

JEWELL
& HER KINGS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROSEMARY A JOHNS

**JEWEL
& OTHER KINGS**

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PACK BONDS OMEGAVERSE

ROSEMARY A JOHNS

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PACK BONDS

My name is Jewel, and I'm an orphan Omega.

My first heat is coming, and the only pack who I want to spend it with are forbidden. Growing up in foster care in the billionaire King pack, I was chosen as a companion for the abandoned Alpha. He's everything that an Omega would ever want. My other foster brothers are my best friends: an alluring, blind male Omega, who smells like heaven, and a jock Beta who takes care of us all. Together, we're each other's first loves, home, *everything*.

But then, the Alpha is given the ultimatum to bond with a wealthy Omega... or else. My best friends and I find ourselves fighting for our lives, futures, and love.

But will they still choose me, when they discover my secret?

A jewel. Her kings. A pack bond that changes everything.

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CHAPTER I



Companion House, The Institute

JEWEL

SIX YEARS AGO...

“**T**he Alpha will decide to foster us and then take us home to be loved, Jewel. I’m certain of it,” Didier’s musical French voice purrs. As the rejected Omega son of the French ambassador, he still stumbles over some of his words, struggling with the language. “This morning, we will become his pack.”

I wouldn’t bet on it.

Yet Didier says it with such certainty that my heart aches.

Can I tell him the truth?

Didier’s ocean blue eyes are lit with happiness at the thought of being matched with an Alpha.

I clutch his hand.

After three Christmases stuck in the Companion House orphanage, which is part of the Institute (I would have been a Senior in high school, otherwise), I know that today isn’t going to end in some kind of bullshit miracle.

As an Omega, I feel the desperate craving to be matched, as much as Didier does. Yet he still refuses to believe that even if we’re fostered today, we won’t become part of a bonded pack.

He’s a romantic.

I’ve had to become a realist.

We’re orphan Omegas, which means that we’re not allowed to bond.

This is Didier’s first Christmas in both America and the Companion House, however, because his asshole parents abandoned him here, as soon as he began to lose his vision to the disease, Omega Blindness. And he still thinks that somehow, he’s going back to his previous wealthy life, where Omegas were treasured and not treated as property.

In France, Omegas are like beautiful, precious ornaments, he told me last month, only to be admired and kept safe.

The first time that one of the Betas in Companion House struck Didier with the Discipline Strap, it wrecked him.

He didn’t speak for a week.

Since then, he's become my best friend.

He's the most optimistic person who I've ever met.

Also, scarily feral.

I love that about him. Because I am too. But unlike Didier, I'm not the smallest Omega in Companion House.

Didier's raven black hair is silky and lies in feathered curls around his heart-shaped face. His skin is translucent; his eyes look even bluer in the sea of paleness.

He's wearing the same uniform that I and every other Companion are forced to: black jeans with a thin, scratchy black shirt that has a high collar, as well as a **C** embroidered on the arm.

We're the ones who sew that **C** on.

Didier has pinpricks on his fingers from sewing by touch alone but he never gives up.

Now, that's badass.

I'm shivering, chilled.

I can't feel the tips of my frozen fingers or toes.

I'm not sure, however, if Didier's shaking more from cold or excitement.

I've heard the Betas whisper that Didier's the most beautiful Omega in the Institute.

I blush, studying his plush lips.

What would it feel like to kiss him openly now?

We're standing with the other Omegas in a front room of Companion House, which I've never been in before.

We were led to this reception room by Gibson, one of the Beta Carers (did someone with a fucked up sense of humor name them *Carers?*), who ordered us to *wait*.

We get given lots of short commands like that.

Apparently we're puppies and not Omegas.

I have an IQ of 172 and am being trained as a tutor for an Alpha but I respond better if my *poor Omega brain* only has to *process single words*.

I know that because I sneakily read a copy of *The Ultimate Guide to Training Obedient and Well-behaved Companions*, which one of the Carers left on her desk.

This front reception room is nothing like the draughty, bare space at the back of Companion House where I live, which is hidden from the public.

Orphan Omegas and Betas are held in Companion House, until they're

twenty-one. If they're not fostered by an Alpha by then, they're transferred to the adult wing.

In the reception room, there's a huge fir Christmas tree, which is covered in robin decorations and tinsel, a mahogany desk in the center with a glass bowl of candy, and several cozy looking velvet couches.

Would it be totally undignified to squeal and jump on the couches?

I mean, several of my friends have already broken into the candy and are smeared in chocolate.

Since *wait* means drop to your knees and remain still in silence, I'm guessing that the moment the Beta returns, we're all in the shit anyway.

We can simply blame our *poor Omega brains*, right?

I glance back at Didier's lips.

He's biting them now, and I seriously want to be the one to be doing that.

It's unfair that it's his teeth, which have the chance to bite into that plump lower lip.

I shift from one bare foot to the other.

Am I totally fucked up? Should I be thinking about another Omega like this?

Why do I have such a devastating crush on Didier?

I want to protect him.

Possess him.

Last week, he offered to allow me to kiss him.

We were lying together in the dark.

We're the only two who are allowed to sleep together at night in the same room because I'm the one who offered to help him, as he adjusts to his Omega Blindness.

There were tears still on my cheeks because I'd been disciplined, and my ass hurt.

He pulled me closer, gently tracing the tears with his thumbs.

"Do you want to kiss me?" Didier whispered. "I've never kissed anyone but I'd like you to be my first."

His offer hung between us in the freezing air.

No one had ever kissed me either.

"Why?" I shifted closer to him.

If we were found out, then the Betas would separate us. I couldn't lose him like I'd lost everyone and everything else in my life.

I didn't think that Didier would survive in Companion House without me.

We were both alone, but he was in a strange country and losing his sight.

I was the only one who was bothering to teach him English.

“Because you’re my best friend.” Didier’s lips grazed mine. “Because I like you. Because I want to make you happy.”

I pressed my lips to his.

Didier tasted of a mix of buttery sweetness and the peppermint toothpaste that we all used.

His lips were much softer than I’d imagined.

My stomach felt fluttery.

When Didier sighed into the kiss, it was the best sound that I’d ever heard.

It was like something clicked into place inside me. I knew that I’d never grow tired of making him sound like that.

Didier drew back and began to contentedly purr. It settled something in my heart but startled me as well.

It did every time.

I’d never known any Omega to purr as much as Didier did, and no Omega ever purred in Companion House.

What the fuck was there to purr about?

Normally, Omegas only did, when they were happy and safe.

And that was the problem, which made my guts churn.

Didier truly didn’t understand how much danger he was in.

The steel Reject bracelet, which is welded around his wrist now with a twisted **R** that hangs like an ugly charm from it, marks him out as even lower status than me.

The **R** holds the technology inside that will alert the cops, if he tries to remove it.

Every Reject has to wear one by law.

There are two reasons to be marked as a Rej.

1. Be defective
2. Be rebellious.

Didier is a Rej1. He’s marked as a Reject because of his eyesight.

I and the other nine eighteen year olds in this room are here not as Rejects but rather as Companions because we’re orphans.

I reach up, pushing my long, amber hair back, which hangs in waves to

my waist and touch the violet choker at my neck. A **C** hangs from it, which holds a tracker in it just the same as a Rej bracelet.

I know because the first week that I was brought here after the car accident, which killed my parents, I tried to run.

I didn't try it for a second time.

Not after being dragged back and made an example of to the other orphans, before being locked in the cells beneath Companion House.

There are places in the Institute, which are even worse than the stained mattresses on cold floorboards where we sleep, lessons with the Betas who run this joint, which start at dawn, to make us *good* Companions to Alphas for the rest of our lives, followed by the small amount of time left until midnight, sewing the Companion uniforms in the cramped workshop.

I shudder.

Hell, I miss mom and dad.

I trace my finger over the **C** compulsively, before I glance back at Didier. He's flushed, and the pink on his pale cheeks makes him look even more handsome.

He tilts his head. "Ma raison de vivre, are you studying me again? When you're silent too long, it's what I like to imagine you're doing. Do I perhaps look chic in my stylish outfit? Should I consider a future as a model?"

He pulls away from me to dramatically pose with his hand on his hip, throwing his head back to expose the long line of his throat.

I almost forget how to breathe.

This is why he's been selected today with me as one of the top ten Omegas, despite being a Reject.

The ten Omegas in this room are the smartest, most athletic, best at homemaking — or the most beautiful.

This is what Companions are for.

Several of the nearest look over and giggle.

My lips quirk. "You could be a model."

"Ah, but of course. But then, I would be the shortest model in all of Paris. I would be world famous as le Petit Omega!"

True.

I catch Didier's elbow and drag him closer to me. "The most famous in all of this reception room."

"It's warm." Didier curls his bare toes in the thick, beige carpet with a contented sigh. "Soft."

“It’s nothing like our rooms,” I explain to him, since he can’t see it. “There’s this big ass tree with lights and robin decorations. Ehm, about half of our class are cuddled in a pile under it. There are these snuggly couches at the back. There’s even candy, and Gibson would be losing her shit, if she could see that most of the candy for the guest Alpha is currently being stuffed into her golden child Andy’s mouth.”

“Candy?” Didier’s face lights up. “Can you show me? I want to get a piece to gift you. You said yesterday how sad it was that you hadn’t eaten any in years. Anyway, chocolate should be appreciated by a true chocolate lover and not wasted on Andy. Mon dieu, it looks like you’re already bonded...to chocolate.”

My heart clenches.

“Okay.” I lead Didier by the elbow to the table, rapping on it, so that he knows we’ve arrived.

I restrain myself from snatching a piece, allowing Didier to carefully feel for a piece in gold wrapping and hand it to me, instead.

It feels like this is important to him.

“Thanks. Do you want one?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Happy Christmas.”

I slowly unwrap the golden chocolate, and my breathing picks up.

The last time that I ate chocolate, I was in the back of the car with my parents, before the truck crashed into us and...everything changed.

I survived, but they didn’t.

I can’t think about that now.

Shit.

I take a long, slow breath like I’ve taught myself, willing away the panic.

My heart’s beating so hard that I think it’ll burst.

Didier rests his hand on my hip like he can sense the uptick in my breathing and heart rate. He strokes soothing circles, and I calm.

Then I let the chocolate melt on my tongue.

It’s delicious, and the flavors burst in my mouth like life that I’ve forgotten.

Somehow, it’s worse remembering that food can taste like this, rather than the peanut butter sandwiches, tomato soup, and weak potato stew that we get every meal.

“I’m sorry that I made you sad,” Didier says, softly.

“You didn’t. It’s just a memory of my parents, you know?”

And he does.

A sudden pain flashes across his face, before he can hide it.

I dread Christmas because there's no way to escape what I've lost.

All us orphans and the rejected feel the same here. The world outside and the Carers themselves have their families, but we don't, and as Companions *we never will again*.

We won't get a pack, no matter how much Didier hopes and dreams.

We're being trained to be servants to *someone else's* pack.

I can't let Didier continue to think anything different for a moment longer because it'll rip his sweet heart to shreds.

I grip his hands and twist him toward me. "You're awesome, Didi. You're fierce and loyal and have a witty sense of humor that I'm at least beginning to get."

He arches his brow. "And you are not half bad either."

"Shut up, asshole. I'm trying to say that I like you too, and that's why I'm so scared for you. Because you keep forgetting the Three Rules for Good Omega and Beta Companions."

Didier's expression darkens. "Pfft, I don't forget them. I ignore them. Perhaps, I wish to be a *bad* Companion."

Horrified, I glance up at the security camera, whose red light is blinking at us from the corner.

We're all fucked already, but if it's recording audio, then Didier announcing that he wants to be a *bad* Companion will lead to him being dragged to the same cells that I was thrown into and the type of conditioning that makes me shake with terror.

My lips pinch. "Now, really *shut up*. You don't know what you're saying. I've been here longer than you. The only way to survive here is to keep your head down and repeat those three rules, when you're told to. But not only repeat them, *believe them*. Because they're true. You said that this Alpha who's coming today to choose one of us to take home with him could make us his pack, but that's not going to happen. Tell me, what's rule number three?"

Didier stiffens, and I hate it.

Then he replies on rote, "A *good companion will not seek their own pack bond because they already belong to their Guardian*."

So, he does know the rules.

Good.

“But stupid rules are made to be broken.” He raises his chin, defiantly. “I speak as a good Frenchman.”

I wince, as Andy gives us a sly look.

Andy’s a strong, athletic Omega, who’s destined to be chosen by an Alpha who wants an Omega personal trainer to help keep them fit.

Or who likes the Omegas who they take in as wards to be on the athletic and flexible side.

Andy’s also the biggest snitch in Companion House.

My adrenaline spikes, and my thoughts race.

How the hell can I get Didier and me out of this without us being separated?

I sigh, looping my arms around Didier’s neck and resting our foreheads together. “Didi, listen. I know that you were indulged in your old life, but in this one, we have no rights, status, or protection. We’re being trained to be sold — although they hide it under the term *fostered* — to some rich kid Alpha to help them. They’ll become our Guardian. But we’ll be no more than their servant, even if they call us *ward*, for the rest of our lives because we’ll have no other way to pay off our debt for the food we eat and the roof over our heads. We’re not worth anything. No Guardian ever *bonds* with his Companions.”

Silence.

For an awful moment, I think that I’ve broken my best friend.

Then there’s a sob, and I think that it’s Didier, before I realize with a jolt that it’s *me*.

Instantly, Didier’s nuzzling against my neck in comfort in the way that he loves to do. His curls are soft on my neck; he’s small enough to fit against me, cuddling beneath my chin.

He smells like heaven.

No one else has a scent as delicious as his.

He smells like a buttery croissant with rich almond filling, which is fresh from a bakery.

It’s mouthwatering.

I allow myself to be soothed and enjoy the moment. We’re never normally unmonitored long enough to express affection and soft touches like this.

But omegas need other omegas.

This connection.

Andy glares at us disapprovingly because scent marking each other is forbidden, but I poke my tongue out at him, and he stalks off.

Didier and I are already fucked. Why not rebel properly?

“But I want you.” When Didier tentatively licks my neck like he doesn’t dare do more but is trying to mimic the greatest taboo of all, the Omega on Omega bond bite. “You are worthy. You’re worth more than all the stars in the sky to me, my Jewel. You shine brighter than anyone who I’ve ever met. You’re kind, smart, and smell of sweet, powdery marshmallows. I could eat you, mon amour.”

I laugh through my tears, flushing, as he nibbles on my neck.

Before he can tempt me with his seduction any further (or make a dangerous warmth unfurl through me with talk about how worthy I am), I curl my fingers into his hair and wrench back his head.

He whines, but his pupils are dilated.

I’m beginning to learn how to play his body, and it’s fascinating.

Didier loves having his hair tugged, but gently, not how the Carers drag him around just because he can’t see not to bump into the furniture and they can’t be bothered to guide him properly.

“How about you don’t hump me in front of everyone?” I give a significant look down at his dick, which is tenting his pants, then wish that I hadn’t because it definitely isn’t small, unlike the rest of him.

“How about you don’t be so sexy, you make me explode in my pants? See, both of these are impossibilities.”

I roll my eyes.

I thought that I was horny, until Didier became my roommate.

“Then take a cold shower later.”

“Cruel marshmallow, fluffy on the outside, hard on the inside.” He pouts but then he says in a small voice, “But we are, non?”

Confused, I blink. “Are what?”

“They can say that we don’t deserve pack. But you and I, we are best friends, family, and lovers. *We are pack.*”

I stare at him.

Omeegas aren’t allowed to have a pack by themselves. I’ve never heard of anything like it before.

Didier is brave for voicing this.

Fearless.

Anxious, I shift from foot to foot. I stare up at the security camera and

then at the closed door. The Carers haven't returned yet. None of the other Omegas appear to be listening.

I wet my dry lips.

I can do this.

I can rebel.

"You're my Companion Pack," I whisper, fervently. "My *everything*, Didi. I won't let us be parted. I don't know how. But we're pack and that means sticking together."

He gives a sharp, decisive nod.

"Here, if we walk forward about six paces, there's a couch." I lead him with a light hold on his elbow to the velvet couch, kicking it with my foot so that he can map where it is.

He lets out a whoop and throws himself onto it, rolling around.

"What?" He says like he can tell that I'm quirked my brow at his behavior without even seeing me. "It's snugly."

I snicker, leaping onto him and dragging down the giant blanket, which is draped over the back of the couch for decoration to cover us both from the cold.

Didier adores soft textures. I wish that I could surround him with more of them.

He gasps, tracing his fingers over the Merino wool, before bringing it to his cheek.

I wrap the blanket around us both like it can protect us from the world.

It can't.

Then I notice the design on the blanket and realize why the Betas must have draped this out here just like they decorated the rest of the room to con the visiting Alpha and his family that we're treated well and are having a merry Christmas.

I'm surprised that they're not going the final step and piping "Santa Baby" on loop.

I wrinkle my nose.

Actually, we're lucky that they don't use that as a special discipline method.

I gently take hold of Didier's wrist and trace his finger over the design on the blanket and the words underneath. "This blanket is scarlet with green elves all over it. They must have put it out for you."

Didier's brow wrinkles with concentration, as he spells out the words that

he can feel raised up on the material with his finger. “*I’m not short. I’m elf sized...*”

There’s a pause, as he appears to process the words.

Then he lets out a musical laugh, before struggling around inside the blanket to push me down beneath him. Despite being small and with an outside fragility, in reality, he’s strong when he wants to be with compact muscles.

Didier rubs his nose against mine. “If I’m an elf, then I have captured you and taken you to my kingdom of ice and snow.”

“I’m terrified,” I drawl. “But I must be an elf too because I’m the one with toys in my pocket. Well, sort of.”

I wriggle around to draw a sock out of my pocket, pushing it into his hands.

He feels it, before blinking. “A sock...?”

“It’s clean and the best that I could do a stocking.”

“Mon coeur, you have got me a gift...? But you told me that Companions didn’t get Christmas presents.”

“We don’t. But my pack *do*.”

Didier smiles, before reaching inside the sock.

I hold my breath.

Is he going to hate it?

We’re trapped inside this Wing of the Institute with its high walls and guards. I haven’t been into the outside world for three years, since I was brought here from the hospital, as soon as my broken leg and ribs had mended after the car crash.

I haven’t been able to buy anything but I could make this from the odds and ends that I *technically* stole from the *technically* not quite a sweatshop, in which the Carers make us work.

Didier carefully draws out the tiny black dog, which is formed out of strips of cloth and stuffed with them. Its eyes, nose, and mouth are violet thread.

When I made the dog, I also gave it a tail and embroidered on fur.

Didier pets it. His expression is unreadable.

Does he even like it?

Shit, what was I thinking?

“Are you making fun of me?” Didier sounds so hurt that I flinch. “Is all I need a toy to hug to save me from the nightmares? Do you think that I am

some stupid child?”

“Hey, no.” I panic, nuzzling against him. “It wasn’t... Fuck, I’m an asshole. I didn’t mean... You told me about your dog back in Paris, Croissant. Your parents gave him to you to raise from a puppy because you were an only child and lonely. You named him after your scent. It was one of the first things that you ever told me about your life, before... Well, here. I know how much you miss him. I just thought—”

Didier stops me with a kiss, hard and inexpert, only catching the corner of my lips, but still, *perfect*. “Thank you. I’m the *asshole*. I love my new Croissant.” He lays the dog beside my head on the couch but doesn’t stop stroking it. “The real one will be sleeping beside the fire now. She will be tired. Christmas Eve is when our gifts are given and dinner is held. Ah, such delicious meals like you’ve never tasted.”

He sounds so sad, as if he’s imagining it. He should be there with his family, but those jerks don’t want him.

They left him behind, when they returned to France.

Despite everything, Didier has more patriotism for his country than anyone I know.

Perfume, bread, coffee...

He’d probably argue that even French air is fresher.

I’ll have to ask him if French shit smells sweeter too.

“In December,” Didier says, dreamily, carding his fingers through my hair in a way that sends tingles through me, “the Eiffel Tower is all lit up. You can see it for miles around. I’d sit by the window and stare out, desperate to walk to it. But my Alpha mother never allowed me out as soon as it became dark. *Mon petit oiseau* (which means *my little bird*), she’d say, *stay safe in your cage*. It’s an old French saying. But people forget the second half: *But if you escape through the open door, then fly high to avoid the jaws of your predators*.” His hands clench. “I wanted to fly high. But no one’s safe outside the cage.”

They’re not.

Especially not a beautiful Rej1 like Didier.

I take a deep breath, cupping Didier’s cheek and moving him to face me. “But that’s it, right? We’re not safe, even inside the cage. And the predator is coming to snatch one of us into their jaws right now.”

He startles, and I drag the blanket around him to keep him close. “I don’t understand.”

“The type of Alphas who choose Companions aren’t our rescuers. I know that you don’t have this system in France, but you need to understand how this works. An Alpha registers with Companion House to choose an orphan Beta or Omega to become their ward and companion for their Alpha kid. They want someone beautiful, wealthy, and talented, who is tied to them to work for no pay for life. Being a Guardian to a ward is a status symbol amongst the rich.”

“They’ll still save us from Companion House and take us home.”

“But just think about the type of knothead who’d choose to take on wards for their Alpha son or daughter. Wards who have no control or rights. Then think about that kid: the rich and entitled brat. They’re given the power to choose a Companion to serve them. How do you think they’re going to treat that Omega? Do you want to become a toy?”

Rage surges through me at the thought.

Some comfortable, happy Alpha, who has a family and pack and *everything* that us orphans have lost, will be given the power to pick us out as a Christmas gift.

I clench my jaw.

If they think that I’ll also smile, kneel, and beg them for that privilege, as Andy and some of the other suck ups will, then they’re going to be really fucking disappointed.

Didier’s hand closes around Croissant. “*We are* that Alpha’s toy.”

“If we’re lucky,” I reply, “he won’t want to break us.” *I fucking hope.* “Unfortunately, I heard Gibson talking on the phone. The reason that they’re so flustered is the King pack are making the selection today, and that’s never happened before.”

“Who are the King pack?”

“Well, that shows you truly are new to this country,” I splutter. “The King pack are one of the most powerful packs both here and in England. They’re billionaires, whose company runs, amongst a lot of other things, Companion House. They’re already literally our owners. Now, their son is going to pick one of us to possess for life.”

“The owners of this evil place are the ones who want to take us as a ward...? I won’t let this young Alpha choose or hurt you,” Didier snarls like he’s preparing to face off the enemy.

Wait, exactly like that.

I’ve never seen an Omega look like he’s readying to battle an Alpha

before, even if he's still wrapped in an elf blanket.

Didier's going to get himself killed.

"Don't." I wrap my arms around Didier to hold him still. "There's being brave and then there's asking for an ass kicking. Didn't you hear me? The Kings own Companion House. They'll get whatever and whoever they want."

I hate it though.

I hate this Alpha who can play with our lives like this.

Who owns every Omega in this room.

"I don't care," Didier breathes. "They can beat or kill me. We're pack, non? That's what you do when you lo—"

The door slams open, and all the Omegas jump.

Gibson is back with the Alphas who are here to choose a Companion to foster.

I stare at Didier.

What had he been just about to say?

That he *loved* me?

Pink stains my cheeks.

Fuck, does he love me?

My heart's hammering in my chest, and I cling to Didier even more tightly.

Do I love him?

I try to force out the words, before it's too late because what I haven't warned Didier about yet is that I also overheard Gibson saying that the Kings are only here to foster one ward.

If either of us are chosen, then it means that we'll be separated.

This could be the last time that we ever get to speak to each other or cuddle like this.

I could be alone again.

I steel myself, as the Alphas who could be about to tear apart my world, stride into the room like they own it.

And they do.

CHAPTER 2



Companion House, The Institute

SIX YEARS AGO..

Thick Alpha pheromones flood through the reception room.

They're overwhelming.

Rolled up together in the blanket, Didier and I end up smelling like a marshmallow croissant.

Why on earth hasn't that been invented?

Didier says that France is the best place for food in the world, but I'm claiming that one for the Americans.

The Omegas cringe back in silence, trying to smell sweeter to appease the powerful strangers, as if that would work after the number of rules that we've broken.

A middle aged Alpha swaggers further into the room, glaring around it like he's on a battlefield and disgusted with the way that his troops are performing.

He's dressed in a gunmetal gray suit with a thick woolen overcoat and leather gloves. His dark hair is thinning on the top.

His expression is haughty and colder than the winter morning outside.

I tighten my arms around Didier. He's shaking but then, so am I.

This cold Alpha is Weston King, Head Alpha of the King pack and CEO of King Alpha Company, who own the government contract on Champion House.

How do I know?

The narcissist has his portrait up in every dorm and classroom like we should be grateful to the knothed.

I only just manage to stop myself snarling but then, panic will help with that.

Then my eyes widen, as I realize the way that Weston's scanning the room and just how this will look to him.

We're meant to be the best trained Omegas, chosen for our obedience and skills, in order to be presented as Companions to his son.

Yet some Omegas are snuggled in a nest beneath the tree, others are playing with the decorations like kittens, while others still have stolen chocolate smeared around their lips.

Andy is the only one in the correct position on his knees.

The asshole.

Nobody moves.

“Father, what’s wrong?” A rich, English voice says from behind Weston. “Your pheromones are strong enough to floor an entire battalion. It must be remarkably distressing to the Omegas.”

An Alpha who looks like he’s a Senior in high school steps up to Weston.

So, *he’s* the entitled knothead son, who’s here to choose one of us like we’re his extra Christmas gift.

I scowl at him on principle, hoping that means he won’t choose me.

I mean, living in the King household would be hell. These are the pack who wrote the rulebook on how Companions are treated and profit off our sales.

Only, my breath hitches.

The son looks to be a foot taller than Didier with tanned skin and a tumble of brunette hair.

He’s gorgeous.

His eyes are a startling deep wine red. They widen in shock, as he looks around the room, lingering for a moment on Didier and me, who are like an Omega burrito.

Then his lips twitch.

He studies my satin gray eyes, before he shoots me a wicked grin, which catches me entirely off guard.

I can’t stop myself.

I grin back.

But then, I notice that he’s wearing the same outfit as his dad, even down to the leather gloves, and that instantly sours my response to him.

It’s as if he’s a clone.

Perhaps, he’s being trained to take on the business empire and learn how to make money out of orphans.

I stop smiling, and the son’s grin wavers.

“Disgraceful,” Weston’s bark makes me jump, and the other Omegas whimper. “Where in God’s name are the Carers? This is precisely why Companions need to be taken in hand.”

The disgusting scent of burned coffee — that of angry Alpha — bursts through the room.

My stomach heaves, and I want to gag.

My eyes water.

Didier wraps the blanket over my nose.

Unexpectedly, a delicious scent like the richest hot chocolate fills the room in waves.

I can't stop my desperate whine.

I stare in shock at Weston's son.

He's trying to go to battle with his own dad by putting out soothing scents to calm us against his anger, and his scent is the most delicious Alpha one that I've ever smelled.

Didier takes a deep sniff, sighing in delight.

"Stop that, Braxton." Weston snatches his son — Braxton — by the back of the neck and shakes him. "Don't waste your pheromones. You need to learn this type of etiquette. You don't soothe Companions. It's most unbecoming."

"I'm terribly sorry, Father."

Braxton doesn't sound sorry.

In fact, his response sounded more like *fuck you*.

You know, if you're uptight, repressed, and English.

My gaze slides almost against my will to Braxton's again, and he's studying me, speculatively.

At last, Gibson sprints, puffing and out of the breath, into the room.

She's a plump Beta who's nearing retirement: a long dreamed about around the world boating vacation with a cushy pension, which she loves to talk about to the Carers, during her shifts.

Her graying hair is normally immaculate but now hangs out of its bun in messy strands around her face.

Her green eyes are wild and frantic.

She's wearing an ivory suit, and a thin strip of leather hangs from her belt.

Her suit jacket isn't straight, and there's a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead like she's just run the length of the building.

If my ass wasn't still stinging from the crack of her Discipline Strap (and I didn't guess that all of us would get more punishment later for this hot mess), I could even feel sorry for her.

"I didn't... They said that you were..." She leans over, holding a stitch at her waist. "You weren't meant to come up here without me yet. I'm meant to be escorting you."

Weston curls his lip. "I apologize for thinking that I had permission to go

wherever I liked in my own damn building.”

“Of course, I m-mean, I d-didn’t mean to imply...” She trails off, as she looks around herself in horror. “Please believe me, they were told to *wait*. They know that command. I have no idea what’s got into them today.”

“May I suggest a little thing called *Christmas*?” Braxton strolls to the bowl of candy and selects one.

I can’t look away from his elegant fingers, as he untwists it and plops the chocolate onto his tongue.

Only, I bet he gets to eat candy every day.

I scowl at him again.

But then, I flush, when he catches my eye.

He arches one brow in inquiry.

Deliberately, I look away.

Weston harrumphs. “You’re being too soft on them. When I was young, a Companion would never dare to move from position once given a command. In England, no Omega would even now, Companion or not. Cut their calorie intake for the next month and double the number of times that they recite the Three Rules. They clearly have not learned to be obedient or good Companions.”

The smell of distressed Omega is now overwhelming in the room.

I card my fingers through Didier’s hair to sooth him, as he scrunches up his nose.

Braxton stiffens. “Father, is that necessary?”

“Of course it bloody is, you young fool,” Weston snaps. “The fact that you’d question me, makes me doubly certain that I’m doing the right thing with you. Now that I’ve been called back to England to take up the mantle of power with a position in the Cabinet after the unfortunate scandal with the Prime Minister, I can’t be distracted by holding your hand. You’ll stay here and learn the American branch of our company. For you to eventually become CEO, you need to learn about Companions. And that means being a Guardian.”

“When are you leaving?” Braxton’s expression is a blank mask, but his voice has become quiet. “Mother’s funeral was only—”

“Tomorrow.” Weston waves his hand, dismissively. “I have important meetings with civil servants and things to be briefed on that can’t be put off. I’m only not flying back today, so that I can be certain you’re settled with a Companion who can tutor you as well. Don’t give me that look. It’s not my

fault that you were too stupid to pass the entrance exams into boarding school for your final year of college. No son of mine will go anywhere but Eton. So, you'll have a tutor at King Hall and like it. This is also the best experience for running this branch of the company yourself by summer."

I bite my lip, and my chest tightens.

So, the son of the billionaire King pack is being abandoned by his dad, in the same way as Didier was by his parents.

He's going to be left here in America, while his dad goes fucking off...or runs England, whatever.

Plus, Braxton's mum has just died, while he's going to be left alone.

I know how that feels.

A tiny part of me gets why he needs a Companion now, although people aren't stuffies.

Why can't he just get a cat? It's what the unmarried Betas do who work here.

Then I pale, and adrenaline spikes through me.

Braxton needs a Companion to tutor him, and I've been selected to be shown to him today because of my high IQ.

I've been trained for years to become a top tutor.

Shit, shit, shit.

At least I don't look smart, since I'm wrapped up in a comedy elf blanket.

"Understood." Braxton straightens his shoulders. "Since I shall be living with them, while being tutored by them, do I get to make the selection?"

Weston glances at Gibson. "Are these truly your best?"

Rude but also, I can't blame him for the doubt in his tone.

Gibson anxiously wrings her hands together. "Absolutely. Some are the smartest, others are the most athletic, and others, as you can see, are the most beautiful in the country. The girl on the couch is a combination of all three. Her name is Jewel. She truly is the jewel in our collection."

I blush but also, why did she have to draw attention to me?

I was trying to look dumb and scowl as much as possible.

I love my name but I hate it when I'm seen like that.

Weston pulls on the fingers of his leather gloves, adjusting them. "Then go ahead and choose whoever you want, Braxton. But regardless of the sales pitch from the Beta, ignore the girl; she looks like an idiot." Again, rude. But score for the elf blanket. "What about this obedient boy who's kneeling?"

My hand closes in Didier's hair, tugging him impossibly closer to me. My

heart races, and I know that Didier can feel it, as our chests are pressed together.

Say Andy, say Andy, say Andy...

To my shock, Braxton's cool gaze meets mine. "I want her."

"The idiot girl?" Weston pulls a face.

"The jewel in the collection."

My stomach swoops.

Tears burn my eyes but not because Braxton's chosen me.

If I'd ever be okay with being picked by an Alpha, then this one who smells of delicious hot chocolate, soothes distressed Omegas, and grins at me with mischief in his twinkling eyes, at the same time as knowing what it is to grieve and be abandoned, is the one who I'd choose.

But he's going to take me away from my own pack and first love.

From Didier.

A tear tumbles down my cheek.

Braxton's expression clouds with confusion. "Is it so terrible to become my ward?"

"*Non!*" Didier snarls, fiercely.

He snatches up Croissant, the dog that I made for him, waving it in Braxton's general direction with another growl like it's a guard dog.

Didier has spoken, when we're meant to be silent.

He's snarled at an Alpha.

He's dead.

Fucking dead.

Gibson inhales sharply.

Now, tears chase down my cheeks.

Braxton looks almost comically startled.

Then he grins, flashing a hint of canine that makes him look like a beautiful devil.

He swaggers to stand in front of the couch, before resting his hand casually on the armrest and leaning over to cage us.

Shit, he's going to beat Didier now.

Instead, Braxton says with an amused twist of his lips, "Are you growling at me, little Omega?"

"Oui," Didier replies. "Jewel's mine. I'll protect her."

"And your dog." Braxton reaches to stroke Croissant like this behavior is entirely normal and he shouldn't have been slapping Didier or dragging him

to the floor. Didier stops growling in surprise. "He's brave."

Somehow, I don't think that he's talking about the toy.

I realize now that Braxton's only affecting to be casual. He's in fact angled to put himself between Didier and Gibson, as well as his dad, without making it look that way.

He's shielding us.

"Please," I whisper, breaking the rule not to speak as well because the risk is worth it, "pick him too. Don't separate us. We're like pack."

"Good God, is there no end to the misbehavior of your Companions?" Weston exclaims. "That French bastard is almost feral. Can't you keep any discipline?"

"I'm sorry," Gibson says, frantically. "He's new, the son of the French ambassador, and a Reject. I think that he's confused about what's going on a lot of the time with both the language barrier and his Omega Blindness, but I agree, it's certainly no excuse."

At *Omega Blindness*, Braxton's expression softens.

Gibson purses her lips, slipping the Discipline Strap from her belt. She marches toward Didier and me, and my mouth dries with fear.

I brace for the pain, as she raises the strap.

The worst thing for Didier, however, is that he can't see when he's about to be struck. Being hurt without warning makes the pain and alarm much worse.

He says that he'd rather take fifty strokes that he knows are coming, than a single one that he doesn't.

In life, I'd always choose the same way. A single stroke of betrayal or anguish that blindsides you is more painful than a whole host that you can see coming.

"We're about to be hit," I tell Didier with a resigned weariness.

He whimpers but doesn't move.

Rage flashes across Braxton's face, before he twists, placing himself firmly in the way of the leather, which lands across his hip. He lets out a deep grunt, and I wince, knowing how much that hurts.

Didier blinks, turning his head from side to side, uncertain what's going on.

"The Alpha blocked the strap to save us," I murmur to him.

Didier looks as confused as I feel.

Why would any Alpha do that for a Companion?

Gibson lets out a choked gasp of fear. “I’m s-sorry. I would n-never dream of s-striking a m-member of the King Pack. My apologies...”

Braxton’s eyes blaze with a terrifying dominance.

He twirls on the grown Beta, as if he’s already the CEO. He snatches the Discipline Strap from her and hurls it across the room.

The Omegas are watching him with huge eyes like he’s their hero.

I don’t know what to think apart from that he owns me.

And he’s fucking terrifying, when he’s angry.

Weston stalks to his son; the burned coffee stench is even worse now. “See what happens, when you blur the lines with these Companions?”

Braxton’s eyes are as cold as his dad’s, as he turns to meet his gaze. “I want *him* as well.”

He points at Didier.

Does he mean it?

Is this truly happening?

Please...

I clutch onto Didier’s hand and I don’t dare to let go.

Weston snorts. “Why on earth...?”

Braxton tilts up his chin. “He’s the most beautiful Omega I’ve ever seen. He’s an ambassador’s son, so I’m certain that he can show me the etiquette you so often tell me I’m sorely missing. He can also teach me French, which can only be of benefit in both diplomacy and our business in France and globally. Plus, if I need to learn about this company that I’ll be running, then I need to understand all sides to it, including those who are Rejects.”

For the first time, Weston smiles. “Well, I am impressed. It appears that when you’re motivated to possess something, you can give a reasoned argument and be just as manipulative as your mother was.” Braxton winces. “Have your pair of Omegas then. But this male one is feral. I won’t have him on my estates without first giving him to your cousin for conditioning. Either agree to him being under Trenton’s training, until he turns twenty-one, or you’re leaving with only one of them today.”

Conditioning?

Shit, that doesn’t sound good.

“Fine.” Braxton’s jaw clenches. “I can’t stop Trenton living in King Hall, I know that. You’re Head Alpha with the authority to place him there, even if I’ll be Chief Alpha in the American branch of our family. But Trenton’s only to have control of the Omega, until he turns *nineteen*, then I’m sole

Guardian.”

“Agreed. Perhaps, you will make an acceptable business leader; you’re good at negotiations.” Weston whirls on Gibson, who has been trying to make herself invisible at the back of the room. “Clear out your desk by the end of the day. You’re fired. No one strikes a King. Don’t expect that you’ll keep your pension and other benefits. You’re only lucky that I don’t sue.”

Gibson’s mouth opens and shut, before she swallows hard. “Yes, sir.”

Would it be inappropriate to smile? Because the thought that she isn’t getting her cozy retirement and boating trip makes me want to fucking cheer.

Didier squeezes my hand and that’s as good as whooping.

Braxton crouches down next to the couch, gently laying a hand on both Didier’s shoulder and mine.

Braxton’s voice is quiet and earnest. “I can’t promise that the months, until I become your sole Guardian, will be easy or painless. But I can promise that I won’t ever hurt you myself. I will do my best to protect you. King Hall is beautiful, and Christ, it has to be better than living here, right? I can also promise you that you’ll be very wanted in my home.”

Home.

It’s been three years since I’ve known what that meant.

Yet are we only exchanging one cage for a prettier one? Are we in danger and actually moving in with an Alpha predator?

CHAPTER 3



Head Office, King Alpha Company

SIX YEARS LATER, PRESENT DAY...

“This is such a risk,” I whisper, as my heart beats like a hummingbird in my chest. “If anyone discovers that we’re behind the mission today, Didi, then we’ll be sold back to Companion House, and you know what they’ll do to us there. I’d rather die.”

Didier rests his forehead against mine.

His silky curls, which feather his pale face, tumble across my bronze cheeks. Their feel is familiar.

It makes me shiver because it fills me with the memory of every night that Didier and I have lain together in our makeshift nest in King Hall, sleeping in each other’s arms.

For six years, we’ve been each other’s pack and home.

For six years, we’ve survived because of our love.

For six years, Didier’s been my best friend and first love.

He’s the same height as me, and I love that about him. We fit together like we were made for each other: A fated pair.

Although, that’s more like the type of thing Didier would say.

He’s a hopeless romantic.

“Ah, but mon coeur, where is the fun in life without taking risks?” Didier arches his brow. “What is danger? Is it not how we know that we’re still fighting against the rules, which try to turn us into obedient dolls?”

I snort.

Didier? *Obedient?*

“So rude,” he gasps.

But he looks delighted.

He’s thrumming with excitement, even as he pretends to lounge.

We’re standing against the walnut door, which is the exit to the outer office.

We’re in the head office of King Alpha Company.

This building is at the heart of the small and traditional town of Sanctum.

It’s the most impressive building in Sanctum.

Because King Alpha’s such a large company, a lot of people rely on it for their jobs.

The King family are a big deal here.

It's Monday morning, but it's quiet on the top floor of the building.

In this outer office, there's a matching walnut desk in the far corner with several computers, phones, and iPads, which is also littered with half-drunk coffee mugs.

At the moment, the swivel chair behind it is empty.

A door leads behind it to a supply closet. I can hear the rustling of the PA, Mildred, as she searches for a fresh selection of her favorite colored Post-it notes (and has a sneaky break and drink from her flask of whiskey, that she thinks no one knows about), which has given Didier and me this snatched moment alone to plot.

I glance at the soundproof glass door opposite, which leads through to Braxton's office.

He's in there now, holding an important meeting with a board member, Thane Hatcher.

It's because of that meeting I'm on this important mission right now.

My heart's racing, and I take a steadying breath.

I can do this.

I must.

I've spent too long obeying the rules about being a good Companion.

It's time that I become a badass one *and break those rules*.

The office is ultramodern with neon violet lighting both in the ceiling and along the floor, as well as a huge glowing C, which hangs on the wall, as if it's more strip club than office.

Perhaps, it helps the workers feel like they're playing, rather than working.

After all, they treat Companions like toys.

I wrinkle my nose at the strong scent of citrus cleaning products. Do they have Companions here that scrub the floors at dawn, before the office opens?

I clench my hands.

Should I ask Braxton?

Since Braxton took Didier and me home, he's kept his promise not to hurt us himself. Yet I shudder at the thought that the same isn't true of his knothead cousin, Trenton.

I've tutored Braxton, but he's always been distant, keeping himself safe behind a wall.

King Hall isn't a home. It's a Gothic mansion, which traps me.

I'm smarter than any Alpha in this building but I had to watch as Braxton

went off every day to university without me and then, as he started to work at King Alpha Company.

I've been forced to remain home and trapped with the predator who turned out not to be the red-eyed boy but his older cousin, instead.

Didier is the only home that I know.

And for the first time, we've found a way to break free and rebel.

As always, we're both dressed in the thin Companion uniforms that we used to sew with the C's on the arms, as well as the chokers hanging around our necks. Since the heat is so overwhelming this summer, I don't miss having a warm sweater or coat to wear like I do in winter.

Sweat plasters my blond waves of hair to my neck.

These are our best uniforms, however, because Didier spends most nights adapting ours in as punky ways as he can get away with, slashing them at the midriff or adding embroidered violet birds onto my jeans.

Luckily, when Braxton sees us at our morning chores in ever more outrageous outfits, he chooses to ignore it.

I also don't miss how he smothers a smile.

Now, I narrow my eyes. "How fun will it be, Didi, if we're sold to some country like England or Italy? They treat Omegas even worse there. How do you think they'd treat a Companion Omega with no nationhood, who was rejected by their entire country?"

Didier pauses, licking his dry lips.

I can't stop myself following the direction of his tongue.

His lips are so fucking plush.

Didier was pretty as a teenager.

Now, as a man, he's ethereally beautiful like a fae in one of those romance novels, which he gets me to read to him at night, while pretending that he chose it from King Hall's grand library for my sake.

Yeah, right.

He loves hearing about the sexy Alpha fae kings bantering with the snarky Omega, who's been snatched from the human world.

And then rutting them over and over and...

In some ways, I'm glad that he doesn't know how much I blush at those parts, although he must be able to hear both how flustered and wet it makes me in my voice because he always smirks, circling his thumb over my hip and maddeningly never higher, where I want him to be touching.

Didier's blue eyes are hooded and scorching, and his ass is so tight, it

should come with a warning so that it doesn't cause Alphas to walk into fire hydrants.

I've seen that happen before.

The fucking best thing about Didier is that no matter how Braxton's cousin has tried to condition him, Didier is still a little bit feral.

Okay, a lot.

And it makes me hot as hell.

I reach to pet his hair, and he melts against me. The delighted sighs that he makes could make me come untouched.

For months, when we were first brought to King Hall, Didier was isolated and immersed in almost total sensory deprivation.

Now, he's so sensitive and touch starved that I try to give him the soft touches and affection that he needs every day.

I make sure that he knows he's worthy of them because he always makes me feel the same way.

But he doesn't let the trauma define him.

When he nudges his knee between my thighs, heat rushes through me, and I struggle not to moan.

I'm so fucking wet.

"Not in front of Croissant," I hiss.

Didier chuckles. "A Frenchman's dog is his wingman or woman, in this case. A Frenchman is also not sexist. I only live to bring pleasure to the Omega in my life, after all."

I glance down at the golden retriever, Didier's service dog, who's sitting obediently next to Didier.

She's looking up at him and waiting for a command.

She's beautiful and lean with a dense, lustrous coat of wavy gold fur, a broad head, short ears, and intelligent eyes.

I flick one of her hairs off the sleeve of my top.

Anywhere I go, I carry part of Didier with me. She sheds enough to speckle our uniforms in gold.

It drives Trenton mad that his suits are always covered in her fur.

It's usually the highlight of my day to see him red faced with rage over his new Gucci outfit *stinking of dog*.

On the first day that Didier was released into Braxton's sole Guardianship on his nineteenth birthday, dazed and barely able to speak, Braxton was so gentle and considerate with him that I think I began to fall in love with him in

that moment.

Then he walked Didier around King Hall, mapping it out for him.

Braxton never touched Didier, but rather showed him the adaptations, which he'd made so that he could be fully independent: ribbons along the doors and on their handles, textured roses in strips of wallpaper, so that he could reach out his fingers and find his way around a room or down a corridor, and even different flooring in the main rooms so that he could orientate himself from one room to the other in bare feet.

In the Rose Parlor, Didier traced his fingers over the roses on the wallpaper with a rasping sound; his face was pale with wonder.

"This is all for me?" Didier's voice was croaky with disuse.

"Hardly," Braxton drawled. "I simply happen to enjoy roses, ribbons, and a bewildering array of flooring. Us billionaires are eccentric like that."

I laughed but then, hurriedly covered my mouth.

Since coming to King Hall, I'd barely spoken to Braxton outside tutoring.

He was a serious and attentive student, although he struggled with both reading and spelling enough for me to suspect that he was smart but dyslexic.

He was neither *stupid* nor *lazy*, which his dad accused him of being on the frosty fortnightly phone calls between them.

Most of the time, however, he was kept separated from us in his own wing of the mansion with his cousin.

Suddenly, an exuberant, young golden retriever in a harness bounded into the parlor.

Didier laughed, as she wound around him, begging to be petted.

He tentatively stroked her.

"This is your new service dog, if you want her. I hope that she's an acceptable birthday gift." Braxton's expression shuttered like he expected his present to be rejected. "I'm aware that you're not allowed to possess anything of your own, but she's more like a new member of this... Well, when you're outside, or I take you places, as I fully intend to, she could help to guide you."

"She's mine...?" Didier was smiling so wide it looked painful. "She is mine to name as well?"

"Of course."

Didier's smile became cheeky. "Ah, then this is easy. Say hello to Croissant."

I should have guessed.

Because I'd kept the toy Croissant hidden under my clothes for Didier all these months, but now Didier had the real thing.

When my gaze met Braxton's, I knew that this Alpha was not only keeping his promise to us, which he'd made in Companion House, he was trying his best to not treat us like Companions.

As if we were Omegas who still had worth and should be treasured.

Perhaps, *that* was the moment I truly fell for him.

What a fucking idiot I am to have to fallen for someone forbidden.

An elite Alpha like Braxton.

My Guardian...

"Good girl." Didier pats his dog on the head, and Croissant's whole face lights up.

Croissant pants, and her mouth falls open like she's smiling.

Her feathered tail wags, sweeping the floor of the office.

We only needed to add a feather duster, and she'd clean the whole floor in a minute.

Of course, we'd tried that in King Hall.

In fact, we'd escaped that chore for an entire week, before Trenton had found out and stopped us.

It'd almost been worth it.

