hand ran up and down my length, his dick pressed tightly beside it, my hand around it, and we rubbed together like that in an uncoordinated way for a minute until we settled into a rhythm.

Both our hands were large and the feel of his on my dick was drawing my pleasure out in long waves. We encircled our dicks, pressing them together, squashing them and rubbing. I soon realised that, as long as I mirrored him, it felt good. We were in sync. And, judging from the way he was breathing, heavy and ragged, he was as far gone as I was.

Each pass of his strong hand over my dick made me moan low in my throat, and the sound spurred him on. He licked at my neck, and sucked and nipped and dragged his stubble along my skin until I was sure it was red and irritable, but I wanted it. I wanted it all.

With his hand gripping one side of my neck and his lips marking the other, I felt trapped. In the best possible way. All I had to do was keep my hand moving over his thick erection, feel its girth in my palm, the hardness of it, and let him take me apart.

When I felt my orgasm crest, I was too far gone to even warn him. My whole body locked up and my pleasure swamped me, washing up from my feet, up through my legs, bursting out of my dick in waves. If he hadn't had me pinned to the cubicle wall, I'd have collapsed completely. As it was, my body locked up tight and he leaned into me, rutting harder, his hand tightening, and then he came. His dick throbbed in my palm and I felt the spurt of come dripping down my hand.

We came together and then slowly came down from the high. He pressed one last, almost chaste kiss against my lips and then drew back slightly. My chest felt suddenly cold and my body far too exposed.

We looked down. I'd never seen so much come from just two men before. It was smeared all over our hands and dicks,

across our abs. Now I got why he'd pulled our shirts out of the way. That would have been a sticky, embarrassing mess.

Chapter 2: Nat

One month later

I was all set to join my new team and I only had a few excited little butterflies dancing round my stomach. I loved playing football but I didn't want to do it professionally. It was a hobby, and one I was good at. That was what I liked about this new team. They trained hard, yes, but they didn't run the team into the ground trying to make professionals of us all.

I'd spoken to the coach several times and, finally, agreed to join the team. I was well aware that I was the new kid on the block. I was actually only one year away from finishing my degree, but I'd transferred universities in the last year to be nearer to my family. Specifically, my Grandad who was recovering from a major operation. I needed to be on hand. Not that I'd have told him that. He'd have sent me packing faster than I could say 'home care'.

I felt the smile tug at my mouth. Grandad was amazing and it was only fair that I'd moved back home to be nearer to him now, considering he'd practically raised me.

I heard his walking stick tapping slowly along the hall and I shoved my dirty washing into the laundry basket while I waited. I'd put a load on before I left. And who said students couldn't multi-task?

"All set?" he asked, appearing in my open doorway.

"Yep, all ready to go."

I looked over at him and my eyes scanned him critically for just a second, checking he was doing ok. He was still much thinner than he should be, still pale from being inside for

too long. I was used to seeing him tanned and wrinkled from the sun, since he spent so much time out in his garden. I hated gardening. It was a bit of a wild mess at the moment and I felt a pang of guilt.

“Do I need to tell you what to do if the other kids are mean to you?”

I flipped him the bird. “No, Grandad, you don’t. This isn’t my first day at school.”

He chuckled and I heard the faint wheezing sound underneath it.

“I don’t have to go, you know.”

I tried to sound casual but I knew it was a mistake when he frowned.

“You know, son, if I thought you were trying to nursemaid me, I’d kick you out of this house so fast...”

“I know, I know. I was just offering. Only to be polite. No way was I actually going to stay and watch re-runs of *Neighbours* when there’s a team of hot men, just waiting for me to drool over them.”

Grandad chuckled. He was an omega man, much smaller than me, obviously, but I actually looked a lot like him. I’d inherited his curly hair and green eyes. My grandad had good genes.

Of all my family, he was the one I was closest to. And the one I would do anything for.

“Now there’s a thought,” he said, and tapped his chin, pretending to think.

“What?” I grinned. I knew what was coming.

“Perhaps I *will* come to watch one of your games some time. It’s been a while since I’ve seen some truly beautiful alphas running round, looking all... physical.”

I laughed and pretended to gag.

“Grandad, don’t perve on my teammates! *I* want to perve on my teammates.”

He waved a hand. “Fine, fine, but you owe me.”

I thought we were done and reached down to grab my bag, swinging it onto my shoulder.

But Grandad hadn’t finished.

“Should I lock up tonight?”

Normally, I locked up because I was last in. He didn’t go out much these days. But when I went out drinking or clubbing, Grandad locked up before he went to bed.

“Yeah, might as well. If all goes well, I’ll hit a few bars with the new team, get to know them a bit.”

“Mmm hmm.”

The knowing way he said it made me flush. He knew what my preferences were and was the only one of my whole family who didn't seem to mind, although the rest of them constantly reassured me that 'it was ok with them' and 'they didn't mind that I was *like that*'.

They said it so often that, one day, they might convince themselves.

Grandad was the only one who'd taken it in stride. He'd never made me feel anything but loved and accepted. That was why he was my favourite.

I tried to will my blush away but Grandad cackled. “If you don't come home, I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, when you get back from lectures.”

“You have an appointment at the hospital tomorrow at 11am,” I reminded him.

“I remember, thank you.” He always got snippy when I reminded him of things. He said it made him feel old. “I can get myself there by bus.”

It was hard, to navigate his moods. I wanted to help but I didn't want to smother him. For an old omega, he was fiercely independent. So I gave a casual shrug.

“If I don't find myself a hottie to spend the night with, I'll be back anyway. I should have got over my hangover by 11.”

It was as good a compromise as we were going to get. I tried to give the impression that I'd drive him to the hospital if I was around but otherwise he could make his own way there. No way would I actually let that happen, though. He might talk a good game but he tired easily and even walking to the bus stop at the end of the road would take him half an hour and exhaust him. I'd be back tonight, hot fuck or no.

"You haven't been out in a while," he pointed out. "Having new friends might be good for you."

"Yeah."

I tried to look like I was leaving but he stood in the doorway, leaning slightly against the frame. He'd been standing up for too long, just talking to me.

"Anything you want to share with the class?" he asked.

"No."

I was very sure about that. Grandad might be very liberal and we might gossip together about my love life or lack thereof, but telling him the real reason I hadn't been out in a while was a no-no.

I felt my body tingle with the memory of that night. I'd had a lot of casual sex in clubs and enjoyed it immensely. One night stands got hand jobs or blow jobs, but I had never expected to feel the kind of pleasure I'd experienced a month ago.

I still felt a strange mixture of emotions at the memory of it. That alpha. The anonymous alpha whose name I hadn't even managed to learn. I hadn't even asked. I'd just wanted him, so bad. His eyes had bored into my skin like hooks and drew me to him across the dance floor. Somehow, I'd known he was looking at me, despite all the other gorgeous alphas writhing together in time with the music.

He had been a fucking fantasy come to life, all keen and needy. I'd felt his strength as he'd gripped me, but he'd been so desperate for me to take charge that he'd let me own him.

It had been the hottest sex of my life. And then he'd taken one look at us in the cold light of afterglow and had bolted.

I still got a wrenching feeling in my gut when I thought about it. Some guys couldn't handle knowing their own desires like that. And it seemed my anonymous friend was one of them.

I'd gone back to the club several times after that, looking for him, but he'd never showed again. Then I'd decided to move on. It wasn't like I wanted to start any kind of a relationship with someone so deeply in the closet.

It was just... the other men I'd taken in the little cubicle or even gone home with didn't do it for me like he had. They were so tame by comparison.

I tried to shuffle round Grandad, who was still blocking the doorway.

"I'll probably go out at the weekend. I've got work to do this week."

And, if I was lucky, I'd find some nice hot alpha to take my mind permanently off my dark-eyed stranger.

“Now, come and sit down. You'll miss *Neighbours* if you don't hurry.”

I got him settled with a hot drink and gave him a kiss on the cheek as I left.

Chapter 3: Josh

I was watching Riley carefully, out of the corner of my eye. He was a slender little omega and even I could see he was very pretty, in his own way. Just not for me.

That had worked out well for us. With complete lack of attraction on both sides, we'd actually fallen into a kind of... friendship?

I paused and considered. I didn't make friends easily. I was too intense and I didn't tend to put up with bullshit, so people soon got tired of me. I had mixed feelings about that. Half of me didn't mind losing those kinds of friends, because it wasn't like I wanted to be friends with people who would drop me in a hot second if I did something wrong. The other half of me, though, longed for someone I could be close to.

I hadn't even realised at first that Riley and I were becoming friends. I'd just seen some omega standing in the car park, looking wide-eyed and scared, and had gone over to see if I could help. I'd changed his tyres and gone on my way. It was Riley who'd decided we were friends. He always gave me a bright smile and didn't mind when he did most of the talking.

At least, normally he did most of the talking. Today, though, he'd turned up to football practice looking practically ill. He'd gone unnaturally pale and didn't seem to be able to concentrate. I'd hurried him into the changing rooms and sat him on a bench.

After that, I didn't know what to do. I'd given him some water, which he'd sipped, but then he hadn't been focused enough to do anything else. He'd asked me one question about what I was doing there early – I'd finished lectures early

and decided I might as well get started – and then he'd sort of stared off into the distance. He hadn't even grilled me about my lectures or whether I'd cooked that lasagne recipe he'd sent me. It freaked me out. When Riley stopped talking, something was wrong.

I changed into my kit but stayed as close as I could without getting in his way. I was worried I'd turn around and find him in a dead faint. Maybe he'd hit his head as he fell. The thought of turning round to see his body on the floor and a pool of blood made me sick.

Luckily, he stayed conscious and I stayed near enough that I could catch him.

I was actually glad when some of my teammates turned up because I felt like I had back-up. They all took in Riley's pale, drawn face and frowned, glanced at me, and said, "Hi." The way Riley drew his mouth back in response was weird. He probably thought he was smiling at them but it was definitely a grimace. Liam was actually so shocked that he looked round at me with wide eyes and mouthed, "He ok?"

I shrugged. Liam gave Riley another awkward glance and began to get changed on the other side of him, probably having the same thought I'd had – someone needs to catch Riley if he falls.

Most of us were there by that time, standing around in our kit, not sure whether to go out and start warming up or not. We all knew Riley was there to see Chris. It was actually really adorable the way he watched Chris when he was training. His eyes were rivetted to Chris' body and he had a kind of love-sick adoration in his eyes.

The fact that Chris lapped up the attention and showed off for his omega made me think they might actually be able to make a go of things. Chris was so good-looking that he had a whole fan club of admirers, but I'd never seen him give a shit about any of them except for Riley.

Just then, Chris' voice rang out. "Riley! There you are, I've been looking for you. What are you doing here? Are you ok? You look awful."

I frowned at Chris. Even I knew better than to say something like that. And, as if to prove my point, Riley burst into tears.

Chris rushed over to him and wrapped his arms around Riley, so I decided – just for the time being – not to punch Chris' lights out for saying something so fucking stupid. They murmured together and then one very clear phrase rang out.

"I'm pregnant."

The whole room went very quiet as the rest of the team stopped talking and shuffling round. I held myself still, waiting to see what Chris' reaction would be. I wasn't sure whether to be glad Riley had told him in front of everyone or not – clever man for doing it in public, maybe not so clever for doing it in front of Chris' friends. If they were going to take sides, it would be Chris'. Except me. I'd take Riley's side.

My shoulders tensed instinctively, readying for a fight. I didn't even know what kind of fight I was expecting, but in my experience, things always turned bad.

Luckily, in this case, it didn't. Chris' face broke out into a huge smile and he cried, "Holy shit, are you sure?"

“Yeah.”

“That’s great, Riley! Wait, *is* that great? Did you want children?”

“Yeah, I just didn’t know if you…”

Chris planted a kiss on him and said, “I want children. With you.”

Around me, the rest of the team began to whoop and cheer and whistle. Looked like I’d been wrong about this going badly, and I was glad.

Chris grinned round at us. “At least our kid will have lots of uncles.”

Riley had regained a little of his natural colour and there was a glint of humour in his eyes that I was glad to see back.

There was a scuffing sound, ever so faintly, as someone walked into the changing rooms from Coach’s office. I don’t know why I got a terrible feeling about it, but I did. Somehow, I knew it wasn’t just Coach and I knew whoever was with him would be nothing but trouble.

Sure enough, I looked up and my eyes went straight to the alpha standing next to him.

Not just any alpha: *my* alpha.

The alpha I'd fucked at the club. The one whose body I still dreamed about.

I'd expected never to see him again, yet there he was, standing not ten feet from me.

Shit.

Chapter 4: Nat

I'd got there early to meet Coach and sign the forms and get my kit and so on. He struck me as a decent man and he said the team was friendly, so I was looking forward to starting. We were just finishing up and Coach stood up and stretched so hard that even I heard his back click. He gave me a rueful shrug and said, "Some of us are getting old, you know."

Then we heard whooping and clapping coming from the changing rooms. I raised my eyes at Coach but, from the baffled look he gave me, I'd say he didn't have any more idea about what that was about than I did.

We went out, and I followed Coach quietly into the changing rooms. It was the usual type of thing, all tiled floor and benches, pegs along the walls with various pieces of kit hanging off them, and that particular smell, part damp from the showers, part old kit, and part sweaty alpha.

Most of the team were standing around and they had their backs to us as we went through the door. They were looking at something I couldn't see. I heard some murmuring, including, "Want children... lots of uncles..." and then a clear omega voice asked, "Do you think they change nappies?"

The whole team shouted, "No!"

Most of them laughed and I got the impression I'd just walked in on a group bonding session. The room was filled with smiling and happiness and I just caught a glimpse of Chris Perez, the captain of the team, sitting on a bench with his arm around a handsome omega, grinning as though his cheeks would spilt with pleasure.

It looked like they'd just had a moment.

Chris asked, “Do you want me to skip practice today? Coach will understand.”

“No, you don’t need to do that.”

I glanced at Coach to see what he thought of the idea of his captain skipping out of training for the day and he saw me look and gave me a wink. More and more, I felt sure that this was a good team, that they looked out for each other and teased each other and I’d be lucky to be one of them.

Coach cleared his throat loudly.

“Now that’s sorted, perhaps we can get on with some football.” There were a few sniggers. Coach was restraining a smirk and he tried to give the impression of stern task-master but his eyes were twinkling. He gestured at me. “I’d like to introduce you to your new teammate, Nathan Windlow.”

Everyone turned to look and I got my first good look at all their faces. They were mostly a blur of male faces, mostly alphas, some non-presenting men, and I gave them a big smile. As my eyes scanned the team, though, they landed on my alpha and I did a tiny double-take.

I’d finally got used to the idea that I’d never see him again and then, suddenly, there he was. Right in front of me. Looking absolutely incredible, in his dark blue and white kit. And looking absolutely horrified to see me.

Charming.

It only took an instant for me to realise that this would not be a romantic reunion. I had enough practice suppressing my reactions to do a passable job of glancing over him like the rest of the team, as though we were complete strangers. I did a better job of it than him, at least. Could he look less pleased to see me if he tried?

It was a bit of a kick in the teeth. I'd never seen anyone look so horrified to see me.

And the fact that this was the alpha who'd blown my mind with all the hot sex, it was particularly galling.

Still, I summoned my pride and tried to look as though I didn't know him. The glare he gave me was more than enough warning that he wouldn't appreciate me telling anyone we'd met.

I turned to look at Coach, not sure whether I was meant to make a speech or something, not convinced my voice would be steady if I tried.

Luckily, Coach wasn't one to hang around. He said, "That's enough of the introductions. Get changed, Nathan. We've got a lot to get through."

I swung my kit bag onto the bench and decided to concentrate on getting changed.

I wasn't going to think about that alpha.

All I was going to do was put my kit on and play some football. That was all I needed to think about.

I hardly noticed Chris standing up and fussing around his omega until he clapped me on the shoulder. Then I noticed.

“Welcome to the team, Nathan” he said. His smile was wide and I noticed, in a detached way, how good-looking he was. He was a large alpha with a square jaw and straight teeth and warm skin, and I could tell he more than earned his reputation as a heart-throb. Maybe it was because I’d just seen my- no, *that* alpha again, but I couldn’t bring myself to check him out properly.

I appreciated his friendliness, though.

“Hey, thanks. Call me Nat. Congratulations, by the way! Did I read that right? You and your omega are expecting?”

His grin got even wider, if possible.

“That’s right. This is Riley, my omega.”

It was cute that he introduced him as ‘his omega’ when I’d literally just said that myself, but he seemed desperate to say it so I just smiled and said hello.

“I guess I could introduce you to some of the lads. That’s Sean, and this is Liam. Hey, Liam! Liam!”

The alpha in question turned round, blinking and asking, “What? What happened, man?”

“I’m introducing you to Nat.”

“I thought there was at least a fire or something. Hey man,” he said to me and then went back to what he was doing.

Chris rolled his eyes. “Well, that was Liam.” He looked round and his eyes landed on my alpha. “That’s Josh.”

I couldn’t trust myself to speak so I raised my hand in a brief salute and he clenched his jaw so hard he must have been in danger of cracking a tooth. His dark brows were low and his eyes were so nearly black that I couldn’t tell what colour they were from this distance. I hadn’t been able to tell in the club, either. The lighting hadn’t been good enough and I’d learned his body not from sight but from touch.

Chris rolled his eyes again. I got the impression that he treated all the rest of the team like wayward children.

“As you can see, everyone’s very friendly.”

I managed to tear my eyes off my alpha – Josh – and gave a weak chuckle at the heavy irony in Chris’ voice.

“I’m going to take Riley outside and get him settled. Do you know the way out onto the pitch?”

I nodded, sending him a smile. I didn’t want to be unfriendly, it was just I’d been unsettled by the suddenness of this weird reunion. Chris left, his arm around Riley, and Josh marched after them without a backward glance.

As I stripped, I tried to calm the swirling emotions in my belly. I hadn’t realised how deeply that alpha had affected me until I saw him again. For some reason – even knowing it

wasn't going to work out well – my heart had decided it would flutter about at the sight of him and I felt a rush of excitement.

Too bad he didn't feel the same way.

Chapter 5: Josh

My head was not in the game. I must have stumbled through that whole training session like a zombie and I got bawled out by Coach more in that one session than I had in an entire season.

