



THE INFINITY SERIES
BOOK ONE



INFINITE BETRAYAL

GAYLE DONNELLY AND
ROBYN MACKENZIE

Infinite Betrayal

The Infinity Series

Gayle Donnelly & Robyn Mackenzie

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Blurb

The existence of the Coteri has remained hidden for centuries...until now

He would protect her with his life...

Mathias has been ordered to protect Mina Roarke at all costs while keeping her father's secrets concealed. But from the moment he sees her, the hunger he's desperately tried to bury roars to life. The beast within is awakened and wants only one thing ... Mina.

But when his enemies target her life, Mina and Mathias become caught in a lethal game of revenge. To save her, Mathias must not only expose the truth ... but also what lies deep within him.

*

She was just looking for answers...

Mina had always been told she was special. In what way, she never fully understood until her life and everything she thought she knew and believed in was turned completely upside down.

After the unexpected death of her mother, Mina finds clues about her past that trigger more questions than answers. Her quest to find those answers thrusts Mina deep into the Black Forest of Germany and into the arms of a man who tests her control ... in more ways than one. She is wrenched from her own reality into a world filled with adrenaline-charged danger, blazing sexual heat and the answers that have been hidden her entire life.

Mina alone holds the power to change her future, but when she comes face-to-face with ultimate betrayal, can she still trust in the one man who has captured her heart?

Dedication

To our kids—Thank you for your patience when we needed “quiet time” and for giving us our daily doses of reality to keep us grounded as to what's truly important.

To our husbands—Thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement, always making sure we knew you believed in us.

To our mothers—You know what you did!

To Judith—We can't thank you enough for your advice and never-ending support. Fate was definitely watching us when we ended up on the same shuttle ride!

*

“Not of my blood but always of my soul. Forever Sisters. Forever Friends.”

Chapter One

The cold mist of the morning air did nothing to clear away the hurt and confusion that filled Mina's mind. As she lay in one of the padded lounge chairs on the deck of her childhood home, a cigarette in one hand and a letter dangling from the other, Mina could do nothing but stare out onto the open Sound. The majestic Olympic Mountains stretched up through the gray sky, the vast snow-capped peaks hidden by the fog and low-lying clouds of the Pacific Northwest. Huge evergreens filled the never-ending expanse of the mountainsides and the water of the Sound softly lapped the rocky shore below the deck, completing the backdrop.

She closed her eyes and took another drag from her cigarette. Mingled with the smell of menthol smoke was the tangy brine and seaweed that had washed up on the rocks. She stared up, watching the smoke leave her lungs as gulls shot across the water, trying to snatch up something for breakfast.

Mina looked down at the crumpled piece of paper she was weakly clutching. Turning it in her hand, her gaze caught on the silver-embossed crest at the top of the page. A falcon with outstretched wings bisected the crest and there were several other symbols surrounding the bird that she didn't understand. Her stomach turned with uneasiness. She had just recently seen that particular emblem, and apparently it was the calling card of the one person Mina hadn't even known existed. It had graced the top of her mother's will. The same document which stated Mina was worth more money than she had ever dreamed. The same document revealing a father she thought wanted nothing to do with her or her mother.

Mina tilted back her head, closed her eyes and took another drag from her cigarette. The minty menthol smoke burned down her throat and into her lungs. The telltale calm from the nicotine flowed through her veins. Mina had quit smoking eight months ago, but losing her mother had brought the nasty crutch back into her life. She needed an outlet and there was no way she would drown herself in food like she had done when she was younger. She needed something to calm her current state of mind. Everything seemed to be crashing down around her and she couldn't do a damn thing about it. Control freak that she was, the sudden death of her mother had sent her sense of direction right out the window. Nothing was in her realm of control and she hated it.

The funeral had been small but beautiful. White lilies and sterling roses adorned the casket that held the body of her mother, Julia Kathleen Roarke. She had just turned fifty-seven a few months before the heart attack had taken her life.

A single tear tracked down Mina's face, dropped onto her robe and was quickly absorbed by the thick fleece. Her momma was gone.

Taking a last drag, Mina crushed the cigarette in the makeshift ashtray she had created out of a dirt-filled flower pot and reached for her coffee. The morning was characteristically cool and she loved winter in Washington. All snuggled up in her white fleece robe, thermals underneath and giant fluffy slippers, Mina took a slow sip of her warm espresso and looked out over the water once again. The smell of snow was in the air. It was like inhaling the scent of cold metal. Christmas was coming and Mina should be brimming with excitement.

Christmas was the best time of the year for Mina and her mother. They would pick a weekend in early November, bring down all of the tubs of decorations from the attic, blare Mitch Miller Christmas music over the stereo system and spend the days decorating their huge home. Lights and garland would adorn every entryway and the staircase. The everyday knickknacks would be removed and replaced with mini porcelain Christmas cottages that lit up and gave the house a soft glow. Christmas candles smelling of pine and sugar cookies were lit to engulf the home with holiday scents and the baking would take days at a time. At last count, they had seven theme-decorated trees in the house, one for every room on the bottom floor and two more for their bedrooms upstairs. Mina and Julia had spent years accumulating all of the decorations that adorned their home and every one of them had a memory behind it. The Wizard of Oz dolls that Julia had sewn when Mina was a child, paper ornaments Mina had made in school and photos in hanging frames of them both on numerous vacations they had taken together.

Closing her eyes again, Mina felt the panic build in her chest. A Christmas without her mother was going to destroy her. The holidays were their special time of year. A time when both women felt the excitement of the season and spent all of their time together. Planning out menus, picking out new recipes, shopping for gifts and spending their evenings in front of the fire, talking and laughing. Twenty-eight years of Christmases with her mother and now all of that was gone. Over. Never to happen again.

Mina felt the warm tears spill over her eyes and track down her cool face. She wasn't in the mood to stop them this time. This time, she would let out her despair and not care that she was losing control. She was entitled. Her mother was gone and she was grieving. So what if everyone who knew her thought she was as tough as nails and could handle the weight of the world with a smile on her face. Screw them. She was human and she missed her momma. She was entitled.

Julia had instilled strength in Mina as she grew up. *Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.* That was Julia's mantra and she preached it daily. Mina knew her mother only wanted the best for her and wanted her daughter to be strong and independent. Someone who could succeed in anything and still be able to laugh in the process. Be strong but still smile in the face of resistance. Well, her tough-girl bravado was slowly crumbling and Mina was turning into a pile of goo. She wasn't sure anymore if she had the strength in her to get through this.

Mina always thought her mother was one of the bravest women she knew. A single mother living on her own, Julia never complained about not having Mina's father around. She had been both mother and father wrapped into one. But Mina knew when she walked past her mother's room at night and spied her sitting by the window, staring off into the night, her thoughts and memories surrounded the man she once loved.

Julia rarely spoke of Mina's father. It seemed too painful for her when she did. On those rare occasions Mina could get her to share a story or two, Julia would talk of a man larger than life. Tall, dark and protective, he seemed to be every woman's fantasy come to life. She had always wished she could at least see a photo of him or know more about his family and background, but Julia only revealed enough to let Mina know that the man who had fathered her was one of honor, devotion and love. Julia didn't even tell Mina his name. He was simply known as "father" and if he had not died so suddenly, he would have shared their lives.

Lost in her grief, Mina didn't hear the sliding glass door hiss open and close behind

her. Warm hands swept over her shoulders and squeezed. Mina immediately smiled through her grief and opened her eyes. Chloe. Her best friend. Standing over her with an empathetic smile on her gorgeous face. Red curls dangled down around her cherub cheeks and beautiful emerald eyes shined in the morning mist. She was Mina's lifeline. The only thing keeping her truly sane. Not by blood but by soul, Chloe was truly her sister. The only other woman besides her mother who she would lay her life on the line for. The only other person on the face of the earth she would truly feel connected to. Truly able to trust with anything. And what made her truly magic, the only other person who knew how to handle Mina's control issues as well as her legendary short fuse. She had even tempered Mina's cursing streak, limiting her to an occasional shit or damn it, which by all accounts was an undocumented miracle.

They had met on Mina's first day of college at Evergreen State. Chloe worked at the bookstore and Mina ended up in her checkout line when she bought her books. They had immediately hit it off, and ten years later they had formed a bond that was stronger than anything they had known before. She loved Chloe as if she was her own sister and knew she could depend on her for anything.

After Julia's death, Chloe had moved into the house on the Sound with Mina. Chloe had recently taken a job as a web designer for a firm in Los Angeles, so this was the perfect time for her to end her lease at her apartment and spend what little time she had left in Washington with Mina. Mina couldn't imagine staying in the huge house alone, so she was grateful for Chloe's company. But she knew eventually, Chloe would have to leave. And Mina still had yet to get used to the idea of being truly alone.

Chloe leaned down and kissed Mina's forehead and brushed the tears from her face. She circled the chase lounge, grabbed a chair and dragged it across the deck next to Mina. "You thinking about Christmas?"

Mina rolled her eyes and gave Chloe a smirk. "How the hell do you know what I'm thinking every time I get upset?"

Chloe smiled and leaned back in the chair. "It's a gift Mina-girl. I've been trying to tell you for years I have super powers but you just won't believe me."

Mina snorted and reached over for her coffee. "Yeah, right. You just know me too well. You also know this is about the time Mom and I would get the Christmas stuff down."

Mina tracked where Chloe stared and sighed, knowing her friend had spotted the flower pot with several crushed cigarette butts in it. "I know what you're thinking, but don't say it. I just need it right now. I'll stop."

"I know you will, babe. That's why I'm not saying anything ... for now."

Mina looked out over the Sound and noticed a single falcon perched on the bough of a huge evergreen right at the water's edge. Her eyes narrowed on the bird, but as soon as she focused on it, its large wings unfurled and it took flight and soared right over them. Mina tracked the bird and smiled. "I love it when they do that. It's as if they're watching me."

This had been Mina's home for her entire life and nothing would ever take her away from it. The brisk mornings, ferns growing wild everywhere she looked, the whale pods every spring, the long drives up the coast to the little wineries with Chloe, the snow-capped mountains, and of course, this house. The house she grew up in and learned how to live and be the woman who she was. The house where almost every happy memory of

her life originated. Where Julia taught her how to put on makeup in the upstairs bathroom, where every year Mina stood against the entry to the kitchen and Julia would mark her growth with a pencil on the wall, where she would camp out on the deck at night and sleep under the stars and dream of a future with a man who loved her unconditionally.

Mina snapped back out of her haze and remembered the piece of paper she had in her hand. She sighed and turned her head to face Chloe.

“What? What’s wrong, Mina?”

Without a word, Mina extended her arm and handed Chloe the piece of wrinkled paper. “I found this last night when I was in Mom’s closet.”

Chloe took the paper and began to read. Her head popped up immediately and she stared at Mina, eyes wide with shock. “What the hell is this?”

Mina looked away and her gaze focused back over the calm water of the Sound. “Apparently the father I thought had died is alive and well and living in Germany.” She reached over for her pack of cigarettes and lit another. “That’s not the only letter, Chloe.” Mina blew out a plume of smoke and looked back at Chloe. “There are hundreds of them in a trunk behind Mom’s clothes. I was up all night reading.”

Chloe looked down and continued to read it.

Mina had almost memorized the letter that Chloe read. She took a long drag of her cigarette and exhaled. That particular letter had been written twenty-eight years ago, right after her birth. The words were eloquent and full of love and loyalty to both Mina and Julia. The man, known only as R, spoke about how much he loved them both and wished he could be with them. Have a family. He wrote of his need to hold his newborn daughter. Watch Mina grow and learn. Jesus. He had been writing to Julia all this time and Mina never knew. Her mother kept him from her. But why?

Even though some of the letters had mentioned the agreement between him and Julia to keep Mina away from Germany, there was never an explanation of why. If he loved them so much, why did he send Julia away? Why was he not here? And why the hell did Julia tell her that her father had died?

Not having a father growing up hadn’t bothered Mina. Julia had been a wonderful mother and Mina hadn’t wanted for anything. Their relationship was a close one where Mina knew she could talk to her mother about anything. Boys, school, her hair, those damn freckles she had across her nose. Julia had been a great mother and a close friend. They were close in every way, but Mina realized as she got older Julia had a sadness inside her.

Father’s Day to Mina was just another day, but Julia had always spent the evening standing on the deck, staring out onto the water. Lost in thought and missing the man she had loved. Mina knew to let her mother have that time alone, but that didn’t stop her from watching her from the upstairs window. Sometimes Mina saw her wipe a tear away from her face, but Julia would always smile as she thought about the man who had given her a daughter. Losing the man she loved had been hard on Julia, but Mina never felt her life wasn’t whole.

Mina never thought she needed a father. She had everything she needed.

Mina had her hair pulled up in a messy bun on top of her head. She wrapped herself tightly in her robe and lay curled up on the lounge, staring out over the water. She felt so lost.

Chloe reached over and patted Mina on the hip, bringing her out of her haze. "Sweetie, you know if I could take all this pain and confusion away from you I would. But I am here for you. Come on, honey. Let's go in and warm up. It's colder than a witch's tit out here."

Mina let out a chuckle. "You and your sayings, Chloe. I swear each time you come up with something even more stupid than the last."

Chloe pulled Mina out of the chair. "Hey! They're not stupid. They're funny and they make you laugh." She gave Mina a tight hug. "Come on. Let's go look at these letters together and see if we can't figure out what's going on."

* * * *

Six hours, two pizzas and ten beers later, Mina and Chloe had gone through almost all of the letters. Julia's room was covered with paper and envelopes spanning over twenty-eight years of correspondence between her and R, and the women were no closer to finding out why they had decided not to be together and hide his identity from Mina.

Chloe leaned back against the end of the bed and stretched her legs out over the wood floor. "Mina, this is insane. We're never gonna find out what happened from these letters. They hid it too well."

Mina tucked the letter she had just finished back into the envelope. "I know. Why the hell did she keep this from me, Clo? She lied and told me he was dead."

"I don't know, babe, but we're not gonna find anything in these letters. What about the trunk? Was there anything else in it?"

Mina looked over her shoulder into her mother's closet. On the floor was a wooden trunk, lid open and sitting there like the Arc of the Covenant. Untouched and full of mystery. She crawled over to it on her hands and knees and peered inside. Shaking her head, Mina let out a sigh. "Empty."

Mina sat back and looked at the mass of papers all around her. Her heart literally ached and a lump formed in her throat. "Jesus. I can't believe she didn't tell me, Chloe."

Chloe met Mina's gaze with furrowed brows. "Me neither, hon. But the reason had to be significant. I mean, this is huge. What could have possibly happened to prevent your father from being with you two?"

Mina reached down and grabbed one of the letters next to her and started to scan it again. "I have no idea and I don't think we are gonna find out by reading these."

Continuing to scan the letter, Mina's gaze settled on a word that had been prevalent in several of the letters. Her father had referred to Mina using the word. Kätzchen. What did that mean? Mina carefully placed the letter on the floor and stood, moving toward the doorway.

"Where are you going?"

On a mission, Mina didn't even turn to reply.

A few seconds later, she returned with her laptop. When she was connected to the internet, she went to a translation site and entered the word kätzchen. The result popped onto the screen and Mina's hand went to her mouth in surprise. "Holy shit!"

Chloe's head snapped up and she looked over at Mina. "What?"

Mina looked up and smiled. "Kitten. It means kitten."

"What means kitten?"

Mina absently pointed to the pile of letters. "This word in the letter. I can't

pronounce it, but he used it to refer to me. It means kitten. He referred to me as his little kitten. Jesus, Chloe. Mom called me kitty all the time!"

Chloe reached over and picked up the letter containing the reference. She read the word aloud, "Kat-chen."

Tears poured down Mina's cheeks when she met Chloe's gaze. "Kitten."

Chloe scooted across the floor and wrapped her arms around Mina. She rocked back and forth and let Mina cry it out. "Shhhh. It's okay, babe." Chloe stroked her hand over Mina's back and held her tight. "It'll be okay."

* * * *

Letters and envelopes were strewn all over and Chloe knew Mina wouldn't get the answers she needed here. Closing her eyes, she realized what she needed to do. What she had to do.

Chloe reached for the laptop. She cleared the browser and started frantically typing. She knew this was a long shot and didn't think Mina would go for it initially, but she had to try. Chloe had given Mina her support and trust for the past decade. She wouldn't stop now. Her singular mission right now was to take away Mina's pain. She couldn't do anything less for her sister. Damn it, this had to work.

Chapter Two

The next week went by in a blur. Mina had finally emailed her resignation to her work. She hated that job and hated her boss more—sanctimonious, sexist pig that he was.

She then spent the rest of the week researching. The envelopes had all identified a singular postmark. The name of a town stamped on the envelope: Staufen.

It was located in the Black Forest of Germany about three hours away from Munich and was mostly known as a tourist town. The town was situated at the bottom of a large hill amongst old castle ruins. The online photos showed this town to be both quaint and beautiful with different colored buildings all with window boxes full of begonias. The population was estimated around eighteen thousand people—not large by any means, but from what Mina could see it had every accommodation needed.

Chloe walked into the room with take-out Chinese and plopped down on the floor next to Mina.

“What did you find out today?” Chloe bit into an eggroll.

“The town is about three hours from Munich and is located in the Black Forest. Tourist town mostly but really beautiful. Here, I’ll trade you—egg roll for laptop. Take a look.”

Mina crunched into her shrimp egg roll as Chloe scanned the photos on the screen. “This is really beautiful, Mina.”

Taking another bite of the eggroll, Mina reached over to grab her rice. “Yeah, it is. But I’m still wondering if this is the best thing to do right now. With you leaving, and the holidays coming, I’m not sure this is the smartest thing for me.”

Chloe continued to click through all of the photos on the website. “Honey, think about it. You have the time. You definitely have the money. Why not find out what your mother loved about that place. It can’t hurt and you may end up discovering something about your past that you had no idea existed.”

Mina swallowed her rice and grabbed her bottle of water. “Come on, Chloe. Be realistic. Like I’m going to walk into this little tourist town in Germany and find out who R is and all of these little mysteries will suddenly be solved?” She took a drink and screwed the top back on the bottle. “You know as well as I do that won’t happen. This is probably going to be a huge waste of time.”

Chloe held out her hand for the water and grabbed it from Mina. “I know that, dumbass. I’m just saying, what can it hurt? You’ll spend some time on vacation in a beautiful place. Lord knows you need to get out of this house for a while.”

Mina laid her head against the end of the bed and tried to look as pathetic as possible. She pouted out her lower lip and whined, “Come with me.”

Chloe shook her head. “My job starts soon, and as it is, I’ll have to work virtually until I can find a place in LA to live. They’re being really generous with delaying my start date so I can stay with you for a while, but extending that time to travel with you to Germany might be pushing it a bit much.”

“Yeah, I know.” Mina sighed as she sat up and reached for her rice again. “I just wish I didn’t have to go alone. I’ve never been outside the US except when we went to Cancún a couple of years ago and the idea makes me nervous. I mean this trip isn’t like

driving to Portland to go shopping. This is another continent where they speak another language.”

Chloe slid the laptop off her legs and grabbed another egg roll. “Hey, you can do this. You’re one of the strongest women I know. Once you set your mind to something, you always follow through.” She popped the rest of the egg roll into her mouth and chewed. Reaching for her lo mien, she sat up and crossed her legs. “You do realize most businesses in large cities and tourist towns anywhere in Europe speak predominately English to cater to the visitors. In a small town like this, American tourists are their bread and butter.” Chloe dangled the noodles above her head and slurped them off the chopsticks. “Just fly into Munich, rent a car and drive there. The hotel looks good and you’ll be fine.” She swallowed the noodles and stuck the chopsticks back in for another bite. “I know you can do this, Mina. It’s the only way to find out what happened.”

Mina put her rice down and grabbed a beer out of the bag Chloe had brought upstairs. “Uh-huh. Like I’m going to walk into that town, start asking about a guy with the initial R and they will all know what I’m talking about.” She snorted. “Get real.”

Chloe wiped her mouth and grabbed a beer for herself. “Listen, Mina. I don’t think anything like that will happen because it’s not reality. What I do think will happen is that you will get to spend some time in a new place, get to see some beautiful things and possibly find out why Julia loved that place. Don’t you think that might help? God knows I would love to go with you, but I need to get to LA and find someplace to live.”

Mina felt her chest tighten. “I wish you could stay here with me. Can’t they just let you work virtually and you fly down for meetings or something? I mean, come on. It’s not as if you have to be there. You design websites. You don’t need to physically be there.”

Chloe chuckled. “Honey, you will eventually get through this and as much as we love each other like sisters, after a while, we may end up wanting to kill each other. You know that we both need our space sometimes. You know as well as I do this is something you need to do on your own. You need to say goodbye to Julia and try to get answers surrounding your father. This trip may give you that and I can’t help you do this. It has to be you.”

Mina leaned back against the wall and started playing with her fried rice. She suddenly wasn’t hungry anymore. Should she go to the place where it all began? Where her mother met the man who fathered her but separated himself from them? She didn’t know what it would do to her to leave Chloe, either. She always felt emotionally stronger around her friend. What would happen if she severed that connection by going that far away?

Mina sighed and got to her feet. “I’m going downstairs for another beer. Want one?”

“Nah, another bottle of water would be nice, though. This lo mein is kind of spicy.”

“Okay. Be right back.” Mina went downstairs to the kitchen to grab the drinks. She popped the top off the beer and took a swallow. Damn, that tasted good. Now the craving was back in her head. Mina remembered she had left her cigarettes on the deck. Might as well get rid of one. She needed to clear her head.

She opened the glass door to the deck and stepped out into the cool breeze coming off the water. The air was thick and moist with fine mist coming down. Another normal day on the Sound. She walked over to the edge of the deck, grabbed her pack and lit a cigarette. She took a long pull and felt the nicotine enter her system. She leaned over the

railing and took another drag. The buzz of the nicotine went through her and she needed the numbing sensation right now. There was a lot to think about and she needed to resolve herself to the decision she had made.

She loved this place. She loved her home. She loved Chloe. She loved her mother. Mina didn't want to leave, but she needed to do something. She needed to at least try to find out what made Julia love this man enough to hide him from his child. Maybe she would just get a great vacation out of it. Maybe some time away would help her deal with what had happened in the last month. Her life was a hell of a lot different now and time alone may be just what she needed to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Chloe was right ... she needed some time away.

Mina had always wanted to go back to school and work on a Masters in Literature, but never had the time or the motivation. Hell, now she had both. But she felt she needed to chase after the phantom who was her father. At least if she went to Germany, she could tell herself she tried. She made an effort to find out about a man who separated himself from a family he had written so longingly about wanting to have but couldn't.

Mina crushed the cigarette out in the dirt and turned back toward the house. When she opened the glass door, she took one last look over the Sound and focused on the backdrop of the Olympic Mountains. She smiled at the site she had looked upon her entire life. Her gaze shifted to the huge evergreen that hung over the water by the deck. Sure enough, there was the falcon. Perched on the low branch as he always was, looking in her direction. She stepped into the warm home and slowly closed the door. "See you later, big guy. I have somewhere to go."

The door clicked closed and she watched the falcon stretch out his wings and take flight. He soared over the deck and then out of sight.

* * * *

The following Tuesday, as Mina stepped out of her Jeep in the drop-off section of Sea-Tac airport, she realized this wasn't going to be easy. When she returned from Germany, she would be returning to an empty house. Chloe would be gone to LA and Mina would be alone. Her chest tightened at the thought. She knew Chloe couldn't stay with her forever. At least she would be back before Christmas and they could spend the holiday together.

When she got outside, Chloe had a bag for her. "Okay. There are a few necessities in here for you: sleeping pills for the flight, Valium just for fun, anti-bacterial hand sanitizer, granola bars, gum, and of course, some Twizzlers. You have your iPod, right? All charged up?"

Mina stared at her friend, flittering around her like a bee, and forced herself not to break into tears. "Yeah, I got it. I have the charger in my bag too."

"Okay. I just wanted to make sure you would be comfortable on the flight. Traveling for eighteen hours is gonna be tough." Chloe reached up and zipped one of the pockets closed on the backpack. "Okay, now, you call me when you land in London and before you get on the flight to Munich. Remember, when you get the rental car, you drive on the other side of the road. I reserved an SUV so you would feel safe. The attendant made sure there's a GPS in the car and it should take you a little over three hours to get to Staufien." Chloe was babbling. "I programmed the hotel number into your cell if you have any trouble. Oh, and I have an aunt in Bremerhaven just in case you need someone. I

programmed her number in your phone too. Her name is Izzy. She knows you're traveling her way."

The entire time Chloe prattled to Mina, she didn't make eye contact. She kept checking Mina's bag and fumbling with the car keys. Once, she even reached out and straightened Mina's coat and backpack strap. Chloe wasn't a fidgeter and it was clear she was just as nervous as Mina.

Chloe finished her speech and finally looked at Mina. Tears ran down her cheeks and her nose was red. "I love you, honey. You're gonna be fine."

Mina reached out and embraced Chloe. She inhaled the citrus scent of her hair and whispered in her ear, "I know, because of you. I love you too. I'll call from London."

Mina continued to hug her friend as the tears started to run down her own cheeks and into the corners of her mouth. She could taste the salty warmth and knew she was getting Chloe's suede jacket wet. She didn't care. Just one more minute of feeling safe. Chloe held her just as tight and Mina felt the movement of her shoulders while crying herself.

They finally broke their hold on each other and stepped back. Mina stared into Chloe's eyes and smiled. "Love you, sis."

"Love you too."

Mina turned and walked into the terminal. Her adventure awaited her.

Chapter Three

The flights weren't as bad as Mina had thought. She arrived in Chicago on time and switched planes. Before they took off, she swallowed one of the sleeping pills Chloe had given her and stretched out in her reclining chair. The pills must have been really good, because Mina didn't remember take off. Hours later, the call of nature woke her out of a deep sleep. She unbuckled her seatbelt, walked to the restroom and quickly finished her business in the cramped closet latrine.

Just as Mina returned to her seat, the flight attendant approached and asked if she would like anything to drink. First class rocked. Mina ordered a Crown and diet Pepsi and a bottle of water. Now was as good a time as any to dig into the romance novel Chloe had packed for her.

When Mina was halfway through chapter eight, the overhead speaker clicked on and everyone was asked to prepare for landing. She leaned over and grabbed her backpack to stash her book and iPod. As she pulled up the bag, an older woman walked down the aisle. Her foot must have snagged the loop of the strap, because at the exact moment Mina pulled the bag, the old woman teetered forward and was about to fall face first in the aisle. Mina didn't have time to catch her, but she saw a pair of hands reach out and grab the old woman by her waist and pull her back. In the meantime, the coffee in the woman's hand came to rest directly in the center of Mina's lap.

With a bolt, Mina shot out of her seat and contained the yelp forming in her throat from the hot liquid currently running down the front of her pants and quickly soaking in. Great. Hot coffee on the crotch was sooooo much fun.

"Oh, my dear, I'm so very sorry." The old woman began to wipe Mina's pants with her handkerchief and a shaky hand.

Mina let out a sigh and forced a smile. "I'm fine, ma'am. It's all right." Mina gently pushed aside the woman's hand, picked up the airline blanket still on her seat and tried to sop up as much liquid as she could. The older woman stepped away, continuing to apologize.

Mumbling to herself, Mina looked down at her stained khakis. "Shit. I look like I wet my pants. Great."

A warm male voice enveloped her. "Are you all right, miss?"

Mina's head shot up and her gaze locked onto a pair of gorgeous blue eyes framed with long black lashes. Those eyes belonged to one hunk of a man standing in the aisle helping the older woman back to her seat. Mina had to physically swallow the lump in her throat. Was this guy actually real?

Long dark hair that hit his shoulders and was straight as a pin. Tight jeans and a black turtleneck sweater. Probably about six and a half feet, this man, or rather God of a man, towered over Mina as she looked up at him with an appreciative gaze.

As hard as it was to answer him when her mouth had gone completely dry, Mina replied, "Yes. I'm fine. Thank you." She continued to watch him maneuver the elderly lady into her seat a few rows ahead. He turned back and gave her a nod, then returned to his seat in the second row. How had she missed this guy being on the plane? No one could miss him.

Mina sat in her seat, locked her seatbelt in place and got ready for the landing. Minutes later, she felt the bump of the tires hitting the runway and the pull of the pilot maneuvering the wing flaps to slow the plane to a crawl. London's Heathrow airport. She had a four-hour layover and wanted to get freshened up and maybe get a bite to eat before her flight to Munich.

* * * *

After she landed in Munich, Mina trotted through the terminal to find the rental car place. She brimmed with excitement. She was in Germany. The place where her mother found the love of her life. Where this man supposedly was currently living. She couldn't believe Chloe had actually gotten her to come here, but right now, she was extremely happy she had agreed to her friend's suggestion.

She secured her vehicle, got a few maps from the attendant and quickly returned to the baggage claim area. She recognized a few people from her flight, so she knew she was at the correct turnstile. The bags continually flowed out of the hole in the wall and she waited impatiently for her luggage to come out. The passengers by her continued to retrieve their belongings and she felt the panic start to swell in her stomach.

Why wasn't her luggage coming out?

When the last passengers grabbed their bags, there were two more left on the turnstile. Neither was hers. Where the hell were her suitcases? She flagged down a security officer and asked him where she should go to ask about her bags. Mina ended up in a small office sitting on a metal chair, waiting for her turn to plead her case.

An hour and a half later, after speaking to six different people because of the language barrier, she learned her luggage was on a plane to Brazil. How the hell did someone mistake a tag that said Munich for freaking Brazil. What was she supposed to do now? Of course, this had to happen to her. She left her cell number and the address and number of her hotel in Staufen with the baggage superintendent and exited the office.

She was pissed, she was tired and she needed a shower and a soft bed. Shuffling out of the baggage claims office, she ran into something solid. "Ow!"

"Excuse me, miss," a familiar male voice answered.

Heart racing, she immediately looked up into familiar blue eyes and long black lashes. The voice belonged to the gorgeous hunk of a man who was on the flight to Heathrow from Chicago. She had no idea he had been on the Munich flight.

"Seems as if every time I see you, I need to ask if you are all right." Again, his voice rolled over her like warm butter. His mouth curved up into a sexy grin. "Are you all right?"

Mina exhaled as she suddenly realized she had been holding her breath. "Yeah, as all right as I can be. They lost my luggage." Realizing her close proximity to him, Mina backed up a few steps. "It's going to take two or three days to get it back and I have a three-hour drive ahead of me."

The hunk of a man looked around, scanning the area. "Where are you headed?"

Mina was about to automatically answer, but intuition told her to hold her tongue. Yeah, this guy was hot and all, but she didn't know him and she was in a strange country, and no one except Chloe knew where she was. And why was he still in the airport an hour and a half after their flight landed? "I'm heading to my aunt's house for a family visit. She is expecting me, so I better give her a call. Nice seeing you again." Mina raised

a hand. "Bye."

Mina turned and walked toward the rental car area. Luckily, he went in the opposite direction and she let out a small breath of relief. Now all she had to do was drive three hours to a town she had never been to before. Since she'd had to spend so much time in the luggage office, it would be dark by the time she got there. Great.

* * * *

Mina woke early, showered and put on the clothes she'd worn the day before. Her goal for the day was to find some semblance of replacement clothing. Thanks to the small hotel gift shop, she'd purchased some of the bare necessities when she arrived late the night before, but she still needed pants. She'd been utterly exhausted. She'd purchased her items in the gift shop, checked in, went to her room and collapsed on her bed.

As she glanced around her room now in the morning light, she thought it was extremely quaint and clean. The furniture all looked to be antique and the quilt on the bed was in a starburst pattern with blues and reds. There was a wash basin and stand in the room, but since she actually had her own bathroom, she figured it was only for decoration. Her window overlooked the street below and she had a pretty clear view of an antique store across the way. The room was quite nice. She couldn't wait to see the rest of the hotel and town.

Mina sat on the bed and sighed. What was she doing here? Although common sense told her she wouldn't be able to learn anything about her father, the imaginative side of her still wondered. What would she gain by finding the man who had an affair with her mother years ago and was a part of her own creation? What would he say to her? What would she say to him? Not only would it be terribly hard for Mina to face him, but she knew actually finding him would be an impossibility. All she had was the initial R and the fact he had more money than Midas. Maybe she would get lucky and he would find her. She laughed at the thought. Because after zero contact for twenty-eight years, her father coming to her now was just that laughable.

Mina opened the door and headed down the short hallway to the steep stairwell that led to the lobby. The smell of bacon and coffee teased her nose. Dear god, she was in heaven. Now all she needed was a cigarette and her satisfaction would be complete. Too bad Chloe had gone through all of her bags to ensure Mina had not packed any nicotine. Chloe had lovingly placed a box of cinnamon Nicorette in Mina's luggage, but it was somewhere in Brazil by now. She really, really, wanted a smoke.

Mina grabbed a cup of coffee and strolled through the small lobby and outside onto the stone walkway. She should be exhausted from the trip, but the idea of just being in Germany had Mina energized with anticipation. She had never been this far out of the United States and here she was in a small town in Germany, looking down a cobblestone street and seeing castle ruins in the background. The air was extremely crisp and cold but it invigorated her. She felt a purpose and she wanted to fulfill it as soon as she could.

Her thoughts briefly went to her mom. Looking around this beautiful town, Mina knew why her mother had probably loved being here. In a way, she felt as though she was connected to her mother at that moment. Mina looked up at the clear blue sky and wondered if Julia was looking down on her, smiling at her daughter's tenacity to find out about the father she had never known. Or would she be upset knowing Mina had uncovered the secret Julia closely guarded for twenty-eight years?

Not wanting to sadden herself with thoughts of her mother, Mina fished out her phone and punched in Chloe's number. After five rings, the answering machine picked up. "Chloe? You there? Pick up if you're there. Hello?" Mina looked down at her watch she'd forgotten to change to the current time zone. It was around midnight back home and Chloe must be sleeping. Looking up, Mina spotted what looked to be the town's clock tower. She decided to set her watch and hoped the time the tower showed was correct or at least close.

Mina had no idea what time the shops here opened for business, so she just strolled down the road to see what was around. Chloe did a fantastic job in picking this particular hotel. Due to its location, Mina didn't need to use the car to get around and at the moment, that simple fact made her feel all the more comfortable. After her late night trip in the dark from the airport, she'd had enough driving for the time being and enjoyed the idea of walking. Restaurants, shops, bars, and even a drug store, were close by and the architecture was absolutely breathtaking in this area of town.

The buildings stood two and three stories, inter-connected like the old brownstones in Seattle. Each one was distinguished by its own unique color and intricate brass signs hung above most of the doorways, describing the business held inside. She walked toward the clock tower building to see what she could find.

Mina spent an hour or so window shopping until the stores began to open for business. She got busy trying to find clothing to maintain herself until her luggage hopefully showed up. Being that it may take a couple of days, she thought a pair of jeans and a couple of tops would do the trick.

After finding a few shirts that would tide her over, Mina's phone rang. It was Chloe's personal ringtone.

"Hi, Clo. I'm sorry if my call earlier woke you. I forgot about the time difference."

"Hey, honey. No worries. I just woke up after one of my infamous dreams and saw I missed your call. How is everything?"

Mina sighed. "Oh, just fabulous." Sarcasm dripped in her tone. "My luggage is somewhere in Brazil and I'm wearing coffee-stained pants, but other than that, life is grand."

"What do you mean your luggage is in Brazil? How the hell did that happen?"

"Who knows? At least my underwear is clean and I made it here with my carry-on bag."

Chloe chuckled. "Well, that's all that matters right?"

"Yeah. But the worst part is the wonderful Nicorette you packed for me is in said luggage and I am jonesing for a smoke bad."

"Don't you dare, Willamina. I swear I will hunt you down myself."

Mina rolled her eyes and smiled. "I won't. I'm just bitching out loud. Look, I just wanted to check in and let you know it's completely gorgeous here. I'll call you again when my luggage shows up so we can chat more. Right now, I gotta find some pants." Mina looked up just as the clock tower started to chime. "The shopping here is a bit limited, or my ass is just too damn big to fit in anything because I can't even find a pair of jeans."

Chloe laughed again. "It's not your ass, honey. It's the European sizing. Try men's jeans. They may fit better and there will probably be a wider selection. You like the low riders anyway, right?"

“Yeah. I will. Love you.”

“Love you too, honey. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Mina smiled at Chloe’s concern. “I’m fine. This is just a bit too surreal for words, but I’ll get through it. You were right. I need to do this.”

“All right. But you call if you need anything.”

“I will. Love you, Clo.”

Mina closed her phone and sighed. Men’s jeans. Not a chance. With that, she headed back in the opposite direction to see if there might be any shops that could at least offer her something in the women’s section.

After several hours and countless stores later, she purchased what she needed and was thoroughly depressed at the thought of being forced to buy men’s jeans, after all. Mina ended up in a pub perched by a frosted window, drinking an incredibly hot coffee and nibbling on a sandwich. What she wouldn’t give for a Spar Café mocha. Her shopping bags sat at her feet and she looked down to survey her goodies: a sweater, a thermal hoodie, socks, undies and one pair of low ride men’s jeans. She was still shocked as hell she couldn’t find any women’s jeans that fit her right in any of the stores. Damn, Chloe was right again.

She picked up her coffee and continued to sip the bitter liquid, wishing for a couple of pumps of mocha. Sitting there, looking out the window, wondering why her life had gone in this particular direction, she noticed several people on the street suddenly scurry for entrance into any building along the cobbled streets. What was happening? Mina stood and wiped the frost and fog off the small window to peer out. Once she saw what was coming, she couldn’t believe her eyes.

Oh, I am so not in Kansas anymore.

Slowly moving down the narrow cobblestone road was a giant dog. Well, the closer it got, Mina soon realized it was no dog. Her eyes widened as she realized what it was. No, this was definitely not a dog. It was a wolf, and it was enormous. Its alert gaze and stealthy gait sent anyone who saw it scrambling for safety. The wolf quickened its steps as it came closer to the pub and Mina was able to finally get a clear view of his size. She stared out the window transfixed. He was magnificent, yet Mina was still thankful she was safely inside.

The other patrons of the restaurant moved toward the windows next to Mina. She could hear their short, shallow breaths, which did nothing except fog the windows again. Mina reached down to grab her napkin to wipe off the glass for a better view.

Her brief movement must have caught the wolf’s attention, because he stopped mid-lope ... directly in front of the pub window. His golden, yellow eyes met hers and his head lowered to catch her gaze.

This was kinda cool in a horrific sort of way. The collective gasp of the rest of the patrons in the small pub caught her off guard as she turned to her right and looked at an elderly gentleman. He mumbled something, suddenly crossed himself and backed away from the window. Okay. A shiver ran over her skin. Now would be a good time to drag out the German to English handbook she’d picked up at Heathrow, but she couldn’t bring herself to move away from the window.

Still standing at attention in the middle of the street, the wolf continued to gaze in her direction. Could the animal actually see her? He was massive. The color of his fur mimicked the look of dark ash. Flecks of white, and even a bluish tint, covered his chest

and his front left paw. Other than those two areas, he was the color of charred wood.

Mina leaned to get a better look at the gorgeous animal and her nose bumped the chilled glass. The wolf slowly shifted his huge paws forward and came toward the window. Unbelievable. He was beautiful. Wild. Dangerous. Almost seductive. She suddenly wanted to open the heavy doors to the pub and run to him. To know what running her fingers through his thick, coarse fur felt like. She wanted to feel his warm breath on her face while she looked directly into those magic eyes and scratched behind his ears. How wonderful it would be to have an animal like this as a companion. Something to love her unconditionally. Something to protect her from the world and all the nasty things in it.

She shook her head at her own ruminations. What was she thinking? This was a wild animal, not a big teddy bear. She couldn't just offer it some kibble and expect it to follow her back to her hotel to become her BFF. This beast could easily take off her hand. Come on Mina ... get a grip.

Almost as if the animal realized she had snapped out of her trance, he backed away and trotted down the road again. Once he was at the forest edge, he darted into the trees and was gone. Well, that was interesting.

She turned to grab her backpack to pay for her lunch and discovered all the other customers stood in the middle of the modest room staring at her.

She quickly grabbed her bag, pulled out the exact currency to cover the coffee and sandwich, then pushed her way to the door. Mina wrapped her mother's blue scarf around her neck a few times, threw her pack over her shoulder and began the trek back to the small hotel.

As she walked along the narrow street, she grumbled at her rotten luck. It was truly cosmic her luggage was the only set not to make it on the plane during her layover in Heathrow.

It felt as if the day had gone on forever. But when Mina glanced at the clock tower, it was only late afternoon. The oversized, fluffy bed in her room called to her. Considering she had spent most of the last twenty hours on a plane, driving on the wrong side of the road in a strange country, and on what seemed to be a never-ending search for pants, she was dead tired and in desperate need of a shower. The sun was already starting to set and the street lamps snapped on with a flicker. Mina walked the couple of blocks needed to get to her hotel envisioning a hot shower. She reached for the door to the quaint hotel and suddenly froze. Something looked at her. She felt it. That telltale chill started at the base of her back and traveled all the way to her neck. Heat flushed beneath her skin and she knew without a doubt her entire face and neck were blood red.

Slowly she turned to her right. Her gaze scanned the dim street. The metal sign above her head naming the hotel clinked in the wind. She turned to scan the entire area.

As she was about to brush it off as sleep deprivation, she saw them. Two beady eyes staring in her direction. They were yellow due to the front stoop lantern from the hotel shining into them. Since they were so low to the ground, she dismissed them as belonging to a stray alley cat and started to push the heavy door open to finally enjoy that hot shower she had been dreaming of.

Instead of hearing the creak of the door, she heard the low rumble of a growl. Her legs locked and her body halted in place. She turned back to the set of eyes. They were higher now, just about even with her middle. This was no cat from the alley. This was

something else entirely. Her spine stiffened in response.

Her left hand gripped the handle of the door while she slowly slipped her right hand into her pack. She grasped for anything that could possibly get her out of this hellish situation. Her fingers closed over a cool metal cylinder—breath spray. Jesus, at least the freaking animal would have minty fresh breath as he ripped her throat out.

She slowly slipped the spray out of her bag and readied her aim when the eyes shifted from yellow to white. The animal moved toward her. The glare from the lantern played color tricks on the set of eyes moving closer still. This thing, whatever it was, stalked toward her.

Breath spray ready, she raised her right hand to squirt the minty liquid in those eyes. Her hand shook. Her index finger readied above the plunger and she was about to drench the animal with stinging mist when she saw the fur. Ash colored and thick. The white left paw scraped across the snow-covered cobblestone and came to a halt a mere three feet away.

The wolf.

Chapter Four

Okay. What was she supposed to do now? This was a wild animal. Something not to startle or go near. But all she could think about was dropping to her knees and saying, “Here puppy, puppy.” She wanted to touch him like she’d fantasized about earlier that day when she was at the restaurant. She wanted to know what that gorgeous fur felt like under her palm.

The wolf starred up at her. Not moving, looking as though he tried to think of something to say. She felt as though she lost herself in his amber eyes.

Mina slowly leaned into the hotel door so she would be able to escape the animal staring her down. The moment she moved, the wolf moved. Toward her. Hair rose on the back of her neck. Damn it. Now what was she supposed to do ... become dinner?

The wolf, in all of his glory, sauntered toward her and then did the most unimaginable thing. He sat. Right in front of her. He just sat, looking at her as if he was saying, “What’s up?” His mouth actually opened and his long, pink tongue unrolled to hang out like a puppy panting for a treat.

The wild beast actually looked like a regular house dog waiting for a pat on the head. Her left hand moved off the door handle to reach for him. She couldn’t get over the urge to touch the animal. Sitting there looking like a friendly pup, he wanted her to pet him. To touch him. Somehow, she just knew it.

Not smart Mina. Wild animal. Do not touch!

Mina gently shifted slightly toward him. She didn’t want to startle the animal, but she just had to touch him. Mina splayed her fingers on her right hand and raised it so the wolf could see what she was doing.

Not changing his position, the wolf lifted his gaze to watch her careful movements. After what seemed like an eternity, Mina lowered her hand toward the wolf’s head. Closer. Closer. She was almost there. She didn’t sense fear nor was she thinking about what this animal could do to her. All she wanted was to touch him.

Slower. Lower. Her hand reached for the wolf. Her fingers trembled, itching to touch him. Almost there. Barely brushing the shining coat, she felt him. Soft as fleece. She sunk her hand into his thick pelt and reveled in the feel of him. She bent down and was now eye level with the wolf. Staring into those endless eyes of his, she smiled. His tongue unraveled again and he stared back, mouth wide open and almost appearing to smile himself.

How could she be doing this? The sudden death of her mother must have done something to her common sense. She lost it more by the second in the presence of the wolf. This magnificent animal was doing something to her.

She was on her knees now in front of him and both hands were completely engulfed within his thick, black fur. Her pants soaked up the grayish slush of the street and her nose began to run. She didn’t care. She felt alive, as if she had some sort of unnatural power to speak to animals or something. Mina Roarke—Wolf Whisperer Extraordinaire.

Without warning, the wolf stood and quickly backed away. His head now hung low and his expression had turned predatory. Baring massive canines, the wolf’s head dropped to attack mode. Mina shot to her feet and backed away from the animal. She

turned to her left to follow the wolf's gaze.

Two men walked, or rather stumbled, down the road. Obviously drunk and slurring their words, they meandered toward her. She whipped back around, only to see the wolf trotting to the forest edge. He left her. Damn those drunken jerks. They ruined a perfectly good fantasy.

Reaching the edge of the trees, the wolf stopped and turned to look back at Mina. His mouth opened again and that long, pink tongue waved in the cold air. Smiling again. Almost inviting. Did he want her to come with him? Did she dare follow this animal out into the forest?

He seemed to be waiting. Was she being sucked into this weird fantasy she had no control over? Everything happened too quickly and she was so tired of not knowing what came next or what emotion she should be feeling. Mina had been put through the ringer this past month and she wanted some peace.

She took a couple of reluctant steps toward the wolf who still looked at her intently. At that moment, he looked like a friendly puppy just wanting to play. Mina actually smiled. The wolf's ears perked forward and his mouth opened wider as if to smile back.

She wanted to continue to walk toward him and slide her hand back into his warm fur, but Mina was a smart girl and this was a wild animal not to be trusted. He could turn on her in a second and she would be helpless. Still, for some unknown reason, she yearned to go to him and it truly felt as if he wanted her with him.

Was this why Julia had always told her she was special? It seemed that when she was young, Mina could always attract wild animals. Whether it was the deer in the backyard letting her pet them, or the falcons always flying over her when she was on the deck, Mina had always had an affinity for wildlife. Was that why she was "special"? Could she somehow attune herself with nature? Were wild animals not threatened by her? Maybe. Or maybe she was just losing it. She took another step toward the wolf. He rose from his haunches and whined.

Mina suddenly couldn't remember a time when an animal purposely hurt her. She had been around nature most of her life and at no time had she felt she was in danger. Once when she was in elementary school, she'd followed a skunk down her driveway and the thing actually let her pet him. Of course Julia screamed wildly and ran toward her for fear she would be sprayed, but the skunk just ducked and scooted back into the ferns on the side of their home.

Would this be any different? Of course a skunk couldn't necessarily kill her like a wolf could. But they were both wild animals and she realized they both had wanted her attention.

With trepidation pulling at her muscles, she took another step and dear god, the wolf actually wagged its tail. Could she do this? Could she follow a giant wolf into the Black Forest of Germany?

Mina slipped her shopping bags into the lobby through the door and placed her arm into the second strap of her pack. She carefully made her way down the road and reached the wet, snow-covered leaves and pine needles marking the edge of the forest.

One step.

That was all that held her back. One step and she would actually be following a wild animal into the forest.

Mina took the one step, then another, trudging her way into the dense trees. The sky

wasn't completely dark yet so she could see the wolf ahead of her, leading the way. He trotted slowly, allowing her to keep up.

Mina muttered to herself. "This is insane." All the while, she continued to follow him. Up the hill and deeper into the forest, she continued to participate in follow the leader. After a few more minutes she stumbled on something. She looked down and discovered her boot was untied. Bending, she hollered, "Hold up, big guy. Gotta tie my boot."

Lacing up both of her boots tight and double knotting them, she rose to continue following the wolf. She looked where she thought he would be. Nothing there but trees. She looked to her left and to her right. Still nothing there.

"Well, shit." Mina sighed in exasperation.

Now what? She couldn't just stand there alone and expect the wolf to come back and get her. She called out. "Hey, big guy. Where are you?"

No answer. Well, of course no answer. This was a wild animal not a tour guide.

Mina blew out an exhausting breath and turned on her heel to begin her way back toward town. Her disappointment was palpable. As she tried to turn, Mina found she was frozen in place. She couldn't move. She looked down at her foot, expecting it to be lodged under a tree root or something. Nothing but her waterproof Timberline boot. Again, she tried to move. Not happening.

She scanned the trees for something, anything that could help her. Where had that wolf gone?

She felt the ever-present panic rise in her stomach. How stupid could she have been? Following a wolf into the woods. She had to be out of her mind.

Startled, she looked over her shoulder at a subtle movement. Okay. Maybe that was him. But what if it was something else? Something hungry. She couldn't think about it now. She needed to get out of there and back to the safety and warmth of her little hotel room.

The movement continued. The small bushes swayed and the rotted timber on the floor of the forest seemed to be snaking across the ground toward her. Wait, it wasn't the ground moving ... it was the air. Thick fog crept toward her. Her stomach tightened and her hands trembled as her panic level increased. Why the hell had she followed that damn wolf?

She felt it. Something was slowly surrounding her. Mina knew she should move and move quickly, but she couldn't bring herself to budge. Within seconds, she was enveloped in a cool, thick fog. It lapped at her thighs and swirled up her stomach and around her arms. Her trembling hands opened and her fingers splayed out in the thick soup, feeling its coolness. Her breath hitched in her throat as she closed her eyes and willed her body to move. She took several deep breaths to try and calm her nerves. This is ridiculous. This was her body and it should move when she told it to, but in this case, there was someone or something that had a different plan for her.

How did she get herself into this mess? She was standing in the middle of the Black Forest, feet cemented to the cold, damp ground and she was being held captive by freaking fog. She would laugh at the absurdity of it all if she wasn't so frightened. Her legs strained to capacity trying to move. The small vein on her forehead throbbed as she grunted while struggling to break free. Why couldn't she move?

Mina took more calming breaths. She had to stay calm. This was just some freak of

nature, right? It would be over any minute. She'd sprint out of the dense forest and laugh about it when she was safely ensconced in her small but really desirable hotel room.

The air stilled and a chill ran over Mina's skin. She didn't see it but by god she began to feel it. Like an oppressive heat smothering her, even though she was in the thick of the Black Forest in November. It was as if a wool blanket had been wrapped around her while she stood in a sauna. She broke out in a sheen of sweat and gnashed her teeth together, straining to move her freaking legs.

Move! Move! Move! Jesus, why the hell was she not moving?

Chapter Five

A smell enveloped her. The scent was like inhaling the night. Strong but soothing. It reminded her of the trips she took with Chloe to New Orleans every year for Jazz Fest. They would stay in The Provincial Hotel on Chartres and spend the evenings sitting on the balcony facing the Mississippi. This same smell would waft up from the French Market as they drank, laughed and took in the sights. Pungent patchouli mixed with vanilla. Distinctive only to the Quarter. Right now, she was nowhere near Louisiana, so why did she smell the unique incense?

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted movement again. This was different. The movement was at eye level. Someone was there. Maybe help. Maybe not.

Mina started to shiver from both the cold and the fear racing up her spine. She spun her head around toward the sounds. "Anyone there?"

Silence.

Whipping her head frantically, trying to see around her, she shouted out again, "Is anyone there?"

Nothing. Not a sound.

Mina's heart beat wildly as she continued to scan her surroundings for anything that would get her boot out of whatever she was stuck in, but she couldn't see a thing. Maybe she could dislodge whatever the hell it was locking her in place. It had to be a vine or root and if she could get a hold of it, she could somehow maneuver out and get free.

She skimmed her shaking hands down her shins and ended up at the tips of her boots. She felt all around the heels and back around to the front. Nothing there. She dug the tips of her cold fingers underneath the arch of her boot and tried to feel if anything was there. She could barely get the tips past the ridges of the boot soles, but she couldn't detect anything holding her.

With a jerk, she rose and crossed her arms over her chest protectively and gave herself a squeeze. Her stomach turned and her teeth chattered. Why couldn't she move? Nothing on the ground prevented her from taking a step, but she couldn't bring herself to move either foot. Panic set in full bore and she started to shake. Warmth still surrounded her, but she was chilled through to her bones. Damn she was scared ... and she hated being scared.

Weakness.

Again, she turned her head in all directions hoping to spot something ... anything that could help her. At that moment, she saw movement again from the corner of her eye. She felt the blood rush from her face and she thought she'd faint. Mina had never been a fan of horror movies or anything with creatures hiding in the shadows. She was too much of a sissy to sit still long enough to watch something like that. Chloe, on the other hand, could howl at the moon, laughing through the worst of any slasher flick.

"Hel-lo?"

Something was wrong. Something unnatural. Mina usually didn't believe in stuff like that, but at this moment she began to reconsider. She felt the hair on the back of her neck rise. The hair on her arms stood on end and her scalp tingled all over. She was being watched.

She closed her eyes and felt moisture pool at the corners of her lashes. Her stomach rolled with panic. Still inhaling the spicy scent of patchouli and vanilla, she leaned back her head and whispered to herself, "Please get me the hell out of here. Please."

"It is not normally wise to curse while praying."

Had she said that out loud?

Mina felt a shiver go through her stomach and she whipped her head back at the sound of the deep, male baritone voice. Her eyes flew open and she let out a high-pitched yelp. "Whoa! Who's there?"

"I am."

Swinging her head from side to side, Mina sought to get a bead on the voice to determine where it was coming from. Damn ... that voice. It flowed over her senses, her body immediately reacting, not in fear, but in yearning.

Squinting her eyes while looking around, Mina again tried to see who was there. "Who are you? Where are you?"

"I am here to watch over you."

His voice was like warm syrup. Maybe if he kept talking she could get a line on his location. "What?"

"I am here to watch over you."

She continued to look around her, trying to spot the man with the porn voice. "What?"

"If I am to constantly repeat myself, then maybe you should have your hearing checked."

Her panic vanished and her temper immediately flared. Why did she suddenly want to call this guy an asshole?

Closer. He was getting closer. And to her left. "I don't need my hearing checked," she snapped. "Maybe just a general scan to determine if she was still sane or not, but hell, she could hear just fine."

"Then as I said, I was sent to watch over you."

Coming up behind her on her left. "By whom?" A sudden suspicion popped into her mind. "Do you know Chloe Walker?"

"I don't believe I am familiar with anyone by that name. Why?"

Mina's fear returned. She was beyond scared now. Her nerves were firing a mile a minute. "What do you want?"

Closer now and still to the left, the voice answered her again. "I'm not here to hurt you, ma chère. Quite the opposite. I have been ordered to make sure no harm comes to you."

Warm cream. That damn voice coated her like thick, warm cream.

Mina heard the rustling of underbrush to her left and she turned toward the sound. Her gaze started at ground level and she caught sight of a shadow moving toward her. She tracked it through the thick brush of the forest, watching it come closer and closer. Panic started to rise in her chest and the urge to bolt simmered just underneath her skin. She crouched down and placed her hands on the cold earth, hoping she had not been seen by whatever was out there with her. The shuffling continued toward her and just as a scream was about to escape her throat, she noticed a very nice pair of black boots emerge from the rotted brush in front of her. Her gaze traveled up. And up. Attached to those boots was one hell of a large silhouette of a man standing in front of her.

Oh god. She was about to be murdered on her first day out of the country. Fantastic. The giant stopped and proceeded to bow, wrapping one arm around his middle and the other behind his back.

What the hell?

“I am Mathias de Bounevialle, Ms. Roarke. I am here for your protection.”

She sucked in a startled breath. “You know my name?”

“Of course. As I said ... I was sent to watch over you.”

Mina had completely forgotten she was mysteriously glued to the ground and couldn't move. Apparently that was the last thing on her mind, considering she was actually having a conversation with a stranger in the middle of the forest. And the voice of that stranger was as smooth as satin. With every word he spoke, she felt as if she was being caressed.

Mina shook her head, trying to rattle around some sense that had evidently disappeared. This was not the time to get turned-on.

The owner of that sex-filled voice moved directly into the moonlight and she could see him perfectly. And oh how perfect he was.

He was well over six feet tall. He wore a long, charcoal gray coat that swept the ground as he walked. His legs were tightly encased in dark denim and a tight black turtleneck outlined his taut stomach and massive chest. She noticed a chain around his neck that held a silver open-knot infinity cross. Her eyes widened. The same cross she currently wore around her neck. Her mother had given her that cross for her sixteenth birthday and she always wore it. And now, a strange man following her into the forest had one too.

When she reached his face, she wanted to kick herself. He was absolutely gorgeous. Long, brown wavy hair cascaded around his broad shoulders. His eyes glowed emerald green and his mouth was quirked in a smug little smile. His chin was dimpled and it matched the two other indentions gracing his cheeks as he smiled.

Wow.

He began walking toward her and Mina stood and instinctively lifted her hand to stop him. He obeyed and halted in his tracks. “Look. I don't know you. Please stay where you are.”

The man calling himself Mathias smiled once again and stretched out his arms to his sides with his palms open toward her. “As I have said, chère, I will not harm you. I give you my word.”

Mina wiped her cold, sweaty hands on her jeans and felt her legs shaking. If she could only move, then she would have an advantage. Right then, she was a sitting target and this guy could basically do what he wanted. But if that were the case, why did he stop when she asked him to?

Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.

Looking down at her boots and then back to the huge stranger, Mina reluctantly asked, “Um ... I seem to be stuck on something. Can you help me?”

“My pleasure, Ms. Roarke. I will, however, need to move toward you to help.” He paused a moment, continuing to stare into Mina's eyes. “With your permission?”

She nodded in agreement and he began walking toward her. The closer he got, the bigger he got. He was massive. Massive, and again, utterly gorgeous.

When he got about a foot away from her, he took another step and then dropped to

one knee. Mina was startled with his movement but remained still. She was tensed and ready in case he tried to do anything to her, knowing this guy could take what he wanted in seconds. But she would still do what she needed to do to fight him off if she had to.