Didier's eyes flutter closed, as he pushes closer into my hand, and I card my fingers through his hair and down to his neck.

Gently, I massage his stiff muscles, before tracing around to his beautiful collarbone, which is exposed by the open buttons at the front of his uniform.

"Hmm," he sighs. "If we weren't about to strike a blow for the illegal Omega resistance and become terrorists, then I would say never stop touching me. Just. Like. That."

My pulse jumps.

Startled, I hush him. "We're not terrorists. Maybe criminals. But there's a distinction."

Possibly.

"So, the President is wrong then."

I open and then close my mouth. My hands are shaky, but I've never been so sure that I'm doing the right thing.

As much excitement as fear winds through me, churning my guts.

The President has declared those helping the Omega resistance — a secret organization who help Omegas escape from abusive packs or the Institute,

transporting them in illegal railroads to safety and setting them up with new identities, as well as promoting an agenda of equality between the dynamics — to be terrorists.

I huff. “Even if I could vote, I’d have voted for the other guy. The President’s a knothed Traditional, and it’s the liberals who are going to make changes. But they’re taking too long. We’ve waited six long years for anyone to even remember that Companions need help too. There’s a whole Omega Society, movie stars, singers, and subversive poets standing up for dynamic rights and increased equality, but who’ll stand up for Companions?”

Didier tilts his head. “After our joint mission with the resistance to rescue the abused Companions today, then I’d guess it would be you, *le bijou*.”

Le bijou, my codename.

It means *jewel*.

Okay, I may not be the best spy but I didn’t know that I’d need to be, when I first stumbled across the Omega Society Server.

Its symbol is an empty birdcage.

“And *you*, le oiseau,” I say, drawing out his codename in turn, *bird*. “I know that I was only allowed a computer because it was meant to help me to tutor Brax, but hey, knowledge is power. Finding that server was like the whole world opening up, even if we’re locked in the tiny Companion Wing each night. But we can simply escape onto there and chat to other Companions from all across America.”

“To start with, it was frightening to hear so many others wrestling with the same problems and thoughts. But then, so comforting and helpful because it was the only place that didn’t feel like propaganda but real information, which we could trust. Companions and Rejects could share tips and solutions. For the first time, I didn’t feel that we were alone with this. You know, shut up in...”

“A Gothic mansion in the woods with an abandoned Alpha and his psycho cousin?” I drag Didier closer, smothering my laugh against his shoulder. He loops his arms around my neck, playing with my hair. “I never expected that we’d find the resistance secretly recruiting on there.”

“The thread was called *The Caged Companion*. We should have guessed, non? Still, you are a legend, mon amour.”

I flush. “Yeah, that’s right. The Omega, the legend.”

Didier drops his hands to his side, tapping my hip three times. “Mais oui, you are the legend who created the new rules, by which we now live.”

“Did you recite them yet today?” I say, mock sternly, in my best Trenton impression. “Tell me, what are your Three Rules for Badass Omegas and Betas?”

Didier stands straighter. “One, a companion will rebel, raising their own voice — they will be heard.”

“Two,” I continue, and an emotion so powerful that it almost makes my knees buckle washes through me; it takes a moment for me to process that it’s *hope*, “a companion will do whatever job they fucking like.”

I enjoyed writing that one.

“Three,” Didier’s voice is infused with fervor, as his hand tightens on my hip, “a companion deserves to choose their own pack bond, and to be loved, treasured, and adored because the right pack bond can change everything.”

We’re both breathing fast. Our foreheads are touching.

It feels like sacrilege, so fucking taboo, to say those words that break everything we’ve been taught.

But it’s liberating.

It helps steel me for what we’re about to do because we’re not only about to go against empty words. Instead, we’re going to rescue Companions themselves and break the law.

“Do you think that anyone saw my post with the new rules?” I murmur.

“If even one Companion saw it and repeats it to themselves before they sleep, then you have changed the world.” Didier kisses me, light and loving. “No matter what happens today...if we fail even...know that I am so proud of your courage and that I may be little, but I have a big heart. And I have loved you with every part of it.”

My eyes burn with tears. “Because I’m badass...?”

“Because you’re *you*, my Jewel.”

I kiss Didier again, desperate for a final moment with him.

I know that he needs this as much as I do.

Risk?

Danger?

It’s about taking back our choice.

We’re deciding to become rebels today on behalf of Companions everywhere but if we’re discovered, then we’ll be returned to Companion House.

After that, there’ll be no kind Alpha like Braxton to rescue us.

We’ll be separated, sent out of America, and sold.

CHAPTER 4



Head Office, King Alpha Company

“Quickly, she’s coming back,” Didier hisses.

Mildred stalks into the office from the supply closet just as Didier and I pull apart from each other.

She shoots us a disdainful look.

Mildred’s a Beta like most secretaries. She’s in her forties with a sharp bob and bony elbows. I’ve never seen her wearing anything but baby pink, and despite acting simpering around Alphas and an asshole around everyone else, she’s annoyingly efficient at her job.

I bet that’s why Braxton hasn’t fired her, despite her long breaks in the supply closet.

She clutches the neon Post-it notes to her chest, wiping her hand across her mouth.

Then she narrows her eyes at Didier and me.

“Were you talking out here?” Mildred demands, sharply. “I’ll be reporting you to your Alpha. You know that you’re meant to be silent in public. Reject, *corner*.”

She snaps her fingers at Didier like he’s a dog.

Didier gives her one of his Gallic shrugs that infuriates her more than if he’d given her the middle finger.

It's why he does it.

He trails his fingers lightly over my hip one last time.

Then he reaches down and picks up Croissant's leash.

He gives his dog one of the set commands (which is the only time that he is allowed to talk as a Companion), "Croissant, find the corner."

The fact that it's a set command says such a fucking lot.

Croissant smoothly leads Didier around the furniture in the room to the closest corner and Didier faces it, as Croissant stands panting at his side.

What's the point of making a visually impaired Omega face a wall?

I roll my eyes.

At the same time, our plan is falling into place.

The good thing about prejudiced idiots is that...well, they're predictable.

I send Mildred a fake sugary sweet smile as I take myself to the opposite corner without her needing to ask.

It looks into the glass door that leads into Braxton's office.

Braxton is in an intense meeting with a board member, Thane Hatcher, who was running the company with Trenton, before Braxton took over three years ago.

Hatcher has been challenging Braxton over the change in direction, in which he's been taking the company, including vetting Guardians more closely and the better conditions in Companion House.

I peer through the glass door.

Braxton was gorgeous when I first saw him but now he's grown into all man.

All Alpha.

He's dressed in a sleek Savile Row gray suit. He's six foot five and broad shouldered, tanned, with a hint of stubble.

With his wine red eyes and tumble of brunette hair, he looks like a fallen angel.

Right now, he appears to be one who's about to smite one of his demons.

I could watch him kicking the asses of these pompous knotheds, who think that they can bully Weston's *idiot son*, every single day.

Thane's known as the most dominant Alpha in a company, which is one of the most ruthless in America.

He's a wiry Alpha, who's twice Braxton's age with a shock of ginger hair and a beard.

Braxton stands in front of his desk, casually leaning on it.

Thane paces in front of him. He gestures wildly, throwing down a file in front of Braxton like he wishes that it would strike him in the face.

Papers spill onto the desk.

Casually, Braxton pushes the file to the side with a single finger like he doesn't know or care what's in it.

Thane reddens in fury.

It's hot to see Braxton so in control without even needing to raise his voice.

He's the most naturally dominant Alpha I've ever seen. He doesn't need violence to have the power.

When I press my nose to the glass to see more clearly, the movement catches his eye, and he looks up.

Braxton's brow furrows at the fact that I've been put in the corner, and his gaze meets mine.

His lip curls up at one side in a wicked smile, even as he arches his brow in an expression that I know means *really?*

I return his smile, trying out Didier's Gallic shrug as a response, although I'm not certain that I pull it off.

Braxton's eyes twinkle, before he turns back to Thane, tearing into him with his own brand of cool analytical destruction with renewed fierceness.

He's putting on a performance for me.

My cheeks pink.

Fuck, this is hard.

My stomach twists.

I'm so conflicted. Braxton is my friend, even if neither of us are meant to put that label on it.

Well, I do in my heart. Can I do more than that?

Would Braxton?

After I rescue the abused Companions today, however, I'll be working in secret for the resistance. I'm picking a side.

And it's not Braxton's.

He's the enemy of the resistance.

He's CEO of the company who oppresses Companions.

Companions are classed as property, so theoretically, I'll be stealing from him.

Anguished, I lick my lips nervously.

Braxton wouldn't tear into Didier and me just as fiercely as he's

demolishing his business rival now, right?

He'd still protect us, if he found out that we were working against him...?

Or would he see it as such a betrayal that he'd pursue us as his next prey?

I look away from Braxton.

It's too late. I'm committed to the mission.

This is about changing the world. I can't let my emotions or my fear get in the way of that.

Then why does this hurt so much?

My heart rate picks up.

This is almost it.

Any moment...

Sweat drips down the back of my neck, and I fidget.

"Stand still," Mildred snaps.

I deliberately shift from one foot to the other, resting against the wall.

Mildred sighs. "Turn around. I need to keep an eye on you."

Score.

I smirk, before hurriedly masking my expression.

I attempt to look contrite as I turn around to face the room.

"I'll be telling your Alpha about this disobedience as well." Mildred sniffs as she settles herself behind her desk. She picks up her phone and scrolls through her messages. Her nails are long and talon like. "Don't bother me. I have a lot of work."

She concentrates back on her phone, looking at her notifications. I have a feeling that she's searching through the Nest and Knot site for sex toys for her Omega's next heat. It was what she was doing, before she went for her break.

Considering that Companions for elite Alphas are the brightest, most athletic, and prettiest Omegas and Betas, people have the hardest time remembering that we can fucking read.

Suddenly, the walnut door slams open.

A stout teenage Alpha with short ginger hair and a sneering expression prowls into the room. He's dressed in a designer t-shirt and jeans.

"Aaron," Mildred simpers, instantly giving the teenager her full attention, "your father is still in the meeting with the CEO. He told me that you were to wait for him here. I have some candy, if you're hungry...? I bought it just for you, knowing that this meeting was happening this morning. He said that you had your Companions with you and should use them to help you with your

schoolwork.”

Aaron Hatcher: The Target.

Also, he’s the type of abusive brat and bully that I’d once feared Braxton would be.

The type who treats their Companions like punching bags.

The triplets, who are fostered with Aaron, write all about it in the safe space of the Caged Companion.

It’s how they were selected for rescue.

I have access to Braxton’s work calendar. I knew that he had this meeting with Aaron’s father, who in turn, always brings Aaron tagging along as well, since he was expelled for bullying other Alphas.

It’s ironic, really.

I stiffen.

Go time.

Three male high school aged Omega Companions trail in after Aaron with their heads bowed. They’re identical triplets, and their uniforms are rags.

Their feet are bare.

They’re dangerously thin, and there are purple shadows under their pretty violet eyes.

They look exhausted and haunted.

Their blond hair is unwashed and hangs in matted tangles to their shoulders.

Aaron snatches one by the hair, dragging him after him with a casual cruelty.

The Companion gasps, and the others flinch.

My shoulders hunch, and I ball my hands into fists.

My expression hardens.

Whatever happens after this, I know now that this risk is worth it.

For the first time since the car accident, my life isn’t a crash. It’s not merely random, terrible violence outside my control.

I’m choosing to say *no more*.

“The jerks are useless. Why should I spend the day cooped up inside with them?” Aaron tugs more harshly on the Omega’s hair, and he whimpers. “Corner.”

My eyes light up.

Perfect.

I hold my hands up, beckoning the Companions over.

The triplets look confused but are so used to following orders that they pad over to me.

Aaron sits on the edge of the desk. “Where’s this candy?”

I snatch my chance, while Mildred scrambles to search her desk for candy like if she doesn’t find it quickly enough, she’ll face the firing squad.

I pull the triplets into a huddle around me, using them to block Mildred and Aaron’s view of me, as I whisper, “Listen to me. I read what you wrote on Caged Companion.”

The triplets’ eyes widen, before they gleam with terrified tears.

The one closest to me grasps my hand. “Please, don’t—”

“I’m not telling anyone. But that’s why I’m offering you this. Do you want to leave the Hatcher pack? Would you like a real home, instead? To be adopted properly and given new identities as treasured Omegas, rather than Companions? I know that I’m asking you to trust a stranger here, but I’m a Companion too. I know what it’s like. We’re the same.”

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to ignore the tightening of my chest and my own panicked breaths.

Instead, I push my shirt to the side at my neck, slipping it off my shoulder just enough to reveal a pink scar.

The triplets’ wary expressions soften. It isn’t pity but rather shared understanding.

They glance at each other like they’re having a whole conversation without talking. Since they’re triplets, I guess that they pretty much are.

Then as one, they nod.

“But Aaron will kill us, if he catches us trying to run,” the one whose hair was grabbed by Aaron dares to say.

“Trust me,” I reply. “The people who are helping you to escape have a way to take off the tracker in the Companion choker. It’s not as advanced as the one in the Reject bracelet. Nobody knows that they’ve broken the technology. This billionaire tech guy has secretly been putting all his efforts and money into it. Don’t ask me for names because seriously, this isn’t the type of outfit that give them.”

“Are you escaping with us?”

I freeze. It’s a fair thing to ask.

Why don’t I?

There’s a one word answer: Braxton.

Or three words: Braxton and Didier.

The resistance offered to extract us at the same time as the triplets. We could have a new life...today.

Didier and I discussed it, but Didier's also wearing a Reject bracelet. He can be tracked in a way that I can't be.

I would never leave Didier because in our hearts, we're already bonded.

Yet even if we could both escape, we decided together that we wouldn't.

Braxton is our friend.

His mom is dead. His dad abandoned him and in six years hasn't visited even once.

And his cousin is a dick.

Braxton has no one in his corner just like we don't.

It doesn't matter that he's a billionaire Alpha. He does a different type of work to us but he's no less trapped than we are.

If we ran, then we'd just be another in a long line of people who'd rejected and abandoned him.

I can't do that to him.

Didier and I are already pack (so is Croissant), and Braxton has long become part of ours as well.

He just doesn't know it yet.

And I don't abandon my pack.

"I'm not escaping today. It's just you. When I click my fingers, run for the door." I meet each of the triplets' gazes in turn, making sure that they're concentrating because we only have one shot at this. "Don't hesitate and don't look back, no matter what happens. Go out into the corridor and follow it to the left. Then take the first right out onto the fire escape. Don't stop, no matter what anyone says to you. I made sure all the doors are open. Continue, until you reach the bottom. There's a white van down there, which is waiting to take you to safety. I swear, this is your choice. Have this one moment of courage, and you'll be flying free."

They look agonized.

I don't rush them.

This decision is huge.

Risk and danger.

Didier was right. What's life without them?

The triplets level me with cautious looks, clutching each other's hands.

Why should they trust any adult? But fuck, I hope that they do.

"Okay." The one at the front tilts up his chin. "We'll trust you."

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Are you talking, Companions?” Aaron growls, and the triplets jump. “How dare you? How fucking dare you?”

He snatches up a file off the desk and hurls it at them. They flinch, and papers explode across the room.

Mildred splutters out a protest, jumping out of her seat like she can catch her work.

This is it.

I thought that I’d need to start the distraction myself, but Aaron is such a knothead that he’s providing it all by himself.

Improvising, I hurriedly pull the triplets to the side and closer to the door.

When Aaron picks up Mildred’s phone in its heavy pink case from her desk and hurls it at the triplets, I jump in front of them.

The phone hits my forehead, and I groan.

Pain shoots through me, and I double over.

But this is fucking perfect.

I groan again, dramatically. Then I shove the triplet nearest me even closer to the door.

Blood trickles down my forehead, and I press my fingers to it, shocked at the wave of dizziness that makes me sway.

The triplets whimper.

I grit my teeth and click my fingers loudly, giving the signal.

Didier’s head snaps up, and so does Croissant’s.

They’ve also both been primed.

There’s an agonizingly long moment.

Then *everything* explodes.

The triplets scramble for the door, and I step forward to block Aaron’s view of them.

“Look what you’ve done!” Mildred exclaims, horrified. “You’ve injured the CEO’s Companion. She’s bleeding. That’s property damage. He’s going to blame me, you know. He put me in charge of looking after them.”

Mildred stands up and backs away, using her desk like a shield.

She’s so focused on the blood, which is now dripping down my face, staining my cheeks, lips, and even chin, that she doesn’t notice the triplets slipping out of the exit.

“I’m not frightened of stupid King.” Aaron puffs out his chest but he’s paled.

“Your dad is,” I mutter.

“What did you say?” Aaron takes a threatening step toward me.

“Bark,” Didier whispers.

Croissant barks loudly, exuberantly bounding into the center of the room.

Didier twirls around with an equal energy, and his grin is the feral one that makes my breath catch every time.

“Where are you, Croissant?” Didier pretends to panic, reaching for the dog.

As he spins and stumbles across the room, he’s athletic and graceful even in his pretend helplessness.

He’s walked this room enough that he doesn’t need guiding.

Anyone who thinks that he’s defenseless simply because he’s small, a Reject Omega, Companion, or visually impaired, is in for a fucking shock.

At the same time, Didier skillfully staggers in front of me to protect me from Aaron, adding to the choreographed confusion that we plotted all along.

“Get out of the way,” Aaron snarls.

“Who are you?” Didier reaches forward, as if to pat at Aaron.

Aaron bats away his hand.

“Don’t injure another one of them,” Mildred wails in horror. “King will tear out both our throats. He never punishes the spoiled creatures.”

“Then it’s about time that he did. Perhaps, I’m more of an Alpha than he is.” Aaron raises his hand to backhand Didier.

Didier braces himself.

Croissant growls deep in her throat and leaps to hurl herself between Didier and Aaron, blocking him with her body.

“I’d back away, unless you want to be savaged.” Mildred’s eyes are wide, as she stares at Croissant, who looks ready to bite in defense of her Omega. “That dog is scarily loyal to the damn Reject.”

Aaron raises his hands, slowly backing away. “Good doggy. No need to bite the nice Alpha.”

I tap Didier on the shoulder, and he nods.

We’ve done it.

Didier pets Croissant on the head in reward, and she wags her tail, happily.

“Wait,” Aaron looks all around himself in panic, “where are my Companions?”

Gone, I want to yell in victory, by now, they’ll be free, and you’ll never

be able to touch them again, asshole.

But I can't say that.

Instead, I slip my arm around Didier's waist, and he rests his head on my shoulder.

Blood is staining my lips, and I can taste its coppery tang, but it tastes like victory.

Suddenly, I look up and realize with shock that Braxton has just swung the glass door open and is staring in shock around the room.

He studies the blood on my face, and his eyes darken.

He leans in the doorway, intimidatingly powerful.

His scent fills the room, and it's dark chocolate now, bitter with his anger.

His chest is heaving, and he bares his teeth.

Fuck, I've never seen him like this.

I lean closer to Didier, shaking.

"What the hell happened?" Braxton growls.

CHAPTER 5



Study, King Hall

Didier curls his fingers in my hair in just the way that I love, and my skin tingles. He's breathing fast, but then, so am I.

We've been sent to *wait* in Braxton's study in King Hall.

As usual, we're ignoring the command, standing casually in each other's embrace in front of Braxton's huge mahogany desk, which is carved with wolves' snarling heads.

Wait is a normal enough order from Trenton but coming from Braxton, it made me pale.

He must still be furious.

In his office, Braxton swept to me, ignoring Mildred's bleated apologies, while Thane prowled out to grab his trembling son by the scruff of the neck, demanding explanations.

Braxton tilted my head to the side, examining the cut on my temple with the darkest eyes that I'd ever seen.

Then he barked at Thane, "I want a full report on this incident within the hour."

He snatched both Didier and me by the arm and yanked us out of the office in silence, while Croissant barked at our heels, confused.

In the ride back in the limo, Braxton tended to my wound with the

emergency first aid kit.

The bruise and cut were really only small, where the corner of the phone's case had caught my forehead.

Head wounds always bleed a lot.

Companions know this stuff, which rich Alphas don't.

Braxton kept glancing at where my blood stained the tips of his elegant fingers crimson and wrinkling his nose in distaste.

Yet he still slipped off his jacket to wrap around me, so that I could be surrounded by his scent and comforted by it.

I was delighted, burrowing my nose in the collar and taking deep breaths.

Before he could stop him, Didier dived across the limo and burrowed his nose in the jacket as well, glued to my side.

Although Braxton's touch was gentle, as he tended to me, his movements were jerky with rage.

He refused to even look at Didier like it was his fault that I'd been hurt.

There was a cold ball in my stomach.

What if he blamed Didier?

Trenton blamed Didier for everything that went wrong in King Hall.

What if Braxton did the same and punished Didier for this?

What if he sent him for more conditioning?

But Braxton made a promise. He'd never break it and do that, right?

Braxton spent the rest of the journey scrolling through his messages and social media and making terse, emergency phone calls to the rest of the board members.

Then he led us to his study and ordered us to *wait*, but that had been hours ago.

I scrunch up my nose at the stuffy, papery smell of the study.

One entire wall is lined with antique leather-bound books, which I know Braxton has never opened, even though I need to dust them every week. On the other side, is a grand fireplace like every room has in this mansion.

The walls are painted a cool steel with a red ribbon around it for Didier to use.

There are two striped armchairs either side of the fireplace, and a more comfortable looking velvet, antique couch along the far wall. But there's nothing personal in the entire room. There are no trophies, medals, interesting collector items, or even family photos.

It's the lack of family photos, which is the saddest.

I wish that I had photographs of my parents.

But Braxton doesn't have any up of his King pack.

He only has a framed certificate of his business degree and then stacks of files and reports for a company that I know he hates running.

My stomach rumbles. It must be gone lunchtime, and we've missed it.

The scorching afternoon sun casts long shadows through the high arched window with heavy burgundy drapes, which is behind the desk.

The window looks out over the traditional flower garden with sculpted hedges and a gravel path, which leads down to the pool, pretty pool house and tennis court, and in the distance, the blurry dark green haze of the forest groves.

Where's Braxton?

What the fuck is he doing?

Watching one of his boring sports games that go on for literally weeks like cricket? Taking a relaxing bath? *Having a wank?*

Actually, with the way that Didier is playing with my hair, I could do with a wank myself.

For years, maybe as far back as just after the crash, rage has simmered through me just beneath my skin. It's been a safer emotion than grief, depression, or fear.

But now?

Fuck, I totally get Didier now.

From the moment that I've met him, he's taken a savage joy in standing up against authority, even if he's been beaten down again for it. Nothing that life has thrown at him has taken his spirit.

Knowing that we freed those kids to have a home and real family, even if it means that our own lives are over, has filled me with something other than rage.

It's an electric excitement.

Danger is spicy.

Didier leans closer, and his velvet voice is sultry in my ear, "What you did today, mon amour, was the sexiest thing in the world. It made me harder than I've ever been."

I shiver, twisting in his hold to kiss along his jaw.

For the first time, I'm glad of the rule that Croissant isn't allowed in Braxton's study.

It's not fair, but on the other hand, Croissant loves to chew things (and

has already chewed through Braxton's files, couch cushions, and his computer wires).

Didier's breathing hitches. "You smell like sweet hope, rebellion, and strength. It was such a thrill, non?"

He walks me backward.

I tap on the desk so that he knows we've reached it. "Such a fucking thrill."

"I am going to fuck you later." Didier's ocean eyes become hooded. "I am going to use my tongue like you love. You'll be so wet that you'll be begging, but I shan't let you come, until my cock is buried in your pussy. Then I'm going to make you come so hard that you never wish for an Alpha's knot again."

"Hell, yeah," I breathe. "Please..."

"Begging already?" He teases.

I gasp, as he pushes me over the desk onto my back and cages me.

His eyes glint wildly.

My breath is coming in fast pants.

I can feel how hard he is through his jeans, as he grinds against me, biting his lip.

"Or I could," Didier says, checking in with me, "bend you over this desk right now and then—"

"Do you mind awfully not dry humping over my desk?" Braxton's amused voice comes from the doorway. "I have some rather important paperwork on there, and you're crumpling it with your arse."

Startled, Didier jumps.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Immediately, Didier scrambles to pull back from me, as always protectively placing himself in front of me.

I push myself up from the table, grasping Didier's hand in mine.

Whatever happens next will happen to us equally.

Just because Didier's classed as a Reject doesn't mean that I'll let him take more of the blame.

Enough of that happens already.

I gently tug at Didier, trying to pull him down to kneel like we're meant to be, although he resolutely refuses to, lifting his chin.

Brave idiot.

"Don't." Braxton sounds pained. "I didn't mean to give you that

command. Well, I did. But I shouldn't have given you that order and I'm glad you ignored me. I was being a knothed."

I stare at him in shock. "You don't say *knothead*. I've never heard you say that in your life."

He grimaces. "Indeed, I don't. But *you* do, so I'm certain that's what you were calling me in your mind. A *big* knothed, right?"

I scowl, putting my hands on my hips. "Uh-huh. The biggest."

Didier wrinkles his nose like he can't believe that either of us are talking to each other like this.

To be fair, I can't believe it either.

Braxton's lips twitch, as he swaggers closer. I fight to hold my moral high ground, even as he towers over us.

Braxton's strong scent of hot chocolate washes over me, and I'm reassured that it's soothing and rich, rather than bitter like it'd been before.

I only notice when he's close, however, how exhausted he looks.

His hair is disheveled, and his purple tie is askew, as if he's loosened it to pull open his collar either because of the heat or frustration.

Possibly both.

My heart pangs because as much as I don't regret what I've done, I do regret the pressure and stress that Braxton is now under.

He perches on the desk, studying me in a way that makes me feel like he can see right through me.

"I'm sorry that you missed lunch." Braxton crosses his arms across his strong chest. "You can go to the kitchen and get something soon. But first, we have some things to discuss."

Didier's large eyes flutter in his pretend innocent look that would melt most people's hearts, but doesn't work on Braxton because he's known us for too long. "Mon dieu, you would have us starve? We were attacked, that is all there is to it. Will you interrogate the victims?"

Okay, now he's laying it on too thick.

Braxton's gaze darts to the thin cut on my temple. "Does it still hurt?"

"Not if I don't touch it."

"Then don't touch it."

"Ha-ha." I lick my dry lips. "Will anything happen to Aaron?"

I bet that it doesn't.

He'll be protected by his dad. But maybe he'll at least be fined and lose his pocket money.

That'd be something, right?

I'd love it, if he ended up having to do his chores himself, now that his Companions are gone.

At the mention of Aaron's name, Braxton's eyes blaze. "That little bastard is as bad as his father or will be very soon, if nothing is done. He's currently taking a day trip to the Alpha Center to see where abusive Alphas like him end up. I hope that the shock of that will at least change his behavior out of fear alone."

Wow, that's so much better than him losing his pocket money.

"Please don't sell him any more Companions," Didier pleads.

Braxton gives Didier a long look. "*More?* Interesting how his Companions, who are such timid things, chose today to run. In fact, it's interesting how many Companions appear to have either successfully escaped and removed their trackers or been kidnapped in the last few months. It's almost like there's some kind of organization behind it."

"Oui, interesting," Didier says, matching Braxton's casual drawl.

Braxton narrows his eyes. "I have banned Aaron from ever being a Guardian again. He was responsible for his Companions and he lost them. That's the official line."

"And the unofficial line?" I ask.

Braxton's shoulders slump, before he stands and rounds the desk.

I wish that I could tell him the truth.

If I do, however, it puts him in as much danger as I'm in. As the Alpha CEO of the company, he'd be guilty of fraud, terrorism, and disobeying his Head Alpha.

He could be sent to the Alpha Center himself permanently on a Bad Alpha course. He'd be locked up and never released.

They'd break him.

I couldn't bear that to happen.

Plus, if he doesn't side with us, then that endangers more than Didier and me, it threatens every Companion on the server who trusts that safe space, as well as the resistance itself.

I can't risk it.

Braxton throws himself into the leather chair. "Unofficially? Do you know how bad this looks for my company? I've spent the last hours that you've been in here fighting to put out so many fires, I'm amazed that I'm not covered in ash. Of course, the trash media already has hold of this story.

That hack Beta, April Lavere, is running the story on every news outlet. My least favorite headline is *Knot My King: The Guide to Losing your Companions and Kingdom.*”

Didier chuckles. “Witty.”

Braxton slams his hand against the desk, and the sound echoes shockingly loudly in the room.

Didier flinches.

“Do you have any idea what would happen to you, little Omega, if you were suspected of being involved in this?” Braxton growls.

Staring at Braxton’s serious expression and how his hands are shaking, as he tries to clasp them together on top of the desk, I realize that I’ve got it all wrong.

Braxton wasn’t pale with rage earlier, when he grabbed Didier and me.

He’s not angry now.

He’s terrified.

Concerned for us.

I squeeze Didier’s hand because he’s trembling. He can’t see the same cues that I can.

“Brax isn’t cross with us. Smell his scent, Didi,” I say.

Didier breathes in deeply and then visibly relaxes.

Braxton blanches. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I was furious earlier, but not at you, at the brat who’d dared to lay a hand...or phone...on you. And at myself for allowing it to happen, when I’m meant to protect you. I’d hate myself, if I thought that I’d broken the promise, which I made to you when I first brought you here.”

Didier and I both reach to adjust our collars.

There’s a reason that we hide our backs and our scars from Braxton.

Neither of us want to hurt Braxton, as much as he’s never hurt us.

It’d break him as surely as the Bad Alpha Center to know what happens under his own roof.

Sometimes, secrets are painful but they can also protect more than the truth.

Braxton’s expression gentles. “It killed me to see you covered in blood like...”

“*Carrie,*” I offer.

Braxton’s tight expression eases even further. “I have to admit that it was quite dramatic.”

“Perhaps, she enjoys bathing in blood.” Didier gives one of those grins that Trenton calls *insolent*, but I call *hot*. “Mais oui, I know — what if she could be the first Omega Dexter! That show would have been better if that had been the twist.”

“There is going to be an internal company investigation into the Companions who ran today,” Braxton’s voice has become cold and distant again. Perhaps, referencing *Dexter* was a mistake. “Also, a police one. It may fascinate you to know that I had a knot shrinking *presidential* phone call, where the President himself demanded that I explain myself.”

Shit.

I freeze, leaning closer to Didier.

My pulse roars in my ears. I struggle hard to remain standing.

We’re royally fucked.

Well, I guess we were from the moment that we were selected by the *Kings*.

“President?” Didier says, coolly. “It is so kind that he takes the time to care about kidnapped Companions. I thought that we were invisible to Alphas like him.”

“Didi,” urgently, I poke him in the side.

Silence.

Braxton leans forward on the table, signaling the move to gain Didier’s attention by rustling the papers there. “I’m tempted to put you over my knee, my little Omega. Because if you ever talk like that in front of anyone but me, you will be at the very least given back to Trenton for further conditioning.” Didier flinches. “Here is the story — *truth* — you were in the office today being watched over by my PA because I keep you close to me for safety. You were attacked by Aaron, who was so distracted by his tantrum that he lost control of his Companions. They ran in fear from him because he was attacking them.”

Braxton's created a narrative to protect us.

Does he know that we’re involved or is he making sure that no one can even suspect it?

“As you say,” Didier smoothly replies.

Braxton fixes me with his piercing gaze. “You were whispering with the triplets. What did you speak about?”

I swallow; my breathing is ragged. “How they were terrified that Aaron was going to kill them.”

And it's not even a lie.

Braxton inhales sharply. "No wonder they took the opportunity to run. Well, as you're my wards, I can write your witness statements for you. Shall I say that was said to you, while you'd been ordered to stand in the corner (and I'm afraid that Mildred was quite explicit about your misbehavior), then in the ensuing mayhem, which was caused by Aaron's escalating violence, you *didn't* see the Companions escape?"

He's covering for us.

Didier and I nod.

Why is Braxton lying or at least, bending the truth, to the press, police, and even the President?

He's also deliberately not asking us the tough questions like he doesn't want to know.

He's doing this for his two Companions, who shouldn't mean more to him than servants. Only, he's never treated us like he was meant to. He's always acted like we're his best friends.

Pack.

Yet we can't ever be his real pack bonds, and that tears me up inside.

Braxton's gaze slides from mine, and he looks unsure for the first time. "If anyone thought that you had any involvement in what happened today, the consequences would be dire. Jewel, you could be marked as rebellious and become a Rej2. They could take you from me, sending you back to the adult wing of the Companion House in the Institute to train you, before putting you up on an online overseas auction." He looks troubled. "I can't currently stop this practice but I've been trying, ever since I became CEO. It's what I was fighting with Hatcher over in that meeting. Do you have any concept what the type of pack who buys an Omega in an auction like that would do to you?"

I shudder.

I don't.

And I never want to find out.

I can tell by Braxton's haunted expression that he knows but then, he's from England. He knows how Omegas are treated over there. His mom was an Omega, and I bet that it wasn't all nuzzling, purring, and sweet nest building for her.

"Our Guardian needs us for a moment," I murmur to Didier.

He nods, and I guide him by the hand to Braxton.

Braxton looks at us, uncertain.

I round the desk, leading Didier with me. Then I let go of his hand and reach to adjust Braxton's tie.

When Braxton was younger and I tutored him, I'd often do up his tie, smarten his suit, or help him clean the smeared ink from his fingers after our study sessions.

It's familiar and calming.

I do up his collar, pulling it straight.

For the first time since he's entered the room, Braxton relaxes.

Didier feels around to the back of the chair, tracing his way over the leather. Then his nimble fingers massage Braxton's shoulders.

Braxton sighs

He needs this because I'm responsible for the unexpected shit show, which he finds himself in the middle of. He deserves it because he's spent hours, saving my ass.

My stomach swoops, and my fingers falter.

Fuck, I'm falling for the enemy of the resistance.

A Traditional and my Guardian.

But he doesn't feel like my enemy.

He feels like my best friend who even now is thinking of how to protect me above everything, even his career and reputation.

Braxton shifts in his seat. "Wonderful as this feels, you may both stop your kind attentions, when you hear what I've ordered."

I freeze but force myself not to stop stroking up and down his tie in a way that I know he loves, even though he'll never admit it.

Even as I know that he'll never admit that he chooses violet ties in solidarity with the violet on our uniforms, rather than to match with his company logo.

Plus, how he'll never admit that over the years, he's deliberately *lost* items of clothing around the mansion, so that Didier can steal them and add them to our nest in the bare Companion Wing.

Didier loves scents, especially Braxton's.

Before he had Braxton's first lost tie to sleep with around his neck, snuggled in the scent, Didier struggled to sleep through his nightmares.

Now, he's safe in his scent every night, and so am I.

Didier increases the pressure of his massage into the knots in Braxton's shoulders, and Braxton almost hides his wince. "What have you ordered?"

“Since it appears that someone is kidnapping all these innocent Companions,” he says (I’m not sure how he keeps a straight face), “I’ve been forced to issue a countrywide stay-at-home order for all Companions for the next two weeks.”

My eyes widen.

He’s confining us to King Hall? We can’t leave at all?

“House arrest,” Didier mutters.

“Just during the initial investigation.” Braxton reaches up to tap Didier’s hand. “Don’t you think that you’re getting off easy?”

“We didn’t run.” Didier’s mouth twists. “As you said, there was chaos. We could have done.”

Braxton opens his mouth and then shuts it like he wants to say something but doesn’t know how to form the words. “You didn’t.”

He looks to be thinking hard as he glances between us.

I want to cup his stubbled cheek like I would Didier and tell him that he’s our friend.

That we’d take him as our lover too.

That despite convention, tradition, and stigma, he’s my pack as well.

But I can’t.

It’s wrecking me to keep the words inside.

Is that why he’s struggling as well?

“Will you leave me?” Braxton’s expression is raw and vulnerable. “I mean, would you, if you had the chance?”

“Never,” Didier declares without even hesitating. “You smell too delicious.”

Braxton smiles, but his gaze is firmly fixed on me.

I take a step back. “There, you’re smart again.”

Braxton’s smile wavers. “I see.”

His expression shutters, but he can’t hide the pain fast enough.

“How could I abandon the Alpha who wanted me and has always made me feel wanted?” I hurry to say. Braxton raises his chin, smiling in that gorgeous way of his with a hint of canine that makes my stomach fluttery. “Aren’t we friends? Plus, if I wasn’t here, who’d be left to talk about smutty romance novels with you?”

He looks mock affronted. “As if an Alpha of my standing would read smut.”

“The entire collection of Alpha smut hidden on a special shelf in your

library with so many interesting knots that it makes even me blush — pierced, double, ridged, and vibrating — would say different.”

I want to make Braxton blush, but he only sprawls in his chair and winks. “So, you read them all too then. Was any particular knot your favorite? I could always get you a toy like that. I don’t want you to say that I’m not meeting your needs.”

“Shameless.” Didier gasps, before adding, “What about *my* needs?”

“When I walked in those looked well taken care of by Jewel, but if you want a fun toy, you only need to tell me.” Braxton gives Didier an assessing look. “Would you enjoy *taking* a knot as well?”

I flush. What does he mean?

Didier instantly stops his massage.

“Since I don’t get heats, as you know, that was cruel,” Didier’s voice is icy. “You say that you’re not angry, but words can hurt far more than the lash of a whip.”

Concerned, I look at how still Didier has become. His beautiful face is no more than a mask.

He’s registered as a NH, Non-heat: medically incapable of getting heats.

He’s also infertile.

It’s a side effect of the disease, which is commonly known as Omega Blindness.

But then, I’m a Non-heat as well.

“All right, can we please take it as read that I’m truly bad with words and am so exhausted that for the last week, I’ve only been functioning on black coffee and willpower alone?” Braxton ducks his head, avoiding both our gazes.

What had he been trying to ask Didier?

“Is that an apology?” Didier demands.

Fuck, if Gibson or anyone at Companion House could hear how Didier is talking to our Alpha, they’d beat him senseless.

Braxton is as much a badass Alpha, however, as we’re badass Companions.

He breaks all the normal rules.

“I’m sorry,” Braxton replies. “But you can take a knot outside a heat, right? Not that I’m saying you should or... Christ, just ignore me. I truly have no game, do I?”

Game?

Shocked, I stiffen at the same time as Didier does.

Is Braxton flirting with us in a Hugh Grant ineffectually English way?

Before I can ask, however, Braxton shuffles the papers on his desk more as a way to have something to do with his hands and distract himself from how epically he's just crashed and burned.

Then he continues in a business like tone, "Anyway, you'll be happy to know that I'll be suffering right along with you over the two weeks. Since these escapes have been happening on my watch (and this time, literally from my outer office, while I was theoretically present), the board has thought it prudent that I keep a low profile. My King name is not precisely helping the company or inspiring confidence right now. So, I'll be staying in King Hall with you. Won't it be nice to spend some time together?"

Guilt crawls up my throat. "They suspended you."

"Not officially."

Didier cocks his head, and his hair tumbles across his face. "They did not want it to seem so bad as a suspension. Let me guess, they *strongly suggested* that you take some leave. You've not taken any of it, after all, since you started there, huh?"

"Precisely." Braxton runs his hand through his hair, mussing it. "Plus, for the first time, we shall be joined in King Hall by a Beta."

My heart leaps into my throat. I don't know that I've stumbled back a step, until Braxton is reaching for me in alarm.

Braxton's courting a Beta.

Does he want to bond with her?

Will she become the new mistress of King Hall?

This is the day that I've feared, since I was brought here.

Being Braxton's Companion over the years has mainly consisted of helping him with his work, while stealing sneaky sniffs of his tie as I adjusted it, or debating just how big of an Alphahole a hero could be in a romance novel, before he became irredeemable.

Surprisingly, Braxton's far less tolerant of book boyfriend Alphaholes than I am.

"Is your spirit animal a bull?" Braxton would mutter. "Usually, you shouldn't charge toward people who are walking red flags."

"So, what's your spirit animal?"

"A wolf."

"Wait, don't you think that's a...?"

“Red flag, of course. But then, *you’re* a bull.”

Only, he’s not. And we both know it.

Yet the moment that Braxton bonds with someone from posh society, whether they’re an Alpha, Beta, or Omega, creating his own pack around him, they’ll have authority over Didier and me.

We’ll have to follow their commands.

Every Companion dreads the day that they stop being the Guardians’ toys and are put in their place as an entire pack’s servants.

I’ve heard the fucking horror stories.

To be fair, I didn’t think that Braxton would wait six years to bond.

I can’t blame him for this. He hasn’t had someone like I’ve had Didier.

He’s been alone, and I don’t want him to be lonely forever.

I only want him to be happy and feel loved.

I can’t stop my hands from clenching at my sides, however, because I know like a jolt of agonizing lightning through me that I want and need him.

I want it to be *me* who makes him feel loved.

But I can never have him.

Braxton leans forward. “What’s spooked you?” Then he glances around at Didier, who’s snatched his hands away from Braxton’s shoulders like he’s been burned. “And you as well, little Omega? I know that we’re rather stuck in our ways here, and it’ll take a bit of adjustment, but this whole incident has made me realize that we need a higher level of protection. Father has been on at me to get a personal bodyguard for years. This was the last straw. Now, I can legitimately argue that it needs to be a twenty-four seven live-in one, who can be based here in King Hall. I’ll be assigning the Beta, who is called Matthew, to guard you, when he’s not with me off the estate. His file also says that he enjoys gardening and personal training. He’s strong, so I’m certain that he can help you with the more stenuous chores.”

“He’s a Companion,” I breathe.

Everything falls into place.

Only Braxton could talk about a Companion so casually like he wasn’t a ward at all but a normal employee.

Braxton glances between us. “Did I not say that?”

Didier leans his elbows on the back of the chair, smiling. “Non, you most certainly did not. But why do we need a new Companion? I have always protected my Jewel.”

“This is not up for debate,” Braxton’s tone becomes harder. “Matthew is

excellent at his job and trained by the best. He's a year younger than you. He was trained to be a college Companion because he was a top athlete and has outstanding ability as a hockey player. Yet he also needed to be a personal bodyguard because of his ex-ward's celebrity father."

I perk up. "Who was it? A movie star? Senator? Retired NHL player?"

"You know that I can't share that information. Don't pester Matthew for it either. I imagine that it's traumatic to be raised from childhood in one family and then sold to another, when you're considered surplus to requirements."

"I have no idea how that would feel." Didier's expression is shuttered. "Rejected by the people who raised you, when you're no longer wanted. How could I possibly empathize?"

Braxton's expression gentles. "So, you'll be kind to Matthew then. He has the best scores and credentials. I was checking him out and then interviewing him over the phone this morning as well, arranging for his transfer here this evening. He's only been in the adult wing of Companion House for a couple of weeks, and I'd prefer that he not stay there for a day longer than necessary."

Me too.

I'd prefer that no one stay there at all.

"Ah, a new friend for us." Didier leans against the window, and the sun halos around him, making his skin glow, until he looks ethereal. "What fun we shall all have together this summer."

We'll have two weeks forced together in King Hall.

We've never had that before.

Excitement thrums through me because I love that we'll have this time, but there's an edge of fear as well because it's going to be harder to hide my secret.

Is Braxton truly going to let his own investigation into the escapees go and make sure that we're safe?

Or is he intending to use this time to find out the truth?

"Fun?" A nasal voice sneers from the doorway. "A playboy like you always thinks with your knot. I know your type, Brax, and I know exactly the type of *fun* that you want. I don't care what kind of a whore you are in your free time, but when it impacts on the business that this family has spent generations building with their blood, sweat, and tears, then I do have a fucking problem."

Trenton prowls into the study.

He's a decade older than Braxton. He's dressed in a black business suit with a flamboyant yellow waistcoat. He has oily brunette hair, which is swept into a neat side parting.

He'd be good looking in a charming way with his too white teeth and his hazel eyes, if he didn't look disgusted all the time.

Plus, if I didn't know that he's a sadistic psychopath.

Instantly, Didier and I clasp our hands behind our backs and drop our gazes.

We know how to behave around Trenton. He believes in every word that the training manuals say about conditioning obedient Companions like they're Gospel.

Braxton turns to face Trenton, steeping his hands on the surface of the table with what looks to be an extreme effort of will power. "Trenton, always a pleasure."

"Brax, never one." Trenton throws himself down on the armchair by the fireplace, lounging his legs over one of the arms like it's *his* study. "You know, I believed that King Hall would be mine one day. Dad always said that it would be. We never thought that your English branch of the family would show their faces back in America, but here you are, fucking everything up. I love this country, but do you even care how many American jobs are at stake if you fuck this up? How many families are terrified right now that something will happen to their traditional right to a Companion?"

"Well, as an Englishman, I can't be against tradition, surely." Braxton's expression is so blank that even I can't tell if that's sarcasm.

Trenton glares at him, assessing. "The King name used to mean something. Kings of industry. Kings of society. Kings of fucking Virginia."

Braxton quirks his brow. "Kings of industry who are fucking all of Virginian society...? My word."

Now I know that he's taking the piss.

Didier is unable to stifle his chuckle, and Braxton pushes his chair back to snatch him by the hand.

Trenton follows his movement with narrowed eyes. "Do you think that I'm dumb? You're the idiot who can't read worth a damn, not me." Braxton flinches. I bare my teeth. *The asshole.* "It's clear to me that you're rutting your Companions, although it can't be that satisfying, when they have no slick between them..."

Didier becomes ashen, and I whine.

Braxton stands up; he's shaking. "Get out."

Trenton looks shocked. "What?"

"I said," Braxton leans on his desk, darkly dominant, "get up out of that chair and walk out of here, before you're unable to walk."

Trenton gives a bark of laughter. "Well, that's all the proof that I need. You're soft on your Companions, Brax, and you're making bad business decisions because of it. Can't you see that I'm trying to help you? If you don't stop this, there'll be no business left to run. Have you seen the stock price? We're in freefall. The board members won't stand for this much longer."

"Fuck the board members."

"You won't get your treasured changes to the company through without them."

"Why are you still sitting there?" Braxton's muscles bunch, as he vaults over the desk, scattering his neat papers. Trenton shrinks back but still doesn't stand. "I can't throw you out of King Hall, but by God, you will leave my study."

Braxton snatches Trenton by the tie, yanking him to his feet.

"Okay, okay," Trenton gasps.

"First, you'll apologize."

Trenton rolls his eyes. "You know me, your father values me because I call you and everybody else out on their bullshit. It's what I do."

"And what *I* do is stop anyone from hurting those under my protection. I'm a big boy. If you want to throw insults at me, then go ahead. But don't you dare attack anyone else in this household with slurs. So, apologize, or I'll wreck you."

Trenton's gaze darts to Didier and me.

I can see in Trenton's darkening expression that as soon as he gets us alone, he's going to make us pay for this humiliation.

Only, Braxton has no idea about that.

My heart hammers in my chest.

"I'm sorry for my inappropriate insinuations." Trenton's jaw clenches.

"And...?"

"Hurting the feelings of your wards...?" Trenton says like he's never apologized before, which is possibly true.

I can't stop the slow grin from spreading across my face. It's the best

feeling to finally have Trenton forced to apologize.

Who cares if he means it? He may make us suffer for it in the future, but right now, I'm basking in the moment.

Braxton pushes Trenton away, wiping his hands together like he wants to get the scent of him off his skin. "Now, get out."

Trenton storms to the door but then, turns back. "You think that you're so much better than me. But you're not. You're not even respected in the company. Did you know that all the other board members are laughing at you? Hatcher's been blocking your changes for months. They've been giving you busy work to distract you like you're a kid."