I found my eyes going constantly to Nat and had to wrench them away and keep them forcibly on the ground or they'd go straight back to Nat's handsome face. Obviously that wasn't the most efficient way to know where the ball was and I changed tactic when I got hit in the stomach by a particularly hard pass and it knocked the wind out of me.

Any hope I'd have of coming across as cool or like I didn't care was long gone and all I hoped for was the end. I just wanted to get out, get away from here.

It was strange, to spend my time wishing myself away, because football had always been the one thing I loved, where I could lose myself in the game. I had always been able to block the rest of the world from me and all that existed was the match.

Except for today. My mind was a jumbled mess of memories, fears, speculation. What was Nat going to do? He could tell everyone. He could laugh with them about how needy I'd been, how unsure of myself.

The fact that he sent a few knowing looks my way didn't help. He looked so damned cool, so unaffected. How could he smile like that, so easy and charming? I shook my head, trying to get a grip, and lectured myself. Nat looked like he didn't care because he *didn't*. I'd been a quickie in the toilets at a club, not someone important. And it most definitely

hadn't been his first time with an alpha. It hadn't meant the same to him as it did to me.

I felt a sudden impact all along my left side, a heavy body colliding with me. My feet left the ground and I felt a moment of weightlessness as I was lifted into the air and then struck the ground. Hard.

For a moment, I lay still, just trying to process what had happened. My body was disconnected from my brain and I couldn't tell whether it was ok or not.

“Josh? Josh, speak to me.”

It was Chris' voice and I heard the worry in it. Behind him, I heard Riley cry, “Is he ok?”

I forced my mouth to move. “I'm ok.”

Chris shouted back over his shoulder, “Yeah, he's fine, Riley. Just needs a second to get up.”

My head was gradually clearing and I could feel the ache all along my right side where I'd hit the ground and, bonus, a dull ache in my left side as well where Chris' heavy body had hit me, knocking me over.

I pushed myself up from the ground, hoping I wouldn't throw up. It had been a long time since I'd felt like that, the sudden pain making me want to puke. Not since I'd left home.

Coach was beside me, his voice low. “Josh? You hurt?”

“Nah, just bruised.”

“Take your time getting up.”

I struggled to my feet, hating that I could feel my legs wobbling, hating that I stumbled. Of all the times I didn't want to look weak, it was now.

But it was my own fault. If I'd been paying attention to the game like I should have been, I'd have seen Chris coming.

I didn't look at any of them, couldn't bear to see what was in their eyes. I just concentrated on taking deep, slow breaths and making sure I was stable.

Apparently, I did a good job because Coach thought I was recovered. He began to yell at me. I just stood there and took it, knowing I deserved it. He called me an idiot and told me I needed to get my head in the game. Two things I already knew, thank you.

“Yes, Coach.”

“I'm calling it here. Get in a line, we're going to warm down.”

Great. I'd been such a spectacular idiot that I'd managed to end an entire game. This day was going well for me.

I joined the line and warmed down with the rest of the team, ignoring the glances that I kept getting, mostly from Riley and Coach. I couldn't bring myself to smile because I felt there was still a chance I'd puke all over my own shoes if I

did, so I couldn't reassure him except by following the movements I was meant to and feeling my muscles begin to ease.

“Right, that's it. Get inside the lot of you. Nat, good first session. I'll think about trying a few different things with you next time.”

We trooped inside and I stripped and showered as quickly as I could, keeping my back turned to the rest of the team, wishing myself away. I couldn't actually go, though. I needed to do something first. I needed to talk to Nat.

I was dressed and fussing with my socks, pretending I couldn't work the simplest item of clothing because I wanted to dawdle until the changing room cleared a bit. As expected, luck was not on my side.

Chris asked, “So, Nat, are you coming out for drinks?”

I glanced up just in time to see Nat smile at the alpha. “Sure, why not?”

Everyone began to talk then.

“Where are we going?”

“You're not going to dance on the table again, are you, Liam?”

“You loved my dancing, don't pretend you didn't.”

“Hey, Chris, can I invite my girlfriend?”

“Someone needs to stop me when I decide it’ll be a great idea to do shots.”

“But it *is* always a great idea to do shots.”

“Yeah, Sean, invite her along. More the merrier.”

I listened to them all gabble excitedly and then they began to stream out. I guess they were sick of me that day because none of them looked my way. Not even Nat. I only just managed to stand up and grab him, just before he went out the door.

I wrapped my hand around his bicep and he stopped, looking back over his shoulder in surprise. When he saw it was me, the surprise vanished. He knew exactly what I wanted.

Well, probably not *exactly* what I wanted. I wanted him to kiss me again, actually, because having Nat’s body against mine was the first time in years I’d been quiet in my own head. Wasn’t going to happen, though.

He shuffled to the side to let the last few people out the door and he gave Sean a blinding smile that made me feel sour and said, “I’ll be out in a second. Just forgot my boots.”

If it had been anyone else, they might have questioned it or at least waited for Nat, but Sean just smiled benevolently and said, “Ok, see you out there,” and left.

Nat turned to face me. He was my height, and we were standing just a little too close. I could look him right in the

eyes. They were the most intensely green eyes I'd ever seen. Beautiful eyes. I hadn't appreciated that before. I'd been too captivated by his body and his lips, the way he moved, the sheen of sweat making his skin glow...

There was a lot of beauty contained in this one man and it seemed unfair that he'd also get pretty eyes and curly hair. It was still damp from his shower and it hung down over his forehead, looking a little longer than it had before. I wasn't going to brush it away from his forehead for him.

"Josh, right?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't catch your name before. And you didn't catch mine, either. I'm Nat."

"I know. I heard."

He gave a small hum, and I wasn't sure what he meant by it. But I ploughed on.

"About that night—"

He sighed. "Don't worry about it. I'm not going to tell anyone."

"I—"

That had been exactly what I wanted him to say. I was terrified he'd tell someone and everyone would know. But

hearing him say it sounded wrong. Like that night hadn't mattered. I guess it didn't matter, not for him.

He realised that I was having trouble with my words and took pity on me.

"I'm not going to out you, Josh. That's not my style."

I couldn't speak, so I just gave a sharp nod of my head.

We were still standing so close I was convinced I could feel the heat radiating off his body. He was right there in front of me and his lips were right in front of mine, looking so pink and soft, surrounded by light stubble.

If I stayed there any longer, I'd do something stupid like try to kiss him. So I gave another nod and then walked around him to open the door. I held it open, letting him through, and then let it close behind him. I needed a few minutes to myself and there was no way I could face any of the team right then if they were hanging around, waiting for Nat.

I sat on the nearest bench and put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. I just needed a minute. One minute and then I'd be ok.

I might have been there longer than a minute, I couldn't tell. All I knew was there was the sound of a door opening and then Coach said, "Josh, you ok?"

I sat up sharply, glad I'd got myself under enough control that I looked and sounded the same as normal. "Fine."

“Do you feel sick? Dizzy?”

I stood. “No, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You took quite a hit. You went down badly.”

“I’m fine,” I repeated, wishing I could say it convincingly enough for him to believe me.

I grabbed my kit bag and set off for the door but Coach called after me.

“Josh?”

I turned, waiting.

“You know I’m always here, if you need to talk. About football or your classes or whatever.”

“Thanks Coach.”

“Josh.”

“Yeah?”

“Just... you’re doing ok. One bad day doesn’t change that.”

I gave another nod and left. I wasn’t even sure what he meant by that. For a start, it wasn’t just today that was going

badly for me. At this point, bad days were my norm. It meant I was *not* doing ok. In fact, arguably, I was exactly the fuck-up my father said I was.

It was late by the time I got back to my flat and went to my room. I didn't bother to turn any lights on. It was for the best, since I knew the place was a mess. I could never get it to look tidy, no matter how much I cleaned or stacked my boxes neatly. The place was still piled with boxes, no matter which way they were stacked. I preferred not to see them.

Instead, I flung myself down on my bed and burrowed under the blankets. I wanted to just stay there forever, except it wasn't the relief I'd been hoping for. No, I curled up on my side and my brain very helpfully provided images of Nat and the team out drinking together, dancing... of Nat catching the eye of some lucky alpha... of him taking the anonymous alpha out the back to the toilets and crowding into a cubicle with him...

Yeah, apparently my brain hated me and was going to torment me all night.

Chapter 6: Nat

I was feeling weird about my conversation with Josh. I'd realised we weren't going to fall into each other's arms and live happily ever after the moment I'd seen the horror on his face, but there had still been a little part of me...

Ok, it had been more than a *little* part of me. And that stupid part had lit up at the possibility of having Josh touch me again.

It was awkward that he was obviously not interested. At all. And, from the glower on his face, he was planning on doing horrible things to me if I told anyone. Not that I would. I might be out of the closet but other people were entitled to come out in their own time and their own way.

All in all, by the time I got out to the nearest club with my new teammates, I was determined to have a good time. Exactly like Grandpa had said, I needed to get out and enjoy myself.

So I set about drinking. Hard.

To be fair, I was barely keeping up with the rest of the team, who could knock drinks back at an impressive rate. Within an hour, I'd lost count of the number of drinks I'd had and was feeling light-headed and reckless.

I hit the dance floor with two of the team and a little omega woman called Perdi who I assumed was dating Sean. I let the music thrum through my body and began to dance. I always felt good when I danced. It didn't hurt that I carried the memory of Josh's eyes on me, watching me move like I was the single most entrancing thing he'd ever seen. A little

worry pricked at the back of my mind that, if Josh looked at me like that again, I'd fall straight into his arms.

I shook off the feeling and danced harder. There were all kinds of people pressing up against me as I moved and I danced with them all. I didn't care who I danced with, I just liked dancing. Men, women, non-presenting, alphas, omegas, I danced until I was covered in sweat and my smile was a permanent fixture on my face.

When Perdi danced up to me, I put my focus on her. She was a good mover and we had fun, moving our bodies in time to the music. I took her proffered hand and twirled her around. She squealed with pleasure at being spun and I couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of me.

It had been so long since I'd thought of an omega in a sexual way – I'd come to the realisation about my sexuality very early on – that I was actually surprised when I felt a strong hand gripping my wrist and a low growl in my ear. I looked round in surprise, my drunk brain not quite comprehending what was happening fast enough.

Sean broke my hold on his girlfriend's hand and dragged her away from me. His teeth were bared and he was exuding protective alpha pheromones. My heartrate sped up.

Only, it wasn't fear or even the desire to fight the other alpha that made it beat like that. Sean held Perdi close, his arms wrapped around her, claiming her as his.

I had just enough presence of mind to hold my hands up in a placating gesture, half-surrender. Sean had been drinking even more heavily than me and I didn't know any of these people, not really. I didn't know if Sean would get violent, whether the team would back him up, and I didn't know

whether it would do more harm than good to try and explain that I wasn't interested in omegas. I suddenly felt very, very sober.

"Hey, I wasn't trying anything," I said. I wasn't even sure he heard me over the music but I spoke anyway. "We were just dancing."

Perdi wriggled around in Sean's hold and spoke to him, and I had no chance of hearing what she was saying. Whatever it was, it calmed Sean down a little. He grabbed her and lifted her whole body, crushing her to him and stalked off with her plastered to his front, his arms wrapped around her like steel bands.

I felt the familiar tightening in my chest. It was longing.

Not for Perdi, cute as she was. Not even for Sean, specifically. It was for being held that way. Owned. Claimed. My body wanted that. I wanted someone to be unafraid to claim me in public, to tell the world I was his.

My recent experience had reminded me how unlikely it was that I'd ever find an alpha who liked me enough to come out and do that.

I watched Sean out of sight and then looked around to see where the rest of the team were. I could only identify a couple of them. They'd dispersed across the club and I scanned the crowd. My eyes landed on Chris and Riley. They were both sober and looking at me with hard eyes.

Slowly, I made my way over to them. Chris tipped his head, gesturing for me to keep walking. I followed him and Riley across a long strip of bar towards some open doors. As

we stepped into the cool night air, I gulped it down. It was a patio area, with tables for people to put their drinks on and a large railing to stop them stumbling into the road.

“What was that about?” asked Chris.

I turned to face him. He was standing with his arms folded across his chest, his jaw clenched hard.

I shrugged. “We were just dancing. We were having a good time.”

“Didn’t you know she was going out with Sean?”

“Yes, I did. And I figured if she was uncomfortable with anything we were doing, she’d tell me that.”

Chris pursed his lips. “I guess you were only dancing. But didn’t you know Sean would react like that?”

“No, because I don’t know Sean that well. Not to mention, if he doesn’t trust his girlfriend to dance without doing anything she shouldn’t, that has more to do with their relationship than with me.”

Chris frowned. I realised as I said it that, for all he treated his team like children, he was fiercely protective of them. I had probably just ended any chance I had of fitting in with his team and my stomach slowly sank.

Then Riley spoke up.

“You know, Nat’s right.”

“Huh?” Chris looked down at his omega.

“He’s right – if Sean doesn’t trust his girlfriend, that’s not Nat’s fault. He was just dancing.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

“I wouldn’t like *you* dancing with someone else like that. I know that might make me a dick, but I would hate it.”

To my surprise, Riley smiled up at his alpha. “Then all you need to do is tell me that, and I won’t.”

Chris frowned even deeper. “I don’t want to stop you doing things you like, either.”

“So we’ll talk about it and come up with something we’re both happy with.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

Riley stuck his nose in the air. “I always make sense.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “You refused to come out to the patio last time we were here because, and I quote, *it looks like a graveyard and there could be ghouls hiding out there.*”

Riley glanced round, his smile fading. “You know, I stand by that assessment. Can we go back inside now?”

Chris unfolded his arms and took Riley's hand. "In a second, pumpkin." He looked over at me. I nearly fainted with surprise when he said, "Sorry. I shouldn't have reacted like that. I guess I'm feeling more protective than usual and took it out on you."

"No problem."

He held out his free hand and I shook it. I was more baffled by the peace-offering than anything else. I followed Chris and Riley back inside in a daze.



The next day, I rushed into the changing rooms ten minutes late.

Chris shouted, "There you are! I was starting to think you weren't coming at all. We thought Sean had scared you off by being an idiot."

Sean grunted.

I looked round at the crowd of faces. At least they weren't openly hostile. In fact, some of them were smiling and nodding at me as normal. It looked like Sean's little display of ownership wasn't that unusual. A distracted little part of me tugged at my heart with that familiar longing but I ignored it. I had other things to do.

"Yeah, sorry. I was driving my Grandad back from the hospital and it took longer than I'd thought it would."

“Hey, not cool. Is your grandad ok?”

“Yeah, it was a check-up. He’s, um, going to be fine. He had an operation, you see. It’s just going to take a while for him to recover, that’s all.”

Chris nodded and, around me, several of my new teammates stood in a semicircle to listen.

For some reason, I carried on talking. I liked to talk but sometimes it was a compulsion and I rambled on, usually when I didn’t have all my emotions in check. It was fairly good proof that this whole move/new university/pining for the hot alpha I wished would be my boyfriend/hangover was getting to me more than I’d thought.

“Yeah, he’s really grumpy about it. He was always really active and it’s knocked him back so much. He can’t even stand for long. He’s too used to being independent and it’s getting him down that he can’t even get out into the garden with his plants.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Liam said, and clapped me on the shoulder. “Hey, you could bring him to the game next weekend, if you want. Coach can save him a seat.”

Someone shoved Liam playfully. “You just want Nat to bring his grandad here so you can check him out to see if he’s hot.”

“I do not.”

“Yeah, a nice older man. Nat, is your grandad an omega?”

“He is, actually.”

Liam shoved a couple of the team away as they jeered good-naturedly. “Hot old omega. Exactly your type.”

“I don’t like old men, guys. He’s not even old. He’s just older than us.”

I blinked at Liam. “Who is?”

Chris leaned across. “Liam’s omega. He’s a hot silver fox.”

“Yes, he is, so I don’t need any other omegas thank you. Also, we’re not official so he’s not... technically *my* omega.”

From Chris’ shit-eating grin, I could tell they teased Liam about this omega often.

“What Liam means by ‘not official’ is ‘not at all’. Hey Liam, maybe you should bring *your* omega to the game. At least he’d get to see you doing something you’re actually good at, instead of constantly failing his class.”

I realised what that meant. “You’re trying to date a professor?”

“Yeah. Except he’s really smart and I keep trying to take his class but I don’t understand any of what he says. It makes me look dumb.”

Chris patted Liam on the shoulder. “Get him to come to a game. He’ll see you in your element.”

“Not like I haven’t tried that.”

I changed quickly, still listening to them teasing Liam about liking older men. He didn’t seem to mind being teased nearly as much as he minded this omega thinking he was dumb. I could understand that. I didn’t mind people knowing I was into alphas, even if they didn’t like it, but knowing the alpha I wanted most was right there and I wasn’t worth coming out for was a much harder pill to swallow.

I had completely forgotten about Sean when he walked up to me, looking sulky but determined.

“Perdi said you guys were only dancing and I overreacted because I was drunk.”

He said it with the sort of stilted delivery that proved he was reciting it by rote. Guaranteed, Perdi had made him promise to say it.

“No problem,” I said.

Sean glowered. I wanted to sigh. This year wasn’t going to be fun if half the team got their undies in a knot about me dancing.

Sean ground out through gritted teeth, “Sorry.” I knew then that he really loved his girlfriend. He was prepared to give me an apology he didn’t think he owed me, just because she wanted it. It was kind of sweet, in a weird way.

“Thanks. We really were just dancing.”

“Yeah, she said she liked dancing with you. I hate dancing.”

I decided to take that as an opportunity to make friends. “I could teach you a few moves.”

“Maybe.”

I shrugged. “Offer’s there if you want it. Perdi’s a great mover.”

A little sparkle entered Sean’s eyes. “Yeah, she’s really sexy. Never seen anyone move the way she does.”

“She’s great but she’s, uh, not my type.”

Might as well get it out there now. No point in waiting to find out whether my new teammates were going to have a problem with my sexuality. If they did, I could leave the team now before I wasted too much time with them.

Sean’s whole expression changed. A darkness that I hadn’t been able to pinpoint lifted and he grinned at me.

“You should have said! I thought you were after my omega. Everyone always tries to steal her away because she’s so pretty. I had to fight off two alphas last week who were trying to buy her drinks at the bar.”