He reached down and grasped her calf. She instantly felt the warmth of his hands surrounding her leg. He ran his palms down it and then moved them over her boot. Within seconds, he freed her foot and she stumbled backward. He quickly stood and grabbed her around the waist to steady her. She froze at the contact and looked up into his eyes. Mina felt her body shiver. He stared at her as though hungry. Hungry for her. Mina felt his fingers dig into her hips and unconsciously, she swayed toward him.

It was almost trancelike. Her body betrayed her mind and reacted to this strange man as though they had been lovers for years. Her hand landed square on his chest and she felt the beat of his heart. It was as rapid as hers.

Turned-on? I'm actually getting turned-on at a time like this?

He immediately stepped back at her touch. "I apologize for the closeness, Ms. Roarke. Are you all right now?"

In a shaky breath, Mina replied, "Yeah. Fine."

They stood there, silently staring at each other.

Mina finally spoke, breaking the spell. "Who sent you here?"

Mathias placed his hands behind his back and blew out a breath. "You mean a great deal to someone with great power in this part of the country. I believe you know him as your father?"

Mina flinched at the last word. Father. He knew she was here. Her body ran cold. "How? How did he know I was even here?"

Mathias smiled down at her. "Your father knows many things and it is not my place to ask how he knows them."

Mina's pulse quickened and she tentatively took a few steps toward Mathias. "Is he here? Can I see him?"

"He is away on business at the moment, chère, but has asked me to protect you until his return. I hope you will be able to accept me until then. Otherwise, I will just have to follow your every move as your shadow."

Mina looked down at her hand completely engulfed by his and then back to his beautiful, chiseled face. She felt herself warming to him again and she needed to keep her head straight. She was not the type of woman to become instantly charmed by a man. But apparently this was no ordinary man, because all she could think about was how wonderful it felt to have her hand held in his. The warmth that emanated from him was staggering. So was the dominance. He was someone of power and authority sent to care for her. Or so he'd said. It was up to her whether or not to trust what he said. But as she gazed down at their joined hands again, she realized she felt safe with this man and didn't understand why.

She gently tugged her hand from his grasp and tucked it in her jacket. "Look, Matea..."

"Mathias."

"Sorry. Mathias. I don't know you or anything about my father. You can't just expect me to go with you and not question it. I can't do that."

"I know that, Ms. Roarke. That is why your father asked me to give you this. Something to persuade you to trust me." Mathis reached inside his coat, pulled out an

envelope and handed it to Mina.

She took it from him and quickly opened it. At the top of the paper was the familiar falcon's crest she had seen on all of the letters her mother had received from her father. Her hands began to shake as she read the letter:

Mina,

I am so sorry it took the loss of your mother to finally bring you to me. I loved her more than you know. There are reasons I could not be with the both of you, but now that Julia has passed, it's time for you to know who you are. I cannot keep you hidden forever, and as your father, it's my duty to care for you and keep you safe.

I want to know you, Mina. And I want you to know why your mother and I did what we did to keep you safe.

Please stay with Mathias and allow him to accompany you wherever you go until I return. When the time comes, he will bring you to me and you will have all the answers you require.

Please do this for me. I know you don't owe me anything and my absence in your life has caused you grief and confusion. But please know that Julia and I did this for your safety. It will all be explained soon.

Please trust the man standing in front of you. I trust him with your life.

R

Mina folded the letter and placed it carefully back in the envelope. Hands still shaking, she wiped the tears from her eyes and looked back at Mathias. "Fine. I'll go with you. But please stop calling me Ms. Roarke. It makes me sound like a kindergarten teacher."

"As you wish, Willamina."

Mina cringed at the sound of her formal name. She hated it and coming from such a gorgeous mouth as his, it made it worse. "No. Please, just call me Mina."

"Comme vous souhaitez, Mina."

Mina tilted her head to the side and looked at him in confusion.

Mathias quickly translated, "My apologies. As you wish, Mina."

Mathias moved his hand to the side, indicating which direction Mina should walk. She moved forward and they both headed back to Staufen. She felt his gaze on her and, in a weird way, she liked it. This was definitely not the best time to get turned-on by a stranger, but hell, he was gorgeous and apparently her shadow for a while. Even though Mina was still reeling from the news that her father knew of her presence in Germany, she couldn't stop thinking about the behemoth man walking behind her. What she should be doing was thinking about what to say to the man that had fathered her twenty-eight years ago and why he decided to separate himself from her and her mother. But what ran through her sex-warped mind was how she would love to touch Mathias again. He smelled so damn good and those lips of his begged to be kissed. She must be out of her mind to have these types of thoughts at a time like this. She shouldn't be thinking about touching the complete PD following her out of the forest.

Chloe had come up with that little analogy while they were in college. Every time they saw a hot guy, they called him a PD—Panty Dropper. And this Mathias was definitely an original PD.

Mathias smoothly moved in front of her to lead her down the rough path back to the village.

Mina stared at the vast expanse of Mathias's back. He was huge. They grew 'em pretty big here. "Why don't you have a German accent?"

Without turning, Mathias answered, "I speak several different languages and lived my life in several different countries. I wasn't in one long enough to call home so I just adapted to English since it's usually spoken everywhere."

"Wasn't that French you were speaking a minute ago?"

"Yes. I was born there. It was my mother's language. Sometimes I just unconsciously slip into it."

"Oh." Real witty Mina.

He led the way down the hill and she followed closely. Not too close though. No way would she trip and fall right on top of this guy. She just continued to gaze at the back of his head. Why did he wear his hair so long? He looked like a male model from a cover of a romance novel, and for some reason she suddenly wanted to take a huge pair of shears and lop it off. But how wonderful it would be to run her fingers through it. No, he was too pretty and off limits. She would leave his hair alone, for now.

The patchouli and vanilla scent tickled her nose again as she walked in between two giant evergreen trees behind him. Was that him she smelled? It had to be. She didn't remember smelling anything like that until he showed up. Again, the scent reminded her of the French Quarter. All she needed were a few hurricanes from Pat O'Brien's and Chloe sitting by her side. Her friend would find this oh so hysterical and Mina was sure she would hear Chloe's mischievous little giggle when she called and told her about this goliath of a man.

She looked down the hill and saw Mathias had stopped and waited for her. She picked up her pace and quickly caught up with him. He placed his hand at the base of her back and continued to walk with her toward her hotel. She could actually feel the heat of his hand through her coat. It felt strangely familiar. Comforting.

Mathias looked down at Mina with another little smirk on his mouth. "Exactly what were you doing out in the forest by yourself?"

Mina continued toward the hotel and didn't meet his gaze. She was too embarrassed at the flush created by his touch. "I was just taking a walk. I needed some air."

Looking away, Mathias focused on the path back to the hotel. "A piece of advice, Mina. Do not walk in the woods by yourself. There are things out there that could do you much harm."

At his words, she looked at him, realizing the one thing that could do her harm right now was this man. He was sent by her father and he wasn't offering any information on who R was. Should she really trust him? Hell, she didn't know him. But yet, he touched her and she was let him. Well, that should probably stop considering how she was outwardly reacting to him.

Mina moved away from his hand and put some distance between them. He gave her another amused look, lifting a brow, and continued to walk beside her.

Jesus, she needed a cigarette.

Chapter Six

Mina could see the forest's edge ahead. "What is his name? My father."

Mathias stopped and looked down at Mina. "His name is Roderick."

The named rolled around in her head. Roderick. She looked away and continued toward the lights ahead. "Thank you."

They reached the lantern-lined street and continued toward her hotel. Her gaze shifted to the left to take him in. Damn, he really was beautiful. She imagined wrapping her hands in his long, thick hair and pulling his mouth to hers. She shivered. What she could do to him and what she wanted him to do to her were not what she should be thinking about right now, but she couldn't help it. His skin was alabaster white and smooth as silk. With his dark green eyes and golden brown hair, she thought he would be at least a bit tanned, but his coloring definitely worked for him. He was sex on fire. Her gaze traveled down his profile to his arms. They looked solid and extremely capable of sweeping her off her feet and throwing her across her bed. And those hands ... long fingers ending in what looked to be a two-hundred-dollar manicure.

She worked her gaze back up to his face to check out that mouth again. His lower lip was plump and totally kissable. She wanted to suck it into her mouth and nibble at it with her teeth. What would he taste like? She imagined vanilla mixed with sin. Totally lost in thought, she didn't realize he also looked at her peripherally.

Damn. Busted.

Mina covered. "I like your coat."

His mouth formed that sideways grin again. "Thank you."

Yeah ... totally busted.

They followed the cobblestone street through the empty market area to the long multicolored row houses for some of the businesses in town. Above each door was an elaborate brass filigree hanger with a sign hanging down identifying each business. They swung in the chilled wind, making it sound like a playground swing set during recess. Strands of little twinkling lights were strung on anything that was permanent for the holiday season. The entire scene looked like the inside of a snow globe.

Finally reaching the hotel, Mathias pulled open the heavy wooden door with one hand and swept the other in front of him, bowing before her. Mina stopped in the lobby to grab her shopping bags and headed toward the stairs to her room. She turned to thank Mathias for taking her back to the hotel and almost ran into the wall that was his chest. She caught herself before placing her hands on his well-defined body and righted herself just inches away from him.

"What are you doing?" Mina blurted out, her eyes widening.

Mathias lowered his head and stared into Mina's surprised gaze. His lips lifted into a smile. "I am, of course, escorting you to your room."

Hand shooting up to stop him in his tracks, Mina blurted, "Um ... no. Thank you but, no. I'll be fine." She turned and started to move up the steep steps to her desperately desired room when she felt his hand snake around her lower arm.

"Ms. Roarke, I received very specific instructions from your father. I am not to leave your side until he returns."

Mina looked down at his hand circled around her arm. She felt his heat through her coat. There was no way she could let him walk her to her room. She was too turned-on by him and it had been way too long since she'd had a man in her bed. "Look Matty..."

"Mathias."

"I'm sorry. Mathias. It's been an interesting day, to say the least. I'm in Germany, they lose my luggage, I meet up with a stranger in the middle of the Black Forest and find out my father wants to meet me. To be honest, right now, I just really want to take a shower and try to relax. I don't need you to walk me to my room. It's right up the stairs, and again, I appreciate your kindness but this is good night."

Mina tried to turn again to go to her room. His fingers tightened slightly and he took the first step to loom over her. He inhaled slowly as if he was getting ready to deliver an unwanted speech. Mina narrowed her eyes and raised a hand to stop him from speaking. Instead of delving into the reasons he would not be leaving her side, he reached up with his free hand and grasped Mina's raised palm gently. He released her arm and pressed her hand between both of his as if warming it. His green eyes darkened as Mina's mouth fell open in shock. She stopped breathing, almost as if in expectation of what he was going to do. Very slowly and deliberately, he raised her hand to his mouth.

The blood in her veins stopped flowing as her knuckles came into contact with his warm lips. His mouth remained on her hand for what seemed like hours. Her fingers instinctively curled inward and she fought the urge not to place her other hand in his hair and hold on tight. Jesus, what this man could probably do with that mouth. It might have been a while since Mina had had sex, but the flutter in her stomach reminded her she was probably due for some real quick.

Slowly removing his mouth from her hand, he took a slight nip at her skin with his teeth. Mina's nipples immediately tightened against her shirt at the sensation. Mathias lifted his thick lashes and she met his heated gaze. His eyes were warm and inviting. He didn't let her hand go but simply started brushing the inside of her palm with the pad of his thumb. Mina was immediately aware of the wetness pooling between her legs at the mere idea of what could happen next. She felt chilled but about to melt at the same time. No words came to her. Only a feeling of guilt mixed with the tantalizing thought of letting him touch her more. She was way too turned-on to utter a word. With her mouth still open, she just stood there and stared. His eyes were almost hypnotic. Her mind was a complete blank. All she knew was she did not want this man to let go of her hand.

She imagined he continued up the steps and led her behind him, like a lamb to slaughter. Once reaching her room, he would push her up against the door and crush his mouth to hers, sending her into oblivion. He'd lace his hands into her hair and gently tug at the curls to force her closer. She'd arch against him to get the feel of his body against hers. Warm, hard and ready. His hands would move slowly down her back to grip her ass, lifting her against him. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she'd feel the hardness of his need for her and grind herself against it. She'd moan into his mouth that she wanted him desperately. He'd magically open the door, and within seconds, he'd be on top of her, burying her in the soft down comforter on top of the bed in her room. Gently moving his hands up her sides and underneath her sweater, he'd cup her breasts and move his thumbs expertly over her already hard nipples. Throwing back her head in ecstasy, she'd beg him to take her...

Wake up Mina!

She snapped out of her sexual trance to realize she had been grasping his hand hard enough to dig her short nails into his skin.

He slowly straightened his stance. Once again, she looked up into his gorgeous face. Was he smiling? Her hand still molded in his, Mina remained frozen in place. "Good night then, Mina. Sleep well."

Mina's hand was slowly lowered to her side and his warm palms slipped away, leaving her wondering what the hell had just happened.

Very casually, Mathias turned and walked out of the hotel, closing the door firmly behind him.

Mina remained standing on the third step with her mouth open and her gaze glued to the closed front door of the hotel. "Holy shit."

* * * *

Mathias reluctantly made his way down the cobblestone street away from Mina's hotel. He should not have touched her. What would Roderick do when he found out what happened? Touching the king's daughter in such a familiar way was completely forbidden, and Mathias knew his head would roll if Roderick ever found out. Mathias was sent there to protect and keep vigil over her until the king returned. He was not there to become personable with her. He thrust his hands into his coat pockets and strode toward the forest.

For the life of him, he couldn't help himself. Her hair was long, lush and beautiful, and he itched to run his hands through it. Dark brown curls had bounced in the middle of her back as they had walked back to the hotel. She smelled like lust. Her face was pale and freckled and all he could think of was looking into those deep chocolate brown eyes while he plunged deep inside her, taking her hard and fast. He hadn't wanted a woman like that as long as he could remember. He had only been in her presence for less than an hour and all he wanted to do was ravish her until she screamed.

In searching her room that morning while she shopped, he'd found some of the contents of her backpack she had traveled with. She wore Obsession perfume and used a citrus lotion on her skin. He could almost feel her lying underneath him, wrapping her firm, strong thighs around his middle and digging her nails into his ass while he pounded furiously into her. Standing on the steps of the hotel stairwell with her, he'd inhaled her scent deeply as if to tattoo it on his brain. When he kissed her hand, he could faintly make out the tangy lotion permeating from her skin. He could still smell her scent on his hand. Hell, he needed to wipe that thought out of his mind immediately before Roderick found out what Mathias really wanted to do with his daughter.

Knowing she wanted him in the same way made things worse. Not only could he feel it, but he could smell it as well. When he held her hand, he felt her heart rate spike as he swirled a thumb in her palm. She had little goose bumps on her skin, even though she'd been hot to the touch. With her fingernails digging into the top of his hand, he knew how he affected her. Mixed in with the perfume and citrus of her body lotion, there was also a distinct aroma of arousal. The musky scent made his mouth water. She wanted him.

This was one of those times Mathias wished he didn't have the gift of animalistic senses. Of course in battle, his ability to sense others around him, hear the slightest movement or sound, and to have the ability to shape shift into just about any animal that didn't fly was why he was ranked as high as he was within the Coteri military. As one of

their most feared warriors, he was quickly moving up the ranks. This assignment involving Mina had been his first mission to come directly from Roderick.

Others in his family had been in the king's service in the past. His sister recently completed a highly regarded position in America because of her expertise in the outer world where mortals resided. Mathias' father, Xavier, served as a long-standing member of the king's council before his death. He had been relied upon for several centuries to assist and mentor to Roderick in the elements of war.

This assignment was Mathias' chance to show the king he possessed skills other than ones needed in battle. Yes, he was strong and calculating on the battlefield, but Mathias believed he could out-think any opponent put against him. He had a skill for strategy, but unfortunately a temper that rivaled an erupting volcano. His competitive nature didn't allow Mathias to admit defeat in any manner, be it on the battlefield or playing a simple game of chess. He was determined to be the best at everything. But because of this, few council members laid their faith in him when delegating an assignment.

This had held him back when directives were assigned. The king wanted someone loyal to carry out any mission he needed. Roderick did not want someone questioning him or changing the elements of their duty to him just to fit their own beliefs. The king did not want a loose cannon out in the field. There was no question that Mathias could defend the Coteri kingdom with one hand tied behind his back, but could he handle following orders he did not necessarily agree with?

Mathias battled himself over his strengths that were now becoming his weaknesses. He thought his sheer will and determination on the battlefield entitled him to all of the other benefits that came with a highly ranked member of the military. His baby sister set him straight on this.

Upon receiving the protection detail assignment and learning it involved the king's only daughter, he had been dumbstruck. The king wasn't supposed to have a child, especially a human child, considering he had not mated with anyone during his reign.

Even though Mathias now knew this was what his king had been preparing him for all along, he now questioned his ability to succeed in protecting such a vulnerable treasure. Just being around Mina sent his body into a state of complete need. Hell, his dick was still rock-hard. His frustration with himself prevented him from staying at the hotel as he'd been ordered to do. He ached to be with her, to feel her, to be inside her. He desperately wanted to turn on his heel, return to the hotel, run up those rickety stairs to her room and mark her as his. And nothing short of having her would tamp down his colossal erection. He wished he had not sensed her response. With the knowledge she wanted him as much as he wanted her, there was nothing stopping him. Nothing but the king's wrath.

And now, because of a moment of weakness, Mathias was probably a dead man walking.

Continuing toward the forest, Mathias shed his coat, dropped it where he stood and trotted toward the trees. By the time he reached the edge of the tree line, he was in a dead run. Feet slamming into the frost-covered ground, he sped past the huge evergreens into the mouth of the Black Forest. As he made his way deeper into the trees, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. His strength ebbed and flowed through his body, his muscles and his legs as he gained speed. Finally letting his anger and frustration take over, he began to transform. His long arms reached out in front of him as he dove forward.

Muscles contorted and stretched. Bones shifted and cracked. The hair on his body thickened and turned dark as ink. In midair, his body stretched and wriggled into the shape of a black panther. Claws outstretched to grasp onto the cold earth, Mathias skidded to a stop and turned back. Even in animal form, he knew where he wanted to be. Where he should be.

There was something about this woman. Something that tamed the anger inside him. The bitterness that had caused him so much trouble for years. She calmed him, but at the same time he had the fierce need to protect her, to be next to her. He had always been satisfied with relying on himself. Providing strength for his sister when his parents died. He wasn't used to being distracted by anything or anyone. And then he set eyes on Mina and all of that changed.

He crouched down and focused his gaze on the darkness of the forest surrounding him. His ears twitched at each sound made by the regular inhabitants of the Black Forest. Above him, a falcon circled and made its way north toward the castle. Tremayne doing his nightly rounds. Mathias kept close to the ground to go undetected by one of his best sergeants. If he succeeded in not being seen, he would be speaking to Tremayne in the morning regarding his lack of security within the kingdom's realm.

Within seconds, Tre appeared behind Mathias and casually leaned against a giant evergreen.

"Hey boss. How's the assignment going?"

Not wanting to transform back to his human form, nor deal with answering the million-dollar question of the moment, Mathias let out a feral growl and bared his teeth to the young officer.

"Okay... Okay. I get the hint. See you back at the station."

Tre turned away as if to return to his rounds, but stopped and turned his head back toward Mathias.

"She's pretty, isn't she?"

At that, Mathias crouched and bared his teeth at the young soldier. The fur on his back bristled in anger. At that moment, he knew he could and would attack his friend for that remark.

Tremayne took off running and leapt into the air. Within seconds, he was airborne and streaking straight for the royal security station in bird-form.

Mathias turned and padded his way back to the edge of the forest in order to keep an eye on the hotel. He would have loved to have the ability to transform into a falcon like Tremayne. How easy and convenient to just fly up to her window and remain on the sill until morning, nice and close to her. Mathias was extremely thankful Tremayne had no idea who Mina was. He didn't need anyone knowing he was actually that close to the daughter of the king. Even though the physical exchange between Mathias and Mina was unknown to Tre, there was no doubt Tre felt Mathias' strong emotion toward her after that little display just now. When Tre mentioned her beauty, Mathias' immediate anger and possessive surge sent up a huge red flag. Great. Way to wear his feelings on his sleeve, so to speak. So much for working on his temper and wearing a mask of calm.

When Mathias reached the edge of the tree line while heading back to the hotel, he opted to reduce his size to a normal black house cat. Not the most dramatic transformation he had ever done, but this would at least get him into the building, and with a little luck, into her room.

Chapter Seven

Roderick sat at the conference table deep in the bowels of the castle embedded in the mountains of the Black Forest, his fingers tapping anxiously on the dark mahogany wood. He was there along with all of his Coteri generals from the Royal Legion, listening to their report of the recent activity of the Valta. This was the last place Roderick wanted to be. His daughter was there and he desperately wanted to see her and make sure she was all right.

His gaze wandered around the room, taking in the scene that played before him. His Coteri army was all over the world, but there were a few select stations where his generals were headquartered. To his left was Nash. He was general for the East Coast of the Americas and located primarily in the Appalachian Mountains. Moving around the table from Nash was Killian, general of the West Coast of the Americas stationed in Seattle. This was the one area Roderick had dealt with carefully over the past years.

With Mina living in Washington and only a select few of his closest confidants knowing of her existence, he constantly had to explain to Killian why there was a presence of the German Royal Legion in his area. Kil was the type of male who would take what he was told by the king, but Roderick knew that someday he would have to answer for his deception toward one of his strongest generals. As Roderick looked around the room, Killian caught his gaze. Again, Roderick felt the prodding stare and tipped his head in the knowledge that both of them would have other business to discuss sometime soon.

Roderick continued his scan of the small room and came to Isla of the Highlands, the only woman of the council. Isla had been one of Roderick's father's closest confidants during his reign. The former king, Atticus, utilized her as a personal council. Before his military legion made any decisions on battle, he had always consulted Isla. She was an extremely strong woman who spoke her mind and made sure everyone in the room heard her. Because of her strength of will and extreme intelligence regarding what benefited the Coteri, she was well respected by the rest of the male generals of the council. She sat at the table listening to the updates of activity of the Valta with the confidence and stature of a queen. Roderick never understood why his father didn't take Isla as a mate after his mother, Genevieve, suddenly passed away. They seemed to be in tune with one another on a much higher level than friend or council.

At that thought, Isla cocked her head toward Roderick and gave him a stern look as if she heard what he thought. Isla had been one of his teachers while he was growing up and learning the ways of the Coteri. Even though he was now king, Roderick still felt the authority she held over him. He quickly averted his gaze and settled on the general to his right. Devereux was a very close friend of Roderick and was the current general of the Southern Coast of the Americas, based out of New Orleans.

Dev and Roderick had grown up together and grew very close after the sudden death of Roderick's mother. Dev's mother, Amelia, became a surrogate of sorts during that time. With Devereux, they were brothers. They were friends. They were not king and warrior. For that, Roderick had been grateful. He relied on the honesty and openness he had with Dev, and Roderick often regretted not telling him about Julia and Mina. When

this all came out, he knew he would have to deal with the deception he had dealt his friend. At that unsettling thought, Roderick moved his hands to the armrests of his chair, squeezing in a white-knuckled grip. It was time for him to share the truth with his generals.

Devereux looked over at Roderick, brushed his long, brown locks from his eyes and shot him a tooth-filled grin. At this particular council meeting, Dev was dressed as a biker. He wore black leather chaps over well-worn jeans, a black T-shirt with a skull on the front and a heavy leather jacket was draped over the side of the chair. Roderick noticed the large infinity cross embossed across the back of the jacket. It matched the tattoo both men had on their bicep. The tattoo represented the infinite service they were sworn to uphold to the Coteri. Having the tattoo also meant they were a part of the Royal Guard and would be revered as such to any other Coteri. Every man in the room had the same tattoo, as they were all sworn to infinite service. Their lives were to be spent ensuring the future of the Coteri was certain and strong.

Being Coteri was not a simple task. They had been in existence for centuries. The Coteri were not exactly immortal, but they could live extremely long lives that could span hundreds of years. A mortal blow to a Coteri was an iron blade through the heart. Other than that, most injuries could be healed within hours of receiving them. Limbs could not be regenerated and if they lost their head in battle, that was it, iron blade or not. If a Coteri was lucky enough to escape battle wounds and sickness, he could live a long life and die of old age. Their lifespan just happened to be much longer than a normal human.

Since their existence, the Coteri had always remained surreptitious to the human race. Secretly inserting themselves in human society, they monitored the lifestyle of the humans since how they lived impacted nature and the natural order of the world. And the natural world of the animal bore the effects of those lifestyles. The Coteri and their existence was a necessity for the continuation of man and animal existing together and making the world what it was. If not for the animal, if not for nature, if not for the existence of Mother Earth, there would be no human race. They existed because of each other. Because of the protection, and occasionally the guidance the Coteri provided them.

Over the centuries, certain illnesses reached them from the human world and diseases such as tuberculosis and the common flu were dangerous to their extremely strong immune systems. Although they did not die from the illness, they would sometimes become physically incapable of shifting into any animal form ever again, freezing them in human form. These Coteri were often utilized within the human world to assume titles of influence such as in law enforcement, the medical field, scientific exploration and even government positions. This allowed the Coteri to remain connected with the different levels of human thinking as well as allowing the Royal Legion the necessary information on world events, medical breakthroughs and criminal activity.

Pregnancies were difficult, so a normal, healthy birth was celebrated. Some female Coteri did not survive the actual pregnancy, much less the birthing process. The stress and strain on their bodies drained them of their energy, as well as their ability to fight off illnesses and infection. Additional complications started around the time of the bubonic plague. Roderick's father had deduced that particular illness affected the Coteri race in ways they were unable to identify, causing their female's immune systems to weaken during pregnancy.

For this reason, an edict outlawed the Coteri from having sexual relations with any

human being. They did not want to risk breeding with the human race and not knowing what would happen to the child or the mother. Mixing their DNA would not only change the child's genetic makeup to an unknown, but the birth of a Coteri child from a human woman would more than likely prove deadly.

The health and reproduction of the Coteri had been one of the issues Atticus obsessed over until the time of his death. Now Roderick was saddled with the task. This along with the Valta's assault on the human race, and the Coteri were now thrust to the forefront of the responsibilities of the king. Roderick rolled his eyes and sighed.

Roderick didn't think he could ever get over the guilt he felt for the existence of the Valta. If not for him, there wouldn't be this war raging between men that were once brothers with the same vows and beliefs. If he had only handled Valencia a bit more carefully, the atrocities they discussed right now would not be happening.

Valencia had been one of the most desired females of the Coteri. She was beyond beautiful with blazing emerald green eyes and long golden brown hair. The picture of perfection. Her skin was tanned and satin smooth. She was a small woman, but she was also very strong for her size. Her body was full of curves and her mind was full of knowledge. She possessed the whole package. Valencia was smart, beautiful, strong and extremely desired by the majority of the legion of males at that time.

Valencia had not been shy about what she wanted and pursued Roderick without shame. She made sure everyone knew she would capture his heart, as well as the seat next to the throne as his queen. As a target of female attention because of his position, Roderick didn't take her pursuit seriously and merely regarded her as another appreciative woman. Even so, that fact didn't stop him from finding her physically desirable. During a birthday celebration of his father, Roderick finally understood Valencia's intentions.

She spent the evening following him through the crowds and openly threatening the other Coteri women that might catch his attention. She'd even took audience with the king and made it known she would give him several grandsons if Roderick would only agree to the union. And the way his father looked at Valencia as a brood mare, Roderick had no doubt Atticus would have pushed for the marriage. Roderick refused to have it.

Weeks later, Roderick's father passed away. As a Coteri, there weren't many things that could kill them. Roderick believed in this situation loneliness had taken its toll on his once invincible father. Atticus had never been the same since Genevieve had died, and as the years had passed, his father's spark for life faded away. His reason for remaining in this world had left him and the time had finally come for the king to join his mate in the beyond.

Valencia's pursuit for marriage had only strengthened after the death of the king. She'd been relentless in vying for Roderick's affections and he'd wanted nothing more than to be left alone to grieve for his late father. He had put up with her shadowing him for weeks and finally, he'd had enough. He hadn't wanted her as a lover, as a friend, and especially as a mate. Roderick had wanted her gone.

Valencia became furious at his dismissal of her. She'd gone on a tirade through the court, spouting evilness and lies about what he had planned for the Coteri and their future. After all, he was their future king and it was only assumed she would ascend to be his queen. In her anger over Roderick's rejection, Valencia lost her ever-present control and damned Roderick and his precious Coteri in protecting the human race. She believed

humans to be a weakness, a burden, and the source of upset concerning what she believed the natural order should be. Animal was superior to man. Man hunted and trapped animals to extinction, put them on display at zoos, and experimented on them for new medicines to treat human diseases. She detested the humans for their way of life and she didn't believe they deserved the infinite protection the Coteri unselfishly gave them.

Valencia spent the next few weeks after Roderick's refusal seducing, lying and tricking her way through the ranks of Roderick's army. She'd fed them lies regarding Roderick's ability to be king and led them to believe he was weak and indecisive. She'd also lied about her being his secret lover and about him sharing his plans for the Coteri people. Since he had not been on the throne long enough to prove his worth, they readily believed her propaganda and followed her departure from the Coteri. Roderick even heard rumors she consorted with a spiritual human witch in order to learn mind control and the dark side of witchcraft. He hadn't really believed such a thing, but the more men she took from him, the more he considered it.

She ended up with several of his captains as well as dozens of warriors. They stole to Italy where she created her own army. Valencia was now the head of the Valta: Warriors of Dominance and Supremacy. And presently, the Valtic warriors were snatching human women and killing them.

Top that off with the presence of his human child now in Germany, and he officially had a party.

A loud thud on the table brought Roderick's attention back to the discussion. He looked over and saw something white peeking out from under Killian's hand. "What do you have, Killian?"

Killian removed his large hand, revealing a photo of a brand for all of the generals to view. The symbol was clear and easily identified. The circle with the short, claw-shaped blade intersecting it was the symbol of the Valta.

According to Killian, nearly forty human women had been abducted on the West Coast over the last year. None of the women were found alive, but at least twenty-three of the bodies had been discovered. All of the women bled to death and their bodies dumped in heavily wooded areas. A connection existed among all the women. According to the coroner's reports, all victims had given birth just days before their murder and all of the women were branded on their upper left shoulder. The brand caught Killian's attention and it was the reason this meeting had been called.

Nash chimed in after Killian completed his report. "We're right there with you, Killian. We've had nearly thirty abductions in the last six months and only eighteen bodies have been discovered. All match your coroner's reports, but we had no knowledge of the brand."

Devereux looked over at the king and let out a sigh. "I hate to make matters worse, but the same is happening in the South. I think they are getting a bit impatient in my areas of surveillance. They're getting sloppy. Along the southern coast, we have had women go missing only to turn up with their throats slit, their bodies branded and showing signs of a prior pregnancy."

This was not good news. Valencia had spent the better part of the last fifty years experimenting with ways to breed with the human race in order to produce an ultimate Valtic warrior to defeat the Coteri. She abducted human scientists to study their race and determine how to successfully breed with humans. Rumor was she even tried to breed her

warriors with female wolves and mountain lions, but she was not successful.

The council gathered most of their information from defectors of the Valta. Valencia's leadership and ruling ways were malicious and unforgiving and Roderick welcomed anyone who wanted to leave her rule. Naturally, he did not allow them back into the warrior ranks but utilized them in other areas. The defectors were always placed in positions to serve the public, but were never again allowed to participate in the protection of the Coteri.

Roderick ran his hands over his face and let out a long breath. "Looks as if Valencia finally figured out how to breed with humans. Do we know if any of the children survived these births?"

At Roderick's statement, Isla stood. All gazes in the room were directed at her. She raised her chin and glanced around the table to briefly look each general directly in the eyes. She rested her palm on Roderick's shoulder and spoke, "My king. It's time they know of your daughter."

The room went deafly silent. The blood ran from his face in panic, but his mask of calm remained. Roderick quickly scanned the room and found all of his generals wide-eyed with surprise and confusion.

Devereux stood ramrod straight and faced Roderick. "What daughter? You have a child? When?"

Roderick knew Dev was shocked and curious, but also hurt that he had not been told. He was Roderick's friend and brother and he had been lied to.

Isla removed her hand and faced the men in the room. "Roderick has a daughter. She is called Mina Genevieve and she's here in Germany." Her gaze surveyed the room and the reactions of the generals. "Mathias has her now and you will soon see for yourselves that she belongs here. Belongs with her family. But before we bring her into the walls of the Coteri, we must be assured your vow to protect the king will extend to his daughter. Only then can she truly come home."

Isla looked back at Roderick and gave his shoulder a light squeeze. "Tell them, Roderick."

With a short nod, Roderick let out a sigh and rose from his chair. He looked up and met Dev's dark eyes. He had kept this secret for twenty-eight years and he knew he would lose the trust of several men in this room today. Taking a fortifying breath, he faced the wall of men he trusted with his life and hoped they would understand his reasoning for hiding this particular fact from them. "It is true. I have a child. A daughter. She was born twenty-eight years ago in Washington State and has lived her life there. Her mother passed last month and now she's here to see me."

Devereux ran a hand through his tousled hair and looked back at the king. "Who is her mother? We would have known about a Coteri pregnancy, so how did you keep it secret?" Dev's hands clenched as he leaned forward and placed his fists onto the table. Jaw tense, the muscles in his arms tight and rippling. "And more importantly, why would you keep this from us?" he growled. "We are your trusted council."

Roderick placed his hands on the table too and leaned forward, mirroring his friend's stance. In a low whisper, he revealed his greatest secret. "Her mother was human."

"What?" Devereux launched himself across the table and grabbed the king by the shoulders. "What the hell did you do, Roderick?"

Blood pounding in his ears, Roderick quickly grabbed Dev around the neck with one

hand and held him at a distance. "You forget yourself, Devereux. You may be my friend but you are also a general to the Coteri, and I am king. Remove your hands."

Dev reluctantly loosened his hold on Roderick's shoulders but did not let go immediately. "Why didn't you tell us? Tell me?" He dropped his hands to his side and Roderick released his grip around his neck.

"Please sit back down, Devereux." Roderick motioned to the table. "I'll explain everything to all of you. Just give me a moment. Please."

Roderick sat and ran his hands over his face in frustration. He didn't really know where to begin with his explanation. He had always wanted his council to know about Mina, but he was equally unsure as to what they would do about her. Would they go after her? Would he lose his throne? And there was always the danger of Valencia finding out about Mina's existence. He'd kept the secret for so long he didn't know how to begin.

Isla slid a hand onto his shoulder again and squeezed. She turned to the table full of confused and angered men and cleared her throat to gain their attention. With a voice Roderick had never heard before, Isla addressed the men. "Be silent and be open. All of you." Her voice boomed against the stone walls and stilled every man in the room.

"There's a child that needs our understanding and obviously our protection. She is of royal lineage and deserves everything we can offer. She is one of a kind, gentlemen. Something to be cherished. Not banished. Not scorned. Now show your loyalty and listen." Isla gracefully lowered herself into her chair.

Roderick's gaze traveled around the table and found every general looking at him expectantly. He took a deep, calming breath. "Twenty-eight years ago, I met a human woman named Julia Roarke. She was here in Germany on holiday with her friends. The moment I saw her, I wanted her. I knew it was wrong. Forbidden. But she possessed something that drew me. I introduced myself and we began a short but enthralling courtship. She stayed here when her friends left and I spent every free moment I had with her. We ended up becoming physical and she became pregnant. Although our law prohibited such contact, I was incapable of staying away from her."

Roderick rose from his chair and slowly walked to the fireplace at the back of the room. He looked into the flames and felt the heat on his face. "I have no idea how it happened but it did. She was with child, she was human and we were not mated. Obviously, something inside her allowed it to happen. I shared with her my lineage and my purpose, and she accepted it whole-heartedly. Because of the danger to the child and to her, we decided her returning home to Washington would be best."

Roderick turned and looked directly at Dev. "I am so sorry I didn't tell you. I feared of her safety.

"Eventually, as the pregnancy progressed, I became increasingly nervous and terrified I would lose Julia during birth. So I sent Isla to Washington to watch over Julia and assist in the delivery. Julia never knew she was there. One night, she went into labor and actually drove herself to the hospital. When Isla arrived under the guise of being a maternity nurse, she found Mina already born. Julia experienced no complications to speak of and the baby was completely healthy. Isla didn't know what to make of it and reported back to me. At that point, I knew I needed to make sure there would always be someone there. Isla stayed a few years and then her son Elec took over. He posed as one of Mina's teachers in elementary school and then served as her school counselor through high school." Roderick swallowed against his dry throat, then continued. "I kept in

contact with Julia through letters and we never stopped loving each other. But I never saw her again. Not until the day of her funeral. I went to Washington unattended and viewed the service. That day was the first time I laid eyes on my daughter.”

At that statement, Roderick felt an uncomfortable twinge of sadness. His eyes burned with the tears that threatened to break free. He turned and faced the fire once again and went silent.

Isla addressed the men. “It is our hope all of you can understand why Roderick and I held this information from you. We held this secret for the safety of the child. Nothing more.”

Silence enveloped the room. Shock permeated the air. A breeding with a human hadn’t happened in decades and now that one had, the act was with their king.

Nash was the first to speak. “We have to make sure Valencia doesn’t get word of this.”

Roderick turned and faced his generals again. “That’s why you are all here and Mina isn’t. I needed to make sure all of you would acknowledge her as my child ... would accept her ... would defend her and protect her at all costs. Now that all of you know of my daughter, it’s imperative that until Mina arrives and is under our protection, nothing of her existence is to leave this room. There are only two others that know who she is outside of all of you.”

Killian rose and faced Roderick. “We’re with you. We always have been and always will be. Your child falls within our loyalty to you.”

With a relieved sigh, Roderick nodded, “Thank you.” His gaze scanned the other men at the table. He saw their acceptance on their faces. Saw the loyalty in their eyes. He felt some of the pressure in his chest lessen, but they still had Valencia to deal with.

“Valencia has been trying to breed with the humans for decades now. No matter what she’s figured out, we have to take into consideration what she is doing to the human women and possible hybrid infants. If there are truly successful births, those children are part of the Coteri and deserve our protection just as the human women do.”

Isla took purposeful steps around the table and stood next to Roderick. She looked at him, a silent plea in her blue eyes. “You have to find the women and infants. If Valencia has found a way to breed with the humans, she would have to house all of these women during their pregnancies. She would need a huge medical staff specializing in the birth of humans as well as Coteri. She would also have a similarly trained staff for pediatrics. The trail she’s left behind should not be hard to follow.”

Roderick placed a gentle hand on Isla’s reddened face. The heat of her anger burned his palm and he leaned down and placed a kiss on her cheek. “You are right as always, Isla. I leave you in charge of finding the women and infants. If they are alive, we will protect them. You shall have anything you need from me in your quest to find them. Choose your general to assist and he’ll be devoted to your mission.”

Devereux walked to Roderick and bowed. “I speak for everyone here, Roderick, when I say we’ll do what is needed to protect your child. She is of great importance to you and to all of us. You have our loyalty.” He then turned to Isla and bowed again. “Allow me to aid in finding the women and infants. My men are at your disposal.”

Isla took Devereux’s hand in hers. “I accept. But on one condition.”

Dev looked at Roderick and back to Isla quickly. “And that would be?”

“No more leather, Devereux. You’ll only scare the women even more.” Her gaze

narrowed. “And get a haircut.”

Dev let his head drop in laughter. “Fine, mistress. I’ll drop the leather, but the hair is another thing entirely. I think we may have to compromise on that one.”

Chapter Eight

Mina remained standing on the stairs with her mouth open in total shock. Mathias had walked out the door of the hotel a good five minutes ago, but she couldn't get over the shock of her reaction to his touch. Her body still tingled just from a kiss on the hand. Either this guy had some kind of heavy mojo going on or she'd gone way too long without sex.

She shook off the fog of desire, turned on the stairs and shuffled back to her room. Shower. That's what she needed. A good, long, hot shower. When she opened the door, her room was a bit chilly, so Mina went directly to the bathroom to turn on the hot water. She stripped to her panties and walked back out to the room to check the locks on the door. Once she saw they were engaged, she turned toward the waiting shower.

A small scratching sound stopped her in her tracks. She looked around her room, searching for the source. The scratching continued. It came from outside her door. Mina peeked through the peephole and saw nothing in the hallway. She looked down at the floor underneath her door and saw a small shadow blocking the hall light. Something was in front of her door. Based on the size of the shadow, she figured it was a small animal. Mina unbolted the door, but kept the chain on as she was nude from the waist up. The door creaked open and a large black cat slinked through the crack and rubbed against her calf.

Mina jumped back and squealed when the cat brushed her leg. Not as if she'd expected that to happen. She closed the door and turned around to find the cat. He had stalked across the floor and had already leaped onto the bed. Mina raised her hands to cover her exposed breasts as the cat stared at her with huge yellow eyes. "Uh ... just a cat, Mina. Like he knows what boobs are." She clicked her tongue at her own foolishness and walked to the bed to greet her new guest.

"Hey, big man. Where did you come from?" Mina scratched the cat behind his ears. He immediately let out a low humming purr and rubbed his head into Mina's belly. She bent down and lifted the cat.

He placed his paws on her breasts and licked her on the nose.

She continued to scratch him up and down his neck and his purring became louder.

"Okay. You can stay. But I need a shower first."

The cat leaped out of her hands and circled on the bed. He came to rest in the center and lay down like a male lion watching his prey.

His huge yellow eyes continued to stare at Mina and she once again felt an uncomfortable twinge at being naked in front of the cat. "Just a cat. Just a cat."

She headed for her much needed shower. The hot water felt wonderful against her chilled skin and she stood under the warm spray to thaw herself out. Grabbing for the shampoo, her thoughts went back to Mathias. Why had she been so affected by his touch? Never had she been so turned-on so quickly in her life. All he did was kiss her hand and her body melted.

As she rinsed out the shampoo, she pictured his face again. He was incredibly gorgeous and his body was exactly what she looked for in a man. He was tall, thick and strong. His features were chiseled and delicious. He had plump, kissable lips and his eyes

were mesmerizing. She wondered what he would be like in bed. Would he be slow and luscious, or fast and hard? Either option would be just fine with her. All in all, he was everything she desired regarding how a man looked. Now she just needed to see if he had a brain to go along with that body of his.

The water had started to turn cold, so Mina finished washing and quickly grabbed a towel to dry off. Of course the damn thing was too small to cover her body, so she wrapped it around her waist and moved back into her room to dress.

As she had left him, the cat was still lying in the center of the bed waiting for her. His purring increased the closer she got to him, and again she felt the need to cover her exposed breasts. She quickly turned toward the dresser to grab her clothes. She dressed and slid beneath the chilled sheets.

Her newest guest quickly pounced on her chest and buried his head under her chin, purring loudly. She scratched him behind the ears again and he curled into a ball between her breasts. "You just lookin' for some lovin', big guy?"

That cat raised his head and licked her chin.

"Well, so am I. Some good lovin' sounds pretty nice right now."

Mina closed her eyes and sighed. She needed sleep. Hell, she needed sex. She let her mind drift to Mathias and his succulent mouth. She wanted to kiss him and she wanted him to kiss her. Hard. Even though she didn't know this man or where he came from, his image was suddenly tattooed in her brain. Just thinking about him made her hot and bothered. She felt a tingle in her stomach and had the need to be touched everywhere by him. She fisted the quilt in her hands and forced herself to think of something else. If this continued, she'd have to take matters into her own hands and she just wasn't up for that tonight. She wanted skin on skin and a toy wasn't going to fully satisfy her.

The cat's continual purring lulled her into relaxation and she felt herself starting to fall asleep. She would probably dream about him tonight and have to wring out her panties in the morning. She rolled her eyes behind her lids.

"Damn, that man."

* * * *

Dear god she was almost there. One of the biggest orgasms of her life was coming, and she shook and writhed with anticipation. She kept chanting, "Don't stop. Don't stop." But she had no idea who was there. She felt hands on her body, but she couldn't open her eyes. The fingers continued to delve inside her and bring her closer to her climax. A tongue swirled around her tight nipples and then one was sucked into a warm mouth. She felt herself being marked with one hell of a hickie on her breast, but she didn't care. All she wanted was to come and come hard. She could smell vanilla somewhere. It made her mouth water. She panted and moaned as the hands and fingers continued to pleasure her body. Almost there. The tightening and tingling began and her breath was caught in her throat. "Oh god, I'm coming."

Almost there ... almost ... there...

She threw her head back and was ready to explode. Almost ... here it comes...

"Mina? Are you awake? Mina?"

Mina's eyes flew open and she let out a ragged breath. Her body was covered in sweat and the blankets were pooled at the end of the bed around her ankles. She looked down and found one of her hands between her wide spread legs and the other holding one

of her breasts. “Jesus.”

Her head fell back onto her pillow and she continued to try to regulate her breathing. That had been one hell of a dream. She hadn’t even realized what she was doing until the knocking woke her up. She’d had wet dreams in the past, but nothing like this. Nothing this realistic. Mina removed her hands and tried to control her breathing. The knocking on the door continued and she recognized Mathias’ voice behind the door.

“Mina? Are you awake?”

“I am now. Just a minute.”

Mina scurried over to the bathroom and washed her hands. She also ran a wet washcloth between her shaking legs. She was still so sensitive and on the verge of an orgasm that just rubbing herself with the wet cloth sent tingles down her legs. Had it not been for Mathias on the other side of the door, she would stand there and finish what the dream had started just to relieve the ache.

Mathias continued knocking as Mina walked to the door. She leaned her head to the side, slid the bolt and opened the door with the chain still affixed.

The man in front her was as mouth-watering as he had been the night before. Only now, he looked flushed and angry. “Why are you here, Matty?”

Gritting his teeth, he answered her. “As I have told you several times, it is Mathias, and I came to pick you up.”

Mina rubbed her sleep-filled eyes and looked him over again. Damn he looked good. Dressed in a cream-colored turtleneck underneath a cashmere jacket that looked as smooth as butter. His infinity cross necklace hung around his neck and shined underneath the light of the hallway.

“Pick me up for what?”

“Since you don’t have your luggage, I thought I would take you into Munich for some shopping. You can obtain whatever you need there and I can also offer you a tour of the city. Your father will not be available to see you for at least another couple of days, so I thought I would show you the sites.”

Mina let her head thump on the edge of the door and closed her eyes, her brain still fuzzy from her explicit dream. She raised a hand to cover a yawn. “What time is it, Matty?”

“Do you have ears?”

Mina snapped her head up and glared at him in confusion. “What?”

“I said, do you have ears?”

“Um ... yes, I have ears. Why?”

Mathias took a step closer to the door. The patchouli and vanilla scent she remembered invaded her senses. “Then use them and get my name right.” Just the tone of his voice made her shiver. “Mathias. Now say it.”

“What?”

“I said say my name.”

Mina rolled her eyes and attempted to close the door in his face. She felt the jet lag as well as the residual effects of the orgasm she almost had. “I’m sorry, but it’s way too early for this and the time change is getting to me. Please just let me get some sleep and come back later. I really don’t feel like shopping right now. I just want to sleep.”

Mathias took another step toward the door and placed his hand over hers, blocking her from slamming it shut.

The minute he touched her, she felt a heat flash go through her body and she froze in place.

“Say. My. Name.”

The sweet rumbling of his lowered voice tightened Mina’s stomach in excitement. She immediately decided he would be fast and hard in bed, and that made her all the more hot and bothered. Her nipples had hardened at the sound of his voice and she knew they were probably visible through her peach-colored T-shirt. She didn’t have to guess at that, because he was currently staring at her breasts and his eyes were becoming darkened with hunger.

He raised his heated gaze to meet hers. “Say. It.”

Mina trembled with a need she hadn’t felt in a long while. His brashness and overpowering presence were actually turning her on. A low whisper came from her lips. “Mathias.”

“Good. Now go get ready. We have a long drive.” He removed his hand from hers and walked back toward the stairwell. After taking the first couple of steps, he turned and looked over his shoulder. “You know, you are quite beautiful in the morning.”

With that, he disappeared.

Damn it. He had done it again.

* * * *

When Mina walked into the hotel lobby, Mathias was nowhere to be seen. She grabbed a cup of coffee and walked through the lower half of the hotel to the front of the building. The most amazing thing caught her sight. Parked in front of the hotel was a black Mercedes-Benz McLaren convertible. This car cost half a million dollars and possessed top-of-the-line luxury. It could reach speeds upwards of two hundred miles per hour. A thrill ran through her. What she wouldn’t give to open that baby up on the autobahn.

At that moment, Mathias came up behind her. “Beautiful. Isn’t she?”

Mina jumped and turned toward him. His face was only inches away from hers. She could smell him again and her mouth instantly watered. How the hell did he do that?

“Uh ... yeah. It’s beautiful. Beautiful and expensive. Whoever owns that has lots of cash to spare.”

“Or maybe whoever owns that car likes to go fast.” He smiled down at her and walked to the hotel door. He opened it, and with a wave of his arm, motioned her to follow.

She set down the coffee cup on a side table and slid into her coat. “Mathias, did you happen to see a cat run out of my room when I opened the door? I had a guest last night and he wasn’t in the room this morning.”

Mathias gave her a sly smile. “I’m sure he escaped when the door was cracked, but I didn’t see him. Lucky fellow, though, to have spent the entire evening with you.”

Mina rolled her eyes and walked outside. The air was chilly, so she wrapped her scarf a bit more tightly around her neck.

Mathias placed his hand at the small of her back and led her over to the McLaren. He reached down and grabbed the small handle to the door and tugged.

The door swung up and Mina could smell the rich leather scent coming from inside.

Her eyes widened in total shock. “This is yours?”

Mathias gave her a crooked grin. "It's mine to use. The car belongs to your father. He likes speed."

"Apparently." Mina felt breathless.

"Well, aren't you getting in? It's cold and we need to get going if you want a full day of shopping in Munich."

Mina suddenly felt nervous. She didn't really know Mathias and she wasn't the type of person to just go half cocked into someone's car. Especially considering she was in a strange country and all alone. She wanted to call Chloe. "Give me a minute will you? You can start the car and get it warm. I need to make a call first."

Mina dug her cell phone out of her pack and called the house she and Chloe shared. It would be late in the evening in Washington, but she thought Chloe would at least be at home in bed. There was no answer. Mina tried Chloe's cell number. Chloe answered sounding half asleep.

"Hey honey. What's the matter?"

"Were you asleep?"

"Yeah. I had a busy day trying to find a decent place to live down here."

"You're in LA?"

Through an obviously strong yawn, Chloe replied, "Yeah. I came down this morning to start looking for a place. From what I saw today, there isn't much I like in my price range. I'm too used to the evergreens and the water, but all that's here is traffic and noise."

Her stomach knotted. She knew Chloe would be leaving her, but it was happening too fast for her liking. Mina didn't want to be alone in the house on the Sound. Too many memories.

"You could stay with me, you know."

Chloe sighed. "Honey. We've been over this. I would love to stay, but I can't work virtually. And you know as well as I do if I stayed we would end up killing each other in the end. We both rely on our alone time too much."

"I know." Mina pouted. "No harm in trying. Hey, there's actually a reason I called. I met a guy."

A loud crash sounded on the other end. Mina heard fumbling and then Chloe got back on. "Holy hell, Mina-girl. You work fast."

"Shut up. It's not like that. Listen. This guy says he knows my father and that he was sent to stay with me until I can see him. He's busy for a couple of days or something." She gripped the phone tighter in her hands remembering something. "Oh. Before it slips my mind, I found out what the R stands for in the letters to Julia."

"What is it?"

"It stands for Roderick."

Mina looked over her shoulder and spotted Mathias leaning against the McLaren staring at her. He had put on a pair of aviator sunglasses and Mina's mouth actually watered. God. This could get complicated. The urge for sex had surfaced since seeing him, but how smart would it be to bed an assistant to her father? There was something more to this man too, wasn't there? God, her emotions were all over the place.

Oh, who the hell cared? It wasn't as if she was going to actually have a relationship with him, nor was she going to stay here for a long period of time. But the reality was she really had no idea who this guy was. Her head swam.

“Anyway, here’s the deal. This guy I met. He wants to drive me to Munich to go shopping, since my luggage never made it, and I’m not real comfortable with this. I mean come on, I just met him and now he expects me to get into a car with him and go where he pleases? Help me out here, Clo. He says he works for Roderick and he showed me a letter that was supposedly from my father, but how can I be sure any of the stuff he says is the truth?” Mina started to nip at her thumbnail as she turned to look at Mathias once more. “And to make matters even worse ... he’s completely gorgeous and I’m reacting to him like a dog in heat. Tell me what to do.”

Chloe sighed. “Well, at least you can say you aren’t as depressed as you were a few days ago, right?”

Mathias was slowly pacing up and down the sidewalk. “Uh ... if you saw the ass on this guy you wouldn’t be thinking of anything other than sex, either.”

“Does this guy have a name?”

Mina turned back around to face the hotel and cupped the cell phone with her hand. “He says his name is Mathias de ... something. I can’t remember.”

Chloe was silent for several seconds.

“Chloe? Are you there?”

“Yeah. I’m here. Listen, I know how you can find out if what he says is true. Ask him to tell you something about you or your mother. Make him give you information only your father would know. If this Mathias was sent by Roderick to stay with you, he would have filled him in on the situation. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah. That sounds good. He would have to know something, right?”

“If your father sent someone to stay with you he would want to make sure this guy is trustworthy, knows the situation and is able to keep an eye on you. Ask him for more information and see what he says.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know how it goes. Either you will get a quick call back because he didn’t know anything or I will call you tonight.”

“All right, honey. Be careful, okay?”

“I will. Talk to you soon.”

“Try to keep your hands off daddy’s little assistant.”

“Shut up, Chloe. Like you have control when it comes to men.”

Mina closed her phone and walked toward Mathias to start her interrogation.

Chapter Nine

Mathias stood by the car and watched Mina make a phone call. He couldn't take his gaze off her. The way she twiddled with the ends of her scarf as she spoke quietly into the phone, her body swaying back and forth while she stood in place as though she rocked a baby to sleep. And of course her gorgeous mane of hair cascading down her back was gently moving with the chilled breeze.

He could still smell her skin from the shower the night before. She'd rubbed her citrus lotion on her body before crawling into bed, and he couldn't help pouncing on her chest while he was in cat form. He had thoroughly enjoyed himself while he had snuggled between her breasts and in the nape of her neck.

Earlier that morning, he'd returned to his human form and just watched Mina sleep. Her cheeks were pinked and warm from being under the numerous quilts all night. Her hair was rumpled around her head and he wanted to run his fingers through it while feasting on her neck. Restraining himself, he settled for a soft kiss on her forehead and snuck out the window before she woke up.

Roderick contacted him later that morning to let him know the generals were now aware of Mina's existence. She would need to remain with Mathias until Roderick was convinced his generals' allegiance extended to Mina as well. The king's suggestion of taking Mina to Munich was a good one as it would remove her from the royal lands and Valencia's prying eyes. But the idea of being alone with her made Mathias nervous. He was tremendously attracted to Mina and being alone with her would make it much harder for him to stay away from her physically. However, Mathias also knew the struggle Roderick was going through. He could only imagine the fallout from breaking Coteri law was just adding to the pressure of the whole situation. Not to mention what would happen if the Valta found out about Mina's existence. Taking Mina to Munich would relieve some of the burden the king currently carried.

Mathias' chest surged with pride when Roderick told him to take care of his "little girl". The king trusted him to take care of the one thing he held dear. And this one thing was not "little" or a "girl" by any means. She was a grown woman who Mathias wanted with a desperation he had never felt before, but he also knew he would probably be run through with a blade if Roderick found out what he fantasized about doing to his "little girl".

After speaking to Roderick, Mathias had returned to Mina's room to pick her up for their trip to Munich. He'd assumed she would already be up since it was close to nine in the morning. As he'd walked down the hall toward her room, his heightened senses immediately flared. He'd been able to smell her arousal. His body had taken over and he'd lunged for her room, unable to take his nose away from the closed door. He'd inhaled deeply, taking in her scent, knowing she was near release. His palms had smacked against the wood framing the door and his fingertips had dug in, splintering the wood.

Then he'd heard Mina moan. Sweet Jesus, she would be his undoing. It had been all he could do not to burst through the door and alleviate her need. His sweat-beaded forehead had pressed against the door and his eyes had squeezed shut. His breathing had

grown ragged and he'd needed to get into that room. He'd needed her. He'd started to lose all control. His erection had pulsed against his zipper and his blood had raced through his veins. He'd started to claw the wood, visualizing her lush body sprawled over the bed writhing with need, and he'd been frenzied to give her what she'd wanted. What she'd needed.

Mathias had still been clenching his teeth, trying to retain some form of control when Mina had bellowed, "Oh god, I'm coming."

That had been it. A low guttural growl had escaped his mouth and Mathias had started beating on the door. He'd had to stop it before his body took over. If he'd continued to listen to her become this aroused, he would have taken her right then and Roderick would have killed him. He'd kept frantically knocking and shouting her name.

She'd finally opened the door.

What he'd seen made him want her even more. Not only had the scent of her arousal hit him like a sledgehammer, her face had been shiny with sweat and flushed with desire. Her hair had been mussed all over her head and she'd been short of breath. He'd suddenly pictured her lying underneath him with the same look on her face. She killed his solid reserve and taking her to Munich would just add to his sexual annoyance. She was just too damn tempting.

Still leaning against the car outside the hotel, Mathias shook his head to shove away his X-rated thoughts about the king's daughter and came back to reality. He put on his sunglasses and looked toward Mina still talking on the phone. At the same moment, Mina turned and looked over her shoulder. Even through his sunglasses, he could see the freckles running across her nose and onto her cheeks. Her gaze remained on his face until she gave him a once-over from boots to hair and then turned away to whisper into the phone once more.

How could he feel this way about a human woman? And how could the attraction develop so quickly? He had no answer to either one of his questionable thoughts. One thing he did know was the next time she turned around, she would see the gigantic hard-on he currently sported under his pants. Great.

Mina closed her phone and looked over at Mathias.