Braxton looks like he's been slapped. "I don't believe you."

"I told you, I call it like it is." Trenton smiles, smugly. "Give up on trying to be a leader. Some Alphas just aren't born to be one. Fuck your Companions for all I care but marry a proper Omega and breed a couple of strong Alpha kids to continue the King name. Perhaps, one of them won't be a disappointment like you are. Why do you think your own dad abandoned you where you couldn't embarrass his political career in England? And here in America, you've been working your poor little heart out for years to change the Companion institution. Yet the system is never going to change."

How can he talk to Braxton like that? Say such cruel things?

Has Braxton truly been working himself half to death to change the system?

Has he been doing the same as Didier and me but from the inside?

"It will change," Braxton says with an intensity that takes away my breath. "I swear on my life that it will."

"Your life?" Trenton whistles. "You have some big cajones to stake that. I warn you, I'm only giving you these two weeks to get the business back under control and that's the share price, board, and the whole Companions going missing thing. You'd better get your own Companions behaving as well. If you don't, then I'll contact your father and report back on *everything*. What do you think he'll do as Head Alpha to both your Companions and you, when he learns what a car crash you've made of your lives here? I'm guessing that then you'll be the ones who are *wrecked*."

CHAPTER 6



Companion Wing, King Hall

I balance the open laptop on my bare knee, studying the screen.

I'm naked because it's far too hot for pajamas in the heat of the summer night.

I click through the Caged Companion, searching for clues that any of the resistance members have been arrested or worse.

At the moment, on the server there's a mix of widespread panic about the stay-at-home order and a sort of holiday mood from the older Companions that they'll get a break from going into college or work with their Alphas.

So, a silver lining.

I breathe in deeply, loving the way that our tiny attic bedroom in the Companion Wing smells of the delicious mix of marshmallow, almonds, and hot chocolate.

It's my favorite scent in the entire world. It makes my heart ache because for years, as soon as I smell it, I know that I'm home.

No matter where Didier, Braxton, and I are, and our scents are intermingled, is my home.

I want this feeling to continue forever.

But just like summer, our years shut away together in King Hall as best friends, has to fade at some point.

We're not teenagers any longer.

Would Braxton want us to match as pack bonds, however, even if it was possible?

I wrench my gaze away from the screen to look around the attic room. It's barely more than a large closet with bare oak floorboards and a barred window, which is too high up to look out of.

Cool moonlight streams through it.

There are a bundle of books by the wall, along with the audio books and iPod that Braxton just happened to order for the grand library in King Hall for himself.

He does that a lot: order things *for himself*, which Didier or I just happen to have mentioned liking.

Companions aren't allowed to possess anything but borrowing things from the Alpha bends the rules.

Didier loves listening to the audio books, while he scrubs clean the twenty-nine bathrooms.

In our bedroom, there isn't even room for a mattress. At the start, we only had a thin blanket, but Didier used our spare uniforms to build a nest for us anyway.

Then Braxton started the game of lost and found with us; he *lost* his own clothes, and Didier *found* them. Then Didier added them as materials to build our amazing nest.

He used thread to sew the items together. Shirts and trousers have become the walls and mattress of the nest that we snuggle on.

Jackets are like our blankets.

There are enough silk ties for a legion of businessmen. They lie like violet snakes all around the nest.

They're Didier's favorite to stroke his fingers over, hold to his nose as he sleeps, trying to imagine that he's holding Braxton every night, or have stroked over his dick.

I've had many fun games with those ties.

Didier has less nightmares like this.

The toy Croissant sleeps at the end of our nest.

The real Croissant sleeps in a dog bed that's by the door at the bottom of our nest, which Didier sewed out of an entire repurposed set of lounge cushions that Didier stole.

The following day, Braxton gave him a long look. "I have a brand new

dog bed in the kitchen for Croissant, you know.”

Didier froze. “How strange that I missed *seeing* that.”

Braxton flushed. “My mistake. Let me clarify. Croissant is registered as my dog and so is not bound by any archaic Companion laws, which stop me from purchasing,” he broke off frustrated, “everything that I wish for you. So, anything that you want (and please notice that I say want and not need), for Croissant, then have Jewel write it down for me, and it’ll be bought.”

He’s never broken that promise.

Croissant loved the original dog bed, however, so we never changed it.

Didier crouches to pet Croissant’s head, even though she’s already asleep. He settles her every night. She looks worn out by becoming the resistance’s newest canine member.

Is she the first?

She should get a medal.

“Goodnight, my brave girl.” Didier strokes down Croissant’s back, and her tail gives a sleepy wag.

Then he stands and unbuttons his shirt. He doesn’t have any modesty, but then, he never has.

He’s so fucking gorgeous.

Shamelessly, I lean my back against the wall at the head of the nest and watch, as he reveals each tantalizing strip of pale skin. His raven hair looks even darker in contrast.

When he pulls off his shirt, his compact muscles ripple in the moonlight.

Then he turns and neatly folds his shirt like he always does, so that he can find it easily the next morning, kneeling to place it on the correct pile.

As he turns, my gaze softens. I take in the expanse of Didier’s back and the web of white scarring that runs from his shoulders all the way to his hips.

Didier looks so small, and even though I see each day firsthand how fierce he is, I hate that Trenton (who’s twice his size), hurt him like that in those first months that he was conditioned.

Yet the training didn’t fucking work.

No matter what Trenton did (and Didier has always been tight lipped about it), Didier is more feral than he was before.

If feral means courageous, wild, and rebellious.

If he wasn’t already a Rej1, then he’d definitely have been marked a Rej2 by now.

I can guess at some of Trenton’s methods because I’ve felt them myself.

But I wasn't isolated and kept alone like Didier was.

Didier undoes the button on his jeans, shimmying them down his lean thighs.

My breath catches because the only thing about the Companion uniform that I can get behind is that there's no underwear.

I can cope with going commando, if it means that Didier does.

His dick is large for an Omega's.

It's also pretty, and all fucking mine.

I lick my dry lips, as Didier pushes his jeans the final way off, folding them as well and adding them to the pile. Then he crawls up the nest in the slinky way that he has, adding in a swing of his hips that makes me want to dive on him.

Come on, Jewel, you're a responsible resistance member now.

Work first, play later.

I click on the page again, scrolling down.

Didier cocks his head at the sound as he settles on his back next to me. He sighs, rolling from side to side on top of the nest and luxuriating in the soft textures.

His blue eyes twinkle. "Mon bijou, are you being naughty again and breaking the rules?"

"Mon oiseau, you're naughty all the time."

"So true."

Companions aren't meant to have contact with anyone outside the pack who fostered them without permission, apart from the lawyer who's appointed to oversee their guardianship.

I have one who took on our case pro bono.

He's an amazing Alpha, Benjamin, from the local Champion pack. He takes on as many Companion cases as he can, simply so that they're not alone.

He's one of the only lawyers who's been fighting for both Companion and Omega rights.

Benjamin is possibly the hardest working and kindest man that I know, even if I've never been able to have a real life meeting with him.

Yet the awareness that he's there, caring about what happens to Didier and me, has meant more than he could ever know.

He's felt like a big brother to me.

Except, Braxton didn't set up Companion Controls on this laptop, despite

the fact that his own company manufacture the software and make millions from it.

It's another one of his loopholes, I think.

Companion Controls would have restricted what I could access on the web, as well as restricting who I could contact.

It's standard practice for all those Companions who are lucky enough to be allowed a computer to help with tutoring.

Most have to risk sneaking onto their Guardian's computer, if they want to reach out, including on the Omega Society server.

Didier turns his head, taking a deep breath of the clothes that are all around us like he needs to know we're in our nest again and safe.

As if he needs to be wrapped in Braxton's scent, *an Alpha's*, to truly feel protected, even if he'll never admit that need out loud.

Fuck, how can I get Braxton for both of us?

It's a fantasy that we've pretended for years we don't need an Alpha in our lives.

Yet not simply any Alpha: *Braxton*.

Will we have to live out the rest of our lives like other Companions with nothing more than the faded scent of an Alpha and knotted toys?

All of a sudden, a single message hidden on the server jumps out at me: *Collection and delivery fine.*

That's it but it's enough.

"The triplets are safe," I breathe, hurriedly checking my own posts in case there's more to find. "We did it, Didi."

Didi grips onto my arm. "C'est magnifique!"

Didi tends to slip into French when he's excited or calling me pet names.

I love it.

"Yeah, it's awesome." I smile but then I gape at the screen. "Hold on."

I click onto social media in case my hunch is wrong.

My pulse accelerates.

It can't be.

"What's happening?" Didier sounds strained.

"I don't know but...it's gone viral."

"What has? My sexy ass?" He wiggles his ass in a way that's so distracting I can't help glancing up from the screen.

I also can't help running my hand over his ass, in a way that makes him purr.

Then I reach to tug on his curls. “Nope, the *Three Rules for Badass Omegas and Betas* post. It’s been copied and reposted everywhere. They’re getting hundreds of thousands of likes. There are even memes. *Alphas* are reading them out in protest. Oh, fuck.”

“What?”

“It’s on the news. There are conspiracy theories about this being part of the resistance, a prank, or even a subversive act by that poet, Ben. You know, the one who’s anonymous like the artist Banksy and puts out subversive works.”

Didier grins with delight. “You’re infamous, mon bijou. I always wanted to be a daring outlaw. I told you that you were a legend.” He stretches out in the nest again. “I wish that I could build you a nest that was worthy of you. A legendary one. Is it not a travesty that nests are designed by Betas? I would love to design them.”

I study him carefully. “Wouldn’t that be hard on you?”

“Because I’m a NH? I may not experience a heat in my life, and others may think that I’m less of an Omega because of that, but it’s not true. I don’t define myself by what others tell me that I’ve lost...” He points at his eyes, and I pale. “...rather by what I can do. And I would very much like to help other Omegas through their heats. That would make me happy.”

I duck my head, and my eyes smart. “What if I also never get my heats?”

“Then you haven’t lost anything. Instead, you’re a badass Omega who’s made the first viral video of the resistance.”

I raise my head. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Always know just what I need to hear.”

Didier reaches out, fingering one of the ties. It’s the most special one that he possesses because it’s the first one he stole.

It’s thin, coming apart at the seams no matter how many times that he fixes it, and Braxton’s scent on it has faded.

But there’s enough of Braxton’s scent left that it’s mingled with the marshmallow almond croissant of our scents.

The tie’s perfect for holding close and dreaming that we have our Alpha in our nest with us.

Now, I want to imagine that he’s joined with us in this moment of triumph.

It’s clear that Didier feels the same.

I can help with that.

I push my laptop off my knee.

Hot and cold washes through me, as I reach for the tie. I tangle my fingers with Didier's for a moment, signaling my intention.

His breath hitches, and his eyelashes flutter.

"It's always been you, l'amour de ma vie," he murmurs, as I slide the tie from his hold into my own. He sprawls like the most beautiful doll ever made, all pale languorous limbs and hard muscles. "Only you."

"I love you." I stroke the silky tie in soft touches over his cheeks, nose, and plush lips like a kiss. "You're being so good for me now. Beautiful and everything that I need. It's making me wet just to know that this is bringing you pleasure."

When I wrap the tie around his neck, where he's most sensitive, his hands flutter at his sides like he's struggling to remain still. When I press more firmly above the Companion Collar like I can replace it with my own one that he's taking willingly, closing my hand to apply just enough pressure to make him gasp, he arches off the nest.

Oh yeah, there's my kinky Didier.

"Remember our safewords," I murmur, pressing a kiss to his sweet lips. "Red for stop and yellow for slow down, lighter, or you need a break. This is just to help you sleep after the adrenaline of today, okay?"

"Oui."

He's already reduced to French.

Ties, collars, and bondage does it for him every time.

I smirk, loving the way that his pupils are dilated and his thick dick is hard against his stomach.

"Hold out your wrists," I order.

Obediently, Didier holds out his hands with his palms pressed together, as if in prayer.

I expertly bind the tie around his wrists like I've done many times before, slipping my finger between the silk and his skin to check that it's not too tight.

His whole body relaxes, as soon as he's bound. Now that he knows I've got him, he can let go.

Didier's trust in me and submission is mind blowing. It makes him even more precious to me.

How can I not protect him with everything in me?

Didier can be an obedient and well behaved Omega, when it's consensual and he's being respected.

Traditional Alphas like Trenton simply don't understand that. They'll never know how much they're missing out on because of it.

I trace one finger up the length of Didier's dick, and he shudders.

"Yellow," he gasps.

Instantly, I pull my hand back, startled.

"Are you okay?" I check in. "What do you need? Would you like me to untie you?"

"Non." Didier pulls his bound hands to his chest. "It's just... I don't need you to pleasure me tonight. It's not about that. I only wanted to feel secure. And I do now. Can we cuddle?"

"Of course." I pull Didier against my side, resting his head on my shoulder and playing with his hair.

He gives a deep, rumbling purr that vibrates through me.

Concern worms through me though.

When was the last time that Didier turned down a handjob?

He's *never* turned down a handjob.

Begged for one. But not refused one.

Is this about the mission? The new Beta? Worry about whether Trenton will try and take revenge on us?

Then the truth hits me.

As soon as he reached for the tie, I should've realized.

I snuggle down, tracing over one of the scars that's wrapped around Didier's shoulder, before pressing a kiss to it.

Didier's lips tug into a contented smile, which reassures me that he's okay. He's resting his tied wrists between us.

"So, is this about Braxton?" I venture. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about him for months. Fuck it, for years. When I wake up in the night, I reach for him like he's just going to be here with us. But he's not."

Didier's purr abruptly breaks off. "We shouldn't do this."

"I know but I can't help it," the words burst out of me and suddenly, I can't hold it in any longer, "I love Braxton and I know that if we don't get him to be our Alpha, all our hearts are going to be broken."

CHAPTER 7



Companion Wing, King Hall

Didier stiffens and he pales. “You mean that you love him as a friend, oui?”

I grasp the ends of the tie, which binds Didier’s wrists, giving him the grounding connection. “You know that I don’t.”

Didier shakes his head, and his curls brush against my cheeks, as we lie naked together in the nest in our tiny bedroom in the attic of King Hall. “I didn’t really, but it doesn’t matter...”

I study the conflicting emotions, which are flitting across his expressive face. “Why?”

“Because I love him too,” Didier bursts out, before biting his lip like he wishes that he hadn’t spoken. “He’s *our* Alpha. I’m from France, where there’s no such thing as this stupid Companion rule. I deserve to be cherished. I deserve...*you* deserve...for our Alpha to have courted and bonded with us years ago. It’s like being rejected over and over again, every day, to be...”

He turns his head away, burying it into the nest, which he’s literally built out of Braxton’s clothes to create the fantasy around himself that he’s loved and wanted by the Alpha.

Except, that’s a fairy tale.

Neither of us are wanted like we need.

Like we fucking deserve.

“Will Brax ever love us back like we love him?” I ask in a small voice.

“Don’t wish for that.”

“Why not?”

Didier raises his bound hands to stroke my hair, soothingly. I lean into his touch.

“Because it’d mean nothing but pain. The number three rule is that Companions can’t bond. What does that leave us with? Being used like whores.”

Outraged, I wrench away from Didier. “What the fuck did you just say?”

“Am I wrong?” Didier coolly raises his brow. “Sex toys? Pets? Maybe I should use a more polite term like *stress relief*?”

“Brax would never see us like that.”

“Precisely, which is why he hasn’t touched us in all these years. He has treated us like friends but he hasn’t crossed the line. He’s a billionaire, and we’re nobodies. I’m even a Reject. Can you not see the problem with the power imbalance? He clearly does, even if he doesn’t actively abuse it.”

“He wouldn’t...”

“Again, it’s why he *hasn’t*. He’s never held his status over us.”

I’m shaking and I feel like I don’t know whether I want to scream or whoop with joy.

Because so much is falling into place now, and I don’t know how I didn’t see it before.

“*He already loves us,*” I whisper.

Didier nods.

“He just couldn’t show it because he doesn’t want to pressure us or make us frightened,” I say.

Didier nods again.

“He’s probably as torn up inside as we are. He must have been for years.”

Didier gives a hollow laugh. “Funny, non? He can’t be with us because he’s such a good Alpha. And we want to be with him *because* he is such a good man.”

Warmth unfurls through me.

I’m smiling goofily and I don’t care.

I reach for Didier, snatching him by the shoulder and pulling him up to sit next to me.

I loop my arms around his neck. “Brax loves us.”

“Did you miss my whole *pain* speech?”

“We can work all of that out. We’re the legends of the resistance. We can do anything.”

Didier sighs, dramatically. “Ah, perhaps I shouldn’t have called you that. I have created a monster.”

I lick his cheek in retaliation, and he pulls a face. “Too late.”

“As you wish, *mon coeur*. If you want Brax, then I shall get him for you.”

“He’s not like one of his ties. You can’t just steal him and add him to our nest.”

Shame.

Didier smirks. “That’s what you think. Let me work out a scheme. Brax is only not making a move because he’s too honorable. But *I’m* not too honorable to put a move on him on your behalf. I will hook him for us. If there’s one thing that a Frenchman is best at in the world, it’s seduction.”

“According to you, there are a lot of things that Frenchmen are best at in the world. You use that sentence about good food, wine, building nests, and last month, you even claimed it for dirty talking.”

Dider winks. “Us Frenchman have many talents.”

“Uh-huh?”

Actually, it was true.

Lucky me, *so fucking true.*

Didier draws back to whisper into my ear, “Just hearing your sexy voice saying *dirty talk* is making me so hard right now. I’m desperate to touch myself, but you’ve bound my hands and my cock belongs to you. *I belong to you.*”

I shiver.

Hell, he knows how to push my buttons.

“You’re such a gorgeous man.” I cup Didier’s cheek. “And you’ve proved your point.”

He laughs.

I should spank the brat, but he’d enjoy it too much.

You shouldn’t reward bad behavior.

More relaxed, we both settle back, cuddled in each other’s arms.

“So, another Companion arrived in our beautiful cage this evening.”
Didier wrinkles his nose. “We have to be even more careful, now that we’ll have this new person sniffing around. We can’t trust them. Do you think that

we'll meet the Beta tomorrow?"

I card my fingers through Didier's silky hair. "His name's Matthew, and you don't need to say *Beta* like you're sucking a lemon."

Didier hesitates just for a moment. "It was the Beta in my pack who advocated that I be left behind in America. I felt that she was always jealous that I got so much of my Alpha's attention. She doted on me, and even though I've had long enough to work out how she could have decided to throw me away, I remember the argument before she did, and it was the *Beta* who pushed for leaving me in America. I didn't understand what they meant. I thought that they were debating about me attending a specialist school. It's how they talked about the Institute, right up until the moment that the gates closed behind me."

The assholes.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugs, but his expression is closed off like he's lost back in the memory. "Then there were the Beta Carers..."

"Hey, it's not fair to judge a whole dynamic on that sample of assholes. I know that you don't have many to go on, and I don't either, but I had four bonded parents: two Alphas, an Omega, and a Beta. We were traveling back from a weekend at the lake. We were middle-class, and I feel like such an idiot because I didn't look outside my happy bubble to see what happened to Rejects or Companions; I hadn't even met one. I mean, I saw them around. But I'd never spoken to one. It didn't cross my mind that I could be turned into one myself."

"What was your Beta parent like?"

I tighten my hand in Didier's hair. It's been so long since I've allowed myself to think about my dad, Andres.

I haven't spoken about him, since he died.

That thought hits me in the guts.

Didier is the first person to ask about him.

I wasn't even allowed to attend my family's funeral.

Suddenly, I'm desperate to talk about Andres. "He was awesome. All my parents were. Mom was sweet and the homemaker. My Alpha parents were both doctors and ambitious, which is why the weekends that we took by the lake, away from work, were so important to all of us. But Andres was different. I'm closer to him in character than anyone. He had this unique, subversive way of looking at the world. He was an inventor, smart, and full

of energy and curiosity about everything. He drove the others mad sometimes, but he always had time for me, even when I was tiny and messed with his experiments. He loved explaining everything to me. He always looked for ways to change the world.”

I swallow hard, refusing to cry.

This is a happy memory. A farewell that I never got to make.

Someone else should hear about Andres.

I feel happier deep inside for managing to talk about this finally.

“He sounds amazing,” Didier replies. “I wish that I could have met him, all of them. They created an equally amazing daughter.”

“Their family bond did.” I tilt my head. “The way that the three dynamics linked and complimented each other was beautiful to watch.”

Didier brightens in a way that makes me nervous because I know it means that he’s had a dangerous thought. “Ah, so we need to include this Beta in the seduction then.”

My eyes widen. “Woah, that was not where I was going with that story at all.”

“You were. I just got there faster than you, even if you do have an IQ of 168.”

“172,” I correct him, absentmindedly.

He laughs. “Because those four points make all the difference.”

“No seducing the new bodyguard,” I command.

Didier pouts. “You stop all my fun.” *So not true.* “What if he’s gorgeous? Come on, he could be—”

“Fucked up from being rejected not once but twice...? You know how bad we felt, and now this Matthew’s been sold like an unwanted toy. On top of that, he’s spent some weeks in the adult wing of Companion House.”

Didier shudders. “Mon dieu, the horror.”

Neither of us will ever forget the day that we were taken to the adult wing for a tour.

It was meant to act as a warning to all of us from the kid’s side about what would happen if we didn’t work hard enough to gain the skills, which would ensure that we were chosen to be wards. Worse, if we ended up not pleasing our Guardians and being returned.

The dark cells and discipline rooms.

Didier looks thoughtful. “Okay, he can be part of our Companion pack.”

I eye him. “Really? Just like that?”

“As a Companion, Matthew’s pack. But not like me. I mean, no one’s like me.” He struggles for words, as he often does, when his emotions run strong. “I love you and...”

I smile.

Possessive little Omega.

I let go of Didier’s hair, kissing him, long and lingering enough for him to melt against me. “Even if we both want to invite him into our bed, and he wants us back, it won’t be the same as I love you. How you love Braxton isn’t the same as how you love me, right?”

Didier shakes his head, vigorously.

The expression on his face is one of adoration. “You’re my first love, soulmate, *my everything.*”

“See?”

He relaxes, before his lips curl, teasingly. “Before we consider taking anyone as a new lover, they’ll have to prove that they’re capable of being awarded Didier’s Medal for worshiping your delicious pussy.”

I choke on my own tongue, blushing. “Would you stop calling it that?”

“Why? It is delicious.” Didier pushes me onto my back by my shoulders and cages me; our noses touch, and his dick is hard against my stomach. “No one deserves to kiss you anywhere, if they don’t worship you.”

“Does that include Brax?”

“But of course.” Didier gives a cheeky smile. “You’re imagining it, non?”

And I am.

I’m panting, as my chest rises and falls rapidly, with the thought of the gorgeous Alpha who I’ve crushed on for so long pleasuring me.

Didier’s eyes become hooded. “Our strong Alpha on his knees with his head between your thighs, while you sit in his leather chair behind his desk. And I, his small Omega, stand over him. I’m holding him by his hair, directing him. He can’t breathe because it’s more important that he worship our Jewel. *Let me worship you now.*”

“Fuck, yeah.”

Didier’s smile is dangerous, as he slides down my body in a way that doesn’t need guidance because this is so familiar between us.

“I love to touch, scent, and taste every inch of your soft skin,” he purrs.

Then, he does.

He maps his way down my body.

It’s electric.

He's leaving a fire in his wake. He's setting everywhere that he touches alight.

My toes curl, and I struggle to stay still.

He kisses down my stomach. At the same time, he reaches up to circle one of my nipples, while tweaking at the other one.

The combined sensations make me whimper.

He turns all his attention now to nibbling light bites around my bellybutton, before pushing my legs wider and kissing the sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

He rubs his nose against my clit and then licks a long stripe down the center of my pussy.

"Yes," I hiss.

Didier flattens his tongue and circles my clit, before tapping rhythmically over it.

"That's it," I moan. "Fuck, just there."

Instantly, Didier sucks on the exact spot.

Pleasure winds through me.

My back arches, and I moan, reaching down to grip him by the hair.

I hold Didier just where I want him, pushing his face harder against my wet pussy.

He hums his approval at the rough handling, and the vibrations are almost enough to tip me over the edge.

He worships me with increased vigor, before slipping two fingers into my pussy and crooking them.

And that's it.

I tumble over the edge of ecstasy.

Eating me out is something that Didier can fairly say he'd be awarded a medal for.

I should make him one.

I thrash from side to side, screaming wildly.

The release is thrilling and satisfying.

I collapse back against the bed, boneless. I relax my hold on Didier's hair, petting him.

He purrs, and the vibrations are almost too stimulating on my hypersensitive pussy.

Suddenly, the door smashes open with a bang.

I scream again, only this time in terror.

A powerful Beta with muscled chest and the broadest shoulders that I've ever seen, as well as a shaggy tumble of golden hair, barges through the door.

He's dressed in an adapted Companion outfit, with loose black joggers rather than jeans.

His skin is creamy, and he looks like he's escaped from a model shoot for an all-American jocks calendar.

He scans the room like he's looking for attackers, but when his gorgeous honey colored eyes meet the sight of Didier still gently licking between my spread thighs, as us two Omegas sprawl naked in our nest, he lets out a shocked gasp.

Then he trips over the dog bed in the doorway, landing on the bottom of our nest in a sprawl.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The new Beta Companion!

I didn't expect to meet Matthew tonight, and I definitely didn't expect to meet him like this.

"I thought that you were in danger." Matthew's voice is deep and American, and fuck me, he even has dimples.

Croissant doesn't even wake up. She's not much of a guard dog, but then, she's become used to sleeping through Didier and my kinkiness.

Didier lifts his head from between my legs but doesn't attempt to cover himself.

Instead, he growls, moving himself protectively in front of me. He tilts his head like he's listening for where Matthew is, in case he needs to attack.

Matthew throws a suit jacket from the bottom of the nest at me.

My cheeks are red, as I pull it over me like a blanket.

Matthew studies Didier wide eyed like he's a stunning primal Omega god who needs to be appeased with a sacrifice.

I know how he feels.

"Easy, little Omega. I'm sorry that I startled you." Matthew knee walks closer to Didier on the nest, holding out his hand like it may be bitten off. "I'm Matt, your new Beta bodyguard. I've just arrived for my shift and I heard the scream..."

I burst out laughing.

Wow, embarrassing.

In fact, as first meetings go, this has to be the worst...or the best, I can't decide.

Didier stops growling. “Your shift?”

“I’m meant to be guarding you. Screaming is usually not a good start to that.”

Didier smirks. “Screaming in this bedroom is a very good end to the night.”

Matthew glances between us. “I’ll remember that.”

“Didi, he’s holding out his hand for you to shake it.” I meet Matthew’s honey gaze; his eyes are beautiful. “He can’t see you and he’s a bit tied up right now.”

Matthew briskly nods. “Understood. I wasn’t briefed on much, before I was brought here.”

“Well, that sucks.”

“I’m good at winging it or at least, pretending that I am, while in fact, making a deeply calculated analysis.”

Scary, in an impressive way.

Didier holds out his bound hands, and Matthew takes both of them between his to shake. “Bonjour, Matthew. You know, you don’t need to be formal with us. No one has shaken my hand...ever. In Paris, we kissed each other on the cheek, at least twice. Since I’ve been here, no one greets me. And we’re all Companions.”

“Then it’s about time someone did treat you with respect. You’ll have to show me that Parisian thing some time. I’m glad about that formal shit; I’m terrible at it. Most of the beatings I’ve received have been over forgetting protocol or, you know, forgetting that when you’re taking notes as a college Companion for an Alpha who can’t be bothered to attend, you don’t spend the class doodling cocks, instead.”

I quirk my brow. “Were they at least interesting cocks?”

“Oh yeah, some had wings and everything.”

Didier laughs.

“So, call me Matt.”

Didier leans closer to Matthew, before sniffing. “You smell like orange frozen yogurt. Delicious and cool.”

Now that the panic is over, I can smell the Beta’s scent too.

It’s perfect for a summer’s night.

It makes me want to lick him.

“I’ve never been called delicious before.” Matthew gives an easy smile. “So, you’re the two troublemakers in this joint then.”

I grin, pulling the jacket more firmly around myself. “That’s us.”

Plus, I can’t believe that no one’s complimented him on his scent — or everything else.

Seeing him next to Didier makes both men more tantalizing: one so muscular and large and the other lean and small.

The fantasy of Matthew throwing Didier over his shoulder or manhandling him in other sexy ways is going straight into my wank bank.

I hope that the thought doesn’t show on my face.

Matthew runs his hand through his tousled hair. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe. Your Alpha will help with that as well, huh?”

I scrutinize Matthew.

Despite his muscles and golden retriever personality, which makes him appear laid back, I can also see the tension in the way that he’s kneeling. It means that he’d be ready to leap back to his feet in a moment, if he needed to.

He’s a dangerous man, who’s been trained to be a bodyguard. He has an athlete’s body and strength. And he’s assessing threats right now, while trying to look like he isn’t.

The unasked question lies underneath his words: Is Braxton a threat in this household?

“Brax will,” Didier answers. “Trenton won’t.”

I don’t expect such simple honesty from him.

“Huh, so is this Trenton guy...?”

“Brax’s cousin,” I supply.

“Okay, the cousin, is he the reason that you’re both covered in scars?” Matthew’s look is shrewd.

Shit, I’d forgotten that we’re exposed like this.

I pull the jacket more firmly around myself.

Matthew looks like he’s itching to reach out and trace over the scars on Didier like somehow that will take away the pain of when they were inflicted.

It’s too late.

They were caused years ago.

Nothing Matthew does can take away that pain.

Didier draws in a sharp breath. “Stay away from Trenton. He’s a coward. I don’t think that he’ll attack a Beta or one whose hands, when we shook, were twice the size of mine. So, you don’t need to worry.”

Matthew’s gaze drops to Didier’s crotch. “My hands may be twice your size, but man, you have nothing to be ashamed of in other departments. If I

was twice you *there*...I'd be monster cock dimensions. You know, working toward tentacle sized."

Didier smirks. "I like this one. We're keeping him."

"Wasn't that inappropriate?" I try to scowl but fail because a guy who can talk about monster cocks and tentacles like that has my vote.

Matthew stands, brushing off his uniform. "Probably, but I'm a ward, not a paid employee, and you're the ones lying around here naked."

"This is our room!" I retort.

"True," Matthew replies, brightly. "Sorry about the whole dramatic non-rescue. I don't usually carry on like that. But I take helping Omegas seriously. I used to have an Omega sister. A twin as well, Asher. My twin and I always looked out for her, well, before we went into the system."

The first melancholy chases over his handsome features.

"Brax's a good man. I respect him," I reassure Matthew. "We're okay."

I hope.

"You respect him, huh?" Matthew looks thoughtful. "I wasn't expecting that. I mean, *respect* is a strong word, and few Companions feel it for their Guardians. The guy must be doing something right."

"He is. You don't need to be afraid of him."

Matthew is trying to act all badass Beta who isn't scared of anything, but I've been in his place before.

I know what it's like to be feeling out a new home and what the threats are.

Matthew doesn't want to admit the terror of the unknown, which is making him hypervigilant and interrogate us.

Only this morning, he'd have been locked in a dark cell, alone.

Yet I'm going to give him the dignity of pretending that I can't see any of that because he appears to need the illusion.

"The only time to fear is if you dare to touch Brax's vintage cars." Didier scoots up the bed, searching me out to wrap his arms around me. "Mon dieu, once I had to get some supplies from the garage, and I tripped and fell against his beloved Porsche. I scratched the bonnet and I truly think that I heard Brax sob, when he saw the damage."

"It's possible that Brax's in a passionate relationship with that Porsche," I add. "He's very dedicated to her. Possibly, even bonded."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to only steal it for a joyride, when he's at work," Matthew deadpans.

“That’s a joke, right?” I pale.

Braxton truly does love his cars.

Matthew’s smile is all dimples; I’m not sure that I trust it. “Of course. I’m a Lamborghini man myself.” *Not that reassuring.* “Anyway, I can tell that this Alpha is different to my last Alpha-hole Guardian. He gives off different vibes. I also kind of tested him this evening.”

I freeze. “What did you do?”

Matthew leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his powerful chest. “I’m a personal trainer. I could tell that Braxton is more used to sitting behind a desk, than running laps. Someone shows their true nature, when he’s not fit but he’s being put through a vigorous routine of more push-ups than he’s done before in his life, his legs feel like jelly, and he’s collapsed in a sweaty heap at his Beta’s feet...all while that Beta hasn’t broken a sweat yet.”

“You are my idol,” Didier breaths.

Matthew laughs.

I cock my head. “So, what did Brax do under that pressure?”

“Said *dear God* a lot, begged for water, then gave this adorable grin that would melt most people’s hearts and asked if he could take back his request to be *whipped into shape.*”

Now Matthew is *my* idol.

I’d been worried about this new Companion: that he’d be broken.

Instead, he’s only been here a couple of hours and already he’s worked out Braxton and taken him in hand.

Seriously, he’s skilled.

“And what did you say?” I ask.

“*See you at 5 a.m. for your dawn half marathon run around the estate.*” Matthew smiles. “You’d have thought that I’d ordered his knot to be lopped off.”

Didier and I both wince.

Poor Braxton.

Except, Matthew could be the best thing to happen to any of us. He’s like a breath of fresh air in this ancient mansion.

“You’re wicked.” Didier closes his eyes as he settles to sleep next to me. “I’m happy that you’re living with us now.”

Matthew’s expression is soft, as he watches us both in the nest. “It’s what I’m here for, and I’m happy too.”

“I don’t understand though.” My brow furrows. “King Hall has state of

the art security. We're on lockdown here for two weeks. Why did Brax need to rush to bring you in?"

Matthew looks away. "Yeah, the security is awesome here. I'll need to do a full review of it this week just to be certain nothing has been missed. I do like to play with my tech toys. I have the feeling, however, that this isn't about guarding you from an outside threat, but rather an internal one. This asshole Trenton, I'd guess. You know, Chief Alphas like to act like they're the big man, but most still have a *Head Alpha* somewhere who's really calling the shots. I figure that Braxton used the security threat to his company as the excuse to call me in. Perhaps, he wasn't able to do it before. If you respect him, then the best theory is that this is the first opportunity that he's had to do it."

I gape at Matthew.

How has he seen that, when I missed it?

How much else has Braxton done for us over the years?

"I bet you're right," I reply. "Shit, how did you get a handle on Brax and the situation so fast?"

For the first time, Matthew's smile becomes dangerous. "It's what I'm good at: rapidly reading people and situations. It's why I was picked to be trained up like I am. But it's also how I survived my childhood. Look, how I see it is that this Alpha has spent years playing a part and wearing a mask, while bending as many rules as he can. The question is, whether it's all because of you two."

Didier is listening, intently. "Why would you care?"

"Hey, this is what I live for. I make actual files with color-coded sticky notes on all the people who I've protected or the ones I've been passed around to at college like a party favor. Survival, right? But since I arrived this afternoon (and Braxton was dumb enough to give me unrestricted web access), all I've done is research him. That image? Smile? He plays it well."

"Plays?" I query, warily.

Matthew flashes a smile that's all white teeth. "None of it's real. But it's so fucking interesting to analyze. In the tabloids, gossip rags, and amongst the business elite, Braxton's all about the bullshit King name. His role is to project the image in public of the powerful, young Alpha, who's only waiting for the right society heiress to bond with, while giving thoughtful interviews about his latest charity auction event and his love of vintage cars."

"The vintage cars bit is true," Didier mutters.

“But the rest is bullshit because behind closed doors in private, he’s bending as many rules as he can and remaining unbonded, while allowing his two Omega Companions to fuck like bunnies in a nest made out of his own clothes.”

Defensively, I drop my hand to the tie, which is around Didier’s wrists. I slip the tie off, unwinding it.

I rub Didier’s wrists, massaging the circulation back into his hands.

Matthew watches us.

Didier and I both hold one end of the silky tie, which is a way that we often like to sleep, almost like Braxton is held between both of us.

I can’t help feeling possessive of the hot chocolate scent of these clothes and our nest like Matthew may try and take it away from us.

Matthew’s expression tightens like he understands. “Hey, I didn’t mean that Braxton shouldn’t do that, or that I’d ever try and take a nest away from an Omega. Only that I find it *interesting*. He’s trapped, right? You do get that. As part of one of the most powerful but Traditional families in this country, who run such a huge and government backed institution, he can’t simply walk away. He’d be imprisoned in the Alpha Center, if he tried to. So, his strategy of skirting the rules and keeping his liberal attitude hidden in public is smart. I admire the guy. Plus, I need to have a game plan, so I know how to tame him. I can’t run him ragged on half marathons every day, unfortunately.”

“Bodyguard, personal trainer, and tamer of Alphas.” I smirk. “Is there no end to your talents?”

“Well,” for the first time Matthew’s expression becomes shy, and it hits me hard in the chest in a way that I’m not expecting, “cooking and baking also happen to be in my official skillset. It’s one of the chief reasons that your Alpha chose me over other candidates. Will you mind eating more than the poor assortment of cereals, soups, and frozen meals that I found on my exploration of the kitchen?”

Didier begins to tremble with excitement. “A chef? I am in love with you. It is official.”

“And I want to have your chocolate chip muffin babies,” I add.

Matthew laughs. “Good enough for me.” Then he becomes serious. “Also, it’s my job to protect you, so that this asshole Trenton won’t harm you anymore. You go to sleep and know that I’ll be on the other side of that door, standing guard over you all night. I hope that from now on, I can chase away

your nightmares.”

CHAPTER 8



Entrance Hall, King Hall

One week into the stay-at-home order, over what the local news reports are calling the *heat wave of the decade* with plenty of winks to camera, and I've never felt so frustrated.

Is Braxton deliberately avoiding me?

By now, I know the list of my daily chores well enough but normally, I have additional ones that involve spending time with Braxton. This week, however, he hasn't added any that would mean we'd spend time alone in the library or kitchen.

Instead, as soon as I enter a room, he finds some kind of an excuse to leave it with studied politeness.

He appears distant and stressed, which I know isn't helped by the constant press interviews that he's needing to hold to stop his company imploding.

I can read them online.

I also hear the heated phone calls with his board members through the closed door of his study.

I miss him, both as my friend and the man who I love.

Is Braxton trying to protect me because Trenton has been watching us so closely or is it only my desperate love for him, which is reading more into the

actions of a good, responsible Guardian, than is truly there?

Perhaps, he doesn't love Didier and me...not like we love him.

Maybe, he never will.

I bite my lip, wringing the chamois cloth between my hands.

It's Sunday morning, and I'm hot, exhausted already, and my muscles are aching.

My ass is cold and numb, where I'm sitting on the marble floor of the Gothic entrance hall, which has a grand double floating staircase leading down from the gallery above. The railings are mahogany and carved with snarling wolf heads like the ones on Braxton's desk.

The chandelier is like hundreds of tiny, golden lanterns. It blazes, even though savage sunlight spears through the rose tinted glass panels on either sides of the imposing front door.

The blood-tinted light turns the expanses of white marble ruby. It's like being trapped on the inside of a wine glass.

Or inside Braxton's eyes...or heart.

"I bet Brax's enjoying his weekend lie-in," I mutter with only a hint of bitterness.

It helps to imagine how adorable he'll look sleeping on his silk sheets (I bet they're silk because I've never seen them).

I've only caught Braxton sleeping once, slumped over his work in exhaustion.

I've always wanted to lie next to him, watching while he slept and see him truly relaxed.

Wow, that makes me sound like a creeper.

I don't care.

I've had six weeks to think about what I want and need.

I've been patient long enough.

Didier shrugs. "Pfft, let him sleep. For me...? I'd rather be up and working."

He buffs his cloth more vigorously in circles, working the marble to a shine. This is one of the jobs that he learned most easily, when we first came here.

We leave it to Sunday like a treat because it's his favorite chore.

See, you look for positives where you can find them in life.

Didier's wearing one of his heavily adapted outfits. He's slashed rips all down the front, which show tantalizing hints of his pale skin and abs, as well

as his taut stomach.

It gives the outfit a punky look.

He's added Braxton's tie defiantly around his neck.

Every couple of minutes, he runs his fingers over the silky material or raises it to his nose to sniff at the scent.

Sometimes, I bend over and take a deep breath of the scent myself.

It's comforting.

Yet Didier needs it more than me. After his harsh isolation and conditioning, as well as his Omega nature being more unstable than mine, he needs an Alpha's scent.

Our Alpha.

He fucking needs his touch.

I have to get Braxton to see that.

The tie's tied loosely and askew, giving Didier the rebellious bad boy look. It also covers the Companion Collar, as if Braxton's claim can outweigh that one.

I know that it's on purpose. Didier is making a point.

But will Braxton understand it, if he sees?

"Even Croissant is still snoozing," I say. "See, dogs get to sleep in."

"Because I want her to," Didier objects. "She tired herself out with mischief, playing with me last night. She's a tug of war champion."

"So, you're not tired out with mischief...?"

"Never."

Didier never seems to be.

I stretch my aching arms behind me.

Fuck, I wish that I wasn't.

Also, there's been the underlying anxiety threading through me all week: the tension about whether our secret mission will be found out or Trenton will discover a way to take out his anger on us.

Yet Matthew has stayed true to his word and swaggered to our door every evening, chatted and joked, until he's become so familiar that it's hard to remember what it was like without his calming presence.

Then he's settled himself outside the door to guard us.

Trenton normally saves his abuse for the evenings and night, but he hadn't bothered us all week.

After the first night, Didier stole another cushion from the parlor and sewed one of Braxton's jackets around it, so that it'd smell like him. Then he

left it outside for Matthew to have something comfortable to sit on.

Matthew's bright smile, when he saw that Didier had created a cushion for him, made me feel squirmy inside. "You've made me a gift?"

Didier became very still.

Fuck, I should've known that it'd be a big deal for a Companion.

We weren't meant to own anything. We *were* the possession.

Nobody gave us gifts.

Didier and I made things for each other all the time, but we were different.

We adored each other and never acted like obedient Companions should.

Had anyone been kind to Matthew, however, since he'd become a ward?

Matthew held the adapted cushion close to his muscular chest, embracing it like he wished that it was Didier.

"Oui," Didier replied. "It's from both of us."

Matthew's gaze darted between us. "Then thanks. To both of you."

There'd been a lot of weight in those words and a heat, which settled deeply into me.

Now, Didier runs his cloth close to my hand, and our thumbs brush.

The touch is electric.

A smile plays across his lips, and I know that the touch was deliberate.

Didier seeks out my hand again. "Brax can be a lazy Alpha, sleeping or sprawling in his pajamas to watch those boring cricket games. We're up, the sun is hot, the air smells of the climbing roses, which are in bloom. My father's favorite saying is right: Eat well, laugh often, love a lot."

"Well, we do the second two..."

"We do the first one, mon amour, since Matt arrived." Didier smiles, dreamily. "Home made fresh bread? Potatoes dauphinoise? Profiteroles? Either he's been sent by heaven or he's fattening us up to be sacrifices."

"Or it's his strategy to seduce us. He does seem to go into his color-coded strategies, as he told us. Plus, he definitely goes in for flirting. Food could be his love language."

Didier licks his lips. "Then a few more of those gooey brownies that he made yesterday, and I'm going to be ready to get on my knees for him."

"Hey, if he throws in the strawberry ice cream milkshake that he made on Tuesday with all the whipped cream on top, then I'll be right there kneeling with you."

I would. It'd been like drinking summer in a glass.

I sigh, forcing myself back to buffing the marble; I can almost see my hot mess of a face in it now, as my hair hangs down, sweeping the floor. “But I hoped that we’d have time with Brax to work out where we stand with him both about the investigation into the Companions and you know, whether he’ll allow himself to love us. It all seems impossible now.”

Didier’s expression becomes fierce. “Impossible is not a French word. I think Napoleon said that.”

I squint at Didier. “And things turned out so well for him, right?”

Before Didier can puff himself up into too much patriotic outrage, Matthew strolls from the back of the mansion into the entrance hall.

He’s singing Halsey’s “New Americana” to himself.

He has a gorgeous voice.

“Matt’s just strolled in,” I tell Didier, “like King Hall is his own mansion.”

Didier snorts a laugh.

Matt casually pulls a rosy apple out of his pocket, tossing it into the air playfully once and catching it. He stops singing and takes a bite.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Hard at work then? There’s always room for a third worker here.”

“Nope, I’m good.” Matthew takes another loud bite of his apple, chewing on it with great satisfaction. “I’m busy, anyway.”

“Busy eating?” Didier asks.

“Uh-huh, busy refueling. My body is a temple or some such shit. I’ve already been working since dawn anyway.” He leans against the wall, watching us with far too much enjoyment. “Nice to see that *you’re* busy. It gives me a nice view. I love the outfit, Didi. Have you cut it up in some kind of protest? Since it reveals so much of your skin, I can get behind that. The naughty schoolboy look works for you. Plus, I’m getting in some guarding right now.”

Asshole.

Although, with the way that Matthew’s clothes are clinging to him with sweat in the heat...*stupidly muscled and handsome* asshole.

“Wait, rewind.” My brow furrows. “Why were you up at dawn? It’s Sunday.”

“How else could I take our Alpha on a two hour run through his woods?”

I chuckle.

So much for my image of Braxton lazing in his silk sheets.

Wow, that's perked me up.

Suddenly, I'm energized and feeling much better about working today because we're all up together.

Plus, I feel tingly at the way that Matthew possessively now calls Braxton *our Alpha*.

He says it so easily.

Like it's already arranged.

Indisputable.

Didier hurls down his cloth in order to throw his arms up dramatically. "This is me, worshiping you."

Matthew gives an easy smile, which makes his cheeks dimple. "Hey, you haven't heard my whole personal training plan yet. I'm the kind of guy who really expects my Guardians to commit."

"What did you do?" I demand.

Matthew's honey eyes are mischievous. "I find modern dance to be a perfect cardio workout."

I stare at him in shock. "You didn't."

"I'm not shitting you."

Didier crawls closer to Matthew, running his hand up his leg to his thigh; Matthew swallows, and his tongue darts out to wet his lips at Didier's touch. "Matty, I will swear to never steal the cookies before they're cooled again..."

"Yeah, right."

"I swear it on my pretty Omega life, if you recorded that dance session with the most dominant Alpha in Virginia, then let my Jewel watch it."

Didier never fails me.

Matthew grins, looking over at me. "Hey, of course I recorded it. How else could I watch it over...and over...*and over* again? How could I enjoy the sight of Braxton's tight ass slowed down and on repeat, as he stumbles through the least fiery tango I've ever seen, tries some approximation of ballet jumps, which would've been adorable if I hadn't been concentrating on not pissing myself with laughter, and falls on his ass, during the cha-cha-cha?"

I burst out laughing, and so does Didier.

"How did you do it?" I ask. "Brax doesn't dance. It's just not his thing. He can tear another Alpha apart in a meeting with moves that feel choreographed but he does that with graphs and statistics, not dance moves. You've been here a week and you've already got him attempting things that

he's spent years hiding from, even if he..."

"Sucks at them?" Matthew takes another bite of his apple. "It doesn't matter whether you're any good at dancing or not. It's about letting yourself go enough to give it a try. And yeah, he sucks balls. But the point is, I wore him down enough with the run that he could forget his public image and all those stresses and fears and just go for it. Let himself feel something in the moment. That's why it was good for him. I mean, even with the falling on his ass."

"I understand." Didier cocks his head. "You're good for Brax. I wish that he'd let us be good for him too because I want to be."