Chris grunted. “I remember that. They were creeps.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sean. “She’d already told them no. Some alphas don’t know how to take no for an answer. I had to kick them really hard.”

On the basis Sean was even taller than I was, and he was built like a wall, I grimaced at the idea of him kicking me.

He looked back at me. “I didn’t realise you weren’t interested. I assumed you were trying to sleep with her and it makes her really uncomfortable when guys come onto her. You should have said.”

“I don’t think I should have to announce my sexuality to make other people comfortable. We were dancing. It doesn’t matter what my sexuality is – neither she nor I were doing anything wrong.”

Sean scratched his head. “Huh?”

Chris patted him on the shoulder. “He means you shouldn’t get growly with alphas who are talking to Perdi unless Perdi has already told them to piss off and they didn’t listen.”

Sean nodded. “Fair. Perdi always knows her own mind.”

Chris gave me an eye-roll and I thought they’d got me ever so slightly wrong. I hadn’t quite meant that. I’d meant I shouldn’t have to tell other people that I was into alphas so they were comfortable leaving their omegas near me. Either they trusted their omegas or they didn’t. Either they trusted me or they didn’t.

Before I could correct them, though, Coach came into the changing rooms, already shouting. I had already learned that that was his favourite way to start a training session. The whole team high-tailed it out onto the field to warm up.

Chapter 7: Josh

Every day since Nat turned up in my life had been absolute torture. I just couldn't stop myself from watching him and wanting. He was always smiling, laughing with the rest of the team, looking gorgeous and happy. I half longed to go over there and grab him, shake him for being so damned happy when I was so unhappy, but I never did. The other half of me liked seeing it too much. He breezed into my life, the team, any room he entered, and lit it up. He talked and laughed and made everyone around him smile. I'd long since come to accept that I was not that person. Nobody smiled when I walked into a room. Except recently Riley had taken to smiling nicely at me, and it always made me feel a bit warmer inside. Riley was sweet.

I had headed in early, sneaking into the changing rooms ahead of everyone else. Not even Coach was in and so I used my own key to get in.

Once there, I put my plant down on the bench where Nat normally changed and tucked the label into the ribbon. It looked really fucking pathetic now it was here. I'd thought it was a good idea at the time, since Nat's grandad was missing his plants and I *had* a plant – it had seemed logical to give it to him. Everyone was happy, right? Well, Nat's grandad would be happy. And from the way Nat had talked about him, having his grandad happy would make Nat happy, too. He'd talked a bit about the operation and demonstrated how long the scar on his grandad's abdomen was by lifting his shirt and drawing his finger from his belly button to the centre of his pecks. I'd had to look away before I fell over trying to get a better view of his muscled chest.

Still, the point was, I had a plant that might make them both happy, so I'd brought it with me. It just seemed much more pathetic in the cold light of day.

It wasn't that the plant itself was pathetic. In fact, it looked really healthy and I'd had to tie it to a stick to keep it upright. I watered it exactly as often as the label had indicated when I'd bought it and it had sat on my desk for nearly three years now. I talked to it, sometimes, when I was having trouble writing my essays. Hashed out some ideas. My plant was an expert at deciding which sentences needed to be cut from essay introductions. Our conversations were always strictly professional, though. I hadn't even told old Planty about Nat. It meant I could give it away to Nat's grandad with a clear conscience; I wouldn't want to give it to a man if it knew what I'd been imagining doing to that man's grandson. That just seemed creepy.

No, the problem with the plant was that it was in just a plain old plastic pot because I'd never been able to afford a better one. I'd tried to jazz it up by asking my flatmate for a ribbon – she was into craft and stuff, so I knew she had some. I offered to pay for it but she just gave it to me and said it was worth it to get confirmation that I could actually speak. It seems I might not have spoken much around the flat.

I found talking hard. Growing up knowing that the next word I said could be wrong and, if it was, I'd get the beating of a lifetime, didn't exactly encourage me to waste words. I'd assumed I was over that but maybe old habits hadn't died off like I'd thought.

Still, it was too late to do anything about it now. The plant was here and it had a nice yellow ribbon tied around its pot. The card I'd put in was actually just a post-it note because I didn't have any cards, either.

I gave the thing a goodbye nod.

“Good luck, Planty. Enjoy your new home.”

With that, I snuck out of the changing rooms, locked up and walked over to my car, sat in it for ten minutes and walked back. As I’d expected, half the team were already there by the time I got back.

I was there just before Nat, which meant I got to see his reaction to Planty.

“Hey, Nat! Nat! Look at this.”

Nat walked in and I made my way through the crowd, who’d barely glanced up at my entrance.

“What is it?”

“A plant.”

“A plant?” echoed Nat, and pushed through to look at it.
“Oh.”

I couldn’t tell whether that was a good ‘oh’ or a bad one. He looked around at the gathered team. “Whose is it?”

“It’s yours!”

“Mine?”

“Yeah, yours. For your grandad.”

Nat stepped forward and reached out to Planty, brushing his fingers lightly across its silky green leaves. He reached for the post-it note and peeled it off and read:

FOR GRANDAD

“You guys bought my grandad a get-well plant?”

They all looked at each other.

“No.”

“No.”

“Not us.”

“Nothing to do with me.”

“Does anyone know who did buy it?”

They were searching round. I pretended to ignore them.

“Who was in first?” asked Nat.

There was some mumbling and debate and then Liam said, “I was in first but it was already here when I got here.”

There were whistles and cat calls. “Liam’s after another old omega!”

“Buying him presents.”

“Trying to seduce the grandad.”

Liam blustered, “This is why I didn’t tell you I was here first. It was already here when I arrived. I don’t need any other hot omegas, I’ve got my own.”

“So who did buy it then?”

To my relief, nobody seemed to even remember I was there. It meant that, when the rest of the team arrived and began the same line of questioning, nobody even thought to put me in the list of suspects.

To my even greater relief, Nat liked the plant.

“Guys, I don’t care which of you bought it for Grandad, I’m just really glad you did. He’ll love it. It’s in really good condition.”

I felt a tiny worm of pride wriggling its way into my chest at his words. It might not be much, but I’d done something Nat liked. Even if he never knew it was from me, I was glad he’d got some joy out of it.

There was a sheen of tears in his eyes when he looked round the whole group of us and said, “Thank you.”

Coach interrupted the moment by coming out bawling.

“Are you lot still in here? Why aren’t you outside warming up already? If you lot get any lazier, I’m going to

replace one of you with that plant.”

Sean decided to pipe up. “Hey, Coach, did you see who left the plant here for Nat’s grandad?”

He answered just deliberately enough for me to realise he was circling the truth.

“No, I didn’t see anybody bring it into the changing rooms.”

He deliberately didn’t look my way as he said it and, when he finally did, I caught his eye and froze. He knew. He hadn’t *seen* me come in with it but he knew I was the one who’d left it there. I was the only other one with a key.

From the way he got on with training, though, I guessed my secret was safe with him. First time in as long as I could remember that anyone had got my back.

Chapter 8: Nat

“Hey, Grandad, you’ll never guess what I’ve got.”

I kicked the door open, juggling my kit bag and the bag of books I’d checked out of the library and our new plant.

“A hot young boyfriend?” Grandad guessed.

“For me or for you?”

He cackled. “Either one would be fine by me.”

I dropped the two bags in the hallway and went into the living room where Grandad was sitting in his chair. He turned the TV down and looked round at me as I came in.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a houseplant for you.”

“Why’d you go and waste your money on a houseplant for me? A specimen like this wouldn’t come cheap. Don’t you have booze or drugs to buy?”

I put the plant down on the little table beside his chair and kissed his cheek, ignoring his words. His eyes were rivetted to the plant and he reached out to turn the pot round and see it from every angle.

“Firstly,” I said, “I do drink but I don’t do drugs. Secondly, I *didn’t* buy it.”

That made Grandad look up at me. “No? Where did you get it, then? I didn’t raise you to steal things, either.”

I rolled my eyes. “Grand Theft Horticulture?”

He chuckled. “Seriously, where’d you get her? She’s a beauty.”

“She? We’re gendering plants now, are we?”

“I can’t call her they/them until she asks me to. I remember the rules.”

I’d explained about non-binary pronouns two years ago when one of his friends’ grandchildren had come out as non-binary. Grandad had listened very carefully, determined to get it right and make Ash feel comfortable and accepted for who they were. Exactly the way he’d accepted *me*.

I only wish Grandad’s friend – now ex-friend – had done the same.

Grandad hadn’t quite understood the grammar of it all but he had learned the ‘rules’ and Ash still came round whenever they were home for the holidays, delighted to spend time with someone who respected them. And someone who broke out the ‘good gin’ when they were here and got tipsy in the afternoon.

I knelt down by his chair and helped him turn the plant, since it was surprisingly heavy.

“Where did you really get her?”

“The team bought it for me as a welcome present.”

“You’re kidding?”

I grinned, enjoying telling him the story. “I’m not kidding at all. I walked into the changing rooms and they were all standing there, waiting for me. And they’d put the plant on my bench. Then they all pretended not to know who’d brought it.”

“The fairies must have spirited her there. They always bring you what your heart desires.”

“Really?”

“Yes, always.”

For the first time, I really considered it. I’d thought it was a nice gift. Something a bit more personal than a case of beer, which would be most football team’s go-to present for a teammate. But I thought about it and realised that, whoever had been the one to choose it might just have known something I didn’t.

“Have you been wishing for a plant, Grandad?”

He waved a hand airily. “Oh, it was just a fancy. I thought it might be nice, since I can’t get outside any more. I’ve missed having something alive this near to me.”

“Do I not count as alive?”

“You’re a student – you barely count as human.”

I threw back my head and laughed.

Grandad continued, “And you’re gone a lot of the day. Your Grandpapa used to do all the gardening. I only took it up when he passed away. I didn’t want all his hard work going to waste. And it made me feel closer to him, I suppose. Silly, probably.” He glanced at the plant and reached out to just touch a shiny dark-green leaf. “But this will be nice, to have nearby.”

I took his hand and held it in my large hands and waited until I could see Grandad had his emotions under control again.

“I’m glad the fairies bought you what you wanted, Grandad.”

He cleared his throat. “Actually, it was your gift – they bought it for you. You could keep her in your room.”

“No, you keep it, Grandad.”

“No, I think you should—”

“They bought it for you. There was a note. Hang on, I put it in my kit bag because it kept falling off the pot.”

I rushed out and retrieved a slightly crumpled post-it note.

“For Grandad,” Grandad read. “I like how they’ve adopted me as the team Grandad.”

“Yeah, I wondered about that. But it proves the plant is definitely for you. You can keep it wherever you want.”

“I’ll have her here, then, if you don’t mind. So you don’t know which of them picked her out for you?”

“No. And I don’t know any of their handwriting, either, and I’m unlikely to ever see their handwriting seeing as we’re not exactly a novel-writing club.”

“A mystery then,” conceded Grandad.

“Really must have been the fairies.”

“Must have been. Now they’ve brought me what I wanted, maybe they’ll bring you what you want.”

“Pizza?”

“Not unless pizza is your heart’s desire.”

I didn’t want to tell him what my heart’s desire was. Grandad, though, was shrewd.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Got something you want to share with the class?”

“No.”

“You sure? Because you’ve been moping about for nearly a month now.”

How he knew that, I wasn’t even sure. I cleared my throat, trying to work out what to say.

“It’s difficult. To, you know, meet someone.”

Grandad nodded. “Especially when you’re already in love with someone else.”

“Exact- no! No, I’m not *in love* with anyone.”

“Then who have you been moping around after for the past month?”

“I wasn’t... moping. I wasn’t.”

I might have been moping. But I wasn’t in love with Josh. Not after one night and the worst reunion in history.

Grandad shrugged. “I fell in love with your Grandpapa after a week. I just knew we would be perfect together. And I was right. What’s the problem with your alpha?”

“He’s not out.”

“Maybe he hasn’t met anyone worth coming out for.”

“He met me. And he didn’t come out.”

“Did you ask him to?”

“No, I didn’t. Because I don’t think he should have to come out before he’s ready.”

“And you told him that, did you?”

I paused as I was already shaking my head. “Actually, we didn’t talk about it.”

“So you haven’t actually given him a reason to come out. Or made him feel comfortable *not* coming out.”

It made me think. I’d assumed Josh didn’t want anything to do with me after he made it clear I wasn’t to tell anyone about us. But he hadn’t said that. He hadn’t said much at all, to be honest.

There was a small chance that I could salvage something with Josh. He might not give me everything I wanted, but then finding an alpha who wanted me and was prepared to go possessive-growly-alpha to claim me in public was perhaps expecting too much. Maybe expecting him to even be my boyfriend at all was too much. But we could be friends.

The way I felt right then, being friends with Josh would be better than nothing.

I looked over at Grandad, who was admiring his new plant.

“Maybe I’ll talk to him.”

“That’s my boy. You got to give those fairies a chance to work out what your heart’s desire is. Although, if you *did* order pizza, I wouldn’t say no to a slice.”

Chapter 9: Nat

It took me two days to get Josh alone, and even then it wasn't easy. I was frustrated that I didn't have his number and I couldn't think of a way of asking anyone for it without making it obvious that I was interested in him. Even if I made it clear *I* was pursuing *him*, I would out him by association, and I wasn't prepared to do that.

It meant I was practically bursting with a mixture of excitement and nerves by the time I got him alone.

"Hey, Josh! Wait up."

He stopped, turning to look at me. We were in the car park and I had chased him out of the sports centre and half-way across it, worried for a moment that I'd lost him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I wanted to talk."

"What about?"

"Well..." I'd had a lot of time to think about what I was going to say. I'd planned to tell him that I wanted to be friends but my words died on my lips. He was looking at me with such wary intensity that it looked like he was expecting a blow.

"Hey, are you ok?" was what actually came out of my mouth.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know, you just look...”

Really hot. He looked really hot, but since I was going with the ‘lets just be friends’ angle, I didn’t think it was best to say that.

“Um, you look stressed.”

“No, it’s nothing. Do you have a ride home?”

I gestured across the car park and said, “Yeah, my car’s just over there. Why?”

“Thought you might be after a ride.”

“No, actually, I just wanted to talk.”

He studied me. I tried not to squirm under that gaze.

“Alright,” he said at last. “What is it?”

“I... do you think we could go somewhere a bit nicer? I don’t want to have a whole conversation in a car park.”

“Alright. Where?”

“How about the Blue Bear?”

His eyebrows rose. It was a queer bar and I loved it because it was friendly and relaxed. I realised my mistake.

“Uh, we don’t have to go there. I didn’t mean- I wasn’t trying to make you go somewhere queer. It’s just I know it’s near here and I thought we could talk privately there. Without looking like we’re on a date or anything! Lots of people just hang out there in groups. But we can go somewhere else, if you know of anywhere.”

Well done me. Great ramble.

Josh surprised me. “We can meet at the Blue Bear. I’ll follow you over there.”

It was only when I had bounded over to my car, pleased that Josh had agreed to this not-date with me, that it occurred to me to wonder why we were driving over there separately.

I asked him about it as soon as I parked up and he pulled in beside me.

“I could have driven us over and dropped you home, if you wanted to drink. Why didn’t we think of that?”

“Nah.”

“Ok.” Abrupt much. “So... shall we?”

I gestured at the door and he waited for me, so I led the way. It was a friendly little bar, bright and airy and, at this time of day, not too busy or too loud. I tried not to get shivers as I walked in there with an alpha by my side, tried not to

wonder if the people around us thought we were an item. They didn't. They didn't give us a second glance.

"Do you want to grab a table and I'll get the drinks?"

"No."

He stood, shoulders straight and tense, and waited at the bar.

"Josh? We can go. Seriously, we can go. It was a mistake to suggest this place, I should have known it would make you uncomfortable."

"It doesn't."

"It was just the first place I thought of that was near."

"It's nice."

Before I got a chance to respond, the barmaid came bustling over and smiled at us with scarlet-painted lips and gorgeously strong shoulders. She was a beautiful alpha woman and even I was stunned for a moment, despite men being my preference.

"What can I get you?"

"A pint, please. Whatever's on tap."

I looked round at Josh, who grunted, "A Pepsi, please."

As she bustled off to get our drinks I said, “Maybe I should have got a soft drink if I’m driving. Clever.”

“You can have one beer.”

“Yeah. You didn’t want a beer?”

“No.”

He was still tense and I didn’t know him well enough to know what to do to put him at ease. We got our drinks, I tapped my card and smiled at the barmaid before leading us over to a table in the middle of the room, near the pool tables. I figured it was the place least likely to make it look like we were on a date. We were just two bros hanging out, ready to shoot some pool.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

We sat in silence for a whole minute after that, and I actually counted the seconds as I waited for Josh to be the first to speak. He was *not* talkative.

But a minute was the maximum time I could go without talking, so I started.

“It’s great here. On Wednesdays, they have a darts tournament and anyone can join in. I used to bring Grandad here in the holidays.”

“Your Grandad comes here?”

“Yes. He’s a very cool grandad. It’s not a student bar – the age range is pretty varied.”

“And he doesn’t mind?”

“Doesn’t mind what?”

“That’s it a queer bar?”

“No. Why would he mind?”

Josh grunted.

I asked, “Did you think my grandad would mind that *I* was queer?”

He shrugged. “Some people mind.”

“Yes, they do.” And I could tell just from that little chat that someone in Josh’s family – or maybe *everybody* in Josh’s family – *did* mind. No wonder he freaked out about it so hard.

I tried to reassure him. “Not everyone in my family is so accepting, but they don’t do anything really horrible. They’re just a bit distant. Grandad has always been my champion, though. Always wants people to be comfortable in themselves.”

“Nice.”

He could have sounded sarcastic. He didn't. There was enough sincerity in that single word for my heart to ache that Josh hadn't had that himself.

"So tell me about your grandad then."

"Sure, ok. Well, he's actually really good at darts. I never was. If he had a better partner, he could win. I always got us relegated half-way through the tournament, though. Can you play?"

"A bit."

"Want to give it a go? While we chat?"

"Sure. You can practice for when you bring your grandad back."

I nearly tripped over my chair leg standing up because that was the longest sentence he'd said in... maybe ever.

We paid for some darts and claimed the dart board. Nobody was up that end of the bar, so we had the whole place to ourselves. I congratulated myself on a brilliant idea. What could be more two-bros-just-hanging-out-in-a-platonic-way than playing darts? And we were actually much more private over here. I liked that, even though I told myself not to.