He quickly opened the car door in hopes of hiding his obvious desire for her. Unfortunately, the doors opened up instead of out. All he ended up doing was bringing more attention to his front. Again, great.

Mina looked down and then quickly up to meet Mathias' gaze. A little evil grin appeared as she approached the car.

"Sorry about that, but I had to make a call first."

"That's fine, but if you want the car to stay warm, you'll need to get in." Mathias reached out to her. "Let me help you."

Mina didn't reach for his hand, but deliberately placed hers in her coat pockets. She looked at him with a determined stare and made no attempt to get in the car.

"What is it?" Mathias dropped his hand to his side. "What's wrong?"

Mina tilted her head to the side and finally spoke. "I need to ask you a couple of questions before I go anywhere with you." She paused and kicked at the rocks on the sidewalk. "You have to understand my reluctance to get into a car with someone I just met. Even though the car is worth half a million dollars and you 'say' you know my father. Can you answer some questions first?"

Mathias extended his hand again toward her. "Of course I can, Mina. But don't you think you would be more comfortable sitting in the car? I'll take out the keys and hand them to you. But let's at least get out of this morning cold."

He watched her expressions warring with each other as she tried to figure out what to do. Absently pulling her lower lip between her teeth, Mina closed her eyes and finally placed her hand in his.

He led her to the car and helped her in.

Once he pulled her door closed, she reached over and turned off the ignition and palmed the keys.

With quick steps, he rounded the car, got in on the driver's side and shut the door, blocking out the chilled air.

"All right, Mina. What is it that you would like to ask me?"

*

Guilt suddenly crashed in her chest as she looked over at him. He had been nothing but nice since their meeting, but that was all the more reason to make sure he was who he said he was. She would not fall into a European sex trap and end up in some East German whorehouse after being drugged and abducted. She needed something to calm her nerves. Damn, she wanted a cigarette.

She squared her shoulders and finally asked, "What do you know about my mother?"

Mathias' brows furrowed in confusion. "Your mother? Why would you ask me that?"

"Well, if you're who you say you are, I would assume my father would have informed you of everything about me. Prove you are who you say you are. Now ... what do you know about my mother?"

Mathias leaned back in the leather seat and looked at the roof of the car. "You're making me prove who I am? My word is not enough?"

"No. I'm sorry. It's not." Mina crossed her arms over her chest. "I need to believe you are who you say you are before I can go anywhere with you."

Mathias brushed his hand across his face in frustration. He let out a long breath, his gaze narrowing. "Your mother was Julia Kathleen Roarke. She spent an extended amount of time here in Germany back in the early eighties and developed a relationship with Roderick. There were circumstances that prevented him from staying with Julia, so she returned to the Seattle area later that year. Once Roderick found out about Julia's pregnancy, he was determined to make sure you and your mother would want for nothing. He financially supported the both of you and kept tabs on both of your lives. He wanted to make sure your mother was always with you, so she never worked and told you the money was from your grandmother. You were born April 26, 1983, and given the name Willamina Genevieve Roarke. Genevieve was the name of Roderick's mother. He was in yearly contact with your mother until her untimely death a couple of months ago. With your arrival here in Germany, he has sent me to watch over you until he can meet with you." His hands clamped on the steering wheel. Tight and white knuckled. "Is that enough? Do you believe me now?"

Mina sat stunned and hurting. "Wow. How detached of you to explain so clearly." Mina tried to keep the tears from spilling out of her eyes. "I especially loved the complete absence of emotion in your clarification of the information you were given. How very clinical of you. Thank you so much." She looked out the window and let out an

exasperated and very shaky breath.

Her hand came out and she opened it to reveal the keys to the car. She felt his warm one slide over her shoulder and she flinched at his touch.

He slowly took the keys and started the engine. "Buckle up, Mina."

She did as he asked, but continued looking through the passenger window, not wanting him to see the tears that began to fall.

* * * *

Roderick sat in the room he had created for Mina wishing he could be the one to escort her to Munich. He looked around at the huge mural that graced the walls. The painted woodland animals frolicked around the huge evergreen tree. The room was his little secret. He had kept it undisclosed from everyone all these years. Now he sat on the little twin bed with sky blue bedding with his head in his hands, wondering how he was going to handle all of this.

Located in a turret of the castle, the room was rounded with a spiral staircase running up against the wall. Roderick built a second story loft near the windows and had loaded it with dresses and shoes and baby dolls he knew Mina would never see. The dresses ranged in sizes to match each age from toddler to present day. Most of them were in the colors of the Royal Family: deep blue and silver. Holding the pictures Julia would send him every year, he sat in this room and imagined her wearing each gown on her birthday. He somehow felt closer to her when he did.

A small table and chair set he had made himself sat in the center of the room. He had often dreamed about how wonderful it would have been to sit with Mina as a child and have a tea party. In the center of the small table was a child-sized Blue Willow china tea set.

Roderick rose from the bed and walked toward the table. He picked up a little tea cup and palmed it. Her little hands would have looked precious handing this cup to him with pretend tea inside. He placed the cup back on the miniature saucer and continued to survey the room. He looked up at the loft and saw all of the colorful gowns hanging in the old armoire sitting against the rock wall. The mirror he'd brought back from England stood opposite the gowns, so Mina could see herself and all her beauty as she tried on the dresses. He smiled at the thought of her here now, wearing one of the gorgeous gowns he had stored there for her. How beautiful she would be. Just like her mother was.

He had always known that someday someone would find out about Julia and Mina. But he had never thought that when it did happen, one of them would be this close to royal lands. So close to Valencia's prying eyes. This was his main concern now. Not the fact he'd broken Coteri law by being with a human woman, not the fact he'd lied about producing a child with Julia, and not the fact he'd kept everything from his royal council. He was worried about what Valencia would do when she learned of Mina's existence.

After telling his generals about Julia and Mina, he'd also explained someone had always been close. Guarding Mina and Julia.

Killian seemed relieved at the knowledge he had been right to question the presence of the Royal Guard in his vicinity. Killian was especially upset that Roderick had kept this from him. But Roderick knew telling Killian would have been a mistake. Now not doing so may have been a bigger mistake. Killian was loyal to the Coteri, but right now Roderick knew all Kil wanted to do was kick his royal ass.

Isla would be in charge of seeing to Mina and her education on the history of the Coteri. She would also watch Mina to see if any of the Coteri powers were present in her blood. Most Coteri youth's powers became known during puberty. Since Mina was a grown woman and not showing any signs of power, Isla needed to determine just how much Coteri Mina was.

There was no evidence of a Coteri child born of a human mother in hundreds of years. Mina would need to be watched very carefully to determine if she had any special abilities. The mere fact Julia became pregnant was astonishing, but her actually surviving the birth without Coteri presence was nearly impossible to believe. What had made Julia special that she carried a Coteri child to term and birthed a perfect baby without any assistance or lasting health concerns? Isla's charge was to find out.

Thankful Mathias was currently driving Mina to Munich, Roderick turned to leave her make-believe bedroom. He stopped at the door and looked around once more. What would his life have been like to have had her here when she was growing up? Would they have been happy as a family? Would she have been accepted into the Coteri culture? At that moment, he wasn't sure, but he was achingly sorry he hadn't had the courage all those years ago to at least try and find out.

Roderick slowly stepped into the hallway and closed the door. He engaged the locks with his mind, so no one could pass through, and headed to his study. He would need to pull out everything Julia had sent him about Mina and their life in Washington. He needed to be ready for anything she may throw at him. He made a mental note to remove anything that might literally be lobbed toward him in a fit of rage. One thing he did know about Mina that Julia had shared was she had a temper and she was not afraid to show it.

* * * *

The drive to Munich proved to be a test of Mathias' patience. Apparently Mina had no trouble sitting silently in the car for the first hour and a half. That she would not look at him or even speak a word drove him out of his mind. This was a three-hour drive and he refused to spend another minute in total silence.

"Mina, would you like to stop for an early lunch?"

"No."

His grip on the steering wheel tightened. "Well then, are you in need of a break? Do you need to use the facilities?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Mina ... are we going to continue this drive in total silence?"

Mina finally turned and made eye contact. "Look. We don't really need to talk, do we? I just need to use the restroom and we can get this trip over with so I can meet the man who fathered me. That's all."

Mina turned back toward the window and that was it.

Silence for the next twenty minutes until they stopped at a fueling station.

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While Mathias gassed up the car, Mina used the restroom. When she returned the key to the clerk, she spotted American cigarettes behind his shoulder. Giddy up. "Do you speak English?"

The clerk smiled and nodded. "Great. I'll take a pack of Marlboro menthol lights, please."

The clerk handed her the cigarettes and she handed him the money. Dear god, this was going to be good. She hadn't had one of these in almost three days and just the thought of lighting one up made her shake. Her nicotine fit was in full force. She grabbed a book of matches and walked outside. Mathias was still by the car, so she slinked around the side of the building to light up. She put the cigarette in her mouth and was in the process of lighting it when a hand grasped her wrist. Mina's eyes flew open and she immediately tried to free her arm from the grip. "What the hell? Let me go!"

Mathias stood in front of her, face red and eyes narrowed. "What do you think you are doing? Do you know what that does to your body?"

"Yes, I do." Mina pulled her arm again, but his grip held. "Let me go," she barked. Jesus, you're as bad as Chloe."

Instead of letting her go, he used his other hand to remove the cigarette from hers and crushed it with his boot.

Stunned at his audacity and still hurting from his earlier insensitivity, she raised her free hand to try and slap him away. He grasped that one too and ended up holding her against the wall of the station with her arms above her head. Looking into his furious eyes, Mina felt shockingly aroused. Maybe her response was the anger coming out. Maybe she reacted because of the stress of it all. Maybe because he loomed over her, smelling like something she wanted to take a bite out of. Maybe she responded because he held her against the wall. Maybe because it had been a while since she had had sex. Whatever the reason, she felt herself getting turned-on. She looked at his mouth and immediately wanted it on her. Her eyelids lowered and she looked up at his eyes again. They were darker than she remembered.

He moved in closer and their bodies were almost touching. Almost.

She knew at that moment, he wanted her too. Her lips parted and she let out a small moan.

That sound must have been the last straw. Mathias slammed his body against Mina's and roughly took her mouth with his. She immediately opened to him and closed her eyes, feeling his warm, strong body against hers. There was something so erotic about being out in the open, taking the chance anyone could see them.

She wanted to run her fingers through his gorgeous hair, but he still had a death grip on her wrists and was roughly holding her to the wall. She tried to pull her arms down, but he let out a low growl and kept his hold. His mouth devoured hers and it was all she could do to remain standing. Her body was completely betraying her, allowing this man to turn her inside out with a level of passion she'd never felt before.

Locking both of her wrists in one of his huge hands, his other one slowly moved up her side and brushed the curve of her breast.

With a whimper, she turned into his hand to give better access and he moved his thumb over her tight nipple. At the contact, she bit her bottom lip and let out a low groan. It had been so long since she'd allowed a man to touch her, she almost forgot what it felt like. And even then, it had never felt anything like this.

Mathias slid his thigh between hers and pushed his sizable erection into her belly, letting her know exactly how much he wanted her.

Mina was almost breathless. She looked up at him and whispered, "Let go of my hands. I want to feel you."

Mathias raised his head and looked down into her eyes. "No, chère. I like you just

the way you are right now.”

Again he ran the tip of his tongue along her bottom lip and then sucked it in between his teeth.

When he lightly bit down, Mina let out another desperate moan.

He pulled away and looked down into her eyes again. “You are so beautiful, Mina.”

She rolled her hips against his thigh in a circular motion, mindlessly grinding herself against his leg. She needed to feel him. Her body was on fire. She had been waiting for this and it was too good. She felt as though she was losing her control. His hand still massaged her breast and she needed a release, bad. Between moans, she pleaded with Mathias. “Please. Let my hands go.”

He gave her a slight one-sided grin. “No.”

Mina continued to move her hips against his leg and rub her belly against his hard cock. She arched into his hand, so he would continue touching her sensitive nipple and let out another breathless moan, all the while keeping eye contact. Just looking into his eyes as he touched her turned her on. She had always liked making love with the lights on so she could see her partner’s reactions. See his body moving against hers. See his excitement when they climaxed or when she took him into her mouth. Always, she tried to keep eye contact. This heightened the intensity. But standing there with his hand on her breast and his leg between hers, she felt hotter than she had ever felt before. She had knots in her stomach and all she could think about was him taking her right there against that dingy wall.

There was something intensely hot about being held while being pleasured and Mina hadn’t been properly pleasured in a long time. He was in control and he knew it. She wanted him badly. But not like this. Not against the cement block wall of a German gas station. She needed a bed. A big one. As she slowly came to her senses, she tilted her head to the side and licked her upper lip with the tip of her tongue. “Let me go, Mathias.”

“Baby, I can’t let you go. I’ve wanted to do this since the moment I saw you.”

He moved his hand down and found the hem of her sweater. His fingers caressed lightly up her ribs and slipped inside the material of her bra. Her nipples were so hard and sensitive that when he pinched one between his fingers, Mina let out a little squeal.

“Montrez-moi que vous aimez.” He crooned. “Show me what you like.” Mathias moved forward and pushed his leg higher between Mina’s to move against her. He captured her mouth again and moved his tongue lightly over hers, teasing.

Mina felt the rough concrete wall dig into her back as he pressed even harder against her. She ground her hips down against his thigh, making her even more wet. She wanted her hands free. She wanted to touch him. She ached with need, but knew they had to pull back, didn’t they?

“Let my hands go, Mathias. We need to stop.”

Mathias breathed raggedly and his mouth moved down her neck again. He nipped her skin with some strength, causing her to flinch. “No.”

The hand that had been dedicated to her breasts started to move down her belly toward the hem of her jeans. She wanted him to shove his hands down into her panties and stroke her to orgasm, but not against the side of a gas station. Even though all she wanted was his fingers, his cock inside her right at that moment, she had to bring this to a halt. This wasn’t the right place or the right time.

She pulled her face to the side and forced out the words. “Mathias, we have to stop.

Look around you. Look where we are.”

Mathias lifted his head and looked down into Mina’s eyes. “Je suis tellement désolé, bebe. I’m sorry.” Mathias released her wrists.

She immediately sank her hands into his hair and brought him forward so they were nose-to-nose.

“Don’t be sorry. We just need better timing.”

Mathias reached up, pulled her hands free and kissed them. “Come, Mina. You’re cold and we need to get moving.”

Lacing his fingers with hers, Mathias led Mina back to the car.

She was surprised when he turned and tossed her the keys.

“You want to drive?”

Excitement tingled her skin. Mina just looked at him with her mouth gaping open. “What?”

“Get in and I’ll direct you. Once we get close to the city, I’ll need to switch out with you, but until then you can drive for the next hour or so.” He held up a warning finger.

“But there is one condition.”

Mina clucked her tongue. “Really. And what would that be?”

“No more smoking. Ever. Throw away the pack of cigarettes right in front of me and you can drive.”

What Mathias didn’t know was she had turned around before leaving the store and purchased a second pack just in case. They were safely buried in the bottom of her backpack.

Mina walked over to the trash can next to the gas pump and made a big production of throwing the pack away. “There. Happy?”

Crossing his arms over his chest, he scowled. “Yes. Does that mean we have a deal?”

She walked to the driver’s side of the car and opened the door. A twinge of guilt built in her stomach, but knowing she was soon going to meet her father and all the stress that would entail, she figured one small white lie wouldn’t hurt. “Yep. We have a deal.”

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Once their seatbelts were on and she started the car, she looked over at Mathias and gave him a mischievous grin.

He straightened in his seat and warned her. “Mina.”

She started laughing and floored it. When she hit one hundred ten miles per hour, he warned her again. “Mina.”

“Don’t worry, Mathias. I can handle this.”

He felt her throttle the gas and rocket them back onto the road. She was enjoying herself and he wanted her to. She had been through hell and it was his job to keep her entertained until Roderick was ready for her to return.

He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. How had he lost control back at the gas station? One touch and he had become completely entranced. Mina had been right to stop them, but at that moment he’d wanted nothing more than to take her right against the brick wall. They had been outside. In the open where anyone or anything could see them. Hell, he hadn’t even given thought that the Valta could be looking at them right then. They could have been the birds that had flown by or the rat that scurried past the dumpster as they had walked away. He hadn’t felt their presence, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. If the Valta had seen them, they would immediately be

wondering who Mina was and why she was with him. Putting a target on her head.

Mathias looked over at Mina smiling behind the wheel of the McLaren. She was precious to the king. She was his daughter and Mathias had been given the ultimate responsibility to make sure she stayed safe. Not only had he put her in harm's way, he had stood there and let his dick rule over his mind.

Mina looked over at him and winked, obviously enjoying the speed of the powerful engine. It was apparent she was able to handle the vehicle. But could he handle her?

Chapter Ten

After an hour and a half with Mina behind the wheel, she commented on the beautiful scenery they passed, as well as how the McLaren handled. A few times he had to remind her that going one hundred twenty miles per hour was not a good idea and she would eventually slow down. The entire time, Mathias was still remembering the feel of her body against his. He had not completely quelled his arousal and still ached to touch Mina again. He needed to transform into animal form and run a few miles, but since he was stuck in a car with the very source of his hunger, he had to control himself for now.

Mina turned down the radio's volume and slightly leaned toward Mathias. "You said you would need to switch out with me after about an hour. Want me to pull over somewhere?"

"Oui. It's about time to switch. We're close to the city, so I'll need to take over."

About fifteen minutes later, Mina pulled into another fueling station. She cut the engine and looked over at Mathias. "You look too serious, Mathias. What are you thinking?"

He let out a long breath and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know what came over me back at that fueling station, but there's something about you, Mina. Something that makes me unable to think straight."

She turned and looked back out the windshield. "Well, for the sake of my dwindling ego, I hope that's a good thing."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. You're a very beautiful and desirable woman, but I cannot break your father's trust and let that happen again. I am here to watch over you and that needs to be the extent of our involvement."

Mina turned to him again and leaned in closer. She lowered her gaze to the sizable bulge behind the zipper of his pants and slowly returned to his eyes. "You sure about that?"

Her luscious hair fell over her shoulder toward him and her mouth was slightly open. Inviting. She licked her lower lip and he sucked in his breath. She leaned closer and placed a hand on his cheek. Mina slowly ran her fingers into his hair and clenched a fistful. She started to pull him to her.

He hesitated. "Mina."

"Shhh. Don't ruin it, Mathias. Being in a car may not be any better than against a wall but hey, it's a pretty expensive car. I want to kiss you, and I'm pretty sure you want the same thing."

His body tightened. It took all his self control to not pull her to his lap and take her in the damn car. "Mina. I cannot forgo my responsibilities to your father. We shouldn't do this." Even though he denied her in his mind, his body moved toward hers. "I want you too much right now."

"Then just kiss me and we'll figure out the rest later."

Mathias groaned as Mina tightened her grip in his hair and tugged him to her. She covered his mouth with hers and sucked on his lower lip. The kiss was slow and seductive and Mathias couldn't get enough. She ran the tip of her tongue over his lips and slipped into his mouth. Their tongues entwined and their mouths moved in perfect

harmony. Mathias marveled when even with the gearshift in the way, Mina had somehow managed to pull closer to him and wrap her other arm around his middle underneath his coat. She spread her fingers across his taut lower back and dug in, massaging his muscles while continuing to make love to his mouth with her lips and tongue. Mathias heard Mina let out a low moan. He was right there with her. She used the grip she had in his hair to pull back his head, so she could have access to his neck. Her mouth settled on him just below his ear and she sucked his skin with eagerness. She licked and sucked her way up and then brought his earlobe between her teeth and lightly bit down.

Mathias let out a guttural growl and quickly pulled her head away only to stare directly into her eyes.

Mathias watched as Mina removed her hand from his back and slid it over his chest. Moving lower, she spread her hand over his middle and made her way downward. The little minx gave him a seductive grin and brought her lower lip between her teeth as her hand finally reached its destination.

Mathias sucked in a harsh breath through gritted teeth and tightened his grip in her hair. "Don't, Mina. You have no idea what this is doing to me. Stop. Now."

*

Mina continued to stare into his magical green eyes. Chloe was right. This was exactly what she needed. Time away from what had happened. An escape from the pain she had wallowed in for the last month. Her mother was dead and there was nothing she could do about that now. Now all she could think about was enjoying the man currently looking at her as if she was the most decadent piece of candy in the box.

Her hand was now on his thigh and moving toward his bulging erection. "You know you don't want me to stop. You know you want me to touch you. To hold you in my hand and stroke you down. You want to feel my mouth on you." She slowly moved her hand up and down then squeezed. "Tell me you want to feel me, Mathias. Tell me."

Mathias closed his eyes. "We shouldn't do this, Mina. No matter how good it feels, no matter how badly I want you, we should stop." He loosened his grip on her hair and moved his other hand to stop her movement on his straining cock. "If I have you, I'm a dead man."

Shocked at his statement, Mina's eyes went wide. "What do you mean you would be a dead man?"

She saw the obvious strain in his clenched jaw and felt his grip on her hair tighten. Mina felt power surge through her. This beautiful man wanted her.

"Mina. Your father trusts me to take care of you. If he knew what I want to do to you right now, he would have my head."

Mina smirked and let out a little laugh. "What is it you want to do to me?"

Mathias squeezed her hand and smiled. "I think you know exactly what I want to do to you."

"Well, maybe. But soon, you'll have to actually tell me." She kissed him lightly on the mouth again and sat back, wondering what he meant about her father taking his head.

"Come on, Mathias. I'm a big girl and we're both adults. I choose who I sleep with and what I want to do with my life. Roderick has been absent for one hundred percent of my life up until now and he really doesn't have a say in the matter."

She felt the slight tug of his fingers in her hair again and then nothing. He released his hold and she watched him move away from her. "Mathias?"

“Make no mistake, Mina. I want you so much now I’m ready to take you right here in this car. But I’m loyal to your father, and I don’t want to disappoint him. If there was a way I could make love to you without jeopardizing my loyalty to Roderick, I would do it.” His voice lowered. He leaned in close and met her gaze. “But if I made love to you, Mina, you would be mine.”

Whoa.

Mina leaned back and smiled deviously. “Pretty confident in your abilities, aren’t you, lover boy?”

Mathias ran his finger down her cheek and grazed her bottom lip. “I’m confident that I would never let you go after making love to you.”

That smile she had been sporting was wiped clean off her face at his statement. She looked intently into his eyes, trying to determine if he was as serious as he sounded.

Making love.

He met her stare head-on and didn’t blink.

Yeah. He was serious.

The intensity of his statement, of her immediate reaction to him since their first encounter, shook Mina. “Okay. This just got a bit too major for me.” She slid back in her seat. “Why don’t we just get to Munich and get the shopping going.”

Mina straightened and slowly opened the car door. Cold air swept in and she immediately missed his warmth. After a quick trip to the restroom, Mina went inside to buy a cup of coffee, then returned to the car.

Mathias reached over and tucked her hair behind her ear. “You ready?”

Mina looked away, staring at the road ahead of them. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

A few minutes later, Mathias stopped in front of what looked like a five-star hotel and two men scurried to each side of the car. Mina’s door was raised before she could ask Mathias what they were doing here. Mathias exited the car and spoke in German to one of the men. He handed the man several bills and made his way around the car toward Mina.

“What are we doing at a hotel, Mathias?”

Mathias reached for Mina’s arm and guided her into the lobby. “One day isn’t enough to shop in Munich. Besides, we talked about me showing you some of the sights. Remember, Roderick won’t be back for a couple of days so we have time.”

Mina squeezed his arm. “You mean we’re staying overnight? I don’t have enough with me to spend the night.”

Mathias laughed. “Hence the shopping trip, Mina. You can get anything you need here.”

They continued into the lobby and Mina stopped short. On the high ceiling was a circle of stained-glass pieces in a rainbow of colors with a nature scene in the middle. Padded chairs and tables were situated all over the lobby. A small bar was over to the side. The place was gorgeous. “What is the name of this hotel?”

“Vier Jahreszeiten Kempinski.”

Knowing she would only butcher the name if she even tried the intricate pronunciation, Mina swallowed. “Right. How about I just call it ‘The Hotel’.”

“That’s fine.” He chuckled. “You can call it whatever you want. But for the next couple of days, you can call it home.”

Mathias reached the front desk and again spoke in perfect German.

She loved the sound of his voice. It was low and strong. Very distinctive, but sometimes she could hear a lilt of French when he wasn't concentrating.

The clerk produced two cardkeys and motioned to the elevators.

"Come on, Mina. Let's get settled and then we can head out to shop for whatever you want."

When the elevator doors closed and they were heading up, she noticed Mathias had not handed her a key. "Can I have my room key, please?"

"The keys are for the same room, Mina." He chuckled. "We have a suite. I need to stay with you, so this is the best way. You will have your own bedroom, but we will share the rest of the space."

Mina smiled at the thought of sharing the room with Mathias. She certainly hoped they wouldn't be needing that second bedroom. They reached the top floor and walked down a long hallway to their suite.

When Mathias opened the door, Mina gasped. The room looked like Old World meets Modernistic. The back wall was all windows, and the drapes hanging from ceiling to floor were thick and dark maroon with gold stripes. A painted mural covered one wall showing a Greek warrior in battle, and the furniture was magnificent. All of the pieces looked to be inlaid with gold. Several chandeliers hung throughout and the floors were thick, dark wood. Mina had been in nice hotels before, but nothing like this. This place was pure opulence.

As she looked to her right, she saw a dining room and what must be one of the bedrooms. She immediately went to inspect it. Decorated in blue and gold, the room screamed extravagance. The bed was so high a step stool rested next to it and the armoire reached to the ceiling. She walked over and opened the heavy wooden doors. The inside smelled of cedar and age. A thrill danced through her. She loved it. On the opposite wall was an antique-looking dressing table with a mirror. Over toward the corner was a modern-day computer desk. She turned and looked back at Mathias who leaned against the doorframe, smiling at her interest.

Mina beamed. "I get this room!" She got a running start and dove onto the massive bed. She landed dead center and stared up at the ceiling above the bed. A starburst design had been inlaid into the plaster of the ceiling with little cherubs flying all over the place. She actually giggled. She was almost twenty-nine years old and she giggled like a little girl.

Mathias walked toward her and stopped a few feet from the bed. His hands were locked behind his back and he laughed along with her. "Well, I'm glad the suite meets with your approval. Now get ready. We need to start our shopping."

He turned and moved to shut the door of the bedroom. "You've got twenty minutes."

Mina continued to smile. "I'll be ready."

* * * *

No matter what she'd thought about Munich, Mina had not been prepared for the bevy of choices she would have. When she saw Dolce & Gabbana, she almost sprinted to the shop. She loved their stuff. At D&G, she picked up several pieces as well as a new pair of sunglasses and a purse. Next stop was Gucci where she found a beautiful coat, several sweaters and tops, and of course ... shoes.

After taking a short break for lunch at a lovely little outside cafe, Mathias guided her

toward Dior.

Mina pulled on his arm to stop him. "I don't need to go in there. It's not my style."

With a gentle tug, he continued forward. "Come now, Mina. If you want to go to the opera, you need a gown."

"Opera? We're going to the opera?"

"Yes. While you were getting ready this morning, I called down to the front desk. We have tickets for *La Bohème* at nine this evening. I thought we could go to dinner and then see the show. That is if you're interested."

Excitement bubbled in her chest and Mina beamed again. "Interested? Of course I would be interested, but do I really need a gown? I mean, not everyone there will be dressed in gowns, right?"

Mathias nudged her toward Dior again. "Not everyone will be in gowns. Some will be in tuxes."

Mina swatted his shoulder. "Oh, shut up. You know what I mean. I really have to wear a gown?"

"Mina. We have box seats. I think a gown is in order. Come now. Let's find you something, shall we?"

The sales woman at Dior was all too happy to help since she couldn't seem to remove herself from Mathias' presence. Even though the rotund woman must have been in her fifties, she was still obviously besotted. She introduced herself as Hilde and began selecting gowns for the evening.

Mina was shoved into a plush dressing room. She assumed she would be expected to "model" the gowns for Mathias, but there was no way she was stepping out of the room if she didn't feel comfortable. Mina already had issues with certain areas of her body and her boobs were one of them. Hilde kept bringing back low-cut, spaghetti-strapped numbers and Mina was not really into having her breasts spilling out all over the place. Maybe twenty-five pounds ago such a display would have been all right, but right now Mina wanted the girls to be well contained.

After about the sixth gown, Mathias cleared his throat just outside the dressing room door. "Am I going to see you in any of these gowns, or are you just going to keep it a secret?"

Mina rolled her eyes and opened the door just a crack. "A secret. Now leave me alone. I refuse to spin around on top of that pedestal like a jewelry box ballerina for you. Why don't you go get some air or something?"

Mathias chuckled and tipped her chin up with his finger. Leaning in, he gently placed his lips on hers. He broke the kiss and whispered, "Comme vous souhaitez. Stay put and I'll give you some privacy. Don't leave this area. All right? I'll return in a few minutes."

She gave him a genuine smile and stared into his glorious green eyes. "I'll be here waiting for you."

He laid a quick kiss on her forehead and turned to leave the dressing area.

Mina closed the door to the fitting room and took inventory of all the gowns she had tried on. One was too small. One made her ass look like two marshmallows squished together, and one was peach colored. That alone was a big no-no. She was about to give up on the others still hanging on the hooks when she heard footsteps outside her dressing room. Assuming Mathias was back to bother her, she shoved her head back through the

door and snapped, "I am not model—"

Mina stopped short when her eyes met with another pair of emerald green ones. These didn't belong to Mathias, but to a tall, beautiful woman holding a gorgeous black gown. "I am here to show you this gown, liebting. I assume you are willing? With your coloring and shape, this one should be perfect on you."

Mina reached through the small opening of the partially closed door to grab the gown. "Uh ... yes. Thanks. I'm sorry for snapping. I thought you were someone else."

The gorgeous woman smiled, revealing perfect, white teeth. "Ah. Your lover, yes? The man who is here with you?"

Mina surprisingly blushed. "Yes, but he is not my lover. We're just friends. Did Hilde send you back with this? She was helping me before."

"Ja ... she did. Why don't you try on the gown and show it to your friend when he returns. I think he is getting a bit anxious to see you."

"Really, we're just friends." Mina nervously cleared her throat. "We're going to the opera tonight. *La Bohème*. He says I need a gown because we have box seats. I think he's trying to pull a fast one on me and get me into a dress."

The woman moved to the side of the door and took Mina's hand. Her hands were ice cold and Mina wondered if she had just been outside or something. It was pretty warm in the shop, so why did this woman have icicles for fingers? She was a beautiful woman, though. Her long light-brown hair hung to the middle of her back and she was dressed beautifully. She wore a long brown tweed pencil skirt and a cream silk blouse with outrageously high, cream, strappy heels. Her makeup was flawless and she was probably wearing thousands of dollars worth of pearls around her neck and in her ears.

"Ah, liebting. He is not lying. Box seats at the opera are wonderful and you should dress the part. Try on this gown. I think it's the one for you. And by the end of the evening, maybe he will be your lover after seeing you in it. He certainly is a handsome man."

Mina rolled her eyes. "Yes. Well, you and every other female in the vicinity think so too."

The woman smiled again. "All the more reason to sink your teeth into him before they get a chance. Now try on the dress. It's perfect for you."

"All right. Thank you for your help. Um, what's your name again?"

"You are welcome, liebting, and my name is Valencia."

Mina smiled at her. "That's a beautiful name. I'm Mina. Thanks again."

The woman turned the corner and walked out of the dressing area. "You're very welcome, Mina."

Chapter Eleven

Mina tried on the dress Valencia recommended. She loved it the minute the zipper came up. Perfect. The gown was a tank style, but the straps were about two inches thick on her shoulders and covered with sheer black chiffon. The cut was low, but not low enough to show off too much of her chest. The silk material underneath gathered at her midriff and then flowed down to the floor. Chiffon covered the entire dress below her waist. It was all black until about her knees where the black slowly faded into a midnight blue and then flowed into a periwinkle at the hem. The flow of color was perfect and looked very natural. The black minimized what Mina thought was a poochy stomach and also accentuated her natural pale skin and dark hair. But when Mina looked at the price tag her heart literally stopped. Seventy-five hundred Euro. That was around ten thousand U.S. dollars.

No way would she wear something that could possibly be that expensive. Hell, ten thousand dollars was a freaking car. Not a great one, but none the less ... a car.

She quickly slipped out of the dress, grabbed her phone and dialed Chloe's cell. Two rings later, Chloe breathlessly answered.

"Hey, honey. Whatcha doin'?"

"Hey, Clo. Why are you out of breath? Are you running or something?"

Chloe chuckled. "Hell, no. I just climbed three flights of stairs with about nine shopping bags. The elevator in my building is down for maintenance. Sucks. So, what's up with you?"

Ignoring the chaise in the corner, Mina sat on the floor of the dressing room, crossed her legs and leaned back against the wall, getting comfortable for a chat. "Well, I'm currently sitting on the floor in a dressing room in my underwear surrounded by Dior gowns and trying to find one to wear to the opera tonight. Mathias is taking me to see *La Bohème* this evening."

"Holy shit, Mina. Dior? The opera? Really?"

"Yeah, really. Here's the kicker, though. The only gown I found that I look halfway good in costs over ten grand."

There was a long pause. "Chloe? You still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. So what's the problem? It's not as if you can't afford it, Mina. Get the dress."

"I know, I know but damn, Chloe. Ten thousand dollars? That's like a small car or something. And just because I can afford something this expensive doesn't mean I feel right about spending that kind of money on a dress ... or allowing a man I've never met to spend that kind of money."

Chloe clucked her tongue. "Do you look good in it?"

"What?"

"I said, do you look good in it?"

A smile broke out on her lips. "Yes. Damn, Clo, it's really beautiful."

"Then get it and knock the socks off that hot guy you're with."

Half laughing, half shocked, Mina replied, "Chloe! Jesus! Just say what you're thinking, okay? The hot guy is named Mathias and I'm still trying to decide how far I'm

really willing to take this.” Mina blushed remembering her earlier lip lock with Mathias in the car. Yeah, she pretty much knew how far she was willing to take this. But Chloe didn’t need to know that ... yet.

“Just get the dress and have a wonderful time. I mean think about it. You are going to the opera in Munich in a Dior gown with a great guy. Make the most of it. If anyone deserves a wonderful time, it’s you Mina-girl. I assume you’re spending the night there, right?”

Mina twirled her hair in her fingers. “Yes. He booked a suite at some five-star hotel and the place looks like a palace inside. Separate bedrooms, though, but it’s gorgeous.”

“Better get used to the lap of luxury, sweetheart.” Chloe teased. “Now what else have you bought? Tell me, tell me!”

After filling Chloe in on all of her purchases, Mina ended the call and sat there on the floor looking at herself in her bra and panties. She needed some new stuff if she was going to play the seduction game.

* * * *

Mathias stood outside the front of store when the hair on the back of his neck bristled. He was being watched. He whirled around and scanned the area. People walked everywhere shopping and milling about, but he could sense the presence of the Valta. He wasn’t sure how many there were but they were there. “Hell,” he muttered to himself as he quickly walked back into the store. He needed to get Mina out of there, but if he brought her out in plain sight, they would get a good look at her. Not knowing if they already had or not, Mathias flipped out his phone and called Tremayne.

“Tre. Get Talon and get down to Maximilianstrabe quick. I’m being trailed and my assignment is in danger.”

“Where exactly are you?”

Mathias looked around, wondering which shop Mina would want to visit next. Not really knowing, he settled on one and hoped she would be up for a bit more shopping. “Meet me outside the rear entrance of Versace. Scan the area first and make sure you aren’t seen. They know I’m here so take it easy. I don’t want to alert them of a heavier presence. Just play it cool. Talon will know what to do.”

“Got it.”

Mathias wanted to scrap the opera, but changing their plans now would make her suspicious. The alternative was being locked up in a hotel room with her with nowhere to go. He would probably end up with his hands all over her within an hour, so they had to stay busy. It was hard enough for him to not touch her. Just sitting in the dressing area at Dior earlier, he could smell her musky Obsession perfume and the scent had made him crazy. He had been picturing her naked in the dressing room, trying on those gowns. Thankfully, she asked him for some privacy. He’d needed air. Preferably cold air to calm his libido.

Since he couldn’t very well keep her inside Dior much longer, Mathias entered the store to find Mina by the checkout desk, standing next to a garment bag.

He walked toward her. “I see you found a gown. I’m sure you will be beautiful in it.”

A blush rose to her cheeks and she smiled. “Thanks. And yes, I found a dress. Although I think you might want to look at the bill before you decide whether my appearance in it is more important than the price.”

*

Mathias moved to the front of the checkout desk and Hilde handed him the bill with a huge smile plastered on her face. He glanced at the receipt and turned back toward Mina. He gave her a small grin and she could see his shoulders shake as he silently laughed. He laughed at a ten thousand dollar bill?

He produced a small business card from his wallet and handed it to Hilde. When she read the card, she looked back at Mathias wide-eyed. He smiled and nodded his head as though he confirmed what she read. What exactly was on that card?

Hilde typed some information into her computer and that was it. The dress was Mina's. Wow. I guess Roderick really is Daddy Warbucks.

Mathias arranged for the gown to be delivered to the hotel. He placed a hand at the small of her back and led her out of the shop. The crisp air felt good on Mina's warm cheeks and she absently wove her arm through Mathias'. "Where to next?"

Mathias placed his hand on hers and looked down at her. "How about we get you some shoes at Versace and then head back to the hotel so we both can get ready for dinner and the show? I still need to arrange for a tux to be delivered and we can take care of that at Versace as well."

"Sounds good to me. Let's go."

After only thirty minutes in the store, she knew she was in heaven. Mina didn't think she ever wanted to leave the Versace shop. Clothing, accessories, shoes, everything was gorgeous and at her fingertips. She knew all she had to do was pile it up on the counter and Mathias would take care of the bill. She considered doing just that but decided not to. She would grab a few things, maybe add a few extravagances and then head back to the room.

Thinking of Chloe, Mina had the saleslady wrap up a red patent-leather Shopper purse. She made arrangements to have it sent back to Washington and decided on a black leather grommet satchel for herself. Now she had something presentable to carry her belongings, instead of her North Face backpack.

Mathias arranged for his tux to be delivered to the hotel, and Mina let him know she was finished with her shopping. He took care of the bill the same way he had in Dior and the sales lady reacted just as Hilde had when she saw the business card. What the hell did it say? When they left, she would have to ask Mathias to show her one of the cards.

She headed toward the front doors only to have Mathias lightly grab her arm and stop her.

"Mina, we're leaving out the back entrance if that's all right. Come this way."

Mina raised a brow in question. "All right. But why?"

"I'll explain later, but for right now, we need to leave through the back."

"Wait." His tense mood had her suspicious. Mina pulled her arm away from his grasp. "What's up, Mathias? Is there something wrong? Tell me."

Mathias let out a slow, calming breath and took her arm again. "Mina. Your father is a very wealthy and powerful man. He has many friends, but he has just as many enemies. I have reason to believe people are outside that may wonder who you are. If they knew you were his daughter, they may attempt something not too polite. Now please, let's go so we can return to the hotel."

Mina followed Mathias but was incredibly confused. "What do you mean 'something not so polite'?"

“Mina. I don’t want a confrontation nor do I want you in a position of danger. Like I said, your father has enemies.” His stare darkened and his jaw clenched. “Why do you think I was sent to watch over you?”

“I don’t know, Mathias,” Mina sarcastically replied. “Maybe because he thought I would get lost or something. Not because I could be killed.”

Mathias led her through the back storeroom of the shop and stopped at the bolted steel door leading outside. He paused, put a hand on the door and stilled.

A few minutes passed and Mina was dying to know what the hell was going on with the “meditation act” Mathias pulled with the door.

“Mathias, are you trying to contact the spirits or something? What are you doing?”

“Quiet.”

Mina jerked in response to his biting tone. Wanting to take a shot back at him, she sucked in her breath to let him have it when all of the sudden she felt a tingle go up her spine.

“What is that?”

Mathias turned toward Mina. Eyes wide in disbelief. “You feel it?”

Mina raised her own hand and placed it on the steel door. “Yeah, I feel it. What is it? An electrical current or something? My skin is all tingly.”

Mathias just stared, brows furrowed. “Are you sure you feel it?”

“Yeah. Is it static I created from trying on so many clothes?”

He removed his hand from the door and placed it over Mina’s still lying flat on the metal. “No, Mina. It’s not static.” He pulled her hand from the door and brought it to his mouth. He opened her hand and laid a long, languid kiss on her palm.

Her fingers curled instinctively inward and she cupped his chin. Mina whispered, “What’s that for?”

Mathias lowered her hand and laced it within his. He leaned toward her, placed his lips on her forehead and inhaled her scent. “It’s for you, Mina. Just for you.”

Mina felt her stomach knot. He had an incredible effect on her and she still had no idea why. Every time he touched her, she was instantly aroused. Just holding his hand made her tremble with need. She was not in a position to have a connection to this man. She would be leaving in a few days and all she could afford was a night full of hedonistic sex. Her heart couldn’t manage an emotional attachment she knew would have to end when she went home. She didn’t think she could handle another loss in her life right now. Maybe her response was just because it had been a while since she had been with a man. Right?

The strange tingling was still bothering her when Mathias opened the steel door and revealed two men standing there.

Dear god, they were huge. Huge and gorgeous.

* * * *

Valencia stood across the courtyard staring at the doors of the boutique where Mathias and Mina shopped. Where were they? They should have been finished by now. She looked down at her beautifully manicured nails and fantasized about sinking them into Roderick’s eyes. What was the king up to now? Why was Mathias, a newly ranked general of the Royal Guard, escorting a human woman while she shopped? Surely there were others that could take care of that type of chore.

Why him? Why was she so important?

This Mina. She was pretty enough, Valencia thought. But why did she deserve that level of attention? She was human, but there was something about her. Something Valencia was unsure of. Something was strange about this girl. Something special. What was she to the Coteri? Valencia wanted to know and she wanted to know now.

“Luca,” Valencia snapped. “Find out what’s keeping them.”

She looked at her son and wondered if he could finally live up to the expectations she had for him that he had always managed to evade. She sighed in resignation, knowing he would never be the man she demanded him to be. Where had she gone wrong with Luca? She loved him as a mother would, but the fool was just too damn resigned in thinking the world was his for the taking. Too full of his own ego to realize that everything he had was her doing. He was a damn disappointment, but he was her son and ultimately, her responsibility.

She gave him a slight smile and watched his face soften in return. At least he was beautiful. If not for that, she thought, he would be nothing more than a specimen used for testing.

His large hands enveloped both of hers and brought them to his lush mouth. He placed a kiss to her knuckles and spoke. “As you wish.”

“And don’t take too long, Luca,” Valencia warned, pulling her hands from his. “I hate waiting.”

* * * *

As she was pulled out of the shop into the cold, Mina gasped. Mathias immediately yanked her within his grasp and almost covered her with his body as if he shielded her. From what, she had no idea.

Looking up at the two men, her mouth gaped open and her eyes were wide. The smaller of the two—if around six-foot-three and two hundred plus pounds was considered small—immediately smiled at her warmly. He had shaggy brown hair and what looked like amber-colored eyes. He reminded her of a surfer type in the way he presented himself. He held out his long hand toward her and his smile got even bigger. “Hey. I’m Tremayne but you can call me Tre.”

Mina took his hand and shook. “Hi. Nice to meet you.”

Her gaze then went to the big one. He must have been over six five and two hundred and eighty pounds. And from the looks of him, he was all muscle and attitude. Hell, as big as he was, she’d be surprised if he didn’t have to turn sideways to get through a doorway. She looked him up and down. He wore soft, tight black leather pants, biker boots and a heavy black leather jacket she immediately thought had to have been specially made for him. No way a coat that size could be purchased off the rack. He looked hard and extremely striking. Long wavy black hair brushed the tops of his shoulders and his eyes were the color of the ocean. He had a goatee, but Mina also noticed a day or two had probably passed since he last shaved the rest of his face. His hands were massive and rough looking. Well used. Mina immediately thought of Chloe. That brought a smile to her face.

The big one grimaced. “What’s so funny, little one?”

Mina covered her mouth with her hand. “Nothing. Just thinking of someone who would love to make your acquaintance. And you would be?”

“Talon.”

“Talon. Good to meet you. Now boys, can you please let the ‘little one’ in on what’s up? Why are we in the cold behind a high-end fashion boutique?”

Mathias continued to hold her under his arm, his gaze scanning everywhere. He tightened his grip.

She slipped her hands around his waist to hold on.

Whatever was happening, Mina instinctively knew to stay close to both of these men. They may be strangers to her, but apparently her father trusted them with her life. And it was obvious Mathias trusted them as well.

“We need to get you back to the hotel without being seen,” Tre told her with a grin. “Otherwise, the boss here will blow a vein.”

Mathias glared. “Shove it, Tre. I don’t need your commentary right now. We need to get her out of here. I know they’re here. I can feel them.”

Surprised at his tone and word usage, Mina looked up at Mathias and grinned. “Shove it?”

“Later. Now come on.” His lips pressed into a flat line. “We don’t have much time.”

She sucked in a breath. “You’re serious, aren’t you? Am I really in danger?”

Mathias placed his hands on either side of her face. Looking deeply into her eyes, he spoke with complete confidence. “You will never be in danger as long as I am with you. Now, come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Talon walked ahead with both arms tensed at his side as though he was ready for battle. Mathias and Mina were behind him with Tre bringing up the rear. What was the large bulge under Talon’s coat? Jesus, was that a sword?

Talon stopped short, raised his hand and pointed toward the sky.

“Shit.” Mathias stiffened.

All three men closed in on Mina and raised their arms over her. She was immediately surrounded by them and she started to panic. She kept her mouth shut, but she wanted answers. They pressed closer together and Mina was crushed against Mathias’ chest. He smelled so good. That patchouli and vanilla suited him somehow. Delectable yet refined. She heard his rapidly beating heart, as well as his quick breathing. He looked up, so her head was tucked just under his chin. It felt oddly calming being against him. If there weren’t two other men pressed against her back and side, she would actually be enjoying this. But right now, she had no idea what was going on, so she was just doing what she was told.

A few seconds later, Tre spoke. “They didn’t get a look at her, but they know she’s here. They’re curious now. We gotta get her outta here fast.”

Talon snorted down at Tre. “Wow. That’s almost genius, Betty. Got anything else for us before we head out?”

Tre reached out and shoved Talon’s shoulder. “Quit calling me Betty. So what if I like to bake. I don’t see you turning down my red velvet cupcakes, asshole.”

Talon gave Tre the one-fingered salute.

Mina just gaped. Who the hell were these guys?

They all moved away from Mina, but she felt their protective presence. She was almost soothed to know these gigantic men were actually there to protect her. But why her?

Mathias whipped his head around and stared down the two warriors. “Would you

two stop nagging each other for five fucking seconds so we can get her out of here?"

Mina's head snapped toward Mathias and she knew her eyes were bulging out of their sockets. "You just said fuck!"

"Yes, Mina. I cursed. Satisfied?"

Mina gave him a small grin. "Incredibly."

"Good. Now go with Talon back to the hotel. I'll be there shortly. Don't worry. He'll not leave your side. Trust him and do as he asks."

The seriousness of the situation came crashing back down on her. Mina reluctantly let go of Mathias and took Talon's hand. "All right. I'll see you soon."

Talon reached around and gathered her hair in his hands. He quickly wrapped it up and pulled out a leather tie. He secured her hair to the nape of her neck and then produced a red scarf out of his coat pocket. He gently wrapped it around Mina's head to hide her face. He removed his coat and switched with Tre.

How he got his tree-trunk-sized arms in Tre's coat amazed her, but he somehow did it. Talon tied his own hair back in a low ponytail and put on a pair of shades. Other than his size, he looked completely different. He put an arm over Mina's shoulder and pulled her close. They moved casually to the corner of the building. Talon looked around and then saluted Mathias and Tre. He maneuvered them through the crowd and away from the shop. He flagged down a taxi and they quickly got in.

Talon turned his gaze toward Mina, who simply sat there, frozen in place. Talon reached over and placed his hand on her shoulder. "You're going to be fine. We'll keep you safe."

"Easy for you to say, Terminator."

Talon looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. "I saw that movie. I'm bigger than him you know."

"You don't say." Mina gave him a wicked smile. "Well, like I said, I know someone that would love to make your acquaintance. Maybe someday I'll introduce you."

Talon chuckled. "You do that, little one."

Chapter Twelve

Mathias seethed at the idea of another man touching Mina. Just seeing her get into the taxi with Talon almost made him bolt after the vehicle as it pulled away. But he had also seen how easily Talon had warmed to her. It may not have been obvious to her, but Talon giving her the name of “little one” had been his way of accepting her. And that didn’t often happen. Especially with females.

The shitty part about it was he had to stay and draw the Valta’s attention away from Mina when all he wanted to do was be by her side. They were already aware of Mina’s presence and now they were obviously wondering why a human woman required the protection of one of Roderick’s generals. He had fucked up. He should have kept her secreted away and out of the prying eyes of the Valta. He’d thought getting her away from royal land was the smartest thing to do. The farther away from Roderick the better. Considering what had just gone down, Mathias figured he should just gut himself right there and save Roderick the trouble.

After the taxi had rounded the corner and was out of site, Mathias crossed the street and headed toward a nearby restaurant. Trying to shield his anger and frustration at what had just transpired, as well as fuel his courage into making one of the hardest phone calls he had ever made, Mathias entered the restaurant and headed straight for the bar. He quickly ordered a shot of vodka, turned toward the front windows and froze. Standing outside, leaning against a light post, smiling deviously for all to see, was Luca.

Alarm and anger shot through Mathias like a lightning bolt. “Fuck.”

Mathias pulled out his phone and kept his gaze on Luca. He should have known that bastard was behind this. The shot of vodka was placed in front of him and Mathias quickly downed it and motioned with his hand for another. This was one time he needed a little liquid courage. He dialed Roderick’s private line and the king answered after only one ring.

“Report.”

Mathias ran his hand through his hair and sighed deeply. “Luca is here.”

“Did you see him?”

The second shot of vodka arrived and Mathias downed that one as well. “I’m looking at him right now.”

“You know what that means don’t you?”

“Yes, Roderick. I know. Talon and Tre are here. She’ll be protected.”

Silence greeted him as a response.

Mathias rubbed his hand across his face and looked at the empty shot glass. He wondered if drinking would be the smartest thing to do right now. Screw it. He signaled the waiter to bring another with a swipe of his hand over the glass.

“Roderick?”

“You are the one, Mathias. The one I’ve trusted with my child. Do whatever is necessary to keep her safe and away from them. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sire. No harm will come to her. I swear my life on it.”

Mathias heard the line go dead and he flipped the phone closed. Looking back out the window, he saw Luca was long gone. No telling where he came from or how he knew

Mina was here. But now that Mathias knew Luca was involved, it only strengthened his resolve to keep her safe.

Mathias finished his drink, paid the check and walked out into the cold, crisp air. Looking around, he knew the Valta were watching him. He felt it. He buttoned his coat and began walking toward the hotel and hoped he would lose whatever tail Luca had placed on him. Smiling slightly, Mathias saluted the air and muttered to himself, "Let the games begin."

* * * *

Mina followed Talon into the lobby of the hotel. Needing a drink, she immediately made a beeline for the bar. She dug through her new Versace purse and found the cigarettes she had stashed in a side pocket. She quickly unwrapped the pack, pulled one out and used her beat-up matchbook to light it. The hot smoke crawled down her throat. Oh yeah. Heaven.

Exhaling, she ordered a shot of Crown Royal and a beer chaser from the bartender and motioned to Talon to sit. She wasn't going anywhere until she finished the cigarette and enjoyed the slight buzz provided by the shot of Crown.

He took the seat next to her and crossed his arms over his chest, emphasizing his massive expanse. "You think you should be doing that?"

Mina took another drag and waited for her shot and beer. "You mean drinking? Yeah. I kinda do."

When her drinks were delivered, she quickly killed the shot of Crown and took a couple of swigs of her beer.

Talon continued to scan the room, not making eye contact with her. "I mean the smoking. It's pretty bad for you, you know."

Mina turned in her seat to look at his striking profile. "Gee. Thanks, doctor. I was unaware of any of the effects nicotine had on me."

A brawny shoulder lifted in a shrug. "I was just sayin'."

Mina took another drink of her beer and nursed the cigarette, immediately ashamed for snapping at him. "Yeah, I know what you were saying. I'm sorry. Guess I'm still just a little freaked out by all this. You want a drink?"

Talon grinned. "No thanks. I need to stay sharp."

She continued to look at this behemoth of a man. Chloe would die if she saw him. He was a little rough around the edges, but put a Harley between his legs and she could completely see Chloe drooling over this man. She should take a picture of him with her cell phone and send it to Chloe. She would freak.

Mina dug her phone out of her new bag and flipped it open. She hit the camera button and stealthily lifted it so she could see his face on the screen. She hit the send button and a little click sound went off.

He quickly turned and glared.

"What the hell was that?"

Mina continued to punch the buttons on her phone to send a text to Chloe with the picture. "Nothing. Just sending a picture of you to my friend. She would be really interested in meeting you. You seem to be just her type."

"God-like?"

"No." Without missing a beat, Mina belted back at him. "A smart-ass wrapped in

leather. Chloe goes for the tough-looking ones with quick wit. Especially the big ones.”

Talon’s jaw tensed. His blue eyes narrowed slightly. Then his features relaxed and he smiled. “I like you.”

Mina smiled back. She liked him too. Noting his initial reaction to her comment, she hoped she hadn’t offended him. Something about him screamed personality. Loyalty. Strength. But she was sure only someone very special could break through the shields he had up. She sensed he was a man holding on to a secret and was dead set on not confronting it.

She finished her cigarette and put it out. “Please don’t tell Mathias. I had to make a deal with him that I wouldn’t smoke again if he let me drive the McLaren.”

“In that case, you better hit the ladies’ room. He is about to walk through the lobby doors, and he’ll smell you a mile away.”

“Shit.” Mina scrambled off her chair and dashed for the restroom.

*

Mathias entered the hotel and immediately spotted Talon at the bar. Mathias quickened his pace and joined his friend. When he didn’t see Mina, he launched himself forward and grabbed Talon by the collar of his jacket. “What the fuck, Talon?” he growled. “Where the hell is Mina? You can’t let her out of your sight.”

“Back off, Mathias. She’s fine. She’s in the ladies’ room and no one else is in there. I would have already sensed them.”

Running hands over his face, he slumped down in the chair Mina had just occupied. “Luca is here.”

“Fantastic.”

“Yeah. I’ll need you and Tre to keep an eye out tonight when I take her to the opera.”

“Christ, Mathias. You’re still taking her?” Talon leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Look, I don’t know why she is so important to Roderick, but you can’t parade her around Munich for everyone to see. You’re putting a bull’s eye on her head.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Mathias glanced around to see if anyone noticed his raised voice. “I can’t very well scare the hell out of her and keep her stuck in the room all night. We’ll be careful. She’ll be fine.”

Talon cocked a brow at Mathias. “You mean you can’t be stuck in that room with her all night.”

Mathias leaned over the table toward Talon in a show of dominance. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Talon stared straight back. “It’s been a while since any female has gotten your attention, Mathias. I saw how you were with her today. But remember, she’s human. You can’t touch her. By the way you held onto her this afternoon, I think you want to do more than that. Be careful, man. It’s not right and you know it.”

“What you saw today was me trying to protect her. That’s all. Now back the hell off and do what you’re good at.” Mathias turned and waved a hand toward Talon. “Go scout out the opera house and the restaurant I’m taking her to. Give me a call when you’re through.”

Head shaking, Talon stood. “No restaurant, Mathias. Just bring her down here for dinner or eat in the room. I’ll take care of the opera house. If I see anything, I’ll bring in a couple of the guys for added protection.” He pushed in the chair and leaned toward

Mathias. "Here she comes and don't say a fucking word about smelling smoke on her. She's freaked out enough."

*

When Mina returned to the bar, her gaze immediately locked with Mathias. Her stomach flipped and her pulse raced. She'd never had this kind of reaction to a man before. Especially a man she'd only known for two days. As she approached, Mathias stood and pulled out a stool for her.

"Are you all right, Mina?"

She cast a quick glance at Talon and grinned. "I'm not sure what all is going on here and I fully expect some answers. But I can tell you Talon did a very good job with his babysitting duties. Not a scratch on me."

Mina reached for Talon's hand. "All kidding aside, thank you for today, Talon. I appreciate you."

Talon immediately removed his hand from hers. "No problem, little one."

"I'm sure compared to you everyone is little, huh?"

Talon cracked a small smile. "Tell that to your friend. Maybe that will entice her."

Mina leaned back and took another drink of her beer, her gaze returning to Mathias. Mathias just stared into space, deep in thought.

She didn't want him preoccupied with what happened today. She wanted to see him without that mask of formality. Wanted to see him less stiff and proper as he had always been when he was with her. She liked what she saw of him today. Liked the banter between him and the other two men. He had been warmer then, even though he was obviously concerned about the situation. He seemed to be more "himself" with Talon and Tre than with her.

With her, he was always guarded. Always making sure he said the right thing at the right time. Like he danced to someone else's tune. Looking sideways at him, she decided. She wanted to find out who he really was. What music he liked, his favorite food, where he was from, what his family was like. Hell, she didn't even know if he had siblings or not. They had never had a personal conversation and maybe tonight was the time.

Before she had the chance to ask any of those questions, Mathias rose and motioned with his hand for her to follow. "I thought we could do dinner here and then drive to the opera for the show. Sound good to you?"

"That's fine. The front desk should have all of our deliveries by now. Why don't you have them sent up while I hit the spa? I think I need a good, long soak and some pampering after today."

"Not the spa, Mina. I can arrange for them to come to you in the safety of the room."

Not wanting to get into the question and answer game right there in the lobby, Mina quickly agreed. "That's fine. Where will you be?"

She watched as Mathias stopped in front of the elevator and looked down at her. She immediately started to fantasize about looking up into those gorgeous green eyes of his while lying naked underneath his huge, hot body. What the hell was wrong with her? She had never reacted to a man like this.

He reached out and punched the elevator button and smiled. "I'll be around."

* * * *

Two hours later, Mina glided from her bedroom into the main living area of the suite.