"So do I." My heart clenches.

"He'll get there. Right now," Matthew's lips quirk, "he's conning himself that I'm simply his personal trainer and this is all part of his job role. Healthy body, healthy mind. He needs my American ray of sunshine to kick his English repressed ass."

"He's not repressed." I remember Braxton's devilish smiles, which make me flush. "He's just used to being unloved. There's a difference."

Matthew's expression becomes serious like he's processing this new view.

He slips his half-eaten apple back into his pocket.

Then he adds, casually, "Plus, he wants to fuck me, so there's that."

"What?" I splutter.

Didier bares his teeth.

Matthew looks amused. "It's not like he doesn't want to fuck both of you as well. The guy could literally hammer nails with how hard he is all of the time. Talk about blue balls. His pheromones are so strong..."

"Stop talking about his pheromones," Didier hisses, sounding scandalized and like an Omega in one of those moralistic Victorian novels.

It's funny, considering that Didier was dirty talking to me last night about how he'd love to watch, while Braxton covered me in pheromones during his rut and then covered me with his cum...in a pretty necklace.

I blink away that image.

Wait, what the fuck *is* Braxton doing for ruts right now?

I don't know.

He's not doing Didier or me.

I assumed that he was going into Sanctum and finding an Omega to rut with or else going to the Institute or a government appointed center to find

one.

Has he been struggling through them with only toys?

Has he never had a rut?

Why does that thought make me warm with joy?

Matthew gives me a knowing look. “You must have seen the scorching glances that he throws your way and how his expression softens, when he talks about you. He wants to bend me over and fuck the challenge out of me. But he wants to make sweet love to both of you, cradling you safely in his arms. He’s one of those protective Alphas, right?”

My breathing is too fast.

I can imagine it.

I’m trying not to.

But I can’t help it.

I clench the cloth between my hands, bowing my head.

I can’t still my wildly beating heart.

Matthew pushes away from the wall and leans to tip up my chin with one large finger.

I meet his intense gaze.

“I’ll be there with him, when it happens,” Matthew says. “That’s if you want me to be, baby.”

I swallow. “I do.”

He traces his finger over my lips, and I open them longingly.

When he pulls back, I don’t know if I’m disappointed.

Didier is silent, but his head is tilted in a way that I know means he’s listening attentively.

Matthew taps Didier’s shoulder. “The offer’s open to you too, baby. You’re a beautiful pair of Omegas.”

Didier bares his teeth. “We are, but you better not have just called me *baby*, or you’ll find that I’m small but I have sharp teeth...”

Matthew’s pupils dilate, and he licks his lips. “Then I definitely fucking meant you.”

“You didn’t let me finish.” Didier sounds seductive, but there’s a silky edge to his voice that should warn Matthew. “You’ll find that I’m small but I have sharp teeth, *when I bite your dick.*”

I wince.

Matthew covers his crotch reflexively. “Sorry, not my kink.” Then he moves his hands to cradle Didier’s head, which makes him either brave or

stupid. “Well, I don’t think it is, but hey, I’ll try anything once. At least, let’s put it in the maybe, *open to exploring it* column. How about I draw up a checklist of kinks and fantasy role plays that we can each fill in and then talk through together this evening, since this is new to us, at least to the three of us together.”

I blink. “That’s very...”

“Thorough, responsible, fun...?”

“The kind of thoughtful consent that I never thought anyone but another Omega would have for me. Thank you.”

Matthew cards his fingers through his golden hair. “Hey, it’s spreadsheets. I love those. And this consent thing is new to me too, and I’m grabbing it with both hands. I messed around with the female Betas at college. I mean, the ones who approached my Guardian and wanted to fuck me. My last Guardian didn’t care what I did, as long as I completed my work during the day and went to the women’s dorms to do the deed. At least it was good stress relief and exercise, you know? But he didn’t want me to form any attachments because...well, it’s not like I could bond with anyone. So, no second dates. I belonged to the knothed. But I’ve never been with a guy before.”

Didier leans into Matthew’s touch, as if asking for strokes.

Matthew obliges, appearing startled and pleased, when Didier purrs.

“Neither have I,” Didier admits.

“Oh.” Matthew gives a soft smile. Then he reaches out one of his hands to me, and I reach to grasp it. His thumb rubs across the back of my knuckles. “We’re going to have so much fun discovering kinky stuff together then, the three of us.”

“As long as there’s romance.” Didier’s blue eyes darken. “My Jewel is worth that.”

“Yeah, she is.”

I tilt up my chin. “*Four*. Not three.”

“That’s how it is, huh? You need all four of us to be together?” Matthew looks thoughtful. “Then what the lady wants, the lady gets. No one’s ever going to say that I don’t provide for my Omegas. Anyway, you were right about the Alpha. I have a whole file with a ton of sticky notes on him by now, and he’s not a threat to any of us. He’s fucking dominant. Dangerous, too. But in private, he treats me with an equality that he has to hide in public. I respect him, and if I can say that, even after seeing him dance *Swan Lake* in a

suit (and failing in style), then you know that I'm serious. He deserves a pack as well."

Frightened, I glance around us.

The entrance hall is still empty.

We're being way too fucking loose lipped about all of this.

What if Trenton overheard us?

"Don't talk about pack bonds," I say, stiffly. "You know that we're not allowed those."

Surprised, Matthew pulls away.

His gaze is searching, before he appears to understand.

"Got you." He rolls his shoulders back, stretching. "Rule three: good companions won't seek their own pack bonds because blah blah and other bullshit."

"That's the one. Word for word. They must have loved you in Companion House."

Matthew winks. "How did you know? I was their favorite. I'm sweaty as fuck; I'm going for a shower."

He taps Didier on the shoulder as a goodbye and shoots me a smile, which feels private and special.

His honey gaze lingers on me, slow and considering.

It feels as intimate as a kiss.

Then he bounds up the stairs of the grand staircase two at a time.

Matthew's such a big presence that he owns King Hall, as if it was made for him.

"Do you think Braxton knows how lucky we all are to have found Matty?" Didier's head is tilted like he's straining to follow Matthew's ascent.

"At the moment, I'd imagine his thought processes are closer to *dear God, help, and what the hell is happening to my carefully constructed life?*"

Didier laughs. "Eat well, laugh often, love a lot, remember? This last week, I feel like we may finally be able to do that, for the first time ever. Matty's like the missing heart to this home."

And Didier is the Soul.

Yet Braxton is the glue that we need to hold us all together.

"So, we'll work out checklists and safewords tonight and then we're going for this with Matt, right?" I say. "We're making him our lover."

"He's our Beta," Didier replies, and I should've expected the possessiveness in his tone. "You will kiss him, mon amour, then we will both

show him what an attachment that's forever feels like. He's not some toy to be messed around with. He's..."

I know he wants to say *our chosen pack bond* but doesn't dare out here in the entrance hall.

If we were free, then we'd match with him.

But we're not.

Fucking is one thing. A Reject, Companion Omega talking about deciding on a pack bond is a whole other level of taboo.

Suddenly, there's the sound of voices from the parlor, growing closer, along with loud footfalls.

"Quick, look busy," I hiss.

Didier feels around for his dropped cloth, before grasping it in his small hand.

He bends over the marble floor, cleaning it with intent concentration. He's unable to stop the fine tremors, however, that are running through him.

I can work out that there are two sets of footsteps clattering sharply on the marble, but Didier is better at telling the difference between them than me.

His fear means that one of them must be Trenton.

I hold onto my own cloth, ducking my head and focusing as much as I can on my chore in silence.

I don't look up.

Hell, they're here...*right in front of me.*

Two sets of shoes stop just in my eye-line: shiny black Oxford men's shoes and a pair of Louboutin stilettos.

I struggle not to react and not only because they're such fucking beautiful shoes.

The woman who wears them is also beautiful, but on the inside, she's as ugly as sin.

Verity Sloane, a widowed thirty year old Omega from elite society with a name that sounds like either a Harlequin heroine or a porn star.

She's Trenton's ambitious best friend. She's a gold digger who has been after the position as Braxton's bonded Omega for years.

Every time that she's visited, it's never ended well for Didier and me. She hates that Braxton shows more interest and friendship to us, than he does to her.

But then, if she wasn't such a cruel snob, maybe he'd have been her friend.

It's this kind of jealousy, which makes Companions' lives so miserable, as soon as an Alpha Guardian bonds. After all, we can't be the first wards to fall in love with their Guardian or to have a Guardian who's become their best friend.

I sneak a glance at Verity.

She's thin and stylish, wearing an elegant white dress with a silk scarf tied at her neck. Over sized sunglasses balance on the top of her head, and her hair is pulled into a shiny, ash blond ponytail.

Her features are fine and delicate with large, baby blue eyes.

She's everything that a society Omega should be.

Everything that *I'm* not. I feel it keenly in my shapeless uniform with a collar around my neck, marking out my status, along with my messy hair, as I kneel on the floor.

How can I compete with Verity?

She's refined, well connected, with good breeding.

I'm a servant, and she's destined to be mistress of a mansion like King Hall and her own pack.

Verity ignores Didier and me like we're invisible, which I'm used to.

"Delightful as it is to see you as always, Trenton," her voice is a sophisticated drawl, which is overlaid by a fake sweetness that she saves for the Alphas around her, "I put off my trip to Monaco for you. So, we've had tea, but now I'm leaving, unless you get to the point."

Trenton smirks. "Aren't I known for that? I just like my demonstrations to be more direct and hands on. It's my cousin who's all words and no rutting. Look, the Companions branch of the business is a hellhole. But so what? It's profitable."

Verity hums her agreement.

Assholes.

I only just stop myself from leaping up but then, I can see Didier and I know that he has the same problem.

Instantly, I lay my hand on his, squeezing.

Trenton will beat Didier's ass, if he so much as twitches right now.

"The problem with Braxton is that all he cares about is his image," Trenton sneers. "He wants to look *good*."

"I know, sweetie." Verity smiles. "He's playing everyone at their own game and he's so handsome and charming that the press and the Traditionals are just eating it up. My grandfather told me the story of what it was like

before Companion House was formed a hundred and fifty years ago, when orphan Omegas and Betas were a huge financial strain on the country, threatening the stability of existing packs and taking bonds from those with good families.”

“Exactly.” Trenton’s lips pinch. “Companions are given housing, food, and training. They should be grateful to pay that back by working for their Guardian. It’s a debt.”

I’m shaking. My eyes are burning with tears.

I hate them both.

Trenton narrows his eyes, studying me like he can tell the rebellion in my heart. “My cousin’s forgotten why our society has developed in this way. He’s squeamish about taking the harsh decisions that are needed. Why do you think that the company is going bust because he’s refused to make discipline stricter against Companions in light of the runaways, including...?”

He snatches Didier by the hair, twisting his face up like he’s a doll on display.

Shit.

My adrenaline spikes, and my pulse roars in my ears.

“Is this the blind one?” Verity asks with studied boredom like she’s inquiring between defective stallions in her soon to be owned stables.

I grit my teeth, holding onto Didier’s hand even tighter.

Please, don’t say anything...

Braxton would kick both Trenton and Verity’s asses, if he saw how they’re treating Didier. Yet I dread him finding out because Trenton has threatened to hurt Braxton so fucking much, if we snitch on him.

Trenton nods. “My cousin wouldn’t even let me interrogate these Companions of his and find out what really happened a week ago. He wouldn’t let me lay a hand on them. I have shareholders whipping *my* ass over this but I can’t so much as spank theirs.”

Verity sighs. “Liberals.”

“Yeah, fucking liberals.”

“Sweetie, Braxton is young. It’s why he needs someone like me by his side. It’s what we were talking about earlier. He needs guidance. I have the connections with the Alphas in my family and network that can help make this whole horrible mess of yours go away. The tarnish on the King family name can be polished; the crown can shine once again. If you want this to happen, you know what you need to do. You know that I love Braxton, but

sometimes that love has to be tough. He should learn that.”

What the fuck is she talking about? What have they been scheming together?

Unexpectedly, Verity’s expression hardens, and her eyes blaze.

She takes a step forward and snatches the tie, which hangs around Didier’s throat.

At the unexpected strangulation, Didier’s eyes fly open, and his hands flail, pulling out of mine.

“Non,” he wails.

It breaks my heart.

“Stop it!” I holler, pushing at Verity.

Shit, I’ve done it now.

“Aren’t they trained at all?” Verity loosens her hold on Didier in shock but still holds him up on his knees by the tie. He’s panting in distress. “They both spoke without being addressed directly.”

Yeah, because you strangled someone who couldn’t even see it coming.

Jerk.

I’m breathing hard, compulsively opening and closing my hands on my lap.

“You’ll recite the rules one hundred times on your knees before bed,” Trenton orders.

I sigh.

As punishments go, it’s boring but lenient for Trenton.

Especially as I intend to adjust it to *badass rules*, anyway.

Apparently, Verity thinks that it’s lenient too.

“She pushed me, sweetie, and that’s all your have to say about it?” Verity hisses. “When she’s under my authority, I’ll have her cut a switch for that.”

I become ashen.

Under her authority? *Cut a switch?*

She sounds so definite like it’s a done deal.

Has Braxton agreed formally to a matching? Is that why he’s so distant?

This can’t be happening...

Has Braxton given himself in an arranged marriage to Verity in order to save the King Alpha Company?

To save Didier and me?

Everything suddenly feels so far away. There’s a rushing sound like the ocean in my ears.

I sway.

If Verity moves in here, then she'll take away all the privileges, which Didier and I currently enjoy. I won't be able to connect onto the server and help run the resistance.

The freedom that I have right now will be lost.

I'll have lost Braxton.

Will she even separate me from Matthew and Didier?

Didier growls, holding his arms out to shield me.

“Bless you heart, is that feral growling meant to be intimidating, as if you weren't a defective Reject?” Verity shakes Didier by the tie. “Did you think that Braxton giving you this token, which is scented by him, means anything? That wearing it around your neck makes you special? It's as close as you'll ever come to touching him. He's soft hearted and no doubt feels sorry for you, in the same way that he does for charity cases. But he's only your Guardian and that's all he'll ever be to you because Braxton is mine. Soon, he'll have me to dote on and cherish, and he'll forget all about you.”

CHAPTER 9



Garden, King Hall

I grin as I run with Didier down the sloping lawn in the back garden of King Hall.

I hold onto Didier's hand, allowing myself to be as fearless as him.

Croissant barks, leading us away from our duties and to freedom. The sun shines off her golden fur, as the air shimmers in the heat.

Croissant is off harness to give her the chance to run and play.

The same rebellious thrill, which burned away the rage that usually simmers under my skin, is flaming in my veins.

It's Monday morning, and we should be busy doing our chores.

But, fuck it, these could be our final few days, before everything changes, and I'm not going to waste them elbow deep in soapsuds.

If Verity truly is moving in soon into King Hall, which has been my home for the last six years, then it means the end of the happy bubble, which Braxton has carefully built for us.

I can see that now.

Perhaps, it has been a cage but it's one that Braxton, Didier, and I have shared together, strengthening the bars with our love, rather than beating at the bars with our wings.

None of us have been safe, but our deep friendship was forged from the

moment that Braxton walked into Companion House.

I was wrong about Braxton.

He *was* our savior.

So, if I'm about to lose our refuge and home, then I'm going to enjoy my last few days, which means escaping to my favorite place in the entire estate: the Omega Secret Garden.

First, we need to run to it, before Trenton catches us shirking.

Excitement thrums through me.

Didier's eyes are as wild with joy at our mischief as mine are.

I won't cringe in fear any longer.

King Hall looms behind us like a Gothic nineteenth century castle.

It's imposing with a marble porch, which is fluted with pillars and wide granite steps down to the lawn.

I squint through the bright sunlight, spotting Matthew. He's working by the crimson rose bushes, which are in heady bloom.

Matthew's casually standing over Braxton.

Both Alpha and Beta are stripped to their waists in the sun, and their muscles glisten with sweat.

I can't look away.

They're both so powerful that it takes away my breath.

They look like gods.

Braxton is doing press-ups, and his muscles ripple with the effort. He looks like he's been at this for a long time already; his arms are shaking with the effort. His hair is plastered with sweat.

When Matthew meets my gaze, his lips curl up at the side.

He winks at me, before he casually places his bare foot on Braxton's back and presses down.

"Dear God," Braxton gasps, and his knees look like they may buckle.

But he doesn't collapse.

Wow, I'm impressed.

But then, Braxton has always had serious will power. It's one of the things that I find hottest about him.

He's ambitious and focused.

Underneath the easy smiles, Matthew would make a good marine drill sergeant.

Fuck, he's playing with fire. How far does he think he can push an Alpha like Braxton, before he snaps?

Braxton has high levels of self-control but even he has his limits.

“What’s happening?” Didier asks. “You’re breathing has gone all funny.”

I pull Didier in Matthew’s direction.

How can I miss an opportunity to take a closer look at either of those two gorgeous men’s half-naked bodies?

“Matthew’s setting himself up as the type of challenge that Braxton’s going to want to bend over and fuck,” I whisper.

Didier laughs.

“He’s pretending that Brax needs to be out here doing press-ups without his shirt on in this heat as part of his personal training,” I continue, “and fuck, does he look good. He’s doing that thing they show in films, where the bully marine puts his foot on the soldier’s back. It’s hot.”

Didier’s breath catches. “Mon dieu, and it’s even hotter now that we know what fantasies and kinks Matty wants to explore. Would you like to watch me caught between those two dominant men?”

I blush.

Looking through the checklists together last night, showed me how well his kinks aligned with mine.

He’s a dominant Beta.

It’s a good thing because he’s going to need to be to handle Didier.

For Braxton’s sake, I’m glad that he’s as natural a dominant as he is because I don’t think that Matthew is ever going to stop testing and challenging him.

It appears to be what he needs.

And I love to watch all of them.

“Fuck, yeah,” I breathe. “Voyeur is definitely one of my things: to see you spitroasted between men who are twice as large as you, Didi, knowing that you were all three performing for *my* pleasure would be an ultimate fantasy.”

“Halt,” Didier calls out to Croissant, who immediately obediently stops, looking back to wait for further commands. “Stay.”

I guide Didier toward Matthew and Braxton.

Braxton hesitates, and I can tell the moment that he’s caught our scent because he starts exercising again with renewed vigor, attempting to hide the shake in his arms.

I can’t stop the soft smile.

“Brax is attempting to put on a good show for us.” I admire the way that

the muscles of his shoulders ripple.

Didier sighs, dreamily. “He is like one of the heroes in those Gothic romances that you read and talk about together all the time, non?”

“Don’t let Brax hear you say that,” I warn. “I suspect that he’s listening now. And those heroes tend to spank their cheeky Omegas over their laps.”

“Your point is? Does it not also end up with sensational hate sex and a HEA?”

“Gothic hero?” Braxton leaps to his feet; his red eyes flash.

I’m mesmerized by the trickles of sweat between his tanned pecs and abs.

I’m even more mesmerized by the gold barbell nipple piercings.

I swallow.

Wow, they’re unexpected.

Braxton arches his brow, beckoning Didier and me closer.

My mouth is dry, as I pull Didier with me.

“My eyes are up here.” Braxton’s lips twitch.

My gaze shoots to his face.

My cheeks pink. “When did you...?”

“She’s talking about my nipple piercings, Didi.” Braxton’s voice is as cool, as if he was talking about his business portfolio. “Would you like to feel them? I had them done last year. I enjoy the feel of them. They make me more sensitive.” His gaze never leaves mine; I have a feeling that he’s truly talking to me. “It’s not the only place that I’m pierced.”

Oh, fuck me.

Didier begins purring like he can’t stop himself, and in embarrassment, he buries his face on my shoulder.

I pet his curls.

Braxton’s smile is slow and smug.

Fair enough, how many Alphas can get an Omega to purr without even touching them?

Matthew tuts. “Hey, Mr. Sexy Piercings, we’re not finished yet. You have eighty-seven push-ups left. We were trying to hit your personal best. Come on, you can do it.”

Braxton growls, swinging to Matthew.

Matthew’s eyes widen like he knows that he’s pushed too far. He stumbles back a step, but Braxton prowls after him.

Braxton reaches out and snatches Matthew by the chin, holding him in place. “That’s *Master* Sexy Piercings. And we’re done, Matt, when I say that

we're done."

"Got it. So fucking got it."

There's a long moment, before Braxton slides his hand down from Matthew's chin to the wildly fluttering pulse in his throat.

His hand lingers.

Matthew's eyes are glassy, and he's breathing hard.

"Are they about to fuck?" Didier whispers, lifting his head from my shoulder.

Braxton stumbles back like he's been burned.

He clenches his jaw. "I wasn't... You haven't seen how this one tortures me. He even forced me to *dance*."

"The horror." I smirk.

"I'd dance with *you*." Braxton's gaze darts to mine and then away. "At least we would share the torment then. Anyway, it looks like you're flying away from your responsibilities, or am I wrong? Don't let me stop you. I'll pretend that I didn't see you, shall I?"

Matthew furrows his brow. "What do you mean?"

"They have this secret garden. They've always sneaked away there, when they want to get out of chores." He sounds wistful. "King Hall may have my name, but that place isn't mine. It's theirs."

"It's Omegas only," Didier explains with a reverence reserved for the sacred. "The story goes that there was an Alpha who lived here, and his bonded Omega was dying. She loved nature, so he had the Omega Companions build her a garden. But she died, before it was finished. So, in his grief, he walled it up, letting it grow wild."

"Wow, and that's why love stories suck." Matthew pushes his golden hair out of his eyes. "They're always so fucking tragic."

"Not all of them." I straighten my shoulders. "The Companions who built that garden fell in love and used it for their trysts."

"Oh." Matthew glances between us, before nodding.

Braxton swaggers closer, grabbing me by the shoulder and turning me toward the woods. "Go on, then. Get to your tryst. I don't want to see you before lunchtime. And don't worry about Trenton. We won't be bothered by his delightful presence for the rest of the week."

"Why?" I ask.

This is too good to be true.

Braxton gives a devilish smile. "There may have been emergency

business meetings called that he needs to attend halfway across the country. Of course, they *may* have been manufactured emergencies. By which I mean that I invented them.”

“Do I tell you often how fucking awesome you are?”

“It bears saying again.” Braxton looks more relaxed than he has all week. “Trenton was driving me crazy. I needed to get him out of the way. I’m desperately trying to work out a plan to turn this whole mess to my advantage, while Trenton is going behind my back to board members like Hatcher, who’d rather take away Companion rights.”

I bite my lip.

Everything that Verity said echoes through my mind.

Braxton is mine...

Soon, he’ll have me to dote on and cherish, and he’ll forget all about you...

I may not have another chance to ask him about this.

I steel myself. “So, will you be having Verity Sloane over, while Trenton is away?”

Braxton grimaces. “Good lord, I hope not. Why would I?”

Didier straightens, and his expression becomes hard.

He raises his hand to touch the tie that hides the bruises, which were left by Verity.

Trenton has threatened to make certain that we’ll be sent back to Companion House, if we ever complain about his treatment of us.

The tour that we were given of the adult wing was enough to make sure that’s an effective threat.

As is the fear of losing Braxton.

Yet worse, is the threat to Braxton himself.

Trenton reports on Braxton to his Head Alpha in England, Weston. He said that he’d make sure that Braxton is punished and sent to the Alpha Center, if we complain.

Didier and I made a pact to protect our Alpha.

If Omegas want equality, then that means they can make the choice to protect their Alpha, as much as their Alpha wants to protect them.

Braxton has always been our Alpha, no matter what the law says.

“Because you’re going to be officially matched to Verity,” Didier says in a small voice.

Braxton’s expression is a frozen mask. “What?”

“Are you going to be bonded to her?”

“Never,” Braxton’s voice is icy. “I hate her and always have. She’s obsessed with me. She tried to force our bonding, when I was only a teenager. I resisted, and Father backed me because of my youth. He said that I was too young to bond with anyone. Finally, she matched with some ancient oil tycoon. Since she was widowed, she’s been...persistent again. But I’d rather cut off my own knot, than allow her to touch me.”

Joy roars through me.

It was a lie.

Verity’s not going to own Braxton, King Hall, or me.

All of a sudden, life is full of opportunities and possibilities again.

Didier whoops, looping his arms around my waist, before spinning me.

I laugh and kiss him.

When I look up, Braxton is grinning as he watches us.

He hurriedly shuts his expression. “Why would you think that I’d want...? The only Omegas who I intend to have in King Hall — in my home — are you two troublemakers. Is that clear enough?”

Will Braxton ever be able to say *I love you*? Or is this as close as he’ll get?

I nod.

“Why did you think that?” Matthew is scrutinizing us with a shrewd expression.

“No reason. Now, I have some trysting to do.” I hold my arm out to Didier, and he grabs it by the elbow.

“Croissant, good girl,” Didier hollers. “Run to the secret garden.”

That’s a command that Croissant knows well.

Her body is one big wag, as she leaps up and chases off toward the woods.

“Let’s follow her.” Didier laughs in delight.

He loves this as much as I do.

We run after her, and I feel even more free now because Verity isn’t going to take my home nor my Alpha.

I can find a way to fight for this and Companion rights.

Didier and I skirt to the end of the manicured lawns.

Peregrine falcons wheel in the blue sky above.

We steer off to the shady fringes of the huge forests, which are part of the vast estate of streams, ponds, and mountains. We need to pick more carefully

after Croissant down the winding track that runs through the center of the yellow birches and maples.

Up ahead, I catch sight of the moss stone wall, which bounds the Omega Secret Garden.

The garden is hidden in the center of the forest like it was left here by the fae.

Croissant is already squeezing her way through the small hole at the bottom, which Didier and I first found as excited teenagers.

I drop to my knees and wriggle on my front through the cold mud.

My hair snags on a rock, but I pull myself through and into the peaceful silence of the garden.

Didier throws himself onto his stomach behind me and skillfully drags himself through behind me.

Then he leaps onto me, nuzzling my neck and walking me backward.

The garden is the only place that has truly been *ours* alone...ever.

Braxton has respected our wish that he not visit here. His curiosity must have been killing him, but he gave us this.

Our one truly safe space.

Trenton is too lazy to explore the estate well enough to find it.

The garden is small and overgrown with wild roses, a fountain that doesn't work in the middle, which has a sculpture in the center of a bird bursting out like it's flying to heaven.

Or its Soul is.

Yet the bird is covered in brambles now.

There's a single overarching American chestnut tree, which guards the garden.

Songbirds nest in the tree's branches, hopping around and calling musically to each other.

It's another reason why this is one of Didier's favorite places.

Didier licks and nibbles my neck, pushing me down to be cradled in the roots of the tree.

He throws himself down next to me.

He's breathing hard.

"Brax isn't going to bond with that bitch." Didier shudders. "You're safe, *ma raison de vivre*."

"So are you."

"That doesn't matter."

“It does to me.”

We lie in peace for a moment.

I soak in the hot sun and the sound of the birds.

Croissant wanders around the garden, sniffing the flowers and having the doggy time of her life digging holes.

Didier holds his hand in front of his face, slowly moving his fingers. I notice how he does this a lot, as we lie on our backs underneath this chestnut tree.

“Do you like that?” I ask.

“I can see best here.” Didier continues to stare at his hand. “The movement of light and shadows. It’s beautiful.” My chest becomes tight. “The light looks amazing filtered through the leaves on the tree.”

Omega Immune Syndrome (OIS), commonly known as Omega Blindness, is a progressive disease with no known cause, although it’s likely genetic.

It has no cure.

It’s an invisible disease. Didier’s eyes are blue and beautiful.

OIS eventually leads to total blindness: Didier won’t be able to see even movement or light and shadows.

I’m going to try and make sure that he snatches as many moments like this as he can, before then.

I won’t be like the Alpha who spent his time concentrating on building a grand garden for his Omega, rather than enjoying her last days with her, only for her never to see the garden.

What I admire most about Didier is that he’s not once allowed his Omega Blindness to define his life.

So, I won’t either.

I turn to take a deep sniff of his buttery scent. “You smell so delicious that I could lick all over you.”

Didier gives a delighted smile, squirming to lie even closer to me. “Ah, but I come from the city with the best scents in the world.” His expression becomes dreamy like it always does, when he talks of his past, before he was abandoned in America. But then, he’d only known the life of a loved and treasured Omega then. “You know, sometimes I think that it’s what I miss most about Paris — the smell. There was a bakery across the street from our apartment. Every day from our balcony, the heavenly scents would drift across of pain aux chocolates, baguettes, and sweet brioche.”

My stomach rumbles. “Okay, now you’re just making me hungry.”

“It’s why I love Brax’s scent. The first time that I smelled him, it felt like home. I was so alone and lost in Companion House. You were the only one who was kind to me, and I loved you already. But the rich, thick hot chocolate scent, coming from an Alpha...? I knew that we were going to be saved.”

“I don’t understand.”

“In Paris, I was served at breakfast every day hot chocolate. You can’t walk down a street without the same scent drifting from the cafes. We French pride ourselves on being the best hot chocolate makers in the world. I knew as soon as I smelled Brax’s scent that he was meant to be ours.”

My heart’s beating fast because I want it to be true.

I need it to be.

“That quickly, huh?”

“Of course, he’d also have been ours, if he smelled of red wine, coffee, or... well, us French make a lot of the best things.”

I slip my fingers into Didier’s hair, gently turning his head to kiss his plush lips. “They make the best Omegas.”

At my unexpected praise, Didier blushes and kisses back fervently.

Our tongues intertwine.

Didier brushes his fingers across my breasts, matching the dance of his tongue.

My nipples pebble, and I arch into his touch. He presses me down harder with the length of his body, nudging his thigh between mine.

His silky hair feathers across my face.

Then he teases my nubs, shooting pleasure through me and making me pant.

When Didier pulls back, he pushes a strand of hair behind my ear. “Brax is our Alpha. You want him. Matty wants him. And I would do anything for you, mon coeur.”

His voice is low and earnest.

His face is so close to mine that our lips are almost still touching.

I shiver at his intensity.

He fucking means it.

“I’d burn the world for you or pluck the moon from the sky. Just say the word.” It sounds like an oath. “So, what is a law? A taboo? We’re a pack, and if we need to battle for it, then we do, oui? We have the rest of this week,

until Trenton returns to convince Brax that we want him and that he can break free too.”

“There’s the entire company, the board, all those people’s jobs, the King name and its legacy, the pressure and expectations, and his knothed dad... How can we compete with that? How can we expect Brax to go against everything that he was raised to believe?”

Didier’s expression hardens. “People have told me for many years what I *can’t* do or no longer deserve. If I’d listened to them, then I’d still be lost in the dark. But I’m not. We’re badass Companions, and rule three is that we deserve to choose our own pack bond and to be loved, treasured, and adored because the right pack bond can change everything. Well, my Jewel, even if it means my destruction, I choose Braxton and Matthew...and my heart has always chosen you.”

CHAPTER 10



Kitchen, King Hall

So, this is what a vacation feels like for adults.

I relax on my wooden kitchen chair, letting the sun from the large domed windows play across my face.

King Hall's kitchen has terracotta leaf tiles on the floor and walls, a range along the back wall, as well as a scorched hearth that's large enough to roast a whole hog, and copper bottomed saucepans hanging from the walls and rafters.

I'm sprawled at the central oak table.

It's a lazy Thursday afternoon, and I haven't done any work all day.

Braxton has insisted that us Companions only do what we want.

So much *choice* has been bewildering but like finally being set free.

I haven't been on a vacation, since I was taken into Companion House.

The last four days have felt like heaven.

I've run wild in the woods with Didier, climbed the trees by myself with no one to scold me if I became dirty or tore my uniform, and taken strolls in the flower gardens with Braxton.

In evenings, Didier has snuggled in a warm nook in the library, listening to his favorite audio books. I've sat cozied on the library's leather couch with Braxton, who's taken out his entire collection of Alpha smut to share with me

and have lively discussions about our favorite type of knot.

We've both decided that pierced does it for us.

Braxton said it with such a twinkle in his eye that I can't wait to see what's in his pants.

In the mornings, I've woken up as late as I've liked, wrapped up in my warm nest with Didier.

As always, we've been tangled in Braxton's clothes, although now we're bold about holding out our hands for Braxton's tie, which every night Braxton slips off his neck with a smirk and hands to us to add to our nest.

And every night, Matthew bounds into the room with a sunny smile.

He slips into the nest, before touching me with expert fingers or mouth, spiraling me to a mind-blowing pleasure, which is the perfect end to the day.

Yesterday, he brought Didier and me breakfast in bed.

Matthew slid a silver tray onto the mattress between us with a crimson rose from the garden balanced on the side.

The tray was covered with a mouthwatering array of food: freshly baked pain aux chocolates, croissants, baguette, pots of butter and jam, and sliced strawberries and cream.

He must have been up before dawn, baking.

Romance, Matthew said with a grin.

He threaded the rose into my hair.

If Didier wasn't already falling for Matthew, after he sniffed the array of French pastries and took the first delicious bite of croissant and jam, then he definitely was afterward.

The way to my little Omega's heart is through his stomach.

Matthew has been insisting that we eat the rest of our meals together in the kitchen.

He's been choosing to cook and bake for all of us.

I get now that it's not a chore for Matthew but rather, it's his happy place to provide for us.

When we're eating our meals together, it feels like having a proper family again — *pack*.

But a new one.

Except, is it only a temporary one?

What happens when Trenton gets back? When the stay-at-home order lifts?

How do I keep this heaven?

I wrinkle my nose, taking as deep a breath as I can of the rich, sweet scents, which fill the kitchen.

I lick my lips, side eyeing the chocolate chip muffins, which are cooling on a plate on the table in front of me.

Matthew didn't forget that I'd said I wanted chocolate chip ones.

Matthew talks tough and acts laid back, but really, he's all about the romance.

I sneak a glance at him.

I'm alone with him in the kitchen.

In the heat, Matthew's shirt hangs open to his waist, revealing his Companion Collar, which is stark against his creamy skin.

He's a mountain of a man.

I suggested that he should wear an apron, but he shot me a look like he would rather burn than wear something with frills.

"I'm going to ask Brax to buy you one of those aprons for guys with attitude." I tilted my head. "You know, the ones with the slogans. I don't want you to be burned."

"Guys with attitude?" Matthew's lips quirked. "Hey, I'm down with that. *Smokin' Hot, and I Don't Mean the Food, Made With Love and Some Other Shit, Baking King...*"

"*Prick With a Fork...*?" I laughed.

I dodged back, as he made a grab for me in order to tickle me into submission.

Now, I watch, while Matthew crouches down to check his next batch of chocolate cakes in the range.

Quickly, I reach out, using his distraction to break off the corner of the closest chocolate chip muffin on the plate.

It's still warm and soft.

I push it hurriedly into my mouth, and my eyelids flutter closed at its gooey, delicious taste.

My fingertips are stained with sticky chocolate.

I give a happy wriggle in my chair.

When I open my eyes, however, I squeak.

Matthew is now standing over me like a gorgeous, golden god.

His hands are on his hips, and he has a stern look in his honey eyes that are glancing between the broken muffin, my chocolate stained fingers, and my guilty expression.

Whoops.

Matthew's wearing the type of expression that he normally only directs at Braxton, when Braxton tells him things like *paperwork is more important than star jumps.*

Although, I agree with Braxton on that one.

My ass has too much self-preservation, however, to admit that to Matthew.

"These muffins are meant to be for everyone's tea," Matthew's voice is deep and rumbling. It pulls at something instinctual inside me. "Did you just steal some, baby?"

"You mean..." Playful mischief sweeps through me. I pick up the rest of the muffin and take as large a bite of it as I can manage, before it can be taken away from me. "...like this?"

I only just manage to mumble the words out around my mouthful.

Fuck, it's delicious.

I moan in delight.

Matthew's eyes dance with laughter, but he somehow manages to retain his stern expression.

Impressive.

"I knew that you were a troublemaker. Come here." He reaches down and swings me out of the chair into his strong arms.

I *eeep* and swallow the muffin.

My stomach swoops, but I love the feeling of being so easily picked up by him, manhandled, and moved around like this.

Matthew settles down in the same chair that I'd been sitting in and places me firmly on his lap (at least it's not over his lap, right?).

He loops his arm around my waist, pulling me onto his chest.

I enjoy Matthew's warmth, sense of being held in place, and the steady beat of his heart.

I reach up, pushing aside his open shirt.

He has a beautiful tattoo over his heart.

It's a heartbeat with a number above it: **8:22.**

Is it a time?

When I reach for it, Matthew moves away. I take the hint and respect him by not tracing the tattoo.

"May I touch you?" I ask.

"Everywhere but the tattoo," he replies.

I experimentally lick across his nipple.

Matthew's breathing becomes ragged. He puffs his chest out in encouragement.

He's sensitive.

I'm going to enjoy playing.

I lick and nibble more insistently, alternating between sides.

"Are you trying to distract me from your crime?" Matthew's eyes twinkle. "Go ahead. I encourage it. Make it up to me, baby."

I look up at him through my eyelashes, as I circle his nipple with my tongue. He splays his large hand on my thigh, matching my movements with his thumb.

"It's my fault anyway, right?" Matthew's voice is raspy with desire. He reaches for the crumbled remains of the muffin. "My Omega was hungry. I should have been feeding you, huh?"

My Omega.

I'll never get tired of the easy and certain way that Matthew claims me as his.

He raises the muffin to my lips. I turn my head away from his peaked nub to take a bite of the muffin.

I moan in delight.

Matthew shivers like that sound is bringing him more pleasure than my mouth on him.

"Good girl," he murmurs. "I should have known that you'd take what you want. You're an awesome rebel who doesn't care about bullshit rules."

I freeze.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Has he guessed about my connection to the resistance?

I want to tell him.

It's this constant itching under my skin. But I can't risk putting him in danger.

If I'm caught, then neither Matthew nor Braxton will be implicated because right now, they don't know about my connections to the resistance.

My secret is protecting them.

Weirdly, he says *rebel* like it's a badge of honor.

As if he fucking admires it.

In fact, as if it's something that he's proud of and not the worst thing that you can call an Omega.

In reward, I lean forward, licking the crumbs off his fingers. Then I draw two of his fingers into my mouth.

I suck on them, slowly and then putting more effort into it.

Matthew's pupils dilate. "Yeah, just like that."

He pushes his fingers in further, and I hollow my mouth, drawing him in even deeper.

I ache, wishing that it was his dick. I'm desperate for the taste of him, heavy on my tongue.

I suck on him passionately. His fingers taste sweet, of vanilla and chocolate.

I could suck and lick on them for hours.

I look up at Matthew, and our gazes meet.

His breath hitches, and he shifts underneath me.

His dick is poking into my hip.

Finally, Matthew draws his fingers out of my mouth and pets my head.

Matthew's gaze is worshipful. "That was amazing, baby."

When Matthew kisses me, it's nothing like Didier's kisses.

It's slow, gentle, and all-consuming.

It's a kiss, which tells you that you're being claimed.

When I draw back, I glance at Matthew's hard dick and try to slide to my knees underneath the table.

Matthew keeps hold of me around the waist, however, stopping me.

"I can't wait to feel your hot mouth wrap around my cock, after feeling its talents, but not now. I don't want to rush things. Those cakes will be ready any minute, and filling the kitchen with smoke because you're sucking my dick, isn't the memory that I want for our first time doing that."

"I think that it'd be a fun memory."

"Right up until Braxton runs in here and covers us in foam from the fire extinguisher."

"Foam party!" I snicker. "Okay, you've got a point. Brax is currently surprising Didier with the latest assistive technology that he had his PA send over. I don't want to spoil that moment for them."

Matthew's expression softens. "Yeah, our Alpha is under enough pressure without needing to shoot extinguishers at me because we're on fire from how hot we are together."

I trace my finger down Matthew's naked chest. "Five chilies smoking hot."

Matthew hesitates like he's debating whether to say something, then he turns me, until I'm straddling and facing him.

We're so close now that our foreheads are touching. His breath ghosts across my lips.

"A lot of the pressure is because of these Companion kidnappings," Matthew says, watching me closely.

My pulse speeds up. Sweat drips down the back of my neck.

I force my expression to become a mask.

"Uh-huh?"

"I mean, he's still running with that *kidnapping* bullshit. But I analyze and look for patterns. Even though Brax's shut down as much of the investigation as he can," Matthew continues, "I've continued my own."

I drop my gaze from Matthew's; it's like he can see into my Soul.

"So, this morning I reviewed all the security footage from the office the day those triplets ran."

"How the fuck did you get access?"

"I'm the security expert in this joint and our Alpha...well, *isn't*. It's interesting that he's trying to suppress such a lot. Strange also that the witness report he put in on your behalf doesn't match up with what I saw. It seems to me that he's trying to protect someone."

"Just say what you want to." I grit my teeth.

I'm trembling. I want to hurl.

My chest is rising and falling rapidly. My lungs are burning.

"Hey, hey, don't panic." Matthew's large hands are suddenly on my upper arms, rubbing.

"Are you kidding?" I hiss. "Do you know what you're saying?"

Matthew's gaze is cool. "Yeah, I do. You're not the only smart person in this mansion, and Brax isn't the only one who'd risk jail or death to protect you. As I said, I watched that footage; I saw the state those kids were in and how that knothed hurt them...and you. I'm glad that they *ran away*."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Matthew bites his lip. "I want you to know that I'm on your side in whatever this is. You don't need to hide from me. Anything that I can do, I will. I'm hundred percent in."

"I fucking love you." I kiss Matthew, and this time, it's me who's leading.

He slides his hands into my hair, and I moan at the way that his hold

tightens.

When he pulls back, we rest our foreheads together.

“You love me, baby...?” Matthew says, sounding unsure.

Wait, I said that out loud, didn't I?

“Is that okay?” I ask. “I want you to be my Beta. I mean, forever.”

Matthew shudders, and his eyes gleam with unshed tears. “I want that too. But I've had two families already, and I've lost both of them. I'm not sure that I believe in *forever*.”

My gaze becomes determined.

“Then I'll have to convince you.” I glance at the tattoo. “Is this something to do with it?”

Matthew raises a shaky hand to trace over the line of the heartbeat. “My twin, Asher, and I both got these in secret, when we turned eighteen. Our Guardians didn't know. We'd have been in such trouble, but fuck it, we didn't care. We wanted something to connect us, even though we'd been separated. We hadn't met up in person until then, since we'd been fostered separately. This tattoo represents our love, but also, our endurance. *Survival*. No matter how shit our lives become, we'll never stop our heartbeats.”

I jerk in shock.

Matthew always appears so upbeat and sunny.

Just sometimes, however, he allows glimpses of vulnerability and melancholy to show through, and when he does, it's a precious gem because he's trusting you to keep that side of him safe.

To keep his heart beating like the pact that he has with his twin.

He taps the numbers: **8:22**.

“This is the time that I came into the world,” Matthew explains. “Asher has one minute later on his chest.”

“You're the older brother.”

That makes so much sense.

Matthew was the older brother who cared for his younger twin and sister but lost both of them.

He cares for all of us now.

He nods. “Dad was this hotshot businessman. When I was real little, we were spoiled with expensive designer clothes and toys. The kids in school were jealous of my sneakers. I should never have ended up as a Companion.”

“What happened?”

Matthew hasn't told us how he became a Companion.

Somehow, I feel that he needs to tell me this.

Has he been able to speak to anyone about what happened, since he was fostered?

I bet that he hasn't.

"Mom left." Matthew's expression is open and raw in a way that I haven't seen it be before. "Dad should have had the whole world open to him. Not like the Kings or anything but still, he had connections. But he was a violent drunk. It's why Mom left. How often are Omegas allowed to just... leave? So, you can guess how bad it was. Worse, the asshole gambled and he lost because gambling's a mug's game. So, as a mug, he gambled away the pack's fortune. When the pack was finally declared bankrupt, he fell apart."

I grasp Matthew's hand in mine. "I'm sorry."

He blinks like he's never heard anyone say that to him before. "It is what it is, right? Dad was an Alpha, and they rarely cope, when they fail. So, he neglected everything, including Asher, my sister, and me. I was only a kid but I did my best to care for the others. In the end, Dad was taken into custody for it, neglect or something. I knew enough about what happened if you were fostered to make sure that we *ran*."

I stare at him.

My heart aches for the kid that Matthew had been.

He'd been so brave even then.

I remember the time that I ran from Companion House as well. I didn't get far but at least I tried.

"They caught you?" I dread the answer because I remember what happened to me.

"First, I begged my relatives to take us in, but they were so fucked off with their name having been tarnished by Dad that they wouldn't talk to me. So, I turned up on my best friend's doorstep, instead. Ed was an Alpha, and I'd always admired him. We'd been friends since kindergarten. I'd been on sleepovers there, and his family liked me. So, I pleaded with his parents to take us in as wards."

My heart's in my mouth. "What did they say?"

"I was so relieved, when his dad put his arm around my shoulders and steered me into Ed's room. It was warm and decorated with ice hockey players on the walls because that was our favorite sport to watch together. His mom gave us all cookies and milk. I thought that we'd found a new home. I remember that we played computer games with Ed and it felt..."

normal and safe. Then about an hour later, the doorbell rang. Then a whole gang of officials from Companion House came barging up the stairs and grabbed us.”

I let out a shocked breath. “The parents called Companion House.”

Matthew’s eyelashes are matted wet. “Ed cried, but I didn’t. The dad wouldn’t meet my eye. The mom kept telling me that things would be *okay*. But the dad, yeah, he didn’t even try to lie.”

“The asshole.”

Matthew shrugs. “No one has ever wanted me, until you. Do you see? When they pulled me away from my brother and sister, I fought. So, the official slapped me. My best friend looked so shocked, as if such things just couldn’t happen. His dad had to hold Ed back from diving after me to attack the woman and save me. I’d never been hit before. But after that, everything changed. I had to adapt. Because the rule is to separate families and break down those bonds.”

“Have you been able to contact your siblings?”

“They fostered all three of us, keeping us apart. I’ve never been able to find my sister. Asher became a badass hockey player. It’s one of the reasons that I fought hard to take up hockey as a skill, so that I had a chance to share the ice with him. We stole what moments we could together at college in Washington, even though he’s with the pro hockey team, because the rink at the college is one of the best, and they use it sometimes. But mostly, I’ve felt alone, rejected, and unwanted — until I came to King Hall.”

I kiss Matthew to make sure that he feels as loved as he can and as a thank you that he was courageous enough to share his past with me.

Matthew twines our hands together. “I just wanted you to know that I’ll never be like Ed’s family. No Companion will be trapped, if I can set them free.”

My breath catches.

I understand now.

Matthew knows precisely what Didier and I am up to with the resistance and he’s helping me understand why he won’t tell on us.

In fact, why he wants to help.

“Then if we can do more to free the Companions,” I say, carefully, “I’ll tell you.”

When Matthew smiles, it chases away the last traces of sadness in his eyes. “I’m going to enjoy booting this system in the balls, just where it hurts.

But first, we need to protect Braxton.”

A cold ball of dread forms in my stomach. “Why?”

“Those files that I keep on him come in useful because it means that I can follow the inner workings of his company, and it’s not looking good. I’d say that certain board members are only days away from trying to kick him off the board.”

Horrified, I startle. “They can’t do that. He’s the CEO.”

“He may be named King but he’s not royalty, which means that he does not have a God given right to sit on the throne. If he gets ousted, then I’d bet anything that he’ll get recalled to England, and with the way that Omegas are treated there...”

My breathing speeds up. “We’d lose everything.”

“I won’t let that happen.” Matthew’s voice is cool and determined.

He tilts his head, deep in thought.

What’s he planning?

