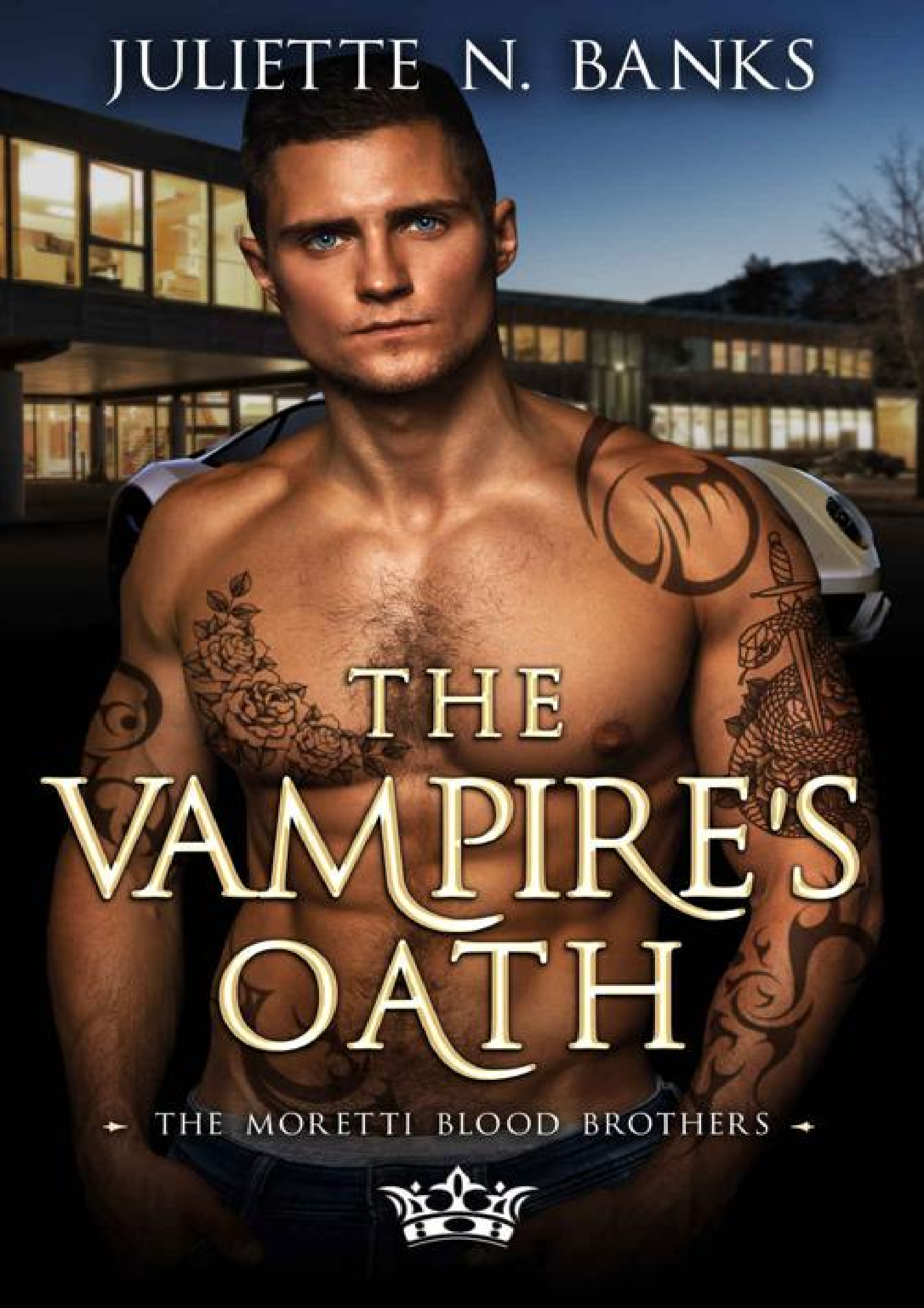


JULIETTE N. BANKS

A muscular man with short dark hair and blue eyes is the central focus. He is shirtless, wearing a dark crown-shaped belt buckle. He has several tattoos: a large rose on his left chest, a snake on his right arm, and a circular design on his left shoulder. The background shows a building with lit windows at dusk.

THE
VAMPIRE'S
OATH

← THE MORETTI BLOOD BROTHERS →



THE
VAMPIRE'S
OATH



By Juliette N. Banks

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THE
VAMPIRE'S
OATH



CHAPTER ONE

“**F***rà*, I can’t believe we’re working together again.” Ben said to him, the Italian slang for brother—or rather, *bro*—rolling off his tongue.

“Except now, you’re not my boss.” Alex grinned and lifted his glass of beer in cheers. Ben, an incredible leader, had been the head assassin when they were at Ari Moretti’s organization, The Institute. It was a loss to the team when he joined the senior Moretti royal army.

In saying that, Oliver, who now held the head assassin position, was doing a great job.

Had he wanted it? Maybe.

Now? Not at all.

Not because he’d won the top spot in the Vampire Games and was awarded the coveted SLC job. He knew he couldn’t remain an assassin after what had happened. The timing was serendipitous in some ways.

Yet, the nightmares still haunted him.

“He’ll still boss you around. Trust me,” Kurt said. “Either that, or Craig will step into the sun because he can’t live another day dealing with his...charm.”

Marcus snorted, and Ben smirked into his glass.

“You think wonder boy here would get promoted to commander?” Lance asked, referring to Ben.

All the SLCs, except Tom who was on duty, had taken Alex out for a celebratory drink.

He was joining their team. A big deal to the race, the royal army, and to him. Alex had nearly thrown in the towel after eighty years of working for and being trained by Ari—the most ancient vampire in their race.

As an assassin, Alex had taken down the worst of the worst in the bad guy world. Some of them dressed in Armani. Some of them not dressed at all.

Motherfuckers.

It was just another day at the office, every day for years, and he was proud of what they did. Until the worst happened.

He'd killed a woman.

An innocent woman.

Jason, a former assassin colleague, had been with him when it happened. Repeatedly, he'd told Alex it wasn't his fault.

He knew, but it didn't change the single fact it had been *his* bullet which killed her. Shit like that happened in black ops. Not often, but you could only control so much in an environment. If somebody moved when you'd told your trigger finger to fire and the bullet had left the chamber, then there was nothing you could do.

Except some situations fucked you up more than others.

Alex had killed a lot of people. Vampires *and* humans. There was bad among both races. Not just bad, downright fucking evil.

Which meant they saw life and death, for those who chose that life, differently.

Among them walked the innocent. Victims.

The woman he had shot was not there by choice. He'd seen it in her eyes as her life ended.

As his soul screamed.

His parents had brought him up, like most vampires, to value females. They created life. As a slow-breeding race, the emphasis on this was greater than they witnessed in humans.

A baby being born was a huge celebration.

The first vampire came into existence in 500 A.D., and now their population sat at around ten million. A slow growth compared to the eight billion humans roaming the Earth.

His father had told him females were perceived as, and were, weaker than males, and it was his job to protect them.

The man had included human women in his teachings.

Perhaps this was why he had chosen the assassin life? When he'd learned of the darker side, he'd been drawn to eradicating it and helping to protect the weak among them.

The reality was, no matter how many they took out, new people stepped into their shoes. Alex had begun to wonder if it was simply a fact of life. There would always be a percentage of evil in the world.

Still, he wasn't a philosopher. He was a killer.

And now a vampire who had taken a female's life.

Alex had been plagued by nightmares and, finally, had known the assassin business wasn't for him anymore. He couldn't continue to do his job.

Alex had contacted Oliver and Ari and quit.

Knocking off bad guys who were running drug or trafficking rings was fine. *That* he could handle.

Killing an innocent female who was there against her will?

No fucking way.

Doing so had destroyed his soul.

Alex had been clear, when he started with Ari all those years ago, he wouldn't kill any females. Ari knew his moral code and never assigned him those tasks. They did discuss how it could be a liability, but Alex had assured him if one of his team members were in danger, he'd take the shot.

No questions asked.

It just might not be between the eyes.

Ari had accepted that after his qualifying period, saying Alex was an exceptional soldier and he trusted Alex would make the right decision if it ever came to it.

He had.

There were many times he'd slowed down a woman by clipping her arm or dropping a bullet in her thigh.

All they needed was a little time and distraction.

They were vampires, after all.

This event had been different. Graphically fucking different and still haunted him months later.

Ari had spent hours talking him out of his resignation. Then, a few weeks later, Alex had been halfway out the door when Ari rang him about the SLC position and the Vampire Games.

It had given him pause.

Prior to shooting the female, he'd put his hand up for the head assassin position, which had gone to Olivier. So, he wasn't sure it was worth his time.

Success or failure aside, Alex had to be sure in his mind this job would be different. He had taken half a day to think about it, most of it spent punching the hell out of a boxing bag, then agreed to compete.

Why? Because assassins killed. SLCs defended.

The difference was minor but huge in his mind.

Then he'd won.

Now here he was, an SL-*fucking*-C.

Senior Warrior Lieutenant for Vincent Moretti, king of the vampire race.

He along with Marcus, Lance, Kurt, Ben, and Tom made up the SLCs, as they were known, of the king's army. Craig was the commander. Brayden, the prince, their captain.

Alex had beaten some strong contenders. One had been Darnell, and the other a female warrior, Charlotte Vecchia.

She was Marcus's mate. How the guy was okay with her being out in the field, in constant danger, Alex had no idea.

He couldn't handle it, and he wasn't even mated.

Was he sexist? No.

Fine, maybe he was. But he'd rather be accused of some "*ist*" or another than watch another female be slain.

“Congratulations, Alex,” Kurt said, lifting his sweating glass of beer.

“Welcome to the team,” Marcus and Lance both added.

Ben lifted his glass and smirked.

Alex nodded humbly. “Thanks. It’s an honor. You guys were my heroes when I was growing up. Except Ben. He’s just a pain in the ass.”

“Here, here,” Lance said.

Glasses clanged as they sashed together in cheers, and laughter rang out.

“*Salut*, dickface.” Ben grinned.

In about a week, Alex would swear his oath to the king, and then it would be official. For now, it was about settling into the castle, joining the team in some routine jobs, and getting to know everyone.

Except one vampire.

Casey.

The too sassy, too sexy, female lieutenant was another who should not be out in the field. She wasn’t dying on his watch.

Casey had caught his eye over the past few weeks, and the chemistry between them was blistering. Not that she’d admit it.

Her feistiness got his cock hard as a rock, but he was still too raw, the images of the female he’d killed front and center.

Alex knew working with her would be challenging. Not because of their attraction—he’d fuck her if he wanted—but because he’d be on her six the entire time.

He had to make sure they weren’t rostered on together.

Or that he got to know her.

The way she swayed those hips and tossed her long dark hair, pretending she wasn’t aware of him, made him hot as hell.

Alex knew she desired him.

What she didn't like was his constant taunting.

Good.

He did it on purpose to keep her at arm's length. The moment they had met, he'd felt his body want to own her screams. Instead, he was at the top of her shit list.

Good. Again.

Was it? You want her, idiot.

No. She was a female warrior, and he had to keep his distance. Charlotte was Marcus's job to look after. Who was taking care of Casey?

Calling her *Pip Squeak* wasn't exactly complimentary, and it wound her up. Compared to him, she was tiny as fuck. Reason number fifty-seven she should remain inside the castle walls and stay safe.

If it were up to him, she would.

If it were up to him, she'd be tied to his bedposts, and he'd pleasure her twenty-four-seven.

But she wasn't, and she had an attitude the size of the Sahara Desert. So, it was better if they remained frenemies.

"Hello, boys," a sweet, smoky voice said.

Fire raced to his groin.

Fucking great.

Alex put on his game face. Smirk in place. *And go.*

He turned. "Hello, Pip Squeak."

"Hello, Dexter," Casey said, dark angry eyes challenging him.

"Who?" Ben asked, frowning.

Game on, beautiful. Game on.



CHAPTER TWO

Alex followed Brayden Moretti down the hall, Craig beside him.

“Okay, I’m just going to get this off my chest and never mention it again,” Alex said. “I’m not expecting you to remember me, but I attended one of your orgies in England back in the eighteen hundreds.”

Brayden turned and shot him a smirk. “Oh yeah?”

“Fuck, man. Those were the days.”

“How’d you get an invite?” Craig asked, grinning.

“I was shagging a duchess. She wanted to get a bit kinky, so she got us an invite.” Alex remembered the threesome they’d started with at the Moretti castle. It had quickly turned into a five-person orgy, and then he’d lost sight of the big-breasted noblewoman.

When the prince had arrived, things had shifted, most of the females being drawn to the powerful alpha. Alex had watched him be very selective who wrapped their mouth around his cock. It was subtle, but the powerful warrior was totally aware of who was in the room and how he conducted himself.

When the assassins began working with the Moretti royal family several months back, Alex had wondered if the prince would remember him. Not that he expected Brayden to be all like: *Oh yeah, I recognize you. You had your face in that redhead’s pussy. The tall, dark-haired guy sucking your dick.*

He could have.

But he didn’t.

“I bet the duchess got a bit more than she expected. They were always the naughtiest of them all.” Craig laughed. “I’m a very happily married male, but I’m not going to lie—those were happy times.”

Brayden snorted. “I’ll kill either of you for repeating this to my pregnant princess, but yeah, not the worst time of my life,” he added quietly.

They continued along the corridors of the Moretti castle in Maine.

Alex let out a laugh when the prince winked at him. “I get it. Neither of you would trade your mates to go back.”

“Nope,” they both replied simultaneously.

Firmly.

Brayden pushed through a door, after planting his big thumb on a security panel, and led them into a huge office. Near large windows, there was a big wooden desk with a couple of armchairs sitting on the other side. Nearby, a round table stood with a bunch more chairs.

The walls were covered in bookshelves and decorated with paintings that looked old and classic. One was of King Frances. Another a scene in what looked like Italy.

“Van Gogh,” Brayden said, sitting.

“Really? Nice.” Alex wasn’t surprised. The castle was covered in the classic works. None as pricey as this, and he bet there were a few more in the royal chambers.

“I prefer Monet.” Craig leaned and dug his hands into his black sweatpants.

When there was silence, Alex turned and caught Brayden raising his brows at the enormous vampire.

“What? I like art,” Craig said, shrugging.

“Metal art.” Brayden laughed. “In the form of weapons.”

Alex smirked. Then he just stood and waited for further instruction.

He’d worked with Brayden and Craig a number of times as an assassin out in the field. Royalty was disregarded, and you just got the job done. Now, here in the castle, Brayden was the prince of their race. Alex wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do.

He hadn't bowed yet.

Fuck, maybe he should have.

"Sit," the prince said, pointing to a chair.

Alex did as requested, while Craig leaned against a bookshelf several feet away.

Brayden stared at him a moment and clicked his fingers. "Ah, prince stuff. Right. Okay, here's how it works. Official engagements, you must refer to me as the prince. Unless—and I mean this—it interferes or delays the protection of the king, royal family, or our people. Otherwise, it's Brayden or captain."

"Got it."

"I don't want you to bow. I want you to do your job. Don't ever make me repeat that again," Brayden reinforced.

"Clear as day," Alex said.

It was. Brayden was a practical warrior, and because they'd worked together in exactly that way, he was completely comfortable with those orders.

"All the SLCs report to Craig. Ultimately, to me. All of us to Vincent." Brayden clicked something on his keyboard.

"That is, unless Bray or I give you an urgent and direct order to get the king and heir apparent somewhere safe, then ignore Vincent's objections," Craig said, shaking his head. "He will. Every damn time. It's like fucking clockwork."

Alex glanced at Brayden for confirmation.

"Yeah, I can't officially say that, but...what he said." Brayden shook his head, mirroring the commander's response. "At the end of the day, the king's life, and now prince Lucas, is the priority. Above all."

Wow.

Talk about a stark reminder of what their responsibilities were in these important roles. Threats to the royal family and their race were ongoing. Most vampires had no idea what they did each and every day.

Alex was also acutely aware they had not mentioned the queen. He was sure every conversation after this would include her, but this was the cold hard truth.

Vincent Moretti was the king.

His son, Lucas, was the heir apparent. Those two lives were the priority.

Then, Brayden was next in line to the throne.

“He’s worked it out.” Craig lifted his chin in a nod.

What?

“He has,” Brayden said, sitting back. “My grandparents birthed this race, and it is my life’s purpose and responsibility to keep a Moretti on the rightful throne. Whether that be my brother, my nephew, or God help us, me.”

Alex nodded.

Brayden crossed his arms. “That’s not to say the queen and princess aren’t important—they fucking are—but if the shit hits the fan and you have a hard decision to make, remember this conversation. I’ve had it with every single one of the SLCs.”

Craig shuffled beside him, uncrossing and crossing his ankles.

“It also means, if Vincent and Lucas are compromised, Brayden is the survivor and goes to the top of the list.” Craig raised a brow at the prince. “Just to be clear. He kinda glossed over that. Again.”

The prince growled.

Jesus.

If they thought Vincent would be hard to cage and keep protected, the prince would be impossible.

One glance at Craig told him they were thinking the same thing. The way he held his eye for a brief moment gave Alex the impression this conversation would continue in private.

Craig would be the one left to enforce it if the king died.

End of story.

Alex really didn't want to witness the battle that could take place between these two should it ever happen. Even if he was a betting man, which he wasn't, Alex could never choose a winner.

"Never going to happen, so forget that," Brayden said, brushing it off as if reading his mind. "If we do our jobs, it won't. So, Alex, congratulations. I'm happy to have you on the team."

"Thank you," he replied, lowering his head.

It felt like an enormous honor. Not only that—the timing had been perfect. God knows what he would have done after leaving The Institute.

He had enough money in savings to last him decades. Maybe longer. But he wasn't a male who liked to sit still.

Alex was a warrior, and a male born to protect and defend.

Sometimes, that meant taking lives.

Just not goddamn women.

"The oath ceremony is in a week. You can get started now or take a break. The option is yours," Brayden offered.

Alex was about to say he would start now—he could get his belongings packed up and shipped from Seattle, where The Institute was located, over to Maine—when the prince's phone rang.

"Excuse me." Brayden swiped and lifted the phone to his ear.

At the same time, Craig's phone beeped.

The two huge males glanced at each other. A dark serious look.

"Looks like I'm starting today." Alex laughed when the prince stood abruptly.

"Gather the other SLCs, even if off duty, and meet us in the operations room." Brayden walked past him and slapped

him on the shoulder as Alex stood. “Welcome aboard.”

“Fuck me.” Craig pressed away from the wall. “Go time!”

Alex headed to Max Bar, where he knew Marcus was hanging with his mate, Charlotte, and... Casey.

Not that he was keeping tabs on her.



CHAPTER THREE

Casey sipped her beer and wished everyone would stop talking about Alex *goddamn* Giordano.

Sure, he'd won the Vampire Games.

Whatever.

Only because her bestie, Charlotte, had defaulted. Now she was mated to an SLC who was madly in love with her. For Casey, it meant the two worlds between the senior warriors were blurred. Social worlds, at least. There used to be a solid line between the two.

Max Bar was theirs.

The SLCs socialized elsewhere.

Now, not so much.

It got worse. Their new friend, Madison, was mated to Ben, another SLC. He and Alex had worked together as assassins in Seattle and were good buddies.

Casey was sure he was an excellent warrior; in fact, she knew he was. She'd watched him in the Games and privately admired his—*cough*, body, *cough*—skill.

In person, the guy was insufferable.

Obnoxious.

The fact he was hot as sin, with eyes that pierced through her well-installed barriers, was irrelevant. Annoying.

It wasn't just her noticing either. Stories of Alex flirting with every female in the castle were filtering in the hallways and changing rooms.

How many had he slept with already?

If he thought Casey was going to be the next notch on his bedpost, Alex was going to be highly disappointed.

She was not interested.

“I knew you two lovebirds were mates,” Casey said, moving her attention away from the irritating male everyone wouldn’t stop mentioning.

Marcus shot her a look of disbelief. “How?”

“The way you looked at each other. Plus, all the shagging.” Casey shrugged.

“You told her every time we had sex?” Marcus asked, looking at his mate.

Charlotte tilted her head, thinking, and Casey pressed her lips together to stop her laugh. “Ummm. Let me see. No! I didn’t tell her anything.”

Was that really true?

No, not completely.

“You told me a couple of things. Be honest,” Casey said, and they both giggled.

“Jesus,” Marcus mumbled into his drink, shaking his head as the two kept laughing.

“Chicks...” Darnell, a friend of theirs, chugged back his beer.

Tristan, their other guy friend who hung out with them, sniggered into his beer. “Don’t ask for details. It will just haunt you.”

All three of the men nodded at each other.

“Seriously, though. You didn’t know, Case. You told me to find a new fuck buddy,” Charlotte admitted.

Marcus growled, and Casey rolled her eyes. The whole protective male thing was so boring. How Charlotte was into it, she didn’t know. Her friend was a powerful warrior.

Casey appreciated their power and dominance out in the field when they were at work, and sure, maybe in the bedroom, all that testosterone and ripped muscle was hot.

But she didn’t want or desire some guy dominating and taking over her life.

Casey valued her freedom and could look after herself.

She'd fought for it.

For however long it lasted...

Her brain shut down that thought fast.

"Did he look at her the same way our newest SLC looks at you?" Tristan boldly teased Casey.

"Oh, boy." Darnell rubbed his forehead.

Casey pointed her beer at the vampire. "Say his name and die."

Taking his life into his own hands, Marcus shrugged. "Well, *he who shall not be named* will be making his oath to the king in the upcoming ceremony. Are you not going to attend?"

Casey opened her mouth to reply, then let out a loud moan when she saw who'd just walked in, as if he'd been summoned like the devil he was.

Her nipples pebbled, and heat rushed to the space between her legs.

Damn it, body. Stop it. He's the enemy.

Her mouth watered, and Casey forced herself to swallow really, really slowly. Which was a waste of time. Alex was a trained assassin. Trained to spot the slightest movement.

What was he doing here?

Casey had thought he was going back to Seattle until the ceremony. If he'd forgotten, she'd be happy to remind him.

Or provide a map.

Or plane ticket.

"Hello, Pip Squeak." Alex smirked, using his new pet name for her. The one lacking any intelligence or creativity, given she was five foot four with a small frame.

Fuck petite. Casey had layers of muscle and skills she was dying to use on him.

Non-sexually.

“Hello, asshole.” She raised a brow, looking bored.

Which just made him grin wider.

Casey was going to poke her finger through those dimples if he didn't leave her alone. Slap her hand over his unshaved square jaw, until those stunning gray eyes watered.

Of course, he was just as broad and tall as the other males on his new team, but something about those round muscular shoulders made her want to touch.

His eyes slid over her body, and she shivered, wriggling uncomfortably. She never should have worn her cropped back top and workout shorts. Her damn nipples were like headlights for all to see.

Casey crossed her arms, and his smile widened, his eyes connecting with hers and heating her to the core.

Fuck.

Then his smile faded. He turned to the male opposite her. “Marcus.”

“Alex,” the senior vampire replied.

“We have a situation. Need you in the ops room immediately.”

They could all hear the seriousness in his voice.

Marcus's body stiffened, and he dropped his beer on the table. Casey watched the two senior warriors, wondering if she should head to the training room to prepare to be sent out into the field.

Marcus, who had been an SLC for hundreds of years, didn't give them any instruction, so Casey swirled the last of her beer around in the bottom of her bottle and watched him kiss Charlotte farewell.

Then he and Alex teleported out.

“That didn't sound good,” Darnell said.

Tristan threw back the last of his beer and slid it across the table. “It didn’t. Shall we head to the showers, just in case?”

They all stood, their training and intuition kicking in.

Twenty minutes later, they were dressed in their Moretti fatigues and given instructions to head out.



CHAPTER FOUR

Vincent scanned his thumb on the panel and entered the operations room. One look at Brayden's face and he could tell the prince was pissed off.

So was he.

Six other faces turned to greet him.

"Gentlemen." Vincent walked to the front of the room, but not before he laid a heavy hand on Alex's shoulder. "Welcome to the team, young man."

"Thank you, your majesty," Alex replied.

Vincent caught Brayden's eye as he tossed his phone on the table and turned to face the room.

I haven't said anything yet. The team is ready to deploy, the prince telepathed him.

Vincent nodded, then glanced at Craig, who was standing with his head hanging, staring at the ground. He wasn't fooled, though; the commander was as alert as any predator at the top of the food chain.

Which just happened to be vampires.

Craig, one of the most powerful.

The commander was also just as furious with him as the prince was.

Sometimes, being the king sucked ass.

These warriors, and his brother, were the best at what they did. Protecting the throne. They didn't, however, understand the fine balance of democracy and working with the humans, now they were somewhat exposed.

It had changed everything.

Whenever something strange happened in the world, his fucking phone rang.

Whenever an unexplained phenomenon happened, his fucking phone rang.

Vincent was part of a group of world leaders, which included the U.S. president, who were privy to their existence, and they were still trying to pin the blame for many unusual human events on their race.

None of which were true or had any basis in reality.

However, if this was the worst he had to deal with, after the leak a year or so ago which had sent them all into a spin, then so be it.

The leak had been spun into a fake news campaign by his communications expert, Brianna—Craig's mate—and bought them time.

However, the leak had gone past the President of the United States, James Calder, with enough detail, leaving Vincent with little choice but to confess their existence. Both agreed humanity was not ready to know. So, they had formed a team to prepare the world, and someone had come up with the name: Operation Daylight.

The monthly project meetings gave them the opportunity to put in place policies and laws and brainstorm the challenges that would come up when the entire world discovered who they were.

During the last meeting, it had been tabled that a fucking FAQ sheet for vampire beginners was required.

His father and grandfather, powerful vampires, would be rolling their eyes. In their days, swords had clashed. Vincent had spent the week replying to emails about whether vampires slept in goddamn coffins or could eat gluten.

The truth was, knowledge of their race would create fear and panic; however, it appeared their planning time might be coming to an end.

They weren't ready.

Not even close.

Then there was greed and power.

Vincent glanced around the room at the males. They were the most powerful, skilled vampires in the world and had seen what the worst of humanity did when they learned of them.

A handful of human scientists had discovered their kind from one of the rebel vampires in Italy. BioZen, the pharmaceutical company, had kidnapped a dozen or so vampires, using a serum which weakened them, and used them as lab rats.

Cruelly and without their consent.

Like any vampire would give it.

His team, and with the assistance of President Calder, had found the majority of the captured vampires.

Some of them still alive.

Some of them hadn't survived.

The Moretti team had finally tracked down and taken the human leading the BioZen experiments. Xander Tomassi. For weeks, they held and questioned him. He'd told them a few things, but Vincent knew he was still keeping secrets close to his chest.

The warriors had all the skill, and desire, to torture the truth out of the human, but this was where things got tricky. Being a member of Operation Daylight was akin to the UN. There were rules now. He had to play by them.

Vincent would've also been happy to just happen to step out of the room, letting Craig do a little torture of his own to get the piece-of-shit human talking.

But humans marked easily.

And healed slowly.

POTUS had already visited the human once, so it wouldn't be good for future negotiations and credibility if they went around chopping up humans. Frankly, it wasn't his MO, but Tomassi had done a lot of cruel inhumane acts. He was a monster.

Tomassi deserved no respect or kindness from Vincent or his males. Lucky for him, he'd come to them at a time when political drivers were more of a priority.

For now.

Vampires lived a long damn time.

Which brought him to the news he was here to deliver to the team. One they would not like.

He was a direct man so got right to the point. Vincent slid his hands into his pockets. "We have to let Xander Tomassi go."

"The fuck?"

"You have got to be shitting me."

"No fucking way."

Vincent let them get it out of their systems. He knew Craig and Brayden wouldn't shut them up, and frankly, he didn't blame them.

Finally, he held up his hand.

"I agree, but that's not how things work nowadays. Soon—and probably sooner than we'd like—we'll be a visible part of this democratic world. Having on record that we held and tortured Tomassi is not how we want to begin our public relationship with the human race."

It was almost word for word what James Calder had said to him during their conversation earlier.

The man had been right, although Vincent hated to admit it.

Vincent hated, to the very core of his soul, Xander Tomassi. He had caused more pain and trouble than any other foe in Vincent's long life or reign.

He'd tortured vampires and fucked with the DNA of one particular vampire, changing him into a hybrid. The latter wasn't known by any member of the Operation Daylight team.

And Vincent planned to keep it that way.

Announcing one race to humanity was enough. The hybrid wolves...they were still learning about themselves.

The hybrids were a small group, and Sage, his lead scientist, had said there was a chance it could impact their health, length of life, or any other terrible thing.

In short, they might not live long.

Vincent had provided a home for the dozen or so vampires in Greenwood, Maine, where they were transitioning into their wolves and discovering more information they then fed back to Sage.

Important work.

Highly confidential work.

“The timing sucks,” Craig said. “I would’ve had him singing a tune if you’d given me ten minutes alone with him.”

“I would have clapped from the sidelines,” Kurt added.

“Why now?” Alex asked.

Smart kid.

Vincent was looking forward to watching how the newest recruit worked out. Ari trained Alex and he had substantial experience.

“The Russians,” Vincent admitted. “When I shared with President Calder that Nikolay Mikhaylov was in the United States and the proud owner of hybrid super soldiers after they took Charlotte—”

“Fuckers,” Marcus growled.

Fair enough. She was his mate.

“... it changed everything,” Vincent explained.

Not only had they messed with one of his vampire’s DNA, changing him into a wolf, Xander Tomassi and his team had taken former military men and blended vampire and human genes.

Then hello, super soldier.

Or hybrid soldier, as they were now referring to them as.

Brayden tossed a pen on the desk in front of him. “BioZen also funds many of the politicians in the United States, so we can’t just blow up their buildings and destroy their business.”

“It’s more than just funding. They provide important medications for humans. They *do* save lives.” Vincent shook his head. “We’d be killing millions of humans if we wiped out their production.”

The human world had become a maze of power and money, far more political than it had been when Vincent’s father was king. Back then, things were more straightforward, despite the desire for power being something that had existed forever.

The world was a much more complicated place.

“So he’s just going to walk out the door?” Tom asked, dropping his booted feet on the floor, and leaning his elbows on his knees, with a look of disgust.

Brayden ran a hand through his hair and took a step forward. “No. We’re going to hand him over to the U.S. Coastguard.”

Vincent watched the faces of all his senior warriors. They were smart as fuck. He could see them calculating the risk and all the things that could go wrong.

Likely far more than he could imagine.

“Something smells fishy,” Alex piped up.

“Agree,” Kurt said, scowling.

“I have every reason to trust Calder.” Vincent glanced at Brayden. “He simply wants the human in his custody, which is the right thing to do. If this all blows open and it becomes known we have Tomassi in our vampire prison, and the president of the free world knew about it, it would create outrage.”

While painting vampires in the wrong light.

Telling them *why* they were holding the pharmaceutical executive wasn’t an option. The media would want to know how Xander’s people were able to capture strong vampires.

No one could ever discover knowledge of the serum. It was *the* most dangerous threat to the vampire race. Should they release it to the public, or put into the wrong hands, the game changed.

Immediately.

Brayden crossed his arms. "It's not without risk. So we are going tight on this. I want two backup teams with you all. Tom and Lance, remain here with me to protect the king."

Vincent's mind flashed to his son. Lucas was just now talking, but he was heir to the throne. Still so young and vulnerable. Brayden and every male in this room included Lucas in their line of thought. Every day.

Craig nodded to Tom, who pulled up the current schedule on the board. His eyes roamed the complex charts, then Craig nodded.

"We'll need to get a few vamps out of bed, but it's doable," Craig said. "Tom, do your magic, buddy."

"On it," the SLC replied.

"Kurt, Marcus, you're both on point. Alex, why don't you join them," Craig added. "Prep your teams."

"Roger that." Kurt stood and zipped up his black jacket with the "M" on it.

The Moretti logo, signifying centuries of history or rule over the vampire race. The creation of their race.

Vincent dropped his hands to his hips and looked every male in the eye. "I don't make this decision lightly. I know you've hunted him for months, wanting revenge. Handing him over goes against every bone in my body, but my focus is on the big picture, for the future safety of our vampires. He will never walk free; I can guarantee you that."

A few of them nodded. Their unhappiness warranted.

"Take care of yourselves out there," Vincent said and, with a nod to his brother, left the warriors to do what they did best.



CHAPTER FIVE

Alex glanced around the training room. Teams of Moretti warriors were preparing to set out. Kurt had given everyone a quick briefing on the situation, while Alex and Marcus had opened the weapons cupboard and started pulling out the good stuff.

This was a truly unknown situation.

After the king had gone, Brayden and Craig pulled them up and told them to keep their eyes peeled.

The president might be telling them he wanted Xander back for diplomatic reasons, or he might know something he wasn't sharing.

Brayden didn't take chances with the safety of his warriors, so it was truth talk.

They didn't know who wanted Xander free, but all of their instincts were pinging.

Alex had been in the business long enough to know, with this many variables, it was an extremely dangerous situation. Even if it looked like a simple handover.

Yeah, sure. Where vampires were handing over a human in a world that assumed they were fictional characters.

Surprise, motherfuckers, we're real. With all the fangs and sexy fucking we're depicted with in your stories.

Alex snorted quietly to himself and strapped a knife to his ankle. Then he took the Glock Marcus handed him and slid it into his holster, under his black Moretti jacket. He did the same with the second gun on the other side.

Fangs and fucking—that was his life. Along with killing. Hopefully, less of the latter.

Alex stood, locked and loaded.

“Take this.” Kurt handed him a small syringe filled with clear liquid.

“What is it?” Alex asked, taking it and turning it over. The syringe was housed in a thick white plastic surround that looked easy enough to snap open.

“It’s adrenaline. If you get shot with that goddamn serum, stab yourself with it and teleport the fuck away immediately.” Kurt pointed to it, holding his gaze with intense seriousness.

Brayden walked over to them.

“No heroics with this, Alex. So far, everyone has woken up groggy but without any lasting effects,” the prince said. “Get as far away as you can to safety, somewhere you won’t wake up under the sun, and then you can call for an evac.”

Christ.

Reality was kicking his ass.

“You’ll have about ninety seconds. Two minutes at best,” Marcus added, joining them. “Don’t wait. Teleporting will drain you, so you’ll need every second.”

Ninety seconds was a good amount of time for a vampire, but Marcus was right. Teleporting did use a lot of energy, and it might mean you were stuck where you landed.

Vampires could only teleport to a place they knew. That might mean a position outside a building. If the sun came up while the serum took you under, you’d be ash my daylight.

If the people who had shot you didn’t capture you and... Well, he was one of the few who had been privy to the data obtained from BioZen and knew what the scientists had done to the vampires taken.

A shiver ran through his body.

He’d rather meet the golden globe in the sky.

“You got shot recently,” Alex said to Marcus. He’d been called onto a job while participating in the Games, to utilize his sniper skills while they retrieved Charlotte from the Russians.

“Yeah, trust me. It’s not nice,” Marcus replied. “Don’t hesitate. You’re no good to anyone once you go down.”

Or dead.

“Correction. You’re a liability,” Brayden added firmly. “Teleport, then call if you can’t get back to a Moretti location.”

“Yes, sir,” Alex said. Then his eyes slid across the room as a petite vampire burst through the doors.

A sexy petite vampire, full of fire.

“Found it!” Casey called out, walking over to join her team.

Goddamn it.

Alex crouched and redid his shoelaces to hide his reaction to her presence. His brows bunched so hard he had a mono brow. Lifting his eyes, he watched her pull her long, dark wavy hair around and weave it into a side plait. Then, using some kind of black magic, she tucked it up somewhere, and it turned into a bun.

No fucking way.

She had to stay here.

Visions of Casey being shot with the serum and being taken by their enemies flashed before him. Her plait coming loose and a man using it to yank her head, holding her down...

Okay, wait.

That had gone a little R18.

Now his cock was having a party in his pants, and he was imagining what he’d like to do with her long hair, while she was on her knees. It wasn’t horrible.

But totally inappropriate.

The point being, she was the single female standing in the training hall, ready to head out on an unknown and dangerous mission.

Was he the only one who thought this was a completely fucking stupid idea?

Alex had already killed one female who got in the line of his fire. He wasn't going to sit by and let another woman get hurt, or worse.

Alex frowned.

Or was he letting that experience get in the way of clear thinking? There were no females at The Institute. He'd been brought up to protect them—not kill them—and now he was expected to stand side by side and respect them.

He meant no offense, but it went against everything he knew.

Alex watched Charlotte walk over to Marcus and tiptoe up to kiss him.

“See you when you get back.”

The male tugged her against his body, returning the kiss.

Casey hung back, shooting him a glare. Alex felt the corner of his lips twitch. He couldn't ignore the desire he felt for the little firecracker.

If she weren't a soldier and in dire need of putting space between them—as in, getting her out of the damn field—he'd have her on her back, and those eyes of hers would be full of fire for another reason.

Her mouth begging him.

Alex would make her wait for her release, taking his time on that little lithe body of hers.

“Are you rostered on back here?” Marcus asked.

Charlotte shook her head. “No, but I'm going to hang in the main hall to keep my eyes and ears open.”

She'd been Alex's main competitor in the Vampire Games, gunning for the SLC role. If he hadn't challenged her, Charlotte might be standing in his shoes. Yet she'd defaulted, and Alex wasn't sure why. Now she was bonded to Marcus.

Had the senior warrior asked her to stand down, knowing the job was far too dangerous? Not wanting to see her put herself in danger every day?

Whatever the reason, Alex couldn't argue Charlotte was a skilled warrior. Did that mean she should be out on the streets, fighting instead of safe at home while her mate went out to protect her and the race?

No.

Ditto, Casey.

If Alex had his way, he'd spin that little firecracker, who was currently glaring at him, around and kick her fine ass until she was back in her room. Knitting or some damn shit.

Safe.

Protected.

Alive.

Casey might be fast, but so was he. She might have moves, but so did he. What she didn't have was the strength of a male vampire.

Which meant she was vulnerable.

This was the first and last night he intended to be out in the field with her. She would distract him, worrying about her safety.

How he would manage that, he wasn't sure. The Moretti's accepted females into their army. It was Alex's job to follow orders, and that included working with everyone.

"Babe, you'll need to work the next shift, so make sure you rest." Marcus slapped Charlotte's ass.

"Inappropriate behavior," Casey called out, giving Marcus a fake chastising look.

Marcus laughed.

Little minx.

"Okay, thanks, HR. Everyone, grab your things and meet out front of the castle in five," Marcus said, raising his voice for the last part.

Charlotte high-fived Casey, then left.

Alex shook his head.

How was everyone okay with the tiny pocket rocket heading out into so much goddamn danger?

As everyone began to collect their weapons and head to the exit, Alex watched Casey. Her tight toned ass snug in her black pants, her muscular slight frame a huge contrast to the enormous males around her. His fingers itched to run along the bare supple skin on her neck, his mouth following their path.

From the first moment he'd met Casey, her cheeky defiant eyes had challenged him, and his cock had sat up to attention. Yes, he wanted to fuck her. To do that, he had to keep her alive and unharmed.

Alex stepped up beside the little warrior. "Why don't you stay behind with your friend, Pip Squeak. Shoot the shit. Do girl stuff."

Casey slowed, her green eyes darkening and narrowing to fine slits, meeting his. Then she blinked, brushing off her deep-seated anger. "What, like play with our vibrators or something?"

Fucking hell.

Um, yes.

Alex's mouth watered, a groan stuck in his throat, and he considered what the consequences might be for teleporting them both back to his room, laying her out on his bed and fucking her ruthlessly.

He suspected she wouldn't be quite as willing as he wanted her to be, yet he couldn't help the smile hitting his lips.

Casey let out a dry snort. *So that would be a no, then?*

She stalked off, calling over her shoulder, "Alex, the seventeen hundreds are calling and want their sexist attitude back."

His cock swelled in his pants.

The vision of her lying on his sheets, sliding a dildo in and out of her pussy, wasn't going anywhere fast.

Christ.

It was going to be a long night.



CHAPTER SIX

Casey sat in the back of the eight-seater custom SUV, behind Marcus and Kurt, who were flanking the prisoner.

Alex was driving. Ben riding shotgun.

Literally.

In his arms lay a rifle loaded and ready for any surprises. They made their way to the drop-off point. Kurt and Marcus had their hands on their Glocks, just as Casey and Darnell did. Their rifles lay on the floor in front of them.

Easy access.

Casey lifted her eyes and found Alex, once again, staring at her in the rearview mirror.

She'd lifted a brow a few times to let him know she saw him and his opinion meant nothing to her. If he didn't think she was capable because she had a vagina, that was his problem.

Fortunately, he wasn't the king, so it was not up to him.

Why don't you stay behind with your friend, Pip Squeak. Shoot the shit. Do girl stuff.

Casey let out a small, annoyed scoff, and it caught Darnell's attention.

"You all right?"

"Yeah," she grunted, trying to stay focused on the job. Alex was a distraction.

Do girl stuff. What in the fuck? What did he think she did in her spare time? Play with Barbie dolls?

Jesus effing Christ.

Talk about a douchebag.

If only he knew what she *did* enjoy doing. Reading. Non-fiction, biographies, fiction, and everything in between.

Including some of the hot smut that would probably have him rolling his eyes.

Or plant that stupid smirk on his face.

Alex was hot and knew it. And worse, he knew she was attracted to him.

Why him? Hell, she was surrounded by gorgeous, powerful warriors, and the one guy her body decided it was going to react to ended up being a sexist pig.

Alex clearly preferred his women barefoot in the kitchen, pregnant, with fancy tea towels dangling from their shoulders.

To add to the fire, he continued to pick on her size.

She shook her head.

It was unprofessional at best and edging toward bullying. But in an environment like this, Casey knew she had to stand her ground. Running to her commanding officer would not gain her any respect.

Right now, she was hoping he'd lose interest and figure out how things were done around here. She wasn't the only female warrior—her and Charlotte, the most senior—but if Alex continued to express his disrespect of females in the Moretti army, someone would soon call him on it.

Not that she planned to let him get away with it. Reporting him to one of her superiors wasn't necessary.

Yet.

Casey could handle him.

She had to be cognizant of what was really getting under her skin. Casey had finally got away from the sexist bullshit she'd grown up with and found her place in life.

For now, at least.

Alex showing up, with his smart comments and quips, was the reminder she didn't need. She wasn't going to react and let him win. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to deal with him often. He'd soon lose interest and find a female in the castle who worked in a role he found more acceptable.

Casey sighed inwardly.

What a shame it was. He was hot as sin, with eyes and a body she could happily melt into for a night or two.

But, *hell no* to that.

Alex could take his chauvinistic jokes and shove them where the sun didn't shine.

Casey leaned forward, checking out a man walking along the road, and then faced forward. It was time to focus.

"Where are you taking me?" Xander Tomassi, the man they were dropping off with the US Coastguard, asked.

POTUS wanted him in U.S. custody, so that was today's mission.

The human had a cover over his head, which was very gangster of them, but Casey suspected the team had done it to stress him out. They weren't hiding their dislike of the man.

"The pits of hell, if I had my way," Kurt growled, and Marcus nodded his agreement.

They continued through the dark streets of Portland and crossed the bridge over to South Portland. To their left, Casey spotted the U.S. Coast Guard base, and ten minutes later, they pulled into Bug Light Park.

Alex turned off the vehicle and lights, and they sat in silence.

"Someone, please tell me what's happening," Xander cried, beginning to wriggle.

"God, we should've gagged him." Ben adjusted his rifle on his lap without turning around.

"No head, no sound. Just saying." Kurt shrugged.

Casey smirked, then leaned forward and twisted to get a better look out the window. Two more Moretti SUVs pulled up beside them, positioned to provide the best protection and exit should something happen.

“That’s sick. Let me out of here. Where—” Xander’s voice suddenly became muffled.

“Someone owes me a pair of socks,” Marcus said.

Alex laughed, his eyes gleaming with humor until they locked with hers. Fire flushed through her.

Darnell nudged Casey, and she glanced away, breaking the connection of the atomic blast spreading through her.

If Alex was so worried about her being effective on the job, then maybe he should keep those eyes of his to himself. The last thing she needed to be accused of was being a distraction to the new boy.

Hardly a boy, she mumbled to herself.

“Secure the area,” Kurt instructed.

Casey exited the vehicle, along with Ben, Alex, and Darnell. Her Glock raised, her back to the SUV.

Scanning her surroundings, Casey saw nothing that raised any red flags. Her fellow vampires from the other vehicles moved into position.

“Hey,” Alex said quietly.

Casey jumped.

Jesus.

How had he moved in beside her so damn silently? She rolled her eyes. Of course, he was a former assassin.

“Do you have the injection?” he asked, his enormous body towering over her.

Did he *need* to be so close?

Did her body need to heat like this every time he was near? Her nipples reacted, and her cheeks warmed.

“What injection?” She frowned.

If this was a game he was playing...

Alex growled, and his frown matched hers. “Stay close to me.”

The hell she would! What was he up to?

Well, she wasn't falling for it.

"Would you quit it!" she snapped under her breath, then realized he was her superior officer. While it wasn't official, it was still inappropriate of her to speak to him like that.

But, man, he was irritating her.

What damn injection?

Vampires didn't inject anything.

"You want to reword that, Lieutenant?" he growled.

"I'm trying to do my job," she hissed. "I don't need you to protect me."

His eyes and nostrils flared. At the sound of tires on rubble, they both turned.

A few minutes later, three U.S. Coast Guard pickups drove into the lot, parking twenty yards away.

Alex took a step forward, positioning himself slightly in front of her, and slapped his palm on the back of the SUV.

"All clear," Ben said into his comms, then the doors opened, and Marcus got out, pulling Xander with him.

Marcus walked the prisoner to the back of the vehicle, where Kurt joined him, and they waited. Casey, Ben, and Alex moved closer to surround them.

Members of the U.S. Coast Guard, dressed all in camo gear, got out of their pickups and did the same. She recognized the M4 rifles and Sig P225's they held.

"Evening, gentlemen. I'm Lieutenant Commander Jenkins," a tall, built man said.

Hello! Casey wanted to say. *Not a gentleman.* God, was everyone a fucking sexist these days?

She must have let out a sound because Jenkin's eyes shot to her. "And ladies. My apologies." The man had a Texas drawl, which was a little charming, so she shot him a brief smile and nod.

After that, she couldn't see anything because Alex stepped in front of her.

For the love of God.

Casey moved to her side three times, putting a wide gap between them, and ignored the feel of Alex's eyes burning into the side of her neck.

"I'm here on a special order of the President of the United States. To collect a parcel," Jenkins said, staring at the prisoner.