She was showered, washed, polished, waxed and relaxed. She was greeted with the sound of classical music playing and Mathias standing by the window with only a towel wrapped around his waist. He spoke in hushed tones on the phone. Unaware she was behind him, he continued with the conversation.

“I know, baby. It’s hard. The separation won’t be for too much longer.”

He paused to listen to the person—obviously a woman—on the other end of the line.

“Please. I’m all right. Don’t worry. I’ll be home soon and I’ll see you then.”

Another pause.

Longer this time.

“Je vous aime. I’ll see you soon.” Mathias flipped the phone closed and turned around. He froze in place.

Mina felt a sudden tightness in her chest. Her stomach rolled and she actually worried she might lose her lunch all over the pretty white carpet. She could only think of one word: fucker. He had been coming on to her for the past couple of days, professing his lust and looking at her as if she meant the world to him, only to be speaking to a lover on the phone while she got ready for the opera. What a complete fucker.

“Mina...”

Mina plastered on a smile. She needed to save face and not let him know she had been affected by the call. No way would she let him know. “No need to explain, Mathias. I’ll just go and get dressed.” She turned toward her room. “See you in about thirty minutes?”

“Mina ... wait. I need to explain.”

Mina spun around and faced him, mask firmly in place. “That’s where you’re mistaken, Mathias. You really don’t.” She lifted her chin. “Not to me. Especially not to me.”

She turned and walked through the dining room toward her room. She noticed the fresh flower arrangement that had replaced the decorative bowl filled with sea shells and also noted several tall candelabras loaded with lit candles. Apparently, he had planned on eating in the room instead of a restaurant.

She turned to see him standing in the middle of the living room still covered in only the towel. Damn, he looked good enough to eat. He had watched her walk away and he looked desperate to explain. Well, she wasn’t going to let him. She could put on a mask too. Just like he had been doing with her. She thought she knew what type of man he was. Honorable. Trustworthy. Loyal. Well, she had been dead wrong. He was nothing she had thought he was. She felt crushed. Betrayed. She was supposed to trust this man and she had. Until now. How could she have been so stupid?

What had she gotten herself into? She had let herself enjoy the fantasy and now she was back in her terrible nightmare. One where in just a few days, she would be back at home, alone, and missing her mother. How could she have thought that a man that looked like him would want her? For him, she was a job. Nothing more. And as she stood there feeling pathetic, anger built inside her, her famous temper rising to the surface. How dare he treat her like she didn’t matter. Like she was something to waste his time on. She then came to the realization she couldn’t let him see her hurt. She was stronger than that. She had to be.

Apparently, he had a woman at home and Mina was never one to poach on another girl’s property. But for some reason, she didn’t care right now. She’d show him she could

handle a one-night stand just as easily as he obviously could. She'd never had a serious relationship with a man in her life and that had been just fine by her. She was not going to start now. Not with him. In five seconds flat, he had just changed her mind. He would be a fuck. And probably a great one at that. Just looking at his highly muscled chest, his six-pack abs and that beautiful trail of hair that started at his belly button and ran under the towel to what was probably a huge cock, she imagined riding him until she got what she wanted and then leaving him there to wonder what the hell had just happened.

Poaching went against one of her cardinal rules, but hey, his lady at home would thank her in the end from saving her from the cheating bastard he was. She may be hurting on the inside, but she wasn't going to let him know. On the outside, she would eat nails. She had been through enough. He wasn't going to destroy her resolve. If the death of her own mother hadn't killed her, this man surely wasn't going to. She was going to take Chloe's advice and have as much fun as she could before she returned to Washington and back to her life. She could do this. So why did she feel as if her heart had just been torn from her chest?

Mina turned and went to her bedroom. She calmly but firmly shut the door and spied her gown hanging in the armoire. Perfect. She'd had such fun picking out that gown, all the while thinking of the fairytale evening Mathias had planned for her. She'd so been looking forward to it. But now, all she could think of was what a fool she'd been. He'd played her, and given her emotional state, she had made herself an easy target. How could her initial reactions to this man have been so intense and so wrong? And why did the realization of his betrayal hit her with the same intensity? He was a virtual stranger. It shouldn't hurt this bad.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked over to the armoire, unzipped the garment bag and ran her hands over the soft, black chiffon. She would have her fairytale evening. She deserved this. She would spend a wonderful night with Mathias and then walk away without a backward glance. She knew she had to put her shields in place, both physically and emotionally, or she'd never be able to get through this night. Mina moved into the bathroom to begin her hair and makeup, the first steps in securing her mask. She would have this night damn it ... and after it was over, she wouldn't think about him again.

*

"Son of a bitch." Mathias ran a hand through his still-damp hair. He had completely screwed up. She was pissed and he knew it. Hell, any woman would be pissed, but most would have reacted differently. Most would have taken a crack at him or at least yelled. Not Mina. Cold and calculating, she just walked away. He hadn't known her long, but he knew her well enough to know she always had a sarcastic comment at the ready. And that's what scared him most ... her almost calm demeanor. He knew he was in trouble and he needed to make it right.

But how?

He walked back into his bedroom and dressed. Maybe she would let him explain during dinner. Surely they couldn't sit there in silence and not talk about what just happened. Surely she would say something.

Twenty minutes later, he waited for her. Staring holes through her bedroom door, Mathias was about to come unglued. He hadn't heard a peep from her since she'd shut the door in his face after overhearing him on the phone. Either she just didn't care or she was gunning to kill him. He was betting on the latter.

Dinner had been delivered and the waiters were busy setting up the table. The food smelled wonderful. Braised beef and amaretto orange sauce with red potatoes and a green salad. A desert of baked pears still remained under the silver dome to keep the heat inside. The waiters finished and bid him good evening.

The minute the front door of the suite closed, the door of Mina's bedroom opened.

When she walked through the doorway, he couldn't move. He was in awe. Mouth dropping open, he felt his throat go dry. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

She stood there with her thick, dark hair cascading around her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle, but it accented her gorgeous brown eyes. The dress hugged her beautiful curves and her breasts were pushed up to show just enough skin. Hanging from her neck was her infinity cross pendent. It sat just above the soft curves of her breasts, and he had to physically hold himself back from wanting to crush his mouth on that exact spot. She was breathtaking and he was unable to move. He just stared, wishing she would reach out for him. Wishing he felt her against him. Under him. On him. Around him.

She held her hands out to her sides and turned in a slow circle to give him the full effect. As she turned, he spotted her manicured toes strapped in sexy high heels. He gazed at her voluptuous figure and wondered what she had on underneath. His gaze travelled upward and spied a small Celtic knot tattoo on her left shoulder. She turned her head to the side and looked at him with half-closed eyes. He had never wanted anything more in his life.

"Well, what do you think? Is the dress worth ten thousand dollars?"

Unable to stay where he was, Mathias walked toward her. Reaching for her hand, he replied, "It's not the dress I'm looking at. I'm looking at the woman wearing it, and I would say she was worth everything I have and more."

She moved away smoothly and glided to the table. "Dinner looks great. Let's eat. I can't wait to see *La Bohème*."

Mathias lunged to grab her chair.

She smiled and sat. "Thank you."

He moved across from her and began to serve the meal. She seemed to enjoy him waiting on her and didn't appear to be angry at what had happened earlier. Why was she so calm? Damn, that unnerved him to no end. He knew she was angry, but yet she seemed ambivalent to it. What was she up to?

Once the plates were loaded, she began eating. In silence.

Damn it. She intended to actually sit there and say nothing. A few minutes passed and nothing. Not a word. Mathias felt the anger rising in him.

"Mina, I want to explain that call you overheard earlier."

She placed her fork down on her plate and delicately wiped the corners of her mouth. "No need. I understand completely."

"No, you don't." Mathias dropped his silverware on the plate, a loud clang echoed through the room. "Damn it, Mina, I need to explain."

Mina calmly placed her napkin on the table and scooted back. Once standing, she turned toward her bedroom. In silence, she walked in and a few seconds later, returned with a deep blue shawl over her shoulders. "No. You don't. That call is none of my business. Now if you don't mind, I am ready to go. Dinner was great, but I'm not that hungry and I'm anxious to get to the opera."

She dismissed him.

Mathias rose from the table and stalked behind her toward the door. “Mina, come on. You need to just calm down and listen to me. I was tal—”

“Calm down?” Mina interrupted. “What do you mean calm down? I’m fine, Mathias. Do you hear me yelling?” She raised her hands in the air. “Am I throwing a tantrum like a jealous girlfriend? No, I’m not. I’m a big girl, Mathias. One with several years of experience with other men.” Mina waved a hand at the door. “Now if you don’t mind, can we go?”

“What other men?”

Mina laughed then. Laughed right to his face. “Oh, please. Like I’m a wilting virgin waiting for my flower to be plucked? Believe it or not, Mathias, I have had several men and none have affected me in the least. They were merely something for me to pass the time and enjoy.” She waved her hand at him. “And I’m sure I will enjoy you too.”

“Enjoy me?”

“Yes. Enjoy you.”

His mouth dropped open in shock. Had she just insinuated she would use him for sex? Mathias grabbed her arms and pulled her to him roughly. “Listen to me, Mina. It’s not what you think. You are who I want. Now let me explain who was on the phone.”

Mina pulled free of his grasp and turned toward the door. “Like I said, there’s no need to explain. I’m not interested in explanations. I’m interested in having a wonderful time tonight and then we’ll see what happens. Now come on, Mathias. Let’s go to the opera. Okay?”

“This isn’t over, Mina.”

Without looking back at him, Mina softly replied, “It is for me, Mathias.” She squared her shoulders and opened the door. “Now please, let’s just go.”

Chapter Thirteen

When they arrived at the opera house, Mathias exited the car and gave the keys to the valet. Before he had the chance to help Mina out, one of the ushers beat him to it.

Mathias made it around the car just in time to see her step out. Her small foot came out and he caught sight of her calf and upper thigh as she held her dress out of the way. The blue chiffon grazed her skin and caught his eye. He followed the fabric as it fell and swayed around her legs as she stood. When he looked at her face, she had a slight smile, but there was a look of hesitancy in her eyes.

He closed the door and pulled Mina's hand through his outstretched arm. To his left, he felt Talon about ten steps ahead and Tre trailed them on his right. Good. He needed them there to keep an extra eye out.

Once inside, Mina walked toward the crystal bar and ordered a glass of champagne.

Mathias asked for tonic with lime and once the drinks were handed over, he guided her to the side of the room to watch the crowd. With his heightened gifts of sight and smell, he could detect anything in the vicinity that posed a danger. As of that moment, he couldn't sense anything out of the ordinary.

He turned to Mina. "So. Are you going to speak to me this evening or will we be watching the opera in tense silence?"

Mina smiled back at him. "Of course I'll speak to you. What is it you'd like to talk about?"

Sensing a trap, Mathias rolled his eyes. "You know what I want to discuss, Mina. I want the opportunity to explain who I talked to on the phone. You have the wrong impression and you're angry about it."

Her lips pressed together. "I am not angry, Mathias. And like I said before, I don't want to hear any explanations. I inadvertently walked in on a private conversation that's truly none of my business. I would just rather forget about it and enjoy the evening."

"Mina, I was talking to a friend. She is a friend, Mina. I've known her since I was a child. We grew up together. She is nothing more than a friend."

"Whatever you say, Mathias."

The lights flickered, signifying the opera was about to begin. Mathias took Mina's arm and led her to the elevators.

Tre waited for them there. As they approached, his eyes widened at the sight. "Damn, Mina. You look fantastic."

Mina smiled wide. "Thanks, Tre."

Mathias growled under his breath and shot Tre a look that could kill.

"Sorry, man. Just speaking the truth." Tre ushered Mina into the elevator and waited for Mathias to get in. "I'm not the only one who thinks so, either. Half the men in the room were watching her."

Mathias quickly turned to scan the room. "Who looked at her?"

"Calm down. They were just taking in the view."

Mina stood in the back of the elevator with a smirk on her face. She enjoyed this, damn it.

Scowling, Mathias ordered, "Just get us to our seats, Tre."

The elevator doors opened and Mathias led Mina past several alcoves. Each had dark emerald green curtains covering their entrances. Beside each opening was a brass plate with writing on it. Each alcove was named and Mathias led her to the Wolfe Suite.

He parted the curtains and she sucked in a breath. Mathias turned to stare into the suite. He'd seen it many times, but this was Mina's first and he wanted tonight to be special for her. He had no idea why her happiness had become so important to him. It was her safety he was responsible for and he needed to remember that. But watching her walk into the suite, her hair shining in the soft light, her mouth rising into a genuine smile, Mathias realized making this woman happy was something he desperately wanted to do. Inside the small room were two chairs covered in emerald green velvet, padded foot rests, a small bar to the left side and little gold opera glasses on top of each seat cushion. The room was illuminated by two tiny wall sconces giving off a golden glow. When he looked back at Mina, he saw the awe in her expression. She walked toward the railing and peered over. He knew the view was spectacular. The stage was right below them to the right. They were so close she would be able to see every nuance of the faces of the performers.

Mina turned and gave him a genuine smile. "This is beautiful."

His chest instantly warmed. He so wanted her to enjoy herself and experience something new with him. Her earlier frustration was immediately replaced with wonder and he could see in her eyes that she was excited at the evening to come. He found himself hoping she wanted to share it with him as well. Since setting his eyes on her only the day before, the need to please this woman had become forefront in his mind. But his feelings for her were coming dangerously close to crossing the line with the king and if he didn't pull himself back, he knew there would be hell to pay.

He smiled back. "I'm glad you're pleased." Moving toward the small bar, Mathias reached behind and grabbed another bottle of champagne. "Would you like another glass?"

Mina handed him her empty flute and nodded. "Sure. Thanks."

He poured the drink and handed it to her. Her fingernails had been buffed and polished a light shade of pink. The same color as her toenails. He cocked his head and truly looked at her as she sipped her champagne oblivious of his presence. Her eyes sparkled with excitement and she looked delicious. Her hair was long, lush and shimmering in the glow of the dimmed lights in the small suite. He wanted to bury his nose at the nape of her neck and inhale her scent while running his hands through all that gorgeous hair.

Mathias looked down at the gown Mina had chosen. The design was perfect for her. Perfect for her shape and coloring. The black and blue combination brought out the paleness of her skin and the cut of the dress only enhanced her voluptuous curves. She only wore her pendant and small diamond studs in her ears so her jewelry was minimal but perfect. She was perfect. She kept scanning the rows of people below them, probably wondering who they were, and as they looked up at her he could only imagine who they thought she was. She looked like royalty.

The box seats were owned by only the most wealthy and successful in Europe. Looking in the suite next to theirs, he recognized the Prime Minister. They nodded at each other politely. The Wolfe Suite had not been occupied in quite some time. Roderick was not one to take in a show too often. Isla usually came with her son or another friend

just to keep the seats filled. She was also very fond of the opera.

The lights finally dimmed all the way and Mathias motioned for Mina to take the seat closest to the stage. She lifted the small opera glasses and sat. When the music began, she was still sparkling with anticipation. He just watched her. Watched the lights from the stage play off her lovely face. He longed to touch her. Hold her hand. But he knew better. She would succeed in driving him mad. He had to remain cool and collected. Maybe by the end of the night, she would listen to him. For now, he just leaned back and watched the actors on stage.

* * * *

When intermission came, she had finished the entire bottle of champagne and needed to use the ladies' room. Mathias walked her to the area and watched her go inside. He waited out in the lobby where Talon and Tre joined him.

Tre slapped Mathias on the arm. "So how's it goin' with Mina? She enjoying herself?"

Talon shoved Tre aside, slamming him into the wall and stood next to Mathias. He leaned in and pointed in Tre's direction. "Betty here cried right up to intermission. When the ladies hit those high notes, he just tears up."

"Would you shut the hell up, Talon. And quit callin' me Betty. Do it again and no more cinnamon rolls for breakfast."

"Ooohhh, you play dirty, Betty. You know I love those."

"I've had enough of your shit, Talon."

"Enough boys." Mathias broke them up. "You two can kiss and make up later, but for now, I want you both keeping your eyes peeled. Something's up. I can feel it."

When Mina went to the ladies room, Mathias noticed she was swaying just a bit. Great, another stellar move on his part. Get the king's daughter drunk.

After leaving the ladies' room, instead of heading toward him, Mina walked straight to Tre and Talon. She sauntered over and looped her arm in Talon's. "You boys look nice tonight."

Talon patted her hand but quickly unlooped her arm from his. "Hey, little one. You don't look bad yourself."

"Thank you." Mina replied with a smile.

Mathias watched Mina scan the crowd. The room was filled with Munich's elite. Beautiful gowns, sparkling diamonds and rich men.

Mina smiled and patted Mathias on the arm. "Excuse me, won't you. I'll be right back."

Mathias reached out and grabbed Mina's arm. "Where are you going?"

Eyebrows quirked, Mina looked down at his hand wrapped around her arm.

He immediately released his grasp.

She looked back up at him and plastered on another one of her fake smiles. "I'm just going for another glass of champagne. Do you mind?"

"Don't you think you've had enough for the evening?"

Mina glared. "I think I know my own limits, Mathias."

She turned and her gown flourished out behind her.

Mathias watched her walk toward the bar. Damn, she was too beautiful for her own good. Running his hands through his hair, he let out another long sigh.

Talon looked over at Mathias and sighed along with him. "Remember what I said, Mathias. Don't do anything stupid."

"Shut up, Talon, and just keep an eye on her. I'm going to the men's room."

Talon crossed his huge arms across his chest. "No problem."

*

"Mina. How wonderful to see you. When you said you were coming to the show tonight, I meant to tell you I was attending as well with my son."

Mina smiled back at Valencia. "You look absolutely gorgeous, Valencia. You have a son?"

"Why thank you, lieblich. Look." Valencia extended her arm. "He's approaching now. Let me introduce you."

Mina turned and sucked in a breath. This man was her son? Mina didn't think Valencia looked a day over thirty, but she had to have been with a son who looked like this. He was dazzling. Tall, dark and luscious. His hair was shaved close to his head and a dark goatee set off his stunning face. He headed straight for them and Mina suddenly warmed.

She couldn't stop staring. He looked like an advertisement for sex. Mina absently licked her lips and felt she couldn't look away.

His black eyes locked on hers and didn't waver. Once he reached them, he immediately grasped Mina's hand and brought it to his soft lips. "Please introduce me, Mother."

Valencia beamed with pride. "Mina, this is my son, Luca. Luca, this is Mina... I'm sorry, but I don't know your last name."

Mesmerized, Mina continued to stare into Luca's eyes. "Roarke. My last name is Roarke." She didn't break eye contact with Luca as she spoke. She felt hypnotized. She felt soft.

Luca smiled. "Nice to meet you, Mina Roarke." He continued to caress her hand with his. "How is it you know my mother?"

Still in a daze, Mina shook her head slightly to wipe away the fog in her brain. "Um ... she helped me pick out my gown for this evening."

Luca gave her a hungry stare, his gaze taking in every inch of her body. Without looking away from Mina, he spoke to Valencia. "Excellent choice, Mother." He kissed Mina's hand again and she felt the tingle move all the way up her arm into her chest. What was this man doing to her brain? Her body? She felt so strange.

Still staring into Mina's eyes, Luca moved his hand to her waist and tugged her closer to him.

She let him.

"Would you like to join me in our box suite for a drink, Mina? I would love to get to know you better."

Mina felt dizzy. Maybe she had drunk too much tonight. That had to be it but hell, this man touched her and she let him. Why? Something wasn't right with this. She felt her heart begin to race.

Luca wrapped his arm fully around her and guided her away from the crowd. "Come now, Mina. I'm sure we can find something in common with each other."

Mina's vision blurred. She wasn't in control of her body. She moved on autopilot and someone else maneuvered her. She couldn't even bring herself to speak much less

stop her legs from moving with Luca's.

One minute, Luca smiled down at her, and the next she was being harshly pulled backward. Off balance, Mina started to fall. Huge hands grabbed her and pulled her upright. She looked up. Talon. His arms wrapped around her and his face was red with fury. But he wasn't looking at Mina. He stared right at Luca who was now sporting a grin that sent shivers down her spine.

She felt another set of arms tighten around her and pull her from Talon's arms. Looking up, she saw Tre's concerned face as he too stared over her toward Luca.

Her head felt like a bowling ball on top of her neck and she couldn't control her movements. Tre pulled her against his chest and she watched as Talon placed himself between Mina and Luca.

"Back up, asshole," Talon ordered. "Now."

Luca continued to smile at Talon. "Come now, Talon. That's no way to greet an old friend. How have you been?"

Talon flexed his hands and dropped his head slightly.

Mina looked from one man to the other. They knew each other?

"Where's Mommy-dearest, Lucy? Still doing her bidding?"

Mina rolled her head to the side, trying to find Valencia, but she was nowhere to be seen. How did a gorgeous red-head in a bright yellow gown disappear that quickly?

Luca laughed and rolled his eyes. "Still the smart-mouth prick I see. Well, I guess this is my cue. Until next time, brother."

With that, he slowly strolled away.

Talon turned and helped Tre steady Mina. "Can you walk, little one?"

Unable to answer him, Mina stared blankly into his concerned gaze. He placed his arm around her waist to steady her and looked over at Tre. "We need to get her out of here. Now."

*

Talon swept Mina into his embrace and wove his way through the onlookers toward the elevator. He made a beeline for the elevator, but was cut off by Mathias shoving past Tre and furiously grabbing Mina out of his hold.

"Merde sainte! What happened to her?"

In unison, both Talon and Tre replied, "Luca."

"Jesus Christ," Mathias barked. "I leave for five minutes and you let that maniacal bastard get near her. I should kill you both right now."

"Later," Talon growled and hit the down button on the elevator.

Once they reached the main floor and exited the elevator Talon immediately stopped midstride. "They're all over the place, Mathias. And they're closing in."

"Fuck."

"Yeah. We need to move. Fast."

* * * *

Mina woke up feeling foggy about the events of the evening. She remembered seeing some of *La Bohème*, but how had it ended? She rubbed her eyes and tried to focus on her surroundings. Looking around, she soon discovered she was in her hotel room. How did she get there? And why was she still in her gown?

Closing her eyes again, she rubbed her hands on her forehead to try and fend off the

huge headache pounding behind her eyes. She must have had way too much champagne to not remember the end of the performance. Had she passed out or something? “Great,” she groaned to herself. That was all she needed. Being drunk and stupid in front of Mathias and his sidekicks.

Mina rolled to her side and curled into a ball. That could not be good for her ten-thousand-dollar gown, but she didn’t care. Her head hurt and the night had not gone as she had planned. Not at all. Damn that champagne.

“Good evening, sunshine.”

Mina’s eyes shot open. Hell.

Mathias sat perched in what looked like a freaking throne at the end of her bed. Had he been watching her the whole time? Probably. What an ass.

“What happened?”

“What happened?” Mathias echoed. “Well, where to begin.” He leaned back in the chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. “Let’s see now.”

Mina leaned up on her elbows to get a better look at him. His tie and jacket had been thrown on the floor next to him and his shirt was unbuttoned to the middle of his chest, revealing a light dusting of brown hair covering his skin. His hair was mussed like he had been running his hands through it all night. He looked tired but her mouth still watered at the sight of him.

Ass.

God, she did not want to hear this. Not from him. She let herself fall back against the pillows and threw her arm over her eyes.

“First of all,” he began, “you acted like a child about not letting me explain the earlier conversation you overheard. Then you ignored me during dinner, followed by drinking way too much champagne. Then to end the night off, you flirt your way right into the hands of the very man that wants your father dead. How’s that sound?”

The word “flirt” got her attention. Mina sat up again and stared him down. “What do you mean flirt? I didn’t flirt with anyone.”

“No?” Mathias rose from his chair and walked toward her. He sat on the side of the bed and took Mina’s hand in his. His gaze softened as he looked down at her.

“Because you were angry with me, you put yourself in a position of extreme danger. And that is completely my fault. I never should have taken you out after I knew of his presence here.”

“Who are you talking about?”

Mathias continued to hold her hand and rubbed his thumb over her wrist. “I’m talking about Luca. The man you were flirting with tonight.”

“I was not flirting,” Mina snapped and slapped his hand away from hers. “I was just talking to him. The man doesn’t look like someone who would want anyone dead. And please, enough with the melodrama. Using the word ‘dead’ is a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“Not harsh enough for Luca. I’m serious, Mina.” Mathias’ face hardened. “The man is a lunatic and I want to know how you ended up talking to him.”

Mina rubbed her face again with her hands. “Can I have some water or something, please? I feel as if I have cotton balls in my mouth.”

Mathias left the room and retrieved a glass of ice water. He gave it to her and repeated his question. “How did you end up talking with him, Mina?”

She gulped down the water and wiped her mouth with her hand. "He's the son of the woman that picked out the gown this afternoon."

His brows drew down. "Hilde?"

"No. Valencia."

"What?" He jerked and roared. "Jesus Christ, Mina. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What for, Mathias? She was just a woman working in a boutique and she helped me pick out a gown. How the hell was I supposed to know who her son was?"

Mathias rose and stalked away from the bed. "Luca is bad enough, but you actually spoke to Valencia?"

Mina's brows furrowed in confusion. "Yeah. Why? What's wrong with her?"

Standing at the foot of the bed with veins popping out of his forehead in fury, Mathias answered her. "She is the leader of the worthless fucks who want to take your father down, and she definitely does not work in a boutique. Luca is her son. Her lackey. Her errand boy. A man who has no scruples in what he does for her. Hell, Mina. He could have killed you. Or worse."

"Uh ... I hate to break it to you, Mathias, but I don't think there is anything much worse than death."

He walked back to Mina and sat, shoulders slumped. "Yes, chère. Where Luca is concerned, there is."

Mina was silent. A creepy feeling washed over her. "All he wanted to do was talk to me. He offered me a drink and that's the last I remember." She rubbed her hands up her arms, fending off the goose bumps popping up. "Did he drug me?"

"Something like that, yes. You were damn lucky Talon saw him when he did, or I would have lost you."

At his statement, she blinked in surprise. He said he would have lost her. Mina reached for him. Grasping the edges of his sleeve, she brought him into a hug.

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tight. He put his hand on the back of her head and pressed her into his chest. "I won't lose you."

She warmed inside at this statement. His embrace was strong and protective. She felt safe. Warm. Almost loved.

Wait ... he already has a woman.

Mina immediately released her hold and scooted off the bed.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't poach, Mathias."

"Poach? What are you talking about?"

Mina put her hands on her hips and squared her shoulders toward him. "Poach. You know ... mess around with someone else's man. I don't do that. I was angry earlier and told myself I could go through with this but I can't. It's not me and I can't do that."

Fists balled at his side, he stood and faced her. "Damn it." He scowled. "I told you, it's not what you think. She's a friend from my childhood. We're friends. That's all."

"But the way you were talking to her. The words sounded so ... so intimate. Like you were lovers. Why should I believe you?"

Mathias walked toward her and grabbed her arms. He backed her up against the wall and pinned her against it.

She felt the weight of his body pressing against her and she immediately tried to push him away, but it was like trying to shove a brick wall.

Nose-to-nose, he stared into her eyes. “You want to know why you should believe me?”

Mina shook now, but she wasn’t afraid of him. She was afraid of what she felt for him.

Without warning, he crushed his mouth to hers. He pressed even harder into her body and she felt him. He was hard and ready. She opened to him and the kiss became deeper. More aggressive. More carnal.

Just as she began to melt against him, he ended the kiss as quickly as he had started it. She gasped for breath now. Totally turned-on by his invasion. Mina looked into his eyes and she could see his hunger. His anger. His chest rising and falling quickly. He kept looking at her mouth as if he wanted to devour her.

With the tip of her tongue, she licked her bottom lip.

He went at her again. Harder this time. Faster.

Mina raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck. She ran her hands through his hair and held him close. Not letting him pull away again.

His hands ran down her sides and around her waist, then lower to grasp her ass.

Mina moaned into his mouth and arched her back to rub her breasts against his chest. She needed more friction. More touching. More everything.

He broke the kiss and his lips trailed down her neck. Licking and sucking her skin.

She let out a low moan and let her head drop back to give him better access. The tip of his tongue grazed her collarbone and he went even lower. He sucked the top of her breast and then cupped it with his hand to bring her chiffon-covered nipple to his mouth. He sucked on her through the fabric and she felt the heat of his mouth.

Still fisting his hair with her hands, Mina held him to her and looked down to watch his mouth work over her. God, he knew what he was doing, because she was getting wet just by him holding and sucking her breasts. Watching him do it made her even hotter.

When he moved from one breast to the other, she moaned, “Mathias.”

He stopped and looked up at her. His eyes were molten and his words came out breathless. “Say it again.”

He rolled his hips against hers, pressing his hard cock into her belly, letting her know what she did to him. He kissed her lightly on the mouth and whispered to her. “Say it.”

Mina breathlessly gave him what he wanted. “Mathias.”

“Now tell me you want me.” He licked her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. “Tell me.”

Mina didn’t hesitate. “I want you.”

Mathias touched his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. “Dieu m’aide.”

Chapter Fourteen

Mina felt her entire body shiver as Mathias bent down to remove her heeled shoes. She watched him gently unbuckle each one and slowly remove them. His hands then traveled upward under her dress to caress her calves and then her thighs.

God, this man was like nothing she had ever experienced. Wherever he touched her, he left heat behind, making her melt beneath his hands.

He stood and turned her to face the wall. She placed both hands in front of her to brace herself against his weight. Bending his knees, he pressed himself against her, letting her feel his hardened cock on her lower back. She put her face against the cold plaster wall and closed her eyes. She couldn't wait much longer.

Mathias reached up to move her hair and put his mouth on the nape of her neck. He sucked and nipped her tender skin. His hands rested on her hips and his fingers dug into her skin, guiding her to match his rhythmic movement.

Mina groaned. "Please, Mathias. Don't tease."

"No teasing, baby," he whispered. "I just want to feel you."

She removed her hands from the wall and reached back to place them on his thighs. She guided them up to feel him, but he quickly moved out of her reach.

"Not yet, love. You first."

At that statement, he slid his hands over her stomach and continued upward to grasp the top of her dress. His fingers dug into the delicate material, ripping both straps from her shoulders. He pulled the dress over her breasts. The sound of the expensive fabric ripping should have made Mina cringe, but at that moment, she could have cared less that he had just ruined the straps on a ten-thousand-dollar dress. She just wanted his hands on her skin and whatever it took, she was fine with. When he freed her breasts from the gown and began pinching and rolling her nipples between his fingers, she pressed her ass into his sizable erection. The wetness between her legs soaked into her panties.

Mina heard Mathias let out a low growl as he bit down on the delicate skin between her neck and shoulder.

She shuddered deep inside and she actually thought she was going to come. She pushed more into him and the tingling started. Her breath shortened and she closed her eyes. She felt the burning pressure between her legs start to build and she let out a low moan. Dear mother of Jesus. She was going to come.

Mina moaned as Mathias slowly released his mouth from her skin, licking his way up her neck. He put his mouth to her ear and whispered, "That's it. I want you to come, Mina. I want the sound of my voice to make you come."

Mina threw her head back and screamed out. The orgasm hit her violently and fast. Never in her wildest dreams did she ever think she could climax with just words.

This. Man. Is. A. God.

Mathias wrapped his arms around her and clamped down again on her skin with his mouth.

She continued to yell out and convulse in his hold, letting him know the power he had over her. What he could do to her just by telling her to do it.

When her shuddering stopped and her breathing slowed, Mina felt Mathias' mouth

leave her skin. His tongue lapped at her neck and then behind her ear, sending shivers down her spine.

As Mathias continued his explorations, Mina felt his hands move to the zipper of the dress. She felt a small tug, then heard his growl of frustration, his mouth and tongue still driving her to distraction. At the next hard tug, Mina let out a gasp.

Mathias stilled instantly. "What's wrong?"

She turned and looked over her shoulder. "The zipper must have gotten me."

Mathias bent down and kissed the skin on her back, his tongue moving in small, lazy circles. "Better?"

"Mmmmm."

Mathias continued to lower the zipper. "Now turn around for me, baby. I want to see you."

Mina's legs felt like noodles from the explosive orgasm she had just experienced, so moving would not be easy. She placed her hands on the wall in front of her and pushed back, resting her head against his expansive chest.

He slid his hands over her body and cupped both her breasts. "Turn round."

Mina suddenly felt self conscious. No man had seen her fully naked in a while. She was still uncomfortable with her body and the idea of standing almost naked in front of a man as beautiful as Mathias was a bit daunting to her. It was bad enough she stood there in nothing but a pair of skimpy panties with her double D breasts hanging out.

"Why don't I go put on a nightgown or something?"

Mathias chuckled and tightened his hold on her. "I'm trying to get your clothes off, Mina, not add more." He leaned down and kissed her neck once again. "I want to see you."

Mina was actually nervous. Maybe even a bit shy. She didn't want Mathias to not be attracted to her. She wanted him to want her. All of her. She was so used to men being attracted to her on the outside because she never let any of them inside. Never let them really know her. All they knew was she was playful, attractive and bold.

She thought about what Chloe would say to her at that exact moment. In her mind, Mina could hear Chloe setting her straight. If he doesn't love you the way you are, screw him. Like he's perfect or something.

Trouble was, he looked pretty damn perfect to Mina.

Never could she remember when she had wanted a man this badly. But wanting and trusting were two different things entirely. And for Mina to do this, she would have to put her trust in Mathias. Someone she had only known for a few days. Trust was something she only reserved for one person in her life. And more than just a few days were involved in building that trust.

Mina didn't trust anyone other than Chloe. She had always been there for Mina, since they had met that fateful first day of college. Chloe was the only person who would always tell Mina the truth as well as do whatever it took to protect her physically and emotionally. She trusted Chloe with her life.

She continued to wonder if she could trust him. Her gut told her to let go and put herself in his hands, but her mind still tried to protect her dwindling self-confidence. Since her mother's death, Mina was not the brazen, self-confident woman she had been before. She felt beaten. Defeated. Betrayed.

Until now.

Right now, Mina felt wanted. Needed.

Even though Mina and Mathias were new to each other, there was something unique building between them. Something strong. And right now, she was willing to explore what that was. But in order to do that, she would have to give him her trust.

Slowly, she turned in his embrace and faced him. She looked into his emerald eyes, expecting to see disappointment. What she was met with was his devastating smile.

Mina watched his gaze travel over her body, up and down, side to side. He took in every inch of her.

“Dieu. You’re beautiful.” Mathias smiled and placed his hand on her cheek. “Now I’m going to show you why you should believe me when I tell you I want only you.”

Mathias slowly raised his hands to cup her breasts in his palms. His hands were large and she fit him perfectly. He didn’t squeeze. Didn’t massage. Didn’t move. He just held her gently. Looking at his hands holding her.

He bent his head, gently laid his cheek down on top of her breasts and closed his eyes. He inhaled her scent and let out a slow groan. “Mine.”

Mina felt her eyes stinging with tears. Her stomach knotted tightly. He had won her over. And he had done it with a single word.

Mathias turned his head and buried his face between her breasts and kissed her. Once. Twice. Then rose to meet her gaze. “Mina.”

She couldn’t answer him. Hell, she couldn’t breathe much less speak. She was so overwhelmed with emotion all she could do was look back into his adoring eyes.

Mathias skimmed his hands down her body, splaying his fingers across her ribcage. Moving down, he caressed her skin carefully. Smoothing his hands over her slowly.

He reached down and lifted her leg, placing his mouth on the top of her right foot, kissing his way up. When he reached the one area she wanted the most attention to, he stopped and leaned down to start on her left foot, kissing his way up.

Mina let out a protesting moan.

Mathias reached under the lace of her panties and pulled. Slowly, he lowered them down her thighs, her calves and then he lifted each of her feet to take them off.

He placed a soft kiss on her belly, making her shiver with anticipation. He slowly stood, grasped her hands with his, led her back to the large bed and eased her down on the edge. Standing in front of her, he began to undress.

Never had a man actually stripped in front of her. He was completely on display, and again she started to feel shy. Why? She had no clue, because she had definitely seen a man’s penis before, but she was visibly shaking with nervousness. She felt as if she watched porn and had gotten caught. A kid getting busted with a cookie in her hand five minutes before dinner. Telling her mom she didn’t color on the walls when she was holding a crayon.

He had kicked off his shoes and was slowly unbuttoning his shirt when she couldn’t take it anymore.

Mina slid off the bed and walked to him. She reached up and moved his hands out of the way so she could finish what he started. After each button was released, she followed the opening of his shirt with her mouth. With the first touch of her lips to his chest, Mathias growled low under his breath and fisted Mina’s hair in his hands. He guided her down as each button was undone and she ended up circling his belly button with her tongue.

Not wanting to bend over while being buck naked, Mina went to her knees, undid the clasp of his dress pants and slowly brought down his zipper. This was one big man. Immediately, excitement charged through her. Whatever nervousness she had been feeling went flying out the window. She grasped the band of his tight boxers and brought them down along with his pants. When he stood there as naked as she was, she finally looked up at him from her kneeling position.

Looking upward at a man like him was an awesome sight. He watched her with dark emerald sensual eyes. His chest heaved with shallow breaths. His head was framed with his dark wavy hair hanging around his shoulders. His mouth was open, inviting. She brought her gaze down past his hard abs to his impressive cock, straining in front of her face. Mina couldn't resist reaching out and tracing it with her finger. At her slight touch, a bead of cum appeared at the head. She leaned in and licked it off with the tip of her tongue and tasted him.

She looked up at Mathias to see his eyes closed and his head thrown back. The veins in his neck strained and he appeared to be hanging onto his control by a thread. Mina liked that. To bring a man like Mathias to his breaking point within seconds of just touching him gave her the needed confidence to finish what she had started. She leaned in again and placed the tip of her tongue at the base of his cock, licked his long length, and circled around his engorged head. She flicked under the ridge and heard him suck in his breath through gritted teeth. Slowly, she sucked in the head of his cock and took him to the back of her throat. His size proved to be something she had never experienced before, but that only excited Mina more. He was silky smooth and rock-hard. Deliciously responsive to her teasing tongue. Mina pulled back and tongued the broad head of his cock and then engulfed him once again. Sucking him in and lodging him at the back of her throat. Then she swallowed. Hard.

"Son of a bitch, Mina!"

Mathias immediately grasped Mina by the hair and pulled her off. Yep. That was the line and now she knew what she had to do to cross it. Perfect.

He looked down at her with clenched teeth and a feral look on his face.

Mina gave him a seductive grin. "Did you like that?"

Mathias let out an animalistic growl that made Mina shiver in anticipation. He reached down and grasped Mina under her arms and lifted her to her feet as though she weighed nothing at all.

"Tell me what you want from me, Mina."

She raised her hands, brushed her fingers over his dark chest hair and moved closer. She felt his thighs against hers, his hardened cock on her belly, her nipples against his warm skin. Looking into his eyes, she seductively whispered, "I want your mouth on me, Mathias. I want your hands on me. I want you inside me."

He smiled down at her. "You want a lot, don't you?"

Mina smiled back. "I want it all."

Mathias moaned lowly as he leaned in and touched his head to hers. "And you shall have it."

Chapter Fifteen

Mina's heart raced. Her eyes were closed, hands diving into Mathias's long, dark hair, she was forehead to forehead with a god of a man and he wanted her. Just her. And he wanted her now. She had thought about this moment since the second she saw him in the forest the day before. Wondering what type of a lover he would be. What he would taste like. How he would touch her. He had turned her on the moment he spoke. And Jesus, just the scent of him made her mouth water.

She tilted her head and licked Mathias' lower lip, then brought it into her mouth to suck. He lightly and seductively kissed her back for what seemed like an eternity.

They stood there, in the middle of the bedroom, in an opulent hotel suite, just exploring each other's mouths. Gently brushing their bodies together to feel the heat between them.

His hands moved all over her, learning each curve and where she was the most sensitive to his touch. His fingertips grazed her hardened nipples and she moaned in response to his tender stroking. She arched her back, pressing her breasts closer, hoping he would become more aggressive. More forceful. Mina liked a man to take what he wanted. Not torture her through teasing.

She ran her hands down his taut back, pressed her body closer to his and pleaded, "Mathias. Please. Touch me. I want more."

He trailed his lips down the pale skin of her neck. "I know, chère. And I'll give it to you. Soon."

Mina dug her nails into his ass and pulled him closer. "I'm not used to asking, Mathias."

Mathias lifted his head and looked directly into Mina's eyes. His smile was gone. Possession filled his gaze. "After tonight, you won't be asking another man for anything."

That shut her up quick. She froze in place and stared. Did he just tell her she was not allowed to be with another man after tonight? What the hell was he thinking? And why in the world did she like that idea?

With her hands still digging into the tight muscles of his ass, Mina wasn't sure how to react to his blatant statement. His words should have offended her. They should have annoyed her to the point of laughter, but instead she warmed to the thought of being possessed by him. Belonging to him. Dominated by him.

She was tired of always being the tough one. Always being the one in charge. For once, she wanted to be taken care of. Pampered. Loved. Having Mathias do those things for her felt right. She wanted it.

Mina was ready for her dream. Ready for the man she used to imagine while sitting out on the deck back home. The last month had been hard, and the more she thought about where her life took her, she wanted to be a part of something special. Roderick's money was a life guarantee and not working was even nicer, but she also craved a partnership. A relationship with a man. Since she'd never really had one, she was curious about what made a relationship work. Did she have what it took to be with just one man? She wanted to think she did. Especially if the man were Mathias.

Tracing her jaw line with his finger, Mathias' voice rumbled from his chest. "You're mine."

Mina smiled at the thought. Belonging to him would be nice. Very nice. She would just have to do something about him teasing her sexually and it would be all good.

She leaned back and looked up, once again trying to gauge what he was thinking. Was he truly serious? She was sure he probably had women crooning over him wherever he went. Who was she kidding? The man was colossally gorgeous. So why her? Why now? They had just met. How could he be so positive about a decision like this? Unless ... was he playing her? Just saying these things to get her into bed?

Wait. What was she thinking? She was the one that wanted to fuck his brains out and was basically begging him to do it. Why would he think he needed to give her sweet words and endearing promises when she was pretty much a sure thing? She was so confused.

"What do you want from me, Mathias?"

Mathias reached down, planted his hands firmly on her ass and lifted her to him. "Wrap your legs around me, Mina."

She did as she was told. She felt his stiff cock slide against her swollen sex and she moaned at the brief contact. God, she wanted more.

"I'm going to make love to you until you scream. Until you know you're mine. No man will ever touch you again. Only me." He stared through her soul with his hungry emerald eyes. "I'll mark you so every man who sees you knows who you belong to."

His declaration made her tremble. Her stomach twisted in a nervous knot. She tightened her legs around his middle to feel more of him. She couldn't speak. Hell, she couldn't think because of the wave of arousal overtaking her. Mina just kept looking into his beautiful green eyes wondering why he felt so strongly about her. What was so special about her?

With fluid strides, Mathias carried her over to the huge bed and set her down gently. He reached behind his back and unwrapped her legs from his body.

Mina lay back and watched him.

He pulled her feet up to the edge of the bed and placed them there. Her knees bent, he ran his hands down her thighs, spreading them for him. Allowing him to have full access. To see every part of her body. Mina closed her eyes, feeling the embarrassment leave her mind to be replaced with complete wanting.

"Do you want to belong to me?" His voice did things to her that should be illegal. "Do you want that, Mina?"

She closed her eyes. She was losing herself with him. Her control of the situation was long gone. What happened to the "fuck him and leave him" idea she had come up with a few hours ago? Yeah right. As if she ever had a shot of that happening.

"Open your eyes, baby. Look at me." His hand caressed her face. "Watch me love you."

Damn, he was good. Lust slammed into her with just his voice saying he was going to touch her. Something about him affected her in a way she couldn't grasp. He made her ache. Made her body clench in need. Her skin itched to be touched. The essential hunger for Mathias was overriding her strong bravado to use him and leave him. She reached up and cupped his face, rubbing her thumbs across his strong jaw.

"Mathias?"

“Yes, love.”

“Just know one thing. I don’t trust easily.”

He leaned down and kissed her softly. “I know, love. I know.”

Mina raised her arms above her head and wove her fingers together. She stretched and arched, pushing her breasts out as an offering. She was giving herself to him. “I hope so.”

Mathias rose and ran his hands down her chest. Over her breasts. Over her belly. Down her thighs. He placed his hands on her knees again. Spreading her open to him. He looked at her body while his hands moved over every inch.

Mina felt her skin warm everywhere his gaze traveled. She forced her eyes to stay open to watch him. Wondering what was going through his mind. They had become so enthralled with each other in such a short period of time. What was this going to mean to him? To her?

“You are exquisite.” His hands slid down the inside of her thighs and when they reached the juncture between, he slowly lowered himself to his knees in front of her. “So beautiful.”

She didn’t answer. She just kept looking at his face. His eyes. She was wet with need for him. She could almost feel his mouth on her. The anticipation was killing her.

With a low growl, he licked between the bare, wet folds of her skin. With each swipe of his tongue, he moaned into her.

She felt the vibrations move up her body. His tongue flicked her clit and then circled it gently. The sensations shot through her, coiling inside. He was devouring her. She felt her body clench and shiver with the need for release. She needed to touch him. She needed him inside her. At that moment, she just needed.

Mina lowered her arms and ran her hands through his long, dark hair, holding him to her body. Encouraging him on. She lifted her feet off the bed and moved them over his shoulders, digging her heels into his back. Feeding herself to him.

Mathias continued feasting on her. Sucking her into his mouth while flicking her clit with the tip of his tongue. He slowly pushed a finger into her and twisted.

“Oh god, Mathias.” She gasped. “More. I want more.”

A second finger slid into her. She was panting now. Moaning. Begging him.

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Mathias watched Mina’s body react. Her hips were in rhythm with his mouth and fingers inside her. She worked herself on his tongue and mouth. He smiled against her and continued flicking and licking her clit, sending her into heightened pleasure. His tongue moved down and lapped at the wetness drenching his hand with his movements inside her. She was so responsive to his touch and he reveled in that. Every move he made, she countered it, giving herself as much pleasure as she could.

He gave her one last flick of his tongue and then moved upward and over her. He brought one of her nipples into his mouth and sucked. His teeth grazed the tender flesh and Mina moaned his name again. His fingers were still inside her. Working her. He felt her flesh ripple and grip his fingers as he pushed them deeper inside. She was getting close.

“Mathias. Please. I need to come.”

He released her nipple and ran his tongue up her neck to her mouth. “I’ll tell you when you can come, Mina. Not yet.”

He took her mouth again and slipped his fingers out of her body. He used her moisture to rub his thumb over her clit and hold it down gently, applying tiny bits of pressure.

Mina started to arch off the bed. Her hands fisted in his hair, pulling his head back to give her access to his neck.

She went at him fiercely. Sucking and licking. Her teeth grazed his shoulder and she bit down into his hot skin.

He felt a shudder wash through him and saw stars. His animal rose to the challenge. The need to take her was cresting and his body started to disobey his mind.

She licked up his neck and bit down again. Sucking. Moaning.

Something inside him snapped. His breathing rasped. The feeling was excruciating, but at the same time he didn't want it to end. Her teeth on his skin felt so good it hurt. He had to get inside her now. All of his instincts told him to mark her. To take her hard. Never before had another woman evoked this type of reaction and he had to have her now.

Mathias had wanted this to be perfect. Beautiful. He wanted to give Mina what she needed. He wanted to make love to her gently. Soulfully. He wanted to whisper words of love and desire to her all night long while giving her such pleasure she would want to burst. But when her teeth came in contact with his skin, something inside him shattered. He lost control and the animalistic need to take her was overwhelming him. The animal inside him was breaking free.

He moved and stood over her.

Mina whined at his retreat from her body. She was misted with sweat and her skin was flushed with arousal.

Her eyes were almost like liquid and they looked up at him with complete trust and wanting. His heightened sense of smell picked up every nuance. Her lingering Obsession perfume, the lotion she had used on her arms and legs, the citrus smell of her shampoo, the musky scent of her need for him. His mouth watered. His breathing quickened. Growling, he reached for her and quickly turned her over. He placed his hands on her hips and pulled her to him.

The only thing running through his mind was taking her. Now.

"Yes." Mina yelled out her approval and rose on her hands and knees. She threw back her head and her long hair spread over her back.

Mathias reached out, grabbed a handful of it and pulled. Mina's head arched and he lowered his mouth to her neck, sinking his teeth into the soft flesh and sucking. His other hand snaked around her belly and found her swollen clit.

He worked her until she writhed under his hand, moving in the same rhythm.

"Now, Mathias," Mina pleaded. "Please."

Mathias pulled away from her neck and yanked on her hair again.

Her head snapped back and she turned to look at him.

He was wild. Sweat rolled down his forehead and chest. He held on to his control by a thread. He felt like an animal. Mina smiled up at him. It would be so easy to lose himself to her.

With his mouth at her ear, his voice rumbled his demand. "You will not come until I tell you, Mina. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes. I hear you." She moaned. "Anything you want. But please, I need you

now.”

“Do you understand, Mina? Say it.”

“I understand. Please. Now!”

Mathias moved his hands from between her legs and grasped his engorged cock. He ran the head along her swollen, wet folds and ground it against her clit. She moved back against him, moaning with need, enticing him to take her.

He leveled the head of his cock at her opening and surged forward. Roaring, he sank into her pussy with one thrust, burying his cock to the hilt.

Mathias felt the almost unbearable heat of her. The tightness. He couldn't get deep enough, as if he tried to reach inside her soul. Binding himself to her. The urge to mark her raged inside him, catching him completely off guard. He withdrew slowly, feeling every tight inch of her and then slammed himself to the hilt, knocking Mina off her hands and into the mattress.

Mathias reached under her and pulled her body up against his chest. He brought his hands to her breasts and pinched both nipples as he continued to drive into her. Hard. He looked down at her flushed face as she leaned back against him, resting her head on his shoulder. As he watched her glorious body move with his, he knew, regardless of the repercussions, he could never let this woman go.

He continued to pound into her as if he couldn't stop. Mina moaned his name, begging him not to stop. “So good, Mathias. You feel so good. Don't stop.”

She raised her hands and moved them behind her head to thread through his wavy hair.

Mathias looked down at her longingly.

“Come for me now, Mina. I want to look at you when I make you come.”

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When he had entered her, Mina felt a burning shiver surround her body. The feeling that was moving through her was much the same as when she was lost in the forest the first night she saw Mathias. Her skin tingled. Her hair stood on end. The pleasure she experienced when he thrust inside her was almost unbearable, but she wanted more. She throbbed everywhere. The waves of pure desire continued as he rocked his hips back and slammed into her again. This time with so much force her arms gave way and she fell against the mattress.

He brought her back against him. Mina laid her head against his shoulder and looked up at him. His head was thrown back. His lips curled, revealing clenched teeth. He was so strong. So beautiful. What was she doing putting her emotions in danger with him? This man could definitely hurt her. If she let him.

He simply took her breath away. There was no sugarcoating it. No man had ever affected her the way Mathias did. She had never allowed it. Still looking at him, she knew that even if she fought his possession of her, he would win. She would give him everything she had. Even after she left this country and went back home, she would never forget him. Never forget what he was doing to her.

Mina grasped one of his hands that covered her swollen breast and guided it down her belly to her clit. She moved his fingers over herself in the way she liked. She continued to stare into his eyes as she pleased herself with his fingers. Her chest hurt just looking at him. Wanting him this badly. He was seeing all of her and she let him.

His thrusts became more forceful now and she felt the pressure building within her.

She was getting close. As he continued to plunge inside her, she felt him swelling even larger than before. He was getting close as well.

“I want you to come now, Mina. I want to watch you come for me.”

It was as if her body absently obeyed his command. No sooner had he said it, her body began to convulse, her fingernails digging into his skin, her mouth open, a scream escaping. She felt the throbbing between her legs and the tingling in her stomach as the orgasm began to take her over. But this time was different. Right when she felt the power of the climax hit, Mathias let out a guttural growl and lowered his mouth to her neck. He pierced her skin with his teeth and held her to him with his arms and mouth. She was locked in his embrace. When she should have felt pain, she felt pure lust. Mina felt his fingers dig into her hips as his body stiffened. His release shot into her, warming her to the core.

He would definitely leave bruises on her but she didn't care. She felt his need for her. His desire for her. Mina's head spun as she closed her eyes and saw stars behind her heavy lids. Again, her skin tingled and she felt a wave of electricity wash over her. She tightened around his cock and felt him surge upward again. The sensation was mind numbing. Never-ending. Her body still convulsed under the power of the orgasm and her skin was on fire. Almost stinging. She felt molded to him. A part of him. Like she was melding with both his mind and body. Mina felt his heartbeat against her back and could have sworn hers mimicked his quick rhythm. Their breathing synced together. She could smell his skin. The scent was stronger now. More invigorating. Like her senses were heightened. She felt the air around her. A slight shift of the temperature. The blood running through her veins.

Mina finally opened her eyes and she felt different. Transformed. She rolled her head back onto Mathias' chest and looked up at him. She expected to see a well-sated man staring back at her but instead, she saw anger. Frustration. Her defense mode quickly kicked in and she started to move away from him.

She felt his hold on her tightened, not allowing her to move an inch.

“I'm so sorry, Mina.”

Okay. Now she was confused. She'd just experienced a truly spiritual orgasm with a god-like man and was completely blown away by his touch. Hell, she was still shaking from the intensity of it and he apologized? “Sorry for what?”

His warm arms held her to him. Tightly. “I lost control. I wanted this to be gentle. Meaningful. Not wild and uncontrolled. I wanted to make love, Mina. Not hurt you. Not ... fuck you.”

Okay. Now she was really confused. “Hurt me? How did you hurt me? Did you think my screaming was in pain? Jesus, Mathias. That's called the orgasm of the century. You were magnificent and I loved every minute of it.”

Mathias released his hold and slowly withdrew.

She winced at him pulling out of her body, enflaming her now-tender tissues. But even that small movement made her nipples harden again. She felt a jolt go through her at the friction he caused removing himself from her. God, she wanted him again. How could that be?

He looked deeply into her eyes as if searching her soul. Trying to gauge what she felt. He looked down at Mina's neck and grimaced.

Mathias leaned down and gently took her lips with his. Kissing her softly. Tenderly.

His fingers feathered over her face, wiping away the stray makeup and sweat. "Lay back, Mina. I'll get you a towel."

He gave her a quick kiss and walked naked toward the bathroom.

Mina lay back on the bed and watched him walk away. She pulled the fluffy down comforter over her body. Why had he just apologized? She'd loved it. Hell, she had been moaning his name and screaming her lungs out. Hadn't he noticed?

Mathias returned with a warmed, wet washcloth and started to pull back the comforter.

Mina stopped him. "Uh ... I'll do it." She pulled the cloth out of his hand and pushed it under the comforter. She cleaned herself up and threw it across the room. She looked up at him and he watched her every move. "What?"

Mathias lowered his head and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry, Mina. I truly am. I just lost control. I wanted you so badly I couldn't wait. I wanted this to be special for you. Memorable."

Mina softened at his admission. She reached out and brushed the hair from his face. "Mathias. Believe me ... it was more than memorable. What you gave me was the time of my life. I enjoyed every moment of being with you. I wouldn't have had it any other way. And if you want the truth, I want you again. Right now."

She threaded her hand through his hair and brought his lips to hers. She licked his lower lip and tugged it between her teeth. "What you did to me, for me, with me was astonishing. And I want it again." She kissed him. "And again." Another kiss. "And again."

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Mathias put his hands on her face and kissed her gently. He lowered her back onto the mound of pillows, continuing to kiss her mouth, her neck. She was his. They would be mated. Some way. Somehow. He would figure out a way to stay with her. To always be with her. He was falling in love with this woman and he had just met her.

This was what his father meant when he told Mathias about his mother. Xavier used to tell Mathias that when they'd first met, his mother had hit him like a lightning bolt. "I saw her and I knew I had to have her. She became my life."

Mathias knew what he had done was forbidden. Not only was she human, she was the king's daughter. Completely off limits. But he wanted her like he had never wanted anything in his life. She was his, although now he would surely be punished for his insolence. He would not let her go. No one would take her from him unless they killed him first. She was bound to him. His mate.

Looking into her eyes, he gave Mina a small smile. She was his strength. His life. His lightning bolt. His Mina. "And you shall have it."

Chapter Sixteen

Luca entered the room with a watchful gaze. His mother was not happy and there was no telling how she would handle this latest setback after witnessing his defeat at the hands of Talon. Once again, Talon had gotten the best of Luca and once again, he had failed his mother.

“Ah, son. I see you made it back in one piece.”

Luca turned slowly to see his mother lounging on a wine-colored chaise facing the open doors that looked out over the Tyrrhenian Sea. Valencia’s home in Gaeta, Italy, was her favorite one. The view over the ocean calmed her. The heat of the sun soothed her. Luca was glad for those elements at this moment. Disappointing his mother once again was not what he had planned.

The sun was setting and at the sight of her lying on her side facing the water, Luca could appreciate the beautiful woman who was his mother. Her bronzed-brown hair shimmered in the sunset and her tanned hand draped over the gold-embossed arm of the chaise. Her nails were impeccably polished and each finger was adorned with audacious rings. As he walked closer to her, he caught sight of the serpent ring on her thumb. His stomach immediately clenched. He hated that one. It always left a mark.

The breeze hit him and he smelled the salt and brine of the ocean below. Sheer golden curtains framed the open doorway nearby and they billowed above her in the wind. She looked like a painting. Like a Greek goddess. Hell, if that were only true it would be easier to earn her love. She may have looked like a goddess, but he knew her true soul was more like Medusa than Hera.

He walked around the chaise and stood directly in front of his mother, blocking her view of the sea. “I see you are pleased I am not harmed. I’m all warm inside knowing you care. Where are my cookies and milk?”

Valencia’s narrowed gaze slowly rose. The anger he saw in her eyes should have made him wince, but he was used to her fury. Used to her blaming him. “Don’t push me, Luca.”

Luca moved to the side of the chaise, grasped his mother’s hand and brought it to his lips. “Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it, Mother.”

She quickly slipped her hand out of his grasp and away from his mouth. “What you will be dreaming of is a quick death if you fail me again.” Her gaze narrowed. “I want that girl. She means something to Roderick and I need her.”