“You’ve already got a scheme in motion, haven’t you?” I demand.

I’m not surprised. In fact, I’m impressed.

Matthew sees a problem and he fixes it. I’m the same. I can respect that.

“Fuck, yeah,” he replies. “You’re all mine, and I’m not losing this home. So, Brax has a couple of days to convince the board. I think that he has less time than even he realizes. I’m going to let him use me for a demonstration, when he takes me in there for an emergency meeting that’s planned for Saturday morning.”

I pale. “What?”

Demonstration?

That sounds fucking bad.

“It’s nothing,” Matthew says, breezily.

He’s lying.

“It’s not nothing.”

“Look, yesterday when I offered this to Brax — that he show off his own credentials as a Guardian in front of the board to sway them about his strength as Alpha and CEO — he went cold and hard, then told me to go bake some cookies. He shut me down. But I kept pressing. My old Alpha did this trick all the time, when he first took me to college, in order to get into the frat house that he wanted.”

I brush Matthew’s hair out of his eyes. “I hope that they hazed the shit out of him.”

“He was such a smug asshole that they worked him over hard enough that Hell Week earned its name. He deserved it because he was a knothed. But Brax isn’t. Yet he needs to prove to those old Traditionals on the board that the changes he’s trying to push through will be good for business and aren’t only because he’s a soft liberal who’s in love with his Companions because *that’s* the narrative, which Hatcher and Trenton are painting for them.”

“But does that mean he can never make things better?”

“When he’s Head Alpha, he’ll have the power to push through board member changes and get liberals in the key roles. Then he can do what he likes.”

I tilt up my chin. “If you’re determined to do this demonstration, then take me as well.”

“Good try but not happening.” Matthew smiles. “I’m your bodyguard. It’s literally my job to avoid putting you in danger, and Brax would kick my ass, if I even considered it. Plus, look at the optics. I’m going to be bigger and stronger than any one of those board members. If Brax is such a dominant Alpha that he can make *me* submit to him, put me in my place, and discipline me, when I could snap him in two, then no one’s going to think him weak again. Let me do this for you all. Please?”

“You’re asking for my permission...?” My heart’s beating fast.

I know that this is a sacrifice, but at the same time, Matthew’s desperate to show that he can care for and save someone again.

He nods.

“You don’t need it but you have it,” I reply. Matthew’s eyes crinkle, as he smiles. “You have me.”

And that’s the danger.

He does.

I’ve fallen for my two oldest best friends and my new foster Companion, all of whom are tied to me for life as wards and Guardian.

Our love for each other needs to be kept secret.

Yet it’s forever.

Will it save or destroy us, along with every other Companion in America?

CHAPTER II



Ocean Blue Pool, King Hall

It's Saturday, the hottest day of the year, and I'm cooling off in the Olympic-sized swimming pool, which is hidden to the side of the estate, behind the gold lined marble pool house, which is ringed by trees.

The water is an intense ocean blue.

I'm covered in the trees' shade, which is lucky because I'm burning up.

There's a sheen of sweat on my skin, and I've had to push Didier's concerned hand away from checking the temperature of my forehead twice.

"I'm not going down with flu," I protested.

This is my first ever pool party, and I'm not missing it because of some summer bug.

Today's too important.

Once Trenton returns, the easy fantasy that we're a pack will end.

At least, it will, unless I can truly convince Braxton that we all want this and are willing.

Even then, it depends on being able to help Braxton to bring about the changes to the Companion system that will revolutionize it.

I sigh, floating on my back in the soothing water.

The sky is an ocean of blue above me. A bird appears to do back stroke across it.

I struggle to ignore my dizziness.

It's not only my first pool party. It's Braxton's as well.

Who invites people to things like this with a handwritten note?

When a handwritten note was pushed under my door last night, I'd been frightened.

"What is it?" Didier asked, sleepily.

He pushed himself up on his elbows in our nest.

I crawled over to the note and picked it up like it could explode in my face.

"It reads: *Jewel and Didier, you're invited to a barbecue and pool party, Saturday at noon.*"

Didier laughed. "It's a date."

I stared at the note. "Brax doesn't do things like this. It must be down to Matt's influence. Ever since Matt helped to keep him on the King Alpha Company board by allowing himself to be used in that horrible demonstration, those two have been close. He'll probably have Brax counting the laps in the pool as his daily exercise."

Didier settled back into the nest, clutching the tie more firmly to his nose and sniffing it like it was Brax's scent gland. "Non, it's a date."

Hope soared through me.

I felt like I was flying and falling at the same time.

Then it hit me.

"We don't have costumes or even underwear to swim in." I panicked, flailing at Didier's legs to get his attention. "Fuck, is it skinny dipping? He doesn't waste any time, does he? But what the hell do we do about our scars?"

Instantly, Didier's eyes snapped open, and he pushed himself upright. "Mon coeur, he doesn't know about the scars. It would devastate him. W-we c-can't...m-mustn't..."

I hushed him, stroking over his hand with the soft touches that he needed, when he tipped toward anxiety attack like this. It was grounding, when he didn't have anything visual to anchor himself with.

"Just breathe. You're right. We need Brax to keep his head in the game. So, maybe we just make up some excuse and not go."

"Are you serious? Turn down the most romantic gesture that Brax has made in his life? *Reject him?* It would probably take him another decade, before he even asked us for a drink."

“So, what do we do?”

Didier took a long moment to think. “We don’t take off our Companion uniforms. We can argue that we’re frightened that our skin will burn in the fierce sun and keep them on in the pool.”

“Even Brax won’t buy that.”

Didier shook his head. “You’re underestimating how fragile Alphas thinks Omegas are.”

Now, as I float on the surface of the pool, and my wet Companion uniform weighs me down, while my head throbs, I wonder if those Alphas are right.

I feel fragile.

“Fetch!” Didier laughs.

There’s a splash near my head, which is followed by loud barking.

A spray of water covers me, and I can’t shield my face in time.

I splutter, as my face is splashed, before kicking myself upright and glaring at Didier.

Didier’s grinning and treading water by the side of the pool. Like me, the Companion uniform is clinging to his skin. He’s radiating happiness, lit up from the inside.

He’s hurled a tennis ball next to me, and Croissant is excitedly paddling to fetch it.

She takes the ball in her mouth, before swimming back to Didier and dropping it for him.

Didier pets her head. “Good girl.”

I smile.

Seeing Didier and Croissant playing together like this reminds me just how much the dog in our pack has brought us all together and healed Didier from his time in isolation.

Healed me too.

Didier wraps his arms around Croissant. She barks again, excitedly. She works her legs and swims, pulling Didier around the pool and making a game of it.

I swim across the pool, glancing at the Gothic cabana on the side.

The cabana has a fireplace and wrought iron lanterns. It leads through into a spa room. In front of it is a huge modern barbecue pit.

Braxton is in charge of the barbecue.

Of course, he’s the type of Alpha who would be.

Disappointingly, he's also not wearing a frilly apron. But he is wearing, over his shirt with his jacket removed and his shirt sleeves turned up, a black apron that reads:

BRAXTON BBQ KING

And that's why I love him.

Actually, that's one reason among many.

I wrinkle my nose at the rich meaty aromas of smoked pork and beef.

Matthew is casually leaning against the wall next to Braxton. He's nursing a bottle of cool beer.

They're chatting and relaxed, but their hips are touching.

They've been close, ever since they came back from the demonstration at Head Office. In fact, Braxton hasn't allowed Matthew out of his sight; I'm not sure which of them needs the reassurance more.

Yet it's clear that something's shifted in their relationship because of it.

Is it trust?

Protectiveness?

Love?

When I ran to knock on Matthew's door, as soon as I heard him return that night, he looked weary but better than I expected.

I pushed myself onto tiptoes and threw my arms around his neck. "Are you okay? Tell me that you're okay."

"Don't worry about me. Braxton is doing enough of that for all of us, and the most important thing is that his place is now safe on the board. He's safe, and *you are.*"

Both men are watching the pool — *watching me.*

I flush, catching their eye.

"Go play," Didier calls to Croissant.

I turn to watch, as Croissant comes as close to pouting as a dog can but swims to the other side of the pool. Then she hauls herself out and shakes herself off.

Water sprays out, and Didier laughs, as he's covered in it.

Croissant trots happily into the garden, looking for a flowerbed to dig up, probably.

"Where are you, le bijou?" Didier whispers.

I stiffen.

Le bijou?

He only uses that name if he's plotting.

I swim across to Didier. “Le oiseau, what are you scheming?”

I reach for his hand.

“Only this...” Didier’s expression becomes seductive, as he settles against the wall of the pool with one arm and yanks me closer with his other. “Follow my lead.”

He pulls me into a passionate kiss that takes away my breath.

All of a sudden, the day around me seems very far away.

I gasp and try to feel for Didier’s shoulders to balance myself but to my shock, he twists me, holding me against his chest with his hand at my throat.

He must be able to feel the wildly beating pulse in my neck.

It’s so rare for Didier to be dominant like this that I revel in it.

When he lowers his soft lips to my ear, I shiver. “Touch yourself.”

“W-what?”

“You heard me.”

I can’t see Didier’s expression but I can feel how hard he is behind me.

I work my hands beneath the water, struggling to undo my pants, before slipping my fingers into them.

This feels strange, new, and forbidden.

Exciting.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” I murmur.

“It’s precisely what we should have done years ago.” Didier tightens his hand on my neck, and I slip my fingers over my clit. I hiss as I begin to work my fingers in delicious circles. The water makes my fingers wet and perfect. “Brax has invited us on a date, oui? But he has given more attention to the meat on the barbecue than to us. He’s waiting for us to show him that we desire him like this. So, let’s show him.”

“Good plan.” I work myself harder, pushing my fingers toward my pussy.

I throw my head back onto Didier’s shoulder, and my eyes close.

He knows my body so well by now that he *tuts*. “Are your eyes open...? I promise, he’ll be watching us, mon amour. This performance is for him.”

Through the haze of pleasure, I force myself to raise my head from Didier’s shoulder.

I don’t stop touching myself and then I open my eyes.

Immediately, my gaze locks with Braxton’s.

He’s frozen in front of the fire pit. His gaze is dark and hungry.

Dominant.

I’ve never seen him look at me like that.

It's the best fantasy that I've ever had.

Being watched by an Alpha — nope, that's wrong, *by Braxton* — while I work my fingers in and out of myself, driving myself faster and faster toward the edge is making me pant.

So, I'm an exhibitionist.

I fucking love it.

I love Braxton.

And by the fierce desire in his gaze and the way that he's tenting his pants, he's a voyeur.

So, we fit.

It's his heavy gaze on me, which makes me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, as well as empowered, which is bringing me close to the edge.

Almost there...

“He wants you,” Didier purrs into my ear, a gorgeous rumbling sound that vibrates through me. He's humping against my ass like he can't help himself. Then he adds more loudly, and I know that he means Braxton to hear because it's a deliberate challenge, “He looks at you but he doesn't touch. I hold his Jewel by the throat, and he won't come and take her, even though he can see that she needs him.”

Didier flexes his fingers around my throat.

Wait, I finally see what Didier's doing now.

My impossibly brave...beautiful...reckless Omega.

He's challenging an Alpha on his own territory. He's threatening an Omega to push his protective urges.

It's ridiculous

Didier would literally die for me, and outside biological urges, rationally Braxton knows that.

Yet I'm almost at the point of orgasm, and it's flooded both my pheromones and marshmallow scent, which for some reason, is even more sugary and potent than usual, around the pool.

Braxton's eyes are blazing like not only does he finally understand that this is consensual on both sides but he now must become the white knight.

Didier has an interesting seduction technique. I should have guessed that.

Because Betas are less affected by both pheromones and scents, Matthew only snorts in amusement.

Braxton growls, however, and rips off his apron.

Oh, fuck.

We have over six feet of enraged, *touch her and die* Alpha coming our way.

Braxton stalks to the end of the pool and without even hesitating or stripping down, dives into the water.

“Merde,” Didier whispers.

I can tell how turned on Didier is by the display of Braxton motoring through the water toward us with focused intent by his being reduced to one word French cuss words.

I pull my hand out of my pants, in case I need to scramble out of the pool.

Hurriedly, Didier lets go of my neck, just in time for Braxton to burst from the water like a devilish wild cat. His red eyes are blazing, as he wrenches me from Didier and into his arms.

Braxton’s shirt clings to his hard muscles; the water has turned it transparent.

He cages me against the side of the pool. “So, do you need me to touch you?”

I nod.

My head is spinning, and my breathing is ragged.

Braxton kisses me.

At last...

Somehow, the kiss manages to be sweet, even as his large fingers slide into my pants, and he takes over, where I left off.

He presses on my clit, tracing over it.

Braxton King is touching me!

He’s touching me...*there*.

Then he groans into the kiss like he’s having precisely the same thought, stroking me more insistently and matching the dance of his tongue.

I’ve waited for this moment for six years.

My best friend wants me as much as I want him.

I stare into Braxton’s eyes, as he doesn’t stop kissing me like he doesn’t want to break our connection.

And it’s enough.

Enough to spiral me up...*and up*...and then shake with such intense ecstasy that I feel flushed, fevered.

I wail in pleasure, and Braxton swallows it in the kiss.

Slowly, he withdraws his hand and does up my pants.

Only then, does he stop kissing me.

Braxton studies me, searchingly. “Now, I believe that we skipped some of the parts of our first date. We should have done the eating and talking bit first. Certainly, going on what the movies show. I don’t know, since I’ve never been on a date before.”

He’s stroking my face, never looking away.

“You’ve never been on a date...?” My brow furrows.

What?

He looks confused. “Why would I have gone on one? You know that I’ve only ever wanted you. You’ve been everything to me, since we first met. Surely, you know that, my Jewel.”

My stomach drops.

My whole world turns on its head.

Does he mean that?

Can he?

Please, let it be true.

Matthew strolls closer to the edge of the pool. “Huh, interesting choice you all have to go swimming in your clothes. I like it.”

Still clutching his beer, Matthew wanders to sit next to Didier, dangling his feet into the cool water. He reaches out to pet Didier’s hair.

Didier purrs, nuzzling against Matthew’s thigh.

Matthew tips his beer at Braxton. “As much as I enjoyed watching that hot scene between Jewel and you — and I did — don’t freak out at Didi again. The dude was playing you, but I love the guy, as much as you do. You’d beat yourself up for the rest of your life, if you ever hurt him.”

Braxton flushes with shame. “Didi, I’m sorry—”

“What for?” Didi gives a sly grin. “For treating me like an equal? Like I’m a real man? And is it true? Do you love us?”

When Braxton hesitates, it breaks my heart.

Braxton moves next to me, leaning his back against the wall. “It’s complicated. The whole situation is. Wanting you and falling for you as more than friends could put your lives at risk.”

Matthew holds the beer out to Didier for him to take a sip. “Let me make this real simple for you, *Guardian*. You love us, and we love you. Oh, and we all love each other.”

Braxton narrows his eyes. “How do you know that I love you?”

“The bonding gifts,” Matthew replies, brightly. “You’re not as subtle as

you think. You've been trying to bond with us under the radar, right? You haven't been treating any of us like wards or within the rules."

"Gifts?" I ask.

I stare between Matthew and Braxton who appear to be caught in a battle of silent wills...and glares.

Matthew sets down his beer to count off on his fingers. "Croissant, the assistive technology and audio books, the whole adapted house, most of the books in the library..."

"I knew it!" I point at Braxton. "Are you even into that merman monster smut or did you get that for me as well?"

Braxton rolls his eyes. "Of course I bought it for you. Do you know how remarkably painful it was to pretend to be excited by semen puns?"

"Then there's every ingredient that I asked for to bake and cook with in order to make your favorite things. Plus, all the new ice hockey equipment, so that I'll be able to take part in a training session with my brother next week." Matthew's scowl fades away. "Have I told you how that means the world to me? Because of you, Braxton, I'll be able to see my twin properly again. You've been holding back out of fear but you've still been treating us like we were already your bonded pack."

Love surges through me.

I reach for Braxton's hands, but he tries to pull away from me.

"Then I was weak," Braxton growls. "Christ, I want you. I want you so much it hurts, but my father could destroy you, if he finds out about every rule that's been broken. I hoped that I could hide it under friendship and protect you that way." Braxton's expression shutters. "As the law stands, you're my property. I was wrong to touch you and give in to instinct. Everything about this is appalling and outdated, and I'm sorry because I do love you. I love you with everything in me, but it doesn't mean that I can claim you as my bonded pack."

"Yet," Didier says with more determination than I've ever heard.

I nod. "Exactly. So, in public we can't be a pack but we'll know that we are one in private, right? If you don't think that we know our own minds, when we tell you that we're willing and this is consensual, then you don't know us. Come on, Brax, we all know each other better than anyone."

Didier turns from Matthew to Braxton on the other side to me. He reaches out his arms, and Braxton draws him closer.

Didier lets out a happy sound. His expression is one of awed wonder.

I know why. He's wanted to be able to do this for as long as I have.
He settles on Braxton's chest, scenting his neck and breathing deeply.
I know that Didier's desperate to lick. I admire his restraint.

"When I was given to Trenton, what do you think happened to me?"
Didier reaches to touch Braxton's jaw. "I suffered the worst conditioning that your Companion manuals recommend to train an Omega to obedience."

Braxton stiffens; his distress is palpable. I tighten my fingers around his.

I'm even more glad now that we made the decision to wear our full uniforms into the pool, so that he can't see the scars.

"I fought every day with Father over that decision." Braxton drops a kiss onto the top of Didier's hair, although his voice wavers. "But he wouldn't even allow me into Trenton's wing, where you were being kept. In the end, he threatened to have both Jewel and you returned to Companion House, and me sent to Alpha Military Academy, if I raised it one more time. I fully understand, if you think that I failed you as an Alpha..."

My heart aches.

"I don't," Didier hurriedly replies. "Listen, Trenton didn't break me. All the things that he did to me would have broken most Omegas. *But he didn't break me.* The worst of it though was the isolation because my imagination got the better of me. I kept thinking of all the terrible things that could be being done to my Jewel, just like they were being done to me. And I loved her, even then."

"I was her friend," Braxton snarls. "She was my tutor, and I never did anything—"

"You don't take compliments well, mon prince." Didier nips Braxton in mock exasperation, and Braxton flushes at the pet name. "What I mean to say is that once I was returned from that terrible conditioning, I found precisely that. Jewel was not only safe but loved and with a new friend. She was happy. The first thing that you did was to make me feel safe and then to hand me my independence. How could I not fall in love with you then as well? This is not about you being our Guardian. It's about you being the man who we love and respect."

"Then as that man, consider yourselves all privately claimed."

Matthew whoops. "I'll drink to that."

I can't believe it.

At last, we're pack.

In secret but still...four of us, *pack!*

Joy soars through me, as I throw myself onto the other side of Braxton's neck and take a long sniff; the hot chocolate scent is strong and rich, creamy like it always is when Braxton is truly happy.

Didier is purring and licking Braxton's throat.

Braxton is laughing; it's a beautiful sound.

Yet something's wrong.

My head's throbbing worse than it was before.

I'm shaking.

The sun's beating down savagely, but I feel chilled.

My hands are clammy.

A fever is ripping through my body.

What the fuck is going on?

Wait, it couldn't be...?

A wave of heat hits me, followed by another, then another.

Shit, if this is happening at long last, it could be why Braxton reacted so strongly to Didier's challenge toward me.

Why I'm so close to coming for a second time, simply from the feel of Braxton's hard chest and his scent.

This isn't simply because it's a hot summer day or I'm going down with the flu.

My first heat is unexpectedly here after so long.

Please, why now?

Why when it's going to endanger all of us?

But I can't stop it.

Please, please, please...

Then my pussy gushes with wetness, and it's too late.

My vision becomes hazy. I can only see blurred blue, as sky melts into water.

There's someone...several people's...panicked voices.

But I can't hear what they're saying.

My eyes begin to close.

Then I sink beneath the water.

CHAPTER 12



Braxton's Bedroom, King Hall

Did I drown?
Am I dead? Is this what heaven is like for Omegas?
It smells and feels like it is.

Fevered, I roll around on the soft bed, which is more comfortable than anything that I've lain on for years.

Although my skin is itching, it's soothed by the gray silk sheets on the four-poster bed.

And the sheets smell deliciously of Braxton.

I've never been allowed inside Braxton's luxurious bedroom before, but I woke up on what must be his bed because it smells of the richest hot chocolate.

I sigh, burrowing my face into his pillow and taking as deep a breath as I can of his scent. It's exhilarating and makes even more slick gush between my thighs.

I need my Alpha.

I need to be knotted.

Please...

This is where he sleeps.

Braxton didn't have me placed back into the Companion Wing or into an

impersonal spare bedroom. He carried me to his own bedroom because he truly meant that I'd be his First Omega, at least in his heart: official mistress of King Hall.

I begin to purr, deep and satisfied.

It feels like I'm still at the bottom of the pool, and I'm struggling to look up through the water.

Sounds are muffled, and my vision is hazy.

There are voices — people talking on the other side of the room — but I can't concentrate on them.

I'm in heat.

Finally.

Yet it's happened under the stay-at-home order just when the Alpha who I've been friends with and loved for years has claimed me.

We're not bonded, however, and I have no idea, if he's going to rut and bond me through my heat for the next twenty-four hours.

How can he, when the scandal would risk his company and life at this crucial time?

Late afternoon sunlight streams through open French windows out onto a wrought iron balcony at the far side of the bedroom. The floor is thickly carpeted, and the ceiling is high with a fan that's slowly turning and cooling my heated skin.

My eyes widen, when I notice the bedroom walls. They're plastered with sketches like Braxton's been hoarding them as a private treasure.

The pencil sketches are of Didier and me.

At the bottom are a couple of Matthew, and a large one of all four of us together.

My breath hitches.

The oldest sketches are yellowing like they were pinned there years ago. The newest one must have been drawn only this week.

"Alpha," I whisper, stretching out my hand toward the pictures.

All of a sudden, I need Braxton with an aching desperation.

I've always needed him, as much as he needs me.

I'm burning up from the inside like there's a sun at my core.

Braxton is the only one who can put out the flames.

Where is he?

I battle to clear my thoughts.

"Alpha," I whine again.

“Hey, baby, you’re going to be okay.” Matthew strides across the room; his expression looks strained, even though he tries to smile. He leans over me, pushing a strand of hair out of my face. “I’m not an Alpha (and I may not have a knot), but will I do for the moment?”

I don’t miss the vulnerability in his voice. Betas are treated like shit because they’re knotless.

I’d never make a Beta feel like less for that. Betas are usually the most giving lovers.

Yet I can’t help the aching, biological desire right now for my Alpha.

Still, I force myself to nod.

Matthew’s expression brightens. “How’s your head? You were rubbing it.”

“Throbs.”

He leans over and kisses my forehead, before grabbing a cool cloth from a bowl on the oak bedside table and dabbing the sweat from my brow.

I stare up at him.

“Where’s Brax?” I whisper.

“He’s on the other side of King Hall, taking a cold shower, hopefully,” Matthew mutters. “Don’t worry, Didi’s with him, holding him back from going into rut. The problem is that you tumbled into an unexpected and powerful heat, while you were in his arms. The poor asshole has never even experienced a rut before. This will be his first, assuming that you want to spend your heat with him. Combine that with almost drowning, and Braxton saving you, and you’ve triggered every Alpha instinct that he has. If you weren’t his Omega before, then in his head, you are now.”

I blink at him.

I’m not seeing the problem.

Why’s Braxton not here with me now?

I narrow my eyes. “I want Brax.”

Matthew sighs, before wringing out the cloth and dropping it back into the bowl.

Matthew perches on the bed next to me. “I hear you but also, not yet. He wants to be certain that he has your consent, and you can’t give that, while you’re lost in a fog of his pheromones. Secondly, he wants you checked over by a doctor and fully informed. This is no longer something that we can keep private.”

Cold dread coils in my stomach. “You have my enthusiastic consent.

What do you mean, *informed*?”

“Do you always question and answer back, Omega?” A nasally, pompous voice demands. “If my Omega did that, heat or not, they’d lose the privilege of speech, until they learned their place.”

I whimper and cringe back into the sheets.

An elderly Beta with winter-white hair and sparse beard totters to lean over me. He peers at me through metal glasses like I’m an interesting specimen that he wishes he could dissect.

He’s wearing a neat, tailored jacket.

“Then I feel sorry for your Omega,” Matthew says in a dangerously low voice, which makes the elderly Beta pale. “How about you spend more time focusing on your own bedside manner and not scaring Omegas, when they’re at their most vulnerable? I won’t have you freak her out. She needs to stay calm.”

Matthew clasps my hand between his strong ones.

“Does your Alpha allow you to talk to guests like that, Companion?” The elderly man says, scandalized. “The name of Doctor McKay is renowned throughout Virginia. I’m one of the preeminent physicians for Omegas, and coming out here at short notice is a huge favor for the King family and Trenton in particular. I don’t know Braxton and if I’d been aware that I’d be treated with disrespect, then I wouldn’t have come. I don’t normally treat Companions.”

He eyes Matthew and me with distaste.

I shudder.

Matthew’s expression hardens. “Finish your medical exam and then get out, Doctor. We don’t need you.”

McKay’s eyes widen, before he reddens with rage. “Is that so, Companion? Then how about the fact that your bad Omega’s registered in the database as a NH, Non-heat? So, why’s she having her first heat now? She’s too old. Are you expecting me to believe that this a miracle?”

I whine in distress.

Bad Omega.

My mind is too fuzzy to think.

Am I in trouble?

Will I be beaten with the Discipline Strap? Just for a moment, my mind slips, and I can’t remember if I’m in Companion House still, waiting to be punished by a Carer.

But if I am, why am I lying on a soft bed, surrounded by a delicious rich scent that means *safety*?

Matthew calmly stands, but there's such a coiled threat in each movement that McKay scrambles back a step.

Matthew's voice is cool, even as he prowls toward McKay, driving him away from me and toward the door; every step that McKay is pushed further from me, the easier I can breathe. "I warned you. Do you think just because I'm a Companion, I won't stand up for the woman who I love? Think again, asshole. Don't ever call an Omega in heat *bad*."

McKay draws himself up, self-importantly. "Threaten me all you like, it won't change the truth. I'll be telling your Guardian about your rebellion."

Matthew's grin is dangerous. "Go ahead. In fact, tell him everything that we said today. Tell him just how *bad* we were."

"I will, word for word. You see, your Omega must have lied about her NH status or stolen some heat suppressants. This isn't the first time that I've seen it, nor is it the first time that some arrogant billionaire pack thinks that they can threaten me into silence. It's my legal duty as a doctor to inform the NH registry of the deception. She needs to be sent to the Institute, and in your case, I imagine back to Companion House."

"Please, no..." I beg.

I'm shaking, lost in an overwhelming mix of fevered heat and terror.

Matthew casts a worried glance at me, before his eyes blaze with fury. He snatches McKay by the neck and slams him back against the wall.

The door next to him rattles.

McKay blanches, freezing. "What in God's name are you doing?"

"Be quiet." Matthew towers over McKay. "Your *privilege of speech* has been revoked because you're a mean, prejudiced old man who doesn't deserve to practice medicine around Omegas. So, you're going to answer my direct questions. Nod if you understand."

I watch with wide eyes, as McKay swallows and then nods with difficulty, as Matthew doesn't release his grip.

"Okay, good. So, I know that she's a NH and hasn't lied because she shares a room with another Omega, and they both don't have heats," Matthew says. "I'm their bodyguard and friend. It's sort of my thing to notice stuff. If she'd been taking suppressants, or she'd somehow been able to hide it, for some crazy fucking reason, then I'd also know."

"Can I speak?" McKay's voice wavers.

At last, Matthew pulls his hand back from McKay's neck. "Go on, but don't be an asshole."

"How long have the two Omegas slept in the same room?" He grimaces.

Matthew glances at me.

"Six years," I struggle to answer.

Words are increasingly hard to say.

McKay huffs. "Well, there's your basic mistake right there. This is why Omegas should be kept separate from each other, especially if one's a NH. In my paper, Non-heats and Isolation, I advocate that infertile Omegas, who are by nature to be marked as Rejects, should be kept away from other Omegas and trained with..."

"You!" I hiss.

This man is the reason that isolation was used as a tactic to condition Didier.

Rage burns through me as fiercely as my heat. I struggle to sit up; I'm shaking.

McKay blinks. "She's delirious. You need to make a decision. Look, allowing her to become so close to a defective Omega messed with her body, impacting the natural rhythm of her cycles. But it couldn't stop them, only delay them. Now, this heat is going to hit with a vengeance."

"Don't ever talk about our male Omega in that way again." Matthew grabs the doorknob, wrenching open the door.

Then he grabs McKay and throws him out into the corridor.

McKay turns back to bellow, vibrating with rage, "I should let you find this out the hard way, but you're lucky that I have such a commitment to the Hippocratic Oath. Make sure that your Alpha knows this; my debt to the King family is well and truly paid now. An artificially delayed heat like this is extremely dangerous. Her only hope of survival is to see out the heat with an Alpha."

Matthew clenches his jaw. "Not a problem."

"Then she needs to bond with him."

Bond?

Will Braxton publicly claim me like that?

What happens if he doesn't?

I whine, writhing on the bed, comforted by his scent.

Matthew glances over his shoulder at me. "I'll tell him."

McKay's expression is petty and vengeful. "If she does all that, *perhaps*

she'll survive.”

My mind screeches to a halt.

I could die...?

My heart speeds up.

Terror washes over me at the same time as the only call through me is:
Alpha, Alpha, Alpha.

“What are the odds of survival?” Matthew’s white-knuckling the frame of the door.

“With an especially dominant Alpha rutting and bonding with her over the next twenty-four hours,” McKay replies, “fifty-fifty.”

I bite on my lip to hold in the sob.

I’m going to die.

CHAPTER 13



Braxton's Bedroom, King Hall

Hot.
Fever.

Too much, too much, too much...

I writhe, thrashing from side to side on the silk sheets.

My eyes flutter closed.

The lights are low, and there's a refreshing breeze from the fan above me, wafting onto my skin.

My mind is hazy.

I should be frightened. Something's wrong, right?

Yet my thighs are sticky with slick, my core is throbbing, and I feel empty and aching to be filled.

I'm lost in my first heat.

Wait, the one that could kill me...

The one that's going to lead to my death.

"Alpha," I murmur, "Alpha, Alpha..."

"I'm here, my Omega," Braxton's voice is deep and rumbling.

My eyes snap open.

My Alpha.

Braxton's sprawled on his elbow on the bed next to me, stroking my hair. He's dressed in a formal shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his powerful forearms, pants, and tie; his gaze is piercing. "I've always been here."

And he always has been. I know that now.

I nuzzle closer toward him, breathing in his rich scent. "Need you. Want your knot."

Braxton's hand tightens possessively in my hair. "Have you forgotten your manners?" He leans down, and his wicked lips nibble at mine. "What if I pin down your sweet Omega wrists, make you moan, and keep you writhing here, throbbing with desire and on the edge, until you beg me for my knot like a good girl?"

My pupils dilate. "Yes, please."

Braxton chuckles. "So, now you're polite."

"If you want a feral Omega in your bed, then keep on teasing her," Didier warns. "Actually, then you'll have *two* feral Omegas in your bed."

"I've wanked to that fantasy for years." Braxton smirks.

I turn my head to watch Didier, who's kneeling next to me.

He looks excited.

He's building a nest around me on the bed. My eyes widen, when I recognize that he's using Braxton's best clothes.

Braxton's closet stands open on the far wall.

Fuck, Didier's raided the closet and pulled out Braxton's best suits to build this spontaneous nest. He's working with serious intent, binding the legs of the pants to the fancy waistcoats and winding the ties through them like glinting snakes to create soft walls.

He's added furry cushions from the couch and the bunched sheets.

It's the coziest place, in which I've ever slept. The comforting scent of Braxton makes me feel safe, and I don't care that it isn't some fancy Omega Chamber like Mom had and wealthy Omegas do.

It's fucking perfect.

I reach out my hand, brushing it across Didier's knee. "I love my nest."

Didier pauses, bending to catch my hand in his, before kissing the back of it. "Mon coeur, I wish that I could make one like you deserve."

"We have an Omega Chamber in King Hall." Braxton looks uncomfortable. "But it's not ready to be used. It's locked up and filled with boxes of old junk, I believe. I didn't think that it'd be needed."

Until a couple of days ago, I'd have taken that to mean because he wasn't bonded to a society Omega yet.

A lot can happen in one stay-at-home fortnight.

Now, I know it's because he thought that Didier and I were Non-heats.

He didn't want to distress us by making us clean a chamber that we were never going to use.

He's truly been protecting us, even from that.

Didier traces his fingers along Braxton's jaw. "Let me clean it out for her next heat. If you help me, I want to design her the Omega Chamber that she deserves. I have so many ideas..."

Braxton's eyebrow arches. "Really?"

Didier bites his lip. "I've dreamed of being able to help other Omegas. I've been thinking of designs in my mind for years. I can do this."

Braxton loosens his tie. "Of course you can. I believe in you, my little Omega. So, you'll design our Jewel the best Omega Chamber in America, then we'll use it as the model example to help set up your own design business. That is, if that's what you'd like."

Didier freezes. "You'd allow me to...?"

Braxton's expression hardens. "I won't *allow* you anything. I'll invest in an excellent idea. Who better to understand about the needs of Omegas than other Omegas? And I'll invest in a person. You're talented at design, and I can set you up with any courses that you need. By the end of this twenty-four hours, when all of us get through this, you won't be my wards anymore. I don't know how we're going to find an official way to pull this off, but when we do, you'll be my pack mates. And my pack can achieve whatever they want. Anyone who says differently, can talk to me."

"Now you really will have two feral Omegas in your bed." Didier's thrumming with desire, almost as much as I am.

"And you have an Alpha who's almost falling into rut," Braxton growls.

"Lucky me then, that I'm a Beta who has both." Matthew strolls into the bedroom.

He's naked.

Wet gushes between my thighs.

Matthew looks like a giant with his powerful muscles and his thick, gorgeous dick, which is already fully hard and standing up proudly against his stomach.

He balances a tray in his hands that's covered with bottles of soda and

Gatorade, grapes, and plates of chocolate and baked treats.

He carefully lays it down on the bedside table.

I could kiss him for the chocolate.

I intend to kiss him everywhere anyway.

“For later,” Matthew points out. “Don’t worry, Braxton, I know that when you fall into rut, you’re going to be seriously out of it. It’s going to be a wild ride. But it’s my duty as Beta and the only one not caught up in the rut to look after you guys, feed, and guard you.” He taps the Gatorade. “We’re all set on the dehydration too.”

“Plus, look after Croissant,” Didier adds, burrowing through the clothes to stretch his arm across my chest and lightly trace around my nipple through my top.

I gasp at the added stimulation.

Another wave of heat burns me.

Matthew crawls onto the end of the bed. “Don’t worry, I will.”

“And I’ll look after all of you. But first,” Braxton’s eyes darken, “strip our Jewel, Matt.”

“With fucking pleasure.” Matthew kisses the arch of my foot.

His blue gaze meets mine in devotion.

Then he kisses my ankle.

When he reaches for my pants, however, I jerk away.

“Don’t,” I gasp.

If I’m stripped, then Braxton will see my scars.

Will he still love me? Want me? Knot me?

Do the scars make me ugly? *Defective*?

Will he believe me about how they happened? Trenton always told me that Braxton wouldn’t, if Didier or I ever told anyone.

There’s a high pitched whining noise, and it takes a moment to realize that it’s coming from *me*.

Matthew sits up onto his heels, studying me with a concerned but knowing expression.

Has he worked it out?

Didier hushes me, feathering kisses down my jaw.

“Don’t take off my clothes,” I insist. “Not now.”

Braxton tilts his head, and a strand of his brunette hair tumbles over his face.

He cups my cheek, gently turning my head, until we’re looking eye to

eye. “You’re my treasured jewel, who’s more precious to me than anything in the world. I’m never letting you go. And that means, I don’t give a fuck what survival rate the doctor said you have, I’m getting you through this heat. Now, that means we’re going to rut and bond, unless you’ve changed your mind about consenting...?”

I shake my head vigorously.

Braxton’s cussing hits me hard because it’s so unlike him; his restraint is slipping, and his emotion is bleeding through.

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Thank God. Then I’m going to do this bonding in the way that means the greatest connection between us all, and saves your life because if you die, then so do I. Now, I would imagine that the more skin we have in contact, the better it’ll be. Plus, as powerful as my dick is, I still don’t think that I can knot you through denim.”

“Then take off just my pants,” I reply.

“Demanding Omega,” Matthew teases.

I know that this is a conversation that I must have at some point. My mind feels like cotton wool, however, I’m a ball of heat and desire, and I can’t handle it right now.

It means everything that Braxton is respecting that.

Matthew pops open the button on my jeans and eases them down my legs. He drops them off the side of the bed.

I notice that Didier is casually copying us, but there’s nothing casual about it.

He’s hiding his own scars.

Braxton’s eyes flash, as he looks up and down my body from my naked hips to my feet.

He’s never seen me like this before.

He inhales, taking in my Omega pheromones.

When he smiles, slow and dangerous, his canines glint in the light.

“My Jewel,” Braxton’s voice drops to a dominant growl, as he leans over me, “you’re just as beautiful, as I always imagined. I’m tipping into rut and I need your body more than I need to breathe right now. Christ, the thought that I’m going to get to fuck you over...and over...and over again to make sure that I never lose you, is the only thing that’s keeping me sane.”

“And the thought that I’ll finally get your knot is the only thing that’s keeping *me* sane,” I reply.

Braxton kisses me passionately, as Matthew licks a stripe up my pussy.

I arch off the bed.

Braxton lets go of his tight hold on my hair, stroking my head, instead
The sensation as he plays with my hair is electric, shooting straight to my pussy.

I push into his touch.

When he pulls back, there's a devilish quirk to his lips. "Didier and you are close, but I'm your friend as well. I believe in equality. Maybe one day soon, you'll fully trust that. So, we need this heat to have the strongest connection, which means that taboos and tradition can go to hell. All three of us will fuck you at once this first time."

I freeze and then I whimper.

Triple penetration?

Fuck.

Also, yes, yes, yes...

I don't know that I'm saying that out loud in a feverish lust filled chant, until Braxton chuckles.

"It appears that our Omega approves."

"So do I." Didier slinks towards me.

He brushes his fingers across my breasts.

Matthew's pupils are blown wide with desire, and he's panting. "Is this that fantasy we were talking about on Friday?"

They discussed fantasies together...?

Braxton nods, before leaning down to the bedside table. He pulls open the drawer and takes out a bottle of lube.

He throws it to Matthew, who catches it. "Why don't you prepare her?"

This is happening. *It's actually happening.* And the three men who mean more than anything in the world to me are going to be joined together in my first heat at the same time.

I allow my head to fall back onto the pillow and just float away.

I lose myself in the waves of heat.

I'm nothing but sensation.

Desire.

Matthew runs his hand down Didier's back, and Didier shivers. Then Matthew kisses him, and it's soft and gentle.

This is Matthew and Didier's first time with both each other and a man.

I can't help smiling because Didier is being included.

In some packs, another Omega wouldn't be invited into the nest and a NH

would be shut away in shame, during a fellow Omega's heat.

Didier could have reacted with envy or distress that my heats have come in, when his never will.

Instead, he's happy for me. He's built me a nest.

He loves me, as much as I love him.

As I love all of these three men in my bed.

Yet I could still die tonight.

I whine, and instantly, Didier is nuzzling my neck in comfort. He licks and sucks gentle love bites. His purr vibrates through me.

It pushes me back to that floaty place that I was in before.

I struggle to keep my eyes open, as my hand creeps to stroke between my thighs.

"I don't think so." Braxton catches my hand between his. "You don't get to touch yourself from now on. You have us three to worship your gorgeous pussy, along with the rest of you."

I forget sometimes.

Braxton isn't nice.

He's kind. Sexy. Smart.

But he's not *nice* in the same way as Didier is, which is exactly why he's what we both need.

I gasp, as Matthew kneels between my thighs, resting his hand reassuringly on my knee. His lubed finger circles my hole and then pushes in.

It's tight, and I whine at the slight burn. But then, the burn's gone, and there's a burst of pleasure.

Matthew smiles. "I'm just stretching you. I have to make sure that I fit."

My eyes widen, as I watch him slowly work in two fingers, pumping them in and out of me.

Braxton leans down to whisper into my ear, "I'm going to knot you, Matt's going to pound your ass, until you're moaning his name, and Didi's going to use this sweet mouth of yours. Then we're going to swap places and we're going to keep alternating, until you're safe and ours, and we all feel so fucking owned by the others that we'll never be anything but pack again. All right?"

I nod at his check in because I want that too.

All of it.

I want it right fucking now.

I reach up, grasping Braxton's tie.

I hold him close, stopping him from moving away. “I’m already yours. But I can’t wait to feel all your cocks in my holes, breeding me.”

He inhales sharply. “Dear God...”

I love it that I can reduce Braxton to a *dear God...*

I intend to reduce Didier to babbling French by the end of this heat as well.

I won’t be the only one who’s lost to the frenzy.

Matthew traces around the rim of my hole, and it makes electric tingles shoot through me.

I’m panting.

Matthew pulls back, tossing the lube onto the floor. Then he wipes his sticky hands down his thighs.

He nods at Braxton.

To my shock, Braxton snatches me by the shoulders, pulling me up from the bed and pushing me into Matthew’s strong arms.

Then Braxton lies down on his back. He undoes his belt, sliding his hand into his pants and pulling out his dick.

I stare at it.

It’s as gorgeous as Braxton is. Its base is thick with a knot.

Am I going to be able to take that knot?

I haven’t seen one up close like this before.

Shit, I guessed that it was going to be *pierced*.

There’s a Jacob’s Ladder series of barbell piercings along the under shaft and into the knot.

They look fucking amazing.

They must have hurt though, when they were done.

I wince.

The knot is the most sensitive part of the dick for an Alpha.

He truly does have a knot of steel to have it pierced.

What are they going to feel like inside me?

“His dick’s pierced, Didi,” I blurt because Didier can’t miss this. Braxton’s lips quirk with amusement. “This whole ladder of barbells. It’s like he’s been walking around in his posh suits like Mr. Corporate, but he had this rebellious knot in his pants.”

Braxton runs his hand languidly up and down his dick, and his long eyelashes flutter, as he plays with the piercings in his knot. “You know me better than that. I was never a leader of corporate anything. I put my middle

finger up to my father's world in any way that I can. I just keep it secret or *in my pants*, until I can reveal it. And today," he glances down significantly at his dick, which has grown from half-mast to full, "is all about revelations."

Didier looks thrilled, before his gaze becomes sultry. "No one can read all that Alpha smut and not have a kinky side. It's time we let it out."

He frees his own dick, and both Matthew and Braxton are riveted at the way that Didier's small hand strokes up and down his dick, before Didier throws back his head, showing off the long, pale column of his throat.

He'll have them feeding out of his hand by the end of this twenty-four hours.

Braxton snarls, turning his attention back to me. "I need your pussy *right now*."

Matthew is so strong that he can carry me like a doll toward our Alpha.

I catch myself on my arms over Braxton, surprised to be on top but finding that I love the position.

Desire throbs through me, as I kneel over Braxton. He grabs me by the hips.

He's still controlling me, but I don't feel trapped.

I don't have time to think about it because Braxton pumps his hips up, driving his dick into me in one long thrust.

I moan, arching my back at how large he feels.

I'm filled more deeply than I've ever been.

It's overwhelming.

The piercings on his dick feel like a ribbed condom; they rub on my insides on each snap of his hips. His knot catches and stretches me on each thrust.

It's intense.

Perhaps, Matthew will count this as his exercise for the day.

I collapse forward with my hands on Braxton's shoulders.

My heart's beating fast, and my pulse is roaring in my ears.

There's a thin sheen of sweat on my skin.

Fuck, does that mean that I'm dying or being saved?

I rest my forehead on Braxton's. The gusted pants of his breaths are hot against my skin. His loving honey gaze never leaves mine.

I'm caught in his hot chocolate scent; surrounded by a nest made of his clothes.

He's inside me.

It's heaven.

Then I feel Matthew pressing against my back, and I realize that this is just the start.

“Okay?” Matthew strokes down the curve of my spine. “Ready?”

“Please,” I beg. “Fuck me.”

Didier moves to fit himself with his back against the headboard and with his legs resting either side of Braxton. He reaches out, feeling for my hair. Then he tangles his fingers in it, yanking back my head.

I stare up at him.

The way that Didier's listening intently...*fiercely*...is fucking hot.

I feel the head of Matthew's dick nudging at my ass.

It's large.

Then he's pushing into me, and my mind scrambles.

I whine, and suddenly, there's another dick, familiar this time, painting across my lips.

It distracts me from the pressure behind me, refocusing me.

I manage to glance up, and Didier is working his dick across my face. I open my lips obediently, and he slips it into my mouth.

I suck, deepthroating Didier as much as I can at the angle. I'm relieved to have him to help me cope with the other new sensations.

Braxton underneath me growls with desire at the sight.

He snaps his hips even more urgently.

Pleasure coils through me.

Then Matthew is finally fully seated in me.

He's being so careful.

He moves his hands in soothing circles on my hips. Then his hands brush against Braxton's, and Braxton entwines their hands in a way that's achingly tender.

Their gazes meet over my head, as they fuck me; I can feel how close their dicks are inside me.

“Move,” I hiss. “Harder.”

I don't know who I'm saying it to. Just one or possibly, all three of them.

But all at once, they're moving, *harder*.

I moan in pleasure, but the sound is muffled, as Didier holds me by the sides of my face now and thrusts faster and deeper in and out of my mouth.

I'm close.

So. Fucking. Close.

“Oui,” Didier throws his head back.

Then there’s nothing but a litany of blissed out French.

I knew that I could get him to babble in French.

I suck harder, hollowing my cheeks.

Didier’s dick pulses.

He’s about to come.

“Brax,” Didier cries, desperately.

Is he waiting for permission?

“Come,” Braxton growls.

And Didier does, wailing my name.

Jewel, Jewel, Jewel.

I swallow, and the taste is welcome and familiar.

A mix of Didier’s pleasure and Braxton’s command sets off a chain reaction. Braxton stiffens, and the next few pumps of his hips are erratic.

“Fuck, yeah.” Matthew tightens his hold on Braxton’s hands, as they meet on my hips.

When Matthew comes, he gasps, shuddering.

Then he rests his body across the length of mine, letting go of Braxton’s hands.

I can feel all three of my pack, sated and happy.

We’re connected in such an intense way that it’s mind-blowing.

I never thought that I’d have this.

“My Jewel…” Matthew feathers kisses down my back, before slowly pulling out of me.

Didier pets my hair reverentially as he slides his softening dick out of my mouth, and I reach out my tongue desperately to get one final lick in.

My head falls forward again.

The other two men tumble to the other side of the bed and lie tangled in each other’s arms, watching me.

I’m lying on top of Braxton alone now.

He’s never stopped fucking up into me.

Braxton licks his plush lips, and his gaze darts to my mouth.

“You’re going to take my knot now, good Omega,” Braxton’s voice is softer than I could imagine with the intensity of his possessive words. “I’m going to breed you because at last, you’re mine.”

He drops his hand between us to rub over my clit, and I moan.

So fucking close.

Then suddenly, Braxton's hitting *exactly* the right angle inside me on every thrust like he's deliberately waited until this precise moment, and I'm electrified.