Xander tried to rip out of Marcus's hold on his upper arm, wriggling and mumbling around the socks stuffed in his mouth.

Good luck with that, human. It would take a strong vampire to get loose from that powerful warrior.

"A parcel?" Kurt snorted. "Would have put a ribbon on him for ya, but the guy's a piece of shit."

The men on either side of Jenkins tensed, but he waved them back with a slight lift of his hand, indicating he had respect and authority over these soldiers.

"I don't have any details of his crimes. I've just been ordered to collect him and hand him over," Jenkins said.

Casey didn't know either. The warriors at her level weren't always given every piece of information. Charlotte was now a level above her and being mated to Marcus. Casey wondered how much more she was privy to.

It didn't matter, the prince and commander told them what they needed to know, and it had never been a problem.

Casey was sure, whatever this human had done, it was likely bad news. They had held him in the castle for quite a number of weeks.

And prisoners were not common.

It's not like they went around capturing humans.

"Where will he be held?" Marcus asked.

“That’s higher than my paygrade,” Jenkins said, his gun down by his side. “And given I have no information about who you are, you will excuse my team for being eager to get this transfer completed swiftly.”

Marcus gave the man a slight nod.

Casey knew her team felt the same. There was a tension in the air she wasn’t used to from the SLCs. For such a seemingly low-risk job, they’d been prepped to be on high alert. So, there was something they weren’t being told.

Do you have the injection?

Casey’s eyes darted to Alex, who immediately felt her gaze. He held her eyes for a moment, then a sound in the distance pulled them away.

Ahead of her, Darnell swiveled his rifle and stiffened. He was one of her best friends, and a rank above her. Something was up. She slowly slid her eyes around the lot, then landed on Tristan, her other good friend, who was over by one of the other SUVs.

His eyes were locked on the entrance to the park. Tristan turned and said something to the vampire near him, then retreated behind the SUV.

She lost sight of him from there.

“Alex, something’s not right,” Casey said almost silently, knowing he’d hear.

He didn’t move. He didn’t speak. He didn’t even damn well blink.

Which meant he was on high alert.

A chill ran through her.

Her eyes moved back to Marcus and Kurt. The two were incredibly still and quiet. Were they telepathing?

Beside her, Alex turned, looked her right in the eye, and then abruptly returned his focus to a spot in the distance. He hissed darkly, “Get down. Right fucking now.”

Casey dropped to the ground as chaos erupted around them.

“Fuck’s sake,” Kurt growled. He vamp sped around the other side of the vehicle.

Bullets sprayed the SUV. The metallic ping from the proofing, repelling them as they ricocheted away. Excellent if you were inside, not so good when you were outside.

Casey ducked, and one missed her ear.

“Casey. Get under the SUV,” Alex instructed her.

“Yeah, no,” she said. That wasn’t what her training had taught her to do, and she wasn’t about to go hide like a little... girl.

Vampires and humans crouched with weapons drawn and pointed, looking for the invisible enemy. Marcus moved with Xander and was currently behind her.

The human wriggling like a goldfish.

Ben was on his stomach, rifle poised to take a shot. “Try it, asshole, and you meet your maker,” he said quietly.

Casey glanced in the direction both he and Alex were looking.

“The sniper will read his lips,” Alex said, his body again in front of her. Protecting her.

“That one of yours?” Jenkins yelled across the lot.

The hell?

She knew he wasn’t aware they were vampires, so it was likely the men thought they were mercenaries, or worse.

“Oh, yeah, because we order our own people to shoot at us on the daily,” Kurt replied, then cursed.

“Could just be a bad shot,” one of the coastguard uniforms said, crouching behind the pickup.

“We don’t miss,” Kurt retorted. “Trust me on that. Prepare for handover.”

“Now? While we are under fire?” Jenkins protested incredulously.”

“Goddamn humans,” Alex muttered. “Ben, take the shot.”

Tires crunching on gravel...Vehicles approached, distracting them all. The humans wouldn't have heard them yet, but the vampires could.

Ben lowered his weapon and moved alongside them. “Damn it. He's up in the trees.”

“Twenty bucks says it's the fucking Russians,” Marcus grunted, and Xander started really freaking out. “Keep still, asshole, or I *will* let them have you.”

Xander went silent.

Casey's curiosity was getting the better of her.

What was this all about?

She felt like she was in one of her suspense novels.

“Let's get this shit done. We need to hand this guy to the president. Cover me,” Marcus instructed them, and Casey and Alex nodded. “Kurt, let's go.”

“Let's do this,” the SLC replied.

The two huge warriors moved like lightning, crossing the distance and pulling those humans into their vehicles like they were puppets. Casey bet a bunch of mind manipulation was taking place at high speed.

Bodies were slamming doors and starting engines. Then the Coast Guard vehicles began to drive out of the park, as if nothing had happened.

Casey shuffled in her crouched position, giving her stiffening ankles some relief.

“Stay down,” Alex said gruffly.

“Quit it,” she snapped, and just as she was about to stand, when Marcus and Kurt were at the hood of the SUV, she heard the sound.

Click.

Down she went, her eyes shooting at Ben, who had his weapon back up.

“Motherfucker,” he said, swiveling his weapon. “Alex.”

“Yup,” Alex replied, reaching out his arm and tucking Casey behind him like she was nothing more than a bag of groceries. He ordered in a tone that harbored no argument, “Stay the fuck there.”

It was a direct order, so she obeyed.

Then Alex dropped into a shooter position.

“Report,” Marcus demanded.

“More than one shooter,” Ben said, now down on his belly, elbows in the dirt.

They all went silent while Casey grit her teeth. She appreciated Alex was trying to protect her, but he was singling her out, and it was inappropriate.

Few things could kill a vampire.

The sun, damn it. What she wouldn't do to swim in the ocean under a sunny sky. Of course, that was a weird thing to wish for. A little like someone allergic to shellfish wishing they could munch on a lobster, but it looked cool in pictures.

Removing a vampire's head was another way to kill them. Or destroying the heart. Bullet. Knife. Ripping it apart with your teeth. Whatever rocked your boat.

So, unlike fantasy stories, vampires were not immortal. If one of those bullets found its way into her chest at just the right spot, then she'd be toast.

If the sun hit her, she'd be ash.

Casey watched the tailgates of the U.S. Coast Guard disappearing into the distance.

Finally, they could get the hell out of here.

Nope. Of course, it wasn't that easy. Her instincts had been right.

A black SUV cruised past the Coast Guard vehicles and drove into the park. Then stopped. Their headlights on full, pointed right at Casey's team. If they'd been humans, it would have blinded them, but either way, it was a dominant and confrontational move.

"The fuck," Kurt growled. "LCs, get in the vehicles."

"Russians," Alex said, snarling. "Do as he says."

"Just flip the vehicle," Casey suggested, staring from vampire to vampire.

Why did they suddenly fear a car full of humans? Russians or otherwise? Something didn't add up.

Do you have the injection?

The SUV began to creep closer.

"Motherfucking fuckers," Marcus muttered, long and dark. "Everyone—"

BOOM!

Suddenly, an explosion, and they all dropped and covered their heads.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex shoved his face in the dirt as the explosion ripped around them. The second he could, he lifted his head, took in the situation, and jumped to his feet.

Casey was facedown on the ground in her black fatigues, her legs splayed.

Without thinking, he scooped her up, ripped open the SUV door, and threw her in, slamming it to silence her cries.

The black SUV containing what they suspected were the Russians was tire-spinning and speeding out of the parking lot.

Kurt was across the space, following.

“Kurt!” Marcus called. “Get your ass back here.” Then he took off after him and tackled the huge vampire to the ground. “You want to get shot with that serum again, you fucking idiot?”

Kurt kicked the other SLC off, and they both jumped to their feet, stance wide, watching the Russian vehicle retreat.

The door behind Alex tried to open, Casey’s cursing as clear as day. He gripped the handle, holding it closed. Then Alex spun around and pointed to the other vampires. “Everyone, get back to base.”

He might not have been sworn in by the king yet, but everyone knew who he was after the very public Vampire Games. Vampires spurred into action. Marcus and Kurt came stomping across the space, faces like thunder.

“I’m going over there to see if I can catch the shooter.” Ben indicated the spot on the hill with his jaw. “Pick me up on the way past.”

Alex nodded as the vampire teleported away.

“We need to get the fuck out of here. Head back to the castle,” Kurt called out, and the drivers of the other SUVs sped out of the lot.

Marcus, Kurt, and Alex ripped open the doors and piled in, Darnell entering on the other side.

“The hell do you think you’re doing, manhandling me like that?” Casey screamed at Alex from the back seat.

Kurt raised his brows and looked between them. Alex ignored her and started the vehicle.

“What’s going on?” Marcus asked.

“Nothing,” Alex said, his own tires spinning as the SUV moved forward.

“Nothing, my ass.” Casey caught his eye in the mirror and shook her head at him, fury flowing from those pretty green eyes.

At least she wasn’t unconscious and being carried into a private jet full of Russian mobsters, like her friend Charlotte had been a few weeks earlier. Those mafia assholes loved to shove their cocks into any hot, wet female.

Alex wasn’t going to let Casey be one of them. She might not understand the danger they were just in, and he hoped she never did.

Casey could scream the castle down for all he cared.

As they neared the entrance to the park, they found the site of the explosion. Both U.S. Coastguard pickups were engulfed and burning.

“Jesus,” Marcus cursed.

“God, I hate those assholes,” Kurt said. “Craig’s gonna be pissed they killed Xander. He wanted that job. Hell, *I* wanted that job.”

“Craig won’t be as pissed as the king. He’s going to need to call POTUS and explain.” Marcus let out a long sigh. “What the hell were you thinking, chasing them? You think I would save your sorry ass if they shot you with that shit?”

“Yeah. I do.” Kurt gave the guy a smirk.

Marcus shook his head.

Alex steered the SUV around the burning vehicles and skidded to a halt when he saw Ben run across the grass toward them.

He ripped open the door and leaped in.

“We need to move it. More Coastguard and officials on the way,” Ben said. “Found a body, though.”

“ID?” Kurt asked.

“Nothing official, but I know the tattoos of the Bratva. He was one of them.”

Alex knew exactly what he was talking about. They’d both been trained and had dealt with them for many years.

He gunned it and slid sideways when they hit the main road, then slowed to the speed limit to blend into the night traffic.

Once comfortable, his eyes flicked into the rearview mirror and found Casey’s.

Wild swirls of thunder greeted him.

Debriefing was going to be fun.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Casey planted her booted foot on the ground and leaned the bike to the side. Then she flicked the kickstand, and Charlotte hopped off from behind her.

They both began undoing their helmets.

“I still can’t believe he did that,” Charlotte said again, shaking her head. “Actually threw you in the car. Like a sack of potatoes.”

Casey had told her about the events of the previous night before they left the castle. Their helmets and the drone of her Harley-Davidson Softail did not allow for smooth conversation.

She took Charlotte’s black helmet and placed it by hers over the handlebars. They had ridden into downtown Portland for a day of shopping.

“More like a damsel in distress. Did he not see my Moretti uniform and vest with knives tucked in every goddamn pocket?” Casey shook her head and pulled the key from the motorcycle.

Not that knives were a good defense against bullets.

Charlotte let out a laugh.

“I’m glad Marcus never goes that far with all his alpha protectiveness. He considers me an equal warrior most days.”

Casey pulled her bag across her shoulder, and they began walking along the sidewalk.

She wanted to ask Charlotte about the injection Alex had mentioned and Marcus’s comment to Kurt about being *shot with that shit*. Her mind was making up all number of scenarios, but she knew, as well as any member of the royal army, information they were privy to couldn’t be shared with lower ranks.

It still didn’t excuse his behavior.

No one had berated him for it either, which had pissed her off even more. All of them had seen him do it, then kept her stuck in the vehicle.

Worse, she had realized afterward she had only tried to exit the one door.

Like a fucking idiot.

“Well, first, Alex isn’t my boyfriend or mate, so it’s totally different. Second, I wouldn’t call it protection as much as being a total douchebag,” Casey said. “It’s not his job to protect me. In fact, I wish he would just leave me alone, full stop.”

Casey had left home for this exact reason.

She’d had a lifetime of being treated like a damn princess. Which she wasn’t. Her father had been, and still was, controlling.

He just couldn’t control her quite as much anymore.

For now...

Don’t think about it.

“Why does it irk you so much? I mean, it’s a little 1885, but I think Alex likes you,” Charlotte said. “He’s also pretty cute.”

Casey’s swung her head around. “Cute? Char, he’s an assassin.”

“*Was.*”

“Fine. Was,” she replied. “There’s nothing cute about a guy who spends his time killing people for a living. I bet he pulls the wings off flies for fun, too.”

Cute he was not.

Savagely gorgeous, yes.

Damn him and those perfect buns. What was it about the threads of muscles in men’s forearms? It literally made her salivate. Alex had very defined, powerful arms.

And shoulders.

His thighs weren't bad either.

Fuck.

“Is that what worries you? It's not like we're nurses,” Charlotte replied with a laugh. “We've killed before.”

Casey let out a sigh.

“I know it's a little hypocritical. I'm just saying *cute* isn't the word I would associate with him. He's a sexist, a misogynist, and made me look like a liability out in the field.”

They kept walking, and the silence grew heavy.

Casey stopped.

“Say it,” she said.

Charlotte slowed and turned. “It's fine. I know you hate talking about it. Just...maybe give him a break. He's not your dad.”

Casey had shared a little about her father's controlling nature with her friend when they both joined the royal army. He had phoned nearly every day, or asked her mother to, and eventually, Charlotte had asked if she had a boyfriend back home.

It had been embarrassing to admit it was her parents. As if she was a baby vamp. Hardly. She was a grown vampire, having had her fiftieth birthday years ago.

Her friend was right—she was just being triggered. The fire inside her began to simmer down, and she nodded. “I know. I just love my job and hate being treated like a girl. Men look at my size and think I need wrapping in bubble wrap.”

“You mean your dad.”

“My father prefers cages with strong bars,” Casey said, and she wasn't exaggerating. A shiver ran through her, her mind flashing back through her life.

Nope.

She couldn't be caged again.

“Well, I don’t think you should let Alex get to you. I think he’s flirting,” Charlotte said as they walked past the bank and stepped into the surf and ski store.

Casey snorted.

That wasn’t flirting. She knew that for a fact.

But there was a growing attraction between them, which was fighting for her attention, despite his chauvinistic tendencies, and it was a little confusing.

Her mind wanted to slap him.

Her body wanted to rub up against him and lick that stupid dimple.

Simultaneously, the two females unzipped their jackets and tucked them under their arms.

“Are you just getting boots?” Charlotte asked, glancing around the vast store full of everything from ski jackets, goggles, boards, bikinis, and thongs.

Casey shook her head.

“Think I’m going to get an entire outfit. I feel the need for retail therapy.” She walked over to the ski clothing area, pulled out a dusky pink bib pant, and held it up. “You?”

“I was going to get ski boots. Oh, and goggles. But now I want a new bib too.” Charlotte laughed, selecting a similar white one.

Tomorrow, they were heading up to Saddleback Mountain for some night skiing. Technically, it closed at eight o’clock in the evening, but that was the thing about being vampires. You could bend the rules.

Their enhanced eyesight and strength meant it was far safer for them to be out compared to humans.

A bouncy young redhead who looked like Smurfette, with her tight blue ski pants and white fitted crew top barely covering her torso, helped them into the fitting rooms.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Smurfette said, twirling the ends of her curls.

“Do. Not. Say. It,” Charlotte muttered under her breath, knowing her friend well and nudging her into the room.

Casey laughed. “Can you find me the matching jacket to the pink bib, please? No other colors. Just the pink.”

This wasn’t her first shopping rodeo. She knew all the tricks to get people to buy more.

Despite her resistance to anything girly, Alex had taken a liking to the dusky pink outfit the moment she saw it. With a black crew top underneath, it would look hot.

Sometimes being petite paid off. Wearing a full-length puffy pink outfit wasn’t something any shape could do. With her small frame and toned muscles, Casey was willing to try it on at the very least.

“Sure can.” Smurfette bounced off.

“See. I’m nice.” She poked her tongue out at Charlotte and disappeared into the fitting room as her friend sniggered.

Beep, beep.

Casey glanced at her phone and realized it wasn’t hers, so she continued trying on her ski pants and bibs. They went in and out of the rooms, showing each other their outfits, giggling about the length of hers on her short legs. It was the bane of her life, getting pants shortened.

Smurfette returned with the pink jacket.

“Sorry, had to go out the back and find one in your size. This is a big seller.” She grinned. “Did you try the bib on yet?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m going to look at boots,” Charlotte said to Smurfy, handing her a pile of clothing. “I’ll take these pants, though.”

Casey went back in as the two women wandered off. She was looking forward to going skiing tomorrow. They hadn’t been for weeks. Unfortunately, Darnell and Tristan, their two guy besties, were on rotation, so Marcus, Ben, and Anna were joining them.

With the pink bib on, Casey stared in the mirror. God, her father would call a press conference if he saw her in pink. Hire a brass fucking band.

No, he wouldn't. Skiing was not on his list of approved activities for her.

Asshole.

She adjusted the straps and opened the door, pulling on the matching Roxy jacket.

Then found herself staring at the one person she didn't want to see.

He was leaning against a wooden beam, chewing a toothpick like he was John damn Wayne, or something.

"Hey there, Pip Squeak." Alex's eyes slowly worked their way down her body, stopping at her ankles. "Need a hand before you ass over?"

Ugh.

Of course, he noticed the extra fabric she had yet to attend to. But he was right. It wouldn't be the first time she'd tripped over a long pair of pants while trying them on.

"God, you're like a bad smell." She crouched to fold the pink material up.

His smile was still on his face when she lifted her head again. Casey glanced over at Charlotte, who mouthed *sorry*, and then shot a glance at Marcus, who was at the counter.

So much for the girls' shopping trip.

Ben stepped out of the changing room next to her, pulling up a pair of black ski pants.

"*Ciao, Case,*" Ben greeted her in Italian, which he did from time to time.

"Hey," she replied.

Smurfette came racing over with far more bounce—which she hadn't thought humanely possible—than before.

Which, of course, she did.

All three of the warriors in her store were beefed up, testosterone-fueled vampires, and despite Casey's dislike of one in particular, they were all gorgeous.

The human was flicking her hair, jutting out her smurfy blue hips, and chewing her bottom lip, staring from one to the other. Like a sugar high.

Clearly, she was having trouble deciding which one she wanted as the father of her children.

Pick Alex.

"What do you think?" the young redhead asked Ben. She leaned against a pillar and almost purred. "Do you need a different size?"

"I'll take these," Ben replied, completely oblivious to her flirtatious moves, as all male vampires would be.

Casey nearly laughed, but she felt for the girl. She might as well have been a sixty-year-old man, for all Ben cared.

"Okay." Smurfette's face fell slightly until she turned to Alex. Her cheeks suddenly matched the red of her hair. "You sure you don't want to try anything on?"

He pushed away from the beam and winked at her. "Not today, sweetheart."

Casey nearly fell backward from rolling her eyes so hard. After nearly bursting into flames from joy, Smurfette wandered off.

Correction. She sashayed off.

The hell?

Casey flung her arms out and muttered, "I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

God's sakes.

Being around these alphas was just about doing her head in these days.

"You need some help there, Pippy?"

Her eyes narrowed at Alex, and she crossed her arms.

“No. Don’t you dare shorten what is already a derogatory nickname,” she snapped, then stomped over to where Charlotte was pulling on her own boots.

Thank God she hadn’t fallen over her long pants.

“Char, what do you think?” Casey asked, twisting to show off her ski outfit.

Behind her, she heard a snicker.

Charlotte stood and twirled her finger in the air to indicate she should spin around. Casey did, ignoring the idiot behind her.

“I love it. Super cute and kind of sexy. Are you going to get it?” Charlotte asked.

“If they can take the pants up overnight, I will.”

“I can take them—” Alex started.

Oh no, he wasn’t. Casey whirled around and found herself plowing into solid alpha vampire muscle.

Oomph.

“Jesus, are you interviewing for the position of a wall?” she gasped, her hands landing on his large, solid pecs. Casey pushed away.

He didn’t let her go. Alex held her wrists, keeping her against him. Her eyes shot up, and she was ready to sass him out, but Casey froze instead. Her lips parted, and the entire English language vanished from her memory bank.

Ethereal gray eyes, filled with humor and lust, had her locked in place, his body like a volcano wrapping around her.

No.

Body, no.

Heat shot to her core, and she felt a need so powerful rush through her, Casey thought she was going to melt.

“Woah, there, little lady. I was just offering to take off—I mean, *up*—your pants.” Alex smirked.

Little lady?

Like someone had poured ice water over her, Casey yanked at her wrists and opened her mouth to speak.

Thankfully, what she'd been going to say never made it out because Smurfy came to the rescue.

“Oh, that’s okay. We have a twelve-hour service, so can have them ready for you in the morning,” she said.

Alex wisely released her wrists, his smile simmering. They continued to stare at each other. She narrowed her eyes, the desire to drop him on his ass consuming her.

“Don’t even think about it, sweetheart,” Alex said, leaning in.

How did he damn well know?

She growled.

“Plus, we have twenty percent off today,” Smurfette continued. “If you buy three items.”

“I’ll take some goggles.” Casey did not take her eyes off the big vampire. When the human danced off to get the eyewear, Casey stood a little taller and lowered her voice. “Touch me like that again, Alex Giordano, and I will bury your ass.”

Then she turned and walked carefully back to the changing rooms.

Because now wasn’t the time to trip.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Alex sat drinking a glass of beer with his new friends and colleagues.

They’d made the young sales assistant’s day by purchasing everything from ski boots and gloves to a sexy pair of pink ski pants. Casey’s—not his—and then decided to have a drink and bite to eat at a local bar.

Alex’s ski gear was still back in Seattle; however, Ben had invited him to join them at Saddleback Mountain tomorrow,

and he'd decided it was a good chance to get to know everyone better.

"Alex is coming up the mountain with us. That cool with everyone?" Ben asked, and Alex's glass froze halfway to his mouth.

Thanks, Ben. Jesus, it felt like the first day at school.

Try being cooler, Beno.

"Fine with me," Marcus replied. "The more we get to know you, the better we work together. Me and the boys have had hundreds of years to bond."

It was mind-boggling, even for him, as a vampire, to think they had all been alive and working together for over four hundred years.

Then again, Ari was fifteen hundred years and counting.

"Damn, I thought going on eight decades was a lot," Alex replied, clinking glasses with Ben. "You're still just as annoying as the day I met you."

"You love me." Ben grinned.

"Where's Anna?" Casey asked. She'd refused to look at Alex since that moment at the store.

He knew why. His heart was still thumping every time he thought about it.

Casey was a gorgeous female, even when she was snarling at him. So when his eyes had connected with hers, then slid down to her pink plush lips, Alex had found himself mesmerized.

And unable to let her go.

The world had simply vanished, desire shooting down his spine, all the way to his balls.

He wanted her.

On her back. On her knees.

Whatever way would make those lips of hers scream the loudest.

Which was a problem. Sex with Casey would just complicate matters. Especially after the way he'd tossed her into the SUV the night before.

She was still mad at him.

Well, too bad. He had thick skin, and she could glare at him all she liked.

When he'd found out she didn't have the adrenaline injection on her body, Alex had instantly gone into protection mode.

He wasn't going to let her get taken. There had been too many variables with the U.S. Coast Guard on site and Russian assassins in the bushes.

Alex knew he wasn't helping by teasing and taunting her with nicknames, and the truth was, he wasn't sure why he continued to do it.

Perhaps he was hoping she'd snap and challenge him to a spar. God, that would be hot.

To have that taunt little body straddled over his, trying to hold him down. Those toned thighs tight around him. The heat of her pussy against his belly.

Those eyes on his as he slid her a few inches backward to feel his stiff cock.

Then he'd flip her, watching her catch her breath, his mouth lowering a few inches to hers. She'd want him. Her lips would part.

Then he would release her.

He'd have to.

Nothing could happen.

So all he had was his vivid imagination and his fucking fist.

Damn it.

Alex had expected some questions about his actions during their debrief last night. Kurt was the one to bring it up. Alex

had replied, saying he believed Casey was at risk because she was behind them—Ben and Alex acting as assassins in that moment and the shooter targeting them—and how she didn't have the adrenaline injection.

He thought the best course of action was to remove her, given she was not fully informed of the risks. Meaning the serum.

Brayden and Craig had nodded, but there was strong doubt in their eyes.

While he wasn't sorry, as he sat opposite her while they all ate and drank, Alex felt a strong pull to apologize.

But he didn't want to say sorry. He wasn't. What *if* they had shot her? Whether a bullet or that Russian serum shit, he wasn't going to stand by and let that happen. Not last night, and not today.

Would he do the same if it was Charlotte?

Alex lifted his glass to his lips and watched the female warrior. It was a good question.

The truth was, if Alex laid a hand on Charlotte, Marcus would rip his head off. Unless he saved her life.

Probably.

As the evening continued, the conversation flowed, and Casey still avoided eye contact with him. It was becoming obvious and awkward. Alex knew he had to clear the air and then keep his distance from her. Regardless of their attraction.

Because of their attraction.

“Are you going back to Seattle before settling in?” Ben asked him, and Alex shook his head.

“Jason is packing up my things, and the movers arrive in a few days,” Alex said. “I wanted to go back and say goodbye to everyone, but things heated up here, so I'll visit in a few months.”

Emotionally, he'd been ready to leave, so it wasn't as if Alex wasn't ready to leave The Institute.

He was.

He'd had one foot out the door already. Hell, he'd handed in his resignation. The people he was close to knew, and the others he'd visit someday.

“We work closely with the team back in Seattle now, as you know, so you'll see their ugly faces on the video each week, at least. Plus, Ari is staying in Maine while Sage continues her science research for the king,” Ben said.

Ben and Ari were incredibly close. He had been Ari's head assassin for as long as Alex had worked with them and more.

The entire race now knew Ari was a Moretti. Brayden and Vincent's uncle. Even more important than being the royals' eldest living relative, Ari was the last original vampire.

His twin brother, Gio—their first king—was the other. He had died over a thousand years ago.

It still blew his mind.

Alex had been living with the guy for decades and trained by him.

Now Ari had mated with Sage, and they'd married in a human ceremony. Both of them had started their lives as humans, so it had been important to them. That, and Ari said it had taken one and a half millennia for him to meet his mate, so it was making it absolutely official.

Not that the wedding was going on any official human register.

Technically, Ari had died back in the sixth century.

Alex was in no hurry to mate. The more the merrier in his bed was his motto. That was why he loved the orgies.

Back when he was at The Institute, it wasn't unusual for the males to head out on the town during their time off, meet some pretty women, and enjoy some group sex.

Threesomes, foursomes.

He enjoyed it all.

Alex was keen to find out if there were any social circles like that in Maine. With most of the senior warriors mated, he wasn't planning to stay home knitting.

He'd ask Ben when they were alone.

"When is Ari back from his honeymoon?" Alex asked.

"In time for your oath ceremony." Ben lifted his beer and tossed it back. "You know he wouldn't miss it."

"Is that why it was pushed out?" Casey asked, her eyes brushing past his.

The sassy witch speaks.

Ben nodded. "I'd say so. Ari has sway with the king."

"Wonder if he knows about Xander? Can't believe the fucker is dead." Marcus popped a French fry into his mouth.

They all nodded, not saying much. Casey wasn't privy to the level of information they were. Alex only knew because of his previous role with The Institute. They'd all been hunting Xander and helping to find the missing vampires for several months.

Casey glanced around the table, tossed her napkin on her plate, and turned to Charlotte. "Are you catching a ride back home with lover boy?"

Charlotte nodded, and Marcus smacked a greasy kiss on her cheek.

Alex laughed.

"Then I'm gone-burger," Casey said, standing and tossing some cash into the middle of the table. "See you all back at the base."

Alex couldn't tell if she was pissed with everyone or just him. But something was off.

Everyone casually called out their farewells, began finishing their meals, and pulled out cards and cash.

Alex watched Casey push through the restaurant doors, her shoulders stiff and jaw tense.

He needed to speak to her.

If it was him making her unhappy, then he didn't like it.

Getting her alone was difficult in such a populated place as the castle, so making a snap decision, Alex pulled out a couple of twenties and tucked them under his beer.

"I'll meet you at the truck," Alex said to Ben, who nodded.

Then he followed the little warrior outside.



CHAPTER NINE

Casey pulled her keys out of her pocket and unlocked the bike seat, sliding her shopping and the extra helmet in.

She'd heard the men following her and was hoping they would make a wiser decision. Mostly because she really wasn't in the mood for stupid humans tonight.

But no.

Now the idiots were approaching closer.

She turned and crossed her arms, facing the two drunk mid-twenties men. "Really?"

"Really," one repeated in a mock drunk tone, swaying a little on his feet and grinning at her.

Yuck.

"Guys, you've really chosen the wrong night to mess with me. I'm in a bad mood." She sighed.

All she wanted to do was go home, sink into the hot tub, and read one of her books so she could tune out the world.

"Baby, we'll get you in the mood," the one wearing a Nirvana T-shirt said.

She let out another sigh, dropping her arms.

"You're right. I'm feeling a little murderly suddenly. Come get me." Casey resigned to the fact this was going to happen.

The hot tub and her book would have to wait a few minutes.

The other man nudged his friend. "She wants it, Brad."

Nope, she really doesn't. Stupid humans.

As they cackled and walked closer, Casey spotted a dark movement in the shadows.

"Oh, for the love of God," she said, throwing her head back and arms out.

The two humans froze, looking confused.

“Sorry, guys. This lady is taken.” Alex stepped out into the light, standing with his legs parted and arms tucked casually into his pockets.

A deceptive image.

He looked friendly and not at all like the deadly vampire he was.

Casey knew differently.

If the drunk men had any wits about them, they’d take in Alex’s height and muscle and see a well-built guy who hadn’t shaved today. In his black jeans, T-shirt, and unzipped black Moretti jacket, he looked like any other handsome guy who had been out with friends for a beer.

Not a trained killer.

If they were sober enough to read the dark look in his eyes, they would’ve run for their lives.

As they should from her. But oh no, she was just a girl.

Fuckers.

To these men, she was just a petite female with long dark hair, and all they saw was easy prey.

And the worst part? Alex saw the same thing.

Otherwise, he would have stayed back and let her deal with her wannabe attackers instead of coming to her damn rescue.

She didn’t need rescuing.

He might be deadlier than her, but she was no wilting flower.

God, he was no better than her father. Well, that might be an exaggeration.

And as for his comment...

“I’m *not* taken. Thank you very much, *Dexter*,” Casey said, knowing he hated the reference to the psycho on TV. “Thank you and goodbye.”

Alex smirked.

“Ahh, what’s going on?” Nirvana asked, looking confused and glancing at his friend.

The other guy shrugged.

Jesus. They were the worst bad guys ever.

She shot Alex one more glare, then focused back on her attackers.

Casey waved them over. “Carry on. Just ignore him. Come get me.”

The two men looked at each other again, then back at Alex. She saw the moment they realized the danger they were in, but she was ready to party.

And to prove a point to the warrior behind them, who was now glaring back at her. All humor gone.

“Oh, come on. Don’t you want a piece of this?” Casey asked, waving her hands down her body.

“Not sure now,” Nirvana replied, his eyes darting between her and Alex.

“Useless.” She flung out her arms. “Okay, fine. Everyone can go home now, then. I have a date with my book and the hot tub.”

She grabbed her helmet, and by the time she’d turned back around, the two men were in a pile, and Alex was two feet away from her.

Which she had expected.

“What are you playing at?” Alex growled.

Casey glanced back at the men and raised a brow. “Did you kill them?”

Alex flinched.

“No, I didn’t kill them. They’ll just have a really big headache when they wake. And maybe sore balls.”

She snorted, then nearly punched herself in the face for letting down her guard.

Alex's eyes flew open. "Jesus, are you okay? Shall I call a doctor? Are your lips hurting?" he asked, mocking her.

Casey dropped her eyes, trying not to smile more.

Damn him.

This close, it was hard to ignore just how beautiful he was. Because he was. Alex was one of the most handsome men she had ever met.

Worse, his cheeky confidence made him incredibly sexy and desirable.

"Shut up. Now, please go away," she said, playing with her helmet.

Alex took a step closer.

Crap.

Casey lifted her head. "Honestly, Alex. Please, leave me alone." His musky scent surrounded her, those gray eyes holding her in place, while her body shivered.

She saw the flicker in his eyes acknowledging her body's reaction. Being a vampire sucked sometimes.

Fortunately, he couldn't see the moisture pooling in her panties, nor would Casey tell him she'd thought of him when she'd held her vibrator on her clit earlier today.

Not on purpose. God, she'd tried to replace him with nearly any other man.

And failed.

"Just give me two minutes. I wanted to apologize for last night," Alex said, his voice low as he stood way too close.

"You were out of place," she said, blinking. "I'm stronger than I look."

Alex's eyes bored into hers for a long moment, then he lifted his hand, and his fingers reached for a lock of her hair. Rubbing it between his digits, he looked thoughtful.

What was happening?

Casey's heart sped up.

His eyes met hers again, and heat spread through her body, his fingers releasing her hair.

“I’ll never not protect you, Casey. I can’t help myself.”

The desire working its way through her veins died a quick death. A familiar chill returning. Casey was furious with herself for letting her guard down.

She wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

“Then you need to take it up with the captain because if it happens again, I’ll lodge a complaint. Your outdated sexist attitude could interfere with the safety of the teams.” Casey took a step back. “If you don’t think I’m fit for the job, Brayden will show the steps to take.”

His jaw tightened. “Casey, that’s not—”

“Until then, keep the hell away from me,” she growled. Casey pulled on her helmet and climbed onto the bike.

As it roared to life, Alex took a few steps back and stood watching.

She steered the bike onto the road, then sped away.

Sooner or later, he’d realize she was no princess.

Casey had zero patience for anyone trying to clip her wings. She’d been caged for way too long, and that cage... her initials were still engraved on it.

Casey was just biding her time.



CHAPTER TEN

Brayden tapped the foot resting on his knee and stared at Vincent across his large wooden desk. Craig stood off to the side, his arms crossed and legs spread.

None of them wanted to have this meeting.

Vincent lifted angry eyes to meet his. The king's aristocratic brow arched momentarily, then he focused back on the phone lying on his desk.

Most people would be excited to speak to the President of the United States of America.

Vincent wasn't most people.

He was the king of the vampire race. The third king in their history. Their father and grandfather reigned before Brayden's brother took the throne in the eighteen hundreds.

He also talked to POTUS at least once a month.

"I heard the vehicles blew up," President Calder muttered, sounding as unhappy about it as they were. Well, perhaps a little less—not one of them had cared if Xander lived another day in his life after what he'd done to their vampires. "I'm furious. Those were good men."

Well, there was that.

Brayden respected the lives of every soldier, but it hadn't been his call to hand over their prisoner to the unsuspecting Coast Guardsmen, and if he'd had the choice, he wouldn't have.

When politicians played soldier, it was never wise. But Brayden would obey his brother to his very last breath. Unless it meant risking his life.

Brayden had to get Vincent to realize they were dealing with a different enemy.

The rebel vampires would always be a threat to the throne, but they honored the laws which their race lived by—for the most part—and had been relatively predictable for centuries.

The mafia were not. They were ruthless, lawless, and any rules they had amongst themselves were broken regularly.

Plus, the rules of the game had changed now the serum existed. Brayden kicked himself for not foreseeing something like this.

He'd thought knowledge of the product was contained to BioZen, who had created it. Xander had given it to the Russians, and now, ten million vampires' lives were at risk.

Vincent rubbed a hand over his face. "They were good men. If my team could've stopped it, they would have."

Brayden's eyes slid to Craig's, and the guy shook his head slowly. They were both thinking the same thing.

If you hadn't asked for the pharmaceutical executive to be returned to you, he and your Coast Guardsmen would still be fucking breathing.

No one was crying a river now Xander had returned to his maker, although Craig *was* in grieving. He'd wanted to be the one to rip the guy's head off. Slowly.

As had half of Brayden's team.

Xander had been the mind child behind the science experiments on Moretti vampires, responsible for handing over the serum to the Russian mobster, Nikolay Mikhaylov, putting in motion events that couldn't be undone.

Brayden was going to try.

"Exactly why couldn't you stop them? Excuse my ignorance, but you *are* vampires," James Calder asked.

Craig let out a quiet snort.

Brayden's lips twitched.

"I'm going to pretend you didn't ask that," Vincent replied in a low growl. "Your team arranged the pickup and location, giving us coordinates only an hour before we were due to do the handover."

"Meaning?" the president asked darkly, over the speakerphone.

“Meaning, you must have a leak,” Vincent replied. “How else would the Russians have known we were there *and* been able to plant explosives on their vehicles?”

The explosives might have already been on *or* thrown into the Coast Guards vehicles. They didn’t know. Without the ability for his team to survey the crime scene—which they didn’t—Brayden wasn’t able to find out.

“They could’ve tapped them as they drove past,” Craig said quietly, reading his mind.

Calder wouldn’t have heard him, but Vincent shot them a warning glance. The president didn’t know they were in the room, and they all wanted it to remain that way.

It’s the most likely scenario, Brayden replied telepathically, and the commander gave a brief nod in agreement.

Yeah, but they still knew we’d be there Craig replied.

So someone was talking.

But who?

“Why would they want to take out Xander if they’d been working with him? He was their supplier,” Calder asked.

The silent accusation hung in the air.

If they were going to kill the guy, they would’ve done it weeks ago, or refused to return him.

Vincent leaned back in his chair and rubbed his forehead. “Well, that’s the million-dollar question. We assume the Russians have other contacts in BioZen. We wiped the memories of their executive team, but it’s a complicated process. If someone had been involved for a long period, we may have missed it. Old memories are more difficult to shift.”

They all sat in silence, letting the president process that bit of information.

If someone had been in partnership with Xander, and there must have been—one didn’t run a multi-million-dollar vampire research project in a pharmaceutical company without

the entire board knowing—someone was either covering his ass, or a silent partner.

Someone more palatable to the Russians.

Or maybe Xander had pissed the *Bravta* off, like he did basically everyone who encountered the narcissistic psychopath.

Likely.

“So there was someone working in collaboration with Xander throughout this entire project,” Calder noted.

Bingo, Mr. President.

“Exactly,” Vincent agreed.

“Jesus, it could be anyone. BioZen has a huge board, and as I’ve said before, many of them are fundamental in funding important political figures.”

Brayden grit his teeth.

What was the president expecting? For them to say, *Oh well, by all means, let’s allow them to continue their experiments on our race?*

Vincent shook his head, catching his eye, and mouthed *for fuck’s sake*.

Brayden slowly nodded.

“Okay, well, if you’d rather, we’ll deal with this the *vampire way*,” Vincent said. When the president went to speak, the king cut him off. “James, I’m going to be straight with you. Handing Xander over went against all my instincts, but in the name of collaboration”—he did that inverted-comma-finger action, despite the president not being able to see him—“I agreed with you, that holding a human captive might not be in the best interests of diplomacy when our race is inevitably exposed.”

Vincent’s patience was clearly wearing thin.

“Have you finished?” the president asked.

The king’s brows shot up.

Oh, boy.

“Not in the slightest,” Vincent replied, his voice lowering. “For the past twelve or so months, I’ve been meeting with you and the world leaders in these Operation Daylight meetings. What have we achieved?”

Fuck all, as far as Brayden was concerned. But then again, he wasn’t privy to everything.

“Diplomacy is not a fast-moving beast, Vincent.,” Calder said, his own voice sounding tense. “These are two different subjects.”

Was it, though?

“See, that’s where I disagree. My job is to protect my race. All ten million of the vampires around the world,” the king said, his voice darkening with every word. “Over the past few years, we’ve been exposed, had dozens of vamps kidnapped using a serum we still don’t have an antidote for, and then experimented on. Now we’ve discovered those same psychos have created human-vampire hybrid soldiers—one owned and used by one of the most dangerous mob bosses in the world—and you want me to sit back and ignore my predator nature by attending a monthly project meeting and shuffling fucking paper?”

Craig snorted.

Brayden knew his brother had left off the hybrid vampire-wolves, which the president didn’t know about. They were the result of the longest BioZen captive, Callan, who’d had his DNA fucked with by scientists.

No one here knew about him and his pack of wolves.

And they wouldn’t.

“I appreciate this is a dangerous and testing time, Vincent, but you need to understand, this is an unprecedented situation. Every decision I make here on out will go down in history and pave the way for humans to accept, or not, your race.”

They all knew the stakes.

They'd been considering it a hell of a lot longer than he had. Hundreds of years longer. Their worst nightmare had come true. Humans had taken their kind and chopped them up to study them.

Brayden wriggled his jaw to release the tension. It made him furious every damn day.

Now he had a child on the way.

He needed his world safe.

“Killing scientists isn't a good first step,” Calder continued. “Whatever choices you've made in the past is history. However, there are now people, important people, who know about your existence and the BioZen experiments.”

He meant the leaders in Operation Daylight.

In other words, whatever actions they took now were going into the history books. They could be cast as murderers or a peaceful race.

While BioZen got away with it.

Vincent cursed, while Brayden shook his head. He missed the old days when they could just kill people.

Not that they were a bloodthirsty race—pun intended—but there were times when a good old-fashioned head snap and *see you on the other side* was just easier.

And necessary.

Vincent picked up his pen and began tapping the end of it on his large desk pad.

“Goddamn it. I know, James,” Vincent said. “You need to understand, we have tried to work in with human laws, but I cannot and will not stay by and let them get away with this. Or continue.”

“I can't let you go around killing people, Moretti,” the president replied.

Vincent's eyes lifted and met Brayden's. He saw the moment his brother made his decision, and damn, Brayden was proud.

“I’m not asking for permission,” the vampire king said.



WHEN THE CALL ENDED, they all shifted their bodies and let out long breaths.

Craig pulled out his phone. “Okay, so I have a list of idea’s, now we’re ready to pull our guns out.”

Brayden laughed.

“Put it away,” Vincent said, a smile creeping onto his face.

“Fine. That was badass, though. You handed the president his ass.” Craig slipped his phone back into his back pocket. “Fuck, I’ve been waiting for this.”

They all had.

Brayden stood, walked to the cabinet, and poured himself a glass of plasma. He glanced over his shoulder, and both vampires nodded, so he poured two more.

Handing them the glasses, he sat back down.

“It had to be said.” Brayden lifted the antique crystal tumbler to his lips.

Vincent nodded.

“Calder knows that. He’s trying to navigate what our existence means now to humanity. The rules have changed. He cannot dictate laws upon us without going to war,” Vincent acknowledged. “A war none of us want.”

“A war we would win,” Craig said.

“Not without great casualties,” Brayden replied.

“On both sides,” Vincent added. “We are powerful predators, but they have numbers and bombs. Not to mention, nuclear weapons.”

“No one is pushing any nuke buttons. They haven’t yet, and they won’t,” Craig said.

Brayden agreed.

When the consequences were lethal, humanity always chose life. It was a survival mentality all animals had.

Nuclear was a no-win option for everyone.

“That’s assuming none of the crazy motherfuckers with power decide to be the one,” Vincent said, tossing back his drink. “But, assuming they don’t, we need alternative strategies.”

About time.

Brayden had been tossing around ideas with Craig and Ari over the last few months, knowing it would come to this sooner or later.

“We’ll put pen to paper and consider how we navigate any number of military scenarios.” Craig nodded to Brayden. “We have some ideas.”

“Keep it tight for now,” Vincent warned.

The king was worried about a leak. Brayden tipped his head back and emptied his tumbler. There were still rebels who wanted to see the monarchy fall for all number of reasons, and if that meant earning money that someone—say big pharma, a politician, or the mafia—was waving in front of your nose, then leaking information and unlocking a door was easy.

Not his team, though.

Brayden trusted every single one of his SLCs.

“When is Ari back?” the king asked.

Brayden narrowed his eyes. “Ari’s on the inside. Now is not the time to bring up ancient family history.” His voice low as he got ready to fight his brother over this.

Brayden trusted Ari with his life.

“On the contrary. I spoke to Lorenzo after Ari and Sage had stayed at the castle in Italy.” Vincent’s voice softened when he referred to the vampire who managed their staff at Casa Moretti. “Apparently, many of the vampires in residence

remember him from before the time he left in the seventh century.”

That would have been emotional for him. As far as Brayden knew, it was the first time he had returned since walking away all those years ago.

“They greeted him with the old *my lord* thing,” Vincent said, referring to just one of the royal greetings. “Ari stopped them in their tracks. He pulled Lorenzo aside and insisted everyone was reminded he was not a royal and to call him Ari or Mr. Moretti.”

“Isn’t he, though?” Craig asked, drawing their attention back to the big vampire, leaning with those thick guns of his crossed over his chest.

“No,” the king replied.

“In other royal families, the relatives have titles.” Craig shrugged.

“Those family members are of the same blood. Ari may have been Gio’s twin, but every vampire in existence is of Gio’s bloodline. Born from his groin, so to speak. Ari was not,” Vincent explained.

“A technicality?” Brayden said, shrugging. “It’s still the same family blood.

Vincent shook his head. “It’s no different from a long family line in a human family. We just live longer and breed slower.”

Brayden considered that.

It was such a fine technicality, but it was the way of their race. A decision made by Gio Moretti.

“Plus, I ask you, brother, if I offered him a title, do you think he would accept it?” Vincent said.

Brayden pursed his lips in thought.

No. Ari wouldn’t accept it.

After fifteen hundred years of being unacknowledged as a Moretti and then going into hiding, they were lucky the

powerful vampire had stepped back into their lives. As a friend.

Instead, their uncle was working with them to protect the race. He was a complex and powerful vampire.

“No. And in answer to your question, Ari returns in a few days,” Brayden said. “Sage has a routine visit coming up with the wolves in Greenwood, so will be going with Kurt and Madison after they return from a ski trip. While she’s gone, I’ll ask Ari for his input into our strategy. His perspective will be interesting.”

“Indeed,” Vincent agreed. “Meanwhile, let’s get some of our teams searching for Nikolay Mikhaylov. Gather all the data you can. Here and in Russia.”

Brayden stood and stretched his arms out, moving his neck left and right as it clicked.

Shit was getting real now.

The Russian mob had sent them a message last night. It said: *We are not scared of you.*

But they fucking should be.

“He was last tracked landing in New York after trying to take Charlotte,” Craig said. “I’ll get some teams on the ground there. Maybe even pull in some of Ari’s assassins.”

Brayden nodded to him.

They worked closely with The Institute on these more covert assignments.

“Find him,” Vincent said. “I’m not going to let this asshole fuck with us anymore. We need to destroy that hybrid soldier, and if that means taking down the *Bravta*, then so be it.”