When we began to play, we were well-matched. I wasn't brilliant, as I'd said, but as we played, Josh began to beat me.

We played mostly in silence, except when I started talking. I told a few tales of times Grandad and I had played here, about bringing Ash here when they turned eighteen, about getting lost down country lanes at four o'clock in the morning the one night I'd driven here, drunk too much, and decided that I'd walk home instead of getting an Uber.

By the end of my chatter, Josh was actually nearly smiling. At least, he looked much less tense than before. I was struck all over again by how handsome he was. I'd almost forgotten it for a moment, but he was tall and dark and his jaw was strong and those eyes...

I realised I was staring and looked down, flustered. Damn, my totally-platonic plan was harder to pull off than I'd thought.

Still flustered, I asked the first thing that came into my mind. "Are you starting to relax?"

"Well, you haven't ditched me yet, so elaborate prank seems unlikely."

I looked up. My mouth hung open until I realised and snapped it shut. That must have looked incredibly attractive.

"That was a worry?"

He shrugged. That was it. Shrugged. Like it was normal to spend his time worrying that people trying to make friends with him were actually setting up elaborate pranks.

"So... when I suggested here, you thought, what? That I'd have a troop of alpha go-go dancers in glittery thongs waiting

behind the bar to give you a lap dance?”

“I hadn’t considered a troop of go-go dancers.”

“But you had considered something like it?”

He stepped up to the line and readied his dart. I’d forgotten we were even playing. “Go-go dancers seem like a lot of effort to arrange. Much more likely you’d send me in here to wait for you and never show.”

Ah. That explained why the separate cars, so he could get away when he needed to. And why he didn’t want to leave me at the bar, where I could have slipped out while he found a table.

Seriously?

He threw his dart and it hit triple twenty. He threw the next two and got the same spot.

It was only when he turned around that I managed to work the words up my throat.

“Josh, I would never do that. I told you I wasn’t going to out you. Besides, that sounds incredibly mean. And if you shrug one more time, I’m going to pour hot syrup down your pants.”

“Isn’t that mean, too?”

“Justifiable retaliation. Josh, I just wanted to talk. Not about that night or anything else, just... talk to you. I think we

should be friends.”

Luckily, he took my suggestion seriously and didn’t laugh at me for making it sound like I was a five-year-old at the playground, asking someone to be their friend. But I’d always been good at making friends and in my experience the best thing was just to ask.

“Ok.”

“Wow, that was easier than I thought.”

He shrugged and the glimmer in his eyes dared me to mention syrup again. I *didn’t* dare because the thought of pouring syrup over his alpha cock was actually more appealing than I’d intended when I’d threatened it.

I cleared my throat and readied my first dart. Then frowned.

“Hang on, did you just win that game?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been hustling me?”

“No. Just took me a while to get my eye in again.”

“You mean all this time you’ve been able to play darts?”

“I did tell you I can play.”

“You said ‘a bit’.”

“I haven’t played in ages.”

“I still feel tricked. Good job I didn’t ask to play for money.” I was still shaking my head as we got ready for another game. “You must think me and Grandad are total amateurs.”

“No.”

I preened a bit. Josh ruined it by adding, “You said your grandad can actually play.”

He threw three perfect darts while I stared at him. Was that... a joke? I felt a bubble of laughter burst out of me. It felt better than I could have anticipated; making Josh comfortable enough around me to actually crack a joke.

It meant I didn’t mind a bit when I lost four games in a row after that and Josh refused to play me any more, probably to save my pride.

Chapter 10: Josh

I stayed behind after practice. Nat and I had talked and I had to admit it had cleared the air a lot between us, but I still wasn't prepared to go to the Student Union and watch the rest of the team fawning all over him. Nat was everybody's best friend. They all wanted his attention, called him to play pool or ask him if he wanted a drink or pulled him onto the dance floor. I definitely didn't need to see him dance again. My cock still got hard at the memory. I think it was a habitual reaction by now: think of Nat dancing, cock gets hard, I jerk off. Over and over again.

It meant I kept my head down when they all arranged to go out and, as usual, nobody noticed I wasn't there with them when they left. I often spent more time on the pitch after they'd left, training and practicing my kicks. I heard them all file into the changing rooms and then I was blessedly alone, at last. It was getting harder and harder – no pun intended – to ignore the way my body felt when I was near Nat. It wasn't just my cock that was interested, either. My stomach swooped and dived every time he smiled at me until I felt like I was on a roller coaster. One day, he'd smile at me and I'd just puke all over him.

As I practiced, I focused only on the movement of my body, the accuracy I needed. Slowly, I got out of my own head and lost myself in the familiar rhythm of it all. I must have been out there for half an hour before I finally felt like I had done enough. I'd managed to unwind my insides from their taught feeling, if nothing else.

By the time I finished, I was looking forward to a shower. I was drenched in sweat and had mud streaked up my sides.

The changing rooms were empty and the whole place was quiet. Coach rarely bothered to wait for me. He knew I'd lock

up behind myself and make sure everything was in place. He might not like me much but it was good to know he trusted me.

I had just stripped off and grabbed my towel when I became aware of a slight noise. For a second, I thought it sounded like breaths but then it was gone and I wasn't sure I'd heard it at all.

When I walked into the showers, I realised why.

Chris was standing there, naked, his back to me. And he was pressing an omega to the wall. The omega's legs were wrapped around his waist and Chris' hands disappeared out of sight, probably holding him up. They were as still as statues.

As I took in what was happening, Chris looked back over his shoulder and the movement rippled his back muscles and his broad shoulders. His whole back was bare and beautiful and right there in front of me, strong and alpha, with a glorious ass. And all I thought was that it wasn't as hot as Nat's.

Nat had broken me.

Chris growled, a low, warning sound. He obviously didn't like me seeing them like that.

My first thought was that he didn't like me seeing them because it was someone he wasn't meant to be with. I didn't like that. If Chris was in an exclusive relationship with Riley, he'd better damned well be faithful.

Then I realised that the omega whose body was being almost completely hidden by Chris' body was pale-skinned,

which Riley was. And they had styled blonde hair, also just like Riley.

It was probably Riley, then.

And close on that thought was the realisation that they had been so still and quiet and Chris hadn't moved much because he couldn't. He'd probably knotted his boyfriend and couldn't put him down yet.

I rolled my eyes. Great. I wasn't going to get a shower, after all.

I left them to it and went back into the changing rooms to dress again. I didn't want to put my clean clothes on over my sweaty body so I pulled my training clothes back on. They were damp and clingy, which was disgusting. Chris had better bloody appreciate this. Why couldn't he knot his boyfriend somewhere else so I could grab a shower?

When I left, I made sure to slam the door behind me so they'd know I was gone. I'd give it ten minutes and then send Coach a text to tell him someone else was still in there when I left so I didn't lock up yet.

I'd cooled down enough that I didn't want to start running again. If I'd jogged, I could have made it home in ten minutes but I wanted to enjoy the walk. The only thing was, it took me past the Student Union and it would be rammed at this time of night. It didn't particularly bother me, but it would be annoying to have to stop and talk or be jeered at by drunks.

Never mind. I set off and headed straight along the path that led through the centre of the campus. I could hear the

crowds before I saw them. There was shouting and cheering and laughing.

I heard my own name among the cacophony. “Josh! Josh!”

Turning my head to see who it was, I didn’t stop. An omega waved at me. I knew I’d seen him before but I couldn’t remember his name.

I gave him a nod but carried on walking past. That didn’t deter him. He rushed out of the patio and onto the path, right in front of me.

“Hi!”

“Hey.”

“Have you been at training?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Do you want to join us for a drink?”

“Nah, not tonight thanks. I’ve got to get back and have a shower.”

The omega looked up at me through his lashes. He was nice enough looking, I supposed, it was just that his body didn’t do anything for me. Small and slim and delicate and pretty. My cock stayed very, very flaccid.

“I could scrub your back for you, if you wanted.”

Ah shit. How did I get out of that?

I’d had offers from omegas and non-presenting men before. I’d managed to fuck a couple of non-presenting men who were big-framed and I enjoyed it enough that I came. The two omegas I’d fucked, though, I’d had to imagine an alpha’s big hand jerking me off just to stay hard and I hadn’t come. I’d got them off and pulled out. End of encounter.

I really didn’t want this little omega following me home and expecting sexy times.

Behind me, Nat shouted. “Hey Josh, there you are.”

When I heard the sound, my stomach lurched inside me. I hated that I associated the sound of Nat’s voice with arousal and pleasure. This was going to get even more fucking awkward.

Chapter 11: Nat

I wasn't proud of it but I could admit it to myself. I was jealous.

Some gorgeous omega was hitting on Josh in the most obvious way possible and I wanted to go straight over there and put my hands all over Josh, claiming him as *my* alpha.

Not that he *was* my alpha. Not yet. But a guy could hope.

I'd made progress on my plan of becoming friends with him but that flicker of hope was telling me that this could be my chance to become more than that. I still sometimes caught him looking at me, and I kept telling myself that if he could take it slowly enough and untangle some of the knot of shame and confusion that his family had tied in his heart, maybe there could be a future for us. Together.

I knew Josh was into alphas. Well, specifically, I knew he was into *me*. Not to brag or anything but he'd seemed really, really into me before. I had not seen him even looking at another alpha, so for all I knew, he didn't like any of them. Just me.

And, yes, maybe I was getting carried away here but the point was, Josh was mine and some horny little omega was trying to muscle in on my man. He was about to meet his match.

I bounded over and clapped Josh on the back. And then, because I was a bad person and I couldn't help myself, I slid my arm around his shoulder, too. I made it as much of a bro-hug as I could but from the way my body tingled and my brain was screaming '*mine, mine, mine*' I couldn't be sure I pulled it off.

“What took you so long?” I asked.

“Practice.” It was more of a grunt than an answer. Josh was not the most easy man to communicate with. Was it bad that I didn’t mind that? I had thought about it a lot and had decided that it was a skill I’d happily work on with Josh for as long as it took. As long as I got to use his body while we did it and as long as he looked at me with that burning intensity.

Damn, I was such a whore for that look. He could make me crawl to him panting with just those eyes, if he wanted.

The little omega gave me an unimpressed glare. Clearly he thought I was getting in the way of his great victory. Little did he know. From the way Josh had come apart in my arms at that club last month, I’d say there was a big chance he’d been *very* unsatisfied with omegas before now.

Too bad, little one. Go dig your claws into someone else.

“You coming inside?” I asked Josh, already tugging at him. I wanted him to follow me. I wanted to sit next to him with our legs pressing together.

He resisted.

The omega said, “We’re leaving, actually.”

Oh.

Josh was leaving with this omega? I had got this very, very wrong if he was. But he didn’t even *look* at the omega.

“Nah,” said Josh suddenly. “You go back inside. Have a good night. I’ve got early practice tomorrow anyway.”

He gave the omega the most unconvincing grin I’d ever seen and I struggled not to laugh. Poor little omega. Not getting his pick of the football team tonight.

He gave a huff and said, “Fine. See you around,” and then stormed off back into the bar.

I nudged Josh with my shoulder. “I’ll walk back with you. I’ve got that early practice, too.”

He grunted and walked away. I smiled to myself and followed. We didn’t have early practice at all.

We walked in silence for nearly five minutes and I didn’t mind. I was a mass of excited nerves about spending time with Josh.

He turned off down a side path and I followed.

“Don’t you live that way?” he asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

“Yes.”

I didn’t say any more. I was waiting for him to ask. Although, given our history and Josh’s record time for not talking, I was going to lose that game of chicken. It would just be nice if he’d tell me that he wanted this as much as I did.

He walked the full length of the road, going into the flats and up to his floor. He opened the door and stepped aside, holding it open for me.

That was the most explicit invitation I was going to get.

“Need a shower,” he said.

“I’ll wait in your room.”

His dark eyes focused on me properly for the first time that night. I saw the glimmer of something inside them but he didn’t take the bait. He just showed me into his room, grabbed his towel and left.

I heard the shower run for a couple of minutes, imagined him soaping and scrubbing, heard him moving round as he got out of the shower and then he came back into the room. I nearly swallowed my tongue.

Josh stood there with his towel slung low on his hips, revealing his dark happy trail and cut abs. His body was even better than I remembered it. So big and strong, broad-shouldered and thick with hair. A drop of water fell from his hair to his shoulder and ran down his chest, snagging on the chest hair right above his nipple. I watched it, fascinated.

He cleared his throat. He sounded nervous. Maybe I hadn’t made myself clear enough when I’d stripped down to my boxers and lay on the bed to wait.

“Sorry about the mess,” he said.

I wasn't even looking at his room. I was barely aware of what was around me. I got the impression of clutter but I could easily tune that out. I was a student; I'd lived with students for three years now. We were messy. In fact, I was certain that my first flat had been a genuine bio-hazard. Living with my grandad meant I was practically living in luxury, but it wasn't *my* doing.

For the first time, I tore my eyes off him and looked around. There were boxes stacked neatly against the wall, each one labelled in clear sharpie. There wasn't much floor space but it was clean. In fact, as clean as anyone could keep a room. Even Grandad would be proud of this room.

"It's actually not messy." I let my voice show how impressed I was.

He gave a grunt.

"It's not! It's just a bit cluttered. Why do you have so many boxes?"

He shrugged. "Got a lot of stuff."

"And you can't bear to be parted from any of it?"

He gave me a strange look then, and I got the feeling he was deciding what to tell me. Josh never seemed to just blurt out words the way I did. He dolled them out carefully, weighing them up before he spoke. I wanted those words. I wanted the truth.

Sitting up, I shifted back against the headboard and patted the space next to me.

Silently, he moved forward, sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked uncomfortable. He wasn't touching me at all, leaving a big gap between us. I might have thought he wasn't interested at all if it wasn't for the fact that I'd seen him looking at me, those hot, dark eyes scorching my skin.

And his towel wasn't doing much to conceal the swell of his dick, either.

I was glad. It was nice to know I wasn't the only one with a hard-on.

It would be better if Josh would actually touch me, though, instead of sitting bolt upright like a plank of wood. Like I had the lurgy.

"What's in them? The boxes?"

"Clothes. Books. Photograph albums. A load of old tat, really. I just didn't want it going in the bin."

"Why would it go in the bin?"

He gave me that look again.

"Josh?" I reached for his hand, sliding my fingers over his palm and linking our fingers. We sat there together, not touching except for our hands, and looking into each other's eyes. "Tell me."

"Why?"

“Because I want to know.”

“Why? What’s it to you?”

He began to pull away from me. He tried to yank his hand out of mine and his eyes turned stormy, his brows pulling low.

He looked angry. But I gripped his hand harder and refused to let go.

“Because I want to know about you and you never share anything with me.”

He stopped tugging at his hand and focused back on my face. And that was when I realised what I’d missed before: he wasn’t angry, he was scared.

I couldn’t for the life of me work out what he could be scared of. Not me, certainly. But he got like this every time I started to pry, started to push a bit deeper into who he really was.

“I want to know who you are, Josh. Tell me.”

If it was possible, I could feel the tension radiating out from him. It made my own muscles cramp up in sympathy. He glared hard and clenched my fingers so tightly that I lost all feeling in my hand.

“I had to bring everything I wanted to keep with me. I didn’t have time to sort through it.”

I couldn't believe I actually had to ask again, but apparently Josh didn't do explanations very well. Talking to him could be like pulling teeth. I asked, "Why?"

"Because my father was going to go through my room and bin everything I left behind."

"Why?"

"To get rid of me. The memory of me. He didn't want any of my shit there, reminding him that he had a total fuck-up for a son."

The sudden lump in my throat made my breath catch. He meant it. I could tell Josh actually meant what he said. Josh was absolutely terrified of letting me see who he really was because he thought that, as soon as I did, I'd realise he wasn't worth getting to know.

"You're *not* a fuck-up. You're not."

My voice was husky and my body reached automatically for him. I found myself wrapped around him, my arms around his shoulders, my chest pressed against his bicep. He stayed as still as a statue.

"You know, this hug would go a lot better if you would join in it."

There were a few seconds where he didn't move and I had just enough time to realise that what I'd said actually might sound like a criticism, if he wanted to take it that way, but then his hands came up and rested lightly on my back. I smiled, leaning in to his touch, and manoeuvred us both down the bed

so we were lying together and I could wrap my arms around him properly. I pulled him right against me, encircling him with my body.

He let me move him where I wanted him and I got a jolt of sharp affection that he trusted me enough to do it.

When we'd been laying quietly for a few minutes, I spoke quietly.

"No offense, but your dad sounds like a dick."

"He is."

"He's wrong about you being a fuck-up."

"Just because he's a dick, doesn't make him wrong."

"Hey, I'm telling you he's wrong. It's rude not to believe the guy you're in bed with, you know."

He shifted slightly to peer up at me from under his dark lashes. I'd never seen him look so vulnerable. He was beautiful and sweet and I wanted to protect him.

"I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"You didn't come here to act as a therapist."

I gave a little chuckle. “No, maybe not, but I *did* get what I wanted.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yeah. Josh, I’m not just here to get into your pants, you know. I wanted to talk to you. Get to know you a bit better. *That’s* what I wanted.”

“Sounds like a waste of time to me.”

I pulled back a little so I could look down into his face properly. “Do you not want to do this? Not get to know me, I mean.”

My disappointment if he said no would be real.

He took long enough to answer that I had time to get a real sense of dread.

“You might find it wasn’t worth the effort.”

“You mean I might find *you’re* not worth the effort?”

He nodded.

“I doubt that. You’re already worth it, Josh. You’re worth it. I want to know more about you. I want to hear you talk. Talk to me, please?”

“Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I chuckled again and dragged him even closer to me. When he started to talk, I felt his breath on my skin.

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me what you like doing.”

If I’d thought there was an obvious inuendo in there, I was pleasantly surprised that Josh gave me a sweet little answer. “Football,” he said. “I like playing football. Always have. When I was a kid, I used to stay out of the house for hours, playing with anyone who was around. Now I just like playing. It makes my thoughts quiet.”

I began to stroke my hand along his smooth shoulders, keeping myself wrapped around him as much as I could. “Your thoughts get too noisy sometimes?”

“Most of the time.”

“Does anything else help?”

His breath fanned across my skin several times and I felt his steady heartbeat thrumming against my chest. Eventually, he said, “This. This helps.”