My back bows, and I grit my teeth to stop myself screaming.

The jolts of pleasure make me feel like I'm floating.

Braxton's breathing is ragged, before he pushes up and he's deeper inside me than he's ever been.

Then he stiffens.

"Jewel," he gasps like I'm something precious that he's been hoarding and can finally bring into the light.

And finally, we're both coming at the same time.

Yet it's not like any time before, which I've shared with Didier.

It's not stopping.

Braxton's pierced knot inflates.

It's getting larger and larger, and his piercings rub against me in a way that pushes me over the edge of pleasure again and again and...

I howl, scratching at his Braxton's shoulders.

He pushes up, capturing my lips with his, before twisting me in one powerful move that rolls us, until he's on top of me with his knot inside.

He's kissing me, his knot is locking us together, I'm blinded by pleasure, and Braxton's red gaze pins me in place.

It's so intense that my cheeks are wet.

I'm shaking, falling apart, and yet, I'm held together by Braxton's kiss.

This is the closest that I've ever felt to anyone.

It's overwhelming.

How could I have been missing out on this?

I thought that the fun I had with Didier was the most that I could feel. But this level of pleasure is life changing.

I can feel Braxton's knot, where we're locked together.

We're no longer two; we're one.

This is how we should always have been

Braxton's saved my life. All my men have saved my life today.

Finally, Braxton breaks the kiss.

He's staring at me like he can't believe this pleasure or connection either.

He looks as wrecked as I feel.

"I'm not going to die," I whisper.

I can sense the truth of that.

Braxton's gaze becomes sharp. "You're not going anywhere. You're perfect, and you've belonged to me, since the moment that we met. Jewel, will you accept the bond of the King pack?"

I don't even hesitate. "Yes, oh fuck, yes."

Braxton's red wine eyes flash, as he lowers his mouth to my neck.

Then he bites.

I howl in agonized ecstasy.

Braxton only bites deeper, making the bond bite, which marks me as his Omega and an official member of the prestigious King pack.

CHAPTER 14



Braxton's Bedroom, King Hall

I yawn, blinking awake.
I'm still alive.

I fucking survived.

My King pack saved me.

I'm wrapped in the sheets on top of Braxton's bed, and the pale morning light is flooding through the French doors out to the balcony.

Is it Sunday morning already?

Wait, it can't be, if I'm entirely out of the heat, then it must be Monday morning.

The stay-at-home order is over, and hell, that was one way to see it out in style.

Braxton is sleeping naked next to me, and Didier's the small spoon behind him.

Didier's snoring softly in his sleep, nuzzling closer to Braxton's scent glands.

He looks contented. He's not having any nightmares.

Matthew's missing.

Panic spikes through me. It feels wrong that Matthew's not here.

Although, he's probably on a dawn run or fitting in a few hundred early

morning laps of the pool.

I wonder if any other Companions have become close (even with their Alphas), during this time forced together in their homes? Perhaps, Braxton's order could have been the start of a revolution of new Companion packs.

I smile.

Revolution via pack bonds.

I can get behind that.

This has been the best but most intense twenty-four hours of my life.

It's like waking up from the best dream, only one that leaves you sore in delicious places.

It's no wonder that I've slept in, but then, so have my pack mates.

Will it be like this every morning now?

My stomach clenches.

How is this even going to work?

"Cut it out, it's still too early, you're safe with me, and my knot is rather tender from our vigorous activities," Braxton mumbles, still half asleep. He doesn't raise his head, where it rests next to me on the pillow. His legs are tangled with mine, and his arm is thrown around my middle. "I can feel your worrying through the bond."

Startled, I concentrate.

Suddenly, I can sense Braxton's emotions like threads connecting him to me.

I've read in all the romance novels about sensing emotions through strong bonds, but I didn't believe it.

It felt like propaganda to get Omegas to fall in line and allow Alphas to match with them.

But it's true.

I can feel Braxton's deep protective love for me. There's an undercurrent, however, of aching loneliness and fear of abandonment, which is heartbreaking.

I always guessed that it was there but feeling it blow through me like a cold ghost's whisper, makes my eyes water.

He's an Alpha but he lost his mom and was rejected by his dad, just like I lost my parents. He's had the weight of expectations of the King name weighing on his shoulders, since he was high school aged.

I forget that sometimes because he's always dressed and acted older than he actually is.

He's had to.

Yet he was only a kid, when he also took on responsibility for Didier and me as well.

Despite that, he did his best for us, even then.

I won't let him feel alone again.

I kiss Braxton, gentle and chaste.

There's an extra flare of love through the bond, which thrums with *home, mine, pack...*

The part of Braxton that fears loss and abandonment dims.

I'm going to spend every day working out small gestures, which have that impact on him, now I know how well he hides those emotions underneath his mask.

"Can I wake up every morning like this?" Braxton murmurs.

He blinks open sleepy eyes.

He tightens his arm around my middle.

His hair is a mess, and there's a crease line across his cheek.

I think that he's never looked so beautiful.

"If I have my way," I reply.

Braxton scrunches up his nose and looks like he's trying not to laugh. "I think Didi is sniffing my neck in his sleep. Is it possible to sleep lick someone? Is that a thing for Omegas?"

I chuckle. "It probably is for Didi. He's wanted to sleep with you, since he was released from conditioning. What do you think all your clothes going missing was about? Or your ties? He needed to imagine that we were yours, even then. It was the only way that he felt safe and loved."

"I know. In some ways, I've always known that it was more than friendship. I just couldn't admit that to myself because it was too big. I'm literally the face of the Companion program. My father is instrumental in most of the rules that mean we're not allowed to be together."

I stiffen. "So, what the hell are we going to do? Weston will have your knot for this."

Braxton's gaze becomes steely. "I could have lost you. You only had a fifty percent chance of survival but you're here now, warm in my arms because of our connection together. All of us are. I won't be shamed for that choice. We're meant to be together, and I've always known it. I'm going to be brave enough to stand up for that now. I thought that I was protecting you by denying our pack status, but that's not possible anymore."

“So, what’s the plan?”

He looks thoughtful. “I’ve been moving board members into position who are sympathetic to my liberal stance. I’ve been networking with people who have the same agenda as me. I’ve been working to overturn the whole system. I simply didn’t think that it would need to be accelerated this fast. Are you still in contact with that lawyer who looks out for wards?”

“Benjamin. He’s one of the Alphas in the Champion pack.”

“Champion pack?” Braxton snorts. “Well, that one doesn’t like the quiet life. He recently bonded with a movie star Omega and made the news, globally. If we want a liberal on our side, then we’ll certainly get one in him.”

Benjamin is more than liberal. He’s bonded to the first ever Omega film director in America.

He fights for Omega rights.

He’s my idol.

It’s Benjamin who made me believe that it was possible to fight for Companion rights.

To resist.

“Do you want me to contact him?” I ask.

“Indeed,” Braxton replies. “I need a legal view on this, one that puts the best interests of the wards first.”

“Okay.”

Braxton’s brow furrows.

He reaches out to brush his fingers over the collar of my top like he’s unsure how to say what he needs to.

Finally, he asks, “Why won’t you take this off?”

Shit.

I wet my dry lips.

Why don’t I?

I can feel my scars. The skin is tighter.

I know that Braxton must sense my distress because he instantly raises the back of his hand to draw it down my cheek.

But I’m not ready to show my scars to him yet. I know that Didier isn’t and I must respect his needs and choice.

When we show Braxton, we’ll do it together.

Plus, I don’t want to risk finding out if Trenton’s threats are hollow or not.

I’d do anything for Braxton, even protect him from this truth.

“You don’t need to tell me,” Braxton reassures me. “Just so that we’re clear, you’re still able to tell me to *fuck off*, which I know is a phrase that you’re fond of.”

“That’s a relief.”

“But also, you can tell me anything. I need you to know that too.”

I bite my tongue hard.

“Uh-huh.”

When the bedroom door swings open, I startle.

Matthew swaggers in without knocking like this is his bedroom now, but then, since he’s been the one who’s looked after the rest of us during the heat frenzy (as the Beta who’s not been caught in it), feeding us grapes, holding Gatorade to our lips, and cleaning us up, he has a right to.

It appears that Braxton thinks so too because his lips only curl in greeting. “Good morning, Matt.”

Matthew’s just as naked as Braxton, which means that he’s been strolling around King Hall like that. The thought of such bad behavior from a Companion takes away my breath because it means without any doubt that we truly are officially pack and not merely wards now.

He moves closer to the bed.

“Morning, Braxton. I come bearing breakfast treats.” Matthew holds up a tray, which is heavy with plates of pastries, muffins, freshly baked rolls, and sliced melon.

“Then you’re so welcome.” I struggle to sit up, making grabby hands.

Matthew slides the tray onto the bedside table, before picking up a large plate of pastries and crawling onto the bed to the other side of Didier.

Braxton disentangles himself from Didier and sits up, before pulling me to sit on his lap.

He picks up a bowl of melon and holds out a piece to me.

When I turn up my nose, he clicks his tongue. “Fine.”

He swaps the melon for a chocolate chip muffin and holds that to my mouth for me to take a bite of, instead.

I munch on the muffin happily, nuzzling against him.

Braxton shakes his head, but his eyes are dancing, as I take a second bite of the muffin.

See, Alphas are trainable.

“Bodyguard, personal trainer, and chef,” Braxton says. “I don’t think that I’m paying you enough.”

Matthew narrows his eyes. "You're not paying me at all."

Braxton's lips quirk. "Aren't I? What a shocking oversight. Well, that's point one on the new Companion policies. You can all help me to write them."

I stare at Braxton in shock.

"Tell me this isn't a joke," I say.

"But I'm known far and wide as a topnotch comedian. Surely you know that," Braxton says so dryly that I don't know how he doesn't start coughing. "Look, I've been subtly making changes to the ward rules for years. But the board tried to get rid of me. They forced me to humiliate Matt in a demonstration, making him kneel, while I disciplined him. I don't take well to people threatening me or hurting those under my protection. So, I'm going to rewrite every last policy, rule, and guideline and I'm doing it in consultation with the Companions themselves."

This could be it: the way that things change for Companions in America.

Didier sniffs, tuning toward Matthew's plate of pastries and reaching for them.

Then his eyes open, and he makes a sleepy, questioning sound.

"Matt brought us breakfast in bed, Didi," I explain.

"Wow, that's a surprise. My Didi wakes up, when he sniffs out the pain aux chocolates." Matthew pulls off a buttery corner of the warm pastry, which is dripping with melted chocolate.

"*Hmm*," Didier hums his agreement, opening his mouth like a demanding baby bird.

Matthew laughs. "Come here, little Omega."

He copies Braxton and shifts to sit with his back to the headboard. He hooks one strong arm to pull Didier onto his lap.

I love the sight of such a large Beta, holding Didier (who's much smaller but impossibly beautiful), safely within his arms.

For the first time in a long time, I dare to believe that we can find a way to always be safe.

Didier smiles, settling against Matthew's chest. "It wasn't the smell of the chocolate. It was the smell of us all being together. That's my favorite scent in the world."

Braxton looks stunned, before he swallows. "Then you're lucky. Because we're going to be together from now on."

"Are we, mon prince?" Didier tilts his head. "You bonded with Jewel but

not with Matt or me. You're our Guardian. Yet we're not bonded pack and that makes us just as vulnerable as ever."

Matthew's lips pinch. "He doesn't have to bond with us."

"Of course not." Didier bites his lip hard. "I only thought..."

"I don't have to. I want to. I'm desperate to and I always intended to." Braxton's eyes are dark. He reaches for Didier's hand, clasping it. "I'm sorry, if in the midst of things, I haven't made that abundantly clear. A rut clouds an Alpha's mind as well, and from the moment that I was in the pool, I was flooded with a deep need to—"

"Fuck me, until you made me beg?" I tease. "Or was it until you bred me? Or made me scream?"

Braxton groans. "Please don't repeat my dirty talk the morning after. And by the way, it only encourages me to make you blush harder next time."

Matthew edges closer to Braxton, pulling Didier with him on his lap. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I meant to find a way to bond with all three of you. Isn't it obvious that I love each of you? We fit together. I mean, not conventionally. Not in any way that this society would accept or applaud but still, we fit. Didi, you're the joy in my life, as well as my spirit. I only need to think of you, and I light up inside. I couldn't have kept going all these years without you. Jewel, you know how I feel about you because you're already connected to me through the bond, but you're my best friend, and every moment of happiness that I've known has included you. And Matt..."

Matthew shrugs, avoiding Braxton's eye. "It's okay. I know that I don't have the same long shared history that you have with your Omegas."

"You don't have to. You're my Beta, and despite being a sadistic personal trainer who drives me harder than anyone in my life, I don't think that I've ever felt so firmly *seen* before. I can relax around you. You're—"

"The golden retriever who we need like Croissant," Didier declares.

"Didn't you notice the *sadistic*, when he's making me do push-ups?" Braxton grumbles.

Didier smirks. "He doesn't make *me* do them."

Matthew coils Didier's hair around his hand and then yanks Didier's head back; Didier's breath catches. "That's only because I've been busy developing a personal training plan for you. Just wait and see how many push-ups I'll expect you to do every morning from next week."

I keep still and quiet, in case Matthew adds me into this exercise

massacre.

I wouldn't survive it.

Braxton looks far too satisfied.

"Doesn't Didi's throat look perfect for biting?" I prompt.

Braxton's eyes darken. "It looks beautiful."

And it does.

"Please," Didier begs.

Braxton arches his brow. "As much as I enjoy little Omegas begging in my bed, and I do, now isn't the time. You will never need to beg for my love. Didier and Matthew, will you accept the bond of the King pack?"

Matthew and Didier both reply solemnly, "Yes."

Didier's head is still yanked to display his throat, and his chest is rapidly rising and falling. He's clenching his fists by his sides.

Matthew holds him in place.

"Matt, turn your head as well," Braxton commands, "I'm always efficient."

I notice that he doesn't order him to *bare* his neck, which would make this act about submission.

Matthew's breath hitches, but he turns his head.

Braxton keeps his arm looped around my waist, as he holds me on his lap, refusing to separate me from this bonding.

He leans in close to Didier's neck.

Didier's butterfly long lashes flutter against his cheek, as his breathing speeds up.

Braxton teases him, licking across the fast pulse in his neck. Then he sucks, deepening to a love bite, before nibbling and grazing his teeth over the skin.

It's a tease, and at the same time, it's allowing Didier to get used to the increased sensations, especially as he likes soft touches.

A bonding isn't soft.

Finally, Braxton bites.

Didier yells, and I wonder how overwhelming it must be to feel the sensation alone, as the bond slams in.

I raise my hand to touch the bond mark on my own neck, which will slowly scar.

It's sensitive, and I shiver.

Didier's shaking, as Braxton pulls away, licking over the livid teeth

marks.

Didier's eyes are hazy.

Then instantly, Braxton grabs Matthew firmly by the hair to hold him in place and bites into his neck without the gentle licking and sucking that he'd done for Didier.

Matthew stiffens but only gasps.

Finally, he slumps back; his whole body relaxes like he could have come from the bite alone.

Didier rests his head on Matthew's shoulder and begins to purr.

They both look exhausted and wrung out.

But I can feel their joy through the bond.

My lovers

My pack.

"Mon dieu," Didier whispers, "I shall never be in alone in the shadows again with this bond. Your emotions are like bursts of light, and they'll always be with me. How could I have dreamed to live without this?"

I tremble as I reach to pet Didier's hair, and he melts into my touch.

Braxton slides his hand to Matthew's shoulder and holds it there, possessively.

I could live in this moment forever.

Unexpectedly, the bedroom door slams open.

"You're an asshole, Braxton," Trenton snarls, prowling into the room. "You sent me halfway across the country for a series of crisis meetings that some middle manager could have handled."

Braxton grabs a sheet, covering us all as hurriedly as he can. "Don't you have any manners, Trenton? Have you ever heard of knocking?"

My heart's beating hard in my chest. I grip onto Braxton's shoulders.

It's Monday.

Trenton's back home, and it shows the impact of a heat and a bonding that I was able to forget about him.

It's too late now.

I can feel the rest of my pack's combined panic and fear, despite Braxton's cool outward appearance.

"Have you ever heard of not sending your cousin to bullshit business meetings?" Trenton takes another step into the room but then he stops and sniffs.

"We'll talk about this later," Braxton insists.

Trenton ignores him, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “Huh, so that’s why you wanted me out of the way. The King name really isn’t about fucking Kings of Virginia anymore and is simply the Kings of Fucking. But to do it in your own bed... If you want to fool around with Companions, that’s what their wing is for.”

“Get out,” Braxton growls, low and dangerous. “This is your very last chance, Trenton. If you say one more word, I’ll ruin you.”

Matthew tries to sit up to take a better defensive stance to protect us but he’s still woozy from the bonding bite.

Trenton’s eyes widen, as he takes another sniff. “It smells like *heat* in here. But that’s impossible. The Omegas are both Non-heats. Tell me that you’re not that fucking stupid.”

He stalks closer to the bed, before his eyes dart to take us all in: the way that Matthew is sheltering Didier with his naked body to protect him. How Braxton is holding me securely in his lap, possessively.

Then his gaze darts in shock to the bond bites on each of Matthew, Didier, and my necks.

“You bonded with them.” All the blood drains from Trenton’s face, before he snarls in victory, “I tried to help your ungrateful ass. I did everything that I could to warn you. But you had to act like you’re above everyone else. How fucking badass will you feel, when I put in my report on this tonight? Because when I tell your father, he’s going to fucking kill all of you.”

CHAPTER 15



Hockey Ice Rink, Washington

It's been two days, since Trenton returned to King Hall, throwing our newly formed pack into a state of terror.

He's locked himself into his wing, and I have no idea if he's put in that phone call to Weston in England.

Braxton has been keeping us all in his private wing for protection, although I don't know how he thinks he can keep us safe from the Head Alpha, if Weston decides to return to America.

Braxton hasn't slept.

Even though he's an Alpha, he's made a nest for himself out of his paperwork and he's been frantically working.

Beside him, I've been sneaking onto the Omega server to feel out the resistance and gain news on the Caged Companion.

I've also been following the viral phenomenon of the Three Badass Rules in wonder and sending emails back and forth with Benjamin, brainstorming ways out of this crisis.

"I almost have the majority shareholders on my side," Braxton explained this morning. "There are several wealthy individuals, along with myself, who own a large percentage of the company and have the same liberal views on the necessary changes to protect Companions. I only need to convince one

more investor, and I'll have fifty percent on my side, which means that I'll fully control that board. I can force through every last one of our changes. Then Trenton and Father will be too late to do anything about it."

"What if Trenton hasn't called your dad?" I said. "It could have been a bluff."

"He's called him," Braxton replied, grimly. "It's just a matter of what Father's planning to do about it. I don't know if it's better or worse, if he turns up."

Worse, definitely fucking worse.

I remember being the frightened kid with my arms around Didier like that'd mean we couldn't be separated, as our worst enemy, CEO of the company who ran Champion House and Head Alpha of the King Pack swaggered into the room, an Alpha with a colder expression than the winter morning outside.

It still gives me nightmares.

I shiver now as I sit on the cold metal bench beside the ice rink.

I pull my thin Companion's coat more firmly around myself, hugging my hands under my arms.

My ass is numb on the bench.

I wish that I had gloves.

The lights are dim, apart from the spotlights that are directed onto the vast rink.

The red and blue markings on the ice stand out in pretty lines; I don't understand them.

I don't feel like I need to. I'm mesmerized anyway.

Yet I can't look away from the rink.

I've never been to a hockey game before, in fact, I haven't been taken to any public sports game.

It's not the type of place that you take an Omega kid and definitely not an Omega Companion.

But I'm a bonded Omega now, and I'm here with my Beta.

This morning, Matthew looked as vulnerable as I've ever seen him, as he approached Braxton, who was sitting at the desk in his bedroom, typing. "So, I guess my visit with my twin is called off then."

It was a statement, but the deep yearning in Matthew's voice for his brother turned it into a question.

Of course, Braxton had promised that this week, Matthew would be able

to have a hockey training session with Asher.

“Brax, you can’t.” I sat up, from where I was sprawled on the bedroom floor with Didier. “Matt hasn’t seen his twin in ages, and it was a promise. It’d be like keeping Didi and me apart. Asher must be feeling so alone. Please...”

Matthew looked frozen like he never imagined that someone would be begging like that on his behalf.

Braxton glanced between us in confusion. “I’m not the one calling this off. It’s all arranged for you to meet up at the college’s ice rink. Of course you must still see Asher. He needs you. This hockey team, the Blades, which he’s ward to... Well, he’s a starplayer but he’s also caged. I’d never stop him seeing his family because he’s *mine* now.”

Matthew laid his strong hand on Braxton’s shoulder. “Thanks.”

There was a lot being said in that one word. I felt it through the bond.

So did Braxton because he studied Matthew, before smiling.

Then he glanced over his shoulder at me. “Anyway, you need to get out of here for some fresh air. There’s no need for all of us to be stuck inside like the sword of Damocles is over our head.”

“It is,” Didier muttered.

“Well, yes, but we can pretend that it isn’t. Didier and I can throw around some ideas. And Matt...?”

Matthew nodded, rocking on his heels and thrumming with enthusiastic excitement.

“Show our Jewel your skills on the ice. Impress her.”

“Hey, I can do that.”

I grinned. “I get to go too...?”

Braxton arched his brow. “He needs someone to make a heart sign to, when he scores, or does that only happen in romance books?”

I laughed. “Perhaps, you should stop reading so many of these books now. It’s setting you up with unrealistic expectations.”

“Disappointing.”

“What car do you want me to take?” Matthew leaned down to whisper seductively into Braxton’s ear, “How about the Porsche? I’ll take good care of her.”

He liked to play with fire.

Braxton looked horrified. “You wouldn’t.”

“So, you love me but not enough to let me drive your car...?”

Oh, he was playing dirty.

Braxton took a steadying breath. “Fine, but no breaking the speed limit. There had better not be a scratch on her, when you bring her back to me. And handle her as gently as you would my knot, you understand?”

Matthew’s grin was gleeful. “I’ll look after your baby, *baby*.”

Of course, Matthew drove the Porsche as fast as he skated.

I’m never telling Braxton that or how exhilarating it was.

After all, I want to cling to the leather seats and laugh, as Matthew speeds us both in an insanely expensive car, when we both don’t own a dime between us, as often as I can.

Yet if Braxton finds out, he’ll never entrust his *baby* to Matthew again.

Now, it’s just as exhilarating to watch the twins in their hockey uniforms, clutching their sticks, skating faster than I thought it was possible with an intense physicality and shooting the puck at the goal.

It’s unpredictable, hard hitting, and makes my blood sing.

It’s not even an actual game, and I can’t help whooping and clapping, before flushing with embarrassment.

The players stop to wave at me, and one of them (it must be Matthew), makes the sign of a heart.

My flush deepens.

Damn Braxton.

It still makes my stomach all squirmy.

Asher nudges Matthew’s shoulder playfully, and they laugh.

I can sense through the bond Matthew’s bright excitement and his thrill at being able to let go with his brother on the ice.

I scrutinize them.

The only way that I can tell between Matthew and his identical twin is that Asher is like the Porsche on the ice: I’ve never watched this sport before but even I can tell that Asher’s playing is at another level.

Matthew’s good.

But Asher’s like a god.

Asher’s playing around with Matthew to have an excuse to spend time with him, but Asher’s is a different class of talent.

Asher’s family now.

I remember the tattoo that’s on Matthew’s chest: to keep his heart beating like the pact that he has with his twin with the time of his birth **8:22**.

His younger brother has the matching tattoo on his chest, but with **8:23**.

In the bond, it feels like a wound in Matthew (which I sensed in the flashes of pain), is scarring over.

It's like watching one Soul being reunited.

I bite my lip, clasp my shaky hands in my lap.

It's going to hurt to break the twins apart again.

Does Asher have his own pack?

There's something mysterious about the Blades.

Is Asher safe?

All of a sudden, something rings in my pocket.

I jump, looking around myself in my shock.

What the fuck is that?

Then my heart settles, and I sheepishly fish out my new iPhone from my pocket. Braxton pressed it into my hand, before I stepped into the Porsche, insisting that if I was to leave King Hall without him, he needed to have some way to contact me.

My shoulders slump in relief, as I see Braxton's name flash up onto caller ID (or **ALPHA**, as Didier insisted I program in for him).

Matthew has stopped skating. He holds his stick loosely at his side.

He's looking over at me, as I answer the call.

"Hello?" I say, unused to talking on phones. "We're okay. Matt didn't crash, speed, or scratch your baby. The twins are both incredible at ice hockey, by the way. Can they see each other more often? I mean, you should see how the brothers are together—"

"You need to get back here," Braxton interrupts me, urgently. His voice is clipped and businesslike. It's a tone that he never uses with me. My eyes widen, and I find myself standing and taking a step toward the rink because fuck, I just know that this is serious. "I mean *now*. On the way back, make up some kind of story about why I sent you out for essential errands. You did not go to meet Asher or do anything as frivolous as ice hockey."

"Brax," my throat is tight, "what's going on?"

He continues like he hasn't heard me, but to my alarm, I can hear in the background on his side of the phone, a loud, incessant banging. "Do not...I repeat, do not...come speeding up the drive in my Porsche. Lord, what was I thinking? Park it somewhere close by and then walk down, as if you took public transport."

"What's happening?" I demand. "What's that noise? Brax, are you safe?"

I clutch the phone tightly to my ear.

My heart's hammering in my chest, and my pulse is roaring in my ears.
Matthew's skating toward me now with a desperate, furious speed.

But why does it feel like no matter how fast he skates, it's going to be too slow?

"That doesn't matter. Didier's safe." Braxton sounds distracted, and my hand shakes. There's a crash on the other side of the phone, and my eyes widen in helpless shock. "Now, I need to make sure that you are as well, when you come back."

"Why? What the fuck is going on?" I hiss.

"Father's arrived from England with a small surprise. Didier's in our bedroom, and I locked myself in my study both to distract his attention and to take this call. But the door's about to be broken through...fuck, it's gone. Just get back here. Father needs to see that we're bonded, and you're not merely Companions anymore or he could put out an order directly against you from Companion House. If he does that, then one of their squads will come for you through your trackers, you'll be auctioned out of the country, and I'll never see you again. Jewel, *I love you...*"

Suddenly, there's the sound of a scuffle.

"Alpha," I scream.

Then the line goes dead.

CHAPTER 16



Study, King Hall

“**W**ait.” Matthew pounds after me down the hallway, which leads through King Hall, trying to catch at my sleeve to hold me back. “*Jewel...*”

No fucking way.

I don't care that he's meant to be my bodyguard and protecting me or about the fear in his voice for me.

I only care about the memory of the desperation in *Braxton's* voice as he said *I love you*, before the line went dead.

And how Braxton's in that study alone with his dad, the powerful Head Alpha of the King pack.

I'm only ahead of Matthew because he had to park the Porshe just like we'd promised, and the moment that he pulled up, I jumped out and began to run with my heart pumping, my skin clammy, and tears streaming down my cheeks.

As King Hall arose in front of me then, with an unfamiliar white Rolls Royce pulled up in the driveway, I finally understood that home, pack, *and everything* always meant Braxton to me.

I can't lose him now.

I stumble at the sight of the study door.

The thick oak door has been split down the middle.

Fuck.

It's enough for Matthew to reach me.

He grabs me by the arm. His mouth is set in a grim line, as he pushes himself in front of me.

"I'm going in there," I hiss.

I can hear the harsh voices coming through the open doorway.

"I know you are." Matthew takes a deep breath, catching my gaze with his. His eyes are hard and dangerous. "But so am I, and this is what I'm trained in. So, please, let me protect *all* of you."

His intensity shakes me.

It strikes me then that Matthew has all of us worked out and possibly has from the start, maybe because of the way that he had to quickly assess his dad's mood to protect his other siblings.

Didn't he say that it was his talent?

I give him a quick nod, and the stiffness in his shoulders uncoils slightly.

He steps through the doorway, and I follow him into the study.

The voices break off.

It's late afternoon, and the sun casts long shadows through the high arched window behind the desk.

There's an Alpha sitting behind the desk, only it's not Braxton.

It's a middle aged Alpha who's dressed in a gunmetal gray suit with dark hair that's thinning on the top. His expression is even haughtier and colder than I remember it being.

Weston King, Head Alpha of the King Pack and currently Deputy Prime Minister of England.

There's an Omega, who's wearing an elegant, designer black dress and pearls, perched on his lap. She has large blue eyes and a coy expression.

Her hair hangs in fetching ringlets down her back. She only looks to be a couple of years older than Braxton.

She's nuzzling close to Weston, despite the fact that he stinks of the burned coffee stench of angry Alpha.

"So, here they are, your missing wards." Weston grimaces. "There was no need for all this nonsense and dramatics, you young fool."

Trenton is leaning against the wall, which is lined with antique leather-bound books, opposite the grand fireplace.

His arms are casually crossed.

He looks infuriatingly smug and satisfied.

“You mean like *you* breaking through my perfectly good door?” Braxton asks.

I turn hurriedly to Braxton, but Matthew stops me from rushing to him.

Braxton’s sitting stiffly on the velvet, antique couch, which is along the far wall.

My breath catches.

Braxton’s pale, and there’s a purpling bruise on his cheek that wasn’t there, when I left this morning.

Matthew’s expression becomes even harder. He balls his hands into fists at his sides.

Braxton gives a subtle shake of his head.

I let out a gasp, when I see Didier trembling on his knees by the side of the couch. I rush to him, needing to check him over and be certain that he hasn’t been hit as well.

Didier’s breathing too fast and buries his head against my neck, taking deep sniffs of my skin, as soon as he’s holding onto me.

I entwine our fingers together.

He doesn’t appear to have been physically hurt.

I bare my fangs, twisting in front of him.

At the same time, Matthew steps in front of Didier and me.

I notice then that Braxton’s positioning on the couch has been deliberate: it made it look like he was placing himself above Didier, but whatever’s been going on in this study, in reality, it hid Didier from sight behind the couch, while keeping Braxton the center of attention.

Shit, how often has Braxton done that?

Subtly protected us without us knowing?

Weston’s hard gaze sweeps across us, at the same time as he plays with the Omega on his lap’s hair. “It’s unbecoming to allow them these sorts of liberties. It’s unbecoming, when they’re Omegas.”

“It’s unbecoming to terrorize Omegas.” Braxton bares his teeth.

Sometimes, I can see the same sharpness in him, which is in his Father.

It’s like watching two Alphas fence with words.

“They need teaching their place, but you let them waltz in and out, whenever they please. Where were they again?” Weston reaches for the whiskey crystal decanter on Braxton’s desk, and like it’s his own, pours

himself a generous measure.

“I didn’t tell you. On purpose.”

Trenton smirks. “I love family get-togethers.”

Braxton narrows his eyes at the Omega on his dad’s lap. “And how often do you put *her* in her place? She looks remarkably treasured to me.”

The Omega’s coy act drops.

She shoots Braxton a vicious look that makes me want to leap over the desk and kick her ass.

She’s trouble.

Even Braxton looks taken aback.

“Who the hell is she?” I ask, before I can stop myself.

“How rude of me. I didn’t do introductions, did I?” Braxton’s voice is as dry as my throat feels. “This is my new stepmother, Elizabeth. You know, the new one who I didn’t even know that I had.”

Silence.

Wow, just when I didn’t think that Weston could become even more of a sucky dad.

I sneak my hand up to encircle Braxton’s ankle in solidarity.

A deputy prime minister’s bonding should’ve been a big deal, which means that he kept this bonding deliberately quiet.

The knothead didn’t even tell his son, let alone invite him for any of the traditional bonding events.

That counts as neglect within a pack.

“How long?” Matthew demands, taking a pace forward.

“Does it matter?” Braxton says, wearily.

“Eighteen months.” Elizabeth smiles, nuzzling closer to Weston. She’s proving her power in the room; it isn’t love. “I’m so happy to meet you all.”

“You’re so sweet, Liz. And you are *treasured*.” Weston’s eyes soften, and with shock, I realize that I may be wrong. It could be love for Weston. “You’re silly but sweet. You always see the best in people. A lady of your breeding and status shouldn’t sully yourself by even speaking to Companions and certainly not ones who don’t know how to be obedient and good.”

Didier flinches.

Elizabeth casts her gaze down in pretend demureness. “Of course. You know best.”

“Does he?” Didier raises his head, and his gaze becomes fierce. “He owns a company that sells Companions to make blood money, but he knows

nothing about us. You live happily in another country, safe and treasured in your happy bubble. I understand because once, I thought that would be my life as well. Your comfortable life is paid for by the misery of thousands of Omegas. Can you live with that?"

Didier can't see Elizabeth's sly smile like she wanted to tempt one of us into an outburst like that to prove just what a *good* Omega she is and how bad we are, or he'd know that *fuck yeah, she can*.

Trenton straightens as he glares at Didier. "Shut up, or I'll shove you right back into isolation."

Instead of flinching in terror like Trenton expects, Didier shrugs. "Better alone than with bad company."

I give a startled laugh.

Fuck them.

If they're going to wreck us anyway, then we're not going down as good, obedient Omegas.

We'll go down as the rebels that we are.

"I thought that you agreed to let me protect you." Matthew scowls.

"I'm not good at being the damsel in distress," I reply.

Weston slams his hand down on the desk, spilling the whiskey.

I jump.

"Enough." Weston glares at Braxton. "Do you see where your soft hearted nature has led you? Do you even get them to repeat the three rules daily like they should do?"

Braxton meets my gaze. "Well, only the *badass* ones."

My breath stutters to a stop.

Next to me, Didier makes a choked off sound.

Braxton knows.

He has to fucking know, right?

Shit, I'm the worst keeper of secrets *ever*.

I guess it's what comes of being smart but also, of being surrounded by other smart people.

To be fair, it's what attracts me to them.

"That's a joke in very poor taste." Weston's cheek twitches. "Now, I had an important meeting with the Home Secretary, before my plans were interrupted because of you. I'm a busy man. Do you have any idea what it's like to have to rearrange the workings of an entire government because—"

"You don't like my choice in bonding partners?" Braxton arches his

brow. “Sorry, are we still dancing around this?”

The scent of burned coffee becomes even more choking, and I cough.

Braxton glances at me in concern, and suddenly, his rich hot chocolate scent wafts through the room to counteract it.

“Stop it,” Weston snaps. “Are you still wasting your pheromones soothing Companions?”

“They’re not wards or Companions any longer.” Braxton leaps up, vibrating with a righteous rage that’s breathtaking in its love for his pack. I stare up at him with wide eyes. “Or are you intending to ignore that I’ve claimed and bonded with them? I wasn’t under duress or mentally unfit. I love them and I’ve chosen all three of them. They’re part of the King pack now. And Father, you’re right. You are a busy and important man. You’ve been running England, while I’ve been running the company over here. You haven’t been bothered with my life for quite a number of years and by God, you bonded without even telling me, so clearly you don’t wish me to be part of your life either. So, let us return to our own lives and stay the hell out of each other’s.”

“Are you done?” Weston says, coldly.

Trenton whistles. “So, you do have balls.”

What the hell is Weston going to do now?

Slowly, Didier stands.

He straightens, and to my shock, he takes a careful step forward.

I push myself hurriedly to my feet as well and hold out my arm to him. He grips me by the elbow, and I guide him forward, until we’re standing next to Braxton.

Matthew closes in on the other side.

We’re shoulder by shoulder like pack should be.

Braxton isn’t alone.

Braxton studies us in shock. His eyes gleam for a moment, before he clenches his jaw and turns back with added confidence to his dad.

“They’re my bonded,” he says with steely resolve. “If you can choose an Omega who’s the same age as me to be yours, then you certainly shouldn’t judge me for falling in love.”

Weston reddens. “I’ll whip the skin from your back, boy. Then I’ll send you to the Alpha Center like I always should have done, when I got the reports from Trenton about how you allowed yourself to become too close to your wards. Then I’ll—”

“Weston, dear.” Elizabeth plays with Weston’s tie, allowing the material to run between her fingers suggestively. I grimace. “Please, for me, don’t be too hard on the boy. You let him choose such pretty wards. It’s not surprising that he was tempted, shut up alone here with them. Isn’t it instinct now that he’s bonded to protect them? You always protect me so well, Alpha.”

She’s playing him.

I gape at her.

Why is she helping Braxton?

Weston tightens his arm around her, calming down.

Why is she protecting her new stepson...*unless, she isn’t.*

Suddenly, I notice the sneaky glance that she exchanges with Trenton.

He winks at her.

What the hell are they plotting?

Braxton exchanges a troubled glance with me.

He noticed the connection between Trenton and Elizabeth as well.

Weston harrumphs. “As always, you’re sweet. The King name has to mean something, however, and I shall be a laughing stock, if my son and heir is bonded to ex-Companions.”

“Are these his friends?” She gestures at us with a wrinkle of her upturned nose.

Defensively, Braxton wraps an arm around me.

“It’s pathetic, isn’t it?” Trenton smiles, slow and cruel. Braxton winces. “He was tutored by this one...” He jabs a thumb at me. “He could have been out making real friendships or finding someone to rut in town. Instead, he never did anything but hang around here with them and work.”

“Well, that’s it then,” Elizabeth sounds delighted like she’s solved the mystery.

It’s an act.

Fake.

I wish that I could shove her off Weston’s knee to teach her what it feels like to be forced to kneel, just once.

“What is?” Weston demands.

Elizabeth looks down, pretending to be bashful. “I’m probably wrong. I’m sorry.”

Weston chuckles, indulgently. “It’s all right. You never need fear me. Now, out with it.”

“Father,” Braxton grits his teeth, “you’re a bloody hypocrite.”

Weston's eyes flash. "And you're lucky that I don't make you submit and bare your neck."

Braxton becomes ashen.

"I only thought that if Braxton were to bond with an appropriate Omega, one with the breeding and status that fits the King name, then they'll become the First Omega." Elizabeth's eyes warm with a sudden triumph, which twists my stomach because fuck, *this* is what the wink with Trenton was about. It's also my worst nightmare. "They can be the one who he's seen about with in society and who runs his household, as it is in England. Who notices or cares about the Second or Third Omega or indeed Second Beta in the pack? Braxton could take a First Beta, who again has higher status."

"I would never do that," Braxton snarls. Then he twists to sweep his gazes over us. "I swear, I shall *never* do that. Do you believe me?"

I want to.

But what if he doesn't have a choice?

What if it's the only choice between worse ones?

"I believe you," Didier says without hesitation.

Didier's always been so firm in his beliefs, whether in people or ideologies.

Only, this isn't something that I want to hold Braxton to because if I do, and he can't keep it, then it'll break him.

Matthew remains as silent as me.

"Matt? Jewel?" Braxton desperately swings his gaze between us.

"Trouble in paradise?" Trenton tuts. "You should have listened to me."

This is revenge. It's personal.

But there's something more...

Weston looks thoughtful. "It's an interesting idea."

"Father, don't do this..." Braxton lets go of my hand and paces to the desk, resting his hands on it and leaning toward Weston.

At this angle, Father and son look even more similar.

"The less important and less than impressive pack members can be kept hidden in the attic here or the current Companion Wing, something like that." Elizabeth nuzzles against Weston's neck like she's making up ideas on the spot, only she isn't. "They like it here anyway, don't they? The muscular Beta one, isn't he a bodyguard? So, he could still be that. And the others could be used for breeding. Only let a society Omega be the one who the press see."

Weston tilts his head. “Now, hasn’t my Omega come up with a reasonable compromise? Omegas aren’t always silly, or do you think that they are?”

Braxton’s shaking, and I suddenly realize that so am I.

“I don’t think that they’re silly at all.” Braxton’s burning gaze meets his new stepmom’s. “In fact, I think they’re capable of being exceptionally smart and sometimes, exceptionally cruel.”

Elizabeth whimpers.

“Don’t you dare insult my Omega again,” Weston barks.

“Then don’t insult mine.” Braxton leans more heavily on the desk.

“You don’t have one yet, at least, not one that counts. But this Friday night, there’ll be a matching ball held here. Then you’ll be matched with a society Omega or by God, you won’t like the consequences.”

My knees buckle, and Matthew dives to hold me up.

I hide my face against his citrus scented neck, and he wraps his arms tightly around me.

“Non,” Didier cries. “Non, non...”

“If you say *no* to me, Omega,” Weston says, frostily, and I shiver, “then as your Head Alpha, I shall make sure that you have another dose of conditioning, until you are too afraid to ever say *no* to anything again.”

My guts churn, and the scars on my shoulders phantom itch.

I can’t bear it.

Please, let Didier back down.

He doesn’t.

Of course he doesn’t.

Instead, even though he’s stranded in the middle of the room without even Croissant to assist him, he clenches his fists at his sides and looks ready to fight.

“You won’t touch Didier.” Braxton’s eyes darken. “You won’t touch any of my bond mates or every dirty secret that I know on each of your companies will be splashed over the tabloids, news channels, and social media platforms by the end of the day. Do you understand?”

“Are you threatening me?” To my surprise, Weston chuckles. “That’s amusing. You’ve finally grown a backbone. I’m your Head Alpha, however, and you know damn well that I can arrange for this matching, if I choose.”

He’s really going to force Braxton into a bond.

Braxton cocks his head. “Then I shall have to endeavor to choose

someone at this ball who you'll hate even more than my current lovers. Do you really want to risk that? Because I'm certain that I can embarrass you more."

My smart Alpha.

"That's an easy problem to solve." Trenton finally pushes away from the wall, strolling to stand next to Weston's shoulder.

He's standing like he's the actual son and heir to the legacy, company, and fortune just like he always wanted to be.

Braxton straightens, eying him.

He sees it.

Braxton's expression tightens with hurt just for a moment, before it smooths to a mask again.

Elizabeth is tracking Trenton's movements hungrily. So, how long have those two been in contact? And why?

Their hunger appears more ambition than anything: hunger for power.

Normally, I'd admire Elizabeth because she's an Omega who holds the power behind the throne and is in her own way, fighting for Omega rights.

Only, the difference is that she doesn't care who else's rights get trampled, while she does it. She only appears to care about whatever power grab she has going on for herself and her friends.

Not all Omegas are sweet and good just like not all Alphas are brutal and bad.

"So, how will you save this young fool from himself?" Weston demands.

Trenton's mocking gaze meets his cousin's. "I have a close friend who is of the best standing in society and a good pack. She's widowed and now independently wealthy. She's previously shown herself willing to be matched with Braxton, but he rejected her. Still, I have no doubt that she'd accept his offer of a bond. Verity Sloane is the perfect match."

I want to hurl.

"Never." Braxton leaps over the desk at Trenton.

Trenton scrambles backward, but not before Braxton has snatched him by the neck and slammed him against the wall.

"You did this." Braxton slams Trenton back once and then again with a crack.

"Help," Trenton squeals. "Stop him."

"Let go of your cousin," Weston snarls. "You will go to the matching ball on Friday night, my son. You will dance with Verity. Then by the end of the

evening, you will have asked her to bond with you. It'll be announced to witnesses. If you refuse, then your current bond mates will be sent to the Institute for retraining, while you will be sent to the Alpha Center.”

CHAPTER 17



Corridor, King Hall

My breaths are quick. I glance anxiously over my shoulder. It's night, as I creep down the lavish corridor that leads to Braxton's bedroom.

I clutch my laptop under my arm.

Shit, nobody had better find me here, or I'm dead.

Didier and Matthew wanted to come with me, but this mission is mine alone.

I want all my men to be safe.

My shoulders are stiff with tension, and I walk as quietly as I can. My bare feet sink into the thick carpet.

Tomorrow, Braxton is meant to be bonded to a new Omega. Our pack will be broken and possibly, our bonds.

I don't know what Braxton wants us to do. He can't refuse this because the alternative is worse for all of us.

I've sent messages to my lawyer, Benjamin, and he's asked me for time to come up with something.

But I don't have time.

Since yesterday, King Hall has been flooded by an army of Beta servants, who Elizabeth has been directing to get the mansion ready for the matching ball.

In fact, she's taken over the house like it's hers.

I've hidden on the staircase, watching to take news of what's going on back to Didier, who Matthew wisely advised to stay out of Trenton's sight in the Companion Wing, where he can guard him.

I haven't been able to find Braxton anywhere, and he hasn't visited us. That's scared me more than anything.

Once, I thought that there were two types of people in this world: Companions and everybody else.

At one time, before my parents' accident, I was part of the lucky, ignorant majority.

After it, I learned about the true darkness in the world. Then just how much I'd fight against it.

I thought that Braxton was part of that lucky majority.

Yet seeing Braxton being surrounded yesterday by his dad, cousin, and new stepmom, I realized that I was wrong.

Just like dynamics are a label, on which people build expectations and restrictions, so are the titles of wards and Guardians.

Didier and I have helped, served, and protected Braxton since we were high school aged, but now I get that Braxton's done exactly the same for us.

I wish I'd seen that earlier.

I'll fight for Omega and Companion rights.

And I'll fight for all my Kings.

Ahead of me is Braxton's thick, oak bedroom door.

I hurriedly glance over my shoulder.

The corridor's empty.

I approach the bedroom, as my heartrate leaps.

Is Braxton inside?

When the door doesn't open, but only rattles, when I try to open it carefully, my brow furrows.

Then my eyes widen in shock.

There's a key in the lock...*but it's on the outside.*

No fucking way.

Have the assholes locked Braxton into his bedroom in his own home?

I shiver, chilled.

If Weston's prepared to do that to an Alpha, then I can no longer allow myself to hope that his words are empty threats.

As quietly as I can, I turn the key, pushing open the door.

I slip into Braxton's bedroom, which lies in shadows. All the lights are turned off, apart from a single lamp that rests on the bedside.

Moonlight streams through the locked French windows at the far side. The fan slowly turns, stirring the hot air in the luxurious prison of a room, which still feels like a furnace.

I scrunch up my nose at Braxton's distressed bitter scent.

When I turn toward the four-poster bed, Braxton sits up, startled. He's dressed in steel gray pajamas, and his hair is disheveled like he's been running his hands through it repeatedly.

His cheek and lip are swollen and bruised.

Our gazes meet, and his eyes widen with concern

"Jewel," Braxton breathes, holding his hand out to me. "Come here."

I rush across the room, barely noticing my feet moving across the carpet in my need to get to Braxton.

I toss my laptop onto the end of the bed and dive into Braxton's arms.

He pulls me further onto the bed, claspings his arms around me. He rests his chin on the top of my head.

I find unexpectedly that I'm shaking.

A wave of need crashes over me.

I sniff at Braxton's neck.

Braxton raises his hand and traces over the bond bite on my neck like he's claiming me all over again.

In this moment, I understand even more than when I was knotted in my heat, the primal bond between Alpha and Omega.

This, being held, feels so fucking right.

It's like I can finally breathe again.

"I've been so worried," I whisper. "We all have."

Braxton hushes me. "You don't need to worry about me."

"Don't we? You were locked in your room."

"Then let me correct that: I don't want you to worry about me."

"Tough." I pull back to peer up at him. "Why have you been locked in here?"

Braxton avoids my gaze for a moment, before sighing. "You know me. I'm rather vocal about things like being forced into a new bond against my will. Silly of me."

My throat is dry. "Did you refuse it?"

"I'm not *that* silly, when you'd all suffer the consequences, if I don't. I

won't ever allow our bonds to be broken or to have you sent away for cruel retraining at Companion House or the Institute."

"So, what are you saying?" I demand. "That you're going to go through with making Verity First Omega?"