Luca turned toward the open doors and walked out onto the balcony. He looked down at the white boulders lining the shore and then watched the water crash over them. “I’ll get her for you, Mother.”

“Luca. You are my son. My heir. A part of me.” Valencia followed her son onto the balcony overlooking the ocean. “You will be the salvation of the Valta if we can just figure out why the offspring do not survive the birth. Your seed will bring us success.”

Luca looked down at Valencia and noticed the fury was gone from her eyes and the emotion was replaced with something softer. A look he longed for and rarely saw. He wanted Valencia to love him as a son. Not as the answer to the breeding problem. Luca clenched his fists in frustration, knowing he would never fully gain the motherly love

from Valencia he so craved. “Christ. Is that all I am to you? A cock that won’t run dry?”

Valencia pinched the top of Luca’s hand and made him flinch at the sting she left behind. “There was something about her, Luca. Something special. I sensed she was human but also something else.” Valencia raised her hands and placed them on Luca’s face. “Something like you.”

Luca’s eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

Valencia smiled warmly at her son. “She is meant for you, Luca. She was created for you and now she is here. I feel it. You have to take her. We need her for you to continue the Valtic lineage.”

“Luca.” Valencia looked up into her son’s shocked eyes and tried to soothe him. “Listen to me. I know she is like you. She is here for you. Only you. With her, you can create a race of Valta that the world will never defeat. She is yours. You must go and claim her. Do you understand?”

Luca was still stunned at the idea that there would be a woman worthy of him. In recent years, he had often defied his mother by taking as many Valtic women as he could. He always made sure to pull out before coming inside them, not wanting to risk any chance of a pregnancy. Sex had become a way of silently challenging his mother’s influence.

Once he’d tired of Valtic women, he crossed the line and began seducing human women. Luca started becoming rough with them. Even violent sometimes. He would play with them like a cat with a mouse. He saw women as something to own, something to fuck.

He had resolved himself to the life he currently lived. Lead the Valtic army, do his mother’s bidding, jack off in a plastic tube three times a week and fuck as many women as he could find without Valencia knowing.

Except for the maternal love he felt for Valencia, Luca never considered actually loving another woman in the way a mate was required to be loved.

He thought about Mina. How she looked. How she acted under his influence. How she smelled. Felt. Would feel lying under him while he pounded into her, making her scream.

Luca would find out. He stiffened with resolve. He would find her and take her away from Mathias. Take her away from Talon. He would take her.

He opened his eyes and looked back over the Tyrrhenian Sea. The sun’s dwindling light was almost fully extinguished by the black of the night and he could just make out a lone fishing vessel coming back into port. Luca grinned as his gaze followed the boat over the water.

“What are you smiling about, Luca?”

“She will be mine, Mother.”

Valencia smiled at her son. “Yes, Luca. She is yours. Now go and get her for me.”

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Valencia had no idea what she was missing until Mina walked into their lives. When she learned of a constant presence of the Royal Guard in Washington State, she had sent her own spies to check it out.

For years, she waited and wondered why. Then she received word that Mathias, general to Roderick, had been spotted escorting a human woman through Staufen. This same woman had also been shadowed by several other Coteri members while still in the

states and even on the flights to Germany. If Mathias was dedicating his time, she had to be someone of importance. Protecting her. He had to be doing this on orders from the king. Which meant this woman was special somehow. Why else would Roderick order one of his most powerful generals to protect a human?

Again, Valencia had no idea until she came face-to-face with Mina in the boutique the day before. When she looked into Mina's eyes, she felt it. Felt the similarity straight through to her bones. A hybrid. Half human, half Coteri. Once she realized what she was dealing with, the plan laid itself out in Valencia's mind. Get Mina to buy the dress and then wait. Wait for the zipper to catch her lovely, pale skin to give Valencia the needed blood sample to prove what she was certain she already knew.

Valencia currently awaited a call from one of her trusted guards stating they had retrieved the dress from the hotel suite that Mathias and Mina were occupying. If her original plan had worked and Luca had succeeded, Mina would be there in Italy with them. But because of Talon and Tremayne, he had failed. Again.

Chapter Seventeen

Mathias made good on his promise to make their night together slow and gentle. After taking Mina again in her bed, they enjoyed each other in the shower and again on the couch in the living room. Mathias then carried her to the bedroom and gently placed her under the sheets. Once he had covered her naked body, she immediately fell asleep.

He had lain down next to her and just studied her face. She had a sprinkle of freckles going over the bridge of her nose, making her look like a little girl. Her lips were full and reddened from their time together. He noticed her mouth moved in her sleep as though she suckled a baby bottle. Her lips pursing and moving. Her full cheeks were pink and warm and her eyelashes were black and reached for miles. With her eyes closed, they actually touched her high cheekbones. He smiled and continued to listen to her sleep. Her breathing was calm and deep. She was well sated and that pleased him.

He dared not close his eyes because he knew Talon and Tre would want to discuss what happened. They needed to go over what happened the night before as well as how to get Mina back to Staufien safely. Now that Mathias knew Luca was involved, he was not happy with the whole situation. Luca was a nightmare. Crazy. Once he got something in his head, he didn't give up until he had it.

He gently slid out of the bed, leaving Mina to her well-needed sleep. Mathias spotted Talon and Tre in the living area as he exited the bedroom, silently closing the door behind him. He let out a long breath as he walked into the kitchen. Things had irreversibly changed. What now?

Talon and Tre followed Mathias into the small kitchen. Talon stood staring at Mathias with his hands on his hips. "Coffee," he demanded.

Talon was not someone to mess with in the morning. To function properly as well as not kill anyone looking at him the wrong way, he needed at least four to five cups of strong, black coffee to calm him. He hadn't shaved and there were dark circles under his eyes from the long night keeping watch. He looked like the walking dead.

"I'll get it, Talon. Go sit down." Mathias needed time to gather his thoughts.

"Fuck. I need coffee," Talon grumbled.

Tre laughed as Talon stalked into the living room. "He acts like a little bitch all day if he doesn't get what he wants."

Talon slowly turned his head and looked back at Tre. "Not another word, ball sack."

Tre held back a smile and mimicked zipping his lips shut and Talon let the one-finger salute fly.

"Both of you shut the hell up. I don't want you clowns waking Mina." Mathias got the cups and started pouring. He returned to the living area and handed both men their coffee. Mathias sat and took a large gulp.

Talon lifted his feet to the table in front of him and reviewed what he knew. "From what I saw, Mathias, there were about fifteen of those Valtic fuckers circling the opera house and about five in the main lobby. Out of the five, three were Valencia's personal guard and one was female. Probably Luca's latest plaything. They knew to go after Mina though. Knew what to watch for. She's a target now."

Mathias let out a frustrated breath. "No shit. Now how do we get her back to

Staufen? Any ideas?"

"I could fly her out," Tre suggested.

Talon kicked Tre in the leg. Hard. "You dumbass. She doesn't know about us. I think she'd pretty much shit a meat axe if she saw you transform and offer her a ride."

"Sorry. Forgot. Shit a meat axe? Ouch." Tre turned back to Mathias. "Why doesn't she know about us but Roderick wants her protected? Isn't that kind of against what we do with humans? Let them get close to us?"

Mathias rubbed his hand over his unshaven face. "Yeah, Tre. It is. I'll just tell you that Roderick has a special interest in this particular woman, and we have to make sure she stays safe. That's all you're getting right now."

Talon stood and headed toward the kitchen. "I say we just put her in the car and drive her back like nothing's up. We're here to back you up. I can give a few of the guys a call to scout the way home and set up camp along the route to make sure the road is clear. Let's just give those Valtic fucks the finger and drive right past them. Quinn and Seager can take recon. They're good. And fast."

As he passed by, Mathias held his cup above his head so Talon would get him a refill. "Yeah. We could do that. Getting her back there isn't the problem. It's leaving her in town that I'm worried about." Mathias ran his hand over his face in frustration. He knew Roderick's reaction would not be a good one regarding the presence of the Valta, but it would be nothing compared to what he was going to do once he realized Mina had been marked. "Shit. I need to call him and let him in on last night."

Talon returned from the kitchen and handed the filled cup back to Mathias. "The boys can stay in town and keep an eye out for her. She'll be fine. There is no fucking way the Valta would try to take her out of Roderick's backyard. They're too stupid and not that good. Call the king and see what he wants us to do."

Mathias flipped out his phone and dialed Roderick's private line. This situation was not something Mathias wanted to report to the king. Not only had he trusted him with his only child, but allowed Mathias to take her to Munich for what he thought would be a nice, sight-seeing trip. The excursion had ended up being a complete cluster fuck.

"Roderick. There's news."

"Well," the king replied, "from the tone of your voice, it's not good news. Is Mina safe?"

"Yes, sire. She is now. There was an event last night and Mina was witness to ... well, a few nuances of our race."

"What the hell happened, general? And don't leave the least detail out or I'll know."

The ice in Roderick's voice chilled Mathias to the bone. "Yes, sire. I accompanied Mina to the opera last evening and there was a kidnap attempt."

"What," he roared. "Who the hell touched her?"

Mathias paused and swallowed. He knew what Roderick's response would be. He would want someone's head on a spike and Mathias prayed it would not be his. He felt Talon's and Tre's stares boring into his back.

"Valencia and Luca."

"What! Get her back to me now," he ordered. "Now, damn it. I haven't even spoken a word to her yet and that bitch and her son went after her? How did they know about her?"

"I have no idea, sire. I called in Talon and Tre and they are escorting us back. Quinn

is currently running recon on the roads back to Staufen and Seager is at the hotel awaiting our arrival. Talon was the one who thwarted the attempt. He should be praised for his actions.”

“Where the hell were you, general?” Roderick accused. “She is your responsibility, Mathias, and you let this happen. You have much to answer for when you return. Just get her to me now.”

“Yes, sire. How do you want me to handle her questions about Luca and Valencia? She’ll want answers and she is quite an intelligent woman, Roderick. I don’t think I’ll be able to keep her pacified with half-truths.”

“Just tell her enough to satisfy her curiosity until she is returned to me. I will tell her all she wants to know. Now move, general. Bring me my little girl. Unharm.”

“Yes, sire.”

Mathias flipped the phone closed and turned to Talon and Tre. “Shit, boys. We need to get going. Call the men and let them know we are on the move and for them to keep their eyes open.”

Talon immediately straightened and cleared his throat loudly, looking over Mathias’s shoulder. “Good morning, Mina. Did you sl—What the fuck is that?”

Mathias turned to see Mina stop short and immediately looked down at herself. “What’s what?”

Jumping from his chair, Mathias quickly realized what Talon had seen. He looked back toward him. “Fuck. Talon, just wait a minute.”

Talon’s eyes shot from Mina to Mathias. “You fucking idiot,” he roared. “You marked her?”

“Talon,” Mathias growled. “Remember who you’re talking to.”

Talon reached over, grasped Mathias by the shirt. Nose-to-nose, he yelled in Mathias’ face. “I know who I’m talking to. She’s human, you fool. You can’t have her. Do you know what you’ve done?”

Torn between the need to protect Mina at all costs and wrenching his friend off him, Mathias planted his hand against Talon’s chest and fisted his shirt, holding him in place.

Mina dove forward and grabbed Talon’s arm. “Let him go, Talon,” she screamed. “Get off him.”

Without looking at her, Mathias addressed Mina. “Go back into the bedroom, Mina. I’ll handle this.”

Mina stood her ground. “Like hell I will! What is going on? What did he see?”

“Back in the room now, Mina,” Mathias barked.

Talon had his hands on Mathias’ arms, trying to drag him across the room away from Mina. “It’s not bad enough that the Valtic bitch tried to take her but now you fucked her? Are you insane?”

*

They were grappling with each other and Mina started to panic. These men were huge and the damage they could do to each other would be horrifying.

Tre stood and reached for Mina’s hand. “Please, Mina. Come with me. You shouldn’t be here now. Do what the general says.”

Mina pulled her hand away from Tre and leapt toward the two huge, growling men standing in front of her. They were both shaking with fury, trying to get at each other. “Let go of him, Talon! What the hell is wrong with you?” She looked over at Tre then.

“Wait ... he said human. What did he mean I’m human? And what do you mean general? He’s a general?”

Mathias spoke low and even. “He saw your neck, Mina. I marked you. Something I shouldn’t have done. Now go back into the bedroom before I lose what little control I have left. Tre. Get her back in that room. Now.”

Mina planted her feet in the carpet. “I’m not going anywhere until this stops. Let him go, Talon!”

Tre reached for her again. “Come on, Mina. He’ll explain later. Please.”

“No.” Mina shouted and pulled out of Tre’s grasp. She moved to grab a hold of Mathias’ arm to pull him away. At that moment, Talon’s elbow pushed up while wrestling positions with Mathias and connected square on Mina’s cheekbone. She went flying toward the wall.

Mina didn’t come in contact with the wall. She didn’t fall. The impact to her face didn’t knock her out. It barely registered as painful. What it did do was piss her off. Mina flew toward the wall but ended up landing in a crouched position facing all three of the men. She felt the warmth of blood move down her cheek where Talon’s arm had contacted with bone.

“Oh Jesus,” Talon warned. “Look at her.” He released Mathias, raised his hands in surrender, and slowly backed away from Mina.

She turned and looked at Mathias and Tre. Her eyes bore down on them. They too had their hands raised and were stepping back.

Mina watched them. Tracking them. Following their every move. She could hear their quickened breathing. See the tiny movements of their eyes, feel their erratic heartbeats. Fury built inside her. Her muscles twitched at the ready. She felt as though she were ready to strike out at them in a nanosecond.

“Mina, baby. Calm down. It’s all right,” Mathias gently crooned. “It’s me, love. Just stay still.” Mathias stopped moving and slowly dropped to his knees in front of her. His hands were still raised and he showed her she was in charge. “It’s okay, baby. Just stay calm. I’m all right.”

Mina had no idea what was happening. Unbridled rage boiled inside her. The need to protect was forefront in her mind. Not to just protect herself but to protect Mathias from Talon. All of her senses felt heightened. She tasted blood in her mouth. Probably from the blow she received by accident. That taste fueled her. Driving her anger. In her mind, she knew Talon hadn’t struck her on purpose, but she was still seething with the need to strike. To protect.

“Mathias,” Talon spoke lowly. “We have to get her calmed down. She doesn’t know how to handle it.”

The minute he spoke, Mina rose and let out a feral growl toward him. She was furious. Ready to attack.

*

Mathias raised his fist in the air to alert the men behind him. “Shut the fuck up, Talon, or she’s going to rip you apart.”

“She’ll try.”

Mathias turned and glared over his shoulder at Talon. “And you would knowingly strike her?”

Talon lowered his gaze to the floor. “No. I wouldn’t.”

“Then shut the hell up!”

Mathias was in shock looking at her. He was in sheer disbelief. She cocked her head to the side but continued to keep Talon in her sights. How could this be happening to her? Did marking her do this?

Mina crouched down, her hands grasping into the plush ivory carpet. Her fingernails had lengthened into deadly claws. Mathias could see the enhanced muscles in her arms twitching, getting ready to strike. Blackened stripes started to appear on her skin. Over her face. He looked into her eyes. He knew her Coteri blood had come to life. Her now-yellow, slitted eyes. Her tiger eyes. Golden with brown flecks around the edges. They were honed in on Talon. Watching his slightest movement. Ready to rip him apart with the now inch-long canine’s protruding from her mouth. Her pink tongue rolled over her new gleaming fangs. She was partially transformed. Jesus. She was Coteri.

“Mina, baby. Look at me.” Mathias moved one of his hands toward her. Slowly. “Mina. Look at me, love. Not him. It’s over. You can calm down now.”

Mina blinked at the sound of his voice. He could still see her chest quickly rising and falling with her quickened breathing. Her hands were still working the carpet below her. Fingers fisting the luxurious nap now being shredded beneath her newly formed claws.

Mathias crooned to Mina. “Come on, baby. Come to me.” He wanted to calm her enough to break her gaze from Talon. If given the chance, she would tear open his throat, but they had to settle her enough for the transformation to cease and reverse. Her emotions were overriding her, and she wasn’t used to having her body deceive her this way.

Mina let out a sigh and looked into Mathias’ eyes. She immediately softened and lost her taut stance. She finally sat down and reclined to her side, still looking up at him. “That’s it, baby. Just lie with me.”

Mathias leaned in and lay down next to her on the floor. She quickly curled into his chest and closed her eyes. He rolled his head toward the other two men. “Get the hell out of here. Now.”

Tre grabbed a hold of Talon’s jacket and pulled him to the door. “Get movin’, dickhead.”

As Talon turned to retreat, he looked back at the scene before him. For once, he didn’t have a response. No smart retort. He just moved back silently and walked out the door without a word.

* * * *

A couple of hours later, Mathias walked out of Mina’s bedroom to find both Talon and Tre sitting in the living area once again. This time, there was no friendly banter. No name calling. Only silence.

He had sat in that bedroom with Mina watching her. Waiting to see how long the transformation back to her human form took. It hadn’t taken long after she had passed out. Her breathing had been erratic for a while, but once she was in a deep sleep, she relaxed and her body returned to normal.

Jesus, how was he supposed to explain what had happened? She had absolutely no idea of the existence of their race. Now to find out she was a part of it would blow her mind to pieces. The night before, he had gained her trust. Shown her how he felt about her. How much she meant to him. That he didn’t want to ever let her go. Now that trust

and emotion would be put to the test when she remembered what her body had done. How it had betrayed every one of her beliefs in the human race. How she had been betrayed by her father, her mother, and ultimately, him.

He had just found her. Taken her as his. Made the decision that he wanted no one else. Marked her as his mate. He had waited decades for a mate and now he was in danger of losing her because of her special ability that no one could or would explain to her.

Mathias sat and ran his hands through his hair and sighed heavily. "Go ahead, Talon. I'll give you five minutes to say whatever you have to say. But know this, after your five minutes are up, you won't say another word about Mina to me again. You feel me?"

Talon didn't move from the wall. "I feel you, general."

"Then you better start talking because the clock is ticking."

Talon walked toward Mathias and stood in front of him. "You broke the law, general. You touched a human woman with sexual intent. You subjected her to our ways and to our culture. By law, I should remove you from your rank and take you into custody."

Mathias raised his head and looked Talon in the eyes. "Are you?"

Talon sighed, pulled out a chair and straddled it. "Look, Mathias. You may be general of the Royal Army but we have been friends for decades. I consider you a brother and you know it. But what you did ... what you did was wrong. Even now, after seeing what happened when her emotions took over, you had no way of knowing she had Coteri blood. Why? Why did you do it? Take her. Mark her."

Mathias dropped his head again and sighed. "I have no fucking clue, brother. I couldn't control myself. I couldn't fucking control it. All she did was touch me and I was lost. Like the damn woman was inside my head. Now all I can think about is keeping my mate safe. Protecting her."

Raising his hands in disbelief, Talon glared back at Mathias. "A mate? Are you high? You have had more women than both Tre and I can count and never once did you mark any of them. You never even considered it. They were a scratch to your itch. Nothing else. Why her, Mathias? What makes her so damn special? We risked our damned lives for her and we deserve some answers. So cut the shit and let it loose. What exactly is she to the king?"

Mathias stood and walked to the windows, giving Talon his back. The sun was high in the sky. It should have been a different kind of day. One where that beautiful woman in the next room could wake up in his arms and snuggle close. One where there was no law preventing him from being with her. One where no one was after her. So much for that kind of day.

Mathias didn't want to answer Talon. What he felt for Mina was none of his fucking business. He just knew she had become a part of him in a very short time and he was ready to give up everything to just be with her. If the king wanted to kill him, so be it. He would leave the military and find something else to support them. Hell, they could move back to Washington and he could enter into society there. Making sure she was safe for the rest of her life. Making a life together. Making babies.

"You can't have her, Mathias. It's forbidden."

Mathias tensed at Talon's statement and fought to keep his voice calm and even. "She's mine. No one takes her from me. You saw what happened. She's not completely

human. That means the law doesn't have anything to do with this. She's mine, Talon. Just try and take her."

"Jesus, Mathias. You can't have her. This girl obviously means something to Roderick. He'll kill you. Now quit stalling and spill it. Why did he have you guarding her?" Talon walked to stand beside Mathias. "I picked it up last night when she got out of the car at the opera house. There was something different about her. It just felt like something was off. I didn't sense it before but right then, I knew."

Mathias ran his fingers through his hair. He turned and Tre was standing by the couch with his hands on his hips staring him down. "Spill it, Mathias."

"Fine, you fucks. She's Roderick's half-breed daughter. Not only is he going to slice my throat for putting her in danger, but to top this shit off, he's gonna castrate me for marking her. I'm a fucking dead man walking. Happy now?"

Both Talon and Tre were silent. A new first. They both stood there, just staring back at Mathias.

Tre walked to the couch and sat. "A half breed? The king himself broke Coteri law and bred with a human?" He turned toward Mathias and looked him dead in the eye. "Mina is the Royal Princess of the Coteri and you just marked her." Shaking his head, Tre continue. "Oh, you are fucked all right."

Talon let out a low whistle. "Holy shit, Mathias. You are so fucking dead."

Mathias rolled his eyes. "Ya think? Your perception sometimes amazes me, Talon."

"You still can't have her, Mathias. She's royalty and you know how that goes."

Mathias turned back and looked at Talon again. Fierce and determined. "She's mine. No matter what Roderick says or does. Your five minutes are almost up, Talon. Anything else?"

Talon stood and walked to Mathias' side. "Yeah, there is. Go take care of her. She's awake. I can hear her moving around. We'll be out here calling the boys and making the plan. You got some explaining to do, brother."

* * * *

Mina stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, staring at her neck. Jesus. This was one hell of a hickie. She remembered the little pink freckled circles on her neck like when she was in high school. Not this monstrosity. There were even teeth marks. Had he bitten her? She didn't remember. All she remembered was about six incredibly explosive orgasms the night before.

"Holy shit," Mina muttered to herself while running her fingers over the bruised flesh. "How the hell didn't I feel this?"

She then looked at the bruise that was slowly turning red and purple on her cheek. She knew Talon didn't strike her on purpose. What was killing her was not knowing what had happened next. She just remembered getting hit and then waking up in her bed alone. Why the hell were they fighting? Talon had reacted to seeing her neck, but what was the big deal? The mark was just a hickie and they were both two consenting adults. So what if she and Mathias had done the nasty the night before. It was the best sex she had ever experienced and she felt satisfied. Loved.

Was she really loved? Did this man, one she just met a few days ago, really have the feelings for her that he professed last night? He had not said the word "love" but his endearments for her made her believe he felt something more than just physical. And the

wonderful part was she too felt something more. Something substantial and new to her. She felt true affection. A connection with a man. Someone who started to mean a great deal to her.

But how could this be happening? It had only been a few days. Could people develop a relationship this quickly? Hell, she didn't know. She had never had one before. She knew people who professed love at first sight really did exist. Maybe it does, but she just never allowed herself to find it. Was this love? It was sure stronger than she had ever thought she would feel about someone else. Even before they made love, he was constantly on her mind. Since the night she sensed him in the forest, he had been the center of her world. And amazingly enough, she liked it. Her chest constricted. Jesus, what the hell was wrong with her?

Before he said a word, she knew he was there. She could smell him. His scent hit her the minute he walked into the room. Her mouth actually watered at the idea of seeing him. She felt herself tingle and her nipples hardened in anticipation. Mina knew Mathias was near. She turned and faced the doorway of the bathroom and waited for him to come into view. He rounded the corner and looked her dead in the eyes when he came forward. He slid his hands around her neck and into her hair, bringing her to him for a long, hard kiss.

"Are you all right, love?"

Mina slid her hands around his waist and pulled him closer. "I'm okay. Just confused." She reached up and placed a soft kiss on his lips. "What happened? Why were the three of you fighting?"

Mathias reached behind himself and grasped one of Mina's hands. "Come over and sit down. We need to talk."

Mina timidly walked behind him. Her defenses slowly started to rise. "All right. You start."

Mathias sat Mina on the bed and pulled a side chair next to the bed to face her. "Mina. There are some things that need to be straightened out before we see your father. You need to understand what happened this morning. And last night."

Great. He regretted what they'd done last night. She felt the blood run out of her face. Wonderful. Just what she needed. A guilt-filled lover. The one time in her life she lays her trust in someone and he is going to throw it back at her. She felt herself start to put up the walls, trying to protect what little ego she had left. Damn. She was really starting to like the feelings she had for him. She liked the warm, snug feeling this morning when she woke up after a night filled with lovemaking. Her body was blissfully sore and she could still feel him with her. On her. Inside her. She wanted to hold on to that. She wanted more. She wanted him and now he was going to throw her away.

"Yeah ... um ... what did Talon mean when he said you couldn't have me because I was human? What the hell was that?"

"Talon shouldn't have said that in front of you. And yes, that will be one of the things I explain. First, I want you to tell me what you remember about this morning. Can you do that for me?"

Mina crossed her legs on the bed and leaned forward. "Um. Sure. There's not much, though. I guess I blacked out when Talon accidentally hit me. I remember coming out of the bedroom and him freaking out about the hickie you gave me. Then the two of you grabbed each other in a testosterone-induced fit and he accidentally smacked me. I woke

up a few minutes ago and washed my face. Then you came in. That's it."

"Mina, that was seven hours ago. You have been out most of the day."

Mina felt a shockwave run through her. "W-what?"

"Seven hours ago. You've been asleep since this morning. I let you sleep because your body needed to rest. Something has happened to you, love, and I need to explain it."

Mina started to get worried. She felt the nervous lump in her stomach and throat. What she wouldn't do for a Valium right now. Her hand went to her throat in panic. "What's happened to me, Mathias?"

Mathias let out a long sigh and dropped his head into his hands. "I'm going to start at the beginning, Mina. I'm going to tell you the story of your father and of your heritage. I'm going to say things you will find extremely hard to believe, but you need to just listen. Just listen. Then you can ask me whatever you like. Just trust me." He looked up and met her gaze. A wrinkle grew between his brows. "I would never say or do anything to hurt you. Do you believe me?"

"Let me have a cigarette."

"No."

"Just one and then you can have my undivided attention. I am freaking out here, Mathias. You make it sound as if I have some kind of hereditary disease or something. I need to calm down. Just let me have one." She waved her hand toward the side of the room. "I'll go out on the balcony."

"No," His hand gripped hers. "You cannot leave my side. Ever. That's just one of the things I have to explain."

Mina was completely taken aback by his reply. "Wait a minute, Mathias. Ever? I can't ever leave your side? What the hell is that supposed to mean? And you can go to hell if you tell me I can't have a cigarette now because you just blew that one, buddy. You're scaring the hell out of me."

Mina walked over to her crumpled-up backpack in the corner of the room and dug out her stash. Cigarette in hand, she stepped over to the balcony, opened the doors, and lit up.

"Mina ... this is the last time I allow you to do this to yourself. Understand?"
Allow?

Squinting, Mina took a long drag. "Yes, master. I understand."

Mathias sighed. "At least stand to the side. I don't want you in full view."

Mina turned and looked at him. "Full view of what?"

"Mina. Do you not remember what happened last night? Luca tried to take you from me. I won't let that happen again."

Sick to death of not knowing what was happening, Mina took a final drag, flicked the cigarette over the balcony and walked back to Mathias. "Fine. Will you please tell me what you need to tell me? Like who is this Luca guy and why would he want to take me? Who is he to me? I'm getting a little scared, Mathias."

Mathias reached out and brought Mina close, hugging her to his chest. "Do you know how much you mean to me? I would never let anything happen to you again. I swear to you. Now why don't you go take a shower and get dressed? Once you are comfortable, I'll tell you everything."

Mina squeezed into his protective embrace and closed her eyes. Dear god, he felt good. Warm and strong. She inhaled his scent and tried to relax. Her walls were dropping

down again. Thank god. She should call Chloe. Mina needed her touchstone. The one person who could put anything into perspective.

Mathias released his hold and Mina walked over and grabbed her purse. "I'll just go shower and get dressed. Get me a coffee?"

"Whatever you like, love. I'll be right back."

She liked his term of endearment for her. Love. Did he mean it? Did he feel it? With a smile, she walked into the lush bathroom to shower and dress. Suddenly, thinking about loving him was easy. In such a short time, this man had gotten under her skin. Broken down her shields. Earned her limited trust. What was next? She still had to meet with Roderick. Her heart raced. Jesus. She would soon be standing in front of the enigma that was her father.

Mina blew out a breath. She would deal with that when it happened. Now she wanted answers. Why did she feel this way? Why did she pass out for seven hours? Why were he and Talon fighting? Was Mathias being truthful about his feelings?

Even though these questions swam inside her head, making her dizzy with confusion, she still felt a sort of calm wash over her. Her senses seemed heightened. Her connection to Mathias strong and vibrant and seeming to be on another level altogether. As if they were bound by both mind and body. He would take care of her. She felt that inside her skin. She knew he would protect her and make sure she reached her father safely. She laughed at that thought. Never had she placed her life in someone else's hands. Never had she allowed a man to mean this much. Why this man? Why now?

Chapter Eighteen

Mina dialed Chloe's cell number and was directed to her voice mail. Her fingers tightened around the phone. Shit. "Hey, Clo. Still in Munich, but some weird shit is going down. Some guy named Luca tried to kidnap me at the opera last night. Why, I have no freaking clue, but I'm getting a little scared here. Mathias and Talon kept me safe, but why the hell would someone want to take me? What is my father into?" She leaned a shoulder against the wall. "On a lighter note, I had the best sex imaginable with my hot bodyguard. Dear god it was earth-shattering. You should see the hickie he left on me. I even let him see me naked." She chuckled. "Damn it, I wish you were here. I'm going to meet my father in the morning. Should be interesting. He has a lot of explaining to do. I'm a little scared, Clo. I know I'm rambling on and on, but so much has happened and I really need you. Call me back, okay? Love you."

Mina closed her phone and held it to her chest. Chloe was probably out starting her new life without her. Great. New job. New friends. New life. One without Mina. Oddly enough, she didn't feel as hollow as she had in the past when thinking about Chloe leaving. Maybe she had found some needed strength in the last couple of days being on her own. Maybe this trip was the best thing she could have done. Maybe that man in the other room would be her saving grace. Maybe. If she let him.

Mina showered, dressed and walked out into the living area. Both Talon and Tre were talking on their phones, pacing the room. When Talon saw her, he halted and stared into her eyes with obvious apology. She could immediately tell he was sorry for what had happened and she felt for him. Even though he was a giant of a man, Mina sensed Talon had a heart of gold. He appeared to be this menacing biker dude with a permanent scowl, but she had seen another side of him. A caring side. She knew he would be a good friend if she allowed him to be. Mina walked to his side, leaned up, gave him a warm kiss on the cheek and smiled into his eyes. He bowed his head in acceptance and continued his conversation about the tedious trip home. He was forgiven.

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Watching the exchange, Mathias stood in the kitchen doorway. It was apparent Talon was taken with Mina in the way he almost smiled at her. He was proud of Mina for absolving Talon of his actions but he didn't like the kiss. She shouldn't be touching another male. Ever. He would have to explain this fact to her now that she was his mate. He was not one to tolerate anyone touching what was his. Watching her walk tentatively toward him, he silently hoped she would be accepting of his wishes. Mina wasn't exactly what he would call obedient. But that was one thing he was thankful for. He wanted her just the way she was.

She looked beautiful. Almost as beautiful as she had the night before, lying underneath him, moaning his name in her climax. Her hair was long and curling down her back. A black sweater hugged her voluptuous breasts and the designer jeans accented the seductive curve of her ass. The clothing she had purchased the day before complimented her lush curves and the heeled boots from Versace were the cherry on top. He desperately wanted her again, but he had to tamp down the arousal. He needed to explain what had happened and give her some answers.

Mathias was a bit nervous playing this role. He had expected this part of the reveal to be done by Roderick. Telling Mina of her heritage and how it was going to affect her was the king's responsibility. Now, because Mathias had marked her, claimed her, Luca had tried to take her and she had partially transformed, he needed her to understand the urgency of the situation and why they needed to get her back to Staufen safely.

She reached for him and wrapped her arms around his middle, pressing herself close. Mathias leaned down and covered her mouth with his. Softly. Slowly. He wanted to savor the moment before he had to reveal everything. He wasn't sure how she would react and this may be the last time she would allow him to touch her.

Slowly she returned his kiss, winding her fingers in his hair and pulling him closer. She was so soft. So delectable. He wanted to take her again and again. Wanted to feel her wrapped around him. Feelings of love and adoration rushed through his brain as she continued to kiss him. His chest constricted with his emotions. This kiss was quickly turning him into the animal he was. A low growl built in his chest. His blood hammered through his body and he inhaled her scent.

He could smell her arousal and he became more and more wanton. He knew Mina was wet for him. Her middle rubbed against his now fully erect cock and he could still feel the ecstasy of being inside her. Taking her slow and then hard and fast. She had liked them both. Screaming his name and climaxing all around him. Her soft core tightening like a vise, milking him dry. He had never felt that much sensation with any other woman.

She was his.

Mathias heard a loud cough from the living area and he reluctantly released Mina from their kiss. Talon stood with his hands on his hips watching the entire exchange.

"General, I think you need to have your conversation now. Quinn is on his way and Seager is staying in town to case the hotel for our return. We don't have much time."

Mina met Mathias' gaze. Her eyes were glazed over with arousal, but there was something else. A pang of fear. He knew she needed information, but he also knew she was scared of what she would hear.

Mathias grabbed her hand and headed to the bedroom. He closed the door behind them and led her to the bed. She removed her boots and crawled to the center of the mattress, crossing her legs in front of her. Ready for the great reveal.

He sat in the same chair he had occupied for most of the day while watching her sleep. Reaching out, he took one of her hands and brought it to his mouth.

"Mina. I need you to just listen. Reserve judgment. Open your mind and just listen to me. Can you do that?"

Mina quickly nodded her head in agreement.

"Remember, love. I wouldn't risk you for anything, and I don't want to frighten you in any way. Some of the things I say will be unbelievable. Just know that I am telling you the truth and that you mean a great deal to me. Do you believe me?"

Mina cocked her head to the side and gave Mathias a slight smile. "You know, Mathias, I actually do. Now just tell me what I need to know."

He kissed her hand again and then placed it back in her lap. "Good. Just remember that."

Mathias leaned back in the chair and took a long, slow breath, readying himself. Preparing himself to freak the holy hell out of Mina, because he was completely sure she

would jump up and run screaming for the door before he finished.

“Now I’m not what you would call a scholar on the subject, but I will do my best. Isla would be much better for this and I am sure your father has already planned on the two of you meeting.”

Seeing the confusion in her eyes, Mathias quickly clarified. “Isla is what you would call an academic. A researcher. A historian. She knows all there is to know about our heritage and will be a great resource once we have returned to the palace.”

“Palace? What do you mean palace, Mathias?”

“Shit. Okay. Just let me start at the beginning, all right? I promise I’ll try and answer all of your questions. Just let me get through this and we will go from there.”

“All right. Go ahead.”

Rubbing his hands down his face, Mathias let out one last breath and began explaining to Mina where she came from.

“First of all, our race is called the Coteri. We have been in existence for centuries and our purpose is to keep peace between nature and man. In order to do that, we exist in both the human as well as the animal world.” Noticing her brows coming together at his use of the word human, Mathias reached out and placed his hand on hers. “Mina, our race is not completely human. We embody certain attributes of the animal world which makes us ... well ... special.”

At the last word, Mina sucked in a breath. “Oh holy hell.”

“Now let me continue, Mina. We have the ability to harness certain characteristics of animals such as sight, smell, strength and shape. We can shape shift, Mina. Using our emotions, we shift into certain animals. Few of us have a choice as to what animal category we can shift to. Some shift to only certain mammals while others can shift to both mammal as well as bird form. Mina? Are you listening to me?”

“Um ... listen, Mathias.” Her voice trembled. “I appreciate your level of imagination and all, but I think I need to get back to my hotel in Staufen now. Why don’t you let go of my hand and I’ll just grab my bag. Okay?” Mina started to slide off the bed.

Mathias blocked her attempt to leave.

“Mina. Please. You agreed to hear me out. I warned you some of the things I’d say would be unbelievable, but please ... let me finish. I swear to you I am not deceiving you in any way.”

“Mathias. Let go of my hand. Now.”

He was losing her. He felt her erect her defenses against him. She was closing him off. Shutting him out. She thought he was insane and she had every right to. He was sitting there telling her he could shape shift. Something she was probably only aware of through watching horror movies. Of course she thought he was insane. He couldn’t lose her. He wouldn’t lose her, but he also couldn’t force her to believe him. She was too strong for that.

He reluctantly let her go.

*

Mina swiftly scooted off the bed, quickly pulled on her boots and grabbed her bag. She turned to look at Mathias. Jesus. She’d just had the most amazing sex ever with a complete nutball. And to make matters worse, she had allowed herself to have feelings for said nutball. Actually pictured herself being with him. Had even thought of staying in Germany to get to know him better and see what happened between them. Well, so much

for that little dream.

Mina opened the bedroom door and tried to make a quick getaway. Unfortunately, she still had to get past two very large men blocking her path to the only door that led out. Shit!

Talon uncrossed his legs and quickly stood. "Well, that was fast."

Mina hurriedly walked around Talon and headed for the door. "Not fast enough for me."

Mathias came out of the bedroom and barked, "Stop her. Mina, you're not going anywhere until you hear me out."

In what seemed like a microsecond, Tre suddenly appeared in front of the door with a shoulder leaning on the jamb. "Sorry, Mina. The general says you stay."

Mina whirled and stared Mathias down. Her temper rose along with her fear. "Who the fuck are you people, anyway? You can't make me stay here, Mathias! You are out of your ever-loving mind if you think I will believe anything else that comes out of that mouth of yours. How could you say the beautiful things you did to me last night, then feed me this crazy story only hours later? I'm not stupid, Mathias! Now call off the dogs and let me out of here."

Talon smirked over his shoulder at Mathias. "You told her we were dogs? What the fuck, general?"

"Not now, Talon."

"Fine." Turning back to Mina, Talon gave her a wicked smile. "But just to set the record straight, Mina, I'm a bird man myself. I've never liked the idea of licking my own balls, but Tre over there, has a pretty good reach, if you know what I mean. Don't cha, Scooby?"

Tre shot Talon the finger. "Fuck you, man. You wish you could do what I do."

Mina covered her face with her hands and stomped her boot into the carpet. "Oh, Jesus. You too? You are all fucking nuts. At least I didn't sleep with all of you."

With that statement, Mathias roared, "You will never sleep with another man as long as I draw breath, Mina. Never. Do you understand?"

"I understand you and your puppies here are out of your skulls, and I am not staying here a minute longer." Her breaths came out in short bursts. This couldn't be happening. None of this was true.

Talon turned back to Mathias and lifted a finger to his own face. "Did she just call me a puppy?"

"Shut up, Talon!" Mina and Mathias shouted in unison.

Mathias stalked toward the door. "Mina, you're not going anywhere until you hear me out. You promised you would listen and, by god, you will listen."

She was turned now, facing the door and trying to get past Tre. Like there was a chance in hell that was going to happen. Mathias shouted, "Mina, look at me."

Mina turned. "Let. Me. Go."

Within seconds, Mathias transformed right in front of her. She watched as his skin began to disappear, only to be replaced with dark fur. His eyes, no longer the gorgeous green she had longingly stared into the night before but now shifting to a golden hue. His beautiful body contorting and changing. She heard the popping of his bones as he changed shape and size to accommodate his new form. Once all movement stopped, she looked at the shape that was left behind. There he was in all his glory. The black cat from

her hotel room staring her in the eye.

Mina gasped. "Holy Mother of God."

She felt her legs buckle and before she realized it, a strong set of arms lifted her and moved away from the cat now sitting where her lover once stood. Never taking her eyes off the animal, she was placed on the couch where she shifted her body over the back cushions to watch the black feline start to stalk toward her.

The cat wound its body around the corner of the sofa and hopped onto her lap. Mina let out a loud yelp and brought up her hands to protect herself.

Talon's hand gently moved over her knee. "He won't hurt you, Mina, but there was no other way you would listen."

The cat leaned down to Talon's hand still on Mina, bared his small pointed teeth and hissed.

"Oh, sorry, Mathias." Talon quickly removed his hand and stood over Mina.

"Believe him, Mina. The fact you exist will only bring our races closer together. Listen to him. Please."

Mina looked down at the large black cat sitting on her legs. He was staring right back with his golden eyes. This wasn't real. No fucking way. They must have drugged her or something. This couldn't be happening. She shook uncontrollably and her mouth was bone dry from her shortness of breath. She scooted up the couch and ran her hands through her hair. The damn cat was just sitting there, staring, with his long tail waving behind him.

"You were in my hotel room, weren't you?"

It raised its small paw and patted her belly.

"You watched me get undressed, didn't you?"

His dark, shiny head dropped as he laid his ears back, appearing guilty.

"Holy shit," Mina whispered to herself. "This can't be happening. This isn't real."

"It's very real, Mina," Talon whispered next to her. "We're all very real."

Mina turned and looked at Talon standing next to the sofa. "You're this way too?"

Talon gave her a small smile. "Well, not exactly that way. I usually choose a more manly type of animal. Never a kitty cat."

The black cat on her lap let out a low hiss.

Mina looked back at the cat. Hell, it wasn't a cat. It was him. She felt as if she had just dropped down the rabbit hole and there was no way of escaping. What the hell had she gotten herself into? She was a realist. She didn't believe in all of this hocus pocus shit. This kind of stuff only happened in dreams. Fantasies. Really good romance novels. Not in the real world.

Talon laid his hand gently on her shoulder, breaking the spell. "Come on, Mina. Let's get you back into the bedroom, and Mathias will tell you what you need to know for now. Isla will take care of the rest."

Mina absently stood and the cat—Mathias—hopped down to the carpet in front of her. Talon turned toward the bedroom and pulled her along with him. And please don't call me a dog again." His head nodded side to side. "It's insulting."

Mina and Talon followed Mathias/the cat into her bedroom. She sat on the bed and watched Talon walk out.

"Remember, Mathias, make it quick. We don't have much time and Roderick is waiting."

Talon shut the door, leaving Mina alone with what she still could not believe was Mathias. A man who had turned himself into a cat and snuck his way into her hotel room in Staufen. The same man who had apparently slept on her chest as a black cat. The same black cat that apparently was really her lover who was not human but some race she never knew existed. Mina needed to wake up. This had to be a dream. Things like this just didn't happen to normal people. Well, she wasn't exactly normal, but she had always thought she was at least a human being.

She rubbed her shaking hands along her jeans and wondered what to do. What to say. This wasn't a moment that had a particular theme to it. She knew how to handle a "morning after" moment, a "whoops—my boob is showing" moment, but a "my lover is a shape shifter" moment was not one she was too familiar with. And after all that had happened in the last hour, Mina found herself wondering where Mathias' clothes went when he shifted. And wasn't that a hell of a thing to think about at a time like this.

In answer to her question, she watched as Mathias' body began to contort and stretch back into his human form—fully dressed. If it hadn't happened right in front of her, she would never have believed it. She kept her gaze on him as he reached out to take her hand. Instinctively, she bolted off the bed to the other side of the room.

"No. Don't," Mathias pleaded. "Don't run from me, Mina."

His voice softened. "Please don't be scared of me, Mina. I'm the same man who spent the entire night loving you. Loving your body. The same man who wants you. Will always want you. Nothing has changed. I have never wanted a woman as much as I want you. I don't want to lose you. Not after all of this."

Mina stared back, wide-eyed and flushed from fright. "What are you?"

"I am Coteri. As you are."

"I can't do that." Her arm waved at his body. "I'm not like you."

"Yes you are, Mina. Your father is our king. The ruler of our race. He and your mother had a relationship together. A forbidden union. We are not allowed to take a human as a mate, so when your father impregnated your mother, he broke one of our most sacred laws. You are his daughter, Mina. Part of him. Part Coteri. You can do this." He paused and then looked down at the floor. "You have done this."

Mina stepped back, placing her hand on the wall to keep upright. Dizziness had wracked her head at the thought of being something other than human. "What? The hell I have. I think I would remember turning into an animal, Mathias."

"No, Mina. You have. This morning when Talon grabbed me. You feared for my safety, and you allowed your emotions to take over. Your body transformed. You became your strongest, most comforting Coteri form. A tiger."

She turned toward him again and put her hands on her hips. "So if emotion can change me, then why am I not on all fours right now?" She waved her hand along the length of her body. "Because I am completely freaked out right now and nothing is happening."

Mathias walked toward her, but Mina put up her hands to stop him. He obeyed her command and stood where he was. "It doesn't work that way, Mina. You are aware of your emotion right now, but you have no idea how to control the transformation. What happened this morning was instinct. You thought I was in danger so you transformed to protect me, knowing you couldn't stop Talon in your human form. Mina, please. Just sit and let me explain. We don't have much time. Your father is waiting for you and the

Valta are on our heels. Please.”

A single tear tracked down her face. In almost a whisper, Mina asked Mathias, “Does it hurt? You know ... to change?”

“No. It doesn’t hurt, Mina.”

“I should be telling you how freaking nuts you are and trying my damndest to get the hell out of here, but I told you I would listen so I guess I will.” She wrapped her arms around her middle. “That little show out there is also a pretty good reason why I’m still here. There’s no arguing with that. But please tell me one thing. Is what happened between us real or was that just something you thought would be an added bonus?”

Mathias slowly walked toward Mina, reaching for her. “You and I are very real, Mina. Nothing I said to you was fake. I meant every word. Every kiss. Please let me hold you, Mina. Let me feel you again.”

Mina remained unmoving. Amazingly, she still wanted him. She still felt her blood stir when he was close to her. He had made his mark on her and she wanted to be his. Mina slowly nodded her head.

Closing the gap between them, Mathias ran his fingers through her glorious hair and lightly pressed his lips to hers. They both kept their eyes open, watching each other. He ran the tip of his tongue over her lower lip, drawing it in his mouth where he gently suckled it. Mina let out a low moan as he let go of her lip. “Let me in, baby.”

Mina surrendered. She couldn’t take it. Just one touch from him sent her into flames. She had just watched this man change into a cat right in front of her and suddenly all she could think was that they had way too many clothes on at the moment. Why was her brain not working? She had a good head on her shoulders. A smart woman. She had graduated with a 3.6 GPA. Never had she allowed a man to cloud her judgment. Rule her mind. But that was exactly what Mathias was doing. Breaking down her walls with his mouth. His hands. His wonderful words of endearment.

Finally, her eyes closed and she let go of her fear. Her body melted into his and she released herself into his hands. He kissed her deep and long. Her body tingled in response to his touch as though he owned her. She didn’t want to walk away from this man. He had a hold on her both physically as well as emotionally. Never had she experienced this before. Never had she given herself freely and openly. She was scared out of her mind. For reasons unknown to her right now, she somehow knew he would take care of her. Make sure she was safe.

Mathias ended their kiss and just simply held her, his hand on the back of her head pushing her cheek into his chest. She could hear his rapid heartbeat and knew he was as scared as she was. She closed her eyes and just felt him hold her. Tight. Close.

Mina sniffed and rolled her head to look up at Mathias. “So, I’m not human?”

“Mina. You are half Coteri. A beautiful race who comes from nature. One who holds a very important position in the survival of the human race. You should be proud to be a part of it, but I realize you still need a better understanding. Let me try to explain a bit more, all right?”

Mina nodded and allowed Mathias to lead her to one of the high-backed chairs against the far wall of the bedroom. Once seated, he began at the beginning. Explaining that the Coteri race came into existence centuries ago, and since then they had kept their presence a secret from the human race. For obvious reasons, they took great strides to not be discovered, but yet lived within the human society to remain informed of the world’s

events and challenges. They made sure they could do everything in their power to assist with the betterment of man and nature.

He told of Valencia and her defection from the Coteri decades before and her formation of the Valtic army. The Valta wanted to rule over rather than live amongst the humans and it had then become the Coteri's charge to protect them against Valencia and her plan for domination over the world and its human inhabitants. In detail, Mathias also explained the evilness of Luca and his treatment of women over the past years. Using them as playthings as well as trying to breed with them to create a new race to defeat the Coteri army. He described Luca's special ability for mind control and how he had gotten Mina to come with him so easily.

As Mathias continued to enlighten Mina on her heritage, she sat in stunned silence. It was like a terrifying fairytale. Her father was a king. She had the ability to transform into animal form. She wasn't human. She was special. Jesus.

Mathias also informed her of recent kidnappings and explained why the Coteri was on high alert. Their warriors and scouts were all over the world trying to stop the Valta from taking young women and using them as incubators for impregnation. This was why it was so important to get her back to Roderick safely. If Valencia knew of her real heritage, Mina would be target number one and the entire Valtic army would be after her. Mina held the key as to how their race could breed with the humans and Mathias would do everything in his power to protect her.

He told her of his status as a general here in Germany and his relationship with Roderick after his own father had passed away. Roderick had taken him in and treated him as a son and Mathias was loyal to the bone. Mina raised her hand and touched her neck, wondering about the significance of the mark. Mathias covered her hand with his. "Yes. He will want to kill me for this, but you are mine, Mina. No one is taking you from me."

Mina closed her eyes and lowered her head. "How can you say something like that? We've only known each other for a few days. How can you be so sure?"

Mathias placed a finger under her chin and raised her head. "Since the moment I saw you in that forest, I have wanted you. I have never wanted another woman as I have you. Never felt as strongly before. I don't know what it is and I really don't care. All I know is that I never want to lose you. You are mine."

Mina looked into his beautiful green eyes and got lost in them. She felt exactly the same about him. He had invaded her mind the second he spoke. He was all she could think about. She wanted him so badly she ached with need. And that scared her to death. But she was in no way ready to share her feelings with Mathias. She needed some semblance of protection and independence. She wasn't ready to put her heart on the line only to get hurt.

Millions of questions swam through Mina's mind about her mother, about Roderick, and obviously about her own feelings for Mathias. She was starting to go crazy. She desperately needed Chloe.

A light knock at the door brought Mina back to reality. "What is it?" Mathias snapped.

Talon entered the room. "Time to go, general. The boys have cleared the way and right now there are no obstacles. We need to get her out of here."

"Fine. Give us ten minutes."

Mathias stood and pulled Mina to his chest. “Come on, baby. Let’s get you packed so we can get you back to the palace.” He placed a short kiss on her forehead and led her across the room to the closet. They packed her things in silence.

After everything was in order, she turned to look at the room once again. The room where they had made love. The room where she had given her trust and possibly her heart to this man. The room where she learned her life had been a lie from day one. Where she learned she was not completely human. The room that changed her life forever.

Mina noticed the gown from last night draped over the trunk at the end of the bed. She walked over and pulled it off. “Shouldn’t we take this?”

Mathias smiled. “Considering I ripped the straps I would say it has no further use. If you like, we can always buy you another.”

Mina placed it back on the trunk. “Maybe one of the cleaning ladies could sell the fabric or something. Maybe help them out. I’ll just leave it here.” She ran a hand down the beautiful chiffon one more time. She had been Mina Roarke in that dress the night before. Just plain old Mina, ex-insurance adjuster, currently twenty pounds overweight, missing her best friend and her dead mother. Now she was Mina Roarke, Coteri-hybrid, walking into only god knows what. Mina looked at the ceiling and silently prayed. Thanks Mom. Appreciate the heads up on all of this. I’m “special” all right.

Chapter Nineteen

Thirty minutes later, Mina was speeding down the highway with Mathias behind the wheel of the McLaren. Talon and Tre were following in a large black Mercedes SUV. What had she gotten herself into?

All she had wanted was a few answers after her mother's death. Maybe a little adventure and the opportunity to gain some independence, since Chloe was obviously starting a new chapter in her life and leaving Mina on her own. No way had she ever figured she would wake up this morning, after sharing a night of incredible sex with a man who could shape shift and a kidnapping attempt by another shape shifter who could control minds. Not to mention that apparently she had partially transformed herself. Mathias said she had morphed to a tiger form. Her eyes had gone gold, her teeth elongated into fangs, claws had erupted from her fingertips and her skin had become striped with black markings. Conveniently, she could remember none of that episode, so she was forced to take the word of three men she had just recently met and who were currently a part of her non-human king father's army.

Her mind started pounding with the weight of all the questions she still had. Why had she not transformed earlier in her life? Plenty of times in the past she had allowed emotion to rule her actions. Mina had always been a very passionate and strong-willed woman. When she had something to say, she usually said it. Damn the consequences, but she would not sit idly by and be weak. Her mother had inadvertently helped mold Mina into the woman she was today—tough, strong and independent. Yet since her mother's death, Mina had felt anything but those things.

Up until now.

Mina looked down at her hands and wondered how claws could have come out of her skin and there wasn't a mark on her now. She rubbed her finger across her teeth and tried to imagine just how big they'd grown. A tiger. Why had it been a tiger? She loved tigers and had always felt sorry for them when she saw them at the zoo. They were too powerful to sit in an enclosed area. They needed to be in the jungle where they belonged and not in some zoo with fake boulders and a false waterfall. The more Mina thought about it, the cooler she thought the situation was. A tiger. A strong, ferocious animal that ruled its domain. All of this was just too incredible to believe. Ridiculous actually. But if she was going to survive this with her sanity intact, she needed to be open-minded enough to listen.

Now sitting in the plush leather seat next to Mathias, speeding down the wooded road toward Staufen, all she could wonder was what he thought. What did he want? Was he serious when he said she was his? Why had he said the monstrous hickie on her neck was his way of claiming her and what did that mean? She squeezed her thighs together, feeling the tingling between them at the memory of his mouth on her. Why was she getting aroused just thinking about him kissing her? Hell.

Mina looked out the passenger window, hoping to hide her current state. The intensity of her feelings for this man scared the hell out of her.

Mathias placed a hand on her thigh. "Are you all right, Mina?"

She startled at his touch. The heat could be felt through her jeans. "Yeah. I'm fine,

considering what's going on."

"We'll be back at the palace in a few hours so just try and relax. Nothing will happen to you."

Mina turned in her seat and faced him. With everything going crazy around her, she was amazed at herself that all she could think about was touching the man sitting next to her. He had just said they were heading to a palace and her father was a king. She should be freaked out beyond belief, but right now all she craved was him. She wanted to drink him in. Wrap herself around him. Smell his scent on her skin. Feel him moving between her legs as he made love to her again and again. Her whole body ached for him. What was it between them that made her hunger so strongly? She felt out of control regarding Mathias. All of the questions she had suddenly disappeared. All but one. Could she actually love this man? Was that truly possible so soon?

She covered his hand and laced her fingers with his. "It's pretty hard to relax with your hand on my thigh, Mathias."

His fingers gripped into the flesh of her denim-covered leg.

Mina saw the flexing of his jaw as he clenched down. Bingo. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him. Her stomach started to churn with desire. Mina looked at the speedometer and saw the car was going around ninety-five miles per hour. Too fast for her to do what she wanted to do. Even though the idea of reaching over, unzipping Mathias' pants and taking him deeply into her mouth was exhilarating, she didn't want to end up wrapped around one of the gorgeous evergreen trees that lined the road if he lost control of the half-million-dollar car.

So instead, Mina thought about asking some more questions. Nothing like getting a man to talk about himself to learn something about him. "How long have you been ranked a general?"

"Two years."

"What does it entail?"

His grip relaxed on the steering wheel. "I am head of the Royal Army here in Germany, and I handle all of the security for your father and for the palace. I also oversee the training and placement of the younger soldiers."

"How did you get the job?"

Mathias chuckled. "It's not a 'job' per say, but something I have wanted for a lifetime. My father was friends with yours. I grew up at the king's feet and he took a liking to me. Since my father was a part of Roderick's council, I was always around. One day, your father walked through the halls of the palace and he saw me arguing with a girl. At the time, I was very young, but I had also just witnessed her kissing another boy. I was so angry, I started yelling and flailing my arms all around her. Roderick saw the whole thing and came forward to intervene. He sent the girl on her way and then took me to his private study. I was so scared I thought I was going to shake right out of my clothes. He told me to sit in a giant leather chair placed right in front of his huge desk and then admonished me for all of the things I had done wrong in that situation."

Mina interrupted, one eyebrow rising. "You mean my father counseled you on how to treat a woman? How ironic."

"Mina. Your father worshiped your mother. It's not my place to tell you of their relationship, but you need to talk to him about it. Remember, Mina, there are certain details you'll learn about the Coteri. There are rules we don't question or rebel against."

Mathias squeezed Mina's thigh again. "But, there are certain people who can make us do both of those things. Uncontrollably and very willingly."

Mina looked at his hand on her leg and then back up to his beautiful face. His eyes said it all. He had broken one of those rules ... for her. "Mathias, I want to know all about you and the Coteri, but you have to understand how difficult this is for me. I mean, come on. Finding out I'm not completely human is something I never thought I would hear. And now I'm thinking about things I've never imagined I would even consider. I'm just a little out of my element, and I really need Chloe with me right now."

He stole a glance. "Why Chloe?"

"She's my best friend, Mathias. The one person who I can count on. The one person who I know will always be there for me."

"I will always be there for you, Mina."

Her heart clenched at his words. Mina closed her eyes and squeezed Mathias' hand. "I'm beginning to believe you, Mathias. And that is very hard for me to say. I've never believed in a man before. I've never allowed myself to."

"I saw how my mother was at certain times of the year and more often at night while she was alone. Or thought she was alone. She would just stand at the window and stare out over the water, a look of utter despair on her face. She tried to hide that part of herself from me, but even as a young girl I knew she thought of my father and the love she lost. I vowed to never let a man gain that kind of control of my heart. And I never did. All these years, I have never had a serious relationship with a man and I've never regretted it. I got what I wanted and then walked away, heart intact. And then you walked up to me in the middle of the forest and all that changed."

Mina reached over and wove her hand through Mathias' long, dark hair. "I'm not sure exactly what I'm feeling right now. All I know is I don't want to be away from you. I want to be with you." Her voice lowered to a husky purr. "I want you."

At her admission, Mathias slowed the car, veered to the shoulder of the road and stopped. He quickly picked up his phone and dialed. "Everything's fine, Talon. Hang back for a minute." He turned to face Mina and gently cupped her face with his large hands. "Mina. You're mine. I want you too, and I won't share you with anyone. Understand?"