I held him tighter.

Chapter 12: Josh

I was so full of emotions that I couldn't sort them out. They squirmed around inside me like live eels trying to break out of my skin and all I knew was that Nat had me. He was holding me together, keeping me in one piece.

Slowly, I let go and leaned into him. It was the best feeling, letting go of my control and trusting that someone else would hold me together. And there was nobody except Nat I would trust to do it.

We lay like that for a long time. I was reluctant to move because I was enjoying the feeling so much. My body reacted to being pressed against his broad chest and the feel of his thick thighs wrapped around me, holding me close, but I tried to keep my groin pulled back so he wouldn't notice. Wouldn't stop holding me.

It must have been the longest Nat had ever been quiet. I began to find it unnatural.

"Talk to me," I said.

"What do you want me to talk about?"

That made me smile. Nat didn't even question whether he *would* talk, only what he'd talk *about*.

"Everything."

"I can do that."

And he did. Nat talked for hours. If I'd been talking for a fraction of that time, I'd be exhausted, but Nat seemed to get more energy from it, not less. His voice grew stronger and he began to wave his arm around to gesture, keeping the other one wrapped tightly around me. He talked about football and his family holidays and his professor and the fact he needed to buy groceries and his first crush.

"I'm telling you, Josh, this alpha was beautiful. You'd agree with me. Ten-year-old Nat was totally smitten."

I growled a little, not liking him talking about other alphas, not when *I* was his alpha.

I stopped myself mid-thought. I wasn't his alpha. He wasn't mine. We...

We *could* be together. If Nat wanted me, that is. I'd wanted to be his for so long that my body felt it like an ache by then. I just hadn't thought Nat would want to bother with me, not after he'd had his quick fuck in the toilets of the club and realised what a loser I was in real life.

I shifted my body round so I could look up at him from where I'd buried my head in the crook of his neck, breathing in his musky scent.

As I met his eyes, his face broke into a smile.

"Am I succeeding in making you jealous?" he teased.

"Yes."

He chuckled and I wanted so much to capture his lips, to taste them and feel them move underneath my own.

I realised he'd stopped laughing and raised my eyes from his lips to meet his own pretty green eyes.

"You know, if you keep looking at me like that, I'm going to lose my control and make a move on you."

"Is that what you want to do?"

In answer, he shifted his hips and I realised he'd had his hips pulled back just like I'd had mine pulled back, so he wouldn't feel my erection. His dick was hard and he rubbed it against me. I could feel the heat through his thin boxers. I looked down and realised my towel had come loose and was draped half-way off the bed.

As though it was the most natural thing in the world, I leaned over and kissed him. Those lips were everything I'd remembered and more. I sank into our kiss, opening up for him when he thrust his tongue between my lips. My hands grasped at him, trying to hold him even closer to me, even though we were already plastered to each other and there was no way we could get closer. Well, maybe one way...

He pushed me back and rolled on top of me. His body was heavy and glorious, pressing me down into the mattress. I liked the feel of it but I wanted more. I wanted to own him.

Flipping us was harder than I thought, not because I couldn't lift him off me but because my bed wasn't big enough to roll without rolling straight onto the floor. I let him stay heavily on top of me.

“What do you want, Josh?”

“Want you.”

He nibbled at my neck and I felt the smile in his lips. They were doing sinful things to my earlobe and my cock strained upwards.

“Trust me, the one thing I can guarantee is that you have me, Josh. What do you want to do with me?”

I wanted to fuck him. It was something I’d always dreamed about, fantasising about fucking a large alpha man, and since I’d met Nat, he’d very much starred in those fantasies. But I knew some alphas didn’t like to be topped and I didn’t want to ruin things now we were finally getting started.

Dragging his head up, I claimed his lips again and fucked my tongue into the warmth of his mouth, holding him tightly, rutting up to rub my dick against his. The feel of his thick cock against my own would be enough to send me over the edge soon.

I was more than half-way there, my dick leaking pre-come and my balls feeling heavy, my skin burning, when Nat whispered into my mouth. I almost didn’t hear him.

“Please.”

“Please what?”

“N-nothing.”

I gripped his cheek, forcing him to meet my eyes. I could barely concentrate with the feel of him on top of me and the fact he didn't stop grinding his hips wasn't helping, either. I don't think he even realised he was doing it.

“Tell me.”

“Do you, uh, want to fuck me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why the hell wouldn't I want to fuck you?”

“There is that.”

“Get on your knees.”

I stumbled out of bed, nearly falling into my desk as my feet got tangled in my discarded towel. I rummaged in my drawer and grabbed my lube, which was on top of everything else because I'd been having a lot of fantasies recently. When I turned back to Nat, my breath caught in my throat.

He was on his hands and knees, his broad back smooth and shining, his firm round ass displayed for me. Nat was every fantasy I'd ever had come magically to life.

My fingers felt thick and clumsy as I opened the lube and dribbled it down his crack. He gasped when I ran my finger over his pucker and I paused.

“You want to stop?”

“No. It feels good. Please keep going.”

He thrust his ass back at me and I took that as proof he wanted it. My first finger breached him steadily and I stretched him around it but the second was harder to get in. My whole body was shaking with need, every sense on high alert, and I fought against my own desires to make myself go slowly.

At last, I had four fingers inside him and he was slippery with lube.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

He bent his elbows and rested his shoulders on the bed, presenting his ass to me like a prize. I didn't know what I'd done to earn this kind of good luck but I took it.

Lining myself up, I breached him as slowly as I could. His channel squeezed around me, choking my dick and making it pulse. Damn, I was close. Nat's body felt too good to handle.

By the time I was fully seated and had waited for him to adjust, I had myself under control. Just.

I slid my cock out of his ass a few inches and watched it, fascinated by the sight of me inside my man. When I pushed back in, I grunted with pleasure.

“Harder,” he demanded. “I want you to fuck me.”

That was what I wanted more than anything, but I didn’t want to hurt him. My dick was stretching his ass and no matter how much lube I’d used, I wasn’t sure it was enough.

“Did I stretch you enough?”

“Yes, I’m ready. Just fuck me already. I can take it.”

His words settled something inside me. The way he growled them out, impatient and demanding. He wanted this.

So I let go.

I thrust into him, using all my weight and strength to drive myself forward. He keened out a cry and, for a second, I thought I’d hurt him, but then I heard the words mixed with the sound.

“Fuck, yes, at last. Like that, please like that.”

I pounded into him, not holding anything back, gripping his hips and yanking him back to meet my thrusts.

My lips were pulled back in a growl, which I heard vibrate around the room, along with the slapping sounds of our skin meeting in a sticky, sweaty mess. I had never been so turned on.

It didn't take long for my orgasm to start building. Nat's hole was so tight, his big body so strong and supple beneath me, and I leaned down over him, driving in to him harder, and reached for his cock.

When he came, I felt it in his ass. The tight squeeze around me was more than I could take and he milked my climax out of me. I've never come as hard as I did then. Even his hand on my dick hadn't felt as good as surging into his tight heat and burying myself there.

As he shuddered beneath me, my balls drew up and my dick throbbed, sending come pulsing out into my alpha's hole. I filled him, feeling my orgasm drag out with the satisfaction of it.

But something was wrong. The pleasure didn't fade, it just kept coming. I swear I'd pumped him so full, it must have been uncomfortable, but my orgasm was shimmering over my skin still and I just held on, gripping his hips and crying out.

It was only as I finally began to come down from my high that I realised my dick was growing. I felt my knot expand and lock us in place, joining us together.

He gave a groan and shuddered beneath me again, clenching around my knot and making me gasp with pleasure. Tightening around my knot must have jolted his prostate because he shuddered and shivered and groaned until at last he quietened.

Shit, I'd just knotted an alpha. Specifically, *this* alpha.

He would know exactly how I felt about him now.

Still panting and breathless, he said, “I gotta lay down. Gunna collapse.”

He was still on his knees, so I held his hips and tried to manoeuvre us both down onto our sides. That seemed like it would be the best angle for us both, since we’d be stuck like this for a while.

I was glad that I’d taken him from behind. It meant I didn’t have to look him in the eye now. I was spooning him as we lay there, my dick buried in his ass and tugging on his rim every time he moved even a little. It felt amazing, which weirdly made me feel worse about it. I knew I’d regret it. If I’d learned anything from life, it was that revealing too much never went well for me. It was just that I had no more control over my knot than any other alpha out there.

But it felt so *good* right now.

“How long will this last?”

“I don’t know. Sorry,” I mumbled.

Nat had been all boneless and relaxed but he twisted round to peer at me over his shoulder, and it tightened his muscles around my knot.

I couldn’t even help the groan I let out. I’d had no idea that knotting felt so incredible.

“You’ve never knotted before?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

“Really?”

He was quiet for a moment, and I thought he was going to ignore that question since it was so personal and none of my business, but then he said, “No, I haven’t. I don’t think I will. I’m not interested in that.”

There was something lurking behind his words, a darkness I didn’t associate with Nat at all. It made me feel suddenly cold, despite the work-out we’d just done.

“No,” I said. “Guess not.”

Of course, since everyone knew that knotting was an unconscious bodily function, and since it only happened with... people who were important to you, it was incredibly clear what Nat was saying. If he wasn’t interested in knotting his partners, it was because he didn’t care about them. Didn’t care about *me*.

A wave of humiliation rolled over me. How could my body have done this to me? I’d basically just given him absolute proof that I was in love with him and he’d only been here for a good time.

My knot would go down in a few minutes – the average time was supposed to be between five and fifteen minutes – and he’d get the hell out of here and never come back.

I buried my nose in the back of his neck and tried to breathe in his scent, since it had calmed me so much earlier. Whatever magic it had worked before, though, was gone. My mind raced with a thousand thoughts and each one was as unhelpful as the last.

It didn't help that every time Nat moved, even a little, he squeezed my knot and I felt a fresh wave of pleasure. The humiliation and the pleasure were warring inside me, making me feel sick. I'd never felt so close to Nat, and yet so distant.

Chapter 13: Nat

I'd had all night to think about what happened.

I'd heard the strain of uncertainty in Josh's voice when he'd knotted me and my heart had gone out to him. I'd wanted to make it better for him, stop him feeling so vulnerable. He was such a tender man. If ever I met Josh's father, I was going to kill the bastard for making Josh feel anything less than perfect.

It should have been a beautiful moment between us but it seemed Josh had been wrapped up in the toxic masculinity of alphas for too long and thought it was something shameful. I knew exactly what the macho alphas said about knotting. That it was a sign of weakness. That it showed emotions. That it gave your omega power over you.

I'd heard a lot of locker-room 'banter' over the course of my life and it had got old really quickly. In my last school, the biggest insult an alpha could give another was to suggest he'd knotted someone.

Even I wasn't immune to that constant barrage of ideas. For years, I'd been *glad* that I hadn't knotted anyone. And then I'd been a bit concerned that my body wasn't doing what it was meant to. And then I'd realised that I was never going to knot my partners, even when I'd been with other alphas.

It had taken me a long time and a lot of soul-searching to get used to that idea. And I'd been so proud of myself for accepting it, for accepting that part of me. Until yesterday.

Lying there with Josh, with his knot filling me up so good, pressing against my prostate gently in a way I'd never imagined – kind of arousing but not too much, since I was still

sensitive after coming – I’d realised I was ashamed of the fact I’d never knotted anyone.

Even the lads at school had come to appreciate that knotting was natural. I’d been convinced that half of them were knotting their cute girlfriends and boyfriends long before they’d ever admitted it. But the fact was that, somewhere along the way, most of those alphas had grown up and matured. And I... was never going to do that. I just wasn’t designed for knotting.

At least, not being the one *doing* the knotting. I’d learned tonight that I had a big, big thing for *being* knotted.

I’d wanted to tell Josh that but he’d retreated from me. He couldn’t get away physically, not for ten minutes, but he retreated from me emotionally and it was like he wasn’t even in the same room.

It worried me.

I’d thought we were getting closer these past few weeks but, suddenly, we were back at square one.

I had been mulling it over all morning and my mood was about as low as it ever got. Normally, I was a happy person. I didn’t stay down for long. A whole morning of brooding was off the charts for me.

From behind me, Grandad asked, “Got something you want to share with the class?”

He was leaning in the kitchen doorway and I could see he was tired from walking even that short distance.

“No.”

He raised a sassy eyebrow and I relented.

“Ok, yes. I’m having romantic problems. Come and sit down.”

I pulled out a chair and got him settled in it while I leaned against the sideboard.

“Romantic or sexual?”

“Ew, Grandad, don’t say sexual.”

“Just asking. We need to be clear about what we’re talking about.”

“Fine, fine, I guess both? I’m having romantic problems *because* of my sexual problems.”

“And what exactly is the problem?”

No matter how much Grandad and I gossiped together about how cute alphas were and however much he supported me being my authentic self, it was a different thing to talk about sex with him.

On the other hand, if I was going to talk about my sex life with anyone, I guess it would be Grandad. He always had good advice.

“Well, I, um, have certain preferences in bed.”

Grandad nodded. “Uh huh. Lots of folk have preferences. What makes you think yours are a problem?”

“Because I’m an alpha.”

“You’re going to need to clarify that. I don’t see a problem.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face and decided that I couldn’t bear to keep feeling so unsure about it, so I might as well tell him and see if he could help.

“I don’t like to top.”

Grandad nodded. Waited. Then asked, “So what’s the problem?”

“I don’t like to top, Grandad.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“Because I’m an alpha.”

“So you think you’re meant to like topping?”

“Exactly.”

“I would have thought you of all people would know that was bullshit, Nat. Is your alpha trying to pressure you into

topping him?”

“No. But when I said I didn’t like that, he went really... distant.”

“Maybe it was just surprise. He might have assumed you would want to, since you’re an alpha, and he needed a moment to get used to the idea. What’s the matter, anyway? Does he not like topping either?”

“No, he definitely likes it.”

I could feel my whole face flaming as I admitted to my grandad that Josh had blown my mind when he’d fucked me. And I knew Josh had liked it because, hello, knot.

“So he likes topping. You like bottoming. I’m still struggling to see what the problem is here.”

“What if he... gets bored or something? Wants someone vers?”

Grandad tutted at me.

“Rubbish! I only ever bottomed for your Grandpapa and we had a very fulfilling sex life for forty years.”

I pretended to gag. “Thanks for over-sharing, Grandad.”

He looked at me, deadly serious, and said, “Any time. So what are you going to do about your alpha?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“Not... really.”

The very brief words we’d had after sex did not count as a conversation.

“So that’s your first step already sorted,” said Grandad. “See how easy it is when you share with me?”

I smiled at him. “I know you’re joking but talking to you really does make it easier.”

“Who does your alpha talk to?”

“Josh, Grandad. His name is Josh.” That was a big step for me. I’d had a few boyfriends there and there, and a lot of one-night-stands, but I’d never introduced them to Grandad. Never felt they’d be around long enough to ask him to bother learning their name. Grandad was going to need to remember Josh’s name, though.

“Josh, then. Who does he talk to?”

“I don’t know. He’s not close to his family.”

“Friends?”

I thought about the football team who hardly ever glanced at Josh once the final whistle had blown. He’d never gone out

with them, not when I was there. I'd thought at first he was avoiding me but I'd asked a few of them and they'd looked at me confused, as though wondering why I was asking about him in the first place. I'd come to the conclusion that Josh didn't normally go out with them.

“No, I don't think he has many friends.”

By which I meant I was probably his only friend. And then only since we'd gone to the Blue Bear and started talking again.

“Must be lonely.”

The thought of him being so isolated made a physical pain clench at my chest. No wonder Josh had such a low opinion of himself.

I was going to find him and make him see how much value he had. How wonderful he was. And I was going to do it today.



I sent a message to Josh, asking him to meet me at the Blue Bear. He was already waiting for me when I arrived and his face was as tight and closed-off as ever.

My heart sank. Maybe he did mind that I wasn't interested in topping, after all.

“Hey,” I said. My heart was beating hard.

“Hey.”

I was so used to being the one carrying the conversation with Josh that I automatically began to talk.

“I thought we could play some more darts. Maybe you could teach me how to throw better? Because now I’m back home, I’m thinking of bringing Grandad here on a Wednesday again. He needs to start building his strength up and a darts tournament will be the incentive he needs to get him out of the house.”

“How’s he doing?”

We walked inside. It was quiet with only a few patrons, mostly sitting in groups around the tables next to the windows. A couple of omegas I recognised were playing pool and I gave them a wave as we went past.

I said, “Better, thanks. He just gets tired so easily.”

Josh grunted. “How easy is it for him to stand up and sit down again?”

“Um, easy enough, I guess. The problem is standing for too long.”

“Then he can sit down between bouts. Won’t be a struggle for him to get up each time.”

I was touched that Josh was even thinking about it in that much detail. He ordered our drinks and carried them over to the dart board. But he wasn’t looking at me the way I wanted

him to. He usually looked at me with such desire in his eyes that I felt faint. He was avoiding my eyes and I selfishly wanted that lust back on his face.

I was going to have *The Conversation* now. So we could get to the good stuff, namely Josh kissing me and looking at me and if he wanted to knot me, I'd be ok with that, too.

"Josh, I wanted to talk."

"I thought you wanted to play darts."

"Huh? Yeah, I do. Well, ok, the darts might have been a secondary idea. I wanted to talk first."

"What about?"

Could he sound any more wary? He knew exactly what I wanted to talk about and he didn't like it. It didn't fill me with confidence. But I reminded myself that he'd enjoyed topping me and he liked... maybe loved me enough to knot me. That counted for a lot.

"I wanted to talk about us."

He shrugged. "It's fine. I get it. You don't want a repeat. It was just fun, right?"

If it wasn't for the fact that I'd learned to read him so well over the past few weeks, he'd have convinced me that he really meant that. He sounded like he didn't care at all, and that stung. But there was tension around his eyes and his

shoulders were stiff. He had his hands in his pockets, the picture of casual, but he was as tense as anything underneath.

“Josh,” I said, and reached out.

He stepped back, jerking out of my reach.

“Yeah, fine. It was fun. Let’s play some darts.”

He actually reached for the stupid darts, as though our conversation was over.

Oh, hell no. I was not having that.

“Josh!” I grabbed his shoulder, trying to get him to stop. It was hard and unyielding, proving I’d been right about him being so tense.