Brayden stared at his brother, then at Craig.

He slid his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels, smirking. “Right. So just to be clear, we’re starting a war with the Russian mafia. Got it.”

Craig burst out laughing.

“At least we’re not sitting around with our fingers up our asses anymore,” the commander said with glee in his eyes.

Craig loved a good battle.

Vincent raised a brow. “Just to be clear, they started it.”

Touché.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nikolay lay with the white sheet just covering his semi-hard cock. Elizabeth was draped across his chest, asleep.

He stared into the darkness out the windows of his NYC penthouse.

A war was coming.

He could feel it in his bones.

A different kind of war.

He had a decision to make. Did he collaborate with his enemies or join forces?

As far as he knew, the mafias across the globe didn't know about the vampire race yet. When they found out about his hybrid soldier, Kane, it would send ripples of fear through them.

Mobs didn't take kindly to a power shift like that.

Still, it wasn't them he was after.

Yet.

Elizabeth stirred, then settled. His fingers slid down her shoulder, along her back, until he cupped her ass. She was an angel in this dark storm. A way to appease the devil inside him. She could take his cock hard and often.

Which was why he was keeping her.

"I need to work," Elizabeth had told him. "If you won't let me leave, then at least give me something to do."

His lips twitched at the memory of his response.

"You're not a prisoner. You can leave at any time," he had said.

She'd scoffed in that Italian way. "You took my clothes. I cannot walk out of here naked."

They both knew it was a lie. She would leave if she thought her life was at risk. Clothes or no clothes.

Except if she tried, he had armed men at the door instructed to keep her protected. And inside the penthouse.

They both knew she had made no attempt to leave because he gave her what she craved.

His cock.

His dominance and power.

Pleasure.

“I will get you some clothes. I will give you whatever you desire, Elizabeth. Except your freedom.” He had towered over her, his dick thrusting into her. “Show me I can trust you, and I will give you some work in my organization.”

“Harder,” she’d begged, and he’d pulled out, teasing her needy pussy.”

“Tell me I can trust you,” he’d demanded.

“*Si, si,*” she’d said, reverting to her native language.

Nikolay wasn’t sure if he could trust Elizabeth, but she had worked for that asshole, Xander, for a long enough time knowing he was not an honest man, so he would consider it.

He had asked her about Tomassi and why she had let him fuck her.

Elizabeth was reluctant to share the details about how she’d been treated. By the time he had coaxed it out of her, Nikolay had decided the man had to die.

So, for that reason alone, he was no longer breathing.

Elizabeth was his.

Plus, Xander had become a liability.

Then he’d learned the U.S. Coast Guard were collecting him from the vampires, so Nikolay had sent a team to intervene. It was the perfect opportunity.

He would’ve preferred to bring him here and torture him for hours, slicing up the psychopath, but capturing him without

interference from the vampires was too risky.

And unlikely.

Even with the serum.

Tomorrow, he and his second in command, Alexi, were meeting with Walt Cashmore, the director of BioZen. Xander had worked closely with the human on the vampire project, so he was now the man they would deal with for the supply of more soldiers and the vampire serum.

Nikolay had a big order for him.

The vampires were going to make him a very rich and powerful man. The most powerful on the planet. He would rule the mafias and cartels across the world, and the governments would bow to his command.

Rome wasn't built in a day.

First things first—or Phase One, as he was calling it—he had to educate the men he'd partner with and show them the odds were against them so they would negotiate.

That's what the mafia did.

His father, Boris, might have died at his hand, but he had taught him all he knew. Power wasn't given. It was taken.

Nikolay smiled into the darkness.

By the time Phase Two was ready for execution, they would be all be calling him *Pakhan*.

Boss.

The boss who had exposed the vampire race and could protect humanity.

For a price.



CHAPTER TWELVE

After the confrontation with Casey the night before, Alex had pondered whether to stay home instead of joining the team on their skiing trip.

In the end, Kurt and Madison had decided to join them, so he figured the increased numbers would make it less awkward.

It didn't.

Casey had greeted him with a simple "*Dexter*" when they'd all met in the underground parking lot and took off in the black SUVs nearly two hours ago. Now, they were about thirty minutes out from Saddleback Mountain, and she had yet to say another word to him, despite being in the back seat together the entire drive.

That had been a complete fuck up neither of them could rectify. After all the couples started piling in, Alex and Casey found themselves standing on opposite sides of the vehicle with the doors open.

Casey had cleared her throat and climbed in, putting her scrunched up jacket between them. Marcus was driving, Charlotte in the front. They'd made idle conversation, asking him about his life back in Seattle.

"So you ski?" Marcus asked.

"Snowboard," Alex replied. "I used to ski, but when boarding was invented, I just preferred it."

"So do we," Charlotte said, shooting a look at her friend. "Right, Case?"

"Yup," the little brunette replied, pulling out her phone.

Her words from the night before had been playing around in his mind. As a warrior and team player, he was well aware just how much trust played a part in an effective execution on a job.

Alex had no doubt Brayden and his team had trained every soldier in the Moretti army. Including the females.

Yet...

Alex couldn't shake the overwhelming feeling he had to keep Casey safe.

The Institute didn't have female warriors, so at first, he'd thought it was just an adjustment, on top of killing the woman. Except he didn't feel the same about Charlotte.

His explanation must be that she was mated to Marcus.

At least, it was all he could think of.

Charlotte was taller and bigger-boned than her petite friend, but still a slim female.

God, he was over analyzing the whole thing.

It had to be some kind of PTSD.

After he'd returned home the night before and the sun had begun to rise, Alex had been completely restless. But he eventually fell asleep.

Then the nightmares, which had stopped after leaving Seattle, had returned.

His finger ready.

A decision made.

The silent click.

The woman moving.

Blood.

Her eyes flying open as they connected across the distance with his. She couldn't see him—Alex knew that—and yet it was as if her soul reached out to his, pleading for him to take it back.

He couldn't.

The bullet was already in her brain matter.

She'd fallen, bodies around her fleeing. Not caring if she was dead or alive. A wasted life.

The target fell after her, taken down by a fellow assassin nearby.

In his dream, bile rose in his throat. Alex leaned away from his rifle, vomiting. Just as he had at the time.

He'd killed a woman.

Then, he was back at his childhood home, sitting at the dinner table with a bowl of red soup in front of him. Steam poured off it, but it wasn't a tomato.

The woman's face reflected back at him from the boiling blood.

His father was yelling at him.

His mother, crying.

Alex tried to lift his hands in the dream, but when he glanced down, he found them covered in blood.

A woman screamed.

His head lifted, and the victim sat opposite him, at his parents' kitchen table.

A bullet hole in the center of her head.

Blood was pouring down her face, and she clung to the edge of the table.

"You're evil," his mother cried at him, disgust on her face.

"You don't deserve to have a seat at this table. You have tarnished this family's name." His father shook his head in shame.

Then the scene distorted, and bloody holes appeared in his parents' foreheads.

No!

That's when he woke, crying out. Sweat pouring from him as he panted. Alex had cursed, gasping, so he didn't throw up.

He hadn't last night, but he had before.

Fucking nightmares.

Alex knew what it was. PTSD.

Post-traumatic stress disorder. It came in all forms and affected vampires in much the same way it did humans, from

what they understood.

Alex knew it was a matter of time. He had to just deal with it. Killing had been his job.

He hadn't meant to hurt the woman, but at the exact moment his finger had pulled the trigger, she had moved.

Life happened.

It was unfortunate.

Yet his soul felt like he'd ripped it open with a cheese grater and poured alcohol on it.

Now he had to stand back and watch the female sitting beside him put herself in dangerous positions every night and be okay with it?

He wasn't.

Fuck!

Of course, he knew he was projecting his trauma onto Casey, but how the hell did he stop it?

And why just her?

Alex needed to get his shit together, or he *would* put the team at risk. Hopefully, they would never be on the same job again. The last thing he wanted to do was risk another vampire's life or his job. He was a fucking SLC.

Ari and Brayden had trusted him enough to put him forward for the Vampire Games, and he'd won.

Now, Alex had to prove he was worthy.

Was it because he was attracted to her?

The fact he'd never fought beside a female might be the cause. A female he wanted to fuck so badly his cock ached.

Alex glanced over at Casey in her new pink ski bib. She stared out the window.

Her tight black top showed off her olive-skinned abs and the curve of her supple breasts. He'd been fighting an erection the entire drive.

Thank God for loose ski pants.

Whatever this was, Alex was sure it would eventually pass.

After this trip, he would make sure any socializing with his team excluded Casey.

As much as he wanted to, getting involved with her sexually was a really bad idea.



FORTY MINUTES LATER, Alex was leaning on the bar, enjoying a much-needed whiskey with Ben, Marcus, and Kurt while the females freshened up.

They had piled their gear up at a nearby table, ready to hit the slopes.

“Babe, get the girls down here. The slope is closing soon, so we need to get up the mountain before then,” Ben said, holding his phone to his ear. “Anna.” The growl in his voice hinted at something naughty.

Alex glanced away and rolled his eyes.

Why had he thought joining all these couples was a good idea? All the sexual growling and innuendo’s were making his permanent erection painful. Which reminded him...

“I get the impression we’re not super welcome at Max Bar,” Alex said, talking about the on-site bar at the castle.

“We, being SLCs?” Kurt asked.

Alex nodded.

“Yeah, we usually keep away so the teams can relax and hang without their SOs hanging over their shoulders, but things have got a little blurry recently,” Marcus said, taking a sip of his drink.

“I think I started it. When I mated Anna, she was new to the castle and wanted to meet people, so I would pop in to check on her,” Ben said.

“Stalk her, you mean.” Marcus snorted.

“Technically, he kidnapped her.” Kurt laughed. “But yeah, Madison is friends with Anna, and they’ve all just become friends. So I get dragged there from time to time.”

“It’s not official. You can drink there if you want. It would be a way to meet others in the castle,” Ben said.

Alex nodded, rubbing his jaw.

Ben studied him, then Alex saw the moment the vampire clicked.

“Ahh, I get it.” Ben smirked and slapped him on the shoulder. “Kurt, who’s the guy who runs those sex parties in the south wing?”

Alex’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

They all nodded.

“Oh yeah. When the prince’s orgies ended, Sam started up these weekly events. He’s your man. They run three times a week now. Tomorrow’s the next one,” Kurt said.

Fucking fantastic.

“Not to be creepy or anything, but it doesn’t look like you’re lacking female attention, dude,” Marcus said. “New kid on the block. Fresh meat, and all that.”

They weren’t wrong. He’d seen the looks and blushes. One meal, when he’d been in the cafeteria, a female had walked right up, dropped her phone number on the table, winked, and walked away.

“And an SLC,” Kurt said, rolling his eyes. “Have you checked your fan page yet?”

Alex laughed.

Yeah, he had.

“I’d rather not have any one-on-one relationships at this point. Just need a bit of fun relief,” he admitted.

Not while he was dealing with whatever was going on in his head. Plus, his cock wanted Casey.

But he was taking back control.

“Totally get it,” Kurt said, nodding.

Alex had known Kurt before he mated Madison. The vampire had joined them on a few nights out in Seattle, so he knew the kinks he was into.

“I’m surprised Tristan didn’t mention it to you already. He’s a regular.” Ben slid his empty glass across the bar and glanced at his phone. “Where the fuck are these females?”

As if on cue, Casey, Charlotte, Anna, and Madison stepped into the bar, looking like ski field models.

“Where does Tristan go regularly?” Charlotte asked.

“Sam’s events.” Marcus kissed his mate, then smirked at Alex.

Alex tossed back the last of his whiskey, and when he lifted his eyes, he felt, before even seeing, Casey’s glare.

“If you want some sexy orgies, come with us when we visit the wolves.” Madison laughed. “They’d love you.”

Alex had heard about the heightened sexual drive of the hybrids, who were now living in Greenwood. He wasn’t sure he was willing to risk being bitten and shifted into one of them.

He was horny, but not *that* horny.

Still, it sounded like it wasn’t all that miserable, being tucked away in the mountains and fucking like rabbits.

Or rather, wolves.

“Oh, yeah?” Alex asked, ignoring the laser beams Casey was boring into his skull with her gorgeous green globes.

She lifted her arms and tightened her ponytail, looking grumpy as hell.

“Can we please go?” Casey growled. “Some of us came to ski, not plan out our sex life.”

Charlotte shot him a questioning look.

Alex smirked.

Well, well, well. Was the little warrior jealous?

“Sorry, Pip Squeak. Didn’t realize you were such a pure wee thing,” he teased. “I’ll remember not to offend your senses in the future.”

Alex would happily pleasure all her senses, but it was in both their best interests if he kept his body away from hers.

Which was a damn shame.

Alex had a feeling the fire in her eyes would translate to quite the firecracker in the bedroom.

If he wanted to keep his job, it was better he seek out Sam’s parties instead.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Casey: Age Seven



“I DON’T CARE IF SHE’S a vampire. She’s also a little girl.” Casey’s father crossed his arms and glared at her mother.

Casey was peeking through the crack in the door, having broken out of her room.

Well, she’d only had to open the door and sneak down the hallway, but she’d likely be punished for *that* as well. Casey knew her father could hear her.

He was a vampire, after all.

But he hadn’t always been. Casey had learned her father had started his life as a human before meeting her mother.

He’d been a member of the English royal family. A duke. She didn’t know what that meant. Casey was only seven, after all.

Daddy said it meant she had to act like a lady and wasn’t allowed to play like the boys. She told him she liked playing with the boys.

He had gotten mad at her.

Later, he had sat her down and listed all the games she was allowed to play—*dumb dolls? Gah! I want to climb trees and fish in the ponds*—and had given her nanny a list of subjects she had to learn.

Reading was the only thing on the list that interested her. The rest sounded really boring.

“You can’t keep restricting her like this, Richard,” her mother said. “It goes against her nature.”

Casey watched her father pace back and forth. “She’s seven, for crying out loud, Valerie. I can’t have her wielding a

sword, even if it is a wooden one. What will people say?"

No swords?

She loved sword fighting.

Casey had let out a little huff.

Her mother sat on the end of the bed. "I know being a vampire is still new to you, but trust me, you will not care what your aristocratic family thinks or says in another few decades. They will be dead," Valerie said.

Casey's eyes had flown open.

My family is going to die? A little squeak snuck out.

Next minute, the door was flying open, and her mother was crouching before her.

"Darling," her mom said, pulling her into her arms.

"Don't kill them. I'll be good, I promise," Casey cried.

"Oh, darling. We aren't killing anyone." She rubbed Casey's back. "Look at what you have done, Richard."

"You said it, not me," he mumbled. "And I'd rather we not discuss these things at all."

Her mother wiped Casey's tears and shot her father a look, shaking her head.

"You don't understand, Richard. But I need you to try," her mom said. "Casandra is not human. She never will be."

Casey knew she was a vampire and that it had to be kept secret from her royal family.

"I'm sorry, but as the man of this household, I insist that our daughter behave like a lady. Her education can continue, but that is the only allowance I will make." He growled and pushed past them, out the door. "She is not to play with those boys again."

Her mother let out a sigh and smiled at her. "It will be okay. I will keep working on your father. He will come around."

“Why will they die, Mommy?” Casey asked, more concerned about that now.

“Daddy’s family are human. Remember?”

Casey nodded.

“Vampires live much longer lives than humans. We can’t tell them, though. But one day, they won’t be with us anymore,” her mom said. “Daddy is a new vampire and is yet to understand that. He had been raised to believe little girls must behave in certain ways.”

“How old are you?” Casey asked her mom.

“Two hundred and twenty-two years.”

“Wow, that’s old,” Casey said, sitting on the floor.

Her mom grinned, then let out a sigh and sat down with her, brushing a hand over her hair.

“You have fire in you, darling. I don’t want to smother it, but I also need to respect your father and the times we are living.”

Casey blinked, not understanding what she meant.

Then an idea struck her.

“Like a dragon? Like in my book?” Casey asked, excited. She could blow fire on Thomas, who lived next door. He was annoying and always threw stones at her. She would burn off his hair and laugh as he rolled in the grass, trying to put out the flames.

“Yes, sweetheart, you’re my little dragon.” Her mom tweaked her nose.

Cool.

Little did she know, the worst was yet to come.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Casey crouched low on her board, then lifted as she careened down the snowy mountain.

God, it felt great.

She needed this space.

The mountain had closed about an hour ago. All the humans were now out of sight, so they'd spread out and were free to go where they liked.

A snow-covered ski jump appeared in front of her, and Casey crouched again, hit it, and went flying into the air, slamming into the fresh snow. She pressed the toe-side edge of the board into the white powder, slowing and grinning as it crunched and splayed behind her.

Yeah!

Despite the darkness, the full moon offered great visibility, along with her vamp sight, so she could see a few of her pals skiing around her.

Well, most of them were her pals... except him.

Sam's fucking club?

Alex had women throwing themselves at him. Why would he need to go there? Not that she hadn't been herself a few times. She just made sure she didn't go when Tristan was there.

Showing her girly bits to one of her best friends—one who told her regularly he wanted to shag her—wasn't appealing.

Seeing Alex naked? Now that was something she would love to see—and never admit to anyone.

Because, yes, she was ridiculously attracted to the vampire. If only he would stop treating her like a goddamn princess he wanted to cage, then they could be friends.

Right now, he just reminded her of the restricted childhood she had had. It pushed her buttons and made her want to

scream.

No one really understood what she had endured. The older she got, the smaller her cage.

Now she was free.

For now.

And while she was, no one was going to tell her she didn't belong or wasn't skilled enough to be in the Moretti army. She had worked hard to get where she was. Only Charlotte truly understood.

Her friend had been right. After the moment in the ski store, it was clear Alex was attracted to her as well.

She couldn't go there.

If he didn't respect her now, spreading her legs for him wasn't going to improve matters.

Charlotte came swooping down beside her.

"Hey," she said, and they both twisted their bodies, digging into the snow and skidding to a halt.

Casey lifted her goggles and grinned. "Perfect conditions."

The snow had stopped falling; the sky was clear, with a million stars twinkling above them.

"I know, right? It's gorgeous," Charlotte said. "We need to do this more often."

Casey nodded as Kurt and Ben swooshed past them, having some kind of race. That was a train wreck just waiting to happen.

They moved over to the tree line so they could chat. Charlotte looked like something was on her mind, and it must have been important if she wanted to do it on the mountain.

"What's up?" Casey asked.

"I wanted to ask you about something. Don't get mad. I know you don't like Alex, but... do you think you'd be able to get along with him? Move past his stupid attitude." Charlotte

wouldn't look her in the eye, and it immediately sent a warning bell through her.

Casey tilted her head and ignored the tightness in her chest.

"I mean, yeah, he's a jerk, but I haven't decked him yet, so..." She laughed, but it came out all wrong.

Charlotte smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Cool."

When she didn't elaborate, Casey decided she couldn't let it go. "Why? What's going on?"

Charlotte shifted her board. "Nothing. I mean, it's just different being mated. Alex is on the SLC team with Marcus, and you know how it is."

How it is?

How what was?

Did she have to be friends with everyone Marcus worked with? Even if they were completely disrespecting her? Taunting her?

What if someone decided to bully her?

Fuck that.

"Do I?" Casey asked, a brow lifting.

"They'll bond. Warriors do. You know that," Charlotte replied. "So he's not going anywhere. And you're my BFF. I don't want to lose you."

Casey let out a long sigh.

Her tension began to wash away now she realized what her friend was concerned about. It was unnecessary, but Charlotte had been through a huge change recently, and it made sense she was feeling a little sensitive.

Plus, if she was honest with herself, she was being a sulky bitch about Alex. She had to stop and not let him, or others, see how much he got to her.

"Babe, you're not going to lose me." Casey nudged Charlotte with her gloved hand, smiling. "That seems a little

dramatic, even for you.”

Charlotte went quiet, even after the little snort she let out.

“Dude. You’re killing me. What is going on?” Casey asked.

“It might. I heard the guys commenting on the tension between you and Alex. You know what they’re like. Zero tolerance for the drama. I don’t want to have to choose,” Charlotte said.

The fuck?

“Choose? What the hell, Char? Who said what?” Casey yelled.

She was well aware the mating bond would always pull Charlotte to Marcus, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be friends. What the hell were they saying?

Did they not want her hanging out with them?

“I’m not repeating anything. Can you just—I don’t know—be Switzerland or something?” Charlotte pleaded. “Alex is a nice guy.”

Nice? He was bullying her.

Alex had pulled her off the job and thrown her into the car, clearly believing her incompetent.

He was lucky she hadn’t laid a formal complaint.

Casey’s heart began thumping like hellfire, and she raced through a million different scenarios. “Was it Marcus? Did he say something?”

Charlotte flung back her head. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Can you please—”

“Just what? Just let him call me stupid names and put up with his sexist shit to keep the peace? So everyone else is happy?” Casey growled. “So you don’t have to choose Marcus over me?”

God, she was mad.

“You know what? I’m done,” Casey snarled.

“Case—”

She spun her board and pushed off. “No! This is bullshit.”

Casey raced down the mountain, bending down low and then letting her board loose. She lifted into the air and crashed down, crouching, and going hell to leather toward the bottom.

How dare she!

Did Charlotte not care about how she was being treated? Did the SLCs not see what Alex was doing?

The air burned her face, and she realized she hadn’t pulled her goggles back down.

Who gives a fuck!

As the snow leveled out, she skidded to a halt and let out a curse.

With a glance over her shoulder to check Charlotte hadn’t followed her, Casey unclipped one boot and walked her board toward the building.

Then she stopped.

“Damn them all. I’m not fucking leaving. He is not going to push me out of my social group and life. Or my fucking job,” Casey muttered to herself.

Re-clipping her boot, she stood and teleported to the top of the mountain.

Alex Giordano was not winning.



ALEX SPUN HIS BOARD around and lifted his goggles. He’d been trying out all the fields, getting a feel for all the different levels. Saddleback Mountain was an excellent venue.

Glancing around, he sensed Marcus had gone over to the next field. He decided to do the same and teleported over to the top.

Smack!

Jesus.

Alex slammed into something hard and fell back on his ass. Dazed, he rubbed his head and looked around.

A pink puffy body lay a few feet from him.

Oh, great.

He unclipped his boots and padded over. Crouching, he stared down at the angry vampire glaring back at him.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Do I look okay? A second later, my atoms would’ve been blasted all over this mountain,” Casey answered through gritted teeth.

Alex let out a dry laugh.

“You seriously can’t be blaming me for teleporting into you. Have you seen how big this place is?”

“Exactly. It’s like the universe is out to get me,” she snapped.

Using every ounce of his willpower, Alex kept his eyes from rolling. Then he asked, “Are you hurt?”

Casey, however, didn’t try to stop hers. Those emerald eyes did a completely exaggerated roll and then continued their glare.

“What part of *I’m a vampire* does no one in this life understand?” she asked.

Okay?

What was that about?

“So you believe in reincarnation?” he asked, trying to make her smile.

Tall order, but he liked challenges.

“Jesus, your brain is as big a wall as your body.” Casey threw her arm over her eyes.

He smirked.

A moment later, she huffed and tried to push him away. He grabbed her wrist, but she sat up, and he found himself inches

from her face.

From that mouth.

Way too close.

As they both blinked, the temperature skyrocketed between them. Alex watched her lips part, and for once, she was quiet. Except for the thud of her beating heart.

Or was that his?

Casey's eyes dilated. Alex's body made a decision without consent and leaned closer. All the blood in his body seemed to rush to his cock, and it hardened, pressing against his zipper.

Then, as he leaned in another inch and reached behind her neck... Casey vanished.

"Are you out of your mind?" she cried from behind him as he went crashing face-first into the snow.

Alex leaped to his feet, spinning to find Casey standing with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

It was nearly laughable, if his cock hadn't been so hard.

"Oh, come on. You wanted me to kiss you." Alex prowled toward her.

Although he *was* feeling less confident than he had been a few seconds ago. No female had ever teleported away from him or rejected one of his moves.

Ever.

"Oh yeah, so much so, I broke down all my atoms and moved through time and space. I soooo want you." Casey threw her hands out and did another eye roll.

Alex grinned and stopped his approach.

God, she would be dynamite in bed.

"What?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

Ah, no. Alex was not repeating *that* out loud. He might have just proven he wasn't as smart as he thought, but he wasn't completely stupid.

She would bite his head off.

The truth was, Casey teleporting away had been the right thing to do. Alex had lost his mind for a moment. Not surprising—it's what she did to him.

“Nothing, Hellfire. Let's just say you did us both a favor,” he said. “Because if I had kissed you, I'd be taking us back to the room and fucking you so hard you wouldn't be able to ski for a month.”

Alex hardened further, and Casey squeezed her thighs together. It was the slightest movement, but when his eyes lifted to hers, those long lashes barely flickering and her pupils dark, he knew she'd seen where his eyes went.

Jesus, he could take her here. Right now.

He could throw her to the ground and rip that sexy pink bib right off her. Those perky breasts of hers would pop right out of that short black top and into his hands. His mouth would be on them in seconds, while her legs wrapped around his body.

Alex's fangs itched in his mouth, eager to taste her.

“Go. Before I lose the ability to ask nicely,” he growled.

His hands clenched, fighting the urge to take her without permission.

Something he'd never done to a female.

Casey blinked a few times. Her mouth parting in surprise until her eyes lifted to his, and he knew what she'd see.

Rich, barely controlled lust.

She teleported away in the next second.

“Fuck.” Alex pulled a glove off and threw it to the ground. He ran his hand over his face.

He needed Sam's details pronto.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The operations room was full of warriors this morning. Everyone was there.

Alex leaned against the side wall, while the other SLCs sat with legs stretched out or up on desks. Brayden and Craig were talking them through the next steps in taking down their enemies.

There were more than ever.

Alex wasn't familiar with the challenges they now faced, having worked with the royal family when he was at The Institute.

It all began, so he understood, when the rebel vampire, Stefano Russo—who'd been executed by the Moretti royal family—shared the knowledge of vampires with Xander Tomassi. He gave them a lot of information no human should have. Things like the fact Tungsten—the strongest steel on the planet—was the only thing able to keep vampires out of a building.

So what did BioZen do? They reinforced their labs with it, ultimately enabling them to keep vampires contained so they could experiment on them.

Also, keeping out those who tried to save them.

Stefano had tipped the scales for their race—not in their favor. He had deserved his death. The rebel fraction who was currently rebuilding didn't understand the repercussions of what their former leader had done. The details of the vampires' kidnappings were kept highly confidential so as not to create a worldwide vampire panic.

Now BioZen had involved the Russian mafia. The *Bravta*.

“This is likely to lead to a war. We don't know enough about the *Bravta* or how big their operation is, but doing nothing is no longer an option,” Brayden said.

“I’ll speak to the team back in Seattle,” Alex offered, referring to The Institute. “We have data on them. I know Ari will be happy to share.”

Craig was scribbling on a whiteboard and noted it down, nodding at him.

“Tom, get our tech team digging into whatever database we can. Legal or not. I want everything we can find so we don’t go into this blind,” Craig said.

“Got it.” Tom ripped his jacket off, displaying a pair of guns Alex wasn’t expecting. The guy was a big vampire, but quieter than the others.

Alex didn’t realize he was so ripped.

“We have some contacts in the FBI. I’ll reach out,” Tom said, then smirked. “I know they’re always happy to see the mob take a hit.”

“Who isn’t?” Kurt added. “Those fuckers peddle every goddamn nasty shit on the planet, killing people.”

Alex wondered how much the team knew. In his former job, taking down mobsters happened frequently. From blood diamonds to drug smuggling to human trafficking, those men were the worst of the worst.

What made him angrier was how the governments allowed it. Anyone who thought it was outside their control nowadays, with the level of visibility via technology they had, was just lying to themselves.

Which posed the question, why?

What purpose did the mafias play in the world?

Aside from power and greed, which corrupt officials tapped into for their own financial gain.

“Be extremely discreet,” Craig said. “We need a complete blackout on this until we show our hand. No one outside this room knows what we’re doing. So tell them we’re just information gathering.” He glanced at Alex. “With the exception of The Institute team, but again, express the importance of this being top secret.”

“I’ll reinforce that. I want everyone we speak to and when documented,” Brayden demanded.

“Roger that,” Tom said. “I’ll work with Alex to see what our joint data shows.”

Alex knew they were being careful, but it was clear everyone was concerned about where the leak was coming from, and they weren’t discounting it from being within these walls.

Which was smart.

They also wouldn’t want talk of a war against the mob getting out.

“The commander and I will be working on a strategy with Ari when he returns. All of you will be fundamental in the execution of the plan, so we’ll be including you in the review when we’re ready,” Brayden said. “In saying that, any time is a good time to give me your thoughts and ideas.”

Alex suddenly turned to Ben who, by the glint in his eyes, had the same idea at the same time.

“Frankie,” Ben said, and Alex nodded, both of them grinning.

“Okay, one of you Muppets better start talking, or I’ll wipe those smiles off your face,” Craig growled, and Ben laughed.

“Frankie Licata,” Alex said. “Member of the Italian mafia based in NYC. He leaked us some information about the Irish mob few years back.”

“That’s right. One of my guys spoke to him. He got in tight with him,” Ben added. “You know Jason. It wasn’t quite undercover, but obviously, Frankie doesn’t know who or what he is.”

As in, a vampire.

“Good. Ring Oli,” Brayden instructed them, referring to Ben’s replacement, who had taken over the head job several months ago. “Find out if this Frankie will talk.”

“He will. Those mobsters are about as loyal to each other as a bunch of mean girls.” Ben smirked.

“You’re friends with a lot of high school girls, are you?” Kurt asked, one sarcastic brow raised.

Ben replied with his middle finger.

“Sick bastards.” Craig shook his head.

“I said friends. Jesus, I didn’t ask him if he was running a sex ring. Fucking hell,” Kurt said, grimacing. “Any of that shit crosses my path, and I’ll be breaking necks.”

Alex’s body tensed.

It *had* been a sex trafficking job Alex had been working on when he’d killed the female. The one who kept haunting his dreams.

Or one of the females, anyway.

Every day, he fell asleep and was haunted by the awful and bloody nightmares. Then woke stiff with the image of Casey’s hot wet mouth wrapped around his cock.

It was a mind fuck.

One he needed to remedy.

The drive home from Saddleback Mountain had been two hours of torture. Alex had opted to drive, hoping to keep his hands and eyes busy and that Casey and Charlotte would sit in the back together.

No such luck.

Casey had opened the passenger door as Marcus and Charlotte slid into the back seat, cozying up. They drove through the early hours of the morning back to Portland. Sounds of their friends’ lips smacking and licking thickened the sexual tension between them.

Alex had bent the steering wheel a handful of times, his teeth clenched.

“A word, Alex,” Brayden said, snapping him out of his memory. The room had almost emptied, he noticed, blinking.

Shit.

He'd completely zoned out.

"Sure," Alex replied, uncrossing his legs and pushing away from the wall.

They walked to the front of the room, and Brayden pointed to a seat as he sat in front of his laptop.

One didn't argue with the prince, so Alex sat his ass down. Not just because Brayden was a Moretti. Or maybe it was, but on a good day, waves of the most powerful alpha energy he'd ever come across rolled off the guy.

Alex was a huge vamp, but Brayden had a good amount of height and width on him. Still, it was more than that. Something indescribable.

He waited for the vampire to speak.

"You ready for the Oath Ceremony? I know Ben's wasn't streamed, but he came to the team in a different manner. Yours will be much more public," Brayden said. "You okay with that?"

The Vampire Games.

The four-day event had been live on VampNet. The majority of the race knew who he was and always would now. They all had fan pages on the secure vampire internet site, which included photos and information he had no idea how they had gotten. Some facts. Some memes that were photoshopped and kind of hilarious.

Gray sweatpants. His favorite.

And he didn't think all that exaggerated.

Alex suppressed his smirk.

"Yeah, it's no problem." Alex knew this wasn't what the prince wanted to talk to him about. It was a hallway conversation at best.

"Great," Brayden said, shutting his laptop. "I'll get a date from the king, and we'll lock it in. Brianna, his comms person, will arrange the announcement online."

Brianna was Craig's mate.

When the prince stayed seated, Alex knew more was coming.

"This is a big job you've stepped into. The team has been together a long time. They have their ways of working. Ben has slipped in, for the most part, without any issues."

Alex nodded.

"He was in a leadership role for a long time. I'm not into comparing my warriors, but I think it's worth recognizing the step up you've taken." Brayden leaned back in his chair.

Alex tilted his head. "You're concerned?"

A heavy chill ran through him. Did the prince not feel he was up to the job?

"No," Brayden simply replied.

"Then I'm confused," Alex said.

There was no way he was walking out the fucking door with that hanging in the air.

"It's my job to ensure this team runs optimally. That means all of you have the training, experience, tools, and weapons at your disposal," Brayden explained. "It means empowering the commander to lead you. It means making sure the right people are in the team and that you all gel."

It meant the prince didn't think he was gelling with the team and fitting in.

Or something.

It meant fucking something.

"Fuck, Brayden. You're freaking me out," Alex said, shifting uncomfortably.

The prince leaned forward.

"You wouldn't be sitting here if I didn't think you were a fit. I know you are. I also know you've been through some shit before you competed in the Games."

Ah.

So that was it.

Brayden had been thinking about what happened with Casey during the U.S. Coast Guard handover.

He swallowed.

“It’s the reason you are here. Am I right?” Brayden pushed. “Otherwise, you’d remained in your assassin role.”

“Yes,” he confessed.

Alex knew Ari had told the prince about his situation prior to his application. He knew all the details about the death of the female. Hell, Brayden knew his entire work history. It was part of being accepted into the games.

Brayden knew everything.

“Any regrets?” Brayden asked.

“No. None. This is where I want to be,” Alex replied, without missing a beat. “The assassin business doesn’t align with me anymore.”

The prince sat up and leaned his elbow on the desk, while Alex sat in his little fucking chair in the middle of the floor, wondering what to do with his arms.

So he crossed them.

“There’s going to be a war, Alex. Maybe the biggest one in our history. Humans will know about vampires very soon, and it’s going to change everything. I know you have everything I need in an SLC. What I don’t know is whether you’ve processed killing that woman and moved past it.”

Fuck.

“I don’t think you have,” the prince said, dropping the bomb.

Alex ran his hands through his hair and stood.

Goddamn it.

“She was innocent,” he ground out. “The female. My bullet went straight through her damn forehead. She was one of their victims, and I took her life.”

The prince was silent as Alex turned to face him, knowing his own would be ravaged by the memory of his kill.

Brayden held his eyes and then nodded. “There may be others. I can’t guarantee there won’t be,” the prince said. “But when there are, I need to know you won’t hesitate to take the shot to protect your team, your race, and, more importantly, your king.”

Alex crossed his arms.

“I’d take the shot.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nikolay stared across the vehicle at Alexi as his phone started to ring. They were on their way to meet Cash Waltmore, Director of BioZen, and were only a few minutes from arriving.

It was an important meeting, but this was a call he wanted to take, so he'd risk being late.

Not that Cash knew they were coming.

Irrelevant details.

Nikolay stretched out a leg and swiped to answer.

"*Dobro ve utro*, Enzo," he said, greeting the Italian in his native Russian tongue.

Enzo Romano was head of the Italian mafia in New York City. He was also the brother of the Scillian mafia boss.

Respected. Feared. Deadly.

Whatever.

"Mikhaylov, I heard you were in my city." Enzo's voice was dark and rough after too many of those cigars the mafia smoked. He should tell them it would kill them. "Are you on the way to the airport?"

Nikolay let out a laugh.

"Come now, Enzo. I am here in the Big Apple, enjoying some delicious New York pizza for a few days. You know you are always welcome in Moscow."

He wasn't.

The rules were different in his country. If another mafia stepped foot in his motherland, they would have to be very stealthy or have a fucking good reason for being there.

If he gave them an opportunity to explain themselves.

"Bullshit. I would be dead before I left the airport. You've been here for *more* than a few days. Do you need an escort? Or

directions to get home?” Enzo asked, and Nikolay bristled.

He didn't like—despite the double standards—being asked to get the fuck out of the city.

His voice hardened.

“The rules of the game are changing, Romano. They *have* changed. I have a proposal for you. Let's meet and smoke your disgusting cigars, and I will tell you,” Nikolay said.

If Enzo disagreed, he'd have worse terms offered to him when he finally got on board. He would.

They all would.

There was silence.

Nikolay knew the powerful man was trying to figure out if his offer was a threat or something far worse.

Unfortunately for Enzo, it was the latter.

But he wouldn't figure it out. Unlike their usual business affairs, there would be no intel for him to be sifting through.

Nobody knew about vampires yet.

“I don't do business with men who slaughter their fathers,” Enzo said, letting out a puff.

Nikolay nearly laughed.

“Well, we know that's not true,” Nikolay said, lifting his eyes to Alexi, who was listening carefully, his hands resting on his knees, always prepared to reach for any number of knives and weapons he had on his person. “But in any case, you should hear what I have to say, and then you can decide what side of this war you want to be on. Because, my friend, a war is coming and one unlike you have ever seen.”



NIKOLAY STEPPED INTO the BioZen building and slid his hands into his coat pocket while Alexi spoke to the receptionist. She looked flustered.

Which was to be expected, given he didn't actually make an appointment with Cash Waltmore.

Also, Alexi had just told her who Nikolay was. A risky move because of the authorities, but they wouldn't be here long.

If the police knew he was in the United States, they could move to arrest him. Unlikely, but it was a possibility.

He turned and left Alexi and the receptionist to it, rubbing his ear. It was still ringing from Enzo's expletives and yelling.

He had then hung up after he'd dropped the V word.

Vampire.

Nikolay had smirked.

"He'll call back," Alexi had said, his eyes not lingering long on his before drifting outside the vehicle again, constantly on the lookout for threats.

Yes, Enzo would be calling back.

Knowledge was power, and Nikolay had set off a huge bomb which would ripple through the mafias around the world.

They'd come sniffing. Curiosity would get the better of them in the end, after they'd tied themselves in circles trying to figure out what he knew.

Mob bosses didn't throw threats of war around without a very good reason and a lot of leverage.

In short, Nikolay had just thrown a bomb into the balance of power of mafias all around the world.

The gossip train would be going full steam.

"Make space in my calendar. We'll be having a few sit-downs with some of our enemies within the week," Nikolay had said to Alexi.

By then, he would've set in motion more of his plan.

Cash Waltmore came striding across the floor toward him, looking less than pleased to see him standing in the lobby of

BioZen.

Alexi stepped in his path.

Cash halted, his face paling somewhat.

Alexi was enormous. Arms like tree trunks and over six foot four.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Cash ground out quietly, trying to see around and over Alexi.

“We have a meeting. Come, I don’t have much time.” Nikolay pulled off his black cashmere coat.

“We do not—” Cash started, then Alexi moved closer. “Fuck. Follow me.”

Smart man.

“Xander is dead,” Nikolay announced when the door closed.

Cash’s eyes flew open. “Jesus Christ. How?”

Well, there was no need to go into those details. As in, oops, we accidentally blew him up.

It was likely the U.S. government had already told his wife, but the news hadn’t worked its way to his employees yet. How they’d explained his absence these last few weeks, Nikolay didn’t know.

Or care.

“Yes. Sad,” Nikolay replied flippantly. “So, I need you to hand over all his files. Everything he knew about vampires. We could be next. *You* could be next.”

They weren’t, but fear was a powerful motivator.

While the man fish-mouthed, Nikolay kept driving the knife home.

“I have the ability to protect us, but I need the right weapons. Weapons you have, Cash. Information which Xander had from Stefano Russo. He must have kept details. I want those. To protect us.”

The man was not looking good.

He'd gone quite gray. Perhaps he should pull back on the scare tactics. The guy was used to working in a boardroom, not Nikolay's line of work.

"You want some water?" Alexi asked, narrowing his eyes.

That snapped him out of it.

Cash glanced at them both and then cleared his throat. "No. God, this is a mess. I think we should go to the authorities. This is way out of our league now."

Was it?

Not his.

Questioning his abilities—him, the head of the fucking *Bravta*—provoked the darkness inside Nikolay. He was done playing games with BioZen.

They had held the power for long enough.

Xander had been eliminated, and now Nikolay wanted all the information he had.

"Do I need to reintroduce myself?" Nikolay growled, laying his hand on the wooden desk. His large ring, which he'd cut from his dying father's hand, dinged bluntly. "I am *Pakhan*. The head of the largest and deadliest crime syndicate in the world."

Cash swallowed and was now a sickly green color.

Ah, finally.

"What do you need?" Cash asked, swallowing again.

Nikolay nodded, his darkness slinking back. Now he had the pharmaceutical executive exactly where he wanted him, and his plans could continue.

Not that he ever questioned they would be successful.

If Cash hadn't offered, Nikolay would have taken.

"Glad you asked. I need the serum in bulk. Either you can supply it, or give me the ingredients, and I will get it manufactured. I don't care either way."

Cash gaped for a few seconds. His eyes darted to Alexi standing beside Nikolay, with his tree trunk arms folded and his Glock tucked into the front of his pants. Then he nodded.

Funny how compliant people could be when they thought their lives were in danger.

“I’ll also be taking all the hybrid soldiers you have available right now.” He leaned back in the chair.

“We can’t. I told you, they are already—” Cash began.

Nikolay suddenly leaned forward, scowling. His size and reputation cast a dark shadow over the man.

“You won’t be answering to anyone if you’re dead, Waltmore. We’re at war. You and I are at the top of the vampire’s hit list.”

Unlikely.

“Shit.” Cash slammed his fists down on the table. “Fucking Xander. Goddamn that idiot.”

Nikolay leaned back in his chair again and glanced at Alexi, who was standing a few feet away.

“My jet is ready to leave in the morning to pick up the soldiers. I want the serum and all of Tomassi’s data. Alexi and his team will interview all the scientists who worked with them. Instruct them to tell us everything.”

“Jesus, Nikolay, that’s our intellectual IP,” Cash said. “I could lose my job over this.”

Or your life.

You decide.

Nikolay waited for the intelligent man to figure it out.

“I’ll have to speak to Dr. Phillips and Xander’s widow. He kept much of his data in his home office,” Cash said, resigning himself to the inevitable.

Nikolay stood.

“Excellent. Alexi will be in touch.” He pulled on his coat as if they’d just had a lovely meeting about spreadsheets or

some shit.

Now he could get back to Elizabeth.

Fucking her seemed to clear his head. He needed a rational mind to polish the next steps in his plans.

“Play your cards right, Waltmore, and you will remain breathing. Plus, I could make you a very rich man,” Nikolay added.

He wouldn't.

The man's days were numbered. Nikolay couldn't have loose ends.

Once people knew about the vampires—and oops, he might be the one to leak it—Nikolay's position in this war would be cemented right at the top.

Governments and people of the world would be looking to him to protect them. He would have the serum and an army prepared.

For a price.

Because money was power, Nikolay was about to have absolute control.

Then he'd decide if he wanted to keep the vampire race alive, or eliminate them.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Casey walked into her room and let out the huge sigh she'd been holding in all day.

She hadn't spoken to Charlotte since their fight on the mountain and was still pissed about it. However, people were beginning to notice, and it was becoming awkward.

"What is up with you two?" Darnell had asked her earlier when they were sharing a meal in the café.

Tristan was with them as well.

"Nothing," she replied, shrugging it off and digging into her salad.

Tristan went to say something, and she held up her fork, pointing it at him.

"No, we're not fighting over crotchless panties or having a threesome with Marcus, or whatever other inappropriate thing you were going to say."

His offended expression was almost funny until he locked eyes with Darnell and the two burst into laughter.

Males.

"But was it a bra?" Tristan asked, not able to help himself.

She couldn't deal with the two of them at the moment. Especially not their bathroom humor. The truth was, she was horny.

The moment on the mountain with Alex had created an inferno in her body she couldn't douse.

Casey yanked off her jacket and threw it on the bed. Next, she stripped off her black pants. Her workout had done nothing to dampen her need.

Alex Giordano was, without exception, the most handsome and sexy vampire she'd ever seen. She wanted to do all the naughty things she could imagine with him.

There. She'd said it.

He wasn't just handsome. The chemistry between them was off the charts. Alex only had to look at her and she burst into flames.

It infuriated her.

Why? Because his attitude reminded her of everything she was trying to hide from.

As if on cue, her phone rang.

Father.

She considered letting it ring, but knew better.

“Hello, Dad.”

“Cassandra,” Richard said. “You didn't call yesterday.”

Oh, shit.

She hadn't realized the day. Every week, she was expected to call home and update them on how she was.

Report in, in other words.

“Sorry, Father, I was—” She nearly said *up the mountain with friends*, and then caught herself. “On rotation late, protecting the little prince.”

She always downplayed her role in the king's employment. Her father thought she did lightweight security.

He was silent for a while, and it sent an icy chill through her. Just as she was going to speak, he continued.

“Your distant cousins are visiting from England in a few weeks. Phillip and Andrew,” Richard said, and she plonked down on the end of her bed.

He was always trying to matchmake, hoping she would mate with someone proper.

Whatever that meant.

“You'll be home by then—” Richard started, and she felt immediately sick.

Casey wrapped her arm around her middle.

“Dad, I’ve got to go. I’m being called,” she said, knowing there was only one thing her father respected in her life, and that was the vampire king.

And even then, only just.

“Call next week, and we will make plans,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

Casey tossed her phone across the bed and stared at the wall. If only everyone knew how delicate the price of freedom was.

And how easily it could be taken away.



CASEY HAD DONE THE only thing she *could* do when she got upset about her family. She’d opened a novel and escaped reality.

She must have fallen asleep because she woke, blinking, wondering where she was and what time it was. Oddly, she had dozed off during a steamy scene and ended up dreaming about Alex.

The ache was back.

She put her book down and headed to the shower, turning the water on and stepping under the cold stream. How else could she stop the need from overtaking her?

Casey washed her hair, used her special gel for her face, and then soaped up her sponge.

How could she be attracted to a male who, just like her controlling father, thought she was nothing more than a female who should be keeping house?

Not that there was anything wrong with doing that—it just didn’t interest her.

The moment Alex was near, her eyes took in every inch of his wide back, thick arms, and round ass. She wondered if he had a gorgeous cock as her fingers found their way to the swollen flesh between her legs.

Would it be long?

Would it be girthy?

“God,” Casey gasped, circling her nub with her forefinger. Her other hand grabbed a boob, and she pinched her nipple. Hard.

Because Alex would be rough. She knew he would.

He’d want control.

Alex would demand control.

She moaned, arousal spreading through her body.

Was he at Sam’s right now, fucking some female? Did he take cock down his throat, or was he more of a fuck-them-in-the-ass type of vampire?