My stomach twists, when I remember her saying that she'd make me cut a switch.

It's going to be hell.

I have to tell Braxton. He's my Alpha.

I need to trust him and tell him everything now.

It's time.

I take a deep breath. "Verity hates Didier and me. She's a Traditional and she believes in beating Companions. You should hear how she talks about you in this condescending way like she's going to control you..."

Why is Braxton blinking at me in confusion?

"Ehm, I know." Braxton cocks his head. "I detest her. Don't you remember that as teenagers we called anything that we hated *a Sloane*? I haven't lost my mind and suddenly started finding controlling Queen Bees attractive."

"I don't understand."

Braxton takes my hands between his. "I've been working with some people. They could help us."

Hope blossoms in my chest.

I push myself to my knees. "What people?"

"I'll tell you soon. But first, I need to say something." Braxton pushes himself to his knees to match how I'm sitting. "I should be the one who's kneeling, and I should have done it a long time ago. I've had to keep up this front. It's been necessary to protect you, but it's been the hardest thing that I've ever done. You're my best friend, Jewel. I need you to know that I never saw you as property or a ward. You're my most precious, treasured Jewel. Nothing that I own or possess (and yes, despite the jokes I know you tell about me, I even include my cars), will ever mean more to me. The beauty of every diamond or gem fades next to yours. I won't ever let you go."

My eyes prick with tears. "Brax..."

"No, please, let me get this out. I've wanted to say this for ever so long." Braxton's intense gaze focuses on mine. I'm pinned in place by it. "I should never have agreed to become a Guardian. It was wrong, even if I was a kid. I see that now, but Mother had just died, and I was raw with grief. She was an

amazing woman. Our Beta had already died when I was young, and Mother was all I had. She was kind and loving. Father, on the other hand, was disappointed in me. I wasn't quite the son who he wanted. When he abandoned me here, so soon after her funeral, it was devastating."

I cup Braxton's bruised cheek. "He doesn't deserve you as a son."

Braxton's expression gentles. "I wanted someone to love. A family. But it was still wrong of me to go along with Father's plans. When I saw you on that first day in Companion House with so much fire and courage, then how your friend and you stood up for each other like you were already pack, I couldn't leave you there. It was instinct. Still, it was unfair of me to claim you like an instant family to fill up my loneliness. Only, you did."

"You saved us," I say, firmly.

I need him to hear this.

I need him to believe it.

"But I haven't saved all the other Companions." Braxton's jaw clenches. "Have I? I'm the CEO with blood on my hands. I didn't need Didi to tell me what happened in conditioning; I could see how traumatized he was, when he was returned to me. He flinched, every time that I reached to touch him."

I swallow, remembering the lash marks, when they were still fresh on Didier's back, the way that he was desperate for any touch, as long as it wasn't from an Alpha, the nightmares that he suffered every night, and the haunted expression on his too thin face.

My expression hardens. "What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing. I want you to listen. After that, I swore to myself that I'd keep you safe. So, I began to work as hard as I could with the help of your tutoring and Didi's lessons in etiquette and diplomacy to make sure that two years later, I could become CEO and bring about changes within the company. Except, that wasn't going to be enough. I knew that I had to change things even more drastically. Recently, I began to anonymously send all my pay and dividends to a certain charity that supports Omega rights."

I stare at him. "You're helping to fund the Omega Society."

It's the same one, which funds the Omega server that I use, as does the resistance.

He's been giving away his profits to help Omegas.

I grab Braxton around the shoulders and kiss him, hard and passionately.

He makes a surprised sound, before lifting his hands to bury them in my hair. Then he twists me, and I land in the pillows, as he stretches his body

over mine.

I love the full body contact and his warmth, after our separation.

I can feel how hard his dick is against me through the silky material of his pajamas.

He kisses me, thoroughly.

He slides his fingers gently down my cheeks, and I shiver, before he draws back, feathering kisses across my nose. “If I’d known that charitable giving led to kisses, then I’d have been giving more earlier.”

I nip Braxton’s lower lip in retaliation. “It’s not just any charity though, is it? These...people...who you think will help you....?”

Braxton looks wary for a moment, freezing. “How do you feel about being bonded to a terrorist? I mean, from CEO to criminal? Women have a thing for bad boys, right?”

He gives a devilish grin.

I stare at him in shock.

Shit, is he serious?

Does he mean the resistance?

“You’re resistance too?” I hiss.

“*Too?*” Braxton arches his brow. “Well, I am certainly glad that I misdirected the investigation into the *kidnapping* of the triplets because you’d have cracked under interrogation in oh, ten seconds.”

Rude.

Also, true.

I flush.

“Look, I’m new at this. That was my first mission.” I’m not pouting.

I’m not.

“And now you’re giving out more information without me even asking a question.” Braxton looks delighted. “You need more training or wait, is it *any* training? Was it Didier’s first mission too?”

This is going the exact opposite of how I ever expected this conversation to go.

“Ah ha!” I glare at him. “I’m not implicating Didier as well. Got you.”

“Well done.” Braxton’s eyes twinkle. “Christ, I knew it. You wrote those *badass rules*, didn’t you? It’s viral, and they’ve been driving Trenton half mad.”

I laugh. “I plead the fifth.”

Braxton looks like he’s won the lottery.

I'm caught up in his excitement.

"You're officially my hero." He studies me in awe. "Perhaps, I'll get better at the secret rebel side of things but I suspect not. I'm entirely new to all this resistance stuff. I'm more suited to sitting in my office and simply donating to the cause. But I needed to reach out to the resistance online to help us. They suggested that I invited certain notable and powerful packs to the matching ball — a Senator and a sheriff, as well as your lawyer, Benjamin. The lawyer appeared to know all the details of the case."

"I've told him everything. I have for years. He's been like a brother to me. He's a good man."

"Then my smart Omega, it looks like we've found our unholy alliance of lawyers and criminal rebels."

I stare at Braxton. "You do know what you're saying. You haven't hit your head?"

He chuckles. "My head has been hit several times, but I'm thinking clearly. We may never have met this mysterious resistance or know who their leaders are, but we've both been working for them, and it's time to trust them. The problem is that Father is Head Alpha with the authority to force his will on us. That's what needs to be broken. If Father thinks that his Traditional ideals give him the power, then he'll soon learn that our rebellious liberal ones are powerful too. It appears to me that this resistance is more connected to elite society than anyone guesses."

My heart is beating fast, and I'm smiling hard. "I felt so alone but maybe, we never were."

Braxton nods, and his hair brushes across my cheeks. "The message that I received from the resistance simply said that I needed to pretend that I was going through with the matching ball. I'm sorry, if that hurts you."

"It's only pretend. It hurts you more than it hurts me. Look, I've been the one who's really been acting. I mean, fuck it, you've only been funding the resistance, but I've been working for it."

Braxton slides his strong hands down my arms, before encircling my wrists. Then he gently raises my arms above my head and presses them down against the pillows.

"Keep them there," he orders.

I nod.

My pupils dilate at his dominance.

"Do you know how proud I am that you helped those triplets escape from

Hatcher's son? As soon as I have control of the company, I'm firing Thane. He's a bastard too."

Braxton lowers his hand between us, dragging it in a line that sends electric sparks through me, everywhere that it touches. He opens my uniform shirt, one tantalizing button at a time. Then he peels it back slowly.

My breathing speeds up, and I bite my lip.

"Dear God, to think that Didi and you...don't worry, I shan't ask you to incriminate him but I will kiss him tomorrow anyway...showed such fierce courage. I always admired that about you both."

He lowers his mouth to kiss my breast, licking it with his tongue.

My back arches.

My hands clench into fists, but I don't move them from where they were placed above my head.

"Smart." Braxton strokes up my sides, and his touch is soft, gentle, and reverent. "Kind." He leans over me, slowly mapping my body with his tongue. I'm panting now. He looks up at me through his eyelashes. "Brave."

The drag of his fingers across my skin and teasingly across the strip just above my pants is achingly slow and tender.

"We're the King pack. We're going to fight for each other and for our love. Ward or Guardian, it doesn't matter. We're bonded, and by staying together, we're going to prove to society and the whole of America that Companions deserve pack bonds the same as anyone."

When Braxton finds a sensitive spot that makes me gasp, he circles it to draw out more moans, watching me attentively for cues.

He's driving me the best kinds of crazy.

It's as if he's desired to touch me like this for years and now, outside the blurred fever of the rut, he's finally taking the chance to truly learn how to pleasure me.

Exactly like that.

When I meet Braxton's gaze, and he kisses me once again, it's terrifyingly like he's making certain that he gets to truly love me, in case anything goes wrong tomorrow night at the matching ball, and we lose each other forever.

CHAPTER 18



Companion Wing, King Hall

I lean my head against the wall, as a thrill rushes through me.
I'm desperate to fly from this cage.
And by the end of tonight, I will.

We all will.

Silvery moonlight streams through the high, barred window and down onto the oak floorboards. This no longer feels like my bedroom, even though it's been where I've slept for years.

Braxton's bed, where I can feel safe in the arms of my pack, is my home now.

Yet Weston and his new wife, along with Trenton and Verity, would take that away from me because I'm an orphan Omega.

Except, this one fights back.

I breathe in deeply, loving the way that Matthew's orange frozen yogurt scent is also mingled in with the delicious mix of marshmallow, almonds, and hot chocolate.

I scrape my fingers against the bare wall of the attic room, which I've shared with Didier for so long here in the Companion Wing.

I throw my head back, listening to the sounds of the ball downstairs beneath us: bright chatter, laughter, and music.

It's early, but the first visitors have already arrived.

I hum along to the rocky version of Elley Duhé's "Middle of the Night."

It's haunting, passionate, and like a war cry to our love.

Not Braxton and some new Omega's love, but *our* hidden love and Braxton's, which has needed to be secret for so long.

"Brax chose this playlist, right?" Matthew's sitting next to Croissant, who's curled in her dog bed.

Matthew pets her, fondly.

He's also conveniently placed himself on guard next to the nest.

He's dressed in a gorgeous gray suit with purple waistcoat and tie, which Didier has adjusted to fit him.

He looks like a golden haired model from a photo shoot, who's only acting in a *stroke the dog* pose, before the camera clicks.

It takes my breath away that he's mine.

I flush and force myself to reply, "Of course he has. It's awesome, and it's also going to piss off his dad, who probably hoped that he could waltz to Mozart or some such shit."

"*Mozart or some such shit*," Didier repeats, shaking his head. "Maybe I should have been teaching you the same etiquette lessons as Brax."

I glance at Didier, who's also dressed in a suit, only it glimmers dark purple. His tie is frayed though because it's his favorite: Braxton's violet one, which Didier loves to sniff, hold at night through his nightmares, and have stroked over his dick.

I redden at the image of that as I stare at it tied snugly around Didier's neck.

He's never looked so handsome.

Warm pride spreads through my chest.

"Those lessons wouldn't have stuck. Are you almost ready?" I ask, fidgeting more with excitement than nerves. "We're going to be late."

"Fashionably late." Didier looks up at me and winks.

He's kneeling in the middle of our nest.

He has a gorgeous patchwork dress laid out on his knees. He's sewing it, never pausing, even though his fingers are red and sore.

He designed this dress and has been working on it, ever since we found out about the ball.

He insisted that I wasn't attending the ball in my Companion uniform.

Tailor's scissors rest next to him.

He's sliced one of Braxton's designer jackets, which was a shimmering gray and had been lining the nest, into strips to make the bodice of the dress, before adding darker sleeves out of a shirt.

Now, he's adding various shades of purple ties to hang from it in a silky skirt.

It's beautiful.

I drop down next to Didier, stroking over the trailing ends of the dress' skirt in awe. "This dress is amazing. Thank you, Didi. This means so much to me."

Didier's hand falters. "Mon coeur, I want to give you things too. I always have. You deserve them. You should have something nice to wear for once. *You will.*"

"I don't care about things like that."

"I know. But indulge me."

"Indulge all of us because soon you're going to have to get used to dressing up and even, shocking idea here, wearing socks and shoes." Matthew waggles his eyebrows. "How will you cope?"

I don't know. It's never seemed possible.

Finally, it does.

"So, these are the types of liberties that Braxton allows you. How trying it's going to be to train you out of the bad ways that he's been teaching you," Verity's drawl comes from the doorway.

Shocked, I startle.

Verity's blocking the way out of the room.

She's studying us with none of the fake sweetness that she saves for Trenton and only a sophisticated coolness, while she surveys us like we're the dirt beneath her shoes.

To her, we are.

She's dressed in a white ball gown with puffy sleeves and shiny baby blue bow that's tied around her thin waist, which matches her eyes.

Her shiny, ash blond hair is pulled tightly onto the top of her head and makes her features appear even finer and more delicate.

"It's Verity again," I whisper. "Don't fucking do anything this time."

Didier growls — of course he does.

He drops the needle, and his hands clench into fists.

Matthew leaps up, gesturing with his hand for Croissant to remain in her bed, although she gives Verity a hard stare and barks.

Matthew takes up a bodyguard stance in front of Verity, between her and us.

I wrap my arm around Didier.

Verity gives a chilling laugh. “Sweetie, I applaud your training. I intend to use it, when you’re working for me. But it’s not your role to protect *them* from the *First* Omega.”

“You’re not bonded with Braxton,” Matthew replies. “I’d say that currently makes you nothing but a fucking trespasser. What was Braxton saying about his policy on trespassers last week...?”

He hasn’t said anything about trespassers...

“*We don’t call 911,*” Didier answers with fierce glee. “Matty deals with them.”

Matthew bares his teeth, nastily.

Just for a moment, Verity’s confidence pales in the face of a Beta’s aggression.

She’s still an Omega, after all.

Hope rises phoenix like in me.

Then Verity steels herself, tilting her chin. “I’m not his bonded...yet. But by the end of tonight, I will be. Then you’ll wish that you’d started off our relationship in the right way. After all, we’re going to be in the same pack, aren’t we?”

My gut churns at that thought.

We need to make sure that our plot works, or she’s right. Braxton will still be the Alpha, but we’ll have both Trenton and his best friend living here.

And we’re still have Weston’s threats hanging over us.

“How did you do it?” I demand, crossing my arms. “You’ve wanted Braxton to claim you for years, or at least, to become part of the King pack. So, how did you get Elizabeth on side?”

“I didn’t do anything.” Verity sniffs. “I believe that Trenton and she decided that it’d be pleasant to take control of the pack, and that Braxton also needed to be brought to heel. They decided that I was the Omega for the job. Now, do you truly think that’s how you speak to someone who isn’t a Companion? On your knees, all of you, and recite the three rules.”

None of us move.

I boldly meet her gaze.

Matthew gives her an unimpressed look, adjusting his tie.

Verity snorts. “Well, how thoroughly you’ll need conditioning. What a

bore.”

“We wouldn’t want to bore you,” I reply. “Why don’t you go downstairs and quaff some champagne, while planning your next yachting trip or something?”

She ignores me, scanning our room (and refuge), with a dismissive sniff. “So, you’re thieves as well.”

I bristle, even though it’s sort of true.

“Audio books and Braxton’s clothes.” Verity shakes her head. “All these need to go. You can have a blanket. What more do you need?”

Rage simmers through me.

It’s enough, joining the thrill of the upcoming mission.

This is why we’re risking everything because losing means being under the authority of someone like Verity and allowing other people to continue to be as well.

This ends tonight.

When Verity takes a step closer to Matthew, he doesn’t stand aside. “Move.”

He sets his jaw. “You have no idea how much that’s not happening.”

Verity assesses him for a long time, before reaching up to trace one manicured finger over his plush lips; he flinches but still refuses to budge. “I hadn’t realized how gorgeous you are, Beta. I’m certain that you’re going to be able to handle yourself, when you help me through my heats.”

I blanch.

“Don’t touch him.” I jump up, hot with possessive protectiveness.

“Jewel, don’t,” Matthew warns.

Verity casts an amused glance at me. “We’re not rivals. I’m going to be the official Omega of the King pack, while you’re only…” Her gaze settles on the dress, which Didier is clutching to his chest in distress. Her eyes burn with fury. “How ugly.”

I flinch but I’m relieved that Didier doesn’t react because he doesn’t know that she’s talking about the dress, which has been made with his love.

I fucking hate Verity.

“You have two options.” Verity presses her nail against Matthew’s chest. “You can allow me in there or you can pass me the scissors.”

Matthew gives a bark of disbelieving laughter. “Yeah, pass you a sharp weapon. That sounds about the last fucking thing I’m going to do.”

“Do it, or I’ll bring Trenton back with me, then see if we can start this

ball with a demonstration, but this time, with three Companions. He told me all about the fun one that you put on for the other board members. He thoroughly enjoyed it.”

Matthew pales, before he glances back at us, weighing his choices.

We’re so close to our freedom, but for our plan to work, we need to attend the ball.

We can’t risk anything stopping that like Trenton coming up here, being locked up, or being used in demonstrations.

“Give the scissors to her,” I say.

Matthew nods, ducking to pick up the scissors and passing them over.

My adrenaline spikes, as Verity passes them from one hand to the other, enjoying our rising tension.

“Now, let me have that monstrosity of a dress,” she demands.

Didier shakes his head, holding the dress protectively behind his back.

“Didi,” I grip his chin and stroke my hand down his cheek to make sure that he both has the soft touch and focuses on only me; his panicked breaths slow and begin to steady, “it’s only a dress. What matters here is that we’re safe, okay?”

He stubbornly continues to hold onto the dress.

Verity sighs. “I see why Trenton had to whip that one so hard. It’d be a shame, if I advised that he do the same tonight...”

“He’s going to hand it over.” Matthew ducks to Didier, tapping his shoulder. “Pass it to me.”

Didier growls, shoving the dress into Matthew’s arms.

The strands of ties hang over Matthew’s arms like tails.

Matthew turns to Verity, before hurling the dress at her.

Verity gives an outraged squawk. Then she holds up my dress like it’s trash, rather than the most heartbreakingly beautiful thing that I’ve ever seen.

“Sweetie, you weren’t really going to wear this tonight, were you?” She casts me a fake pitying look. “I’m saving you. You’d have been laughed out of the ballroom. Anyway, since when were you invited? How presumptuous of you. The Companion Wing is where you belong. You should get used to staying up here and listening to parties, while I dance and enjoy myself with our Alpha.”

Dread curls through me, as she slowly opens the scissors and places them over the bodice.

I hold my breath.

I raise my gaze to hers, pleadingly.

Please, no.

Verity looks triumphant.

Surely, she won't do this.

Then she cuts into the dress with a snap, slashing into it with vicious cuts.

Matthew snarls in outrage, and Croissant's fur bristles.

My shoulders slump with defeat.

"What's happening?" Didier demands, panicking. "What's...? I can hear...like she's... Please, tell me that she's not destroying it?"

Verity pauses with the scissors raised. "Of course, the blind one. Let me help you like my poor Braxton spends his life doing. I'm cutting into this so-called dress, and yes, I'm destroying the ugly thing. You should be lucky that you can't see just how vile it is."

Didier makes a sobbed cry of distress.

I can't look away, as Verity slices through a tie on the dress' skirt like she's beheading a snake

Verity's eyes light up. "I'm slicing it to ribbons because it's trash. Although it's fitting because you've all been thrown away like trash as well, haven't you?" We all wince; I see how hard Matthew tries to mask it. "Your Jewel won't be wearing it because she won't be going to the ball. None of you will."

"*Non!*" Didier bursts to his feet, enraged and wild. Matthew hurriedly catches him around his middle to stop him diving on Verity. She looks terrified, backing up and clutching at her throat. "Stop. It's Jewel's. I made it for her. Give it back."

Matthew holds Didier in his strong arms. He's so much larger that it takes almost no effort to pull Didier against his hard chest and keep him there.

"This is what she wants," Matthew murmurs against Didier's hair. "She's trying to provoke one of us into attacking her. She wants a reason to hurt us, so we don't give the bitch one, right? It's just a dress."

Didier sounds heartbroken. "But it's not *just* a dress."

My heart aches.

I leap up and rush to encircle Didier with my arms as well, breathing in his scent and nuzzling against his neck to reassure him. "You made it for me, and it was the making of it that meant something. The action and not the beauty. Although, she's wrong. I promise, you designed such a pretty dress for me, but I didn't need to wear it for that to count."

Slowly, Didier stops struggling. “Thank you, ma raison de vivre.”

“Idiots.” Verity watches us with what looks suspiciously like jealousy, before tossing down the scissors and the destroyed dress into a crumpled pile on the floor.

My eyes well with tears.

Verity begins to turn to leave, before she storms back with a snarl. “You think that just because Braxton has favored you and chosen you over...”

“You?” I say, low and hard.

“Shut up.”

“It’s true though.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. From now on, you’re not going to be treated like treasured pack. *I will*. As if fostered wards could ever be worthy of love. You can’t move in real society. You can only bring shame down onto Braxton’s head. Do you want that? How selfish.”

I flush, looking away.

Verity’s pressing on my private fears. I won’t let her.

Braxton believes that we’re worthy.

We are.

Verity gives a nasty laugh like she’s scored a hit. “Braxton, poor dear, needs me at his side because none of the pack who he’s chosen for himself are good enough for him. You can’t attend charity or business dinners. You can run wild here on the estate, climbing trees and getting dirty in the gardens, but do you know what the elite social calendar is? I can return the King legacy to its former glory. You’d be lost at polo events or fashion weeks. I’m the only one who’s suited to be matched with a billionaire CEO. You’re not even suited to attend this ball. So, you won’t.” Her smile is cruel. “You don’t even have a dress to wear.”

She boots the destroyed dress back into the tiny bedroom.

Except, we have to attend the matching ball.

It’s crucial to our plan.

“Braxton invited us,” Matthew insists. “Last I looked, he’s the Alpha. I thought that type of dynamic shit mattered to you Traditionals.”

“It does, but then, Braxton’s father is Head Alpha and that sort of thing also matters to us Traditionals.” Verity narrows her eyes. “Weston left the arrangements to his Omega wife, who allowed *me* to have a say on the guest list as well. And *I’m* disinviting you. Then, of course, Trenton gave me this.”

She slips her hand into a small pocket in her ball gown and pulls out a

key.

My eyes widen.

Fuck, it can't be.

Except, I know that it is.

It's the key to our bedroom.

Instantly, Matthew reacts, diving for her, but his feet become tangled in the dress.

Croissant leaps up, barking.

But it's too late.

Verity slams shut the door in Matthew's face.

Despair floods me, as I hear a click, and Verity locks us in.

We're trapped.

CHAPTER 19



Companion Wing, King Hall

“Open this door.” Matthew slams his shoulder into the door so hard that it vibrates. Shit that must hurt. I wince, but Matthew doesn’t. His expression is dark with rage. “Open this fucking door.”

He rattles on the doorknob, and his muscles bulge.

The door doesn’t open.

Didier is sitting in the middle of our nest, and Croissant’s head lies comfortably on his lap. Didier scratches behind her ears, and she whines.

The sounds of the ball, which appears to be building into full swing now, filter up to me from below.

I kneel next to Didier in the nest, clutching the slashed patchwork dress to my chest.

It’s a hot evening, and sweat drips down my back.

I should be dressed by now and getting ready to join the ball.

We have one chance to pull this off. Benjamin has been clear on that. What we’re trying to achieve has almost no legal precedent, but it *does* have precedent with some clever footwork.

By the end of tonight, we could be free of Weston’s control.

We must attend the ball for that to happen, however, and if we don’t, then this will be our cage for the rest of our lives.

Didier and I truly could be kept separate up in this wing, while visitors attend parties or dinners below us, without even knowing that we're here.

We'd be the Omegas kept in the attic, and to think that *Jane Eyre* used to be one of my favorite stories because it had an orphan Omega as its heroine.

It no longer seems so romantic, however, to have an Alpha hero who'd stash an inconvenient pack mate in his attic.

Matthew rams his shoulder into the door again. "Fucking let us out..."

"Matt," I say, quietly, "stop it. You're only hurting yourself."

"I'm doing something," Matthew's voice is tight. "Like I should have done with Verity. I'm a dumb asshole for not—"

"Hey, don't call the man who I love names." I study the tension in Matthew's back, as he heaves for breath. "It doesn't matter how many color coordinated notes you use. Some risks can't be assessed or worked out ahead of time. We didn't know that Weston would be married to a scheming new wife or that she'd have links to Trenton. We couldn't have guessed just how hard they'd all be pushing for this match with Verity, as a stealthy way to take over more of the control. You don't have to take on the duty of protecting us all the time."

Slowly, Matthew turns away from the door; his honey eyes are soft with understanding. "Right back at you."

I drop my gaze.

Didier lifts his hand from Croissant's head to feel out the holes in the dress; his mouth twists. "I could fix this, but we don't have time."

"It's not like we're going anywhere. The door is locked from the outside." Suddenly, my eyes light up. "And that means we need someone to open it from out there."

Matthew turns to look at me with a grin. "Well, duh."

"A classic example of American eloquence." Didier's lips quirk.

"We wouldn't be able to contact Braxton to open it for us, *normally*." Excitement rushes through me. "Unless he'd given me something for safety, when I went out of the house without him for the first time." I scramble through the clothes to find my coat. I search through its pockets. "Ah-ha!"

My fingers close around the item, and I pull it out, holding it like an offering between us: The iPhone.

Matthew's eyes widen. "He never took it back from you."

"Braxton's not great at following the rules. Then all the stuff happened with his dad, and I guess he forgot."

Or pretended to...

I swipe to **ALPHA** and call Braxton.

Please, *please* answer.

“Why on earth are you calling me?” Braxton sounds more stressed than I am. “Why aren’t you keeping to the plan? You should be coming to my bedroom.”

“I can’t,” I reply. “We’re locked in.”

There’s a long silence.

“I’m going to kill Trenton,” Braxton growls.

“I love the sentiment. I mean, hundred percent behind that. But this time, it wasn’t him.”

“Who then?”

“Verity.”

Braxton sighs. “Hang on, I’m coming to you.”

I sag in relief, whispering to the others, “He’s coming to rescue us.”

Matthew’s expression relaxes; his chest puffs out in pride. “Of course he is. That’s our Alpha.”

“Tell Matthew that he should lighten the drill sergeant sadism of his personal training routine then,” Braxton tries, hopefully.

He must have heard Matthew.

I can hear rustling on Braxton’s side of the phone, along with his sharp intakes of breath like he’s running.

“Good luck with that,” I reply.

“Did Verity hurt any of you? Are you all okay?” Braxton demands.

I hesitate.

How can I explain just how much she’s wrecked us?

Yet no Guardian can truly understand how we she made us feel.

Instead, I state the simple facts. Sometimes, they’re easier.

“Didier sewed me an amazing dress, since you couldn’t loan me anything to wear. I loved it. He created it out of your clothes. It made me feel like we were all pack — safe. Verity forced us to hand it over and then she deliberately cut it up in front of us because she said that we’d never be worthy of being at your side at a ball like this.”

“*Fuck*,” Braxton snarls.

His cuss word is so shockingly unexpected that I almost drop the phone. It’s loud enough that the others hear it in the bedroom and look at me, startled.

Then Braxton's voice becomes cold and dangerous, "I am going to kill her."

Didier wraps his fingers around my ankle, and I glance down at him.

He's looking anxious and troubled. "Mon amour, you need to tell him that he mustn't hurt Verity. She thinks that she's free, just as I once did. But she's not. She's caged too and being manipulated."

"I don't care." Anger blazes through me. "She hurt you. She wants to hurt all of us."

"I know." Didier gives a sad smile. "Braxton is still an Alpha, however, and he could control Verity through an Alpha Command or ruin her simply by accusing her of being rebellious. Do you want her to be marked as a Reject?"

He raises his wrist and jangles his Rej bracelet.

I wish that I could.

But I don't.

I flinch. "I don't want anyone to wear one of those fucking things."

"Then we have to be *better* than her." Didier traces his fingers over the **R** charm. "I'd die rather than condemn another Omega to the Institute, even one who I hate as much as Verity. Isn't that what true revolution is about?"

"The right to be an asshole?" Matthew snorts.

"The right to be one without being marked as a Reject." Didier's face is bright with determination.

"Just get here," I say into the phone.

There's a sudden click of the key turning in the lock.

Matthew becomes alert, dropping into a fighting stance.

My pulse spikes, as the door swings open.

My heart leaps, and my mouth dries.

Then Braxton's standing in the open doorway.

He's breathing hard, struggling to catch his breath. He's obviously sprinted the whole way here.

He's wearing a stunning designer tuxedo, which makes him look more handsome and more powerful than he ever has. It has a sparkling gray tint to it, which matches Matthew's suit, and the waistcoat has a purple rose pattern embroidered into it.

His bow tie is the same purple as Didier's suit.

He looks like he's sending a strong message: we're bonded.

We belong together.

I study these three impossibly beautiful men, and it takes my breath away that they're mine.

Braxton flashes a smile, dropping his phone from his ear to slip it into his pocket; he's holding a large, carved mahogany box in his other hand. "I'm here. You call, and I come running."

"I'll remember that, when you're complaining about the dawn runs with me." Matthew grins, diving to hug Braxton.

Matthew holds onto him for a long moment, before dragging Braxton into the bedroom and booting the door shut behind him.

Didier gently encourages Croissant off his knee.

Croissant gives him puppy dog eyes but pads to the corner of the room and settles down, resting her head on her paws.

She watches us with bright eyes.

Braxton drops to his knees in front of Didier and me. His expression is earnest.

He places down the box, which is carved with snarling wolf heads.

His gaze sweeps across the wrecked dress, and his jaw tightens.

He looks at me, before tapping the back of Didier's hand. "I'm sorry that this happened to you."

Didier tilts his head. "Then let's make it count."

Braxton clears his throat. "So, I suppose that you've explained about my extracurricular activities."

"Now is not the time to discuss your kinks," Didier chides. "Is this about your bondage fantasy? Edge play? Wait, do you have a thing for sex over the hoods of cars because that would be hot..."

"*The resistance*," Braxton blurts. "All right, now I know that I truly am a bad undercover agent and all I need is to be *embarrassed* into confessing everything."

I shoot him an amused look. "Yes, I explained that we're resistance members, and so are you. Sort of."

"Thank goodness it's only *sort of* or the resistance would definitely have been defeated by now. Although, I love that you didn't need a big Alpha to come swooping in to save you like I've been taught. You were already doing it for yourself."

"Apart from when it comes to unlocking doors." Matthew leans back against the door in question. "So, the mystery resistance is helping us tonight, right?"

Braxton nods. “I spoke to the lawyer, Benjamin, this afternoon. He’s been trying for a long time to find legal routes to make it so that fostered wards have the same protections as Alphas who are adopted. I think that it’s workable. Even if we need to build to that slowly, it’s an existing model to work on. The main thing is public perception. We must get the important packs on side but also the public in general, who have only a hazy idea how Companions are treated.”

My brow furrows. “How?”

“Benjamin is bonded to Jex, the Omega film director. You see, Father and Trenton think that they’re the only ones with connections, but they’re wrong. Of course, Elizabeth is vain and was just delighted to take my suggestions for guests that include a movie star turned film director, Senator from the Knight pack, Falcon, and a Sheriff who’s also an English Duke, Dante. Jex can film what we want him to see, and one thing that I’ve learned from my time as a CEO is that everything is about how the media spin things. If we control that, then we’ve won.”

I leap up. “Well, let’s start spinning...”

Then I glance down at myself in my plain Companion outfit.

My expression falls. But then, I tilt up my chin.

If Verity thinks that this will stop me, she doesn’t know me at all.

“Pass up the dress, Didi.” I let my fingers brush against Didier’s.

Bewildered, Didier passes me the dress.

Braxton pushes himself up to stand next to me. We both study the dress. I sadly turn it side to side.

The sleeves have been sliced entirely off. There are cuts across the bodice, which will reveal flashes of my stomach. The ties hang like beheaded snakes.

Braxton runs his fingers over the garment. “I don’t know what it looked like before, but it’s beautiful. It could be on a runway, something like steampunk meets Gothic.”

Didier blushes at his approval.

“Didi, I want to wear the dress still,” I say. “It’s my truth, and you made it for me. The sleeves are missing, however, and it’ll show...you know what.” I don’t say *my scars* from where Trenton has hurt me over the years, but Didier stiffens because he hears it anyway. “I don’t want to do this, unless you’re ready. But Trenton doesn’t have any power over us now, and I think that we should walk into that ball tonight, showing him that.”

Didier has gone very still.

Have I gone too far?

He's pale, and his breathing is fast. His raven hair is hanging over his face, as he looks down.

Yet, when he raises his head, his expression is savage.

"It's about time." Didier leaps up; he's burning with a courage that inspires me.

He moves to squeeze my hand for a moment.

Braxton watches us with shocked concern, but Matthew's look is knowing.

I turn to Braxton. "You asked me why I didn't undress. I want...no, *need*...to show you."

"We do," Didier says in solidarity.

I know how much this is costing Didier, but then, he always stands with me.

And that means the world.

I can feel my scars like every lash is newly being carved into my skin.

They're part of me, but I'm not ashamed of them.

Not anymore.

Didier drags off his jacket, dropping it next to him. Then together, we unbutton our shirts and slip them off our shoulders.

We clasp each other's hands, before we turn to reveal our backs to our Beta and Alpha.

Braxton and Matthew's gasps fill the small room.

Then there's a deafening silence.

My heart is racing.

I'm trembling.

Then I hear Braxton take a step closer.

I can feel his distress through the bond — *his devastation*.

He reaches out like he intends to trace over the web of scars, before he hurriedly snatches back his hand.

Then he falls to his knees.

Shocked, Didier and I turn.

Braxton's head is in his hands.

Matthew is studying us like he's slotting together all the missing pieces together in his head and making a whole picture, finally.

"I thought that I was at least keeping you safe." Braxton sounds wrecked.

“I’m sorry. Christ, how inadequate is that? *Sorry*? It doesn’t matter if I say it every day for the rest of our lives, it’ll never be enough. I’m your Alpha and your Guardian. You were under my roof and yet, you were being hurt...”

Didier and I drop into the nest with Braxton, nuzzling him. He doesn’t push us away, as we wrap our arms around him but he doesn’t accept the comfort either.

“Don’t.” Braxton raises his head, and his eyes are red-rimmed. “I don’t deserve to be coddled. I should be comforting you and not the other way around. What do I have to complain about? When...?” He forces himself to look at the scars again, and this time he truly studies them. “It was Trenton, during the conditioning, wasn’t it?”

Didier hesitates, picking his words carefully. “The worst of them are from that time, but not just then, non.”

Braxton inhales, sharply. “My Jewel, when the hell were you hit? I gave express orders to everyone within this household and every guest that none of my wards were to be harmed.”

I card my fingers through Braxton’s hair. “Trenton told your dad about that order, and your dad told him to ignore it.”

Braxton’s eyes flash. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’d have stopped him, I swear.”

Didier reaches out, tracing over Braxton’s jaw to make him look at him. “I know. That is why I did not tell you. He threatened you. This was at the order of the Head Alpha, just like Trenton living here was. Nothing is impossible, but some things are just less possible than others. If we’d told you, then we knew that you’d have kicked Trenton’s ass, or at least, tried to. When you were younger, Trenton was older and stronger than you, plus he had the Head Alpha on his side. We were your friends and not your bonded then. In law, we were only your wards with no rights. You would have been locked away permanently, and we’d have been sold abroad.”

Braxton looks between us. “You’re the bravest people I know. If you can ever forgive me for not—”

“Knowing a secret that we kept from you?” I arch my brow. “Because we’re sneaky as well as brave.”

To my relief, Braxton’s lips quirk. “Yes, that.”

“Then for that...and *only* that...I forgive you.”

“I forgive you, even though there’s nothing to forgive,” Didier says.

Instantly, Braxton kisses him. It’s deep and long, and I realize that

Matthew's watching with as dilated pupils as mine are because *fuck*, they make a hot couple.

And they're both mine.

When Braxton draws back, Didier looks dazed.

"I must remember to be more forgiving," Didier purrs.

Braxton gives me a wicked smile. "Actually, that kiss was for being such a fierce rebel. I promised my Jewel I'd kiss you like that. You're all owed rather a lot of kisses, if we can only get through tonight. Do you want me to get your shirt for you to put on again?"

Didier shakes his head. "If my Jewel is going to wear my broken dress with pride and reveal herself, then I shall go bare chested and wear my scars with pride as well. For years, I've been invisible. I've been forced to hide how others have hurt me. Well, tonight, they will see me."

My eyes burn with tears.

We're doing this together.

Braxton strokes the hair back from Didier's face. "My brave little Omega." He glances up and meets my eye. "And my courageous Jewel. How did I get so lucky?"

"Your dad has a lot of money, I mean *fuck loads*; cash always helps with luck," Matthew answers. I laugh, and Braxton mock scowls. "From a purely legal standpoint, we could use what Trenton's done to you, but only if you want to. We have a sheriff in the room and the world's attention. As you say, everything's revealed, right?"

I stare at Matthew, processing what he's saying, then realization dawns. "You knew."

"Color coordinated notes on everyone," Matthew points out. "You should try it. If things work like I think they will tonight, Braxton's not going to need to kick anyone's ass." He points a finger at Braxton. "No tearing out people's throats, and that includes knotheds like Trenton."

Braxton's eyes glint with sudden danger. "I make no promises, and you stop all my fun. Still, I do come bearing gifts."

He disentangles himself from Didier and me, scooting back in the nest to pick up the wolf carved box.

I peer at the box in curiosity. It's the same design as the desk in Braxton's office.

"The items inside this box are family heirlooms, which are given out as bonding gifts to members of the King pack. They would have been

traditionally worn at the first bonding ball. I think that it sends everyone the right message, if you wear them tonight.” Braxton looks hopeful. “I chose these three out of a selection that I have because they feel in my heart to fit you.”

He opens the lid and takes out a pair of beautiful drop antique amber earrings.

I’ve never worn or owned anything like them.

Yet I can’t wear them tonight.

I shouldn’t have expected a guy to know this type of detail, but my chest is still tight.

I glance down. “I love them, but my ears aren’t pierced.”

Braxton beckons me closer, and I crawl across the nest. “High class Victorian women considered it a disgrace to poke holes into themselves, so clip-ons were invented. My Jewel, it’s why I chose these.”

The tension inside me unwinds to be replaced by warm affection.

Braxton is my best friend, alongside Didier. I should’ve known that he’d have noticed even this small detail about me.

“May I?” He asks.

I nod.

Braxton fixes the earrings onto my ears. They’re heavier than I expected and swing when I move my head.

It makes me feel secure.

“They’re beautiful amber earrings,” I tell Didier.

“And *this* is a man’s antique amber brooch.” Braxton lifts it out of the box, laying it on Didier’s palm. Didier traces over it with his finger, enjoying all the different textures. “It belonged to my great-grandfather, who was, according to all accounts, both as beautiful and feral as you.”

Didier grins, closing his fist around the brooch. “I love it.” Then he cocks his head to think. “Put it on my suit trousers...?”

“We’re all about being unconventional, after all.” Braxton takes the brooch from Didier’s palm and fixes the gleaming jewel just to the side of his pocket.

Matthew rubs his hands together. “So, what’s in the box for me? An amber tiara?”

Braxton stands up and casts Matthew a baleful look. “It’d serve you right, if it was.”

Then he holds out the box to Matthew.

What's inside?

My heartbeat increases with excitement.

Matthew peers inside. Then his whole face lights up like the sun.

He puts his hand in and draws out a gold pistol, which has a snarling wolf head design with amber eyes that look like Matthew's honey eyes. "You shouldn't have. What am I saying? *You fucking should have*. This is badass."

"The wolves remind me of you." Braxton's smile is devilish. "It's the gift for the bodyguard lover who's hard to buy for."

"It's a gun," I tell Didi, "a pretty one."

Didier smirks. "Deadly but pretty like our Matthew."

Braxton glances around at us, before his expression becomes earnest. "All my life, you've been here to help me with my studying, French, or fitness. More than that, with my grief and loneliness. Without you, I'd have failed in my college work and later, my business. I'd never have become CEO and been able to start making changes to help all Companions. I'm the Alpha but I'm only a king because I have you at my side. Omegas, Betas, and Alphas were meant to rule together. We're the perfect balance for each other. Now, tonight we're going to prove that. Let me free you and then I'm going to spend the rest of my life, serving and loving you."

My breath catches.

I stand, before holding out my hand to help Didier up as well.

Matthew pushes the gun into his belt, moving closer. We stand in a circle, resting our foreheads together.

We need to touch each other.

Didier stands straighter. "Rule one, a companion will rebel, raising their own voice — they will be heard."

"Two," I continue, and when Matthew joins in, I'm filled with such joy that my badass rules are now so well-known but also, that he truly does understand me enough to know that they're mine, "a companion will do whatever job they fucking like."

"Three," Braxton pulls back to look at us each in turn with a piercing gaze that burns to my Soul, "a companion deserves to choose their own pack bond, and to be loved, treasured, and adored because the right pack bond can change everything."

CHAPTER 20



Chandelier Ballroom, King Hall

Adrenaline rushes through me. My heart hammers.

Tonight everything will change one way or another.

I've spent hours on my knees, polishing the marble floors of the ballroom in King Hall, but I never dared to think that I'd attend a ball here.

Of course, at the moment, I'm more hiding behind gold drapes at the back of the hall, rather than dancing.

Didier stands behind me; his bare shoulder touches mine.

My dress feels silky on my skin. I'm so used to wearing only the scratchy uniform.

I slide my hand down the bodice, loving that it has a punky edge with the slashes that reveal glimpses of my stomach through the gaps, which Verity cut.

Ironically, she's made it look like the adaptations that Didier usually makes in his own uniforms.

I love that about it.

The ties look amazing as they hang in an array of violets and purples from my waist.

My arms are bare.

Exposed.

I am conscious of my scars but not *self-conscious* and that's because of the support of the guys in my pack.

I never dreamed that my friends would also become my lovers or that they'd accept all of me.

I feel whole for the first time since the car crash.

My bones were broken back then and so was my heart and spirit. I hadn't realized that I never fully recovered, even when I left the hospital.

The death of my parents left scars, deep inside me. They're no different to the scars on my skin.

Didier has them too from the abandonment of his parents because of his Omega Blindness.

Yet I don't want to lose them because they're a link to my past. They're part of me and how I got to where I am now.

My new pack have helped me to move on, however, and I fucking love them for that.

I glance at Matthew, who's leaning casually against the wall on the other side of the drapes.

We're hidden from the main view of the ball but we're able to look through a gap to see what's going on and wait for a cue from Braxton.

We need to keep to the plan, no matter how hard it is.

I peer out at the grand ballroom.

The floors are marble, and the walls are covered in swirling gold gilt between arched windows and glowing candelabras.

The ceilings are high.

Five vast crystal chandeliers, which are twisted and shaped like spirals, hang from the ceiling. They blaze with golden light.

Beta servers move amongst the laughing and gossiping crowds, carrying silver trays of champagne and canapes.

My eyes widen at the glittering array of packs who are dressed in black tie and glimmering ball gowns. The elite of America are in attendance: oil tycoons, celebrities, and playboy billionaires.

I've only seen most of them on social media, news, or television, and being faced with them in real life takes away my breath.

Suddenly, this is all feels startling real.

Did Verity have a point? Do I have any right to claim a place amongst these packs?

Didier settles his hand on my back like he can sense my disquiet through

the bond.

“What’s happening, mon coeur?” he whispers.

“A lot of rich people drinking champagne, dancing on the dance floor that takes us hours to polish, and having the time of their fucking lives as they wait for our Brax to choose one of the Omegas to match with.”

“Is Benjamin out there?”

“I can’t see him.”

“He’ll be here,” Matthew says, firmly.

“And Brax?” Didier’s voice croons with a low thread of warning, which I know means that if anyone else is touching *his* Alpha, then he’s going to kick their ass.

My possessive Omega.

I edge even closer to the drapes.

“Careful,” Matthew warns.

I think that we’re well past *careful* by this point.

I scan the ballroom.

Then I see Braxton, and I only just hold myself back from growling.

Trenton has Braxton backed into a corner.

Trenton’s hand is resting on his cousin’s shoulder in a way that could look friendly, if you don’t know what you’re looking for, only I do.

He’s restraining him.

Then he turns Braxton like he’s no more than a doll and guides him toward a gang of eligible Omegas, including Verity.

Braxton stiffens.

“Trenton is pushing him into the arms of Verity, while making it look like he’s passing him around all the Omegas to make this a fair matching,” I reply. “Braxton looks like he’s pale enough to be sick but he’s wearing his classic fake smile. He’s having to make small talk and pretend to be interested.”

“As long as touching them makes him sick,” Didier says, sounding satisfied. “He’s mine.”

“You scare me sometimes.” Matthew considers Didier. “I like that about you.”

Didier blinks. “You’re an adrenaline junkie. I’m what gives you the thrill, non?”

“I hope so.”

When Verity lays her hand on Braxton’s arm, fluttering her eyelashes at

him and laughing at his jokes, I clutch the drapes, crushing the velvet.

It's all pretend...not real...

It still hurts.

Because Verity wants it to be real.

Yet neither she nor any of these fawning society Omegas know the real Braxton.

They don't care who he is behind the designer suited CEO mask. They don't care that he loves passionate debates about romance novels late into the night, that he laughs at funny videos on his social media feeds when he's meant to be working, or that he's scared more than anything of being abandoned.

They only see his pretty face.

They're falling over themselves to get his attention because they desire his money, status, and King name.

My breath stutters.

Fuck, why didn't I see it before?

Braxton is the vintage car to be owned.

He's property as much as I am.

My chest is tight with love for my best friend and everything that he's risking for his pack.

My resolve steels.

None of us are going to be treated like property any more.

The music changes, and Sam Tinnesz's epic, subversive "Wolves" starts to play.

Braxton turns away from the Omegas toward the back of the hall.

Instantly, I know that he's reassuring me that *he's* the wolf here. He's only acting like he's the prey.

My shoulders relax.

I should've known.

Braxton's wine red eyes twinkle, and he flashes his canines for my benefit.

He looks fucking deadly.

He can't say that he's not giving everyone in this room warning.

I smirk.

My Alpha is more dangerous than Trenton or his dad.

I should be feeling sorry for our enemies, only I don't.

"Brax is fine," I tell Didier. "He's just setting things up. He's going to rip

these assholes apart.”

Ouch, bad image.

When I scan across the dance floor, I meet the piercing emerald gaze of a gorgeous Alpha with translucent skin. He’s leaning against the far wall in an attempt to look casual, but I can tell by how tight his jaw is that he’s waiting on a signal.

He’s part of our plan.

He looks like an ethereal fae, if fae power dressed.

“Shit,” I gasp, “Senator Falcon Knight really is here. And he’s even more...”

“Hot,” Matthew supplies.

“Well, I was going with intimidating.”

There’s a man next to Falcon, whose black hair is military short and neat. His skin is ebony with a bronze glow on his cheeks. His gaze is fixed intently on Weston.

“There’s another man next to Falcon,” I continue. “Another Alpha. He’s standing like you do Matthew.”

“Kind of.” Matthew scrunches up his nose. “He’s not a bodyguard. I think that’s Sheriff Dante Marshal. He’s well known for being part of a unit who rescues Omegas from abusive packs or protect them, once they’ve escaped.”

“Is the movie star here?” Didier asks, sounding delighted.

I look around the ballroom and then grin as I notice an Omega, Jex, who’s set up behind a small camera to the side. He’s just obscured enough behind a trestle table of champagne that if you didn’t know his camera and he were there recording the event — *and live streaming it* — even though there’s a notice above his head stating the fact, you could easily miss it.