“It’s fine,” he said, half-turning towards me.

“You keep saying ‘fine’ but you’re not listening.”

“I didn’t realise you had a speech prepared.” His voice was hard and sarcastic, and it made me feel further from him than I ever had before.

“I’m just trying to talk to you.”

“You said everything you needed to.”

That made me angry. The feeling surged up inside me, filling me. “So that’s it? We’re over, just like that?”

“Guess so.”

“And you don’t have anything else to say to me?”

“No.”

He reached for the darts again and I lost it. I grabbed his shoulders, holding him in place, trying to make him *look* at me. His eyes widened in shock but then they turned cold and hard again, and he shoved me right back. And he was strong.

His shove sent me spinning away and I only just managed to stay on my feet. As soon as I had my balance, I launched myself back at him, grappling with him, pushing him back against the wall. His big body matched mine, his powerful arms pushing back against mine, so strong and unrelenting.

“You can’t just decide we’re over.” I hadn’t even finished my sentence before he’d spun me and thrust me against the wall. I hit it hard, and it knocked the breath out of me. For a moment, I was stunned.

My hands lost their grip and Josh slipped out of my reach. He turned and walked away, straight back through the bar.

I didn’t understand why he would do that. He cared about me. I was absolutely sure of it. We were- we were good together. I liked him. Was falling for him. I wanted us to have a chance, and he was just walking away.

“You *knotted* me, Josh.”

When he spun around to face me, I could see the sheen in his eyes even from ten feet away. Fuck, had I done that to him? I hadn’t meant to make him cry. How had I even done that?

“I know *that* was a mistake. Are you going to hold it over my head forever?”

“What? I’m not—”

“I get it. You don’t give a shit about me. You were having fun, and I took it too seriously. That’s my mistake. But you can fuck off if you think I’m going to make the same mistake again.”

I was too stunned to say anything, and that meant I was too slow to call him back. He walked out the bar, and I let him.

As I leaned against the wall where he’d shoved me, the pretty barmaid came round to collect empty glasses and cast a quizzical look my way. I was staring off in the direction Josh had walked like I expected him back, and my clothes were rucked and crumpled from where we’d tussled.

Slowly, I straightened up and sorted my clothes. And, as I did so, I thought hard.

He’d... cared. Taken it seriously, that’s what he’d said. He’d taken *me* seriously. Taken *us* seriously.

What was the problem then? If he wanted to be with me, and fuck knew I wanted to be with him, then why had he walked away?

The best thing to do would probably have been to leave him alone for a while, let him cool off. My brain wasn't on board with that, though. I needed to know. Now.

Every time I'd had a breakthrough with Josh, it had been because I'd pushed: when we'd first met at the club, it was because I'd approached him; when we'd first started hanging out as friends, it was because I'd asked him; when we'd gone back to his flat together, it was because I'd invited myself along; when he'd opened up to me about how busy his head got, it was because I'd asked; when we'd fucked, it was because I'd asked him to. To get anywhere with Josh, I'd had to ask and ask and ask.

And it was worth it. *He* was worth it. The sweetest, most tender-hearted man I'd ever met, all wrapped up in a hard shell. Sure, that shell was gorgeous and could make me come like a fire hydrant, but a hot fuck wasn't worth the effort I'd been going to. No, it was *Josh* who was worth all that effort.

I wasn't about to let him go now.

I was going to push again.

As I set off after him, marching out into the car park, I figured either he'd become my alpha or he'd punch my lights out. Kill or cure.

Chapter 14: Josh

I stripped out of my clothes the second I got to my room and began to pull on some sports gear. I needed to run off this feeling. I needed it gone. Now. Because I couldn't cope with it any longer.

Knowing I wasn't good enough for Nat had been hard enough, but hearing him tell me I wasn't worth knotting was making my head pound with thoughts. They were beating against my skull, hammering and ringing, giving me a headache.

As soon as I was dressed, I went out of my room and opened the door to leave my flat.

Only I couldn't get out. Because Nat was standing on the threshold.

"Josh, you need to listen to me."

I couldn't open my mouth to tell him to fuck off because the sight of him made my stomach clench and dip. If I opened my mouth at all, I might puke on him.

Although... at least if I did that, maybe he'd be so disgusted that he'd leave me alone. Because constantly being around him was definitely going to be too much for me. I'd thought this morning that I could just be friends with him but it wasn't going to happen.

"I didn't think you'd cut and run because of one little thing. Ok, maybe it's something you need but don't give up on us before we've even started. We can work—"

My flatmate – the one into crafts – opened her door and peered out.

“Oh, it’s you. I wasn’t sure who was talking.”

I nodded at her. Still too close to puking to answer.

Nat gave her a wave and a distant part of my brain noted that if even he couldn’t dredge up a smile, it must be bad. That thought joined the rest circling round my head.

She said, “Do you need me to get rid of him?”

It took me a moment to realise she was talking to me. For a start, I didn’t know what a non-presenting woman was going to do to throw the massive alpha out of our flat. Also, I had no idea why she would choose my side over Nat’s.

I shook my head.

“Ok. But if you change your mind, just let me know.”

She closed her door. I looked past Nat, ready to leave the flat and run. Maybe run forever and never stop.

Nat still barred my way.

“Josh, talk to me. We can work something out. I can- I can try, honestly I can. Can we, um, go somewhere more private?”

May as well.

This wasn't going to hurt any less standing by the front door than it was standing in my room. I led him back to my room and went in.

“Josh, I *know* you like me. I don't understand why you're pulling away over one little thing.”

Little thing? Seriously? He thought this was a little thing?

My voice was tight as I said, “You said you'd never knot me.”

I needed to get a grip on myself before I did something even *more* humiliating. It was fifty/fifty right now as to whether I'd burst into tears or throw up.

Nat's voice was soft and he tugged on the hem of his sweater. “No, I can't.”

“So what do you even want? You don't care about me and never will, so why do you keep pushing me?”

“What do you mean I don't care?”

He was looking me straight in the eye, and it was only because I could see the real confusion there that I answered at all. He really wanted to drag this whole thing out, didn't he? I'd been dumped before – twice, actually – but neither of those times had been this painful. And neither of the omegas who'd dumped me had made me feel quite as small as I felt now, standing in front of the man I wanted more than anything

while he told me that I wasn't good enough for him but we could still fuck around anyway.

"You literally just said that."

"I didn't."

"You did. You said you won't ever like me enough to knot me. Trust me, that put me in my place."

"Oh, fuck, no! Josh, that's not what I meant."

"Really?"

I'd meant to sound sarcastic, but my voice came out with a horrible strain of hopefulness to it, which I hated.

"It's not that I won't like you enough to knot you, it's that I- I don't think I can. I *already* like you, Josh. I like you a lot. More than just *like* you."

"If you liked me that much, you'd knot me. It's an unconscious reaction. You can't stop yourself. It's a pretty clear indication that you're not interested."

"No, Josh, you're not listening. I *do* like you, but I- I don't think I can fuck you."

"What?"

"I don't think I can fuck you. I don't like that. Never have."

From the way he was avoiding my eyes, the whole way he was holding his body like he was expecting a blow, I knew he was serious.

I took a step closer.

“You don’t like topping?”

“Not really.”

He was still looking down. The shame was radiating off him, burning my skin. And then it clicked.

“You’ve never liked topping anyone else, either.”

“No.”

“Not at all?”

His voice was barely a whisper now. If I hadn’t seen his lips move, I wouldn’t have been sure he’d answered.

“No.”

“But you like me? You like being with me?”

I figured we needed to be clear about this. So far, we’d had piss-poor communication and, yes, while I owned that most of that was my fault, Nat hadn’t exactly been an open book either, if this was the first I was hearing about this.

Especially since he'd been dominant in our first encounter and had more than matched me ever since.

“Yes, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I *do* like you. And I know you like me. I just... don’t want to top you. I- I like bottoming.”

I closed the gap between us and grabbed onto his head and his shoulder.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you say so?” I growled, just before slamming my mouth down over his.

He went still for a second, I pressed into him, and then he surged up, his mouth opened, his tongue pushed between my lips, his hands locked onto my hips and yanked me closer, and he owned me completely.

My body lit up in the way it did whenever Nat touched me and I tried to pull him closer, to *be* closer to him. I never wanted to let go.

We kissed and kissed, each of us trying to fuse ourselves together. We only stopped because he pulled back. I nearly had a panic when he did but he was holding me so tightly that I couldn’t have got away without a fight and he only pulled his head back enough to look me in the eyes.

“You don’t mind?”

“That you only want to bottom?”

“Yeah.”

“Did I give the impression that I did?”

“Most people want an alpha who dominates them.”

“Bullshit.”

“You don’t like it when I push you back?”

“I love it, but that doesn’t mean you’re dominating me. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’re pretty well-matched.”

“You don’t want to be fucked by an alpha?”

It took more courage than I’d ever needed to have in my life to say what I said next. I took a deep breath.

“No, I want *you*. I like it when you take charge, but you don’t need to top me to do that. And I like that I can push you, too, and you can take it.”

“Are we going to, you know, be together now? Boyfriends?”

Nat wanted to be my boyfriend? My brain short-circuited. The hammering thoughts stopped completely. Everything was silent.

Nat looked away. “Ok, maybe that was too fast. If you don’t want—”

“I want that. Do *you* want that? You want to be mine?”

“Yes.”

My voice was more growl than anything but he heard the words. “You’re mine, Nat. You’re *my* alpha.”

Then Nat did something I’d never have expected. He gave a little whimper.

“Thank God.”

“You’re mine,” I repeated, and dragged his mouth back to my own.

Chapter 15: Nat

I had tears in my eyes as he kissed me. They were tears of relief that he did want me, that he was giving me exactly what I needed.

They were also bitter tears that somehow we'd miscommunicated so badly that I'd hurt Josh in a way I hadn't even known was possible. He'd thought I meant I didn't care about him, when I'd meant to say I didn't want to top him. I couldn't remember our exact words, so I couldn't work out where we'd gone wrong. All I knew was that we needed to make sure it didn't happen again. And I could do that. I would make sure of it.

When he moved his lips down my jaw to suck up a mark on my neck, I cried out with the pleasure of it. It felt good, to have his lips on my sensitive skin, the warm stroke of his tongue and the nip of his teeth, but more than that, he was marking me. Claiming me as his. I'd go out into the world tomorrow with a hickey on my neck and everyone would know that I was taken.

Caveman shit, I know. But it's what I'd needed for longer than I'd realised.

He began to tug at my clothes and we stripped off, sending them flying around the room. He sank down, kissing down my chest, running his hands down my sides to my ass and grasping it. I looked down to see him on his knees before me and my heart filled with joy. I reached out to brush my fingers through his hair and he kissed my hip and my thigh and the base of my cock and then he stopped, looked harder at my hips.

"Fuck, did I do that to you?" he asked.

I looked down at where his eyes were snagged on my hips. There was a series of finger-sized bruises all along my hip bone where he'd grabbed me and pounded into me. I'd known at the time he was holding me tight, that he might mark me, but I'd loved it. I'd wanted those marks.

He traced the bruises gently with a finger-tip.

"They don't hurt," I said. Not much, anyway, but he didn't need to know that.

"I'm sorry."

I gave him a seductive grin. "I'm not."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll tell you if I want you to stop. Otherwise, don't. Let me decide what I want, Josh." I tugged at his hair. "For the record, that's you. I want you."

He surged up and his lips met mine. We stumbled our way across to the bed and fell heavily against each other. We were a tangled mess of limbs and kisses and I loved every second of it.

When he finally reached for the lube, I rolled over to present my ass to him. He squeezed my cheeks possessively and began to rub a lubed finger over my hole.

Feeling him inside me was incredible. I rocked back onto his fingers as he stretched me. He didn't show me any mercy

as he readied me to take his cock. His fingers speared into my ass and I was almost sobbing with relief. Finally, finally, my body was being used the way I'd craved for so long.

I nearly begged when he withdrew his fingers. He growled in my ear, the sound low and dominant. "I'm going to knot you again."

"Oh God, yes! Yes, do it, knot me."

My whole body was crying out for it, the hardness of this man taking me and making me his. He pulled back and I gave my own growl of displeasure at the cool air I could feel against my skin. I wanted him there. I wanted his hot skin pressed against mine, slick with sweat and burning me.

He tugged at my shoulder. "Turn over."

I twisted round and he shoved me down, practically throwing me onto the mattress beneath him and not giving me a chance to move again once I was there. His whole body pressed me down, pinning me in place. He was hot and hard, his erection slid against my own and his breaths came in short bursts, panting with the pleasure of it.

I shoved against him, using my strength to push him up off me. I didn't want him to stop touching me, I just wanted to feel him push back against me. And he did. Fuck, did he push back.

In a second, I was flat on my back with my hands pinned over my head and Josh's mouth on mine, tearing hungrily into our kiss. My body was on fire, burning up, so hot for this man that I could hardly stand it. And he pinned me in place so I'd

have to stand it. I'd have to stand it for as long as he wanted me to. It was almost too good to be true.

I'd never been able to push other men like this. Omegas were so small I worried they'd break. Non-presenting men could sometimes match me but alphas... they were bigger and stronger. I'd never had one like Josh, though. He fought me for dominance the whole time, sometimes winning, sometimes not.

When he let go of my hands and slid his big palms down my body, he gripped and squeezed my flesh like it was his to touch. Then he slid them down my thighs and pushed my legs back towards my chest.

"Like this. I want you like this."

I practically hauled his body into position over me, begging him to fill me up. When he pressed his cock head against my hole, I pushed out, concentrating on not tensing up.

"Fuck, Nat, you feel so good. So perfect."

Me? Hell, if anyone felt perfect, it was *him*. His thick cock was spreading me wide, stretching my hole and filling it, forcing me to let him into my body. My dick twitched.

"Fuck," he said again. "So hot."

From the way he said it, I assumed it was a good thing. His voice was thick with lust and gravelly. I liked that I made him sound like that. I liked that I could growl and snap at him and he'd take it, match me, give it back to me.

When he bottomed out, he held still and I licked the sweat off his neck.

“Not going to last long.”

“Me neither. Fuck me already.”

He did. He pounded me hard and I had to grip the headboard to stop him from fucking me up the bed. My muscles tensed and I felt him draw near, just like me.

He gave a low growl, I felt his dick throb inside me, the hot semen pumping out and the deliciously dirty sound of him fucking in and out with his come leaking out my hole.

Then it happened. What I’d been waiting for, craving, all this time. His knot began to swell. I recognised the feeling and it filled me, pushing everything close to the surface. All my feelings seemed to swell out of me along with my orgasm and I cried out, so full, so happy, and my cock shot my seed all over my chest in thick ropes like I hadn’t come in a month.

Inside me, Josh’s knot pressed against my channel and tugged at my rim in a glorious interplay of pleasure and pain.

He collapsed on top of me, his thick body heavy and sweaty.

“Want to move?”

“No.” I slid my arms around his torso, letting my fingers play along the planes of his back. “I want you right where you are.”

“I’m not squashing you?”

“Squashing me just right,” I said. He gave a chuff of laughter and his knot tugged against me, pressing harder, pressing against my prostate. It was almost too good. I whimpered and he groaned.

God, there was nothing like being knotted by Josh.



The easiest way to clean off was to jump in the shower, which we did together. We’d lain in bed together for a while, catching our breaths, feeling his knot joining us. I don’t know about Josh but it was the most at-peace I’d felt in maybe ever.

Climbing into the shower with him, though? Could anyone blame me for getting hard again?

I watched the water stream down his thick body and was on my knees in an instant. It was the first time I’d blown him and he fucked my mouth just the way I liked it. I came on the tiled floor with his taste still on my tongue.

It meant we were both truly sated by the time we clambered out again and went back to his room wrapped in towels. He began searching the floor for our abandoned clothes but I took in the room around me. There were neatly-stacked boxes, a wardrobe, a desk with neat piles of papers and... I walked nearer, studying the marks on the desk. Yes, I was sure that was scuffs from a plant and traces of soil he hadn’t brushed away yet. Actually, the exact same-sized pot as the gift the team had got Grandad.

I turned and saw him looking at me. His face had closed off again. He was wary.

“You gave my Grandad your pot plant?”

“I thought he’d like it.”

“He did.”

We stared at each other, each expecting the other to say something. I don’t know why I thought Josh would do the talking.

I stepped forward until I could reach for him and then I wrapped my arms around his waist.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I leaned my head down on his shoulder. “You know, you don’t have to be afraid of me.”

“Huh? I’m not afraid of you.”

“Yes, you are. You’re afraid you’ll do something wrong. Or say something wrong. Is that why you don’t talk much?”

I heard him swallow. Ironically, I knew the answer just from his body language. I’d learned to read Josh’s movements and his breaths. But I had to wait for him to speak this time.

“Yes.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of that with me. I promise I think you’re worthwhile, Josh. I’m not going to let you go.”

“I’ll definitely get things wrong.”

“Probably. But so will I. It’s just that I want us to be together anyway. It’s not going to be smooth sailing all the way. For a start, we’re going to have to work on our communication.”

“You mean I’ll have to work on mine.”

“No, we’ll do it together. Although we’ll mostly be working on yours, yes.”

He gave a weak chuckle and held me tighter. We stayed like that for a long time, just breathing in each other’s scent and being together.

Chapter 16: Josh

“You don’t have to come out,” he said.

I frowned. “What?”

“You don’t have to come out. Not until you’re ready. If you ever are.”

“Don’t you want people to know you’re my boyfriend?”

He snorted. “If it were only up to me, I’d have a t-shirt printed saying ‘Property of Josh McLean’ and shout it from every rooftop. But it’s not only about me. It’s about the two of us and I don’t want to rush you.”

I noted two things.

Firstly, I was getting Nat a t-shirt like that. He would find it funny and I was a bit more excited by the prospect of seeing him wear it than I’d anticipated.

Secondly, Nat was doing everything he could to make me comfortable. It made me feel safe in a way I didn’t recognise. As though I couldn’t mess up. Or rather, when I *did* mess up, it wouldn’t break us. We’d talk about it. Work through it. Apologise. Kiss. Decide how to move forward.

I felt like part of a team. The *best* team. The me-and-Nat team.

“I’m coming out. I want everyone to know.”

And I didn't want Nat to feel like a dirty little secret, either. He was much more open about this kind of stuff than me. Half the team were his BFFs already.