Or did he prefer only pussy?

Casey knew he’d be talented with his mouth. He wouldn’t stop until he knew he’d pleased whoever he was licking.

Did he want to taste her?

She arched into her own touch, imagining his face between her legs, lapping, sucking, demanding her orgasm.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Casey cried, the heat building to a crescendo at her core. She came in short, hard bursts.

Alex’s name was on the tip of her tongue.

She dropped her hand, pressing her forehead against the shower wall. It wasn’t enough.

He’d started a fire on the mountain, and she was going to need much more than her own hand to put this one out.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When his shift ended, Alex took a quick shower, then dressed in a pair of gray sweatpants, a black T-shirt, and matching trainers. He tossed back his third glass of whiskey, swiped open his phone to check the directions Kurt had given him, then pulled open the door of his room to leave.

It was time to meet some new friends.

Changing his mind, Alex turned, grabbed the entire bottle of whiskey, and then headed out.

He'd drink the whole bottle if he needed to. Alex needed escape.

From life. From his mind. From his nightmares.

The tense conversation with the prince was weighing heavily on him. That and the constant need to jerk off every thirty minutes—without seeing *her* in his head—all day was driving him insane.

Alex needed a lot more whiskey, and a lot of fucking.

It took him ten minutes to get to his destination. Glancing up at the signage on the wall, he checked the room number.

He knocked.

Then waited.

Then knocked again.

“Well, well, well...,” a familiar voice said behind him.

Smirking, Alex turned.

“Heard I might see you here,” Alex said to Tristan.

“You should have texted.” Tristan reached out to a security panel on the left of the door, forcing Alex to take a step aside. “You’d be standing here all morning otherwise. No one’s standing on the other side. You need the code.”

Oh.

“Fucking, Kurt.” Alex laughed.

Tristan shrugged. “He’s probably forgotten. He didn’t come all that often. Even before Maddy.”

“Really?”

Tristan shook his head and pushed open the door. Smoke, music, and sounds of pleasure rushed at them as they stepped into a sexual paradise. Well, paradise might have been pushing it, but Alex’s cock was standing to attention. And thanks to his sweatpants, it had all the room in the world.

Forward thinking.

“Na. None of the SLCs spent much time here.” Tristan raised his voice over the music, and they walked further into the large room.

It was completely different from the orgy he’d attended in Italy last century. While they were still in a castle, now there were modern pieces of furniture, low electric lighting, along with candles which flickered, creating a moody ambience.

A digital music system played rhythmic sexual tones, and around them, people were splayed naked in different positions. That part was the same.

And the moaning.

“God, this brings back memories,” Alex said, dropping the bottle of whiskey onto a table and looking around.

“I heard you attended one of the prince’s orgies. Damn, that must have been legendary.”

Alex smirked. “You have no idea. But by the looks of things, there’s no lack of debauchery on offer here.”

Tristan slapped him on the shoulder. “Dig in, brother. I’ll be over by that well-endowed redhead in the corner. That’s Fiona, by the way.” He *chef kissed*, then added, “Best head in the U.S. of A. I swear.”

Laughing, Alex said, “Thanks for the tip.”

As Tristan wandered off, a few vampires walked up and shook his hand. A sign of respect because of his senior status.

Alex took it in stride, not wanting to make a big deal because of where he was.

He poured himself another whiskey and wandered into the mix. Eyes followed him, and hands ran down his legs as he passed.

Back in Seattle, it hadn't been unusual for him and the other assassins to head out, meet some females, and enjoy them as a group.

Or threesome.

Or whatever took their fancy.

This was his world, and he enjoyed it. Not fawning over some petite blonde with a warrior's mouth.

Alex reached behind him and ripped his T-shirt off, tossing it onto a small table, then sat down on a sofa and rested his whiskey on his six-pack. Skin slapped, and mouths sucked. He reached into his sweatpants and began stroking himself.

"Pretty sure you're not here to self-serve," a brunette said, sitting on the arm of the sofa next to him.

Alex glanced up, sipping his drink. His eyes ran over her curves. She was pretty, not beautiful. Soft around the edges, so he figured she wasn't one of the more junior warriors. Potentially worked in administration or housekeeping. Her breasts a good handful, with long dark nipples.

"I mean, if that's what rocks your boat, then by all means, please continue." She smirked.

"You want to watch?" Alex asked darkly, tugging his pants down to free his cock. He'd gone commando... because why wouldn't he?

She licked her lips.

"I'd rather help you out there, warrior?" she drawled.

A guy nearby began slamming into someone's ass, and Alex tightened his grip on his thick shaft. From this angle, Alex couldn't see it all, but he could hear their groans, and it was working him up.

The brunette was already on her knees in front of him, waiting for permission.

“If you want me to beg, consider this my plea,” she said, placing her hands on his knees.

He didn't.

“Touch yourself first,” Alex ordered, and as she moaned and slid her fingers between her dark pink folds, another female slid next to him.

The newbie didn't speak, simply leaned into him and ran her hand seductively over his shoulder and across his chest.

Alex nodded to the brunette, who leaned in and latched onto his cock.

Fuck yes!

He tipped his head back, then turned it to acknowledge the newbie. Moving his whiskey to his other hand, he reached between her legs and dipped his fingers into her pussy.

Her very wet and ready pussy.

She arched back, pushing her small tits into the air.

Fuck the whiskey.

He dropped it on the table and switched hands. One arm behind her, he leaned down and lapped at those nipples, delving back into her moist hot channel.

Brunette was going to town on his cock, her head bobbing and sucking like a champ.

Alex lifted his head, watching the blonde pant out her pleasure while his fingers fucked her.

“Harder. Deeper,” she gasped breathlessly.

Brunette suddenly gagged on his cock as Tristan rounded up behind her, spreading her cheeks and sliding into her.

“You're welcome.” He winked and slapped her ass.

Alex wasn't sure which hole he had slid into, but seconds later, her mouth flew open, and Alex fell out. Perfect timing. He wanted the blonde on his cock.

Alex lifted her, spinning her, so she aligned over his cock. She reached out and gripped his arms, her eyes wide with delight.

He impaled her on his cock, and she quickly began to bounce.

God. Yes.

This was what he wanted.

Needed.

Closing his eyes, he let her ride him, holding her trim waist. As he got closer, he pressed her down harder on his cock. His thumb blindly found her clit, and she began to tense around him, crying out as she came.

But it wasn't the voice he wanted to hear.

Alex kept his eyes closed so as not to show the female his disappointment. She felt amazing. Her pussy was great.

But she wasn't *Casey*.

Goddamn that female.

With his eyes closed, he could pretend he hadn't sent Casey away on the mountain, had instead grabbed the back of her neck and slammed his mouth on hers. Fucking her in the snow.

Tasting her.

Even as Alex thickened and his hot seed released in long spurts inside the blonde, he knew this place wasn't the answer. It was a momentary release, yes. But it hadn't lessened his desire for the little warrior.

Damn it to heaven.

The blonde's cries became muffled. Alex lifted his head, opening his eyes to find another vampire standing beside them. He had shoved his dick in her mouth.

Nice.

Lifting her and letting the guy take over, Alex glanced around.

There was more pussy and cock here than he'd expected. The royal orgy scene in the Moretti castle was thriving.

He'd come back another time. It had only been a day since he'd seen Casey. With space, whatever was going on between them would die off.

If he did see her, he'd stop his taunting.

He'd keep his eyes to himself.

Alex had to stay focused on his job and make sure the prince didn't regret his decision.

Tucking himself back in his pants, he stood, grabbed his T-shirt, and threw back the last of his whiskey.

A tall blonde guy walked toward him. He was naked, except for a pair of black boxers and a hard on. His own just as visible through his gray sweats. It was impossible not to have a constant one in this environment.

"Alex, right?" the vampire said, reaching out his hand. "I'm Sam."

The guy who ran and organized the orgies.

"Hey, Sam. Hope you don't mind me showing up uninvited." Alex grinned.

"No way, man. Anyone is welcome. We run this event Mondays—because who doesn't hate Mondays, right?—Wednesdays, because hump day." Sam laughed at his own joke. "Then Saturdays."

Alex grinned and glanced around again. "Good set up. I'll be back for sure."

"I know the girls will be happy. New SLC on the block. You have a fan base already."

Alex smiled humbly.

Mostly.

Another guy walked over, shook his hand, and introduced himself—Ken or David, Alex missed his name—then dragged Sam away.

“See you next time,” Sam called out.

“You bet.”

Before Alex could step over the surrounding bodies, a hand slid up his leg and rubbed his cock through his pants. Big eyes met his, waiting for permission.

Alex eyed the door, ready to leave after having that flashback of Casey, but damn, that rubbing had his balls aching all over again.

The answer must’ve been on his face. She tugged his pants down, and then her lips were around him.

He gripped her head and sped her up, pressing deeper down her throat. God, yes, she had a tight—

His eyes lifted, drawn like a magnet across the room.

Dark green eyes pierced his as his orgasm poured out of him.

The most painful orgasm of his life.

As he cursed and gripped his cock, pulling out of the female’s mouth, Casey turned her eyes away and walked into the crowd.

Disa-fucking-ppearing.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Of course, Alex Giordano was here. The stupidly handsome vampire was like a ghost that wouldn't stop haunting her. He was in her dreams, at work, *and* in her damn social life.

Now, when she'd decided to do something about the throbbing ache between her legs, here he was.

With his cock down a vampire's throat, coming.

While staring at her.

Casey hadn't known if she should give him the bird or rub one out.

Definitely not the latter.

She spotted Tristan across the room near Alex and decided to keep her distance from both of them. Seeing her friend's cock was not on today's agenda.

Casey wandered through the darker corner of the big room and began to undo her dress. Body confidence was one thing she had. Unlike humans, there was no such thing as love handles or excess fat. Their fancy metabolism was a gift.

Some were more toned than others, and that included her. As a warrior, she worked her body hard. Not as hard as her *former* best friend—okay, fine, Charlotte was still her BFF, just not today—but she was very confident showing her figure.

The entirely naked bit, less so.

She loved sex, like most vamps, but walking around with her lady bits on show went a little too far. Which was why she wasn't a regular.

Tonight, she had stepped outside her comfort zone to get the relief she needed. All she needed was one really satisfying orgasm. Then she was out of here.

She could have gone to Max's or a local bar in town, but she was in a bad mood, had tension to burn off, and couldn't be bothered with small talk.

Casey pushed her dress off, hanging it on a coat rack by the wall, and adjusted her black bra and panties. Someone ran a hand down the curve of her ass as she headed to the bar.

God. She needed a drink before doing this.

Like Tequila-level alcohol.

Especially after watching a bare-chested Alex just shoot his load into another woman's mouth.

Not that he was hers.

It *had* been seriously erotic, though, and she hated how much it turned her on.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled.

Casey picked up his scent at the same time she felt the heat of a large body behind her. Familiar woody tones overtook her senses.

She turned.

Oh Lord, up close, things were so much harder to ignore. He was shirtless, and she took in all the layers of powerful muscle, sexual energy pouring off him.

Do. Not. Swallow, she told her throat.

“I didn't realize this was a place you frequented.” Alex's voice was thick, his eyes sliding from hers, caressing her body as they made their way across her skin.

Arousal heated her body from the inside out, making her nipples hard. Alex's eyes landed on the black lace of her bra, which she knew hid nothing, and his tongue ran along his top lip.

Shit.

Must get away from him.

“Why? Do you think I should be home knitting or doing some flower arrangement instead?” Casey said, reminding herself of the man who'd thrown her in the backseat of the SUV.

He smirked.

Someone let out a loud orgasmic cry, and Casey glanced to her left. A man lapped at a woman's pussy, her legs splayed and her body arched.

Need filled her, her own core clenching.

When her eyes returned to Alex's, his were wild. Predatory even. Then he let out a growl.

"I think you should get as far away from me as you can," he replied, taking a step closer, pressing her into the bar.

"I agree." She swallowed.

Damn throat.

"I don't think you do," Alex said, his mouth getting closer.

She opened hers to say something, then closed it.

More swallowing.

"I'm not going to kiss you," he said.

"Good." She breathed, then felt his fingers reach between them, sliding along the edge of her panties.

Her eyes flew open and throat hitched.

Oh, God.

"Tell me to stop, and I will, but fuck, Casey, I need to taste you. Desperately."

Her heart slammed against her chest as he slipped under the black lace. Their eyes were locked, with people fucking like rabbits around them, but the simple sensation of his finger on her flesh had her nearly coming right there.

How was she allowing this?

This was her arch enemy.

Her hot enemy.

His fingers slid further through her pussy, spreading her juices up and around her clit.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Tell me that feels good," Alex demanded.

Oh God, it felt fucking incredible.

“No.”

His lips stretched slowly into a smile. He circled her sensitive nub, and her legs nearly gave way.

“Say it,” Alex said, leaning closer, his breath on her neck.

He rubbed harder, and Casey’s body arched into him. Her hands nearly betraying her and reaching for his enormous biceps.

Stay. Put.

They would feel incredible, though. She just couldn’t.

“No, mphf,” she moaned.

Maneuvering his hand, Alex slid two fingers inside her, and his thumb pressed against her clit. He surrounded her body, forcing her to tilt her face to his.

“Look at me while you come, little warrior, and I want to hear you cry my name,” Alex purred.

No, dammit.

Casey’s knees were jelly. It was only his hand between her legs, holding her up, and he knew it. She was panting, flushed, and moaning despite all her efforts.

Pressing her lips together only resulted in a louder guttural moan.

“Let go,” he ordered. “Good girl. That’s it. Fuck my hand.”

Oh, God.

She was losing control fast—if she’d ever had it in the first place, with this damn gorgeous male.

Then Alex gripped her neck, and all hell broke loose inside her body. Fire exploded, and her mouth gaped wide open, wanting him, needing him. He slammed his fingers deeper and harder and faster.

“Fuck,” she cried, her hands reaching for his upper arms. She dug her nails into him as her orgasm flew out of her.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Casey,” Alex growled, his forehead dropping to hers.

They both remained like that for a long moment, then, slowly, he slid his fingers out of her and lifted his head. Alex dipped them into his mouth, and she watched him close his eyes, savoring what he tasted.

Tasting her.

She clenched her thighs, wanting his cock, and let out a little moan.

Without opening his eyes, Alex stepped away, leaving her to find her balance and strength in her legs.

“If you’re still there when I open my eyes, I’m spinning you around and fucking you,” he said, clenching his hand into a fist. “Three seconds.”

Casey used one of them to make her decision. The next to vamp speed to her dress. The third to reach the door.

turned as she opened it, and their eyes locked.

When she saw his fangs slide out, she ran.



CHAPTER TWENTY

A few days later, Alex walked into a meeting room and kicked the door closed behind him. A video screen on the wall lit up.

“Look at you two, with your fucking fancy Moretti uniforms on,” Oliver said with a shit-eating grin.

Alex gave him the bird and smiled, taking a seat opposite Ben.

“How’s my chair? Keeping it warm?” Ben asked, tapping the remote to turn up the volume, then chucking it onto the table.

Alex took in three of his former Institute teammates—Jason, Oliver, and Logan, who now filled the screen. All of them looking as badass as they always did, with their buzzcuts and military-tight T-shirts.

Black, of course.

Jason was chewing a pen with a cheeky grin.

Oliver looking all in charge, which was still a new thing.

Logan playing on his phone.

“Yup. It fits my ass perfectly, thanks,” Oli said.

Ben laughed.

“Truck left with your boxes yesterday, Alex,” Jason said. “All your dresses and dolls packed nicely.”

He missed the easy banter with his friends.

“As long as you didn’t soil them.” He linked his fingers behind his head and snickered.

“Did you get in touch with Frankie?” Ben asked, getting straight to business.

Frankie was an FBI source inside the Italian mob Jason had worked with before. Talk about complicated. They knew he was FBI. He didn’t know Jase was a nark.

Or a vampire.

“You know it’s not that straightforward, Beno,” Jason replied. “I’ve reached out, but I’ll probably need to get on the ground in NYC before he’ll give me any gritty details.”

They knew the game.

Ben nodded.

“What he did say was things were getting hot. Even used the word *rattled*. And that it wasn’t just the one—it was all of them.”

“All the mobs?” Ben asked, frowning. When Jason nodded, he asked, “Because?”

“The Russians,” Logan answered for him. “Fucking Mikhaylov is up to something, but Frankie wouldn’t give Jason any more info.”

Ben turned, and they stared at one another for a long moment.

“You want me to get closer? I can fly in tomorrow,” Jason said.

It was tricky for vampires to infiltrate the mafia because of the aversion to sunlight. As in, it killed them. Which made it harder to gain their trust. Disappearing every day raised questions.

“We’ll speak to Brayden,” Alex said. “Ari is back tomorrow, so he can relay any further instructions. You think the Russians have shared details about their hybrid soldier?”

“It’s something big. What else would rattle all the families?”

They all sat, nodding.

“Try ringing him and push for more info,” Ben said. “Then let me know what you get.”

“Got it.”

“Why do I get the feeling he’s acquired, or acquiring, more hybrids?” Ben asked, rubbing his jaw. “We need to let Craig

and Bray know.”

“Makes sense. With Xander gone, it would be just like the Russian to swoop in and take. Fuck. We could have contained this before the mob got involved,” Alex cursed.

“You’re not wrong,” Oliver said. “We fucking tried, but our hands were tied.”

They all shook their heads.

The king had been right to try the diplomatic route. No one would ever have dreamed a pharmaceutical company would partner with the mob.

But welcome to a new world.

“I think you should head to NYC. Its ground zero right now. When it came to the mobs, they’re a bunch of gossiping schoolgirls. Get inside as far as you can. Have a beer with Frankie. Let’s see what you can find out,” Oliver said, making the decision.

Ben gave his successor a grin.

Seeing Oli in charge was a beautiful thing. The guy deserved it.

Plus, he was right. If one mob could rat out another mob, they would in a heartbeat. Right now was probably the best time to strike.

Irish against the Italians.

Russians against the Mexicans.

There was no loyalty. Just blood.

“Give me a few days, and I’ll report back,” Jason said.

They began to wrap up the conversation.

“I’ll update the team here,” Alex said. “Prepare to be ready to deploy at any point. Things are heating up big time.”

Brayden had given them permission to share with the assassins, knowing the likelihood of The Institute team being brought into execution soon was high. Keeping them informed

was smart, in case they picked up anything from their channels and contacts.

Ben shared what they could, and by the end, everyone went quiet.

It was heavy shit knowing a war was coming.

Logan cursed.

They asked a few more questions, and then finally, Oliver turned to him. “So, you good, Alex?”

Jason and Logan watched him carefully. Jason had been on the job with him when he’d pulled the trigger, ending the woman’s life.

Logan had been nearby and had taken out the target.

Thank God.

If they’d botched the job because of him, it would’ve made things worse. It was unusual to have three of them on a job, but this one had been a big one.

“Yup. Have to put up with this guy again, but otherwise, castle life is good,” Alex replied, dodging the question they were really asking.

But answering it all the same.

He would be fine.

They signed off, and Ben turned in his chair, his arm leaning on the desk.

Alex could tell something was on his mind. “What’s up?”

“What was that about?” Ben asked. “And don’t bullshit me. I know Oliver better than he knows himself. There was meaning behind that question.”

Ben and Oliver were best friends. Tight as thieves.

Alex had two choices. He could tell Ben to mind his own fucking business, or share.

None of the SLCs knew about what had happened on that fateful night, and because Ben no longer worked at The Institute, he wasn’t privy to the details of the case either.

But the vampire was his friend and former SO.

If anyone could understand what had happened and the mental and emotional effect, it was another assassin.

They didn't go out of their way to kill females. It was just a vampire thing because of the importance to their race. The woman had been there because she was sex trafficked.

She was barely a woman. A child.

There to pleasure the men.

And he had taken her fucking life.

Now he had to live with it.

"I killed a female. She was collateral damage on a trafficking job," Alex said, his back teeth grinding.

Ben sat staring at him, with no expression, for a long time.

"Bullshit. What really happened?"

Goddamn the guy.

"You know I can't share the details," Alex said. Confidentiality was essential in his old line of work. Regardless of Ben's former title, he couldn't share the content of that job.

"I'm not asking about the ringmasters or any of the other details. I want to know what the dark shadow is in your eyes. I noticed it when you arrived in Maine," Ben confessed.

Had he? Had anyone else noticed a change in him?

The prince had. He'd pulled him up on it already. While he didn't know him well, Brayden knew what to expect from a high-performing soldier.

"Is this why you left The Institute?" Ben pressed.

Alex stood and took a few steps, then turned, rubbing the back of his head.

"She moved, okay? The same exact fucking moment my trigger finger did," he said. "You know how small the possibility of that is more than anyone. But she did. And I killed her, right between the eyes."

Ben cursed.

“I know I’m a killer. It’s what we’ve done for decades. But she was a victim. I was supposed to be saving her. Saving *all* those women. Instead, I killed her. Taking away the chance she was about to have at a happy life. At any life,” Alex said, shaking his head. He stared at the floor, his hand on the back of his neck.

“It happened once,” Ben said. “*Once*. You took a bad shot. We’ve all done it.”

Visions of brain matter hitting the server standing behind her, coating her white apron, flashed before him. The hole in her skull. The single drizzle of blood dripping down her forehead as she crumpled slowly to the ground.

They were memorized.

Haunting.

“Yeah, but did your bad shot result in the back of a woman’s head exploding?” Alex cursed.

Ben held his stare, then he shook his head. “No.”

Didn’t think so.

It was completely different from missing a target.

“Jesus, Ben. Maybe I should have fucking quit. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.” Alex let out the breath he’d been holding for what felt like forever.

His nightmares might include his family, but his parents had long since turned to dust.

Ben watched for a long moment. “You ready to hang up your rifle, Alex Giordano?”

Was he?

One day, he thought he was. The next, he was ready to dive into the action, confident it was just a glitch on the dangerous road he traveled.

It wasn’t like he was a white-collar guy fighting with a photocopier. He was a warrior. Shit happened.

Then he'd question himself.

Had he seen her move milliseconds before moving his trigger finger?

"Fuck, I don't know. I don't want to be a burden or the reason someone in the team gets killed." Alex shook his head slowly, then ran a hand through his short, dark hair.

Ben shut his laptop and stood, planting his hands on his hips. "Is this why you shoved Casey in the SUV the other night? I thought you were hot for her," Ben said. "Jesus. Here I was, waiting to kick your ass for being a protective asshole male, but you did it because she was a female, didn't you?"

Alex nodded.

They both stood staring at each other a long while, his chest pounding despite the relief in sharing the weight of how fucked up he was.

"It's not good," Alex finally said. "Every time I see Casey in fatigues, I want to wrap her in bubble wrap."

Ben let out a sigh.

"Ari and I trained you, Alex. You're strong and resilient. I know we didn't have female warriors back in Seattle, but assassin life is different. Here...you need to train with them. Watch them in action. Move past this."

It wasn't just that.

He needed Ben to understand this was deeper than just a warrior getting over a bad day.

"Look, I know your family sucked and worked with the rebellion, but I had a happy childhood," Alex said. "Both of my parents instilled in me a strong respect for females. Which I know is common in our race, but they rammed it down our throats. My mother fought back in the day for women's rights in the human movement."

The movement not only affecting humans but vampires around the world.

“She was always a strong woman and taught us there was no difference between the sexes at a time when the world thought differently. My sister is now a lawyer, helping advocate for women’s rights across America. They’d be very so fucking proud of her if they could see her now.”

“Yup. They should be.”

Alex let out a sigh.

“When they were still alive, I couldn’t tell them I worked for Ari or The Institute. There was no handing out *assassin* business cards to our friends and family at the Christmas parties,” Alex said.

Ben let out a small laugh. “Nope.”

“It wasn’t that I wanted to make them proud. *I* was fucking proud of me. We took down a lot of bad guys.”

Ben nodded.

“Guys. *Not* girls,” Alex said. “How can I look my sister in the eye next time I see her? Jesus.”

He cursed.

“It’s a little late to get a conscience, Alex. Like eighty years,” Ben said, standing. “You chose to be an assassin. Never in the terms and conditions did it say men only.”

Alex glared at him.

Despite his words being true, they still angered him.

“I do agree with you on one thing,” Ben added. “If this is impacting the way you do your job and how you act out in the field with *all* the warriors—including the females—then you should consider stepping down.”

Alex crossed his arms.

Suddenly, he felt defensive.

What if something happened to Casey and he wasn’t there?

Jesus.

One minute, he wanted to stay away from her, and now, he was becoming her terminator-style stalker.

But he could still taste her on his tongue. Still hear the mewls as she resisted her pleasure. Still feel her tight heat around his fingers.

“Take time to think about it before you’re sworn in,” Ben said. “You don’t want the prince removing you from the team. That shit will destroy you.”

Ben was right.

His mother would be heartbroken if she knew he’d killed someone. But equally, she’d be furious if she heard the things he had said to Casey.

Yet the desire to scoop the sexy little warrior up and keep her somewhere safe wasn’t going away.

Somewhere like his bed.

“Brayden’s watching me,” Alex admitted.

“Brayden watches everyone.” Ben laughed. “Join some of the training sessions and watch the females train. They’re powerful, dude.”

“And if one of them gets hurt on my watch?”

One?

Or just one in particular?

“Our job is to empower the warriors. To train them and lead them out in the field. You’ll have a team assigned to you once you’re sworn in. By then, you need to have your head back in the game. If you can’t, you need to step down.”

More unspoken words: If you don’t, I’ll speak up.

It didn’t matter.

There was no way Brayden Moretti would risk the protection of the royal family by letting him lead a team if he wasn’t, and Alex knew he wouldn’t be sworn in if the prince didn’t think he was capable.

He had to make a decision.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Casey: Age Thirteen



AS IT TURNED OUT, CASEY discovered she wasn't a dragon.

A dragon would be able to escape this hell.

Burn it to the ground and destroy her enemy.

Casey was a mere vampire, caged by her father's beliefs about how females should conduct themselves.

Her mother had been worn down by her father's rigid insistence over the years and had just accepted his rules. Casey had become more rebellious. Fat lot of good it did her, though.

She would sneak out of the house and play with the local vampire boys, but now they were teenagers, they were treating her differently. Her father made her wear dresses that were way too feminine for her liking, and her body had begun to develop.

So, she'd started a fight with a human male—the local kids too scared of her father to touch her—just to show she wasn't a lady.

Last week, she had ripped up three pink dresses that had arrived, along with the new silk stockings, and tossed the shoes into the river. Oops.

Richard Hamilton has been furious.

All of which backfired on her.

He had given her a tighter curfew and had new locks put on her windows.

Tonight, she was attending an event with her parents, where she would play a duet with her cousin on the piano. They'd been practicing for weeks.

Well, Casey had been halfheartedly present and letting Miranda do most of the work. Casey hated the piano and couldn't hold a tune.

In fact, she didn't like music at all and would rather be reading if she couldn't play outside.

"Practice makes perfect, and there is no better motivation than shame," Richard had said.

She had wanted to scream.

Around her, the grownups sipped wine and talked about boring things. The kids raced around, and the girls a little older than her blushed at young men.

So dumb.

Andrew Hale stepped up beside her. "God, I'm bored."

Casey turned and smiled at him. "At least you don't have to make a fool of yourself. I have to perform in a minute."

He grinned. "What if you didn't?"

As she took in the glint in his eyes, her heart began to pound. "How?"

Andrew winked. "Follow me."

Without thinking about the repercussions, Casey picked up her skirt and followed Andrew through the large house. When they were clear of the adults, he turned, and they both began to laugh.

By the time they were outside and running through the estate, Casey was puffing and throwing her head back, feeling freer than she had in a long time.

"This way," he said, leading her down to the lake, where a boat was bobbing in the water.

They climbed in and sat next to each other, giggling until they lay back and stared up at the stars.

"Why is your father so strict?" he asked her after a few minutes.

Everyone knew. Richard wasn't quiet about his abolishment of her, even in public.

"He cares about what everyone will think if I'm not a lady." She sighed.

There was silence, so she turned her head.

"I think you're a lady."

Andrew was two years older than her. They had known each other since they were babies. He was a human, and Casey was sure he knew there was something different about her.

Still, his words had felt softer, more grown-up, and she wasn't sure how to react.

"I—"

Andrew leaned closer, and his lips touched hers.

Oh Lord!

This was her first kiss. All she had done was freeze, until slowly, she began to relax and let her lips part.

Whoosh.

A disturbance in the air had her pulling away.

She knew what it was.

"What the hell is going on here?" her father bellowed, standing on the jetty.

They both jumped up.

"Father!" she cried. "We were just—"

"It was rhetorical. I saw exactly what was happening," he growled. "Get off that boat now and come with me. Andrew, get back in the house."

Andrew shot her a look, then scampered away. "Yes, sir. Sorry."

As Casey took her father's hand and he pulled her onto the jetty, she let out a sigh.

"What were you thinking? If someone had seen you with Andrew, it would ruin your future."

No. It wouldn't.

"I'm a vampire, father," she replied. "I will mate. I am not going to go into society and be wooed by one of these humans."

His beliefs were ridiculous, and she was so frustrated.

"You still must fit into the human world. Do you want us to be outcasts?" Richard asked. "You have pushed me too far this time, Cassandra. From now on, you will have Maria with you at all times."

Maria was her nanny. Now a babysitter.

In other words, her father was putting her under guard.

She gasped.

"No, Papa. I don't deserve this. I'm not a princess like cousin Liz and Kate. Father, please!" she cried.

"No, but you are a lady. Lady Cassandra, and this behavior is completely unacceptable," he said. "If I could afford guards like your cousins, trust me. I would."

She knew he would, too.



A YEAR LATER, HE'D found the money. Or rather, the motivation.

"They will go everywhere you do," Richard said as they stood at the bottom of the stairs inside their house.

No matter what Casey did, it was wrong.

He didn't like the way she looked at men or how they looked at her. She wasn't allowed to read any of her books about engineering and sciences.

Nothing she did was right.

Andrew had continued to show interest, and they had snuck one or two more kisses in the past twelve months, but Maria had seen and reported back to her father.

Hence the guards.

“You may want to have the talk with Cassandra about the proper way to conduct herself around gentlemen,” he said to her mother.

Andrew wasn't a gentleman. Not when he kissed her, and she wanted more.

Her mother shook her head. “Richard, you have to let her discover her sexuality.”

Casey's cheeks bloomed.

“Christ. I'll be in my prison upstairs,” she said, turning and stomping up the stairs.

“Language!” her father boomed.

She spun around.

“Does it really matter? The only people who will hear me are you and my prison guards,” she yelled, then ran up to her room.

She slammed her door and flopped onto her bed, tears prickling in her eyes.

One day.

One day, she would leave this place and find freedom.

And she would never return.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“**M**uch as I hate to admit it, Ben’s idea of you joining in one of the warrior training sessions was a good one.” Craig shot him a glance as they walked toward the training center.

Alex smirked.

“Tell him I said that, and you’ll find yourself without a trigger finger,” Craig added.

“Got it,” Alex said, suppressing his laugh.

The frenemy relationship between Craig and Ben was a little infamous in these halls. He understood why. Ben drove people a little crazy with his cheeky attitude.

That women dropped their panties when he walked by didn’t help.

But when things got serious, so did Ben. The guy was as deadly as they came. He’d been an excellent CO and mentor. Which was why Alex had talked to him the night before.

So, when he’d opened his big trap during today’s SLC team meeting, Alex wasn’t surprised.

Ben didn’t want him to fail.

Now Alex was on his way to join a Lieutenant Training Session led by Tom, after Craig had gone through his official induction session.

The commander pressed his thumb against the security panel, and the door to the training center opened. They walked in and headed toward the group of Moretti warriors warming up in the far corner.

There was no surprise on his face when Casey turned and froze. He knew she reported through to Tom. Alex had scrambled for an excuse to get out of the session today, but had come up blank.

I slid my fingers into her pussy recently, so this might not be the best group for me, was apparently not a good excuse.

Not that he'd said it out loud.

"Sup," Tom said, bumping fists with Craig.

"Thanks for letting me jump in." Alex unzipped his jacket and tried not to look Casey's way. He could feel her eyes on him like a laser.

She would be mad he was here. And if her body...

Before the thought completed itself, he glanced up and found those gorgeous green globes on him.

God, she was getting more gorgeous every day. At least in his mind.

Was she thinking about the way he'd made her come? Because his cock was. It was getting harder by the second.

Jesus, he couldn't do this here.

Think of rifles.

Didn't help.

Think of my sister.

Ugh, no, wrong. Delete. Stop.

"Evening warriors," Craig said, stepping up to the front of the group and planting his huge hands on his hips. "If you don't know our newest member of the army yet, this is Senior Lieutenant Commander Giordano."

"Alex," he said, smiling at the group.

Craig nodded. "He's going to join your training tonight as part of his induction."

Casey crossed her arms.

"Great to have you with us," Tom said. "We all work differently, so you might want to try out one of the other teams tomorrow."

Any other groups would've been better, but Murphy's damn law had put him right here tonight with Casey. It was like the universe was conspiring to see them both suffer.

“In a few weeks, Alex will form his own team, so if you’re interested in a move or sick of this guy”—Craig slammed a hand on Tom’s shoulder, smirking—“then register your interest on VampNet.”

Alex was excited to have his own team and teach others what he knew. It was this part of the new role that was new to him and was going to stretch his skills.

Joining other team training would be good experience for him to see how the SLCs worked and get some tips.

So maybe this wasn’t a bad idea after all.

“It’s good to learn from different warriors throughout your career, so don’t hesitate to express interest if the idea resonates,” Tom said to his team. “Right, let’s get started. I have a hot date with my mate after this.”

Tom was mated to Lucinda, who also worked for the king. She was also the sister of the infamous Russo brothers who had been beheaded after their crimes against the royal family.

Namely, multiple coup attempts.

Alex had only met Lucinda once in passing, but she seemed very nice, and like all mates, the two were clearly in love.

Craig slapped Alex on the back and left them to it.

“Let’s get twenty laps around the castle to warm up, then we’ll launch into sparing,” Tom said, nodding to the door which led outside.

The team sprang into action and headed out.

When his feet hit the snow-covered ground, Alex decided to get this over and done with. He ran for a few minutes, and then as the group began to spread out, he made his way to Casey’s side.

Not before taking in her tight ass peeking out from a pair of black Nike shorts. They matched her sports bra... or tank top. He was pretty sure it was a bra and not a top.

Inside, she'd had a jacket over the top, which seemed more appropriate.

"Hey," Alex said. "I see you've dressed for the weather."

"My God, you can't help yourself, can you?" Casey said, shaking her head. "Sorry. I have my Gloriavale-style full-length, high-neck, long-sleeved, floral dress to change into after."

He smirked and kept running.

"I hope this isn't uncomfortable for you. After—"

"After?" she asked, glancing at him briefly, then refocusing on where she was running.

Is that how she wanted to play it?

Then he could work to those rules, but she better be ready.

"After plunging my fingers inside your pussy and watching you come."

Casey tripped, and Alex caught her, gripping her upper arms, holding her as she panted. Her face was red—more from embarrassment than exertion—and she looked like she was going to explode.

It wasn't unlike the other night.

"Case," Alex said, voice rough.

"Stop. Don't. Last night was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened," she said, and Alex felt his body tense.

The fuck it was.

There was no damn mistake on his behalf. Or hers.

"Bullshit," he said, leaning in. "Your pussy gripped my fingers so damn hard. I know you loved it."

That silenced her.

Goddamn you, admit it.

"You can lie to yourself, but don't tell me you didn't go home and pull out your vibrator, wishing it was my cock," he growled.

Her mouth fell open, then she abruptly shut it.

“Wise move,” he snapped.

“I was horny, that’s all,” Casey finally said. “That’s *all*.”

Liar.

“At least your body didn’t lie.” Alex held her gaze for a moment longer, then turned and resumed his run.

Casey was starting to infuriate him. If she was going to ignore the intense chemistry between them, then there was nothing more to say.

As it turned out, Casey didn’t speak to him again for the rest of the day. Fortunately, Tom didn’t pair them for sparring or the boxing session running simultaneously with the other half of the group, when they switched around.

In fact, she barely looked at him.

Alex did all the looking for them both.

Not at her ass, though it was hard to take his eyes off, but at all the grabby males who had trained with her.

Did they really need this much hands-on practice?

He was, however, impressed with the way she handled herself. And the males in her class. More than once, he watched her flip someone twice her size on his ass.

There was no way they were letting her get away with it. That shit didn’t fly in the Moretti army. Or males’ egos.

With a weapon, she was skilled and a good shot.

Did that mean he’d be happy to stand back and watch her walking into a hot building, knowing their enemy was inside?

Fuck no.

She might be testing his patience, but his need to protect her was still as strong as ever.

After, when everyone left, Alex sat on the edge of the boxing ring and waited for Tom to walk over.

“Good session,” Alex said.

“You’ll do things your way.” Tom tossed a mat onto a pile beside them. “Each group has its own dynamic too. My senior team is different again.”

“How so?” Alex asked.

Tom lifted a sneakered foot onto the ring and leaned his elbow on his knee, contemplating the question.

“More demanding of me, in a sense. They aspire to be SLCs—most of them—and want to know everything I know. They want me to push them.”

Alex nodded slowly.

“Any potentials?” he asked.

“Not in my team. Not yet. Marcus and Kurt have a few.”

“Darnell?”

“Yup. And probably Tristan,” Tom replied, removing his foot, and they both began to walk across the training center.

The room was enormous. Another group was training in the opposite corner, while classes were taking place in rooms off the main floor.

Yoga. Pilates. And Tai chi.

He knew some of the clerical and household members took the classes, as well as the warriors.

“Sounds like we are going to need everyone we can very soon. Or rather, right now,” Alex said.

With the war on the brink of breaking out with the Russians and who knew what else next, they had to be ready. They had to prepare the lower ranks to move up and have all the skills they needed when it inevitably happened.

“You’re not fucking wrong.” Tom held the door open for him. “I’ve seen a lot in my years serving the king, but I’m not sure we’re ready, emotionally at least, for what’s about to come.”

Alex shook his head.

“Yeah. It’s fucked up.” The door closed behind them, and he stopped. “Oh, shit. You go ahead. I left my jacket inside.”

“No worries. And hey, Alex. It’s good to have you on the team.”

He smiled. “Thanks, Tom.”



CASEY SUNK INTO THE hot water and closed her eyes. Charlotte hadn’t replied to her text apologizing for her reaction on the mountain.

She was still mad, but it was time to talk and get over it.

Casey missed her friend and having someone to talk to about stuff. Stuff like Alex.

Stuff like the way he made her feel and how it was spinning her out of control.

Casey felt like her whole world was slipping and sliding on a frozen lake right now. Like she couldn’t get traction.

A storm was brewing, and she was ignoring the deadline ticking in her head.

Casey didn’t like the way she’d left things with Alex. He might annoy her with his sexist comments, but telling him she regretted what they’d done at Sam’s was a lie.

Alex had called her on it too.

For some reason, it was eating at her. She didn’t want him thinking she regretted it or didn’t enjoy it. God, it had been one of the hottest moments of her life.

The hottest—who was she kidding?

Although that was probably obvious to him and anyone in the room watching.

Casey stretched out her legs and moved her body so the jets were right behind her back. She let out a little moan of pleasure and picked up her book, opening it to the page she had earmarked.

Yes, she folded the corner of the page.

Many of her friends hated her for it.

Bite me. She smirked to herself.

Casey flipped over and leaned the book on the edge of the pool, letting the jets massage the front of her.

“So good,” she mumbled quietly.

Then her eyes flew open when she heard a growl.

She spun around.

“I’ll come back later.” Alex turned, but not before she’d seen the desire burning in his eyes.

“No. Wait.” She splashed to sit up.

What was she doing?

Alex turned back.

She bit her lip.

“Jesus, Casey,” he groaned.

She stared back at him for a long moment, her body pulsing in need she could no longer ignore. “Join me.”

Alex glared at her. “Are you fucking with me?”

No, but I think I need you to fuck me.

Just once.

To get whatever this is between us gone so I can get on with my life.

“Always,” she said, her lips twitching.

Alex smirked, dropped his towel on the bench, then climbed in. “You going to read to me?”

Casey grinned and put her book down. “No, I’m not interested in reading anymore.”

Alex sunk low in the water, but not before she had taken in his thick thighs roped in muscle and gorgeous wide back. He truly had the most gorgeous golden skin, which she was dying to run her fingers over.

He had those well-defined pecs, with a tiny scattering of hair around his nipples, and a six-pack that looked like it was painted on.

In other words, Alex was hot as hell.

Casey was surrounded by powerful warriors and regularly acknowledged their incredible bodies. Heck, she trained with them, touched them, and was touched *by* them often, but she'd never been attracted to one the way she was Alex.

She had slept with plenty of the warriors in the army.

But the desire she felt for the male in front of her was on a whole other level.

None of them set off a nuclear bomb inside her like he did.

Before the night at Sam's, Casey had tried to fight it and tell herself it was her imagination, but it was clear that was a waste of time.

Her body was so aroused constantly, wanting his touch, she was finding it hard to concentrate. So why not get this over and done with? Then she could go back to disliking the overconfident warrior.

She knew he was good with his fingers. Now she wanted to know how his cock felt. His mouth.

Alex sat and faced her.

"I take it that's not your Gloriavale bikini." He smirked.

Casey glanced down at her red bikini triangle and adjusted it. Her nipple was nearly poking out.

"Please, it was perfect as it was." Alex held up his hand. "Sorry. I need to behave. It's just—"

"What if I don't want you to behave?"

His eyes darkened, and she could almost feel him touching her with their need.

"Do you?" Alex asked thickly.

She shook her head.

The temperature shot up about seven thousand degrees, and his eyes burned into her. Then he finally asked, “Does that door have a lock on it?”

Casey nodded.

“Do. Not. Fucking. Move.” Alex vamp sped out of the hot tub and across the room, then back in two-point-two seconds.

Before she knew it, Alex had pulled her into his arms, and his mouth was a breath away.

“Last chance to say no.”

“Yes,” she whispered.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Alex slammed his mouth down on Casey's and felt heaven descend. Their tongues crashed together, and he tugged her up against him harder, gripping her long hair in his fist. His other hand slid down her body and cupped the same ass he'd been watching all night.

Tight, toned, and soft.

Releasing her mouth, he licked his lips, watching as she caught her breath. "I'm going to fuck you hard, Casey. After I taste you."

"Yes, please," she said in a breathy voice.

Casey would be pleading him, all right.

Alex pulled the piece of red material to the side and clamped his mouth down on her nipple, lifting her onto the edge of the tub.

Casey cried out.

His mouth moved to her other breast.

"Gorgeous," he said, replacing his mouth with his thumb. "I could see some hot little nipple clamps on these."

"God, more." She threw her head back, clawing at his arms.

"I teased your body last night." His fingers ran down the center of her red bikini bottoms. "Are you burning for me?"

"Yes,"

"Are you wet for me?"

"God, yes. Please, Alex," she moaned.

He had no doubt she was.

This turnaround in attitude was clearly from raw need. His cock was just as greedy. Alex might have looked like he was in charge, but the need to slide her bikini aside and slam into her was nearly overtaking him.

He was going to taste her again.

This time, savoring every second they had.

It would be their one time together. Alex knew Casey was only surrendering because her body was in desperate need of a full, deep cock release.

So, he would take all of her.

“Show me,” he growled. “Dip your finger in and paint my lips.

Without hesitation and with a delicious moan, Casey reached between her legs and slid her fingers inside her pussy.

Fuck, he nearly came on the spot.

“Jesus,” he groaned as her hand lifted to his mouth.

Her own lips parted, her tongue edging out. She watched him lick them. Then he pulled her to him and kissed her.

“Alex,” she pleaded.

Sliding down her body, he tugged the little red bottoms off and tossed them over the edge of the pool.

“Wide,” he ordered, and Casey opened for him.

Hands on her thighs, he kneeled before her, gripping her hips, and licked. Long and thoroughly, until he reached her clit, and then his mouth latched on and sucked.

Hard.

She cried out.

Again and again, he licked, sucked, lapped, and spun his tongue around. She writhed against his face, tasting as amazing as she did last night.

Better.

Like the sweetest honeysuckle.

Casey held the edge of the tub and pressed into his mouth. He worked her toward the pleasure he knew she wanted. His finger slid down further, teasing the sensitive spot at her rear, and she arched in a jolt.

“Easy, baby, let me feel you,” he said. “Good girl.”

“Ohfuckkk,” she cried. “I’m going to come.”

He slid three fingers inside her, his lips surrounding her clitoris. It only took a few pumps before her body convulsed and she let out a cry.

Calling. His. Damn. Name.

Alex hadn’t known how much he needed to hear his name on her lips. Christ, he had to get inside her. He stood, ripped off his shorts, and lifted her from the edge. Her orgasm was still in play.

Casey wrapped her arms around his neck, her body in complete submission, and he pulled her legs around him.

“Holy shit,” she half whispered.

“You ready to ride me, darlin?” Alex asked, sitting in the water on one of the higher seats. She was already positioned above his cock, his hand gripping the shaft.

At her nod, he let her take control, her hands on his shoulders as she lowered down onto him.

Lord, she felt so fucking good.

Tight and so damn hot, surrounding him with her sweet pussy.

“Alex, you’re too big,” she said, halting.

“Keep going. You’ll take me.” He nudged up with his hips, pushing in another inch.

He held her eyes as she slowly took more of him.

“Good girl. Relax.” Alex brushed her hair off her face. “Move up a little and then take more of me inside you. Fuck, you feel hot.”

Gasping, she moved more and more, letting her juices coat his dick, and soon, she was completely impaled.

Holy hell.

Alex reached for her tiny waist and let his thumbs take their turn, tweaking her nipples as she began to ride him.

Fucking heaven.

“Yes, this is... Oh God,” she moaned. “Oh fuck, yes.”

He watched the pleasure on Casey’s face, feeling like the most powerful man on planet Earth, and wondered why nothing had felt like this before.

Nothing.

No woman had felt like this.

Ever.

“Faster,” he said, his hands moving to her hips and grinding her into his body.

Her hands landed on his pecs, those lips of hers swollen and pleading. Alex leaned in, sucking them, kissing her, wanting everything.

“We should have done this earlier,” she gasped out.

Damn right.

“We should have done this ten fucking times.” He laughed, then made a decision. “We *are* going to do this ten more fucking times.”

A flicker in her eyes caught his attention, but his cock took over. A bolt of fire thrust down his spine, and his orgasm began. Reaching for her clit with his thumb, he thrust up hard into her, speeding things up.