He threaded his hands in her hair and brought her mouth to his. The kiss was soft and passionate. She felt her body melt at his touch and let out a soft moan. He opened his mouth on hers and slid his tongue inside to touch hers ever so softly. Mina ran her hands inside his leather jacket and felt the warmth of his body. She clutched the material of his sweater and pulled him closer. The kiss had started out slow and loving, but it quickly turned into something stronger. Mathias' breathing quickened and he was trying to pull her closer to him. The gearshift was in the way and he grunted in frustration. "Damn sports car."

He leaned over the center console and lifted Mina as closely as possible. Continuing the devouring kiss, his hands roamed down her arms and over her breasts. Breaking the kiss, Mina's head dropped back. "God, I want you, Mathias."

She felt his lips on her neck and she closed her eyes, reveling in his touch. His tongue traced the mark he'd left on her the night before, sending shivers through her entire body. She turned her head, allowing him access, and was rewarded with a low growl of satisfaction from him.

Mina brought her fingers down to the hem of his sweater and delved underneath to feel his soft, heated skin. Just as she began to slide them up his taught stomach, Mathias gripped her wrists, effectively stopping her sensual assault.

“We have an audience, baby. I think we need to put this on hold until we get you back to the hotel.”

Breathing heavily and with her eyes still closed, Mina whispered, “What audience? It’s just you and me, Mathias.”

Mathias raised his head from her neck and pointed out the back windshield with his thumb over his shoulder. “Tre and Talon are getting a full show, chère. We need to get to the hotel.”

“I thought you were taking me straight to Roderick.”

Mathias growled lowly. “Not when I want inside you this badly. We can stop off at the hotel for you to change, and of course, let me make love to you thoroughly. Then I’ll take you to your father.”

Mina hesitated then lifted her gaze to Mathias. “Is there love in the Coteri culture?”

His brows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean, Mina?”

“Do the Coteri fall in love and get married?”

Mathias smiled and lightly kissed her forehead, the bridge of her nose, her cheeks, her chin. “A relationship between a Coteri male and female is for life. Once they mate and mark each other, nothing can separate them.”

Mina’s hand went to the bruise on her neck. “Is that what you did to me? Mark me?”

Mathias looked into Mina’s eyes. “Yes, love. That’s what I did.”

She looked down at his neck. “And I should mark you if I want you too. Right?”

“Since you are not full Coteri, I’m not really the right person to ask. That will be something for Isla to answer.”

She looked at Mathias’ eyes, dark with desire. She ran her hands over his face. Learning every line and curve. His lips were full and still wet from her kiss. She ran her thumb over his lower lip and she felt her heart in her chest. Her blood surged through her veins and her skin prickled with excitement. She slowly smiled. “Good. But maybe we can do some experimenting on our own?”

Mathias’ gaze grew even darker as he palmed the back of her neck. “Oh, yeah. I’m all for that, love.” He pulled her toward him for a blistering kiss that ended much too quick. “Let’s get back to your hotel.”

* * * *

Luca lay in a lounge chair out on the deck of his home soaking in the sun. The ocean beat against the rocks below and was slowly lulling him into a stupor when Gino walked in with a small package. “It’s here, Luca. Where do you want it?”

Without moving, Luca responded, “In the study, Gino. I’ll deal with it later. What about the other item I asked for? Is it here as well?”

Gino moved and stood at Luca’s side, blocking the sun to his already tanned body. “Yes. That one is currently waiting in your bedroom. Should I make other arrangements?”

Luca turned his head and faced Gino. “No. That’ll be all. Now get out of my light.”

Without replying, Gino retreated back into the house.

Luca smiled slightly. He had what his mother wanted and a prize to boot. Mina’s

dress was now in his study. Evidence of her DNA was on the zipper, thanks to the small, sharp catch Valencia had sewn into the lining. And after a bit of investigation on the part of the scientists they held, they would know what she was. As an added bonus, a helpless young human brunette was currently tied to his bed for his afternoon amusement.

Life was good.

* * * *

The drive to the hotel seemed to take an eternity. All Mina thought about was running her hands and mouth all over Mathias' body and giving him the same pleasure he had given her the night before.

When they finally pulled up in front of her hotel, there was an extremely large man looming out front. Mathias stopped the car directly in front of him and instructed Mina to remain inside. No problem. She knew what was going on and she didn't want to take any chances.

After a few minutes talking to Tre, Talon, and the other giant standing outside, Mathias finally opened the car door and extended his hand to help Mina.

Once on the street, Talon immediately came behind her and stood very close. His size almost enveloped her. She looked up at him from over her shoulder and he gave her a little wink. "Get used to it, little one. This is my post when you're out in public."

She flashed him a smile. "It's okay, Talon. If I wanted anyone at my back, it would be you."

Talon bowed his head, looking a bit embarrassed at her statement. Did he actually blush?

"You know, Talon, the more I'm around you, the more I'm absolutely sure you would be perfect for Chloe."

Talon almost stumbled backward at her statement. "Who?"

Mina felt a bit shocked at his physical response to her statement. "You know ... my girlfriend, Chloe? Remember I told you about her when we were at the hotel bar in Munich? You would be perfect for her. You wouldn't scare her in the least."

Talon put his hands on his hips and stared down at Mina. "Now what's that supposed to mean?"

Mina smacked him teasingly on his arm. "Don't get so defensive, Talon. I meant because you're so big. Chloe has had her share of big men and that's how she likes them." Mina gave him a quick wink.

Talon's eyes darkened. "Her share, huh? Maybe I would like a woman with a bit less experience?"

Mina laughed. "Hell, Talon. Once you saw her, you'd change your mind. All men want her. She's a gorgeous redhead with a killer bod and she's smart as a whip. You'd love her."

Before Talon could respond, Mathias reached out and grabbed Mina's hand and tugged her to his side. He walked her to the man who had been standing in front when they arrived. "Mina, this is another one of my soldiers, Seager."

She looked up, way up, in order to meet the man's gaze. Sudden recognition hit her. This was the same man who had been on the plane with her from Heathrow to Munich. The same beautiful man who had helped the older woman to her seat after she had spilled coffee all over Mina. Her mouth opened to speak but nothing came out.

Seager smiled down at her. "Yes, Mina. It's me." He lowered his head in a small bow. "It's nice to formally meet you."

All Mina could do was nod in response. She let her gaze travel over him once again. Long dark hair, tanned skin and a gorgeous face that looked to be from American Indian descent.

Jesus. Were all Coteri men this beautiful? Chloe really, really needed to be here. It would be like watching her at one of the semi-annual Victoria's Secret sales. Wild-eyed and crazed to grab what she wanted.

Mathias opened the hotel door and Seager walked in before them.

Mina followed and the rest of the men came in behind her.

Seager gave Mathias his report. "The building is secure, general. I have two men on the roof and a few others on the rooftops around the hotel. I will remain at the front of the hotel and Tre can take the rear."

Talon chuckled. "Yeah. Tre likes taking the rear."

Tre took a quick swipe at Talon but missed. "Will you just fuck off, Talon?"

Ignoring them, Mathias clasped Seager on the shoulder. "Nice work. Now, Mina needs to get cleaned up and packed. Then we'll take her to Roderick." He looked over at Talon. "Grab her bags, follow us up and keep watch in the hall. We'll be ready in a few minutes."

The men did as instructed and Mathias guided Mina up the small staircase to her room. Once there, he unlocked the door and went in before her. He motioned her to remain with Talon and he began checking every corner of her room. Once he was satisfied, he held out his hand to her and smiled.

Her stomach went into knots as she placed her hand in his and walked into the room. She still didn't quite know what to think of this entire situation. She had only just arrived in Germany and now she was about to give herself over to a man she had only known for a few days. But looking into his eyes, she knew she would be safe. There was something between them. She didn't know how to explain it. But as she walked into his embrace, she knew she didn't care. She wanted this man. And for possibly the first time in her life, she would let her emotional walls crumble and let him take her...body and soul.

Chapter Twenty

The door to the hotel room snicked shut and Mina felt nervous now that they were alone again. Like a virgin on prom night. She wasn't afraid of him, but there was something else eating at her. Looking at him now, she saw a tall, beautiful, loving and menacing man who was slowly moving his hands up and down her back while squeezing her in his embrace. But what would he feel tomorrow? Would he still want her? Would it always be like this? Always hungry and adoring? Loving and devoted? She didn't know and that scared the shit out of her.

This entire situation was filled with action and intrigue. In only a few days, she had experienced one hell of a shopping trip, the opera and a kidnapping attempt. She learned her father was the king of a race who was not completely human. She had actually transformed into an animal and watched her lover do the same. There was no way what they had together could survive the mundane of regular life. Everything between them was fueled by action and excitement. Mina knew how that worked. People relied upon each other in life-threatening situations, and their emotions were heightened to the point of saying and doing things they wouldn't normally do. But when reality was thrown into the mix—like getting up early for work or grocery shopping—the proverbial honeymoon was over and they were never the same.

Mina had never done this before. Never wanted to be with just one man. Being with Mathias meant she would have to let him inside, and that had always been a place Mina guarded with everything she had. Watching her mother live every day of her life without the man she loved had been pain enough for Mina. There was no way in hell she could allow herself to be placed in the same position with Mathias. She was on a precipice and needed to make a decision. She wanted him, but did he really feel the same?

She looked up into Mathias' eyes and studied his face intently. What was he thinking right now? Was he truly meant for her, or was he just bullshitting her with the mated-mark thing just to get her into bed again? She hoped for option one.

Mina slowly backed away from his embrace and crossed her arms over her chest. Her gaze went to the floor in front of her and she let out a long breath. "Is this real, Mathias?"

Mina looked up and wondered how she was going to get through this without getting hurt. She was already in too deep. Her voice trembled now. "All of this between us." She motioned between them with her hands. "Is what you feel real, or is it just a reaction to the circumstances we're facing?"

Mathias closed his eyes and sighed. "Why would you think that, Mina? He walked toward her and placed his hand on her face, tipping her head back to look into her eyes. "Everything I've said to you is real. All of the protection I have given you is not because I was ordered to or the circumstances we're facing. It's because of what I feel for you. Because of what you mean to me."

She felt his thumb brush over her lower lip. "You're mine, Mina, and nothing will change that. Nothing will ever happen to you as long as I'm alive."

His thumb brushed over the mark he had left on her neck. "I know you don't understand the ramifications of this mark but know this—it's not given lightly. It's not a

whim that came from a night of passion. It was given to you freely and with complete devotion. I have never once thought about marking another woman, and I will never touch another in desire for as long as I breathe. I know you don't understand right now. But once you speak with Roderick, I hope you will come to trust what I am saying to you. You are what I want. All I want."

Mina removed his hands from her face and walked toward the small dressing table in the corner of her room, needing the space. "You think that now, Mathias, but when all of this is over and life goes back to normal, whatever that means for the Coteri, you'll think differently. I'm not like you. I wasn't raised with the knowledge of the Coteri. I'm my own person. For Christ sake, my mother was right. I'm special and I hate it. I always have, but at least now I understand why she always used that vile word to describe me. Hybrid would have been just too harsh." Mina threw her purse on the floor and stripped out of her coat. She looked back at Mathias. He stood in the middle of the room with his fists at his side, his chin down and his eyes dark. He didn't look happy at all. Even angry he was beautiful. Her heart was breaking. "I can't do this, Mathias. I just can't. I want you desperately, but I just don't know how to do this." A single tear rolled down her cheek and dripped onto the wood floor. "I'm scared."

Mathias closed the distance she'd put between them. He put his finger under her chin and lifted her face to his. "I've never done this either, Mina, and I'm just as scared as you are. I don't know how this works, but we can figure it out together. I know nothing of what it's like to be in the human world, and I'm sure there's a lot for me to learn. Just as there is much for you to learn about your Coteri heritage. Let's just agree to learn together. To stay together. To be together. That's all I'm asking right now. Just open up and let yourself feel. Trust what your heart is telling you. Trust me." He lowered his head and kissed her softly on the lips. "Trust me, Mina. I'm scared too but I want you. Only you." He kissed her again, longer and deeper this time.

Mina felt her body go weak with need for him. She returned his kiss and wove her hands into his hair. She trailed her lips down his neck and lightly sucked. She wasn't sure how or when to mark him, but she still wasn't ready to do it. From what Mathias had told her, doing that would be like slipping a ring on his finger. She just needed to take this one step at a time.

Mathias slid his hands underneath Mina's sweater and ran them up her ribs, cupping the underside of her breasts. "Mina. I need you, *chère*."

Mina let out a soft moan against his mouth and pulled his head back to look at him. She panted heavily and her hands held tightly in his long hair. She looked directly into his darkened eyes and another tear fell down her cheek. "Please don't hurt me, Mathias. Please. I don't know if I could handle it."

"You are a part of me, Mina. I would never hurt you. Just trust me."

She continued to look into his eyes. Trying to silently find a reason to walk away from him. To save herself the obvious grief and pain this man would cause if he were playing her. Tears continued to flow down her cheeks as she studied him. She had never cried like this in front of anyone except Chloe.

God, Mina needed her right now. She felt her stomach tighten at the need to see her best friend. Chloe would know what to say. What to do. And Mina would trust her. Trust what Chloe would tell her to do. But Chloe wasn't here and Mina hadn't spoken to her for the last two days. The decision was now only Mina's. What should she do?

Everything she saw in Mathias' eyes, his mannerisms, his way of being around her, the way he loved her, screamed to trust him. To be with him. But her head wouldn't let her bring down the walls even if her heart were willing. She had to make a decision. And she had to do it all on her own. Should she stay hard and guarded, or should she jump at the chance of having something wonderful ... even if just for a short while? She took a leap of faith.

"Kiss me, Mathias." With their mouths fused, Mathias slowly moved them toward the bed.

Mina pulled Mathias' coat from his shoulders and reached for his sweater when he stopped her. "Lay back, Mina. Let me undress you. I want to see you."

Mina stopped her groping and lowered her hands. She took a few steps backward until the backs of her legs hit the bed. She sat and scooted to the middle of the mattress. She pulled her hair up off her neck and lay back on the bed.

*

He smiled and walked toward her. She laid trust in him and he was overjoyed with her gesture. He reached down and removed her boots. Her jeans were next and then her sweater. She lay in front of him like a juicy offering to the gods. He wanted to just dive in but knew he should take his time. This would likely be the last time they would be able to be alone without the wrath of Roderick over their heads, and Mathias wanted to enjoy it. Wanted to savor it.

Mina's breasts spilled out of the top of her bra. When she raised one of her knees and spread her legs wide for him, he felt his mouth go dry. No matter what view she had of her own appearance, he would always remember what she looked like now. Soft, warm and completely gorgeous. His.

Mathias stepped back and began to undress. He reached over his head and grabbed his sweater. He slowly pulled the leather from the loops on his pants and let it drop to the floor. His zipper was next and he noticed Mina starting to move on the mattress.

She squirmed and writhed with need, and again he smiled at her response. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He dropped his pants and bent down to remove his boots at the same time. When he stood, he was completely naked.

Mina's gaze immediately traveled down his broad chest to his engorged cock, now standing at attention against his stomach. She licked her lower lip and then brought it between her teeth. That little movement made him crazy. Flexing his fingers, Mathias crawled onto the bed and positioned himself over her.

She opened her legs to cradle his body to hers. Mina linked her ankles over his lower back and rose to rub against his erection. "Make love to me, Mathias." She lapped at his neck, ending with a wet kiss behind his left ear. "Nice and slow."

With a low growl, Mathias leaned down and kissed her. She moaned with need and moved her hips against him again, driving him mad. He reached down and placed his hand over her breast, playing with her already extended nipple. He pinched and rolled it between his fingers, making Mina groan with approval. "You like that, baby?"

"God yes, Mathias. I want more."

Mathias reached up, pulled the straps of her bra over her shoulders and freed her breasts from the confining cups of fabric. He immediately took her nipple into his warm mouth and flicked it with his tongue.

Mina cried out and wove her fingers into his hair, holding him in place. He released

her breast, his lips traveling down her abdomen. He rolled his tongue in her navel, and at the same time ran his hands down the inside of her thighs. He grabbed her panties and slowly pulled them down her legs.

Mathias rose to his knees and sat back on his heels. After pulling her panties from her feet, he looked down at her. Face flushed, hair covering the pillow, body writhing seductively on the mattress, almost begging him to touch her. She looked as wild as any animal he had encountered. And she was all his. His gaze traveled down her body and when he saw the wetness pooling between her legs, he couldn't control his need to touch her. He used his thumbs to gently spread her open for him. "So wet for me." Not able to wait another moment, he leaned down slipped his tongue inside her. "So sweet." He whispered.

Mina let out a low groan. "God, Mathias ... please."

Her hips rose to meet his mouth. An offering given freely and he took it. His tongue massaged her clit while he thrust two fingers inside her body, eliciting a scream from deep within her chest. Her body bucked and moved over the bed, but Mathias stayed with her, working her into a frenzy. He couldn't get enough of her. She was all over him and he wanted more.

Rising, Mathias placed Mina's ankle on his shoulder and moved the other around his hip, opening her to his gaze. He looked down and watched as he worked a third finger inside her and moved with deliberate slowness. As she tightened around him, he twisted his hand and curled his fingers inside, sending her over the edge.

Mathias felt Mina's body stiffen and her screams echoed off the walls around them. He immediately replaced his hand with his mouth, catching her release on his tongue, reveling in her taste. This was what he wanted for the rest of his life. This woman, at his mercy, melting under him.

Mathias slowly moved his mouth away and rose over her body to look down at her. A single tear fell from her eye and rolled into her hair.

"I think I'm in love with you, Mathias."

Mathias sucked in a breath and waited for her to deny what she had just said. Waited for an excuse as to why she would refuse to go with her gut and continue to keep him at an emotional distance. He waited. She didn't deny it. Didn't refute her statement. She just kept looking up at him. Another tear fell from her eye and rolled into her hair.

Mathias leaned down and licked the salty moisture from her face. "I certainly hope so because I'm never leaving your side."

Mina actually smiled up at him.

Shocked at the turn of events, he was afraid to say anything to cause her to change her mind. As another tear tracked down her face, she pulled him down for a long and passionate kiss. He loved the way she kissed him. So hungry, but slow and full of desire. As if she was putting all of her emotion in that single moment.

*

Mina pulled her mouth from his and looked upward at him with a coquettish grin. "My turn."

At that, Mina pushed against his chest and used her legs to turn him to his back.

He let out a surprised grunt. "What the hell, Mina?"

She saw the shock in his face and laughed. "I took kick boxing and MMA classes back at home with Chloe."

Mathias crinkled his face in confusion. "MMA?"

Mina leaned down and licked his neck. "I'll explain later."

She continued to lick and suck at his neck while letting her hands roam over his expansive chest. She moved her mouth over his already hard nipple and sucked.

Mathias wove his hands in her hair and groaned in approval.

Mina continued down his chest with her tongue and loved the way he moved underneath her. Mathias moved his hands to her shoulders and gently pushed her down, letting her know what he wanted.

She leaned up and looked down at him. His size was impressive and she wondered if she could successfully do all of the things she wanted to do, but quickly decided she didn't care if she did. She just wanted him in her mouth. Tasting him. She looked up and saw he watched her as she had watched him. She gave him a seductive smile and leaned down to lick the tip of his cock with her tongue.

Mathias stiffened underneath her and sucked in his breath in anticipation.

Mina smiled again and moved her tongue underneath the broad head, sliding down his shaft, around the base, then moved back up. Feeling every inch of his hard length. One of her hands encircled the base of his cock, the other caressed his balls while she teased the small slit at the head.

Mathias let his head drop back and groaned. "God, Mina, you're killing me."

Mina lightly chuckled and sucked him completely into her mouth. She wrapped her tongue around him and moved her mouth down to the root of his shaft. She kept him there, moving her mouth in circles, so the head of his cock pressed against the back of her throat. She no more got him where she wanted him when he reached down and pulled her up over him.

"Enough," he growled and flipped her onto her back.

Mathias hooked her legs over his arms and lifted her hips high. With one stroke, he buried himself inside her. They both cried out at his entry.

Mina clenched herself around his cock, feeling the size and length of him. He threw his head back and pulled out of her. She groaned in protest and Mathias thrust back inside, moving her up the mattress and bumping her head on the wooden headboard.

She continued to watch him as he looked down where they were joined. His fingers found her extended clit and began massaging her. If he kept doing what he was doing, she wasn't going to last much longer. She felt another orgasm creep up on her and her skin began to tingle. Looking up, she pleaded, "Don't stop, Mathias. You're making me come again. I need to come again. Please."

He looked down at her, his hair falling down his face, a single bead of sweat running down his temple. "Come for me, Mina. Now. Come for me again."

Mina's body gave in and she was racked with the convulsions of another monstrous orgasm. How did he do this to her with just the sound of his voice? She screamed out and ran her fingernails down his back, scoring his skin.

Mathias quickly pulled out of Mina's body and flipped her over onto her stomach. He reached around her hips and brought them up, so she was on her hands and knees. He leaned over her body and wrapped his arms under her breasts and spoke softly in her ear. "Mina."

Mina was still recovering from her climax, so she was softly limp in his arms. "Yes?"

“Lean up and hold on to the headboard for me, baby.”

She reached for the headboard, wrapped her fingers over the edge and poked her rear out toward Mathias, letting him know she wanted more.

He moved behind her, slid his cock over her clit and her slick opening. Teasing her. Finally, positioning himself at her opening, he leaned over her and laced his hands in her hair. Pulling her head back on his chest, he looked down at her and thrust forcefully inside. “You belong to me, Mina. You’re mine.”

Mina let out a shrill cry. “Yes.”

He began pumping inside her and moving his hands over the front of her body, teasing and fondling. He hooked his arms under hers and placed his hands on her shoulders, holding her in place. He continued thrusting hard behind her and growling out her name.

His chest moved against her back and she felt his coarse chest hair rubbing against her skin. She felt him coming close to his climax. He grew larger inside her and the pressure she felt started to take her over. “Oh god, Mathias, do it. Do it now!”

His thrusts quickened and his mouth came over her neck. She felt his body stiffen and then his teeth sank into her skin.

Mina cried out and reached her hands over her head to cradle Mathias to her neck. She felt no pain. Only pleasure as her own climax slowly rolled over her. She clutched at him, milking him and a thought entered her head. She and Mathias had never discussed protection during sex. Well, too late now.

She bent her head down against the headboard.

He slowly released his mouth from her skin, licking and soothing as he moved over her. He laid her down on her side and wrapped his leg over her while still holding her in his arms. His hand moved to her hair and he began playing with a long curl. “As much as I would like to just fall asleep with you in my arms, we need to get moving. Roderick is probably frantic with worry.”

Mina didn’t move. She just wanted to feel him behind her. Holding her safe. “I know.” She sighed.

She immediately felt a presence and she bolted up.

Mathias followed her and enclosed her with his arms. “It’s just Talon. You’ll learn to read the difference after you’ve worked at it for a while.”

Mina turned and looked at Mathias. “What do you mean I’ll learn the difference? What did I just feel?”

Mathias moved a curl away from her face and smiled. “You’re starting to feel what I feel and vice versa. The more we are together, the closer we become emotionally. The marking binds us together in more than just a physical way, Mina. We’ll eventually be able to feel each other without touching.”

Mina let her gaze fall to his chest. “When you say ‘eventually’ you mean when I mark you. Right?”

“When you take my blood into your body, yes.”

Mathias wove his fingers into her hair and played with her curls.

“You mean what I felt was Talon out in the hall?”

“Yes. He is pacing now and completely annoyed. He thinks we’re taking too long, but I really think he’s jealous.”

Mina looked back up to him. “Jealous? Why?”

Mathias sat up, pulled the quilt off the floor and wrapped it around Mina's body. "Talon has been alone for a very long time, Mina. As have I. He sees me with you and I think it angers him a bit. He wants his life to remain the same, but at the same time, he craves a partner. A mate. He just doesn't know how to handle it, but eventually he'll figure it out."

Mathias climbed off the bed and dragged Mina with him. "Now get cleaned up and changed, chère. We need to go."

Mina smiled up at him. She actually felt happy. Content. "All right. Give me about twenty minutes and I'll be ready. Where will you be?"

Mathias had already started to dress. "I'm going out to talk with Talon and the others to make sure all is secure and we're straight on the plan to get you back to the palace. You stay right here, and I'll be back in twenty. Okay?"

"All right. I'll be right here waiting."

Mathias pulled on his sweater. "I'll be right outside, Mina, so let me know if you need anything. Twenty minutes and we're out of here."

"Okay."

He leaned down and planted a hard kiss on her lips.

She tried to get him to give her more than a kiss, but he smiled and backed up instead.

"Don't get me started, woman. We need to leave. Get cleaned up and I'll be back."

Mina watched him walk through the door and close it tightly behind him. She hadn't even realized Talon would be in the hall the entire time and she blushed at the thought of him hearing their lovemaking. Oh well. As Mathias said, Talon was a big boy and he could deal with it.

Her clothes were strewn all over the floor, but she wanted to at least look presentable for her meeting with Roderick. She needed something nice but also something that made her feel strong. Since her luggage still had not yet arrived, she walked over to the shopping bags Talon had carried up earlier and dumped them on top of the rumpled bed. Surveying her choices, Mina grabbed a pair of jeans, a thick, mocha brown sweater and some killer Versace brown boots.

She quickly started the shower and cleaned her hair and body as fast as she could. In marathon time, she put on a bit of makeup, dried her curls and got dressed. Now that she was done getting ready, the realization of the moment hit her. She was about to meet her father. The man who haunted Julia for most of her life. Mina's stomach turned into a knot and she bent over. Jesus. How was she going to do this?

Mina looked over at her purse. She needed a cigarette to calm her nerves. Just one wouldn't hurt and she would sit on the window sill and blow it outside so Mathias wouldn't know. She quickly grabbed the pack she had stowed at the bottom of her bag and opened the window. She threw her leg over the edge and put her head outside. The chilled air made her teeth chatter. She lit the cigarette and took a long drag. Ahh. Heaven.

Mina looked around her and saw the awesome beauty of this small town. Everything was so gorgeous. The buildings, the forest, the old castle ruins at the top of the hill. She really did like it here. Mina took another drag and noticed a large bird circling above. She exhaled the smoke and focused on the bird moving lower and lower. Mina assumed it was Tre or someone from Mathias' guard, so she continued to watch the animal circle. As it drew closer, she realized it was an extremely large falcon. She smiled and watched the

large wings flap in the wind. He was gorgeous.

Mina finished the cigarette and put it out on the bottom of her boot. She swung her leg back in and looked out one more time at the falcon. Still smiling, she noticed he came toward her in a very fast dive. She moved out of the way while the bird swooped into her room. She backed up against the wall and watched him perch himself on the footboard of the bed. Mina began walking toward him when all of the sudden her stomach twisted. Something was wrong.

The falcon didn't move, but in the next instant the bird was surrounded by blue flames. They were dancing around his large, feathered body but never touched him. The old footboard was engulfed and the flames quickly jumped to the sheets and clothing. The room was rapidly being swallowed by the inferno.

Mina was still backed against the wall trying to escape the heat of the flames when she saw the falcon shift and change into a male form. Jesus. The bird was Luca.

Mina opened her mouth to yell for Mathias.

Luca dove toward her, placing his hand around her throat and slamming her against the wall. "He can't have you, Mina. Mother said you were only for me."

Her eyes widened in revulsion. On instinct, Mina moved and hit Luca in the nose with the heel of her hand. His head snapped back and she felt his bone crack.

"Bitch!"

The door burst open and Mathias was blocked by the blue flames. Mina could see the panic in his eyes and she charged toward him, not caring of the heat that seared her skin.

Luca lunged and wound his arm around her throat, pulling her against him, effectively shielding himself from both Mathias and Talon. "I don't think so, Mina. You're mine now."

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Mathias screaming through the flames and she knew she had to get away from Luca in any way possible. Mina brought her hands up and raked her nails across his face. Blood poured from his skin. She looked down and the fingernails she thought she had damaged him with were now claws. Her gaze met Luca's and his eyes widened in shock.

"What are you?"

*

Mathias watched in horror as Luca slammed Mina against the wall. He had to kill that bastard once and for all. Talon moved in behind and hollered for him to move. Suddenly, Talon tore the bedroom door off its hinges and threw it over the flames blocking the threshold, temporarily giving them a way in. As Mathias moved forward, he saw Mina claw Luca across the face. Shit. She was changing and would have no way to control it.

He lunged forward, but Luca twisted away, pulling Mina with him. Raising his index finger, he addressed Mathias, "Careful, general, or I'll snap her pretty little neck right in front of you."

Mathias slowed but kept moving forward. He looked at Mina's face and almost lost all control. She was changing right in front of him. Her eyes now glowed gold, and black stripes began to appear on her skin.

Luca smiled and looked down at Mina. She was in the process of opening her mouth, now filled with sharpened teeth, to take a bite out of his arm. He placed his palm on her temple and she immediately slumped in his grasp. Luca continued to hold her limp body

in front of his, protecting himself from Mathias and Talon's assault.

Talon moved to the side, trying to flank behind Luca.

Mathias stayed in Luca's sights, keeping his attention forward. "Give her to me, Luca. You have no idea what you are messing with."

"Oh, I beg to differ, general. I know exactly what I'm messing with. She's mine now." Luca looked over his shoulder and toward the window behind him. A second later, the wall blew out where the window once was, throwing Talon out and down to the deserted alley behind the hotel.

Mathias dove forward but before he could get his hands on Mina, Luca was leaping through the hole in the wall with Mina's body dangling at his side. Mathias helplessly watched as Luca changed midair into a monstrous vulture, holding Mina in its clutches.

He dove out after them, cursing himself for not having aviary capacity. Landing on top of the SUV, he screamed at Tre and Seager. "Get the fuck up there. Luca has Mina."

Tre quickly turned around. "Fuck!" He transformed into his falcon form and took immediate flight. Talon came up behind him in eagle form and both gave chase. They were quickly overtaken by Valtic soldiers transformed into vultures. They attacked Talon and Tre, grasping them with their long iron-tipped claws, and brought both men to the ground, holding them there.

Mathias ran toward them now, determined to kill every one of those fuckers. He kept his gaze on the sky and spotted Luca soaring higher and higher. Getting farther and farther away. Mathias began chanting to himself, "No! No! No!" He reached the open field with Seager and Quinn following behind. They went after the vultures with everything they had. They were completely outnumbered but it didn't matter. They used every skill they had and ended up crushing the Valtic soldiers into the ground.

Mathias turned back around. "Get her, Talon! Now!"

Talon's body remained in human form, his injuries bleeding out heavily. He put his hand over his side, looked over at Mathias and shook his head.

Mathias ran to him. "Now, damn it. Go."

Talon uncovered the large cut revealing the blood-soaked wound. "I can't, Mathias. It's iron. I can't."

Fury ran in waves over his body. He had limited shifting abilities and none of them allowed flight. Mathias turned and scanned the sky. "Fuck." He saw nothing. They were gone.

His body went numb. He slowly dropped to his knees, but kept his eyes skyward, still scanning. Hoping. Mathias threw back his head and let out a blood curdling scream. He clawed at his own chest, causing blood to seep through his clothing. His eyes gold with fury, his teeth long and sharp. He was partially transformed and he couldn't control himself. He couldn't feel her. Couldn't sense her. He was dying.

*

Talon stayed behind Mathias, but wavered on his feet due to the cut.

Tre walked up, limping as well from an iron cut to the leg. "They knew who was here and who could transform to the air. They were ready for us, Talon."

Talon heaved a sigh. "I know."

Quinn came up behind them and skidded to a halt. "Oh, Jesus. Look at him. What the hell happened?"

Talon turned and faced Quinn. "Turn away brother. He's not our general any longer.

His mate is gone and only Roderick can control him now.”

Quinn’s eyes went wide. “Mate? He mated a human?”

Talon ran a hand down his face in frustration. “All is not as it seems. Now go and get Seager. Check to see if any of those Valtic fucks are still alive. If you find just one, bind him and put him in the back of the truck. I’ll take care of the interrogation.”

“Got it.” Quinn bound off quickly to assess the prisoner situation.

Still stiff from the already-healing gashes in his side, Talon slowly walked toward Mathias. The general was silent now and slowly rocking on his knees with his gaze still looking toward the sky. His arms and chest were covered in his own blood. He didn’t make a sound, didn’t say a word, and none of them would approach him for fear of immediate death. Mathias was not himself any longer. His mind was now under transformation. Not a man now, but a wounded animal. Bent on destruction. Fueled only by the thirst to kill. To claim what was his. Only Roderick would be able to control Mathias now. And when Roderick found out about the marking, the men all knew what the outcome would be.

Talon flipped open his phone and hesitated to dial. He had to call the king and let him know the situation. “Fuck.”

Tre turned and leaned against a nearby tree. “Remember to ask for medical. Their claws were tipped and we need the bleeding stopped.”

“No fucking shit, Tre. As if I would forget I’m gushing blood from my side any time soon. You wanna make the fucking call to the king ... be my guest.”

Tre raised his hand and dropped his head. “No thanks, bro. You can have the honor.”

“Then shut the fuck up and watch him.”

Talon knew once he made the call to Roderick all hell was going to break loose. Both Mathias and Roderick would not be contained. They would only be appeased with blood. Luca’s blood.

Chapter Twenty-One

Talon looked over his bloodied shoulder and spotted Killian stalking toward the carnage that was spread out behind the small Staufen hotel. The powerful general of the Pacific Northwest had always had it in for Talon. Ever since he had bedded Killian's niece a decade ago and never saw her again, the general had been a sword in his side and never let Talon forget that he held a grudge. The man was walking strength and even towered over Talon's six four height. Killian was the only man Talon had to literally look up to and this was not a day he wanted to deal with the general's hatred of him. Talon had some explaining to do and unfortunately, it was Killian who had come for answers.

The area behind the hotel had been trashed, but thankfully the building backed up to the forest. If not for that, there would have been some massive attention from the human townspeople the Coteri didn't need right then. The back of Mina's hotel room had been blown out, a totaled SUV that had broken his fall when he was thrown from the blast, Mathias lying almost comatose and bleeding, and the kicker was, they had lost the king's daughter.

They had failed.

Talon had failed.

He blew out a breath and faced the medical team once again. He winced as the docs began treating one of the many injuries he had suffered trying to retrieve Mina. His eyes stung from the blood and sweat dripping into them. How had the Valta known that was where they would be? No one knew but the king and the team traveling with them. The knowledge of their location had not been communicated with anyone and to add insult to injury, no one knew they would be stopping at the hotel. Just going from Munich straight to the king. Something was wrong with this whole thing. He felt it. His gaze traveled to Quinn and Tre, both being treated for their own wounds. No way they would turn. No way. But who? How?

Without warning, Talon felt a large hand engulf the back of his neck, viciously squeeze and pull him back to slam his body against the crushed SUV.

Killian.

Angry.

Fuck.

"I'm the lucky one who gets to clean up your shit, Talon. Roderick is in a rage and I had to do everything I could to convince him to stay away."

Talon tried to twist out of Killian's hold, but the much older and experienced general had full power over the situation and kept him pinned against the vehicle.

"How could you let them get her, Talon? You're supposed to be the strongest Mathias has. Explain," Killian ordered. "Now."

Talon raised his hand and swiped it across his abdomen. "Do you not see the gash in my side, Killian? You try and fly with blood pouring out of you." Sarcasm poured off every word. "I tried, damn it. Harder than you know."

Talon's eyes shifted and landed on Mathias. He felt the rage build inside him at his friend's pain and loss. He had to get Mina back before Mathias gave in and was lost forever. He knew he had to tell. They all needed to know.

“He marked her, Killian. They’re mated.”

Killian released his hold and twisted Talon to face him. “He marked her? Jesus. Does Roderick know?”

“No.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Sucks to be me doesn’t it?”

Killian turned and started pacing. “All right. Let’s concentrate on the situation.” He ran his hand over his face. “Any surviving Valtics?”

“Yeah. Two. And they’re mine.”

“Fine. You do the interrogation. I’ll stay and do damage control. This place needs to be cleaned up fast. At least the owners are Coteri and they will control any onlookers who may have witnessed the blast.”

Killian turned and looked at the damaged hotel again. “You guys were lucky her hotel room was off the back of the building. That blown wall could have landed in the street instead of the alley.”

He removed his coat and threw it on the hood of the SUV. “I’ll make sure we get Mathias back to the palace and meet you there. Start the questioning without me. But remember, Talon, don’t kill them.”

Talon gave Killian a one sided-smile. “I’ll try.”

* * * *

Jesus, her jaw hurt. The pain woke Mina out of her stupor and she tried to bring her hand over to her mouth but couldn’t reach. Her arm was tied over her head. She tried the other hand and found it was also tied. Mina tried to open her eyes, but she couldn’t. Something covered her face. Oh god. Luca.

Mina felt herself begin to panic. Where was she? Where was Mathias? Why was she tied down? She tested her restraints but couldn’t move.

The tip of a finger touched her calf and began to move up her leg.

Mina froze.

The finger moved up the outside of her thigh and stopped. “Nice and smooth.”

Mina jumped and pulled at her restraints with all her will. She would not let this happen.

“You won’t succeed, Mina. I know what you are and you can’t transform, either. The restraints are iron. You’re at my disposal, so you might as well get used to it.”

“Go to hell,” Mina barked. “You’ll have to kill me first and fuck my cold body before I let you get anywhere near me, you sick bastard.”

“Ooh. A tough one. I like a little challenge, Mina. I love when women fight back. It just makes me all the more hungry.”

The blindfold covering Mina’s eyes was suddenly pulled from her face.

She turned away and squinted at the bright lights hanging directly above her. The room was small and the walls were a dull blue. Mina looked up at her hands to find they were shackled with some kind of metal cuffs attached to a wrought-iron headboard. Her legs were held in the same way. At least she had on clothes. Granted, they were not the same clothes she had on this morning, but she felt better knowing she was covered. Her jeans and sweater had been replaced with a long, white linen gown that buttoned down the front.

She looked over and saw him standing over her. Looming. Looking. “Get the hell away from me,” she yelled.

Grinning, Luca made his way around the small bed and faced Mina. He was dressed in all black and looked menacing. “You know, Mina,” he crooned. “I thought you were special. Different. But based on your reaction at your hotel this morning, you’re nothing but a Coteri whore who, for some reason, is important to Roderick. I thought you could be my mate. The mother to my children. But now I’ve decided to let you be my plaything. Just for a bit.”

Mina shuddered at his statement. Special. That fucking word again. Even in the whacked-out hands of the enemy, she was still being told she was special.

Luca smiled fully this time, showing his perfect white teeth. He put his finger on Mina’s wrist and moved it down her inner arm.

She fought him off as much as she could, but he still kept touching her.

“You’ll get used to my touch, Mina. With Mathias gone and Roderick frantic wondering where you are, fucking you is going to be such a pleasure.”

Mina’s eyes went wide. “What do you mean with Mathias gone?”

Luca now laughed. “He’s long dead, Mina. No one will come for you. You’ll remain here until I tire of you. Then who knows. Maybe I’ll give you to the guards. Or better yet, deliver your used body to the Coteri palace steps. That would drive Roderick insane and I’m all about that.”

Heart pounding at Luca’s claim, Mina’s eyes narrowed. “He is not dead. And he’s going to tear you apart. Let me loose and I’ll fucking tear you apart myself!”

“Ah, Mina. All in good time. But right now, I think I like you just the way you are. At my mercy.” Luca trailed his finger over her breast and around her nipple.

Mina screamed out and wrestled with her restraints.

“So responsive to me. I like that.”

“Fuck you!”

“No, dear Mina. I’m going to fuck you. Merciless and hard. And you are going to love it.”

A single tear dropped down her face as Mina turned her head and threw up on the side of the bed. She coughed and gagged at the mere idea of him continuing to touch her. Bile burned the back of her throat and her stomach continued to heave until there was nothing left. She turned her head toward him and spat in his face.

Luca flinched and wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. “Don’t think a little mess will keep my hands off you. Now ... where to begin?”

Oh god. He was going to rape her. Panic started to fill her head and Mina began shaking. “Don’t you fucking touch me. Oh god,” Mina pleaded.

“God won’t help you now, Mina. No one will. Now just lie back and enjoy.”

Mina bucked and reared away from his hands, but to no avail, he kept touching and rubbing her body. She was going to get sick again. Maybe if she puked on him he would leave and she could try and get out of here.

As if hearing her thoughts, Luca reached for the scarf and tied it over her mouth. “I won’t cover your eyes, dear Mina. I want you to watch what I do to you.”

Mina tried to bite Luca’s hands.

But he was stronger and he successfully gagged her with the scarf. He trailed both hands down her chest and cupped her breasts. Mina let out a strangled cry, but that only

made Luca smile more. He teased and pinched her nipples until they were hard. Once distended, he placed his mouth over one nipple and sucked it through her gown. Hard.

Hard enough to cause tear-jerking pain. Mina cried out again.

“You like that, Mina? You like it rough?”

Mina shook her head.

“Too bad.” Luca laughed. “I like it rough.” He leaned down and brought her nipple into his mouth again. Only this time he clamped his teeth down on the sensitive tissue and began pulling side to side. He shifted both hands to her shoulders and held her down as he tortured her delicate flesh.

Mina let out a sob against the gag and fought against her restraints, trying to get away from him.

“Now that’s more like it.”

Luca released her breast from his mouth and looked up at Mina. “Perfect.” He mumbled. “Just perfect.” He slid his hands down her stomach and reached for the hem of the gown.

Mina jumped and tried to pull her hips away. Her screams were muffled by the gag across her mouth.

Luca was openly laughing now. His eyes glittered with excitement at her response. He slowly pulled up the gown to reveal her body naked from the waist down. “Nice. I like a shaved cunt. So soft and smooth. All the better to eat you, my dear.” He quickly put his hands on her knees and roughly wrenched her legs wide open, causing Mina to suck in a surprised gasp. Luca climbed onto the bed and in between her legs, giving him a bird’s-eye view. He put one of his knees on the inside of one of her thighs and pressed her down, holding her in place.

Mina felt his knee dig into her flesh and burn into her bone. He was bruising her. Purposely. This was what he liked. What he got off on. Pain and screaming. Bruises and marks. He was sick. Twisted. Mathias was right. She’d had no idea what kind of danger she’d been in that night at the opera.

Luca leaned down and licked the inside of her thigh.

Mina’s body convulsed as she gagged again. He put his other hand on her opposite knee and pushed harder, stretching her legs until she thought she was being split in two.

“Nice view down here, Mina. Nice and juicy.” He trailed his tongue along the inside of her leg.

Her stomach began to convulse again. Thankfully, she didn’t get physically sick. The scarf over her mouth would have caused her to choke on her own sickness. Her stomach continued to seize and she struggled for breath as he dug his teeth into her inner thigh, pulling and biting hard. Mina’s legs went stiff and she held in a scream. That’s what he wanted. He wanted her to scream. To fight. To feed his need for power over her. Well he could just fuck off and die because she wasn’t going to give it to him. No matter what he did to her body.

He opened wide, bit down hard and sucked. Mina gritted her teeth and held her breath. She would not scream. When he moved his fingers to her opening and shoved two inside, Mina jumped at the invasion, but didn’t make a sound. This was really going to happen and nothing was going to stop him. He would hurt her. Rape her. Maybe even kill her. Oh god, where was Mathias?

Luca reached up and ripped the gown away from her chest and latched his teeth to

the underside of her left breast.

He bit and sucked until Mina thought he was going to rip her flesh. But still, she remained silent. She tried to keep Mathias' face in her mind and Luca continued to molest her body. She remembered all the words of love and devotion Mathias had spoken to her over the past few days. Remembered how she felt about him. How she had fought herself from giving in to him. She now realized she loved him and if she ever got out of here alive, would never tell him what happened in this room. The knowledge would kill him.

Mina rolled her eyes back and started breathing through her nose to calm herself. Tried to go somewhere inside her mind so she wouldn't remember what Luca was doing to her body.

Luca roughly removed his fingers from inside her. He grabbed her face and squeezed hard. "What are you doing?"

Mina didn't open her eyes to look at him. That's what he wanted. Luca wanted her terrified and she refused to give him what he wanted. She relaxed her body and tried to empty her mind. She was a strong woman and no man would own her unless she allowed it. The only man she belonged to was Mathias and no matter what Luca said or did, she knew she had to fight to survive. She had finally found a man she wanted to belong to.

She felt the sting of his hand crack into her face. Mina's head snapped sideways with the blow but she didn't react. Didn't scream.

"Look at me, damn it," he ordered. "What are you doing?"

Luca ripped the gag away and crushed his mouth to hers, forcing his tongue inside.

She didn't move. Didn't react. She just laid there and tried to stay calm. She hoped her mouth tasted like vomit.

His left hers. She felt his fingers tracing the mark on her neck.

"You slut. You let him mark you."

Mina felt something cold on the skin of her neck. A knife.

"I don't think I like this mark on you Mina. Maybe I should just cut it off. What do you think?" Luca grazed her skin with the tip of the blade. Tracing the mark her lover had left. His mark on her body and her soul. Something that right now meant everything to her.

He pressed the tip of the blade down and pierced her skin where Mathias had so lovingly placed his mark. He moved the knife lower and cut again.

Mina rolled her eyes to the back of her head and began singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in her mind.

Luca reared up and smacked her again across the jaw, knocking her head to the side. Pain exploded through her face. She refused to react. That's what he wanted. To see her pain. To experience her fear. She would give him nothing. No sound. No flinch.

Luca released her face and climbed off the bed. "I think I've had enough for one day. You need to be cleaned up. I'll be back to finish you later."

Mina didn't look at him. Didn't move.

She felt swallowed by the silence in the room. Where was he? What was he planning to do to her now? She had to keep thinking of Mathias. Of Chloe. She wasn't going to die in this little blue room without seeing them again. She would fight. But how long could she last?

A strangled cry left Mina's mouth as she heard the door close. She frantically

scanned the room trying to find him. He was gone. She had at least stopped him for now.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Roderick stood at the windowsill looking down over his royal lands. Lands he had worked most of his reign protecting. Lands that would one day belong to Mina. The daughter he'd absently loved since the night of her conception. Worry weighed heavily on his shoulders and he itched to join the search to find Mina.

He knew Killian's argument in convincing him to stay in the palace was valid, but he was about to explode with fury. He felt his talons start to dig into the palms of his hands. The urge to shift was strong since his emotions were running rampant, and it was all he could do to remain in his human form. His little girl was gone. He had never spoken to her. Never touched her. Not held her in his arms as he had planned. She was gone, and right now, he had to wait. Wait to hear the reasons why Mathias had not protected her. Wait on the explanation of what happened and how Luca had succeeded in taking her from one of the few men Roderick actually trusted fully.

Roderick turned and moved back into the center of his study. Hands on his head, he bent down to try and calm himself. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. How had Mathias let this happen? Roderick had trusted him with the most precious thing in his life, and now Mina was gone and he had no idea why, how or where.

At the sound of the door opening, Roderick turned to see Isla standing there, regal and lovely. "I see Killian must have signed over his first born to force you to remain inside the palace walls."

Roderick was in no mood for her jesting. "Tell me what you know, Isla, and do it quickly. I believe you may be the only person I'll allow near me until Mina is returned."

Isla turned and closed the door gently. She glided over to Roderick's side and placed her hand on his arm. "Talon is questioning the two remaining Valtic warriors. Mathias was quite affected by Mina's abduction."

Roderick spun around and glared down at Isla, feeling his rage begin to boil over. "Affected?" he bellowed. "He better be damn more than affected, Isla. I expect him to do whatever it takes to retrieve her and deliver her safely to me. Damn it, I want my daughter here and unharmed."

Isla turned to sit at the large table centered in the room. She was poised and calm and that enraged Roderick even more. She should be panic stricken and just as furious as he was at the events that had occurred. The rightful heir to the throne had been kidnapped by one of the most ruthless members of the Valta, a man known for his violent exploits toward women, and Isla just sat there looking cool and serene.

"Are you going to tell me what happened or do I have to guess?" Roderick barked.

Isla rolled her hands in her lap. "Calm yourself, Roderick, and I'll tell you what I know. You know when you get this way you tend to react too quickly and lose sight of the objective."

Roderick threw up his hands in frustration. "Objective? I would think the objective here would be the safe return of my child, but please, tell me if I'm wrong in this."

"Sarcasm will get you nowhere with me, Roderick, so watch your tone. You may be king, but I'm the one with the clear mind at the moment. Rest assured, we'll retrieve Mina, but you need to listen to what I have to say to you. It means a great deal and will

affect your decisions with regard to Mina's return."

"Fine." Roderick snapped. "What is it?"

Isla inhaled deeply and closed her eyes as if readying herself to deliver a terrible blow.

Roderick's blood ran cold in anticipation toward what she was about to tell him, and he felt the trepidation rise in his chest. Please let Mina be alive. He had failed Julia in so many ways, but please let their child be alive. Roderick knew he would not be able to bear the death of their daughter when he could have protected her more fiercely.

Isla's eyes opened and she pinned Roderick with her stare. "I can feel her Roderick. She's alive, but I'm not sure for how much longer." At Roderick's attempt to stand, Isla raised a hand to keep him in his place. "Once Talon completes his questioning, we're sure we'll have a location, and with Devereux and Killian leading the attack, we will have her back."

Roderick's brows drew together at the news. Why would Mathias not lead the search? "What do you mean Dev and Killian are leading the attack? Where's Mathias? He should be the one commanding the rescue."

"Mathias is not himself, Roderick. He is in no shape to lead the Royal Guard. Dev has taken over and Killian will assist."

"Was he injured in the raid?"

"No."

"No?" he shouted. "That's it?" Roderick swept both hands in front of his body in frustration. "That's all you're going to say, Isla? I ask about the condition of my royal general and you tell me nothing?"

Again, Isla closed her eyes and dropped her head. "He's mated, Roderick. He's marked her."

Roderick rose slowly from the chair. Hands fisted at his sides, he looked down into Isla's all-knowing eyes. He felt his entire body begin to shake with rage. "What?"

Isla boldly stood her ground. "You heard me, Roderick. Mina is his. Her abduction and the pain she is feeling is affecting him and his ability to function. He's lost, Roderick."

For the first time in decades, Roderick didn't know what to say. He knew he should be an angry father protecting his daughter, but it had been his idea in the first place to ask Mathias to watch over her. He had secretly envisioned Mina coming home and Mathias playing a large part in her happiness, but never did he think it would happen so quickly. Hell, he had fallen in love with Julia in a matter of hours. Why would it be so out of the realm of reality for Mathias not to do the same?

Deep down, Roderick realized he had assigned Mathias to protect Mina for several reasons. He was the strongest of the Royal Guard, a trusted general and was all but raised by Roderick after Xander's death. But now that he knew they were mated, he started to admit to himself maybe that was what he had wanted all along. Mathias and his sister were the closest things Roderick had to children and he practically raised them at the request of their father on his death bed. He couldn't ask for a better union. But damn Mathias for doing this without Roderick knowing. Without his blessing.

Fully determined to see Mathias and snap him out of whatever state he was in, Roderick started for the door.

Isla jumped up and fled after him. "Roderick. Don't kill him."

Not slowing his pace, he sarcastically replied, "Not until she's home."

* * * *

Wiping away the blood splatter with his sleeve, Talon smiled into the face of the Valtic warrior who was currently not talking. He had spent the better part of the last hour beating the skin off the face of one of the two Valtic soldiers he and Quinn had managed not to kill. Tre fooled with the other one in the next room, but Talon doubted he got anything out of him. The one currently slumped in front of him had taken a hell of a beating as well as a branding on his back. To his credit, he didn't say a word about Mina's whereabouts.

Talon looked over at Quinn standing in the back of the room. "Go get some water and wake up this fucker."

Talon walked across the hall to see how Tre was coming along. The room was dark and small, but he immediately caught sight of Tre's fists. They were bloody and torn, but fire still burned in his eyes. Even though Tre's subject was currently balled up in the corner of the room, bloodied and passed out, Talon could see Tre wasn't near finished. He reached out and clasped a hand on Tre's shoulder. "Hold up, Tre."

Tre froze and whipped his head around. "You got something?"

"No, but I want to talk to you."

Talon led him back into the hallway and ran his bruised hand through his hair. "You gettin' anywhere?"

Tre looked at his boots and sighed. "Nope. You?"

"Same. But I have an idea. Let's see if two bags of shit are better than one."

"Huh?"

Talon grinned. "Just go get him and follow my lead."

"Whatever you say, boss."

Once they had both Valtic soldiers in the same room, they proceeded to sit them in metal chairs, tie their ankles to the chair legs and their hands behind their backs. Talon had also attached a copper collar around each of their necks to prevent transformation. With all of the movement and activity, both prisoners had woken up and watched the men intently, trying to see if they could escape. Talon chuckled to himself at that thought. Like these two idiots could get past him.

When they were secured, Talon stepped in front of them both and smiled. "Okay, boys. We are gonna play a little game. It's called Truth or Die. I ask you a question and you tell me the truth. If you don't, you die." He paused for effect. "You boys got that?"

One of the Valtic soldiers spat at Talon's feet and slurred, "Fuck off."

"Not an option. But since you still have the ability to speak and your partner here has a broken jaw, I'll start with you." Talon bent his knees and looked the soldier in the face. "Don't even think about spitting on me again or I'll feed you your own balls. Now where is she?"

The soldier said nothing, just glared.

Talon straightened and looked back at Tre. "Now see, that's not how the game is played. I'll give you one more review of the rules." Talon reached down and grasped the soldier's face with his hand and squeezed. "I ask you a question and you tell the truth. If not, one of you dies."

Talon let go and pushed the soldier's head back violently. "Now. Again. Where is

she?”

Raising his head and looking Talon in the eye, the soldier smiled. And nothing else.

“Well damn, Tre, looks as if we’re gonna have to kill one of em’. Which one will it be?”

Tre walked up and stood next to Talon and rubbed his chin with his fingers. “Do you really think we should actually kill one this early? How about we just castrate one with my pocket knife and see what happens?”

Talon snorted. “Fuck that. I want to kill one of them, not play with their balls.”

“Fine, fine. You kill one of them. Then what? What if the other one doesn’t talk? Then we lose our chance.”

It was obvious neither one of them was going to spill any Intel on Mina’s location, but Talon’s flair for getting what he wanted was famous.

“Fuck chance.” And with that statement leaving his lips, Talon’s arm bolted like lightning toward the chest of the Valtic soldier with the broken jaw. Within seconds, Talon’s fist penetrated his chest plate, through his sternum and was buried deep within his body. Quickly and without repentance, Talon withdrew his still-beating heart and shoved it in the face of the other soldier who now screamed.

“You see this, you prick. You’re next unless you tell me where she is right fucking now.”

The screaming soldier bucked back in his chair and ended up landing sideways on the floor in a pool of his partner’s blood. It splattered on his face and his eyes had gone wide in complete terror.

Tremayne reached down and curled his fingers around the Valtic’s neck and squeezed. “Tell. Me. Now.”

The soldier squealed his reply like a schoolgirl. “She’s with Luca. She’s with Luca.”

Talon threw the now-still heart across the room and it squished against the bricks and plopped on the cold floor. He bent down and placed his boot on the Valtic soldier’s balls and pressed. “Where.”

The soldier gargled. “The sea cliffs. Underground. Low tide. You have to wait for low tide to get her. She’s there.”

Tre increased the pressure on his throat. “What fucking sea cliffs? Where?”

Still gagging and struggling, the soldier willingly answered, “Gaeta.”

Tre then loomed over him. “He took her to Valencia’s?”

“No. His home. Underground. Sea cliffs. Low tide.”

Talon looked down at Tre. “Is that enough?”

Tremayne nodded and removed his hand. Smiling, Talon lifted his boot and slammed the heel into the man’s throat, crushing the life out of him. Two down and hundreds to go.

* * * *

“Get up, general. Now!”

Roderick stood at the foot of the cot where Mathias had been placed by the medical team. He propped his boot on the end and kicked, shoving the cot to the side.

“I said get up!”

Eyes open and glazed, Mathias didn’t move.

Mathias had been unresponsive since returning to the palace, letting himself go

because he believed Mina was truly gone. Someone had to break the spell.

The king walked to the side of the cot and looked down. Confused at what he saw, he turned to Killian. "Why does he have two crosses around his neck?"

"We assumed one was Mina's since we found it in the rubble at the hotel. The minute he caught sight of it, he attacked the clean-up crew to get it back."

Both of the infinity crosses hanging from Mathias's neck were intertwined and twisted to the side. Roderick sensed one was Mina's and bent to touch it. When his hand reached out to grasp the silver, Mathias lunged.

Roderick landed flat on his back with Mathias' fingers stretched around his throat, constricting his breathing. A rough growl erupted from Mathias' chest. "Don't touch her."

Killian jumped to the side and tried to remove Mathias' hands from the king's throat.

Very calmly, Roderick grasped Mathias' wrists and effectively removed his hands from around his throat. He gracefully stood and backed Mathias up against the wall, pinning him there with his arms. He leaned in and was nose-to-nose with the snarling general, showing no fear. "You didn't ask for permission to have her, Mathias. She's still mine. My daughter. The only way I will allow you to claim her is if you go and get her."

Mathias stopped struggling against Roderick's hold and held the king's stare.

Roderick felt Killian move in behind him and murmur over his shoulder, "Mathias. Listen to him."

Roderick continued to stare into Mathias' eyes, silently communicating. He tried to enforce his influence onto Mathias in a mental game of control. After what seemed like an eternity, Mathias reluctantly lowered his head. "Yes, sire."

Roderick loosened his grip on Mathias and reached down with one hand, gripping Mina's cross pendant. "This is mine until you return her to me." Roderick yanked the chain from Mathias's neck and palmed the cross. "You are one of my strongest generals. One of the few men I trust with my life. I knew you as a child and now you are by my side as a man." Roderick let go of Mathias' arms and took a step back. "Now be the man I know you are and bring her back to me. Go and get your mate, Mathias."

Mathias raised his head and narrowed his gaze on the king. "Yes, sire."

The door burst open again and everyone turned to see Talon striding in. His face was splattered in blood and his fists were mangled from the beatings he'd doled out to the Valtics. "Well, thank the fuck you're finally awake," Talon drawled as he nodded to Mathias. "We know where she is. Let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mina's entire body stiffened when the handle turned and the hinges squeaked as the door to her prison was shoved open. She smelled him. Sour and evil. He was back for more playtime as he called it. She remained unmoving.