That made me think.

"Why haven't you come out yet, then? To the team?"

"I have."

"When?"

"I told Sean I wasn't interested in Perdi. That she wasn't my type."

"You realise they were whispering about setting you up with an omega, right?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Because they think you're into men."

"I *am* into men." He gave me a pointed look and swept his eyes over my body.

"Yeah, but they think you're into male omegas."

"Why would they...? Ah shit. I don't think I actually said I was into alphas. I just said I wasn't interested in Perdi." He reached for my hand. "Looks like we *do* actually need to work on my communication skills. I might talk a lot but apparently I'm not always clear about what I mean."

The lingering hurt flared up in my chest, the pain of thinking Nat didn't care for me at all, but I smacked it down. I focused on the feel of his warm palm against mine and his body spread out over my bed in a lazy, content way, and his pretty green eyes studying me.

"We can do that," I said.

He leaned forward to kiss me, already smiling. I fucking loved to see him smiling.

"Are you sure you want to tell everyone?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go. Or Coach will give us laps for being late."



Nat was holding my hand and I was sure he could feel how sweaty my palm was but he never let go.

"It'll be ok," he said.

He'd been saying that every few minutes since we'd left the dorms. I still didn't believe him. I wanted to, though. I wanted to so much.

Swallowing to ease my dry throat, I nodded. I couldn't find my voice just yet. Luckily, for once, Nat didn't push me.

He seemed to sense that I was about on the edge of what I could take.

“It’ll be ok,” he said again. I nodded again.

My fingers flexed around his as we reached the door to the changing rooms. We paused outside and Nat said, “Do you want me to go first?”

I shook my head. We’d go together or not at all. I clenched his hand harder. I knew I must be hurting him but Nat could take it. If anyone could, it was him, and I needed him.

I reached out to push the door open and walked through, Nat following close behind me. We made it two paces before the first person noticed we were holding hands. I saw his eyes flick up to see who’d arrived, then flick down to our hands. He said nothing, though, and turned away. I wasn’t sure if he didn’t care or didn’t want to talk to us.

Nat’s shoulder brushed against mine. He was right beside me. It was going to be ok.

We walked through the room and it had never felt like such a huge, massive room before. It seemed to take forever to reach Nat’s bench. He stopped there and I stopped beside him, dumping my kit bag next to his.

He shot me a reassuring look and I tried to grasp onto that as hard as I was grasping his hand.

Chris shouted, “There you are!” and came bounding up to us. “Hey Josh.”

“Hey.”

“Nat, do you do...”

He trailed off as he saw our hands.

I swallowed and said, “We’re going out. Me and Nat. We’re a couple.”

Chris was the captain and he was a natural leader. He had most of the team hanging on his every word, not that he ever seemed to notice. Whatever he said now would make all the difference.

He took in our joined hands, then studied our faces. I could feel mine was tight with anxiety and tension, ready for the worst, ready to defend myself and Nat. If this went badly, we’d have to fight, head straight for the door, try to get Nat out of here before things got too bad...

Chris grinned. “Congrats. Hey, we need to celebrate this. Drinks tonight?”

I was too stunned to speak but luckily I had Nat. He nodded enthusiastically.

“Sounds great. Can we go somewhere we can dance?” He gave a little shimmy.

“Actually,” said Chris, “that brings me on to my original question: do you do karaoke?”

Nat put his free hand to his chest and asked, “Moi? Of course I do karaoke. You’ll have to fight me for the mic.”

Chris threw back his head to laugh. “Me? No fear – I sound like someone’s running over a frog. But Riley wants to go. You can fight *him* for the mic.”

Nat glanced at me. “Want to go?”

I didn’t want to do karaoke myself but I’d get a kick out of seeing Nat enjoy himself, so I nodded. Chris grinned.

“Great. I’ll text Riley to meet us there after training. I warn you, though – don’t underestimate him just because he’s an omega. Once he wants something, he’s prepared to fight for it.”

Nat smiled at Chris as he bounded away and then he turned to me, leaned close to my ear and whispered. “Same.”

I shivered.

Behind me, Sean suddenly asked, “Did I hear that right? You’re going out?”

We spun around and Sean was standing just a couple of feet away, massively tall and broad.

“Yeah. Problem?”

Maybe my tone was a bit too aggressive because Sean blinked at me like he didn’t understand. “Uh, no. I just

wanted to be sure I'd heard right, that's all. Why would it be a problem for me? I've already *got* a girlfriend."

Nat leapt into the fray and smoothed things over. "Thanks for checking, Sean. Yes, we're going out. Josh was just checking you weren't bothered about the idea of two alphas."

Sean looked baffled. "Nothing to do with me. Why would it matter what I care?"

"Some people like to shout abuse when they don't agree with something. We're not going to stay if that happens."

"Not me. I don't care what you get up to together. You can do whatever your kinky little hearts desire. Love is love and all that. Even if you wanted to date an old man—"

Sean got smacked in the face by a towel, thrown expertly by Liam.

"I've told you, he's not old."

Sean gave a shit-eating grin. "Hey, you could invite your professor out tonight. Do you think he likes karaoke?"

"I doubt it."

"Why don't you ask?"

Liam glared at Sean. "Because I already asked him out and he flat-out refused me. I told you, he thinks I'm a dumb alpha."

Sean stopped teasing Liam and went over, punching him on the shoulder in what was probably meant to be an affectionate way.

“Sorry, man. That sucks.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. I’m going to go out tonight and drink myself into oblivion.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“The best plan.”

As the rest of the room began to talk about going out that night, I leaned into Nat, relaxing for the first time since we’d stepped out of the door.

“Thanks. For—” I couldn’t work out what exactly it was I wanted to thank him for. For being there. For holding my hand. For talking when I just couldn’t. For being strong. For trusting me. In the end, I settled on, “For everything.”

Chapter 17: Josh

Watching Nat do karaoke was hilarious. He liked to sing and dance. Mostly dance, actually. And I loved to watch him. He moved with such fluid movements that he looked like grace personified.

He and Riley did a few duets and then Chris decided to get up on the stage. Nat relinquished his mic to the other alpha and came to stand by me where I was leaning against the wall, out of the way where I could watch.

“How did I do?” he asked.

“Brilliant.”

He preened and I felt a warm glow of satisfaction. Then Chris began to sing.

To say he sounded like someone was running over a frog had been – surprisingly – generous. He was a contender for the worst singer in the history of the world. But he was grinning away like he couldn’t stop and he and Riley sang together. Riley held the tune while Chris pranced around the stage, showing off his muscles and trying to impress his boyfriend. Amusingly, I could see it was working. If they carried on like that, it would turn into a Chippendale show.

We watched them for a while until two women wanted their turn on the stage. Riley handed his mic over reluctantly and Chris pouted like a baby. I found it funny. I was actually having a better time than I’d anticipated.

Riley dragged Chris over to us, by which I mean he held Chris’ hand and walked in our direction and Chris followed

behind like a six-foot lamb.

“Did you like our song?” he asked.

Chris butted in with, “Weren’t we amazing?”

I gave a grunt, hoping they wouldn’t ask me to elaborate. I didn’t exactly want to piss Chris off by telling him that he sang as tunefully as a toilet being flushed.

“I need a drink,” said Riley.

“I’ll get you one. You find a table.”

I took their drinks order and left them, working my way to the bar and reciting the order. By the time I was making my way back over to them, they’d snagged a large table and the rest of the football team had piled onto the chairs. There wasn’t a spare. Riley was sitting in Chris’ lap.

As I got nearer, I saw Nat eyeing Chris. For a moment, I was confused. A few nasty thoughts flashed through my mind: was Nat looking at Chris and wishing *he* was his boyfriend?

Even as the thoughts reared up, the rest of my brain smacked them back down. Of course Nat wasn’t wishing Chris was his boyfriend. Nat was a fucking god among men and could have anyone he wanted. If he was going out with me, it was because he wanted to.

I glanced at him again and was struck by how handsome he was. His broad shoulders, strong jaw and the easy smile.

We were so similar, and so different. The perfect combination.

Riley was laughing at something Nat had said, and I'd missed it because of my mini freak-out. I saw the way Riley threw his head back to full-on belly laugh, and he would have toppled right out of Chris' lap if our captain hadn't had his arms wrapped around his omega. It was cute, seeing them together. And I got an ache in my chest at the way they were joined together, as though they couldn't bear to be separated from each other for even a few minutes. Riley trusted Chris to keep him safe and he let go.

And that was when I realised that Nat's eyes weren't on Chris, they were on Riley. Or the way Riley snuggled further into Chris' chest and the place where Chris' hands held him.

Nat wanted that. He wanted to be held exactly like that.

Once I saw it, it was obvious. The desire, the secret wanting, blazed in his eyes. He had learned to cover those desires, to conceal them from everyone, because he was an alpha and he shouldn't need that kind of thing.

But he did need it. And I wanted to give him everything he needed.

I plonked an orange juice down in front of Chris and one in front of Riley, then went back to get my drink. I put my beer and Nat's down on the table in front of him. He looked up at me and smiled.

“Thank you.”

In answer, I grabbed him and hauled him out of the chair. He was heavy with muscle but nothing I couldn't handle. It was a pleasure to manhandle him and the little gasp I got for my trouble made it all worth it. He'd deny that gasp, if I asked, but I'd heard it. It sent a wave of lust through me.

Before he could do anything to distract me – like touch me in any way because, seriously, I might throw him over my shoulder and carry him out of here like a caveman if he gave me even the slightest excuse – I slipped around him and sat in his chair.

A flash of disappointment in his eyes nearly slayed me. I hadn't just stolen his seat for myself, though.

I grabbed his hand and tugged. He resisted for a second and I thought I'd have a fight on my hands.

“Come here,” I growled, letting a little alpha slip into my voice. I knew he loved it when I did that and I admit I got a kick out of making my man go weak-kneed. Who wouldn't want Nat to look at them the way he looked at me right then? It made me feel full, overflowing with love and pride.

He wasn't sure, though. He didn't resist me as I tugged at his hand but he didn't exactly throw himself at me, either. Probably, he didn't want to do anything in case it was wrong. In case I didn't mean what he thought I did. He didn't want to embarrass us.

With a final, hard tug, I yanked Nat straight into my lap. His ass hit my legs with a jolt and I had my arms wrapped around him, keeping him from falling straight out of my lap.

The look on his face was priceless.

It was shock and a tiny bit of fear and then the fear faded away. I saw him realise what I'd done, realise that I'd done it deliberately, and then a joy unlike any I'd seen on his face before broke across his features.

I pulled him close, dragging his whole body against mine and holding him tightly. I got the impression that he was too overwhelmed to speak. His hand gripped my forearm tightly, a bruising hold. It just about said it all.

Beside us, Riley said to Chris, "You know, you don't have to drink orange juice too. You're not the one who's pregnant."

Chris grinned and said, "I won't drink until you can. We're in this together."

"Yeah? Maybe you want to take some of these weird cravings I've been having, too."

"No, I draw the line at ice-cream and anchovies. I will fully support your right to eat them, but I will also have to close my eyes the whole time you do."

They carried on talking about disgusting food combinations – all of which Riley seemed to be craving – and I realised that they were giving us a moment. It looked like I wasn't the only one who could read Nat's expression, then. I felt another wave of gratitude that Riley and Chris was such great allies.

Nat sank back against me, finally relaxing in my arms.

“Thank you,” he murmured, so softly it was like a gentle kiss.

“I love you.” It was all I could think of to say. It expressed it all. I’d do anything for him.

“I know. You *see* me.”

Satisfaction crept in at the edges of my soul. Somehow, I’d given Nat exactly what he needed.

Burying my face in his neck, I took deep breaths of his scent and peppered the soft skin with kisses. He squirmed on my lap and I realised why Chris always looked so fucking happy with Riley in his lap – the two globes of Nat’s perfect ass pressed down on my groin and rubbed against my cock.

Fuck, I didn’t know how Chris sat like this for so long if it felt so good. I wasn’t sure I’d make it through an hour before I just had to bend my alpha over the table and fuck him hard. Already my cock was filling with blood and Nat shifted round some more, deliberately dragging his ass over my length.

I caught his eyes and saw the glint of mischief in them. Somehow, the sweet, vulnerable man was gone and I knew I was about to be tortured mercilessly.

And I was.

Chapter 18: Nat

I couldn't believe that I was sitting in Josh's lap. I'd always wanted to but never thought I would. That was the sort of thing omegas could do but alphas couldn't. I got it, we were bigger and heavier but still, I'd always wanted to sit in Josh's lap and feel his arms around me and have us talk to the people around us like it was no big deal.

How he'd known I'd wanted it, I don't know, but he did. And he'd made it happen.

I'd seen the hard look he gave the people around us, daring them to have a problem with it. Most of them were actually ok with our relationship – if they even gave us a thought at all – and the few who weren't didn't dare to challenge Josh on it.

His arms were strong and he held me close. I was too big to fit in his lap like Riley fitted in Chris' but I didn't mind. I was an alpha, I loved being an alpha, it was just that I loved that Josh was an alpha, too. At that moment, I shifted in his lap again and felt his erection digging in to my ass. It was exciting to feel him pressing into me, to know having me on his lap was turning him on, to be able to drive him higher as I shifted and squirmed, rubbing myself all along his length.

I could feel the outline of his dick, even feel the head where it pressed against the curve of my thigh. He wasn't just hard, he was rock hard and ready. I was doing that. Having me here was doing that to him.

Every time I moved, his hands tightened around me. I wasn't sure if it was just instinct to hold me closer or whether he was trying to hold me still. Whatever it was, I loved it.

What made it more fun was that I ignored Josh and chatted to the people around us, while all the time I was deliberately turning him on and nobody even noticed. I had a whole conversation with Riley before the pregnant omega began to yawn, covering his mouth with his little hand.

Chris jostled him. “Come on, I’m taking you home to bed.”

“I’m not tired,” he said, just as another yawn broke out.

Chris rolled his eyes so only I could see. “Of course you’re not,” he said, and then lifted Riley straight up as he stood, holding his precious boyfriend in his arms. He nodded at me and Josh. “See you at practice tomorrow.”

“See you there,” I said.

Josh grunted. I wanted to laugh because I knew why he couldn’t trust himself to speak. The urge to laugh faded when his hand wrapped around my throat. He didn’t squeeze but it was a warm pressure against my neck. His mouth pressed right up against my ear and his voice was as thick and gravelly with lust as I had ever heard it.

“You’ve been cock-teasing me for long enough. I’m going to fuck you in the next two minutes and knot your perfect ass. You get to decide: do I do that over this table right here or do I do it in the toilets?”

My dick, which had been sitting comfortably hard, suddenly throbbed. The low sound of Josh’s voice vibrated through my ear and somehow managed to tingle along my balls. I barely managed to gasp, “Out back,” before I was being lifted off the seat.

The next minute was a confusion of faces, walking, Josh's hot hands on me, his lips on my neck, his teeth nipping at my ear and my own dick rock-hard inside my jeans. From the way Josh shoved me through the door to one of the cubicles, I realised that his threat of taking me across one of the tables in front of everyone probably hadn't been as hollow as I'd assumed.

I gave a little whimper and Josh let loose. If I'd thought he was turning me on before, it was nothing to what he did then. The little sharp nips became bites, he gripped my shirt and ripped it open, sending buttons pinging across the tiled floor and forcing my shirt off, then his fingers worked open my jeans and shoved them down around my ankles. I was pushed forward so that I bent over, displaying my hole to him. I got my arms up to rest them against the cubicle wall and let my head hang low, just waiting for everything Josh was going to give me.

He didn't waste time.

I hadn't even heard the tear of foil but I felt the dribble of cold lube against my crack just a second before his fingers swiped through it and wiped it across my hole. He shoved one finger inside me, all the way. He'd learned already that I liked the bite of pain when he stretched me and he gave me everything I wanted.

"Fuck, Nat, you're so tight."

"Just take me."

"Wait a minute."

“Give it to me, Josh.”

I thrust my hips back, trapped by my jeans and by his heavy hand between my shoulder blades, but still able to ask for what I wanted. To demand it.

He slid his finger out and I felt the sting of two of his thick fingers breaching me.

“Yes,” I hissed, and Josh’s hot, wet mouth was on my neck, sucking up marks as he thrust his fingers in and out, spreading the lube round. “Now.”

“Wait a minute.”

“No, now.”

I was practically fucking myself on his fingers, sinking down onto them and riding them. It felt so good to be full, to have my alpha at my back. I wanted more, though; I wanted his cock inside me, wanted to be filled with his come, locked together with his knot.

I got a final bite on my shoulder and then Josh eased back, letting his fingers slip out of me. Instantly, I felt his cock head brush up against my hole.

He eased it in slowly and, despite the fact that it was exactly what I wanted, it was almost too much. The stretch was intense and I couldn’t move. My whole body locked up as it waited for the intrusion to end.

I could tell he was barely half-way in when he stopped and I made a sound of protest. Josh leaned over me, plastering his chest to my bare back and wrapping his arms around me.

“I’ve got you, Nat. Just let me take care of you. I’ll give you what you need.”

His voice was low and demanding, but it was smooth. Soft. Comforting.

“Just breathe, Nat. Breathe through it, that’s right. Relax. Let me in.”

When had I forgotten to breathe? I had to admit, it was easier once I started again. I managed to get my body to relax, I pushed out and Josh slipped the rest of the way inside.

Once he was in, he went still and gave me time to adjust. His dick was bigger than his fingers and it filled me more than I thought was possible.

“So tight, Nat. So perfect. My perfect alpha. Been teasing me all night. Gunna fuck the smug right out of you, baby. You’ve been asking for this.”

I had. I really had.

When he knew I was ready, Josh pulled his hips back, dragging his cock out of my hole until barely the tip was inside me. Then he slammed his hips forward, thrusting inside me all the way.

He set up a brutal pace, slamming into me over and over again. My muscles worked hard to keep me from being plastered to the wall, keeping me bent over where he'd put me. Josh took me like his life depended on it, like I was the only thing on the planet. The focus he gave things was so sexy but when he applied that intensity to me? That made me want to beg him to love me forever.

Maybe I wanted him to somehow become more a part of me, or maybe I wanted him to fuck away the sudden emotion I felt, but I demanded, "Harder."