“Now, darlin. Come again for me. Come around my cock,” he instructed.

“Fuckfuckfuckk,” she cried.

“Casey,” his own cries joining hers.

Their mouths crashed together as their bodies exploded as one.



ALEX HADN'T MEANT TEN more times tonight, but as it turned out, they achieved three more delicious orgasms

together. One with Casey on her knees and his cock in her mouth as she slid a vibrator in and out of her.

And he thought he had come hard the first time.

Well, fuck. Watching her with the toy as her mouth sucked him off was a whole other level.

Now she was lying across his body, her own glistening with sweat, as was his.

He was spent.

But the truth was, he didn't want this to end.

Alex loved sex. He *fucking* loved sex with Casey.

She let out a groan and turned over.

Then. He. Pulled. Her. Into. His. Arms.

“Wow. Didn't pick you for a cuddler,” Casey said, lifting her chin.

He grabbed it and slowly kissed her.

Neither had he.

“Just making sure you don't run out of here naked. With your track record of skimpy clothing, I can't be sure. You'd tarnish my reputation.”

A small smile hit her lips, but she didn't say anything.

“You act all tough, but you like me,” Casey said.

“Think I've proven that for the last three hours, sweetheart.” Alex swiped a strand of hair from her face. “Repeatedly.”

“Sweetheart...,” she said, lowering her head to his chest, giggling softly.

And it was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

He tucked his arm under his head and closed his eyes.

“Just for the record. Did tonight count as one, or four?” she asked.

“One. Definitely just one,” Alex said as sleep overtook him.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Casey didn't mean to, but she snuck out of Alex's room before he woke up. When her eyes had opened, she'd been overwhelmed by what they'd done.

It had been amazing.

That was the problem.

So, she'd slid out of his arms and hit the changing rooms in the training center to drop her bags, after showering and changing at her place. And now she was standing face to face with Charlotte.

They had to get past this.

"Hi," Charlotte said, pink warming her cheeks.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Casey asked, holding her bag against her cheek.

Charlotte clanged her locker closed, then turned and crossed her arms.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know you could never put me or anyone before your mate. I was just wound up and hurt that the guys were talking about me," Casey said.

"It was unfair to even bring that up. I know you're not mated, but it's not physically or emotionally possible. You are putting me in an unfair position."

"I know." Casey sat on the bench.

"I'd just told you I was worried about losing you, and then you took off." Charlotte dropped her arms. "I was hurt."

Casey reached out her hand, and after a moment's hesitation, Charlotte took it and sat next to her.

"Perhaps I'm being overly sensitive. I've just lost my family. Including my mom," Charlotte said.

She'd walked away from her human family after learning her mother knew her uncle was abusing her as a child.

“Now I’m mated, and I truly love Marcus, but it’s changed everything. I can’t just hang out with Darnell and Tris. I mean, I can, but Marcus will probably hang them out to dry if he found us all in a hot tub, you know.”

Nope. I’m not talking about hot tubs.

Not after last night and the way Alex’s cock...*Nope. Don’t think about hot tubs.*

“Yeah, he would.” Casey laughed.

“I just got worried things with Alex would escalate, and you wouldn’t be a part of my life anymore.” Charlotte pulled off her jacket and punched it in her arms on her lap. “Am I wrong?”

Well, things had escalated, but not in the way her friend was concerned about.

“Yeah, you are. I promise I won’t let it interfere with our friendship. He’s a dick, but I can handle him.” She bumped shoulders with the female vampire.

Casey *had* handled him very well over and over last night.

“I mean, if he crosses the line, you know the guys will kick his ass,” Charlotte said.

Oh, lines had been crossed.

Well and truly crossed.

She just wasn’t sure what she wanted to do about it.

The sex had been incredible. Mind-blowing. Falling asleep in his arms had not been the damn plan.

Casey had woken up with Alex spooning her, for God’s sakes.

Wrong.

Yesterday, she’d wanted to talk to Charlotte about everything. Now she wasn’t sure what she wanted and didn’t want anyone to know.

Not even her best friend.

Once this passed, she'd tell her what happened with Alex, but right now, it was nice not to want to cut his balls off anymore.

They were rather nice, so she'd let him keep them.

Casey wasn't going to hold Alex to their post-sex buzz agreement to shag nine more times. It would be way too easy to get addicted to that male.

Once would have to be enough.

She'd seen all the female attention he was getting and had already watched him get sucked off at Sam's. Soon he'd be onto other women.

It was better to write the night off as an exceptionally hot night she wouldn't soon forget.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, after one hell of a training session, Casey was standing at the administration desk, waiting for one of the team to hand her the key to the supply room.

She'd ripped her Moretti jacket and needed some more ankle socks.

Everything was provided by the king. From track pants to underwear—though most of the females had a second wardrobe for obvious reasons.

Sports underwear had its place.

So did Victoria's Secret.

She glanced up as Kurt, Marcus, and Alex came walking down the wide corridor toward her. Like one enormous black-clad wall. There was more muscle on the three vampires than in most human gyms.

Alex held her eye as he passed. His expression unreadable. But the glint in his eye was gone.

She felt a moment of disappointment, but it had to be like this.

Kurt winked at her, and she smiled.

“Casey. Here.” The receptionist dangled the key, which had a huge, fluffy pink keyring on it. It was a surefire way to ensure the males around here handed it back.

“Thanks.” Casey walked in the opposite direction to the supply cupboard. She flicked on the light and began to wander through the aisles, looking for the jackets and socks.

White ankle socks. Tick. She tucked three pairs under her arm, then went to the jacket section. It was easy to find, but getting one in her size was the tricky bit.

Size extra small.

For Pip Squeaks, as Alex would say.

Damn, he had looked good, despite looking displeased with her. Those black jeans low on his hips, black T-shirt pulled tight across that wide chest.

Ugh, he was too damn hot.

She felt a presence, and before she could turn, his breath was on the back of her neck.

“You left without saying goodbye, little warrior.”

“Shit, Alex. How did you sneak up on me?” she cried.

She was a vampire, after all. He shouldn't have been able to do that unless he'd teleported in, and even then, she'd have picked up on the vibrations of his port.

He hadn't.

“Assassin, remember,” Alex growled low. “Now, why did you leave?”

God, her ovaries were having a hard time not wanting this man. That musky scent of his embracing her body.

“Because...”

His hand ran softly over the curve of her hip, slipping around and brushing the top of her thigh.

Her breath hitched.

How was she supposed to think straight, with his body pressed against hers?

“Be ready at five. I’ve got plans for round two,” Alex said.

This time, his words hit her right at her core. Her panties moistening. “I, ah, I think we should probably stick with just the once.”

Lying through her teeth.

“If you are going to play hard to get each time, I’ll have to cuff you to my bed, Ms. Hamilton,” Alex said, and if it was possible, she got even more wet. As she moaned, Alex added, “Five o’clock. No panties.”

What?

She turned, and he winked at her, then vamp sped away, leaving her standing there with her mouth open.

Alex was taking her on a date?

What on earth!



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Welcome back, uncle,” Brayden said as Ari entered the king’s office.

“Evening, everyone.” Ari Moretti shot Alex a grin. “Congratulations. Sorry for not texting after you won, but I promised my bride I would remain unplugged unless urgent.”

“Thanks, Ari,” Alex said. “I’m going to miss working with you, but I’m excited to be serving the king.”

Vincent nodded once at him when he turned. The guy wasn’t a big smiler, but then again, he had a huge job. Leading their race.

“Doesn’t look like we’re going to be missing each other.” Ari glanced across the room, where Craig and Ben were leaning with their arms crossed, having some kind of *who has the biggest biceps* competition. “Want to update me?”

It was always Craig.

“Take a seat, Ari,” Vincent said. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but a lot has happened.”

“You should have called,” Ari replied.

“We had your team assist.” Brayden glanced at him and Ben. “You deserved a few weeks away with Sage for your honeymoon.”

“Yes, Oliver updated me. He said Jason is in NYC. How serious is it?” Ari asked.

“Very,” the king replied. “Looks like the Russians are centralizing the mob. At least, that’s what we suspect. As unreal as that sounds.”

Jason had gotten a little more data in the past twenty-four hours.

“It sounds insane,” Ben said. “But throw in news that vampire exists and Nikolay having his hands on a serum that can disempower us, then *boom*, you have yourself a global trade far greater than the drug or sex-trafficking.”

“Or diamonds,” Alex added. “The *Bravta* are the most organized crime group in the world. They copied the Italians in the early days, and honestly, they’ve perfected it. So who better?”

Brayden nodded in his direction and then turned back to Ari. “Alex has given us a rundown on the structure of all the mafias around the world.”

“The main ones,” Alex added.

There were a lot, and they all worked differently. It wouldn’t matter if Nikolay was mobilizing them under one umbrella. For these means, in any case.

“I’ve met Nikolay Mikhaylov. Just briefly, when he was a child. Even then, he looked like he tortured animals for fun,” Vincent said. “This is the most serious threat to our race we have ever faced. He’s ruthless and, like most mafia bosses, doesn’t obey by law.”

“Well, he killed his own father,” Alex said.

“My point being that not even human laws will restrain him, unlike our other foes,” Vincent replied.

The room went silent.

Craig muttered a curse.

“That may be true,” Ari noted. “But let’s remember, they *are* lawless like the king says, but to think this blended mob family will go smoothly is giving them too much credibility.”

The king nodded slowly and glanced at Brayden.

“He’s right. It will be tumultuous at best,” the prince agreed.

“Unless they have a common goal,” Alex added. “Which they do.”

Brayden rubbed the scruff on his chin and sighed.

He stood and cursed.

“This is a great concern,” Ari said. “I won’t lie. Greater than even I have seen.”

Which they all knew was the entire history of the vampire race.

A few of the males muttered under their breath.

“Well, I’d say my theory is correct,” Craig said. “Destroying Xander was no accident. Nikolay wanted him out of the way so he could scare BioZen into handing over everything they had on our race.”

More cursing.

“Data. Serum. Soldiers,” Ben said.

Ari stood with his hands on his hips, swiveling on his feet, as everyone updated him on other conversations and information they’d gathered while he’d been absent.

Vincent might be the king, but Ari was a skilled soldier and strategist.

“They need to be stopped.” Ari faced the king.

“I know they need to be fucking stopped, but the mafia—mafi-fucking-ah’s—are huge. And everywhere,” the king growled. “I can’t just send my warriors out and have them eliminated.”

“Well, we can,” Craig said.

“I’m free,” Kurt offered.

“Just cleared my calendar,” Lance added.

Brayden did a silent laugh, his chest bumping up and down.

Alex and Ben had their eyes on Ari. He wasn’t their leader anymore, but not many things rattled the ancient vampire. When his mate, Sage, had been in danger was the only time Alex had seen the powerful vampire truly out of control.

Now, hints of that fear were visible in his eyes.

The king frowned. “Sage needs to work double time on this serum antidote. Cancel her visit to the wolves.”

Ari nodded.

“We’ve called an urgent meeting with the Operation Daylight team. We’re meeting in New York at the UN building tomorrow night,” the king added. “I want you to join me.”

Ari lifted a brow.

“It’s time we had a bigger presence at those meetings and...” The king glanced around the room as if taking in who would be privy to his words. “As the remaining original vampire alive, I believe it’s important that you are a part of this.”

Ari held the king’s gaze for a long moment.

Alex could sense the importance of what was happening before his very eyes. He didn’t know the full story behind why Ari left the Moretti family and went into hiding for all those years, but one glance around the room and he knew this was important.

That this was history in the making.

“I’ll be there,” Ari finally said, his voice dark.

Brayden’s lips twitched, but his eyes were a little wet.

Wow.

“Good.” The king glanced at his brother. “Brayden, Craig, it’s time we informed more of your warriors of the situation. I know I’ve strong-armed you on this to keep it under wraps, but I agree, now they need to be advised for their own protection. And so we can move forward with your strategy once you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Brayden said. “I was going to push you on it if you hadn’t.”

“I know.” Vincent smirked.

“Second and third level Lieutenants.” Craig nodded, and Brayden shared his agreement.

“Get Tom to put a team together. Alex, why don’t you join us while you’re freelancing and don’t have teams to manage yet.”

Alex nodded. “You bet.”

“The first priority is keeping the king safe. This is a red-hot visit. We’re going right into fire with the mobs in NYC,” Craig noted. “On that note, I’m coming too.”

“No need. I’ll be going,” Brayden said.

“Jesus, Brayden, you’re the prince,” Craig protested. “I’m going. End of.”

Ben smiled over at Alex.

They continued their banter, snarls and shaking heads all in the mix.

“Okay, ladies. You go fight elsewhere. Ari and I will discuss the Operation Daylight meeting and our approach.” Vincent shot Alex a wink. “Welcome to the team, my boy.”

Ari let out a dry laugh. “Be right with you, Vince.”

“You do know you report to me, right?” Brayden said, punching Craig in the arm as the king left the operations room.

“Your princess is pregnant, asshole. If you die, I’m not sticking around here to listen to all that crying and baby stuff.” Craig ducked another fist.

“I’m not going to die...”

Ari stepped into Alex’s view, and he ignored the rest of the fight.

“Alex, get Oli to send over the files we have on all the mafia. There were a few mob family structures we can map out and update,” Ari instructed as Ben wandered over.

“Oh, shit. I forgot about those,” Ben said. “They’re not too old, so likely to be pretty up to date.”

“On it,” Alex said.

“Glad I’m back in time for your oath ceremony,” Ari replied.

“Same. Thanks for putting me forward for the Games. I’ll...I won’t let you down.”

Ari held his stare, and it was clear he knew Alex was still having challenges. Ben might have said something, but it was

more likely the guy was just smart as fuck.

He'd trained and worked with Ari for a long time. The vampire knew him.

"I know you won't." Ari gave him one of his small, barely visible smiles and walked out.

There was nothing like one of your heroes believing in you. Alex was determined to sort his shit out and ensure he was focused on protecting the royal family.

Casey's face flashed before him. Her eyes laced with pleasure as she came.

He cursed silently.

If asked to put her protection behind anyone else, he knew he couldn't do it.

Why, was the million-dollar question.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Casey: Two Years and One Week Ago



CASEY SAT AT THE TABLE across from her parents.

“Cassandra, the world around us might have changed, but that doesn’t mean you can behave this way. I raised a lady, not a tart,” Richard said.

She had slipped her guards and taken off for the night.

Knowing she would pay the price.

It had been worth it. She rarely went anywhere and had been depressed. Each morning she woke, wondering what the point of life was, just going through the events of the day with little joy.

Being caged, as she called it, had stripped her of her spirit. Her mother glanced at her every single day with pity and guilt.

They had moved to the United States a decade ago, needing space from their aging human family back in England.

But a cage was a cage.

“Father, I am a grown vampire. I need my freedom.”

“You need to find a mate and settle down. Have some children of your own. Run a household.”

Casey rolled her eyes.

She’d been scrolling through VampNet the day before and seen the advert for new recruits in the Moretti army. They’d been arguing for over an hour about her applying.

Except she had already applied and tonight received an invitation to interview.

She had to fly to Italy, where the king was currently living.

“Let her go, Richard,” her mother said. “I cannot watch our little girl shrivel up and die any more than she is. I’m

putting my foot down. If you do not agree, then I will leave and take her myself.”

Her father stared, bewildered at her mother.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me.” Her mother crossed her arms.

Smoke almost began pouring out his ears, his eyes darting between the two of them.

“Two years. If you get accepted,” Richard said. “You live at the castle. You do not get involved in anything that would embarrass our family.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You ring home every week,” he added.

She glanced at her mother and gave her a small smile.

“Absolutely.” Excitement beginning to build.

Could this really be happening?

“Then, when that time is up, you will return home to my rules. No more of this immature, rebellious behavior,” he said.

She wouldn’t think ahead.

Right now, she tasted freedom. She could almost see the cage doors opening. When they did, Casey ran with open arms, straight ahead.

The moment she arrived in Italy, she had met Charlotte, and together, they both got accepted into the Moretti army and became fast friends.

She would worry about her expiration date when it arrived.

For now, she was free for the first time in her life and intended to enjoy every single second.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Alex had kicked ass getting prepared for the trip to New York so he could make the five o'clock date with Casey.

Tom was putting together the team who would travel with them in the Moretti jet tomorrow, early evening. Craig had won his fight with the prince and would be joining them, so had directed Lance, Kurt, and Marcus to double down on security for the rest of the royal family in his absence.

Alex was free to leave, and there was no way he was going to miss this date with Casey.

Because #nopanties.

He had plans.

Plans they would *both* pleasure from.

Casey had been on his mind all damn night since surprising her in the supply room.

He had been mad when he woke to find her gone. Well, more disappointed. Of course, Casey was a runner.

Quickly, he'd decided he wasn't going to give her space to keep running. So, when Alex had bumped into her in the hallways earlier, he'd followed her into the supply room.

Keeping his hands to himself had been difficult, but he had, along with delivering his invite. Now he was about to find out if she would go out with him... or chicken out.

Alex hoped like hell she didn't.

Yesterday had been absolutely mind-blowing. Fucking her in the hot tub and then back at his place was the hottest damn sex Alex had ever had.

Not the kinkiest, but that didn't seem to matter.

The way she'd moaned.

The way her pink lips parted as her orgasm trembled through her feminine yet muscular body.

The way she spread for him, glistening and begging him with her beautiful emerald eyes.

Christ, he'd been powerless to do anything but fill every damn hole she had with his tongue, his fingers, his cock.

Alex determined they were doing it many more times. He'd said, but already, he'd decided to increase that to approximately one hundred.

He figured they'd burn out by then, but right now, he couldn't get enough of the little warrior.

Alex was sure he'd never come as hard as he had when his shaft was down her throat and that toy of hers was working in and out of her.

Down, boy.

As he reached her rooms, Alex ran a hand over his cock to get rid of the semi developing with all that thinking.

He knocked on the door and waited.

When she opened it, his mouth began to water.

Jesus Christ.



CASEY LEANED AGAINST the door and stood staring at the gorgeous vampire. Dressed in black denim jeans, which only emphasized his solid powerful thighs, and a black leather jacket, his hair still a little damp on the ends from his shower, he looked like he could be on the cover of *Hot Warrior Vamps* mag.

Which didn't exist.

But it should.

And he would be their top model.

Casey pulled her eyes away before she melted into a pool at his feet.

“Shall we go?” she asked, turning to grab her purse just as Alex grabbed from behind and kicked her door closed.

She gasped.

But in a good way. Like, if he wanted to take her now, he was most welcome to.

“Are you trying to drive me crazy?” his dark voice on her neck.

She turned, his mouth close to hers. “Yes.”

Okay, fine. So her long-sleeved, gray figure-hugging dress was a little short. The knitted fabric fit snug around her ass and finished a few inches longer. Barely.

She’d selected it especially for tonight.

Alex’s hand slid up her bare thigh, around to her front, where he got no further. She grabbed his hand.

“Now, now. That’s not very gentlemanly of you,” she said, turning.

She wanted him to be extremely ungentlemanly, but after almost throwing herself at him yesterday, she figured it wouldn’t hurt to make him work for it today.

“Casey,” he growled in warning.

“Are you here to take me on a date? Or fuck me?” she asked.

“Both. And I don’t care which order I do it in.” Alex’s eyes drifted down. “But first, you’re getting changed. Jesus, Casey. If you sneeze in that dress, your pussy will fall out.”

She let out a laugh.

“Okay, first, my *pussy* cannot fall out of anywhere. Second, you don’t know if I have panties on or not yet.”

“You don’t.”

“I might have.”

His eyes narrowed and cast over her body once more.

“I would have felt them,” his voice low.

She shrugged, her eyes lifted to his, trying hard to ignore how handsome he was. Those eyes of his already fucking her.

His jaw was tight with frustration and a dusting of dark hair.

She wanted to lick him from head to toe.

Slowly.

“Keep looking at me like that, and we’re definitely fucking before we leave,” Alex growled.

Casey swallowed.

“Jesus.” Alex took a step closer and slid down her body. He placed his lips against her thigh, tugging them open. “I can smell you.”

Oh, sweet hell.

“Date,” she said weakly.

Alex’s hands gripped her ankles, then he lowered his head to her legs and let out a long breath. “Date. Yup. Let’s do this.”

She still had no idea where they were going, but she hoped it wasn’t for long because now she was soaking wet.



ALEX TOOK HER HAND when he pulled the black Maserati out of the driveway, then placed it on the golden skin of her upper thigh and tortured himself the entire drive.

He knew she was wet, and he wanted to taste her.

So bad.

But making her wait, building up the anticipation of his touch, was his goal tonight. Whether he could last that long was yet to be seen.

“You going to tell me where we’re going?” she asked.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“You love control, don’t you?”

He smirked, then lifted his hand back onto the stick and shifted down gears, turning into the main street in Portland.

There was no way he was responding to that.

She loved his control. Every scream yesterday had proven that.

When they parked, he walked around to her side of the car and opened the door. It surprised him she had let him. Then he took her hand and led her down the road until they arrived at their destination.

The smell of popcorn surrounded them the moment they walked through the doors.

“The movies. This is where you are taking me?” she asked incredulously.

Alex stopped. “Why? Do you hate movies?”

Casey let out a laugh. “No. I love movies. I just...”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head.

He pulled her closer. “Tell me.”

Pink hit her cheeks, and she leaned in. “I thought you were taking me to a sex club.”

Alex stilled. He studied her eyes, the flush on her cheeks, the pink of her lips. Darkly, he asked, “Do you want to go to a sex club, Casey? Because say the word, and I will have us there in two goddamn minutes.”

He counted the beating of his heart while he waited.

“I’ve never been to one,” she replied. “So... Well, maybe not tonight.”

Call him an opportunist, but he wasn’t walking away from this. “But you would?”

Her tongue swept out.

Jesus.

“With you,” Casey replied.

“Yes. Fuck. With me. Who else?” Alex replied too briskly.

“I could go with other people,” she quietly snapped, frowning at him.

Like hell you will.

Man, what was wrong with him?

“I’ll take you,” he said firmly, then, “you’ll go with me.”

She didn’t argue, which was just as well. His heckles were well and truly raised at the idea of her going with anyone. Or alone.

No fucking way.

Alex tugged her further into the cinema, and they bought tickets, popcorn, and sodas before finding a seat near the back.

They both tossed the salty popcorn into their mouths as the music started up and the movie began. Casey turned and shot him a grin.

“Can’t believe you agreed to this movie,” she said. “I guess it’s not *just* romance. It does have some action. But, Alex Giordano, you surprise me.”

He nearly laughed.

Baby, you won’t be watching the movie, and neither will I.

The lights darkened, and Alex settled in, smiling to himself.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Alex kept his arm wrapped around Casey as they walked out of the movie theater. Her body was jelly from the jaw dropping orgasm she'd just had.

In a movie theater full of people

Alex had waited until they were about twenty minutes in until his hand had slid across her thigh. She hadn't reacted at first. He had proven to be a hands-on affectionate lover.

Then he had tugged one of her legs open.

She had turned her head to his in question, but Alex hadn't responded. He'd simply leaned his shoulder into hers and said, "Watch the movie."

Sweet Jesus.

While she was glancing around to check if anyone was looking, his fingers were already between her bare flesh—because yeah, she had no panties on—and her body had burst into flames.

When she felt the vibration, her lips had parted, and a little gasp let out.

"Uh, uh, you're going to have to stay quiet, or I'll stop," Alex had warned.

Stop?

No, damn way. Her body was completely invested now, and she absolutely did not want him to stop. Who cared if anyone saw?

It wasn't just his fingers between her legs. Alex had some kind of ribbed finger vibrator, which was circling her clit and sliding in and out of her.

"Alex..."

"Shh, watch the movie." He moved the toy slowly through her pussy.

Casey stared at that damn screen for what felt like hours of both torture and the most divine pleasure. The sexy vampire beside her worked her into a state of such dark arousal, she couldn't care less what they were watching.

Wasn't capable of caring.

Casey tried to stay seated and looking normal, but her breathing hitched, her lips pressed together as little moans escaped, and her body kept trying to arch.

"You need to be quiet. Good girl." Alex stared at the screen like he wasn't responsible for turning her into a complete mess.

Finally—finally—when she was about ready to explode and climb on his lap, demanding his cock, Alex had asked her if she wanted to come.

As if there was any question.

Yes!

Her eyes had pleaded with him, her mouth mumbling some undecipherable word, while her nipples pebbled and pressed through the fabric of her dress.

"Be quiet, darlin', and I will give you what you want." Alex had twisted and changed hands so he could wrap one around her.

Then he used his dominant hand to work her, and God, did he ever. He increased the vibration and fucked her with that toy, rubbing his thumb against her clit until Casey nearly screamed.

Alex's mouth had landed on hers, swallowing it instead.

That was all she could remember, until she saw the credits and felt Alex half lift her out of her seat.

Now they stood outside in the cool winter breeze, his body wrapped around her. She turned into him and slapped him on his hard pec.

"How could you!"

He laughed, but looked surprised. "You're angry?"

“Someone could’ve seen,” she cried quietly. “You could’ve warned me.”

Alex led her back to the car. “It wouldn’t have been as half as enjoyable for us both if I had.”

He had a point, but she was still... shocked.

Casey was also still horny as hell.

The orgasm might have been incredible, but now her body was ready for more of him. She was sensitive everywhere and wasn’t sure if she should say anything.

Fortunately, she didn’t need to.

Instead of opening the door, Alex pressed her against the side of the vehicle and grabbed her chin. “I can see the need still in your eyes, Casey. I want to fuck you on the hood of my car, but if you’re truly opposed to public—”

“Here?” she cried, looking around the busy streets.

“No. That would be illegal.” Alex grinned. “Somewhere a bit more private.”

She swallowed.

God, she could get addicted to this male.

He was surprising her in every way she could imagine. Was it wrong she thought he was a gentleman, even though he’d taken her on a date to make her come?

Yet, there was something else. The way his body surrounded her, protecting her—despite not needing it—and almost claiming her.

The way he opened the car door, knowing she would react, but instead, the twinkle in his eye as he appreciated every inch of her body when she’d climbed out, silenced her.

The way she felt as he moved in close, his hand sliding to the small of her back and gently taking possession of her.

Casey wanted more.

She didn’t want to wake up tomorrow and know that was all she was getting of this man. Casey wanted the opportunity

to stay in bed this time and see what his eyes looked like when he opened them after a deep sleep.

She wanted to know what he ate to break his fast.

Casey wanted to know what sex with Alex was like when she was still thick with sleep.

She wanted to surrender to him and know what it felt like to trust a man with her soul.

But that wasn't something she could do.

This, tonight, was special enough.

She lifted her eyes to his, giving him all she had to give.

“That’s my girl.” Alex ran a thumb over her bottom lip.
“Now, get in the car.”



ALEX PULLED UP TO A nearby park. It was private, and there were no other cars around. Being new to the city and anticipating her need after he'd surprised her in the movie theater, Alex had done a search on Google Maps and found the location.

“I’m not a prude,” Casey said as he put the car in park and turned to her.

His lips stretched into a grin. “Never would have called you that.”

“Is this to test me?” she asked.

“No.” He cupped her face and pulled her lips to his. “I just want to see this gorgeous ass on my car and to taste all that sweet come of yours while my grill shines between your legs.”

“God, you are good at the dirty talk.” Casey grinned and then shivered in his arms.

Because I have a dirty mind and dirty plans for you.

Alex plowed his mouth over hers roughly, their tongues laving at each other. Then his hand slid in between her legs once again and found her plump, moist core.

“Stay there.” Alex teleported from the car and opened the door. Reaching in, he pulled Casey out. Then, walking to the front of the vehicle, he lifted her onto the hood. All of his fantasies—or rather, this one—coming true.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” His hands slid her dress up to her waist. “Lean your arms back.”

Casey did as she was told and turned her head to glance around.

“If anyone watches, they’ll just be envious, baby.” He thumbed the cream between her legs.

“Mmmphhh, oh God, I’m so sensitive there, Alex,” she cried, “I need you inside me. Like, now.”

Alex stood back and rubbed his jaw, taking in the way she lay splayed around the Maserati badge, her sex glistening. It was like standing in the best men’s toy shop in the world.

Hands on steel, either side of her body, Alex leaned in and licked.

Then again.

Then again.

She was a wet dream in real life, and all his. Right damn now.

Alex planned to keep her his for as long as he could. Now they’d stopped fighting and started fucking he couldn’t get enough of her.

He was going to chain her to his bed, so she couldn’t run away this time. Alex wanted to know she was in his arms as the sun sank into the horizon and their bodies woke up. He wanted to start his night with his face between her legs, as he did now, and know she would go about her evening with aches and little bruises from their lovemaking.

From his cock.

Casey began to moan and pant, digging her fingers into his head as she lay prone on the hood.

Alex found her core and plunged his fingers in, unzipping his jeans with his other hand.

“Pull your tits out,” Alex demanded, tugging her dress.

Casey pulled the dress right down past her shoulders until they popped out.

Two perfect globes with dark pink nipples needing his touch.

“Alex,” she begged, cupping them in her hands.

“Good girl,” he said, his mouth descending to suck one and then the other as he ran his hand down his shaft. “You ready for my cock?”

“Yes,” Casey replied, thick with need.

“You ready for me to fuck you out here on my car?”

“Ohgoddd, yes.”

He'd never been so exhilarated to fuck anyone in his life. She was a damn goddess.

Alex lined the head of his cock at her entrance and let out a groan. Her heels pressed into the Maserati grill as he slid in an inch.

“You have the perfect little cunt for me, Casey.” He pressed inside her another few inches. “So wet, so tight, so sweet.”

Fuck, his cock was already swelling, ready to blow.

Alex lifted his eyes and took in the sight of her. Casey's long dark hair spread around her, blending with the black paintwork, and he wondered if she was a goddess or a witch.

God knows, she had put a spell on him.

She bewitched him.

“Hold on while I fuck you so hard and fast, you can no longer scream,” he growled.

“Promised, promises.” She grinned at him, then he thrust deep into her, and that cheeky smile of hers disappeared.

Something in him snapped. Those beautiful emerald eyes gave him complete control of her body. And he gave her all of his cock.

He wanted more.

Her body, yes, but also her heart and her soul.

Before Alex had time to consider what the hell that meant, her thighs wrapped around him, and her pussy clamped around his dick.

Holy hell.

One hand on the head, one under her hips, Alex slammed into her deep and fast, her hot moist pussy stroking him to the end. Then lightning struck his spine, his head shot back, and he cried out, pleasure pouring from his body into hers.

What the hell had just happened?

Witchcraft, for sure.

Alex glanced down at the sexy woman on the hood of his car and lifted her into his arms. He vamp sped them a few feet to a soft piece of grass and sat, pulling her onto his lap.

“Ride me,” he said, knowing she hadn’t come yet.

Casey wrapped her legs around him, her glossy eyes glued to his, and she gripped his shoulders.

Alex dug his feet into the ground and pulled her hips to get her going. “Ride my cock. I want to hear you come.”

“I can’t. I’m...” Casey began as his thumb rubbed her clit. “I think I’m broken.”

His lips stretched into a smile.

“You need to come. Let go, baby.” Her breasts bobbed in front of him, so Alex leaned over and took one in his mouth, biting.

“Shit. Fuck, oh God,” she cried and began to move up and over his cock, taking them both to the heights of pleasure once more.

God, she undid him. She was so fucking gorgeous. He wanted to fuck her on every surface and every place known to man.

Then his fangs slid out, blood leaking from them.

Alex needed to bite her. Not just bite her... more.

Casey's eyes met his, seeing his fangs, the moment her orgasm struck.

Protect her.

Damn it. Alex fought the need plowing through his body like a freight train.

Mine.

Christ, this wasn't fucking PTSD.

He knew in this moment he would never sit back and let this female be put in harm's way.

His teeth sunk into her.

Casey Hamilton was his to protect now.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Casey sat on Alex's bed with her legs crossed, wearing one of his black shirts. It was rolled up about a thousand times so she could see her wrists, and Alex had insisted she only do two of the buttons.

So, essentially, nearly all her bits were on display. There was no point in hiding anything at this point.

Slightly unfair, though, Alex was wearing a pair of boxers, but otherwise naked.

And what a sight it was.

His long thighs were threaded with muscle, his tanned broad chest lickable, all the way down to that sexy V which led to party town.

Which she'd already had three times today. Three times!

Now they were refueling after having a long hot shower together—where she'd lowered to her knees and teased him with her tongue until he'd taken control.

Every time she let him, it surprised her.

“Last piece?” Alex offered the pizza to her.

She shook her head. “I'm stuffed.”

“I'll stuff you again,” he said with a grin.

Casey laughed and let her body fall sideways onto the pillows. “Enough, dirty boy.”

She closed her eyes and heard the pizza box being tossed away. The bed shifted, and the light turned off. Then she was in his arms and being maneuvered under the covers.

“We should sleep. I'm heading out-of-town tomorrow,” Alex said into her hair.

She turned her head. “You're going to New York too?”

He stiffened against her and sat up. Casey flattened onto her back as the light turned on.

Alex stared down at her, his eyes dark and jaw taunt.

“What do you mean by ‘too’?” he asked, his voice just as dark and thick.

She blinked.

“With the king.” Casey sat up on her elbows. “Are you going?”

“Yes,”

She chewed her bottom lip. “Please, don’t say what you’re about to say.”

Please don’t wreck this.

Casey watched him grind his teeth, then nodded, switching the light out and pulling her back into his arms. After a few minutes, he kissed her shoulder.

“Goodnight, little sexy warrior.”

Sleep took a while to come, but not before she’d nearly got up to leave twice and spent hours trying to understand why Alex had an issue with her being a female soldier.

It was lucky Alex wasn’t her mate.

She might be intoxicatingly attracted to him and never had such incredible sex, but mating with a male who couldn’t let her be who she truly was wouldn’t work.

They’d ticked two of their ten sessions off their list.

She doubted they’d get to five.

Sadly.



“CALL IN SICK,” ALEX said, tugging Casey before she teleported back to her room.

They’d shared a meal, had more shower sex, and already said their goodbyes before getting ready to head out to work for the evening.

Both of them would be in a bunch of SUVs heading to the Moretti private jet and then flying into New York.

Both.

Casey was going to be in New Fucking York, which was a complete red zone for them right now.

“Alex—”

“Just hear me out,” he began, then stood staring at her.

What did he say?

There was nothing he could do to stop her from going. Brayden would lose his mind if he heard him, and... he had no argument.

“Waiting,” Casey said, crossing her arms.

She had that damn dress on from last night, and it was messing with him. Her hair, wet still from their shower.

Alex wanted her to just get back in his bed and wait for him to return so they could push repeat and do all of what they'd done last night and day all over again.

She wouldn't.

Casey would hate him for it.

Everything on the tip of his tongue suggested he didn't think Casey had the skills to protect herself or the king. Or that he didn't think she could do her job.

Yet that wasn't true.

Goddamn, he just wanted to know she was safe at home.

Fuck.

He *did* sound like a nineteenth century asshole.

Yet...

Those eyes holding his were waiting for an answer. Giving him the opportunity to go down another path. To trust her. Have faith in her.

Click.

Blood.

The woman's head exploding.

They all flashed before his eyes, but it was Casey's face he saw.

"Fuck, Casey." He gripped her face with both his hands. "If something happened, I'd lose my mind."

She slowly shook her head, and gripping his wrists, she pulled them away from her face. He let her.

"Don't say it. Don't, Alex," Casey whispered.

Don't destroy this.

That's what she was asking, and fuck, he wanted to give it to her. What else could he do?

Never had he felt more powerless than he did right now, having to go against his instincts and let the female he... he... he had just fucked walk into danger.

They stood staring at one another, her chin lifted to accommodate their height difference. Her fingers still wrapped around his wrists.

Alex gave a slight nod, and she released them.

Then he pulled her against him and slammed his mouth down on hers.

He'd never felt so powerless in his life.

Until the moment she stepped back and teleported away.

The next time he'd see her, she'd be in uniform, loaded up.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Nikolay lifted his glass of ice-cold vodka to his lips, holding the eyes of the Italian in front of him, and swallowed. Behind him, no less than ten of his loyal men. Alexi stood right beside him.

“You’re fucking insane,” Enzo Romano, the Italian mob boss, said.

He’d called back.

Nikolay shrugged.

“Even if I agreed to this, which I’m not, you think the Mexicans, the Irish, the mafias around the globe, are going to just roll over and play fucking dead, Nikolay?”

“Yes.”

“*Oh mio dio!*”

Nikolay rolled his eyes. “God isn’t going to help you, Enzo. You lost his audience the day you made your first hit.”

On the other hand, the devil might be listening.

There was probably a special place in hell for all of them, and it was likely to be a lot more fun.

Nikolay mentally shrugged.

“How do we even know this *cazzo* is true?” Enzo asked.

“Speak English,” Nikolay snapped. “I have no time to be translating Russian to English to fucking Italian.” Then he lay one arm on the table. “Show him.”

Alexi dropped a phone on the table, with a video ready to be played.

Enzo dragged it closer and hit play.

Watching the men lean over his shoulder, watching the video of Kane demonstrating his excessive speed and strength, was boring but necessary.

Enzo lifted his eyes. “This could be fake.”

“It’s not.”

The Italian played it again.

“*Che due coglioni!*” The Italians began to curse and waffle on in their language. Which was a joke because half of them had been born in Brooklyn.

“So, we shoot them. Get some snipers,” Enzo said.

Nikolay shook his head.

“They’re not human,” he replied, his voice dark and becoming impatient. “And not easily killed. That is one of the hybrids. The vampires themselves are far more powerful.”

He let that sink in.

“I have all the science and information on this new race. I also have a product which incapacitates them and evens out the playing field.”

Enzo let out a grunt.

“How many are there?” Franko, the Italian’s second-in-command, asked.

“Over ten million scattered around the world,” Nikolay replied. “Most of them are everyday citizens. Their army is small but clearly powerful.”

Nikolay threw back the rest of his vodka.

Someone topped it up.

“We need to diversify,” Nikolay said. “Every fearful human on the planet will want this serum. They’ll want soldiers in their neighborhood protecting them. The opportunity for this is huge. Join me, or you are against me. I won’t be offering this again.”

He would, but every cartel that refused him would take a cut in their profits, so it was in their best interests to say yes upfront. They knew that. It was how they all worked.

Well, aside from the fact they never worked together usually. Not like this.

Not with them giving him the power.

Enzo stared down at the video, then back at him, grimacing.

“We need to move fast. Together, we can produce enough of the serum so that we dominate the market. We’ll have a product and a brand with a shell company so nobody will know who they are buying from... but not be able to live without it. Not safely,” Nikolay said. “Because vampires are dangerous.”

He gave them a rare smile he knew terrified people.

Enzo let out a puff of smoke from his cigar, barely reacting, and Nikolay felt a small amount of respect for the guy.

“What of the governments?”

“We’ll be untouchable. The money we’ll make will allow us to buy the access and favors we need from officials. It’s going to break down the systems from the inside out,” Nikolay explained. “If we can produce enough upfront and ensure production is seamless and ongoing.”

“You want to shift our drug production to this serum?” Enzo said, figuring it out.

“Some. Yes,” Nikolay replied. “It will be faster and necessary.”

Enzo shook his head.

“You are asking the impossible. Who in their right mind would shut off one business to start another for a make-believe race we do not even know is real? Insane, Nikolay.”

The opportunities were endless.

“How do we know the vampires aren’t already in bed with the governments?” Franko asked, crossing his arms. “Wouldn’t be the first time they’d covered shit up. Why did the talk about vampires go quiet suddenly a year or so ago?”

Good fucking question.

One he’d been asking himself.

“If they are, it means we have to work faster.” Nikolay stood suddenly, which had all the men in the room shuffling and reaching for their metal.

He ignored them. Shooting the head of the Russian Mafia would create a war none of them wanted.

“I will need your answer in forty-eight hours.”

Enzo leaned back in his chair and blew out another puff of smoke. “The answer is no.”

Nikolay smiled. He walked to the door, his men surrounding him. “Forty-eight hours, Enzo.”

The answer would be yes.

They both knew it. By then, he would have met with each mafia leader and would be ready to start Phase Two.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Nikolay walked into his penthouse and found Elizabeth sitting at the dining table, tapping away on the laptop he had given her.

She looked up and smiled. “Ciao.”

He walked over to her, nodding at his men to give them privacy, and they scattered. Except one.

“We should talk,” Alexi said.

“Later,” he growled.

“Nikolay,” the guy pushed as Nikolay gripped Elizabeth’s chin and lowered his mouth to hers.

“You’re dressed.”

“You bought it for me.” She smiled, running her hands down the front of the white dress which clung to her figure.

Without taking his eyes off her, he said louder, “If you are still here in five seconds, I will end your life.”

Alexi scoffed, and Nikolay heard his footsteps as he left the room.

“Would you really?” Elizabeth asked, her eyes wide.

He lifted her from her chair and tugged her against him. “What do you think?” his voice dark, a tug of his lips.

“I think you are a very dangerous man,” she replied, her Italian accent heavy.

“Someone has been Googling.” Nikolay pushed the strap of her dress off her shoulder and pulled it down so he could expose her nipple.

“You aren’t a good man.”

He lifted her onto the table and pushed the laptop aside.

“No,” Nikolay said, stepping between her legs, smiling when he found her bare underneath. “You follow instructions well.”

As his fingers roughly pushed into her, Elizabeth gasped.

“Tell me, have you decided if you will stay or go?” He slid his fingers in and out of her, his thumb tapping her nub.

His other hand tightly gripped her hip, as if to say he would never let her go. She tossed her head back and moaned, her orgasm quickly building.

“Your answer, Elizabeth.”

He wanted her to think it was her decision.

When she didn’t answer, he slid his fingers out. Her head snapped back to his.

“Now.”

“Don’t stop,” she said, reaching for his hand. “Yes, I’ll stay.”

“Good girl.” Nikolay began to unzip his pants. “You and I will be quite the team, my love. I have a job for you in my organization. And we will continue to pleasure one another.”

“I need more clothes,” she said as he pressed his cock inside her. “Oh, God, God.”

Elizabeth would have clothes. And jewels, luxury holidays, and houses all over the world. Whatever she desired.

But she would never have power.

He would always own her.

It was the only way this would work.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Alex stood at the foot of the Moretti private jet's stairs as Vincent and Ari Moretti stepped inside it. He, along with a dozen other warriors, all wore the same black uniform with the Moretti *M* embroidered on their chests and pants.

They all held rifles across their chests, under bulletproof vests, and knives strapped in numerous unseen positions on their bodies.

Comms pieces were pressed into their ears.

When they landed, they were going straight to the UN building for the king's meeting with all the leaders.

Two of their SUVs remained parked below the jet and were being unloaded, while Alex and three others stood guard. Someone handed Casey two large black canvas bags Alex knew contained weapons, and she walked toward him.

Their eyes connected as she took her first step. Who knew half a second was capable of saying so much?

Of giving so many unsaid warnings.

Alex had promised to respect her and let her do her job.

It was fucking hard, but he would.

Despite every bone in his body wanting to send her home.

He'd seen Casey train. She was strong and skilled. Casey also had a powerful team around her, and she was armed with weapons she knew how to use. And this time, she also had the injection filled with adrenaline.

"This is not my first rodeo," she had said earlier. "Please, Alex. I'm enjoying us."

He was too.

A lot.

She was so beautiful, and he now realized he loved spending time with her. Not just the sexy stuff. Although watching her on the hood of his car, spread, wet, and begging

had been one of, if not *the*, most intimate and incredible sexual moments of his life.

Alex had done *way* kinkier things.

Except none of them had been with Casey Hamilton.

That was the difference.

She got him hot like no other female had. It was her husky voice calling out to him. Her sexy eyes pleading with him. Her breasts needing his touch, which had him so hard he was sure he could snap his cock in half.

Alex wanted more, so he had no intention of doing anything to destroy what they had. He'd decided she was his to protect and had claimed her in a way that was both confusing and nonnegotiable.

That meant pushing back his instinct to wrap her in bubble wrap and lock her in his cupboard.

Alex was just glad to be on the king's detail tonight so if anything happened, he would make sure Casey got back to Portland in one gorgeous piece.

Even if she bit his head off.

Craig walked toward the jet, carrying a bag over his shoulder. "Brayden!"

The prince climbed out of the last SUV, his phone to his ear. He surveyed the surrounding space, then said something low and pocketed his phone. One of the warriors marched over and shut the door, banging on the roof, and the last SUV took off.

"All loaded. Let's go," Craig said to the prince and shot him a glance.

Alex nodded.

As the prince and commander climbed the stairs, Alex nudged his rifle at the other warriors, and they followed.

The flight attendant closed the door behind him as he boarded the jet.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in the air.

Weapons were lying on the ground, their bulletproof jackets unstrapped for comfort, as they flew the ninety minutes to NYC.

Casey sat opposite him, chatting with Tristan and Darnell, casting him the odd glance.

Alex wasn't giving anything away, but damn, he couldn't help casting a few glances at those lips, which had been wrapped around his cock only a couple of hours ago.

"Alex." Craig's head appeared over one of the white leather seats. The entire plane was white, which was a stark contrast to the black exteriors and their uniforms. There was something powerful about it.

He stood, grabbing his bottle of water, and slid into a seat next to the commander. The prince, who was sitting across from them, studied him.

A few seats ahead, the king and Ari spoke quietly.

"We're just going over the contingencies," Craig said. "Plan B. Should the shit hit the fan."

"It shouldn't. It's the UN," Brayden said. "But..."

"That's assuming the government is clean," Craig said, finishing his sentence.

Alex nodded. "Yeah, and we don't assume."

"Correct," Brayden agreed. "We obviously can't get a team in there to sweep beforehand, so we need to be alert. Inside and out."

"The Russians," Alex noted, knowing where they were headed with the conversation.

They'd had little time to prepare a strategy before liftoff tonight and weren't able to take many bodies with them because of the venue. With twelve warriors along with himself, Craig, Bray, Ari, and the king, it was already quite the entourage.

"I'll be inside with Vincent and Ari," Brayden said.

“Unfuckingfortunately,” Craig growled.

Brayden smirked. “I think the three of us can handle a room full of suited humans.”

Yeah, but not if they had the serum.

All three of those vampires were, along with Craig, the most powerful of the race. But tranquilizer guns loaded with serum could hit a target fast.

He’d used them himself.

“So, I’ll be outside that door, and I need you to float between the inside and outside points without drawing attention,” Craig directed.

Alex was an expert in doing exactly *that* after his years as an assassin. Being invisible and silent was an art.

“I’ll do what I can, given I’ll be walking through the doors with you,” he said.

Craig rubbed his hand over his face. “I’d keep you outside, but I want your eyes on things as we enter. Mine will be on the Moretti’s.”