The last couple of hours, Mina had tried to shut out the pain and soreness of her body as well as keep the thought of Mathias being dead out of her mind. He wasn't gone. She felt it. He was not dead as Luca so sickly tried to convince her. He would come for her. She knew it. But he better hurry the hell up.

Luca walked around the end of the bed and came up beside Mina. He reached down and moved the hair out of her face and rubbed her bruised cheek with the pad of his thumb. "Ah, Mina. I see you're ready for another round. Good. Very good."

Mina turned her head away and closed her eyes. She was determined not to put up a fight like he wanted. Screaming and begging was what got him off and she wasn't going to do anything to encourage him.

Luca wrapped his fingers around her face and jerked her head back toward him. She immediately closed her eyes. She didn't want any of this burned into her brain as an image that could later wake her in the middle of the night screaming. His touch and voice were enough to make the devil cringe.

"No more waiting, Mina. Mathias is gone and you are all mine to do with as I wish." He loosened his grip and moved his hand to her throat, pressing down.

Mina sucked in as much air as she could and held her breath. She knew he wouldn't kill her. He wanted to violate her too badly to let her die now. "You think not to scream but I know better. When I'm done, you'll be echoing to the heavens with your pleas. It will be absolutely exquisite."

She couldn't help it. She had to do it. It wasn't in her nature to take shit from anyone. Especially men. Mina opened her eyes and looked directly into the face of the devil himself. "Go to hell, Luca. You have nothing I'm afraid of. Too bad you're threatened by me and had me tied up. If you really wanted a fight, you'd let me loose and we'd see what kind of man you really are."

For an instant, his hand around her throat loosened and his eyes widened. He was actually contemplating her challenge. Her pulse jumped in anticipation. Would he let her loose to fend for herself? She pushed a bit more. "I'll kick your dickless ass and you know it. You're nothing. If you were half as powerful as you make yourself out to be, you wouldn't have to tie women down."

Luca slowly released his grasp around her neck and continued staring down into Mina's eyes.

His expression had now changed from the menacing prick he thought himself to be to something that almost looked frightened and intimidated. She was getting through to him. Beating him at his own game. She hadn't taken two semesters of psych for nothing.

He looked up at her wrist restraints and then quickly back to her eyes.

He was actually thinking about it. Mina pushed again. She smiled at him. A crooked smile. He backed up a step and turned away, giving Mina his back. She was getting to him. She made him doubt himself. Playing him. She would win.

Without a single word of warning, Luca swung around and landed a full-fisted punch to the left side of Mina's jaw. She grunted at the impact and saw stars. She could taste and smell her own blood leaking out of the side of her mouth.

Luca was immediately in her face, nose-to-nose. "You finished with your little game now, Mina? Because I'm ready to fuck."

She spit the blood out of her mouth and felt the teeth that were knocked loose. God, this was it. She could do nothing else but just lay there and take it. He was going to beat and rape her to his black heart's content and then throw her away. Her mind immediately went to Chloe. Her friend. Her sister. She wanted her. Needed her.

Luca reached down and ripped the now-stained white gown down the middle, exposing her breasts and stomach. She followed his gaze down her body and found her torso was covered with newly formed bruises and cuts from his teeth and the knife he so easily used earlier. He seemed to drool over the marks he had already made in anticipation of what he was going to do next. He ran a single finger down her sternum and back up again, tracing the blue and purple marks all over her middle. "So smooth."

She looked over at his face. Big mistake. He was almost smiling. Evil, sick fuck that he was.

Luca grabbed the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head, revealing a deeply tanned, muscle-bound torso.

How could someone so evil still look like a Greek god? Mina didn't want to see any more. She turned her head toward the wall and closed her eyes, but when his hand roughly came between her legs, she jumped and let out an involuntary yelp. "That's it. Scream for me, Mina."

He violently shoved several fingers inside her and turned his wrist, forcing her to bite her lip, stifling the scream bubbling up her throat. His hand moved forcefully between her legs and he ran the other over her bruised breasts.

Mina felt the muscles in her legs and arms wrench while pulling on the restraints. She tried to tamp down the panic rising inside her but to no avail, her body started shaking. Tremors rocked her so hard her teeth began to chatter. Her breathing shortened and tears ran down the sides of her face. She was completely out of control of her body as well as the situation. This was one of her worst nightmares—to not be in control.

Luca abruptly stopped and removed his hands from her body.

Mina heard the buckle of his belt and the zipper of his pants. Oh god. He was stripping.

She felt the side of the bed lower when he placed his weight on it.

He was actually humming to himself as he scraped his fingernails over her already bruised breasts. He positioned himself in between her spread legs and began running his rough hands up and down her thighs.

She tried to pull away from him as much as she could, but he gripped her legs hard and pressed them down into the bed. More bruises. A little whimper escaped her lips and Mina regretted it immediately. That only fueled his frenzy.

He rose and laid his chest on hers. He was cold. Clammy. Disgusting.

Mina felt the tip of his tongue on her neck and she froze.

He began sucking on her skin, marking her with blood bruises all over.

Her head thrashed uncontrollably now. She had to get away from him. He was all over her and she was losing it. "No. No."

He reached up and clamped his hands on either side of her head to keep her still and then sank his putrid mouth onto hers, trying to force hers open with his tongue. She immediately thought about biting it off, but he must have had the same thought at the exact moment, because he rose and looked down at her, smiling. One eyebrow lifted and he clicked his tongue as if he had caught her with her hand in the cookie jar.

Luca's fingers dove into Mina's hair, then and he roughly pulled at the roots. She felt his thigh between her legs rubbing up against her roughly. She was dry and raw and she knew he would rip her open at any moment. She even considered peeing in the bed to see if that would disgust him enough to leave her alone, but she decided against it. She could completely see him sitting up and urinating all over her in retaliation. She was humiliated enough without being a human toilet.

He pulled his other leg over and began to position himself to ram inside her.

She sucked in a breath, readying herself for the pain she was going to have to endure. Mathias. Where was he? She tried to reach him with her mind. Please Mathias. I need you. Help me. Come for me now.

Luca reached down and grabbed his penis and rubbed it against her opening, trying to create some form of lubrication for entry. He finally spit into his own hand and ran the saliva along the head of his cock to make it easier for him.

Mina tensed and froze. This was it. She was going to be raped by the devil. She raised her head and looked straight into Luca's eyes. She was frantically pulling at the restraints and bucking wildly, trying to get away from him. She was too panicked to remember not to give in to Luca's hunger for a fight. All she could think about was trying to get away from him. Mina's breathing was strained and a pleading scream left her lips, "Noooooooo."

He smiled back at her.

Luca reared back to slam into her and a knock sounded at the door.

Her head snapped to the side, eyes now watching the door, praying someone would save her from him.

Luca roared with frustration. "Get the fuck lost. Now."

The door opened and a lean, dark-skinned man appeared. He kept his gaze to the floor but walked in with confidence. "My apologies, Luca, but your mother has called for you. She expects you immediately. You need to leave now while the tide is low."

Luca's hands were squeezing the tops of Mina's thighs so hard she thought she felt his nails break the skin. Luca turned and looked at the small man standing there. "Now? I have to leave now? Are you fucking kidding me, Gino? Now?"

The man named Gino didn't raise his head but confidently replied, "Yes. Now. She expects you immediately and I have been asked to escort you to the boat for departure. Now."

Luca removed his hands from Mina's legs and sat back on his heels. He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Jesus fucking Christ and her timing." He looked down into Mina's horrified eyes and slightly smiled. "I guess you will just have to wait for me now won't you, Mina? Don't worry, sweetness, I'll be back soon."

Still trembling uncontrollably, Mina felt the bed move and he stood over her with his hard penis in her face. She immediately turned away, but Luca grabbed her head and turned her back. "You want a taste, Mina? Just a little taste?"

Mina looked up at him. Determined to make him think he hadn't gotten to her, even

though she was frightened out of her mind, she opened her mouth wide and licked her blood-stained teeth. She chomped her teeth down hard and grinned. “Yeah. I’d like a little bite.”

Luca took a quick step backward, raised his hand and smacked her hard across the face. “Maybe I won’t forget the gag next time, Mina. Remember that.”

Mina turned back toward him and spit a mouthful of blood at him. “Next time, my ass. You’ll never fuck me. Never. He’ll come for me and when he does, he is going to rip you to pieces.”

Luca chuckled as he pulled his pants back on. “Right. A dead man is coming for you. Keep hoping, Mina. I like it when a woman still has hope. It makes it all the sweeter when they suddenly realize while I’m fucking them to death that hope is long gone.” He turned and grabbed his shirt and walked toward the door. “Lead the way, Gino. And leave her as she is. I don’t want her cleaned until I’m finished.”

Mina turned away as the door was slammed shut and the locks engaged.

A broken sob escaped her chest and she couldn’t stop shaking. “Please come for me.”

* * * *

Roderick watched as his men moved around the main table in the study, discussing their plan of action. They had the location, but still needed to work out the details of the rescue. After reviewing the terrain and possible locations for the caves, Talon, Mathias, Dev and Killian filled him in on their plans. There were two areas on the coast that best fit the description the Valtic soldier had given Talon. They couldn’t investigate until low tide, so their travel time would be a benefit. By the time they reached the Italian coast, they would be able to scale the cliff walls and locate the caves. Since there was more than one area, they decided to split up. Talon would gather his unit and search with Mathias and Killian while Quinn and Tre would accompany Devereux with their own unit in tow. It was iffy as to what they would find. They were unaccustomed to that particular area of the country, but they would not stop until they found Mina.

The scouts Talon had sent returned with good news. In searching both areas, they had spotted a make-shift dock in front of one particular area of rocks. Perfect for a boat to secretly land. Roderick was impressed as he watched Mathias take control and immediately set the plans in motion for every member of the guard to concentrate on that one site. Even though Devereux wanted to at least check out the other location, Mathias was set and would not budge. Mathias was sure she was there and they needed to get to her as fast as possible.

Roderick’s confidence expanded as he listened to Mathias outline their plan. Mathias would have Talon and a few other men fly the perimeter while he and Seager would lead the rest of the unit down the cliff’s edge. Once at the cave, they would all gather and move in, swords swinging. Mathias made the orders clear: kill anything in their path and get Mina out alive.

* * * *

They arrived a few hours later and low tide was set for early evening. They were about twenty minutes away. Mathias gave Talon and Tre a nod to begin the air

surveillance, and Devereux and Quinn readied the rest of the guard for the ground assault. Thirty men. All there, willing to risk their lives for his mate.

Almost time.

As the men prepared for the upcoming battle, Mathias stood alone looking over the cliff's edge. The wind brought the smell of the ocean and for a brief moment he closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing evenly. He needed to keep his anger in check. He wouldn't accomplish anything if he let his fury take him over. He needed to remain clearheaded and focused. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes on this. Mina was his only objective. Get her out. Get her home. Keep her safe for the rest of their lives.

Mathias had always thought his life was good. Fulfilled. He was successful in his position, he had a sister he dearly loved, friends surrounding him, and of course, Roderick. Since his father's death, Roderick had been the father figure Mathias needed. Someone to guide him down the right path of being a respected and deserving Coteri male. But right now, Mathias felt anything but deserving.

He should have never left her. This was his fault. Had he stayed with her in the room, Luca wouldn't have had the opportunity to take her. She would be safe in his arms right now had it not been for his ignorance.

Why did he leave her? He closed his eyes and tried to picture Mina in his mind. Her long, curly hair spread out on top of a pillow, her deep chocolate eyes looking up at him, her lips curving into a wicked smile, the citrus smell of her skin, the feel of her body wrapped around his. The picture in his mind quickly shifted to the image of her limp body being held in Luca's huge claws as he flew out the hotel window. Mathias clenched his fists in anger. He should have known better than to leave her for even an instant. He of all people knew the target on Mina's back had been huge. With Luca doing the chasing, the danger to her was tripled. This was his fault.

Devereux came up behind Mathias and placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's time, Mathias."

Mathias sucked in a long breath and let it out slow and even. He was focused. He was determined. He was rage. "Let's go get her."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Valencia was standing in the middle of the lab when Luca arrived. She heard the door snick shut and she spun, anger radiating off her. She stomped toward him and when she was close enough, her hand rose, swung and her serpent ring bit into his face. “You, idiot! Where is she?”

Luca righted himself and wiped the trickle of blood off his jaw. “Hello, Mother. Nice to see you too.”

Valencia drew back to hit him again, but this time he moved out of her reach. “Where is she, Luca?”

“Stay calm, Mother. She’s fine. She is safely ensconced in my home, anxiously awaiting my return. It’s just like you wanted, Mother. She’s mine now.”

Valencia turned toward him and snarled, “No, you fool. She is not yours. She’s Roderick’s.”

Luca cocked his head and looked at his mother as if she had lost her mind. “What?”

“She’s Roderick’s. Roderick’s daughter. The blood on the zipper proves it. She’s a hybrid like you. And I want her here. Now,” she ordered. We need to contain this and make sure Roderick doesn’t find her. No one knows of your blood line and we need to keep it that way. We have to find a way to breed with the full bloods.” Valencia let out a calming breath and came toward him. She tentatively reached out and grasped his hand. “Have you hurt her, son?”

Luca brought his mother’s hand to his mouth and gave her a chaste kiss. “No, Mother. Just breaking her in. Having a little fun.”

“Have you had her, Luca?”

Luca closed his eyes and gave a tight smile. “If Gino hadn’t walked in, she would have been mine in all ways.”

“Well, no more of that Luca. She’s too valuable. You’ll need to wait until I have the proper testing done. I can’t have her tainted.” Valencia reached up and cupped her son’s cheek. “I need you to go get her and bring her to the lab. Can you do that for me, son?”

“Anything you wish, Mother. I will have her to you by morning. How’s that?”

“Good. Make sure no one follows you and only take your best warriors. I cannot let her slip out of our hands. She holds the key, Luca. The key to you having children and we need her. Unharmd. Understand?”

“I completely understand, Mother.”

Valencia reached for her son and brought him into a loose embrace. “Good. Now go get her.”

* * * *

Mathias, the other generals and the rest of the Royal Guard had reached the bottom of the cliff with no trouble. But as they made their way toward the mouth of the cave, all hell broke loose. Valtic warriors started pouring out of the cave and dropping down from the cliffs above them, defending the opening. So much for a sneak attack.

Mathias smiled and bolted forward, leaving the rest of his men in his dust.

Mathias' father's sword would not be defeated. Not today. The long, sharpened blade cut through the Valta as if they were butter. He sliced and stabbed, lunged and drove the blade into their chests, their necks, their heads. He mowed through them without fear of death. Mathias was fury. He was vengeance. He was possessed. He could only hope he would have the chance to gut Luca in the process, but that would be the cherry on top. Getting Mina was his only objective.

They made their way farther in and were almost at the mouth of the cave. His men fought like a machine. When one moved, the others rallied behind him. They may have been initially outnumbered by the Valtic scum, but their mission was what drove them. The king's daughter was inside that cave and every warrior would give up their lives for their king. That was their purpose: infinite service to the Coteri and their king. The only outcome for them was to retrieve her and return her to Roderick.

In an instant, Talon reached around, pulled Mathias to the side and deflected a blow from a Valtic warrior who had come up behind him. With one swing, Talon took the man's arm off at the elbow. Blood splattered across Mathias' face and he quickly dove down to miss yet another swing from a Valtic sword. He kicked out and brought the enemy warrior down, quickly slicing his throat.

Mathias looked up to see Devereux, Quinn and Tremayne fighting with everything they had. He took a quick scan of the area to watch his blue-clad Coteri warriors littering the beach with Valtic bodies. They were steadily moving closer to the mouth of the cave. Once inside, the battle would definitely take on another life, since they were unfamiliar with the layout. Their animal senses would play a larger part once inside, but Mathias had faith he would be able to sense Mina and get her quickly.

Minutes later, with several Valta detained in iron cuffs for questioning, and blood-covered Coteri warriors storming up the sand, they entered the tidal cave. Darkness and stench enveloped their senses. What the hell did Luca have going on there?

Just inside the mouth of the cave, they came upon three passageways. "Damn. Leave it to Luca not to have a straight line to his residence."

Devereux stalked up behind them and moved to the left. "I've got this one."

Talon turned, mock-saluted Mathias and followed Dev down the shadowed tunnel.

Killian and Quinn moved to the right and made their way down the far tunnel, leaving Mathias staring down the mouth of the one in the center. Tre stood at his side. "Come on, general. Mina's waiting. And you know how she gets when she has to wait."

They trotted down the middle tunnel followed by about thirty members of the Royal Guard. No telling what they would run into, but Mathias knew he needed to find Mina, and fast. There was a minor mental connection formed between them, but since she had not completed the bond by sharing his blood, it was not as strong as he wished. He knew she was there, but because he couldn't get a bead on her location, it started to drive him mad. He slowed and allowed Tre to take the lead in order to try and concentrate on Mina's presence.

There were several chambers off the main tunnel and they searched each one. Some were living areas while others were separate bedrooms. None of them were opulent enough to be Luca's. Entering a large room obviously used for training, Mathias felt a breeze next to his left ear. He looked behind him to find an arrow sticking out of the wall behind his head. Damn! Too close.

Tremayne immediately jumped in front of Mathias, tossed his blade and ended the

Valtic archer that almost took out his general. Another battle ensued within the tunnels. Bodies and blood flew in every direction, but once again the Royal Guard was victorious. There had been no need for transformations during the battle as their swords had done the majority of the damage. Transforming would only hinder their fighting skills, but if pushed into a corner, Mathias knew he could claw his way out of anything if he transformed.

Wiping blood off his blade, Mathias turned to Tre. "She has to be here somewhere. See if Talon or Killian have anything."

Tre picked up his sat phone and dialed. After speaking to both men, he faced his general. "Nothing showing Mina has been here. Talon did say he'd found Luca's personal quarters and took the liberty of trashing it. Other than that...nothing."

Fuck. Where was she? Mathias ran a shaking hand through his now blood-soaked hair and turned toward the door. He knew she was there somewhere. He shoved a decapitated body out of his way with his boot. "Let's keep going."

The tunnel seemed endless. They had to be in the middle of the mountain by now, but Mathias hadn't sensed anything definitive. They reached a fork in the tunnel and both men turned to look at each other. Son of a bitch. They didn't want to separate any farther. Their numbers would be compromised. But there was no other alternative. Mathias lowered his head and let out a frustrated breath.

At that exact moment, a shiver went up his spine. He snapped up his head and looked down the corridor to his left. The hair on his arms and neck stood up. "There." Mathias took off in a dead run, not waiting on anyone. He sensed her. She was alive and he tore directly for her.

A dagger whispered past Mathias' ear and landed in the chest of a Valtic warrior who had been poised to attack. Mathias turned and nodded his thanks to Tre and continued running, not caring what lay ahead.

Tre caught up with Mathias and ran at his side, deflecting anything coming at them. Mathias just ran, his sword swinging next to him in his hand. His focus was only on Mina. They finally reached a door and Mathias placed both of his hands on the cold metal. "Oh god."

Tre turned and ordered the rest of the guard to form lines and keep off any attacking Valta.

Mathias began working the locks, breaking and shoving as needed. Finally, the heavy door was heaved open. He lost all feeling in his body at what he saw.

Mina was laid out flat on top of a bed. She was strapped by her wrists and ankles to the four corners and her body was covered with blood. The gown she wore had been ripped away, exposing most of her torso. He couldn't see her face, but he could see her chest rising and falling with breath. She was alive.

Mathias lunged forward and whipped around to the other side of the bed.

Tre quickly moved in next to him.

Mina's face was covered with her blood-crusted hair. Mathias' hands hovered over her body but he didn't touch her. He looked down at her and an all-consuming rage began to build inside. Her body was covered with bloody bite marks and bruises. There was more blood pooled between her legs, staining the sheets and the mark Mathias had so lovingly left on Mina's neck had knife slashes around it. Luca had done this. Luca had hurt her. Luca was going to die ... slowly.

Mathias mumbled under his breath, "Oh, baby ... I am so sorry."

"Mathias. You have to release her arms and legs. We gotta get out of here. Now."

Mathias didn't acknowledge Tre. He just kept scanning Mina's body, taking inventory of the damage as though he tried to burn it into his brain. His hands still hovered over her body as he hesitated to touch her.

"General!" Trey barked. "Now!"

Mathias snapped up his head and looked at Tre. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't bring himself to touch her knowing all of this was his fault. He hadn't been there to protect her. To keep her away from Luca's sick games.

Tre's hand landed on Mathias' shoulder. "Move, Mathias. I'll get her."

Mathias grabbed Tre and threw him to the side of the room against the wall. "You will not touch her."

"Fine, general. I won't touch her. But you need to get her off that bed right now, or we won't get her out of here alive. You have to get her uncuffed and moved. Understand?"

Mathias turned toward Mina's battered body. "I got it. Give me the cutters."

Tre handed Mathias a pair of metal cutters and he began snapping the chain links to release her limbs. He didn't want to risk cutting the metal at her skin for fear he would hurt her further. She already had bloody wounds from fighting against the restraints, so they would remove the cuffs later. As he kept cutting, he suddenly saw Mina's hand move. Mathias stopped working on the chains and reached over and moved her hair out of her face. His stomach lurched at what he saw. Dear god, she had been beaten badly. Her eyes were swollen shut and her nose and lips were bloody and cut. One of her cheeks was already bruised blue and her neck was covered with reddened hand prints. Luca was going to die for this and Mathias was going to take his time killing him. One cut at a time.

"Mina, baby. I'm here now. You're safe, love."

Mina instinctively moved away from his voice and began fighting off his touch. She was frantic and screaming. Her hands going at his face, trying to hurt him.

Mathias gently grabbed her wrists and held her arms back. "Baby, listen to me. I'm taking you home now."

Mina kept fighting him. Her head rolled, flailing around and she kept screaming and fighting. "No! Get off me."

Tre held out a syringe. "Take this and give it to her. She'll need to be sedated. She's too out of it to hear you."

Mathias looked back at Tre. There was no way he would be able to inflict additional pain. She was already beaten bloody. God forbid, probably raped. He couldn't bear hurting her further. He closed his eyes and murmured to Tre, "You do it."

Tre reached over, bit off the top of the syringe, sank the needle into Mina's bruised thigh and pumped the sedative into her blood stream.

Mina's body quickly relaxed and she was soon unconscious again.

Once she was free of the restraints, Mathias slipped his hands underneath her legs and shoulders to lift her against his body. This was his fault.

Eager to get Mina out of this hell-hole, he quickly followed Tre out of the room. As they entered the dimly lit corridor, Mathias heard Tre on his phone. "Yeah, we've got her. Start heading back to the entrance. We'll be out in five." After a long pause, he heard

Tre continue. “Yeah, bro. It’s bad.”

Mathias tightened his hold on Mina, quickening his pace. She’s going to be fine, he kept saying to himself. He had to believe that because he could survive with nothing less.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mina lay on a white sandy beach in a blue bikini and she looked amazing. Her normal swim attire was a tank top and shorts, but damn this two-piece was hot. She looked over at the water's edge as Mathias emerged from under the turquoise blue waves.

He rose out of the water and fingered his wet hair out of his face. His chest glistened in the sunlight and his body flexed everywhere with every step he took toward her.

It was kind of funny to see him like this. Cats don't normally like the water. She watched him stalk toward her like an animal to its prey and she was more than happy to be his. Her stomach began to tingle with anticipation. Her fingers absently clenched in the sand. She smiled wickedly at him, wondering what he had in mind for her.

When he reached her, he knelt down beside her and began rubbing a white washcloth soaked in cool water down her body.

She closed her eyes and let her head drop back against her lounge chair, marveling that this beautiful man took care of her. The cool cloth felt so good on her hot skin.

He moved it over her face and down her neck. He stopped only briefly to untie her bikini top and then resumed moving the cool cloth over her breasts and swirled it over her belly.

The breeze blew over her moistened body, causing her nipples to harden and little goose bumps to rise on her skin. She looked back at Mathias' face and she was startled to see he had tears running down his now bruised and soot-covered cheeks. She reached up and wiped the tears away from his eyes and cupped his face with both of her hands.

He looked down at her and kept saying, "I am so sorry baby. I am so sorry." Mina immediately became confused.

"Sorry for what? What happened, Mathias?"

Mathias grasped her hands in his and just kept repeating he was sorry as he rocked back and forth on his heels.

The hold he had on her hands steadily tightened and became rough, almost crushing her fingers. She began to pull away from him to try and release herself from his hold, but he was just too strong.

He kept chanting, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry."

Mina felt the panic set in and her body began reacting. She started fighting him with everything she had. His grip tightened on her hands and he tried to pull her off the lounge chair onto the sand. She kicked, screamed, twisted and fought with her legs, but she couldn't get him off her.

When Mina looked up into his eyes again, it wasn't Mathias she saw. Luca. Smiling and salivating at her nakedness. He pushed her back down into the sand and mounted her body. "Time to play, Mina."

"Noooooooooooo."

Mina woke up screaming and flailing, trying to kick the sheets from her body. She slammed her head against the headboard behind her and scurried to the side of the bed. She was no longer in the same blue room as before and she wasn't tied up. Mina reached up and felt her face. Her right eye was still swollen and her lower lip was fat and cut. She looked down at her battered arms and legs. There were bruises and bite marks all over

her, but the cuffs on her wrists and ankles were gone. Mina slowly lifted up the hem of the gown. The higher the fabric went, the worse the injuries got. When she reached the tops of her legs and saw the large bite on her inner thigh, she squinted her eyes shut and yanked the gown back down. That bastard was going to pay for what he'd done to her. If it wasn't Mathias or Roderick killing him, Mina would make sure she would tear his throat out herself. No matter what, she would make sure to watch him die.

At least she was decently covered up in a clean gown. She had to get out of there before Luca returned. There was no way in hell he would be interrupted again, and Mina didn't want to even think about what he would succeed in doing to her the next time.

Mina quickly scanned the room and saw the medical equipment next to her bed. There was a monitor of sorts and an IV bag that had been toppled over on its stand. She followed the tube from the floor and saw it was inserted in her inner arm. She reached down with her still-shaking hand and yanked the tube out. No telling what they were pumping her up with. Blood spurted out, but she quickly grabbed the sheet and covered the bleeding.

The room was extremely large and filled with natural sunlight from the numerous windows on the far wall. The walls were gray stone with several sconces mounted all around. It had modest furnishings, but her eyes focused on the royal blue tartan hanging on the far wall. It was wrapped around an elaborate silver rod and depicted a falcon with its wings spread. Falcon. Her bird.

She had to move. She had to get out of wherever she was and get back to Mathias. She wasn't safe.

Dragging the sheet behind her, Mina carefully slid off the bed onto her shaky legs and padded over toward the only door she saw. She kept looking all around her for anything she could use to protect herself when she heard loud stomping coming toward the door.

Shit.

The door burst open. Two women came in and tried to reach for her. Mina may have been beaten, battered and almost raped but she wasn't currently chained to a bed. She was going to do anything she could to get the hell out of there. With both hands, Mina pushed the taller woman back and she landed flat on her ass. The short, blonde pulled out a syringe and dove for Mina. Both women collided and hit the floor. The syringe was inches away from her neck, but Mina lifted her knees and shoved the blonde off. Mina twisted her body around and she scampered to the corner of the room. Hands up, crouched and ready for battle, Mina dropped her head and prepared for the assault. She felt power building in her chest. Her skin began to tingle and her vision became slightly blurred. Now was not the time to pass out. The blonde stood in the middle of the room with the syringe in one hand and her other up and open, as if trying to calm her. Yeah right. No calm here. Mina would kill her to get out of here.

The tall one began to speak but Mina didn't hear a thing. Her ears were ringing so loud from the fall to the floor all she saw was the woman's lips moving. Mina shifted back and forth on her feet, preparing to dart toward the door when she noticed both women suddenly shudder and immediately move back. That's when she felt it. Felt him.

Mina kept her eyes on the door and saw him come around the corner.

He skidded to a halt when his eyes met hers.

My god. He was actually here. He had come for her. Relief swept through her body.

She was safe.

Mina's legs gave out and she plopped down on the cold floor, still looking up at him.

He didn't move. Didn't speak. He just looked into her eyes.

She slowly raised her hand and reached for him, gently whimpering his name.

It all happened in slow motion. He reached out as he dropped to his knees in front of her. His hands slid under her arms, pulled her into his lap and cradled her body against his. He gently rocked back and forth as he chanted into her hair, "I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

Just like in the dream.

Mina closed her eyes and relaxed against his chest. She dug her fingers into his shirt and held on for dear life. Mina sobbed against his neck. "Don't leave me, Mathias. Get me out of here."

"I won't, love. I'm here. You're home now."

Mina held him tight and whispered, "Kill him for me."

Mathias pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. "I will, love. I will."

The tears began to flow down both of their faces as they cried together huddled on the floor. Nothing would separate them again.

* * * *

As the boat entered the dock, Luca knew something was wrong. Usually at least ten guards stood watch on the cliffs as well as at the mouth of the cave. He scanned the area around him, none were there. No one was there.

Luca sprinted up the rock-covered path and into his previously unknown hideaway, leaving Gino and the rest of his warriors back in the boat. He had the strong feeling he would be moving soon. The tide the evening before must have washed away any evidence of a battle, because he couldn't smell anything or anyone in the vicinity as he made his way up the cliffs toward the entrance. He should have been able to sense his guards but there was nothing. No one.

Son of a bitch.

When he entered the mouth of the cave, he immediately raced toward Mina's chamber. The farther he ran, reality set in. She was gone. They had found her and taken her back. Fucking Talon. Fuck!

Luca kept running through the winding paths within the mountain. The deeper within, the thicker the smell of death became. He should have never left. Never let his mother simply order him around. If it hadn't been for her interruption, he would have taken Mina in twenty different ways by now as well as branded her brain and body as his. But noooooooo! Valencia spoke and he always listened. Fuck that. From now on, that bitch could fend for herself, or treat him as the equal he had proven himself to be.

As he made his way deeper into the mountain, Luca spotted the bodies. Blood was everywhere. How could all of them be dead? He had at least a hundred soldiers here. No way had Talon killed them all.

Luca reached the chamber and kicked open the door. No Mina. Nothing. Luca felt the rage inside him. He wanted to fuck. He wanted to kill.

Luca walked down the catacombs to his private residence. As he neared his rooms, he noticed the bodies of his Valtic soldiers had been carefully stacked around the door. Fucking Talon and his little messages.

Luca kicked past the bodies and entered his room only to stop cold in his tracks. Everything in the room had been trashed and destroyed. Heads, arms and legs were piled in the center of the room. His century-old bed was crushed and broken, but none of that held his attention. The message above his bed was what had his interest. Written in blood on the wall were two words. Two words he had recently spoken to Talon. If it was the last thing he did, Luca would shove those two words down Talon's throat and rip out his heart in the process.

You Lose.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mina woke up and immediately felt him. His arms were wrapped tightly around her, holding her completely against his body. She didn't jump or panic. She knew he was with her and would be always. She knew she was safe. Warm and safe. Finally.

She looked up to find Mathias staring down at her. She smiled back at him and reached to run her hand through his hair. "Do you know when I first met you, I wanted to chop off your hair?"

Mathias chuckled. "Why?"

"I thought you looked like an arrogant romance novel cover model."

"And now?"

"Now I like the feel of it too much to cut it. I like running my hands through it. Using it to pull you closer to me."

Mathias slowly leaned down and kissed Mina on her nose and tightened his hold. "Mine."

Mina smiled and cuddled closer. "Yes. I'm yours."

They both lay there just feeling each other. Letting each other know they belonged together. Mina knew with what had happened as well as how she felt about Mathias, she was never going back home. She couldn't. There was nothing for her there other than Chloe, and Mina would find a way to persuade her to move.

It felt so good to be with him. To just feel him wrapped around her. But she knew she needed to talk about what had happened, and find out how he had gotten her out of that hell-hole. She needed him to know Luca hadn't done what she knew Mathias thought he had done. Now was as good a time as any.

"Mathias?"

"Yes, love."

"Tell me what happened."

"Not now, Mina. Just rest."

Mina pulled away and sat up. She winced a bit at the soreness in her body, but she didn't want Mathias to see her pain. She looked at him sternly and replied, "I know you think I don't need to hear this right now, but I really do. This isn't something I want to dwell on forever. I need for you to know what happened to me. And I need answers as well. I don't want anything between us. I'm stronger than you think, Mathias."

Mathias ran his fingers across her bruised cheekbone. "I already know how strong you are, baby. Believe me."

"Then tell me how you found me?"

Mathias leaned back on the pillows and let out a long sigh. "How about this. Let's get you into the shower and fed. Then we can talk. Sound okay?"

"Only if it's a bath. A really hot one. And only if you come with me."

Mathias leaned in and kissed her softly on the cheek. "I'm not leaving you."

Mina watched Mathias walk to the bathroom. She heard the water begin to run and wondered how she had ended up where she was. Just days ago, she had been home in Washington, grieving the death of her mother and now she was in an entirely different world. She had a father now. A lover now. Her life was inexplicably changed forever.

She rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom. She was still sore from her abduction, but she tried not to let Mathias see her wince in pain. She stepped onto the cold tile and looked at the tub. It was brimming full of soapsuds and the room smelled like citrus. Her favorite. Mina smiled and turned her head to find Mathias standing still, watching her. There he was. In all his magnificence. Splendidly naked. The man she felt safe with. The man she loved.

Mathias came to her and slowly bent to lift her in his arms. He gingerly placed her in the hot, soapy water and then slid in behind her. He gently washed her hair and her body, but she wondered what he was thinking when he ran the sponge over her bruised legs. She could sense he was somewhat uncomfortable touching her where she had been injured or anyplace intimate on her body. She didn't like that one bit, but could understand his hesitation. She had just been through hell and there was no way he would want to make her uncomfortable and touch her intimately. No matter how badly she needed or wanted him to.

They got out of the tub and Mathias towel dried her body and her hair. He helped her into a clean set of pajamas and back into the bedroom. She sat on the bed, cross-legged with her head back and her eyes closed, enjoying Mathias tenderly brushing her hair. She didn't ever want to move. She was so relaxed and calm with him. She felt secure. Complete.

Without warning, Mina whispered to Mathias, "He didn't rape me."

Mathias stopped brushing her hair and remained silent.

"He didn't rape me, Mathias. He just hit me. That's all. What he did will heal." Mina turned and faced Mathias. "He didn't rape me, Mathias. Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"Then why do you have that look on your face? You look like you want to tear down the walls."

Mathias put down the brush and cupped her face with his hands. "Baby, he took you from me. I thank heaven above he didn't have you but he still took you from me. Touched you. Hurt you. For that, he is going to suffer and die a very slow death."

Mina put her hands over his. "And I'm going to be there when it happens."

Mathias nodded his head and slowly moved toward her. He again hesitated when his mouth was almost on hers. Mina looked up into his eyes and smiled. "Kiss me, Mathias. It's all right. I won't break."

*

Mathias tenderly grazed her lips with his. He didn't want to push her, but he needed to feel her against him. Under him. He kissed her again, needing the physical connection.

She held his face to hers. She opened her mouth on his and licked his bottom lip. "Kiss me."

His control crumbled. Forgetting her bruises, he crushed his mouth on hers and buried his hands in her hair. Mina moaned with need and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him against her. He gently lowered her to the bed and positioned himself over her. He tore his mouth from hers and looked down at her. Mina's eyes were darkened with desire and she panted, running her hands up and down his chest. He knew he shouldn't do this now. Not after what she'd been through. She was still battered and bruised, but it had been too long since he'd been inside her.

Mina wrapped her legs around him and rested her ankles on his lower back. She

started to unbutton her shirt.

By the time she had reached the last one, Mathias realized there was no way he could stop himself now. He would just have to be very careful not to be too rough. But damn, he wanted her. Bad.

She pulled the two halves of her shirt away from her body, revealing her bruised breasts.

Mathias turned his head away and closed his eyes. Even though the power of his desire for her was unchained, he didn't know if he could touch her. She was hurt. Still sore and swollen from the beatings she had taken at Luca's hands. That fucking bastard was going to pay for every mark he had put on her.

Mina put a hand on Mathias's face. "Open your eyes and look at me. Not the marks. Not the bruises. Look at me." She rubbed his cheek with her thumb and smiled. "I want to feel you, Mathias. I want to know I belong to you. I know you won't hurt me. It's all right. I want this. I want you."

He looked down at her filled with the knowledge she was his life. His soul. His reason for being. "Baby, you're hurt. I can't do this."

She pulled him down and kissed him lightly. "Then take away the pain, Mathias. Make me forget."

"Baby ... your father wants..."

She placed her finger over his lips to silence him. "Please, Mathias." She dug her heels into his back and ran her fingers up his chest, lightly grazing the skin with her nails. "I need you."

She had just been through probably the most traumatic experience in her life—other than the death of her mother—and she looked up at him full of passion and complete desire. How could she be doing this? She had strength in her he wasn't even going to try and comprehend. This was his woman. His mate. Strong and brave. Damn. This woman owned him. He couldn't deny her.

He lowered himself next to Mina and stared at her bruised jaw. His fingers lightly stroked the swollen area and moved to her neck.

"Mathias, close the shades please. It's too light in here."

He quickly sat up. "Are you all right? Is something wrong?"

"I'm fine. Just close the shades for me please."

Mathias slid off the bed and closed the shades. He turned toward her, pulled off his sweater and kicked off his boots. He slid next to Mina and laid a kiss between her breasts.

Even though the room was now dimmed, he could still see the marks. The damage that had been done to his mate's body in his absence. In his failure to keep her protected. He realized why she wanted the shades drawn. She didn't want him to see what was done to her. Didn't want him upset. She had been beaten bloody and almost raped and she lay there making sure he was comfortable. As he ran his hands over her stomach, he knew from this moment on, he would never live without her. Never leave her. Always protect her. Protect their children. Never again would this happen to her. He would die protecting what was his. And she was his.

Mathias pulled down her pajama bottoms and grazed her hip with his mouth, kissing and licking. "You will tell me if I hurt you, Mina."

"You won't hurt me."

Mathias leaned up on his knees to pull the pants from her legs and he caught sight of

the bite mark on the inside of her thigh. High on the inside of her thigh. He froze at the thought of another male that close to her body.

Mina quickly grabbed his arm to get his attention. "No. You look at my eyes ... remember? It's still me, Mathias. I just have a few bumps and bruises."

Fury flashed through him. "Bumps and bruises?" he roared. "This isn't a fucking bump or a bruise. It's a fucking bite mark, Mina. That bastard bit you and you want me to make love to you like this? You want me to not notice the brutality that went on for two fucking days while I couldn't find you? All of this is on me. My failure to keep you safe. I can't do that, Mina. I can't hurt you."

Mina rose and let her hand fly, slapping right across Mathias' face. "Stop!"

Stunned into silence by her reaction, Mathias stilled and stared at her fury-filled face.

Mina slapped him again, harder.

His head jerked to the side with the blow.

"Did you hear me, Mathias? Stop this now." She cupped his face with her hands and jerked him toward her. "I need you to make wonderful, slow, sweet love to me. I want to know all of that horror is over, and you'll be the only man who will ever touch me again. I need to feel the connection with you. Feel you loving me." A single tear tracked down her beautiful face. "Now, if I can get over the shit behind all of these bites and bruises on me, then you can too." Her voice trembled now. "Make it go away. If for just a while."

Mathias reached under her arms and gently laid her down on the mattress next to him. He rolled over and seated his body in between her thighs, lacing his arms underneath her knees, bringing them up against her chest. He deliberately rubbed his erection against her inner thigh, leaned down and slowly kissed her deep. He pulled his mouth from hers and looked back into her eyes. "Remember when you asked me if Coteri fall in love?"

Mina nodded.

He placed his hand on her forehead and pushed her glorious hair away from her face. "Not very often do we find a mate, a partner like the one I found in you. You live inside me, Mina. I'll love you forever."

And with that, Mathias proceeded to give Mina what she wanted: wonderful, slow, sweet love. He was gentle and deliberate. Paying attention to every part of her body. Loving her as if she deserved to be loved. She was right. The bruises and marks would fade, but he would always remember what Luca did. How he wasn't there to protect her. Mathias held her tightly at that thought. Never again would he leave her.

Mathias pulled out of her body and turned her over onto her belly. He reached under her arms and lifted her to her knees with her back against his chest. He quickly thrust back inside her and Mina let out a low moan. His hands caressed her stomach, her breasts, her shoulders. He moved her hair to one side and began trailing kisses down her neck. Mina laid her head against his shoulder and guided his hand down between her legs. "I need to come, Mathias. Please."

Something inside him snapped and he felt his eyes roll back in his head. He felt his teeth elongate and his body began to tingle with the innate need to claim her. The need to mark her was unbearable, but he couldn't hurt her. Not now.

His fingers swirled around her clit as he thrust his cock deep inside her. She moved with him now, giving as much as she got. Her body started to pulse around him and he knew she was close. Mathias leaned down and grazed his teeth along her shoulder and

Mina let out a yelp of pleasure. “Yes, baby. Do it. I want to feel it.”

“I can’t hurt you, Mina.”

Still moving quickly against him, she raised her arms over her head and ran them into his hair, pulling his face to her neck. “Make me yours. Please.”

Mathias was quickly losing what little control he was barely holding on to. Mina ground her ass against him as he slammed deeper inside her. Her fingers gripped his hair tightly as she moaned along with his thrusts. He leaned down and inhaled her scent. Jesus. The smell of her skin was going to end up killing him. His lips trailed across her neck and to her shoulder. She was ready. Pulsing around his cock, straining to come any second.

Her fingernails dug into his scalp. She was there. Mathias licked the juncture between her neck and shoulder. Over his first marking. It was still red with cuts from Luca. Fucking bastard. Closing his eyes, he inhaled again, smelling citrus and Mina, effectively wiping the image of Luca from his mind. She was his.

He opened his mouth and sank his teeth into the already sensitive skin on her neck and held her to him. Mina let out a yelp and immediately came around him. Her body shook so hard Mathias wrapped his arms around her middle and held her against him. He tasted her blood in his mouth and he clamped down harder as he came inside her.

Holding her. Filling her. Praying he was creating a life inside her.

Mathias was still shaking and convulsing from his climax as he released her neck and licked the blood from her skin.

Once released, Mina quickly moved and spun on him. Facing Mathias, she pushed him on his back, straddled him, and slid down on his still hard cock.

His eyes almost popping out of his head, Mathias grabbed her hips and held tight. As if he was going to stop her.

She rode him hard and fast as if still unsatisfied. He leaned back watching her. Long, dark hair bouncing against his thighs, her beautiful breasts swaying as she moved. Her moans were getting louder and her movements getting faster.

Mathias felt her clench against him and knew she was going to come again. He threaded his fingers in her hair and pulled her head down so he could watch her face as she climaxed around him.

Mina opened her eyes to look at him and he was shocked at what he saw. No longer were they the gorgeous brown he was lost in every time he looked at her. They were now gold and speckled. Fierce. Tiger. Holy Christ, she was shifting. He quickly slashed at the skin on his neck to draw blood. Her eyes immediately focused on the red mark. Mathias clenched his hands in her hair and looked directly at her. “It’s all right, baby. Let go. Come for me now.”

*

At his demand, Mina threw her head back and came fiercely around him, screaming and digging her claws into his shoulders and grinding her body down on his cock. Her head snapped forward and she instinctually sank her mouth over the slash at his neck, tasting blood. At the first nuance of the copper taste, Mina ground harder against Mathias, groaning at the sensations she felt for the first time. Her teeth clenched the muscle in his shoulder as she moved him deeper inside her. Her entire body was flushed and tingling with awareness. The bonding was happening. A shockwave of pleasure coursed through her body. She was weightless, but at the same time the pressure of her

climax held her to him. Eyes rolling back into her head, Mina inhaled deeply, scenting everything around her. She had completed the bond. She had taken his blood. Instinctively she knew they would be forever bonded as one. Just as Mathias had told her. Always able to speak to each other in their minds, always aware of each other's emotions, always able to find one another. Forever together.

Mathias gripped his arms around her as he came once again, filling her with his seed. They were mated.

Mina released her hold and leaned back to look into his eyes. The tiger inside her had subsided. She was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of peace and happiness.

Mathias leaned up and licked her lips, then kissed her soundly.

Mina groaned and leaned into his body for support.

She pulled her head back and tried to stifle a yawn, then looked down at Mathias with a grin. "You're mine now, mister."

Mathias laid her down in bed, covered both of their bodies and held her close. "Always. Sleep now. Your father wants to see you soon."

"Don't leave me, Mathias."

Mathias squeezed tighter around her. "Never. You're home now, Mina. Sleep, baby."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

For the next day and night, Mina found herself connecting more and more with Mathias. They talked, ate, laughed and made love. He told her stories of when he was a boy, and she shared some of her better stories of her times with her mother. They talked about their favorite things as well as what pissed them off. Unbelievably, they both had huge pet peeves about people who were late and slow drivers in the fast lane. But they both loved mint chip ice cream, a good steak and Crown Royal.

After having a huge meal consisting obviously of steak and ice cream, they were finally ready to rejoin the world. Because they were now mated, Mina had healed at an incredibly fast rate. The Coteri blood in her came alive. Her cuts were now just pink marks on her skin and the colored bruises had faded.

Mina felt much better knowing she wouldn't be a walking billboard showing everyone what Luca had done to her. They wanted to keep that part of the rescue as private as they could. All of the men who had been in her presence during the mission had been sworn to secrecy by the king himself. The realm and its inhabitants already knew who she was and that she had been taken prisoner and survived. They didn't need the details of her time in captivity. It was going to be hard enough to have them accept her as a hybrid as well as a member of the Royal Family.

Hand in hand, they both walked quietly toward the center of the castle. Mina felt her body humming with energy. It felt as if she was going to burst out of her own skin. Mathias had explained it was her Coteri blood coming to life. The mating between them had awakened that previously dormant side of her and now she felt the same thing a young Coteri would feel when their innate powers came to life. There was no telling what she would be capable of doing once she fully accepted her Coteri side.

Mina squeezed Mathias' fingers tighter at the thought. He turned and smiled down at her. "It'll be fine, Mina. Don't worry."

Mina marched toward a father she had never met, had millions of questions swimming in her head, held hands with a shape shifter who just happened to be a general of her father's Royal Army, and she had fallen in love with him within days of meeting him. Great. She could just see herself walking up to Roderick and saying, "Hey, Pop! Nice to meet cha. Thanks for sending this hunk of a man/cat to watch over me. He's really great in bed."

"Don't worry? Mathias, have you forgotten what I have on my neck? What we did yesterday? Don't you think he's going to be just a bit ticked off at this?"

"Yes, Mina. He's not going to be exactly pleased, but he won't say a word to you. You are his daughter. He has waited the last twenty-eight years to see you. Our mating won't stop him from loving you."

They continued through the stone hallway, and suddenly the corridor opened into a gigantic atrium. The ceiling was adorned with silver etchings and a single mural spanning the entire space. The painting showed animals and children running through a dense forest by moonlight. The colors were vividly deep and took Mina's breath away. As she looked around the room, eyes wide and mouth gaped open, she noticed all the ornate furnishings against the walls and the tartans hanging down between doorways that led to

the numerous hallways spanning through the castle into the mountain it was built into. There were three massive fireplaces within the room and they were all roaring with flames. Everything looked so regal. So formal. Untouchable. Mina secretly hoped that would not be the case with Roderick.

Mina stopped walking and jerked her hand to stop Mathias. "So what does that mean for you? What's he going to do to you?"

"What do you mean?"

Mina pried her gaze away from her new surroundings and looked up into his gorgeous green eyes. "You said he wouldn't say a word to me. Where does that leave you?"

Mathias' free hand moved the hair from Mina's forehead and he bent down to give her a soft kiss. "Don't worry about me, chère. I'll be fine. Your father is a reasonable man. It's not as if I'll get forty lashes if that's what you're thinking. We'll talk it out and it will be fine."

"It better be, Mathias. He may be my father in blood, but he has no rights over me. He gave those up when he sent my mother back to the states without him."

Suddenly, a rich, deep voice boomed behind the both of them, echoing off the colossal walls of the room. "Independent, just like your mother. I expected nothing less."

Mina froze. She felt her face pale at the sound of his voice.

Ho-ly shit.

Mathias squeezed her hand with his, leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Mina. You need to turn around. The king is addressing you."

Mina looked helplessly back up at Mathias and whispered back, "How the hell can you be so damn calm. How did he hear that?"

The voice boomed again. "I can hear you now, young lady. Now turn around. I want to see my daughter's face."

Mina dropped her head and swore to herself. Was she really ready for this? Did she really want to come face-to-face with the man who had slowly torn out her mother's heart? The man who had knocked Julia up and left her to raise his child on her own? The man who chose to remain absent from her life?

Screw it. She had fallen in love with a shape shifter, been kidnapped by a psychopath and had discovered she wasn't wholly human. She could handle this.

Mina unlaced her fingers from Mathias' hand and slowly turned on her heel to face Roderick. She looked up and saw him standing at the top of a gigantic flowing staircase. It reminded her of the scene in *Gone with the Wind* when Scarlett O'Hara stood at the top of her stairs at the end of the movie yelling after Rhett Butler to come back to her. The only difference was the carpet wasn't rich red like the movie but a brilliant royal blue. Standing at the top was the man who had broken her mother's heart.

She focused on Roderick's face.

His hair was jet black with a slight sprinkle of gray throughout. His skin was tanned and wrinkled around his dark eyes as though he spent years staring into the sun. He wore all black. That must be the thing around there. He looked rough, regal and very handsome. She could now understand why her mother found him fascinating. In just the few seconds she had laid her eyes on him, she felt entranced. Like she was somehow being drawn to him.

Roderick moved like a predator down the stairs toward her. He was smooth and

graceful, but at the same time, menacing. She sensed raw power coming toward her and she was his child. Jesus. Julia must have been completely floored by this man when she met him.

Mathias moved to stand behind Mina and placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

Roderick stopped right in front of her. Never breaking eye contact. He continued to look directly into her eyes and then roamed his stare over her face. Taking her in. His hand rose up and he traced the bridge of her nose with his index finger. "Your mother's nose."

Mina quickly jerked back from his light touch.

He reached into his front pocket and pulled something out. "Allow me?"

Mina's brows came together in confusion. "Allow you to what?"

"Allow me to return something that's yours."

Mina looked down at his hand and then back to his face. "What is it?"

Roderick took a step toward her and opened his large fist. "It's the necklace I sent your mother for your sixteenth birthday. You lost it during your unfortunate abduction."

Mina was shocked at his description of what had happened to her. "Is that what you call it? Unfortunate?"

At her tone, Mathias lightly squeezed her shoulders.

Roderick replied gently, "Unfortunate is what I would call it if I was in front of my council or my people. Since I'm standing in front of my only child, I will amend my statement. You lost it when that worthless bastard snatched you away from Mathias." He raised an eyebrow. "Is that better?"

Mina rested her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "Much."

Roderick stepped forward and raised his hands to reattach the necklace around her neck. Mina moved her head to the side to give him access to the clasp. Mathias gently lifted Mina's mane of hair from her neck to allow Roderick better access. He locked it together and let the cross rest in the middle of her chest. He then reached over and grasped a tendril of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers. "Your mother's hair."

Mina watched as Roderick's gaze traveled over her face, almost examining her with his gaze. Before she could adjust her hair to cover her neck, and the obvious mark, his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched.

Oh shit.

Roderick squinted and then like lightening he pinned Mathias with a murderous stare.

Mina's blood immediately began to boil and she went into protection mode. With her index finger now firmly pressed into Roderick's sternum, she let him have it. "Now you listen to me and listen good. You may be the king around here, but you are also the SOB who left me and my mother alone for the last twenty-eight years with no explanation to me whatsoever. What I do with my life is my business and until you have proven your worth, you'll do well to stay out of it."

Mathias dug his fingers into Mina's shoulders, effectively stopping her tirade.

Roderick continued to stare into Mina's eyes. When his hand rose, she looked to the left and saw two gargantuan men coming out of the shadows. Coming toward them. Fast.

At his signal to them, they skidded to a halt, but kept their eyes trained on her. Apparently yelling at the king was a big no-no.

Mina slowly lowered her hand, but stood her ground, staring right back at him. Not intimidated in the least.

Roderick smiled. "Your mother's strength." He stepped back and motioned toward the staircase with an outstretched hand. "Come with me, Mina."

Mina turned and looked back at Mathias, silently asking if she was safe to go. He leaned down and brushed a quick kiss against her lips. "Go, chère."

Mina reached for Mathias and laced her fingers in his. "Come with me."

From the landing of the staircase and without turning around, Roderick provided her with a stern reply she didn't want to hear. "The general has other things to take care of at the moment."

Mina turned and watched her father ascend the stairs like the king he was. She could actually feel the power he exuded. She immediately thought the man should have a cape on or something. She could picture it billowing behind him as he ascended the giant blue staircase. She noticed a ring on his finger as his hand slid up the shined banister. What was the insignia on it? Jesus, she did not want to do this. How could she be expected to speak to him after what her mother had gone through? Hell, he didn't even show up for her funeral. If he loved her that much, why did he let Julia go? Why was he an enigma to her and not some fond memory? Why did she want to slide her hand into his and walk next to him? Why did she keep thinking he smelled really good?

Turning back toward Mathias, she again asked, "Please go with me."

"I was not invited, Mina. It's you he wants to talk to. Now go." He kissed her again. "You'll be fine. Get to know him. Talk to him. That's all he wants."

She reached up and grabbed the cross resting on his chest. She stared at it and then down to the one around her own neck. "These mean something don't they?"

"The cross is the symbol of our race. It's what you are, Mina. Now go. Quit stalling."

"Fine. But how will I find you after this?"

"Don't worry. I'll find you."

And with that, Mathias turned and walked away from her.

Mina stared after him as he left the room and she felt sick. Where the hell was her cell phone? God only knew with all of the drama that had gone down. She needed to call Chloe. It had been days since she had spoken to her and Mina knew Chloe was probably going through the roof right about now wondering what was going on.

She looked back toward the stairs and Roderick stood at the top, looking down at her. Damn it. She suddenly felt like an eight-year-old kid getting called to the principal's office. Just sensing his presence made her feel like a little girl again. She had to snap out of it. He was the one who needed to give her answers. Twenty-eight years worth.

Mina started walking toward the monstrous staircase, determined to make him answer everything she was going to throw at him. There was no way she was going to let emotion take over. He had been a secret long enough. She was going to get answers.

When she reached the top, he didn't say a word. He just started walking. She reluctantly followed. They passed several rooms and then finally stopped when they arrived in front of two colossal wooden doors. He opened them and she remained standing in the hall. She wasn't completely sure she still wanted to do this.

Mina let her gaze and mind take in the surroundings. The room was a bit intimidating. There were all varieties of weapons hanging all over the walls of the room. Some had to be ancient but others looked quite modern. There was a huge map of Europe

on a far wall and another of the U.S. on another and there were little blue pins stuck all over them. The numerous windows were adorned with deep royal blue curtains and they went from the floor to the extremely high ceiling.

Roderick walked over and started pulling them open.

It was a weird feeling being in the heart of a mountain as she and Mathias had walked through the corridors and then to be in a massive room with windows. This place looked like a castle on the outside, but she knew it was built deep into the mountain for security as well as secrecy.

She tentatively took a step into the room. Then another.

Roderick watched her every move. Studying her. Probably trying to see Julia or maybe just a bit of him in her.

Mina walked over to one of the windows and looked out. It was early evening and the sun started to set behind the gorgeous mountains of the Black Forest. She watched as several falcons flew out into the trees. Now she knew why she was so drawn to that particular bird. Its likeness was all over the castle and adorned several tartans on the walls. It had to be another symbol for their race. One circled around and flew toward her. It landed on the wrought-iron railing outside the window. Cocking its head, it looked at her and spread its wings out as though waving. Weird.

Roderick had silently walked up behind her and when he spoke, she almost jumped out of her own skin. “Tremayne. He’s checking on you for Mathias.” With a slight wave of his hand, the king dismissed Tre and the bird immediately took off and flew toward the trees.

So freaking weird. This was going to take a lot of getting used to.

Mina turned and backed away from the window. She began to explore the room, looking at everything on the walls and adorning the furniture. Everything seemed so antique or ancient. She wondered just how old Roderick really was. The way Mathias had explained it, Roderick could be hundreds of years old. Jesus, this was going to take some getting used to.

Normally when Mina felt like this, she would stretch out on the deck with a couple of shots of Crown over ice and a pack of cigarettes. Both would easily take the edge off. What she wouldn’t give right now for a shot, a cigarette and Chloe. This was too much for her to handle right now. She’d been kidnapped, almost raped, and had incredible sex with a man—who wasn’t human—that she’d just pledged her life to after only knowing him a handful of days. Now she was in the same room as her phantom father and she was just a bit too freaked out right now. Was it too much to ask for a small shot of whiskey or something?

“Not a good idea, Mina. At least not right now.”

Mina whipped around and just stood there with her mouth wide enough that if she stuck her tongue out, she could probably taste the floor.

Roderick put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “Stay calm. There are certain bonds between us that allow me to read your thoughts if I choose to.”

“Then don’t choose to. Jesus. You people are going to be the death of me with all of your little tricks. Stay out of my head, Roderick. You’re not invited.”

“I apologize.”

They both just stood there in silence. Mina had a boatload of questions, but she wasn’t sure if she could sit here and listen to his excuses. And she was sure that’s what

they would be. Not justifiable reasons but damn excuses. She had spent her life believing he was dead only to find out recently he was alive and well and had chosen not to be with her and her mother. There was no way to not feel betrayed, regardless of his reasoning. Yet she had so many questions for this man. Now she was finally standing in the same room with her father and she couldn't bring herself to ask him anything. Hell, she couldn't even keep eye contact.

Usually Mina didn't mind silence. She could wait patiently and make the other person yield and speak first, but this drove her mad. Roderick was just standing there looking her up and down and she was getting the willies. She had to say something. She turned and faced him. "So, just how old are you, anyway?"