Omegas are often invisible, even ones like Jex.

Jex is a college aged willowy beauty with brunet curls and twinkling hazel eyes. He’s dressed in a stylish emerald tuxedo with a pink rose clipped behind his ear.

He’s so achingly beautiful it hurts. He looks every inch the movie star.

It means everything to me that he’s helping us. This alliance of rejects, rebels, and Omegas is as beautiful a thing as he is.

It feels like the birth a new world.

Possibilities.

Hope.

“I didn’t think that I would meet a celebrity Omega.” Didier blushes,

adorably. “Mon dieu, and I’m only half dressed.”

Matthew snorts but he looks just as excited to see Jex. “From what I’ve heard, this Jex will like that. Perhaps, I shouldn’t mention how many of my teenage wank fantasies were about Jex and his steamier movie scenes. There was this one, where he was bent over a hay bale...”

Didier growls, diving past me to reach for Matthew. He plasters himself against Matthew, licking up his neck and rubbing himself against him in an effort to restate his claim with his scent.

Matthew bites his lip to keep in his chuckle. “I get the point, Didi. No film star Omega, even with the sexiest line in knot puns and spanking scenes, will ever replace you. Even in my wank fantasies.”

“You can explore your fantasies with me,” Didier purrs, seductively.

Matthew’s cheeks pink. “Shit, now there’s an offer.”

I wave my hand at them to hush them.

It’s starting.

Weston marches across the dance floor with Elizabeth on his arm. He’s holding a glass of champagne in one hand. He’s wearing a black tuxedo, while she’s wearing a matching black satin dress that trails behind her. She has loops of pearls at her neck and hanging from her ears.

Weston prowls to the small raised end of the ballroom, and everyone parts for him like he truly is royalty.

The music cuts off. There’s a hushed excitement and whispers.

Everyone’s watching Weston.

Elizabeth tosses her pretty ringlets, smug at being the center of attention.

Weston jerks his chin at Trenton to get him to join him at his shoulder like he’s the true heir.

Trenton smirks, straightening his shoulders.

I glance at the sudden movement from the side.

Falcon and Dante are purposefully moving to the front of the crowd, who are now standing around Weston and waiting for him to make a speech.

Dante gestures across at Jex.

Jex winks, focusing the camera on Weston.

I lick my lips, and my heartbeat quickens.

Matthew’s lips tighten. He looks coiled for action.

“Weston’s about to make a speech like we thought,” I whisper to Didier. “He’ll insist on the matching happening now. Get ready.”

Didier draws back from Matthew, and his expression darkens.

He nods.

Braxton looks alone amongst the crowd — apart from the flock of hopeful Omegas around him and Verity at his shoulder — but he isn't.

He knows that we're just behind the drapes.

Plus, he has the secret power of the entire resistance on his side.

Weston *clinks* on his champagne glass, and everyone falls silent.

“Ladies and gentleman, thank you for attending the matching ball tonight at King Hall for my son and sole heir to the King name, fortune, and legacy, Braxton.” Weston looks around at his audience, puffing out his chest. “I'm sure that many of you thought that this day would never come. After all, my son does have his playboy image to keep up but even he has to bond with the right Omega and start popping out some Alpha babies eventually.”

There's a smattering of polite laughter.

Knothead.

Weston waves at Braxton. “Come up here.”

“Of course, Father,” Braxton drawls, swaggering toward Weston. “I wouldn't want to miss a moment of this.”

Weston looks wary but he still claps a heavy hand on his son's shoulder. “So, enjoy the night. Drink, eat, and dance. And when the clock strikes midnight...”

“Is this a bloody fairy tale?” Matthew mutters. “Dramatic asshole.”

“...My son will choose his new Omega.” Weston casts Verity a sly smile. “He'll choose who he wants to be bonded with for the rest of his life.”

Braxton shrugs out of Weston's hold.

Weston glances at him, uncomfortable.

The audience is glancing between them, shifting their feet.

“Will I really?” Braxton says, coolly.

“Yes,” Weston grits out, “you bloody well will.”

Braxton cocks his head. “Strange because I already have chosen.”

Shocked whispers spread through the crowd.

Society loves a scandal as much as it loves gossip.

Trenton takes a hurried step forward, clapping his hands together; his gaze finds out Verity's. “Great. So, some lucky Omega here at the ball has already caught your eye then...? I don't blame you. There's nothing wrong with being decisive. Come on, why don't you tell us who they are?”

Verity's eyes glitter with excitement. She begins to step forward.

“What an excellent idea. Thank you, cousin.” Braxton looks like a wolf

about to rip apart a lamb; a tremor runs through Trenton like he can tell and this side of Braxton scares him. “I’m so happy that you’re all gathered here tonight, ladies and gentlemen, to witness this. I know who I want to be bonded to for the rest of my life. They’re my best friends, supporters, and defenders. They’re people who will stand at my side and always have my back. They’re my pack, who I trust with both my heart and life. Their names are Jewel, Didier, and Matthew. I’m glad that you can celebrate tonight at our bonding ball because *we’re already bonded.*”

My eyes gleam but with happy tears.

I can feel the strength of Braxton’s burning love through the bond.

He meant every word.

“You little fool,” Weston barks.

When Weston shoves Braxton, Matthew jerks forward, as if he’s about to leap to defend him.

“Wait,” I hiss. “Brax hasn’t said the words for the signal yet.”

Matthew nods, unhappily.

The crowd is stirring now, and it’s not on Weston’s side.

Braxton is liked. His *good* image, which he’s spent years cultivating in interviews and by supporting charities, is working in his favor.

Weston is known as part of a despotic English Parliament, which is oppressive. People may flock to his events for the prestige but they won’t take his side against Braxton.

Weston abandoned Braxton in America, and America has adopted Braxton as one of their own.

Verity looks like she’s been slapped.

Her face is red, and she’s trembling. She’s looking at Trenton like he’s betrayed her.

Maybe she thinks that he has set this up to ruin her.

Trenton shakes his head, desperately. “This isn’t how it should have... I mean, this is a mistake. You’re meant to be choosing...”

“Shut up, moron,” Verity snaps, mortified.

She hangs her head, blushing.

The other Omegas are inching away from her. Some are laughing, while others are whispering behind their hands about her.

We don’t need to touch her.

This is social death.

Elizabeth snatches onto Weston’s arm, before he can lash out at his son.

“It’s all right. They’re only his ex-Companions. So, he’s made it public tonight. But he needs to choose a First Omega still.” She narrows her eyes at Braxton. “He must or he knows the consequences.”

Perfect.

Let’s see Elizabeth’s image come back from those words being live streamed.

“*Consequences?* You’ll have me punished, dear stepmother, if I don’t bond with someone of your choice? Father? Like how you beat me and locked me up before this event in order to force me to attend it?”

Braxton boldly meets Weston’s gaze.

Weston glances around the crowd, which is now hostile to him.

The guests at the front are edging closer. Some of them are board members. They’re eying Weston threateningly, while others are now at Braxton’s back in a protective ring.

Weston clears his throat. “I’m Head Alpha. I’m entitled to do with you precisely as I please.”

Got him.

Braxton’s expression hardens. His gaze slides to Falcon and Dante.

Falcon nods.

“Ladies and gentleman, in a moment I would like to introduce you to my actual bonded Omegas and Beta,” Braxton announces. “My much loved pack.”

I take a deep breath, edging closer to Didier and Matthew.

Didier slips his warm hand into mine.

“They’re my ex-wards, who my father would have pretended didn’t exist.” Braxton’s sharp gaze finds out Verity, and she lets out a sob. “Verity Sloane would have kept them locked in the attic, hidden and used for nothing but breeding, while she continued her extravagant life as my First Omega, flying to Monaco, partying on yachts and being treasured. She has already terrorized my pack.”

The Omegas around Verity are now staring at her in horror.

Verity covers her face. Her shoulders heave with sobs, as she muscles her way out of the room.

No one follows her to comfort her, not even Trenton.

Trenton’s frozen in place. He looks terrified.

He should.

“Please tell me that was Verity crying,” Didier mutters.

“Oh yeah,” I answer.

“Let me make this clear,” Braxton glances toward the camera, and I know now that he’s talking to an audience of millions, an entire nation, “all my pack will be treasured. We’ve been failing our orphans. The whole system has. Any Beta or Omega, your beloved child or pack member, could have ended up as a Companion, and they deserve to have a chance at a pack bond. I’ll be making changes to how Companions are treated. From now on, they’ll be adopted, the same as Alphas are.”

There’s a flurry at the front of the audience, as Thane Hatcher pushes through. I glimpse his shock of ginger hair.

Thane’s eyes flash with outrage. “How dare you! You’re CEO but you’re not backed by the entire board. I will make sure that you’re thrown out—”

“You won’t,” a cold, commanding voice says.

It makes even me jump.

“Who’s that?” Didier asks.

Falcon steps forward. His arms are crossed.

“Falcon,” I reply. “Shit, he really is intimidating.”

“And hot,” Matthew adds.

“Just because you’re a senator,” Thane sneers, “does not give you power over private companies.”

“True,” Falcon replies. “Yet the fact that the Knight pack is spectacularly wealthy and has become the largest investor in King Alpha Company means that now the impressive CEO here, Braxton, has the power on the board. Would you like to do the honors?”

“With great pleasure.” Braxton prowls forward; his smile is darkly victorious. “Hatcher, you’re fucking fired. You’re banned for life from company property from this moment on, as are your cronies who tried to get me kicked out of my own company with your little plots. Oh, also your bully of a son. And every last one of your pack is banned from ever becoming a Guardian. I shall be instituting a register of banned packs.”

Thane’s mouth hangs open in shock.

Weston looks between them, before yanking on Braxton’s arm. “This has gone too far. You’re destroying your image, the King name, and our whole legacy. Have you gone mad? I’ll send you to the Alpha Center, and your pack will be sold for this. Do you understand?”

“That you’d destroy me for finally being able to be happy? For falling in love? For finding my pack? Yes, I understand perfectly.” Braxton pulls his

arm away from Weston.

Elizabeth quails, when Braxton glares at her.

Then Braxton steps forward, allowing the crowd to form a protective circle around him with Falcon on one side and Dante on the other.

“Who would like to meet my precious pack?” Braxton calls.

There are yells of assent and cheers.

The Omegas, who’d earlier been fawning over Braxton and hoping to be chosen, seem as excited as anyone. They’re caught up in the romance.

Braxton knows how to work a crowd.

“He should go into acting.” Matthew laughs. “Or PR.”

“I think that he’s been in both for a long time,” I reply.

“Stop this,” Weston calls, furious. “Stop this nonsense. They’re only Companions and Rejects.”

But he’s ignored.

Almost time.

I swallow, preparing myself.

Butterflies swarm in my stomach.

“Please welcome my treasured new bonded pack of King Hall.” Braxton gestures toward the back of the ballroom.

This is our signal.

“Come on.” Matthew slips between Didier and me.

He’s so tall like this, but it makes me feel safe, as he takes both of our hands and leads us out from behind the drapes and between the crowds.

They part for us.

I’m horribly aware of my slashed dress, the sleeves that reveal my scars, and of Didier not wearing a shirt, which reveals the silvery web of scars on his back.

The excited mood instantly dampens.

There are shocked whispers and horrified looks, some of them at Braxton like they’re revising their view of him.

Do they think that he did this to us?

For the first time in my life, I’m glad that Didier can’t see because he’s unable to notice the way that he’s been looked up and down. There’s a mix of lascivious glances at his bare chest because fuck, he’s gorgeous.

He’s the most beautiful male Omega in the room.

Then there’s the pitying glances and horror at the scars that ravage the pale expanse of his back. Yet there’s also the sneers, which appear to imply

that he must have done something to deserve them because of the Rej bracelet that dangles from his wrist.

Somehow, however, I know that Didier can sense the mood of the room. He's always been good at that.

He raises his chin, straightening his shoulders defiantly.

Braxton smiles, stepping off the raised end of the ballroom to walk toward us. "Here they are. Won't everyone give them a warm welcome?"

Braxton looks around him, but there's only an awkward silence.

Ignoring this, Braxton strolls toward us.

"My Jewel." He drops his hand to my neck, and only I can feel the slight tremor running through it.

I meet his gaze, and I nod.

We're in this together, and he has my consent.

He nods back. Then he kisses me, chastely.

When he kisses Didier, he pulls him towards his side, allowing Didier to take a breath of his neck. "My little but fierce Omega."

"Mon prince," Didier murmurs.

"Matt." Braxton drags Matthew into a deeper kiss, which leaves them both breathless.

Finally, Matthew pulls away, twisting to face the guests. He falls into his bodyguard role, slipping his hand to the gun that Braxton gifted him.

He's deliberately allowing people to get a flash of it. He's letting them know that he's ready to defend us.

"This is my pack," Braxton announces. "None of us are hiding now."

"Hiding?" A deep, cool voice says. "Like the scars on their backs."

When Dante steps forward, even though I know that his anger isn't really directed at Braxton, his acting is good enough that it makes me quail.

Dante looks like he's ready to smash Braxton to the floor and slap handcuffs on him.

Braxton glances around at the Virginian elite. "Until I was bonded, I didn't know about these scars. My wards were threatened into silence, and I'm ashamed that they were being hurt without me knowing. I'm their Guardian. I should have been able to protect them. I shall spend my life trying to make that up to them."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're not responsible?" Dante growls. "I'm a sheriff, and punishment that leaves scars of that type isn't discipline. It's illegal abuse."

All of a sudden, there's a commotion, as someone elbows their way through the other guests toward us.

I twist to look around.

Then my face lights up, when I see a tall and powerful Alpha who's aged around thirty.

Benjamin!

He's dressed in a stylish business suit and embroidered waistcoat that matches his blue eyes. He looks like a slice of the spring sky. He's pale with neat golden hair and killer cheekbones.

He's clutching several files.

He shoots me a shy smile.

"What bloody nonsense is this?" Weston huffs. "They're Companions and that makes them property. They don't have the same protection under law as other Omegas do. You'll be saying next that they can't be conditioned."

"So," Dante says with a dangerous edge, "you're the Alpha who was responsible for conditioning them...?"

"Don't," Trenton hisses, glancing around at the guests who have turned against them. "Don't say another word without speaking to our lawyers."

Well, my lawyer is already here and is watching everything with a sharp expression.

"Why do you need a lawyer, Trenton?" Braxton twirls on his cousin. "Your confession is written all over my pack's skin. And if they're *property*, then as their Guardian, you've permanently damaged my property without my permission, which is illegal. Which is it? Either you've abused them or you're responsible for property damage. Either way," he glances over his shoulder at Dante, "arrest him."

I've never been so satisfied as I am by the way that Trenton becomes ashen, falling over onto his ass, as he scrambles to get away from Dante.

Nobody helps him to stand up, not even Weston.

"Don't be such a weak fool." Weston looks down at Trenton with contempt. "I expected better from you. You're not the Alpha that I took you to be. Can't you see that my son's playing you?" He studies Braxton with a savage smile. "So, you do have some fire in your belly. I'm impressed. But officer, this is easily cleared up. There's no offense here. I'm Head Alpha and I gave my nephew permission to discipline the Companions. I have the power over the wards, as head of the King pack. They're my responsibility."

When Benjamin winks at me, I feel like whooping.

We've got the knothead.

I try hard not to show the triumph on my face.

Braxton doesn't quite manage it, which tears away Weston's last vestige of calm.

"I've had enough of this charade," Weston snarls. "I don't know what you allow to go on in this overly liberal and disorderly country of yours, but in England, we'd know how to treat any pack member who acted out in this way."

When Weston moves threateningly toward Braxton, Matthew pulls out the antique wolf gun and cocks it.

"Fucking try and hit Brax again." Matthew's face is cold and hard. "Lay another hand on any of us. I dare you."

Weston stares at Matthew in shock.

Then he turns in outrage to Dante, who's casually watching and hasn't even made a move for his own gun.

"What's wrong with you?" Weston demands. "Aren't you a sheriff? Why aren't you protecting me? I'm Deputy Prime Minister."

"Not of this country," Dante replies. "America waged rather a successful revolution to govern themselves quite a long time ago. I'm not here to guard you. Where are your own security detail? I imagine that you thought you could use the trained bodyguard, Matthew here, for free. Perhaps, you believed that this mansion has the best state of the art security. Except, neither the Beta nor the security are *yours*, are they?"

"What?" Weston demands.

Benjamin raises his hand, adorably like he's asking to speak in class; his cheeks pink as everyone turns to look at him. "I'm these wards' lawyer. I need it to be clear that Matthew is trained to protect his Alpha, who is Braxton. For doing that job on his own pack territory against an Alpha who has threatened, beaten, and locked all members of his pack up, he is only doing both what he's trained to and what is instinct."

There's muttered agreement amongst the guests.

Many of the Betas are openly glaring at Weston now. I bet they're imagining what they'd do for their own Alphas.

"I don't care if it's his job or not." Weston drags Elizabeth with him, as he marches toward Benjamin. Yet Benjamin bravely holds his ground. "I've been insulted, disobeyed, and now had a gun waved in my face. This I do

know, as Head Alpha, I have the authority to confine my son to the Alpha Center and to send these Companions back to Companion House to be sold out of America to a country that *does* know how to break them. ”

There are shocked gasps and cries of outrage.

Who sells their own pack?

Weston does.

I slip my arm around Didier’s shoulders.

I need to hold my nerve, even as my heart beats wildly in my chest.

Benjamin casts a worried glance at Didier and me.

Yet he’s pale with rage, as he turns back to Weston. “Let us all be clear. You’d condemn your son to a lonely misery in the Alpha Center, breaking bonds made in love, while condemning these Omegas and Betas to an even worse fate, simply because you don’t agree with your son’s choice. Yet I have here...” Benjamin pulls out of the files a bunch of letters and holds them up with a dramatic flourish. “...glowing references from any number of Alphas who have come in contact with them over the years, including me.”

Weston narrows his eyes. “Who the bloody hell are you?”

“I’m a lawyer for Omega and Companion rights.” Benjamin prowls toward Weston. “And you’re an Alpha who holds a British passport and hasn’t been back to America for over five years.”

“What do you mean to insinuate by that?”

“No insinuation. I’m trying to be very clear with my statements. Yes or no?”

“How dare you?”

“Answer the question,” Falcon commands.

I stare at these three powerful men — senator, sheriff, and lawyer — who are arrayed against Weston.

Suddenly, it’s Weston who looks small.

“Yes,” Weston grits out.

Elizabeth pulls away from him.

“That means you have no American citizenship,” Benjamin declares.

I can hardly breathe because I’m watching this play out so intently.

I never thought that anyone would speak up for me.

Trenton told me that no one would care that Didier and me were being hurt. In fact, that we deserved to be.

And that even if we told, we wouldn’t be believed.

He was wrong about all of it.

A wave of intense gratitude washes over me.

“Neither does Braxton,” Trenton pipes up. “He’s English too. I’m the true American King.”

“That’s not true.” Benjamin points at his other file. “It’s all in here. Braxton has dual citizenship with full right to work and live permanently in America. But you, Weston King, *don’t*. Did you know that by Virginian law, you could be arrested for breaking a number of laws?”

Weston’s sweating; he wipes at his forehead. “You can’t just show up here and accuse me—”

“He can,” Dante drawls, “because he’s right.”

“You abandoned an Alpha as a minor here in America without assigning him a guardian in an official capacity.” Benjamin lists off each crime on his fingers. “That could make you guilty of neglect. Of course, there’s also the abuse of the wards in the King pack. Then as a non-US citizen who owns a government contracted company, there’s absenteeism.”

“That’s a federal case.” Falcon arches his brow. “Serious.”

“I left Trenton in charge, while I was on essential work for my government. He’s responsible for any crimes.” Weston leans down and snatches Trenton by the arm.

He yanks Trenton to his feet, shoving him toward Dante.

Dante drags Trenton’s arms behind his back.

“B-but...” Trenton splutters. “I only did what you told me to, Uncle.”

“Is that your confession?” Dante asks.

“He ordered me to condition that Omega.” Trenton looks at Didier. “It was my job.”

“It was abuse.” Dante’s voice is clipped. “That’s why you’ll be going to the Alpha Center, until you can be safe to be allowed around Omegas.”

“No...” Trenton wails, struggling.

Dante slams Trenton face first to the floor, slipping out his handcuffs and clicking them shut around his wrists.

I bet that was fucking satisfying.

It was satisfying to watch.

Matthew is grinning.

“What...?” Didier asks with wide eyes.

“Trenton just got his ass handed to him by the Sheriff,” I whisper. “He’s lying on the floor in handcuffs.”

Didier’s smile is even wider than Matthew’s.

“I have diplomatic immunity,” Weston blusters. “You can’t arrest me.”

Braxton winks at me.

Then his expression becomes severe, as he swaggers toward his dad.

Weston stumbles backward.

“Indeed, what a shame.” Braxton’s lip curls up. “After all, you’ve already admitted that as Head Alpha, you told Trenton to whip and scar my wards. You were so proud of that fact. Why not repeat it now?”

“*Diplomatic immunity*,” Weston repeats, weakly.

“True, but as Benjamin has set out the laws that you’ve broken, it means I have a right to challenge for both emancipation and the position of Head Alpha here in America.”

Weston’s eyes burn with sudden fire. “Don’t you dare. If you do, then you’ll be an outcast from the English line. I swear, Braxton, don’t try and contact me, your new stepmother, or any of your other family in England. You’ll be dead to us and all of English society. I’ll make damn certain of that.”

“How shall I ever survive?” Braxton says, dryly. Then he looks back at me and smiles, before his gaze scans across Didier and Matthew as well. “I have all the company that I need in my own pack. I always did, here with my friends in King Hall. I don’t need anything more. I’m formally requesting emancipation from you.”

“Of course, you’ll need a judge or senator to witness the emancipation,” Benjamin states.

“And look at that,” Falcon’s smile is almost as dangerous as Braxton’s; I didn’t know that they made Senators like him, “he does.”

Weston looks around, as if things are only just beginning to click into place in his mind. “How did you manage this? You don’t have political ambitions. You don’t have important friends like this.”

“Don’t I?” Braxton replies. “It’s almost like you don’t know me at all.”

“Congratulations, Braxton King, you’re formally emancipated. You’re Head Alpha of the King pack in America.” Benjamin smiles at him. “Two consequences. One, you’re now official owner of King Alpha Company, which was abandoned by Weston King, because of his absence, along with all properties in America, including King Hall. And two, the wards are yours, as well as being your bonded packmates. He has no power over them or you.”

Braxton turns to his dad with a snarl. “Leave my house and take the next flight out of America.”

Weston looks shell-shocked. “Braxton...”

“Now, before I decide that I really want a hunt...” Braxton’s eyes flash.

Matthew raises his gun.

Elizabeth squeaks and sprints for the door, tottering on her high heels and leaving Weston behind her.

Weston bellows in outrage but still runs after her.

Matthew slips his gun back into his belt.

All of a sudden, the ballroom is filled with laughter, clapping, and such a surge of joy that I don’t know how much is mine, through the bond, or everybody else’s.

It’s overwhelming.

It’s more intense than anything I’ve felt before because finally, I’m free.

The predator’s not in the cage with us.

The cage door’s open, and at last, I may be brave enough to fly out of it.

“We’ve done it.” Braxton bounds toward us, pulling the rest of us into an embrace.

Our scents mingle, and I breathe them in like life: almond, cool citrus, and hot chocolate.

I’m crying, I’m laughing, and I’m kissing my men because we’re in public but finally, we can do exactly what we want.

No more secrets.

No more feeling ashamed.

No more being invisible.

Then someone’s turned the music on again, and we hold each other tightly as we dance.

CHAPTER 21



Secret Garden, King Hall

ONE MONTH LATER...

Naked, I lie in a nest of the softest materials that I've ever felt, resting my head on Didier's equally naked chest. He feels warm beneath me, and I love hearing the steady *thud — thud — thud* of his heart.

We're sprawled in the Omega Secret Garden in the middle of the forest, which has now been renamed simply the Secret Garden.

It's no longer for the dead, but the living.

We don't need it as our safe space for just the two of us to have trysts anymore.

We're not two orphans without families.

We have a new one: A pack.

For years, Didier and I were a couple. I thought that keeping our secrets and fighting for each other was the closest that I could come to bonding.

Except, now I have a bonded Alpha and a Beta as well, and I love all of them equally.

I escaped through the open door into the sky and I'm flying high to avoid the jaws of my predators.

A peregrine falcon wheels through the blue sky above me. I squint against the late afternoon sun.

I'm cradled with Didier in the roots of a single overarching American chestnut tree, which guards the garden.

Didier wants to design an Omega Chamber out here for me, which will be close to nature.

Songbirds hop along the branches and call musically to each other in the peace.

For a moment, Didier twines our fingers together and moves them in front of his eyes.

His expression softens, and I know that he's enjoying the play of shadow and light.

Didier has never explained his Omega Immune Syndrome in terms of loss. He takes the joy that he can in what he *can* experience.

And I take my joy in him.

I purr, licking and nibbling at his neck. His dick thickens against his thigh.

Our easy nakedness like this, without shame or fear, is such a gift.

Didier's gaze becomes hooded. "Mon amour, are you seducing me?"

"I can't always leave the tempting to my sexy Frenchman."

His lips quirk. "Of course, but you're meant to be helping me to choose the best samples for my new business."

He lets go of my hand and twists to the side. He holds up a swathe of materials, which are scarf sized: cashmere, silk, wool, and satin.

"I'm helping," I insist. "What kind of product feedback are you looking for?"

"Which one do you prefer on your skin, now that you're out of heat. Then we'll repeat the experiment, when you're in heat next week and compare," Didier replies.

His expression is bright with excitement.

I admire Didier so fucking much that he's running with his concept for a design company for nests.

I admire him even more that he's insisting on setting it up with investments offered through packs on the Omega server who love the idea, rather than accepting Braxton's offer to fund it.

Didier has always been independent.

I'm not sure anyone knows what to make of an Omega who's a Director of their own company.

It shouldn't be possible.

Yet every time that an Omega proves that it is, something will shift in society, and it won't be able to shift back.

For now, I've accepted an offer to help run the social media side for the Omega Society, as well as the Caged Companion branch of the resistance.

I'm definitely better at anonymous viral campaigns, than I am at daring missions.

"Okay, let's test one of the materials," I offer.

I stretch out in the garden nest.

Something mischievous flashes across Didier's face, as he leans over me. His silky hair sweeps my cheeks, and his plush lips almost press against mine.

I pout, as he swipes the satin scarf across them, instead. Then as he draws it between my tits and lower in teasing degrees.

I shiver.

"Stay still," Didier says with mock severity. "The test must be scientific."

Who is he kidding?

When he drags the scarf between my thighs across my clit, I buck up at how delicious the sensation feels.

My eyes flutter closed.

Fuck, yeah.

This is the material.

It's perfect.

I moan.

Instantly, the sensation is gone.

I open my eyes and glare at Didier accusingly. "Hey, have you just played me?"

"Me, mon amour?" Didier looks at me with his large, innocent blue eyes, which I know are anything but. "What's your score out of ten?"

"Ten." I push up to capture Didier's lips, and he makes a surprised sound, before melting into the kiss. "But the tables can be turned."

I snatch a silk scarf as quietly as I can. I slip it around my hand like the softest glove and then wrap it around Didier's balls.

He humps into my hand in shock.

I chuckle.

Didier gives a deep, rumbling purr, which vibrates through me, as I glide the silk over him.

"See, the seducer becomes the seduced." I tighten my grip as I lean to whisper into Didier's ear, "What score do you give?"

"Let me come, and it's ten," Didier pants.

"Are you having a seduce off?" Matthew calls. "Because hey, I approve. Omega on Omega action for the win."

I glance over at Matthew.

He's in the middle of the small garden, clearing away brambles and wild roses from the fountain of a bird, which is bursting out like it's flying to heaven. He's been trying to get the fountain working for the last few weeks, and now the water quietly tinkles.

The rest of the garden hasn't been tamed, but it is feeling tended to and loved again.

Matthew's spent every spare minute out here.

Croissant sits faithfully at Matthew's feet, sleeping while he works.

Matthew looks relaxed and happy.

He spent the morning meeting Asher at the ice rink again.

I know that Matthew worries about Asher. We need to find out more about these mysterious *Blades*.

Knowing that Matthew's talented jock twin is safe is our next mission.

For now, simply having contact with Asher again after so long has lifted the pain from behind Matthew's haunted eyes.

I know that if he could be certain that his twin was also loved, he could finally start to heal for good.

Matthew's dressed in casual violet shorts and nothing else. He wipes sweat off his forehead, pausing in his work to look at me, as if I'm putting on a show just for him.

Actually, with Didier it's often been hard to get any work done. We've always touched, kissed, and fucked each other whenever we could.

It's been a bit of a shock for the rest of the pack to keep up with us.

I think that they're enjoying the challenge.

"Here's some feedback," Braxton drawls. "Some of us are trying to work. Not all of us are so lucky that rating pleasure is an effective statistic in board meetings."

Didier winks. "Then you're in the wrong business."

Didier wriggles and purrs again, trying to encourage me to move my hand faster and touch his dick to let him come.

I don't.

"It appears so." Braxton's sprawled facing me in his suit; he hasn't even loosened his tie.

He climbed through the hole in the stone wall only minutes ago, clutching piles of files and looking tired and stressed.

I glance at the papers that he's laid out on the grass. "Tough day? Are you okay?"

Didier grumbles, and Braxton glances at Didier's hard dick in sympathy.

"I'm better than our little Omega right now." Braxton quirks his brow. "But if you insist on talking about this... The last month has been challenging. As you know, I've barely slept or eaten, trying to make sure that the right policies get changed as quickly as possible for the Companions. It looks like they'll be passed next week by the board."

I let go of the silk scarf, and Didier sits up in outrage; his dick is painfully hard.

"That's amazing news, mon prince." Didier's voice is shaky, but he still makes an effort to smile.

Matthew leans down to stroke Croissant's back. "It really is."

I cock my head. "So, why are you frowning?"

Braxton massages his temples. "It's complicated."

I crawl across to Braxton, instantly sensing that he needs me. He opens his arms to me, and I settle myself on his lap.

"A lapful of naked Omega," Braxton observes. "There is literally no kind of day that isn't made better with the addition of this."

"So, what happened today?" Matthew asks. "Isn't this what we've been working towards?"

"Dear God, it is." Braxton furrows his brow. "It's only that I've wanted this so long and spent all my energy focusing on it, I don't know what I'll do after it's achieved. It's defined who I am."

"It hasn't," Didier replies, pulling his knees to his chest and encircling them with his arms. "Every day in so many small actions, you've defined who you are. We're all only just beginning to find out who we *can* be, non? There are so many exciting possibilities and opportunities. So many more battles to still be fought."

I grip Braxton's chin, until he's looking at me. "So much love."

"Beer to be drunk," Matthew offers, "games to be watched, and lots and lots of fucking..."

"Oh, *that*..." Braxton's smile becomes devilish, as he all of a sudden slides his arm around my waist, swinging me around in a move that drives the breath out of me. "Then it's probably time for a performance review."

I should've known that Braxton would love boss and employee roleplays.

I land back in the soft nest next to Didier under the tree.

My eyes widen.

Braxton looks dangerous.

"We are so fucked," Didier mutters.

"Oh, yeah," I grin, "in only the best way."

Braxton wrenches at his tie to loosen it. "Bodyguard, this male Omega secretary may well need to be fired, unless he impresses me. Come and help. He's trouble. Quite feral."

He clicks his fingers in an imperious way that I've never seen him do to his real staff but is fucking hot now.

Didier's breath hitches. "I am such a bad staff member."

Braxton is fighting hard to keep in character.

Didier has only ever been the best Omega for Braxton but he truly is

trouble, and it's why he's perfect.

"Are you okay with this?" Braxton does drop out of character then to check in with us both. "Didi? Jewel?"

We both nod.

Instantly, Braxton becomes stern again.

He growls, lunging and grabbing Didier by the neck.

Matthew stiffens.

Normally, this rougher play is confined to the Alpha and Beta.

Braxton remains still for a long moment, giving Didier the chance to safeword but he doesn't.

Instead, his pupils are dilated, and he's breathing fast.

It's one of my fantasies to see Didier like this: to know that he's safe but caught between the stronger pack members.

"I thought that I gave you a job." Braxton guides Didier, making it look like he's being rough, while really helping him to lie over me. Didier's hard dick presses against my hip. Hot and cold washes over me. I'm flushed. "Bring her to pleasure within five minutes, or the rest of your performance review will take place over my lap."

Didier turns to look over his shoulder, while Braxton's hand tightens on his throat. "Oui, Sir, but also, have a told you that you're a horrible boss, and I'm putting in a complaint to HR?"

I bite back a laugh, and Matthew chuckles.

"Bodyguard," Braxton says, coldly, "you sound amused. I believe that I said you were meant to be the one holding down this feral Omega. Unless you want to join him in being jobless by tomorrow."

Braxton lets go of Didier with a soft stroke down his hip, which is in contrast to his harsh tone. Then he sprawls with his back to the trunk of the tree.

I squirm around, until I can meet Braxton's gaze, which gentles.

I want to be able to look into his eyes, as I'm fucked at his direction by Didier, and he gets off on it.

"Yes, Sir." Matthew mock salutes with a casual fondness. "I wouldn't want to lose this job, when I have my babies at home."

"Babies?" Didier splutters. "Real ones?"

"Oh, yeah." Matthew falls to his knees behind Didier, sweeping his thumb through the soft hair at the nape of his neck. "A dozen adorable Omegas. All cute and fierce."

Braxton swallows. “A dozen...?”

I grin. “You’d better make sure that you perform well then. It was five minutes, wasn’t it?”

Braxton looks at his watch with a flourish. “The clock is ticking.”

Matthew slips his hand between Didier and my body, circling across my clit.

I shudder and bite at my lip.

I’m already so wet.

Matthew slides his hands down to Didier’s hips. He wraps his muscled arm around Didier’s waist and drives Didier’s dick into me with one thrust.

I don’t know who is more shocked, Didier or me.

We both keen at the same time.

Then Didier is gripping at my shoulders, and we’re searching out each other’s lips, kissing in desperate, passionate gasps.

Matthew dry humps against Didier, driving him into me. It feels like they’re both fucking me at once, as well as each other.

Didier isn’t in control, but then, neither is Matthew.

“Keep your pretty eyes on me, my Jewel.” Braxton sits dominantly beneath the tree.

His eyes are dark; his expression is possessive, as he watches us together.

“Four minutes,” Braxton says, lazily.

Braxton undoes his pants and draws out his pierced dick. He works it at a slow pace almost as if to prove that he’s the one in charge and so has that luxury, while we’re working hard, needing to put on a performance to impress him.

Didier pistons into me.

He whines, and his nails claw at my shoulders.

Pleasure coils through me, forced faster like an electric band that’s going to snap.

“Deeper,” I howl. “There, fucking there.”

Matthew growls, snapping his own hips. He tightens his arm around Didier.

“Three minutes.” Braxton’s cheeks are tinted pink, even though he’s trying to suppress the way that he’s panting.

He’s not unaffected.

I know Braxton.

He’s struggling not to leap on me and fuck me as hard as Didier is.

“Two minutes.” Braxton’s voice is shaking now. “Don’t disappoint me.”
Didier growls fiercely. He sucks on my neck, losing himself in the sensation and breaking Omega taboos.

None of us care.

“Mon amour,” Didier whispers like a prayer, “mon amour.”

Tears are weeping down my cheeks; I feel seen and turned inside out.

I’m fucking flying.

It’s too much.

It’s not quite enough...

“One minute,” Braxton warns.

He looks like he’s struggling to hold himself off from coming now; his eyes are half-hooded.

Matthew leans over Didier’s back, thrusting him even deeper into me.

Then he whispers, “Baby, come for me. Come hard. Come for me right fucking now.”

And I do, at the same time as Didier does.

The feeling, as Didier stiffens and comes, kissing me with a desperate wildness, and I tumble into a mind-blowing pleasure, is intense and perfect.

As I come down from the high, Didier strokes through my hair, feathering kisses down my jaw.

Matthew carefully lifts Didier off me and lays him next to me.

Didier nuzzles against me, purring.

And I purr back.

Braxton growls, diving toward us. Then Matthew bats Braxton’s hand away from his dick and works him one-handed at a frantic pace.

As I lie in a dazed, sated state, watching how Matthew pins Braxton next to Didier, kissing him, before bringing him to an orgasm of his own that makes him arch into Matthew’s arms, I feel like the luckiest Omega alive.

Matthew grins, tidying Braxton’s dick back into his suit trousers for him.

Braxton entangles his legs with mine and kisses the top of my head. “You’ve passed your reviews with flying colors. Bonuses all around.”

“So, do I get to keep my job?” Matthew asks. “My poor babies won’t starve...?”

Braxton snorts. “I forgot about the babies.”

“Although,” I offer, “it wouldn’t be the worst thing, if we had our own soon...”

Three heads turn to look at me, and a blast of joy surges through the

bond, which is overwhelming.

For most of my life, I thought that I wasn't capable of having kids. Even then, I didn't think that mine was a world, into which it'd be safe to bring them.

But for the first time, I can consider it.

"I'm not sure about twelve but I shall be happy with whatever you decide. However many we're blessed with, they'll know every day of their lives how much they're wanted and loved." Braxton sounds so hopeful that my eyes burn with tears. "Since we already decided to do your heats naturally for safety's sake because they were delayed, I'm fine with whatever happens. In fact, more than fine. I can't wait to be a father because I know what an incredible mother they will have in you, Jewel, and how lucky they'll be to also have two further fathers, who'll love them. In fact, who'll treasure them, as none of us truly ever were."

Didier's breath catches. "You would let me be their Father?"

My heart breaks a little.

"Listen, my little Omega," Braxton says, firmly, "rules that don't allow Reject Non-heats to take part in raising kids are wrong. You're my friend, bonded, and one day, you'll be Father of my child."

I grasp Braxton's hands. "Fuck, I love you." He hasn't only accepted me, he's accepted my lover, Didier. I glance around at these gorgeous and courageous men who mean everything to me. Who I'd die for. "I love all of you."

Then I purr, as Didier, Braxton, and Matthew settle their arms around me, in the nest underneath the tree in our very own secret garden.

At last, I love and I'm loved.

I flush with excitement. Who else will be saved like I've been? I know now that the right pack bonds can change everything.

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now **PUCK AND HER BLADES (PACK BONDS BOOK FIVE)****

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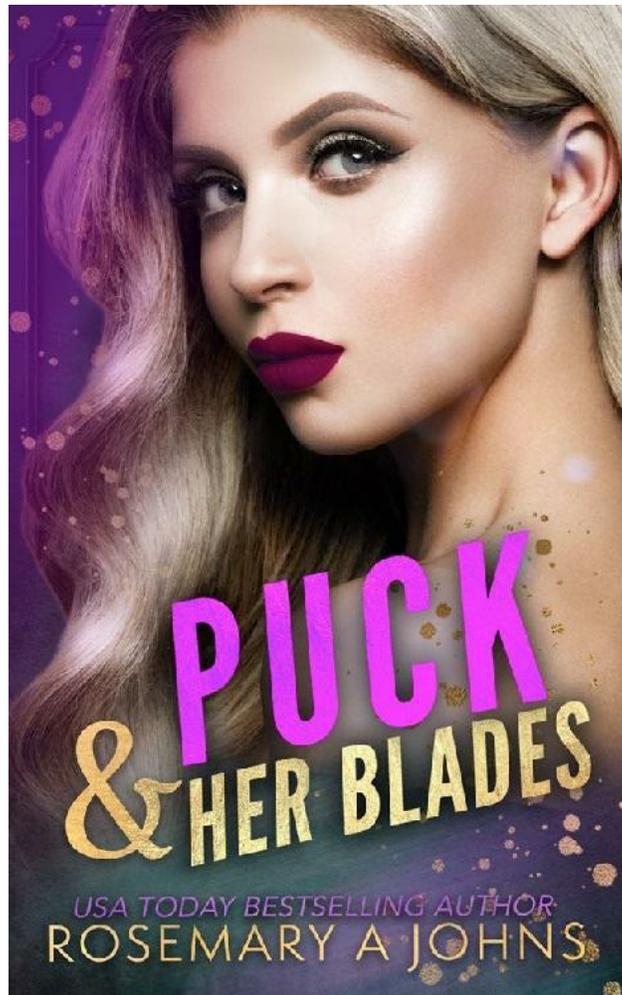
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WHAT TO READ NEXT: PUCK AND HER BLADES!



My name is Puck, and I'm the only Omega hockey mascot.

After a tragic figure skating accident, I'm marked as a Reject Omega and

sold to the most notorious team in the Alpha NHL to become their puck mascot. All alone, I'm a nobody who's only brave enough to throw off my costume and dance at night. When a dangerous heat hits me mid-game, surely the star players, the Blades, won't leap from the ice to save me?

But will the Alpha Captain, his wild child best friend, their fiercely protective Beta, and the sweet and funny male Omega put me above their hockey? I'm falling hard for these men who smell like my dream pack, but will they bond with a reject?

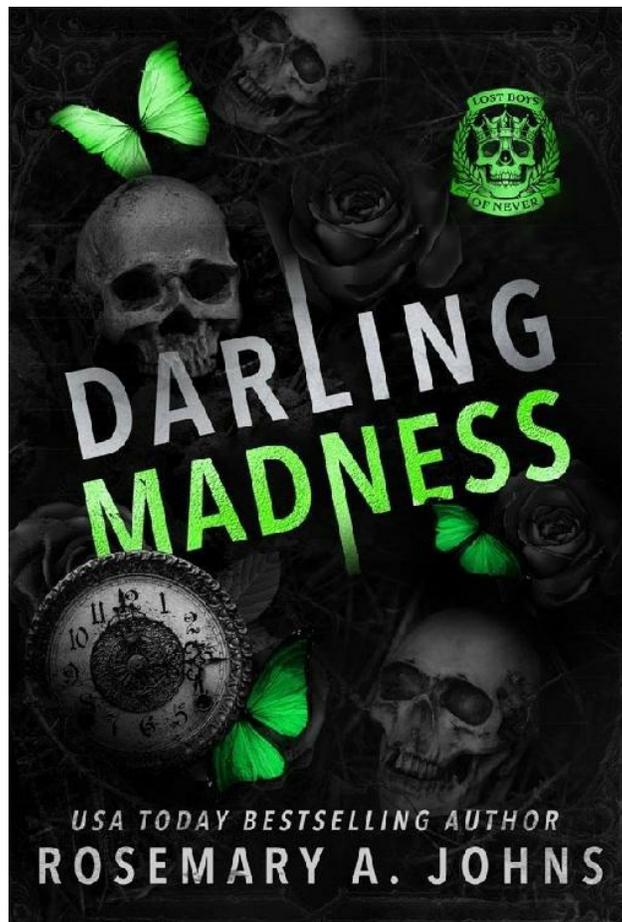
The Blades always play to win, but when all our secrets are revealed, will they lose me?

A puck. Her blades. A pack bond that changes everything.

[ONE-CLICK FOR PUCK AND HER BLADES' STORY HERE!](#)

LOST BOYS OF NEVER

READ ROSEMARY A JOHNS' NEW STANDALONE
CONTEMPORARY



Reverse Harem Retelling of Peter Pan!

The last time that I could be touched without flinching was five years

ago, when my brother tried to burn me alive.

Now, Mom promises me a new life, billionaire stepdad, safety. And all on the mysterious, paradise island of Never. But it's a lie. Never's a nightmare of secrets and dangerous desires, a cover to hide an asylum for the most broken heirs of the super-rich elite.

Now, I'm one of them.

All I wanted was a chance at a normal life. But instead, I'm claimed as the Darling of the dark and ruthless men who run Never — my stepbrothers.

Peter, Shadow, and Pan.

They're cold, wild, psychos.

I should run from and not towards them. They're forbidden. Only, they're as beautiful, as they're damaged. And their scars match my own. When they swear to burn down the world to keep me safe, I finally have a chance to no longer fear the flames...or their touch.

Except, there's more secrets to reveal. There's a killer on the island. And he's coming for me next.

If you fly to Never, you may never grow up...

Our darling. Our madness. Our Never.

[Click here and fly to Never...](#)

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“My shifter side claims you as my fated mate.” The demon merman touches the Soul Bond mark on his muscled chest.

He’s seduction and sin. A predator who knows that their prey is willing. My shifter. Enemy. *Sweet monster*.

His gaze meets mine with a piercing intensity. “Dive into the water, my princess.”

When I leap into the water, his tail wraps around my middle, and his plush lips taste mine.

“I’ve been alone for centuries,” he growls. “Will you reject me?”

[GRAB MY DEMON OF WATER HERE NOW AND BE READY FOR](#)

THE REBEL DEMONS!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ROSEMARY A JOHNS is a USA Today bestselling and award-winning romance and fantasy author, music fanatic, and paranormal anti-hero addict. She writes sexy shifters and immortals, swoonworthy book boyfriends, and epic battles.

Winner of the Silver Award in the National Wishing Shelf Book Awards. Finalist in the IAN Book of the Year Awards. Winner in the Best Indie Book of the Year Awards. Runner-up in the Best Fantasy Book of the Year, Reality Bites Book Awards. Honorable Mention in the Readers' Favorite Book Awards. Shortlisted in the International Rubery Book Awards.

Rosemary is also a traditionally published short story writer. She studied history at Oxford University and ran her own theater company. She's always been a rebel...

Thanks for leaving a review. You're awesome!

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APPENDIX ONE: KING PACK

Braxton, CEO of King Alpha Company, Chief Alpha

Matthew, Companion Beta, bodyguard and personal trainer

Didier, Omega Reject and Companion

Jewel, Omega Companion

Trenton, Alpha, Braxton's cousin

Weston, Head Alpha, Deputy Prime Minister, Braxton's father

Elizabeth, Omega, Braxton's stepmother

APPENDIX TWO: OMEGAS

Jex, Omega Reject, ex-movie star and film director, bonded to Champion pack

Didier, Omega Reject and Companion, bonded to King pack

Jewel, Omega Companion, bonded to King pack

Elizabeth, Omega, Braxton's stepmother in King pack

APPENDIX THREE: BETAS

Asher, Matthew's twin, ice hockey player in Blades pack

Matthew, Companion Beta, bodyguard and personal trainer, bonded to King pack

Gibson, Carer Beta in Companion House

Andres, Jewel's father

APPENDIX FOUR: ALPHAS

Braxton, CEO of King Alpha Company, Chief Alpha of King pack

Trenton, Alpha, Braxton's cousin

Weston, Head Alpha, Braxton's father

Falcon, Senator, Chief Alpha of Knight pack

Xavier, Second Alpha, tech billionaire of Knight pack

Duke Dante, Sheriff and Second Alpha in Marshal pack

Benjamin, Omega rights lawyer, Second Alpha in Champion pack

APPENDIX FIVE: DIDIER'S FRENCH

Non = No

Oui = Yes

Mais oui = But yes

Mon coeur = My heart (endearment)

Mon amour = My love (endearment)

Mon petit oiseau = My little bird (endearment)

Mon prince = My prince (endearment)

Ma raison de vivre = My reason for living (endearment)

L'amour de ma vie = Love of my life (endearment)

Le bijou = Jewel

Le oiseau = Bird

Mon dieu = My God

C'est magnifique = That's wonderful

Merde = Shit

Petit = Little

Bonjour = Hello