Alex glanced behind him.

“Darnell can take point outside with the team. Then I’ll move out when we’re in position and comfortable.”

Brayden took a swig of water.

“The sooner we get that antidote, the sooner things change,” the prince said. “It could take days or years. Sage needs help.”

“She does.” Ari stood with his hand on the back of Brayden’s chair. “I’ve just been speaking to Vincent about it. It could be one of the most important defenses we have in the coming months. He’s approved a full team. I’m going to call Sage now and get the ball rolling. There’s no time to delay.”

Alex patted the syringe in his pocket.

At this point, all they had was adrenaline, which would buy them a few minutes if they were drugged. Enough to

teleport away to a safe location.

The alternative was being taken captive.

Or death.

Why else would they incapacitate a vampire, if not to continue experimentation or enslavement?

Fuck all those options.



TWO HOURS LATER, THEY walked through the UN building in Manhattan and led to a secure area which was surrounded by secret service and other security personnel from all around the world.

In summary, it was a clusterfuck.

They had left Alex to select which team member remained outside or went inside with them. Casey was right behind him.

Fuck what anyone thought.

The look she gave him, just before he nodded, said she was well aware he'd done it.

Too fucking bad.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Brayden walked beside his brother into the meeting room full of world leaders. Ari a step behind them. While Vincent wasn't a warrior, he'd been trained by their uncle and was surveying the room in much the same way they were.

Brayden scanned every leader and security agent in the room, taking in their concealed weapons, the cameras at different points, the exits, and all the items on the tables.

Bulges in jackets were scanned with their vampire eyesight as they walked around the room, shaking hands and being introduced.

The humans were used to meeting with Vincent, but having three of the most powerful vampires in one room, with their alpha strength pouring off them, was showing. More than one man dabbed his brow with a napkin.

Good.

As they should. The vampires were predators, and it was important the leaders realized it.

Vincent might have spent over a year meeting with these men, building trust and relationships, but Brayden and Ari had one goal for attending tonight—ensuring the king remained alive.

The king, of course, had other goals. Including agreeing on a global plan, now the chess pieces on the board were moving.

The energy in the room changed as the President of the United States arrived. James Calder walked into the room, power radiating from him. The entire room was a dickfest of testosterone and bullshit.

Brayden afforded himself a moment to glance at his uncle.

Ari held his in return for a quick moment. His expression giving away nothing, but he knew the ancient vampire would have even less patience for the politicians.

He'd lived for over fifteen hundred years. Outliving kings, lords, prime ministers. All of them.

And vampire kings.

"Gentlemen," President Calder said, sitting. "Vincent, good to see you."

"You remember my brother, the prince?" Vincent replied, casting his eyes to his right, where Brayden sat.

"Yes. Good to see you, Brayden," James said, his gaze moving to Ari.

"This is Ari Moretti. Another senior member of my family," Vincent said. "And advisor to Brayden and our... security team."

Brayden fought the twitch in his lips.

He meant army, but those are fighting words.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Calder." Ari refused to use titles for anyone. As one would after living for so long.

The president's brow lifted ever so slightly, watching Ari for a brief moment. His eyes returned to Vincent, who just stared back.

Nice.

A solid power move.

The room waited to see the president's reaction. Some of the most powerful people in the world were well aware of what had just happened. While Ari didn't give a fuck.

Brayden knew his uncle.

He was smart as hell, but had long since thrown out the bullshit rules of power and politics. Ari played by his own rules.

Brayden respected that.

"Shall we start?" the Italian president asked. "We have all downed tools and rearranged our schedules to be here at the last minute, flying across the world."

Brayden knew Matteo Buccini had recently joined the Operation Daylight team *after* it had been formed. The first former president, Diego, had sadly lost his life.

While Brayden watched.

Brayden had let Ben work out his anger after learning the man had been responsible for the capture and torture of many of their vampires in Italy.

Including Anna, Ben's mate.

So, yeah, very sad and all that.

The world believed it was suicide, as they'd expected after changing the crime scene before they left.

So yeah.

"We've spent over twelve months preparing the world to learn of our existence," Vincent said, breaking the tension and getting right to the heart of the reason they were all here. They had agreed they wouldn't stick around in Manhattan longer than they needed to. "As with all bureaucratic things, they're weighed down in red tape and slowed by agendas. Today that ends."

Way to kick off a meeting, brother.

POTUS cleared his voice as mumblings and leaders began to stir. "Let's take it back a step. Although, Mr. Moretti is not wrong."

Mumbles began around the room.

"You're ending our partnership?" Jeremy Smithers, the British Prime Minister, asked.

"No," Vincent said.

"Tonight, we need to discuss the execution of our plans and be ready to act, gentlemen," the president added. "The luxury of time is now over. Not completely, but we're about to lose control of the window to announce the new race to the world."

"We're not ready. Has there been a leak?" Chung Lee from South Korea asked.

“No, we aren’t ready,” Vincent said. “But we can stop it.”

“It’s unlikely though.” James steeped his fingers.

“For God’s sakes. Stop what? Who has the knowledge?” Jeremy demanded.

James shot Vincent a look, then glanced around the room, his jaw tight.

“The Russian *Bravta*. Mafia mob boss, Nikolay Mikhaylov, specifically,” the president announced.

A round of *fuck’s* sounded, and then the room exploded into questions.

James held up his hands.

“It doesn’t end there. We have good intel coming in by the hour that he is collaborating with the other mafias in New York and around the globe to form a mega mafia.”

“Not collaborate,” Matteo said.

Brayden narrowed his eyes at him. He wasn’t surprised the politician already knew. The Moretti family originated from Italy, and had lived for many centuries in the country. The mafia ran deep, and corruption was still a reality. Hence Diego being so easy to coerce.

May he rest in misery.

“I wouldn’t even call it a merger,” Chung Lee continued. “More like a hostile takeover.”

Something that was impossible to comprehend. Never in the history of ever had the mafias agreed on anything. Except the love of money and power.

And beautiful women.

Someone let out a dark laugh. “You think they’ll succeed? We’re more likely to see democrats and republicans having high tea together than the mobs going into a partnership.”

Usually, Brayden would agree with them.

“Unless there was a powerful motivator,” Ari said, his voice slow, dark, and low. Commanding attention.

Everyone turned quietly and looked at Vincent for clarity.

Brayden and the king had spoken at length about sharing the knowledge he was about to give voice to. It was playing one of their last hands, but at this point, it was nearly moot—the Russians had the serum and were using it.

Soon others would.

“BioZen developed a serum which weakens vampires. We won’t know how, but we are working on it,” Vincent said, anger lining his voice. “Mikhaylov plans to produce and distribute this serum globally. A weapon against vampires.”

A hush rang through the room.

Some of them, Brayden was sure, would welcome this information.

“Jesus, Vincent. Is this how BioZen took and tortured your people?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes,” the king replied darkly.

“We are producing an antidote, but when it is ready, we do not know. Until then, it remains a slight risk,” Vincent shared. It was an enormous risk, and they all knew it. “If Nikolay succeeds with his plans and exposes us, then empowers people with the serum, it will create a dangerous path ahead.”

Brayden watched as the reality of what could happen really sunk in.

“Our vampires will not sit back and wait to be attacked. It’s not in their nature.” Ari’s voice was tenser than Brayden had ever heard it. “Nor will we ask them to.”

Brayden understood.

Ari might not be the father of this race, but he had been there at the beginning with his twin brother, Gio. To him, the race was as much his as Gio’s.

He would not stand by and let one generation of humans destroy their race.

Nor would Brayden.

Brayden leaned forward. “Spoiler alert. We won’t let that happen. Let me be clear. The Moretti family will not stand by and watch our vampires harmed, tortured, or killed. Vincent has asked Ari and I to attend today to ensure when you walk out that door today, you understand without a shred of doubt what that means.”

The suits all nodded at him.

They didn’t understand. They couldn’t.

But it would do for now.

“It’s bigger than our race,” the U.S. president said. “Mikhaylov will control the mafias, corrupt government officials around the world, and gain such an outrageous level of wealth, he will tip the balance of power on the planet.”

Every world leader knew that couldn’t be allowed to happen. There could never be a one world leadership. It was far too dangerous and threatened to take away human—and potentially vampire—rights. Democracy would be dead. A dictatorship would be inevitable.

Wars, despite what peace-loving people thought, were nature’s way of righting that balance when things tipped too far left or right.

“It won’t go that far,” Jeremy Sanders said. “Surely.”

“Stop the denial. These are uncharted waters we’re in. Look at these vampires sitting across from us, trying to find their place in our system.” James Calder pointed to them. “The real threat is the Russian mafia. One man.”

Nikolay Mikhaylov.

“He must be stopped,” Matteo said.

It was bigger than just one man. The information was being spread across the global mafias as they sat there fucking about.

Just as it hadn’t ended with Xander’s death, it wouldn’t with Nikolay’s. Their world had irrevocably changed now. There was no turning back.

“We need an aligned global front on this,” Vincent said. “And it’s time for action.”

The president stared at the king without blinking as the room full of powerful men accepted what they were saying.

“You’re threatening war.” Sanders eyes narrowed. The British were well aware of the costs of war.

“The war has already begun,” Ari said. “Welcome to the party.”

The president let out a long sigh. “The Moretti’s are correct. We have run out of time. Tonight, we sign policies and agree on a strategy to destroy the enemy. Or our world will change overnight.”

Brayden leaned back in his chair.

Now they did things his way.

With guns.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The man stood in the shadows, watching the king of the vampire race, Vincent Moretti, walk into the UN building.

A chill of anticipation ran through his body.

Brayden and Ari Moretti then followed the king.

What were the fucking chances of the royal family being in New York while he was?

He drew his black coat around himself, lifting his collar against the light snow that was falling, and kept watching. For *him*.

The SUVs all emptied, the king's warriors spreading out, some of them following inside.

But *he* wasn't there.

Still, it had to be a sign. Another one.

The human he'd saved just over two years ago had found her way into the king's household. He'd asked himself many times why he had been drawn to her cry.

To her blood.

Now he knew.

It was destined.

Charlotte—now Charlotte Vecchia.

Mate to Marcus Vecchia, one of the king's beloved SLCs.

He snarled, his fangs pressing against his gums, wanting to growl at the thought.

Marcus fucking Vecchia—a name very familiar to him.

He stepped out of the shadows and began walking back to his hotel room, thinking how ironic it was that he was about to do just that. Step out of the shadow he'd been living in for all these centuries.

He had been flailing for too long.

Then Charlotte had appeared in his life like a gift he wasn't ready to believe he deserved.

But he did now.

It was the second time he'd made a mistake and paid the price. This time, he wasn't going to do it again.

It was time to go collect what was his.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Casey stood to the side of the UN entrance, her rifle tucked against her body. The night was chilly but in a good refreshing way.

Alex stood several yards away, his attention not on her.

Also refreshing.

So far, he'd been letting her do her job.

However, he'd directed her upstairs with the king's detail, then asked her to join him outside when the commander nodded at him to go down.

Her eye roll was on pause for when they were alone. Then she was giving it to him.

Casey had to hand it to him, though. He never spoke a word to her as they walked through the building. Once at the door, he'd indicated where he wanted her to stand, then kept his focus on the job.

Small steps.

At least he hadn't locked her in a closet somewhere.

Yet.

God, he was lucky he was so incredible in bed.

Across the road, a glint caught her attention. Her eyes darted, her body stilling.

"Casey, report," Alex said through the comms. He must have sensed her reaction, even from that distance.

How, she didn't know, but wrote it off to his assassin's background.

Or that he knew her body.

Possibly both.

"Movement at your"—she glanced to check his location—"eleven o'clock."

Casey watched a man in a long woolen coat step out of the shadows, glance their way, then continue.

She shook her head. “False alarm.”

There had been something, though, about the way he’d stood watching. An intensity. The man continued walking at a normal pace away from them.

“Terry, follow him for five,” Alex instructed.

“Yes, sir.”

It was evening, so the building was quiet, most of the workers at home doing human things. The odd vehicle had pulled up or swiped to go into the employee parking area.

Otherwise, it had been a non-eventful night.

Darnell stood a few paces from her, his gun pointed down at the ground. His stance was wide, and his coffee-colored jaw relaxed, but she knew he was anything but.

When his roaming eyes slid past hers, he quickly winked.

She suppressed a grin.

The entire operation so far had gone off without a hitch, and hopefully, they could get home quickly so she and Alex could go on date three.

Oh, the anticipation.

“The king is on his way down,” Alex advised, and she watched all the warriors around her stand up straighter, their weapons rustling against their uniforms as they tightened their hold.

Alex walked closer to the entrance.

“Move in,” he said to the warriors further out. “Prepare the vehicles.”

The doors clunked open. Moretti-clad soldiers surrounded the vehicles, and Alex lifted his chin at her, nodding to his side.

Really?

She frowned. He glared.

“Now,” Alex mouthed.

Ugh.

He was being ridiculous. All night, he’d kept her on a thin leash, and Casey knew her colleagues would notice and figure he thought her incompetent.

Turns out, she might be busy after all today. She had lost all desire.

Okay, fine. Not completely.

But she was pissed.

Dropping her weapon to her side, Casey obeyed and moved, with a wide berth so she didn’t get in the way of the royal party, to the space behind Alex.

The commander, king, prince, and Ari Moretti exited the building. In that order.

“Move in,” Alex instructed everyone, moving closer as the Moretti’s headed toward the SUV.

Click.

Casey slapped her hand against her neck.

The fuck?

“Alex,” she cried out quietly, knowing immediately she’d been shot with the serum as she felt the small dart in her neck.

She pulled it out and tossed it away.

Click.

Click.

Click.

“Shit. Casey! We’re under attack!” Alex cried out, spinning around. “Everyone, down!”

“Fuck!” Craig yelled, shoving Brayden into the vehicle as his hand slapped against his own neck. “Go,” he growled.

Casey dropped to her knees, her rifle in one hand as she clamored for her syringe in the pocket of her uniform. Craig dropped to the ground as he was shot a second time.

Alex crouched, his gun lifted. “Where’s the fucking king?”

“In. The. Car,” Craig groaned out, ripping his own syringe out of his top pocket. “Go. Get them to the airport and out of here. Now.”

Dark figures ran across the front section of the UN building toward them as Casey pulled the syringe out and flicked off the end.

Then guns began to fire.

“Fuck,” Alex cried, dragging her with him as he moved to the commander.

Casey fumbled with the syringe, her eyes beginning to blur. Then finally, she plunged it into her leg. It worked quickly.

“Casey, stay right fucking—” Alex began.

She wasn’t stupid. Casey knew he’d have to save the commander and royal family. Around her, the other vampires were dropping like flies.

The element of surprise. Why hadn’t they seen them?

“Find. Me,” Casey croaked. Her eyes locked with Alex, then she teleported away.



ALEX DRAGGED THE COMMANDER into the SUV and turned, his rifle lifted. God, he was a heavy fucker.

UN Security was piling out of the building and dropping as fast as his team. Not from the serum. From bullets.

Jesus.

This was going to be a nightmare to explain, but that was someone else’s job. Alex was focused on getting the royal family out of here and keeping his team safe.

Pop, pop, pop.

He ducked, leaned to the side of the vehicle, then took out three bodies.

Behind him, a few more of his team cried out and dropped. A quick glance showed they were all teleporting away, as instructed.

“Craig,” he said, nudging the guy.

Noting the syringe in Craig’s hand, Alex grabbed it and stuffed it in his pocket. The big guy had taken two, so he was knocked out cold and hadn’t been able to teleport away.

Thinking fast, Alex had to decide whether to dose him with his own adrenaline or just get the commander out of here.

Alex popped his head up to survey the area and saw only two more men. Mafia. Or hired guns.

Who the fuck knew?

But there were more bodies on the ground than breathing. Alex wasn’t going to assume there weren’t more coming, but right in this moment, they had seconds to act and move.

“They’re mine,” Darnell said through the comms piece. Alex saw the humans drop, then Darnell joined him beside the vehicle. “Jesus, they got Craig.”

“Yeah, twice. He’s going to be mad as shit when he wakes.” Alex shoved his body further into the SUV. “Give me a hand.”

Together, they got the big vampire into the vehicle.

“Everyone move out,” Alex said, and the SUV behind them began filling up with their remaining team members.

Alex jumped out of the car and ran a hand over his head.

Where the fuck had Casey gone?

He turned to Darnell. “Jump in the driver’s seat. Get Craig to the airport. Meet the Moretti’s there. They’ll be five minutes at most ahead of you. Get them off the ground and in the air ASAP,” Alex instructed.

“Yes, sir.” Darnell did as he ordered, but turned. “You’re going to find Casey?”

Alex nodded.

“How many others did we lose?”

“Three, maybe four. Someone said they were teleporting to the airport. Don’t wait. Get the king home,” Alex said, then added. “If Casey is there, get the prince to text me.”

There was no time to exchange numbers with the guy.

“Got it.”

Alex knew Casey wasn’t at the airport. How, he wasn’t sure. She wasn’t the first female vampire he’d sunk his fangs into. Yet her blood called to him.

It was coming from somewhere nearby. Not strong enough to pinpoint her, but he would find her.

Alex wasn’t leaving until he did.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

After watching the Moretti convoy depart without any followers, Alex left the human security and ambulances to deal with the aftermath. The president would update the king, but they knew what they needed to know. The Russians—or at least one of the mafias—had attacked them.

Alex tossed his rifle into a bush after removing the magazine, then began walking the streets of Manhattan.

He could scent Casey.

It was faint, an indicator he hadn't taken much blood from her, but it was there.

That they had a connection was a very fucking interesting point. Sharing blood meant they could communicate telepathically, but only if both parties ingested.

Casey hadn't taken his, so it was one way at best.

He'd called out to her, but knew it would be useless. Casey was drugged.

Where had she gone? Did she know New York City, or was this her first time in the Big Apple?

He ripped out his phone.

"I heard. What's going on?" Marcus said on the first ring.

"Russians. Attacked us outside the UN," Alex replied. "They were just fucking with us. Junior soldiers at best."

That they'd had the upper hand and element of surprise, then only downed half of them was proof.

"So, there's a leak," Marcus cursed.

"Yeah, in the government. Not us," Alex said.

"Agreed. This was a tight, fast job." Marcus cursed some more.

"Craig is down," Alex said, continuing his update. "Few other warriors got hit, but they all teleported to the airport."

“The king?”

“Ari, Vincent, and Brayden are fine. Should be in the air by now. Darnell went back with them,” Alex added.

There was silence.

“You’re not with them?” Marcus growled.

“Casey teleported. I’m looking for her.”

Marcus cursed.

“Casey, what?” Charlotte asked in the background.

“Put me on speaker. I need to find her,” Alex said, and the rustle told him the phone was being passed over.

God, he hoped she could help. It wasn’t light yet, but it would be before Casey woke up.

Wherever she had landed.

“Where is she?” Charlotte asked, her voice pitchy.

Alex ran a hand over his short, dark hair. “I don’t know. She’s in Manhattan somewhere. Does she know anyone here?”

More silence as he gave Charlotte time to think.

“Fuck, I don’t know. Um, shit. Was she drugged like I was?” she asked.

Come on.

“Yes. Faster, Charlotte. I don’t know where she is or how long until she wakes. Sunshine and all that.” Alex tried not to snarl.

There were probably a few hours until daybreak, but Alex wasn’t going to stop until he had no more options. Who knew where she had teleported to? This was Manhattan. Anyone could have seen or found her.

“I can’t think of anyone she might know. If she does, she hasn’t mentioned them to me. I do know she’s visited NYC before. That’s all I can add.”

“Call Darnell and Tris. Then text me,” Alex said.

“Okay,” Charlotte replied, and he could hear the worry in her voice.

“Alex,” Marcus said darkly. “Who told you to leave the Moretti’s?”

Shit.

No one had.

It had been his decision.

But he didn’t report to Marcus, and right now, finding Casey was his priority. The royal family was safe.

“I need you and Kurt to meet them at the airfield when they land. Don’t take Sage. Ari will lose his shit. Keep her safe at the castle.”

“Jesus, man,” Marcus growled.

“I’ll deal with it when I get Casey home safe,” Alex growled in return.

“Please find her,” Charlotte said.

He would.

If it was the last thing he did.



AN HOUR LATER, ALEX was heading down Broadway, dodging tourists, and trying not to stand out. You know, because Moretti uniform, muscles, and all that.

“Hey, man. Are you the terminator? Can I get a selfie with you?” some guy in a puffy red jacket called out.

“I’m an assassin on a job. So can’t stop,” he mumbled.

Red jacket burst out laughing. “Right on. Go get the baddie.”

Alex snorted.

The truth was always easier, and people were less likely to believe you. Fact was stranger than fiction.

He pressed his lips together as a group of young women fluttered their eyes at him, tugging their fancy scarves around their necks and sneaking a quick photo.

Jesus, really?

Next time, he was wearing his fatigues to the bar to pick up the ladies. A low growl sounded deep in his throat.

His eyes flew open.

Shit.

No! No fucking way.

Not Casey.

She couldn't be. Could she?

There was only one reason a male would react like that at the thought of being with another female.

Casey was his mate.

No way.

No goddamn way.

Alex ran a hand through this hair and kept going. He'd deal with it once he had her in his arms. Alex continued pulling in her scent, noticing it was becoming stronger.

Then his body abruptly stopped.

Alex glanced around. The stores were closed at this time in the early morning, so he went down the alleyway and looked behind the big dumpsters.

No bodies.

Alex lifted his face to the sky and walked back out onto the street. She was near. He could sense and scent her.

Which was insane.

Well, obviously not after his moment of enlightenment before.

Think about it later.

He glanced around the shops. Starbucks, an antique store. A clothing store.

Then he saw it.

Strand Bookstore.

She had to be in there.

Alex had noticed she loved her books. He'd noticed everything about her.

It was closed, but if she'd visited the store before, she would've been able to teleport in and find somewhere to collapse. Alex leaned against the glass, looking for a spot to teleport to.

"It's closed. You'll have to come back in the morning," a young guy said, shooting him a look and pointing to the sign with the opening hours.

Like it was obvious, and he was stupid.

"Cool. Thanks." Alex made his way back down the alley. There were far too many people around to suddenly vanish into thin air.

Fucking New York. He missed the quiet of Portland.

He missed Casey.

He needed to see her face. To see she was safe.

To protect her.

Alex groaned. The pieces falling together like a puzzle.

Pulling out his tool, because he didn't want to bust it, Alex got the door opened in under six seconds, then slid inside.

"Casey," he called out, despite knowing she was already unconscious.

Walking through the store, he glanced down aisles of books. Alex took the stairs and walked up a level. Then found another set of stairs, her scent getting stronger again.

"How big is this damn place?" he asked nobody.

Finally, on the top level, he found the sci-fi section and saw a pair of familiar boots sticking out. Alex vamp sped over to her and dropped to his knees.

“Thank fuck,” he cried.

Leaning down, he listened for her breathing and let out another curse when he heard it, along with the light patter of her heart.

Lifting her head, he noticed some froth in her mouth.

Oh shit, that's not good.

He pulled out his phone and dialed Ben.

“Dude. I heard,” Ben answered.

“Need you to teleport to Sage as fast as you can,” Alex demanded. “Like, right fucking now.”

Ben didn't say anything.

Alex just heard crackling as the phone disconnected from the breakdown of atoms.

Then it rang again.

“Ben, what are you doing—” Sage began.

“You're on speaker. Alex, go,” Ben said, his tone all business.

“Sage, they have drugged Casey with the serum. She's been under about an hour now. I've found her, but she has froth coming out her mouth.” Alex's eyes were not leaving Casey's face, looking for any other symptoms he might have missed.

“Heart rate?” Sage asked immediately.

“Low, but stable.” He wasn't a doctor; he didn't know all the numbers shit.

“Breathing?” Sage asked.

“Soft. I don't know,” he cursed.

“Is she panting or just quietly breathing?”

“Yeah, that. The last one,” Alex said.

“Put me on FaceTime so I can see her.” Alex pushed the buttons and turned the camera. “Show me her fingernails,” Sage then directed.

Alex lifted her hand and put them in front of the phone.

“Up to her lips,” she said next, and Alex did as the scientist asked.

“Lift one of her eyelids.”

After a few minutes, Sage thanked him, and Alex flipped the camera around, finding Ben and Sage standing next to each other.

Ben with crossed arms, Sage with a pen and paper.

“I don’t know what the froth is,” she said. “I will need to speak to Dr. Abbott. Casey is a small vampire, so it may have impacted her far more than our large warriors. Get her to a safe location and then don’t move her. Can you get some blood or plasma for her when she wakes?”

She could have his.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Call me when she wakes,” Sage said. “And Alex, don’t give her any more adrenaline. Unless your lives depend on it, and even then, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Jesus.

Another reason his little warrior should stay at damn home.

“Go to ground, Alex,” Ben said. “You need any help?”

“No. I’ll get us a room and bunker down.” He knew exactly what to do. They’d all trained for this repeatedly. “Then I’ll bring her home.”

Alex signed off and let out a sigh.

Casey is a small vampire. Yeah... so he’d been trying to fucking tell everyone.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Alex lay on the bed with the blinds and curtains drawn, even though the stars were still out. Somehow, it just felt like Casey would be safer.

He'd undressed her, cleaned her a little, and then put her into bed.

They were at a shitass hotel where the least amount of attention would be drawn, especially since he hadn't exactly checked in.

Alex had also jimmed the lock so no one would get in and had put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door.

He lifted the remote and flicked through the channels, but it was a waste of time. All he kept doing was staring down at Casey.

Mate.

Nope. Not ready to think about it yet.

Alex pulled off his boots and clothes so he was only in his boxers and a singlet top, then slid down on the bed next to her. Tucking his arm under his head, he lay watching Casey, making sure she took each and every breath.

As he began to doze, he laid his arm across her stomach and pulled her in close, then drifted off to sleep.



CASEY GASPED AWAKE, and her head began to pound. Next to her, a body tensed, tightening around her.

“Casey?” a voice growled.

She panted, trying to draw in as much oxygen as she could. “Am I alive?” she asked.

A low snigger.

“Yeah, babe. You're alive.” Alex sat up and leaned on his elbow, staring down at her.

Damn, he was beautiful.

Her body began to relax as she stared up into his glittering gray eyes, feeling safe and protected. She might say she didn't want anyone to look after her, but Alex had somehow made her like it.

Just a little.

It felt different from the cage her father had put her in.

His hand brushed the hair from her face, and eyes full of unspoken words studied every inch of her. Something had shifted. The way he was looking at her was... more.

“You found me.”

“You told me to,” his voice was nearly a whisper.

She glanced around the really ugly room and asked, “Where are we?”

“In Manhattan. A three-star, nobody-will-find-us hotel,” Alex said. “You’ve been out for”—he glanced at his watch—“seven hours.”

Her eyes flew open.

Wow, that was a long damn time.

The last thing she remembered was teleporting away to the one place she had liked when she visited NYC. The bookstore.

Casey had taken some holidays and traveled to Manhattan, having always wanted to visit. She'd come on her own, and it had been exhilarating.

“Gah, my head feels like crap.” Casey lifted her hand to her forehead.

Alex got off the bed, and she took in his tall, muscular, nearly naked frame. How could one man be so stunning and elicit a reaction from her, even in this state?

He smirked and handed her a bottle of water, swigging one himself. Then he climbed back on the bed and helped her sit up against the headboard.

“That will help,” Alex said, indicating the water. “Drink it all.”

“This décor is fucking terrible.” She took in the poo-brown duvet cover and matching wallpaper. “What were they thinking?”

Alex laughed. “Sorry, princess. I would’ve got us a room at the Ritz, but it was a last-minute booking.”

They shared a grin.

“Thanks. For finding me,” she said, and he pulled her into his arms, kissing the tip of her nose. She felt dizzy, and while it was safe to say Alex Giordano was capable of turning her world upside down, this was different.

Her hand rubbed her forehead again.

“I don’t feel good.”

“You need to feed,” Alex said.

Oh.

“I’ll be okay. When can we go home?” She tried to calculate the time, but her brain just felt wobbly.

A little growl escaped Alex.

“Doctor’s orders, Case. I could try to find some blood, but I don’t want to be out on the Manhattan streets solo after what happened at the UN. So, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to take my blood.”

Casey didn’t have a huge issue with ingesting another vampire’s blood. For some vampires, it was a hugely intimate act. Alex had taken hers, and it had been hot as hell.

By taking his blood, it would connect them in a way that couldn’t be undone. They could communicate telepathically and... it was just more intimate. Especially for those who had been lovers.

She knew many former lovers who had regretted it.

Alex had drawn blood from her while deep inside her. That’s how she’d known he would have a good chance of

finding her after she had teleported away.

Was she willing to close the gap between them and let that wall down?

Did she have a choice?

Alex was right—she needed blood. Taking his wasn't unappealing. In fact, if anything, she was scared it would connect her to him emotionally, so she would feel more than she did already for the stupidly gorgeous vampire.

Casey had to remember to be annoyed with him after chaining her to his side at the UN. A move that had potentially saved her. But still.

Which had her wondering... If Alex was here, where was the royal family? And her friends.

“Darnell? Tris?” she asked.

“Safe, back home in Maine,” Alex replied. “As are the king and the rest of the warriors.”

Thank goodness.

Yet, when it came to the chain of command, Alex shouldn't be here. She had seen the commander go down.

Oh God.

“Shit, Alex. You left the king? The prince?” Casey stiffened. “Jesus, do you know what that means?”

He glared at her.

“Of course, I fucking do. Did you think I was just going to fly home and leave you here?” he growled. “Leave you to face the sun if you were facedown in some alley or some well-meaning person had sent you to a hospital?”

The risks had been great. They all knew that.

It was why the serum was such a terrifying concept.

They had seconds. Not minutes.

Casey cursed and climbed off the bed, staring down at her panties and the singlet she still wore.

He'd removed her bra.

"I know, but... I would have woken before opening time," she said, only half sure.

Then what?

Casey would have needed blood and then had to find somewhere during the sunlight hours where she would be safe.

Alex jumped up and held out his arm, the one with his timepiece. "Newsflash, sweetheart. It's ten in the morning. Sun o'clock."

Casey nearly laughed at his stupid terminology, but there was nothing funny about it.

In other words, she would have been ash. Or stuck in Strand Books, trying to explain why she was spending over eight hours in a bookstore.

Something she wasn't entirely opposed to.

She glanced at the cabinet across the room and narrowed her eyes. Alex noticed. He sighed and walked over to it, then chucked the bag on the bed.

"Here, I got you some books," he said, the heat leaving his words.

"You stole them?" she gasped.

Alex crossed his arms. "What the hell? No, I probably paid triple. I tucked a hundy under the register."

"And you wrapped them...," Casey said, lifting the bag.

Her eyes flew open.

"You got me the *Dufort Dynasty!*" she gasped, lifting the shiny paperbacks out. "And *Ward!*"

Casey could nearly fall in love with the gorgeous male if he kept doing dumb stuff like this.

Alex shrugged.

"Sit the hell down, open one, and drink from me," he ordered, tapping her ass, so she sat on the bed.

She grinned at him. Alex had been taking notice. He'd seen that she loved books without even saying anything.

Alex had found her in the bookstore, out of all the millions of places that she could have been in *all* of Manhattan. That was some good detective work.

Even with her blood to track.

Alex nudged her back up the bed and tucked his arm under her. Then he tugged her in close, his eyes drilling into her with a million unsaid words, and bit his wrist.

So fucking sexy.

Her eyes must've given her thoughts away because he slammed his mouth down on hers, drawing her body against his, and she melted.

Casey grabbed his shoulder and let out a little mewl.

"Drink and read," he purred, placing his wrist at her lips, and she began to draw from him.

The connection between them clicking into place as his red-hot blood slid down her throat.



ALEX CLOSED HIS EYES as his blood joined with Casey's. His cock was hard as a rock, wanting to join them in a commitment neither of them was ready to face.

Draw after draw, Casey pulled from his wrist, and her life energy brightened. He felt like a damn superhero, knowing it was his blood healing her.

While her eyes were closed, sucking like a newborn lamb, she had the books on her lap and was clinging to them.

Who knew his gift would silence her into such a state of appreciation? All he'd done was grab a couple from the bestseller romance book porn section.

No big deal.

Except he didn't remember the last time he'd bought someone a gift. Nineteen something or other, probably. Not

this century. Likely for his mom.

Getting a comatose body to a hidden and safe place wasn't the time to browse the shelves, looking for the perfect gift. Yet he had. Knowing Casey would like it.

Her body began to relax, and she let out a little sigh.

God, I want that mouth on my cock.

Casey wriggled her body, pressing into his thigh. Alex pushed her hair back, tugging into it so he could grip it.

Her eyes lifted to his as she removed her mouth and slid a tongue over the puncture, healing it. Mouth still open, she slid her hands up his chest, blood lining her lips, and stopped an inch from his face.

“I need you to fuck me,” her voice gravel.

His cock nearly leaped across the damn room. It jerked so hard.

Alex took her face in his hands and slid his tongue over her bottom lip, tasting his blood, then pulled her body across his lap.

She settled on top of his erection and groaned, pressing into him. Alex let out his own moan and closed his eyes. Casey lifted his hands to her breasts, and he cupped them, his thumb flicking her nipples.

“You should rest,” Alex said reluctantly.

Like really, really, reluctantly.

“I'm fine,” she purred.

“They drugged you.” He moaned again as she pressed down on his lap and moved her pussy in circles.

“You knew taking your blood was going to make me horny,” she said. “I need you inside me.”

Casey reached between them and pushed back, sliding her hand inside his boxers. Then she stroked him.

Slowly.

From tip to base.

Over and over.

Her eyes locked on him.

Goddamn, he wasn't a saint.

"Come here." Alex lifted her, tugged off her panties, and placed her back down, shaking his head at the cheeky smirk she gave him. "Sex addict."

"Alex addict." She shrugged.

"Is that right?" he said, settling her back on top of him. Guiding her hips, he took his cock and pushed it through her folds.

She was soaked.

"Baby," he groaned. "You really need this."

She bit her lip and nodded.

"Take my shoulders and work your way down onto my dick," he ordered.

And make it fast because I don't want to embarrass myself.

"Are you always this bossy?" She asked, then let out a little gasp when his head slid inside her.

Alex pressed his hips up to give her another inch.

"Always. Now give me that mouth." He tugged her down and claimed her lips, her tongue, her damn soul, and she lowered further, taking all of him inside her.

That's when the gentleness ended.

Alex thrust up into her when she lifted and took her hips, to repeat time and time again. Going softly with this female was near impossible. The need to own her and fuck her as hard as he could was a constant force, as if she'd be his forever if he slammed into her deep enough.

Mine.

His eyes flew open, their mouths still connected, as her small body rode his cock to oblivion.

The voice inside him was getting louder.

Impossible to ignore.

“Alex...” Casey pulled back, her body arching as her orgasm made her body shudder around him. Her pussy clutched his cock, sending him to paradise.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” he cried out. “Casey.”

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

“Oh fuck,” he cried again, this time for a whole different reason.

Because he knew the last thing Casey wanted was to be owned. Not by anyone. And certainly not him.

A man who could never let her be the little warrior she was.

Alex was doomed.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

When they arrived back home, they immediately took Casey to the lab so Sage could check her over and run tests. Alex's blood had helped revive her, as had his incredible lovemaking.

The man was insatiable. But then again, so was she.

With him.

It wasn't a horrible day spent alone, uninterrupted—well, except the food delivery guy—in bed with the sexiest warrior in the race.

In her opinion.

Alex had been quiet as they flew home, clinging to her hand, as if worried she'd try to escape if he let go.

Normally, she'd complain, but after watching all the women gazing at him as they'd walked through Manhattan and then again at the airport, Casey had felt an unreasonable amount of possessiveness.

She'd never experienced such a response in her life.

Casey decided it was a side effect of the drug—her story, and she was sticking to it—and gave herself the rest of the journey home to wallow in his delicious attention.

Alex had bought her books.

That made her all warm and gooey inside. As if she belonged to Alex Giordano, and in his arms. She'd never before imagined what it would be like to have someone protect her. To have her back.

She'd been running from any male staking a claim on her for a long time. For good reason.

Because her father still did.

Don't think about it.

But it was time she did. Casey couldn't ignore the small but important fact that she had to return home soon. Back to

her cage.

More than ever she didn't want to.

The bond between her and Alex was now stronger than ever. They'd crossed a line in Manhattan, and Casey could feel Alex's blood running through her veins. She could feel his essence.

He'd always be there now.

Casey would take a piece of him when she left Maine. It would be both heartbreaking and a bitter comfort.

"How's she looking, doc?" Alex asked from his seat across the room. He looked tired and still damn sexy. His denim-clad legs splayed wide in front of him, slouched in the seat.

He cares, she realized.

Their eyes connected momentarily, and then she glanced away.

"All your stats are fine. I advise every vampire to take a day after being injected to let your system push it out and metabolize it. So no work for at least another twelve hours," Sage said. "Precaution only. We haven't seen any side effects yet, but who knows if they'll change the serum ingredients at any point?"

"Or females could react differently," Dr. Abbott said, walking into the lab. "We will be testing your blood to see if that's the case. This could help to create an antidote."

Sage frowned. "Maybe."

Casey pulled down her sleeve. "It certainly knocked me out fast."

"Because of your size," Dr. Abbott said. "Just like humans, it makes a difference. The drug moved around your system more quickly, *and* you got the same dose as a two-hundred-pound warrior."

Casey shot a glance at Alex, who kept his expression passive, but she knew he wanted to do the old *told you so*.

“I’ll let you know if there is anything new that we should be concerned about. So, stay in the castle for the next twenty-four hours.”

“No problem.” Casey jumped down off the table. Just as Brayden stepped into the room.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Good,” she said, lowering her head to the prince, and he waved off her half-hearted curtsy. Something he did often when it came to the warriors in the castle.

“And the official response is?” Brayden asked, shooting Alex a glance, then looking back at the scientist and doctor.

“She is okay. Twelve hours stand down from duty, though. I mean it.” Sage said, and the doctor added. “I concur.”

“Good. How’s the recruiting going?” Brayden enquired.

“We’re moving fast. Thank the king for me,” Dr. Abbott said. “This will help us to gain more traction. There’s no guarantee we will get an antidote any faster, but it could.”

“We will try,” Sage said, nodding and collecting her blood samples.

Brayden let out a long sigh and turned to face her and Alex. “I hear you rejected the use of the jet.”

Alex stood from his chair and ran a hand over his hair, ruffling it. Her ovaries did some weird fluttering thing, and she looked away.

“Yes, sir. It was easy enough to get two first-class seats on the next flight home,” Alex replied.

Brayden didn’t respond, simply turned to Sage. “Can you see LC Hamilton home? Alex and I have business to discuss.”

“Of course,” Sage said as Casey swallowed.

This wasn’t good. Alex should never have stayed in Manhattan. She didn’t want him to lose his job. Not for her.

“I’d prefer to take her,” Alex said.

Everyone’s brows shot up.

Was he out of his goddamn mind?

Casey watched the prince almost double in size, his brow arching.

“Alex—” she began to say.

“That wasn’t a request,” Brayden growled, glaring at him. Alex was nearly as big as Brayden, but the power rolling from the prince was far greater.

Than anyone.

She’d noticed it the first time she met him.

“I know,” Alex said calmly.

Jesus.

Sage turned and stared at her, then suddenly grabbed her arm. “Casey, let’s go. Alex, I will see your girl home.”

His girl?

Brayden glanced at her, his eyes narrowing, and she swallowed. Then let Sage pull her out the door.

As the door closed, she heard Brayden’s dark growl. “That female just saved your life.”

“I know,” came Alex’s reply.

Oh God.

“Keep walking,” Sage ground out. “No matter what you hear. Keep. Walking.”

Casey swallowed. Her mouth was dry and her body almost shaking.

“You know the prince well?” she asked Sage when they had walked a few minutes.

“Not that well, but there’s a reason I called you *his girl*, and let’s just say, I hope for both your sakes, Alex knows.”

“Knows?” Casey asked.

Sage stopped at the lifts and pressed the button. “That he’s your mate.”

Casey's eyes flew open.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Alex followed the prince to the training center and stood there with his hands in his pockets. The huge vampire bellowed across the room for everyone to clear it.

Tom lifted his head and stared, then nodded to his team to do as instructed.

“The fuck,” Kurt asked, coming over. “What’s going on?”

Brayden planted his hands on his hips. “Ten seconds, and if this room has any bodies left in it, they’ll become bowling fucking balls.”

Kurt raised a brow, then glanced at Alex.

Craig teleported over and slapped the guy on the back. “And we’re gone.” Craig shot Alex a look before dragging the other vampire away.

At this point, Alex was fully aware the prince was mad. With him. And that he should be slightly terrified, or at least a little scared out of his mind.

Yet, he’d been prepared for this.

Well, not quite this.

He’d never heard of Brayden losing his cool this way before, but the enormous vampire looked furious. The door closed down the end of the hall, and it was just the two of them.

Alex watched the prince walk to the wall and pull a sword down.

Great. At least losing his head would be quick and fast.

Then the thing came flying at him. Alex reached out and caught it.

“I’m not slicing my own head off,” he said.

He drew the line at that.

“I’ll decide that,” Brayden said, coming at him like the skilled warrior he was.

Their swords clanged.

The power he felt through the blade was fierce.

Clang.

He leaped to the side, his arms only just deflecting the force thrown at him. Jesus, the prince was powerful. Nearly unnaturally. Even more than a vampire.

Alex had trained under Ari, the same male he now understood Brayden had learned from as a boy, and then a soldier being guided to lead the Moretti army.

The prince kept coming at him, hard and fast.

“I agreed to have you in my army because I believed you to be a loyal warrior,” Brayden ground out, the silver of his sword slicing through the air.

“Yes, sir.” Alex leaped to avoid losing his legs.

“You left my fucking family. You left the goddamn king,” Brayden snarled.

“No, sir. Well, yes. I did.”

Good argument, asshole.

For what felt like an eternity, the powerful vampire swung his weapon through the air, and they danced around the room. Fury and defense, thick and unbending.

He wouldn’t apologize.

Alex could never have lived with himself if Casey had died because he’d made the wrong decision. No matter what the consequences.

Then, with a slash, as the prince backed him into the corner, the tip of his sword was against Alex’s throat. “Not once in hundreds of years has a senior lieutenant commander disobeyed me or the rules.”

Alex just stood there, breathing as softly as he could, while drawing in what could be his last breath.

“Ari tells me you’re one of his best assassins. So what the fuck happened? You have twenty seconds, so make it count.” Brayden bared his fangs. His eyes red.

“Casey is my mate,” Alex said.

And fuck you for making me admit it.

The prince glared at him for a long moment, then inched away.

Alex drew in a breath he was sure wouldn’t belong to him and let it out.

Mate.

Casey was his mate. If he were being honest, it had been simmering away in the back of his mind for days. Facing it would mean losing her.

Alex knew without asking she didn’t want to be mated. Not to someone who couldn’t respect her career choice or smothered her with his need to wrap her in bubble wrap.

Her desire for freedom and independence was all-consuming. That she’d let him into her bed was one thing.

Claiming her was a whole different beast.

Alex was an alpha male. Dominant. Possessive.

Protective.

He could never change.

Even unbonded, he’d protected her, knowing the consequences. She knew. He saw the look in her eyes.

Asking her to bond with him would only increase the need to keep her safe.

“Shit.” The prince dropped the sword and took a few steps away.

Alex took in a few more blessed deep breaths and tossed his own away.

Brayden stood with his back to him and ran a hand over his head.

“Darnell was and is a completely competent senior warrior. If he hadn’t been there, I would have left her. But...”

Alex didn’t know what to say. Heck, he didn’t even know if he was speaking the truth, even though on some level, he meant it.

“You couldn’t have,” the prince said, turning.

Alex shook his head, confirming what the prince said. He hated that it was true, but it was.

This was nothing to do with PTSD. It never had been.

Yes, he’d been fucked up about killing the woman, but his response to Casey had always been about her being his mate.

Still, Alex needed to make sure the prince knew he hadn’t just jogged off to get the girl. He was and always would be a highly skilled and loyal warrior.

“Darnell would be wearing this jacket if it wasn’t for me,” Alex said, tugging on the *M*-embroidered black clothing. “Charlotte defaulted on the Games, and Darnell would have won if I hadn’t have entered.”

The prince crossed his arms.

“That’s for me to decide. Not you,” Brayden said. “There are rules in place in an army to ensure we are all protected. The commander was out. You were the next most senior warrior. You left your post.”

Alex nodded. It was true. He had.

He pressed his lips together.

“Speak your mind, warrior,” Brayden growled.

Alex shook his head. His next words could mean the loss of his job, which looked to be inevitable, anyway.

It was better to accept his fate.

“I said. Speak. Your. Fucking. Mind.” When Brayden growled, you followed orders.

Here goes nothing.

Alex ran a hand over his face. “I made an executive decision. You and Ari were with the king. You are two of *the* most powerful vampires in the world. In existence. I had put Craig in the SUV and instructed Darnell to get everyone back and in the air.”

Alex cursed and flung his hand out.

“Fuck, I knew at that point the other vampires had teleported there. Casey was the last man... female... down. She needed my help.” He growled. “I was not going to leave the city without her. No matter the cost.”

The prince crossed his arms.

“Even before I realized she was my mate—which, frankly, I’m not one hundred percent sure of—I had her blood calling me.” Alex continued.

He glanced around the training center, thinking about that moment and reflecting on his entire career.

“Ari has rules. Strict rules. But when we are out in the field, we’re on our own. We were trained to think independently.”

And that is what he’d done. Alex had analyzed the situation and made a decision to get everyone home safely. It might have broken the rules, but it could have saved a vampire’s life.

Casey’s life.

“The Institute doesn’t have an army of people like the you have so we have to be self-sufficient.” He concluded.

“Rogue behavior, just like fucking Ben.” the prince said, shaking his head.

Well, Ben was a law unto himself most days, but that was another story.

“I’m not making excuses. I can see why it’s necessary in an army structure, but critical thinking enabled me to get everyone home safe. You can’t deny that.” Alex said, knowing he was skating on really thin ice.

Really fucking thin.

As in, his legs were feeling wobbly and wondering if they were about to be detached from his body.

This wasn't over. The prince had dropped his weapon, but Alex was under no false pretenses that he was forgiven.

“That is my call.” Brayden said. “My fucking rules. My army. My god damn rules, Giordano.”

Alex nodded and lowered his eyes to the swords on the ground.

He had known there were different rules in the Moretti army. He knew what he should have done.

And yet...