With a snarl, he yanked my chest up so I straightened. I sank down onto his cock just a little more, making me groan. Then Josh took me like he meant it.

He thrust into me so hard that the slapping of our skin filled the whole room, mixed with our grunts. It was the sexiest sound.

I found myself pushed flat against the wall, plastered to it by my strong boyfriend, held there as he fucked me. The wall was cool beneath my over-heated chest and I leaned my cheek against the smooth surface. Each time Josh thrust inside me, he pushed my hips forward so my dick slid along the wall. Within moments, I was basically humping it, desperate for relief, praying that the smooth surface would give me enough friction to get me off.

The sound of Josh's panting changed. When had I learned to tell the particular sound of his breath just before he came?

"I'm close." His words were muffled by my skin, since his mouth was pressed against my shoulder, biting and sucking and licking.

I was about to reply, really I was, but he changed the angle of his thrusts, driving his dick straight into my prostate and I yelled. My hands scrabbled at the wall, seeking purchase, something to help me get off, but Josh was in control and I was not.

He kept me pinned close enough that I couldn't even slip my hand between my body and the wall to jerk myself off. When I tried, he yanked my hand and pressed my wrist to the wall, leaning his weight against me harder. I hadn't thought it was possible for him to get any further inside me, but apparently it was.

I began to sob with desperation and then I heard his grunt, felt his rhythm stutter and his cock pulse inside me. He filled me with his come, hot and searing my channel. Fuck, I was close. So close.

For an awful moment, I thought that was it, that he'd pull out and we'd be done, but of course he wasn't done. The base of his cock began to swell and I felt it tugging on my rim. He pushed inside me, pressing his groin against my ass so that his knot expanded inside me. It filled me, an unrelenting pressure, pressing hard against my prostate, grinding against it.

It was too much or maybe it was just enough. It was everything.

I came with a hoarse shout that echoed around the bathroom. My orgasm rushed through me and my dick spurted hard. I felt the come pulse out between me and the wall, painting us both, then run slowly down, smeared between us with my final thrusts.

At last, I was done.

My whole body went weak and the only reason I stayed upright was because Josh was plastered to my back, leaning his whole weight against me.

His breathing was slowing down and I heard him swallow. “Damn, you’re always something else, you know that?”

“Considering your knot is still inside me, that had better be a good thing.”

The amusement in his voice made me feel gooey inside. “It is. Here, let me try and sit us down.”

The lid of the toilet seat clanged shut and then Josh lowered us down. Each movement made his knot twist and jolt inside me. It was pressing so hard against my prostate, swelling beyond endurance.

“Is your knot bigger than before?”

“Maybe.”

“Fuck, I think it is,” I groaned as we finally settled onto the seat, me on Josh’s lap, filled with his dick.

His arms were around me, one hand splayed against my abdomen, and his face close to my ear. “Is it hurting you? I can try to get it to go down.”

It was difficult to do, to force a knot down, but it was technically possible.

“No, it’s good. It feels...”

“What?”

I realised that he sounded breathless again and twisted round to look at him. The expression on his face was tight, full of lust and pleasure.

“So hard,” I groaned.

“It is.”

He thrust up, just a little. There was almost no room for movement with the way we were joined together but each time he moved, it sent a wave of pleasure through me, a different pleasure. And, behind me, Josh’s ragged breathing told me I wasn’t the only one feeling that way.

“Nat, it feels so good.”

“Harder,” I begged.

I circled my hips on his lap, forcing his knot to tug against my rim, to press up inside me. It felt like a boulder in my ass, but in the best possible way.

“Love you,” he whispered.

Just as he said it, his knot ground against my prostate so hard that an orgasm surged up through me, shooting out of me before I even knew it was going to happen.

The way I tightened up must have squeezed his dick and milked him because Josh grunted and I felt his dick pulse inside me yet again.

When he'd stopped moving his hips in tiny little thrusts, I sank back against him.

"I love you, too."

His arms tightened around me and I rested my head back on his shoulder.

"I know. It feels good to hear you say it, though."

I gave a contented sigh. "It feels good to finally say it."



We slowly came down from our high, our breaths evened out and my body draped over his in a boneless mass. I looked around.

"You know, we have sex in the classiest of places."

"*You* chose the bathroom."

"It was the best of the two options." I was absolutely certain now that Josh would have taken me across the table if I'd made the mistake of choosing that, and we would have been arrested for indecent exposure.

“You still chose it,” he said, grinning as he kissed my cheek. “You chose it last time, too. When we first met. I followed you into that bathroom without a second thought.”

“I knew you were special the moment I saw you. I wanted you so much.”

He nuzzled into me and I realised he did that more and more, kept his mouth on me, kissing me along my neck or my shoulder, almost like he was sneaking kisses in and I wouldn’t notice if he wasn’t kissing my mouth.

“I’d have followed you anywhere,” he admitted.

“I’m glad you did. I’m glad we got here. That we have this.”

“All this and more, Nat. You’re *my* alpha now.”

I turned my head so we could brush our lips together.

“That’s just how I want it to be. You make me happy, Josh.”

Sitting on his lap in a public cubicle with my come drying on my stomach and his knot still in my ass, I had to admit that I couldn’t be happier.

Epilogue: Josh

Meeting Nat's grandad had been a big moment for me. Nobody had ever introduced me to their family before and I wasn't sure what to do. Whether he was just naturally very relaxing to be around or whether he noticed that I was in full-blown panic mode, I don't know but Archie put me instantly at ease.

He didn't bat an eye when Nat held my hand.

In fact, I relaxed so much that I almost missed it when the two of them began plotting to win the darts tournament at the Blue Bear.

"Excuse me, what was that?" I asked.

Nat had been leaning forward, planning, and he sat up to look back at me.

"I said, I'm not sure whether team t-shirts are a thing in amateur darts."

"Yeah, before that."

"You mean when I said you and Grandad would definitely win?"

"Yeah, that."

Nat's forehead wrinkled. "But you will win. At least, you stand a good chance."

It looked like I'd been right. Somehow, Nat had signed me up to play darts with Archie at the Blue Bear. And I... didn't mind. Actually, I was sort of looking forward to it.

"Cool," I said.

Nat flashed me a smile and hunched forward again, asking, "What would your team name be, anyway?"



I had expected the Blue Bear to be a bit more crowded on a Wednesday night but I hadn't expected half the people there to be members of my own football team.

We ushered Archie through the bar to the far end where we could get him a seat and Chris was already shouting over the noise, "Hey Nat, Josh! Over here, we got a table."

I glanced at Nat, who shrugged, and we headed straight over. They were sitting round a small table and the chairs were crammed in tightly. Several of them were standing round because there weren't any chairs left.

"How did you know we would be here?" I asked.

"Nat was telling us about it."

I studied Chris, who began to look a little sheepish and ended up mumbling, "Thought it was about time."

Riley leaned around his alpha. "We thought we'd come and cheer for the team."

Several of my teammates around me gave various affirmations.

“Yeah.”

“Exactly.”

This was Riley’s doing. I could tell. No way would they all have come out to watch me playing darts, of all things, unless he’d asked Chris to do it.

The omega gave me a brilliant smile and I nodded back.
“Thanks.”

Liam, who was standing, elbowed Sean, who was sitting. Sean said, “What? What was that for?”

Liam nodded at Archie.

I looked over at him and saw he had rested a hand on the back of a nearby chair, to steady himself.

Sean stood up.

“Hey, man, take my seat.”

“That’s not necessary,” said Archie, even though it was plain to everyone that it was.

“Nah, no problem, man.”

Liam pulled the chair out and held it steady, and Nat ushered Archie forward. He sank into it with obvious relief.

Chris asked, "What can I get you to drink, Mr. Windlow?"

"A gin and tonic would be lovely, thank you. Tell Megan it's for Archie and she'll put it on my tab. You know, I probably wouldn't notice if a certain football team added the odd pint to my tab."

He gave Chris a wink. Chris laughed and went over to the bar with a couple of the guys in tow.

Riley asked, "So when does the tournament begin?"

I looked at my watch. "Soon."

In fact, we'd just have time to get our drinks and then we'd be up.

Chris came back with several drinks. He saw his chair had been nabbed and so scooped Riley up out of his chair and deposited him on his lap before lifting his glass to Archie.

"To Team Windlow."

The whole team raised their glasses and drank deeply. Just in time. I heard the emcee call for all players to go up to the board and held my arm out for Archie to use as leverage to stand. He gave a satisfied smile. "It's been a while since a handsome alpha has been this considerate to me."

Before I could brush off his praise, Riley said, “Josh is always looking after omegas.”

I don’t know whether I was more surprised or Archie was.

I blustered, a little embarrassed by the unwarranted praise. “I just changed your tyres. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Riley was already shaking his head vehemently. “*And* saved me from the werewolf that was about to eat me!”

“It wasn’t even full moon.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “Don’t encourage him.”

Riley smacked his hand gently against Chris’ stomach. “You’re the one who said you and Josh would protect me from zombies.”

Chris grabbed his hand. “And we will, I promise.”

“See,” Riley said to Archie, as though he’d just proved a point. By this time, I had no idea what point he was proving. “Josh always looks after omegas.”

Archie patted my arm and let go – once he was standing, he liked to walk independently as much as he could. Nat leaned in to me. “Do I need to worry about all these omegas you’re looking after? You got an omega kink you’re hiding from me?”

I snorted. “No, I haven’t. I really haven’t. Like, really, *really* haven’t.”

Nat was grinning at my excessive rambling. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Because you haven’t denied it enough.”

I grabbed him and wrapped my arms tightly around him, pulling him close to me and pressing our bodies together. Just the feel of all this alpha man in my arms was making my blood sing with excitement.

“I’m sure. I’m an alpha who’s into alphas. Specifically, I’m into you.”

“I’m going to restrain myself from making a joke about not being into me yet but maybe later.”

I pulled him tighter to me, squashing us both. “Much appreciated.”

He dropped a kiss on my lips. “Good luck.”

“You don’t need to stay and watch, you know. It won’t be that interesting.”

Nat flashed me a flirty smile and said, “Watching my alpha is always interesting. It’s high on my to-do list.”

I felt the glow inside me. I was feeling that more and more these days, and it had taken me a while to get used to the sensation of safety and love.

“Besides,” added Nat, “I am a great cheerleader.”

Archie called from across the room, “You’re a better cheerleader than you are darts player.”



“Well done!”

Nat sounded so thrilled that I actually had to check: “You know we didn’t win, right?”

“But you *nearly* won.”

Archie chuckled. “We’ll win next time. I was just getting my eye in this time round.”

I nodded. “We sure will.”

Archie looked round at the gathered team and smiled. For an older man, he was still very handsome. He looked so much like Nat it was uncanny, only in a slight, omega way.

“Right, I’ll be heading off now. That’s more than enough excitement for an oldie like me.”

There was a chorus of protests, all imploring him to stay. He waved a hand airily.

“You young ones enjoy the rest of the evening. I’ve got a taxi outside, waiting to take me home to bed.”

He said goodbye to everyone and Nat and I walked him outside. Before he got in the taxi, he patted Nat’s cheek and

said, “You chose well, son. You’re just like me – a sucker for dark eyes.”

I glanced at Nat, hoping to see him blush and was rewarded. He’d said something about the way I looked at him turning him on. I didn’t know what I did when I looked at him – I just looked, and I liked what I saw. It wasn’t like I could help my facial expressions anyway.

Nat cleared his throat. “Again, thanks for oversharing, Grandad.”

Archie grinned. “Always a pleasure.”

He levered himself into the back seat of the taxi and I waited until he was settled to close the door. His face peered out at me from inside.

“My Nathan really did make a great choice, son. I couldn’t have asked for a better grandson-in-law.”

He slammed the door and the taxi pulled away. He gave us a cheery wave as though what he’d said was just a random goodbye, like it hadn’t shaken my entire world. I was still blinking after him, trying to clear the water from my eyes, when Nat sidled up beside me and took my hand.

“Uh, I guess my grandad accidentally proposed for me.”

“I know it was a joke,” I said quickly.

Nat leaned over and rested his head on my shoulder.

“Not a joke. Just a bit early, that’s all. Besides, I want a much better proposal story to tell our grandkids.”

I nodded. I could arrange that.

Read Liam's story next

Want to know whether Liam will ever be able to impress his professor enough to finally get that date?

Available for [pre-order](#) NOW!

Liam has been in love with Waggoner for months but impressing the hot silver fox is harder than he thought.

When Waggoner needs help, it's the perfect opportunity for Liam to spend time taking care of him. Surely Waggoner has to notice him now...

ALPHA'S OMEGA PROFESSOR (Sweet in Silford 6)

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

Available for pre-order!

Out Friday 9th December 2022

Treat yourself now and get it delivered just in time to be the perfect fluffy escapism from all the seasonal chaos.

Pre-order [now](#)

Leave a Review

Please leave me a review or a star rating!

If you enjoyed *Alpha's Secret Alpha*, let other readers (and me) know.

Reviews mean the world to me so take just a few seconds to give tender-hearted Josh and Nat a star rating.

Hope x

Stay in touch

NEWSLETTER

Sign up to Hope's newsletter [here](#)!

Get updates about her latest novels and releases. No spam, just latest releases, offers and freebies.

Claim your FREE short story from the Dragon's Mate series.

WEBSITE

Check out Hope's website <https://hopebennettauthor.com/>

GOODREADS

Join Hope on Goodreads [here](#).

TWITTER

Find her on Twitter [@HopeBennettAut1](#)

EMAIL

Email Hope at hopebennettauthor@gmail.com.

AMAZON

Follow Hope Bennett on Amazon [here](#)!

More books in the series

OMEGA'S SHY ALPHA (Sweet in Silford 1)

Jared is sexy and confident. He can have any alpha he wants. Except the one he really wants: Sutton. His alpha is so shy, Jared's going to have to take matters into his own hands if they're ever going to get together. It's for the best. All Sutton has to do is say yes.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

OMEGA'S SWEET OMEGA (Sweet in Silford 2)

Richard is prepared to take things slowly, if that's what his omega needs. Gui is too shy to speak to his secret crush, Richard. Luckily, his best friend, Jared, has appointed himself fairy godmother. He's certain he can get Gui out on a date.

And a date can lead to more...

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

DELETED SCENE (Sweet in Silford 2)

Richard takes Simon to Tony's party, determined to have a good time. Get this slice-of-life chapter to see what drunk Richard is like and who his favourite Simon is.

[Read it for FREE](#)

OMEGA'S STUDY PARTNER (Sweet in Silford 3)

Simon is always the best friend, never the boyfriend. Meeting gorgeous omega, Angelo, brings home to Simon exactly what he wants... and what he thinks he can't have. Luckily, Angelo is smitten with the sweet alpha who stands up for him. But they're both about to get more than they bargained for.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

ALPHA'S BRAVE OMEGA (Sweet in Silford 4)

When Riley's car is targeted for vandalism, he's scared. Luckily, the alpha he has a secret crush on comes along to save him. Chris is determined to protect Riley from all the monsters, but not all surprises are bad...

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

Other books by Hope

FAMILY OF FIRE (Dragon's Mate book 1)

This is the first in my dragon shifter series, so start here to read about Lew and Morgan, the first dragons to find their fated mate comes from their rival clan.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

HEART OF FIRE (Dragon's Mate book 2)

Discover Dane and Seren's long road to love. Being kept from their mate was killing them both. But being together could be just as dangerous.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

PROTECTING PRINCE (Dragon's Mate book 3)

Prince knows Darren is his mate the moment he scents him. But he just can't keep it together long enough to woo his mate.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

MEET THE IN-LAWS (Dragon's Mate short)

Prince is about to meet Darren's family for the first time. His nerves aren't helping. Can Darren keep him calm enough to get through the introductions?

[FREE STORY](#)

A VERY MATED CHRISTMAS (Dragon's Mate novella)

A seasonal novella from the Hoskins' castle. Lew needs to show Morgan the true meaning of Christmas, Seren is excited to be spending a family Christmas with Dane, and Darren has a surprise planned for Prince.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

WITCH MATE? (Dragon's Mate book 4)

Anthony is in trouble and he has nobody to turn to for help. Except the cute dragon shifter he's never met but can't get out of his mind. Will Dimpy protect the witch who turns up at the Hoskins' castle?

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

BREAKING FREE (Dragon's Mate book 5)

Dum needs to free Matty from his chains. When he finally gets out of the priest's coven, Matty is determined to right some wrongs. And Dum? Well, he'd just love to help his mate do that.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

UNWORLDLY (Dragon's Mate book 6)

Randall has been sent to get his sister, Marcia, back but that rude troll is always hanging around, irritating Randall beyond reason. Broadmire might find it just a bit too much fun getting under Randall's skin.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

THE ASSISTANT CRISIS (Magician's Luck 1)

A series of M/M Romances with a sprinkling of magic. Clueless magicians, surly assistants, steamy interludes and a happy ever after.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

THE FAMILY MISFORTUNE (Magician's Luck 2)

This follows on from book 1. Al is happier than he's ever been. But his new life is threatened by his meddling family. He can't let them scare Sean away... but he doesn't know how to stop them.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

WISH FROM THE HEART (Bric-a-brac Love 1)

A standalone story about a prickly genie, an adorkable master, three wishes and a happily ever after.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

A NEW NORMAL CHRISTMAS (Normal Christmas 1)

Written especially for December 2020, this story proves that love can be found, even in the hardest of times and a little Christmas magic can go a long way.

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

CHRISTMAS ONE YEAR ON (Normal Christmas 2)

Bart and Danny have been together for a year now and they're settling in to their new life together. Can Danny plan the perfect Christmas for Bart once again?

[Amazon US](#)

[Amazon UK](#)

[Amazon CA](#)

[Amazon AU](#)

[Amazon DE](#)

About Hope

Hope is a M/M Romance and Fantasy author. She is an absolute believer in true love, head over heels for a happy ending and always on board for a sprinkling of magic in her stories!

If she's not curled up with a good book, she's out hiking. At least, she tells people it's hiking but really it's just walking with sensible shoes on. She loves to reach the countryside when she can.

Hope embraces the British stereotype by being addicted to tea, glorious tea. She drinks it from mugs and doesn't understand why anyone would try to talk to her before she's had her first one of the day. Let's just say that mornings aren't her time to shine.

Where she really shines is in her writing. Sign up to Hope's newsletter [here](#) to get updates on her latest releases.