Roderick gave her a one-sided grin. "Is that what you really want to know, Mina? My age?" He took a few steps toward her. "I think you have other questions on your mind. More important things to inquire about than my age." He continued forward. "Put it this way, I'm much older than I look." He stopped just inches away. "You are the only family I have left." He moved even closer. "I want to know you."

Mina sidled away and walked toward his massive desk, giving Roderick her back. "You should have thought about that twenty-eight years ago when you sent my pregnant mother back home to Washington."

She walked toward the mahogany desk and put her hands on the edge and something caught her eye. She walked around the desk and looked down at the small frame peeking out from under the paperwork that was strewn all over the top.

Mina pulled the three-inch frame out and studied it with surprise and fascination. The frame held a drawing. A child's drawing. Her drawing. It must have been done when she was very young. Green and brown crayon lines were all over it. It had been her attempt to draw a tree. There was a small M scribbled in the lower corner. Mina looked up at Roderick, completely astounded at what she held in her hand.

"Yes. It's yours. Your mother sent me many things from your childhood. It was the only way for me to stay connected to you and Julia."

Mina's hand shook now. She felt her own heart beating. "Why?"

Roderick slowly walked toward the desk. "Is that what you want to know? Why I let you and your mother leave? Why I didn't keep her here?"

Tears formed in her eyes now. Still shaking, she answered, "Yes."

"Come with me, Mina. I'll tell you everything you want to know. I will answer any question you have. It's time you know the truth about me and your mother."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mathias walked down to the training rooms. Hopefully, some of his men would be there so he could kill two birds with one stone. He needed to speak to them about the mission in Italy. He wanted to thank them. They had been enormously victorious in not losing one single Coteri warrior in the battle. That took skill. That took guts. That took a lot of fucking stupid guys charging into a battle that in hindsight, Mathias thought was a total crap shoot. There was no telling what Luca had had in store for them. Hell, the guy was a psycho. Mathias half expected a three-headed dog or a seven-foot Cyclops to be protecting the cave. As many experiments as Luca and Valencia had headed up, nothing would surprise him.

The closer he got to the training room, the louder the music got. The bass was thumping like crazy and Mathias could actually feel it in his chest as he approached the double doors. He opened them and was blasted with Disturbed blaring from the speaker system. He figured the room would be crowded with soldiers, but to his amazement one lone man stood to the left of the mats beating the hell out of a bag.

There was no mistaking who it was. Talon stood to the side of the bag in black workout shorts and his hair slicked back in a low ponytail. His face was flushed and sweat poured off his body. His shins and elbows were already red and bruised from taking swipes at the bag, and looking at the way he punched, Mathias knew Talon's knuckles would come out of those gloves covered in blood. The six-foot-five, two-hundred-forty-pound warrior was taking something out on that bag and Mathias was going to find out exactly what it was.

He walked over to the stereo and flipped the power off, effectively stopping Talon's assault on the poor bag.

Talon threw his hands up and yelled, "What the hell, man? Turn it back on."

Mathias dropped his duffle to the floor and started walking across the mats toward Talon. "Not now. We need to talk a minute."

Still hopping up and down on the balls of his feet, Talon continued to move and jab toward the hanging bag. He breathed heavily and looked completely exhausted, but Mathias knew Talon could go another two hours before calling it quits.

"Come on, Mathias. I'm right in the middle of a workout. Can't it wait?"

"No."

Talon stopped jumping and started walking in circles.

Mathias crossed the floor and came within inches of Talon, stopping him in place. The close proximity took Talon off balance and he stepped back. "What is it? Is it Mina? Is she all right?"

Still staring into Talon's eyes, Mathias answered, "She's fine. She's with Roderick."

"Then what is it?"

Mathias finally broke his stare and looked down at the mat. He let out a long sigh and looked back up. "I want to thank you." He paused again and looked at the ceiling, feeling uncomfortable with the emotions building in his chest. "I wouldn't have her if it wasn't for you."

Talon stood in silence. Mathias reached out his hand and Talon took it. They gripped

each other firmly as Mathias placed his other hand on Talon's shoulder and squeezed. "Thank you, my friend."

They unclasped their hands and like two little boys who did something they weren't supposed to, they shifted their weight on their feet and just stared at the ground. Seeing them right now, no one would know they were two of the fiercest warriors the Coteri had.

"Anytime, general. I've grown kind of fond of her too, ya know. There aren't too many females who can put me in my place, so you better hold onto her."

Mathias chuckled. "I plan to, brother. But it may not be as easy as I thought."

Talon started jumping in place again. "What do you mean?"

Rolling his eyes, Mathias replied, "She's with Roderick now. No telling what he'll do to me for marking her without his permission."

Talon began to tear the tape around his gloves off with his teeth. One bloodied hand emerged and he started on the other glove. "Look, man. Roderick is gonna have to deal, because I don't see you letting her go anytime soon. And there's no way he will remove you from rank." Both gloves dropped to the floor and Talon ran a hand over his sweat-covered face. "He just may make your life miserable for a while. That's all."

"Great. Thanks for that." Mathias turned and made his way back to the stereo and his duffle bag. "By the way, you feel like telling me what's got you beating the shit out of that bag?" Mathias grabbed his gloves. Looking over his shoulder with a grin he added, "Wouldn't happen to be lady troubles, would it?"

Talon narrowed his gaze on his friend and stalked over to the stereo. He changed discs and Seether blared through the sound system. "Drop it man. It's nothing." Talon returned to the bag to continue his workout bare fisted.

Mathias strode onto the mat. That look he'd seen in his friend's eyes was telling. "I can make you tell me you know."

Talon's jaw clenched as he turned back to the bag. Mathias already had a very strong suspicion just who could have turned Talon so inside out. And he didn't like his suspicion one bit. Mathias moved to stand chest to chest with his friend. His stance tight as he crossed his arms over his chest and stared directly into Talon's eyes. "It's not gonna happen, brother. She's not for you."

Talon took a step back and mirrored Mathias's pose, crossing his arms over his chest. "I said drop it, Mathias. You've got nothing to worry about on that front."

Mathias studied his friend for a moment then gave a quick nod. "Good. Come on, Talon. Let's go a couple of rounds."

Talon threw his arms up in frustration. "I just took off my fucking gloves!"

Mathias continued toward the center of the blue mat. "Then we go bare fisted."

Mumbling to himself, Talon turned to follow his general. "Shit. This is gonna hurt."

* * * *

Mina followed Roderick back down the long hallway, past the gloriously large blue staircase and went deeper into the mountain. She felt the air cool around her and she was thankful. She had been heated with nervousness since she woke up. It didn't help she could actually feel the blood coursing through her veins and her skin was still tingling from the mating. All of this was so bloody strange to her. As it would be to anyone, but it happened to her.

They hadn't passed many other people on their way to wherever he took her and it

made her a bit nervous. She really didn't want to be alone with him. She didn't know the first thing about him. Well, other than he was some sort of mystical king and he was the reason she wasn't completely human.

They rounded a corner and she saw two of the biggest men she had ever seen standing next to an extremely large door. The same men who came at her in the atrium when she'd dared touch the king.

At their arrival, both men immediately unsheathed their swords, touched the tips to the floor and bowed their heads.

Roderick stopped in front of them and motioned Mina to come forward. She figured she was close enough to the goliath men and she stayed where she was. He gave her a small smirk and then turned back to the men and addressed them. "Simon, Gabriel, this is my daughter, Mina. She is to have access to anywhere she desires." He turned back to Mina and motioned her forward.

Again, feeling like a little girl, she tentatively walked toward the men.

Roderick gently grasped her elbow and guided her to his side. "Mina, these men are my personal guard. This is Simon and this is Gabriel. I have known them since they were children and I trust them implicitly. I hope you can learn to do the same. They are here for our protection."

At their introduction, both men raised their heads and looked at her. Dear god, they were beautiful. Huge and beautiful. The one named Gabriel had shoulder-length slate black hair and pale skin, but his eyes were the most beautiful shade of blue she thought she had ever seen. They reminded her of ice. But not cold. Simon had similar hair color, but his was shorter and his skin was darker, as if he spent more time outside. He too, had gorgeous blue eyes.

She caught herself staring and blushed with embarrassment. These Coteri men could rule the world's population of women if they all looked like the few she had already met.

Gabriel extended his hand and Mina quickly took it, trying to steel her nerves to show she wasn't intimidated or scared. She didn't want to immediately appear to be the weak hybrid. His hand literally swallowed hers and she tried to wrap her fingers around his large palm. No such luck.

He gave her a slow smile and finally spoke, "Welcome home, Mina." Jesus his voice could melt butter. Where the hell was Chloe? She would cream in her jeans if she saw these guys.

Simon extended his hand immediately after. "Good to finally meet you, Mina. Just let us know if you need anything."

Mina felt a strange prickling to her skin when she grasped Simon's hand. So much so she pulled away just as he encased her hand in his. She rubbed her hand on her jeans and looked back up at him. "Th-thanks. I will."

The men moved to the side and Roderick walked into the room.

"This is my private office, Mina. No one enters here without going through Gabriel or Simon. We won't be disturbed."

Mina quickly followed and heard the door close behind her. She looked at her surroundings and sucked in her breath. The room was enormous. The walls were chiseled stone and there were sconces lit everywhere, illuminating the room with soft light. A huge fireplace was to her left and it roared with warmth. Where the hell did the smoke go from the fire? She was in the middle of a freaking mountain and there was a fireplace?

There had to be some elaborate ventilation system or something, because the smoke traveled over the flames into the flue.

Above the carved mantle was another tartan with the falcon embroidered on it. Within the design, she noticed the infinity cross.

Mina walked toward the fire to feel its warmth, and as she got closer, the objects resting on the mantle came into focus. She was much shorter than the mantle and couldn't see every item placed there. She tentatively reached up and pulled down a silver cup. She ran the pad of her thumb over the engraving: Willamina Genevieve ~ Daughter. Mina felt the hair on her head stand on end as her hand began shaking. She placed the cup back on the mantle and reached for the next item. It was a small silver box. She opened it and tinkling music began to play. It was "Baby Mine" from the movie Dumbo. It was what Julia used to sing to her when she was little. As Mina had gotten older and Julia had mentally disconnected with her, she used to hear Julia humming the song when she was alone in her room. Looking down in the box, she saw what looked like a tooth. "My god," escaped her mouth as a whisper. Mina turned and looked at Roderick.

He had moved to one of the chairs in the room and sat in it, staring at her. Watching her reaction to what she saw.

She turned back and looked at the box in her hand. It was tiny, silver and lined with light blue velvet inside. A little tooth lay in the middle. She knew instinctively it was hers. And he had it.

Mina slowly closed the box and placed it back on the mantel. She wasn't sure if she should continue examining everything he had, but curiosity was killing her. She slid her hand along the wood and felt something hard and cold. She grabbed it with her fingertips and brought it down. It was a large square of glass and embedded inside it was a lock of hair. Jesus Christ. Was this her little curl encased in glass?

"Yes. It's yours, Mina. As is everything else up there. Your bonnet from your christening, your first pair of shoes, a bow you wore in your hair. It's all yours." Roderick stood and walked toward her, reaching for the glass square.

She let him have it.

He stared down at it intently. "I remember when your mother sent this to me. She didn't want to cut your hair, but she wanted me to see the color. She waited until you slept and reached underneath near the back of your neck and cut off a curl. She tied it together with a bow and sent it to me." He ran his fingers over the smooth surface of the glass. "It smelled like you for weeks."

Unbelievably, Mina felt a tear run down her cheek. She wasn't supposed to feel sorry for this man. She was here for answers, not affection. Not a relationship. Not until she understood what happened. But watching him look at that lock of hair did something to her. It tore at her chest. He looked like a man with a broken heart. Could she believe that now? Could she believe him?

Roderick looked over at her and wiped the tear away with his finger and smiled at her. "Once I couldn't smell you any longer, I had the curl placed in glass just as it had been sent to me. That way, it would remain intact." He placed the glass back on top of the mantel and took Mina's still-shaking hand. "Come sit with me. I'll tell you everything you want to know about Julia and what she meant to me."

Mina followed him to the couch. She pulled off her boots and curled up in the corner of the leather cushions. Roderick slipped a bottle of water into her hand and then sat

across from her in a large leather chair.

With his elbows on his knees and hunched over his own legs, he looked into Mina's eyes. "I loved your mother with everything I had. The moment I saw her, I wanted her. She was standing in the tower of the Neuschwanstein Castle on holiday with her friends. She leaned on a windowsill looking over the forest." Roderick leaned back in the chair and looked at the ceiling as though picturing her in his mind. "Her hair blew in the wind and her eyes were closed. She was the most striking thing I had ever seen."

He looked back down at Mina and clasped his hands in his lap. "There was just one problem with that little scene. I wasn't in human form. I just happened to be flying as a falcon. The falcon is my strongest form and one I feel most comfortable in. You will soon learn all about your abilities from one of our high council members, Isla. She will be able to help you understand all of the nuances of our race."

Mina absently nodded and gestured for Roderick to continue.

"Right. Well, I circled around and just kept my eyes on Julia. Watching her. She was eventually joined by her friends and she walked away from view. My curiosity got the better of me and I slipped into another window in the castle and transformed back into human form. I made my way down and met up with her tour group. I followed her at a distance, just listening to her voice, watching her movements. She intrigued me. The way she threw her head back when she laughed out loud, like she was so full of joy. I wanted to feel that. I felt as if I couldn't walk away from her. As if she was mine. She was supposed to belong to me.

"I tagged along with the tour group for the next hour or so and when they retreated back to the bus, I slipped away and followed it back to her hotel in falcon form. Then I waited. The next time she exited the hotel, I pretended to bump into her and I asked if she wanted to go for coffee with me. From that day forward, we were together. I knew what I was doing was forbidden, but she seemed to call to me. Her friends went back to the states and I reserved a room for her at the same hotel you stayed in. The same room even. I would meet her during the day and show her Germany. At night ... well, I won't get too much into that, but a few weeks later, we discovered Jewls was pregnant."

Mina put her hand up to interrupt him. "Why was it forbidden? What was wrong with her?"

"Nothing was wrong with her, Mina. Other than the fact she was a different race than I was. You see, decades ago we found if we bred with humans, it was a danger to them and to the child, because humans could not tolerate a Coteri pregnancy. Both the mother and child would die either during or shortly after birth."

"Then why did I live? How did Mom succeed?"

Roderick rose from the chair and ran his hand impatiently through his hair. "The only thing I can think of is that as our relationship deepened, Julia would tell me she thought she could feel me even when I wasn't there. When I would arrive at the hotel to see her, she somehow knew if I had a good or bad day even before I would utter a word to her. She said she felt my emotions as if she had been looking through my eyes."

Mina interrupted again. "But I thought that only happened after the mating had occurred?"

"It does. That's what made it so confusing. I hadn't even slept with Julia at that time. There was something else causing it. Something on a higher plane that I could never figure out. She had something that connected with our race, connected to me. Something

that allowed her to adapt to me and survive a pregnancy. To this day, I still don't know how she did it alone. I think that's why I ignored our laws and became intimate with your mother. I knew I shouldn't, but I had thought if there was some chance she could somehow be mine, I would risk it. I would have never intentionally gotten her pregnant. It would have been too dangerous to her. She had told me she was on birth control and I had assumed that would prevent her from becoming pregnant. But apparently, human birth control doesn't work with Coteri men. And after you were born, I was so grateful I had taken that chance. I didn't even know if Julia would make it through the pregnancy, but she was determined to have you. No matter what happened to her or us. She loved you with everything she had."

Roderick walked back over to Mina and knelt down in front of her. "I know I'm leaving out a lot of information, but I will try to make sure you know everything. I have loved you since the day I found out about you. It has broken my heart all this time not being with you, but Jewls and I decided it would be for the best. For your safety as well as for hers. I also made sure you were always under my protection. From the day you were born."

Mina felt mesmerized by his touch. His stare. She wanted so badly to just reach out and hug him but she still needed answers. She held herself back and asked, "Why would it have been unsafe for us here? Why did you send her away?"

He rubbed his thumb over her cheek and stood again in front of her. "I didn't send her away, Mina. We decided it would be safer if she left and went home. When we began our relationship, she had no idea what I was or what type of title and responsibilities I had. I confided in her because of my love and devotion to her. She believed me immediately. She knew there was something mysterious about me and that our relationship was unique. I told her about our law, and because she was able to become successfully mated with me, we knew that one day the Valta would come after her. And after you. They desperately want to know how to breed with the human race to successfully gain their own army of power. She left to protect you and I let her go to protect the both of you. Can you understand that, Mina?"

Mina hesitated a bit. She didn't want to agree so quickly but she got it. He was protecting them. Not abandoning them. Her gut turned. She believed him. "Yeah, I understand." Mina stood and walked back over to the wall full of shelved books. She scanned the spines and was surprised to find copies of all of her old textbooks as well as everything she had to read for her Literature degree. Shakespeare, Dante, Bronte, all of them were there. Still scanning the books, she asked, "Did you read all of these?"

"Of course I did. I wanted to make sure you were reading substance instead of fluff. I don't normally indulge in reading for pleasure, but I found some of the works to my liking."

Mina reached for one of the books and pulled it down. It was the complete works of Robert Frost. Mina turned and held the book up. "You really read this?"

Roderick squinted to see what the spine revealed. "Well, not all of it, but some. Just enough to make sure it was good enough."

"Good enough for what?"

"For you."

Mina put the book back and walked toward the couch. She took a swallow of water and sat back down and sighed. "So, what now?"

They both sat there in silence for a few minutes. Uncomfortable silence. She didn't know this man and it was obvious to her he desperately wanted to know her. She just needed time. Time to digest what had happened. Time to figure out what to do next.

Mina continued to look around the room, trying to avoid Roderick's stare. She felt completely exhausted and all she wanted was a shower, a bed and Mathias. She briefly closed her eyes.

Roderick picked up on the signal. He stood and reached for her hand. She placed it in his and he pulled her to her feet. He squared himself in front of her and sucked in a breath.

Oh shit. What now.

"I want to discuss one other matter with you before you go, Mina. I want to discuss Mathias."

Mina immediately went on the defensive. "He's not up for discussion, Roderick."

Putting his hands up in surrender, Roderick retorted, "That's not what I meant, Mina. Give me a chance to explain. All right?"

"Fine. Explain."

"Remember the night you first met Mathias?"

"Yeah, I had stupidly followed a wolf into the woods and he was out there. Now that I know what he is, it was probably him messing with me."

Roderick smiled down at her. "No, Mina. It wasn't him. It was me. I lead you to him."

Mina's mouth dropped open at his admission. "It was you?"

"Yes. It was supposed to be Quinn, but I couldn't resist the opportunity to finally see you up close, to be near you. Mathias had no idea it was me. He knew you would be there, but had no idea I had taken Quinn's place. I had to stay away until I explained your existence to my council. I needed to make sure they would accept you and what I had done. I wasn't going to bring you into a hostile environment not knowing how they would react to you. I've known Mathias since he was young. I see him as a son and I trust him implicitly. That's one of the reasons I sent him to protect you. I hoped you would form a bond with him. It's something I was confident would happen. I am very happy for you, Mina. And for Mathias. I couldn't ask for a better mating."

Mina just stood there wide-eyed. Her father had set her up? "What?"

Roderick gave her a crooked smile. "You heard me. I'm glad you're with him. I just hope things will go easy for you. I am extremely thankful our people have accepted the fact I have a child. There will be challenges later, but I'm hopeful the Coteri will see you as one of their own." He stepped closer and placed his hand tentatively on Mina's belly. "And you, Mina, will soon have a child of your own."

She couldn't swallow. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't feel anything. She went completely numb. The only response she could actually think of came tumbling out of her mouth. "Fuuuuuuck."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Mina, honey! It’s all right.”

Her face was completely drained of blood and her body was about to collapse on the hard, cold, stone floor. Pregnant? She couldn’t be pregnant. There was no way. The doctors had told her that all of the endometriosis she had dealt with in the past would probably make it almost impossible for her to conceive. She thought about it again. “Probably” and “almost” had never been prominent in that statement, but all of a sudden, those two words meant a whole hell of a lot. The only reason she was on the pill was to regulate her periods. She never even thought about the chance of getting pregnant. It had always been a dead issue.

Mina reached behind her and she caught the arm of the chair. She slumped down in the cushion and didn’t blink. Her breathing started to hitch and she felt another panic attack coming on. Oh god. Pregnant.

Could she hope? Could she believe?

She absently started looking for her bag, instinctively craving a cigarette. This was one of those times when one was a prerequisite to keeping her sanity. Her hand flailed next to her and she started scanning the room with her wide eyes.

Roderick knelt in front of her and grasped her hands in his. “Your bag isn’t here, Mina, and even if it was, I wouldn’t let you have what you are looking for.”

“I know.” She huffed. “Hey wait ... get out of my head, Roderick.”

“I’m sorry, Mina, but you needn’t worry. This is wonderful news.”

Mina continued to stare at the floor in front of her. The carpet covering the stone floor was gorgeous with its blues, whites and grays swirling together. She looked around the room and noticed all of the colors and fixtures. All beautiful. All one of a kind. All from a world she knew nothing about. And why the fuck was she thinking about color patterns now? And just how many major life changes could a single psyche take without imploding?

She fixed her gaze on the man kneeling in front of her. His eyes were deep and dark. His face was beautiful and worn. His lips were pursed together and tilted up to one side in a slight smile. He wanted to be her father. She knew he told the truth. She could somehow sense that the man in front of her would do anything for her. Her mother made a good choice in this man.

Mina grasped one of Roderick’s hands and squeezed. “How can you know this? How can you be sure I’m pregnant?”

Roderick squeezed her hand back. “You are a part of me Mina. Therefore, I’m very attuned to you. Also, a Coteri mating is a very strong thing. It is easily sensed amongst our people.”

Mina looked back at Roderick. “Wait. You mean I can’t get pregnant unless I’m mated?”

“That’s how it works, Mina. Once two people are mated, they can then start planning a family of their own.”

Mina released his hand and stood. She absently put her palm on her stomach as though she felt what was currently growing inside her. She walked a few steps away from

Roderick and then turned to look at him. “But Mathias and I were just mated within the last twenty-four hours. How could you know I was pregnant in that short of a time?”

Roderick stood and faced her. “That’s not possible, Mina. I can sense you have been with child for at least a few days.”

Mina looked down at the floor again. It had been that long since they had been in Munich. The first time they had been together. The first time they had made love. She looked back up at Roderick. “But ... we weren’t fully mated then. The way Mathias explained it was I would have to take his blood into my body to become fully mated. I hadn’t done that until yesterday.”

“He explained it correctly, Mina. A pregnancy doesn’t occur until both people have committed themselves to each other. But like your mother, you are special.”

“Oh god. Please do not call me special. I absolutely hate that word.”

Roderick smiled slightly and reached out to grab Mina’s hand again. “That’s not what I meant, Mina. I was only speaking of your uniqueness within the Coteri. Your mother also became pregnant before we were fully mated, which tells me she and you both hold something exceptional inside you that allows you to merge with Coteri blood easier than an ordinary human woman. That’s why you need to speak with Isla. She will try and figure out what it is that you have that allows you to mate and breed within the Coteri.” He ran his thumbs over the tops of Mina’s hands in a soothing motion. “Now that you are with child, Mina, we may be able to finally figure out this puzzle. If you are willing.”

“As long as there is no danger to the baby, I’ll help. I don’t want this to happen to another woman and she not know what to do.”

“The baby will be fully protected. No harm will come to her.”

Mina’s eyes snapped wide. “Her?”

Roderick smiled again. “Him. Her. I’m just partial to little girls, that’s all. Whatever it is, it will be protected and cherished.”

Mina felt her hands trembling. Her body trembling. A baby.

“Okay. I’ll help. When do I meet with Isla?”

Releasing her hands, Roderick turned and strode back to his desk and sat down behind it. Mina got the feeling he felt much more comfortable sitting behind a desk than being out in the open. Some men felt it was a symbol of power. Like her previous asshole boss. He would sit behind that damn desk, lean back in his chair, put his hands behind his head and bark out orders like a freaking dictator. But Roderick was different. He sat behind his as though it was part of him. It was covered with paperwork, books, maps and god only knew what else. She was sure he knew what everything was and exactly where it was. It was one of those chaotic but organized desks she had never had. She was much too anal to allow that kind of clutter.

Mina followed him over and sat on the corner. She fingered some of the papers at her side, trying not to look directly at him. She was still uncomfortable around him and it would take time to get over that. She had spent twenty-eight years not even aware of his existence so it would be a while until she would feel comfortable thinking of him as Dad.

Roderick finally spoke, “I would like you to meet with her as soon as you’re comfortable. I know you’re tired and you should rest. You’ve gone through a lot in the last week, and now that you carry my grandchild, I expect you to remain rested and healthy. That mate of yours will be overjoyed with the news.”

Mina cleared her throat and raised her hand. "About that, Roderick. How could you tell I was pregnant and he couldn't?"

"You are my child. Part of me. That's how."

"Okay. Well, I would appreciate you keeping this between you, me and Isla for now. I don't want to take any chances with my body just in case." She absently placed her hand over her belly. "Plus, I want to be the one to tell Mathias in my own time and on my own terms. Is that okay with you?"

Roderick bowed his head toward her. "As you wish, Mina. Now go and rest. I will send word to you when you are expected to meet with Isla."

They both stood and awkwardly faced each other. What was she supposed to do? Hug him? No. Shake his hand? Too weird. Bow? Hell no. Instead, she just smiled up at him and said, "Thank you, Roderick."

Again, he bowed his head. "You are very welcome, Mina. Do you need assistance back to your room?"

Mina backed away and reached for her discarded boots. She slid them on and slowly walked toward the door. "Yes. That would be great."

Roderick walked in front of her and opened one of the huge doors. "Gabriel, please escort Mina back to her and Mathias' room."

Gabriel turned and came to attention. "Yes, sire."

Mina took Gabriel in once more. Damn, this man was fine. Big, bronze, beautiful. The three B's Chloe looked for. Mina was going to have to find her cell phone pretty quick, so she could somehow get Chloe here. This place was like the Macy's store of men. And although she could enjoy the scenery, there was only one man who stirred her senses, her heart and her soul.

Roderick stopped Mina at the door and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Are you all right, Mina? Is there anything else you need?"

Mina exhaled and immediately thought of all the questions she still wanted to ask him, but her exhaustion was winning over her curiosity. "Not right now, Roderick. Thanks, though. I just want to get back to my room."

Roderick removed his hand. "Fine then. Gabriel will get you there quickly. Keep in mind, you will need to learn the layout of the castle, so you can become more familiar with it."

He quickly leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on Mina's cheek. She gasped but didn't move away. He smiled. "Good night, Mina. Sleep well."

Embarrassed and blushing, Mina couldn't meet his eyes. She walked forward looking at the floor and replied, "Thanks. I will."

Mina followed Gabriel's huge form down the long hallway back the way she had come. Her hand circled on her rounded stomach. A baby. How in the freaking hell had she gotten pregnant? She was on the pill, had several surgeries for her endometriosis and her OB had told her not to hold out hope on a pregnancy. Ever.

Now within the span of a week and a half she had found her father, fell in love and was carrying a child. Hell. If this was what her mother meant by one day you will know why you are so special then Mina wished Julia could have been a bit more specific.

A small smile formed on Mina's face just thinking about a little baby growing inside her. Little fingers. Little toes. Mina had always had a thing for baby's feet. Their little toes all scrunched up and pudgy. Whenever she had seen any of her friend's babies, the

first thing she would do is pull off the little socks and kiss the baby's feet. Most of the time the little child would squirm in her arms at the feeling of her lips on their little feet. And the smell. Ahh, the smell of a baby. Soft and powdery. Their fine hair, chubby legs and plump cheeks made Mina just want to eat them up. She had never imagined she would have one of her own. That idea had gone by the wayside after her fourth surgery at age nineteen, after Dr. Rainwater had told her there was too much scar tissue to successfully carry a pregnancy to term.

Rubbing her belly, she wondered what Dr. Rainwater would say today. Considering it took another species to knock her up. Well, however it happened, Mina felt awed by the news. She looked back up at Gabriel's wide back and reached her hand out to his arm to stop him.

He turned and looked down at her. "What is it, Mina?"

"Do you have a phone I could use, or is there one around here? I want to call my friend."

"Your bag is in your room, Mina, so I assume your phone is there as well. Let's get you there so you can check. If it's not there, I will provide one for you."

"My bag is in my room?"

Gabriel held out his hand in front of him indicating to Mina he wanted her to begin walking again. "Talon returned it after they went through everything inside, checking for bugs or tracking devices. You'll find everything there."

"Great. Thanks."

"Not a problem, Mina. We're not far now."

Mina felt herself start to walk a bit faster. Just the idea of having her own stuff back made her feel better. She just wanted to talk to Chloe and tell her everything. Try to get her to come to Germany to stay for a while. Hell, Chloe was from money. She could afford to take some unpaid time off for her best friend. And based on the men circulating through this castle, Chloe would not get bored in the least.

But Mina also wanted to see Mathias. She was dying to tell him about the baby, but should she? Would he be happy or think it happened too soon? There was always the chance her body could reject the pregnancy, but Roderick had made it sound as if she was safe. She would be all right through the pregnancy. She hoped he was right.

For longer than she could remember, Mina always had the "glass is half empty" attitude. If it wasn't her asshole boss, it was Julia retreating into her own mind. The medical problems she had had. Or her inability to trust people. There had always been something holding her down and preventing her from being completely happy. But as she followed Gabriel down the stone hallways lined with antique sconces, she realized the familiar pit in her stomach was gone. Yes, her mother was gone, but Mina knew Julia would be happy knowing she had returned to Roderick and had agreed to stay with him. She was in love. She was having a baby. She was financially secure. She had a true best friend she could trust entirely. She was free to be happy. For once in her life, it was completely and totally up to her.

Mina smiled again. This time much bigger. She felt her eyes well up with tears and one slipped down her cheek. Jesus. She was actually crying in happiness. She looked up and saw Gabriel looked at her over his shoulder, giving her a wink and a smirk. Somehow, he knew the tear that had tracked down her face was in joy and not sadness.

Gabriel continued to lead her through the maze of hallways that confused her to no

end. They rounded the corner and entered the large atrium she had been in before with Mathias. Finally, a room she was familiar with. She could find her way back from here. Mina reached out to stop Gabriel and froze at what she saw. Mathias was standing in the middle of the room with a red-headed woman. A tall, toned, leather-encased, spike-heeled redhead. Her arms were around his middle and her head was tipped up toward him. Mina couldn't see her face, but with an ass like that, she didn't need to. Mina felt a familiar churning in her stomach grow.

Betrayal.

Mina couldn't move. All of the blood had rushed out of her body. Her fingertips were numb. Her legs weak. She wanted to run, but she couldn't make her body move. She just continued to stand there and watch what happened play out right in front of her.

Gabriel quickly placed his hand at her elbow, gently pulling. "Come, Mina. You can talk to Mathias about this when he comes to your room. Let's keep going."

Mina looked up at Gabriel and just stared. Her mouth open, her eyes wide with shock. Shaking her head, she answered him in what sounded like a croak, "I don't think so."

* * * *

Standing in the middle of the atrium waiting for Mina, Mathias was almost tackled from behind. Someone had attached themselves to his back, wrapping their arms and legs around him. He straightened and reached behind him to floor the attacker when he noticed fiery red hair bouncing over his shoulder. He twisted and grabbed, flipping the attacker over his shoulder. The lithe body he captured was wriggling and giggling in his grasp. Mathias immediately felt the warmth in his chest build. "Hey, baby. I missed you."

His assailant placed a warm kiss on his cheek and then smiled. "I missed you too, general. I'm glad you're safe."

Mathias immediately started to scan the room. He couldn't let anyone see him with her, especially with Mina in the castle. This was the one secret he had yet to own up to and Mina walking in and seeing him lovingly holding a leather-clad, six-foot redhead would not be the way to let her find out.

He looked down into gorgeous emerald eyes and couldn't help but see the complete happiness in them. He hated to ruin her joy but he had to get rid of her. Fast. "You have to get out of here, baby. Mina is on her way back and if she sees you, we're both dead. I haven't told her about you yet. She needed to meet her father first and feel more secure with everything she's recently learned. Now is not the right time to drop this on her."

"I don't want to hide anymore, Mathias. She needs to know about us. The sooner the better."

Mathias gently set her on her five-inch heeled boots and grasped her shoulders, holding her sternly in front of him. "I know we need to tell her about us but not like this. If she sees us together, she won't understand. Now give me a kiss and go. I'll find you later."

Perfectly manicured hands went to her curvy hips in aggravation. "So, you're trying to get rid of me too, huh?"

"What do you mean 'too'? Who did you see?"

Silence.

"Tell me who."

Stubborn silence.

Realization slammed into Mathias at her refusal to answer him. “Damn it, I told you to stay away from him.”

“Nothing happened.”

Mathias dropped his forehead to hers and growled protectively, “Stay away from him. I’m warning you. I’ll kill him if he keeps doing this to you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Like I said, it’s over so don’t worry.”

He laid a kiss on her forehead and wrapped her in a tight embrace. “It better be. No one messes with what’s mine.”

She blew out an irritated breath and pushed back from him. “No worries about that. Trust me.”

He could see the unresolved emotions in her eyes. In her posture. Her body language. She was still holding on to feelings for her first love and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. It killed him to see her hurting, but at the same time he felt the anger flushing over him like a heat wave. He would not allow her to be hurt. She meant too much to him.

He pulled her in for another hug. “You have to get out of here before you’re seen. I can’t have Mina find out about you like this. She deserves a full explanation.”

She squeezed him tight and leaned up to kiss him lightly. “I missed you so much, Mathias. Love you.”

He smiled down at her and felt the love he had for this woman warm him. It had been too long since he had held her. Spent time with her. Mathias realized he had missed her terribly and letting her go at that moment hurt. But he also knew he needed to tell Mina the truth. She deserved that much. “Me too. Now go.”

Chapter Thirty

Mina started walking toward Mathias and the redhead. Numb betrayal had turned to intense rage. The woman's arms were wrapped around him and she leaned in to ... oh the fuck she isn't. That bitch leaned in to kiss him. Mina felt the urge to shove her fist down this whore's throat, and then kick Mathias' balls into his. Hands fisted at her sides, her boots clomping on the hard, marble floor, Mina was announcing her approach.

Mathias' head rose and he immediately caught sight of her coming toward him. His face visibly paled and he immediately removed the redhead from his embrace and pulled her behind him. Hands raised he started walking toward Mina. "Mina, just hold on and let me explain. This isn't what you're thinking."

"Like hell, you bastard." Mina swung her fist and barely missed his jaw. She stumbled forward, righted herself and started toward them again. "What the fuck do you think it looks like you lying prick?" She was going to kill the both of them.

The redhead spun and looked right at Mina.

What. The. Fuck.

Mina froze in total and complete shock.

"Chloe?"

For a brief moment, Mina felt ultimate relief. Her heart actually jumped and she started to move toward her best friend. Wanting to embrace her and tell her everything that had happened. Tell her about the baby. About Mathias. About her father. About everything. Hell, Mina actually smiled when she saw her. Chloe was here.

Wait...

Her smile faded. Her heart stopped.

Chloe put out her arms and started toward her. "Mina, honey. I'm here now."

How was Chloe here? Mina hadn't told her where she was. Hadn't told Mathias or anyone else how to get in touch with her. And why the hell did Mathias have his hands all over her? Mina raised her hand. "No."

She looked Chloe up and down just to make sure she saw what she thought she was seeing. Sure enough, her best friend stood in front of her. In the palace. In Germany. And why did she have on black leather pants and fuck-me boots? "What the hell is going on? How are you here? Why were you all over him?" Mina waved her hands wildly in front of her. "What are you doing, Chloe?"

Chloe stopped but kept her arms outstretched. Her hands turned up in surrender. "I know you're confused, Mina, but I ... we can explain everything."

"We? What the fuck do you mean 'we'?" She felt her blood pounding under her skin.

For a brief moment, Mina had forgotten Mathias was even standing there. She looked over at him, his head hung in defeat and his hands were fisted on his waist. Busted.

"You mean you and that bastard over there? Now it's 'we'?"

"Mina, please. Just listen. I'm his sister. Not his lover. His sister, honey. He's my brother, which means now you're my real sister. Mina, you're my sister now."

Shaking her head, Mina raised her hands in disbelief. "W-what?"

“Sister. I’m his sister.” Chloe’s excitement was evident in her broad smile.

“What?” Mina’s brows twisted in confusion. “How? You mean you’ve known about this all along? Known what I was?”

Chloe took a couple of steps toward Mina to breach the space. “Yes, honey. I knew, but I had no choice. Roderick sent me to you to watch over you. I couldn’t tell you, Mina. Hell, I couldn’t even tell Mathias. That was part of the assignment. I was there to make sure you were protected. No one was to know who you were.” Chloe continued to advance.

Mina threw her hand up and stomped her foot on the floor. “Stop.”

Chloe froze.

Mina looked over at Mathias again and saw the pain on his face. The knowledge that she now knew the truth. The defeat. “You didn’t know she was with me all this time? When I told you the name of my friend ... that’s when you put it together?”

Mathias’ head rose and he met her furious gaze. “No, Mina. I knew she was with you, but not until I was given this assignment right before you got here. Roderick told me where Chloe had been and the role she had played in your protection. I had no idea anything would happen between us. No idea the effect you would have on me. Please, Mina. Just listen to us.”

At that moment, Mina’s heart froze. She felt nothing. She had been fooled. Used. Taken advantage of. Pitied. Lied to. Betrayed.

Again.

She squared her shoulders and looked directly at Chloe. “I was a job? Protect me? My god, you were a part of me and all I was to you was an assignment?” A single tear tracked down her face. “You let me go through all that pain. You watched me break down every day. What about LA, Chloe? Was there even a job? Oh wait, I was the fucking job. You lied about that too. You let me get on a plane and come over here by myself knowing I felt like falling apart. You abandoned me and all I ever did to you was love you like a sister. How could you do this to me?”

Chloe moved forward again, trying to get close enough to touch Mina. “No! No, Mina. That’s not it at all. I wanted to tell you, so many times, and I knew you had to make this journey to Germany on your own so I made up the new job in LA. Just let me explain it all to you. Please Mina. I love you.”

In a soft voice, void of emotion, Mina replied. “I don’t think so. And I don’t believe you. Not this time. How do you expect me to ever believe anything that comes out of your mouth, Chloe? Everything you said or did was a lie. Our friendship was a lie.” She pointed her finger at Chloe. “You are a fucking lie!” Sweeping her hand in front of her, she looked at Mathias then. “And you too, you bastard. I’m done with the both of you. Done with all of this.”

Mathias started toward her. “Mina. Wait, chère.”

Mina’s numb control snapped as she screamed, “Don’t call me that!”

She was shaking now. She didn’t know what to do. Where to go. She turned and Gabriel was still standing behind her, looking at her with pity. Pity was not what she wanted. She wanted out of there and she didn’t care where she would end up. She just needed to get out.

She took off toward the first hallway she saw and left them behind. Their screams for her to come back were echoing off the atrium walls as she rounded the first corner and

started up a flight of stairs. She had no idea where she was, but she didn't care. The walls were closing in on her and she was having trouble breathing. Her chest was burning and her legs ached as she continued to race through the maze of hallways and staircases. She wanted to get lost. To get away. She couldn't face any of them. All of them had lied to her. Her mother, her best friend, her lover, her father. She didn't have anyone. She was alone. Well, not totally. She had a baby inside her. One she needed to think of right now.

Breathing heavily, she slowed down and looked around at her surroundings. To her right, there was a massive door, but with an equally massive lock on it. She tried it anyway. The door squeaked open and she flew inside and locked it behind her. Maybe they wouldn't find her here.

She leaned her forehead against the cold wooden door and tried to catch her breath. Her hands instinctively went to her belly. A baby. God, what was she going to do? She had no knowledge of what this baby would be. No knowledge of her heritage. No one to depend on. The tears started to flow down her cheeks and splashed on the floor next to her feet. "Damn it to hell."

The sounds of pounding footsteps snapped her out of her trance along with the sizzling feeling flowing over her skin she knew would be Mathias coming closer. Hell. That's how he found her. The mating. The bond. "Shit."

She backed away from the door and waited. Waited for him to burst through and try to make her listen to him. To make her understand. She didn't want to hear it. She just wanted away from there.

Sure enough, he began beating on the door, begging her to open it and let him and Chloe in. The beating started to get louder and then there were loud bangs. He was trying to kick the door in. It wasn't budging. Thank god.

"Go away and leave me alone!"

Chloe started pleading. "Please, Mina. Please just let us explain. You have to hear us out."

"Open the door, Mina," Mathias ordered.

"Go to hell!"

The banging continued until Mina put her hands over her ears and slid to the floor. The room was too dark to see anything and she had no idea how to turn on a light. She could be in a coat closet for all she knew, but at least the door held.

Finally the banging stopped. She didn't hear voices. She couldn't feel him. Thank god. He was gone. She tried to focus on the room and where she could possibly be. It was still too dark to see, so she moved forward on her hands and knees back toward the door. There had to be a switch or something there to light the room. She reached the door and stood. She ran her hands up and down the walls trying to find anything when the room suddenly lit up.

Mina quickly turned and was face-to-face with Roderick.

She was so startled she jumped backward and banged her head on the door. "Jesus, Roderick! Where did you come from?"

He came forward and placed his hand on the back of Mina's head. "Are you all right, Kätzchen?"

Mina batted at his hand and moved away from him. "I'm fine. How did you get in here?"

"Look around you, Mina." His arms outstretched and he turned to reveal her

location. "I created this room. It has always been mine to move in and out of. Now it will finally be yours."

At his statement, Mina looked over his shoulder and saw what he referred to. "Oh, Jesus." Mina absently started walking forward, around Roderick, to take in what she was really looking at. This was her room. The same room he had written about to her mother years ago. The room he had made for her and had imagined her living in.

It was gorgeous. Two levels, an open loft with what looked like racks and racks of dresses. The bed was small. A child's bed. All ruffles and lace. Baby dolls all over. A little tea set on top of a miniature table and chairs. Mina walked over and picked up a tiny tea cup. She palmed it and looked back at Roderick. "You really wanted me here, didn't you?"

"Infinitely."

Mina placed the delicate tea cup back on its saucer and sat on the end of the bed. She placed her head in her hands and bent over. Mumbling through her fingers, she asked, "What am I supposed to do, Roderick? Who do I believe?" A small sob escaped her. "I'm all alone."

He walked over to the little table and pulled out one of the miniature chairs. Sitting in front of her, he ran his hand over her hair. "All of this was my doing, Mina. I sent Chloe to you for your protection. Believe her when she says she loves you. When you were taken, she was frantic. She would do anything for you, but you have to realize she was in Washington under my orders. She went there to watch over you, but while there she fell in love with you as a sister. As you have said, she is a part of you. But you are a part of her too." He placed his finger under her chin and lifted her gaze to his. "You are not alone, Kätzchen. You have your family with you now."

Mina's eyes were reddened and swollen. "What about Mathias? Did you send him to me to keep me busy too? Is what he feels real?"

Roderick brought Mina's hands into his. His large palms engulfed her small hands. He was warm. "That man would die for you. He gave you his mark. He gave you his life. Do you really think he would do that on a whim? You know him, Mina. What kind of Coteri male he is. Do you really think he has it in him to hurt you? To hurt anyone out of selfishness?"

He kissed her fingertips. "And do you really think I would let him near my only child if I didn't think otherwise?"

That got a small smile from Mina. "I can't stand this feeling, Roderick. I kept you away from her. I was the reason she couldn't be with you and I felt that emptiness in her."

Roderick reached over and pulled Mina into an embrace. "Mina, honey. You were not the reason she stayed away. I was. I wouldn't risk you or her. I forbid her to return." He ran his large hands down her back and gave her a tight squeeze. Closing his eyes, he felt whole. "I just thought if you both were safe, then everything would be all right. I told myself I had to learn to live without the both of you. I never succeeded in doing so. It was me, Kätzchen. Not you. Never you."

Her sobbing racked her body and she was thankful for Roderick's arms around her. His warmth made it easier to let go. She hadn't cried like this since the day her mother died. Sometimes a good cry can take it all away. Make it all better.

She didn't know how long she cried in his arms, but the tears finally dried and she

found herself lying in his arms, looking up at the rows of dresses in the loft.

Sniffing, Mina asked, "Where did the dresses come from?"

Roderick smiled down at her and then looked up at the loft. "I picked them out for you. One for each of your birthdays. I always dreamed of seeing you in them."

Mina wiped her eyes with her sleeves and blew out a big breath. She straightened and ran her fingers through her hair. It was time for her to move on. Time for her to accept that her mother loved this man with all she had and sacrificed a life with him to make sure Mina was safe. Time to try and let Roderick into her life and hopefully, into her heart. "Well, how about I go try on number twenty-eight for you before I get too fat to fit into it? I have a feeling this baby is going to do a number on me."

Roderick's eyes visibly watered. "You would do that? For me?"

Mina straightened and stood in front of him. "Sure. I think you and I should start spending time together to get to know each other better. If I am ever going to call you 'Dad' I think I need to know all about you."

"Dad?"

Mina smiled and turned toward the staircase that led to the upper loft. "Yeah, Dad. Or would you prefer something else?"

Roderick chuckled. "Dad would be great."

Chapter Thirty-One

Complying with Roderick's order to return to his room had been one of the hardest things Mathias had done in a long time. He didn't want to leave Mina. He had to explain why he hadn't told her the truth. He knew she didn't trust easily and he had the sinking feeling he had completely lost her when she saw him with Chloe. Damn his timing.

He was happy to see his sister, but he was also scared to death Mina would see her as well. And at that very moment, his fear became a reality.

The look on her face would be burned into his brain forever. She had been so hurt. So angry. Mathias knew his relentless pacing wasn't going to help, but he needed to keep moving. Needed to keep thinking of a way to get Mina to believe him. He couldn't lose her. Not now.

Too lost in thought, he didn't hear the door to his room close, because when he turned, Mina stood against it. He froze mid-step and waited. He didn't want to say anything to make her run. He was too fearful whatever came out of his mouth would ruin any chance he had with her. He just looked at her and waited.

Standing in front of the door, one foot crooked to the side, Mina twiddled her fingers as if she were nervous. That was a good start. At least she didn't have balled-up fists ready to take him on.

Mathias had no idea what to say. Should he drop to his knees and grovel? Beg for forgiveness? He had no clue. But standing there not saying anything wasn't helping matters.

He began walking toward her and Mina raised her hand to stop him. He immediately halted. "Please, chère."

Mina held her head high. "If you have anything to say, say it from there."

Mathias uncomfortably shifted from side to side and looked down. How was he supposed to explain so Mina could understand? Would she even give him a chance? There was nothing left for him to do but try. "I was under orders, Mina. I never expected to want you the way I did. I just thought I would keep you busy until Roderick could see you and that would be it. I never expected to feel what I do for you."

He took a slight step toward her, and again her hand came up to stop him.

"I didn't say anything about Roderick or your bloodline because I knew Roderick wanted to do it himself." He ran a nervous hand through his hair. "It wasn't my place, baby. It was his, as your father. And Chloe being my sister; I wanted to tell you. I did. I just wasn't sure how. Hell, I thought Roderick might have told you while you were with him."

Mina continued to stare at him. "It didn't come up. We had other things to discuss."

"Obviously or you wouldn't have reacted like you did when you saw her with me. I would never touch another female in a sexual way. I want you and only you. You have to know that." He paused and took another step forward. "You know that, don't you?"

Mina looked down at the floor and didn't answer.

"I am so sorry, Mina. Sorry I couldn't tell you. Sorry I kept my relationship with Chloe from you. But I'm not sorry for making love to you." He slowly started toward her, not able to stand the distance between them. "For marking you. I want you with me. I

want a life with you. Can you forgive me?"

Mina looked up at Mathias and gave him a small smile. "Roderick explained everything. I know why you did what you did."

Mathias moved a little closer to her.

She immediately brought her hand up to stop him again. "I'm not done yet."

His hands came up in surrender and he froze in place.

"I also need you to know where I'm coming from on this. I spent my life watching my mother crave something she couldn't have with Roderick. That did something to me. It's very hard for me to drop whatever defenses I have and let anyone in. I let Chloe in a long time ago. Her betrayal cuts me deeper than you can ever imagine and I have to figure out a way to deal with that. But I let you in as well. And I do understand your reasons for not telling me about Chloe." Mina shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "I don't know how to do this very well, but I'm going to try my best." Mina inhaled and she looked Mathias dead in the eye. "I love you, Mathias, and I want to be with you, always."

His body immediately flamed with life. Yes.

She continued to shift her weight back and forth and now was nervously twisting her fingers together. "I won't be the easiest person to live with and I still have issues when it comes to trust, but I promise I'll work on that."

Mathias started toward her again, but once again she stopped him with a movement of her hand.

"Just wait. There's one more thing." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to need you to be incredibly comforting and supportive, because having this baby is going to do one hell of a job on my ego."

The heat vanished from his body along with what he thought was every drop of blood he had left.

"Baby?" He rasped.

He dropped to his knees. He pressed his face into her belly and kissed her through her sweater. He then lifted it so he could press his lips to her warm skin. He was finally breathing again. "Baby. My baby. Our baby."

Mina smiled down at him. "Yes. Baby."

Mathias came to his feet and pulled Mina to him. He kissed her deep and hard. His hands tunneling into her hair and holding her to him. He didn't let her come up for air. He just kept kissing her. Holding her. He couldn't get close enough to her. He broke away and they were nose-to-nose, staring into each other's tear-filled eyes. Breathing heavily, he finally spoke. "It hurts, I love you so much."

"Are you all right with this?"

Mathias barked a crazy little laugh. "All right? Oh baby. I'm more than all right. You are giving me what I never thought I could have. You're giving me a child. Our child." He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight. "You realize you are never leaving my sight, right?"

Mina let out a breathless laugh. "Mathias. You're squishing me."

He quickly let go and put his hands around her arms, holding her in front of him. "You are not to leave me. You understand? I won't let anything happen to you or the baby. You stay with me."

Mina continued to laugh. "Babe, it's all right. I'm in a castle guarded by hundreds of

Coteri warriors. I don't think anything is going to happen."

"You're damn right nothing is going to happen." He let her go and started pacing around the room talking to himself, running his shaking hands through his hair. "We're going to need twenty-four-hour security, the best doctor here, need to talk to Isla, need to talk to Roderick." He quickly turned back to Mina and asked, "What did Roderick say? Was he angry? Oh shit. I didn't think of that. I knocked up his daughter before he even got to see you. Shit. He's gonna kill me, isn't he?"

Laughing, Mina walked over to him and ran her hands underneath his shirt and pressed into his chest. "No. He is not going to kill you. He's pretty happy about it, actually. He said something about knowing it was going to happen or something like that. He was kind of cryptic about it, but he was genuinely happy about being a grandfather. You're off the hook, Daddy."

"Daddy," Mathias repeated and smiled, pulling her closer. "I like that."

Mina smiled back at him. "I like it too."

"Oh shit."

Mathias let go of Mina and began pacing the room again. "I forgot about Chloe. She's going to Roderick to ask to be sent out on another assignment. She said she couldn't stay here if you didn't forgive her. She said she had to get out of here. Shit, Mina." He turned back toward her. "We need to get to her."

Mina sat back down on the end of the bed and let out a long breath. "Mathias, I have to take some time and think about this." She laced her fingers together and placed her hands in her lap. "The betrayal from Chloe runs deeper because of how long it continued and how close we were. I know Chloe did what she was ordered to do, but there's a difference between following orders and doing what's right." She looked up at Mathias as tears filled her eyes. "She was by my side for years, Mathias. She watched me go through some of the most emotionally traumatic experiences in my life and had the power to make things better by telling me the truth. She chose not to."

Mina wiped the tears from her face and gave Mathias a hint of a smile. "I know you don't understand, but I can't just forgive her with a snap of my fingers. There's too much there. Too much history. I can't bring myself to speak to her right now, much less even be in the same room with her. Like I said, I'm not an easy person to be with, but this is just how I feel. Deep down I still love her like my sister, but I just need some time. I hope you can understand."

Mathias sat down and put his arms around her. "I understand, Mina. I just wish this hadn't happened the way it did. And she did want to tell you, love. Right before you came to Germany, Chloe was ready to tell you everything, but she knew this was Roderick's duty."

Mina turned toward him and placed her hands on his face. "She thought about it too late, Mathias. And although her betrayal nearly killed me, if all this hadn't happened exactly in this way, I wouldn't have your baby inside me." She kissed him softly on the mouth. "This is between me and Chloe. You let us handle it. Okay?"

"Fine. But I need to get to her and stop her from going. Right?"

Mina kissed him again. "Yeah, I agree. I'm not ready to deal with this right now, but we can't work on it if she isn't here. You're right about that." She kissed him again. "But she wouldn't be leaving right now. It would take some time to make arrangements and I'm sure Roderick wouldn't send her out without telling you. Would he?"

Mina buried her hands in his hair and pulled him toward her. She lay back on the bed and smiled. “We have time, don’t we?”

Mathias reached down and grabbed the hem of her sweater and pulled it up. Smiling down at his mate, he felt happiness bloom inside him. “Yeah, we have time.”

Epilogue

Roderick leaned back in his chair and plopped his booted feet on the corner of his desk. This was all he needed. Killian stood in front of him seething with anger at the fact Roderick had kept Mina a secret all of these years, and what made it worse was she had lived in the Pacific Northwest the entire time. Killian's territory.

"Like I have said over and over again, Killian, it was not a question of your loyalty or your trust. I couldn't let anyone know of Mina's existence."

"Bullshit, Roderick." Killian's face was red with anger. "Isla knew about her. Chloe knew about her. Why not me? She was living in my backyard, for fuck's sake, and you didn't have the decency to trust me with her safety. Instead, you left that to a little girl and her first assignment."

Roderick shot out of his chair and stormed toward Killian. With his finger pointed directly between Killian's eyes, Roderick growled, "Do not speak of what you do not know, Killian. Chloe was, and is still, the best at acclimation to the human world. She protected my child and she did so successfully. You will respect her for at least that."

Killian remained silent. He slowly lowered his head. "My apologies, sire. I've overstepped my boundaries and I am truly sorry."

Roderick lowered his hand and thumped Killian on the forehead. "Cut it out, Kil. You know I hate that sire shit. Now just forget this, will you? Mina is here and I want to concentrate on her, not some misunderstanding between you and me."

Killian rubbed his head and smirked at Roderick. "That seriously hurt."

Roderick rolled his eyes and sat back down at his desk. "Now when are you leaving to go back to Washington? I need to see if you can take care of a few things for Mina while you're there."

Killian backed away out of Roderick's reach before replying, "Oh, so now I'm an errand boy?"

A pen flew out of Roderick's hand so fast Killian didn't have a chance to duck, letting it bounce off the side of his face. "One of these days, Killian, I am going to change your territory to Antarctica. Maybe that will shut that mouth of yours."

Killian rubbed his cheek. "Doubtful."

Roderick sat back in his chair and crossed his feet on the corner of his desk again. "So are we done here or do you want to bitch and whine some more?"

"No more bitching. But I do need a favor."

"What?"

"Since she comes with such a glowing recommendation, I would like to ask for Chloe's services for the next couple of months. There have been moves made against some women's clinics in the area and I need someone on the inside."

That got Roderick's attention. "What sort of moves are you talking about?"

"Threats. A few break-ins, but the worst was a few weeks ago when two young girls were abducted from a clinic in Olympia and then the building was blown to pieces."

Killian winced at what he was about to say next. "A doctor and three nurses were killed in the blast."

Roderick ran his hands through his hair and sighed. "And you think sending Chloe in

there would help? Is this your way of getting payback? Because if it is, let me warn you ... I will not sacrifice her over your ego, Killian.”

“Jesus, Roderick. You just said she was the best at acclimation. I need her. I need someone inside and because she is a woman, she will be accepted much quicker than anyone else. You know as well as I do women are the targets and if she can take care of herself like you say she can, she’s what I need. I’ll protect her just like I would anyone else. At least trust me in that, would you?”

Before Roderick could utter his protest, the doors to the study burst open and Chloe stood there. “I’m going, Roderick, and don’t even think about telling me otherwise.”

* * * *

Still groggy from the night before, it had taken several rings of the cell phone to bring him out of his coma-like sleep. He had spent the better part of the evening entwined with two women and then drank himself into a stupor.

He reached over and grabbed the phone. “What?”

“There’s movement I thought you should know about.”

He sighed and ran a hand down his unshaven face. “Again ... what?”

“Killian is taking the redhead back to Washington. The one who twists Talon in knots.”

He sat up in bed and swung his tanned legs over the side. “Ooohhh. That’s good. When are they leaving?”

“They are on their way out now. Mina will be completely ensconced in the palace. And you’re gonna love this part.”

“Just spill it.”

“Apparently breeding with humans is a little easier than we thought. Mina’s pregnant.”

There was a long silence over the receiver. “You still there?”

A spine chilling laugh erupted over the phone. “Oh, fucking perfect.”

“What do you want me to do now?”

Walking into the bathroom, he turned on the shower and ran his hand through his tousled hair. “Stay where you are and keep your eyes open. I need to know everything about her pregnancy. You’ll get double for this one, my friend. Your payment will be in the same place as before.”

“Your generosity only makes me more loyal to the cause.”

“I know. Keep it that way.”

He closed the phone, ending the call. Pressing the button on the wall, he called for his assistant.

The little man swiftly came into view in the doorway of the bathroom. “You rang?”

He stripped and stepped into the steaming shower. “Yeah. Get ready to go to America. Make all the necessary arrangements and make sure no one knows about it. I’m starting a new game.”

“Anywhere in particular?”

Rinsing the shampoo from his hair, he opened the shower door and smiled. “Seattle.”

“Consider it done, Luca.”

The End

About the Author:

Gayle Donnelly and Robyn Mackenzie both hail from the Midwest. Writing partners as well as friends (perhaps even sisters in another life), both are married and each has two wonderful children. The similarities don't stop there. Both earned degrees in English education, both have a profound weakness for Starbucks coffee, and both are completely captivated by the ethereal beauty found in the Pacific Northwest. Their individual passions for writing and storytelling led them to create *Infinite Betrayal*, the first book in their Infinity Series.

You can learn more at their website: www.DonnellyMackenzie.com

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