“If Casey had died because I'd followed the rules and not used this thick skull of mine to make a different decision, you shouldn't want me in this job.” Alex said, lifting his eyes to the prince.

Ari stepped into the room.

“The boy is right.” Ari said, looking like a sleek Jaguar as he walked across the room towards them.

Boy?

Well, he was nearly a thousand years older than Alex, so he let it go.

“Ari,” Brayden warned.

The ancient vampire stopped a few feet away and slid his hands into his pockets. Not much stressed him out. The day Sage's life had been in danger was the only time Alex had seen him lose his mind.

He hated to think what would've happened if she hadn't walked out of the BioZen building alive that day.

It still made him shiver.

But what was he doing here?

“The decision is yours, but I stand by what I said to you when I put him forward for The Games. Alex is a highly

skilled and powerful soldier. He has been incredibly loyal to me and his teammates since the moment he arrived at The Institute.”

Alex nodded, lowering his eyes. A raft of emotions flooded his body. What would he do if the prince let him go?

Going back to assassin work was not an option. Was it?

He was a warrior.

A desk job didn't appeal, and he didn't have a creative or technical bone in his body.

Was he just a killer?

“What he said about the freelance style I teach my soldiers is correct. They need to think for themselves and make decisions on their feet. Alex and Ben have been doing that for a long time. They follow orders, however, if they see it conflicting with the safety or effectiveness of the job, it's in their training to consider options.”

“He knew the rules. They both do,” Brayden said, his voice thick with power.

“Ben is adjusting,” Ari said. “But I think we can both agree, when he was mating Anna, it was a different story.”

Alex glanced up.

“God, don't remind me,” Brayden groaned.

Alex hated he had put Ari in this situation. He hated he was letting the prince down. God, he'd admired the male his whole life. Now he was standing here under his powerful gaze, being admonished.

Not his finest hour.

“Look, I'm sorry. Maybe I did fuck up. Even Casey told me I should've left her. Stubborn damn female,” Alex said. “But she would've died. I know that for a fact. She wasn't protected from the daylight, and she was out for over seven hours.”

“Where did she go?” Brayden asked.

“A bookstore,” Alex said.

The two vampires repeated it simultaneously in question. Alex couldn’t help it—he smirked.

“Yeah. She loves books.” Alex felt warmth fill his chest. “The point is, she would’ve died. A woman died on my watch last year. I wasn’t going to let it happen again.”

He wasn’t going to let Casey die.

End of story.

“And if the king had been in danger?” Brayden asked. “That’s the question I want answered.”

The million-dollar question.

“I would’ve protected him, first and foremost. The sun was hours from rising. We had time,” Alex said. “But he wasn’t. He had you two.”

Ari turned to the prince, and there was a challenge in his eye.

Brayden cursed.

“I can’t have my fucking army going around, being all *2023 critical thinkers*,” Brayden said, doing the inverted-commas thing with his fingers in the air.

Ari’s lips twitched into a smile.

Alex’s chest was thumping, a smile nowhere near the surface.

“I need to trust you,” the prince said.

“You can.” Alex meant every word.

They all stood staring at each other for a long while. He counted his breaths as the Moretti prince made a decision that would change his life.

“So, Casey is your mate?” he asked.

Alex nodded. “I think so. But... it’s unlikely to matter. She’s a warrior. So fucking independent and will run a mile when she finds out.”

The two vampires shared a glance and a knowing smile. Whatever that meant.

“This conversation stays between us,” the prince said, then pointed at him. “You need to be mindful of the difference between working for Ari and the royal army. I *do* want warriors who think for themselves, but not at the risk of the king. He’s first. Always. Do you understand?”

Alex nodded.

“Fortunately for you, Vincent respects the mating bond and would honor the fact you saved one of his vampires. But Alex, I’d go get that girl because, while it’s my job to manage the army, don’t for a second think he wasn’t aware you disappeared,” Brayden said sternly. “Vincent sees everything.”

Alex swallowed. “She’s not my girl.”

Brayden shook his head and walked back over to him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“You just risked your career and nearly your fucking life, warrior. You better bet she’s your mate. Now go to her,” Brayden said. “And let me spar with my uncle and burn off the rest of this fucking anger.”

Alex began to walk away, then turned.

“So just to be clear, I still have my job?” he asked.

“You do. And you have a new team member,” Brayden said. “Darnell proved himself to be an excellent asset. As you said, if not for you, he would’ve won the Vampire Games. We need more top-notch warriors, so I’ve offered him the position.”

Alex smiled.

Well, at least he’d saved the girl and got a good vampire promoted.

So there was that.

“I meant what I said. Be mindful of following orders. I might’ve done the same thing and saved my princess,”

Brayden said. “But the king’s life is more important than any of us.”

Ari nodded his way. Alex let that sink in as he walked out of the training center.

Now he had to face Casey, who he knew was going to be freaking the hell out and probably planning how to get far away from him.

Bad luck. He wasn’t letting her go.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Casey had spent the night pacing her room, wondering where the hell Alex was. The rumor of the prince clearing the training center was all over the castle in minutes.

Was he dead?

Oh my God, what if the prince had killed him?

It would be her fault.

“Brayden is not going to kill him, Case,” Charlotte had said when she had visited to see if Casey was okay. They were together when they heard the news.

Marcus had texted her, telling her not to worry but to stay away from the center.

“You should have seen his face, Char. He was mad. Alex left. *Left* the king.” Casey shook her head.

Charlotte tilted her head. “I’m confused.”

“The king. Dude who owns this big house. You’ve seen him around,” Casey replied.

“Ha fucking ha. What I’m confused about is who you’re more concerned about. The king, or Alex?” Charlotte said. “Because right now, it appears you might... *care* about the douchebag. Or sorry, wasn’t it *the asshole*?”

Casey shot her a look, her brows bunched. “Fine. We shagged.”

“Clearly,” Charlotte had replied.

Wait, what?

She knew?

How many other people knew?

Oh God, did all the SLCs know? Did Alex tell them? She would remove his testicles if he had.

“He told Marcus?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

Charlotte had shaken her head. “If he did, he hasn’t mentioned it to me. And he would. He’s kind of a gossip.”

Casey had let out a big sigh and then asked, “Do you think anyone else knows?”

Charlotte had shrugged. “Who cares? But it sounds like you do. You like him. Care about him. So, what does that mean?”

Good question.

Casey had buried her head in her hands. “I don’t know. He’s so controlling and, ugh, sexist. I can’t stand it.”

Was that still true?

Casey felt protected, more than controlled by him now. It was like a natural instinct to resist a man caging her in, but with him, she still felt like she had her wings.

“Because of your dad?” Charlotte asked.

Casey had nodded.

She hadn’t told her friend everything, but when they’d joined the Moretti army, it was so fresh in her mind that she had shared a little too much.

Charlotte knew he had restricted her life to the point she could barely breathe.

“Even now, I have to ring him weekly to ensure he doesn’t come barging into town and drag me home,” Casey said, shaking her head. “The leash is long, but not gone.”

“He doesn’t own you,” Charlotte said. “It’s a form of abuse, Case. You need to either cut him off or... shit, I don’t know.”

Abuse.

God. She had never considered it that way before. He was her father. He’d never raised his fist—his voice, yes, but not his fist—at her or physically harmed her.

“I don’t know if it’s abuse...,” she had said, wondering.

“You’ll never let any guy close to you, especially a mate, if you let your father keep controlling you,” Charlotte said. “You have to surrender to the mating bond, and it takes some deliberate choosing. If that makes sense.”

“I couldn’t,” Casey replied quietly. “I could never give up what independence I have.”

It was about to run out anyway, so the entire conversation was irrelevant. But she was hoping they would forget.

Who was she kidding?

“Why would you? You’re still tethered to a man who’s emotionally abusing you.” Charlotte’s lips bunched, and pity poured from her eyes. “Babe, I know about abuse. It comes in all forms. If you’re scared, that’s abuse.”

Fuck.

She wondered if her friend was right.

The idea was horrifying.

Was it abuse?

Charlotte had left her not long after their conversation, the drain of the drugs in her system and the new realization leaving her feeling depleted.

Casey stared at the wall for what felt like hours, revisiting her life and her father’s behavior. Then she had opened her laptop and googled different types of abuse.

Oh God.

Tears had poured down her face as the reality of her life sunk in.

So many of the behaviors matched.

What did she do? Phone her mom and declare her father an abuser? Like that would change anything. Her father was likely to jump on a plane and do what she feared—drag her home.

Casey sat shaking, crying, feeling like her world was crumbling to bits around her.

She couldn't go home.

Casey couldn't return to her cage.

And she couldn't risk stepping into another one. She had to end things with Alex and find out if the royal family could protect her if her father came for her.

When her father came.

Casey had to be free. She would die if she wasn't.



DESPITE HER SELF-DECLARATION, Casey had expected Alex to show up, and when he didn't, after hours of waiting, she became worried.

Was he okay?

Had the prince hurt him?

He might not be dead, but could be... well, she didn't know, and that's how she found herself pacing in front of his door, chewing her thumbnail and wondering if she should knock or teleport home.

Casey walked down the hall, then spun, walking back past his door. Again. And again. This time when she turned, Alex was leaning against his doorframe.

"New form of exercise, or do you want to come in?" Alex asked, one brow raised and a smirk on his lips.

Ugh. Smug, asshole.

The desire to jump his bones and tell him she was crazy happy he was alive and in one piece scared her. So she spun away. It was better if she went home.

Alex teleported in front of her, forcing her to stop.

"You're alive. That's good. Okay, bye," she said, trying to walk around him.

He reached out and halted her. "That's it?"

"Yes. I have to go."

“No, the fuck you don’t,” Alex growled.

“Look, I came to tell you we need to cool this,” Casey said. “You nearly lost your job. And I... This isn’t working for me. So we need to stay away from each other.”

Before she knew what he was doing, he reached down, scooped her up, and walked into his room, kicking the door closed behind them.

Then he placed her on her feet, grabbed her face, and kissed the life out of her.

Goddamn him.

“No,” Alex growled when he released her lips.



NO?

“You can’t just—”

Alex’s mouth slammed down on hers again, and he nudged her thighs apart, her core heating.

Her body wanting.

His hard member pressed against her need, her mind fighting for dominance even as Alex surrounded her with his powerful essence.

Casey didn’t want to feel desired and safe with him, yet she did. His arms surrounded her, his hand cupping the back of her neck, and his pulsing body pressed against hers. He slid his lips from hers.

“I can, and I am. Say no to me one more time, and I swear, Casey, I will lose my mind.”

Well, that was too bad.

She lost her mind every time he touched her.

It was time to stop this, despite his words. Except then Alex tugged her hair back, and she gasped. His tongue sliding along her collarbone, his warm breath teasing and sending shivers along her skin to her core.

Casey dug her fingers into his thick biceps, trying to find the will to stop it.

It never came.

Alex tugged her T-shirt off, his tongue circling her nipples and his eyes challenging her. All she did was press her hot core into his hardness even more.

Then he was standing over her, tugging down her sweatpants and ripping his own clothes off.

Okay, now this was unfair.

Layers of ripped muscle glistened from his huge, hard body. His cock jutting and then taken in his fist as he gazed down at her, like she meant something.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he said, stroking himself slowly.

“Alex...” But nothing else came out.

Was she pleading?

Yup.

He kneeled back on the bed and licked her pussy in one long sweep. Casey arched, crying out in some foreign tongue she'd never heard.

Then he flipped her over.

“On your knees, gorgeous.” He tugged her ass into the air. “Hands on the headboard.”

Then his mouth was back between her legs, his thumb against her rear hole and her body shuddering in need of more.

“Greedy girl,” Alex moaned between licks.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she said, pleasure building like a crescendo, and she was about to explode. Fingers plunged inside her and fucked her rapidly as she clenched around them.

“Oh, good girl, ride my fingers. Let me hear you scream.”

And goddamn him, she did.



ALEX WRAPPED HIS ARMS around Casey's waist and pulled her against him the moment he thrust inside her.

"Fuck, you feel so tight and hot," he growled against her neck. "So right."

What was it about this woman saying no to him that made him want to claim her all that much more?

She was afraid.

He'd show her she didn't need to fear him.

Yet, he wasn't sure he could be the male she wanted. Or needed. Alex pulled out to the tip of his head, then slammed his cock in hard.

Casey cried out.

He did it again. And again.

Almost like he could fuck her into wanting him like he did her. They both knew that wouldn't work. She'd come to him just as he'd hoped she would. It was the only way. If she hadn't, Casey would have turned him away.

He knew her.

The prince's word's an echo in his mind, playing over and over. *Go get your girl, Giordano.*

He moved them up the bed, lifting her arms so they splayed on the wall.

"Keep them up there," he commanded, reaching for a nipple and tweaking it as he nudged her legs wider and continued thrusting inside her.

"Ohgod, Alex. Shit," she cried as he pinched her nipple, his mouth on her neck.

Claim her.

Fuck.

His fangs threatened to release and sink into her neck without permission. He could. Her lithe, small body would be so easy for him to flip around and fuck as he wanted. To take what she wasn't offering.

He wouldn't.

Alex could never live with those beautiful eyes of hers, full of resentment for the rest of their lives. Surely, she must know this was more than just a sexual attraction between them now.

Her head flung back, her pussy gripping him. "Fuckfuckfuck."

She rested her head on his chest, his mouth sucking on her jaw.

"Surrender to me, gorgeous. Give me what we both want."

Casey knew it meant more than her orgasm.

"I can't," Casey moaned. "I can't."

"You can. Trust me."

Fire spread down his spine, through his veins, his nervous system, his frame stiffening as the roar of his orgasm struck.

"I can't," her voice small as he cried out his pleasure.

Won't, or can't, little minx?

He had no idea yet how accurate his question was. But he was about to.

And it was going to change everything.



CHAPTER FORTY

Casey lay awake for hours, listening to Alex sleep, his body wrapped around her. As if knowing she would slip away if he let go.

Even now, she felt the chains of the mating bond trying to take hold.

He hadn't said anything, but she'd felt it.

Casey saw it in his eyes.

Felt it in his lovemaking.

Sensed it through the blood bond already sizzling away within her.

She had been honest. Casey couldn't do this. She wouldn't.

For most, it was a love bond. For her, it was bondage.

Discovering that she had, and still was, being abused by the one man who should've been protecting her over her lifetime was heartbreaking.

Casey wasn't about to give another male that opportunity.

Alex was beautiful. Powerful, persistent, frustrating, and dominant. He made her feel incredible, but she didn't know if she could trust him.

His long eyelashes lay peacefully on his cheeks, his luscious lips slightly parted in sleep, and heavy growth on his face from a lack of shaving. She liked the rough look on him. It went with his sex-tousled hair.

On the side of the bed, his heavy silver watch glinted, lit only by a small lamp in the other room. The rest of the room was dark. Black sheets, black cabinets, black blinds.

So masculine. Just like Alex.

My beautiful warrior.

Who she had to let go.

Gently moving his arm, she slid from the bed and dressed.

Then, without a backwards glance, she teleport back to her room.

To the false sense of freedom.

Her days were numbered, and she still wasn't sure how to save herself.



ALEX OPENED HIS EYES and let out a sigh, rolling onto his back.

Did Casey really think he wouldn't feel her move? Feel her distance herself from him?

Stupid damn female.

He was attuned to every single breath she took.

It was then he absolutely knew Casey was aware of the bond between them. She felt the way their bodies moved as one when they were together. Connected by his cock or otherwise.

Alex didn't go after her.

He would give her space to process it, and then he was going to claim her.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Brayden lifted Willow off his lap and put her on her feet. “Can’t I stay?” Willow asked, the fear still lingering in her eyes.

“Sweetheart, I’m fine. There was never a threat to me,” Brayden said, wishing he hadn’t told his mate what happened. There had been too many warriors out in the field to keep it a secret, so she would have heard eventually, and he didn’t want to worry her.

Not when she was so far along in their pregnancy.

He was fine, but he might not have been.

If one of those darts had hit him, he would have gone down like any other vampire. Although he had some theories on that. The Moretti blood was far more powerful than others in the race, and it might protect them.

Or it might not.

The only people who knew about the power of their blood were those with it. Vincent, Kate—the queen—and their son, Lucas. His princess, Willow, Ari, and Sage.

No one else alive knew.

Brayden wanted Sage to test his theory, but the priority right now was creating an antidote. Until they had the true serum, not just samples of it from their blood, it was unlikely to tell the real story, in any case.

Vincent walked into the living room and sat in one of the large armchairs. “Willow can stay if she likes.”

Brayden narrowed his eyes. “Who are you, and where is my brother?”

The king let out a laugh. We need to keep the whole family informed now. Plus,” he said, nodding at her large bump, “I remember this stage, and frankly, Kate was more terrifying than any enemy I’ve ever faced. And she’s...”

Willow crossed her arms over her boobs. Okay, fine. She crossed them over her chest. He only saw boobs, and boy oh boy, they were getting bigger.

“She’s...?” Willow asked with a brow hitched.

Vincent almost winced. Brayden wanted to laugh, but knew better in the company of these two.

“A more experienced royal,” the king said finally.

“You weren’t going to say that.” Willow frowned and bunched her lips.

“Well, we’ll never know, will we?” Vincent leaned forward to pick up the mug of coffee they’d set out for him. “Let’s get started.”

Willow shot Brayden a look, and he held his hand out. “Come. You can stay, but you have to listen, not take over.”

She slapped his hand.

Brayden knew his mate wouldn’t like it, but this was an important discussion, and there was no room for her sass tonight.

“Jeez, you’re both absolutely terrible at dealing with hormonal women.”

“We’re predators, my love, not midwives.” Brayden’s princess slowly lowered herself into the seat beside him. He didn’t bother trying to help. She’d just slap at him again.

Give it five minutes, and Willow would’ve forgiven him. Like him, she knew how to pick her battles. They both had strong personalities, and while they could argue like warriors, they fucked just as passionately.

“We’re waiting on Ari,” Brayden said, just as the man walked through the door with Sage. “Ah, here he is.”

“Evening, nephews,” he said.

“Uncle,” Brayden replied.

The two females hugged as Ari poured them two glasses of plasma and sat in the other large armchair beside the king.

Sage slid onto his lap and took the glass.

“Still can’t believe I drink this stuff. We used to sample it in labs, not think of it as food,” the young scientist said, taking a sip.

“I know. My milk is going to have a high dose of blood in it, apparently. So weird,” Willow said to her.

“I told you that.” Sage giggled as the king said, “Let’s move on. This isn’t a nursery.”

Ari smirked and took a drink.

“Is the queen not joining us?” Brayden asked. Vincent insisted that the whole family be fully informed, so where were Kate and Lucas? Not that Lucas would understand a great deal. He could barely say ten words yet. Though two of them were *dadda* and *king*.

Which was unlikely to be a coincidence.

Brayden was impressed with how much time the king spent with his son. Not surprised, given the moment the little vampire was born, he was being primed to be king.

“Lucas has art class. So, apparently that’s important for his future as king. He can paint himself a sword and hit his enemies with a paintbrush,” Vincent said, rolling his eyes.

Ari laughed, throwing his head back.

“Really Vincent? Chil—” Willow muttered, shaking her head, and before she could say any more, Brayden slid a hand over her mouth.

Fortunately, Ari filled the space.

“Vincent, I remember you and the prince doing art class. You painted each other more than the canvas, but it was important for your development. Guiliana was adamant your father allowed you both the time. I am glad Kate is doing the same.”

Brayden released his hand when Willow bit him.

“That’s so sweet,” Sage said.

“I love it, hearing you talk about the boys when they were little,” Willow said. “Did you change Vincent’s nappies?”

For the love of God.

Sage silently giggled as the king let out a growl.

“Must you? Every time?” the king asked, shaking his head.

Willow nodded. “Oh, yes. Every single opportunity.”

“Enough,” Brayden said.

Some days, it was amusing. Today, he wanted to get down to business. The surprise, or perhaps not-surprise, attack on them outside the UN building in Manhattan was a big concern.

The president had confirmed the bodies were members of the mafia. Not just one, but a mix of Italian and the Irish mobs.

Craig and Brianna walked in.

“Hey,” the big guy said, leading Brianna over to the sofa where Brayden and Willow sat.

Brianna kissed Willow on the cheek, patting her tummy. The two shared an affectionate smile. Craig leaned his ass on the arm of the sofa and laid his hand on Brianna’s far shoulder.

Craig might not be a Moretti, but he was as close to family as anyone else. There were few meetings he didn’t attend. As commander of their army, if something happened to him or the king, Craig would be the one to ensure the royal family continued to rule.

Lucas was next in line, but way too little to do so yet. Like twenty years too little.

Never had their lives been in more danger than they were right now. Contingencies had to be discussed. With Ari in their lives, despite being from a different bloodline from their original creator—his twin brother Gio—there were options.

One Vincent was grappling with.

“So Mikhaylov must’ve had a reason for attacking us. Any theories?” Brayden asked. “Was he testing us?”

“Testing my fucking patience.” Craig rubbed the back of his head.

“How are you feeling?” Sage asked.

“Pissed off. But fine,” Craig replied.

“I’d say he was proving our existence to those he’s going into partnership with. Believing in vampires is a tall order for most humans,” Ari said. “If it was me, I’d examine the hybrid soldiers, if he still has one, but because they are still human, I’d question if the man was just enhanced by steroids or some freak of nature.”

Brayden shrugged. “None of us used our vampire abilities.”

Nor would they, outside the UN.

“Which was likely a great disappointment to the Russian,” Ari said. “However, the fallen vampires did teleport away, so they may have seen.”

Which was a problem because, until now, that and their ability to telepath were unknown to humans. Callan, the vampire BioZen had held for over six months, had said he’d never given those two abilities away. There had been no way for them to test it and no reason for him to try using them.

Housed in a tungsten cell, he’d been unable to teleport out.

Brayden glanced at Craig.

“We have wiped footage,” he said.

“Nothing on social feeds,” Brianna added. She led the communications team for the king.

“I doubt it matters. If they were observing from a distance, one of them would’ve seen,” Ari noted.

He was right.

Over seven of their vampires had been shot with the serum and teleported away. Thank goodness they had all returned unharmed. He knew about every single warrior in his army and if he’d lost one of them to the mafia, Brayden would have been furious.

They were his responsibility.

Brayden wrapped his hand around Willow's head and kissed the other side before standing. He paced to the window in his large living room and glanced out at the vast front lawn of the castle.

"So, we are at war," Brayden said.

"Indeed." Vincent let out a sigh. "A very complicated one. How do we fight our enemy when they're scattered around the globe and have a disregard for human laws? Or any laws?"

Brayden turned and slid his hands into his pockets.

His eyes slid over Willow's swollen belly and then landed on his uncle.

"From all angles," they both said at once.



BRAYDEN, CRAIG, AND Ari walked toward the operations room thirty minutes later. The king had returned to his office, leaving them to it, their females choosing to stay and chat.

"You're concerned," Ari said when they stepped through the security-coded doors.

They were alone.

"I have a child on the way. It does change things." Brayden shook his head. "This is the largest and most avert enemy we've ever had."

The most challenging.

Yes, they needed to come at them from both sides. But there were more than two.

More than four.

They were everywhere.

"Governments, we understand and know where to find," Craig said, and Brayden nodded. "The rebel vampires we have a history with and, for the most part, are aware of what they're up to."

“Correct.” Brayden sat at his desk.

“We have some information on the mobs. We’re not going into this completely blind,” Ari pointed out. “It will take them time to restructure and get their ducks in line.”

Ari had a lot more experience with the mobsters than they had. The Institute was a private security company which had worked discretely for decades, taking out some of the world’s worst.

He had contacts and information that would be fundamental in them winning this war.

Craig took a load off next, linking his fingers behind his head. “I can’t see this working well for them. Not long term.”

Ari rubbed his jaw and then shook his head.

“It doesn’t need to.”

They stared at him.

“I’ve been thinking about this. What would he want out of a partnership with the other mafias?”

“Distribution. They have some of the best in the world,” Craig said.

“And?” Ari asked.

Fucking hell.

“Jesus. Laboratories,” Brayden said.

But that would mean stopping the production of their other merchandise. Meaning drugs.

“Exactly.”

“There’s no way they would cut off opioids and all the rest of the shit they produce,” Craig said.

“They would if it meant the type of money this could generate. Think about it.” Ari noted. “Every human on the planet, all eight billion of them, will want this weapon. The serum. When they discover we exist.”

Goddamn it.

“Not just one, but hey, a six-pack,” Brayden said, shaking his head.

Ari nodded. “With no competition, he can price it how he likes. Wal-mart will stock that shit. Amazon will ship it.”

Craig let out a loud curse.

Brayden felt his stomach curdling.

This was bad.

Really fucking bad.

“He has to be stopped,” Ari said. “Not in a week or a month. Now.”

The Operation Daylight team had promised, before they wrapped up, to make Nikolay Mikhaylov a wanted man. Globally, he would be hunted.

The likelihood of capturing him? Very slim.

The warrant for his arrest would slow Nikolay down and make his plans more difficult to implement. Depending on how quickly the other mafias bought into his plans.

“Have we heard from Jason?” Brayden asked.

Ari shook his head. “It’s a backup at best having him on the ground. Infiltration is a slow game.”

As was the hope of creating an antidote.

“The pressure is really heavy on Sage’s shoulders,” Ari said, reading his mind. “Dr. Abbott and Anna have been recruiting scientists as fast as they can to speed up the work, while Sage continues the research, but it could take a week or a decade.”

Brayden shook his head. “Jesus.”

Ari sat on the edge of a table. “What I’m about to propose is not going to go down well, but hear me out.”

Brayden’s brows raised, and he shot a look at Craig.

“If its track down the Russian prick and kills him, I’m good with it,” Craig said. “Give me a week.”

They all knew it would take longer.

Perhaps.

Or maybe not.

“Tell me,” Brayden said, open to ideas.

“We need more scientists. There are very few around the world who specialize in what we need. So... we may need to turn some. I know, I know.” Ari held up his hand. “But these are desperate times. You know as well as I do there are humans out there who would love to become a vampire.”

Brayden cursed.

Ari was correct.

When humans learned of them, they either went straight to fear or curiosity. They’d all been begged by a human—before wiping their memories—to be changed.

Who didn’t want near immortality and power?

Well, some people didn’t, but many did.

A surprising amount.

“The king will have to approve it,” Brayden said. “It doesn’t solve anything quickly.”

“No,” Ari said. “Unless they do come up with something, so we shouldn’t ignore the possibility.”

Brayden stared at his commander and best friend, going back to what he’d said in jest earlier. Well, the truth was, Craig wouldn’t have been joking. He would pack his bags and leave in an hour if Brayden gave him the order.

It *had* crossed his mind.

Craig was a powerful vampire with unique skills—some lost to most of the race.

Yet it could be the most dangerous and destructive mission of his life.

He couldn’t risk it. Not yet.

“Let’s start brainstorming,” Brayden said, standing and adding the option on the whiteboard.

Craig’s lips stretched into a smile.

“Don’t get fucking excited. It’s dangerous, and you know it. Remember, you have a mate to consider,” Brayden growled.

And me.

Craig had been with him for hundreds of years. He was an essential part of the royal army and his life. Throwing him to the wolves wasn’t plan A, or fucking G.

But it had to stay on the table.

“I’m bringing my assassins in on this and closing the books at The Institute until we win this war,” Ari said. “Can we set them up a space and some accommodations?”

Brayden nodded. “Speak to Lucinda, Tom’s mate. She will arrange everything.”

Ari nodded as Brayden wrote that on the board.

“Add me to your list,” Ari said. “Craig is one option. I am another.”

“Jesus,” Brayden said, shaking his head.

It made him hate the Russian even further. The chances of losing the vampires he loved was increasing by the hour.

“You know it can’t be you, Brayden,” Ari said. “Whatever we do, we’ll do it with a well-thought-out plan. But I know you. Do not override us and go yourself.”

He turned to face the two large vampires before him.

“Don’t deny it,” Ari growled. “I know you, nephew. I watched you grow up. I trained you.”

Goddamn him.

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” Craig said. “That’s it. I’m putting a goddamn guard on you.”

“You know I’m the captain, right? I can send them away.” Brayden laughed.

Ari smiled, but Brayden could see the darkness in his eyes.

As far as Brayden knew, and though he'd never tested the theory, they thought him to be the most powerful vampire alive.

Was Ari stronger? It was possible.

Brayden might be a Moretti, but when it came to protecting the throne, the strongest vampire with the right skills should be the one to destroy Mikhaylov.

That might be Ari or Craig.

Or it could be him.

“Side note, we should proceed with the oath ceremony as a show of strength, in case of an announcement,” Craig said. “Both Alex and Darnell.”

“Agreed,” Brayden replied.

The event was tomorrow night.

“Trust Alex, Bray. He was reacting to the mating bond,” Ari noted. “We’ve all been there and know the madness.”

Brayden leaned his hands on the back of his chair and signed. “I know. I was furious at a lot of things when I confronted him. I lost my cool.”

“Not like you.” Craig shot him a look.

It wasn't.

Not much rattled Brayden's cage. Watching his vampire warriors drop like flies had infuriated him.

“Yeah, well, I've never seen your fat ass out cold, so bite me.” Brayden raised his brows at his long-time buddy.

“Rather not,” the commander said.

Brayden shook his head, laughing.

“Let's get the SLCs in here and brainstorm this out. I'm ready,” Brayden said.

He was so fucking ready to take on this Russian asshole.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The vampire's phone pinged. A notification from his VampNet app.

Alex Giordano and Darnell Balotelli were being sworn in as SLCs by the king tomorrow evening. He had watched the Vampire Games online and seen the two compete.

Envious, in a way.

Removed, in a sense.

The ceremony was open to the public to attend, the post said. Tickets are on sale now. Seats limited, blah, blah.

He kept scrolling.

It was also being streamed live on the secure vampire network. He stared at the post for a long moment.

This was the sign he'd been waiting for.

When he'd found Charlotte had left after he'd returned from his trip, realizing what she meant to him, he had gone looking for her. It had been over two years.

He had almost given up.

Then, just a few weeks ago, he'd learned her whereabouts. Mating an SLC made females a public figure, much like an English prince marrying.

It broke girls' hearts and made them semi-famous.

Charlotte was a warrior in the royal army. He'd laughed. Of course, she had become a warrior. As a human, she had worked in a gym—her body was incredible.

His body vibrating with the need to act, he made a decision and clicked *Buy Now*.

Some would say he was too late, but that was bullshit.

Yes, he'd let her go, but he hadn't expected to find she'd been stolen from him. Yet again, Marcus had taken what was his, and this time, Joel wasn't going to walk away.

He was going to get her back.

Charlotte was his.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Casey sunk low in the hot tub until it reached her chin. “You have to go. Darnell is being sworn in, too. This is a huge day for him. You’re one of his best friends,” Charlotte said.

Fuck.

She groaned inwardly.

Charlotte would understand if she knew the full picture, but there was no way she was saying it out loud.

Alex was her mate.

Not being near him today had been painful. She’d only seen him briefly in the training center a few hours earlier, but it was enough to slam her heart up into her throat. Especially when he’d cast his eyes over her and carried on.

Casey had been expecting Alex to knock her door down or confront her, but he hadn’t contacted her at all.

Not at all.

Had he not cared she’d left?

Which that what she wanted?

“Casey!” Tom bellowed, walking down the hallway past the hot tub room.

“In here, sir,” she yelled, sitting up.

“You’re rostered on tonight. Suit up,” he said.

“I only just finished a shift,” she argued, all hope of not attending the ceremony dashed.

Tom crossed his arms. “With Darnell moving into the SLC role, I’m having to shuffle everyone. You had a few days off. You’re on.”

“I was *drugged*.” She wanted to just go home and wallow about Alex. With ice cream.

“You’re a vampire. Get over it.” Tom then walked off. “Be ready in an hour.”

“Where is the compassion?” she cried, sinking back down into the water.

Charlotte smirked at her.

“What’s so funny?” Casey asked. “Why is the universe so against me?”

Her friend shrugged and climbed out of the hot tub. “Life has a way of putting us in the right place at the right time.”

Pfft.

Whatever.

“Right. Does that include the Russian asshole shooting me with the dart?” Casey asked her so-called friend and flicked water at her.

Charlotte nodded, splashing her back. “Didn’t you say you had great sex all day, and Alex bought you amazing books?”

Well, there was that.

“Is that what she said?” a sexy low voice asked from the doorway.

Her head almost twisted off her body as she turned around fast.

Goddamn.

Alex stood leaning on the doorjamb, his arms crossed and those gorgeous biceps of his bulging out of his T-shirt.

He’d been working out.

Her body shivered as a chill snaked through her.

“You know, I have a sudden urge to be somewhere not here,” Charlotte said.

“Traitor,” Casey mumbled.

Wrapping a towel around her body, Charlotte walked past Alex, then winked at Casey from the door. Wiggling her fingers, then disappearing.

Alex closed the door and leaned against it. “You left.”

While she had been dying to see him, the disappointment in his eyes hurt. Wanting Alex but knowing she couldn't was so confusing.

A conflict inside her that wouldn't settle.

“Again,” Alex added.

Crap.

“I had an early start.”

“Tell the truth,” Alex replied.

Casey let out a sigh. “I tried to tell you, before you—”

“Ravished you?”

Yes. Totally and undeniably ravished every inch of me, and I'm going to miss it so damn much.

“Yes.” Casey glanced away. “Look, Alex, we can't—I can't...do this anymore. It's... The sex... is amazing. You are... Well, you're nicer than I thought you were.”

He snorted.

She lifted her eyes to his, and a smile hit her lips.

Don't. Don't let him break down your barriers. Do you want freedom or great sex?

“You think I'm a bit more than *nice*, Casey Hamilton,” Alex demanded, moving across the room toward her.

No.

Shit, if he touched her, kissed her, they'd just be back to square one. Casey moved around the tub to the far wall so he couldn't reach her.

Alex laughed. “Scared of me, Pip Squeak?”

“Yes,” she said.

He leaned his hands on the edge of the pool. “Come here,” he ordered, and she felt his words right between her thighs.

Hot and dominant. Full of promise. Full of demand and control. That was what scared her.

If she mated, her father would have to relinquish his control, but while that might solve the issue of his ongoing abuse, it would not give Casey the freedom she deserved.

The freedom she needed.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

She shook her head. "I have to get ready. Tom has rostered me on tonight for the ceremony."

Casey saw the disappointment on his face.

"I want you to be there with me," he said, narrowing his eyes. "I'll speak to Tom. He can get someone else to stand in."

Casey softened. She would love to be there for Alex as he proudly swore his oath to the king, but it would just bring them closer. Another shared memory.

It would bond them further.

She had to draw a line in the sand.

"No!" Casey shook her head, lowering her eyes to lie. "No, I want to work. More money and all that. Anyway, you should have Ari or Ben there with you."

Alex stood and crossed his arms.

"Casey, enough. Stop denying this. I know you have feelings for me."

Her throat dried up.

"Sexual," she said and began to climb out of the pool. Casey had to get away from him. From the way his eyes pulled her to him, the way his soul called to hers. "I'm not looking for anything serious. This was fun, but that's where it has to end."

She felt like throwing up.

"So that's it? You want to end it. Go fuck other guys," Alex growled as she wrapped a towel around her body, her back to him.

“Don’t.”

“While I fuck other females,” he said, his breath on her shoulder. “Is that what you want, Casey?”

No.

Her heart splintered. She spun, her hand landing on his chest.

“Don’t, Alex. You just don’t understand. You don’t know anything about my life. I—”

“You what?” he growled. “You think I’m going to let my mate walk away?”

Her heart thundered.

“Please,” she pleaded.

“Say it. Say you know I’m your mate,” Alex demanded.

Casey shook her head.

“Say it! I know you feel it.”

Sweat beads formed on her head, and she wiped them away.

“Jesus, Casey.” Alex shook his head. “Is it that terrifying to imagine me as the man you love? The man you bond with?”

She stared as he waited for her to reply.

“Yes,” she whispered honestly. “I can’t. I... I’m just not cut out for it. I’m not your mate.”

Oh God.

Was she really going to let him go?

“If you stopped being so scared for a moment, you’d realize we are.” Alex cupped her face. “Casey, please. Why won’t you let me in?”

She lowered her eyes.

Then she realized he needed to understand. To truly understand why she couldn’t be with him. Alex deserved to know the truth. She had to show him there was no choice here.

Not for her.

“Because you’re just like him. Dominant. Powerful. Controlling. I’ve spent my life being controlled by my father. I can’t bond with you or anyone. I can’t live in a cage.”

Alex stared at her; his eyes wide. “The fuck. I would never do that. You are not that child anymore, Casey. You need to get over it.”

As if it were that easy.

He had no idea.

Nobody understood what she had been through.

What she was *still* living through. Her father’s threats were only a phone call away.

The day she had to return home almost here.

Casey inched away. “You don’t know him. The last time we spoke, he threatened to come and take me home.”

Alex frowned, and shame spread through her.

This was the moment of truth. She’d made herself out to be this tough little warrior, and now she had to admit to being a victim of an abuser. Did he still like her now? Was she sexy to him like this?

Casey doubted it.

“Now you know who I am, Alex Giordano. A caged little bird.” Casey shook her head. “Not so appealing now, am I?”

“The fuck, Casey. Do you think I would let you go? You are my mate.” Alex reached out his hand.

She stepped away.

“So then I’d be owned by another man? No thanks. I’d rather die than mate, Alex. I—” Her words died off as she realized what she was saying.

Oh, God.

Alex blanched, his eyes turning red. “You. Would. Rather. Die?”

Oh no.

“Alex—”

Before Casey had gotten his name out, Alex had ripped the door open and disappeared. Casey fell to her knees, tears prickling as a ghastly sound escaped her lips.

What had she done?



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Nikolay held Elizabeth's gaze as she wrapped her mouth around the head of his cock. She had a glint in her eyes that hadn't been there before.

She was happy.

Or at the very least, content.

And wet.

He'd deal with that afterward. Right now, as her head bobbed under his desk, he had four of the biggest mafias in the world on video conference. The Italians, the Irish, the British, and the Colombians.

The screen on his desk showed their ugly mugs, and they were scowling. Resting asshole face was part of the costume mob bosses wore every day, but this was a genuine state of anger.

None of them had wanted him to be right.

"So, gentlemen. Was our test proof enough?" he said, his Russian accent rich as he suppressed a moan.

Nikolay reached out his hand to slow Elizabeth's progress, and the little rabbit licked his head.

Fuck.

His finger hovered over the camera button.

He had to pay attention.

Pushing mute while Enzo Romano, James Boyle, Tommy Adams, and Manuel Escobar began to debate the realities of what they had seen from the live footage of their attacks on the Moretti royal family when they were in Manhattan, Nikolay glanced down. "Up on the desk, and knees out."

"But..."

"I told you to be silent," he growled.

Then pressed the mute button so his audience could hear him.

He patted the left side of his large black marble desk.

Elizabeth licked her lips and climbed up. She tugged her dress up to her waist and let her knees flop to the side.

Spreading wide.

Nikolay couldn't wait to sink his cock inside her glistening cunt when he was done.

“You had live coverage and representatives—your own men—on site.” He rolled his eyes, slipping a single finger inside to the knuckle.

She moaned.

“Which are now laying in the morgue,” James, head of the Irish mob family, said. “So we can't question them. Seriously, Mikhaylov, this all sound like a bunch of fucking sci fi. Those men looked nothing more than a handful of former military ops.”

An expected but frustrating response.

Elizabeth arched, shoving her hand over her mouth.

“You're asking us to go into partnership with you, hand you enormous power, and disrupt our distribution and income channels with just that little exercise as proof?” Manuel, who headed the Colombian cartel, said. “Then you are more insane than your reputation, Nikolay.”

You have no idea, you dangerous asshole.

A little groan slipped out as he added a second finger, but not before tapping her sensitive bud.

With his other hand, he opened his bottom drawer and pulled out a ball gag. He placed it on her stomach, and Elizabeth put it in her own mouth.

Her obedience was so fucking hot.

“We have little time,” Nikolay growled. “You don't think the government and the vampires are on to what we are doing?”

Nothing stays secret for long. Catching one of them is more difficult...”

However, he'd expected this.

He'd be wanting more proof if it was him, and he respected these dangerous men for pushing him. So, Nikolay was willing to do a little more to seal the deal.

Alexi stepped into the room. His eyes fell on Elizabeth, and he crossed his arms.

Interesting.

Alexi went to back out, and Nikolay shook his head.

His second obeyed.

“Give me a week, and I will have a real-life vampire for you to play with.” Nikolay sped up his fingers.

Elizabeth writhed and arched, lifting those pert breasts.

Alexi glanced down at her again, swallowed, then dragged his eyes away.

He wants a taste.

Hmm, tempting.

Sharing Elizabeth was not something he'd considered, but as her eyes went to his second-in-command and she didn't flinch, Nikolay's cock jutted in his pants.

“We want more than three percent, Nikolay. This is going to create tension with the Feds, and they'll be wanting a cut to stay quiet,” Tommy Adams said. The head of the British mob family had been sitting back, listening during most of the call.

The guy was smart and had more influence than Nikolay liked him to have.

Fucking British.

He leaned closer to the screen, suppressing the desire to snarl at them. If it weren't for him, this incredible opportunity wouldn't be at their fingertips. They clearly didn't understand how huge this could be.

“How you run your business is not my problem. Three percent across all the mafias is a sizeable chunk. Do the math. How many people take your stinky drugs? How many will want a serum to protect them against dangerous vampires?”

He let that sink in.

“Once they’re exposed, we will have enormous demand, greater than any product in the world. But we must move faster than the governments who already know what we are planning.”

That shut them up.

Italian, Irish, and Mexican mutterings filled the screen. Debating and panicking over what might happen.

His eyes dropped to Elizabeth, who was on the edge. He rubbed her clit harder, faster, shooting a glance at Alexi, who was rubbing his jaw and over his mouth.

“I should go,” Alexi said gruffly.

“Stay,” Nikolay replied darkly. “You should learn what she likes.”

Alexi’s eyes widened slightly, but he took a step closer.

Then another.

Then another.

When he was by the edge of the desk, unseen by the four powerful men on the screen, Alexi shot him another look.

Nikolay pushed mute.

“Touch her breasts as she comes,” he ordered, and Elizabeth let out a groan around the ball, arching as Alexi reached out both hands and pinched her nipples.

“Fucking hell,” Alexi said, his eyes on her pussy as Nikolay’s fingers kept working her.

Nikolay glanced back at the videoconference. “Gentlemen, I have an important matter to attend to,” he said, his voice thick. “I will be in touch in a few days. Think it over, but

speed is the most important thing here. And I promise you a little vampire to play with.”

He clicked the red button, then rolled his chair to the left and replaced his fingers with his mouth. Alexi removed the gag and pulled his cock out of his pants.

She immediately slid her tongue out and licked him.

“Good girl, fuck his cock with your mouth as I taste you,” Nikolay said.

As she came on his lips, Nikolay knew today was only going to get better.

Then he had to go find himself a vampire.



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Alex stood to the side of the stage and peered out. His body was vibrating with anger still.

It was more than that. He was hurt.

Pushing his emotions aside, Alex took in the ballroom, which had been converted into a theater and was already filled with hundreds of vampires. TV cameras were already broadcasting live and interviewing those arriving on what appeared to be a kind of vampire red carpet.

In this case, a black Moretti carpet.

It was a big deal to have new SLCs.

Ben had agreed to do his oath again so the race could see all three of the new SLCs swearing their allegiance to the king.

And the race.

After the Games, Alex was used to the notoriety and celebrity, but then he'd only had to do what he did every day.

Shoot and stuff.

Now he'd have to walk on stage, kneel before the king, and give his oath. Then sit on a red couch with the king, Ben, and Darnell for a Q&A session hosted by Brianna.

What he wanted to do was smash a few things.

I'd rather die than mate.

Didn't Casey realize the implications of not mating? Or how far bonded they already were?

No one really knew the science behind the mating bond, and it went without saying that mates over the centuries had likely missed each other and still lived.

Alex didn't believe in the whole fate thing.

There were any number of possible realities that could interfere with two people meeting.

But once you bonded, they had proven that if one mate didn't choose the other, the result was madness or death.

I'd rather die than mate.

A bunch of young vampire women fluffing their hair wandered down the aisle. Fans. Females who would love to share his bed. Or body. Or whatever.

Damn it.

Why had Casey rejected him? She'd mentioned her father and his controlling behavior. It was confusing. Casey was a strong, independent woman. Alex had witnessed it firsthand since the day they met.

Why didn't she just tell the man to go jump?

Better yet, if she mated Alex, he could tell her fucking father Casey was now his to protect and look after. But the fear in her eyes had been real. She truly believed the man could show up and take her away.

Over his dead body.

Whether they were mated or not.

Alex might be furious and hurt, but he wasn't giving up.

Casey was his.

He could feel it in every cell of his body. Even when he wasn't thinking about her, he was thinking about her. Wanting to know if she was okay, wishing he could see her sexy smile, looking forward to running his fingers over her beautiful body.

Watching her fall apart in his arms.

Hell, just watching her lie beside him and read one of her spicy novels was the happiest thing in the world. And they were definitely going to *not* see another movie.

"Alex," Brayden said, stepping up beside him and slapping him on the shoulder.

Alex gave him a nod. "Hey, sir."

"How's the mating going?" Brayden asked with a smirk.

Not great.

Alex sighed, running his hand over his face. “She just told me she’d rather die than mate with me.”

Brayden raised his brows.

“Ouch. Did she give a reason? Mating is never straightforward. Ask any of the males in this castle. We all have our own little nightmare that turned out well,” Brayden smirked again..

Alex lifted a shoulder. She had, but it didn’t make a lot of sense. He realized a controlling parent could make someone adverse to mating. Totally made sense. But preferring death was a very strong reaction.

Especially after how fast they had connected and the bond he could feel between them.

How could she deny it?

“Honestly, I’m fucking confused. One minute, she’s in my bed, and then she’s running away like a damn rabbit,” Alex replied, happy to be sharing the weight on his shoulders and trusting the prince. “Casey is one of the most independent females I know. She said she doesn’t want to be controlled.”

“Well, you *are* a powerful male, Alex. It’s a big adjustment for these females. At least she’s not human. That’s a whole other level of sweet hell.” Brayden laughed, then glanced over his shoulder.

“I want to protect her, not control her,” Alex said and realized he truly meant it. Clipping a bird’s wings might stop them flying but it also restricted their world and joy.

There was no way he wanted to see his gorgeous warrior shrivel up. He wanted her to thrive.

“Then you need to show her. There will be a reason for her fear. Find out what it is,” Brayden said. “And fix it.”

Suddenly, he had a thought. The question had been on his mind since the moment he’d left Casey.

He turned to the prince.

“Casey said her father was and still is a control freak. Let me ask you this. If he turned up here and forced her to leave, what rights does she have?”

Brayden slid his hands into his pockets, and his eyes narrowed. Alex knew he was taking this seriously.

“Casey has all her rights. First, she’s an employee of the Moretti royal army, so she cannot just up and leave—forced or otherwise. Second, she’s an adult vampire. It would be kidnapping.”

Alex’s lips relaxed into what could nearly be called a smile.

“Thank you.”

Brayden tilted his head. “And if you’re looking for permission to stop him, should he turn up, you have it. Direct from me. If I don’t get to him first.”

This time, Alex grinned.

“Thank you. If it comes to that.” Alex said, then Ben and Darnell came up behind them as the music started.

Brayden shifted gears and gave him a nod, keeping their conversation confidential.

“Good luck, warriors. I’m proud of you all for getting here. It’s an enormous accomplishment very few ever get.” Brayden shook all their hands. “Now don’t trip up on that stage and make me look like a fool, okay?”

They all laughed. The prince gave them a grin and took the lead, walking out on stage to stand beside the king.

Then the ceremony began.



AN HOUR LATER, TWO sword taps on his shoulders, and an awkward but hilarious couch session with Brianna and the king, Alex stepped off the stage.

He’d seen, through the bright studio lights, Casey working in the back of the room and forced himself to focus on this

moment. As the prince had said, it was an immense honor and hard earned.

Would he have liked to have her face in the front row, smiling proudly and there for him to wrap his arms around afterward? Yes. Instead, his colleagues were there, shaking his hands and slapping his back.

After the conversation with Brayden, Alex was determined to have another discussion with Casey and show her things weren't as bad as she feared.

He wanted to see her sass again.

To see her tell her father to go jump.

Why hadn't she?

Alex was still perplexed.

Now, he had to attend the after party, which was a black-tie event. He snuck out the back and went to change into his tux.



CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

“**M**om, I can’t talk. Stop texting me. I’m on duty,” Casey said into her phone after stepping out of the room. She had pointed to her phone to a nearby warrior to say she would be gone a few minutes.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of you for two days, Casandra,” her mother said in a tone that sent a shiver up her spine.

However, she couldn’t exactly tell her mom she’d been drugged by the Russian mafia. Or holed up in a hotel room with a warrior, having the best sex of her life.

Who thought he was her mate?

Who she thought was her mate... but they would never accept him, and neither could she.

Her heart was aching.

Having two domineering men was too much. Casey was hoping her father would agree to let her stay longer. She’d made the weekly phone calls, kept her nose clean—as far as he knew—and nothing had reflected on their family.

One of the reasons she hadn’t tried to rise further in the ranks, like Charlotte had, was because of the fame that came with it. No one could know where she was, or her father would pull her out of the army.

All of which she still considered insane, given the world had changed and most of her father’s original relatives were dead. Something she had once mentioned and lived to regret. The slap mark on her face was still visible.

At least to her.

Richard was so entrenched in his beliefs, he couldn’t see how his daughter hated him. Her mother just continued telling her to accept him and his funny ways.

So she’d lied.

Casey had led them to believe she did pretty low-key army stuff around the castle. You know, like lift the barrier arm and let people drive through the gates of the property. A stop-go road person.

“You know the date today, don’t you?” her mother said.

Casey froze.

Shit.

What was the date?

It couldn’t be. Not already. She’d pushed it to the back of her mind, hoping to renegotiate about a month ago, and then Alex had showed up in her life. And she’d been drugged.

Mostly, she had just hoped they would have a discussion with her, and they could push it out. Put another way, Casey had been in denial. Buried her head in the sand.

“Mom. Don’t,” she said.

“You know I can’t control your father,” her mom said. “I have tried to change his mind, but he’s stubborn. You both agreed, so it’s time.”

No it fucking isn’t. It will never be time.

I can’t go back.

The walls began to cave in.

“You’re my mother,” Casey growled in a low voice. “Tell him to stop this. I’m a grown-up vampire. This is insane. I can’t. I won’t come home.”

She didn’t sound grown up, even to her own ears, and she hated it. Shame flowed over her. Imagine if her friends could hear her now.

As tears began to fill her eyes, fear, and anger fought for dominance.

Her father was going to make her return home.

She wouldn’t.

She recalled the shock on Alex’s face—the judgement—as she told him her father still controlled her. She wouldn’t be the

princess he accused her of being.

“I tried, Casandra, I tried,” her mother said, her voice softening.

Casey’s blood turned to ice.

“What has he done?” she asked, her voice beginning to shake.

“He’s... ” Her mother’s voice trailed off as Casey felt a presence behind her.

“Hello, Casandra,” Richard Hamilton said. “It’s time to come home.”

The phone dropped from her ear as she turned and faced her father for the first time in two years. She forced herself not to vomit as her freedom vanished before her eyes.

Noooo.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Alex stepped back into the ballroom and ran his hand down the lapel of his tux. He'd even dabbed on some aftershave and put cream through his hair.

There was only one female he wanted to appreciate the effort he had made, and he was hoping Casey was still working so he could pull her aside to talk for a few minutes.

His anger, and frankly shock, from her words had subsided.

Being upset wasn't going to bond them, so he'd decided he had to forgive her and understand what her childhood had been like.

He wasn't giving up on her.

God, he'd fallen in love with the frustrating little warrior.

Bonding was one thing, but it didn't always mean love. He did. He fucking loved Casey Hamilton.

She was his.

End of story.

Well, except the part where he had to convince her and hope like hell her attraction to him went further than sexual.

He was... well, around ninety-five... okay, ninety-two percent sure.

Around ninety percent.

Eighty-five at best.

Jesus.

Alex rubbed his hand over his jaw and took in the ballroom, which had been magically transformed by the event management team overseen by Brianna. The seats were now gone, and in their place was a scattering of bar leaner tables with candles and napkins. Servers handed out hors d'oeuvres.

Hundreds of people milled around in stunning cocktail dresses and black tux's, just as he did. The king and queen were mingling. The prince and his princess, Willow, draped in a long black dress, were also in attendance.

The SLCs who weren't working stood with drinks in hands and arms around their mates. Kurt, Lance, and now Darnell. Tristan was with him, chatting to a couple of what looked like fans—females, of course—soaking up the attention.

Good on them.

Music spilled from the audio system as Alex walked through the crowd, taking a glass of whiskey from a passing server.

“My man,” Darnell said, clinking glasses with him. “I don't think I can ever thank you enough.”

For nearly getting myself fired?

Alex toasted the man back. The truth was, the tall, dark-skinned vampire deserved it. Darnell had been a strong competitor in the Vampire Games, and he was reliable out in the field. He was an excellent warrior and would be a valuable addition to the SLC team.

“You did well. Truly, you got everyone back here safely. You deserve this,” Alex said.

“You next, brother,” Darnell said to Tristan.

Alex sipped his drink, agreeing with that notion. He would mention it to the prince as an option. It was likely Kurt had already, as the vampire was in his team.

“We're going to need everyone we can in the next few months, so I'll be wherever I'm needed,” Tristan replied. “Can't believe Casey is leaving, though.”

What?

What the fuck!

Alex choked on his drink, wiping his mouth. “What did you say?”

“Casey. She’s packing. Her father has arrived to bring her home. Did you know he was royalty back in the day? Who knew?” Tristan said, shaking his head. “Fucking sucks, though.”

Alex stared at the vampire like he’d just said the moon had decided to land on Earth, or something equally insane.

Casey was leaving?

When was she going to tell him?

Fury sliced through him as he fought to keep from smashing the glass he was holding.

“Her father, Casey’s father, is here? In the castle?” Alex asked through gritted teeth.

Tristan smiled, his beer halfway to his mouth. “Are you two a thing?”

Yeah, they were a thing.

She’s my fucking mate.

And no man, royal asshole or otherwise, was taking Casey from him. He thrust his drink into Darnell’s hand and stormed from the room.

“That’s a yes, then,” he heard Tristan say. “Thank fuck.”



BY THE TIME ALEX REACHED Casey’s room and shouldered the door open, he found her entire room cleared out.

Nothing was left.

Everything gone.

How could she be here one minute, in his arms, and then vanish?

He was about to leave when he saw something in the corner of the room.

Alex walked over and picked up *Sinful Duty*. One of the books he’d bought for her. He picked it up and opened it.

The day they'd lain in bed, in the shitty hotel room, Alex had taken the pen from the bedside table and scribbled inside it. Her head had been on his shoulder, grinning.

To my little warrior, who I will always find. Alex x

He'd seen the flicker in her eye as she'd taken the book and hugged it. Neither of them had said a word, but seconds later it had been crushed between them as he'd pulled her against him and kissed the life out of her.

Alex stared at the page with his handwriting and took in the words Casey had scribbled below his own. His heart cracked.

I'm sorry. X

No. *No!*

Alex wasn't letting her leave. He would fly to wherever her parents lived. *Fuck*. Where did they live? She barely spoke about her family. Had always pushed back whenever he'd asked.

It was becoming rapidly clear why.

Fury fled through his entire being. How the hell had she let this man steal her away from everything she loved?

Her friends.

Her job.

Him...

Alex might not be one hundred percent sure, but he knew Casey had feelings for him. Maybe not the same level as he felt, but she would.

Mine.

They were meant to be together, and he wasn't letting this man take her from him.

Alex tossed the book back on the ground as Charlotte came running into the room.

"Thank God," Charlotte said, puffing. "Come. I know where they are."

Talk about a sight for sore eyes. He had been about to seek Casey's best friend out, knowing Darnell and Tristan had no more information than they'd shared.

"Take me. Now!" he ordered.

Charlotte took hold of his hand and teleported them down to the garage. As he glanced around, she walked to the far wall, and she pressed the button on the security panel.

One of the roller doors began to open.

As it slowly exposed what was on the other side, a large Rolls Royce appeared.

A man in a three-piece suit—a vampire—was on his phone a few feet away from Casey, who was standing at the rear of the vehicle, handing her bags to someone who was loading it.

She looked around, startled.

Mine.

Casey was no longer in her uniform. Instead, she wore a dark gray dress with some leafy pattern. It had long arms, a high neck, and finished below the knee. A dress Alex knew she'd never choose to wear.

Her eyes flew open when she saw him. Her body trembled.

The fuck?

Alex marched over to her as she held up her hands and silently cried, *noooo*. Like his presence was her death sentence.

Sorry, darling, but I'm not the one dying today.

Casey wasn't going anywhere. She was coming home with him.



CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Casey had followed her father back to her room, arguing with him the entire way. When she opened her door and found her things already packed, her stomach had lurched further.

She was so close to vomiting.

“Get changed,” Richard said, pointing to the ugly ass dress laid out on the bed. “You aren’t coming home in those rags.”

His disgust at the Moretti uniform she wore written all over his face. How dare he? She was so proud to wear the *M*-embroidered clothing.

Tears prickled at her eyes.

“Dad, you can’t do this. You have no right,” Casey cried, walking further into the room and turning as she took in all boxes and bags containing her belongings.

They all contained her life for the past two years. Her memories. Her freedom.

Now it was all packaged up and taken from her.

Just like that.

“I am your father. You’ve had your play time, Cassandra. I warned you this was temporary. We gave you two years, and you agreed. Now it’s time to come home, settle down with someone from your station, and join the society I trained you to be in.”

She let a few tears fall. Ten minutes with the man, and she was back to the same weak and pathetic female she’d been all her life.

He was an abuser. Casey saw that now.

Yet she felt weak and incapable of standing up to him.

God, she hated herself at this moment.

This was why she’d told Alex she would rather die than mate him. This feeling of hopelessness. She couldn’t let him

be the man who replaced her father.

Casey never wanted to hate him. She, she, she... cared for Alex.

A hiccup escaped her.

Suddenly, her future seemed impossible. Miserable. How could she live each day the way she had grown up? She had forgotten how cruel her father was.

He was stubborn, lacking in compassion, and yes, she saw it now, abusive.

This wasn't love, unconditional love, as a parent should.

This was control.

“Five minutes. I will wait outside while you shower and change. And Cassandra, I want you in that dress. Not the other slutty outfits I have seen you share on your social media.”

Of course, he'd been watching her social media. Ironically, she had known he would and only shared some of the more acceptable things she'd done. Or at least made it look that way. If she had stopped posting, he would have suspected something.

God, how he had controlled her. It was all becoming clear now.

She glared at him as he stepped outside. When the door clicked, she collapsed on the bed. Tears flowing. With only a few minutes to herself before being dragged back to her family home, she wiped her face and texted Charlotte. She knew he would take her phone away the moment they left the castle.

Then she grabbed the book out of her handbag, scribbled a note for Alex, and dropped it in the corner of the room upside down, hoping he would find it after she was gone.

A tear slid down her face, and she stepped into the shower.

After what she'd said to him earlier, she had no right to ask Alex's forgiveness before she left. Plus, he'd confront her father, which would cause more trouble when she got home.

Her father thought she was a virgin.

As ridiculous as it sounded.

If Richard found out she'd been seeing someone, it would be more than she could handle. She was already starting to grieve the loss of Alex from her life as she washed her hair. Like she was washing away the last of who she had been.

Washing away her life. Her independence.

The tears returned as she washed her face and any signs of the slut her father believed she was.

It was time to face reality and return to her world.

This was only temporary, and she had agreed to it.

Unless she could stand up to Richard—and she knew she wasn't strong enough—then she had to go home.

Casey saw Alex's expression once more as he told her she was his mate and felt her heart breaking. Casey had been falling in love with him, not letting herself feel it or accept it.

She couldn't.

She wasn't free to be herself, let alone give her heart to another.

Casey was simply a bird in a cage.

There to obey.



ALEX STARED AT CASEY and the hand she held up. He had halted, thank goodness, but she saw the fury pouring from him. His head swiveled between her and her father.

Then she saw it.

The moment he decided to explode. His body swelling, his fangs inching out, his fists clenching.

Oh God.

He couldn't.

Casey shot a look at Charlotte, who was beside him, pleading for her to stop him. Charlotte shook her head.

How could they?

Didn't they understand this would only make things worse?

"Alex, no!" Casey cried, but it was too late.

Richard had lowered his phone and was glaring at the huge warrior.

This wasn't going to end well.

For her.



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Alex flew to Casey's side and stood between her and the man who called himself her father.

Mine.

“Casey is not leaving,” Alex said, crossing his arms.

Casey placed her hand on his back, and his heart began to crack at the warmth pouring into him. The small touch said so many things.

It said *please*.

It said *let me go*.

It said *stop, I have to go with him*.

Nope. Casey was his. He wasn't going to let her go and continue being controlled by this male vampire anymore.

Where the fuck was her mother?

Staring at the narcissist before him, Alex could see glimpses of what her life would have been like. He now understood why she had resisted him for so long and was terrified to mate.

In his previous line of work, he'd seen the eyes of victims hundreds of times. It was the same look Casey had given him moments before.

Terror.

If he'd parked his damn ego for a moment earlier, he would have recognized it sooner.

Casey was a victim of abuse. This man, her abuser.

No wonder she didn't trust anyone.

How could she, when the one man who she should've been able to trust had let her down? Worse, had harmed her.

Over and over.

God, it was a surprise she didn't hate him. Alex had taunted Casey and pushed her to her limits with his own need to protect a female. What she had needed was someone to believe in her.

To love her as he let her fly.

The man boldly took a step toward him. If he wasn't Casey's father, he'd be in a lot of pain right now.

No. He wouldn't be breathing.

"Cassandra is coming home, young man. I would advise you to step aside."

"Alex, please." Casey pleaded, her fingers digging into his back.

God, he hated hearing her voice so desperate.

This man deserved to suffer.

Her mother deserved to never see her daughter again. She should've protected her.

"Casey, I failed you. I'm sorry," Alex said over his shoulder, reaching a hand behind him to rub her hip. "I don't deserve you, but neither does this man."

He heard her hiccup.

Keeping his eye on the man, he pulled her to his side and stared down into her beautiful, wet eyes. "I swear, I will never clip your wings. I will protect you as your male, but I will not stand by and let this man take you from your life."

From me, he wanted to say.

But his love for her kept those words inside him.

What she needed more than anything was her freedom.

"Don't ask me to do that," Alex said, cupping her face as his eyes tracked his surroundings.

There were other men nearby, but none of them would overpower him. Charlotte was there also, and so he had backup if they attempted it.

Attacking two Moretti warriors on the king's grounds wouldn't go down well, so he was confident, but wary.

"Alex, I'm sorry," she whispered, her hand on his stomach, her eyes dropping.

God, she was breaking his heart.

He would be strong for both of them.

Mine.

"Men, put Cassandra in the car," her father instructed.

Two vampires Alex had seen standing on the other side of the vehicle approached them.

Alex put her behind him again. "Casey, stay where you are. You are mine, and I am not letting you go."

A little mewl escaped her, and she lowered her head to his back.

Charlotte stepped closer to them. "Case, it's okay."

Alex shot her a look, and she nodded. In other words, *I've got your back.*

Party time.

"Gentlemen, stay right where you are." Alex crossed his arms. "She belongs to me, and if you attempt to attack one of the king's SLCs, we all know that won't go down well."

"Two of the king's soldiers," Charlotte said, standing next to him and crossing her arms.

"I know who you both are," the man said, looking stupidly calm and confident. "I certainly know who *you* are, son."

"Not your son. And not someone you should fuck with."

The man flinched. About goddamn time.

"Casey is not leaving these grounds unless she emphatically tells me she wants to leave."

The man sighed.

Fucking sighed.

Was he a psychopath?

Meanwhile, Casey's fingers were now clenching his jacket.

Alex leaned a little closer. "A message the Moretti prince asked me to pass on. Casey will not leave with you unless he gives her permission."

Then a shiver in the air caught their attention, and everyone turned.

"I decided to pass the message on myself," Brayden said, Craig appearing beside him. The men employed by Casey's father moved back faster than a speeding bullet.

Alex smirked.

Then Marcus arrived, shooting his mate a look which said he was displeased Charlotte had gotten involved without him. She stubbornly crossed her arms and refused to move an inch.

"Jesus, Char," Marcus said.

"She's my best friend. Get your ass over here," Charlotte said, and Marcus laughed, moving in beside them.

Alex was starting to really understand the behaviors of bonded mates now. It would take an asteroid to stop him from protecting Casey right now.

"Oh God, Dad. I'm so sorry about this," Casey cried and began to circle around Alex. He turned and took her arms.

Their eyes connected, and the fear he saw in them was palpable. He wanted to smash her father into tiny pieces and throw him outside under the sun when it rose.

Twice.

"Just wait. Please. Let the prince speak. Then you can decide," Alex said. "The choice will be yours, but sweetheart, you need to know you *are* mine."

A tear slid down her face.

"And I am yours," Alex added.

Casey hiccupped again, her eyes darting back to her father, then returning to him.

A loud sigh came from the psychopath himself once more.

“Your majesty...,” Casey’s father said, lowering his head. “Richard Hamilton. I am sorry about this confusion. This, er, warrior of yours seems to believe he has rights to my daughter.”

“Dad. Richard,” Casey cried, but Alex cupped her face and shushed her gently.

Was that the cunt’s name? Good to know.

He liked to know the name of his enemies as he killed them.

“I’d also like to request that you demand he take his hands off her,” Richard added.

Alex smiled down at her and gently said, “I love you.”

She whimpered.

Brayden took a few steps closer to the man and crossed his arms. “The confusion, it would seem, is that you believe Casey is owned by anyone. She is an employee of the Moretti king and free to leave when she gives notice. That day is not today.”

Alex could hear Richard’s lips flapping in surprise.

“I emailed your office,” he said.

Casey’s eyes flew open, her mouth gaping. “What—”

Alex shook his head gently at her, and she held his eyes.

“Are you an employee?” Craig asked.

“No,” Richard replied.

“Well, what exactly were you resigning from?” Brayden asked.

Alex wanted to laugh.

The ignorant confidence of this man was laughable. But there was nothing funny about it at all.

“For my daughter,” the man said. “I gave two weeks’ notice, and that last day is today.”

Brayden laughed.

“Mr. Hamilton, I’m not going to insult your intelligence by pretending we both think that is legally acceptable. Casey is a grown woman and warrior. Only she can resign from her position.”

The silence was deafening. Alex refused to take his eyes off the woman he loved, keeping her safe and letting her know she was his.

“If Casey wants to leave, she will need to work out her two weeks,” Brayden said firmly. “Now, I think you had better give her an apology.”

Alex nearly smiled.

The prince was smart. He had bought them two weeks to break down the abuse hold Richard had on Casey. It would take far longer, but it would be a good start.

“You love me?” Casey suddenly asked quietly.

His heart burst open.

“More than fucking anything, sweetheart,” Alex said. “And I’m going to prove to you that I’m worthy of yours every single day for the rest of my life.”

“What about me being a warrior? You don’t—” she said, but he silenced her with a finger to her lips.

Fuck that.

He didn’t care. Alex realized his feelings had been driven by the mating bond. He’d find a way to deal.

It was either that or losing her, and that was unacceptable.

“You are an incredible warrior. In fact, I’m going to recommend you for a promotion. Not because of our relationship, but because you deserve it.”

Charlotte called out *yes* behind them.

Alex ignored her gaping mouth, dying to kiss it.

Cupping the back of her neck, Alex added, “I want you in my team. I want to train you to be the best you can be,

sweetheart. But if you'd rather one of the others, I know they'd take you."

"You are welcome in my team," Marcus said, surprising them all. He only trained the best.

The corner of her lips turned up, and Alex felt the bond tugging at him.

"What am I, chop liver? I have to approve it first," Craig said.

Alex turned, and the big vampire nodded at him.

"Fine, it's approved, but you know, stick to the fucking rules."

Brayden let out a laugh, and Marcus shared a grin with him.

"Wait, a damn minute. My daughter is coming home with me. Now or in two weeks. Casey, get over here," Richard growled.

Alex's fangs extended, and he turned.

Brayden held his hand up.

"My patience is getting thin, Mr. Hamilton," Brayden snarled. "Unless you would like to come inside and explain yourself to the king, then I suggest you shut your fucking mouth."

Pretty much everyone smiled.

Even one of Richard's men.

"Yup, that's what I'm talking about," Craig said.

Richard's mouth gaped open.

"Come with me," Alex said and took a step to the side, turning so his back was to Richard.

He wanted to give Casey space to decide. To know she was free.

"It's your decision, Case. I am your mate, but if you want your freedom, then you can have it. But I am not standing here and letting you leave with that man."

She gulped.

“You must think I’m pathetic.” Casey glanced around. “Everyone. How can you believe I’m a strong warrior now?”

“I think you’re fucking beautiful.” Alex’s eyes drilled into hers, hoping she would believe him. “I think you’ve been abused. I think you have people here that love you and believe in you. That will help you heal.”

He reached out a hand, ignoring the spluttering going on behind him from her father. Alex knew the Moretti warriors had his back.

The vulnerability in the eyes of the woman he loved almost brought him to his knees. But he would stand here all night and fight for her if need be.

“One decision right now. Say yes, and I’ll take you back inside,” Alex said. “That’s it. One decision. Just one right now. The rest you can figure out tomorrow. Or the next day.”

Her eyes darted around him to her father, but he blocked her.

Richard had done enough. Alex wasn’t giving him another inch. She wanted his permission, but he wouldn’t give it. That’s not how men like him worked.

Casey had to choose it.

She glanced at the prince.

“Let me make this easier for you, Casey. I need you to get back to work,” Brayden said. “You’ve already had a few hours off. Time which will be docked, I’m afraid.”

Her lips twitched. She had figured out the prince was giving her an out. For now.

The rest would be up to her.

“Yes, sir.” Casey then lifted her eyes to Alex and reached out her hand.

He didn’t hesitate a single second. Alex pulled her against his chest, nodded to the prince, and teleported them away.

Thank fucking God.



CHARLOTTE ALMOST CRUMPLED to the ground in relief when Alex and Casey disappeared.

She wanted to throttle Casey's father. He was worse than Casey had described, but fortunately, Brayden was here, and nothing Casey's father could do could override the Moretti prince.

"Let's grab Casey's things from the car, then you have some explaining to do, young lady," Marcus said, walking past her and tapping her ass.

"She's my friend. Explanation over." Charlotte bumped into his hip as she reached the trunk and began to lift a few of the boxes out.

She was quite capable of standing up to a man like Richard. Especially with Alex there.

"Seriously though, babe, you should've called me." Marcus stood with his two boxes, gazing down at her.

She tipped her head. "Seriously though, babe," she mocked. "Do you think bozo one and bozo two over there could take me down?"

Marcus snorted as he observed the vampires who worked for Casey's father.

"No. But not the point. You are my mate." He leaned down and kissed her.

Secretly, she loved his possessive side and grinned as they began to walk toward the garage. Charlotte hoped Casey would mate with Alex. They made a great couple, and clearly, he loved the pants off her. Literally.

As Brayden directed Richard and his men to leave, Craig unloading a few of the boxes and following them, a tall man walked around the corner of the castle.

Charlotte slowed.

The outline of the vampire's body was familiar, really familiar. As his face appeared out of the shadows of the castle walls, she gasped. "You."

"Hello, Charlotte," the man said, his voice dark.

Marcus stepped in front of her, and she could feel the protective bond clicking into action. Then he froze. "The fuck."

"Hello, brother."

Marcus dropped his boxes and began to growl. "I thought you were dead!"

"No, brother. I've come to take back what was mine. You took my job, but you will not take my female," Joel said.

Charlotte gasped.

The hell?



CHAPTER FIFTY

Casey lay in a ball with her legs tucked up, Alex lying behind her. His arm was under her head.

He'd teleported them back to his room, stripped her from that god-awful dress her father made her wear, then had given her a pair of his boxers and a T-shirt, which was seven hundred sizes too big for her.

And perfect.

They smelled like him.

The TV was playing some random show, which neither of them were watching, but Alex continued to just lay there, being the rock he was.

She had cried and stopped already a dozen times, and he'd held her and hushed her, telling her it would be okay.

Alex loved her.

He was her mate.

Casey turned and wrapped her arm around his waist. He simply laid a hand over it.

"I'm embarrassed," she admitted.

"That's normal," Alex said. "But you don't need to be. He abused you from the moment you were born. How could you know any better?"

"I'm a grown woman."

"He's your father. He shouldn't behave like that. Abuse is invisible when it's emotional. Often to the victim more than anyone else."

His words felt true, and heavy.

She still felt ashamed, but his question rang in her ears.

How could she have known?

Casey could see others had more freedom, but he was her father. They taught her to obey him, regardless.

“Instead of protecting you, he has hurt you. And your mother is just as complicit.” Alex ran a hand over her arm.

Casey chewed her lips.

“Gorgeous girl, don’t be ashamed. Be angry at them if you need to feel anything. But not shame. Look at what you created already? A whole life outside of your family, even with that abuse still in play. Now you are free. If you choose to stay.”

Tears poured down her face.

“I’m getting you wet,” she said, wiping his T-shirt.

Alex sat and ripped it off with a smirk. “Problem solved.”

God, he was so beautiful. He’d protected her from the man who had hurt her all her life.

How could she not love him?

“Show off,” Casey said, running her fingers over his layers of muscle.

Alex had told her in front of everyone that he loved her. Even after what she had said to him. She needed to tell him she hadn’t meant what she said, or perhaps she had at the time, but she had never wanted to hurt him.

And she wanted to know where they went from here.

Had he forgiven her?

“I’m sorry for what I said,” Casey started. “It’s hard for me to trust or imagine being in a bonded relationship after how I was raised.”

Alex turned and tucked her closer, his hand brushing her hair. “All you need to know is that I love you. That I want you. And that whatever you choose is okay with me.”

Did he mean that?

Was it possible?

“What about the bond?” she asked.

“If we bond, it’s because you choose it,” Alex said. “I’m choosing your freedom. There is no way I am forcing you into

this and watching you suffer. That's not love."

Casey reached out and traced her finger over his eyebrow.

"I do love you. I'm falling in love with you. Pretty fast right now," Casey said.

Alex smiled. "Be sure. I'm not going anywhere, no matter what you decide."

She leaned up and kissed his mouth, but he didn't open completely to it.

"What's wrong?" Casey asked, panicking.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to do this. I'm yours, no matter what."

She lay in his arms, staring into his face.

"If we don't bond, you will suffer."

"Not as much as I would have if you'd left tonight. Or if you bond with me when you aren't ready, and these beautiful eyes lose their sparkle." Alex ran his thumb over her cheeks.

This male, who she'd thought was a chauvinistic pig and a bunch of other choice names, was, in fact, the most amazing man she had ever met. He was willing to step back and give her all the space she wanted in life.

Something her father had never been capable of.

She felt her heart begin to crack wide open and dared to hope for the first real time in her life.

"Marcus has just telepath'd me. Your room is all set up and ready," Alex said suddenly.

Oh.

He wanted her to leave?

No. Casey realized Alex was giving her the choice he kept talking about. He was giving her space. Perhaps she did need some time to think.

"Oh," Casey said, sitting half up. "Sure."

Suddenly, she felt lost, like the foundation of her life had been pulled out from under her. Her father would have now disowned her, her mother following his lead as she had all her life and she wasn't sure where her rock was.

Alex was stepping back and giving her space.

This is what she wanted, wasn't it?

She climbed off the bed and forced herself not to burst into tears.

"Thank you. For tonight. For everything," she said as Alex got up and walked over to her.

He lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her gently.

"Let me know if I can do anything," Alex said, his voice thick. "I'm here for you. Always."

Casey smiled and stepped away, teleporting back to her room.



CHARLOTTE AND MARCUS had unpacked as best they could, and most of Casey's things were back where they belonged.

Casey texted to say thank you and then stood in the center of her room.

She began to shake.

She was free. There were no bars on her cage any longer.

It was terrifying and wonderful.

Casey sat down on the edge of her bed and stared at the wall, pressing her hands into her legs to stop them from shaking.

Thoughts consumed her, filling her mind with the worst-case scenario and all the great possibilities available to her now. Yet it all came back to one thing.

One vampire.

Alex.

Casey had to be sensible about this. Did she want him too much too soon? Was she just transferring her dependence from her father to Alex?

How did she know her feelings for him were real?

They are.

They were, she was sure of it.

Right now, all Casey wanted was to feel Alex's arms around her again. To be that girl in the hotel room, reading books beside him, making love to him, and driving him mad.

Casey had fallen in love with him that day.

Before she was free. When she'd been scared to let anyone in, Alex has snuck in and stolen her heart. She just hadn't realized. She'd seen the bond between them as another prison, but it was the opposite.

Loving Alex was her path to freedom.

If she didn't go to him and trust their love, he would always be there for her, yes, but she would have to live with watching him take other lovers.

She would see the inevitable pain in his face of being separated from his true mate.

As her heart ached, Casey knew she didn't want to live without Alex. It would take some time for her to recover from her life of control and abuse, and she needed to know if Alex would want to be with her as she undid it.

He may not. But she had to ask.

She had to know.

Casey couldn't sit in this desolate room for another second, knowing the man who loved her was suffering. Or moving on without her.

She didn't want him to be her friend.

Casey wanted him to be her lover. Her mate.



CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Alex paced the floor of his room and cursed repeatedly.

He'd promised her.

He had explicitly said he would let her go.

Give her space. Not cage her. Not pressure her.

Yet... God he was really trying. But his fists were clenched, and teeth were grinding so damn hard, it surprised him they were still in his mouth.

I fucking love her.

She's been abused, asshole.

Christ, he wasn't going to be able to do this. Every cell in his body wanted to both rip her father's head from his body and go to Casey, demanding she be his.

Perhaps she would be in time.

Mine.

Casey would survive this. He'd be her champion as close or as far away as she needed him to be.

You really think you can do that, buddy?

He had to. For her.

What if she needs you right now?

Fuck. Fuckkkk.

This was going to drive him insane.

What if you're not a cage, but her freedom?

Shut up brain!

What if you are the rock she needs to rest on as she heals and can open her heart? She's your mate.

She was his. His mate. He could heal her. Walking away and leaving her all on her own was not the answer. Casey was vulnerable on her own.

Not weak.

Alone. That was different from being free.

“Fuck it,” Alex said, pulling his shirt and sneakers on.

He turned to grab his phone and then teleported into her bedroom at the same time Casey bolted up from her bed.

They both stood staring at each other.

Panting.

“I can’t,” Alex growled. “I can’t live without you in my life.”

“Good.” Casey cried, flying into his arms.

Alex held her so fucking tightly he was sure he would break her.

Except he wasn’t here to break her. He was here to heal her.

With his love.



CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Casey slid her books onto the bookshelf and then leaned back on her heels. Happiness seeped from every pore.

She had moved in with him immediately. Neither of them wanting to be apart another second.

Marcus had groaned about having just unpacked all her things and that she had to wait a week before they would help her again.

So, they had called Darnell and Tristan, who had hoisted all her boxes over to Alex's.

Alex was nothing like Richard. Her powerful warrior was protective and dominant, yes, but while it still scared her, it also thrilled her.

Excited her.

He gave her a sense of home and safety without feeling trapped. It was an ongoing journey to push away the fear, but one she was willing to continue on.

The vampire bond was powerful. It connected them in a way she had never expected. She felt Alex's love, felt his concern, felt his need to protect her.

As she did him.

That helped her understand.

It came from a place of unconditional love, not control.

Casey turned to grin at the sexy, gray-eyed vampire standing behind her.

"I'm glad you have a nice big room," she said.

All the SLCs had much larger rooms because of their position in the army. Hallelujah for that.

"To fit all your books?" Alex asked, pulling her up into his arms. His mouth lowered to hers, and she closed her eyes, melting into his sensual kiss.

“That and more surfaces to make love to you on.” She grinned as he growled and picked her up, wrapping her legs around him.

“Baby, you and I are going back out to that park one night soon,” Alex grunted, and her panties immediately became moist.

“How do you do that?” Casey asked, her body heating from the inside out as he placed her on the table behind them.

Grinning, Alex asked, “What?”

“You know.”

He pulled her panties down. *I’m so damn lucky.*

Then he widened her thighs, winking at her, and slid his fingers into her heat. Oh yeah, he knew what she meant. They might be bonded, but none of his cheekiness had disappeared.

She loved it.

“That,” Casey moaned.

“*Ohhh*, that.” Alex smirked and lowered to his knees. “It’s just a superpower I have. Now, my beautiful mate, pull off your T-shirt—*my* T-shirt—and let me see those gorgeous nipples. Then get ready to scream my name.”

Casey grinned, sliding the oversized Nike tee over her head. She loved wearing his clothes. Loved having his scent on her when she wasn’t training or in the field.

She had joined Marcus’s team and was learning a lot more skills. Alex was learning to trust her.

His tongue slid slowly through her folds, and Casey arched her back and closed her eyes. There was no doubt she would be making some noise very soon.

His fat fingers filled her core and worked her fast.

Oh, God.

“That’s my girl,” Alex said, sucking her nib.

Panting, she tried to delay her orgasm, but he knew what she was doing and slid his thumb to her rear.

She jumped.

“Scream for me, my stubborn little warrior.”

She heard the smile in his voice.

Then, as his mouth, thumb, and fingers worked her, Casey let go, gave her beautiful vampire everything, and screamed out his name.

He stood, doing away with his black sweatpants with vamp speed, and thrust into her.

“Tell me again, you’re mine,” he growled, his palm slapping the wall above her.

Casey clung to Alex’s body and lifted her eyes to the sparkling gray globes which held hers as he slid in and out of her pussy.

“I’m yours. Forever.”

“And I am yours, Casey Giordano. Forever,” Alex said, then his mouth slammed down on hers, and together, their pleasure collided.

Mine.



EPILOGUE

Joel walked back into the hotel he was staying at in Portland and removed his black woolen coat.

That had gone as expected.

Well, he hadn't expected the prince to be there. He'd seen both Marcus and Charlotte disappear and took a chance they might be on the grounds of the castle.

When he heard the voices, he went to investigate. What were the chances they were there?

Fate.

That's what it was.

Because Charlotte was his.

"Good evening, sir," the pretty blonde manager greeted him.

He hated how his cock reacted to her.

"Evening," Joel said gruffly.

"I hope your evening was enjoyable." She walked to the lifts with him.

His body pulsed, and he glanced down at her. He held the door when the elevator opened. "After you."

"Thank you." She blushed.

Her uniform was very proper, hiding her figure, but he could tell from here she was trim, with perky little breasts.

The doors closed, and the two of them stood side by side. Arousal growing inside him, which he did not welcome.

Damn human.

Charlotte had not responded well to his claim on her tonight. He didn't like the way she had cowered at his brother's side.

Well, it was too bad. He was here to take back what was his.

She couldn't deny their bond.

He had saved her life. Charlotte owed him.

Soon, she would take his cock and know the truth. That he was her true mate.

That didn't mean Joel couldn't enjoy the taste of other mortals while he was in town. He glanced down at the human woman, and her eyes lifted to his.

The blush on her cheeks told him she was attracted to him, and why not? He was as tall and built as his warrior brother.

He'd simply changed his face a little once the technology was available. Joel had been forced to when Marcus had become so famous, when VampNet went live in the beginning of the new millennium.

Still, Marcus had recognized him immediately. As only a twin would.

The changes hadn't impacted his sexual attractiveness to women. Joel knew he was a good-looking and powerful vampire. He'd made sure he was.

The female blinked, and his cock began to grow thick in his pants.

Jesus, he definitely was going to fuck this woman tonight.

"What is your name?" his voice gravel.

"Quinn"

"When was the last time someone fucked you so hard you lost your voice, Quinn?"

When her mouth gaped, Joel grinned and moved fast.

He pressed her body against the wall and slammed his mouth down on hers. She melted, wanting and needing, as most woman did. Few of them were satisfied by the males of this world, but tonight, Quinn would be.

Lucky for her.

He ripped her top open and cupped her breast.

Tomorrow, he would return to Charlotte. He'd given his brother forty-eight hours to hand her over.



Click the title to get [The Vampire's Fate](#) – Joel and Quinn's romance - the next steamy installment in the Moretti Blood Brothers series.

Turn the page to read the book description.



If you love dark mafia romances, check out my NEW SERIES, **The Dark Kings of NYC**. Click, **The Darkest King**, to read book one. Or turn the page to read chapter one!



Elizabeth's Perspective – the FREE bonus read is at the end. Keep flipping!

THE VAMPIRE'S FATE

Joel had found and lost his mate to a man who'd already taken everything from him. Now he knew where she was, he was taking her back. Second chances and all that crap.

Or rather, the bond that fate had predestined for them.

What he hadn't prepared for, was the desire calling from between his legs for the curvy human who peered at him behind shy blue eyes. She should run. She had no idea of the danger she was in.

Quinn was proud to be the manager of Portland's most prestigious hotels. Having the hottest sex of her life with one of the guests was not on her to-do list, and yet even as her instincts screamed, he was not a good man, she couldn't stop giving him everything he wanted.

Until it was too late.

Get The Vampire's Fate now and keep reading the Moretti Blood Brother series!



THE
Darkest
KING



COMING 20 MAY 2023!

CHAPTER ONE



HERE WE FUCKING GO again.

Another gala event. Another speech. Another night spent with strangers who schmooze me for my money and power.

It's all part of the charade I'm playing, I remind myself, tugging on the sleeve of my Armani jacket and adjusting my cufflinks before leaning back into the soft leather seats of my limousine.

There's nothing to prepare. My finance manager arranged the transfer of funds this afternoon, and my script writer emailed me the same cut-and-paste version of the speech I've already given at least five times this year.

Only the name changes, with a modified reason why the cause is so important to Barrett Enterprises.

Except this one *is* important to me...personally.

The We Are Family Foundation is committed to the care of orphans in the U.S. and around the world—a cause I deem important. No one should be alone because they don't have parents or a family.

There are eight fucking billion people on the planet. Few of them with the sort of money I have to contribute, to make a difference. Still, I'd rather have sent a check and sat at home, sipping on my Macallan Gold, watching porn, and jacking off.

Or rather, ordering in.

I don't mean Chinese food.

Truth is, I don't watch porn. I have no need for it. If I want a woman spread before me, I can have one at any time.

I'm Connor Barrett, one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in New York City.

Yet, I'm not who I say I am.

I'm both a ghost and, ironically, one of the most visible men in America. Why hide in the shadows when you can hide out in the open? The opposite of what they trained me to do in the marines.

Even more ironic—I have skilled security protecting me, which even they know is unnecessary. I'm six foot four, broad and muscular. And I've been trained to kill.

I *have* killed.

Still, I can't look over my shoulder while running a billion-dollar empire, doing deals with politicians and untrustworthy businessmen who would love nothing more than to see me fail.

That happens when people owe you favors. They know I'll come knocking, and when I do, they won't say no.

No one says no.

I'm the founder and CEO of Barrett Enterprises. Entrepreneur, philanthropist, investor, and prolific businessman.

Men want to destroy me.

Women want to fuck me.

I reach for the crystal cut glass filled with whiskey in the console beside me and bring it to my lips, remembering the last woman who slid down my black silk sheets and wrapped her red-stained mouth around my cock.

God, I could do with round two.

It's been weeks since I've had a good release without using my fist. I should've booked someone for this evening, but I didn't think ahead.

Booked? Yes. They're not prostitutes—I'm paying for their discretion. I'm paying for control.

Something I never give away.

But I'm careful about the women I fuck. By the time they enter my penthouse, they've accepted payment and signed a confidentiality agreement—one no lawyer would ever let their

client sign—which demands their silence and agreement to the terms of our time together.

One, should they break, would destroy their lives.

So, not prostitutes, but they *are* escorts.

They're instructed to undress and blindfold themselves in my private elevator. I'm not fucking batman—everyone in NYC knows my address—but it just sets the scene. One which makes it clear why they are here, and that intimacy is not welcome.

I'm not looking for a wife.

I need to stay a ghost.

If my enemies knew I was alive, I would be hunted.

The last words my father said to me...*Never tell anyone who you are, son. Run!*

The familiar grinding of my teeth, the pain slicing up the back of my neck from my fury, brings me back to the present, and I blink. I stretch one of my legs and check that the knife strapped just above my socks remains invisible. Just as all the other weapons on my body are.

I don't leave home without them.

"We're going to be a few minutes late, sir," Benson, my driver, says. I pulled him out of the military a few years ago. He knows how to scan for bombs, drive if we're attacked, and protect both of us if shit goes down. "The traffic was built up near Madison Square Gardens."

I'm silent, my body tensing, and my eyes slide over to Mack.

As if on cue, Mack Turner, my head of security, turns from the passenger seat and gives me a reassuring look. "It's an accident, Mr. Barrett. Turn up here, Benson. Then take 27th Street."

My body relaxes.

Mack is one of three men I trust with my life. He's by my side ninety percent of the time.

Not when I fuck.

That's not my kink.

While the We Are Family Foundation is important to me, I don't give a damn about being on time—I'm the VIP guest, and they'll wait for me. However, when you're hiding in broad daylight from the mafias—that's correct, *all* the mobsters and cartels—and are as powerful as I am, it would only take two minutes to go from being the *hunter* to the *hunted*.

Because I *am* hunting them,

They just don't fucking know it.

Glancing at my Rolex, I note I'm ten minutes late. I run my hand over my solid jaw, rubbing my dark scruff. I need to fuck. I've been agitated and impatient recently. As a dominant and controlling lover, the act helps me release built-up energy.

I nearly snort at the word *love*. There's no love in my life.

“Keep the car close when we arrive, Benson,” I say darkly. “I'm only staying an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the limo pulls up outside the Convention Center, I wait for Mack to open the door, then I climb out and stand, running my hands over my Armani tux and glancing around.

The red carpet is empty. Everyone inside is waiting for me.

In and out. That's the plan.

“Give Billy the night off tomorrow,” I say to Mack without looking his way. When I take a few steps and he hasn't responded, I turn.

My dark eyes connect with his.

“You need a new location. It's not safe, Connor,” Mack replies.

I nod.

He's not disagreeing with me. No one would. He'll have his reasons, and I trust him.

“Arrange it,” I say, then step into the hotel lobby. The sign for the event points to the large conference rooms in the back.

To be honest, I’m surprised someone from the company organizing the event is not greeting me. I was told they would. But it’s one less annoying person on this planet to deal with, so I couldn’t care less.

I make my way through the space and find the room and the main door. As I reach for it, it flings open.

Ommph.

“Oh, shit!” the small body who just slammed into me whisper-yells, and the door closes behind her with a click.

Then I feel it...

Wet, cold, and seeping through the front of my tuxedo.

As I grip the petite brunette’s arms and remove her from my chest, her eyes fly open wide, and I can’t ignore the magnetic pull from the crystal blue globes.

Jesus, she’s fucking gorgeous.

My cock wakes up and begins to swell. I imagine gripping all that long dark hair and wrapping it around my fist. Then, as panic fills her eyes, I’m tempted to smirk. But I never smile, and my hands, which have released her, want to touch her again, and that bothers me.

Who is this young woman?

“Connor Barrett,” she gasps quietly, knowing who I am. Her eyes drift down over the dark liquid on my shirt, and she bites her lip, letting out a soft curse. Then those lids dip further down my body.

Don’t look any lower, sweetheart, or...

Too late.

Her eyes shoot back to mine, and I say in a dark, thick voice, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

As she swallows, my lip curls up at the corners.

Tonight just got a whole lot more interesting.



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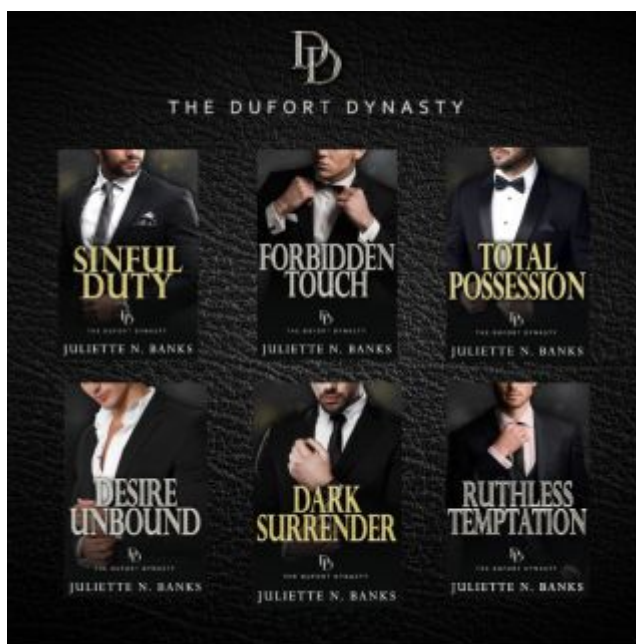
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